

# Arriving at the Place of Death

A few drops of rain lashed against the windows of the bus. Outside, fields were passing by, rolling up and down in a rhythm like sea-waves. Poland.

Clouds floated over the hills in the background and moved slowly over us, hesitated for a moment, and then loosed a shower of mist before soaring onward to the lands beyond. Farms and houses lay scattered among the trees and hollows. In a field nearby, a man was ploughing with a yoke of oxen.

*The Poles have been through so much in their history*, I thought. They were among those who suffered worst in the two world wars, but throughout the years, Poland's faith has kept it strong, and now it has a bright future.

The countryside continued to flash past. Gradually I became drawn into the conversation of those around me, and the laughter of shallow bantering filled the bus.

There was a bump, and suddenly all the laughing stopped. A set of rusty iron railway tracks appeared on either side of us, stretching on into the distance.

Our guide's head appeared over the people sitting in front of us. "Guys," he said into the speaker system, "we're almost at Auschwitz."

Auschwitz. Yes, that was where we were going. The focus of our school's trip was to see this place whose name is synonymous with death. Now that we were so close, I began to wonder what we would find there, and how it would make us feel and think. A fear began to grow in me, and the bus suddenly seemed too hot.

I looked out of the window again. The clouds had drifted apart, and the sun was exposed high in the west, but it didn't make the hills seem any brighter. Houses began to appear again, and I wondered how anyone could live near the death camp without going insane thinking about it.

The guide's voice came again. "We're comin' into the town of Oswiecim, lads," he said. "Those train-tracks we crossed – you'll be seein' them again soon. They're the ones that lead into the camp."

*The railway that rushed ordinary people toward death, in cattle cars.* As I realized this, the fear I had begun to feel increased, and I didn't know what I would do when we got there. I was paralyzed. Thoughts began racing around in my head faster than my mind could follow them.

Images of another time passed before my eyes. I heard the rumbling of the trains. I felt the hope people had when they arrived, thinking they had come to begin a new life. But all they saw was...

*Grey barracks, row on row, without variation. Long, jagged fences. Searchlights flashing back and forth. Prisoners limping out to roll-call. The shouted commands of officers. The crack of rifles.*

The sun was still shining outside, but I could not see it. *Smoke rises from the furnaces. Death rises in the wind and falls with the ash, the people scream and the world's hope dies.* I wasn't thinking clearly. I felt as though we were all in the darkened train on our way to the Place of Death; the bus was our prison, and I had to get out, but I couldn't, because I knew that outside would be worse.

A brick guard-tower appeared in front of us, with barbed wire extending out from it. I half-expected the bus to continue on through the gaping opening where the railway tracks disappeared. Instead, it turned off into a parking lot on the left.

I looked around at everyone's faces as they filed slowly down the aisles; they looked confused, as if they weren't sure what to feel like. As I stepped out a shudder went through me, and I knew I was

stepping on both hallowed and desecrated ground.

As I looked around, though, there was an abrupt change in my feelings. What I saw in front of me was relatively ordinary: a tall, red-brick building, and railway tracks. I had seen barbed-wire fences before. It was completely physical and tangible; there was nothing evil or mythical about it, as I realized I had been expecting. I was disappointed, and had a feeling of anticlimax.

The cold biting of the wind was a shock as I stepped forward, out of the shadow of the bus. I zipped my jacket higher, pulling it more tightly around me; the sun didn't seem to hold any warmth. As we walked forward under one of the side arches and entered Birkenau, the main part of the death camp, I still didn't feel any emotion. We were here. Horrible things had happened here. But that was a long time ago.

The camp was much bigger than any of us had anticipated, and we could see long rows of barracks on both sides, separated from us by more barbed wire. In many places, all that remained of the buildings were their chimneys, rising up like scattered gravestones in the distance. Watchtowers stood at short intervals, and in front of us, the railway tracks led on toward a line of trees at the edge of sight. The strangest thing was that the whole camp was clothed in grass, glowing in the sunlight.

Our guide led us into one of the wooden buildings on the right, and we saw where some of the prisoners slept, twelve to a bunk. We could smell the original wood of the stacked beds, hard and cold. "Can you imagine what it would be like? I cannot," the guide said, and at that moment, neither could I, but for a different reason. I was angry at myself for not being able to see in the emotional way I wanted to see.

I think, though, that my initial lack of emotion allowed me to think more clearly as time went on. As we exited the barracks and followed the line of the tracks, someone slowed down and came back to

where I was following slowly, trying to think. He had just spoken to the guide. “You see those ditches on either side of us?” he asked. His voice was flat, but I could sense that he was holding back his feelings. “Those were dug by the prisoners. And you know how all the camp is covered in grass? That was able to grow so well because the ash from the crematoriums fertilized the ground.”

I stopped. The ground I was walking on was layered by the ashes of the dead. Shaking my head in revulsion, I kept walking, and began to realize that reality can be just as powerful as myth.

The cold seemed to cut into us as we all stopped by a concrete platform beside the rails. Our guide explained that this was where prisoners were unloaded from the trains, and where Dr. Mengele, the 'angel of death', made the selection of who would die and who would live. Those he sent to the left would become slave-labourers. Those he sent to the right went immediately to the gas chambers, after being told they were going to have a shower. “Now,” the guide said, “we will follow along to the right.”

We were following their path. We were going the way they travelled towards annihilation. Now, at last, my mind and heart could see that there was nothing mundane or unreal about this place to the prisoners; the hard, cold nature of it made it all the worse. I looked at those in front of me. Some were already crying; others were visibly shaken. Above us, the Polish sun was falling lower in the sky, casting long shadows in the ditch.

When we stopped again, I noticed something. Although we were all freezing in the wind, no one was saying anything. At home, most of us would be whining about how cold we were, but now...

We felt that we wouldn't ever again be able to say that we were cold, because we knew how cold *they* were – those who were here before, and suffered. We wouldn't ever say we were tired, because *they* were tired. We couldn't complain, because *they* couldn't complain.

I looked around at our whole group, and our faces were lit by a strange brightness. We were doing alright. We were learning to be grateful. It was a start.