

Religious Studies Department

Holocaust Educational Trust Lessons From Auschwitz

In March 2022, Year 13 Religious Studies students had the opportunity to take part in the Lessons from Auschwitz project, organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust. The project took place online this year due to the various restrictions which were in place following on from Covid. This didn't lessen the experience for our students, who heard the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, explored Auschwitz-Birkenau virtually and then undertook a Next Steps Project which involved them passing on what they had learned during the project to their school and local community.

Jessica Su, Kiera McQuaid and Robert McCullough summarise their experiences as follows:

Jessica

At the beginning of the Lessons from Auschwitz project we were sent many amazing things to help aid us in fully understanding the Holocaust. We were given a copy of the book 'Night' by Elie Wiesel which is a 1960 memoir based on his Holocaust experiences with his father in the Nazi German concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald in 1944-1945. Also, we were gifted a homemade virtual reality headset to see key sites at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. I personally thought this was a fantastic experience and it was also very fascinating to use and set up.

One of the first online activities was to consider what the Holocaust really was. We defined it as the murder of approximately six million Jewish men, women and children by Nazi Germany

and its collaborators during the Second World War. We were also provided with images of pre-war Jewish life to examine what life was like for Jews in Europe before WW2. After discussing whether we thought the individuals in these pictures were experiencing a normal life, we were provided with some information about the context of the photographs, as you can see below:



This was taken in Prague, Czechoslovakia, around 1930. It features Ota and Katerina Margolius, a young Jewish couple. Ota was a captain of a Jewish sports club in Prague and an international hockey player for Czechoslovakia. Katerina studied art and then went on to work as a milliner (hat-maker).

Czechoslovakia had about 350,000 Jews before World War II.



This shot was taken in Kodawa, Poland, in 1935. It depicts members of the Tabaczynski family, a Jewish family.

Poland's pre-war Jewish population was estimated to be around 3,300,000.

Following on from these introductory activities, our knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust was developed greatly through a range of online activities which were led by the Holocaust Educators.

We discovered that the Germans invaded the Czech lands in March 1939. They promptly imposed anti-Jewish laws, for example all Jews over the age of six were required to wear a yellow Star of David badge in public by September 1939. Approximately 90% of the Jews in Czechoslovakia (nearly 315,000 persons) were slaughtered in gas chambers before the end of the war, including Ota Margolius who is in the first picture, above.

The Nazis also subjected Polish Jews to murder, slave labour and several discriminatory laws following their invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Jews were often subjected to famine and sickness while working as slaves. Approximately 90% of Poland's Jews (over 2,970,000 persons) were slaughtered by the end of the war, including many of those in this photograph.

When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, they changed the name of the town Oswiecim to 'Auschwitz.' The 'Auschwitz I' camp was previously a Polish Army barracks on the outskirts of town. This town was a gathering spot for communities to trade and socialise.



In the heart of Oswiecim, barely 3 kilometres from Auschwitz-Birkenau stood The Hertz Hotel.

Various organisations, notably Zionist organisations, had political gatherings there. Many Jewish theatre companies visited Oswiecim, and the hotel hosted theatrical performances, balls, charity activities, and lectures.

At the Auschwitz camp people were forced to sleep in barracks that were little more than shelters with hundreds of people inside. Hundreds of prisoners would sleep in cramped three-tier bunks in each barrack.



At the end of the first online seminar, we considered how thousands of people from all over Europe were needed to organise, plan, manage, and implement these activities in order for Auschwitz to exist. Huge numbers of people contributed to the Holocaust, whether they were directly involved in it, collaborated remotely, or just did nothing to stop it. A very poignant lesson for us all was the reminder that genocide is perpetrated by society, not simply by a small group of radicals.



Elie Wiesel wrote "When you listen to a witness, you become a witness" and in the second online seminar we had the amazing opportunity to hear a live witness testimony of a Holocaust survivor called Eve Kugler. Eve was a seven-year-old German-born child in 1938, the year of Kristallnacht. Her parents escaped from concentration camps, her youngest sister was forced into hiding, and Eve and her other sister were sent to America and placed in foster homes. The Nazis tore her family apart. Remarkably, they were all reunited in 1946. Hearing Eve's story was heart-breaking. Being a 7 year old, having to go through three different foster homes, not knowing where your family was, and living in a world of antisemitism. Eve's life was cruel to her for the first few years, but that did not stop her from starting again after she was reunited with her family. She worked, earned a university degree and became a journalist.

In the final online session, we were asked to consider what our 'Next Steps' project would be. For me, I decided to put together this Magazine Article to show people in our school community what I have learned and reflected on during this project. I also asked Kiera and Robert to summarise their experiences of the project and their comments are below.

Kiera

It is important to understand the role of the bystander as we look towards the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust and the lessons learnt. This is the role we are most likely to take on during our lives and it is crucial we understand the detrimental impact of turning a blind eye to others' suffering. Currently, there is a genocide going on against Uighur Muslims which is being ignored by many - perhaps due to ignorance, fear of speaking out or prejudice. We must overcome these barriers and avoid being bystanders as this only leads to more suffering. We often say 'never again' but fail to take action to prevent history repeating itself. As I have learnt, genocide and persecution

take a predictable cycle: classification, symbolisation, dehumanisation, organisation, polarisation, preparation, extermination, and denial. There is no excuse for individuals or Governments to turn a blind eye.



My Lessons from Auschwitz Next Steps project centred around the origins of the Holocaust and prejudice against Jewish people and religious resistance in the camps. I shared my experience with Year 9 Religious Studies classes. I prepared an interactive PowerPoint presentation which was shared during the Religious Studies lessons and a worksheet about medieval and Nazi prejudices/anti-Jewish beliefs to demonstrate the origins of persecution and anti-Semitism. I also drew the pupils' attention to the lessons passed on from the Holocaust survivor, Eve Kugler, around not letting history repeat itself and getting to know others - not confining yourself to friends just like yourself.

Robert

I found the Lessons from Auschwitz project to be very informative. Its focus on the victims of the Holocaust was very enlightening and the Holocaust educators delivered the seminars in a detailed and challenging manner. For my next steps project, I decided to write a short story to encourage others to reflect on the Holocaust, as I had done during the online seminars. What follows is my short story which is entitled A Vision in The Sand.

A VISION IN THE SAND

The alarm managed to penetrate every

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part of my body as I leapt up from my previous residence at a small chair at the corner of the bland, black painted, wooden room. I, like everyone else here, had heard this sound before. But since I was new here, this was only the second time my ears had been assaulted. It was still terrifying. I can only imagine what the people being held here felt like when they heard it. The last time they were summoned, their faces gave me the impression of stone-cold terror, to the point where they looked like they might drop to the floor in tears.

Heading out, through the chipped, green door, the stark contrast of the dimly lit realm of the room, and the bright sunlight outside temporarily blinded me. Blinking heavily, I regained my sight. I wish I hadn't. The sight of their orderly fear would be enough to strike guilt into my soul, but the sight of one of them on the floor, as one of my fellow guards kicked him in the stomach almost made me sick. I had fought at the front. Apparently, the centre of the war wasn't the worst of its deadly reach. My eyes had seen a lot since the outbreak of war, but not this. This was something very different. A new breed of horror. The prisoner lay on the floor, screaming from the pain. The guard towering over him seemed like this pleased him. Every part of me felt weak. The guard dropped down on his knees to the level of the wailing man on the floor. He spoke something inaudible. I regained my self-awareness, and swiftly moved into my position across from the ensemble, quickly standing at ease. The other four guards in my row stared up to the sky. They seemed as though they were avoiding the sight of their surroundings. I didn't. I couldn't.

The guard grabbed the man on the floor by the collar and yanked him off the floor. Then he shoved him into what I assumed was his position in the field of hopeless souls. He resumed his stance as fast as he could, but his face read of hidden pain. The guard that had attacked the solemn man, wasn't just any guard. He was the chief around here. He was no joke. He was the

embodiment of a wolf in this camp. The prisoners were his helpless sheep. Very thin sheep at that. Too thin. He didn't seem to struggle looking at them, as he just simply grinned every few steps, holding his baton in his hands. I guessed that he wouldn't hesitate to use the gun strapped to his left thigh either. I also noticed a skull on his right shoulder as he turned. Death's head. No wonder. Hitler had made sure that he had enough ruthless subjects to keep people in line. However, I had been conscripted. I had fought well for my country, and I had been moved here after our latest string of defeats in Russia. I was convinced it was a mistake, as I didn't belong here, nor did I deserve to be here. It was torture to walk out of that door every morning, but who was there to stop this? The Nazi regime was unstoppable. Better to serve, than to be hung by piano wire.

I couldn't help but cast my gaze downward for a few seconds. That was when the next unfortunate thing to reach my eyes graced them. Three children. They looked like they were younger than five. My gaze couldn't be moved away from them. My brain struggled to take in the sight. In that moment, I felt a flicker of joy, as I was reminded of my three children back in Berlin. I thought of our journey to the beach. My children played around for hours, building sandcastles, swimming, and eating too much ice cream.

I let out a restricted smile. I was immediately cast back to the present. The children looked frightened. My gaze shot back up, as the chief guard cast a glance in our direction. After a brief but painful gaze at me and the others, he spun around to resume his analysis of the rows of captives. If anyone thought this was right, they were warped. What had these people done wrong? For me, the propaganda had never been as persuasive as it was supposed to be, I couldn't imagine eating it up to this extent. As the alarm sounded, my irrational thoughts were silenced, as we were dismissed by the baton-wielding demon. Those kids were just like my own. They wanted to play. Build sandcastles. Eat ice-cream. So, with a generous amount of thought, I decided that they would...

The next night, I stood at the edge of the nearby forest, far from the deathly camp. I watched three young figures sprint as fast as they could into the distance. The moonlight shone through the cracks in the ancient trees that surrounded me. Their wooden figures moved freely in the wind. I heard the ruffle of leaves as I caught my last sight of the children. I let out a smile. This one was not restricted. It was free. Then, the bright white moonlight engulfed my face, temporarily blinding me. This time I was not afraid to open them. This time I was glad of the sight.



Fred Elliott
Family Butchers & Deli

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