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Remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau: "Ghostly Presence"

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Ciara Clark

Ghostly Presence

I don't believe in ghosts, but I've never felt more haunted than I did the day we visited Auschwitz. There is so much to try to explain that I don't know where to begin. The whole way there was a long, stomach-churning journey. Our tour guide switched on a movie in the tour bus on the way there, and I am certain not many of us watched it. We had already studied the Holocaust, and we did not want to look at gut-wrenching pictures of victims taken in the place we were about to visit. Arriving in the parking lot was like walking in to a horror film, all the buildings so familiar from the pictures and movies and documentaries we had seen all our lives, and especially those we had studied in our pre-trip classes and research. As they loomed right in front of me, I could not do anything but look away.

I moved through the cold, austere brick buildings in a fog. Some of the buildings had images of shadows painted on the walls. I saw around a corner the shadow of a man wearing a hat. As I turned the corner to see it and find out who he was, I was taken aback by the fact that nobody was there. It took my mind a minute to comprehend the display, and then my heart was in my feet. I could hardly focus in the rest of the rooms because of those shadows and the reality of what they meant. I wanted to reach out, to reach back in time, but that was impossible. Around another corner, I saw shadows of the fences that surrounded Auschwitz on every side, with inmates shoveling something on the other side of the fence -- dirt, corpses-- who knew? Clearly these were displays in a museum meant to elicit a certain response in visitors, but even knowing that reality, the meaning of the shadows was difficult to assimilate.

The most disturbing thing to me about Auschwitz was the fences. No matter where one turned or looked, one was trapped. Anywhere a path met a fence, a sign was posted with a skull and crossbones. Things only got worse as we moved deeper into the camp, an assassination wall, gallows, starvation chambers, standing cells, all of these nightmares I had seen and read about throughout my studies, but now they were all right in front of my eyes. How could it be denied? How could it be ignored? I felt like I could literally sense the lives of over a million people lost there. It was suffocating, and I constantly fought back tears. Moving on to the death camp at Birkenau, I surveyed the vast expanse that it encloses, the foundations of 300 barracks that once stood there and the ruins of the terrible gas chambers where people were murdered so brutally, all testifying to horrors

perpetrated by “man's inhumanity to man,” as is often said. Despite its vast openness, the claustrophobic effect never left my chest. After Auschwitz, I still could not shake the feeling that the ghosts of Auschwitz were still with me, still haunting me. I am sure it will take a very long time for me to understand what I felt and saw. The memory haunts me still.