

Lest We Forget

Lord Brian Mackenzie

On a bleak Sunday in February 2005, some 60 years after its liberation by the Red Army, I stood in the snow looking at the large wrought iron gate at the State Museum at Auschwitz – Birkenau in Poland. It was still snowing and a bitter wind was cutting through my thick overcoat and woollen hat. I could not even begin to imagine what it must have been like for the thousands of inmates in this extermination camp between 1941 and 1945.

Having been a police officer for 35 years I am not given to displaying an emotional reaction to the horrors that police work throws up. I am not sure however that even I was ready for the story that unfolded before my eyes during my relatively fleeting visit to what amounted to a murder factory of industrial proportions.

For five terrifying years the camp conjured up fear among the people of the German occupied territories of Europe. It was an all too real living nightmare for over one million fellow human beings, which for each and every one of them was a personal tragedy.

Auschwitz was planned, designed and opened by the Nazis in 1940 to hold Polish political prisoners. It was used to terrorise and exterminate the citizens of occupied Poland, but soon became a factory of death for undesirables, mainly Jews, from all over occupied Europe. Other inmates included Soviet prisoners of war, Gypsies, Czechs, Yugoslavs, French, Austrians and others.

Poland of course attempted to defend the homeland in the September Campaign of 1939 but was overrun by the Germans, leading directly to Britain declaring war on Hitler's Germany. The town of Oswiecim and the surrounding districts were incorporated within the Third Reich and given the German name of Auschwitz.

The striking symbol of Auschwitz of course is the main gate which I found myself standing before, with the cynical legend at the top "Arbeit macht frei" [work brings freedom]. It was through this gate that prisoners were marched out of the camp to work for more than 12 hours, before returning to the strains of the camp orchestra playing marches [again, cynically to ease the counting of the returning prisoners by the SS].

Initially the camp comprised 20 buildings; 14 at ground level and six with an upper floor. Between 1941 and 1942 an extra storey was added to all ground floor buildings and eight additional blocks were constructed using the prisoners as the workforce. The number of prisoners averaged 13,000 to 16,000 reaching a record 20,000 in the course of 1942. As the numbers grew, the size of the camp by necessity increased and it became a gruesome factory of death. Auschwitz-I was the forerunner of a whole generation of new camps. An additional camp, Auschwitz-II, later called Birkenau, was constructed three kilometres away. Additional camps were established in the vicinity of steelworks, mines and factories where the

inmates were exploited for their low-cost labour. The first two, Auschwitz-I and Birkenau, are maintained as state museums open to the public.

At Birkenau, for example, there are the remnants of four crematoria, gas chambers, cremation pits and pyres. Also retained is the special cattle-truck unloading platform where the deportees were selected for work or for extermination. There is also a pond with human ashes, much of it used to manufacture agricultural fertilizer! Indeed one thing that stays with me from the visit was the sheer efficiency of it all – the Nazis wasted very little. Behind glass showcases there are thousands of shoes, children's clothing, spectacles and, most bizarre, a large exhibit of false limbs taken from prisoners, all of which were to be sent to Germany for recycling.

It became apparent to me that all inmates were condemned to the same fate – slow extermination by hunger, exhausting work, criminal medical experiments, or to a quicker death, as a result of individual and mass executions. The decision had been taken by the chief of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, and drawings have been discovered which show quite clearly that this industrial killing factory was designed methodically. There are German blueprints showing designs for crematoria dated 27 January 1942.

The scene is perhaps best described by witnesses at the time. For example from the manuscript of the Jewish prisoner Zalmen Gadowski, discovered after the war at the site of the camp.

“Men and women had to line up separately. These orders struck everyone like lightning. Now in the final stage, when the end of the road had been reached, they ordered the dividing, the sundering, of the inseparable.....of what had been joined together and grown into a single indivisible whole. No-one took a step, for no-one could believe in something that was unbelievable. It could not be that the unreal had become real, a fact. Yet the hail of blows that fell upon the first rank of the people standing there made such an impact that families began to draw apart even in the rows at the back.

...They supposed that the formal procedure of precisely determining the number of new arrivals was beginning, the two sexes separately. They sensed that the most important moment was now approaching, when it would be necessary to comfort each other and give consolation.”

From the memoirs of Pery Broad, an SS man in the camp Gestapo.

“First of all the men and women were separated. Dreadful scenes of farewell occur. Married couples are separated and mothers wave to their sons for the last time.

The columns stand on the ramp, in rows of five, several metres apart. When someone succumbs to the pain of farewell and runs one last time to the other column in order to reach out a hand to the beloved and whisper a few comforting words, the SS man instantly rains down blows and shoves that person back in place. Now the SS physician begins the division into those who, in his opinion, are capable of labour and those who are not. Mothers with little children are regarded in principle as incapable

of labour, as are all those who give an impression of being frail or sick. Portable wooden stairs are placed at the backs of trucks and those selected by the SS physician as unfit for labour must climb in.

The SS men from the reception department count them as they go up the steps one by one. In the same way, they count all those fit for labour, who must set out on the march to the men's or women's camp. All the baggage must be left on the ramp. The prisoners are told that it will later be delivered by truck. This is true so far as it goes, except that none of the prisoners will see their belongings again, and everything will end up in the safes, warehouses and SS kitchens.

Smaller baggage containing essential items and whatever they are wearing will be taken from them later when they are received into the camps."

From the notes of the Jewish prisoner Lejb Langfus, written illegally in the camp and buried next to the crematorium.

"They were packed in as tightly as possible. It was hard to even imagine that so many people could fit into such a small room. Everyone who tried to get out was shot for resisting, or torn apart by the dogs. Asphyxiation from lack of air would have come within a few hours. Then all the doors were closed tight and the gas was thrown in through a small window in the ceiling. The people locked inside could do nothing. So they only cried out in bitter, mournful voices full of despair, and still others sobbed spasmodically and sent up a dreadful piercing crying. Some recited the 'eidduj' or cried out 'Sherma Israel'. All of them tore out their hair for having been so naive as to allow themselves to be led there to those closed doors. Only one idea came to them, to utter in voices that rose to the heavens their last cry of protest against the greatest of historical injustices, which was inflicted on completely innocent people only in order to destroy whole generations all at once in such a terrible manner... Because of the great overcrowding, the dying people fell one upon the other, until a heap rose up of five to six layers one atop the other to the height of a metre. Mothers froze in a sitting position holding their children in their arms, and husbands and wives died in an embrace. Some of the people formed a shapeless mass..."

The camp commandant at Auschwitz was Rudolph Hoss, who was later to be brought back from Germany after the war and hanged beside the gas chambers which he had overseen. In his memoirs he graphically describes in a matter of fact manner the real horror of what took place in those dark days in the middle of the last century.

"Jews selected for gassing were taken as quietly as possible to the crematoria, the men being separated from the women. In the undressing room prisoners of the special detachment detailed for this purpose would tell them in their own language that they were going to be bathed and deloused, that they must leave their clothes neatly together and above all remember where they had put them, so that they would be able to find them again quickly after delousing. The prisoners of the special detachment had the greatest interest in seeing that the operation proceeded smoothly and quickly. After undressing, the Jews went into the gas chambers, which were furnished with showers and water pipes and gave a realistic impression of a bath-house.

The women went first with their children, followed by the men who were always fewer in number. This part of the operation nearly always went smoothly, so the prisoners of the special detachment would calm those who betrayed any anxiety or who perhaps had some inkling of their fate. As an additional precaution these prisoners of the special detachment and an SS man always remained in the chamber until the last moment. The door would now be quickly screwed up and the gas immediately discharged by the waiting disinfectors through vents in the ceiling of the gas chambers, down a shaft that led to the floors. This ensured the rapid distribution of the gas. It could be observed through the peep-hole in the door that those who were standing nearest to the induction vents were killed at once. It can be said that about one third died straight away. The remainder staggered about and began to scream and struggle for air. The screaming however soon changed to the death rattle and in a few minutes all lay still. After twenty minutes at the latest no movement could discerned...”

For all its faults, the establishment of the European Union has I believe been instrumental in reducing nation-alist conflict on the continent of Europe and to a great extent, arguably with the unique circumstances of Yugo-slavia, has encouraged co-operation and prevented war.

It is unbelievable to me that around the time I was born the sorts of practices described in this article were taking place in Europe. The one positive thing that I took from my trip to Auschwitz was to witness the number of young people and organised school trips being shown round the museum. I occasionally hear people say that it is time to forget and to put the horror of it all behind us. I fervently hope that we never forget the industrial genocide at Auschwitz and similar camps. It is only through remembering and educating that we will prevent a recurrence of such an iniquitous period of our history which sadly occurred within living memory.

Brian [Lord Brian Mackenzie of Framwellgate OBE]
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