

As part of an initiative by the Holocaust Educational Trust, we had the opportunity to visit the most notorious death camp of the Second World War, Auschwitz, and see for ourselves the reality of the Holocaust. Throughout the trip we were encouraged to think about the human element, rather than the statistics. Considering this, we decided to write about the town that existed before Auschwitz, whose rich history has been largely overshadowed by the events of the war.

BEFORE WAR

It is hard to imagine that Oswiecim, like many towns in Eastern Europe, was once home to a vibrant Jewish community. Having first arrived during the 15th century, by 1939 the Jews constituted around 58% of Oswiecim's population and were well integrated with the Catholic inhabitants of the town as many served on the local council. In fact, the cultural life of the Jewish community thrived across Poland during the pre-war years. It was the golden era for the Yiddish film industry and thanks to a long period of statutory religious tolerance, Jewish youth groups alongside diverse political parties and Zionists organizations flourished. Right up until the eve of the war, the Jews of Poland contributed to every walk of life and despite the increasingly anti-Semitic atmosphere they were Polish in every sense.

DURING THE WAR

Soon after the occupation of Poland in 1939, the town of Oświęcim fell under Nazi control. The German army quickly forced the local population out of their homes, removed all the Jews from the town council and burned down the Great Synagogue. This was when life in Oświęcim changed forever.

The town was chosen for the construction of Auschwitz as it already had army barracks previously built for prisoners of war, and it was easy to construct railway lines from all the major European cities. The main purpose of the camp was to facilitate the mass murder of the Jews which was motivated by the Nazis' anti-Semitism. Alongside the Jews, other persecuted groups included homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses, Romani and criminals.

It took until January 1945 for those who lived in Oświęcim to be free from the Nazi regime.

AFTER WAR

People now live in close proximity to the camp, and in walking through the town there is nothing in particular that distinguishes the normal course of life from any other place. Today, 40,000 people live in Oświęcim. But despite this, there is little trace of the Jewish community that was once so strong there.

After the war, there was only one Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who decided to return to the town – his name was Szymon Kluger. He was born in the town in 1925, and died there in 2000, both his parents having died in Auschwitz during the war. He returned in the 1962 to work in the chemical factory, later retiring because of ill health.



Szymon Kluger's grave in the cemetery at Oświęcim

It still seems remarkable that he would have wanted to return there. What is often not talked about when discussing the Holocaust is the loss of culture, and what this meant for the people who survived. For people like Szymon Kluger, the Holocaust was more than mass murder, it was an obliteration of tradition and Jewish history. A bleak reminder of the consequences of unopposed anti-Semitism now casts a shadow over Oświęcim. But maybe, his decision to return was a necessary reminder that we must overcome the evils of the past.

LESSONS FROM OŚWIĘCIM

This article was written in response to a trip to Auschwitz, arranged by an organisation called the Holocaust Educational Trust which aims to spread awareness of the Holocaust and encourages us to consider the lessons that we should take from it. While most of us know about the Holocaust, it is sometimes difficult to see genocide from the perspective of the individual rather than the historian. Therefore the Trust aims to humanise our understanding. Although it may seem harrowing, visiting Auschwitz is a worthwhile experience and everybody should take this opportunity at least once in their lives.

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