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Nichole Delasalas
Old Dominion University

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Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Memorial

Nichole Delasalas

In the 1940s, Nazi Germany was an unstoppable force spreading throughout Europe. Hitler's agenda was to take control of Europe and make it part of his pure Aryan race. As a result of his actions and his "final solution", many people suffered. The concentration camp of Auschwitz I was created out of an old Polish military compound for three main reasons. The first was to incarcerate real and perceived enemies of the Nazi regime and the German occupation authorities in Poland for an indefinite amount of time.¹ The second was to have available a supply of forced labor for deployment in SS-owned, construction-related enterprises.² And last but not least, to serve as a site to physically eliminate small-targeted groups of population whose death was determined essential to the security of Nazi Germany.³ As one can see by the last reason, Auschwitz was not originally designed to exterminate large amounts of people. Some of the first people to enter Auschwitz were schoolchildren, students and soldiers, not Jews, as many people believe.⁴ The people who perished in the early years died from malnutrition, terrible living conditions, and harsh treatment.

In 1941, Nazi Germany then expanded their forced labor camps and built the sub camps of Birkenau or Auschwitz II, and Monowitz, also known as Auschwitz III, which included the IG Farben factory. This factory was where the Germans produced Buna, which is a synthetic rubber manufactured from coal in order to support the war.⁵ The location could have been chosen because it was in close proximity to Auschwitz I and a source of cheap labor, but historians do not know for sure. Nevertheless, prisoners from Auschwitz I were sent to help build Birkenau and work in the factory. The factory started out with 1,000 prison workers in 1941 to 11,000 prisoners by 1944.⁶ They hoped to house 200,000 prisoners in Birkenau.⁷

The conditions in Birkenau were even worse than they were in Auschwitz I or Monowitz. The barracks were meant to house 180 people, but the Nazis crammed in almost 700 people.⁸ The horse stables once housed 52 horses, but were now used

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, "Auschwitz," Holocaust Encyclopedia, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189> (accessed April 15, 2014).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sybille Steinbacher, *Auschwitz: A History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 29.

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁸ Ibid., 91.

to shelter almost 400 people in three-tiered bunks.⁹ When Birkenau was first built there were no sanitation houses, so the conditions were horrible. Death was a daily occurrence due to the spread of disease through rats and constant illness.

Prisoners began to go through a selection process in 1942 with the arrival of Slovakian Jews.¹⁰ If one could work then they lived, if they could not, then they died. A few people decided the fate of thousands. Those who were chosen to work died shortly after as a result of exposure to the elements, lack of food, and terrible treatment. Though this wasn't the final solution it was the beginning of the end. The final solution was not an order given on any particular day, but was the end result of systematic decision making by Hitler and the Nazis.¹¹ Some of the first prisoners to be killed were part of experimentations with Zyklon B. These people included Soviet prisoners of war, the mentally handicap, the sick, and the weak.

Jews were continuously brought into the camp, but the mass exterminations did not begin until mid-1942 to 1943. The first two gas chambers were temporarily set up in old farm houses located just outside the barbed-wire of Birkenau. These were known as the "red house" and the "white house".¹² They had yet to build crematoriums in Birkenau, so all those that were killed were either taken to Auschwitz I to be cremated or they were buried in mass graves covered with lime, which were eventually dug up and burned in large open air fires. The Nazis tried desperately to cover up there heinous acts. These temporary gas chambers were soon abandoned with the construction of crematoriums 2, 3, 4, and 5. Crematoria 2 and 3 were the largest and they had the capacity to hold over 1,400 people.¹³ Prisoners were under the false impression that the crematoriums were bathhouses used to sanitize them before going to their barracks.

After the terrible act of killing these people in the gas chambers, the bodies were moved to the incinerators and their personal belongings were divided up and taken to the "Canada" section of the camp. These were large warehouses full of personal items. The Nazis tried to keep the mass killings under wraps. In late 1943 into 1944, there was a mass movement of Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most of them were taken to the gas chambers right after departing from the train. This was Hitler's final solution, the mass extermination of the Jewish population, Poles, Gypsies, and homosexuals. Thousands upon thousands of people were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau and on death marches when the allied forces were closing in in 1944. The camp was finally liberated by Soviet troops in January 1945, but not

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹¹ Ibid., 82.

¹² Ibid., 96-97.

¹³ Ibid., 100.

before the damage was done. So the question remains, what do you do with a place with such a horrific past?

Right after the war, the survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau wanted to turn the site into a museum of remembrance, but Auschwitz was not acknowledged as a state museum by the Polish government with state legislation until July 2, 1947. Some of the first visitors were descents of the deceased who came to pay their respects.¹⁴ The preservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau has been based on the language, politics, religion, morality, and culture, but unfortunately these do not have a common ground and that is when legality comes into place.¹⁵ The legal status of Auschwitz-Birkenau has changed with the different government regimes in power. First it was Nazi Germany, then a Communist regime, and finally the Democratic Polish Government.¹⁶ During the communist regime, the museum was portrayed as a “memorial to the martyrs of the Polish nation and other nations.”¹⁷ There was no direct mention of the Jews in there law. This was due to the communist regime making Auschwitz more about their ideological vision than about actual history.¹⁸ The communist condemned fascism and Western aggression and made the Polish prisoners look like heroes, while the Soviets looked like saviors.¹⁹ Birkenau was completely ignored by the communist, while they focused more on the Auschwitz I and only certain parts of the concentration camp instead of the whole site. They also wanted to make sure that Poland and the area surrounding the camp was going to profit off the museum. This was more important to them than preservation, conservation, or education. The communist regime was still able to preserve Auschwitz-Birkenau as well as creating the first of many permanent exhibits, as well as a memorial in Birkenau in the 1950s.²⁰ Yet the controversy over not acknowledging the Jews still remained.

In 1979, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added Auschwitz-Birkenau to the World Heritage List.²¹ This was important to the museum because they could possibly receive financial assistance and funding to help them. Most of the sites on the World Heritage List are not associated with death and destruction. In order to be considered for the list

¹⁴ Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=85 (accessed April 15, 2014).

¹⁵ Pam R. Jenoff, “Managing Memory: The legal status of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Resolution of Conflicts in the Post-Communist Era,” *The Polish Review* 46, no 2 (2001): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25669250> (accessed April 17, 2014).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

the site has to be of historical value and authenticity.²² The Polish government also had to prove that they were going to work to preserve the site and provide a protection zone around Auschwitz-Birkenau.²³ The UNESCO opened Auschwitz-Birkenau up to the world's opinion and scrutiny.

When Poland changed to a democratic state, Auschwitz-Birkenau faced even more challenges than when they were under a communist regime. Poland itself was opened to the Western world by joining the European Union in 2004 and Western academics enjoyed access to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the knowledge that it held. This also increased their tourism, which helped to boost their economy drastically, which has forced the museum to add new exhibits, but has also taken a toll on the site itself making preservation imperative. The number of tourist increased from 492,500 visitors in 2001 to over a million in 2009.²⁴ The academic side of Auschwitz-Birkenau helped to change historical inaccuracies and the museum was able to collaborate with other academics on preservation methods.²⁵ The museums official website states that their main goals are to, "help people better understand the challenges of the modern world. To educate about all the facets of the tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust, Polish victims, and Nazi terror during the occupation, the destruction of victims in the concentration camp system, the persecution and mass murder of the Roma, and about the systematic exclusion of entire national groups from society."²⁶

Some preservation concerns include the original buildings in Auschwitz and Birkenau, the four destroyed gas chambers, surrounding protective zones and fencing, and literature that includes Nazi German death books and personal files of the prisoners.²⁷ They also hope to conserve the more than 110,000 pair of shoes, 3,800 suitcases, 12,000 pots and pans, 40kg of eyeglasses, and 470 prostheses, most of which are on display for public viewing.²⁸ They hope to preserve and conserve Auschwitz-Birkenau for future generations. Educational programs have been set up in Israel, Great Britain, Italy and other countries in order to educate the younger

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Andrew Curry, "Can Auschwitz Be Saved," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?no-ist> (accessed April 16, 2014).

²⁵ Pam R. Jenoff, "Managing Memory: The legal status of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Resolution of Conflicts in the Post-Communist Era," *The Polish Review* 46, no 2 (2001): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25669250> (accessed April 17, 2014).

²⁶ Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=85 (accessed April 15, 2014).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

generation.²⁹ The last of the Auschwitz-Birkenau survivors are dying off and all that will be left to tell the story of the Holocaust is the site itself.

A firm believer in the preservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau is Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, Chairman of the International Auschwitz Council and former prisoner of Auschwitz-Birkenau. He believes that the only people who can decide the fate of Auschwitz-Birkenau are those who died there.³⁰ He believes future generations need to know the truth and the memories will live on through the preservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.³¹ We preserve historical sites around the world, why should we forget the events and heinous acts against humanity that occurred at Auschwitz-Birkenau.³² He summed it up perfectly by stating, “When a man commits evil, he tries to obliterate its traces. I hope to be a false prophet in saying that, but if we allow Auschwitz-Birkenau to disappear from the face of the Earth, we might just be opening a way for a similar evil to return.”³³

The Polish government is being joined by other countries, such as the United States in preserving, conserving, and educating the public on the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum obtained some of the original barracks from Birkenau as part of one of their permanent exhibits. It took many years and intense negotiations for the Holocaust museum to obtain the barracks.³⁴ But in 2003, Poland passed a law that stated that no historical artifact could remain on loan abroad for longer than five years without being returned for inspection.³⁵ Both Poland and the Holocaust museum feared that sending them back and forth to Poland for inspection would cause irreparable damage. However without the barracks an integral part of the museum would be incomplete. Both parties came to an agreement and a new set of barracks are going to be sent to the Holocaust museum for permanent housing to avoid the law.³⁶ With every positive aspect of Auschwitz-Birkenau there are also negative ones.

²⁹ Andrew Curry, “Can Auschwitz Be Saved,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?no-ist> (accessed April 16, 2014).

³⁰ Raffi Berg, “Cash Crisis Threat to Auschwitz,” *BBC News*, January 26, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7800397.stm> (accessed April 15, 2014).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Katherine Boyle, “Auschwitz-Birkenau barracks at Holocaust Museum to be returned to Poland,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/auschwitz-birkenau-barracks-at-holocaust-museum-to-be-returned-to-poland/2013/09/15/ff95ee3e-25fb-11e3-b75d-5b7f66349852_story.htm (accessed April 17, 2014).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

While the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum is willing to loan some of their artifacts to other museums and countries, they are unwilling to give personal items back to survivors or their descendants. The most recent case involves a Holocaust survivor by the name of Dina Gottliebowa Babbitt, who was ordered by Dr. Mengele, also known as Dr. Death, to paint the abnormalities of the Gypsies.³⁷ Her seven paintings still remain in Auschwitz as part of the museum.³⁸ She would like the paintings back, but the museum refuses to give them back because they claim that these paintings are evidence to the crimes committed in Auschwitz, especially because the Gypsies were one of the last groups to be recognized in their suffering at Auschwitz.³⁹ The museum feels that if they return all the artifacts in Auschwitz to their owners, then there would be nothing left to educate the public.⁴⁰ Though there are many supporters of Babbitt, the museum is still refusing to give her paintings back and they hope that they will be able to come to a mutual agreement.⁴¹ This is not the first incident involving private property and it will not be the last.

Some of the continued controversies plaguing Auschwitz-Birkenau are based on religious values and who suffered more.⁴² The religious controversy started with the communist regime, but came to a head in 1984 with the “convent at Auschwitz” started by a group of Carmelite nuns in one of the former warehouses in Auschwitz.⁴³ These nuns justified their convent as praying for the dead and the Polish Roman Catholics believed that this was a good and respectable thing.⁴⁴ The Jewish population did not condone such religious actions and the “Christianization” of the Holocaust.⁴⁵ This caused great animosity between the Catholics and the Jews and the nuns were finally relocated to a new Christian center in town. Tensions also rose with the placement of a Catholic cross and the Jewish Star of David on the site. There is always going to be the great debate on who suffered more in Auschwitz-Birkenau and this makes the issue of religion difficult to resolve.

There are some historians that believe Auschwitz-Birkenau should be closed off to the public. One of the leading historians on Auschwitz-Birkenau is Robert Jan

³⁷ The Global Jewish News Source, “Case involving Auschwitz Artifacts Highlights Ethical Dilemma for Museums,” The Global Jewish News Source, September 11, 2006, <http://www.jta.org/2006/09/11/archive/case-involving-auschwitz-artifacts-highlights-ethical-dilemma-fro-museums> (accessed April 15, 2014).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Pam R. Jenoff, “Managing Memory: The legal status of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Resolution of Conflicts in the Post-Communist Era,” *The Polish Review* 46, no 2 (2001): 143, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25669250> (accessed April 17, 2014).

⁴³ Ibid., 143-44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Van Pelt who has extensive knowledge of the structural aspect of the site. Many buildings and structures have already been restored and soon there will be nothing authentic left. What weathers away with the sands of time will be replaced by new.⁴⁶ Even as an expert, Robert Pelt believes that visitors try and walk in the shoes of the prisoners when they visit the site, but this is not possible because they will never be able to experience the horrors.⁴⁷ Pelt also makes mention of a Holocaust survivor named Jorge Semprun who believes that once the last Auschwitz survivor dies, the buildings of Auschwitz-Birkenau should be reclaimed by the land.⁴⁸ And yet there are some people who want to rebuild some aspects of Birkenau, for instance the gas chambers. It would be morally repugnant to the people who want to see the site closed down.⁴⁹

Many can argue that Auschwitz-Birkenau is a site of “dark tourism”, which can be defined as “recreational visitation to sites associated with death, disaster, and depravity.”⁵⁰ But there is also the concept of “darker tourism”, which can be defined as “visits to sites of death, disaster, and depravity.”⁵¹ The author argues that there needs to be a distinction between dark tourism and darker tourism. He argues that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a dark tourism destination because it is associated with the Holocaust, but not the actual site.⁵² Darker tourism has the advantage of locational authenticity and can evoke more emotions because of the location.⁵³ Birkenau would be an example of a darker tourism destination because it is not only a museum, but it is a mass graveyard just without the graves and still millions of visitors flock to this site every year. The author states that the only true way to distinguish between dark and darker tourism is by the spatial distance and the time gap that separates them from remembered tragedy.⁵⁴ Dark tourism can also be defined by the way people act when they visit these sites of tragedy. For example,

⁴⁶ Andrew Curry, “Can Auschwitz Be Saved,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?no-ist> (accessed April 16, 2014).

⁴⁷ Raffi Berg, “Cash Crisis Threat to Auschwitz,” *BBC News*, January 26, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7800397.stm> (accessed April 15, 2014).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Derek Dalton, “Encountering Auschwitz: A Personal Ruminantion on the Possibilities and Limitations of Witnessing/Remembering Trauma in Memorial Space,” *Law Text Culture* 13, no 1. (Winter 2009): 187-226, https://www.blackboard.odu.edu/bbcswebdav/pid-3952655-dt-content-rid-3400340_2/courses/201320_SPRING_HIST497_30007/Encountering%20Auschwitz_%20A%20Personal%20Ruminantion%20on%20the%20Possibilitie.pdf (accessed April 14, 2014).

⁵⁰ William F.S. Miles, “Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Dark Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 29, no 4 (2002): 1175-1178, http://www.ttu.ee/public/k/Kuressaare-kolledz/Kolledz/Summer_school/Miles_2002_Auschwitz_Museum_Interpretation_and_Darker_Tourism.pdf (accessed April 15, 2014).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

taking happy photos where millions of people were murdered or the clothes that people wear, whether it's the colors that have a negative connotation or have the word that are directly related to death. Either way, Auschwitz-Birkenau is the prime example of dark or darker tourism.

While in Paris there were not as many distinct reminders about what Holocaust victims and what they went through, but in Krakow, it was all but obvious, especially at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Was there a right and a wrong way to feel in a place filled with such tragedy? A place with such an awful and graphic history deserved the utmost respect for those who suffered and died there.

The emotions didn't quite hit me until we pulled into the parking lot. We were about to walk in the footsteps of those that were imprisoned and/or died there, to hear the stories of so many people, and to just get a small glimpse of what their life was like. I do not believe anything can mentally prepare someone for Auschwitz. It is hard to put the emotions into words. You see the pictures online and learn the history in school, but nothing compares to the overall emotions experienced by actually being there.

What I remember most are the exhibits that house the personal items of the victims. To look at them and know that behind each object is a story. Some items I could not look at. For example, the children's clothing and pictures. We heard the stories of the children involved in the Holocaust and those who could not be put to work were sent to the gas chambers. I think I was bothered the most by this because I have a three year old and could not imagine what these families went through. Many of the children in France were separated from their parents by the Vichy authorities and deported to Auschwitz alone. The trauma of the separation of mother and child is unimaginable and only to be followed by more horrors the gas chambers.

I would hate to say that I was part of the dark tourism experience, but if you define dark tourism by the visiting a site that witnessed great tragedy then I am guilty of this; however if you define dark tourism as acting inappropriately and disrespectfully on a site of tragedy, then this was not the case. Each one of us went to Auschwitz with the utmost respect and understanding. Auschwitz was one of the most life changing experiences that I have ever had. I think about the Holocaust in a completely different way now. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity and its transformation in me as one who will work to never allow another Auschwitz to happen again.

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