

Tears fell at train tracks

COLEG Sir Gareth Thomas, 17, of Llanelli, writes of her experiences for the Star.



My journey to Auschwitz started at three in the morning and my expectations of how I was going to react and of what I was going to see kept recurring at the back of my mind no matter what.

The indefiniteness created a large knot of uncertainty in my stomach and it remained there the whole journey.

Visiting Auschwitz 1, the concentration camp, hit me hard.

The first sight the tour guide explained to us was the sign on top of the gate at the entrance of the camp which bore the motto Arbeit Macht Frei — Work Brings Freedom.

At that point I felt belittled, the sign was so manipulative, working was not going to make them free.

My eyes welled up as I put myself in the shoes of the helpless people forced to enter this world of injustice.

The whole tour of this ignominious camp tightened the knot in my stomach more and more.

However, what sparked my emotions the most was the sight of the hair and shoes taken from those who entered the camp.

I didn't expect to see a red, peeped toe sandal in a sea of dark shoes or small hair clips clenched onto hair pieces on the outskirts of mountains of hair.

Seeing these sights really brought the message home and helped me to identify the people as individuals rather than as a whole.

My arrival at Auschwitz Birkenau saw tall fence posts and barbed wire and past these, were the grounds and barracks within this camp, which was built to kill.

The images I saw while there made me feel appreciative of what I have got. We take for granted clean toilets and comfortable beds. Seeing what the victims had to use as toilets and where they had to sleep put things in perspective for me, the conditions were absolutely terrible. They completely dehumanised these people.

The remains of the gas chambers sent shivers down my spine, thinking of how many people were killed in them, however, standing on the platform of the train track in Auschwitz hit me the hardest and tears fell from my eyes.

Overall, my visit to Auschwitz was one which I will never forget and I think everyone should visit there at least once in their lifetime.

Trip brings horrific past into stark reality

THE key to effective teaching is to show, not to tell.

We had all heard about Auschwitz and the Holocaust, but before boarding the aeroplane and walking through those infamous gates bearing the mocking words "Work Sets You Free", there was little empathy or true understanding.

That is about to change. For myself, and these students, history is torn from the textbook page and shockingly brought to life in all its brutal realism.

Surrounded by the watchtowers, enclosed by row upon row of stark electrified razor-wire fencing, we tread the same despondent ground, beneath the same unforgiving sky and breathe the same indifferent air as those countless wretched souls before — only gone are the machine gun toting guards, the gut-wrenching cries of despair and the smell of death on the wind.

But close your eyes and the horror of it all is never far away.

It is February, the yellow lifeless grass gripped in an iced rigor mortis, the temperature at minus six is a long way off the minus 28 of previous months, yet still I am so cold it hurts.

Smothered in four layers of clothing, hat, scarf and gloves, I cannot begin to fathom how they withstood winter's grip in those stripped pyjama-type rags — many didn't.

Although a scant few did survive, the average life expectancy for the 'lucky' 30 per cent, who were not marched straight to their deaths, was only two months.

The railway tracks pass through the red brick barracks and gatehouse, overseen by a watch tower which will be familiar to those who have viewed the movie Schindler's List, but there was no pause button for those crammed into the cattle wagons.

For approaching one-and-a-half million men, women and children, it was straight on to, quite literally, the end of the line and the gas chambers.

During the two hour flight over from Cardiff these students laugh and chatter as youths do, they play with their mobile phones and gossip with friends, which is good and normal.

As their journey continues the realisation hits home.

The mood becomes sombre, you can see it etched on their faces, there are many shakes of the head and sometimes tears, but you know these young lives have been affected by what they have seen.

And that is a good thing as it offers hope for the future.

Each applied to make this journey of discovery and each has volunteered to go back and tell their peers.

Our tour brings us to the disembarkation point. It is a railway station like no other. Cold, starving, frightened families are thrown from the train on to the bitter gravel below.



ALMOST seven decades have passed since the word Auschwitz became synonymous with some of the worst crimes imaginable against humanity. Sadly as the numbers of Holocaust survivors grow fewer the lessons from those dark days still need to be learned. The Holocaust Educational Trust aims to help British youngsters of today bear the testimony to their peers in an attempt to build a far more tolerant tomorrow. Star reporter GERAINT THOMAS joined two Coleg Sir Gar students in travelling to Poland with the trust.



trigger the enormity of what happened here and very often reduce you to tears.

Hundreds of thousands of poor souls descended these steps never to see the light of day again.

While the steps remain, the rest of the cursed structure lies in rubble, blown up by the retreating Nazis, but no amount of dynamite could ever erase the evil which took place here.

I look at a row of beautiful silver birch trees, the sunset glows orange through the branches but I see no joy in the world.

Beyond cold, drained of emotion, hungry and extremely tired we trudge through the darkness, alongside those railway tracks of death, towards the warm waiting coach.

We are so very fortunate. We can head home from a place where those once brought here soon gave up on even dreaming of such a thing, before death put an end to their suffering.

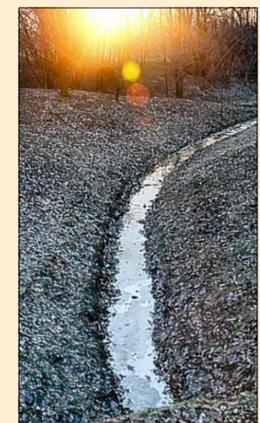
THE Auschwitz-Birkenau complex is made up of three separate camps.

Auschwitz, also called Auschwitz 1, was established by the Nazis in 1940 in former Polish Army barracks. It was primarily a concentration camp. It held 15,000-20,000 prisoners, mainly Soviet prisoners of war, German criminals, homosexuals, and other "anti-social elements".

All inmates worked in the arms factories. Harsh work conditions, poor hygiene and lack of food led to high death rates.

Birkenau, or Auschwitz 2, was a death camp. It was built by the Nazis in 1941. By 1944 it held more than 90,000 prisoners and was the main extermination site, housing gas chambers and crematoria.

Auschwitz 3 was a labour camp. Prisoners were used as slave labour.



■ A winter sun sinks below birch trees which stand where human ashes were scattered in Auschwitz

Combined, Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest of the Nazi camps, with people deported to it from all over Nazi-occupied Europe.

Jews, Poles, Gypsies and Soviet prisoners of war were among the groups sent there.

The total number of people who died at Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1940 and 1945 is estimated to be between 1.1 million and 1.5 million.

Most of them were Jewish and died in the gas chambers.

Before it was liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945, the Nazis were planning to expand the camp.

If prejudice is left alone, it increases

TWO lines of emotionless, elite SS guards march a frightened group of 600 starving boys towards a large red brick building.

Black smoke and the smell of burning flesh streams out of two huge chimneys, smothering the children with a sense of doom and foreboding. They are ordered to strip and enter the 'showers'.

Terrified they protest and are savagely beaten. Some run into the arms of the Sonderkommando (prisoners who have been given the grim task of running this conveyor belt of death) and beg for help.

Those men are powerless to prevent the mass murder but one of their number was not powerless to record the atrocity.

Despite risking instant death, Zalman Gradowski kept a diary of the atrocities and poignantly buried it beneath the mountain of human ashes next to one of the industrial-sized gas chambers in the hope that come liberation, it would be found.

Tom Jackson, of the Holocaust Educational Trust, takes up the true tale. "Zalman Gradowski was a Polish political prisoner who was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in February 1943 and he kept a diary while in there, which was illegal and punishable by death."

"One of the extracts describes a time when 600 boys were being taken to the gas chambers and told to undress.

"At that moment they knew that they were going to die, they had seen smoke coming from the crematoria, so they panicked and were beaten basically into the gas chambers.

"Gradowski says that even though these boys ran up to the Sonderkommando there was nothing they could do, they just stood there paralysed.

"He buried his diary which was found by crematoria 4 and after telling this story he issues us with a challenge where he says, 'You who have lived to see liberty and justice, what will you do?' We have done all we can, we have written diaries and buried them in the ashes but you who have lived to see

liberty and justice what will you do?' "He's basically saying to us, you're the people I expected to come here and now I'm asking you what you are going to do, not about this because it's now too late, but the injustices that you see in your own time.

"That aptly sums up why we have brought these students here today. The challenge has been issued."

Tom, who has been leading visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau regularly since 2003, admits that it is never easy.

"One of the biggest challenges of bringing students here is getting them to confront and accept the humanity of the perpetrators. If you dismiss them as purely evil monsters then we are not answering the questions of how genocide can happen and the ultimate aim of preventing genocide.

"Genocide is carried out by people by ordinary human beings who made choices about their behaviour. And those choices took place within a context.

"While there were undoubtedly some psychopaths who were involved in mass murder in the Holocaust, most people were not.

"The fact is that most of them went back to their ordinary lives after it."

The students are now engaged in The Next Steps project where they will not just tell their peers in schools and colleges about what they have seen, they will also try to get across to them the lessons to be learned from it.

Tom adds: "The primary lesson is to understand where prejudice and intolerance lead to if not challenged.

"It's a lesson we want the students to take away with them and pass on to their peers and communities. If left unchallenged, it increases — it doesn't go away.

"On a daily level it comes down to challenging bullying in schools and challenging comments you may overhear in the local community or even at home and perhaps standing up and saying 'hold on, I don't agree with that, it's wrong'.

"Ultimately it's about stopping genocide but that can only happen if it starts on a small scale."

Shock at scale of Nazi camp

COLEG Sir Gareth Swann, 17, of Llanelli, writes:



I sensed a real feeling of history as I walked around the place, the brick buildings imposing on every corner almost like sentinels.

It was bitterly cold and almost deathly quiet. The tour guide took us around the various different aspects of the camp, slowly taking us through the history of both Auschwitz I and II.

One of the most striking exhibits for me was the "hair room". Before entering this room we were told that before cremation, the heads of the prisoners were shaved, and the hair collected for "re-use".

I entered the room expecting to see perhaps a few clumps of hair however there turned out to be two tonnes of it behind floor to ceiling glass all around the room. I can only describe it as a sea of hair, with each lock representing a person.

The most poignant part of Auschwitz I was the gas chamber itself. This is the only one which the Nazis left intact.

Over 70,000 Jews were killed here and it was harrowing as I walked down the steps to the killing chamber itself.

I really felt a sense of death as I thought of the men, women and children who had perished there.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about it was the scratch marks along the walls, evidence of the victims trying to dig their way to freedom.

Auschwitz II was the most desolate and cold place I have ever been to. Although surrounded by birch trees, I didn't hear a single bird throughout the camp.

We were able to go up into the infamous gatehouse from which I could see the whole camp. The scale of the place is shocking, with barbed wire stretching on for miles between the ruins and remaining huts.

The guide told how the prisoners were given nothing but striped pyjamas to wear and that many would freeze to death in the winter.

I felt guilty at complaining about the cold, hiding behind my coat, scarf and hat.

We held a memorial service with the help of a Jewish Rabbi right at the place where the Nazis would choose between those fit for work and those fit for slaughter. This served for me as a great symbol of defiance to the Nazis' attempt to wipe out the Jews from the face of the Earth.



■ Mountains of suitcases taken from families as they enter



■ A wall of photographs show those killed.



■ Students at the tracks which delivered people to their grim fate.



■ The main gate to Auschwitz with the words 'Work Sets You Free'.



■ The ruins of an Auschwitz gas chamber.