

Auschwitz-Birkenau – Visitors’ Manual Guide

The below article is an attempt to look into the current state of educational processes taking place during a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. In the last ten years I have been looking very carefully at the groups and individuals coming to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau site. It is difficult to make any generalizations, taking into consideration the more than one million visitors annually who have come from all over the world, but certain general trends are visible and taking note of them can improve a general understanding of what Auschwitz-Birkenau was and what it has become today.¹

There is a multitude of very detailed literature on most of the historical aspects of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but very few short, condensed and descriptive texts which might be a good introductory manual of the site for the average visitor who has very general knowledge and-- in most cases-- has read nothing about Auschwitz history and present complexity before his or her visit.

Importance of the site:

Auschwitz and the iconography connected to it are the first things that come to anyone’s mind when they think about the Holocaust. Why? There are several reasons to consider:

Reason number one: Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest and the most efficient of all the German Nazi concentration and extermination camps built in occupied Europe. It is not only the sheer number of victims—close to 1.5 million—which make it unique. It was one of the only two Nazi camps where the perpetrators merged two functions in one place: the function of mass incarceration of slave labor and the function of mass extermination of people in gas chambers.² This is particularly important because between 1942 and 1944 when the gas chambers at Birkenau were active there were as many as 120,000 prisoners in the vicinity

¹ Annual report 2009, *Record number of the visitors*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu , 2010.

² The other one is German Nazi Concentration Camp Majdanek in nowadays eastern Poland.

working as the slave workers of the concentration camp.³ They witnessed the selections and mass extermination. Of course towards the end of the camp, most of those inmates would have been killed or transferred, but still we estimate today that in total in 1945 there were tens of thousands of Auschwitz survivors alive in various parts of Poland and Germany.⁴ Those people had their stories, their testimonies; they went on to write books and to chronicle their lives in the camp. Their voices and the name Auschwitz could be heard globally; Auschwitz-Birkenau became the synonym of the Holocaust.⁵

On the contrary, little has been heard and few people today know about the other German Nazi camps-- those built for the sole purpose of extermination. They were built in sparsely populated territories, often hidden in the forests far from Western Europe. These extermination camps were built to operate temporarily; their sole function was to kill as many Jews as possible from Nazi-occupied Poland and designed to be completely dismantled after the task was accomplished.

This is a list of those extermination camps, with approximate time of operation , number of victims and number of survivors in 1945:

Chelmno - Kulmhof - 16 months of operation 150.000 people killed. 3 survivors

Belzec - 12 months of operation 500.000 people killed. 7 survivors

Sobibor - 19 months of operation 200.000 people killed. 100 survivors

Treblinka - 13 months of operation 800.000 people killed. 60 survivors⁶

The striking thing is that when you visit those places today, almost nothing is visible of those camps' former existence. The German crime was not only the murder of those people, but also the eradication of the memory of their very existence and the manner in which they were killed. This was meant to be "the perfect crime," and its cover-up took a tremendous effort.

³ Auschwitz –Nazistowski Oboz Śmierci , *Liczba ofiar KL Auschwitz* , Franciszek Piper ,Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka , 1998.

⁴ Pieter Lagrou, *Return to a Vanished World.European Societies and the Remnants of their Jewish Communities* The Jews are Coming Back edited by David Bankier, Yad Vashem ,Jerusalem, 2005.

⁵ Deborah Dworak and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz* , W.W.Norton & Company Inc.,2002.

⁶ Aktion Reinhard Camps , *Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno*. <http://www.deathcamps.org/>. Web site Archived on December 2006.

There were no images left which could be used as iconography in the way we now perceive and remember the Holocaust. The low numbers of survivors ensured that their stories rarely became part of the global narrative of the Holocaust and the general commemorative culture.

In this way Auschwitz with its relatively high number of survivors is unique and well documented.

Reason number two for Auschwitz becoming the iconic Holocaust site would be how relatively well-preserved are most of the former camp structures and the remaining artifacts like documents, plundered victim's property, and the quantities of hair shorn from its victims. Visiting Auschwitz – Birkenau Museum we can physically see the buildings, execution sites, imprisonment places and thousands of well preserved objects. This tangible visual help is very important to imagine and recreate the historical time when Auschwitz was functioning. It is possible to locate certain survivors' narratives or camp stories in the remaining camp space. The buildings and objects are also the tangible proof of the crime committed, of particular importance because with every day and every generation we are more distanced from the Holocaust itself. This is particularly true with the Crematorium - Gas Chamber number I in Auschwitz: today it is possible to enter inside to see the gas chamber and the cremation ovens. This is one of the two of such German Nazi-built structures standing in the world today,⁷ which assumes a tremendous burden of proof in the time of the growing wave of Holocaust revisionism.⁸ Equally important are the ruins of Crematorium Gas Chamber number II, III, IV and V located away from the Birkenau iconic main entrance gate.. Though they were blown up by the retreating Germans in 1945, they still communicate how meticulous were the perpetrators, the details of extermination process, and their enormous size. All of those are preserved to be seen by the millions of visitors because of the very conscious decision taken in 1947 to establish Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum on the site of the former German Nazi camp. Auschwitz-Birkenau is now the best-preserved and best-documented former Nazi concentration-extermination camp. All this material proof gains in importance as we are probably the last generation to meet and hear the live stories of the Holocaust survivors. The number of existing material proofs of crime on Auschwitz-Birkenau

⁷ The other one still standing and visible is in Concentration Camp Majdanek. Tomasz Kranz , *Extermination of Jews at the Majdanek Concentration Camp*, Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, Lublin, 2007.

⁸ Those are the only two such structures existing build on the territory of German Nazi Concentration Camps and designed for mass extermination of people. I don't include the existing euthanasia centers or gas chambers designed for disinfection of objects which at times were used for killing for people.

territory including the existing and ruined gas chambers create the very axis of Holocaust documentation today.

The third reason why Auschwitz is the dominant site in the general memory of the Holocaust is the fact the German Nazis decided to make it the central destination of prisoners and later victims from all over Europe. Most of the 3.3 million Polish Jews were exterminated in the already mentioned immediate extermination camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau capacity was reserved mostly for Jewish transports from Western, Northern and Southern Europe. No other camp had so many nationalities crowded in one place, no other camp through its lethal operation would be covering almost the entire territory of Europe. There were Jews deported to Auschwitz from as far as Oslo in Norway, the Greek island of Corfu and the distant French Atlantic Coast. After the war, when the European Jewish and non-Jewish survivors began to look for their missing relatives, the answer was almost always Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁹ In this way, after the war those two words became the incarnation of evil and the icon of the German Nazi genocide in the course of WW II.

Visit and education - challenges

Today most of the visitors to Auschwitz Museum participate in a guided tour that lasts an average of 3 hours. Within this time they spend 2 hours in Auschwitz I, where most of the historical exhibit and artifacts are located, then they are transferred for one additional hour for a guided tour of the territory of Auschwitz II – Birkenau. Those 3 hours are the necessary minimum to get familiar with the camp chronology, history and activity and they constitute the very core of the institutional education process offered to visitors.

The guides offered by the Museum today are drawn from a very highly qualified pool of Auschwitz-Birkenau experts who, in most cases have to be very selective with the presented historical material in order to keep within the time frames of the guided visit. In order to make the most of this time with the Museum guide it is recommended that visitors beforehand acquaint themselves with at least some basic chronology and factual orientation to be filled in with the guide narration. In this way the visitor can spend the time on questions and discussion with the guide which always opens a whole new historical reality. Nowadays such basic information can be easily searched on-line. I recommend the new web-side of the Auschwitz Museum which in a brief way gives you the necessary history milestones.¹⁰

⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, William Morrow & Company, 1993.

¹⁰ See: www.auschwitz.org.pl

The historical exhibit in Auschwitz I doesn't offer a coherent narration. There are almost no descriptions of sites, pictures, documents and artifacts presented. It is worth remembering that this exhibit was put together in the 50's for the generation which remembered war from their own experiences. The primitive nature of the exhibit, when connected with the proper narration by the guide can enhance the experience of visiting the authentic site of the Nazi genocidal policy. For this reason today it is necessary for a guide to narrate it. Without proper guidance people often get lost over the large area and complexity of the camp territory and history.

Auschwitz II Birkenau today at the first glance is a large open air museum made of ruins of buildings or remaining camp structures scattered over a large area of 170 hectares (approx 420 acres). Almost the only way to get the sense of the entire territory is to enter the central watch tower over the main entrance gate. But the most important places in Birkenau are either barely visible because of being ruined or not visible at all. It is only after a one km walk from the main gate when we start to enter into the site of former German Nazi mass genocide. It is the very distant reaches of Birkenau where the ruins of massive Crematoriums and Gas Chambers number II, III, IV and V are located. It is in the distant reaches of Birkenau where the ashes of majority of the camp victims are being deposited in what is today the green, serene and almost idyllic forest, landing and water pond landscape. It is there where the largest cemetery known to humanity is located and it is only due to German Nazi determination to cover up the crime that little evidence is left today. The illusive serenity of the site should always be contrasted with the established historical facts. This place where what is invisible is the most important demands that the visitors pay tribute to the camp victims. The place itself makes these demands in a very metaphysical way because facing the enormous crime and having cognitive difficulties in understanding and explaining its enormity, we always retreat to certain culturally dictated commemorative gestures.¹¹

For the last 5 years there has been an organizational framework for the more individual and formalized education at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. In 2005 International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust was officially created, based on the educational experiences of the Museum staff from the previous years. This evolving institution can be an answer to certain drawbacks connected with the mass tourism at Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum today.¹²

¹¹ James E.Young, *The Changing Shape of Holocaust Memory*, The American Jewish Committee , 2005.

¹²Annual Report 2009 – *International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu ,2010.

Auschwitz memory and its representations.

What is Auschwitz-Birkenau today?? It is the site of former German-Nazi Concentration –Extermination Camp, it is the Museum, it is the largest cemetery in the world, it is the WW II history icon, it is the religious challenge for Judaism and Christianity, it is the material proof of Nazi genocide, it is the site of mass education, it is the site of mass tourism etc. Those are just the most important functions of this site which all coexist, are interrelated, and play into the frictions in the daily reality of this place.

Every visitor will find a different appropriate answer and a different way of putting the reasons of his or her visit on the importance scale. With a few thousands of visitors daily there are days when at one time on the museum grounds there are-- in different guided groups-- the survivors of Auschwitz with their families, some members of the families of the perpetrators;, Holocaust historians, Holocaust revisionists, orthodox Jews, Catholics following the stations of the cross, Buddhists deeply into their meditations, leading world politicians with their very pompous speeches, and thousands of accidental tourists who happen to be there only because the travel operator put in on their itinerary among 4 other sites to see on the same day. Auschwitz-Birkenau today has to accommodate it all. These colorful, loud masses, often strongly opinionated and convinced about the importance of the site, have to coexist in the sobering physically of Auschwitz-Birkenau . The growth of mass tourism in the last ten years creates an enormous challenge for educators and technical problems for the museum as well as large opportunities for the global community to be more exposed to the historical as well as the contemporary cases of genocide.

Everybody expects something before arriving to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Something to see, something to experience. In some cases the fear and stigma generated for years and connected with the word Auschwitz makes people expect some metaphysical experience. At the end of their visit those people exhibit all possible responses from disappointment (in most cases) to a form of personal catharsis after facing the imagined evil. The iconography of the site created in the last almost 70 years is one of the strongest and most globally recognized symbols of genocide and WW II. At the same time every passing day distances us from the event itself and leaves us with less and less people who can say “I have been thereI have

experienced itI can witness.” The next generations will be relying more on certain secondary images of the Holocaust generated by historians, museums, documentation centers reaching their limited audiences; but in the global scale, memory is and will be generated by film and mass culture .

We must do all things possible in order to keep a proper balance between the official, historical, factual narration and the mass culture one. In fact we must take care so that the official historical narration prevails. This narration can be built through museums like Auschwitz-Birkenau but also through the whole system of Holocaust or WW II Museums in the world, though Universities, research institutions etc. Sometimes this education doesn't have to happen at the Museum site itself. Take a look for example at the Facebook profile of State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau opened in the last 2 years which now has over 40,000 followers. ¹³ This many people are daily taking a look into certain historical facts from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp past and also learning information about the current daily challenges of commemorating mass genocide site. I would highly recommend to every one who is planning a visit to Auschwitz to join this Facebook profile as probably there is no better way to prepare for such visit individually.

The mass culture images of Auschwitz bring a lot of good in spreading the knowledge about the genocide but they also bring a lot of simplifications, history misrepresentations and a certain secondary Auschwitz reality which is deeply imprinted in the minds of mass culture participants. Secondary reality which recently less and less corresponds with the historical reality of Auschwitz. A good and critical example of this phenomena is the movie “Boy in the Striped Pajamas”. The movie in its historical and narration level is very, very loosely connected with how Auschwitz really was at the same time it is to imitate Auschwitz. For a global viewer who doesn't have to be an Auschwitz expert the facts pictured in this motion picture are usually taken for granted as a real Holocaust narration. They are not, and on the factual level, they have nothing in common with real Auschwitz history. This situation of selectively picking certain elements imitating Auschwitz and intermingling them into the plot which is a pure figment of somebody's imagination creates a very dangerous and confusing mixture. The story is heart breaking, it is different, it has some positive educational message, it sells well but it completely disrespects the historical facts and it disrespects the 1.5 million stories of victims whose ashes are still spread over the large territory of Birkenau.

¹³See: <http://www.facebook.com/auschwitzmemorial>

There are so many survivors' narrations which are factual, objectified, original, emotional, brave and-- most important-- true and would made brilliant screenplays but instead of that the mass culture reaches into something new, something artificially devised and thus -obliterating the memory of Auschwitz. In this way we are creating a sort of secondary Auschwitz matrix reality. Are the future generations doomed to such narrations? Will the Auschwitz-Birkenau guides soon be forced to change their narration to follow the imagined places and stories? The first questions about sites pictured in the movie are asked every day by visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The mass culture and information creates also a certain threat to the site itself. Obviously there are people now for whom stealing an object like the "Arbeit Macht Frei" inscription from the main gate is not only conceivable but can also be executed. An act of destruction which very much marks the less and less respect some of us have towards our past. Lack of respect connected with Holocaust revisionism which has found its safe haven and major distribution channel in the internet can be very dangerous for our future. Often the first results of search on Google or Youtube on Auschwitz direct you to the materials generated by the Holocaust revisionists. Such barbarian behaviors as robbing the site are obviously more and more morally allowed: in spring 2010 the Auschwitz Museum guards caught two Canadian teachers stealing the metal parts of the Birkenau rail platform.¹⁴ In some parts of the camp thousands of objects buried in the ground during the camp activity are coming to the muddy surface almost daily and cases of those being stolen have been known for years. I just wonder what is the mental construct of a person stealing today those objects belonging to the Auschwitz-Birkenau victims? The last silent chapter of the victims' property being plundered is being written this way...

Until recently believing in a common sense of the visitors and respecting the site's authenticity, the Museum's authorities provided as few security means as possible. The guards were to be almost invisible, not to create a sense of being watched all the time among the visitors, which would be highly inappropriate during a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Apparently the new reality creates new challenges and necessary changes are being introduced.

How to visit Auschwitz

¹⁴ Matthew Day, *Teachers 'arrested for stealing Auschwitz memento'*, Telegraph, 28 Jun 2010

Taking into account the multidimensional history of the site and facing the contemporary multidimensional Auschwitz reality the answer to “how to visit Auschwitz” is complicated. This is especially true because the historical layer of the camp narration is so much interwoven into the current problems, conflicts and physicality of this site. How can we keep a good balance between proper commemoration of the victims of mass extermination and the needs of contemporary mass tourism?

I suggest the three most important principles and values to have in mind while visiting the site would be – historical awareness, respect and responsibility.

In case of most of us historical awareness of the site builds over time, but it would be very helpful if before the visit itself we at least briefly review the most important facts about Auschwitz-Birkenau. This always helps to orient oneself better in the site complex reality and gives certain comfort of having at least the chronology right. Chronology becomes a foundation on which the experience of the site itself can be based and then be amplified thanks to the guide narration. Important part of the historical awareness is the knowledge of the importance of Auschwitz-Birkenau as such which I have tried to outline above.

Respect for the site and its victims doesn't mean one has to spend the 3 hours with a funeral face expression moving in the manner of a mourners march. Respecting Auschwitz today is mostly about not forgetting for the time of visit about the history behind Auschwitz-Birkenau. Sometimes the fact that people forget where they are starts a whole array of disrespectful, too casual behaviors. Those start a sort of social chain reaction of indulgence in behaving in a lighthearted, loud, playful manner. When this element takes over, it changes the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum into a colorful vanity fair, typical of mass tourism today. Auschwitz creates a rare opportunity for all of us today to calm down, rethink and be focused and it's only our personal decision if we use this opportunity or not.

Respect for this place is also inseparably connected with respect towards the other visitors around us. It is worth to remember that there are different people with different needs and approaches to the site. Some are coming to visit the cemetery of their beloved family members the others just to see the site for historical or purely tourist reasons. The less of our own personality we imprint on this site and the more respectful and helpful we are for others around us, the better.

Responsibility for Auschwitz and history behind it is probably the most important task of the education process in which every visitor participates.. The awareness means little when it is not followed by responsibility. Every visitor must feel responsible for bringing a

little of Auschwitz-Birkenau message back home from the visit. In some way every visitor is becoming the modern witness of the past so precious in the time when the Auschwitz survivors are passing away. The time spent at Auschwitz-Birkenau can be given a special meaning when the visitor can evaluate the learned history into his or her own life experience to have a more global look at the reality we all live in. Responsibility means recognizing the consequences of our moral choices and realizing the sort of extremes that humanity and we as individuals are capable of under certain circumstances. All in all, the historical experience of Auschwitz is one of the paths of humanity and we shall not forget about it. Without this process the visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau has no effect on the current world which can lead to repeating of the history on such scale in the future. Finally responsibility for Auschwitz today has its very down to earth sphere of a daily maintenance, conservation and preservation of the site which requires enormous amounts of human thought, time and financial means. This responsibility has only now begun to be undertaken by the global community and foreign governments.¹⁵

Awareness, respect and responsibility are crucial to define today's visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. They should be also adopted every time when we approach other genocides in human history. A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau can be a catalyst to focus on the phenomena of genocide in general. Especially to draw our attention to those crimes which have been happening in the last 20 years or even now. In the last twenty years the Holocaust historians are giving more space to document, talk and compare the Holocaust with other known genocides from history.¹⁶ Such work is necessary to reevaluate the history of sites like Auschwitz and create certain historical model under which humanity starts to act in genocidal way. This can also be an opening for reflection about the responsibility of global community. Having a model like this would be the first step to work out variety of global community responses to potential genocidal situations or behaviors. As we all create this global community it is very likely that the visit to Auschwitz –Birkenau and understanding the genocide phenomena can be a spark for forging or supporting the new anti-genocide legislation or government actions.

Awareness, respect and responsibility in a site like Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum are definitely challenging for visitors. They are three more elements to think of when you walk

¹⁵ Report 2009 – Introduction by Direktor dr Piotr Cywiński, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu ,2010.

¹⁶ Rethinking the Holocaust , Yehuda Bauer, Yale University Press, 2000

the camp grounds. I hope that building your individual visit on those three values as the base foundation of the entire time spent at the mass genocide site will help you individually benefit from this experience and will help you to structure the inevitable multitude of thoughts and emotions. Maintaining those three guiding principles will help you to leave the Museum grounds and say “I have been thereI have experienced itI can witness.”

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