

III.vi: Encountering Auschwitz: Touring the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

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Origins

In 2014, approximately 1,534,000 people travelled to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim, Poland, making the preserved sites of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau Europe's most-visited memorial destination.¹ This figure rose to a record 1,725,700 in 2015: the 70th anniversary of the camp's liberation prompting a 40 per cent rise in first-quarter visitors alone.² Reports of this influx prompted the *Daily Mail* newspaper to christen the site 'the world's most unlikely tourist hot spot'.³ This article was accompanied by a survey listing the internet's 'Most Common Dark Tourism Searches': Auschwitz placed second, after New York's Ground Zero.⁴

This linking of the practice of visiting the Auschwitz museum to the phenomenon known as 'dark tourism' is common. The term was coined in 1996 by Malcolm Foley and John Lennon, initially to refer to 'the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites'.⁵ However, it has since become an umbrella term for a series of related phrases, each with their own distinct characteristics. These include 'thanatourism', which Anthony Seaton defines as travel experiences in which tourists actively seek out dark sites, being 'motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death'; and 'black-spot tourism', which Chris Rojek links to the notoriety of victims, incorporating 'sites in which celebrities or large numbers of people have met with sudden and violent deaths'.⁶ In 2006, Philip Stone further proposed a 'dark tourism spectrum', placing such sites on a scale ranging from 'darkest' to 'lightest' according to criteria including educational impetus, tourism infrastructure and authenticity of location.⁷

The journey of such terms into popular usage correlated with a growing interest among western tourists in visiting the Auschwitz Birkenau-State Museum – Poland's 1989 rejection of communist rule having opened up the institution to a new generation of travellers. This prompted renewed scholarly discussions regarding the ethical implications of locating museums on Holocaust-related sites. Ruth Klüger problematised the trend, asking what the 'carefully tended, unlovely remains' of former concentration camps could possibly communicate of the experience of being incarcerated there.⁸ Meanwhile, James Young, Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork offered critiques of the

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum's exhibitions, branding several aspects of them ethically insensitive or even deceptive in nature.⁹

The concurrent emergence of these two oft-overlapping fields of research may explain the sense of suspicion which tends to permeate texts dealing with Holocaust tourism. Ana Carden-Coyne asks: 'How can the Holocaust be represented both accurately and ethically, without sensationalizing, trading in 'edutainment' or encouraging macabre fascination with atrocity imagery?'¹⁰ Tim Cole warns that black spot sites are rendered commodities within a tourism industry framework: 'When in Kraków we 'consume' the 'Holocaust' on offer at the State Museum at Auschwitz.'¹¹ Meanwhile, Daniel Mendelsohn argues that the 'museumification' of the Auschwitz I and II sites has resulted in a form of historical misappropriation whereby they now serve as a 'gross generalization [...] for what happened to Europe's Jews'.¹²

Many critiques are also rich with moral judgements of visitors to Holocaust black spot sites: Dominick LaCapra warns of 'vicarious victimhood' and of 'fetishising trauma narratives'; Chris Keil refers to an Auschwitz guide's assessment of visitor behaviour – 'it's not yet a park and picnic place, but it's approaching that atmosphere'; and Shalom Auslander satirises guided tours of the Sachsenhausen site in the novel *Hope: a Tragedy* – 'Mother said, Are there ovens at least? The trip shouldn't be a total waste?'¹³ Interestingly, however, scholars tend to set themselves apart from this 'general throng'. Few are those like Derek Dalton, who admit being 'entranced' by the legacy of a particular concentration camp, prompting a visit.¹⁴ More common are researchers like Martin Gilbert who, in *Holocaust Journey*, twice refers to the number of visitors to the Auschwitz I site as 'disturbing', yet fails to consider his own group as part of this mass. Recent research has further perpetuated the idea that there are 'desirable' and 'undesirable' types of Holocaust black spot visitors; Rachael Raine even proposing a 'Dark Tourist Spectrum' as an expansion of Stone's scale. This sister spectrum identifies nine distinct categories of dark tourists: mourners, pilgrims, the morbidly curious, thrill seekers, information seekers, hobbyists, sightseers, retreaters and passive recreationists.¹⁵

Encounters

As with all forms of tourism, a supply-demand relationship exists at the core of Holocaust 'consumption' in the modern era. Yet research within the field has focused on one half of the dynamic: demand-side drivers such as visitor motivation. This has resulted in important

supply-side drivers being comparatively overlooked: in particular, the experiential aspect of visiting Holocaust sites.

Like many concentration camp memorial institutions, the Auschwitz museum offers several different forms of access to visitors: unguided visits, group or private tours, school trips and study sessions.¹⁶ The type of encounter a tourist has will inevitably impact on their understanding of the site, yet aside from work by scholars such as Dalton and Victoria Nesfield, very little access-form analysis has been conducted.¹⁷ This seems a striking omission to the critical literature given that many concentration camp museums actively utilise and promote guided tours.¹⁸ In the case of Auschwitz I and II, tours have also become the means by which the majority of visitors now view the site: 77 per cent (1,180,975 people) employed a guide in 2014; 78.5 per cent (1,358,000 people) followed suit in 2015.¹⁹

It is also apparent that a desire exists among many former ‘dark tourists’ for such research to be undertaken. An undercurrent of discomfort can be noted in online reviews of the Auschwitz group tours: participants refer to commercialisation (‘It may seem like Disneyland’), bad crowd management (‘The speed [...] [of] the organized tour left little time for reflection’), and emotional disconnection (‘Everything had been [...] sanitised to the extent of losing its impact’). Such responses often appear linked to a desire among visitors to develop their knowledge of the site’s history, but to do so in an ethically appropriate way. One ultimately concludes: ‘I had a dismal feeling about the fact that I also was a tourist’.²⁰

This article therefore attempts to expand the scope of Holocaust tourism scholarship by analysing the most popular form of guided experience offered by the Auschwitz museum: the 3.5 hour group tour of the Auschwitz I and Birkenau sites. It takes a personal-theoretical approach framed by my own first experience of this tour, but is further informed by nine subsequent group tours taken between 2009 and 2015. My aim is to evaluate these tours in terms of both form and content, analysing elements which speak to ethical concerns previously raised – or yet to be raised – about the site’s reconfiguration as a visitor destination.

What I do not attempt to assess or judge, however, are visitors’ motivations for attending the site, or their responses to it – except where I feel specific, observable behaviours to be a direct result of the group tour format. My primary reason for this is to keep the focus on the access-type being discussed. But I also wish to acknowledge that a person’s motivation for attending a black spot site is seldom singular (to reference to Raine’s scale, a ‘thrill seeker’ can equally be an ‘information seeker’ or a ‘pilgrim’), and their response is not always discernible or quantifiable – or often even assimilated – until long after their

Auschwitz encounter is complete. This was my own experience as an Auschwitz tourist, in any case, and I do not wish to claim distinction from the ‘general throng’ nor impose an authoritarian insight into numerous disparate experiences.

Old Town

It begins in Kraków, a city which is two cities. Browsing a guidebook map, this division appears precise. The Old Town (Stare Miasto) sits in the city centre; a one square kilometre UNESCO World Heritage Site, pockmarked with over six thousand Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic buildings.²¹ Here, the tourist is promised, they will find a complete and bookended history, starting in the medieval period and halting sometime in the late 1800s. Planty Park – a former moat – encircles the Old Town, cutting it off from new Kraków which fans out across the landscape for a further 327 square kilometres.

Arriving into the new town’s central train station, Kraków Główny, this modern/historic aesthetic divide appears to be confirmed. Emerging from a basement-level terminus, flooded with white light and Day-Glo plastic furniture, I encounter a square where my eyes cannot rest on an older building without a twenty-first century neighbour screaming for attention. The station’s former ticket hall sits abandoned to one side of the square, its boarded-up doorways and cathedral domes subsumed by the glittering steel-and-glass *Galeria* shopping mall next door. From this plaza I am funnelled, via a gleaming subway, directly into the Old Town. This slight-of-hand manoeuvre ensures I bypass the rest of new Kraków, which contradicts this most progressive image. It is a move which, once noticed, appears somehow over-wrought; as though both factions of the city have conspired to render the twentieth century obsolete.

In the most popular Old Town spots, I find myself haunted by young people carrying piles of leaflets advertising ‘Auschwitz: Day Trips’. It is from these sellers – or from the souvenir stalls and tourist information booths pockmarking the area – that tickets can be purchased for a return bus trip and group tour of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 60 kilometres to the west in Oświęcim. Some agents also offer a ‘double-deal’, taking in the Wieliczka Salt Mines on the same day.²² Thus, come 9am the next morning, I find the sidewalks of Świętego Idziego swelling with fellow travellers searching for their particular tour company’s bus stop.

Transport

Once my tour party's bus has left Kraków, small television monitors pinned to its ceiling begin to hum and flicker. Violin music announces the opening credits, followed by stern narration set over images I recognise as Auschwitz: present-day shots – taken in appropriately dull weather – of barbed wire fences, watchtowers, the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate; period photographs of cattle trucks at the selection ramp, prisoners crammed into barracks' bunks, corpses with protruding spines and hipbones; film footage of children shuffling through a corridor of barbed wire, victims being stretchered out of the camp at liberation. Finally, the survivors testify, affirming the importance of remembering Auschwitz and reciting the maxim: 'Never Again'.

This video performs three functions. Firstly, the survivors' words legitimise me as a tourist: I will be witness not voyeur at Auschwitz. Secondly, I am reassured that my destination, ghastly as it may be, is to some extent a known quantity. For although Auschwitz was one of many concentration and death camps established by the National Socialist regime, it has been rendered unique by the myriad ways its image has been propagated in the public consciousness. From Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), to Uwe Boll's film *Auschwitz* (2011); from Tadeusz Borowski's short stories *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1947), to John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006); from school history lessons on World War II to university seminars on Primo Levi, Auschwitz has become an icon of Holocaust suffering, and consequently a thing we think we know about. Thirdly, however – and perhaps most importantly – it reminds me of the two planes upon which Auschwitz exists: historical and mythological; the event itself 'and the representation of the event', as Cole notes.²³

Reception

Nesfield states: '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'.²⁴ And certainly the Auschwitz our bus arrives at is not the Auschwitz of the video we have just been watching. Pulling into a car park at the Auschwitz I site, we are greeted by a snack bar, a bookshop, and a large L-shaped building. Formerly a delousing station for prisoners, today this construction serves as the museum's reception, with cashiers' desks, café, toilets and screening room. But what is most striking about arriving now – August, peak season – is the amount of tourists.

Auschwitz, in the modern era, has become big business. Its status in popular culture is representative of a burgeoning 'Holocaust industry', which Cole traces to 'the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Israeli Secret Service personnel in May 1960, and his subsequent

[televised] trial in Jerusalem in 1961'.²⁵ Although Auschwitz was relatively unknown in the West immediately after its liberation, due to the Soviet occupation of Poland, it nonetheless emerged as 'the symbol of the murder of all six million Jews and not simply the 900,000 or so who had died in the place of Auschwitz-II'.²⁶ This, Cole claims, is not only due to how much of it remained or the Polish government's efforts to reconfigure it as a memorial museum, but because Auschwitz reflects the type of bureaucratic, industrialised murder of Jews that found personification in Eichmann.²⁷

The present day Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum incorporates the former sites of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-II Birkenau, but not Auschwitz-III Monowitz nor any of the complex's forty-plus satellite camps. To accommodate the number of visitors the museum attracts, guided tours are provided 'for as many people as possible', according to Andrzej Kacprzyk, Director of the International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust.²⁸ As such, a 300-strong contingent of trained in-house guides offers group tours in 19 different languages, setting off at half-hour increments throughout the day.²⁹ Each commercial busload coming from Kraków is linked up with a guide upon arrival, while solo visitors are strongly encouraged to participate in tours. Between the hours of 10am and 3pm from April to October, entry is only permitted with a guide.³⁰

Auschwitz I

*Ladies and gentlemen [...] I will be your guide today in this place. We all know that this place is a very important place. It is not typical museum site for visitors.*³¹

As our guide makes their introduction, I find myself distracted. It is the size of the camp that is the initial problem: it is smaller than I expected. A circuit of it could be performed in under half an hour, giving it the feel of a scaled-down recreation. This is partly due to what Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork call a 'misconstruction of history [that] begins right in the parking lot,' whereby the preserved Auschwitz I reflects only the 1940–42 version.³²

Expansions made during the Shoah were sold off in the post-war era or re-appropriated by the Polish government, while other buildings were reclaimed by families expelled to make way for the camp. Another factor may be the notoriety of the site's best-known landmarks. Few, after all, would believe they could jump up and touch an archway as famously imposing as the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate.

The visual aesthetic is also troublesome: red brick buildings, light brown gravel pathways, green grass, blue skies and a golden sun. Today's Auschwitz I is not the filthy,

disease-ridden hell of period photographs. And while I did not expect the site to look the same as in wartime, still I envisioned a more muted colour palate, in line – I now realise – with modern cinematic representations like Tim Blake Nelson’s *The Grey Zone* (2001), or Milan Cieslar’s *Prisoner of Auschwitz* (2013).

Dalton states that the experience of coming to the Auschwitz site as a tourist is enhanced by ‘the memory of filmic and literary representations that are evoked by being there’.³³ Yet for myself, the contrast between these memories and what Young calls the ‘unexpected, even unseemly beauty’ of the present day Auschwitz I only serves to highlight a dual rupture: between the imaginary and real Auschwitz, and the past and present.³⁴ In coming to the site, I discover that the Auschwitz I have envisioned is but a montage of subjective images: black-and-white photographs; grey-and-brown-washed films; the dull weather of the tour bus video scenes. Yet this epiphany is not accompanied by new knowledge of what Auschwitz I was ‘really like’. Instead, I am presented with this theme park version: too small, too colourful. It is what Jean Baudrillard would term a ‘hyperreal’ Auschwitz I, reflecting ‘a real without origin in reality’.³⁵ Thus it seems grimly ironic when our guide continues with an assertion of authenticity:

*The exterior is pretty much the same as it was [...] during the war [...]. The buildings that we can see in front of us, those are the same buildings in which prisoners were kept.*³⁶

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is organised around these buildings. Sixteen of the twenty-eight preserved barracks are permanent exhibitions, while the rebuilt former camp laundry provides a space for temporary displays. The remainder are either closed or house the administration offices of the museum. Blocks 4, 5, 6, 7 and 11 – titled ‘Extermination’, ‘Material Proofs of Crimes’, ‘Prisoners Lives’, ‘Living and Sanitary Conditions’ and ‘Block of Death’, respectively – are the main exhibitions, giving accounts of the site’s concentration and death camp history. Blocks 13 through 18, 20 and 21 are national pavilions, dedicated to Auschwitz victims from the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Russia, the Czech lands, and European Sinti and Roma. Block 27 – formerly the Jewish pavilion – reopened in 2013 as ‘Shoah’, following a refurbishment overseen by Israel’s Yad Vashem.³⁷ Blocks 2 and 3 opened in November 2014 as exhibitions reserved for study parties.³⁸

The Auschwitz I leg of the group tours take in Blocks 4 and 5, then one or two of Blocks 6, 7 and 11, as time and visitor numbers permit. Participants also view the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate, the roll call yard, the execution wall and the SS quarters. The tour concludes with a walk through Crematoria I.

Block 4: Extermination

The interior of Block 4 looks more like an old school hall than a prison: blue walls and a floor of mottled concrete. The first room is dominated by a large map, detailing the transit camps which supplied prisoners to Auschwitz. Other information boards describe the persecution of Jews, supported by photographs of ghetto round-ups. As we proceed through five similar rooms, spread over two floors, we are shown more objects: the Urn of Human Ashes, containing the remains of unknown Auschwitz victims; reproduced arrivals lists and prisoner identification papers; a scale model of Crematoria II; enlarged photographs, including an aerial view of Birkenau and a group of SS officers talking with camp commandant Rudolf Höss.

Since its conception, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum has asserted a ‘statutory obligation’ to collect, safeguard and, where possible, display the surviving remnants of Auschwitz.³⁹ And while many critics find this latter policy problematic, most do acknowledge the institution’s value as an archive. Mendelsohn concedes: ‘one reason to go [...] is that the entire site is a gigantic piece of evidence’.⁴⁰ It is also largely because of the guided tours the museum offers of these artefacts that it is able to fund scholarship initiatives such as the International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Access to the museum is free, though visitors must pay to participate in tours or other educational activities such as conferences. The revenue these generate accounts for a sizeable proportion of the institution’s annual income: 54 per cent (7.7 million euros) in 2015, according to official figures.⁴¹

Our guide uses each artefact they pause beside as a mnemonic device; a vehicle for recounting an aspect of the site’s history. And each subsequent guide I encounter as a group tour participant over the next six years will utilise the same approach – generally from the same limited selection of remnants. Thus, ten times the selling-off of human detritus for profit is untangled from a giant bin of women’s hair; ten times the story of an SS attempt to conceal the existence of the gas chambers is drawn from old Zyklon B canisters:

Poison crystals, stored in cans like this [...]. Can you believe that to deceive world [...], Nazis stole cars from Red Cross [...], and this gas were delivered in Red Cross trucks?⁴²

This artefact-centric approach ensures, as Bohdan Rymaszewski notes, that tourists are provided with ‘material proofs supplementing and authenticating the accounts and reconstructions of past events’.⁴³ However, underlying this model is a troubling implication:

that the history of Auschwitz can be told through its remains. Young expresses concern about this motif, asking: ‘what does our knowledge of these objects – a bent spoon, children’s shoes, crusty old striped uniforms – have to do with our knowledge of historical events?’⁴⁴ Set in the context of the group tour, it can be argued that what these artefacts actually ‘supplement and authenticate’ is not historical knowledge, but rather the chosen method of representation: narrative. These items are utilised by the guides to present a series of interconnected anecdotes. But while this cements their status as ‘licensed experts’ it also creates a double illusion: of both narrative and archival completeness.⁴⁵

Any historical archive comprises three parts: the physical archive, made up of surviving remnants of the period; the testimonial archive, encompassing events or objects whose existence can be attested to by witnesses or documentary evidence; and the lost archive – events and artefacts of which no trace remains. This latter category is critical to Holocaust history, which is characterised by deliberate acts of erasure and fragmentation. Yet it is also the category most at risk of being neglected by museums. This is recognised by Young, who warns that by the ‘fetishization of artifacts by curators [...] we risk mistaking [...] the implied whole for the unmediated history’.⁴⁶ One possible example from the Auschwitz I site is the camp’s brothel. Located in Block 24 from 1943 until liberation, it has been little testified to, and only recently researched in-depth by scholars including Robert Sommer.⁴⁷ This relative absence of archival material appears to correlate with a lack of acknowledgement at Auschwitz I: the brothel is not marked in the main directory, or by an information panel outside Block 24, and neither does it appear to be mentioned by the guides.

It can therefore be argued that the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum enforces a hierarchy of representation within its exhibitions. A demand is made that a physical trace be left in order for an object, event or person to be referenced. Artefacts fulfil this criterion, as do reproductions and recorded testimonies. But if an item cannot be displayed it will be treated as though it does not exist. This is particularly disturbing when one considers that it was the SS who ultimately had responsibility for what remained at Auschwitz – meaning those most at risk of narrative disenfranchisement are their victims:

*Many documents were destroyed by SS before the liberation, and we have to remember that most of the people [...] were never registered [...] because they were killed immediately.*⁴⁸

However, a distinction between form and content may be required when applying this critique to the group tours. For while the form of the guides’ narratives may imply archival completeness, in terms of content they appear vigilant in pointing out that what we visitors

see represents only a fraction of the whole. Yet as the tour continues, I find that where incompleteness is acknowledged, a physical stand-in is offered. Thus I am told: ‘ashes symbolise every innocent victim of this place’ while standing in front of the Urn of Human Ashes in Block 4; a huge showcase of shoes in Block 5 represents ‘all the shoes’ of those incarcerated; and a set of ruined buildings in Birkenau looked ‘exactly the same as the [reconstructed] wooden barracks of the Quarantine Camp.’⁴⁹ I am therefore reassured that what has not survived is still represented, substituted by material presence. Meanwhile, what has been lost escapes my consideration.

Block 5: Material Proofs of Crimes

*We are going to see original, personal Jewish items, found by Russian soldiers at the end of war. So every item is original and every item here belonged to Jew who was killed in camp.*⁵⁰

There are several artefacts in the museum that have lives outside of Auschwitz. They have been elevated beyond archival materials to internationally-recognised symbols of suffering. These include the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate, the execution wall in the Block 11 courtyard and the next item on our itinerary: the stolen property of Jewish victims. Thus it is with an uncomfortable yet undeniable sense of anticipation that I enter Block 5, to view giant bins of shoes, spectacles, shaving brushes, prosthetic limbs, suitcases, kitchen utensils, Torah shawls and children’s clothes.

Standing in front of these artefacts is a powerful experience, for what they serve to illustrate (albeit fractionally) is the vast scale of the crimes committed at Auschwitz. They effectively function as statistics: physical representations of the numbers of people killed. Yet, while arguments can be made about the need to impress the magnitude of the genocide onto visitors, Klüger points out that ‘statistics falls a little short of human interest and is not exactly prodigal with the details of individual lives’.⁵¹ This is a concern taken up by Young: ‘armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction’.⁵² For him, this form of representation constitutes an act of de-humanisation, affirming only that what was once living is no longer. Further, by representing people in this collectivised form – through piles of property ostensibly ‘the same’ – these exhibits fail to acknowledge the myriad disparate lives and belief systems of Auschwitz’s Jews, thereby denying them autonomy as individuals. Dalton notes: ‘when artefacts are displayed en masse, they confound attempts to posit individual histories.’⁵³ This, of course, has uncomfortable political associations. Young asserts that the

primary victims of Auschwitz are remembered ‘as the Germans have remembered them to us’.⁵⁴

The de-personifying aspect of these exhibits is exacerbated by their status in popular culture, according to Mendelsohn: ‘[they have] been photographed, filmed, broadcast, and published so often that by the time you go [...] you find yourself looking for what it is difficult not to think of as the “attractions”.’⁵⁵ The Auschwitz tours arguably propagate this re-designation by encouraging a particular form of objectified viewing: ‘look at *this*; now look at *this*’. This is supported by official sanction, the tours being endorsed by the museum. John Urry believes such treatment, combined with the type of prior conditioning identified by Mendelsohn, results in a ‘tourist gaze’ that ‘is as socially organized and systemized as the gaze of the medic’.⁵⁶ This analogy seems particularly apt as the man of medicine retains a level of emotional remove from their patient or subject, and an apparent potential side-effect of this gaze, observable in a few (though by no means many) group tour participants, appears to be an initial emotional estrangement from these articles as evidence of genocide. There are people who crane their necks, point, ‘ooh’ and ‘aaah’, and ignore the requests of guides for silence and to not take photographs. Such behaviours are noticeable at other well-known landmarks, both by tourists and, on occasion, staff: in Auschwitz I, a teenage boy poses for a friend’s picture beneath the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate, his left arm extended in a Nazi salute; ‘This way, this way to the Wall of Death!’ is one tour guide’s repeated cry as we approach Block 11.⁵⁷ While these incidences do not reflect the behaviour of the majority, they do speak to how easily artefacts reaching this level of notoriety can exceed their historical referent. And when this happens, the risk of dark tourism in its most voyeuristic form appears to increase.

The format of the group tours further reinforces the treatment of artefacts as attractions. The tight 3.5 hour timeframe for covering both Auschwitz I and Birkenau requires guides to be highly selective, focusing on artefacts which constitute ‘unmissable’ parts of the ‘Auschwitz Experience’. However, it is important to note that this categorisation does not originate with the guides themselves: they are responding to the demands of a paying public. In essence, it is the tour guides’ job to produce for inspection a set of Auschwitz remnants adherent to those visitors have seen, read and heard about throughout their lives. The result can only be a standardised tour route – and thus a standardised tour narrative – focusing on the camp’s best-known artefacts. Urry argues that this supply-demand relationship ensures that ‘over time, via advertising and the media, the images generated of different tourist gazes come to constitute a closed self-perpetuating system of illusions’.⁵⁸

The visitors of today effectively determine what the visitors of tomorrow expect of their Auschwitz encounter. But this means the tours – and thus the ‘material proofs’ they show – testify only to a speculative, preconceived Auschwitz, one established by visitors long before they set foot in the camp.

Block 6: Prisoners Lives

As we enter our final exhibition block, the issue of prisoner representation arises again. In a room entitled ‘Starvation’, we encounter a series of enlarged photographs of Auschwitz survivors, post-liberation, being treated in hospitals for extreme malnourishment. John Mack states that ‘the greatest risk of being forgotten [...] occurs when a person is no longer in charge of the mechanisms of their own remembrance’.⁵⁹ Here, no information is provided by our guide as to who these prisoners are or about their lives before Auschwitz. They are merely ‘objects of study’, to use Sara Horowitz’s phrase, illustrative only of the effects of starvation on ‘prisoners’, as a collective noun.⁶⁰ And again, the tours exacerbate this effect by normalising objectified looking:

*Can you believe [...] how they look, like [...] skeletons? Polish lady: twenty-five kilos; Belgian Jew: thirty-five kilos; and this Dutch Jew: scary twenty-three kilos.*⁶¹

An underlying consent issue further problematises these photographs. Their subjects are naked, in a state of physical deterioration. And yet there is nothing to suggest that these individuals ever consented to their images being publicly displayed. I find there is thus an element of voyeurism in my viewing them, derived from not knowing if one has permission to look, yet looking anyway. Such images become, to use Susan Sontag’s description of atrocity photography, ‘tacitly pornographic’ – the tours heightening this act of violence by ensuring such artefacts receive regular audience.⁶² The acknowledgement of whether consent has been given is thus as important to the viewing of these artefacts as the status of consent itself, yet no reference at all is made to permissions within the exhibit.

What can be demonstrated, however, is precedent within the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for overriding the wishes of former inmates regarding the display of personal items. Klüger notes: ‘they exhibit my Auschwitz poems in their museum, against my express wishes’, while artist and survivor Dinah Gottliebova-Babbitt encountered a similar issue.⁶³ Over a 35-year period, the museum repeatedly refused her requests to return seven portraits she made during her imprisonment at Auschwitz, claiming they constituted an essential part of the museum’s archive.⁶⁴ Upon Gottliebova-Babbitt’s death in 2009, her daughter said this

stance beget her mother's 're-incarceration as a spiritual hostage of the Auschwitz Death Camp'.⁶⁵ Interestingly, Gottliebova-Babbitt's paintings are the only original prisoner artworks currently on display within the museum's permanent exhibitions, despite over 2,000 other examples being held within its archive.⁶⁶

Roll Call Yard

We file out of Block 6 into the fierce August sunshine. As we trail our guide towards the Roll Call Yard, they relate an account of a famous escape from Auschwitz:

*Four Polish political prisoners employed at the warehouse, they stole cars of guards, uniforms of guards and also guns. [...] Everybody in the camp thought they were SS men. They escaped and they were never caught later.*⁶⁷

This is an anecdote I will hear related each time I take a tour during the course of my research. And not just this tale but others, featuring some of Auschwitz's most recognisable 'names': Lili Jacob Meier, who found the 'Auschwitz Album'; Alberto 'Alex' Errera, the Sonderkommando thought to have taken covert photographs of a gas chamber; Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who martyred himself for a fellow prisoner; SS 'Doctor' Josef Mengele, who used prisoners for brutal medical experiments; and, of course, Höss, the camp's longest-serving commandant.

While each figure represents an integral part of Auschwitz's history, what these recurrent tellings, recounted by multiple guides point to is an ethical issue particular to the tours. As previously established, the hierarchy of representation the museum imposes demands that a person or artefact survives, be testified about or leaves some physical trace in order to be remembered. The tour guides, however, create a hierarchy-within-a-hierarchy, relating only the most extraordinary – and thus most 'narratable' – aspects of the camp's history to visitors.

The above phenomenon is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, it places the people present during Auschwitz's operational period in the service of modern tourists: they are asked to be in some way exceptional to secure representation. But, as Klüger states, it is 'impertinent of the living to ask of the dead that they should have acted or behaved in a certain manner'.⁶⁸ Secondly, if representation is 'earned' by exceptionalism, the potential to further skew the historical picture is clear. Using the above anecdote as an example, escape attempts from Auschwitz were rare and very seldom successful – however, the above story provided me with the opposite impression. In effect, the tour guides can thus be said prioritise

narrative concerns over historical accuracy, seeking out heroes and villains, death-defying stunts, acts of bravery, and tales of survival against all odds. These tropes of literary fiction are spoon-fed to tourists as representative fact, resulting in a history of Auschwitz peppered with stories atypical of Auschwitz. Finally, by selecting only the most exceptional stories to relate to tour groups, the guides narrow their own frame of reference. This means that from group to group they are liable to recount the same stories (though this is perhaps understandable if one is running multiple tours a day). However, if every guide relates only these few, most 'narratable' stories, the result can only be a standardised tour narrative, lacking in variation and unreflective of the complexities of the concentrationary universe.

Crematoria I

The first leg of the tour concludes with a walk through the SS quarters. This includes a hospital building, administration offices, and a substitute gallows in the place where Höss was hung in 1947. Finally, we pause next to a building marked 'Crematoria I' which, according to van Pelt and Dwork, is also a reconstruction, created specifically for the benefit of tour participants. In the days when the guided tours covered only Auschwitz I, they state, 'the [museum] committee felt that a crematorium was required at the end of the memorial journey, and Crematoria I was reconstructed to speak for the history of the incinerators at Birkenau'.⁶⁹ By and large, the tour guides do not claim this building to be original. However, they do uniformly request that visitors observe a reverential silence while walking through it. Similar observances are often made in front of another reconstructed artefact: the execution wall in the courtyard of Block 11. Such elevations of stand-in objects collapse 'the distinction between themselves and what they evoke', according to Young,⁷⁰ elevating secondary sources to the status of primary artefacts. Yet this final act of blending fact and fiction seems an appropriate endnote for our Auschwitz I tour.

Birkenau

After a five-minute bus ride, we arrive at Birkenau. As we exit the vehicle our guide informs us that, due to the Auschwitz I leg of the tour overrunning, we will spend just forty-five minutes here instead of 1.5 hours. Thus we will visit only the Quarantine Camp then climb the entrance tower for a panoramic view of the site – bypassing the usual route which also incorporates the selection ramp, the International Monument to Victims of Fascism, the crematoria ruins, and the Men's, Women's and Family Camps.

Looking out at Birkenau from the entrance tower, at a set of train tracks leading to the selection ramp, I am initially struck by how uncared for the site seems compared to Auschwitz I. On one side of the railway are original red brick barracks, some still standing, some held up with makeshift scaffolding; on the other a forest of chimneys that stretches as far as the eye can see – former wooden prisoner barracks. Beyond the visible horizon – what Mendelsohn calls ‘a vanishing point that was indeed a vanishing point’ – are the grown-over Field of Ashes, the ‘Canada’ warehouse foundations, and the ruins of four crematoria.⁷¹

I will later discover that the contrasting presentations of the two camps are a deliberate feature of their re-design as subsections of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. When the institution was established in 1947, the Polish government’s ministry of culture and art (Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki) decided it should function as a ‘historical document’ serving two roles: education and commemoration.⁷² Auschwitz I became and remains the complex’s educational centre: the focus of its exhibitions and tours, as well as an annual programme of conferences. The Birkenau site, meanwhile, is maintained in a state of semi-ruin, fulfilling the commemorative aspect. The International Monument to the Victims of Fascism was erected between the remnants of crematoria II and III in 1967, while the surviving brick barracks have been left empty, with only a few open for public viewing.

The alternative aesthetic of Birkenau can offer certain advantages to the visitor. Its scale alone serves a representational purpose, as Mendelsohn explains:

When you [...] wander the enormous, vertiginously broad plain where the barracks once stood, and trudge over the great distance to the place where the crematoria were [...] it begins to be possible to understand how many people could have passed through there.⁷³

This stands in contrast to Auschwitz I, where I found it hard to accept that such a small space could be connected to genocide. van Pelt and Dwork further appreciate the less artefact-reliant approach at Birkenau, claiming that by dint of not being ‘museumified’ it has retained its identity as a Jewish space: ‘the bleakness of Birkenau fits the Jewish memory of the genocide as Shoah: total devastation and ruin’.⁷⁴ Indeed, while the few reconstructed wooden barracks gesture towards our present-day desire to understand, the skeletal chimneys simultaneously acknowledge the impossibility of being able to retrieve what has been destroyed. This is something I felt was lost in Auschwitz I, where my attention was constantly diverted to what remained.

While acknowledging the differing roles of the two preserved sites, van Pelt and Dwork nonetheless contend that Birkenau occupies a ‘position of secondary importance’

within the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.⁷⁵ They point out that the primary exhibitions are all located in Auschwitz I where mainly political prisoners were incarcerated, claiming this highlights a ‘specific ideology of remembrance’ with Polish persecution at its core.⁷⁶ Their critique extends to the tours: ‘one can visit Birkenau, but on one’s own. The standard guided tour does not include a visit to the principal site of the Judeocide’.⁷⁷ In the 20 years since publication of van Pelt and Dwork’s analysis, the Auschwitz museum has demonstrably attempted to address this perceived Polish bias. The main ‘Visiting’ page of its official website reminds potential tourists that ‘it is essential to visit both parts of the camp’, while the guided tours now continue on to Birkenau after Auschwitz I.⁷⁸ Thus, as Geneviève Zubrzycki notes, ‘the museum and its guides now place more emphasis than before on Birkenau’.⁷⁹

However, it arguably remains the case that the two sites are still treated differently by the tour guides. Zubrzycki claims that ‘Birkenau is presented as an “option” rather than as an integral part of the visit’ to tour participants, and I ultimately came to the same conclusion during my research.⁸⁰ For example, in each of the group tours I participated in, the duration of the Birkenau visit depended solely on the time in which the Auschwitz I section was completed. Consequently, on eight out of ten occasions my party was diverted to the reduced route. And while parties on coach tours originating from Kraków are escorted to both sites as part of their package, when joining tour parties originating from the museum itself, I found the Birkenau leg was routinely portrayed as a discretionary add-on:

In here [Auschwitz I] we are going to spend two hours; in Birkenau one hour and a half – so altogether three hours and a half. Of course [...] if you need a bus to Kraków you can leave much sooner.⁸¹

It can further be argued that the format of the Auschwitz I group tours removes the onus on tourists to visit both sites. It begins beside the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate (often incorrectly perceived to be the Auschwitz entrance gate) and finishes beside Crematoria I, thus providing a deceptively complete-feeling narrative, running from the point of imprisonment to death. This appears to feed into a sense prevalent among tour participants that to see only Auschwitz I is ‘enough’. This is evidenced by participation drop-off rates between the first and second legs of tours originating from the museum. Typically, I found that of a party numbering approximately fifty, just five to ten people would continue to Birkenau. ‘This is usual,’ one guide confirmed when questioned.⁸²

*So, ladies and gentlemen [...] this is the end of our tour. I'd like to say goodbye and thank you very much for your attention.*⁸³

New Town

When the bus returns us to Świętego Idziego, I head into the Old Town – drawn by its promise of a pre-Auschwitz timescape. Yet despite its oxidised copper domes, and the ‘Olde Worlde’ stylings of its traditional restaurants, it is swamped with the filler of any other city-centre travel destination: currency exchanges; drinking holes; gift shops. In Rynek Główny, visitors ride in horse-drawn carriages past St Mary’s Basilica, *Diesel* and *Coffee Heaven*. Old Kraków is a theme park too, I realise – albeit an extraordinarily beautiful one.

Later in my trip, I visit the Dom Śląski Museum. Here, in the Gestapo’s former Kraków headquarters, I view an exhibition titled (somewhat vaguely) ‘People of Kraków in Times of Terror: 1939-1945-1956’. Here, the persecution of Jews is presented as one facet of the larger overall struggle for Polish independence. Irwin-Zarecka identifies this as a troubling Polish cultural fantasy. She claims that, far from being a well-intentioned expression of kinship, the notion of shared victimhood instead reflects a politically-motivated desire to rewrite the past: ‘assigning all the blame to the Nazis, helps eliminate questions about the Poles actions and inactions towards the Jews’.⁸⁴ She is referring to the participation in anti-Jewish pogroms by Poles, during and after the German occupation.

The following day I go to Kazimierz. Located in new Kraków, this Jewish Quarter boasted a population of approximately 70,000 Jews pre-World War II. Only a few hundred live there today. Despite this, an industry has sprung up around Kazimierz’s eradicated heritage: Judaism is emphatically celebrated, for the benefit of tourists. Restaurants advertise ‘genuine kosher food’ and ‘traditional Jewish entertainment’ – usually non-Jewish musicians, dressed in Hasidic costume. In the Izaak Synagogue, visitors can purchase hook-nosed, wooden figurines of ‘The Jew’. It is a cruel mimic; a performance of a history in which no blood is shed.

And perhaps that is what this city has been concealing all along. Auschwitz being ‘over there’ allows Kraków to rewrite its entire twentieth century, and conveniently ignore its antisemitic past. Thus possibly the most ethically problematic aspect of the Auschwitz bus tours, is that they provide the means by which vast swathes of history are transported out of Kraków. Meanwhile, the elder and modern versions of this divided city meet at the borderline of Planty Park, and face in opposite directions to continue their separate parodies of the past.

Conclusion

This article has identified several troubling aspects of the guided group tours currently offered by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. At the heart of each appears to be a binary paradox: the tours assert presence through artefacts, which diminishes a history characterised by absence; they are presented as vehicles of fact, when they rely on fictional mechanisms for their narrative constructions; they claim to represent victims, yet employ problematic models of representation; and they assert the significance of the Judecoide, yet downplay the importance of the Birkenau site.

However, it is also worth noting that the current leadership of the museum appears willing to engage with criticism of its ethical practices – even where it ultimately defers from popular opinion, such as in the Gottliebowa case.⁸⁵ For example, in March 2015 an 11-year refurbishment plan for the main exhibitions was announced. This was accompanied by a press release in which the museum pledged that ‘the new narration will [...] illustrate more the fate of an individual and the personal aspect of crime’.⁸⁶ This was followed in April by the unveiling of QR codes at locations in Auschwitz I and Birkenau, allowing users with compatible devices to access audio of survivor testimony.⁸⁷

It is therefore not my contention that the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum should cease to use the tour form as a means of educating travellers. It is, after all, simply doing its best to cope with the vast numbers of visitors it attracts, while also navigating endless contrasting, shifting – and often irresolvable – representational and political demands. Instead, what I hope this article points to is the need to examine the guided group tours as part of this redevelopment programme. I would also suggest that contemporary Holocaust tourism scholarship has a useful role to play, by continuing to identify and analyse ethical issues connected to the use of guided experiences at black-spot sites, and by helping to devise less problematic representational models where such exist.

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