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Remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau: Children's Shadows

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Rachel Anderson

Children's Shadows

I'm going to share some of my feelings I had jotted down in my travel journal from March 13th, the day we went to Auschwitz-Birkenau:

Upon arrival in Auschwitz, it did not feel like I had entered a concentration camp, or any kind of place of suffering to be frank. I did not get that feeling until I was standing under the "Arbeit Macht Frei" sign. That is when a wave of anguish and terror swept over me. From that moment on until we got back onto the bus to head back to Kraków, I had the largest lump in my throat from being constantly choked up. Every single exhibit we saw filled my heart with dread and there was no way of getting around that feeling.

The exhibits of the children were the most heartbreaking in my opinion. Our tour guide had made sure to point out the dates of birth on the suitcases on display and pointed out one that had a July 1943 birthdate which meant the owner of that suitcase was a year old or so on arrival at Auschwitz. There is an exhibit of children's drawings that an artist reconfigured to create a sequence in the sense that it went from happy drawings to gloomy drawings. I walked into that room when no one was in it. I did a full 360 just staring at these drawings produced by tiny children imprisoned at the place I was simply visiting. Some things they drew were things that an adult mind should never have to process. Viewing these drawings made me feel like the walls they were on were closing in all around me.

By the time we were on our visit to Auschwitz, I was beginning to feel homesick just because we had been gone a week at that point. When our guide showed us the separation of the women's sections and the men's sections and how families were broken up so easily, I felt extremely selfish in a sense for missing my loved ones. I was on the other side of the ocean on an educational vacation if you will, and I knew I would be coming home to everyone I loved. But inmates at Auschwitz had been separated from their families and loved ones by guns, barbed wire and an electric fence, never to see them again (or at least not know if they would be able to see them again).

This study abroad program expanded my knowledge and consciousness of Holocaust remembrance more greatly than I ever could have imagined. I am not one to get very emotional, but when I sit down at my computer and go through the pictures I took of Auschwitz and all of the other places we had visited, I feel that lump in my throat come back.