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Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant in a Changing Landscape: Seventy Years On

Abstract

January 2015 marked the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz–Birkenau by the Soviet Army. In 2014 alone, over one and a half million visitors crossed the same threshold, beneath the infamous words: *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Of these visitors, a majority were organised educational groups, particularly high school, college, and university students. British visitors are second only to Polish in the number of visitors. Writing from the perspective of an educator within British HE, with experience of delivering Holocaust education at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the author considers the imperative for Holocaust education in the UK and at sites of history, at a time when the number of Holocaust living survivors is rapidly decreasing, yet visits to the sites of the Holocaust are at an all-time high.

Keywords

Holocaust, Auschwitz-Birkenau, international visits, Prime Minister's Commission on the Holocaust

Introduction

In 2014 1,534,000 visitors walked through some of the most familiar gates in the world, beneath a slogan that has come to symbolise Nazi brutality: *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the notorious words wrought in iron above the gates of Auschwitz concentration camp in South-West Poland (Bartyzel, Mensfelt, and Sawicki, 2015, p.19). Of these visitors, seventy per cent were classified as 'young people' by the museum, and the majority were guided round the site by the museum's educators, who deliver the historical lessons of the site in 19 languages (Bartyzel, Mensfelt, and Sawicki, 2015, p. 21). UK visitors remain the second-highest visitor group after Poland, making up almost 200,000 of 2014's figures (Bartyzel, Mensfelt, and

Sawicki, 2015, p. 20). 2014 also saw the launch of UK Prime Minister David Cameron's initiative, the Prime Minister's Commission on the Holocaust, announced 27 January 2014, International Holocaust Memorial Day. The Commission, with its membership made up of cross-party political representation, experts in the field and celebrities, commits to creating a memorial and lasting and effective educational resources on the Holocaust for future generations. The Commission is a timely reminder that the face of Holocaust education is necessarily changing as the survivor generation dwindles, and the event itself fades from living memory.

The record number of visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2014, which has increased year upon year indicates the demand for an 'authentic' educational and historical experience of the Holocaust, and is one way of bringing students into contact with a tangible piece of history, after the survivors have gone. An educational visit to as site of such extreme trauma and significant history is laden with challenges. Equally, however, the visit provides a unique opportunity to bring students to the terrain of the history they are studying, and a site visit can offer unrivalled potential to engage students with their academic study. In this article I firstly outline the state and rationale of Holocaust education in Britain, then discuss issues of delivering site-based Holocaust education at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a context I have personal experience of. Finally I evaluate what I believe the real educational value of a site such as Auschwitz-Birkenau to be.

Holocaust Education in Britain

The British commitment to Holocaust education, remembrance and research is enshrined in the Stockholm declaration of 2000, with Britain one of the members of the Taskforce on International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (now the

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, or IHRA). The Holocaust has featured on the British National Curriculum since 1991, the first European country to make the Holocaust a mandatory subject within the history curriculum for state schools (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2012, p.1). In 1991 visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau (globally) were less than half a million. By 2001, the year of the first international Holocaust Memorial Day - 27 January, marking the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau– the figures had climbed to half a million. Since then the numbers have risen consistently year upon year to the vast figures the museum receives today.

What is not mandated in the National Curriculum is the Rwandan genocide, the massacre of Bosniaks during the Bosnian war, or any other recent atrocity, each of which revived the well-worn moral dictum of 'never again'. Once could question whether the succession of humanitarian crises to follow the Holocaust is a resounding failure of the moral lessons believed to be imparted by its study, or perhaps an increased imperative for the continuation of Holocaust education. There is a long-standing tension between universalising and isolating the Holocaust as an historical event. For every educational figure to argue that the Holocaust has a transformative value because it holds lessons of universal significance and enduring resonance, there will be a scholar who will argue for the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and the necessity to maintain the integrity of Holocaust memory by emphasising its uniqueness over its universality. Certainly, the elevation of the Holocaust above other genocides and historical events, as compulsory for UK education, implies that there is something different about the Holocaust, something that happened during this event that separates and isolates it from other atrocities. Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer, for a long time a major proponent of the Holocaust-as-unique argument, has more recently revised his argument, recognising that calling the Holocaust unique and arguing that ensuing genocides

are not the same thing, is tantamount to suggesting that the Holocaust cannot be again, thus de-legitimising the continued push for its education (Bauer, 2006, pp.14-15).

In 2009 the Institute of Education's Centre for Holocaust Education undertook the first national study into teaching the Holocaust in British schools (Pettigrew et al, 2009). The results of the large-scale teacher survey indicated that the quality and time devoted to Holocaust education in the UK school system is varied and inconsistent. The literature suggests that the time reasonably allotted to the Holocaust on the curriculum is restrictive and inadequate, given the amount of modern history included in the subject, resulting in significant differences between schools as to how much time is dedicated to the Holocaust, which it is reasonable to suggest, may be largely steered by the teachers' own knowledge, interest and confidence in teaching the subject. Kellaway, Spillane and Haydn (2013, p.39) elaborate:

> Given constraints on curriculum time, there are hard choices to make in determining what should be covered in teaching the Holocaust and other important events in history. It is not just a question of considering what content to include and what parameters to set in terms of the chronology and timespan of the focus of the lessons.

With the revised National Curriculum coming into force in September 2014, including a whistle-stop tour of British history from the Stone Age to beyond the Second World War, and the exemption from the National Curriculum for Academy schools, the disparity between schools' approaches to Holocaust education is likely to increase further, which means that when students who choose to approach the Holocaust within the post-16 context, such as via

a visit to Auschwitz, the educator may experience a breadth of subject knowledge amongst their students from potentially nothing at all, to a high level of awareness.

The IOE has been a leading participant in the Prime Minister's Commission on the Holocaust, and particularly the Commission's focus on educational resources on the subject. Much of the recent published research on Holocaust education has in fact emerged from the IOE's Centre for Holocaust Education, and been driven by the Centre's focus in the last few years on the effectiveness of Holocaust education in UK schools. The Centre's goals for 2015, in line with the renewed governmental interest in Holocaust education is to have school teachers and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students participating in the Centre's educational programmes and accredited online MA module 'The Holocaust and the Curriculum', and to develop the 'Beacon Schools' initiative, forming a link between schools and the Centre (Institute for Education, 2015)

Teaching the Holocaust in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Given the clear link between school education and academic research on the Holocaust within higher education, there remains a dearth of up-to-date published research on post-compulsory Holocaust education in the UK, beyond the policy-driving research of the IOE, when compared, for example, to the USA. The visitor figures published by the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum state that seventy per cent of visitors are young people, most of whom receive some form of educational tour. The Auschwitz-Birkenau museum does not recommend itself for visitors under the age of 14, therefore it is reasonable to assume that many of the young visitors participating in educational tours are beyond the age of compulsory school education. Considering the significant emotional impact of presenting challenging educational material within a concentration camp, the respective absence on

evaluative material on the educational impact of such visits on older teenagers and young adults is noticeable.

What is the rationale for teaching the Holocaust at a site of history? Typically, in fact, a site of Holocaust history often refers specifically to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is *a* site of Holocaust history, not *the* site. It is a distinction that could be explored more critically, although some notable Holocaust scholars have raised this question before. 'Berlin can be a confusing city for students to visit. In many ways they prefer simpler narratives and cities like Krakow are, for them, more pleasing to the eye. In Berlin, there are layers upon layers of history everywhere you go – one layer can often obscure the next' (Waters, 2010, 5). I write from a British perspective, where any visit to a continental Europe site of history necessarily includes logistical and financial considerations. Few schools, colleges or universities are in a position to offer lengthy residential, or multi-stop field trips to the continent, therefore the choice of Holocaust destinations is dictated by how much can reasonably be included in a short visit. The town of Oswieçim offers a context with some history, a pre-war town where more than half of the population were Jewish, a community now destroyed. Auschwitz-Birkenau also offers various elements of the machinery of the Holocaust: a concentration camp, a slave labour site, an extermination camp, the final destination of so many deportees some of whom arrived directly from their homes, some had experienced many years of Nazi detention around occupied Europe. The significance of Auschwitz-Birkenau in framing International Holocaust Memorial Day has also arguably played its part in the association of Auschwitz iconography with Holocaust memory and thus, education.

In one respect, then, Auschwitz is a multi-faceted location ideal for interrogating the scale and breadth of the Holocaust. Realistically however, a short visit cannot possibly include all the elements of this vast complex. In the camp's original raison d'être as the final point of Nazi persecution and state murder, does Auschwitz in fact offer the simplest

narrative, free of the layers Waters identifies in Berlin, or just a more sensationalist one? Concentration camps such as Bergen Belsen say more about the Holocaust from a British perspective; sites which were discovered and liberated by British forces as they entered the ruins of Nazi Germany from the West. Historian John Saddler notes the destruction of the Belsen site in 1945, on the one hand an act of defiance by the survivors, aided by the British soldiers, and on the other, an attempt to control the disease that ravaged the camp and the remaining survivors (Saddler, 2010 p.243-4). These efforts to destroy the evidence of Nazism at these sites have left little frame a site educational visit around. Often, the physical artefacts discovered at German camps were distributed to other sites and museums. Many of the exhibits on display at Auschwitz I have been brought in from other camps. These physical pieces of 'evidence' are in fact evidence of atrocities that took place elsewhere, not necessarily in Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is also the case that as the site ages and the infrastructure deteriorates, it is being restored and artificially preserved. This does not detract from what the site represents, or why such artefacts are on display, but it does impact on the authenticity of the site, if this is one of the fundamental rationales for delivering education on-site. What Auschwitz-Birkenau as an entire site represents is the Holocaust encapsulated – the final destination of so many victims, Jewish, non-Jewish, political, non-political, from all corners of Europe; those selected for forced labour, and those selected for death.

Since 1988 the Holocaust Educational Trust has been a major driving force in supporting and delivering Holocaust education in UK schools, colleges and universities. The concept of a one-day educational visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau was realised by the Holocaust Educational Trust under the rationale that 'hearing is not like seeing'. This government-sponsored initiative, called the Lessons from Auschwitz programme, began in 1999 and more than half of the schools in the UK (with a post-16 provision) have now taken part in it, over 20,000 British students (Holocaust Educational Trust, n.d.).

Having accompanied student groups around Auschwitz-Birkenau on educational visits, I identify a number of challenges and issues for consideration. The first is logistics. 191 hectares of land make up the grounds of the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum and memorial, according to boundaries fixed in 1957 (20 at Auschwitz and 171 at Birkenau) (Oleksy in Davies, 2000, p. 85). In the space of a few hours, visitors on organised tours see a fraction of the site, which now has a dual function of site of history, and tourist destination. A challenge in preparing first-time visitors is that the most frequently encountered narratives of the Holocaust do not prepare the visitor for the dual function to the site as it is presented now. Typical expectations of Auschwitz-Birkenau being harrowing, bleak, sombre, quiet, are logically informed by artistically shot black and white photography online, and by the profane nature to the site. While the modern museum and memorial must maintain a duty of care to visitors, however ironic that may be, visitors may expect this to be less visible, and do not necessarily anticipate their first sight of place to be a coach-park, café, gift shop, and chaotic reception point crowded with visitors queuing up for headsets and radios.

The reality of any one-day visit to the camps is that visitors are walked round the traumatic and graphic array of exhibits, herded along crowded corridors, huddled in together to hear their guide over other guides, moved on quickly so as not to get left behind, and very often are trying to photograph everything they pass as they move. There is an irony to this homogenised mass behaviour, which does not go unmissed here. The only points student groups are able to stop for a few minutes are the times the guide or group leaders, pause to explain, or elicit discussions. Naturally, in an educational visit there is a need to prevent the participants lapsing into disengagement, and to ensure that all members of the overall group receive an educational experience consistent with the aims and ethos of the organising group, but there is also a tension inherent within breaking into students' individual engagement with the environment to force a group discussion. In an environment which can be totally

overwhelming and that is from the beginning often antithetical to expectations, continually disrupting individual orientation, engagement and thoughts, can be counter productive to the rationale for delivering Holocaust education on site in the first place.

The second challenge is in negotiating the various competing agendas at work within the historical site-cum-educational museum. Firstly, as I have stated, Auschwitz-Birkenau contains some striking – I would go so far as to say iconic – features, namely the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate within Auschwitz I and the watchtower and gateway to Birkenau. These physical landmarks of the sites orientate the visitor into the camps, according to the route they have read in the testimonies: the unloading ramp, the gate, the three-tier beds, and the latrine barracks, yet they are often anachronistic, muddled, historically inaccurate orientations of the site. The crowded reception point for present-day visitors was once the registration point for deportees, and is therefore a crucial element of the Holocaust narrative. Because tourist features mask the history of the building its significance can easily be missed. Keil considers these issues and identifies 'the moment when modern visitors truly enter Auschwitz' as the passing through the infamous gates, a 'liminal moment' in the visit (Keil, 2005, 484). What Keil's article identifies is the tension between surrounding students with recognisable stimuli, which is both a hook and a distraction, and simultaneously demanding their attention and educational engagement.

The physical exhibits within the museum (largely Auschwitz I), whether discovered at the site or shipped in from other camps, support and bolster the imagery which fills most testimonies, the selection process, in front of the seemingly ubiquitous Dr Mengele, the violent loss of possessions, the ruthless dehumanisation process the deportees endure. The trophies of Nazi barbarity and Jewish victimisation are now presented behind glass walls. James Young writes of the 'macabre dance of memorial ghosts' who are present only by their absence, behind their confiscated glasses, beneath their confiscated clothes and shorn hair,

laid bare in the exhibition (Stier in Hornstein et al, 2003, p. 212). There is a very specific trajectory of victimisation and suffering throughout; the exhibits displaying the absence, and the suffering and dehumanisation of the victims are made clear, and are unrelentingly thrust upon the visitor, whereas the collections of works of art, caricature, and craft, of incredible skill and effort, highlighting the human talent, the resistance, the humour and personalities of the prisoners, are hidden away from the standard tour. Many visitors will leave the site with no knowledge of these archives and special collections, and little sense of the defiance, humour and energy of these prisoners, their identity subsumed beneath the dominant theme of suffering and dehumanisation presented by the typical exhibitions. This singular Jewish identity as that of victim, which seems to emerge in much Holocaust discourse, when not placed within a wider scope of Jewish cultural life in Europe, is the reason British historian Lionel Kochan expresses concerns about the place of the Holocaust in UK education at all (Short and Reed, 2004, p. 8).

The educational agent leading the group will have a specific and defined trajectory on the site visit, and a short space of time to achieve this; there is clearly an agenda at work here. There is also a further agenda that may conflict with that of the visitors and the education agent. The guides at the camp are generally Polish and have dedicated a long time to training for their roles. For guides who have a personal connection to the Holocaust that is not part of the Jewish story of the Holocaust, there is a desire to share this with their visitors which may conflict with the story the visitor or the group wishes to focus on. It may be the case, for example, that many visitors to the camp will spend several hours there and leave again with no knowledge of the gypsy family camp, or the children's camp. Similarly, the narrative of the Polish prisoners of war may be totally absent from a tour of Auschwitz because it says nothing about the Jewish Holocaust narrative, or it may be added to a tour at the wish of the professional guide because of a personal agenda. Although the competing agendas in

operation within the site are demonstrative of the number of national and cultural stories of the Holocaust, each a strand of life enveloped and devoured by the Nazi juggernaut, the one thing Auschwitz-Birkenau presents more clearly than any other site of Holocaust history, mere perfunctory mentions of such stories without the time spent to consider the people behind the narratives and the impact on these communities now, can risk being seen as incongruous and extraneous. While the scale of the Holocaust only really begins to emerge through these multitudinous narratives and there is an undeniable value in this, the programme an educator is most likely working to, whether it is curriculum based or the programme of the organising agency, does not often permit many disruptions to the planned schedule, and therefore disrupts the potential for the student to engage with these various elements of the Holocaust.

Krystina Oleksy, in her capacity as senior curator at the museum, recognises that the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau performs different functions for different visitors. The first visitors to the site, Oleksy identifies, knew personally of the impact of Nazism in Europe, therefore the site was purely a place of remembrance and a grave. Now however:

> Young people should know that Auschwitz was the work of ordinary people who were often similar to us. They were ordinary people before the rise of Nazism and after the fall of Nazism. Nothing marked them as different from their neighbours, as was repeatedly demonstrated in the trials of the war criminals. Presenting the perpetrators as monsters or sadists would be the best way to tear Auschwitz out of its historical context and to reject any personal responsibility for what could happen in the future. Our task is to show how, given certain circumstances, people can condone cruelty and follow immoral, inhuman orders. Such a

> presentation makes the problem relevant and prevents it from being regarded as remote history (Oleksy in Davies, 2000, p.79).

Oleksy sees her role as presenting the site she curates within a moral paradigm. While not denying the value of what Oleksy sees her role as, I do not believe the museum, or as much of it as the typical visitor sees, performs this function. Visitors to the sites, particularly Auschwitz I, are exposed to extremely personal and traumatic exhibitions, yet for those visiting in an educational context they are expected to negotiate these confrontational and emotive images with a finer understanding of the human narratives and figures behind this, and also with an understanding of the contemporary significance of the site, and of Holocaust education more broadly. Kay Andrews, who has significant experience of delivering and evaluating Holocaust education, makes a valuable comment on the impact of using Poland, and specifically Auschwitz-Birkenau as the destination for educational site-visits:

> In my experience, the emotional response many have to a site such as Auschwitz-Birkenau – especially on a short visit – leads some students to focus more on commemoration than on historical understanding. This is not to negate the importance of commemoration, but to raise the question of how we ensure students develop an understanding of the events as well as being able to memorialise (Andrews, 2010, 46).

Ian Gregory offers an alternative perspective on how the emotional impact of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau can inform a moral education:

> An education about the Holocaust, above all things, simply must convey the misery and degradation that it brought in its wake. Holocaust survivors wrote so that we should understand the outrage to which they were subjected. We owe them no less than to ensure their voice is heard and the lessons learned. It is not the task of Holocaust educators to disguise from the young the depths to which humanity can sink (Gregory in Davies, 2000, p. 59).

In June 2014 American teenager Breanna Mitchell posted a photo of herself on her Twitter page, with the caption 'selfie in the Auschwitz concentration camp'. Mitchell's post and complaints about her smiling 'selfie' went viral. Naïve, Mitchell may have been to post such an image, but she is far from the only visitor to have done so. The subject has been discussed widely in Israeli media, where the selfie craze has seen many similar images posted to social networks from among the 100,000 high school students who visit Poland each year from Israel (Uni, 2014). What this latest issue of concentration camp etiquette demonstrates, is that Auschwitz is a stage. Visitor behaviour varies from nationality to nationality, and is inevitably scrutinised by fellow visitors. Young students are presented with the tourist version of the Holocaust in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and necessarily participate in this industry as visitors to the site. At the same time, they are expected to elicit the historical, and possibly moral, lessons from the site, a difficult balance for any visitor. Ordinarily students have the privacy of the classroom within which to explore and respond to a challenging subject. In a public space such as Auschwitz, students are denied this shield, and educators, while not attempting to prescribe a response, must at least be aware of this too.

Conclusion

Gregory's assertion on revealing the truth of the Holocaust to students, and the social minefield students tread while visiting sites, leads me to question what we expect students to gain from Holocaust education. I know from experience that students are motivated to visit in an effort to understand what happened there, and how it happened. I have set out my concerns as to how achievable this is, given the constraints of selecting a single site and with limited time to explore it. Holocaust education is a deeply challenging subject. When placing it within the historical site, more complex issues arise. Pedagogically, this form of Holocaust education has little measurable value in terms of how value and success is typically standardised. I don't believe it is possible to teach this subject without some form of agenda, particularly given the scope of the subject and typical time restraints placed upon it, and the exercise is an emotional and practical challenge for educators, facilitators and students in terms of how the subject is delivered in an educationally responsible and socially relevant manner. The issue of selectivity in what narratives are explored in site-based education is one which significantly impacts on what memories of the Holocaust are passed on from generation to generation; the broader the scope of these narratives, the more complete picture will be collectively built up. The challenge is how to nurture the interest students will develop, invariably based on differnent narratives, while justifying site-based education by clearly identifying the educational programme of the visit and giving educators the confidence and structure to carry this out in the most challenging of environments.

Clearly, the moral questions of the Holocaust have a place alongside the history of the event in an educational context. There remains, however, the issue of balancing an uncritical pathos, with historical accuracy, universalisation, and moralisation, all while offering a clear pedagogical value. Thus, the Holocaust as an academic subject can become laboured by moralisation, or become too universalised, the facts of the historical event stripped away in the search for dictums and emotional pronouncements that never again shall we bear witness

to the intolerance and hatred which can see hundreds, thousands, millions go to their deaths. Without denying the contemporary significance or moral imperative to be derived from the Holocaust, but I would argue that what an educational visit to a site such as Auschwitz-Birkenau can offer first and foremost is a tangible connection with history. In educational terms, this can be assessed, standardised and evaluated. Whether these are the desirable outcomes of education is another article. The moral imperative to emerge from the Holocaust is personal and almost impossible to usefully evaluate, yet this may well be the - albeit unquantifiable - most lasting memory for students visiting these sites. What Auschwitz-Birkenau may offer in a greater capacity than the classroom is the genesis for students to derive the moral lessons from the Holocaust independently.

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