

In March 2018 two students from Torquay Girls Grammar School, Ellen Carthew and Cyann Fielding, representing the History Department, visited Auschwitz extermination camp in southern Poland with the Holocaust Educational Trust. As part of the project they met a Holocaust survivor. This is an account by Ellen of the interview.

Anna

Under the cover of the Second World War, for the sake of their "new order", the Nazis sought to destroy all the Jews from Europe. For the first time in history, industrial methods were used for the mass extermination of a whole people. Six million were murdered, including 1,500,000 children

The Nazis enslaved and murdered millions of others as well. Gypsies, people with physical and mental disabilities, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, trade unionists, political opponents, prisoners of conscience, homosexuals, and others were killed in vast numbers

- Imperial War Museum London

I met with Alina Hughes, on Wednesday 14th March, to talk about her mother's life both pre and post war as a Polish woman living in Krakow and as a prisoner of Auschwitz. Much of the information she had on her mother's life was obtained posthumously, through Alina's own research, as like so many of the survivors Anna did not dwell on the past and much of the formal records of her life were destroyed by the Gestapo.

Ana Bialas was born in a city on the outskirts of Krakow, before the war she worked for the Municipal Authority in her town. She was arrested by the Gestapo as a possible 5th columnist (a person who could undermine the authorities from within) in 1942.

As a political prisoner (1942 - 1945) she was beaten, starved, refused water and water drip tortured. After each interrogation she was imprisoned in a cellar, bruised, sometimes unconscious and often fainting from the pain. (This was testimony offered by fellow prisoners during the Nuremberg Trials).

Polish civilians were transported into Nazi concentration camps to act as a cheap labour force which was utilised by the Nazis in order to keep the camps running.

When entering Auschwitz, her hair was taken and identity removed by the issuing of a number which was tattooed on her forearm. The positioning of the tattoo on her arm was commonly used for those of Polish and Jewish heritage. I found out that tattoos were placed on the leg of any babies born within the camp and Russian Soviet spies had them placed on their chest.

Anna's job was to unpick the sewn hems joining the material of the clothing confiscated from the prisoners. This was to locate any gold that was often smuggled in by prisoners, in a desperate attempt to fund survival essentials like food, brought in from allies on the outside. The section of the camp which handled loot was referred to as Canada by prisoners in reference to the imagined riches of North America

The very use of trade and currency within the camps was a way of revolting against the dehumanization process of the camps, signifying their drive to retain their humanity. This was because the Nazis wanted to starve prisoners', therefore the prisoners saw food smuggling as a form of resistance. This strategy was referred to as IBERLEBN which translates as "to survive or overcome", which in the face of genocide was their only means of resistance.

Anna being a Polish and young and healthy and not being Jewish did not face an immediate death sentence in the same way as the Jewish prisoners, instead she was selected to be worked to death. During their time at the Camp the labour force were made to do many horrific tasks, such as do moving the bodies out of the gas

chambers and carrying crates of clothing which were often sodden due to the weather conditions. This slave labour in appalling conditions, under horrific mistreatment almost always led to their deaths within a very short time.

The prisoners survived on very thin potato soup, and from eating small bits of rotten vegetables and bread. The Nazi propaganda lied that they were feeding prisoners 1,000 calories a day, however from survivor testaments and evidence it is clear that the prisoners received a fraction of this nourishment. This worsened towards the end of the war as the Nazi state had depleted wealth and so the prisoners were starved.

In addition to this the prisoners worked 12 hours a day completing manual labour jobs, in conditions that exposed them to the elements. They were only allowed one layer of clothing, that being the pyjamas issued, and they were frequently punished if found with more than this one layer. Therefore many died through cold induced trauma as the climate would drop well below freezing in the winter months. Having recently visited the Camps in my modern winter clothing I could not imagine how people endured -25 temIn Mrch perature in just a thin uniform and with just wooden clogs on their feet.

We now know that Anna at this time had a tumour within her spine, this was exacerbated through the manual labour, such as the heavy lifting of the crates of sodden clothes, this led in later life to complications and she was told she would never walk again. It is testament to her determination that she endured this throughout her time at the camp and continued to be mobile even after her diagnosis.

Alina told me how Anna escaped from the camp and her eventual flight to England.

Anna was a political prisoner and her husband was a member of the Polish army, this meant that they had connections with the Polish resistance movement .

One of the main sources of underground resistance was the Polish resistance movement with the Polish home army at its fore front this was the largest underground resistance movement in all of occupied Europe, covering both Germany and the Soviet zones of occupation. In the spring of 1944 they numbered 400,000 members with 100+ radio stations broadcasting in occupied Poland

During the later stages of the war after consecutive defeats for Germany in Europe and Africa the security in the camp was comparatively weak, as troops were needed for the front-line. With Russia also joining the war effort and the German hierarchy not convinced that they were going to win the war the focus at the Camps shifted from imprisonment at the camps to executing as many Jews as possible. It was at this time that the underground Polish resistance managed to begin freeing a few prisoners from Auschwitz without being caught.

A key example of how the Polish resistance worked is the story of Witold Pilecki in 1940, Witold Pilecki, an intelligence officer for the Polish resistance created a plan to enter Germany's Auschwitz concentration camp, to gather intelligence on the camp from the inside, and help organize inmate resistance

The Polish Army approved this plan, provided him a false identity card, and on 19 September 1940, he deliberately went out during a street roundup in Warsaw and made himself be caught by the Germans and along with other civilians was sent to Auschwitz.

In the camp he created and organized the underground organization of ZOW (Związek Organizacji Wojskowej). In October 1940, ZOW sent its first report about the camp and the genocide to Home Army Headquarters in Warsaw

One example of the escapes Pilecki fuelled took place on the 20 June 1942, four Polish prisoners, Eugeniusz Bendera, Kazimierz Piechowski, Stanisław Gustaw Jaster and Józef Lempart escaped dressed as members of the SS-Totenkopfverbände, fully armed and in an SS staff car. They drove out the main gate with a smuggled report from Witold Pilecki about the Holocaust. The Germans never recaptured any of them.

Anna although reticent to talk about her experiences both because of Alina's young age and not wanting to relive the awful experiences has told Alina that she was rescued by the Polish resistance towards the end of the war.

Anna was smuggled through Europe and was finally issued with a Military Exit Permit in April 1947. She travelled on the T.S.S. (troopship) 'Empire Halladale' from Wilhelmshaven to Tilbury to join her husband in London. The cost of the voyage was approximately £500 in today's money, funded partly by the Red Cross (no details of where the remainder of the funding came from).

She finally received a Certificate of Registration (Aliens Order) from the authorities in Eastleigh, Hampshire in June 1947.

They then moved to the Polish refugee camp situated at Stover, she retained her strong Polish culture and Alina's first language was Polish, she learned English for the first time when learning English grammar whilst attending school.

Survivors especially from Eastern Europe had no homes to return to as others had taken them or found it too painful to return. As their families had been murdered they were often disorientated and lost, so many emigrated to start new lives in Palestine, the USA, and Britain. Also Displaced persons camps were set up where they were cared for by the United Nations.

In August 1945 Britain, the USA, France and Russia drew up the charter for an International Military Tribunal to try the surviving Nazi leaders and some of the worst prison guards at the camps. Its main purpose was to prosecute the Nazis for their crimes against humanity.

The Americans also mounted twelve subsequent trials dealing with the role of the German high command, industry and the complicity of the judiciary in the exploitation of Polish slave labour and for medical crimes.

Survivors including Anna were then given monetary compensation from America which allowed those who had survived limited recompense for the horrors they had endured.

Alina recently visited Auschwitz, and found that the prisoner number allocated just before and after her Mother's, and whose portraits hung on the walls of the museum, had been murdered at the Camp shortly after her mother had managed to escape

It was a privilege to be told Anna's story. The statistics of the 6 million murders at the death camps are truly horrific, however it is too mechanical or even too big to comprehend, therefore I believe that using individuals, with names, families, schools, and jobs, is so vital.

As time goes on and those involved get older it becomes more difficult for each new generation to comprehend the magnitude of the horror man can do to each other and how what underpins the 6 million murders were so many single acts of aggression/deceit/ignorance/greed perpetrated by one individual onto another individual.

I now feel that it is vital that I relay Anna's survival story to my wider community so that when asked about the Holocaust they can now give at least one name of a person who a state, from a time not very long ago, decided could be replaced with a number and deleted from history.

You who live safe

In your warm houses

You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider if this is a man

Who works in the mud

Who does not know peace

Who fights for a scrap of bread

*Who dies because of a yes or a no
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in the winter.*

Meditate that this came about:

I commend these words to you.

Carve them into your hearts

At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,

Or may your house fall apart,

May illness impede you,

May your children turn their faces from you.

Primo Levi- If This is a Man