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Auschwitz was the motivating factor calling Kate and I to Poland for Spring Break. It was our sole reason for being in that country. The first thing we did our first morning in Krakow was schedule our tour. Six hours seemed like almost enough.

Killing time before the tour was excruciating. I had no idea how to prepare mentally for Auschwitz. I did not know what to expect or what would happen. Even as I got onto the bus, I wondered if I was doing the right thing. Kate asked me if I thought I would cry. I did not know.

53 minutes of black and white footage from the day of liberation at Auschwitz played on television screens above our heads. Interviews with the men who filmed the footage were shown intermittently between clips of survivors as a narrator told us what we were looking at. The video showed the examination of the emaciated ex-prisoners receiving check-ups. It was a disgusting display of human life, not because of the quality of the bodies of the prisoners, but because it was done by a fellow human being. It was not a result of famine or disease, but the fault of another human being.

Our group disembarked from the bus and we were given a blue sticker to wear on our shirts to signify what group we were in. I was an English speaker who wore blue. We proceeded through the gates of the Auschwitz museum with no idea what to expect or what would happen next. We were only pointed towards the entrance.

Through the front museum and out the back door, I walked past posters they sold in their gift shop. I wondered who would hang a poster of Auschwitz in their home. Walking outside, the weather was eerily nice. The sun was shining and the temperature was balmy. I was angry at the atmosphere for being so disrespectful. I did not like that life was flourishing in a place that saw the end of so many lives.

Our blue branded group was assigned a tour guide from the Auschwitz museum. He led us away from the door and started his lecture in front of the main gate of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Over the entrance into the camp was a metal sign that read: ALBEI MACHT FREI, which in German means "Work grants freedom." I had seen the image so many times in documentaries or in pictures. I looked past the gateway and looked into the camp. Rows upon rows of red brick barracks filled the background. I realized my uneasiness was coming from the modernity of the camp. All of the pictures of Auschwitz are usually in black and white and make it seem so far away. I never thought of it as something so modern. It was in my world, it was not the ruins of an ancient, far-off world.

While I was taking in my uncomfortable surroundings, our tour guide began explains the history of the Auschwitz concentration camps. My mouth dropped open when he said 1947. That was the year Auschwitz survivors came back to the very location I was standing, the very place they had experienced the worst period of their life, and dedicated a museum to the symbol of their torment. The tour guide elaborated that the survivors felt it was important to inform the world of the hidden activities that went on behind the gates we stood in front of. Our group was dead silent as we walked under the gateway and into the camp.

I was locked into our tour guide. Every statistic he gave, every fact he mentioned, my ears pulled them in ignoring everything else. "11 million people were killed during World War II. Over 1 million of those people would be killed at Auschwitz. This concentration camp is a physical memory to the Polish people. Auschwitz is the most recognized symbol of the Holocaust." There was a pause in his speech as someone asked him a question. In front of me was a young couple. They were two of the small minority of our group that was not an older adult, and could not have been much older than me. I watched as the girl positioned herself a few feet in front a barrack. Placing her hand on her hip and smiling, her boyfriend took a picture of her. May a higher power help her and not allow me to find her grave after her death.

The first building we entered was a barrack that had been turned into the main building to display the documentation of first arrivals into Auschwitz. Our tour guide spoke of the Parisian Jews who had no idea they were going to a concentration camp and believed they were being moved to a colony for the re-establishment of the Jewish community. While the Eastern Europeans were already adjusted to the idea of being sent away and mistreated, the Parisians were not expecting what was to happen to them. He also, among other things, explained the process that people would undergo upon arrival at Auschwitz. He described how all of the people were separated into two lines. One was sent to the gas chambers and the other to the work camps. All of the women, regardless of the line they were in had their hair cut off. When they were sent to the showers, they had no idea whether or not water or gas would rain down on them.

Mountains of hair, five tons of human hair, inside a glass display case was waiting for us in the next room. The Soviets had found it upon arrival at Auschwitz. The hair of women and children, mothers and daughters, was all thrown into a massive pile. The hair had faded over time and was different shades of grey. I walked up to the glass and surveyed the sight. Braids and ponytails, like the ones I wear in the summer, were scattered among the piles. Locks of beautiful hair had been stripped from these women, robbing them of part of their identity. A glimpse of orange peeked out among the mounds of grey. There must have been a red head among the group. My friend Rose is a red head.

To the right in a different display case were nets and textile made from human hair. All of that stolen femininity had been used to make simple objects.

We continued through different rooms filled with the lost belongings of unfortunate victims. Each room held faded memories lurking in the shadows of the possessions snatched from the hands of innocents. An oversized pile of broken eyeglasses sent me back to Rome when I stepped on my own glasses and broke them. I was lost and confused without them. I stumbled around the bathroom looking for a way out, blind without my functional eyes. I shuddered at the thought of being eternally blind.

Our group notices that the glasses are out of date, along with most of the pots and pans and the luggage. The glass of the display case grows thicker as I think of my olive green cloth luggage back at the hotel. It looks nothing like the leather suitcases displaying the names of their owners. They do not make suitcases like they used to.

At the end of the hallway, there is a corridor with glass on both sides. The group makes its way through the doorway to the corridor and finds itself surrounded on both sides by shoes. We walk through the valley of shoes surveying the selection. Wooden clogs litter the piles. Men's shoes peek out at every corner. "Hey Natalie, aren't those the shoes you have been looking for?" I look in the direction of Kate's finger and the glass fades away to the image of my shoes within the heap. Mine were in my suitcase.

The next part of my part of my story I will proceed through slowly. I took baby steps through the building, hesitating in front of every door and every display. I ran my hands along the walls and allowed my fingers to feel the grooves in the wood of the doors, closing my eyes as I did so to isolate the each sense. This was the barrack that contained the punishment rooms.

Every doorway exposed to the hallway down the center of the lager had a glass surface covering the preserved room. Rooms of the S.S. appeared as they were waiting the return of their owner. Open space played between a comfortable bed and working desk covered with materials still ready to be looked over. The political prisoners had rooms that were the same size, but filled with more furniture to accommodate more people. The last room prisoners would ever see before being executed still contained its original sink adorned in the striped lager uniform. Every room was progressively worse than the last, slowly allowing the view to carry the full weight of what happened at Auschwitz.

Down a staircase and through a poorly lit hallway brought us to the front of hell's iron gate. Dragging my feet slowly in steady steps, I found myself in front of the dark entrance of the first gas chamber used on people in

Auschwitz. My eyes lowered themselves from the plaque that commemorated the victims to the floor of the frightful room. I could not bring myself to raise them.

Retreating out from the dark and redirected towards the unspeakable. We proceeded down a hallway that had seen the countless faces of those who suffered and heard the unspeakable cries of desperation that one cannot even imagine, but that the atmosphere begs you to attempt to for the sake of those lost. Starvation rooms. Ten were killed by starvation if one tried to escape. The white cement walls covered in filth were the last images the ten brothers in death would see besides the pained faces of their comrades as they slowly faded from this tormented life, Some of the doors are worn to the bare wood on the inside. My fingers lightly place their tips on the wood in an attempt to absorb whatever may be left there.

Turn to the left and walk farther down this side hallway. Brick closets with tiny wooden doors a foot and a half tall from the floor. Sentenced prisoners were forced to stand four at a time in these crevices no bigger than a chimney. All night they would stand together unable to sit down. In the morning they would go to work, eat, and then go back inside their closet. This would go on for weeks at a time.

Returning from the end and walked up the staircase, past the washroom with the sink and clothes. Outside. The last sight to see: "The Death Wall." The misfortunate were taken from their rooms and asked to dress and wash in the room they would see last. They were brought outside through the door leading out into what should be a courtyard. The ground is covered in gravel and dust. The right side is where you will be directed. A thick grey slab of stone is propped in front of the brick wall rising twelve feet high. The prisoners would have been asked to place their face to the wall and it would be there that they would wait with others for the execution style blow that would end their miserable existence in this inferno. If they were lucky, the corners of the courtyard would not yet be littered with bodies of their peers already shot and left to be recycled.

I turn around in time to see a group of at least twenty tourists wanting to take pictures with the wall. Soon, swarming, buzzing pests, all wanting a chance to see, cover the monument.

My tour guide was waiting outside for me, ready to continue on. As we move to the next building, the guide points out what looks like a playhouse in the center of the road in the camp. This was the station where the guard would take role call when weather was not pleasant. It seems superfluous when you consider the number of people who died from overexposure to the elements during role calls that lasted up to 12 hours long. Some of them did not even have shoes, much less a heated miniature room.

Our last sight at Auschwitz to see was the crematorium located just outside the lager. In order to get to the crematorium, we had to walk through a break in the barbed wire fence. So freely we are able to move between the fence and the outside world, but as was the popular suggestion at Auschwitz, for many, the electric fence was the way out.

Inside the crematorium we walked through a gas chamber that resembled a community shower. Through a door on the side of the gas chamber were huge incinerators used to burn the bodies of thousands upon thousands of victims. It is not right to talk about such things in a paper of such little importance as this one.

Auschwitz-Burkenau was our next destination. One of the largest of the camps at Auschwitz, Burkenau demanded respect. Large brick watchtowers loomed over threatening brick walls, demanding respect and drawing out fear. Ever so often, the breeze would blow the unpleasant smell of decay.

We went up the main watchtower to the very top. From that point, we could see the entire camp sprawling out across the horizon with rows and rows of barracks. The camp was split in half by train tracks that entered the camp through our tower. Our tour guide explained the visions in front of us and told us the horrors that happened at Birkenau.

The left side was the men's camp and the right side was where the women were put. They moved women into barracks that were horse stables that had been adjusted to for people. They were still not complete, however, when they moved the women in and they went without any water for the first few months. They also did not have a good heating system, nor were the conditions clean or suitable for a human person. Carolyn's words echoed in my head as I remember her telling me she had never been to a place dirtier than Cairo besides Mexico.

We proceeded down from the tower and went to Mexico. Inside a stable, he showed us the beds that held six women each night. We saw the hooks on the walls that still remained, waiting for the return of the horses that actually belonged there.

We had to cross the train tracks to get back to the exit. People were stopping to take pictures. I stopped to take in everything that was around me. The sun was setting and the wind was lightly blowing my hair in every direction. I closed my eyes and opened them slowly. The high barbed wire fences, the train tracks that had brought in so many people and took out so few. The buildings upon buildings that unfairly housed human beings as nothing more than animals seemed to go on forever. I turned around to examine the train tracks and saw that behind me, they stopped at they left the camp. They had no beginning, only an end.

Our tour guide finished his oration with these words. "It is important to remember that Germans did this. Human beings did this. We did this. We have to remember that the Germans were not unlike us. They showed us what human beings are capable of. Auschwitz is what human beings are capable of. "

I was once asked if I would recommend going to Auschwitz. My answer to that is no. You recommend restaurants and hotels; you do not recommend the largest cemetery the world has ever seen. If you are narrowing down vacation options between a week in Greece and a day in Auschwitz, buy a bathing suit and tan on the beach. Auschwitz is not just a place to mark off the list of places to see; it is an experience. It is something that moves you inside and affects your life forever. If it does not, you were never meant to go.

So why did I go? I did not go for pictures, not for souvenirs or postcards. I did not go to be educated on World War II or the Holocaust. I came as a pilgrim searching for enlightenment. I spent my second semester in Rome preparing for my trip to Auschwitz. As a child of literature, I was sent by the words of Primo Levi, Anne Frank, Giorgio Bassani, and Kurt Vonnegut. Memories of trips to the Gestapo headquarters in Rome and the Jewish Ghetto, along with visions from Italian films such as *Roma Citta Aperta*, allowed my mind to open its eyes so I could see not just with my external eyes, but the eyes of my emotions as well. These are the eyes that took in every opportunity to absorb an understanding of what happened at that fatal location over sixty years before my birth.

Auschwitz was opened by its own survivors. The survivors wanted to share with the world what had happened. They wanted their story to be known. Before going to sleep each night, they could lay down knowing they were preventing another disaster by informing the world of what had happened.

Authors like Primo Levi, Eli Weisel, and Giorgio Bassani who wrote about the Holocaust, in the face of protest, share their stories to inform the masses of the horrors of the war. They displayed courage and bravery as they informed the world of the truth. Through literature, they told the narrative that needed to be heard.

Literature gave me new sight and way of thinking that lead to newfound avenues of learning. Literature left faint footprints on my soul, and as I retraced those footsteps over spring break, I made them my own. I internalized what was given to me as a gift from artists of different mediums.