

# Remembrance sites

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### Notes from Berlin and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

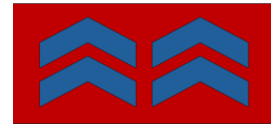
It had been planned as an enlightenment journey. Enlightenment in the opposite sense of revelation, in relation to being faced with the gravity and size of the darkness that MAN is capable of. [I will deliberately not use the word humanity in this context].

» » » One must *see* to grasp its reality.

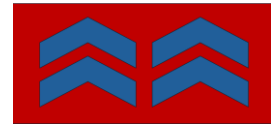
» » » One prepares mentally for such a journey: Reasons are personal. To some, rooted in family history. To others, by life's casual encounters. One does not want to fall into the sin of cultural appropriation. It is an experience that should be approached with humility, with the desire to comprehend, or at least to begin to grasp the size of what happened, of what MAN was capable of. I reflected upon the works of Zimbardo and the Lucifer effect and Hannah Arendt's - the banality of evil and "We, refugees". I feasted in spirit and kept silence.

I first saw the memorial in Berlin. A remarkable architectural artefact, with a striking symbolism. At first sight flat, in its reality, a multidimensional experience of massive concrete, empty space and sky. One starts at its shore and plunges into the labyrinth "of the shadow of death". The smoothness of the concrete contrasts with its mass. Sound is altered.

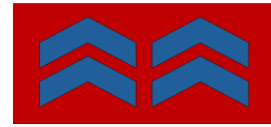
The immersion in the massive concrete blocks alters the senses. At its deepest point, one gets submerged in the grey concrete. Seeing the far glimpse of the blue sky from the very bottom of the concrete valley one could also imagine what a person deprived of liberty feels when looking upwards.



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin'25. Source: The author.



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin'25. Source: The author.



### From the monument in central Berlin to Auschwitz.

From the estheticized experience of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, the brutal reality of what I knew from pictures and films that Auschwitz was, needed preparation and contrast was expected. Rather, as one approaches the premises, from a place of pilgrimage for humanity in her whole, Auschwitz seemed more like a place of tourism.



Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.2025. Source: The author.

Logistically, Auschwitz is neither in the centre of a city nor in the next vicinity of a major one. A little over 300 kilometres from Warsaw, 550 kilometres from Berlin. A one lane road leads to the site. Historical analysis on matters of collective guilt regarding knowledge on the side of the local population have looked into the geographical placement of the extermination camps and the likelihood of the population in its vicinity being aware of what was happening.

By the size of the parking facilities at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, number of busses on the site and available places, one can imagine the incoming stream of people at peak moments.



Size in itself indicates that history is being remembered and acknowledged. However, by transforming this experience into a touring one, by becoming massive tourism, it loses its formative and persuasion power, when one experiences it as part of a mass. The examples here are of note.

One is from the newsfeeds in previous years reporting on the young generation [What word can be used for this site? One cannot “visit”. One can “see”] being at the site as part of school organised activity and showing mixed signs of engagement. For the young person who learned about Auschwitz from the history book, it can be understandable that ex-ante expectations are disaggregated from the reality, that one actually grows into the experience and that it can be shocking, if not well prepared for being faced with it. Pictures are not enough. Without seeing, walking through the grounds, what happened remains a chapter in the history book.

More concerning though are signals that remembrance is being weaponised, either by distortion through overwhelming of the site or politicisation of remembrance. In this regard, a striking element on the website of the Memorial is the announcement accompanied by the explanation from the site’s administrators of unexpected volumes of visitors being brought in by touring cars at costs that were not incurred by them and that exceeded in pure economic terms the actual trip, raising questions as to the reasons for their being there.

Another indicator is the security system in place. Entry resembles passing through an airport security check, again indicating the politization and weaponization of history and positioning in relation to historical events. Several check points and market routes indicate the scale of the volume of visitors with airport like scanners for both people and baggage indicating concerns for security due to, at least, number of visitors.

Similar to the transformation underwent by the volunteers in the Stanford prison experiment, gatekeepers to world’s history became bureaucracy and rule implementers, following the rule of automatic bar codes dictating rights of passage. Parking tickets are emitted by chatty, merry, chubby individuals, that bear no visual indication of either organisational or emotional connection to the place or its signification. Of course, the phenomenon of de-sensibilisation is well known in psychological works. Not only in the face of prolonged war, atrocity and suffering, but also when having to process standardized tasks with different levels and forms of violence or selection purposes. As Goldman showed, at any one time, individuals are guided by cognitive intelligence or by emotional intelligence, but not by both in the same time. And in the face of daily experiencing of what was a service in high demand, one acts as objective gatekeeper, allowing or denying access based not on inner sense of what is right or wrong but according to cold rules, often embedded in electronic systems that cannot be overwritten. For logistical reasons one could understand the need for streamlining processes of entry. However, denying entry when no such logistical imperatives exist given the argument of time slots and bar codes (how ironic is that?!) seems not only whimsical but an offence, not to the traveller but to the purpose for which the remembrance site was built in the first place, its significance and a stain on the entity that acts as a host to this world heritage. Because heritage is not only about the beauty of what can be admired by the world, it is also about the ugliness, and its



potential for resurfacing, that should not be forgotten. In denying entry from behind glass windows and computer screens, the administrating entity acts not as guardian of human history but as entry guard to a ticket based site, resembling a modern version of the original defence “it is not me, it is the system”.



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**About the author.**

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles.

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