

# Prayers and reflection in the shadow of Auschwitz

On arriving in Oświęcim, a town in southern Poland, on a rainy Monday afternoon in August, I was about to realise my life-long ambition of visiting this place. Many may not recognise the name Oświęcim, however, its German name *Auschwitz* will evoke much more resonance and meaning. I was here to participate in the Maximilian Kolbe Stiftung, a workshop organised annually by the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation, in conjunction with the European bishops. This year's theme was *Dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence*. Twenty-six representatives from various European countries were invited to enter into a process of learning about dealing with the experience of violence and its consequences in the context of Auschwitz.

The workshop took place in The Centre for Dialogue and Prayer in Oświęcim, a Catholic institution which began in 1992. Founded by Archbishop Franciszek Cardinal Macharski, in cooperation with the bishops of Europe, as well as with representatives of Jewish organisations, the Centre is built close to the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Its aim is to create a place for reflection, education, sharing and prayer for all those who are moved by what happened here. The Centre commemorates the victims and contributes to creating mutual respect, reconciliation and peace in the world.

On Tuesday morning, 12 August, I awoke filled with anticipation and trepidation as today we were scheduled to visit the camps. The first camp we visited was Auschwitz I, established in 1940 to house Polish prisoners and then Soviet POWs. It was a ready-made facility for the Nazi regime, as it had previously been a Polish military barracks complete with brick buildings set out in blocks. As I walked through the gate under the well-known sign *Arbeit macht frei* (work makes you free), I was immediately aware that I was entering into a very different space. Our guide requested us to be respectful within the

camp as it is, first and foremost, a memorial to those who died and to those who suffered whilst imprisoned here. None of us needed reminding and as we listened to one horrific story after another, we all walked around silently and alone with our thoughts.

In the afternoon, we visited the much larger camp of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, established in 1942 as a purpose-built extermination camp. The buildings here were very different to those in Auschwitz I and were nothing more than



mere wooden sheds with concrete floors, with no insulation to protect against the extremes of weather where, in a Polish winter, the temperatures can go as low as -25°C and, in summer, can reach as high as +35°C. From 1942, this camp became the place for the mass extermination of humans, most of whom were Jews. The exact numbers of those who died in Auschwitz will never be known, however, it is estimated that one million Jews; 75,000 Poles; 21,000 Sinti Roma; 15,000 Russian POWs and others were killed here. The people who arrived at the camp generally did not know

what awaited them. In the gas chambers up to 2,000 people at a time could be gassed to death in just 20 minutes. Those selected to die thought they were heading for showers and de-lousing facilities – many were even given soap and a towel. It has often been testified by some survivors that the camp commandant's greeting would be: *'This is a concentration camp – there is no way out other than through the chimney of the crematorium.'*

Walking through the camp, I was deeply struck by the silence all around me – a silence like none I have ever experienced before – however, it is not a peaceful silence, but a trauma-filled one where something most horrible took place. The stillness felt like a vacuum – where life had been sucked out and a void left behind. Everywhere in the camp I felt the dead were all around me – and they are – their ashes strewn everywhere.

On 13 August, we met with some Auschwitz survivors, now very elderly, many in their early nineties. As they told their stories, I was deeply moved and amazed at their zest for life, their *joie de vivre*, their positivity, their ability to forgive and move on and to hold no anger or grudge towards those who kept them captive and treated them so cruelly.

Visiting Auschwitz evokes many more questions than answers. *Where was God? How could humans do this to other humans? How could such a terrifying and horrific campaign of violence and extermination continue for as long as it did? Why did it take so long for the rest of the world to come to help those held captive? Why do similar atrocities still happen today?* I wonder have we learned anything from Auschwitz and the atrocities which took place there.

And yet, in spite of the horror which took place in Auschwitz, I am still left with a feeling of faith. My experience of meeting with the survivors has inspired me to remain hopeful and optimistic for life and for the future. As Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, and author of *Man's Search for Meaning* once said – *'When we are no longer able to change a situation – we are challenged to change ourselves.'*

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