

Learning from the Holocaust

LEAVING KRAKOW and AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU



Holocaust Education Trust Ireland

Learning from the past - lessons for today

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The town of Oswiecim and its Jewish past

Oswiecim today is a town with a population of 40,000. It is located on two rivers, the Sola and the Vistula, and on a major railway junction, where the lines converge from Warsaw, Berlin, Prague and Vienna. Most people have probably never heard of the town of Oswiecim, but most will be familiar with the Germanised name of Auschwitz. For over 60 years, the inhabitants of the town have lived alongside its former camp whose name has become synonymous with the Holocaust.



Oswiecim, like most other towns in Poland before the war, had a Jewish community that could be traced back to the mid-15th century, when the Jews were allowed to settle permanently. From that time onwards, the Jewish community flourished, erecting its first synagogue in 1588. By the twentieth century, the Jews were integrated into local life and were involved in the local council. The community was vibrant, and there appears to have been little antisemitism. When a new priest arrived in the town, the local rabbi greeted him and declared that the Jews and Catholics should work together. Before World War II 60% of the population of Oswiecim were Jewish.

Between the wars, brick-built barracks were constructed on the edge of the town. These buildings were put to different uses by the Polish government. Some were used to house Polish refugees and soldiers of the Polish army, whilst others were used by migrant workers. Later, it was these same barracks that formed the main camp of Auschwitz I.

In September 1939, within weeks of the Nazi occupation, the town's main synagogue was burnt down, and those Jews involved in the town council were removed from their positions. By the end of October, the entire administration was replaced by a Nazi one, including a Nazi mayor. Within a year, Himmler had ordered the establishment of the concentration camp in the town, making use of 300 local Jews as slave labourers in the conversion work.

During the war, an exclusion zone surrounded the camp, and many of the local population were forced out of their homes. In the first 'resettlement' in June 1940, some 500 locals were arrested, half of whom were sent to labour camps in Germany. At other times, families were evicted, and their homes were taken over by the SS. These 'resettlements' took place on a number of occasions. Other locals in the nearby village of Brzezinka were evacuated to enable the building of Auschwitz II, Birkenau.

Since the war, the inhabitants have had to deal with the economic problems and the stigma of living in a town associated with genocide. Economically, the town gains little. As the majority of visitors stay in Krakow and visit the museum on day trips. Recently, one of the town's former synagogues has been restored, and it is now a Jewish education and information centre.

The museum itself is run by an International Council and supported by the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. It recognises the difficulties for the locals and tries to discuss renovation and conservation plans with them. Today, Oswiecim is dealing with its difficult past, but the demands of modern living mean that it is rarely far from controversy.

The Krakow ghetto



...Heavy freight trucks arrived at the front gates. The crowd swayed, rose from the ground. People squeezed through the open gate. SS men standing in the passage yelled like maniacs, kicking and pushing people to the exit. Cries of the separated children and screams of the parents froze the blood in the veins. Children were left in their carriages to meet an uncertain fate. The parents accurately guessed what lay in store for them. The shooting did not stop for one moment. Time and again, a new group of Germans led children to the courtyard of a building ...a series of shots left no doubt what happened there. People fled the ghetto in a rush. They would quickly climb into the trucks because the SS men standing by were beating them mercilessly....

The square was emptied. The liquidation of the Cracow ghetto was drawing to an end. In the Plac Zgody, as on the battlefield – thousands of bundles, luggage was left behind, and, here and there, small children played on the asphalt wet with blood...In the pools of blood were mired bundles, packages and parcels of food prepared for the last journey. Next to them were discarded items of religious ritual wrapped in velvet – prayer books, kittel (prayer gowns), and prayer shawls, strewn about by the Germans looking for treasures.



Ghetto Heroes Square in Podgórze, a symbolic monument devoted to the Jews of Krakow. Photo by Piotr Trojanski.

The ghetto died, and it would seem that this was the last act of the tragic drama. However...

From: *The Cracow Ghetto Pharmacy* by Tadeusz Pankiewicz, Holocaust Library