

## Site-seeing : Reflections on visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with teenagers

**Abstract:** Every year the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum receives hundreds of thousands of visitors. Many of these are school pupils on organised educational tours. This paper considers how the museum presents itself to visitors generally, then raises a number of considerations around the particular needs of teenage visitors. The research findings presented are based on semi-structured interviews with a small group of 17 year olds who were visiting the museum as part of the Holocaust Educational Trust's *Lessons from Auschwitz* (LfA) programme. LfA visits provide a context of good practice here, from which this paper explores young people's reactions and interactions with sites at the nearby town of Oświęcim, at Auschwitz I, and at Birkenau. Further, it explores their reflections on hearing from a Holocaust survivor prior to their visit, and their motivations for participating in this visit in the first place. A key consideration is their emotional engagement with the sites and how they perceive and understand this emotional interaction (both as a present and ongoing experience). The findings suggest that young people experience their visit in a variety of ways, and that the survivor, the town, and the museum all contribute to their growing understanding of the topic in a range of interlinking ways. From the evidence, this is clearly a necessarily incomplete and ongoing process in their learning. Given this, the paper concludes by raising a number of considerations for educators to more broadly consider when taking educational visits to the museum, to help them support their pupils in their learning.

**Key words:** education, educational visits, Auschwitz, Oswiecim, emotional learning

Auschwitz was never meant to be visited, yet in 2017 the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum received around 2.1 million visitors – the largest number to date and the result of a four-fold increase in visitor numbers over the previous two decades.<sup>1</sup> Many of these visitors were school pupils, who appear to be between the ages of 14-18,<sup>2</sup> engaging in educational excursions with their teachers or youth leaders. This paper raises some of the issues that might be considered when visiting the museum with pupils of this age, within the wider context of ‘dark tourism’ and the management of difficult heritages in Poland.<sup>3</sup> It offers preliminary research undertaken with the Holocaust Educational Trust on their *Lessons from Auschwitz* project (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme/about-lfa>) as an example of good practice to prompt and provoke further research and discussion. These discussions are based on the author’s experience as a researcher within the field of Holocaust Education, as a former schoolteacher, and as an Educator on the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project.

### **(Dark) Tourism in Poland – preserving history and memory.**

The term ‘dark tourism’ was first used in 1996 to describe ‘a fundamental shift in the way in which death, disaster and atrocity are being handled by those who offer associated tourism ‘products’’.<sup>4</sup> Poland’s economy continues to benefit from a growing tourism industry (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/413249/number-of-arrivals-spent-in-short-stay-accommodation-in-poland/>), and undoubtedly part of this industry centres around activities which can be classified as ‘dark tourism’ because of their connections with the country’s wartime past.<sup>5</sup> This has inevitably led to an uncomfortable relationship between past and present, where difficult heritages collide with the contemporary commercial realities of the tourism industry. In Kraków for example, souvenir shops and stalls sell caricatured pasts of the Jewish history of the town, while museums, memorials and restaurants all contribute further to this clichéd veneer. The active Jewish population of Krakow now numbers a few hundred (with only a handful of synagogues in regular use), while the former Jewish district of Kazimierz has been redeveloped as a vibrant cultural hub. A beneficiary of cheap

airline connections and a magnet for stag and hen parties, Kraków presents itself as a fusion of histories, cultures and faiths, yet the country's official tourism and information portal (<https://poland.pl>, managed by the Republic of Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) underplays the darker side of its recent history. While the Ministry's wish to foreground Polish history before and beyond occupation and persecution is entirely understandable, these prevailing contemporary presentations disguise what has at times been a 'bitter controversy' over 'the ongoing legacy of Auschwitz' and its associated history post-liberation.<sup>6</sup>

The development of Nazi-era sites in Poland has been unavoidably ad-hoc. Attempts at co-ordination have been frustrated by disputes over ownership of land, over looted property, and – most problematically – over memory and how most appropriately to commemorate what was lost.<sup>7</sup> An example of this is the site of the former Chełmno extermination camp (<https://chelmno-muzeum.eu/en/>). The site's misappropriation over several decades has resulted in a *mélange* of memorials that struggle to present a coherent narrative for visitors, and that impede archaeological work at the site.<sup>8</sup> The Chełmno site illustrates the enormity of the undertaking facing those tasked with preserving and presenting such places across Poland. Consequently, many of these places have remained unmarked or minimally defined. At other sites marking or commemoration is more explicit, with numerous efforts at recreation or reconstruction. Marking and defining these sites for future generations has been a complex and exhausting undertaking, and one which will always be necessarily incomplete.

### **Auschwitz Birkenau – a site of history, a site of memory**

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum arguably embodies *all* of these approaches. Parts of the museum remain relatively unmarked (such as the extensive mass graves towards the back of Birkenau) while other parts are nominally defined (such as the photograph illustrating where the camp orchestra played at the entrance to Auschwitz I). The memorial at the end of the rail tracks at Birkenau more explicitly marks and

commemorates the final journey for so many of the victims. Then there is the recreation and reconstruction within the crematoria at Auschwitz I<sup>9</sup> (and more recently in the iconic 'Arbeit Macht Frei' sign above the entrance gate, following the theft and subsequent recovery of the original in 2009). The institution's attempts to meet a variety of needs – as a memorial, as a museum, and as an authentic site – might appear contradictory, but the museum publicly states that it believes it 'in fact fulfils all of these functions, as they do not cancel out, but rather complement one another',<sup>10</sup> and it is certainly not the only historic site confronting such issues.<sup>11</sup>

Established as a museum in 1947, the first exhibits detailed the experience of Polish prisoners through objects such as photographs of inmates, their stolen possessions, and the detritus of industrialised murder (for example, the display of discarded Zyklon B cans).<sup>12</sup> The original museum reflected communist anti-Fascist narratives,<sup>13</sup> but the museum exhibits have refocused from the Polish narrative towards the Judeocide perpetrated primarily at Birkenau following the country's democratic transition from 1989 (and this is where its emphasis has remained). As such it has come to symbolise *different* things at *different* times, for *different* audiences. This has enabled, 'Auschwitz, and the Holocaust in general, [to] become part of almost everyone's 'memory'... It necessarily escapes, therefore, from any single interpretation, any one 'truth', and has to adapt to the needs of many different groups'.<sup>14</sup> This was manifest in the site's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. At the time it was defined as being 'directly or tangibly associated with events... of outstanding universal significance' under Criteria VI (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>), and was recognised as bearing 'irrefutable evidence to one of the greatest crimes ever perpetrated against humanity' (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31>). Further, the citation acknowledged how the site was 'a place of memory' and 'of transmission to future generations and a sign of warning'. But calling upon this site to perform so many functions has been a cause of dispute since its foundation.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, 'Auschwitz' is well known, yet often misunderstood. Nonetheless, it remains arguably the fulcrum of Holocaust memory,<sup>16</sup> and *how* and *what* is presented at Auschwitz-Birkenau defines global Holocaust memory and is under constant and intense scrutiny.

It 'represents perhaps one of the greatest dilemmas for interpretation'<sup>17</sup> as it is a site that both presents and *represents* history – the former arbitrated through rigorous academic enquiry, while the latter is a mediation between the site and the visitor. It is a consideration of this mediation – particularly for younger visitors – that will be the focus now of this paper.

### **Visiting with school pupils from the UK – a case study**

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (its official title) welcomes thousands of visitors every day and many of these are teenagers on organised educational tours. Some visit as part of their studies in school History lessons, others visit with various youth, religious, or community groups. Affordable flights in and out of nearby airports mean that like most other visitors they mainly arrive on coaches and rarely stay in the locality for longer than a day.

It can be argued that the UK is not a case representative of these various groups and I fully acknowledge and accept this criticism.<sup>18</sup> The UK's relationship with the Holocaust is materially different from that of our European neighbours, as it did not happen on British soil (although the Channel Islands were occupied and prisoners were deported from the labour camp on the island of Alderley). However, since there is *no* single narrative of the Holocaust it cannot be said to have happened in a particular, universal manner *anywhere*. Different countries across Europe experienced the Holocaust in diverse, often unique ways. Consequently, any case study will be as universally applicable as it is inadequate. What is offered here is a consideration of an educational programme in *one* European country as it attempts to help its young people better understand the events of the Holocaust through visits to the site at the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum.

The curriculum in schools has been a matter of devolved government policy within the constituent countries of the UK for many years. While there is no specific requirement for pupils in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland to study the events of the Holocaust,

pupils in England study it as part of a compulsory unit of the National Curriculum for History.<sup>19</sup> Whilst not all schools are required to follow this programme (due to local funding arrangements for schools), the majority do. Consequently, British pupils tend to learn about the events of the Holocaust in History lessons, usually between the ages of 13-14.<sup>20</sup> The Holocaust Educational Trust (<https://www.het.org.uk>) was established in 1988 by two prominent parliamentarians in response to the draft proposals for the new National Curriculum (and the debate surrounding the inclusion, or not, of the Holocaust as a topic within the documentation). The Trust's flagship programme is the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme>), open to all 17-18 year-olds in state schools and funded by the devolved governments in the UK's component countries. Each project consists of four parts:

- An Orientation Seminar
- A one-day visit to Poland
- A Follow Up Seminar
- A 'Next Steps' project

Each pair of participants from a school or college works in a group of around 20 young people led by an experienced Holocaust Educational Trust Educator, possibly joined by a handful of teachers or other guests (such as local newspaper reporters or politicians). Each project takes around 220 people ('participants') on a chartered flight to Poland and there are around 15-17 such flights each year. Since its inception in 1998, the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project has taken over 37,000 young people to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. The British were the second largest national group of visitors to the museum in 2017,<sup>21</sup> and the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project is the largest of its kind in the country.

### **Research rationale and methodology**

I have been an Educator on the *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme for six years. During this time, I have accompanied hundreds of young people and teachers on their

visits to Poland. Anecdotally, we frequently hear of the impact participants feel their involvement has had on them. Some even go so far as to say it was a ‘life changing’ experience. This prompted us to consider how we could explore that experience with participants before, during and beyond their visit to Poland. This article presents findings from the initial small-scale research project undertaken during one *Lessons from Auschwitz* visit to Poland, which has subsequently informed a larger-scale project, currently on-going. For the purpose of clarity in this paper, the word ‘Educator’ (demarcated by a capital letter) will be used to describe a freelance educator employed by the Holocaust Educational Trust, as opposed to any other teacher / educator who may be attending. The word ‘student’ will be used when referencing those 17-year-olds who agreed to take part in this research study, as opposed to other student participants on this *Lessons from Auschwitz* visit.

This research builds on my previous work exploring the role of emotion in classroom-based Holocaust Education,<sup>22</sup> my experiences as an Educator on the project, and recent research in the UK around Holocaust Education and visitors’ experiences at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.<sup>23</sup> Drawing from these studies, it adopts a constructivist methodology, with the underlying assumption that people’s experiences of the site will be co-constructed in the nexus formed amidst their social lives, their personal and familial histories, the site itself, and the various forms of mediated memory they encounter at the site and beyond.

This small study involved twelve 17-year-old students on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* project day visit to Poland, from the north of England. They represent a small, purposive sample from whom voluntary, informed consent was sought prior to the day of travel.<sup>24</sup> During the visit I accompanied their group as a participant observer, as I was *not* their group’s Educator (although I clearly self-identified to the students as both a researcher and Educator from the outset, in the interests of avoiding deception).<sup>25</sup> The students were interviewed using a semi-structured instrument,<sup>26</sup> aimed at exploring their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the site as the day visit progressed. Interviews were conducted at opportune moments during the day, when

they were not actively engaged in educational activities. I also felt it was inappropriate to conduct interviews whilst on site at the museum, out of respect both for the site and the students' privacy during what can be a very challenging encounter with the place.<sup>27</sup> Preliminary findings are presented here within the context of a wider discussion around the purposes of the project. Finally, implications for practice are considered, alongside implications for the next stage of this research.

### **Students' experiences on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* day visit to Poland**

- Students' motivations for visiting

Participants volunteer and are selected to represent their school or college on a *Lessons from Auschwitz* project in a variety of ways; most often by application letter to their co-ordinating teacher.<sup>28</sup> Some are studying History, but many are not. Whether they would regard themselves as historians, pilgrims, tourists, or just curious visitors will depend on their motivations for volunteering. Equally, individuals cannot necessarily know how others (even within their own group) see themselves in this respect. Consequently, groups are likely to consist of pupils who are visiting in various ways. While the majority will no-doubt be interested in learning more about the site's history, there are certain to be pupils with a variety of undisclosed personal histories and familial hinterlands that cause them to interact with the site in different, intimately personal ways.

Upon arrival in Poland, participants are taken by coach from the airport to Oświęcim (the town adjacent to the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum). During the coach transfer, the students were asked why they had wanted to come on this visit. None expressed a particular reason beyond simply 'wanting' to go. However, one elaborated that 'I can't really say exactly why I wanted to go. I just know I wanted to see it. I've heard so much about it, I want to see it in real life'. At the start of this article I asserted that 'Auschwitz was never meant to be visited'. This was because Auschwitz is not there; the Auschwitz of today is *not* the Auschwitz of the 1940s.



Indeed, the museum itself refers to today's visitors 'visiting the post-camp space' – a specific choice of words differentiating what *is*, from what *was*.<sup>29</sup> It is important therefore, to make this distinction clear for young visitors to the museum. What they experience on their day visit is not (and can never be) an authentic experience of the camp. Rather, they are visiting a geographic present of a historic past – the 'post-camp space' not the 'real life' this student expected. Whilst they are engaging with authentic objects, they are presented by the museum for mass consumption, and for the better comprehension of the incomprehensible. One of the other students was more clear about this distinction; referring back to having heard a survivor during their Orientation Seminar a week earlier, he considered that although he might 'go home now and I'll be like oh yes, I've been to Auschwitz', he appreciated that 'you haven't really... you've visited what was'.

- The Holocaust as an individualised event

Participants raised the issue of the Holocaust as an *individualised* event on several occasions during the interviews. At the Orientation Seminar they had heard from a Jewish survivor of Bergen-Belsen, whose testimony they had listened to for around an hour before having an opportunity to ask them questions. As young people living at the close of 'the Era of the Witness', this opportunity is an increasingly rare and valuable one.<sup>30</sup> The experience affords them far more than passive engagement with a recorded text, which 'cannot be compared to seeing and hearing a survivor or eyewitness face to face'.<sup>31</sup> As one student put it, 'obviously it does have more of an impact when the survivor's there, talking to you directly'.

Clearly the experience of recently hearing directly from a survivor resonated with the students on this visit, in terms of their identification with the individual within the wider event. Whilst contemplating the scale of the Holocaust as presented at the museum, one student reflected that 'everybody had a life, everybody had a dream. They were all individuals... they all had their own lives'. This evidently particularly struck them in Block 6 at Auschwitz I, where photographs of prisoners line the walls

showing each individual's name, profession, date of entry and date of death. The brevity of their survival 'shocked' several of the students, leaving one to reflect that 'the fact that anybody survived Auschwitz is just amazing'.

- The sites – Oświęcim

Upon arrival in Oświęcim, participants visit a site of pre-war Jewish life, such as the site of the former Great Synagogue on Berka Joselewicza. Although time can sometimes be limited, it is an important part of the programme that participants spend time considering the pre-war community context in-country. Here, they have the opportunity to engage with the town as it *is*, as well as reflecting on the town as it *was*. The Jewish population of the town (which pre-war outnumbered its Christians neighbours)<sup>32</sup> is present now only in its absence. Local people go about their everyday business – challenging the young people to consider complex issues of memory, in contemporary time and space. It was quiet in the town centre on the day of this visit, causing one student to observe that 'it doesn't feel like there's much going on. It feels like we're in the middle of nowhere'. Yet they were also drawn to consider the geographic location of the place within the wider country – 'it's just so big... everything must be far to get to, like you couldn't just walk anywhere that you needed to go, you'd have to drive'. These observations of a quiet town within a larger country also challenged them to consider their own position within the rehearsal of memory (and the impact of their presence as 'tourists' on the local town and its population). Although the focus of this part of the visit is undoubtedly on celebrating the richness of pre-war life, this can make for a necessarily uncomfortable starting point as participants begin to attempt to locate themselves physically within a temporal and geographical memory space. If young people aren't given this opportunity to locate the town in these manifold modes, then their Educators risk presenting them simply with a version of what Cole has critically called an 'Auschwitz-land' which 'threatens to trivialise the past, domesticate the past, and ultimately jettison the past all together'.<sup>33</sup> With young people, dislocating the past from the present, risks nullifying it entirely.

- The sites – Auschwitz I

The scene that confronts the participants upon arrival at Auschwitz I can be strangely perplexing. For school pupils the Auschwitz that they are familiar with (from text books and films – the one whose name has come to be ‘the byword for the epitome of inhumanity and barbarism’),<sup>34</sup> does not correlate with the often tourist-centric scene before them. The various information boards, kiosks, and administrative cabins obscure the entrance, with hotels and other eateries visible across the road. In busy periods, the atmosphere is anything but sombre.<sup>35</sup> The contradiction that exists between young people’s expectations and the reality of the point of arrival can be stark. It is only once they have passed through the main entrance that they get their first view of the inside of the camp and the already familiar ‘Arbeit Macht Frei Gate’. Passing through the gate is ‘a liminal moment, marking the descent into memory’,<sup>36</sup> which can be immensely challenging for young people – indeed for any visitor. This is also the point at which they begin to engage with their museum guide. The museum regards visiting with one of their approved guides as being ‘the most valuable form of learning the history of the camp’.<sup>37</sup> Generally speaking, the students agreed with this assumption, with one remarking they felt the guide’s presence really ‘makes a difference’. There are over 300 museum-trained guides who work at the site in a freelance capacity, providing education in around 20 languages. The Holocaust Educational Trust tend to work with a small group of these guides, who have an enhanced understanding of the *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme – particularly how to work in collaboration with the Trust’s Educators who deliver various inputs on-site during the tour. This is a partnership that has been developed and nurtured over many years in cooperation with the museum. It is with their guide that participants begin to move from one place to the next at this site. They move almost entirely without conversation, secluded within their own thoughts by the headphones through which the museum guides provide their expert and thorough commentary.

Throughout their shared time in these exhibits at Auschwitz I, Educators provide additional educational input in tandem with the museum guides, as well as on-going pastoral support for their group. The collective narrative presented by the museum is both multi-layered and necessarily oversimplified. Consequently, the guides endeavour to present an account that is essentially understandable, whilst remaining ultimately at the limits of comprehension. This led some of the students to see their guide's role as very factual. As one said, 'the way the guides delivered the information was very black and white; this is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened'. Whilst they undoubtedly found their guide's inputs valuable in this way, another questioned 'whether it's meant to be that way [so matter-of-fact], just so that we realise how bad it really was?' The presence of the Educator means that participants are able to explore issues raised, ask questions or receive support in ways that would not be possible in other groups on tours with the same guides. For example, the brief time on the coach transferring from Auschwitz I to Birkenau offers welcome respite for the young people, time to reflect and ask questions, and for their Educators to ensure their well-being.

Constraints of time necessitate that almost all visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum see only a small fraction of the exhibits open to the public. Participants on a typical *Lessons from Auschwitz* project enter Auschwitz I through the Arbeit Macht Frei gate, then head to Block 4. This block details the scale of the extermination perpetrated by the Nazis, through photographic and documentary evidence. It variously presents both the methods of killing, and their consequences. Upstairs in the block, a single dimly lit room houses nearly two tonnes of female victims' hair, illustrating both the human cost and the industrial scale of the Nazis' actions. Next door, Block 5 presents further material evidence of their crimes, such as looted glasses, Tallitot, prostheses, pots and pans, shoes, suitcases, shaving brushes, and tins of polish. These objects all divulge the humanity of the victims, and the inhumanity of their oppressors. Each individual possession acts as a 'gateway' to its owner and these exhibits can be overwhelming for young visitors.<sup>38</sup> This is when the relationship forged between the Educator and their group since the Orientation

Seminar is so vital, enabling them to safeguard the well-being of the participants in their care. Groups move through further exhibits in Block 6 (illustrating the life of the prisoners in the camp) and Block 27 (housing the 'Shoah' exhibition, presented in association with Yad Vashem in Israel

[https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/pavilion\\_auschwitz/index.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/pavilion_auschwitz/index.asp)). They visit the courtyard of Block 11 (site of the 'Execution wall' – a reconstructed site of Polish martyrdom) and the Roll Call Square. The groups then move towards the site of Rudolf Höss' post-war execution, within view of the villa where he lived with his family during his time as camp commandant. Finally, the groups move towards the reconstructed crematoria,<sup>39</sup> which they pass through in silence at the request of the museum guide. The majority of Educators choose not to go into the gas chamber with their groups, preferring instead to supportively receive them as they emerge. Groups then move towards the exit, handing back their headsets as they do so, before re-boarding their coaches to transfer to the site of Birkenau.

- The sites – Birkenau

There is more time for discussion between the group and their Educator at Birkenau than there will have been at Auschwitz I. Participants are often surprised by the size of Birkenau, as one pair of the students said, 'neither of us realised how big either of the camps were and we just kept walking and walking and walking...'. Educators' inputs at Birkenau invite participants to try to continue to connect this enormous physical scale of the industrialised murder with individual stories from survivors (such as testimony from the survivor they heard at the Orientation Seminar, and other survivor testimony extracts read by the Educator). Participants visit the reconstructed barracks at the front of the site, prompting one of these students to comment on the impact 'actually seeing the living conditions that they lived in' had on them. Critical reflection continues at the unloading ramp where the young people are invited to consider the dual (and potentially inconsistent) purposes of the single goods wagon there – presented as both an illustrative exhibit by the museum, and as a memorial by one family to a murdered relative. Towards the back of the site, at the ruins of

crematoria II and III, participants consider the role of the Sonderkommando and acts of resistance such as the uprising of October 1944. The group then move to the Sauna building, before concluding with a commemorative ceremony led by the rabbi accompanying the visit, before returning to the airport by coach. At each point of the visit at the Birkenau site the focus for the Educator is on contextualising and complicating the place and its exhibits and on provoking thoughtful reflection, particularly through engagement with individuals' testimony. The dialogic space created between the museum guide, the Educator and the young person enables the latter to bound their developing knowledge and understanding during the day, creating an opportunity for critical engagement taking them beyond the passively receptive experience of most visitors on guided tours of these sites.

### **Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum – an emotional encounter**

According to the State Museum's own website, visiting the museum can be 'a difficult and painful experience which provokes reflection and the asking of difficult questions to which there is often no answer' ([http://lekcia.auschwitz.org/en\\_12\\_miejsce\\_pamieci/#](http://lekcia.auschwitz.org/en_12_miejsce_pamieci/#)). The students clearly felt that their visit had been an emotional encounter, and one that would not be easy to process. This was apparent even on the coach as they approached the museum – with one expressing a worry that 'I really don't know how I'm going to feel. I can't prepare myself at all for it'. This is something Educators are aware of, and often discuss with participants at the Orientation Seminar prior to the visit to help them manage with their emotions during the day. Once at the museum, the students were struck by a range of emotional reactions to particular places and objects, such as the room displaying victims' hair in Block 4 at Auschwitz I. Some of their reactions were quite extreme – 'I kept feeling sick. Every time I saw something, I felt sick. I just felt really sick' – whilst another found it 'all very grounding'. It's not unusual for participants to talk about their emotional responses on site, and these are often unexpected reactions that they are trying to cope with in real time. Often, they can articulate at the Orientation Seminar how they *expect* to feel on the visit but are subsequently

surprised by how they *actually* react when on-site. Significantly, this often marks the beginning of a process that continues over time, and there was an overwhelming sense among the students that the emotional impact of their visit would continue to resonate and evolve in the coming days and weeks (and possibly beyond). An essential part of the *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme is the Follow Up Seminar. This usually occurs about a week after the one-day visit and this gap allows participants time and space from the visit to begin to process their experience. Several of the students resonated with this intention during their visit. As two of them reflected, 'we think it'll hit us more when we get home, when we have time to really reflect'. Another was clearly struggling to emotionally process their experience, saying 'I don't know. I need a minute, I need a good... I don't know when it's going to hit me. I think probably when I get home, it'll hit me'. The students seemed aware that they had something significant to deal with (or that they *should* have) but were unsure how or when this might happen. Some spoke about the photographs they had taken – for some these were 'to show people who haven't been what it's actually like', whilst another reflected that 'just looking at them doesn't do it [the site] justice'. One participant saw their photographs as being more a personal emotional encounter – '[my photographs are] just for me. I'll probably never go to Auschwitz again, so in a year or two years, to see a picture will trigger my memory'.

The final part of a participant's *Lessons from Auschwitz* commitment is in undertaking a 'Next Steps' project in their school or local community. The emotional impact of their experience had clear implications for this stage as the students began to think about how they would explain to others what they had learned. As one put it candidly, 'I don't know how I'm going to explain what it was like'. The specificity of this comment is interesting – while they might be able to explain the *facts* of what they had seen, they were struggling to be able to explain it in more abstract terms (what it was 'like'). This is further complicated by another's reflection that 'I couldn't expect what it was going to be like until I'd been there'. Perhaps the experience is, necessarily, beyond comprehension and explanation, and this is something the students would need to explore with their Educators at the Follow Up Seminar in the coming days, if they were

to find a satisfactory way in which to understand and explain their experience to others (and indeed, to themselves).

### **Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with teenagers - implications for practice and research**

As one student put it, they had clearly found their day visit 'more informative than what we've been told before' in school. There was a general feeling that the site visits had helped them 'picture the scale of things' better and helped correct misconceptions (such as one participant's incorrect preconception that 'they were all put – like in Birkenau'). In comparison to their classroom-based learning, one student summarised that 'it [the site] really taught me everything'. In these ways, contact with the sites lends invaluable context and complexity to young people's developing understandings. This necessarily must be an incomplete process; there are few answers at these sites, only more questions. As one student put it, they left with far more knowledge, but much of this was 'a lot of answers to questions I didn't know I had' before visiting.

These complexities have been acknowledged by Museum Director Piotr Cywiński in asking 'how can one present this place and its extensive history?'<sup>40</sup> Debate continues to be waged over the form and function of the museum. Undoubtedly 'Auschwitz is a stage'<sup>41</sup> – an assemblage of authenticity and inauthenticity, of history and of memory, of the past and of the present. While a visit to such a place 'can offer unrivalled potential to engage students with their academic study',<sup>42</sup> it is reasonable to reflect on how practical this is at a site of such complexity. Paradoxically then, the immense power of the place to teach about the history of the Holocaust, might also be the source of its incapacity. Taking young people there for a single day might appear to be a futile – or at least inadequate – task,<sup>43</sup> leaving participants little more than 'sleep-deprived and irritable'.<sup>44</sup> The reasons for the *Lessons from Auschwitz* single day visit are primarily financially motivated, and any alternative would mean that fewer young people could visit in this way, diminishing the reach and impact of the project. The



programme is undoubtedly self-aware of these issues, evidenced through regular communication and training within the Holocaust Educational Trust's Educator community. The educational content evolves constantly, in response to historical and pedagogical research, and logistical / funding constraints and opportunities. Similarly, the Trust works closely with the State Museum and its Guide Methodology programme, so each understands the pedagogical intentions of the other, and one another's wider contexts.

This paper has considered *Lessons from Auschwitz* as an example of good practice. It has not sought to be critical of the project, but to consider it as contextualising of some preliminary research findings which have led to, and continue to inform, a larger on-going research project. It has hoped to offer considerations for those visiting with young people from across Europe and beyond. It can never be possible to meet every young visitor at these sites exactly 'where they are'. However, based on this small-scale research, I would urge educators taking young people to sites such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to reflect on the following when planning the pedagogical goals and logistics of their visit:

- Young people's motivations for visiting the authentic site, the personal histories they bring with them, and the influence both might have on their learning experiences.
- The extent to which young people are aware of the site as a post-historical space. It is not the site as *was*, but the site as *is* and this is an important distinction to make clear to them as they visit.
- The role of the survivor in individualising the whole, and how young people can be enabled to connect with the individual narrative within the wider event through their engagement with testimony.
- Young people's connections with sites as mediated spaces (through guides, displays, objects, etc.), and how young people understand, interpret and contextualise these mediations within their developing world view.

- The emotional needs and responses of young people within site spaces, and the role that emotion plays in their understanding and interactions with the sites.

There can never be a perfect way to visit a place as imperfect as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Historians view the Holocaust as ‘a complex process’;<sup>45</sup> one that teachers also evidently find difficult to define in the classroom.<sup>46</sup> Extensive research has been undertaken in the UK in the last ten years to try to better understand teaching and learning about the Holocaust in schools, but this is an inevitably incomplete task and tends to focus on education with pupils younger than those on *Lessons from Auschwitz* projects.<sup>47</sup> This paper suggests the need for further investigation and understanding – moving away from the ‘top-down’ approach (of what should be taught to them and how) to focus instead on young people’s learning and their lived experiences of their encounters with the historical events.

This is a considerable challenge for teachers and educators as they help to shape future memory with the generations of ‘postmemory’, particularly in volatile global political times.<sup>48</sup> The next stage of this research project aims to continue to address these issues and more, with a wider audience of students, Educators, other participants, museum staff and survivors. It is hoped that this will help us as educators towards a better understanding of how young people encounter and interpret these sites. One of the students acknowledged that ‘you’ll never fully understand everything that went on’ there, but perhaps we can empower them with the tools needed to help them move towards a better (if necessarily imperfect) understanding of the place.

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## Notes

1. Bartyzel and Sawicki, “Report 2017”, 23.
2. Nesfield, “Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant”, 47.
3. Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*.
4. Ibid.

5. Stone and Sharpley, "Consuming Dark Tourism".
6. Dwork and Van Pelt, *Auschwitz*, 373.
7. Ibid.
8. Winstone, *Holocaust Sites of Europe*.
9. Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*.
10. Świebocka et al., *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 13.
11. Bond and Jessica, "Introduction".
12. Steinbacher, *Auschwitz, A History*, 13.
13. Stone, "Memory, Memorials and Museums", 522.
14. Benton, "Heritage and Changes of Regime", 152.
15. Świebocka et al., *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 13.
16. Benton, "Heritage and Changes of Regime".
17. Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*, 46.
18. Basse, "Case Study Research".
19. Department for Education, *History Programmes of Study*.
20. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*, 34.
21. Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017", 25.
22. Richardson, *Holocaust Education*.
23. Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant"; Griffiths, "Encountering Auschwitz".
24. Denscombe, *Ground Rules for Social Research*.
25. Kawulich, *Participant Observation*, section 6.
26. Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.
27. Benwell, "Encountering Geopolitical Pasts".
28. Chapman et al., *Evaluation of Lessons from Auschwitz*, 6.
29. Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017", 23.
30. Wieviorka, "The Witness in History", 386.
31. Cowan and Maitles, *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*, 124.
32. Wolnerman et al., *Oświęcim*.
33. Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*, 110.
34. Cowan and Maitles, *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education*, 130.

35. Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant".
36. Keil, "Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead", 484.
37. Bartyzel and Sawicki, "Report 2017", 30.
38. Richardson, *Holocaust Education*.
39. Cole, *Selling the Holocaust*.
40. Cywiński, *Epitaph*, 84.
41. Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant", 52.
42. Ibid., 45.
43. Chapman et al., *Evaluation of Lessons from Auschwitz*, 11.
44. Gray, *Teaching the Holocaust*, 66-67.
45. Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution*, 7.
46. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*.
47. Ibid ; Foster et al., *What Do Students Know*.
48. Zurbriggen, "Researching Sensitive Topics".

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