

An Innocent Abroad  
Feature

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A personal pact at Auschwitz

By Dennis Moran

I'm standing in the gas chamber at Auschwitz.

Those words ran through my mind as a sudden realization of the fact and buckled my knees. For a moment I needed to brace myself against the wall while the weakness passed and the faint screams cleared from my head.

I knew that's where my tour group was headed — the gas chamber at the former Nazi death camp in the outskirts of the Polish town of Oswiecim (the Germans called it Auschwitz). At every turn, the tour guides pull no punches in telling you where you are and what happened there. They strongly recommend not bringing children.

But the gas chamber caught me off guard. I thought we were assembling in a plain cellar anteroom to gather our wits before entering someplace more obviously evil. Then I saw the thin pipes snaked along the edge of the ceiling and it hit me. That moment shook me out of the dull glaze I'd worn for the previous two hours of the tour with a few convulsive sobs.

It's a tough place to wrap the mind around. All the more so because you start to try before you get there. The very name of the place is a symbol for the Holocaust, Nazi horror and the worst of what people can do to each other.

Then you approach and see the familiar double layer of barbed-wire fences surrounding the place, and the haunting starts in earnest.

You take in information and evidence of the daily routine of torture, deprivations, cruel medical experiments and killing, and then try to comprehend the scale of it all. Auschwitz was just one plant, if you will, in a vast industry. The genocide of the Holocaust was not a heat-of-the-war crime; it took a lot of planning and organization.

The gas chamber at Auschwitz was rather makeshift, used in 1941-42 while much larger and higher-tech gas chambers were built at the huge Birkenau camp two miles away. The Birkenau gas chambers could accommodate up to 2,000 at a time, and eventually most newly arrived inmates were sent straight there. They

were told it was for a shower. Then the Cyklon B gas began streaming out of the fake showerheads.

The Nazis managed to destroy most of Birkenau as the Soviet Army approached in early 1945, but what's left is open to public view as a part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial. Auschwitz is mostly intact, a collection of two-story brick buildings that had been a Polish army barracks. It isn't known exactly how many died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but estimates go as high as 1.5 million, more than 90 percent Jews.

You shouldn't bring children, but the Nazis did. There are photos of the cruel medical experiments on children conducted by Josef Mengele, and among the seemingly thousands of inmate photos lining the walls — mugshots and profiles made on arrival — are many, many children.

In one room, our guide pointed to a photo of a girl of about 9, a girl with puffy eyes and a terror-stricken look.

"The little girl's eyes say it all," she said. This was one of the opportunities to turn the attention from information, artifacts, and numbers to a particular face. The little girl in the mugshot had the sort of frightened look you hope an adult will comfort. But this little girl was almost certainly tortured and killed.

I grew up in a place, the Quad Cities, where everybody I know expresses horror at the murder of a single child on those rare occasions it happens. Some of my European friends grew up in a place where the torture and murder of children was for a time done en masse by the German Reich.

Two German friends of mine have told me they would not be able to handle a visit to Auschwitz, including a German-Jewish friend who filmed interviews of survivors with a Shoah Foundation grant. For that matter, other friends have asked why I went.

Because it's there, I guess. It happened and left an indelible scar on the century. Other genocides and atrocities happened before and since, and keep happening. "Auschwitz warns" is printed on a poster I bought in the museum shop.

Of course you don't have to visit the death camps to contemplate such things. And indeed being there doesn't help unravel the mystery of evil — deepens it, if anything. A sense of helplessness in the face of that stayed with me while I walked back to the Oswiecim train station as townspeople around me were busy shoveling walks and building snowmen on the winter's day.

Perhaps I went to gaze at the photo of that little girl and make a pact with her. It's best expressed by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: "We must always take sides.

Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”