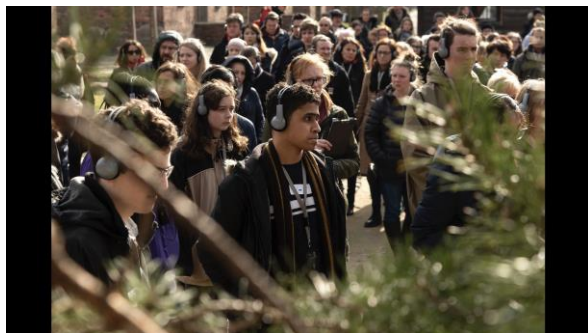


## Lessons From Auschwitz: Carys Lloyd, Orla O'Byrne, Lauren Ragbourne, Ebelina Asaah



This year, four of our A Level History class were selected to participate in the Holocaust Educational Trust's annual programme, Lessons from Auschwitz, accompanied by Mr Postle. On the 10<sup>th</sup> March, we travelled to Birmingham to attend a

seminar to prepare us for the trip. On our first seminar we discussed our preconceptions of Jewish life throughout Europe before the Second World War. Throughout the day, we learned more about the discrimination the Jews faced before the Holocaust, and the destructive extent of antisemitic rhetoric pervading the time. We saw the personal impact of the Holocaust on individuals. Hearing the individual testimonies and stories of the survivors and victims drives home the personal impact of the six million deaths instead of shocking us into numbness with the sheer scale of death. We were also lucky enough to hear the testimony of Mala Tribich (MBE), who pointed out that our generation will probably be the last to hear survivors' stories first hand. Mala's story was heart-breaking but filled with tremendous hope as despite all that she endured; the disappearance of her cousin Idzia, the loss of her mother and eight-year-old sister after they were taken from the ghetto, her separation from her father and brother, and her time in the camp, Mala survived. To hear about her time in Ravensbrück and later Bergen-Belsen was horrendous and emotionally challenging but necessary. We all left that day with an enlightened perspective on the individual horrors faced by the victims. Mala was reunited with her brother Ben (who later became an Olympian) in England in 1947 and was able to learn English, attend secretarial college, and get a job within a year. In the years following the Holocaust Mala did not discuss her experience with those around her; her husband and children knew that she was a survivor, but did not know her personal story. Yet in the last twenty years, having found a growing interest in the Holocaust, Mala accepts invitations to speak in schools whenever possible (she has spoken at NGHS before) as she feels it is her duty to speak for those who no longer can for themselves. It is Mala's 'greatest hope that something positive will be handed to the future generation.'

On the 13<sup>th</sup> March we began our journey to Poland. As we arrived in Krakow we were brought to Oświęcim, where the Jewish community had been obliterated, contrasting the previous years where 58% of the town's population were Jewish. We focused on the idea of 'presence of absence', thinking not solely about what was there, but what was missing, for example the



streets that once were filled with the flourishing Jewish community. We visited a Jewish museum, which again emphasised the normality of Jewish life within Poland prior to the alienation of the community. We were then taken to Auschwitz, immediately struck by the presence of coaches packed with tourists, alongside a café and giftshop, which seemed to strangely disrespect the atrocities that occurred just metres away. However, once we began our tour the heavy atmosphere remained with the group throughout the entirety of the trip. The infamous 'Arbeit Macht Frei' gates loomed over us as we entered, destroying any remnants of the tourism we had seen on arrival. One moment that will remain with us all was the room filled with the hair of women and children, tonnes of real hair reminding us of the lives stolen. On the walls, there were innumerable portraits of the unnamed victims of the Holocaust, reminding us of the personal horrors. Each individual had their head shaven and striped clothing, dehumanising the victims and detracting from their diversity and individuality. Underneath the portraits were the dates of arrival and death in the camp, and we were struck by how many people didn't last more than a couple of months. Before we left, we were shown something often overlooked. The Commandant of Auschwitz's living quarters, and the place he was hanged. His wife and children lived with him, his wife dubbing the time 'the happiest years of their lives'. The house was newly built, well-furnished and comfortable, and all in full view of the gas chambers, crematoriums and the barbed wire tracks. As we returned to the coach, it was a noticeably more sombre atmosphere, barely a word was spoken as we journeyed to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Upon arrival, we were struck once more by the presence of absence, and the sheer scale and vastness of the camp. A marked difference between this camp and Auschwitz I was that Auschwitz I was converted from an army barracks, whereas this was a purpose-built extermination camp. The ashes from those cremated at Auschwitz I somewhat symbolically were used to solidify the grounds upon which Auschwitz-Birkenau was built. This added to the bleak atmosphere created by the railway line that extended to 26 countries but terminated here. Communities were transported here in dehumanising freight trains, and as they arrived, they were divided into men and women and then into the weak and the strong, where those deemed not physically capable were marched immediately into gas chambers, with no record of names or even existence. We walked the road they were forced to on the way to their death. There was no life, no birds, we were wrapped up in coats and scarves yet were still shivering in mid-March. It is not possible to even begin to imagine how these people felt, wearing virtually nothing, mothers and fathers separated from their children and each other. They were isolated within the crowds of people who were all identical in appearance and struggle. Rabbi Marcus spoke to us about religion within the camps, telling how some exchanged food rations for time with the contraband prayer book. He always reminded us of modern day antisemitism and the presence of hatred in the world today. We were also shown the dire living conditions. The barn-like structures, some still unfinished, were filled with three-tier bunks, built on a slant to fit more in, once more dehumanising the inhabitants. It's hard to imagine the contrast between the lives of the perpetrators and their victims. The latrines were primitive and unhygienic, however almost a place of sanctity as the guards were too disgusted to venture in. A poignant moment was the testimony of a Jewish man who took pride in keeping clean and smart as a form of resistance to the Nazi regime.

As the sun set, we walked towards what was the final destination for many victims, and it was haunting to walk the same path that so many innocent people did. The solemn day concluded with a commemorative ceremony led by the rabbi, including prayers and poems written by and about the victims. One that remains with us was a poem written by a thirteen year old Jewish boy whilst in the camp. Hearing his beautiful words reminded us of the duty we have to never let this dark period be forgotten. Upon returning to England, we took a few days to recover, but we are now planning on organising events throughout school to share what we have learned, and develop understanding of the personal horrors of the Holocaust. Our time in Poland will never be forgotten and we believe that this is without a doubt the most important trip that we will ever take.