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## **Engaging Auschwitz: an analysis of young travellers' experiences of Holocaust Tourism**

**Thomas P. Thurnell-Read**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the experiences of young travellers visiting the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate qualitative data on the way individuals approach, engage with and interpret their experience of visiting Auschwitz. In analysing findings from interviews, this paper focuses first on the various motivational factors that initiate individuals' visit and, further, the manner in which individuals seek to actively engage with the site. The latter is seen to draw on imaginative devices, employed by young travellers to feel a greater connection to the site. The influence of historical, pedagogical and cinematic accounts of the Holocaust and how these are seen to interact with individuals' experiences of visiting the camp in reality are considered. Finally, an account of the meanings which individuals ascribe to their experiences is offered. Such is suggested to occupy two positions. First, achieving a greater understanding of the historical facts of the Holocaust and, second, the affirmation of humanist values as understood, at times ambivalently, with reference to contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Holocaust tourism; dark tourism; youth travel; tourist experience

### **Introduction**

The emergence of the sites of former Nazi concentration camps such as that at Auschwitz-Birkenau as tourist attractions is a notable facet of late twentieth century tourism and part of a much wider fascination with the past and, particularly, the bloodier, darker and more tragic aspects of history. While the sites of concentration camps have long been the focus of modern pilgrimages for young Israelis, Germans, European and American Jews (Kugelmass, 1992, offers a focused analysis of the latter) the appeal of such sites for tourists without such links to the events of the Holocaust seems somewhat peculiar. Yet, the chance to visit a place irrevocably connected with one of the most dreadful events in human history is, perhaps, surprisingly not necessarily incompatible with modern forms of tourism. Given the diverse appeal which Holocaust tourism seems to possess, with individuals of varied

age, nationality and background visiting such sites, what do individuals find so enticing about such a macabre attraction? Further, the fact that many of those who visit Auschwitz, or other concentration camp sites, have no direct connection to the Holocaust, being neither German nor Jewish nor Polish, is Holocaust tourism not simply morbid voyeurism? With Holocaust tourism appealing to young travellers, born long after the events that such sites represent, interesting questions can be raised regarding the way young individuals approach, experience and consume such historical sites. While there may be no shortage of historical, theoretical and philosophical texts addressing the Holocaust, the subjective accounts of individuals who experience and interpret different representations of the Holocaust are sadly under researched. As such, this paper seeks to analyse the experiences of young travellers who, in visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, actively participate in Holocaust tourism and, it might be suggested, the preservation and development of Holocaust memory itself.

### **Auschwitz and Holocaust Tourism**

The predominant focus of analysis of tourist phenomena has seen tourism as an extension of recreation and leisure, framed in opposition to the sphere of work, where the change from the normality of work and home imbues tourism with social significance (Smith, 1989). Further still, the separation might be said to be one between the profane ordinary and the sacred extraordinary (Graburn, 1989). However, an analytical framework based around notions of leisure seems remarkably unsuited to visiting the macabre site of a concentration camp or, for that matter, any of the sites of battles, deaths and disasters which Chris Rojek has described as 'black spots' and the interest in which Foley and Lennon have termed 'dark tourism' (Rojek, 1993; Foley and Lennon, 2000).

The emergence of more varied forms of tourism might be understood as marked by a greater range of experiences, often based, in MacCannell's legacy, around ideas of 'authenticity' (MacCannell, 1976). Such is also considered by Les Desforges who, following in-depth interviews with young travellers, asserts the notion of collecting experiences and, importantly, bringing them home to use 'in the narration of identity'

(Desforges, 1998:176). Such is, perhaps, most evident in the forms of youth or backpacker travel to emerge in the latter third of the twentieth century. Jana Binder, drawing on Bourdieu, offers an anthropological perspective on backpacker behaviour in which travel experiences represent an important cultural capital which plays a central role in distinguishing young peoples' personal identities, both whilst traveling and upon their return home (Binder, 2004). Similarly, Obenour considers the themes of personal development deployed in budget traveler accounts (Obenour, 2004), while Noy notes the centrality of such narratives of 'self-change' in relation to Israeli backpackers (Noy, 2004). This focus on travel experiences and identity, Welk observes, are a frequent topic of conversation amongst young travellers and the primary means by which social bonding and social prestige within the backpacker scene are negotiated (Welk, 2004). Further, travel experiences and the associated cultural capital are seen as increasingly beneficial in both educational and career progression (Heath, 2007). For young travellers in particular, we might move away from an analysis which prioritises pleasure and recreation and focus more on how travel experiences are negotiated and positioned in relation to personal identity.

How, then, does this relate to the 'preoccupation with the past' and its visual and architectural manifestations evidenced in many contemporary tourism forms (Brett, 1996:14)? Ashworth suggests that such is not limited to quaint nostalgia but includes 'distasteful heritage', asserting that 'European heritage is concentration camps as much as cathedrals' (Ashworth, 1996:3). The pursuit of the macabre might be seen to provide a cultural capital based around rare experiences which are seen to mark the person as mature and worldly. Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the sights of numerous battles and massacres all feature predominantly on travel itineraries and frequently translate into a sense of authenticity and valuable experience which other more prosaic sites lack. On this, Urry asserts that 'it is now almost as though the worse the previous historical experience, the more authentic and appealing the resulting tourist attraction' (Urry, 1990:118). Sites of dark tourism, then, of which Auschwitz and other sites of extermination camps are oft stated examples, include the World Trade Center's ground zero (Tarlow, 2005), sites of sectarian 'troubles' in Belfast and Northern Ireland (Donnelly, 2005), as well as sites related to the Kennedy

assassination in Dallas and World War II Japanese tunnels on Sumatra (Foley and Lennon, 2000).

The remains of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, like many such sites, are the product of a complex process of memorialisation which is socially, culturally and politically mediated (Young, 1993; Young, 1994; Hartman, 1994, all offer valuable insights). Most striking, however, at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as legacy of the camp command's incomplete destruction, over one hundred buildings survived obliteration (Webber, 2005). In contrast to the site of Treblinka, where 17,000 tombstone-like granite slabs rest in concrete, the surviving architecture of Auschwitz foregoes the need for abstract or esoteric memorialisation. Further still, one might also counterpoise the accessibility of Auschwitz with the inaccessibility of the more isolated monuments of Treblinka and Sobibor (Young, 1988:178). Thus, the presentation of heritage and historical sites is often contingent upon both the selectivity of physical survival and the decision making processes inherent in preservation and development (Ashworth, 1996:3). A telling or, at least, oft stated example of this is the contrived centrality of the iconic gates to the contemporary presentation of the camp as museum which marks a symbolic entrance to the camp at a point where visitors would have already been far inside the compound as it stood in 1945 (Keil, 2005; Dwork and Van Pelt, 1994).

Officially recognised in 1947 by act of the Polish Government and in 1979 by UNESCO world heritage status, Auschwitz remains the most prominent site of Holocaust remembrance and collective mourning. The symbolic power of Auschwitz and its physical remains reflect what Ezrahi identifies as 'the search for a geographical, verbal or symbolic locus of the crime signals a need to locate the epicenter of the earthquake' (Ezrahi, 2003:319). It has, however, been suggested that Holocaust remembrance has become too acutely centered on Auschwitz (Reilly et al, 1997). Further, with the international acceptance of January 27<sup>th</sup> as Holocaust Memorial Day, the temporal concentration of commemoration connects all events of the Holocaust and preceding Nazi anti-Semitism irrevocably with the date of Soviet liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. The postwar legacy of Auschwitz, then, is its transformation 'from obscurity to a universal symbol of humankind's potential for

mass evil' (Kushner, 1994:10). The symbolic potency of Auschwitz, hence, is such as to position the camp as a universal symbol of both Nazi inhumanity and human barbarity and evil in general. Such, Levene asserts, reflects the paradox whereby all Holocaust museums and memorials extol, either explicitly or implicitly, a universal message (Levene, 1994).

Finally, it is worth noting that there has been a noticeable growth in popular cultural representations of the Holocaust in recent decades which can be said to 'have placed the Holocaust in the popular consciences' (Schwarz, 1999:7). In particular, *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) has added to the popular iconography of Holocaust representations and, if it may be said, familiarized many with the events of the Holocaust (Rapaport, 2002). Indeed, the stylistic realism of Spielberg's direction appears fundamental to the reception of Spielberg's film and the position it occupies in contemporary understanding of the Holocaust (Clendinnen, 1999:175, Struk, 2004). Other notable contemporary cinematic representations of the Holocaust, or to feature the Holocaust, include *Life is Beautiful* (Benigni, 1997), *The Pianist* (Polanski, 2002), *Fateless* (Koltai, 2005) and the HBO/BBC television production *Conspiracy* (Pierson, 2001). It is the accessibility of such representation, however, that permits its success in communicating the events of the Holocaust where documentary and archival sources can prove either too austere or, indeed, too painful in their immediacy. Such popularised cinematic recreations occupy the principal position in the transmission of the Holocaust to younger generations (Rose, 1996). Yet, equally, it could be said that such representations have led to a banal familiarity with the events and iconography of the Holocaust that has led such to appear 'strangely weightless' (Hartman, 1994:11).

### **Context and method**

The discussion which follows is based on a small set of interviews conducted in the spring of 2006 in Krakow, Poland. In depth qualitative interviews were seen as suitable to allow thorough accounts of individuals' experiences and interpretations to

be developed. Potential interviewees were approached while staying at one of two centrally located youth hostels in Krakow and several interviews developed from initial contacts in the manner of a snowball sample. Participants were both male and female (five and three respectively) and from various English speaking countries (three Canadian, four American, one Australian). Those interviewed, like the author, spoke English as their first language. Using a flexible interview schedule, interviews were conducted in casual settings, notably quieter corners of Krakow cafes where adequate tape recordings could be made, and lasted an average of 70 minutes. Although participants were given the opportunity to refuse the tape recording, all those participating freely consented to the recording of their interviews and were, further, assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their personal details and tapes. Interview recordings were later transcribed verbatim with interviewee names being replaced with pseudonyms.

Prior to conducting interviews, a short period of observation was conducted by the researcher at the Auschwitz-Birkenau site both in order to gain a degree of familiarity with the setting and also to develop and contextualise emergent interview themes. It was felt, however, that ongoing participant-observation at the site although potentially offering valuable insight would pose an array of ethical issues in terms of intrusiveness and breach of privacy. Further still, certain practical restrictions at the time of conducting the research made a more prolonged period of such observation unfeasible. Focusing instead on interviews with individuals, it was possible to target the demographic of interest (young budget travellers or backpackers) and dedicate more time to exploring their particular experiences and meanings attributed to those experiences.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the subject it was unsurprising that, when talking about the Holocaust, there was a degree of tentativeness sometimes evident. Such usually became apparent with interviewees searching for fitting words with which to express their feelings or at times reiterating their comments in a more socially acceptable form. For example, one female interviewee said 'so, it was, like, cool...not cool (laugh), but it was interesting to see' (Catherine, American Female,

21). Here, and in similar instances both in interviews and observed in casual conversation, it became apparent that there was a strong sense of propriety when talking about Auschwitz and related events and experiences. In this sense, expressing indifference to or criticism of the site during an interview or elsewhere in informal conversation is presumably a faux pas. However, it was felt that such semi-structured interviews offered the best option in giving the participants space to discuss and explore their expectations and experiences.

### **Motivation, obligation and justification**

The beginnings of this project might be traced back to some questions raised by the author's own personal experience of visiting Auschwitz, some years previously. Why, on that initial trip, did Auschwitz feature on an itinerary otherwise limited to Krakow's numerous cellar bars, the somewhat mandatory circuit of churches and chapels and a brief stint of convalescent hiking in the mountains surrounding the town of Zakopane, some 60 miles south of Krakow? What logic led to such a fascination with the site of the largest single mass murder committed by man? What, if anything, did one expect to gain from such an experience? While the answers to such questions, on a personal level, have so far proved evasive, such concerns readily translated into the initial research questions for this project. It soon became apparent that the logic which compelled individuals to visit would also be central to that individual's approach to the site and their subsequent framing of their experiences. As such, the reasoning behind an individual's decisions to visit the Auschwitz site was a significant and recurrent theme in all the interviews conducted.

From the outset, then, it was evident that while individuals often had complex and multi-layered reasons for visiting Auschwitz, very few of those interviewed or spoken to informally held a visit to the camp as their sole reason for undertaking a trip to Poland. While a desire to visit Auschwitz was often a preconsidered reason for visiting Poland, it was generally considered to be one amongst many possible motivational factors. Thus, even for one interviewee who cited his desire to go to Auschwitz as the prime motivation for him visiting Krakow we find logistical concerns regarding the price of flights as a catalyst for his trip:



“Well, actually, [I came to Krakow] for two reasons. The first is I wanted to see Auschwitz and the second is that the flight was very cheap and I wanted to go and I needed an excuse to go...and my friend that had previously lived in Poland said you have to go, if you go to Eastern Europe you have to go to Auschwitz.”

(Thomas, Australian Male resident in London, 22)

In this instance desire to see the site of the camp is coupled with a consideration of the logistical feasibility of visiting. Such was, perhaps, unsurprising from a backpacking subculture that places an emphasis on how one travels and prioritises independent and low-cost travel options. Also, for the majority of interviewees, geographical proximity proved decisive in the possibility of visiting the Auschwitz site becoming achievable whilst making a trip to the area for a mixture of other reasons. Such would appear to coincide with Poland and Eastern Europe developing as tourist destinations with cities such as Prague, Krakow, Budapest and Dubrovnik now well established stops on the backpacker circuit.

Beyond these somewhat practical concerns, there was also an evident influence of personal recommendation and a sense of obligation. Considering the former, it was found that in several instances, individuals based their decision to visit Auschwitz on the suggestions and shared experiences of friends. For example, having attended an American university with a notable Jewish population, one interviewee attributed his desire to visit Auschwitz and, in part, his awareness of the Holocaust to interactions with Jewish friends:

“A lot of my friends were Jewish, they would talk about that, we’d always talk about that...a lot of them talked about those things and had gone to Auschwitz, so they shared their personal experiences.”

(Steven, American Male, 24)

In addition to this case, several interviewees spoke of being told by friends or family that Auschwitz was an interesting and rewarding place to visit. For one interviewee, the frequency with which he was recommended to visit came to perhaps trivialise the site:

“Everyone seems to say the same thing, definitely go and see it. It’s almost spoken about as a big tourist attraction, something like the Eiffel Tower, everyone says definitely go and see it.”

(Mark, Canadian Male, 19)

In this respect, it became clear that there was a certain amount of expectation that people should and would visit the site if they were visiting Krakow. Indeed, Catherine, a twenty-one year old American travelling in Poland with a friend, spoke of just such a presumption, observing of friends and family at home that they would expect that she would go to Auschwitz given that she was going to Krakow. To be so close to a site of such historic importance and not visit would, it seems, be questionable. Thus, several interviewees highlighted a sense of negative expectation in the assumption that one should visit and that not to visit, given their relative proximity to the site, would appear disrespectful. Indeed, a sense of personal duty or obligation was often highlighted as a motivational factor. As such, Catherine further developed her explanation of the rationale behind her visit:

“I felt like the purpose of Auschwitz was to create the memory of them, of those who died, and I felt like...they want you to see it, they want you to know what happened and to have that knowledge. It sounds weird, but I felt like I almost owed it, to them, to see what happened.”

(Catherine, American Female, 21)

### **Getting there, being there and *really* being there**

Not only did individuals seem to offer measured accounts of why they felt it important to visit Auschwitz, they also consider the way one travels to, engages with and interprets the site to be of great significance. Again, such would be expected of

members of a backpacker subculture which bestows considerable cultural capital on the type, form and scope of travelling experiences both in the logistics of their execution and a more abstract sense of authenticity. One clear distinction was between those individuals who joined a tour group, either prior to leaving Krakow or once arriving at the site, and those who did not. Thus, making their own way using public transport and choosing not to join a tour once at the site featured in numerous interviewee accounts. Yet, contrary to what might have been expected, the choice to join a tour was not, on the whole, derided as being too touristy and too superficial. As such, there seemed to be a degree of consensus that taking a tour is regarded as involving a greater focus on the transmission of information and historical facts. One interviewee in particular relates the decision to take a tour as one where a desire to learn from the visit outweighs the need to budget:

“We took a bus there and then we took a tour because at first we thought we’d just do it on our own as we’re concerned about money but then we realised that we’re going to Auschwitz and it’s so significant why would we try to hold back, what, thirty zloty [approx. £5 at the time of research] and you learn so much more on a tour.”

(Carla, Canadian Female, 21)

While paying extra for guided tours might seem antithetical to the budget minded ethos of young backpackers, it is apparent that Auschwitz represented a unique chance to engage with and learn about a historically significant event. However, some did indeed express concern with the experience of being part of a tour and the lack of autonomy that it involved:

“They had a tour guide and another woman, and the other woman seemed to be concentrating completely on herding us...at a proper sign, at a proper direction and that we would stay together, so I was just like chill out women...I’m going to look at the picture for a minute more!”

(Eva, American Female, 20)

In this case, the pressures of being part of a group and being directed seemed, for this individual, to diminish the impact of certain elements of the experience and, in particular, the ability to control one's own pace whilst moving around the site (The importance of this spatial autonomy amongst certain types of travellers is also noted by Edensor, 2002). Indeed, in several instances such was cited as both a reason for and a benefit of not taking a tour. Thus, one interviewee spoke of the advantage of being able to independently experience the site at a pace that suited them:

“Just in the one camp, the main camp, we probably spent two and a half, three hours just walking around a fairly small section of it and two or three tour groups just went by and I found individually would be the way to do it, there's no way of telling how people are going to absorb that kind of information.”  
(Mark, Canadian Male, 19)

This emphasis on independence and autonomy is evident and might be seen in contrast to the experience of being part of a guided tour. Further, it became apparent that this was linked to a desire for a higher degree of engagement with the site and the information it seeks to transmit which seemed common to nearly all interviewees.

One example of this concern for being appropriately absorbed in the experience of visiting Auschwitz was expressed by an individual who questioned the engagement of other visitors:

“It was definitely strange, some people you could just tell, their heads weren't in it that's for sure. You see some people just like chilling, laughing and smoking outside one of the museums. You're just like, how can you do that, show some respect”  
(John, Canadian Male, 18)

Here, the action of others is seen as a counterpoint to one's own behaviour at the site, where maintaining a certain level of respect and solemnity are seen as part of a suitable approach to the site. Similarly, in several cases interviewees spoke of the

need to check themselves for such lapses in concentration and, as such, maintain focus and a certain frame of mind during the visit. For example, one interviewee observes:

“It’s quite a long journey, the tour was very long. I remember amongst all that feeling guilty for being exhausted by it, er, because it’s such a momentous thing that happened in history but also the site is so large it takes hours and hours and hours to explore.”

(Thomas, Australian Male resident of London, 22)

It is unsurprising that behaviour seen as unfitting for a visit to the Auschwitz site, such as smoking, laughing and casual conversation, should feature in interviewee accounts. Indeed, the reading of the behaviour of others as inappropriate, and from this inauthentic, can be seen as a means for individuals to distinguish their own behaviour or experience of the site as preferable and desired. Nowhere, however, was this more apparent and, certainly, consistent in its attitude than in the reactions to the use of cameras and photographic equipment at the site.

While all interviewees spoke of taking photographs, a consistent theme of where and when it was appropriate to photograph became apparent. Yet, the ambiguity of this was expressed by one interviewee who saw taking photographs as a problematic yet necessary part of her experience of Auschwitz:

“I didn’t want to turn it into a spectacle because that would bother me later. But I wanted to know, like I wanted to remember. I almost regret it but I took two photographs in the crematorium...and, I was, like, what am I doing? But, I did. And I think it’s good because I can show, not like a big display, but I can show people, like, look, this is grotesque.”

(Catherine, American Female, 21)

Here, the production of photographic images as an aide to memory, a central feature of tourist behaviour at any site, is seen to feature in the individual’s experience of

Auschwitz despite concerns that, in doing so, she might have overstepped some line of respectful behaviour.



**Plate One:** The Gates of Auschwitz

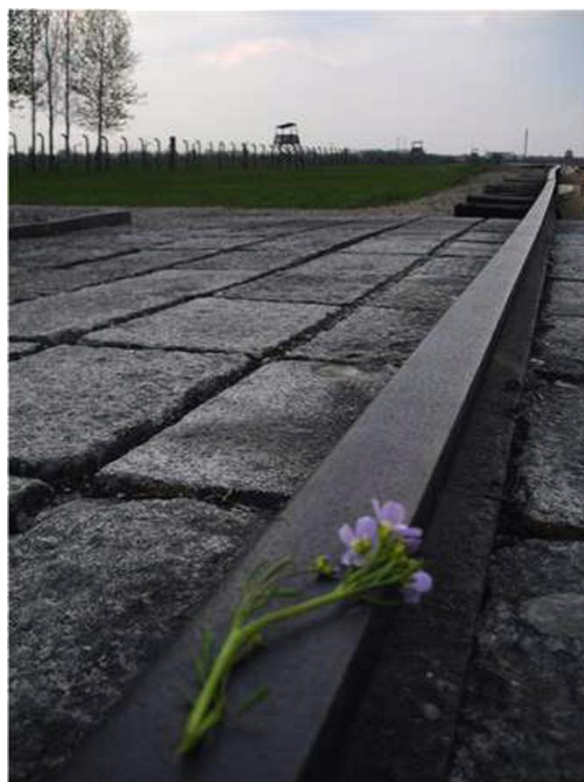
(Source: Dave Gleeson)

Indeed, several interviewees spoke of images they had generated as capturing an element of the experience which was personally significant to them. Although this was understandably standardised, as in the frequent images of the Arbeit Macht Frei gates (Plate One, above) and of uniform rows of razor wire fencing (Plate Two, below).

it was common for an emotive significance to be placed on certain images. For example Eva spoke of a single photograph which she felt could help capture the emotions of visiting the site (Plate Three, below). This mixture of sadness, quiet reflection and, in some ways, hope is represented by a solitary flower, and the only splash of colour, placed at the end of the track. There was, however, an equally prominent concern among interviewees that the taking of photographs might represent a chance to distance oneself from their experience of the site.



**Plate Two:** Wire Fencing  
(Source: Dave Gleeson)



**Plate Three:** Flowers on Railway Line  
(Source: 'Eva')

This emphasis on experience and emotive feeling seemed to reoccur in many interviews, with a general feeling of connection with the site often being spoken of as of greater importance than general details and historical facts. Here, particularly, the experiential quality of Auschwitz became readily apparent. One interviewee recalls:

“I looked through those gates, so they curl up and there’s wire and stuff, and I stood in the middle looking through them and was, like, oh my god I just pictured the people marching and that was really really disturbing. I tried not to picture as much as I could, but it was kind of inevitable.”

(Catherine, American Female, 21)

This notion of being there and being fully engaged with the site and of being able to picture certain emotive scenes often led interviewees to speak of a need to facilitate the imagination and, in some cases, adopt certain imaginative devices whilst visiting the site. As such, one interviewee placed the ability to use one’s own imagination as central to his feeling of engagement with the site:

“I just think there was something about walking the same path that someone else did on the way to death, the judgment, the execution, right there. I liked that it was underdeveloped, the fact that it was in ruins, again, the faculty of mind, it helps, because you had to conjure up images yourself which made you think more.”

(Steven, American Male, 24)

The significance of the presentation of Auschwitz to convey ‘a sense not of abstract history but of tangible actuality’ is apparent (Van Pelt and Dwork, 1996:359). Many interviewees spoke of their ability to be emotively engaged with the site as being influenced by numerous things. While in one case particularly cold weather added to the imaginative process for one interviewee, for several others the warmth of the spring sunshine was seen as an unfitting, even surreal, backdrop to their experience of the site. This sense of engaging with the setting, of *really* being there, seemed an essential element of all participants’ consumption of the Auschwitz site as a tourist



experience. In the light of this, accounts which have privileged the tourist as detached viewer, following Urry's ocular centric 'gaze' (Urry, 1990), clearly bypass much of the experiential and emotive content of tourism which is actively felt and, indeed, consumed by tourists. However, it is worth noting the evident awareness of participants that simple gazing is something that backpackers should not do; the elevation of other sensory experiences being seen as conferring a greater sense of authenticity than sight alone.

### **Auschwitz in history, on screen and in reality**

Both during interviews and general informal discussion observed during the research trip, it became apparent that Auschwitz was, considered to be the primary site of Holocaust memory and, thus, the most prominent site of Holocaust tourism. Prior knowledge, of and familiarity with, the events of the Holocaust, it would seem, played an important role in both initiating an individual's interest in visiting the site and the way they approach and frame their experience once there. Yet, experiencing the physical reality of Auschwitz often allowed individuals a greater level of connection with the Holocaust than might be achieved via cinematic or pedagogical representations. We may consider, then, the interplay of individuals' experiences of Auschwitz as conveyed in historical and educational accounts, as represented in film, television and popular culture and as presented as the physical remains constituting the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial site.

Representations of the Holocaust, particularly *Schindler's List*, appeared to play a significant role amongst interviewees in raising awareness of the Holocaust and fostering an interest in visiting the Auschwitz site. Indeed, in one case an interviewee cited the impression which *Schindler's List* made on him as a reason for wanting to visit the Auschwitz site:

"Its really tough because its very striking, the video media is a very striking way to convey deep feelings like that and huge concepts like that you might not get from just reading about it in a history book or something. And that was probably one of the things that maybe made me decide I needed to come

here and actually see it first hand, because....yeah, it's a hell of a thing to see!"

(Casper, American Male, 23)

Such would seem to concur with suggestions in previous literature that the film and, to a lesser extent, other cinematic representations of the Holocaust have become the primary mode of transmission of knowledge and generation of awareness. Further, as would be expected given that viewings of the film have long featured on many countries school curricula, the interviewees consistently recalled being shown the film and, more often than not, being affected by it.

Here and elsewhere the ability for a teacher or particular individual to offer an inspirational insight into the Holocaust appeared to make a lasting impression upon interviewees. Interestingly, however, a negative teaching experience often seemed to result in a similar level of interest in the Holocaust and the associated desire to visit Auschwitz. Indeed, many expressed a difficulty in comprehending the scope and scale of the Holocaust as a historical event. Thus, those who felt the Holocaust was taught in an overly superficial or abstract and inaccessible manner were able to link this with the hope of reaching a better degree of understanding by visiting the site. Similarly, those who felt the compulsory nature of scholastic teaching to be a barrier to achieving a strong emotive involvement with the events of the Holocaust highlighted the ability for a visit to the site to more actively evoke a sense of personal connection. In this case, it is assumed, the active choice of visiting the site should be seen in contrast to curricular obligation to study the history of the Holocaust.

Given this mixed response to early experiences of learning about the Holocaust, an emergent theme of all interviews was the manner in which visiting Auschwitz fostered a greater or, at least, different level of insight than might have been achieved from either pedagogical and historical or cinematic accounts. For several interviewees who expressed a keen interest in the Holocaust and referred to a considerably advanced level of prior knowledge, the tangible physicality of the Auschwitz site allowed them to more adequately frame their understanding of the

Holocaust. One interviewee, thus, observed the ability to form links between abstract historical accounts and the reality of the site as central to their experience of Auschwitz:

“You stop and think, on this exact spot...this is where it happened, this is, like, this is what everyone talks about it right here or every piece of literature you read is talking about this. And it started to click in back to reality now and again, because it’s easy to let your mind drift.”

(Mark, Canadian Male, 19)

Interestingly, the above case might be contrasted with the interviewee’s traveling companion, John (Canadian Male, 18), who felt that his educational background in mathematics and science left him without the prior knowledge and interpretative framework with which to actively engage with the site. While, this did not prevent the individual from being emotionally affected by his visit, it would appear that some individuals were more readily able to integrate their visit with a wider historical and moral framework.

Where the interplay between cinematic representations of the Holocaust and interviewees’ experiences of visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau site seemed most striking, however, was in the feeling, expressed by some, that the Holocaust depicted by the site was, perhaps, less real or, at least, less dramatic than that depicted on the screen. Crouch, Jackson and Thompson have asserted such an apparent discord between the reality of touristic experiences and expectations informed by the media (Crouch et al, 2005:5). Thus, the striped uniforms in museum display cases and barbed wire fences, though authentic, are already all too familiar having been depicted with astute dramatic skill by movie directors. Such seems to concur with Hartman’s assertion regarding the weightlessness of Holocaust iconography following multiple and repeat cinematic representations (Hartman, 1994). Indeed, interviewees who spoke of a sense of unreality or anticlimax often referred to cinematic iconography which informed their expectations and, hence, framed their reactions to their experience. One interviewee expresses such:

“At Auschwitz it was just so small it was, like, is this it? I mean how can so many people have been killed in such a small place and, again, the barbed wire helps realise it was formidable but it was small, kind of a pretty area also and it’s just, it’s unbelievable. You get there and you’re, like, this is it, this is where it happened and I hate the word surreal but it was almost surreal, you’re just, like, holy shit this is the place that I’ve read about, heard about, seen movies about, wondered about, thought about a million times.”

(Steven, American Male, 24)

The sense of expectation, informed by movies and historical accounts, that is built up prior to visiting the site leads, in the above case, to a sense of anticlimax. Even so, the inevitable link between such representations of the Holocaust and the nature of tourist experience of the site, itself a representation, is clear.

### **Taking lessons from Auschwitz**

The majority of those interviewed referred to their visit to the site as beneficial, citing two main themes, both of which, from the outset, were described as valuable ‘lessons’ from their visit. Firstly, the facts and information conveyed by the site was seen to leave individuals more knowledgeable and more aware of the specific events of the Holocaust. Secondly, a more abstract sense of moral understanding and affirmation was often cited as the lasting lesson of an individual’s visit.

Taking the former, then, it was found that the transmission of knowledge and facts was central to many interviewees’ accounts of their visits. As observed previously, it was recognised that the tangibility of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site facilitated an advanced level of engagement between the individual and the events being presented. Further, it seems that this sense of increased awareness was often contrasted with a previous lack of knowledge. Thus, one interviewee described a sense of gaining a more developed comprehension of the Holocaust in contrast to his previous knowledge which was limited to knowing that ‘there’d been a tremendous loss of life at some point’:

“You got, erm, a sort of a chronological explanation of when it first started, and a sort of progression from Jews being full citizens to Jews being kind of lower class, to Jews having no rights. You really got a progression...you could see there was never a huge step where they said, all of a sudden, you get in the cattle car and you’re going. It was all small steps that led up to this...and it sounds silly but you can almost understand how, you know, people could maybe accept that if you were living in Germany at the time.”

(Casper, American Male, 23)

In the majority of cases, then, interviewees spoke of coming away from the site with significantly greater understanding and knowledge of the events of the Holocaust. Further still, interviewees’ accounts often showed both a keen willingness to learn about the Holocaust and, at the same time, a clear awareness that the site is very much a mediated presentation. As such, one individual observes:

“They really kept telling you the numbers. That was one of the biggest things they want you to be affected by, and you can’t help but be...I was really really really thinking about the different elements and hearing each topic, like, seeing the fact that they automatically kill lots of children...that was something they taught you in Auschwitz I, one of the little signs, and pictures, a bunch of babies’ shoes.”

(Eva, American Female, 20)

The presentation of the site, then, is something of which interviewees were generally aware and, rather than being critical of, engaged with in a relatively responsive and reflexive manner. Thus, the lessons or messages which the site seeks to transmit to its visitors and the associated and somewhat inevitable presentation and contrivance are not necessarily met with cynicism on the part of those interviewed, but a knowing acceptance. Many interviewees expressed a positive attitude to the representation of the site as it allowed for greater engagement. Therefore, while tourists visiting the

site have often, fairly or unfairly, been characterised as undiscerning, it was found here that interviewees seemed conscious of the more contingent elements of the presentation of history.

Considering the second 'lesson' cited by interviewees, it seemed that individuals most often connected their accounts of learning historical facts and information to a somewhat grander impression of emotive connection and moral development. As became clear, specific details were invariably framed as part of a wider moral lesson to be learnt from history. Thus:

“So as awful as it was, as horrible as it was you still have to accept that it happened and learn about it because if you don't then it will just happen again”

(Carla, Canadian Female, 21)

This sense of learning to prevent recurrence was reiterated in many interviews and seemed to be characteristic of many young travellers' accounts of visiting Auschwitz. Indeed, it seems that this moral lesson featured most prominently when individuals spoke of 'taking something away' from their visit. Further, such was often asserted in a particular universalistic manner. As such, one interviewee asserts that the message of Auschwitz is one that transcends national boundaries:

“It's just the sort of thing that everyone needs to go to and see, it doesn't matter if you weren't even, don't live in a country that was part of it, I think it's the sort of example that humanity needs to see, everyone needs to see, so that we can make sure that it doesn't happen again.”

(Casper, American Male, 23)

This universal account seems, in a sense, to offer an almost circular justification for individuals without a personal connection to the Holocaust to find attachment when visiting Auschwitz. Many individuals, while aware of the role of Auschwitz as a place of mourning for both Poles and Jews, asserted that people of all origins or

nationalities could and, indeed, should be affected by visiting the site. This would support Levene's observation that the message conveyed by sites such as Auschwitz is a universal one (Levene, 1994). However, this sense of affirmation of anti-fascist, anti-racist, liberal democratic and humanist values was not without a degree of ambivalence. Such was articulated by interviewees on several occasions. The moral lessons that the Auschwitz-Birkenau site seems to transmit were frequently framed and problematised by contemporary concerns. Thus:

“Something that I thought before I went to Auschwitz, is it a German thing? I don't think it's about these evil German people, but the dehumanising of other people, dehumanising is apparent in many societies and still goes on today. It's not the Holocaust that's going on in Iraq but I think a lot of people disconnect from the reality of what is happening and I think there is dehumanisation, we have to be really careful about what is going on whenever we dehumanise someone.”

(Thomas, Australian Male resident of London, 22)

As noted previously, while much literature disparages certain tourist groups as gazing upon the physical remains of Auschwitz with the same banal curiosity as any number of other touristic sites, the experience of those interviewed here could in no way be described as such. Indeed, it has been shown here that the level of engagement sought by young travellers or backpackers is both relatively advanced and is underpinned by a strong sense of moral obligation to visit, understand and learn from Auschwitz. The message that these young travellers have taken from their visit is phrased in terms of its universality, and is therefore an accessible and valued experience despite their lack of personal connection with the Holocaust.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been on the contemporary understanding and interpretation of the Holocaust by young travellers and their attempt to actively engage with such a tragic part of history. The motivations for young travellers to visit Auschwitz are complex, drawing on personal interest and feelings of moral

obligation. Further, the interaction of historical, cinematic and pedagogical accounts of the Holocaust represent a multifaceted framework in which the reality of the site itself and the history it symbolises is engaged with and interpreted. The nature of this interaction with the site is seen to be both a predominant and desired characteristic of young peoples' experiences of visiting Auschwitz. Such is understood to draw on imaginative devices, a sense of experiential authenticity and a developed reflexive engagement with both the physicality of the site and the moral schema it represents.

Given the suggested potency of Auschwitz as the symbolic centre of Holocaust memory (Kushner, 1994; Reilly et al, 1997; Ezrahi, 2003), we see here how visiting the site is understood to be a unique experience which is rich in meaning. Indeed, such goes some way in answering Tarlow's ambivalence as to whether visiting such a site is differentiated from experiences at other tourist sites (Tarlow, 2005). While the participants of this study do much to highlight their active engagement with the memory which the site seeks to perpetuate and protect, the media, particularly cinema, seems to play the leading role in signaling which sites of collective memory are valued and how they should be interpreted. The accounts offered here suggest an apparent tension between personal interpretations and the prevailing collective memory. Thus, individuals readily speak of their engagement with the site yet do so in the somewhat standardised manner of the metanarrative of holocaust remembering. One practical implication of this, then, might be the expectation that sites of collective memory unavoidably become narrowed over time. Therefore, the apparent concern that dark tourism acts to trivialise collective memory, perhaps, more likely stems from fears that sites can become overly scripted, with alternative interpretations increasingly less likely. To conduct similar studies of different sites of Holocaust memory, those without Auschwitz-Birkenau's infamy, might serve to develop further insight into this area and consider whether the apparent centrality of cinematic representations also informs tourist behaviour and experience at other sites.

It is also worth noting that the subject of study represents only a small temporal section of the experience of visiting the site. It is therefore perhaps pertinent to



speculate, without being too skeptical, on the longevity of the impact that Auschwitz appears to make. How far individuals enter into an ongoing process of assimilating their experiences and to what extent their experiences are utilised in the framing of identity (in the manner outlined by Desforges, 1998) is a point of interest that, sadly, falls outside of the scope of this article. Equally, while the desire for experience and emotional engagement might be readily apparent in this select group of young backpackers, it is not possible to suggest from this that other tourists necessarily fail to value these qualities. Interpretation of behaviour at the site can be seen as relational, with those interviewed here often citing the inappropriate comportment of others. How, one might speculate, would the experience of visiting the site be spoken of by those who are seen to pay little regard to such conventions as refraining from smoking, smiling, laughing or talking trivially of other matters? This clearly leads to the suggestion that a larger scale study of a greater array of tourists and their attendant behaviour and experience at the site would be fruitful.

Considering the frequency with which tourist practice is linked solely with understandings of pleasure and recreation, the case of Holocaust tourism, alongside other examples of dark tourism, offers rich ground for exploring the various meanings which suffuse tourism as a social phenomenon and as an experiential practice. In relation to knowledge of youth tourism and backpacker travel, research into dark tourism highlights instances of engagement and meaning which are clearly striven for by many such individuals.

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