

# **Encountering Auschwitz: A Personal Ruminations on the Possibilities and Limitations of *Witnessing/Remembering* Trauma in Memorial Space**

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Spectatorship allows an intervention in collective memory that, potentially, allows the remembrance of what the museum forgets (Crownshaw 2000: 23).

## **Introduction: *Lure***

Since my teenage years I have been entranced by Auschwitz-Birkenau and its legacy as the largest extermination camp in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Despite my exposure to innumerable historic, literary and cinematic representations of the Holocaust, I was left with the nagging sense that Auschwitz-Birkenau was still something of an enigma to me; and that all my reading and viewing had really accomplished was to act as a powerful psychic lure. Perhaps this sense of enticement I felt is best captured in the closing scene of Louis Malle's acclaimed, semi-autobiographical feature film of 1987,

*Au Revoir Les Enfants* (Goodbye Children). In this concluding scene, a Jewish boy in a small village in France, Jean 'Bonnet' Kippelstein, is dragged through an opening in a wall by a German soldier, having been denounced to the Gestapo along with two other

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Jewish students and a priest, Father Jean. The camera lingers, framing the empty doorway recently occupied by the boys — a potent visual metaphor for the vanishing the audience has just witnessed.<sup>2</sup> Where did they go? What is their fate? In French voice-over (and accompanying subtitles) we are informed a few seconds later that ‘Bonnet, Negus, and Dupré died at Auschwitz’.<sup>3</sup> The film’s final image beckons the viewer to imagine the place where the boys have been taken; a place located outside the cinematic frame and outside our realm of experience (unless, of course, one happens to be a survivor). The final image in *Au Revoir Les Enfants* — an image that stands in for death — has haunted me for some twenty odd years since the film’s release.

In March 2007, I found myself able to visit Auschwitz and experience it mediated both by the exhibits and sights one sees in the camp complex, and the memory of filmic and literary representations that are evoked by being there. Personal experience is a theme that informs this discussion of my three day visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Writing in ‘Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead’, Keil states: ‘substantial numbers of people ... may well think of their visit to Auschwitz as a pilgrimage, as a journey of commemoration and witness’ (Keil 1995: 483). He points out that the notion of pilgrimage in relation to Auschwitz is problematic because:

The dynamic relationship between physical suffering and spiritual gain is one of the defining characteristics of pilgrimage, but the objects of veneration at Auschwitz invoke the suffering of others without embodying any sense of the penitential in ourselves (Kiel 1995: 484).

Whilst one cannot fault the accuracy of this relationship, the experience of pilgrimage in the modern era involves a powerful affective emotive response to suffering that this explanation fails to acknowledge. As I will highlight in this article, my experience of visiting Auschwitz was one of suffering, profound upset and extreme sadness.

Keil has convincingly argued that: ‘interest associated with the dead, more generally with disaster and traumatic history, forms a subset of tourism known as “dark tourism” or “thanato-tourism” — the tourism of death’ (2005: 481). He notes that this phenomenon has so far been

inadequately described (2005: 481). Lennon and Foley (2000) were some of the first scholars to explore the contours of this burgeoning new field of inquiry, but much is still to be done to elucidate precisely what the experience of death tourism means in particular contexts and locations. Current theorising, to my mind, fails to highlight the vital role of the imagination in animating the artefacts and geography of a place and investing them with meaning. Ronit Lentin has simply stated that: '[w]e are compelled to keep excavating the meaning of the Shoah' (2004: 7). Heeding this call, I have come to Auschwitz-Birkenau to dig in the fertile soil of my imagination — my memories of the Holocaust. Tyndall has argued that people who visit Holocaust museums 'bring to such sites mental images from books, education, movies, television, personal memories, and fantasies. Historical consciousness is heavily construed by culture' (2004: 114). As this article will reveal, the mental images that shaped my personal historical consciousness of the Holocaust were powerfully invoked and evoked by new sights and images that I encountered in the camps.

In writing about my visit, I hope to contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a dark tourist visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. I wish to elucidate the essence of answering the call to see and experience Auschwitz in the present; knowing full well that the past must intrude on this *present* and shape its very possibilities. Several elusive questions guide my dark tourist itinerary. What paradoxically lives and endures beyond the moment and place of crime? What needs to echo and how might we access these reverberations?

Not all visitors approach the experience of visiting the camp complex with as much respect as is warranted. A visitor recently observed that he witnessed a young man entering the camp wearing a T-shirt imprinted with the name of a heavy metal band: 'Megadeath' (Ronson 2004: 80). Such a careless and profane gesture seems unimaginable in such a sacred place. There is no place for irony and humour in Auschwitz-Birkenau, only space for deference and solemnity. I approach the camp complex with great sensitivity, having come here to ruminate on the suffering and loss entangled in the landscape and exhibits. For 'dark tourism' at

Auschwitz is an excursion to encounter the traces and echoes of death. Some have questioned the right of non-survivors and those without relatives who perished to dare write about the Holocaust. Whilst I am sensitive to this issue, I take solace in LaCapra's reminder that:

It is ... important to note that the study of the Holocaust has now passed beyond the confines of Jewish studies or as a sector of German studies and has become a problem of general concern. One need provide no autobiographical or other particular motivation to account for one's interest in it and the important consideration is what results from that interest (1998: footnote on page 22).

Additionally, Hungerford states that: 'trauma can be transmitted not only by survivors but also by those ... who show an intense concern with the subject despite the fact that they are not themselves survivors (2001: 74). I thus recount my tangible experience of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau in the hope that it might elucidate something valuable about the experience of being a dark tourist; of encountering the open wound that is the *former* concentration camp (*now* State museum) of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In that sense, I hope that what I have to say might coalesce with the sorts of things that drew me here (cinematic images and narratives) to, in turn, coax others to follow in my footsteps. So, in line with Hungerford's imperative, I wish to transmit something about the trauma entailed in being an ethically engaged dark tourist. That is what I hope will result from my interest in the Holocaust.

### **Arrival: Auschwitz I**

I arrive at the town of Oświęcim having travelled by train from Krakow, a journey that took some ninety minutes. A short bus trip later and I am deposited at the entrance to Auschwitz One (as it is now formally referred to).<sup>4</sup> Here I face the first paradox of my experience of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. Having spoken of the role film has played in shaping my sense of knowledge of and familiarity with Auschwitz, it is poignant that the first thing one literally *sees* (prior to entering the camp proper) is a short documentary film — 'Chronicle of the Liberation of

Auschwitz' — detailing the liberation of the camp by Soviet troops in 1945.<sup>5</sup> Images flood this space still, in a place where so much seems unrepresentable. So, in essence, a point of mediation that drew me to the camp — filmic images — continues, it doesn't shift.

One is assailed with the archetypal catalogue of horrors: skeletal figures with vacant stares; bales of human hair; bodies being tipped into mass graves; twisted piles of metal spectacles and prisoners teetering on the brink of death. The black and white film with its 1940s documentary conventions and voice-over narrative provides a vitally important imaginative conduit. And whilst many visitors will have seen these images before in Holocaust documentaries, the film is a reminder that the spaces the visitor will encounter in the museum were once crammed full of prisoners. This begs the question: what is the purpose of the film at the beginning of this dark tourist experience? Is it to introduce people who don't know to the story of Auschwitz? This seems unlikely given the event of seeking to visit the camps. One hardly stumbles across them. Is it to offer us, those who know about the events, a question — *remember this?* — and a statement — *remember this* —? Finally, is it a device to instil in visitors a reverential frame of mind to suitably prepare them for the place they are about to enter? The film variously functions as a lesson, a demand and a request. It is a fitting precursor to stepping inside the camp threshold.

One enters the original camp through the former reception centre where, in the 1940s, new prisoners entered the camp. I was immediately confronted with the entrance gates with their famed inscription 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work Makes One Free).<sup>6</sup> As I walked through these gates, listening to our tour guide's explanations of their symbolic importance, my overwhelming feeling was one of profound dislocation. The archetypal red brick buildings of Auschwitz One were familiar from literary and cinematic representations of the camp, but it felt like I was entering a surreal empty film set and I half expected some extras dressed in striped prison garb to materialise. Of course, the very suggestion that this would occur seems flippant — and yet that is what it *felt* like. Perhaps this is because in most historic, literary and

cinematic depictions of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the camps are teeming with bodies. The lack of inmates in the modern era, whilst perfectly logical and expected, jars with these remembrances. I recall Keil's fitting metaphor equating dark tourism to 'sightseeing' in the mansions of the dead. The dead inhabit every of inch of this place, so it is no wonder that we anticipate *seeing* them here.

The tour group that I was assigned to followed a standard route that was designed to take in the principal sights of the camp.<sup>7</sup> The rows of three-storey red brick barrack buildings have been converted into exhibition rooms. These rooms (housed in the former blocks) are divided into three categories: 'general exhibition'; 'national exhibitions' and 'places of special interest' (Smoleń 2007). It is not my intention to explore all the exhibit rooms as their number and diversity is well beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I seek to explore those corporeal exhibits of artefacts that invoke such intense, visceral reactions in visitors. Crownshaw has remarked on the importance of artefacts in Holocaust museums:

They invoke memory work in the spectator that can never fully realize the museum's intentions, given the nature of artefactuality, leaving space for the spectator's more personal interpretation of artefacts, memories of events they did not necessarily experience, an intervention in a collective memory (2000: 23).

Thus my personal interpretation of the artefacts I saw will inform the discussion of my 'memory work' in these exhibit rooms.

Block Four contains exhibits devoted to 'Material Evidence of Crime'. This phrase in the guide book jarred as a read it. It seemed incongruous. I thought: isn't the entire camp complex material evidence of the crime? The evidence in these blocks had been collected from the camp grounds and presented here. It is these rooms and their evidentiary exhibits that I now wish to discuss in depth.

In Block Four (Room 4), a large canister with Zyklon B<sup>8</sup> crystals still stored inside is exhibited singularly. An enormous pile of empty Zyklon B canisters is also displayed behind glass — a *mass* of piled canisters gesturing to *mass* murder. Yet it is the minutiae of the exhibit

that catches my attention. One can clearly discern German text and a skull-and-crossbones symbol printed on the label hints at the lethal nature of the canisters' contents. I immediately recall the death's-head insignia detail of the SS uniform and I think — how perversely logical — an organisation brandishing a death symbol using an item bearing this same symbol to exterminate people in a place such as this. The pile of canisters makes it hard for the eye to distinguish the singular from the mass. My first encounter with an exhibit of 'Material Evidence of Crime' prefigures what is to become a familiar sensation as my visit progresses. For the mass exhibits — in their uniformity — bewilder the eye and remind the visitor that this was a place of mass murder.

In Block Five half of a barracks room is taken up to display thousands of shoes of all shapes and sizes. They are piled together, unpaired and largely misshapen due to the passage of time. They are clearly deteriorating and appear to be the same colour, save for glimpses of desaturated colour (dull red the most apparent) that hints at the colourful array this pile must have resembled in the 1940s. Crownshaw has argued that '[t]he overall effect of displaying artefacts is to invoke their own impossible historicization' (2000: 23). This is particularly true when artefacts are displayed en masse; they confound attempts to posit individual histories. I try to find a point of focus, but my eye is spoilt for choice. It is too difficult to choose which shoe to contemplate. Perhaps Crownshaw's point about impossible historicisation is precisely that with mass murder, the individual history of an artefact is elided. There are too many individual shoes to cope with, so the task of historicising a single shoe is the measure of impossibility. I move on, conscious of the pace of the tour, which does not allow time for lingering. The dark tourism experience in Auschwitz One is highly regulated and this is disconcerting. The imposition of a pre-determined route and hurried pace threatens to restrict the impressions one can form. For example, I came anticipating that I would see the infamous display of entangled confiscated spectacles, but this particular exhibit seemed to have been omitted from the tour itinerary.

Still in Block Five, our tour takes in an enormous display of suitcases

brought by victims to the concentration camp. Unlike the shoes, the leather suitcases have not deteriorated so fully. They bear large painted names and birthdates, as the victims were instructed to mark their cases for later identification. As Young astutely observes '[t]hey now appear as self-inscribed epitaphs' (Young 1994: 133). One can discern these names quite easily and some obvious class differences of the owners are apparent in the stitching and form of the cases. Some appear to be hand stitched and luxurious; others are clearly mass produced and modestly sized. Some cases bear labels from Grand Hotels, testifying to tours undertaken in the past. Our tour guide relishes telling us of a Jewish woman survivor who visited Auschwitz several years ago who recognised her suitcase in the display. The suitcase exhibit leaves me feeling numb. As with the shoes, I could not focus on an individual case; my eye took them in as a mass despite their differences.

In Block Four (Room 5) one is confronted with an entire wall glassed in at waist height. Human hair is spread out across the entire width of the display. Time has caused the hair to lose its distinct colours, so the hair resembles a mass of grey matter. To my eye, it looks like grey fairy floss. And yet as I gazed closely at it, clear and distinct shapes emerged. To my surprise and horror I discerned a single plait some nine inches in length amongst the mass. The individual woman who suffered this indignity was nameless, faceless and obviously lacking any biography. This remnant of individual humanity, situated amongst a mass of hair, disturbed me and moved me to tears. The plaited hair animated my imagination. Crownshaw has observed that '[t]he meaning of an artefact is dependent upon its narrativization' and furthermore, that '[i]t is the visitor's gaze, then, that might reinterpret artefactual meaning, loosening artefacts from their exhibitionary anchor and metaphysics of presence' (2007: 179). As I gazed at the plait, a series of questions formed in my mind. When did the woman, to whom this hair belonged, arrive at Auschwitz? Where did she come from? Hungary? Poland? Greece? Did a husband and/or children accompany her in the cattle car to Auschwitz? Did the prison barbers cut her head savagely and make her scalp bleed as the history books tell us was typical of the experience of being shorn? Did she survive or was she



murdered here? How old was she? What was her name? What did she look like? In short, who was she? My questions all seemed futile; the very nature of my inquiring mocked by the artefact behind the veneer of glass. *What did it testify to? What could it testify to?* In my eyes, the plait was a powerful synecdoche; testifying to individual existence in an exhibit that threatened to speak only of mass incarceration and mass murder. The single plait disrupted the *mass* of the mass display. It gestured to the fact that it is individual history built and built and built that makes the exhibit so shocking. It is a mass of individuality. Viewing this gruesome exhibit prompted me to question can trauma be experienced second hand?

To answer this question one can look to the writings known collectively as trauma theory whose main proponents are Cathy Caruth and (jointly) Doris Laub and Shoshana Felman. According to Sanyal, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as:

[E]xperience that — often because of its shattering or unthinkable nature — is not available to immediate and conscious understanding. Instead, the event (or history) is belatedly and repetitively recorded by the psyche in complex and indirect forms that entangle knowing with unknowing (Sanyal 2002: 10).

Writing in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states ‘History, like trauma, is never simply one’s own ... history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’ (1996: 24). According to Sanyal, a key theme for Caruth is that a history of trauma is ‘an entanglement between self and other, past and present, constituting a web of interwoven traumas resisting representation’ (2002: 11). Standing there staring at the mass of hair in the exhibit window, I acutely felt this sense of entanglement between the present and the past; the self and the other. Young argues that ‘showing the items en masse can be effective in prompting visitors to contemplate the scale of Auschwitz’s operations, but in this way it also distances visitors from the experiences of the individual prisoners’ (2009: 56). To my mind this problem of distancing can be partially overcome through each individual visitor’s recourse to imagination. The plait prompted me to engage with its

materiality, not simply as ‘evidence’<sup>9</sup> of genocide, but also as a conduit through which I could imagine the embodied form of the individual victim (her appearance) and something tangible about her experience. Webber has argued ‘[m]emorial places do not offer answers; they must shock people into asking questions’ (2004: 115). Thus it hardly mattered that my questions were unanswerable. What mattered was that I *asked* them. And it did not matter that I knew nothing about the plait’s owner. I imagined a woman’s experience of being shorn of her hair (so carefully plaited) and I felt a sense of connection to an individual victim — however fragile and tenuous — through my private act of contemplation.<sup>10</sup> This, in my opinion, is the real power that resides in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The former concentration camp is a conduit that facilitates countless acts of postmemory. Sanyal captures the essence of Marianne Hirsh’s term ‘postmemory’ well, describing it as ‘the cultural imaginations of successive generations of readers of Holocaust testimonies’ (Sanyal 2002: 3).<sup>11</sup>

Our tour moved through Block Five, taking in other dreadful exhibits. A huge glass window displayed an array of artificial limbs and crutches piled together in an entangled jumble. It is a very disquieting sight. Whilst not natural and organic like hair (prosthetics replace flesh that has already been *lost*), the limbs present a macabre spectacle. Our tour guide tells us that wounded Polish War veterans from World War One account for most of this collection.<sup>12</sup> Like the synecdoche of the hair, the prosthetics gesture to their ‘flesh and blood’ wearers who once walked around with the aid of these wooden limbs.

Our tour moved along to the rhythm of its solemn procession and we entered the narrow courtyard between Block Ten and Block Eleven. At the end of this courtyard lies a removable wall with ends angled slightly towards the centre. It is made of rough hewn logs and covered with a black substance that resembles tar. Many floral tributes adorn its base. Our tour guide tells us that some 20,000 prisoners were executed against this wall and that its purpose was to protect the brick wall behind it from bullet holes and to prevent bullets ricocheting and injuring the SS guards.



Figure 1. Photograph of Death Wall

She remarked, in a matter-of-fact aside, that the wall is a reconstruction, that the Nazis had removed the original wall some time in 1943. I was troubled by this fact. Like much of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the camp in its entirety is a mixture of original elements (e.g. red brick barracks) and restored objects (e.g. prison bunks in Birkenau). The so-called 'black wall' or 'death/execution wall', whilst not fictive, is an inauthentic installation — a replica.<sup>13</sup> It is not repaired and restored, but has been manufactured at some time in the recent past. One can understand that its presence at the museum helps the spectator imagine the murders that this space has been witness to. And there is no denying that the wall is dramatic. But I was left feeling uneasy about this need for artifice. Is the wall really an essential museum fixture? It was not an exhibit like the suitcases, hair, shoes and other 'material evidence of crime' we had seen earlier in the tour. It was a simulacrum and seemed

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paradoxically out-of-place despite resting in the place of the original. It had the same inauthentic veneer of many of the 1930s period decorated shop fronts I had seen in the old Jewish district of Kazimierz a few days earlier when visiting Krakow.



Figure 2. Photograph of shop fronts in Kazimierz

These shop fronts resembled a movie set. In his influential book *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin writes that an object is 'auratic' if it has a capacity to convey its historical authenticity. Its unique existence is based on its 'historical testimony' (Benjamin 1985: 215). It is imbued with the magic of having 'been there' (Benjamin 1985: 215). Perhaps this is why the death wall and the Kazimierz shopfronts troubled me. They had not strictly speaking — '*been there*' — and as a consequence they lacked the powerful aura of the genuine museum exhibits displayed in the barracks.

I was left questioning: is an installation such as the 'black wall'

necessary in Auschwitz? Some may ask why this call for authenticity and what does authenticity *mean* in a place like Auschwitz-Birkenau? It is one thing to repair or restore an installation so that it might resemble its original form. Many of the guard towers and wooden barracks have been extensively rebuilt and renovated. Indeed, much of the barbed wire that surrounds the camp has had to be restrung — the original wire having rusted and deteriorated. It seems appropriate to capture the 1940s essence of the camp through such acts of preservation. For me, the question of authenticity is about where does one draw the line? An extremely radical proposal was put forward in the 1990s to rebuild one of the crematoria and gas chambers at Birkenau, complete with operational lifts in accordance to the original plans. The logic was that a potential visitor would have been able to encounter the extermination architecture, behold its sheer size and functionality, and move through the facility. Clearly such a proposal would be met with outrage and major objections if it was to be seriously considered. Opponents to reconstruction point out that such treatments would be voyeuristic and turn the camp into a grotesque ‘theme park’ and ‘forgery’ (Perlez 1994). Later, when confronted with the piles of brick rubble of the former gas chambers and crematoria II in Birkenau, my sense that artifice is unnecessary was sharpened. One doesn’t need a reassembled gas chamber and crematoria to absorb the horror. For me, the remains of the concrete steps leading downwards to oblivion were powerful in their brutal simplicity. Furthermore, the ruins of the dynamited crematoria in situ are a powerful historical and evidential reminder of the extent that the Nazis went to cover up their genocidal actions.

Our tour moves through Blocks Ten and Eleven. One exhibit room depicts the place where SS physicians would perform rudimentary medical inspections of the prisoners.



Figure 3. Photograph of medical room

A wooden table is laid out neatly with a white tablecloth. Papers and medical accoutrements (a stethoscope and several surgical instruments) lie on the table. Two white laboratory coats hang from a wooden coat rack. A small medical cabinet with a glass top sits in the corner of the room; a small bottle rests on top. Two crude wooden stools face the table and a single chair faces the place where prisoners would sit. What are we, as visitors, meant to make of this strange tableau? No signage accompanies this exhibit. It is not accorded the status of ‘material evidence of crimes’, and yet many crimes were no doubt perpetrated in this room (selections for death). The medical room speaks to the enigma residing in many of the exhibits we see in Auschwitz — the stories of suffering they can tell us don’t come easily. We must imagine what has occurred here, actively work with what we see to yield an appreciation of the multiple horrors deposited in each artefact or exhibit.

## Arrival: Auschwitz II - Birkenau

Having concluded my tour of Auschwitz One, I take a short taxi ride to the larger of the two camps which lies some three kilometres from the main camp in the village of Brzezinka. As I first encounter Birkenau<sup>14</sup> (or Auschwitz Two as it is termed to distinguish the main extermination camp complex from the smaller, original camp) I am awestruck, like almost everyone else who arrives here, by its sheer size. Knowles captures this impression well, writing: 'Birkenau punishes you for your puny attempts at comparison. It's impossible to give a sense of the scope of Birkenau' (2007: 379). The camp is enormous; it stretches as far as the eye can see in any direction. Stark rows of brick chimneys dominate the horizon, their original wooden barracks long since dismantled or destroyed since liberation. The landscape evokes what Knowles describes as a 'fearful symmetry' (2007: 381). The red brick gatehouse dominates the skyline, its infamous silhouette visible from most vantage points within the grounds. A row of restored wooden barracks lie to the right of the camp entrance. To the left lies the Women's section of the camp. Unlike Auschwitz One, where one typically experiences the camp by way of a group tour, at Birkenau one is left to roam at will and take in the sights at one's own pace and without a tour guide. Young astutely asserts that 'it seems that the value of Birkenau for most visitors is experiential rather than informative' and that 'to walk alone at the camp can be a profound experience' (2009: 57). In deference to this truth, I wish to provide an account of my experiences walking around Birkenau — the world's largest cemetery. It bears emphasising that the dark tourist experience of Birkenau is antithetical to that of Auschwitz One. In Birkenau, one has unparalleled freedom to wander in arguably the worst place — the biggest site of death — with no guides and just the self. In so far as the 'Auschwitz One' section explored the regulated and regimented nature of the dark tourism tour experience, this section will explore a very different facet of the dark tourism experience — the ability to wander unrestricted and linger at will.

Keil, drawing on the writings of others, has suggested that:

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[R]epetitive representation — in films, texts and images, corrupts the sacralised nature of the object or location, or at least adulterates perceptions of it, producing feelings of disappointment when confronted by the original, which is smaller, or shabbier, or somehow more banal than expected (2005: 480).

This was not my experience of visiting Birkenau. I was stunned by the sheer size and impact of the extermination camp. I spent two days walking around the 425 acres of grounds, exploring as many barracks and exhibits as were accessible at the time. I can't quite explain my compulsion/need to see as much as possible — as much as was available to see — other than to say that this aspect of dark tourism strangely accords with regular tourism experiences where one often strives to see as much as possible when one visits a museum. Quite simply, the impact of the experience is commensurate with the time and energy it takes to do 'justice' to Birkenau.

As I started to explore Birkenau, it gradually dawned on me that we are placed in the realm of the senses, but our 'out-of-wartime' temporality leads to an impoverished experience of the camp complex. We are slaves to a particular sense — vision — and the sights themselves are somewhat impoverished and visually compromised due to the absence of victims. This notion that vision fails us is perhaps best captured in the reminiscence of Kitty Hart, a former prisoner, upon her first return to Birkenau:

You see grass. But I don't see any grass. I see mud; just a sea of mud. Outside the 'meadow' is green with grass. That's something I can't get used to. It was never like that ... men collapsed and died in the mud (as reproduced in Charlesworth and Addis 2002: 231).

The film-maker Claude Lanzmann quotes Emil Fackenheim: 'The European Jews massacred are not just of the past, they are the presence of an absence' (in Camper 1987). Walking down the infamous *Judenrampe* (the rail siding where selections took place) at Birkenau, I felt painfully aware of my sense of privilege. I acutely felt the presence of this absence.





Figure 4. Photograph of *Judenrampe*

I pondered how many people had walked this very pathway towards a known or unknown fate? What of the *sound* of pandemonium (wailing and weeping) as people were herded towards the gas chambers and crematoria? What of the acrid *stench* of burning flesh wafting over the entire camp? What of the *taste* of fear? To be *here* on a typical day or night and subject to the selection process must have been terrifying in a way that no ‘non-survivor’ visitor can fully fathom. Ensnared in the safety of contemporary time — the *here and now* of the days I visited — I found walking down this railway siding an indescribably sad and painful experience.

Sanyal argues that:

[T]he treatment of the Shoah<sup>15</sup> is a unique historical phenomenon that, because of its extreme nature, opens up unlocatable and unrepresentable forms of knowledge, belongs to an ongoing reflection on trauma, representation and history (2002: 10).

Whilst I acknowledge that the experiences of those who went straight to their deaths at Auschwitz are ‘unlocatable’ and ‘unrepresentable’, I believe that the personal gestures of visitors who ruminate on these unknown and unknowable experiences of suffering are not futile. For as Sanyal argues ‘[T]he unknowable, unspeakable, and unrepresentable can also function as alibis for identification and appropriation (2002: 20). Furthermore, Hirsch states it quite simply when she states ‘I can “remember” the suffering of others’ (2001: 10). It is precisely *this* that I try to do as I walk along the *Judenrampe*. I think of the writer Irène Némirovsky, whose masterful unfinished novel ‘Suite Française’ I had been re-reading on the train to Oświęcim this morning. The preface of the book informs the reader that on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1942, Némirovsky was deported to Auschwitz in convoy number six where she was registered at Birkenau. She died in the infirmary at Auschwitz on 17<sup>th</sup> August that same year. What did Némirovsky think as she walked down this very path? We know she would have been pained at having been separated from her daughters and husband Léon. Indeed, it is documented that in June of 1942 she had a premonition that she didn’t have long to live (Anissimov 2006: 400). I try to envisage the mixture of terror, dread, exhaustion and sadness that would have assailed her. Each step I take feels like a conduit of sorts — and I concentrate on the task of ruminating on her suffering with as much deference as I can muster for a person I have never met. Sanyal writes in the context of the Holocaust that ‘[a]ny reading of the past, and particularly another’s past, is inextricably figural, and hence fraught with the possibility of betrayal’ (2002: 5). And yet my attempts at empathising do not feel like a betrayal. My thoughts gave way to all the other countless victims who walked this way (most to their deaths) — so many unknown and unknowable victims. And yet not having a name or a face to posit to these victims did not hinder me from trying to remember their individual and collective suffering. I even pause to think of a fictive victim. That I remember a literary character rather than a figure from a historic text is perhaps not surprising when one considers Langer’s observation in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*: ‘the power of the imagination to evoke an atmosphere

does far more than the historian's fidelity to fact' (1975: 79). In William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* Sophie Zawistowska is forced by a Nazi officer to choose life for one child, and death for the other. When faced with the realisation that he will take both children if she does not choose, she releases her daughter. This traumatic scene, so horrifically vivid in both the novel and the film adaptation, was played out on the ground in which I was walking. Is it wrong to *remember* the suffering of a fictive victim?<sup>16</sup> Is such a remembrance false and obscene? I can only answer that animating this absent space with suffering figures requires both personal imagination and recourse to things already imagined by others. Irène Némirovsky's suffering, Sophie Zawistowska's suffering and the suffering of the unknown others are, to borrow Sanyal's term, my 'alibis to identify', and I shelter in the belief that this is my justification to resort to imagining suffering in this terrible place. The only other choice I felt was viable was not to attempt to ponder the trauma enacted in this space. But to do *that* felt somewhat easier — as though one was surrendering to the void.

I previously noted that for Crownshaw, memory work leaves space for spectators' more personal interpretations of the artefacts they see (2000: 23). Reflecting back over my visit, it occurred to me that my memory work was not only personal, but quite inter-textual. Images and narratives from novels and cinema were the fulcrum on which much meaning turned for me at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The keynote here is that this process entailed hard work and contemplative effort. The memories (of lives explored in novels, history and cinema) that came flooding back to me, however fragmented and episodic, were triggered by my seeking to connect deeply with the landscape and the exhibits. The labour of such inter-textual remembering was well rewarded with moving experiences, but it felt like, and necessarily was, emotionally hard work and incredibly draining.

In the late afternoon of my first day's visit I found myself in a building known as the 'Bathhouse' or 'Sauna' (disinfection) room in Birkenau. It is a connected series of large rooms that were designed for delousing prisoners to prevent typhus and other diseases presenting a

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major health risk to the Germans. Steel pipes line the roof cavity in one enormous room that was used to shower hundreds of prisoners at a time. In another room, massive steel doors and cages remain in place. At first glance their design and purpose is elusive. A photograph accompanying the installation depicts a prisoner operating what one now realises were industrial scale pressurized steam cleaning machines that held racks of suitcases. The caption explains that the belongings of prisoners were treated to minimise the spread of disease before the suitcases were taken to the part of the camp known as ‘Canada’ for sorting.<sup>17</sup> The ingenuity of the engineering employed here is disquieting: mass cleaning apparatus in a place of mass murder. But it is the final room in the ‘Sauna’ complex that I wish to discuss in detail for its affective qualities are, to my mind, quite unique in Birkenau. Photographs of prisoners found in the camps are reproduced in clusters on huge display boards.



Figure 5. Photograph of gallery: *'Before They Went Away'*

The gallery is poignantly titled *'Before They Went Away'*. As is typical of the times, people are depicted dressed in their smartest clothing. Some photographs are individual portraits; others are of

families assembled at occasions like weddings and birthdays. Some of the photos are more casual — people at play outdoors and by the sea. Other photographs are of tiny babies. Knowles describes these photographs as ‘a heart breaking display of the living, donated by relatives after the war. A pre-war paradise, on wall after wall after wall. Wedding photos. Naked boys on rugs. Two girls out for a walk. All dead’ (2007: 382). The affect of viewing these photographs is quite disarming. They invoke a common *punctum* (Barthes 1981) for we know that those depicted shared a common fate and this fact, to adapt Barthes’s term, not only pierces the viewer but also pierces the heart. This is a gallery of catastrophe; all of the subjects were murdered.

In this same room where the photographs are displayed, six poetic excerpts are displayed around the room in what appears to be a random order. They are reproduced in white enlarged text on a black background in Polish, English and Hebrew. Each poetic excerpt is not attributed to an author,<sup>18</sup> nor are explanations provided for the source of these texts. Reading these fragments of poetry is indescribably painful:

The first to perish were the children, abandoned orphans  
These children might have been our comfort.  
From these sad, mute, bleak faces  
Our new dawn might have risen.

How can I sing. My world is laid waste.  
How can I play with wrung hands?  
Where are my dead? O God, I seek them in every dunghill,  
In every heap of ashes ... O tell me where you are.

I love calling your name. I love to say it: Hannahle!  
Since they took you away with my people I fancy chatting with you.  
You look at me sweetly with your bright eyes, a gentle, sad smile on  
your lips.  
I love calling you in my loneliness, asking you in my solitude: Do  
you remember?

The text is deeply personal and yet it speaks to a universality of experience — of countless victims ruminating on the particular anguish of their individual loss. For me, the ‘Sauna room’ is the affective heart

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of Auschwitz-Birkenau's dark tourism experience. Confronted with images of the murdered and profoundly moving laments, it is in this room that the visitor is afforded an opportunity to behold exhibits that gesture to the indispensable fragility, individuality and humanity of the victims. The piles of rubble consisting of the various gas chambers and crematoria left me strangely unmoved and numb. But in this room, one is assailed with such a simple device: photographs and six poetic excerpts of individual memory. The effect is overwhelming. Tears stream down my face and I make eye contact with the only other person present in the room at the time of my visit — a young woman who speaks English. She says to me 'That's the saddest thing I have ever seen'. I don't know whether she means the words (the poetic excerpts) or the photographs or both. I don't ask her to qualify her meaning. She too has a tear stained face and appears moved to her very core.

Perhaps it is fitting that the only place that was augmented (and *could* be augmented) with individual stories in this manner is the Sauna room. For the Sauna room was a space of hope so close to the spaces of extermination. Those who came here weren't gassed, rather they were washed (I hasten to say cleaned — that rings untrue) in a rudimentary fashion, spared death, granted a reprieve (however temporary). So in this space where living was facilitated (disease combated) it seems fitting to locate those exhibits that remember pre-war *life* in all its splendour.

Writing in 'The Ghost of Auschwitz' Diken and Laustsen grapple with what they term the 'riddle' of testimony in the context of Auschwitz, reenergising Lyotard's question of who can bear testimony to Auschwitz, given that its true witnesses died in the gas chambers (2005: 69). Holocaust literature has long engaged with the vexatious notions of witnessing and testimony. In his famous novel *The Drowned and the Saved*, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes about those left behind to attempt to speak of the fate of those murdered in the camps (1988). Here Levi grapples with the notion of survivor guilt and the burden of providing testimony for those who perished. The historian and legal theorist, David Fraser, notes that the ethical problem of and after Auschwitz is the aporia of testimony — the impossibility of an

eyewitness account of the process of industrialised, mass killing and death (Fraser 1999: 402). Recently, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has identified a paradox. He argues that figure of the *Muselmann* (inmates in the camps who were so starved and emaciated that they lost agency and the ability to speak) are the true witnesses of the camps. For Agamben, the task of bearing witness in the name of those who cannot speak reveals the impossibility of witnessing for the other (2002). In summary, the survivor novelist, legal historian and philosopher represent three radically different approaches to the notion of who can bear testimony. Indeed, a canon of Holocaust literature is still being amassed around the possibilities and limitations of witnessing and testifying, and there are many more views articulated about witnessing and testimony than the three (Levi, Fraser and Agamben) I have chosen to juxtapose here. Perhaps this is why I respond intuitively to the purity and simplicity of the exhortation of Diken and Laustsen: 'We are all descendants of Auschwitz. And we are all obliged to bear testimony' (2005: 84). We must move away from strict rules that relegate witnessing and testimony to survivors in strict juridical contexts. They have their rightfully privileged place at the forefront of the debate. But with survivor numbers dwindling, the role of proxy witness will become more important with each passing year. Other writers echo this imperative. Sanyal states that 'the primary ethical response we must have as readers of the Holocaust is to identify with its trauma by situating ourselves as implicated witnesses' (2002: 16). Indeed Sanyal advocates the notion of 'post-*Shoah* proxy witnesses' (Sanyal 2002: 20). Shoshana Felman's writings also resonate with this theme of surrogate testimony. Katz carefully summaries her conception of surrogate testimony, writing that:

[O]ne must "live the crisis" and it turn "testify", re-enacting the "trauma" so as to disrupt the everyday and ensure that it be marked by the open wound left by the Holocaust (1998: 72).

These ideas echo in my personal acts of remembrance in Auschwitz. When I envisage the suffering of the victims I feel as though I am taking up the challenge to 'live the crisis'. In short, I feel I inhabit the role of

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Sanyal's post-*Shoah* proxy witness. And, upon returning to Australia, in teaching the Holocaust and recounting its traumatic legacy, I feel I am disrupting the everyday.

Leaving the Sauna complex, I walk past 'Mexico' (the name prisoners gave to the unfinished barracks in the swamp at the back of the camp). In the far corner of what is now open land lies a pond where the ashes of the dead from crematoria V were dumped. It was near here that I beheld a photograph (reproduced in a large format) of children waiting in a forest. In the photograph, the children appear calm and patient — a testament to their civility at the precipice of the maelstrom of terror that would soon engulf them. It is hard to convey the aura of grace evoked by this image. An accompanying sign informs the visitor that often gas chamber/crematoria complex V was full, so people were herded into the clump of trees nearby to wait their turn to be exterminated. Knowles writes of the affect of viewing this photograph in situ:

And *there* they were, waiting. A final indignity: sorry about the delay, folks. You will have to wait your turn. Small children waiting patiently on a little path. And *there* I was, on the same little path, walking to the remains of crematoria V, in the same clump of trees. Here is where I cried like a pig (2007: 382, emphasis added).

And *there* I found myself, in the same place that Knowles had stood, and I too cried in the face of such an atrocious photograph. I was appalled by the monstrous logic of the image. The photograph reminded me of Agamben's observation that Birkenau was a factory of death where corpses were mass-produced with serial regularity. Indeed, SS Physician F. Entress defined the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers as a kind of fabrication by 'conveyor belt' (*am laufenden Band*) (2002: 71). The photograph invokes a process of serial production that required an occasional temporary suspension until its capacity to resume was precipitated by the extraction of corpses from crematoria V by the sonderkommando.<sup>19</sup> But for the victims there was to be no reprieve, merely a lull in proceedings.



**Conclusion: *Leaving* (a Meditation on *Entering*)**

Katz argues ‘[o]ne’s responsibility to Auschwitz lies not in the public accountings one is able to formulate, but rather in the “authenticity” of one’s immediate, personal response’ (1998: 72). These responses are as unique and personal as the thousands of people who visit Auschwitz-Birkenau each year. Some people respond by performing rituals of remembrance of the suffering experienced in this place. The remnants of these rituals — coexisting with the remnants of Auschwitz itself — are very powerful. Throughout the entire camp complex one beholds small posies of flowers, memorial candles, plastic national flags, ribbons, origami cranes and candle lit lamps laid on the rail tracks. Some memorials are hasty and rudimentary like the giant star of David that has been carved into the gravel pathway near the sauna building.



Figure 6. Flowers in barracks at Birkenau



Figure 7. Origami cranes hanging from bunks in Birkenau

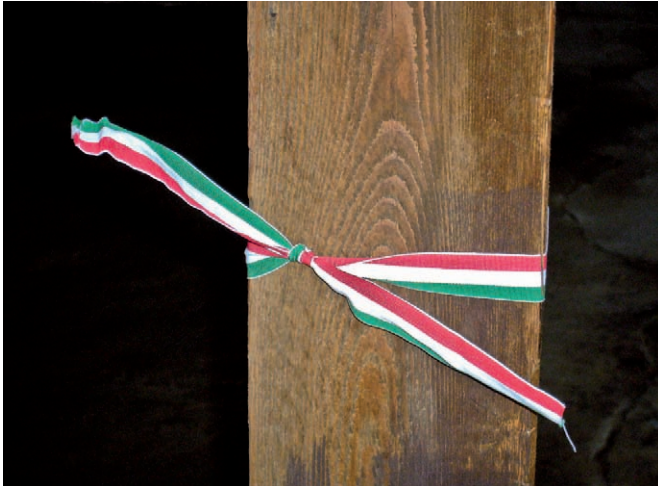


Figure 8. Italian national ribbon attached to post in barracks



Figure 9. Star of David candles near crematoria ruins



Figure 10. Star of David carved into gravel path near sauna building



Figure 11. Glowing candles inside barracks



Figure 12. Memorial candles placed on railway tracks inside Birkenau

These remnants are reassuring reminders of the countless acts of mourning and commemoration performed to honour the dead. Of course flowers wither and die, candles burn out, ribbons and flags are eventually removed by the museum caretakers, and gravel pathways are so regularly trodden that carved emblems soon get trampled away. This begs a final question: why this compulsion to *leave* something behind? Tourists usually *take* things away with them. Indeed the word *souvenir* (French for memory) describes a memento or keepsake object that a traveller brings home for the memories associated with it.<sup>20</sup> Visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau seem to disrupt this practice.<sup>21</sup> The dark tourist seems to prefer to leave a trace of her/his visit behind — a testament to their presence — an antithetical souvenir. But, of course, the dark tourist does *take* something away with her/him and that experience is always much more than the moment on offer.

Despite all I had seen, experienced and felt during my three-day

visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I was tormented by the sense that I was leaving the camp complex strangely unenlightened. Planning my visit, I had envisaged some sort of experiential epiphany. I had imagined that somehow my dark excursion would lead to enlightenment — to my discovering some sort of elusive truth that my cinematic and textual exposure to Auschwitz-Birkenau had hitherto failed to deliver. But then as Kellner has observed, the Holocaust has the ability to tap unconscious sources with unpredictable results: '[t]hings do not turn out as planned' (1997: 406). Kiel asserts that '[v]isitors may bring with them the sense that to enter the KZ<sup>22</sup> universe will be to cross a major experiential threshold into the transcendent' (1995: 483). I had thought that my experience of visiting the former camp complex would resonate with Keil's notion of crossing a threshold. And yet, my experience of entering the KZ universe was not one of transcendence. As I prepared to leave, I reflected on the psychic lure that had first summoned me to Auschwitz Birkenau — the scene in Louis Malle's film *Au Revoir Les Enfants* where Jean 'Bonnet' Kippelstein is dragged through an opening in a wall by a German soldier. I wrote in the introduction to this article that this final image beckoned us 'to imagine the place where the boys and the priest have been taken to — a place located outside the cinematic frame and outside our realm of experience'. As I stood *inside* the camp staring back through the gates of Birkenau, I realised the film's powerful psychic lure had entailed a bait of sorts; a trap of which I was not fully aware when anticipating my journey. For whilst the film served to ultimately draw me to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I discovered that the place that is Auschwitz-Birkenau is not only located *outside* the cinematic frame and *outside* our realm of experience, it is also located *outside* our temporality. This revelation partly explains the genius of film maker Claude Lanzmann's approach to his much lauded nine-hour film *Shoah*. Lanzmann never allowed the camera to *enter* the gates of Birkenau. Camper's (1987) detailed description of the film accounts for this challenging conception of the notion of 'entering':

Throughout the film Lanzmann repeats an image of the main entrance gate at Auschwitz, shot from a train car approaching it on railroad tracks, the camera thus assuming the position and view of an entering

prisoner. In each successive view, we move closer to the entrance gates on this moving train, and thus the shot serves as a metaphor for the film's attempt to try to understand some small piece of the lives of the Nazis' victims, to try to bring the viewer a bit closer to what they might have experienced. But when Lanzmann finally fulfills the expectation he has built up over many hours, through the repetition of these moving shots, and brings the film image through the gates, so that we now see the surviving buildings no longer enclosed by that entrance-frame, and are in effect "inside" the camp, he effects this final passage not through a camera movement with the camera passing under the gate, but via a zoom, the camera remaining obviously outside. Zooms tend to appear mechanical, artificial. As the contents of the image grow closer, the spatial ordering and depth of the image alters, flattening. If camera movement tends to suggest movement through space, as of a human body, the zoom tends to represent the movement of the mind, shifts in human perception. Lanzmann's use of the zoom here is his acknowledgement that neither he nor we can truly pass through the gates of Auschwitz as its inmates did; that no one can recover lost time: we have only our mind's eye, which too must finally fail. Here, and throughout his film, Lanzmann is acknowledging not only the practical limitations of the medium — Hollywood costume dramas notwithstanding, it cannot recreate the past — but also the deeper impossibility of Shoah, that we can never recover the dead, that we can make no images that would be true either to their lives or to their dying. It would be an utter violation of Lanzmann's profound respect for those dead for him to move his camera physically through the gates, and so he must hold back, and acknowledge that he cannot live their loss (1987).

Standing within the grounds of Birkenau, I finally fully appreciated the profundity of both film makers' approaches. Whilst one film (*Shoah*) is a documentary<sup>23</sup> and the other (*Au Revoir Les Enfants*) is a semi-autobiographical feature, both directors refused to permit the camera to pass through the gates of Birkenau. So perhaps this is my epiphany after all? The experience of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau as a dark tourist must entail an experiential failure. Our out-of-wartime temporality cannot capture the multitude of true horrors and loss embedded in the camp complex. Like Malle's and Lanzmann's cameras,

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we too cannot 'enter' the camp. I sensed this unassailable truth every time I depressed the shutter button on my digital camera. I realised that all I was capturing were stills of remnants and relics — the remains of traumas long ago enacted. And yet the failure of the camera apparatus does not signal a total failure. For the very relics and remnants of Auschwitz-Birkenau provide a powerful backdrop — a type of *mise-en-scène* — that helps animate the imagination. I thought back over the many moments of imaginative reflection that had prevailed during my visit, and how the so-called 'material evidence of crimes' (shoes, suitcases, hair *etcetera*) are — despite their plurality — able to invoke a powerful affective sense of individual loss if one is prepared to engage in imaginative contemplation. This small paradoxical triumph struck me as something worth celebrating. And as I prepared to finally depart Birkenau, I reflected on the fact that whilst I cannot 'live their loss' (to use Camper's phrase about the victims), I can pause to imagine their suffering.

As I summoned the resolve to finally leave Birkenau for the train station in the late afternoon, I felt compelled to linger — to *stay*. The psychic lure that drew me here still seemed to exert a magnetic attraction. I kept turning back at the threshold of the camp where the gates border the road. And yet I had one more thing to do that drew me out through the red brick gates, only to return a moment later.

My last gesture in the camp was one I had intended to be my first upon arriving; an act I was forced to postpone due to my arrival in snowy conditions with no flower stalls open. I place a bouquet of flowers on the tracks. I don't know the name of these local Polish flowers. They look like a variety of pastel coloured freesias — flowers I am not able to put a name to for victims I cannot name. As I place them on the railway tracks adjacent to the *Judenrampe* I say defiantly out loud — unafraid that other visitors will hear me: 'These are for you Jean ... and for all the others'.



### Notes

I wish to thank the two anonymous referees whose comments helped me hone and improve this piece. I offer heartfelt thanks to my dear friend and co-editor, Rebecca Scott Bray. You were constantly in my thoughts throughout my dark tourist experience at Auschwitz-Birkenau and I thank you for the profound insights you offered into many drafts of this article. Many thanks also to David Worswick for his assistance in enhancing the quality of my photographs.

- 1 It seems trite at the outset of this article to offer a summary of the evolution of Auschwitz-Birkenau and its rise to infamy as the most notorious extermination camp in Occupied Europe. Hundreds of books detail Auschwitz's operation and legacy, but those wishing to read a masterful summary should consult Steinbacher's *Auschwitz: A History*.
- 2 Of course, the vanishing of Bonnet can be read as a metaphor for the vanishing of countless thousands of other victims of the Nazi genocide.
- 3 Father Jean was imprisoned with other Anti-Nazi priests at Mauthausen concentration camp where he also died.
- 4 It is perhaps helpful here to distinguish the different camp complexes. Visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex typically visit Auschwitz I first (the original camp and main centre of museum exhibits) and then Auschwitz II (Birkenau). Auschwitz III, as it is known, was a labour camp linked to the IG Farben rubber works. It is situated near the village of Monowice. Auschwitz III is not part of any tourist itinerary and all that remains now is the remnants of the factory itself; the camp disappeared long ago. Similarly, no tourist itineraries typically take in the satellite camps of Brzeszce, Rajsko or Trzebinia.
- 5 According to Struk (2004: 147), the 1945 film *Chronicle of the Liberation of Auschwitz* is attributed to four Soviet Army film makers, N Bykov, K Katub-Zade, A Pavlov, and A Vorontsev.
- 6 Other translations of this German phrase are 'works brings freedom' or 'work will set you free'.
- 7 For an excellent discussion of the standard site tour conducted in Auschwitz and its limitations, see Young (2009: 53-59).
- 8 Note, in Holocaust literature, Zyklon B is also commonly referred to as Cyklon B.

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- 9 Analysis conducted by the Institute of Forensic Research in Krakow revealed that much of the seven tons of hair found in Auschwitz contained traces of hydrogen cyanide (prussic acid), the base poisonous component of Zyklon B. See Smoleń (2007: 10).
- 10 For a discussion of the specific humiliation and shame women felt at being shaved by men in Auschwitz see chapter two and three in Reading (2002).
- 11 Whilst Marianne Hirsch specifically uses the term postmemory in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, Sanyal expands the term to be more inclusive by covering those who may not have survivor parents, but still closely engage with Holocaust testimonies.
- 12 The tour guide said that the place of manufacture and company name is traceable on most of the prosthetics.
- 13 Other replicas encountered in Auschwitz are potentially more troubling than the death wall. For example, the gas chamber in Auschwitz One was largely rebuilt after the war using original elements (bricks and steel fixtures). From 1944 onwards, it had functioned as an air raid shelter; so much work was required to restore it to *look* like a functioning gas chamber again. The restored gas chamber features as the culmination of many tours, yet it is not immediately obvious to the visitor that it is, in fact, largely rebuilt.
- 14 Birkenau literally means 'Birch Grove' in Polish. Indeed, large groves of birch trees lie adjacent to the camp complex.
- 15 Shoah is a Hebrew word that means 'disaster' or 'conflagration' and is commonly used as a synonym for Holocaust. It is also the title given to Claude Lanzmann's epic 1995 film.
- 16 The notion of the fictive is complicated because although *Sophie's Choice* is a work of fiction, William Styron has stated that he based the character of Sophie on a woman named Sophie that he met in New York. His explanation is instructive of the creative process through which he turned a chance real-life encounter into the basis of a novel: 'What if I were to convert my brief encounter with Sophie in Brooklyn ... into a fictional narrative in which I actually got to know this young woman over a long and turbulent summer?' (Styron 1997: 397).
- 17 Canada is often referred to as Kanada in many accounts of Auschwitz. The two terms are interchangeable.

- 18 Whilst none of the six texts are attributed to an author, the three examples I have cited derive from the elegiac poem 'The Song of the Murdered Jewish People' by Itzhak Katzenelson Translated by Noah H Rosenbloom. The poem describes the extermination of Jewish life in Warsaw and was originally written in Yiddish during the poet's detention in a transportation camp, Vittel-France, before he was deported to Auschwitz. The poem was buried in Vittel's soil where it was unearthed at the end of the war. It has since been composed by Zlata Razzolina as a requiem. The work which lasts nearly an hour, is comprised of scores for large orchestra, choir and soloist (cantor), to be sung with the Hebrew words of the poem.
- 19 Sonderkommandos ('special units') were work units of Nazi death camp prisoners who aided with the killing process. Sonderkommando members did not participate directly in the killing, which was reserved for the SS guards. Their primary responsibility was disposing of the corpses. Because of their intimate knowledge of and involvement in the extermination processes, the units were regularly liquidated and replaced with new prisoners. See Nyiszli (1993).
- 20 This is not to say that people don't take souvenirs of Auschwitz. It has been documented that some people take small fragments of mortar or brick away with them. This strikes me as problematic – as the removing of tiny pieces of evidence. That said, the ethics of such practices is extremely complicated. Knowles noted in his article (2007: 374) that: 'At the crematorium ... I rub the inside of the chimney's mouth, covering my hands with soot. A porcelain chip comes off, and I pocket it, secure in the pedagogical value of my desecration.' It is not for me to decree what is and isn't appropriate.
- 21 It is interesting to note that the tourist shop at Auschwitz (if one is to call it that) sells only books, videotapes and guide pamphlets. There is, thankfully, no sign of typical souvenir paraphernalia like T-shirts or plastic kitsch. The only discordant items, to my mind, were the postcards on display. It struck me as bizarre that one would want to send a postcard of Auschwitz through the mail.
- 22 The term KZ – commonly used in Holocaust literature – is the German abbreviation for Konzentrationslager (concentration camp).
- 23 Though *Shoah* is conventionally classified as a documentary, the film's director Claude Lanzmann considers it to fall outside of that genre, as, unlike most historical documentaries, the film does not feature

reenactments or historical footage. Instead, it consists almost exclusively of interviews with people who witnessed the deportations and murders first-hand or were involved in various ways in the Holocaust. It also features contemporary film footage of the different places the witnesses discuss. It was produced over eleven years between 1974 and 1985. See Lanzmann 1991. Lanzmann himself has said 'To condense in one word what the film is, for me, I would say that the film is an *incarnation*, a *resurrection*' (as quoted in Felman 1994: 97). For a fascinating discussion of the documentary status of *Shoah* see Farr 2005: 162.

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