Auschwitz in its European dimension

The European and universal roots of the Holocaust

Auschwitz did not arise in 1940 out of nowhere. Its origins – cultural, technical and symbolic – belong both to a body of European heritage and to the history of humanity in general. Far from being a "blip" or an accident of history, the Holocaust is an integral part of it. Academic study of the subject surely depends on recognising that reality, otherwise the Holocaust can exist only in a limbo of the inexplicable, the supernatural or the metaphysical, as some irresolvable act of fate. By reminding ourselves that the tyrants of Auschwitz were not monsters but ordinary people, and by resituating the Holocaust in the context of its complex European roots through analysis of how, at a given point in time, particular circumstances led to the design and implementation of a programme for exterminating one section of society, we can attempt an analytical approach to the question of how such a thing was possible. Contemporary researchers like Georges Bensoussan and Enzo Traverso have stressed the European dimension of this heritage:

Auschwitz did not change the forms of civilisation. If the gas chambers are today perceived as a break in civilisation, it is precisely because they represent a moment that revealed the blind alleys into which civilisation had stumbled and [its] destructive potential. Counter-Enlightenment tendencies, combined with industrial and technical progress, a state monopoly over violence, and the rationalisation of methods of domination, revealed extermination to be one of the faces of civilisation itself.[1]

1. Traverso Enzo, *The origins of Nazi violence*, New York and London, New Press, 2003, p. 2 (First published in French as *La violence nazie, une généalogie européenne*, la Fabrique, Paris, 2002).

The motives for this crime (racism, anti-Semitism, anti-communism, eugenics) and the weapons used to commit it (war, conquest and extermination on an industrial scale) are part of the context of European civilisation. The idea that civilisation implies the conquest and extermination of "inferior" or "harmful" races, and the instrumental concept of technology as a means for the organised elimination of an enemy were not invented by the Nazis, but had been notions familiar in Europe since the 19th century and the advent of the industrial society. The "genealogy" traced in Enzo Traverso's study emphasises the fact that the violence and crimes of Nazism emerged from certain common bases of Western culture. It does not show that Auschwitz revealed the fundamental essence of the West; however, it does suggest that it was one of its possible products and, in that sense, was one of its legitimate offspring.

It was at the time of the Second World War that all the elements identified above came together. Medieval Christian anti-Judaism, the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the inventions of the guillotine, the machine gun and the abattoir, depopulation of the countryside, the Fordist factory and rational administration, along with Counter-Enlightenment thinking, theories of racism, "racial hygiene" and eugenics, and the massacres of Europe's colonial wars and those of the First World War had already fashioned the social universe and the mental landscape in which the "final solution" would be conceived and implemented. They had combined to create the technical, ideological and cultural premises for it, constructing an anthropological context in which Auschwitz became possible. The genocide of the Jews uniquely synthesised a vast range of modes of domination and extermination that had already been tried out separately in the course of modern Western history.[2]

The continent of Europe during the Second World War

Nazi expansionism based on the notion of conquering *Lebensraum* (and underpinned by racist theories) had resulted in an imperial project to put most of Europe at the

2. Traverso Enzo, ibid. p. 150.

service of the "superior", "Aryan" people. This entailed enslaving some nations and getting rid of others, which had been declared "enemies of the Reich", in order to make space for the Germans as lords and masters. Of course the project was not described by Nazi propagandists in quite those terms. Reich Press Chief Dr Otto Dietrich had stated at a conference in Prague in 1941 that the "New Order" was to be based "not on the principle of this or that nation's privileges but on the principle of equal opportunity for all of them". It was to be "a grouping of nations according to their racial composition but [forming] an organic whole".[3] Such was the billing for the intended thousand-year Reich. Some were willing to interpret the planned "New Order" as an embryonic "United States of Europe". "Representatives of the nations of the anti-Communist or anti-Comintern pact gathered at the end of 1941 in a congress christened the 'First European Congress' and this occasion inspired a 'Chant of Europe'."[4] In reality, the Nazis were concerned chiefly with winning the war and conquering more territory, not with reorganising Europe according to any set plan. An obsession with race was one of the main forces driving Hitler's foreign policy. During the war years, 1939-45, most of the countries in Europe, from Brittany to the Caucasus and from Norway to Morocco, were affected by Nazism through its ideology, its foreign policy or its acts of war. Measures to implement the "final solution" of the Jewish question were put in place in most of the countries that were home to Europe's 10 million Jews. Thousands of internment, transit and concentration camps were set up across the continent and the Nazi extermination camps established in eastern Europe drew their victims from virtually every European country.

Auschwitz's European dimension throughout the war years is thus evident at more than one level: the camp system facilitated implementation of the racist ideology that sought to install the "New European Order" and it was also clear from the origins of the prisoners – deportees from so many countries and regions – that the "final solution" was a project on a continental scale, designed to make all of Europe *judenfrei* (Jew-free).

3. Dietrich Otto, *The Spiritual Foundations of the New Europe*, Berlin, 1941, p. 26 (Quoted in Semelin, see following footnote).

4. Semelin Jacques, *Unarmed against Hitler: civilian resistance in Europe, 1939-1943*, Westwood C. T., Praeger Publishers, 1993, p. 5 (First published in French as *Sans armes face à Hitler: La résistance civile en Europe, 1939-1943,* Payot, Paris, 1989).

Europe after 1945

Political Europe in the post-war years was built on the debris of this tragedy. The task was to construct a society based on values quite the opposite of those advocated by the authoritarian regimes of the first half of the 20th century and to promote democracy, respect for human rights, appreciation of diversity, international co-operation and the goal of social inclusion.

Europe's international organisations, including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), were active in disseminating these values through education, recognising that the concepts of peaceful coexistence and respect for others could be learned from a very early age.

The Council of Europe's Day of Remembrance

The Council of Europe was set up shortly after the end of the Second World War (in 1949) to promote the establishment of a peaceful Europe, founded on respect for human rights and democracy. In 1954 the European Cultural Convention was signed, with the aim of encouraging mutual understanding by promoting study of the languages, histories and civilisations of the other contracting parties, as well as that of their shared civilisation.

At the 20th session of the Conference of European Ministers of Education – in Cracow in October 2000 – a commitment was made to declare a Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity in each of the Council of Europe member states, to begin in 2003. The Education Ministers fleshed out the idea when they met again at the Council of Europe's Strasbourg headquarters in October 2002 and unanimously adopted a declaration instituting the Day of Remembrance in schools across all the member states.

By 2007, most of the European Cultural Convention's 49 signatory countries had chosen a date for the day in the light of their own national history. The Council of Europe has assisted with the choice of dates, encouraged the countries concerned to promote the teaching of remembrance as part of the curriculum and helped teachers – through training courses and monitoring systems – to introduce special activities in schools to mark the day.

Auschwitz as part of Europe's heritage

At the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum the European heritage dimension is evident from the range of nationalities represented among visitors to the camp, whether students, survivors, tourists or heads of state (on 27 January 2005, the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 40 countries were represented there at the highest level). Visitor numbers in 2007 totalled around 1 200 000. Of the 10 countries from which the largest numbers of visitors come, seven are signatories of the 1954 European Cultural Convention and two, the USA and Israel, have observer status with the Council of Europe. In terms of museology, Auschwitz I has housed national exhibitions since 1960, presenting the history of the Shoah and the *Samudaripen* in 12 European countries.[5] In 2005 the United Nations selected 27 January as the date for international commemorations of the Holocaust victims, thus underscoring the camp's symbolic and universal dimension.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the "Gate of Death". Photo: Paweł Sawicki.

5. Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Bulgaria, Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the Soviet Union and Poland.

Auschwitz I, delegation of youth and ministers of education from Council of Europe countries laying wreaths at the “Death Wall”, 2005

The symbolism of Auschwitz and its universal message

The 20th century brought the world a culmination of terror and murder, which had never occurred before in the history of humankind. This was especially the case during the Second World War in German-occupied Europe. Violations of basic human rights, extreme racism and xenophobia, the absolute subordination of populations in occupied countries, while transforming them into slaves, and finally the physical liquidation of political opponents, the cultural elite, people actively fighting against the Nazi regime, and entire nations looked upon as useless or inferior – this was the portrait of occupied Europe.

The most tragic fate was that of Jews in Europe, whom the German Nazis intended to totally exterminate, regardless of age, gender, profession, nationality or political leanings. Elie Wiesel, former prisoner of Konzentrationslager (KL) Auschwitz, said that not all of the Nazis' victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims of the Nazis.

In occupied Europe, the Nazis created many different types of concentration camps, however Auschwitz has become the best known. There were several factors influencing this, among them the enormous number of victims, the vast area of the camp and the remaining evidence of the crimes committed.

Auschwitz operated between the years 1940 and 1945. It was the largest centre for the mass extermination of Europe's Jews, while at the same time the largest concentration camp for prisoners of various nationalities, a source for slave labour, a place where executions and criminal experiments were carried out, as well as the mass plunder of the victims' belongings. The Nazis sent at least 1 100 000 Jews, nearly 150 000 Poles, 23 000 Roma, 15 000 Soviet prisoners of war, and tens of thousands of people from other nations to this camp.

All the nations affected by Auschwitz have created their own Auschwitz – or rather their own metaphor of the camp, as well as their own interpretations and ways to commemorate – according to their paradigms, traditions, and religions. The biggest problems arise from the diverse symbolism of this concentration camp. As a symbol it was known all over the world, even to those individuals who have not learned its complicated history, who have not lost anyone in this place, who do not know that there exists a memorial and a museum, and those who do not plan on visiting or learning about this subject.

The complicated history of this camp, which has changed during its existence, has caused Auschwitz to have a distinctive meaning to different national groups. It is a symbol both in the emotional and intellectual sense. A symbol of the worst evil that can be perpetrated by humans, as well as a symbol of the lack of humanity. It has become evidence of the barbaric destructiveness that is possible in a highly developed and civilised society. It is not without reason that humankind sees Auschwitz today as a symbol of the worst that has happened in history. The name of the camp has even become a specific type of code in civilization, used to describe the failure of human culture, thought, behaviour and relationships in our time. At the same time, it has become an example of social indifference and apathy, of the lack of accountability of institutions and organisations that should have reacted immediately while the camp operated and thousands were being led there to become its victims. Its symbolic impact had already begun during the Second World War, is still current today, and certainly will continue in the future.

For the Jews, who were 90% of its victims, Auschwitz has become the symbol of the Holocaust, or as it is called in the Hebrew language – the Shoah. Why only Auschwitz and not other death camps, for example, Bełżec, Sobibór or Treblinka, where Jews were exclusively being murdered? There were in fact many reasons for this. Among these was that Auschwitz had two simultaneous functions – as a concentration camp and as a camp for the immediate extermination of Jews. The majority of the Jews sent to Auschwitz were murdered in the gas chambers immediately after arrival, in a similar way to what took place in Treblinka and Bełżec. However, the SS men chose some of the new arrivals not for immediate death, but to provide slave labour in the concentration camp. Several thousands of them survived the concentration camp and made their way to the west after the war, where they could freely talk about the truth of what they had been through. Among them were many writers, scientists, people who could describe their cruellest and most tragic

experiences in an evocative manner. Moreover, thanks to the work of the Polish resistance movement and the Polish Government in Exile, and Polish and Jewish escapees from the camp, the truth about Auschwitz, however difficult, was getting through to the Allies during the war and the name of the camp started appearing in the mass media. Most often, what was described was the most monstrous: the mass murder of innocent women, men, and children who were sentenced to death only because they were Jews. Hence this cruel crime against all divine and human rights dominated and eclipsed all other events that also took place in this camp.

Auschwitz is also of great symbolic importance to Poles. It has become a symbol of the German occupation, terror, as well as a system to destroy the cultural, social, and political character of the nation and the resistance movement, as well as a system of slave labour. The symbolic function of this place for the Polish nation started during the time of the German occupation. The words "Oświęcim" or "Auschwitz" appeared in Poland's underground press and in leaflets, which were distributed in the thousands. The symbolic function spread quickly, being circulated by word of mouth as a symbol of complete peril.

The enormous importance of the camp in the Polish national consciousness and collective memory is generally almost unknown in the west. Information that Poles also died in this camp is, unfortunately, looked upon as an attempt to falsify history, to claim the memory of the Jewish victims, an attempt at Christianisation, or the effect of communist propaganda. Generally unknown is the fact that two years before the Nazis began their so-called "Final Solution" – the mass murder of European Jews – Poles were being sent to Auschwitz, mainly political prisoners, who were incarcerated and died in the camp up until the end of its existence. Unlike Jewish people, who were deported to the camp along with their entire families, Poles were regularly brought there individually, although there were known instances where a few family members, for instance brothers, or fathers and sons, were arrested together. This fact shows that some families stayed in their homes outside the camp's barbed wire fence, in freedom. Those people knew well the fate of their family members, friends and acquaintances. After mass round-ups were carried out in Warsaw, followed by transportation of people to the camp, almost everyone in Warsaw was sharing information about these imprisoned inhabitants. Overall, approximately 150 000 Polish prisoners were deported to Auschwitz, about half of those individuals died. The camp authorities allowed Poles to send letters to their families, which were often censored, but were still generally delivered to the

addressee. In the event of a Pole's death, the camp administration send an official telegram informing their family of the death.

This kind of information was spread widely during the years of the Nazi occupation and became entrenched in individual and collective memory as the meaning of this place in Polish history. This is how, during the war, thousands of Poles either knew someone who was sent to Auschwitz, or knew a person who had lost somebody they held dear there.

This place has an equally great meaning for the Roma, who were sent to the camp just as the Jews were, but on a smaller scale, simply for racial reasons. They consider 2 August 1944, the date the SS liquidated the so-called Gypsy Camp at Birkenau, a Day of National Remembrance, unifying Roma people living in different countries and confirming their national identity. Every year they come to the museum and memorial to honour the murdered and remind the world of their suffering. In recent years, Roma organisations have been able to bring the history of this nation during the Second World War to public memory and consciousness.

Auschwitz also has a symbolic importance to other groups of victims – for instance Soviet prisoners of war as well as those in the Bible Students Movement (Jehovah's Witnesses), who were also sent to this camp because of their beliefs.

The fact that the history of Auschwitz, as a symbol, has not been closed provides recourse to it in various fields of education for society, as well as in theology. The need for a new understanding of moral obligations and interpersonal relationships is often examined in relation to the history and symbolism of Auschwitz. You can come across such terms as "the face of God after Auschwitz," "the post-Auschwitz generation of Christians."

Over 30 million people have visited the site of the former camp. Even though the majority of those are Poles, mainly young people of school age, there are more and more people from abroad because the message of this site is addressed to the entire world. Taking into account the symbolism of Auschwitz and its importance to humankind, the Polish government asked to have the site of the former camp listed as a UNESCO Heritage Site in 1979. The Auschwitz camp figures as the only concentration camp on the list under the name, "Auschwitz-Birkenau, German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-45)." In 2005, the UN named 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp, as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

These last facts allow us the hope that, for the world, the role and importance of this site will not be diminished, and its universal meaning and symbolism will be comprehensible to everyone.

Auschwitz I, the “Death Wall” where prisoners were executed. Photo: Paweł Sawicki.

The Roma Extermination Remembrance Day, 2009. Photo: Paweł Sawicki.

Before the visit

1.1. What preparations need to be made for visiting Auschwitz and why?

Preparation will be needed to cope with the following problems:

- the difficulty of reconciling mythical representations of Auschwitz with the reality;
- the "unbearable" nature of the trip, if there is no attempt to personalise the search for meaning or the motivation for the trip;
- the sense of dread that visitors experience and their inability to grasp the nature of the place – a kind of intellectual disorientation.

Preparing an intellectual approach to the visit

For most students, the trip will be a very new kind of experience. In their courses at school they will have been taught to analyse information from different sources but no course offers a method for analysing a place of remembrance. They will lack the tools necessary for coming to grips with this particular reality, and they will be unaccustomed to visiting places of this type. There is a risk that they will be unable to make sense of it and will slip into a kind of apathy or inertia – or, worse, a fascination with the horror of it.

What they will see will not allow them to relive the suffering of the camp residents or even to understand it directly. They will have to engage in an analytical effort to make sense of what has been left behind and, in that respect, the experience is not unlike visiting an archaeological dig. It is often hard for non-specialists not only to picture the camp buildings in a multidimensional way but also to envisage the life there, the people, the sounds and smells and the atmosphere of the place at another time.

Visiting Auschwitz is an indirect learning experience; it is about making a physical connection with absence. How can one give a voice to absence? How can a place of silence manage to communicate? How can a museum with standard modern amenities (café, bookshop and research centre) and staff depict the radical abnormality of the Holocaust to students with no in-depth knowledge of it? For some, it is the rural location of the camp that makes an impression, with a church next door, weddings taking place and people going about their business. While this "normal" dimension may come as a surprise, it can also help to keep the Holocaust situated within human experience: many of the SS officers who ran the camp were kindly dads to their own children. Anchoring the whole phenomenon within human experience will help the students to recognise the danger that things like this could happen again.[6]

James Young, has some interesting ideas on the cognitive and symbolic effects of the way that history is presented through museums, for example on the internalisation of the enemy's perspective:

> The Jews of Europe were murdered at least twice over by the Nazis: as both their lives and their humanity had been taken from them, the victims' memory of their pre-war lives had been destroyed and then supplanted by the Nazis' own memory of their victims. For what most visitors seemed to remember from their trips to the museum at Auschwitz were their few moments before huge, glass-encased bins of artefacts: floor to ceiling piles of prosthetic limbs, eyeglasses, toothbrushes, suitcases and the shorn hair of women.
>
> But here we must ask: "What precisely do these artefacts teach us about the history of the people who once animated them?" Beyond affect, 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? In a perversely ironic twist, these artefacts – collected as evidence of the crimes – were forcing us to recall the victims as the Nazis have remembered them to us: in the collected debris of a destroyed civilisation. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives once animating them, so much as the brokenness of lives now scattered in pieces.
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> For when the memory of a people and its past are reduced to the broken bits and rags of the belongings, memory of life is lost. What of the relationships and

6. See Browning Christopher, *Ordinary Men*, Harper Collins, New York, 1992.

families sundered? What of the scholarship and education? The community and its traditions? Nowhere among the debris do we find traces of what bound these people together into a civilisation, a nation, a culture. Heaps of scattered artefacts belie the interconnectedness of lives that actually made these victims a people, a collective whole. The sum of these dismembered fragments can never approach the whole of what was lost.

That a murdered people remains known in Holocaust museums anywhere by their scattered belongings and not by their spiritual works, that their lives should be recalled primarily through the images of their death, may be the ultimate travesty. These lives and the relationships between them are lost to the memory of ruins alone – and will be lost to subsequent generations who seek memory only in the rubble of the past.[7]

Preparing to cope with an emotional response

Before they arrive in Poland, few young visitors have a very clear idea of what they are going to see. For that reason they tend to be more fearful beforehand than they are during and after the visit to the camp. Given the availability today of "virtual" experiences, it may be useful to explore what teenagers expect to find in Auschwitz: how do they picture not just the deaths of the prisoners there, but also their lives, their suffering and the torture they endured? What does hell look like?

This was a place of unprecedented violence, where almost 1.5 million people perished, including children of the students' own age, from their own country. Working from the traces left behind, the students must necessarily draw on their imagination to envisage how that happened.

Preparing by situating the site geographically

Literally getting their bearings through this kind of geographical preparation will help students to counter their fear of the unknown. The teacher can begin with exercises that involve visualising the journey to Auschwitz on various maps, familiarising the students with the route to be taken, the countries they will cross and the destination.

7. Young James E., in Weiss Ann, *The last album: eyes from the ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001, pp. 16-18.

Studying the topography of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps with the help of photographs – a suggested part of preparatory workshops – would be useful in giving the students some prior notion of what they will and will not see when they get there.

Preparing to think about the meaning of a trip to Auschwitz, individually and collectively

If students visit Auschwitz without having considered why they are doing so, there is a danger that, bereft of understanding, they will simply be traumatised, but there is also a risk that their perception of the Holocaust will be trivialised if they regard the visit as just another school trip.

Cognitive preparation

Certain basic information needs to be acquired and properly understood in order for a visit to Auschwitz to form part of a structured educational process and to be integrated into the curriculum. It is neither a sideshow nor an illustration; it is an additional learning source and it needs to be placed in perspective.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the present state. Photo: Wojciech Gorgolewski.