The birch field

John Launer

The field is huge, roughly the size of 300 football pitches. Despite its size, it is entirely surrounded by a fence. The fence is only interrupted at one place, by an imposing brick gatehouse with an arch. Somewhat incongruously, a railway line runs under the arch. The railway continues some way into the field, and then comes to an end in a siding. There are dozens of large huts, or block houses, laid out regularly across most of the field, some made of brick and others wooden. At the opposite end from the gatehouse there are also some collapsed buildings. They look as if they once served some industrial purpose. Apart from these structures—the gatehouse, the railway, the huts, the ruins—the field is fairly ordinary. In the local language, the name of the place is ‘birch’, which was the name of a village that once existed here. A long time ago, before the village itself, there were presumably birch trees growing here, although none are evident now.

The field may look ordinary, but for 3 years in the last century, from early 1942 until late 1944, this was one of the world’s killing fields. In Polish, the name for the birch tree is ‘Brzezinka’. Translated into German, it is ‘Birkenau’, the name that people generally use for this place.

Close by is the small town of Oświęcim, or Auschwitz, with its old barracks. The chief advantage of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex was that it lay at the confluence of two large rivers, and at a junction for many railway lines coming from north, south, east and west. Thus, it was possible to bring industrial goods there—or in this instance, human beings—from almost everywhere on the continent.

At comparatively little expense, over a million people were brought here, in railway vans originally designed for transporting livestock. They came from France, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus and of course Poland itself. They were mostly Jewish, but also included Russian prisoners, Roma (‘Gypsies’), Jehovah’s Witnesses and gay people. They covered all age groups, from babes in arms to the extreme elderly. Soci ally, they represented every imaginable occupation: professors, taxi-drivers, doctors, farmers, business people, musicians, lawyers, nurses, teachers together with their schoolchildren. Some died on the journey through lack of food, drink and sanitation. The vast majority of those who arrived were murdered within an hour or two. With few exceptions, the remainder died here in a few weeks or months through hard labour, starvation, infectious diseases, or by summary execution.

INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION

The Polish scholar, Zygmunt Bauman, has described the process that took place here as a model of efficient modern industrial organisation. The logistics of deportation were meticulous. The layout of the field meant that it only took a matter of minutes for officers to guide each new group of arrivals from the railway sidings where they disembarked to the buildings a little further on where they would die.

Having been reassured that they were to be disinfected, the men, women and children were all closed into chambers in crowds of several hundred at a time, and exposed to a cyanide-based pesticide gas. It took up to 20 min for everyone to die from asphyxiation by gas inhalation or the crushing of bodies as people vainly sought for an exit. Meanwhile, their former clothes, luggage and other possessions were being carefully sorted for resale elsewhere. Once the murders were complete, prisoners removed everything from the bodies that could be recycled: hair, spectacles, gold teeth, prosthetic limbs. The corpses were then incinerated in crematoria that adjoined the killing chambers. At times, up to nine thousand would pass through in a day. It was, as Bauman describes, a logical and efficient production line.

The production of death on this scale was possible as a consequence of seeing particular kinds of people as mere objects, whose worth was no more than what they brought with them. But the perpetrators were in thrall to another kind of idea as well. Using language borrowed from biology, they regarded their victims as pathogens, or as mutants within the gene pool. The process was indeed industrial, but the philosophy behind the process was one of hygiene. In the eyes of those who carried out these murders, Europe was being cleared of dangerous risks through the extermination of those who carried certain racial, political or sexual traits. Through a grotesque misapprehension of human ecology, the people who carried out these acts persuaded themselves that they were doing something both scientific and right.

SCIENTIFIC PROJECT

It was precisely because of this belief in the scientific nature of the project that so many doctors took part in it, and did so with enthusiasm. Doctors supervised the selections where a small number of new arrivals were spared from immediate murder because they appeared medically fit enough for hard labour, or had special skills that might be of use for a while. Doctors carried out human experiments including the use of freezing, mustard gas, malaria, tetanus, poisons, radiation and surgery without anaesthesia.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, around 1500 sets of twins were subject to pseudo-medical experiments including the injection of dye into their eyes to change the colour of their irises, and being sewn together to simulate conjoined twins. Most of the children and adults who did not die during the experiments were then given phenol injections to the heart—also by the doctors. While only a limited number of doctors carried out such work personally, uncountable numbers of them, including German and Austrian university departments and medical schools, were complicit through promoting the spurious theories that justified the separation, deportation, torture and extinction of undesirable races and types.

THE BANALITY OF EVIL

I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time earlier this year and, as well as the obvious horror, I also noted the banality of the place—to borrow a term from the philosopher, Hannah Arendt. The garrison town of Auschwitz and its barracks in some ways resemble Aldershot in the south of England. Birkenau, when all is said and done, is just an enormous field. It is untrue that ‘birds do not sing...
here’ because of what happened. Mercifully, they sing in this place as they do elsewhere. Maybe one day, birch trees will—and should—be allowed to grow here again. The evil is not in the bricks of the buildings nor in the grass growing from the ground. It is in what people chose to do here—and at hundreds of similar sites of mass murder from that time. It is in our historical awareness of what the murderers did, and our sympathy for the terrible suffering of the victims.

But is such sympathy enough? Piotr Cywinski, the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, writes3: ‘The victim is not the problem. The problem for our understanding of human nature is the perpetrator. But who would be capable of looking at the camp’s barbed wire from the point of view of the camp guard? And of putting one question to oneself: In what circumstances could I have appeared in that position? Hatred and contempt probably can never be eliminated completely, but it can be opposed—actively. Every passive observer then, let’s face it, is also the problem, particularly when the passive observers number in the tens and hundreds of millions.

‘Someday’ Cywinski writes, ‘there will be new martyrdom museums which tell the tragic story of the African genocides of the early 21st century; of the children murdered with machetes before the eyes of TV reporters. And then, young people visiting those memorials will walk through—concentrated, disoriented, depressed. And they will be unable to understand what we did back then. How was it possible that no one did anything? After all, they could have.’

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