

## Newsletter

My name is Lauren W, and I am one of two students from Plympton Academy that took part in the Learning From Auschwitz educational programme. This programme is a way for students across the country to come together to learn more about the holocaust in a way that prioritises those involved and their stories prior and during the event, rather than the stereotypes first thought of when the holocaust is mentioned. It includes your initial orientation seminar; a day visit to both the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps in Poland, a follow up seminar with your group and finally a next steps project. This experience is designed to educate young people about the deeper history of the holocaust and the impact it has had on society while also encouraging the spreading of awareness of this event to make others aware and to prevent it happening again. It also gives recognition to those involved; allowing their stories to be told as an individual rather than a group collective to humanise the event. It is an extremely eye opening and incredible programme which I recommend to anyone interested as it gives you a potentially once in a lifetime opportunity to visit these historical sites in person while also making a positive impact on society.

The first seminar is an in person, all day event in Exeter where you're officially put into group and meet those you're going to be working with throughout the rest of the programme. It's also where you gain a lot of the practical information regarding your trip to Poland. When you first arrive there, you are with the entirety of everyone taking part in the programme where you are introduced to the aims and actions of Lessons From Auschwitz. You are then split off into your groups where you meet your group leader and discuss the stories of those involved in the holocaust and their lives prior to their imprisonment in the concentration camps, allowing us to connect with the names and origins of these people. After, we were introduced to a holocaust survivor named Janine Webber who retold her experiences of growing up in pre-war Poland and how she survived the occupation of Poland by German forces. What was interesting about Janine's story was that she never directly experienced being in the concentration camps, making it a great story to share when breaking the stereotypes that the holocaust just predominantly contained the concentration camps. Finally, we were briefed on how our trip should go and how to prepare.

Our visit to Poland and the concentration camps was the most eye opening and emotive part of the whole programme. We began by starting in the town that surrounds Auschwitz Birkenau, Oświęcim, and after learning about the town's prior history and its rich Jewish culture that slowly depleted during the war, made the trip to the camps a lot heavier. We began our tour of the concentration camps at Auschwitz, the death camp which has now been converted into a museum using the blocks which were used at the time, rectifying the history that was created there while respecting the lives that were lost. When you first walk through the famous gate that reads *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the weight of the tragic events finally begins to set in due to the quietness mixed with the history that lays there. We were taken through some of the blocks which were converted to create the museum, with each block focusing on a different part of the camps history, the first being the arrival of the Jewish people. Some blocks included memorabilia from the time, with peoples clothing, possessions and suitcases

on display to show how these people were humans just like us who had to go through these tragic events. One of the harder hitting blocks, however, was the blocks with the human hair, mountains of shoes and pictures of the children. I thought this was when it finally began to set in just how many died unwillingly in these camps and how many lives were taken away, 6 million Jewish lives, and the shoes and hair only showed a minimal percentage. We were then shown what is one of the few surviving gas chambers from Auschwitz Birkenau where we were able to walk through it and see the extent of what the holocaust meant for some people. Once we finished our tour of Auschwitz we made our way in out groups to Birkenau, the work camp, where many of the original structures still stand. This camp was a lot more open, where you first walk in through the same train track entrance where people were delivered by cattle carts and sent to their deaths. We were shown some the blocks where prisoners used to live, 400 – 600 people living in half a basketball court sized rooms with triple bunk beds made of wood with minimal airflow throughout the whole block. Walking the same steps as the people who were forced to live and work there stayed with you throughout your entire time there, making it even more real. As you walk up the centre of the camp with blocks either side of you, you can start to see the carefully crafted memorial at the end of the pathway, with a memorial inscription written in over 20 language to represent how many different people were forced to suffer in these camps. Finally, we were taken round of the destroyed gas chambers and crematoria, one of many the Nazis tried to destroy to cover up the extent of what they'd done. Overall, the day in the camps really puts into perspective the severity of the events of the holocaust and really emphasised how important remembering the events and the people who went through it are so we as a newer generation can prevent it from happening again.

Finally, we had our online follow up seminar to discuss our own individual thoughts and feelings after the trip and how our next step project is going to work. We discussed the importance of remembering the individuals of those involved and to remember their names and stories to keep their memory alive. The next step project is something you do as an individual to remember the holocaust and its history while also educating individuals on its rawer history and breaking previous stereotypes. You can do anything of your choice: a poster, a poem, an assembly etc. Along with this, we must write a 500-word recount of the whole project and how it has impacted us and what we are going to do to spread awareness in the future. Overall, taking part in the Lessons From Auschwitz programme has exposed me to information I would've never known prior while also providing me with an unforgettable educational experience which has changed my view on history.