MONDAY OCTOBER 11, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00

Education in Memorial Sites
The Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau
by
Alicja Bialecka

Should the Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau educate and teach? Or should we only maintain the remains of the former camp, preserve it and make its terrain accessible to visitors? What should be done to commemorate those tragic events from the recent past? The site is an artefact and a document. However, it is also a recollection which reminds the visitor strongly of the Holocaust. But visitors also need proper explanation that will enable them to understand things that are incomprehensible and help them to comprehend things that are inconceivable.

The further we are from the events of the Second World War the more significant is education in memorial places. It is especially important for the younger generation whose sensitivity and knowledge has not been shaped yet. For the third generation born after the war, their history is so remote that they do not identify with it the same way as their parents do and grandparents do. These young people demand real historical knowledge that is consistent with the newest didactics, the most objective commentary as well as convincing evidence, such as authentic sites and properly selected historical sources.

Each year our Museum is visited by hundreds of thousands people of different ages and various nationalities. Most of them come as groups, but also they come as families and individually. Diverse reasons bring them to the former camp. They come out of duty, on a pilgrimage, to struggle with their own past; they come out of curiosity or they make their visit a further step on their tour through Poland. Nevertheless, first, they come to learn what happened here half a century ago and how and why it was possible that it happened at all. They also come to learn how to take precautions against the possible repetition of what happened in Auschwitz. Poles are more than half of all the visitors and the vast majority are school children. Because they are the biggest group among all visitors it is understandable that the education activities of the Museum are directed to them with particular interest and care.

The question of whether children should be brought to the former camp at age 14-15 or not, has been discussed many times by the guides and the education staff of the Museum. Many of us believe that at this age teenagers are not emotionally strong enough to cope with the tragedy of Auschwitz. However, for years it has been a kind of tradition in schools to arrange the so called trip to the Auschwitz Museum and teachers still feel obliged to do so today. As a result most of these young Poles come to the Museum not by choice, but in organised groups accompanied by their history or class teachers. What makes these teachers bring their classes to the former camp? In Polish schools, they teach the history of the Second World War to students aged fourteen and fifteen. Most of the history teachers, especially from the southern part of Poland, come with their students to the Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau
at that time. They treat such trip as a natural complement of school education and also as a form of commemoration, paying tribute to the victims. This has been happening for decades.

Although it is hard to deny the rightness of their intentions, such visits should not be considered as a sufficient lesson about the Nazi ideology and racial policy, concentration camps and the Holocaust. Schoolchildren must come to the Auschwitz Memorial Site properly prepared. History and literature teachers, class or religion teachers have the significant responsibility of preparing their students for the difficult emotional experience of visiting a former concentration and extermination camp. A few hours’ stay in the Museum, however strongly it affects feelings and imagination, cannot entirely replace teaching about Auschwitz by the school. It is true that the authenticity of the place strikes and evokes reflection over the past but not everything will be explained and understood in the place where it really happened. The Museum guide can only manage to show the original artefacts or sites. He will focus on presenting particular events from the history of the camp and from the fates of chosen people. That is why both before and after their stay in the Museum, young people should be taught by their teachers through lessons preparing them for this visit as well as recapitulating it afterwards. The concepts of totalitarianism, Nazism and the Holocaust should be explained and. they should be taught about the mechanisms and consequences of prejudice and discrimination. On the basis of what they have seen and heard, they should be able to recognise such phenomena as intolerance, stereotyping or persecution in their own lives. Only then we can be sure that they have learnt a proper lesson from Auschwitz.

It is widely know that schools in Poland lack resources necessary for school maintenance and the purchase of equipment. They labor to meet constant demands to teach an expanded obligatory syllabus with no increase in class time. History teachers are no exception and despite any commitment to the significance of the Holocaust education, they naturally resist attempts to broaden curricula. Nevertheless, the significance of Auschwitz and the Holocaust education is such that we must help teachers in order to enable them to accept this responsibility. The great task of our Museum is offering teachers such help by providing valuable teaching materials and by close co-operation with schools. The Museum is not demanding of teachers but rather enriches their work by acting as a positive influence, organising teacher training workshops and giving teachers the possibility of the use of a good resource centre.

The Museum started its work with teachers in the seventies, mainly by organising conferences for them both in Oświęcim and in different towns all over Poland. We continued this through the eighties. In recent years we organised conferences on:

- Auschwitz- the symbol for Poles, Jews and Gypsies
- Teaching about Auschwitz and the possibilities of using the Museum Exhibition for teaching purposes
- Major Activities of the Museum and possible co-operation with teachers and school children - proposed subjects of museum lessons, talks, film presentations

Representatives of the Museum Education Department took part in all-Polish conferences for lecturers of teaching methods in History from Pedagogical Universities. The participants discussed the content of the History textbooks for the Polish school of the XXI century, as well as values in historical education.
In the last decade, the Polish school system has been evaluating textbooks and curricula of different subjects, including history and literature. Teachers have become fairly independent in deciding what to include into the syllabus. In such a situation a lot, if not everything, depends on the teacher. His responsibility, at this point, is greater than ever. He must search for new sources of information, choose textbooks and quite often decide about balance in the use of historical material. The National Curriculum obliges him to devote quite a lot of time to teach the Second World War. Whether we he will include a lot about Auschwitz and the Holocaust or not depends quite often on his personal attitude to the subject, his own knowledge or the teaching materials he possesses.

We realised that it would be difficult for teachers from all over Poland to get didactic materials concerning the history of KL Auschwitz and the fates of those who were imprisoned there. That is why four years ago we prepared the first sets of documents, historical articles and photographs connected to this topic for them. These kits were enriched with prospectuses of lessons that prepare students for their stay at the Museum. A historian teaching at a village school a few hundred kilometres from Oświęcim elaborated the lessons. She wrote them and then worked out with her classes before their visit to the Auschwitz Museum.

Permanent and close co-operation between the museum educators and teachers is necessary to pass on the universal meanings and moral lessons that issue from visiting such memorials like Auschwitz. In memorial places there should be well-equipped education centres with a pedagogical library, a reading room and several seminar rooms. Teachers should have an opportunity to enrich their own knowledge there as well as of bringing their classes there for lessons in the museum.

Towards the end of 1995, the Education Department of the Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau decided to plan and implement a new teacher-training project that would focus on the practical aspects of education in memorial places. So far we have worked out a program encouraging teachers to prepare their groups for the visit in the former extermination camp. We provide teaching materials and hold permanent teacher training seminars and workshops. Our intention is to translate our kits and share our knowledge and experience with group leaders from other countries. We have already presented some of our work to certain foreign educators and they were very much interested in co-operating with us. They want us to prepare the information kits in different languages and to organise seminars in the Museum for their teachers.

The Education Centre of the Museum has been developing two series of education guides for Polish teachers and their students.

The first series consists of:

- A teacher’s guide to presenting the fate of Polish and Jewish victims of the camp
- Two educational units preparing school groups for their first visit in the Auschwitz Memorial Site
- One educational unit, which is to sum up what has been learnt and experienced during the visit.

These units are given to those teachers who attend our seminars and who are supposed to prepare their students for their visit in the Auschwitz Memorial Site.
The second series focuses on essential problems arising from the history of KL Auschwitz, e.g.:

- **The Fate of Women in KL Auschwitz**
- **Pregnant Women and Children Born in KL Auschwitz**
- **Mass Extermination of Jews in KL Auschwitz**
- **The Fate of Gypsies in KL Auschwitz**
- **Hospitals for Prisoners in KL Auschwitz**
- **Punishments in KL Auschwitz**
- **SS Staff in KL Auschwitz**
- **The Structure of the Camp Administration**
- **The History of the IG Farben Factory in Monowitz**
- **The Plundering of Personal Effects From the Victims**
- **Last Traces - Drawings and Inscriptions in the Death Block**
- **Criminal Medical Experiments in KL Auschwitz**
- **A Human Being or a Number? - The Fate of KL Auschwitz Prisoners in the Camp**
- **Documents**
- **One Day in KL Auschwitz in Drawings and Paintings by Camp Prisoners or Survivors**

These education guides contain short articles written by the Museum historians and researchers, testimonies of the KL Auschwitz survivors as well as documents, photographs, drawings and paintings from the Museum Archives and Collections. The series is designed for:

- those who wish to deepen their own knowledge
- high school or university teachers in Poland who are interested in incorporating this subject into their social studies and history curricula,
- educators who bring their groups to the Auschwitz Memorial Site for longer study visits,
- Museum educators to illustrate museum lessons or lectures given to different study groups from Poland and the abroad.

During the workshop I will choose and present some educational guides and demonstrate methods of using them both in the Memorial Site or in the classroom.

From January 1996, we have trained about 500 history teachers, literature teachers and priests from Polish schools. They came either from the nearby vicinity of the former camp, i.e. from Oświęcim, Kęty, Brzezinka, Harmęże and other villages or from the nearest provinces in the south of Poland. During seminars, which last either four or six days, teachers pay tribute to the victims of the camp, see documentary films and hear lectures on The Fate of Jews and the Fate of Poles in KL Auschwitz. They also visit the Archives and the Collection Department where they have an opportunity of working with documents, some pieces of art and original camp remnants. They also attend workshops on The Functions of KL Auschwitz and How Could People Give Such Fate to Others during which they get proposed scripts of lessons and work on their own scripts with the use of the received teaching kits and archive materials. Other conference days are devoted to lectures and workshops on different chosen aspects issuing from what happened in Auschwitz. Sometimes we manage to arrange a meeting with a KL Auschwitz survivor. For those teachers who live far from Oświęcim, and during their previous visits with school groups did not have enough time to see the whole of the former camp, there is a long guided visit. It includes the national exhibitions in Auschwitz I, the field of ashes, the Sauna building and the ruins of all Crematoria in Birkenau.
Last February we opened, as the first in Poland, postgraduate studies for teachers of humanities on totalitarianism, racism and the Holocaust. This is the joint project of the Auschwitz Museum and the Pedagogical University in Kraków. All lectures and workshops with well-known specialists invited from different universities and institutes are held in our museum.

Although teachers are the most important link between us, pedagogues working in memorial places and disseminating knowledge about them are also important, as are the young generations who constantly, through the decades come here. We cannot forget about their those who follow them – high school students or undergraduates studying the humanities. Many of them believe that the pilgrimage to this unique place, which for so many became the symbol of martyrdom and national consciousness, should be repeated when they are mature. For these young people it is a kind of recapitulation of what they remember of the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust. The Second World War has always interested young generations in Poland. It is obvious in the country that suffered so much during the war and even long after the war, as the result of the policy of National Socialism. Since the political break in 1989, the Holocaust and Jewish life now lost, has became a subject of interest for many. During the past decades they officially passed this over in silence. Now it is a challenge for young people to discover it. We believe that those who are responsible for shaping the educational policy are aware of this growing interest and will maintain it with the help of such institutions as the Museum and Memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Education in memorial places, among which is Auschwitz, is a very special and unique symbol for different national and religious groups anti is extremely important for present-day societies. Both a visit to the former camp and the education activities which accompany it give enormous possibilities for shaping the beliefs and opinions of the young generations. We can educate here towards tolerance and understanding between people of different races, religions and nationalities. We can disseminate and promote methods of opposing and combating xenophobia, prejudice, stereotypes and racial discrimination. We have to make these young people aware that mankind will never be free of these phenomena and that, if not recognised and halted on time, they may lead to unimaginable barbarisms even in the centre of the civilised world.