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MY AUSCHWITZ STATE OF MIND: A study of the nature of emergence of a text in relation to Auschwitz

Pope, Ivan Alexander

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UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH

MY AUSCHWITZ STATE OF MIND: A study of
the nature of emergence of a text in relation to Auschwitz

by

IVAN POPE

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

External institutions visited for research and consultation purposes:

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

Więźniów Oświęcimia 20, 32-603 Oświęcim Poland

Fundacja Pobliskie Miejsca Pamięci Auschwitz-Birkenau

(Foundation Of Memory Sites Near Auschwitz – Birkenau)

ul. Ward 67 32 - 620 Brzeszcze Poland

The Imperial War Museum London

Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ

The Weiner Holocaust Library

29 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DP

Presentations at conferences:

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Abstract

My Auschwitz State Of Mind: A study of the nature of emergence of a text in relation to Auschwitz

Ivan Pope

This thesis uses practice-based research to ask how I can write a textual deep map from an investigation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As a key part of the research, I made repeated visits to the environs of Auschwitz-Birkenau, walking and cycling extensively around the area in a search for contemporary fragments in the landscape, for example buildings, routes, sites, landmarks, place names, signposts and found objects. I used my own collection of guides, documents, textual, cartographic and photographic fragments and other ephemera related to the town and the Auschwitz museum in addition to support from the Auschwitz Museum itself and external archives such as the Arolsen Archives (“International Center on the Nazi Era - Arolsen Archives,” n.d.) and the Wiener Holocaust Library (“Home - The Wiener Holocaust Library” n.d.) in London. These all acted as points of departure as I embarked on making my deep map.

The research translates into a complex textual map of my subject combining autoethnographic stories with tales from psychogeographical drift, non-fiction examinations of place and semi-fictionalised histories. The research is presented as two conjoined texts, one a form of creative non-fiction and the other a critical reflexion, which between them constitute an examination of how a place as imbued with meaning as Auschwitz can be written about in a new way.

I refer to the writings of a variety of writers, philosophers and theorists, including Giorgio Agamben's spatial grey area, or soglia¹, Walter Benjamin's 'alternative model for organising things in the field of knowledge' and Charlotte Delbo's entrances, exits, boundaries and markers that delineate Birkenau.

My process is deeply personal and predicated on a form of personal exposure to the landscape with few specific notions or processes of exploration. A process of constant sorting is fundamental to my production as I examine place as a series of complex, palimpsestic texts.

Notes on the thesis

While this thesis is presented as divided into two parts (a creative, *Knowing Auschwitz*, and a critical, *The Other Auschwitz*), I ask the reader to read it as two movements that intersect in one hybrid-inclined text, a text that can only exist when the two parts are interpenetrated.

Both parts are equally a documentation of my research by practice and the outcome of my research by practice. They are not so much de Certeau's crossword decoding stencil, but a puzzle filled out in response to the question that I set myself at the start.

¹ Agamben reads the soglia as a field of tension between the topographical and the topological, useful ground for a reflection on the topological spatialities of the camp (Giaccaria and Minca 2011) (in Italian, soglia means threshold, but also gate/door/entry and limen, border, space of passage and transition).

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MY AUSCHWITZ STATE OF MIND

A study of the nature of emergence of a text in
relation to Auschwitz

Knowing Auschwitz

I went to Auschwitz in order to re-map it with text: my aim was the construction of a long text that echoed (somehow) the topography of the site.

The research started formally with a desire to find a new way to write about a very well-known place by being in that place and also not in that place. I needed to experiment with a very difficult place and I chose Auschwitz although I had little idea of what it would reveal. The point was to be in the field, to originate a deep map, to make *something* happen.

My research proposal started with the line ‘Making a deep map from fragments’. This interest in fragments came from a feeling that this was how I constructed texts, from the accumulation of smaller parts. By texts I meant both written work and visual artworks. All my creative work proceeds by the accumulation of pieces. Many aspects of my whole life could be seen as an attempt to deal with the pile of parts that I was good at accumulating. It seemed it was time to examine this subconscious drive more closely.

My research question was how the site and the text would inform each other, how the text could arise out of the cold clay of the site. What I didn’t know at the start was what the text would turn out to be, what the connective tissue would be, how long I needed to spend in the field, whether I would enjoy it or not (appreciate? grow with? learn from?), how the text would spark itself into life or how it would grow, what its structure would be.

I arrived at the idea that I could experiment to construct a text by collecting and assembling fragments from various sources. In order to write this place, I had to enter it,

not just visit it, not just go there and find something to write, but to sink into the topography to produce topology. Then I had to leave it. The writing and the visiting and the leaving came together, could not proceed one without the other, and then diverge: 'the issue of space/place has now moved towards less reductive models, emphasising instead the way in which 'places' are constructed by the people moving through them' (Topinka 2010: 60).

My first degree was in Fine Art and I spent many years constructing installations and undertaking an admixture of performance and production. As the years passed this practice veered ever more into the production of texts although these texts were still generally comorbid with artefacts. I felt that I needed an approach that foregrounded the text but which allowed for the existence or even intermingling of objects. From this desire I came to a view that if the text itself was to be constructed from fragments then it didn't matter so much whether those fragments were textual or physical, they could all go into the mix. Coming to this conclusion didn't solve the core problem: what form of writing could integrate a variety of fragments? What even was a fragment? A search for the fragment in literature (or possibly a literature of fragments) brought me to Walter Benjamin. Eventually, like a detective story with clues provided by Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben and Charlotte Delbo, I started to assemble an autoethnographic method of building a text from an array of fragments. My long text, *My Auschwitz State Of Mind*, is not a recording of my learning as the process unfolded or an attempt to write a text about a death camp. It is a construction realised out of the accumulation of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fragments (thoughts, insights, understandings, notes, responses, discoveries, and the like) through a struggle with topology and topography. Eventually the idea of a constellated text emerged.

Three books that I recently read raised the idea of a spatio-textual approach. From Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* I took an idea of mapping a landscape with language, a

sort of ethnographic approach to the landscape that he describes as ‘how we landmark and how we are landmarked’ (Macfarlane 2015: 3). From William Least Heat-Moon’s *Prairy Erth (a deep map)* I took the notion of creating a map by referential walking in a constrained landscape, waiting for it to ‘open inch by inch to show its long miles’ (Moon 1991). From Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: a secret history of the 20th century* (Marcus 1990) I gleaned the idea of looking at a subject that is not an urban landscape through the lens of psychogeography. Throwing these three approaches together, not so much as a methodology but as an attitude of looking, I set out to write my text.

I chose Auschwitz-Birkenau for three reasons. i) it was a very well-known place ii) it was a very difficult place iii) I had a relationship with the place that had been developing for many years but which I never examined or understood. My thinking was that if I could succeed with such a place then I would have built a template that I could apply to other places. Nowhere would be as difficult or as much written about as the great German death camp.

All Holocaust sites are a continuum of each other, that is undeniable. The Holocaust was a single and singular event. If I were to construct a chart of the worst camps, Auschwitz might stand near the top of it. The majority of Holocaust sites have had little spatial examination: ‘in most European countries the Holocaust has only recently begun to be considered in terms of its surviving archaeological remains and landscapes, and the majority of known sites are still ill-defined and only partially understood from both spatial structural points of view’ (Colls 2012: 86). Auschwitz stands apart, alone, inspected and examined and yet, even here, there is no one true camp.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau is not a contested space, at least not in polite circles, its existence, what transpired there and its role in the Holocaust: these are settled history, but the flood of memoirs and literature that describe the space and topography have made it

effectively unknowable. The site(s) is now a museum, a tourist attraction, an empty space and a UNESCO heritage site, but it must be remembered that it is all these things because it was originally chosen and used as the site of a machine designed for mass murder through a variety of methods. While I am aware, and was aware during my repeated visits, my research was not designed to address this period of the site's past, nor to address how or why these deaths occurred. My aim was to investigate the site as it lay in our present, to consider it as a place in relation to all other places.

Every book about the camp contains a variety of maps that mark key locations and events but which seldom offer a way to connect them or to understand their relation to each other. I had a simplistic view of the place and, although I realised I had been preparing for this for much of my life, I had no real idea what I was doing except an internalised notion of the psychogeographer's² *dérive*³ which I intended to put into practice for an exploration of the site. My aim was to map the space by a process of wandering through its boundaries and fragmented spaces. I arrived at the place hoping that, for all the maps and all the texts that existed, some things were not mapped and that from these unmapped things I could start to construct a new, a different, view of the place. I wanted to talk about what the preserved location had become and leave the connections to the past unspoken.

I assumed I would find an obvious and straightforward way of understanding the landscape, that I would know where everything was, where I was, and how things related to each other and to the past. In the huge empty landscape that is delineated as 'Auschwitz' this assumption provided me with an insight: there is no 'there', there. For all the evidence of horror (here, as described in the guidebook, is the wall where people were shot, here the ruins of the gas chambers, here torture cells, here an unloading ramp,

² Psychogeography was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as a study of the laws and effects of the geographical environment organized on the emotions and behavior of individuals.

³ A revolutionary strategy proposed in 1956 by Guy Debord: a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society, in which participants drop their everyday relations and enter into spontaneous encounters and interactions.

and on, and on) the site seemed to lack anything to hold on to, anything to bring tears or the shock of horror, the abyss. Or maybe that was just me. My initial approach to deep mapping, that the structure of my text would reflect the topography (the mapped space) and the content the topology (the conceptual space), that together they would map the space geographically and emotionally, eventually seemed to be both revelatory and impossible.

‘It is not really possible to tell the truth, to testify, from the outside. Neither is it possible, as we have seen, to testify from the inside. I would suggest that the impossible position [...] is to be, precisely, neither simply inside nor simply outside, but paradoxically, both inside and outside: to create a connection that did not exist during the war and does not exist today between the inside and the outside’ (Agamben, 1999: 35)

Auschwitz is a very well-known place which has been written about since the first post-war days and which continues to be written about. It is riddled with unknowns amid the known. Within even the most densely written places a gulf accrues between what we believe we know and what writers describe. I didn’t appreciate these things although I knew them by intuition. It was spatial truths that drew me in, before and after. Auschwitz is defined by the monotonous, repetitive, orthogonal fragments that remain. They lack any individuality or any indication of the inhumanity of the place. The camp is presented ‘as built on isotropic surfaces with all traces of topography and geology removed’ (Charlesworth 2004: 97).

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was established immediately after the liberation of the camp in a process driven initially by prisoners who anticipated liberation and who were determined to build a memorial to what they experienced. The museum was codified into law by the new Polish government in 1947. This codification led to the setting of a part of the landscape in aspic. Auschwitz proper comprised a huge industrial state (the Zone of Interest) consisting of over thirty sub-camps ranging from tiny transitory locations to

large slave labour sites such as mines or factories and stretched for hundreds of kilometres. Around the museum enclosures, between and around them and the town of Oświęcim and stretching far into the countryside there are dozens or hundreds of sites, fragments of the totality of Auschwitz, which are recorded and remembered briefly in the memoirs of ex inmates, if at all. Only two of the sites, Auschwitz I and Birkenau, were inherited by the museum, and these two places have become the core of Auschwitz as it is known by the world. The result of this focus on the camp buildings means the world sees Auschwitz through the lens of its metonymic parts, largely the Arbeit Mach Frei gate and the gatehouse at Birkenau. You can buy fridge magnets with these images on them at any of the many camp bookshops (but nowhere in the town of Oświęcim itself or outside the museum). These markers of atrocity, plus perhaps the railway wagon, electrified wire fences, watchtowers and railway lines, are used as indicators of the Holocaust. Visitors expect to see them, and do see them, but they barely see anything else, anything mundane outside the expected vistas.

How this landscape outside the legally established and officially sanctioned camp museum, the macro and the micro of it, relates to the past and present of the place is ill considered. The museum wields huge power in the vicinity of their establishment, yet seem to have little interest in it. When I asked them about the residual (original) spur railway line outside Birkenau, they bluntly told me it was outside their authority. ‘The plots on which there are railroad tracks leading from Judenrampe to the Birkenau gate belong to private owners. I do not know much more about it; you can probably get more information from the geodesy [sic] department of the Oświęcim commune office.’⁴

⁴ Email to author from Piotr Setkiewicz, Research Department head, Memorial and museum Auschwitz Birkenau, 20 Aug 2019

Clearly, all Holocaust sites have formal and informal boundaries, an inside and an outside. It is the nature of a bureaucracy, especially one established by law, to have regard only to its own defined territory, yet:

‘Any description of the camp based on dichotomous categories that imagine a radical inside (the camp(s) of Auschwitz) and a radical outside (the town of Oswiecim-Auschwitz) is not only difficult to sustain, but also overlooks the existence of a mobile threshold between the two and its related geographies that were essential in the production of these experimental racialized spatialities’ (Giaccaria and Minca 2011: 8).

The unstable nature of the topographical borders of the camp is ignored while it is being, and has been, irrevocably changed. The museum authorities seem to care little for the existence of such external fragments and to almost actively resent and reject the existence of this history.

In *Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre*, Harold Marcuse addressed the history and development of Holocaust memorial sites,

‘From the earliest attempts to represent aspects of the Holocaust at the sites where it took place, we can derive some principles that have come to characterize Holocaust memorials a new genre of commemorative art distinct from olde forms: they are addressed to transnational audiences; they often explicitly represent multiple meanings; and they use a new repertoire of symbols, forms and materials to represent those meanings. By the time they emerged as a distinct genre around 1960, Holocaust memorials tended to be complex experiential spaces, usually going beyond mere documentary markers to include significant didactic accoutrements’ (Marcuse 2010: 55).

From the start all memorialisation efforts at Auschwitz-Birkenau focussed on the interior of the camps and despite a law that states that what was left of the camp could not be altered, substantial changes were made at Birkenau to build the memorial between the gas chamber ruins that now exists. After many decades of development, which continues even now with the building a vast new visitors centre at Auschwitz, I am not sure that visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau experience a complex experiential space, this version of visiting having perhaps been given over to the newer museums that have sprung up and

which compete with each other for artefacts and visitors. Clearly there are differences between camp sites and museum sites and even between the various existing camp sites scattered across Europe. There is even a difference between Auschwitz I and Birkenau at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The former is a complex of museum type displays most closely echoed by perhaps The Red Fort in Kaunas, Lithuania or Sachsenhausen in Germany, where multiple buildings have survived to be converted in museum style centres. Birkenau consists of a mainly empty fenced site with little museumification which echoes the desolate remains of Plaszow outside Krakow or Sobibor in eastern Poland. All of these sites, and there are thousands of them across Europe, exist both with and without visitors, but is the approach of visitors. 'Without visitors, believers, wreath-layers, and ceremonies, these places would themselves become mere historical sites and works of art' (Young 1994: 172)

To me, Auschwitz floats like a ghost ship in the offing. It drifts unmanned, its cargo unstable, its crew unknowable, the guards and inmates long gone. It is a Marie Celeste of my dreams. It constantly moves towards me but never reaches me.

- i. (I thought) I knew Auschwitz and I chose it because (I thought) I knew it so well
- ii. The place is embedded in our global consciousnesses
- iii. It is metonymic
- iv. I had been thinking about the place and its place for many years
- v. There is a hinterland
- vi. It was easily reachable
- vii. I had never been there before
- viii. There was an overwhelming amount of material to work with

It is at the core of our wartime fantasies. Peel off the layers: the World War, the Blitz, Nazis, Germany, Jews, the Holocaust, Auschwitz. Peel as many layers as you want, we grew up with them, they became so familiar that we stopped thinking about the parts. We didn't want to go to Auschwitz, it was too strange for soft English hearts. Not the Brits, we beat the Jerrys, we won the war with our sense of fair play, our sense of the ridiculous, our hearts of oak. We're not like that. Depending on where you sat for the duration, you could believe different things. The English won the war. The Americans won the war (my mother swore blind that the Americans were cowards and never helped at all. She remembered, she grew up on, the mythology of standing alone). The Russians, the commies, won the war. But the Jews never won any war. The Jews were defeated by the war. The Jews were broken by the war.

When I speak about this project, this text, the first question that gets asked is whether I am Jewish. This is not a question I am totally comfortable answering, partly because I am not sure and partly because I do not consider it to be relevant. But I cannot deny it fully. My father was a Jew, totally and without question. I grew up in a fully secular household, it was not secular Jewish, it was English and, if my father was still Jewish himself (something that he never hid from or denied), it was not an issue or an identity to me. I never asked my father about the Holocaust and he never volunteered any thoughts. I consider the relationship between my father's ethnic origins and my interest in Auschwitz, but only for a moment. If it is a factor it is a subsumed factor. I write the text as myself and myself as the text and I emerge as a constellation within the text. If my father is present then he is present as a constellation. I skirt around my presumptive Jewishness and the Jewishness of my project although it is in some ways undeniable. Asking the question about Jewishness or my father, for example, reveals the method by which subjects are revealed only by constellation. A constellation repeats itself, forms in the reader's mind, is not logically laid out as a structured part of the text but comes and

goes depending on the light, the angle of viewing. The constellation is a key that would unlock the connection between my perambulations and my text.

I peeled away all those layers: the rise of the Nazi party, Weimar, Stalin, the past of a Europe not quite solidified, Prussian nationalism, communism, betrayal, Versailles, colonialism, eugenics, power, wealth, war, you find a blackened hole, a reptile heart in action, an industrial death machine, the true nature of man, a collection of disputed buildings, the remnants of an ancient enmity — then what? I have ‘mental maps that are wildly skewed, a mental atlas so large and complex that we can never fully convey it to anyone else. [...] we live in the world those maps create’ .

There was only one Auschwitz but with each visit Auschwitz changed. My process, to be sufficient to convert the site to a text, engaged with the notion that by putting myself into the landscape I would turn my engagement into a text. During this process I recognised that my way of being in the world was analogous with the fractured and disjointed text that I was constructing. As I put myself into the landscape and the landscape into the text and the text into the landscape I introduced repetitions that came from deep within me. In *Essayism* Brian Dillon says, ‘I cannot seem to leap outside the vexing schedule of short texts’ (Dillon 2017: 34). I wanted at first to write a landscape in fragments without understanding that this urge came from a way of being in the world that I struggled with. It emerged from using a life lived in fragments that refuse to express themselves, internal fragments, each one beautiful and kept and polished and set aside for eventual use, but never used. I worked in the same way with physical objects, setting them aside for that perfect moment. My attic filled up with found objects such as boxes of industrial objects, huge light bulbs, old projectors, wooden boxes, rolls of material. None of them had any real value and I spent years carting them from studio to studio, but they were inspiration for artworks. I never used them and would slowly discard them as the cost of storage

outstripped my ability to earn. In the same way I accumulated press cuttings and pamphlets and printed textual material. I developed an eye in both of these fields for things that were just 'right', but again, I never really used the paper material. It formed some sort of bedrock for my creativity but was never directly used.

The landscape of a biography that is formed from this accumulation, the desire to both reserve, to hold on to this landscape while also to express it, generates a form that repeats key thoughts, that brings them out into the world while also attempting to hold onto them for future use. This undeliberate, semi-conscious process I came to understand as part of a constellational method of writing where the text is constructed by fragments from which patterns are formed in the reader's mind rather than by strict linear progression. To paraphrase Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 2005: 78) Do I repeat myself? Very well then, I repeat myself. I am large, I contain constellations. This repetition mirrors a view of Auschwitz as a place that is both worthy of the most exacting academic examination but which must at the same time be preserved as a completely known and understood story. Auschwitz repeats itself, my life repeats itself, so this text repeats itself.

I set out to write about Auschwitz. Not the Auschwitz of the Nazi period, the Auschwitz of a million deaths. Not the post-war Auschwitz which was contested between the new Polish state, the new Jewish state, the survivors and the Soviet worldview, and not the Auschwitz of record which is now the subject of a thousand academic theses from many disciplines. I set out to write about the Auschwitz of now, the Auschwitz that has come to us (is with us) in our lives at the start of the 21st century. As I moved around, always closer or further from the centre / edges / markers / fences / signs / guides / memory / recollection of the place, I collated fragmentary elements with a view to compositing them into a text. In process the form was unclear, but the landscape, the topography and topology, prompted a form and from that the text emerged. When I started to move the

mass of fragments and started to move within the mass of fragments I remembered things I have read from the past and I encountered new texts that I am reading in the present. I moved and my digital devices collected data, tracked me, recorded my progress, referenced my images against my location, against time, against my communications with others. From this endless and growing digital record I extracted a flow of data to (re)construct my progress, always looking to see how the mapping replicated the landscape. I surveyed my collection from multiple perspectives to find a form and failed to find a form except a version of formlessness. Similarly, as I cast around for a theoretical angle the autobiography of form weighed against any settling. With Auschwitz itself as my teacher, my text purposefully makes use of abundant paradoxes, contradictions, rhetorical inventions and repetitions in order to reinforce the nature of the contemporary site which seems to me to be a confection of fragments which will not cohere satisfactorily into a whole.

I never wished to be an historian or a futurist. I demanded the right to mingle fiction within my non-fiction, to switch between forms without much notice or signing. This standpoint arose from my background as a visual artist where there is no distinction between fact and fiction, but also, strangely, with the realisation that poetry is often referred to (or absorbed under the rubric of) non-fiction. In German there are two words for history, two views of history. One, *geschichte*, can be described as the way large and small events (fragments) fit together to create a view of history. There are many ways in which my long text for this research could be called *A geschichte of Auschwitz*.

This process of writing entailed drifting both literally and metaphorically in landscapes (the topography and topology) collecting fragments and stacking them in disordered piles. This engendered a painful inching forward of the text, a process of assembly and disassembly, and a constant moving and stacking of pieces. As new elements were discovered through this process, the work of finding a home for them all was the job of

the (deep)map maker, first to discern the landscape of the text and then to fill it out. To me it was effective if it produced a map that emerged from the fragments as they cohered around the gravitational pull of the subject.

Before I commenced my formal research I made two trips to or towards east Europe. In 2016 I made an attempt, that I knew I would have to abort at some point along the route, to cycle to Auschwitz from Drancy in Paris. This trip was constrained by time. I cycled from Paris to the German border and this journey forms a part of my research text here. In 2017 I went to Vilnius in Lithuania to visit Ponary Forest, an extermination site outside the town of Ponary, part of what others term the Holocaust by Bullets. It formed one of the earliest systematic murder sites following the invasion of Poland and Lithuania by the Nazis.

I subsequently undertook five trips of varying length to Oświęcim/Auschwitz in Poland.

1-6 January 2018	Five days, 637 photos
2-12 August 2019	Eleven days, 1,222 photos
24-31 January 2020	Seven days, 840 photos
18-20 August 2020	Eight days, 760 photos
8-17 November 2020	Nine days, 1,436 photos

My experience of the site and surrounding countryside during these visits was fundamental to the process of assembling a text. Although I thought I prepared myself for encountering the space, in reality I found I had no idea of what I was entering. The research entailed observing the process of converting visits to a site into a text. This was

not in itself a problem. I quickly assembled my mountain of fragments from these experiences.

Like Les Roberts who recounted how he finally crossed a motorway that he had spent years observing to spend a day and a night exploring a sequestered piece of ground. I also spent years pondering my space, eventually I crossed the boundary (was it dangerous in itself?) and placed myself in the field. I didn't know what I would find or what I was hoping to find. I had to 'feel my way into a space I was as much creating as I was mapping' (Roberts 2015: 591).

The process during my visits entailed taking notes of activity, encounters, realisations and connections. I took thousands of photographs and a lot of video using my phone and a digital camera. As an active part of the process, the creation of an *archive on the fly*, I collected books, documents, maps and other material, both from the site itself and from other sources such as online auctions. All of these pieces and the material collected over preceding years fed into the long text. The catalyst for this conversion was my journeys within the environs of Auschwitz.

At the start all I really knew was that I was going to visit at least once. Tina Richardson, a lecturer in psychogeography and creator of her own variant, schizocartography, said in the introduction to *Walking Inside Out*: 'Psychogeography is about crossing established boundaries, whether metaphorically or physically, locally or globally' (Richardson 2015: 2). I hoped a narrative would start to emerge during and between the visits. I was confident that the ideas would follow the process. That was the pattern of my life: the generation of ideas, of viewpoints, of ways of seeing was the one thing that never failed me, or that I never failed at. As I added repeated visits, each took much the same structure but threw up different issues. Although it seemed obvious in retrospect, I hadn't considered the cumulative effect of the visits, that each time I returned I not only knew the landscape

better but had more understanding of how to prod it to give up more of the ephemera that I desired.

My aim was to effect a form of *dérive* in Auschwitz, a drift within a city, without destination, taking close notice and being directed by observations. This thesis is not an orthodox psychogeographical text but a parallel practice in the nature of contemporary writers such as Iain Sinclair and Robert Macfarlane who blur the boundaries between psychogeographical impulse and autoethnography, drifting in the landscape. Autoethnography is both process and product, research and practice, topology and topography. By placing myself bodily in the place and writing a text that was not my story nor that of the place, I felt I was engaging in an autoethnography that ‘orchestrates fragments of awareness – apprehended/projected and recalled/reconstructed – into narratives and alternative text forms which (re)present events and other social actors as they are evoked from a changeable and contestable self’ (Crawford 2009: 162).

A deep mapping

I imagined writing a deep map in which:

- the written structure would reflect the topography
- the topology would reflect the topography
- the language would map the space, geographically and emotionally

The aim of this research was to understand how a place generates a text. My research undertook the process of constructing a text while investigating a place (and investigating a place while constructing a text, of course). My deep map turned out to be the result of this querying of the landscape. I set out to discover how a deep map was constructed and how it could be expressed as a text. I believe that there is no such ‘process’, a deep map

being a result rather than a process that is followed. I set out to examine, to work out and watch as a text arose from the process of being in the field, to notate a process rather than discover a process.

The term *deep map* is misleading, however. The map produced is not necessarily deep, it may skim many surfaces, it might offer a chronological overview of a space. As Annika Weinert says, ‘maps provide a synopsis. The beholder is confronted, literally at a glance, with the totality of the camp. Maps, understood as images, simultaneously depict the complexity of structures and relations, with details understood in the context of the whole. In a text, this relationship is inverse.’ (Wienert, 2018: 579)

For my purposes the accumulation of fragmentary texts (and non-textual fragments converted into texts) and the laying out of these fragments is the mapmaking. It is hard to watch oneself constructing a text. The text that is produced is the data but it is also the output, the thesis, addressing place as text. The place and the text overlap, imperfectly, but many other things overlap to provide the output. The text considers them imperfectly, but eventually the text emerges as a map. The place is just the place. The territory (eventually) becomes the map and the map the territory. This is the constellation that is formed from fragments in the mind of the reader.

Having previously been a visual artist who wrote rather than a writer who produced visual art, I moved slowly to production of texts as my primary practice. I chose to learn, to work with the fragment and the constellation, to work with difficult subjects. This pair of choices ballooned into a huge undertaking, a deep map formed by the examination of small geographies, of *geschiste*. The research started with the notion of a search for fragments in the landscape. Later it became clear that a structural relationship between my fragments needed to be found for a text to emerge. A collection of fragments is just

that, a collection of fragments until a conscious mind reads through it and makes the connections, starts to recognise connections across time and space. I arrived at my site with vague scratchings of a literary-spatial approach that I internalised and intended to put into practice, using this as a tool to generate my text. My exploration of the site should map the site, the result should look like the site. My aim was to find a way to structure a text in response to the lay of the land, to find a method whereby the fences and gates and barracks and pits and ruins of Auschwitz appeared in the text without appearing in the text. I wanted to use the forms of the landscape to give structure to my text. I had an idea that as I drifted the elements that guided my drift, fences, paths, roads, gates, signs, bridges, views, vehicles, etc, would guide the structure of the text without being literally present. Every time I reached a fence a new part started. Passing through a gateway, a linkage is made. Travelling from sub-camp to sub-camp creates paragraphs and sections. Being unable to enter an area is replicated in the text as a non-enterable text. Finding the removal of a site represents as an erased part. The chaos of historic sites is represented as the chaos of a text, yet close examination allows site/text to be reinstated, to emerge from the mess of erasure and reinstatement, of misunderstanding and nonunderstanding, from omission and discovery, from external and internal views, from now and then. Thus, the second part of this work, the creative text, *The Other Auschwitz*, came to be literally the writing up of my research.

The text is a spazio-soglia, as defined in *Topographies/topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as a spatial threshold*. This ‘attempt to read 'geographically' the entanglements between the camp, Nazi spatial planning, bureaucratic rationalities, and the Holocaust. The notion of the camp-as-a-spazio-soglia is central to this interpretation’ (Giaccaria and Minca 2011: 3-12),.

My growing collection of fragments clamoured for attention, for rearrangement, for reorganisation. As a part was added to the whole the entire edifice seemed to shift on its

foundations and remake itself. Two constituents of my project were the fragment and the constellation. The relationship between them is unfixed, only seen in passing by the observer, the reader, when a text constellates. Benjamin wrote history from refuse, from detritus, searching in marginal spaces for scraps, for rags which he cohered into a big picture, a deep map, of his subject.

‘The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999: 931).

Walter Benjamin recognised that stories of historical progress - of history as the unfolding of a freedom and progress - had been broken and shattered into fragments that no longer, if they ever did, ‘make sense’. Benjamin died on the Spanish border carrying a suitcase of fragments. When war broke out he was writing *On the Concept of History*, a fragmentary text – a set of notes, really – that tried to make sense of the world’s downward spiral: ‘This storm is what we call progress’ (Farago 2016).

Benjamin’s major work, *The Arcades Project*, was created from a collection of fragments, of found particles of text. It is a foundational text of contemporary theory, yet there is no there there – the world is opened up and described by an assemblage of fragments. His model for writing, for disinterring the elements of the past, was the rag-picker, ‘the scavenger of the trash of history, who searches for discarded objects and obsolete techniques, reassembles them for a radical reusing: a fresh understanding of past and present’ (Wallach 2020: 5), his constellational story of Paris, describes ‘the mediating function of the constellation as that which is impermanent and based on a violent act of intrusion’ (Kozicka and Trzeciak 2017).

For Benjamin the border was not porous, but neither was it fixed. He carried his work in a container. The container disappeared (into history) with its contents, or the contents disappeared into history with the container. The container was porous. Benjamin

wrote about the entrance/exit of the Arcade and Charlotte Delbo later wrote about the entrances and exits of Auschwitz. He died on the border between France and Spain during a failed attempt to escape Nazi occupied France. The border was not porous at that moment. He was carrying a valise which contained a manuscript, a project which had been ongoing for decades. It was an attempt to deep map Paris but Almost certainly not the first deep map. He took his own life when turned away at the border, finding another porous border.



Figure 1 Visiting Raijsko with fragments, 2021

Charlotte Delbo was a Parisian woman who worked in the theatre as an assistant to Louis Jouvet. She was associated with but not a member of the Communist party, though she was active in the Resistance. Captured, she was sent in January 1943 to Auschwitz along with 226 other non-Jewish women as part of Le 20 convoy des 31000, the first deportation from Drancy in east Paris. For Delbo Auschwitz was a huge railway station, a place of

arrivals and departures. Auschwitz was an arcade. As the relationship of the fragments is understood the text begins to reveal itself. As the text is read it begins to reveal itself.

Reading Delbo was part of my initial unguided and unmediated search for access to the camp and it tipped me towards a view of Auschwitz as neither sealed nor absolute. Her journeys out of the camp gave me an idea regarding a geography of Auschwitz and caused me to focus on that place more specifically. In addition, her fractured prose hinted at a way of approaching the subject, a way of showing enclosure, entry and exit, spatiality in the structure of a text rather than by explanation.

Her key concentrationary⁵ works were eventually assembled in one volume called, in English, *Auschwitz and After (Auschwitz et apres)* (Delbo 1995). This text is composed of three volumes: *None of Us Will Return (Aucun de nous ne reviendra)*, *Useless Knowledge (Une connaissance inutile)* and *The Measure of Our Days (Mesure de nos jours)*. Although she wrote *None of Us Will Return* and *Useless Knowledge* by 1947, she put them away to see that they would stand the test of time. They were published between 1965 and the early 1970s. A final volume, *Days and memory (La mémoire et les jours)*, was published in 1985.

I didn't come to Charlotte Delbo from Auschwitz, I came to Auschwitz from Delbo or, as Rawecki said, you can only approach Auschwitz through Oświęcim (Rawecki 2016: 18) When I read Delbo I finally knew how I would write about Auschwitz. I had no idea what it was she did in her texts, but it was different. Lawrence Langer writes,

‘She invented a style to freeze that horror, first in its original guise, then as it was prolonged in the memory of its victims As Delbo subtracts epithets in an effort to reach the physical essence of anguish [...] her language approaches the status of music, with its melodic repetitions that often resemble incantations, though she seeks visual images equivalent to the rhythmic phrases of sound’ (Delbo, 1995, p.xvii).

⁵ Concentrationary is a term used for a body of work relating to the concentration camps

She does not give details of where she walks, of how she passes from A to B, but that she is walking, that is enough. It is endless. She chooses not to provide details. She is aware of the importance of spatiality, after all her literary approach was generated by theatre. I have now walked across the fields and stood at Raijsko where she worked. I can see, I can feel how she got to this place. But I cannot reconstruct her route or discover where she worked from her texts. She does not give me a literal map. I can guess at but not identify the streams from which she lusted after water, at which she removed her tights and her toenails. She constructs her texts from a combination of acute observation and poetic rendering. Nicole Thatcher points out, with Delbo ‘space is projected through lexical, semantic, syntactic or typographical determinants’ (Thatcher 2000: 119) Auschwitz and the regime there is described through the lexical, semantic, syntactic and typographical construction of her texts. ‘She shattered narrative form, ruptured the continuity of experience, and employed different literary forms: a tableau, a scene, a dialogue, a poem, or a few isolated lines on a page. To write the unimaginable, to give a new depth to the narrative, she had to begin again and again, each time with a new breath.’ (Dunant 2021: 2)

As an introduction to a notion of hybridity, a method of writing from a variety of forms, there is little or no sequence. In Charlotte Delbo’s writing it is often hard to work out who or when she is talking about, but there is a pattern, a constellation. Delbo gives us a way of looking at Auschwitz that is not seen much. With other Auschwitz writers the quotidian tends to predominate, but with her there is a fragmentary spatial structure to the text. In reading her my interest is in how the landscape generates the text, rather than how she writes Auschwitz: ‘In avoiding linearity [...] a closure that imposes on time a conventional narrative structure [...] space replaces time as the narrative setting [...] the survivor’s drive to order [...] resists ordering’ (Kamel 2000: 68)

My drift

My trips to the site continued and my ability to look and my understanding of what I was looking for/at grew. I was engaged with a world comprised of fragments and places, of places comprised of fragments and eventually with the relationships between fragments. A process of fragmental sorting is fundamental to my production, treating ‘place as a series of complex, palimpsestic texts’ (Taylor et al. 2018: 66) and exploring the tension between generalisation and detail, I combine a distant gaze with close reading. Tim Robinson, a deep mapper with an eye for the need to look now closer/now further, said ‘I hope that my readings of particular terrains [...] are suffused by an awareness of almost inconceivably greater and unimaginably smaller physical dimensions’ (Robinson 1996: 48).

I went to Auschwitz to expand the metonymic fragments that I had already collected into a deep map. Wandering in this landscape, I observed clues, followed them or didn’t follow them. I took pictures and made notes in an attempt to see what transpired as this activity was converted into a text. These notes also contained fragments from before and after the landscape. I compiled and recompiled, constructed and reconstructed, as I looked for a structure that echoed the landscape I walked in. I waited for the text to tell me that it was becoming a map. As I built this text it looped outside of my control. The accumulation expanded and contracted in a rhythmic manner, like an accordion playing, and I lost control of the immense jumble of fragments. Although this was disconcerting, my response was to keep visiting, keep taking notes, and keep writing. It was, at times, like drawing a map with a blindfold on. Slowly I came to understand that within this fragmented text, constellations could be observed. I worked through seemingly endless iterations of fragments until I started to see the constellations that made sense. The text that grew out of this process was not easy to define or edit, but it seemed to mirror the landscape and the history of the landscape. It was complicated and in places

it didn't make sense, it sometimes stopped abruptly, turned back on itself, repeated itself and alluded to difficult things.

My texts are written from refuse. Proceeding like Benjamin's rag picker, where 'ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse' (Benjamin 2006: 218), I visited and revisited my sites, I collected fragments, I moved and expanded them. I hoped to glimpse a landscape in the writing, to write myself into the field, to identify landmarks and landmarking. The feel of the text expanding and contracting was satisfying and I attempted to construct a narrative with this movement.

It is one thing, a trip to write about a place, repeated visits another. Repeated journeys allow resifting, re-examination, repetition. It allows repetition to creep into the text, into the ideas, into the flow of recording it becomes difficult to extricate single instances. This is the aim, to pile instances of thought upon each other. Each visit is a sorting of what came before, layering the potential for more language upon what was previously written. I carry various fragments of story around with me, personal histories, revelations, realisations, anecdotes, quotes, lists, rags. I try not to forget them. Eventually they make their way into a text where they get repeated repeatedly.

The text starts to structure itself in a way that a landscape appears to a visitor, to a walker, to someone who drifts in and out of a site, a country, a subject. 'A work that accumulates out of an exhausted life, out of the narrative momentum of survival energy, is by its nature fragmented, coming in starts and stops, manifested out of any available time' (Zambreno 2021: 87)

My writing process is preceded by a process of assemblage: over time a mass of pieces are assembled into a whole. This proceeds over fragments of time spread out over months and, more often, years. I have two underlying questions: what goes in and what is the subject. Neither is obvious and can only be resolved by writing, by a constant

process of addition and subtraction, of moving parts around, seeing how they butt up against each other, finding a rhythm and a meaning in the concatenation.

As my text expanded I looked to put a structure on it that related to the landscape that I was investigating, to find a template, a mapping system that would both liberate me from the map while allowing me to string all my parts together. I hoped that eventually a coherent yet entirely new story would emerge from the fragments. The use of unregarded marginal objects opened up a new method of mapping. As Yair Wallach points out, ‘These fragments of everyday modernity, when placed together in a collage, had the power to call into question narratives of history as progress.’ (Wallach 2020: 4).

The construction of a text from the accumulation and structuring of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fragments of thoughts, insights, understandings, notes, responses, discoveries, and the like, lead to problems (and potential) of structure. Each fragment is compressed and inserted at a reasonable place, adjacent to related subject matter or somehow in relation to connected subject matter. I revisited insertions, moved and expanded them, looking for a sense of growth, of topology, hoping to glimpse a landscape in the writing, to write myself into the field, to identify landmarks and landmarking. The feel of the text expanding and contracting was satisfying. I attempted to form a narrative with this expansion. This seeds the narrative which flexes and contracts, ebbs and flows, repeats and is constantly moving, unfinished, like a partly demolished building. The text made of fragments becomes infinite in its variation. I found myself searching for an usable process, a way to structure what I piled high. I looked for a clue to sequencing and ordering. Eventually I noticed that constellations were forming and, although I couldn’t see these formations, a sound was emitted, an almost unhearable sound of the sort created by light in the atmosphere, the method by which we see. This became a ‘language [...] through fashion, street lighting, lithographs, prostitutes and defunct shopping arcades.

The logic of historical development was written into these seemingly insignificant and haphazard practices and artifacts' (Wallach 2020: 4).

Within my text individual stories disappeared (or else were reduced to museographical objects) and my textual landscape starts to appear and there is a loss of space. Eventually objects and things cannot be seen in isolation, but only as a part of my assemblage. The camp, which I am busily reconstructing with language, which I am excavating fragment by fragment, noting where the pieces emerge and how (and whether) they connect, starts to shimmer. It takes on a form that I never anticipated – of a mess of connections across the landscape, a mesh of fragmentary stories that I find I am spinning into a text. Within my huge tottering tower of fragments, language becomes elusive and contingent and a new structure fights to emerge, a different kind of presentation of history: The painter Agnes Martin described a *geschichte* of fragments that will 'reverse the Enlightenment trajectory of the museum as a site for the top-down production and policing of knowledge, as a public space, in which history is a spectacle, disseminating the aura of the authentic, so that the past is used to fabricate the future, a future fixated with objects', 'adding and subtracting until there is something algorithmic at work and everything has a place [...] something like snooker – a knocking-on of things but done within an envelope of distinct logic' (Simonini 2020).

At this point in my research, I found that I had excavated an unseen world, a landscape filled with an endless supply of meaning. Of course, there were many others who knew about parts of my landscape and who spent far more time than me analysing it, but the constellational nature of my stories seemed to be something new. As I revisited my fragments, moving and expanding them, I looked for a sense of space, of topography. I was hoping to glimpse a landscape in the writing, to write myself into the field. I attempted to construct a narrative with the sense of the text expanding and contracting, of focusing and defocusing.

The constellation is what we see when we stare into the pierced darkness of night or at the destructured text. The word constellation originates from the Latin for ‘with stars’. Sometimes constellations leap out. They are sometimes subtle and they are always unforceable. They have to be allowed by the writer to arrive, the conditions for them to arise are created through a long process of arrangement and derangement. ‘By assembling together, the random, fragmented and half-obliterated traces of the mundane, the deep configuration of modernity could be grasped, as in a panoramic vision’ (Wallach 2020: 4). This notion of the constellation owes much to Siegfried Giedion who said that the opinion of a writer of history (non-fiction) is a ‘matter of building a constellation from fragments ‘scattered broadcast, like stars across the firmament’ (Kozicka and Trzeciak 2017). In this patterning without pattern, meanings emerge from the fragments only in the reader’s mind, as constellations. They are there but only glimpsed as structure. We think, that relates to that, this to that, that to this, but although we intuit it, we move on without extracting a pattern. It remains ephemeral.

A constellation is a view of a combination of objects seen as a pattern whereas in reality the constellation is made up of a variety of fragments which may exist hugely separated in geography, time, space and consciousness. Within each part of a constellation there may be activity or motionlessness, but the effect of the whole is to construct part of the narrative.

Although slow to emerge, eventually constellations become apparent, patterns dance, become bright, obvious, fade, merge with the surrounding material, become lost. These constellations form in the mind which latches on to fragments and starts to make connections, a meshwork. These textual constellations which emerge from fragments found in the field are originated by writing, by a constant process of addition and subtraction, of parts, moving them around and against each other until rhythms appear in the concatenation.

In all the time I spent walking in and around the site I tried to watch myself, as if looking in a mirror. Auschwitz is impossible to imagine and impossible to write about and also much written about and easy to write about, two things that are superimposed like the deliberately impossible heterotopia.⁶

‘The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal’ (Foucault, 1984:4).

My response was firstly to restrict myself to the empty Auschwitz, the Auschwitz that exists in our world. This is not the camp of Primo Levi filled with walking dead, the Muselman,⁷ and not even the Auschwitz of post-war, of post-enormity. My aim was to address a camp that I could get on an aeroplane and fly to visit, that I could watch changing year on year, that I could situate within my life and which existed both as the result of fragments that blew out of that place in 1945 and of the mesh that those fragments made, connecting a marshy riverside in Poland to the rest of the world. I came eventually to the notion of confusion or muddle in the topography and topology of the place. Does topology beget topography or topography beget topology? Can I discern whether I am within or without a place by reference to a commonly agreed delineator, and if I overlay the topographic and the topologic, how do I know where I am?

I chose to look at Auschwitz through a spatial lens. Although it is possible to see the entire Holocaust as a geographic event, envisaging the camps as geographic events is harder. Tim Coles points out ‘not only does the Holocaust have geographies as well as histories, it has micro-geographies as well as macro-geographies’ (Knowles et al., 201: 6). I was aware of some of those geographies even before I went to visit: Charlotte Delbo walking out of the camp (where to, how did she exit?); Goran Rosenberg retracing his

⁶ **Heterotopia** is a concept elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe certain cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow 'other': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming.

⁷ A term used by camp inmates to designate those who have ceased to try to survive, who are the walking dead. There are many explanations as to why this term came to be used but no clarity on its origin.

father's chronologic journey away from Auschwitz (where was his father in topologic terms?); the connection of the railways into Western Europe (how did they enter the camp?). I was aware of many geographies, but not how they integrated with the camp, the relationships between them or how to situate them as a written text.

When I went to visit Auschwitz (as opposed to dreaming its existence from outside) I found I could not easily recognise or mark the boundary or entrance points. I realised that I was engaged in a seeming endless process of entering and re-entering, leaving and re-leaving the place. Visiting implied going from an outside to an inside to an outside, a *dérive* the same, which implies finding an inside, recognising a boundary so that it is possible to understand when one is seeing the subject from the outside and when seeing it from the inside.

Auschwitz is somewhere, it contains somewhere, is always in relation to somewhere. If the *exterotopia*⁸ surrounds the *heterotopia*, the transitional or liminal areas where one crosses over from the outside to the inside or from the inside to the outside. Auschwitz, which started for me as a contained place to examine, was turned into a complex set of interlocked and overlapping liminal spaces.

Although the camp is generally described and located topographically as the concentrational complex outside Oświęcim in occupied Poland, the actual definitions tend to vary considerably. For my purposes these descriptions could never be enough. An attempt to define Auschwitz, to keep it simple, runs into complex considerations almost immediately. Do we include Auschwitz III, Buna-Monowitz? Do we include all the archipelago of sub-camps, or just those most close? What of structures on the edge of the museum, the potato warehouses, the railway spur? And what of the sub-areas within the camp itself, Mexico or Canada? These are macro and micro issues. I include them as my

⁸ I coined the word *exterotopia* (from *heterotopia*) to mean 'all that is outside the *heterotopia* but which relates to the *heterotopia*'.

camp topography, but they are also my camp topology. I am not limited to seeing what I see, what I walk through. The topological elements beyond the visible, beyond the forensic evidence, what I have read and understood and been told about the place, are a major driver of how I see the place. I am walking in a combination of the topographical and the topological, unable to be either within the camp or outside the camp no matter where I placed myself. This feeling was strong when I visited the place but persisted after I left, when I was in other cities or even in other countries. I felt I could no longer shake off Auschwitz, that it continued to envelop me, that the fragments from which I constructed it were present everywhere.

Visiting the site was like stepping through a series of containers. On arrival I had no idea what the containers were or where I was in relation to them, but my experience was that these uncontained containers seemed to hold the entirety of Auschwitz. I knew of the iconic places, the places that were officially on the map, allowed as parts of a museum of the enormity. I set out to visit these main enclosures but it was in my journeying between sites, and then between visits, that I looked for and noted fragments and these fragments indicated further sites. These sites split into parts, connections between sites arose and were dissipated, semi-sites and disconnected remains materialised. I walked from part to part creating connective tissue as I went and discovering that fragments of the landscape's previous life remained. I found the footpaths that linked known sites; were these walkways parts of the camp? Walking from Birkenau to Auschwitz I realised the road was an arrow straight line, but due to the roadway and the railway overpass it was never experienced as this. Was I in the camp when I was in a bendy bus, tunnelling from one part to another? How did the guards walk between the Kanteen and Auschwitz? When I asked these questions there was no answer, but those pathways were part of the camp to me. When I found Birkenau closed (and shrouded) for a commemorative event I struck out into the countryside and circumnavigated the camp at a distance, never losing line of

sight contact with it. At that point I finally saw the camp in the countryside without the distracting barrier of the ‘gate of death’. Was I ever outside the camp? To the National Socialist occupiers, the whole area, the whole region, was the Zone of Interest. I realised it was not possible to actually visit ‘Auschwitz’ in the way that millions assumed they were visiting it. I could not fix the borders or even know whether there was an actual bordered place or even an idea of a place. ‘Any description of the camp based on dichotomous categories that imagine a radical inside (the camp(s) of Auschwitz) and a radical outside (the town of Oświęcim-Auschwitz) is not only difficult to sustain, but also overlooks the existence of a mobile threshold between the two’ (Giaccaria and Minca 2011).

I felt I was forever in the hinterland, at the limin, the threshold. As I came and went from the place I began to think that I would always be in this interstitial place no matter where I was standing – and my Text needed to replicate this fuzzy geography. The (Italian) *soglia* is the threshold and also the gate, the door, the entry and the limen, the border, the space, the space of passage and transition. Walter Benjamin said ‘we have grown very poor in threshold experiences’ (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999: 494). The term can be used to examine that fuzziness, the overlappingness, of that place where the idea of a camp meets the geographic of a camp.

Agamben’s concept of the *soglia* is ‘not so much the space-in-between the topographical and the topological. Rather, it is where the two come together [...] it challenges the possibility of a clear and stable distinction between an inside and an outside’ (Giaccaria and Minca, 2011: 4). This *spazio-soglia* (spatial threshold) is the area of the threshold. After visiting, I find I can never exit it. No matter where I stand in the world, I am both within and without the ambit of Auschwitz simultaneously. If ‘the camp exceeded its own topographies ... the entire region around Auschwitz was converted into a kind of

expanded spazio-soglia' (Giaccaria and Minca 2011) then there is nothing to stop this spatial ambiguity stretching to the ends of the earth. Although every part, fragment and subsection of the camp is real in itself, as a whole the Auschwitz camp ceases to exist. It cannot exist as a written, mapped description of a place (topo-graphos) and it cannot exist as a discourse of a place (topo-logos). Although it has become an accepted idea formed from the endless mass of fragments that the original camp threw out on closure, there never was an 'Auschwitz' that we can look back at and engage with. The camp changed constantly, was composed of parts, comprised an ever-changing roster of personnel and ideas and inmates and ways of death, of comings and goings, of being in the world. Auschwitz changed every year, every month, every day, every minute. There is an infinite number of Auschwitzs, each one unseeable. What in the end comes new out of this approach, this immersion in a landscape for the purpose of generating a text that echoes, that mirrors, that looks like the landscape?

Constellations are for the reader and fragments are for the writer. Within the text there are patterns upon patterns, patterns within patterns, a mise en abyme of fragments that can be constructed to produce an accounting. Auschwitz exists, appearing in multiple places, made visible by the pattern of the parts, yet simultaneously ceases to exist by the same measure. Fragmented, carried like a sliver of glass in our eye, it appears in all places at all times. We see the world not through it but a part of it is always in our world. When the constellation appeared to me within my text it seemed to connect a variety of issues, of fragments, that I had been accumulating. A constellation is a pattern of objects seen from a distance whereby all the objects appear to be in the same plane. This is of course not true. The objects may be separated by a billion miles or, in this case, by a few decades or by many geographic leagues, but they will appear to be part of the same story. In the same way the iron rails, the railways that form webs across Europe all lead inexorably to

Auschwitz when you are standing in Auschwitz. The railways literally form constellations, but they make the camp constellate, it appears.

Why did I want to write about Auschwitz? Like Primo Levi who, on his return from the camp I ‘felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story to anyone and everyone!’ (Agamben 1999: 224-225). I also came to feel an unstoppable internal desire to find a way to talk about what happened in the last century, and where it happened. For me, Auschwitz was an *over-looked* space, much examined and visited with a prodigious amount of research and publishing attached to it. Eventually I came to see this as my Auschwitz state of mind.

Until I walked within its ambit I didn’t know how this process would unfold from known unknowns, whether I could winkle out something new. My approach was to force a process and, as it happened, to note, reflect, react and re-examine on the fly, to ‘feel my way into a space I was as much creating as I was mapping’ (Roberts 2016: 66). Writing as both a question and a statement, a way of living with what it is that we carry with us, our knowledge of ‘what happened’, ‘together you search for the questions that might help towards an understanding of Why Auschwitz?’ (Seidler 2011: 244).

Where does it come from, this desire to write in a form without sequencing or symmetry but which connects across the diagonal, slanting and sprawling and which does actually radiate from a common centre? In my creative text I question how my narrative emerges from a collection of fragments: ‘Cultures of the fragment have flourished throughout history under such guises as the reuse of architectural parts and the cult of relics, the physical and conceptual image-breakings of iconoclasm, and the aesthetics of repair’ (Robinson 1996: 23). Writing is a way of living with - a kind of responsibility to tell others. To me the process of constructing a text is a result of considering my subject, of my actions, is a method of examining my subject, which is fragments related to the

landscape around Auschwitz. I started with the smallest remains of that universe. The area around the town of Oświęcim and the wider world contain fragments of the non-Holocaust world, the world before there had been a Holocaust.

When I read my notes back I found that they just provided more fragments. Abandoning huge accumulations of fragmentary texture I transcribed my notebooks after the event, typing them up compulsively, as if the process of transferring them to the page would reveal their own constellations. From this process came the following text which I consider to be the true delineation of my research.

The Other Auschwitz

Between 2016 and 2022 in Poland I repeatedly visited the town of Oświęcim and the remnants of the great death camp, Auschwitz.

This remnant is, by definition, vast and indistinct; it is what cannot be contained by and reduced to Euclidian geometry (Giaccaria and Minca, 201: 4).

When I first went there, what was I? A tourist, a researcher, a curious bystander, a drifter, an academic, a reader, a writer, a boy, a man, a dreamer, an empiricist, a psychogeographer? I set out to drift in the landscape of a great crime and that is what I did. Each trip produced more revelations, more knowledge as I scraped at the interface between the past and the present, at the grey area between the camps and the outside world, between what is valued and what is abject. Each trip became dreamlike as I wandered from fragment to fragment, poking at what is both very well-known and almost unknowable.

The trips each lasted between five and ten days. I stayed in hotels and rooms in the old town. Twice I took my touring bike and a tent and cycled to and from Krakow. When I started on these journeys there was just me and the place and all the texts about the place. I had read a lot and I had read nothing. I read Primo Levi on and off over the years, then Charlotte Delbo and Tadeusz Borowski and Elie Wiesel and Ka-Tzetnik 135633, but I had not visited. I thought I had an understanding of the place, but I had not walked across the lines and, until I did, everything meant nothing.

Each trip was just like the others yet always different. As the events, the walks, the sites all piled up in my memory confusion set in. Was I inside or outside? When did

this happen? Where was this fragment found? Ultimately it didn't matter, everything fell into the map, a constellation emerged clarifying the enormity.

I drew maps in my head, trying to differentiate and name the parts, to bring forth a memory of events without remembering the events. I went there to find its boundaries by physical inspection. At first everything I knew was theoretical and based on imagining. I carried the entire metonymic dance in my head. Before I set foot in the landscape I had only my imagined landscape. As soon as I went to the site everything changed. Slowly, and then all at once.

When I got in the field there was no Auschwitz, but also many. A mise en abyme of absence.

Coming and going

The impossible life of Szymon K



Figure 2 Szymon Kluger with his brother at Birkenau, post 1963 (Auschwitz Jewish Centre Foundation)

In 1961 a Jew returned from Sweden to his home town, Oshpitzin in Poland. He returned because the time seemed right, maybe because of a failed relationship, who knows. But who wants to live in Sweden? He was bored and he missed the old ways. He knew he couldn't have them back but he also couldn't think of a different way to move on. He left because the time was right: Eichmann's capture and trial in Jerusalem gave him the final push. He had had enough of the banality.

He had no relations left in his home town. He arrived as the remnant of his community was leaving. The town was known to the outside world only for its connection

to a place of death, its adjacency to the camp where he had been briefly interned, his family murdered. While he was away the camp had been turned into a museum, maybe a mausoleum. In later years he became a recluse, although Moses Weiss told of visiting him in *From Oświęcim to Auschwitz*.

‘Upon leaving the death camp at Auschwitz/Birkenau I stopped in the town to visit Shimek (sic) Kluger, the last remaining Jew in Oświęcim. He offered me refreshments and a hour of gentle conversation, in which he reiterated his hope to leave Poland soon and join his brother and his family in Brooklyn, New York. Before departing, I presented him with a talit, a mezuzah and two yarmulkes’ (Weiss, 1998: 173).

Kluger lived there for forty years until his death in 2000 at the age of seventy-two. When he died there were no Jews remaining to prepare him for burial. Rabbi Sacha Pecaric of Krakow was summoned to perform the taharah ceremony. A busload of American Jewish students agreed to form the minyan, a quorum of 10 males over the age of 13. He was the final Jew buried in the old cemetery. He had become The Last Jew of Auschwitz.

7.1.49	Name	KLIGER, SZYMON,	File	F 18-54
	BD	18.1.25.	BP	Nat Polish-Jew.
	Next of Kin			
	Source of Information	JEWISH CONGREG. STOCKHOLM, L21, P.M.		
	Last kn. Location	Sweden.	Date	
	CC/Prison	Arr. AFTER 26.6.45.	lib.	
	Transf. on	to		
	Died on	in		
	Cause of death			
	Buried on	in		
	Grave		D. C. No.	
	Remarks	HOME ADDR.: AUSCHWITZ.		

What could he see out of the train window on that journey? Endless fields, cows, towns, rivers, forests, fences. He took his binoculars out and watched the landscape, looking for clues in the distance. Each border made him anxious. He had little idea why he was

making this journey or what he expected at the other end. The journey was long. He changed trains three times while the landscape slowly returned to the one of his memory. From his bag he pulled pieces of bread and ate them with cheese or jam. He drank tea from a flask at first and later water. He carried a litre of Swedish vodka and drank deeply from it as the train approached the Polish border, as his anxiety levels soared. This was the new Europe, he thought. He'd been hiding up there, at the top of the world, pretending that none of this existed anymore, but it did. He carried a new passport, a Swedish passport, and a Red Cross document that was designed to get him admitted to this new Republic run by the sort of men that he once worshipped. He was a citizen now.

The railway tracks that he rode over on his route home were the successors to a network built during and after the late Victorian era, a meshwork of steel lines that had expanded across the continent. The same routes, often the same tracks, had been used for trainloads of human cargo in cattle wagons, the mechanised transport that made the great killing possible. At the centre of this nest of roads and railways and rivers and tracks and canals lay his town with various names. The inhabitants had been taken away to ghettos or a variety of barracks, to artificial new towns, to places that were designed to work them to death as fast as possible, to starve them to death. Everywhere there had been a tension between killing and working, labour and death, value and absence. But then, that was the nature of the Nazi state. That was how it had ordained itself.

It seemed a natural desire, to return to one's hometown, to where you grew up, to streets that you knew, that held the familiarity that comforts and contains, but in this case there was nobody and nothing to return to. There was the place on the edge of town where he was told he would find work now he was an electrician. Work was the starting point of his new plan in the people's paradise.

Somewhere between the Lager and the radio factory his faith had gone: faith in the future, that there could be a better world, the faith of his parents, of his people. He

had never really believed in that, perhaps. He didn't lose his belief in remaining on the land, but as he was no longer on the land he didn't know for many years what to do with that. He no longer really knew who he was. He had no Polish passport and no Swedish passport. The government in his country was communist. His neighbours were occupying the houses of dead people. He had lost his parents, although two siblings remained in the USA. He harboured a desire to return but for a long time couldn't convince himself he really wanted to.

He returned to the town with the intention of making a life as an ordinary man, of working hard and advancing in his career, of finding love and marrying and producing children. He stopped himself thinking that he had to produce children to replace those that had been lost, to take the place of his siblings now dead, murdered. He stopped himself thinking that he should become a parent. That woman in Sweden had wanted children and he had fallen in love with her but came to realise that she did not understand him, had no idea of his inner life, as he no idea of hers. She had also come out of the fires of Europe but try as he might he could not merge with her and eventually they fell into silence, their relationship into desuetude. He told himself that was why he had come home but he knew it was not true. He could have gone to the new world and found his brother and sister, but he had decided to come to the old world and begin again by picking up where he knew. He told himself it did not matter about the camp. He wanted to be near where his parents lay. He believed that was his right, that he had to remain in the ancestral lands, that he could only live where his kind had always lived. He kept telling himself this although he wasn't sure he still believed it. In the end he realised it didn't matter why he went back, he could not avoid his destiny.

The Germans called the place Auschwitz, the Poles Oświęcim. He called it Oshpitzin. When he was a boy parts of the camp were already in place, barracks on the edge of town and by the river. They were an outcrop of the times, the dissolution of empires and the

shifting borders. The old Empire was dissolved and new countries had emerged. He believed that they needed to remain where they were, that they would carve out their own destiny from this new configuration and as a young man he had fought with other young men over this concept. When the war came these arguments seemed futile, childish.

In Sweden he learnt a new language and a new way of living. He worked in a factory, learnt a trade. They gave him a house to live in and, eventually, a passport, and now he was a citizen of the North and also of Central Europe, a citizen of Oshpitzin and a citizen of the death camp. Although he retained an accent, he spoke good Swedish and had fitted in well. He had learned to drink vodka with them night after night. He was considered an agitator but also a good worker who learnt quickly. When he told his friends that he was leaving, that he had decided to return home, they tried to persuade him otherwise. 'I will have a job in the chemical works,' he told them in the strange language that he had learnt painfully. His job at the radio factory was a good one and he had learnt a lot. Before, before the war, before everything, he would never have considered working in such a place even if he'd known it existed. 'It's Russki territory, you'll live a bad life,' they said. 'There will be no work, no fun.' They barely knew him from before, as a Pole. They didn't talk about his woman, his sadness. There had been fighting, a baby, she had left. It was easier to drink vodka and laugh than to cry over another broken family.

He had all the benefits the Nordic state could offer him and they would have let him stay, wanted him to stay. They gave him a passport, more valuable than most. More valuable than a Communist Polish passport, he thought. With this he could go to the West, to Germany where his sister was, or to America, where his brother was. In Sweden he lived in a worker's village and went to watch football at the weekends. He drank vodka, good Swedish vodka. 'It's the best in the world,' his friends told him. Some of them had fought in the war. Real soldiers, they had known battlefronts, battalions and regiments, fear and suffering, but not in the way he had. He was a refugee, a stranger in this strange

land. 'In my town we produce the best vodka in the country,' he told them. 'We have the biggest factory and we make spirits for the whole of Europe. Maybe I'll get a job in the distillery, then I can drink all I like.' His friends laughed and told him the Poles made an inferior, almost industrial, spirit. He wondered if this was true, if the factory that he remembered even still existed and whether he wanted to drink himself to death. All the same, he was going home, one way or another. He was thirty-two now. If he had to make a new home, he would. No man should live out his life in a foreign land. He yearned for the place where he grew up. He handed in his notice at the radio factory and at his lodgings, packed his possessions up into a large suitcase and boarded a train that would take him, eventually and after a few diversions, to Krakow and then Oshipitzin. Across the river there were the graves of his mother and father, ashes in the pools. He knew this, yet still he had come back.

It was only twenty years since Himmler had stood on the overpass at Oświęcim and called for the building of a new camp, for the destruction of the small town of Birkenau and the restructuring of the plain and the swamps. The new Jewish state was trying Eichmann but still he didn't believe in that state. If people wanted to go and live there that was their choice. He wouldn't blame them. But he would not go himself and he would not become a believer. He believed in the proletariat, in the mass of workers sorting out their own lives. Jews too. He didn't need an education in torture. Sometimes he felt a sense of pride, this was his town and the whole world was looking at it. Looking, but not seeing, Nobody came to visit.

In his head, to his parents, to his childhood friends and his missing siblings, Kluger spoke Yiddish. To nobody did he speak Swedish, there were no Swedes in Oświęcim just as there were no Jews. He spoke Polish, poorly. He spoke no German. He spoke rudimentary English. He would not learn the new Hebrew that was arising in Palestine.

In the end he spoke to nobody. The camp was undergoing a transformation from death camp to memorial site while Szymon undertook a journey in an opposite direction.

At the town he registered with the Communist authorities who looked at him suspiciously. They were in control now. At least they ran the industries fairly and left him alone. Quickly there were no more Jews. They just went. At work people knew what he was, no simple Pole had lived all these years in Sweden, but they ignored it. Neither his face nor his papers were a danger any longer. He was a skilled worker, an electrician, and they needed workers. He went to the Chemical Works near the small town called Monowice and asked for work and they put him on a production line without asking any questions.

He went to work every morning. They gave him an apartment in a new part of town to the west of the chemical works. His room was small and he shared a washroom down the hall. The building was filled with workers who came from all over Poland and beyond. The work was in demand and the workers were in demand. The communist government was building more factories and more housing. He didn't go to the old town, the days of living in small houses in small streets with family and community close by had gone. He did want to look for his parents, for where they had died, but this would have to wait. Workers were not encouraged to visit the camp on the other side of town. Nobody was encouraged to visit. This town was new, it had a future.

He worked at the factory for a year. The Swedes had trained him well and although he would have preferred to work with radios there was no radio factory here. The younger men were helpful and friendly and after a while he would go and drink beer with them in the evenings. He even went to Party meetings, occasionally. He joined the workers organisation although he didn't believe in it. He believed in the Bund, in the Jewish land, some form of Jewish autonomy in the country where he'd been born, but there were no Jews left here so he didn't mention it. He was alone.

His brother and sisters wrote to him, first from Germany and later, from America. They wrote in Yiddish and he liked to read these letters but they were becoming Americans. They asked if he knew what had become of their parents and whether any of their friends or family were living in the town. They asked whether he attended synagogue and whether he was coming to America. He told them that he didn't attend synagogue, that all their friends had gone to Israel. He didn't tell them about their parents although he knew. They were in the ash pits across the other side of the railway. He didn't know how to tell them, he thought they should figure it out for themselves.

On the fifth anniversary of his arrival in town he went out and got drunk on vodka and fought with some of the younger men from the town. The police came and he fought with the police. They took him to the police station and beat him severely. After that he left his job and his lodgings. For a while slept in the woods. It was Autumn and he knew he could not survive living outside through the winter. He'd had enough of winter survival during the war. He went to the alcohol collective in Haberfeld's building by the river and asked them for a job. They were less picky. They took him on and gave him work loading lorries and filling crates and sticking labels onto bottles. When they needed an electrician they sent for him and he would fix the machinery. He stole vodka from the warehouse, hiding it under his coat. Everybody did that, to drink it and to sell it.

He needed somewhere to live so he broke into his family house behind the small synagogue. The synagogue itself had been converted into a warehouse for carpets but to him it hadn't changed. It was right beside his house, his parent's house, where he would climb in through a window and sleep on their old beds, but for years he avoided passing in front of it. In the old house there was no electricity and no fuel for cooking. He took to life as a hermit. At weekends he would drink himself into a stupor and sleep through Sunday. On Mondays a colleague would bang on the door then appear at the window through which he would also climb to exit the building.

Sometimes in the night he climbed silently from his cot and walked like a ghost through the streets of the new town to the market square of the old town, of the Jewish town. He passed the vodka factory and crossed the bridge on the Sola towards Zasole. As the river faded behind him he could make out in the moonlight the new communist buildings that lined the road, part industrial, part residential. He cut this way and that through the suburbs. Not knowing these roads, he navigated by guesswork until eventually he arrived at the road that ran parallel to the railway line. This road he knew. He turned and followed it until he came to the large concrete railway station that the authorities had built after the war. He slipped over the steel footbridge that crossed the multiple railway lines. Briefly he was in countryside, then the village of Birzinka enveloped him. He could see this too was growing swiftly. Again, he made his way by guesswork, confused by the strange moonlit world, until eventually he emerged from the cluster of new houses and the terrible vista of the camp opened up before him. Everything is conjoined, he thought. He was joined to this place and this place was joined to the town. The past to the present and no doubt the present to the future. Out there in the marshes his parents' ashes were part of the land, part of the camp and part of the world.

Once in the darkness he saw a shadow, a shape like a person sitting on a rock at the edge of the marshes, a naked man with a frog-like face, greenish beard and long hair. He thought it was a vagrant in a patched shirt and hat hung with speckled ribbons but as he stared at this apparition, feeling he had met it before, he remembered his mother telling him of the vodnici, the water spirits with a body covered in black fish scales and webbed paws, a fish's tail and eyes like red hot coals. A vodyanoy dragged people down to their underwater dwellings to serve as slaves. They stored the souls of the drowned in porcelain teapots, here on the marshes where the cremated remains of his parents lay along with thousands of others. He tentatively called out in a half shout that strangled in his throat.

The noise seemed wrong, guttural, obscene. There was a loud splash and the shape was gone.

To be a pilgrim



I was looking for a tree, a brzoza. I had a picture of a glade of trees enfolding people, families, children, the adults with the bemused look of the crushed, the children playing. It took place somewhere around here.

I know this tree well from my youth. In the part of the world where I grew up it is called a birch, or silver birch. As children we ran around in woods composed mostly of these trees. We peeled bark from their trunks. I'm not very good with trees beyond a few basics, but the birch has a silver bark and rings that run around the trunk. I've always known this tree. There is a huge silver birch in the back garden of my mother's flat, planted by my father when they moved in. It started as a tiny sapling and now it dominates the garden, cutting out the light. That's what birches do.

The birch is a very Polish tree, a good merciful tree that weeps and whose whiteness is visible from a distance. All over Poland places derive their names from the brzoza: Brzeźno, Brzoza, Brzeżany. Brzezinka, Birkenau.

Brzezinka was renamed Birkenau by the German invaders. Birkenau was where they built a machine to kill people.

The research that I was engaged on entailed making a deep map of a difficult place. I was making a sort of template for converting a place to a text, a stencil to put down in different places and see what was revealed. The process involved looking for fragments in the landscape, walking at random around a site while writing a text. The place is post closure Auschwitz and the town of Oświęcim, the empty camp of Birkenau, old boundaries, names, spaces, landmarks, the desiccated remains of shit in the landscape.

The space turned out to be not a binary unit but a divided place with sub-camps. I went for a walk around, many walks around. The camp cannot exist now without the town and the town cannot exist without the camp. So far as there is a town and there is a camp, what do they look like from the inside?

It has become clear to me that there are two ways of looking at this place: examining it as a totality or dividing it into parts.

The heterotopia is a divisional lens which examines an enclosed space, in relation to which there is an inside and an outside. The heterotopia others a part of the whole. Psychogeography is a unifying lens.

In #uploading_Holocaust⁹ a 75-minute film composed entirely of video fragments found online, a young Israeli visitor to Auschwitz remarks *I was shocked that it was in colour.*

⁹ Tzaig, Uri, Sagi Bornstein, and Udi Nir. 2016. #Uploading_Holocaust (2016) - IMDb.

This camp is visited annually by millions who never enter the town. The residents of the town seldom visit the camp. Most visitors will come once in a lifetime. Once is enough.

This writing about Auschwitz is not writing about Auschwitz. It is rewriting a world with/without Auschwitz. It is writing the world with the knowledge of Auschwitz. This knowledge, both inexplicable and unbearable, blinds like a flash of light whichever way you turn away from it. In its glare anything that has no direct relationship with then loses its significance.

Despite collecting fragments

for over thirty years

I make a necessary recourse to invention, supposition, fiction

to remediate the

irrecoverable,

unknowable,

irreparable character of the past.

One of the archives I examine is my own.

The narrative houses loss at its core.

I had a decades' long accumulation of fragmentary material sitting on my shelves in orderly files, proof that the camp had an afterlife, that it lived on in our world, that it had got under our skin. Walter Benjamin wrote history from refuse, from detritus, searching in marginal spaces for scraps, for rags which he cohered into a big picture, a deep map, of his subject. The use of seemingly unregardable, marginal objects opened up a new method of mapping. I went looking for fragments to integrate with this mass of accumulated material, material that originated outside the camp and dated from long after the camp was closed.



For seventy-five years the world was pretending to
hunt history down,
stop-start-stop-start-stop-stop-start,
within which there is still Auschwitz.

Fundamental things to do:
walk, feel, respond, map, space.

Looking for a place knitted into the world
by track, rail, thread, tale,
a commonplace tourist destination.

If a text emerges, get it down.

If the abyss appears, get down it.

Try to look,

just try and see.

In certain lights and atmospheric conditions

To locate Auschwitz: Take a pair of compasses and a map of Europe. Touch one compass point to Oświęcim and dig it in to inflict pain on the location then stretch the jaws open until the other point touches Paris. Rotate to inscribe a circle.

Within that first gyre you have enclosed thousands of years of European civilisation.

The perimeter of this circle is one-thousand two-hundred and thirty-three kilometres, as the crow flies, from Auschwitz. This perimeter of this circle embraces four million and seven hundred thousand square kilometres. In nineteen forty-two the landmass within was almost totally controlled by the Nazis with guarded borders which were in some ways as impassable as the wire at Birkenau, in other ways just as permeable. The centre exerted a pull: those who were pushed or thrown or captured by the magnetism were sucked downward toward the unknown centre. Once in motion, the chances of escape were poor.

Close the outer arm of the tool until it touches Rome. Rotate it to describe a second circle.

The perimeter now is nine hundred and sixty-seven kilometres from Auschwitz. Between the two circles you have drawn fall Paris, Reims, Charleville, Dunkirk, Amsterdam, The Hague, Antwerp, Goteborg, Stockholm, Tartu, most of Estonia, half of Latvia, almost Tallinn and Helskinki, down into modern day Russia, Pskov, Smolensk, Bryansk, Dnipro, thousands of towns and villages where the Einstatzgruppen started their work, south to the Black Sea, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Sevastapol, a bit of Bulgaria, Istanbul, Thessaloniki

and back north, encompassing Corfu, Brindisi, Naples, Rome, Elba, Monaco, Marseille, Geneva, Lyon Dijon, and, finally returning again, to Paris, city of light where I was born sixteen years after the camp ended its first life.

The enclosed landscape holds its history. All the memories are there still, either on its surface or just under it, or contained in the people who live in this vastness, or in the houses and fields and roadways, paths, fragments, remains, routes, signs, roads, railways, names, crossroads, waystations, museums, memorials, encampments, death sites, prisons, burial sites, graves.

See Auschwitz in certain lights and atmospheric conditions,
go to and fro, to and fro it,
through the landscape to it,
through towns and cities fro it,
Paris and Stockholm and Corfu and Smolensk,
the sweeping up of it,
the vast swept up of it,
separated by distance and joined to it and fro it.

In the days before the internet I went looking for the enormity. I asked Yad Vashem politely and they sent me a stack of photocopies which included plans for camp buildings, schematics of sites and images taken by reconnaissance planes during the war. When I read Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust Journey* which catalogues a trip, with a group of his students, to visit Holocaust sites across Europe I recognised the potential in travelling in the past although my approach was always lacklustre, more drifting than sightseeing, than Gilbert's methodology: 'It took several months of preparation, working out a detailed itinerary, and finding the archival material, and memoirs, that related to each town we would visit, and to the streets we would walk along' (Gilbert, 1997: xiii). For many years

I thought about making such a trip for myself. It bothered me that I had never been anywhere near the place. It seemed like a duty. As the years passed it loomed larger in my mind. Even when the iron curtain fell in 1990 and swept away the Soviet system in East Europe and made travel easier, opened up the past, I didn't take the plunge. Eventually I convinced myself that, in order to remedy this omission, this laxness, when I made my journey to the heart of darkness, I would make it as difficult as possible. I would find a hard way to travel to that place.

Although I knew a lot about deportations and death camps, who went, how they went, why they went, where they went, what they endured, how they died, how they survived, how some emerged and how they came back, I knew I knew nothing. The harder I looked, the less certain I was. The big picture, the armies, the railways, the laws, the dogma, the hatred, the rules, the cruelty, was always clear but the closer I looked the less I could see. I tried to see the suffering and death of a single person but I could see nothing.

My first Holocaust fragment



Figure 3 Shar Ha'makim Kibbutz volunteers 1979, author's archive

When I was seventeen and wouldn't go to school anymore, my South African Jewish father and my Catholic French mother sent me to do time in Israel on a kibbutz. I agreed to go because some time volunteering in the sun seemed like a reasonable alternative to fighting with my parents or getting a job in a supermarket. Beyond that, I had no ideas.

I flew from London to Israel on the day in 1979 that Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin signed the Israel-Egypt peace agreement. Apart from fearing that I might somehow be killed in a terrorist attack, I knew nothing about Israel, Palestinians or, for that matter, the Holocaust or Jews. I knew little of the politics of the country or the neighbouring states, the wars they had fought, the exiled Palestinians or the United Nations peacekeepers on the Lebanese border. On the flight I was given a card, with a chrysanthemum attached, marking the peace made that day between Egypt and Israel. I probably could not even have told you where Egypt was. At Ben Gurion airport we were parked at the far end of the runway and walked past lines of armed soldiers to the terminal.

On arrival I took a bus into Tel Aviv. I was so innocent of this place that in the dark I mistook the white sand alongside the road for snow. I went to a hostel where I had booked to stay the night and in the morning caught a bus across town to the Kibbutz office. I was anxious about getting to my destination. I am not a confident traveller and bus journeys in foreign cities have always scared me, my fear being that I will not recognise my destination, will have to ask someone where I am.

The next day the air was hot and the sky was bright. Outside the bus windows a noisy summertime city passed by. I clutched my map and watched the streets, trying to keep track of where we were. A line of middle-aged men in short sleeved shirts were strap hanging, their suntanned forearms held up above their heads as they swayed from side to side. On one of them, on his exposed arm, a number was tattooed in blue and I realised at that moment something I had known only by inference was real and coexisting with me in my world. And then he was gone and the Holocaust retreated back into that unknowable space where it was to reside for me for the next twenty years or so. I might be doing myself down here, it was a long time ago and I was a smart kid, but my memory is of being in a bubble where nothing outside my immediate environment mattered. I must have known something of the Holocaust, but I doubt I could have told you what happened, where it happened, where the people I was seeing in the streets, on the buses, came from. I am now further away from that summer than that summer was from the Holocaust itself. People who had been in Europe, in the camps, who had lost family and everything, were still walking the streets, running the country, building the kibbutzes. Except for that one man on a bus with a tattoo on his arm, the visible past remained firmly in the past. At the kibbutz office I met a woman who was recruiting for her kibbutz, Shar Ha'Makim in Northern Israel. It was near Galilee and Mount Carmel she said, though looking back this would have meant nothing to me.

The kibbutz I arrived at had been built on a hillside, on land taken from the Palestinian population, by Jews who had come from Yugoslavia. Of course, Yugoslavia does not exist now, and they would not then nor now describe the land on which they built their heaven as stolen. It was a way of describing their origins: the village's foundation myth. They had escaped from the furnace and built a new life on the land. They had a flour mill that dominated the site and a factory that produced solar heating systems and a lot of orange groves. There was a huge dining hall where we ate. My first job was working in the kitchens, producing vast quantities of food for the members. Although it was an affluent place and they were in the process of building new elegant stone and concrete houses on a wide avenue for all the members, they still ate all their meals in the modernist canteen.

It was the socialist system of the original kibbutzim. There was no money, each volunteer was given a coupon card to spend on extras in the little shop. Apart from that, the members were looked after, when they weren't in the army, from the cradle to the grave. The children were brought up in the communal system. Everyone worked for the kibbutz. Entertainments were laid on. Although war seemed distant, almost non-existent, we partied in decorated bomb shelters with the sabras, young Israelis who had been born in this less than thirty-years-old country, not much older than I was. It seemed peaceful and decent. Much must have seethed under the surface. It was a territory of displaced people, one displacement heaped upon another, and I partied on through the middle of it.

I found my place with the misfits at the edge of this system. In a way we were all misfits on that site, loners and losers who had found our way to the temporary sanctuary of an enfolding community where, in theory, to each was given what they needed and in return each gave according to their ability. In the hierarchy of Kibbutz volunteers there were the well fed big boned American kids who were on some sort of educational plan. The kibbutz loved them, but we hated them, or didn't understand them, which was the same thing.

Below them were the confident Jewish American loners who had organised their own places and knew why they were there. Then came good workers, volunteers confident in their own skin, handsome or beautiful drifters. At the end of this taxonomy came the odds and sods who had no idea why they were there and made little effort to fit in. There was a scary Afrikaner man with a big moustache, a sweet German heroin addict called Peter, a gangly buck toothed Dutch boy called Rob, and me.

I wasn't sure if I was a Jew or not or how I related to all these people. I was far away from my home and friends and an anxiety which had detached me from the world back home seemed to have followed me to this country. I worked for the first month in the kitchens and fell in with my new friends. Later they put me to work in the orange groves which entailed a 4am start to avoid the heat. When this fizzled out they sent me to the solar heating factory. I soon found the best ways to abuse the system. Friday nights brought bottles of a fairly disgusting sweet Carmel wine to every table, but the kibbutzniks on the whole didn't drink it and it was easy to swipe bottles from adjoining tables and get incredibly drunk with the volunteers, who had now become my fast friends. We bought beer with our vouchers from the kibbutz shop and hung out by the pool. We borrowed bicycles from random houses and rode them up and down the hill and sometimes into the swimming pool. I knew I wasn't considered a good volunteer. I hung on tightly to Robbie, the gangly Dutchman, who was a bit boring but who shared my hut with me, looked after me and was always happy to talk. We went out together a few times to Haifa and got roaring drunk in dive bars near the seafront. The American fifth fleet came to town, creating great excitement. The kibbutz took us on trips to Acre and to the northern border from where we looked over at the United Nations peacekeepers, encouraged by our kibbutz minders to imagine the fearsome foe on the other side. We were taken to the ruined fortress of Masada where the besieged Jews who committed suicide rather than be taken by the Romans was once again recounted. And, of course, to Yad Vashem, my first

Holocaust museum and a sacred site for Israeli Jews and Jews worldwide. I remember the darkness of the corridors lined with images of horror and the dark concrete space with a map of European death camps inset on the floor. It was my first Holocaust museum but I can't claim it had a huge impact on me at the time. Looking back, I'm not sure what I made of it all. I was homesick and broke and lovelorn.

To escape the claustrophobia of the kibbutz, Robbie and I took a trip to Jerusalem. Although the kibbutz provided us with some provisions for our trip, we were broke. We camped on a hillside outside in a small tent and wandered in and out of the city, eating bread and cheese and only coming back to our tent at night. After a couple of days, returning to our campsite we met a file of exhausted firefighters heading in the opposite direction. Our campfire, not properly extinguished, had reignited and caused a small forest fire that had consumed many trees, our tent and all our possessions. Distraught, we returned to the kibbutz where I started to think seriously about returning home early. The Jewish National Fund who owned the forest, wrote to me demanding compensation for the damage. I wrote to my parents and begged a loan (another loan), not to pay for the fire but to buy new socks and clothes. Life at the kibbutz moved on but somehow the pleasure had gone and I felt more and more a spare part who didn't fit in.

The American high school students were still there. We moved among them and worked alongside them but didn't understand them. They had classes and disappeared for large parts of the week, but they did like to party and we all hung out together with some of the Israeli sabras on weekends. One night we joined a couple of the Americans in their hut where they were playing cards. Robbie and I got drawn into a gambling session. I'd never gambled, I had no inclination for it, but, as the night stretched on time became suspended as we smoked and drank and played hand after hand. I have no memory of what game we were betting on, but I started to win money. Towards dawn we called it a

night and emerged blinking into the light. I probably had about twenty dollars winnings in my hand.

To me, this was a huge and liberating amount of money. I told Robbie we should come back and play them at cards again. 'We can take their money,' I said. 'They've got so much, they're rich Americans. Let's see if we can play again tomorrow.' He looked at me and shook his head. 'Do you know why I'm here?' I didn't have a clue. 'I'm a gambler,' he said. 'I'm an addict.' Then he told me everything about his previous life. How he had lost everything gambling in casinos. He explained how he would get the train to Brussels and gamble every penny, then have to hide in the toilet on the way back to Amsterdam to avoid the ticket inspector. He told me how he lost his job, his flat, all his possessions because he could not shake his addiction to gambling. 'I inherited a flat from my mother and gambled the whole thing away in months,' he said. We could not go and play cards with the Americans again. If I did, he would not come with me.

I felt like an amateur who had no hinterland, no story of suffering. I was just a greedy, spoiled, kid. Robbie explained more about his life in Holland but I don't remember anything now of that conversation except one thing. 'My father survived the Holocaust,' he said. 'But he lost his whole family. I'm his second family, his after family. I'm his second chance at life and look how it's ended up.'

Soon after, I left the kibbutz and flew back to grey England. As soon as I arrived I knew I'd made a mistake, that I should have worked harder at staying in that strange place. It was too late. For years afterwards, as I attempted to find a way into real life, I dreamed that I was back on that hillside under Mount Carmel, that I was sitting around a fire with my short-lived friends, with Robbie and Peter and the English boy and the Canadian girl who sent me a postcard once from Italy. I never saw any of them again and I have no idea

what happened to them, whether they found a normal life or died in the search, lost on the highway somewhere.

How we are landmarked

My father was a second-generation eastern European Jew, a Litvak, born and raised in the heat and privilege of South Africa before the war. He was part of a community that, while still firmly Jewish, had long cast off the backwoods traditions of their European forebears. Casting off that lineage he left for England after the war, landing from a White Star liner at Portsmouth in 1947, the same time that black immigrants from Jamaica were arriving in London on the Windrush. He was the oldest son of a middle-class family that produced four sons. Their father, Leopold Pope, brought the name, a transliteration of the Lithuanian Paps, into the family, fathered four sons and died, disappearing swiftly into history. He left few clues to the family background and Lithuania. The Pale, the shtetel, the old country, nobody still living had much interest in that past.

He arrived in Paris in the early sixties with a French wife. She was not Jewish, except by conversion, but this was no compromise. It was a deliberate choice. My parents had both shed any trappings of religion. I was born an empty vessel. He had been working in Fleet Street for Lord Beaverbrook's newspapers since the start of the fifties. Taking the classic route into journalism, he'd started as a runner for Reuters on arrival in London. Photos from the time show him as a besuited dandy with slicked back hair and a prominent widow's peak. He hung out with up-and-coming media stars of the day as he built his own career, drinking at night in the small clubs and bars of Soho, indulging too much in the pleasures of the capital and falling in and out of love. He was already no Jew in demeanour or outward appearance and, along with his many Jewish friends in Fleet Street, he kept his ethnic head down. The only thing that he couldn't hide was his

prominent, though not excessive, Jewish nose. His friends, the cartoonists, found him a useful model, generally for the working-class character. He was regularly depicted as a flat capped working man, always with the profile, the large nose, the lower lip.

In *The Wandering Jews*, his 1927 survey of the lot of the Eastern Jews, Joseph Roth praised Paris. 'Paris is where the Eastern Jew begins to become a Western European. He becomes French. He may even come to be a French patriot' (Roth and Hofmann 2001: 82). Roth is complimentary of Paris, even of its antisemitism. Admittedly there is anti-Semitism in France, even outside royalist circles. But it is not one hundred percent proof. Eastern Jews, accustomed to a far stronger, cruder, more brutal antisemitism, are perfectly happy with the French version of it. The French version of Eastern pogroms turned out to be Drancy and d'Hiver and Gurs, and the rest, the cars, heading to the East, taking Jews back to their roots, to kill them. The most well-known photo of the peripatetic Roth was taken in 1926. He is sitting on a railway platform in a suit. Behind him is a goods wagon *of the type*.

On my mother's twelfth birthday, August the fifth 1942, the first trainload of Jews from France was sent to Drancy, east of Paris and then onward, towards Auschwitz. One thousand people placed into wagons for the journey east. These were French trains, French personnel and French guards. My mother was safe in England, her French father interned in Shanghai. Anyway, they were Catholics.

The silent city

In Paris in the autumn of 1940, the new German authorities seized an unfinished development, La Murette, The Silent City, in the east of Paris and converted it into a police barracks. Its high-rise towers were among the first of their kind in France, a modernist

urban community incorporating the first American style skyscrapers in France. It was everything that modernism aspired to be: sleek, sophisticated, technically challenging. It was a statement that signified belief in a world remade. On August 20th, 1941, more than four thousand Jews were arrested and interned there: it became an internment camp and took a new name from the neighbourhood in which it stood: Drancy. A further roundup on the sixteenth and seventeenth of July brought more than thirteen thousand further Jews. The open spaces of its courtyards were enclosed with barbed wire and guarded by French gendarmes. By August the following year the transports had begun. Almost five thousand prisoners were deported by train to Auschwitz.

After arriving in Paris with my bicycle I made my way towards Drancy in sunshine so bright I couldn't see my iPhone. I had to screw up my eyes to see and confirm I was on the right road. I cycled out through the suburbs of Paris. As I got nearer to my destination I was amazed at how, on small turns in the road, it could seem like I was passing through a village. Pedalling up the Avenue Henri Barbusse I recognised the roadside fences, the slope of the road and the petrol station on the other side of the road. I've been here before, I thought, but though I was born near here, I hadn't. The road I was on climbed a gentle slope above the railway and I realised that down below was the abandoned station, Bobigny, where prisoners were loaded onto trains to start their journey to Auschwitz, into a machine designed to kill them.

I had spent so many hours examining this route on Google maps that it was as if I'd been there already. I recognised a gateway. Beyond the gate, steps led through the trees down the embankment, to the empty station. I crossed the road carefully. I didn't want to die here. I propped my bike against the gate. The heat was intense. I read a sign on the gate about access and remembered that I had been going to book a tour of the station. Too late now. I walked up onto the bridge and looked down at the railway lines. The place was quiet, silent and dusty, an abandoned byway on the road to the Holocaust.

Information boards explained how this station existed on a network of railways around Paris and hinted at the horrors that this represents. Right here, in this suburb of Paris, a suburb that could be in any European city, probably any city in the world, people were going about their business: driving trucks, repairing them, delivering food, waiting for the daytime heat to pass. And here, on the road that is little more than a busy arterial route in and out of Paris, was a waystation of the Holocaust. It all came into focus, what was I doing here, why did I want to cycle this route, why was it so difficult?

At the other end of these railway lines was Auschwitz and the killing chambers, directly connected by these steel tracks, like a network of cables, the Victorian information superhighway, able to convey human beings to their death.

I arrived in La Muette in hot sunshine. The Germans and the collaborators and the bureaucrats, the guards and the train drivers, all were long gone, as were the Jews who were sequestered here before being shipped across the continent, to that Polish town, to be killed. There were no cowed occupants, no gendarmes silhouetted against the modernist buildings. The buildings, in use as housing, could be any modern block of flats in any suburb of any city in the western world, except that on the open side of the square there's a railway wagon, a deathless cattle truck, installed on a tiny piece of track. A memorial with a small hedge around it to separate it from the modern world. Someone had taken advantage of this half cover and had a shit next to the carriage. Maybe it's a protest, a deliberate defilement. I cycled around the square a few times, looking for reminders of its origins, placing it mentally in my map of time and space.

I had seen a sister wagon to this one, years before in the Washington Holocaust Museum. At that time, it had struck me as wrong to see a train carriage inside a building. There are several on display around the world, trophies sought out by hunters across the vast marshalling yards of Europe. Where they had been all the years when nobody cared what they had been used for, what they represented? The growth of Holocaust museums

on every continent drives a trade in relics, a trade if entirely above board also entirely below the radar.

For decades we tried to forget this while swearing never to forget. Then, when it was almost all over, we started looking for hard evidence to display. ‘The gravestones hadn’t gone anywhere: they lay under the soil, they’d simply gone underground, so they were brought back to the light and arranged around the wide grassy garden of an old people’s home which had sprung up in the cemetery’s absence’ (Stepanova and Dugdale 2021: 244). A few years later, I would be shown a wagon parked outside a rotting Nazi building at Auschwitz. *This was made six kilometres from Drancy*, my guide told me in fractured English. We come a long way and travel nowhere.

I left Paris in the direction of Poland, not even knowing for sure what my destination was. I was a thousand miles from Auschwitz, but in some ways I was already there. I didn’t have enough time to finish the journey, I needed to be back in England for a family holiday, but I wanted to prove that I could at least start. My knowledge of the camp infused everything in Europe, everything in the world. There was no outside Auschwitz, I was always in it. Most people wouldn’t think like this, such thinking would drive them mad, but, at the edge of my journey, I had to hold that thought.

The sun shone. I headed east along the Seine on my beautiful old heavy touring bike, carrying a tent and a cooker in four panniers so I could stop anywhere. Although I had programmed a route myself, tweaking it towards places the deportation trains passed through, each part of the route was a mystery. My aim was to pass through the landscape and learn from the process, to anticipate my destination and harden myself along the way.

When I got deep into the countryside I started to feel anxious and sad, although I knew this journey wasn’t about either. Leaving anywhere can be frightening and unnerving. Leaving a city to cross the huge empty spaces with only the fragile frame of a

bicycle, a tent, panniers and a few pounds, was unsettling. I'd hitchhiked across Europe before, when I was young with nothing to lose, but where I was headed now suddenly seemed impossible. Could such a place exist in the same world as me? Maybe, in relation to every village, town, city, street, road, house, shop, high street, to what we know, my destination is impossible. I stopped by a river and brewed some coffee. I was alone and nobody knew where I was. I liked that.

The bike liberated me. I got used to it very quickly. Acclimatised, I started to live in the saddle. There is a direct connection between the action of my legs and the drivetrain. I felt every twitch, every engagement, every spin of the gears, and I loved it. I liked corners, winding roads, gentle ups and downs. I didn't mind hills. Up is sometimes better than down. Every inch pedalled was leg power, which is heart power, which is calories burned. I had to keep eating and keep burning up this stored energy of the sun. I wanted to be able to spend all day riding, for weeks on end. I had set out to read the well-worn paths, the glib generalisations, the denial, the acceptance, the memorials, the past used to shore up the present.

I was at the end of one thing and the start of another, trying to detach myself from my old life. Cycling allowed me to throw off stagnation and cowardice and to emerge into the world. I carried my maps in digital form and followed the route on the screen of my phone. I knew where to go and where I was going, but never where I was. In an echo of history, it was a modern form of travel, I found I was always at a precise location while adrift in a landscape. Railway lines crossed and re-crossed my path, the same tracks, I think, which, a thousand miles down the road, would terminate at Auschwitz. Was I following the railway, or was the railway following me?

I superimposed myself onto some small part of history. My route from end to end went roughly Bobigny, Epernay, Chalons sur Marne, Revigny, Bar le Duc, Lerouville, Novéant sur Moselle, Carling, across the German border to Saarbrücken, Frankfurt am Main, Dresden, on into Poland and Nysa, Katowice, then Auschwitz-Birkenau, tracking the route that transports took to Auschwitz. Modern railways are very different to those of wartime France, Germany and Poland. The precise route is unknowable. Even if I went by train, the route would vary from that of the transports with their cargoes of drowning humanity. After all the years thinking and reading about the Holocaust I was on my way, in my own way, to visit the anus mundi, the arsehole of the world.

I know much now about the events of nineteen thirty-nine to nineteen forty-five, the deportations and the death camps, who went, how they went, why they went, where they went, what they endured, how they died, how they survived, how they emerged, how they came back. And I know nothing. The harder I look the less certain I am of what happened. I can see the big picture, the armies, the railways, the laws, the dogma, the hatred, the rules, the cruelty, but when I look closer and try to see the threads that pull all these things into the suffering and death of one person I see nothing. The landscape blurs. I know the trains rumbled across frozen countryside, or hot landscapes, loaded with their human cargoes, cargoes authorised to be kidnapped and sold into slavery and death by unconnected people. But I can't understand how this came about.

I pushed my finger into the ant hill of Auschwitz to see how the inhabitants, even after all this time, move around, disturbed by my interference. When they scurry I watch them go, but I don't know the rules by which they choose their routes. They hide in corners, they line up outside the barracks, they are counted again and again by guards in huge grey coats. Some fall to the ground and die, some are pulled out and killed and still, as I stand over them and watch, nobody looks up to see me watching. There is no pleasure in watching, but I watch events transpire in front of me again and again. I am helpless.

But I am not a god. It is like the light from events that took place millions of years before has finally arrived at the back of my eyeballs, events that took place before I was born are still being played out. The light is still travelling across the universe. When I was born it was sixteen light years away from the source, and the source had been cleansed, tidied up, sanitised. The inhabitants of those events were scattered, Living or dead, they could no longer see the emergent light. But it is there, even now. You just have to be seventy-five light years away to see it.

Cadence and decadence

Cyclists have a cadence at which they feel most comfortable, chosen to minimise muscular fatigue, not metabolic demand. Any particular cyclist has only a narrow range of preferred cadences, the idea being to keep pedalling at the same rate at all times to achieve varying speeds. Treading water and doing doggy paddle is a cadence. The rate at which the feet move in the water is the rate of movement that will keep you afloat and alive. Cadence is what keeps us upright and alive in life. Lose your cadence and you are on a downward spiral to death. The rhythms with which we eat and shit, meet friends, laugh and cry, wake and sleep, that is our cadence. Without cadence, decadence. 'He called cadence: Links, Zwei, Drei, Vier. Links. The men found it hard to keep up. They were wearing canvas foot-wraps with wooden soles that did not stay on. We couldn't imagine how they kept on walking. When there was snow or ice they carried them in their hands' (Delbo, 199: 20).

The clack clack clack of a wagon passing over unwelded railway tracks, making little rhymes as the wheel strikes thrum in your ears, more-to-the-east, more-to-the-east, more-to-the-east. The men on the footplate, shovelling coal at the necessary rate. Without this rhythm you decline fast and die. Cadence.

When war came to Europe, the Jewish population adapted their cadence in response to external events which varied from place to place, from community to community, from person to person and from camp to camp. The aim was to apply the rate that would keep them alive without hastening their death. Even in Auschwitz, on the threshold of death, there was a cadence, finely judged and ultimately futile.

For a while there is a rhythm to the activity within the wagons. Everyone is calculating how best to survive, maintaining life while conserving calories. Nobody quite anticipates death yet, but now every day has to be encountered, managed, controlled and processed. Before, at home with family, community, work, friends, they took the ways of survival for granted. The people who have been selected, through a process of corralling and manipulation, into this wagon are trying to find the cadence that will get them through the day, through the journey, through the gripping fear that is starting to pervade them. All along the train, a thousand or more souls are starting to grapple with the notion of survival in new and impossible circumstances. The deportation that started at Drancy two days earlier will go on for four more days. That is all that is left until the extermination, inevitable and immediate for the majority, and slower and more sophisticated for the rest. But the people do not know it yet.

I knew I was more or less following this railway. The presence of the line reminded me of my mission. My route meandered around the countryside. The software I had used was determined to keep me off the roads and so I cycled along riverbanks and across the corners of cornfields. It was slow going and I eventually decided that when I came near to the road again I would re-join it. On the map I saw a short track leading to a level crossing and a steep hill up to the road, the dead part of a dead-end road, somewhere nobody would ever visit. As I cut away, towards the railway line, I saw a large stone with a French flag fluttering above it. It was a monument to a collection of small, lost, incidents that took place in and around Fossoy during the war. In 1942 a sixteen-year-old boy,

Maurice Zelis, deported from Drancy, threw a letter to his younger brother from the train. A local woman, Pauline Carron, saw it thrown and sent it on to the brother. Maurice was taken to Auschwitz and never returned. The monument also marks a military convoy that was machine-gunned here in 1944. Four women, deported resistance fighters, in the first wagons were killed and six injured. This crossing is a nexus on the route of deportation.

I cannot get emotional, if I did I would go mad, but in that corner of a foreign field I broke down and wept. I cried for all the people who ended their lives in misery and shame and pain and humiliation, far from their homes and families, in anonymous fields, in trains and in camps. There were no stones left on that stone. An isolated place, nobody would ever come across it by chance, yet I had. I left a stone for a Jewish grave. Weeping stiffened my resolve to see this project through.

I realised that the railway was following me.

Train 901-12

The train you are on leaves Bobigny at six-thirty in the morning, not early for you. You are an early riser by inclination and trade. You have packed what little food you had for the journey, but your understanding was that it will be a day or so, after which you will be placed into a transit camp where you will be fed and given quarters. Your wife wanted to bring along a change of clothes, but you told her it would be hard to fit them into the one case you were allowed and that you would do without for the day. You were told to be up at four-thirty or you'd all get a bullet in the head.

Boarding the train is hard. You don't want to climb up into that wooden monstrosity. However, the attendants are your own countrymen and they encourage you with familiar words, albeit spoken harshly. As the crowd dithers and tries to board the

carriages in a seemly manner the guards start to push and then to beat you and in the melee that follows you are separated from your wife and daughter. You look around in despair and see them swept alongside the train, further and further away in the crush. A feeling of desperation sweeps over you, unlike anything you have ever experienced before. A cold sweat bursts out from every pore of your body and a sickness descends to your stomach so strongly that you think you will pass out on the spot. You still hold, clutched tightly in your right hand, the small bag that you brought with food and water, gold coins hidden in the lining. May the good lord preserve them, you say to yourself. You try to move back to the entrance to climb down, to find their part of the train. Surely such a simple mistake can't be allowed, you think, but they had pushed far too many of you into each carriage and you already stand in an undifferentiated mass tight up against others. You can not get back to the sunlight. You cry silently as the doors are closed up, shutting you in stifling darkness.

I've seen your picture, I know what you look like. You are at the start of every Holocaust museum I've ever visited, in every book of photography from the ruins, every collection of how lives used to be. You look at me out of every black and white image, the Polish man arriving at Ellis Island, the bohemian Jews drinking at the Cafe du Dome in Paris, the Viennese family man, proud of his wife, children, parents, arrayed around an afternoon tea party, the Shtetl Jew in his village in the Pale. You are in thousands of photos taken for the same reasons we all make family photos, to give to our loved ones, to remind us of how things were, to reassure ourselves that we are human. I know what you look like. Now you are sealed into a wooden box with a hundred or so other people. You know nothing of Auschwitz, nothing of death camps, gas chambers, ovens. You don't know about selection, about being worked to death. What you do know is all about how to live a life as a social being, to exist in a community, to relate to others, the private and personal realms. You know what you like to eat, how to eat, what your family eats,

how they are with eating. You know how to go to the toilet, to keep yourself clean, to rest when needed, to lie down at night and sleep, to dream, to wake with the dawn. You know how to comfort others, to pay attention to your partner, to keep good relations with your family, to see your friends sometimes, to endear yourself to your children. You are in that wooden box with the door locked, with no seats, no chairs, no beds, nowhere to lie down, no windows, no food, no water, no toilets. Is that not how you imagined a railway car, a cattle wagon for the deportation of human beings? When the doors closed, did you imagine that you don't have to think any further about those on board, about how they pass the minutes and then the hours and then the days in motion in semi-darkness with nothing. One hundred or so people on their feet in a sealed box with no water and no food. Swaying.

After a while you all start to slide around in the shit and piss that emanates from the corner designated as toilet. Someone falls directly into this mess, then stands and looks away from the others. A family, a mother and two small children lie sleeping against the wall, the mire lapping against their sides. Others stand above them, between them, feet on their clothes. One of the children is dead, but you won't realise that for hours. You think about your legs. You try not to, but they are stiffened and screaming at you. All you can think about are your legs. So long as you're not thinking about water. In the tiny interstices between those atavistic thoughts, you wonder where you are going and whether the stories might be true. After the first moments in the darkness, a calm comes over you. The train stands still and the bodies within it start to relax, to release their tension. There are cries and crying from the darkness but also muttered voices consoling others. As there is no room to sit so you lean against the side of the carriage, clutching your case tightly as if someone may snatch it from you and take your food and eating implements, your daughter's doll. That you have all your family's provisions crosses your mind again and you imagine them fearful and hungry, on their own in another carriage. Only one day,

you repeat to yourself, again and again. A thin shaft of sunlight enters from two barred windows high in the side of the wagon and you decide to inch your way towards that light. The air in the space is heating up quickly and becoming fetid. The train starts its journey with repeated and sudden stopping and jerking. It causes you to fall against the people in your wagon. Some fall to the ground, to the straw, and remained there, wedged between the legs of others, as the train gathers speed.

You imagine holding your children's hands, one of each, holding them tight to you, with your wife standing alongside, holding tight around your body. But you have no idea when you'll next see them, so, without them the journey commences. You are not concerned about your fate; you have no fear for yourself. You believe that you are heading for resettlement in the east. The war cannot last forever, you told your children. We will return to France, to Paris and to our flat in the fifteenth arrondissement before you are much older. They don't know anything except war, they had grown to consciousness with it present. You are confident because you have always worked with your hands and your head and you believe you shall be a credit and of value to wherever you end up. You have sixteen pieces of gold secreted in the lining of your suitcase, gold that will stand you in good stead at your destination. No, you do not worry about yourself. It is the suffering of your children that concerns you, but for them you shall be strong and for them you will overcome adversity by all means. You are a strong man.

The hot sunshine of the day gives way to twilight and then the gloom of night. The wagon is quieter now. People are wedged together, supporting each other. Some lie between your feet, stretched as if in repose, perhaps dead. There is no toilet in the wagon; straw at the far end is being used as a toilet, to the horror of participants. In the night, the window above causes strange shadows to fly across the humanity in this cage, again and again a square of vaporous light flickers between the bodies and is gone. When you pass through

stations or small towns the train slows momentarily, then speeds up again. People are asking for water now, with desperation. Children wake and cry and then fall back to sleep again. You are sure some older people are dead, that man looks as if he has passed from this world. You are worrying about children. You have the bread and the water and your guilt over this stops you from opening the case. What's in your case, a man asks. Got any water in there? You hold even tighter. After many hours you fall into a desperate sleep during which you never lose your consciousness of your plight, of the horror of your journey. The rattling of the wheels and the rhythmic clack-clack on the tracks gives you dreams of a monstrous machine that chases your family through the quarter of Paris where you have lived for many years, before you were married and after. Your business was here. You were known to this community, your name had value and your work was recognised.

A town like Auschwitz



Figure 4 Oświęcim 2022

Auschwitz state of mind

After I stepped off the train at Oświęcim I retained no memory of what I had been expecting. The perfectly normal central European town with paved roads and roundabouts and shops and development and churches that I found caused any prior thoughts I may have had about the town to drop away in the way they say stepping through a doorway is designed to make the mind drop what it was thinking, perhaps to prepare it for danger or battle. It is perhaps hard to think about a town that exists alongside a notorious death camp. Many people don't even realise there is a town – few visit it, yet it is everything that you would expect.

I crossed the road away from the railway station and set out towards the old town. It was early and the place was quiet, the streets ordinary. I looked for older houses, for buildings that might predate the end of war.. I had no idea there was an old town and a new town. I walked blind in terms of landscape but not in terms of navigation. In my bag I had a paper map, but it was huge, covering the countryside around the town. It contained cycle routes and tourist attractions and was not designed to be used for the purpose of navigating urban streets.



Figure 5 Oświęcim railway station, 2018

The station was a large concrete and glass edifice which had replaced the small homely traditional pre-war station. I like the modern station. I like the huge metal sign that says OŚWIĘCIM. I like that the passengers run across the tracks to exit the station, it seems rural and dangerous.

I admired some small takeaway shacks with signs for fried chicken in an incomprehensible language, and the rusted green steel walkway that crossed from the main road to the other side of the tracks. I admired the concrete signal box that also bears the signage Oświęcim. I looked across at the endless lines of industrial carriages, coal carriers and even some cattle wagons and made a mental note to cross over, to find out what is on the other side.. It's that sort of station.

Within two years the station had gone, demolished in favour of a smaller modern station, part of a regional railway modernisation funded in part by the European Union.

My site, Auschwitz - Birkenau,

palace of birch,
great death camp,
shadow sibling to the Holocaust
dotted across the territory.

The area around Auschwitz can be defined as a loosely drawn doughnut of terrain, a vague terra incognita which encircles the camp but which has no absolute or even rough borders. It is a landscape through which all visitors to the camp must pass, through which all the victims and inmates of the camp must have passed, through which all the materials for building the camp and all the supplies for the camp must have passed, and back into which much of the same returned. I passed through the shadow topography without noticing it. This place is affected by the presence of the camp although it is not the camp. It stretches to contain dozens of sub-camps. It is not an empty or innocent landscape, it is an unregarded space.

At the start I took with me a single modern commercial map of the area, making an assumption that further maps would fall into my hands. I was looking for a straightforward reading of the landscape and I would know where I was in relation to the Holocaust and myself. I would work out how we landmark. That was my plan, if I had one.

After the camp closed it exploded emitting fragments widely into the world. These fragments have a half-life. They remain scattered, embedded in the landscape.

To map and catalogue
these fragments and
their relationship to
the camp is

rudimentary work but
not below my pay grade.

The Germans created and left behind ‘monotonous, repetitive, orthogonal plans that lacked any individuality or any indication of the inhumanity of the place’ (Wienert 2018: 583). The camp is presented ‘as built on isotropic surfaces with all traces of topography and geology removed’ (Charlesworth 2004: 151). It is a known unknown that contains unknown unknowns. Within the ambit of the offence you can no longer look inward but only outward.

Standing in the field, doing field work.

The field is fenced, disrupted, sanctified.

I question why I am here,

why I chose this site. How dare I.

I am so close it is silent,

there is nothing to look at.

This is ground zero,

the centre,

where the explosion occurred.

What I knew was that I could not imagine that place, could not picture it for myself, was reliant on imagery. I took the imagery I knew in good faith, that was the place. Everyone knew what I knew, which was what it looked like, but what I knew was that it had to be seen, whatever was there needed to be seen. It was in my head, it was my state of mind.

The spatial entirety

Now then! We will begin. When the story is done you shall know a great deal more than you do know.

He was a terribly bad hobgoblin, a goblin of the very wickedest sort and, in fact, he was the devil himself. One day the devil was in a very good humor because he had just finished a mirror which had this peculiar power: everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it seemed to dwindle to almost nothing at all, while everything that was worthless and ugly became most conspicuous and even uglier than ever. In this mirror the loveliest landscapes looked like boiled spinach, and the very best people became hideous, or stood on their heads and had no stomachs. Their faces were distorted beyond any recognition, and if a person had a freckle it was sure to spread until it covered both nose and mouth. (Andersen, 2015: 1)

I wanted to be a tour guide, to gather others around me and walk with them and tell them stories, to show them the edges, the hinterland, the connective tissue, the limina, the penumbric spaces. I'm not interested in the flora, I pass over it without seeing, without noticing. Do birds sing in Birkenau? I can't say, I don't hear them but that may be because I never thought to listen. I was interested in the birches, the trees from which Birkenau took its name. I was landmarking and landmarked by Auschwitz. It tugged at roots I wasn't aware I had. I walked over it as it slumbered in the soil, dug in, holding fast against modernity. I was never alone at Auschwitz.

I had a post card of the view to the front of Birkenau in the 1950s. I bought many postcards of this view, looking for fragments of the past, how it was, how it was when it was abandoned, before it became mythic because, as Joseph Roth said, 'Things have a better feeling for the future than people do' (Roth 2016: 27).

Through this space everything came and everything that went, went.

It is part of, provides space, enables it.

It is conjoined,

a no-mine's land.

This place does not have to be denazified.

This space spewed fragments which poisoned the earth.

At the confluence three rivers delineate and divide,

The ash pits are eternal.

The museum wishes to be eternal.

On my second trip I went back to Birkenau but was hesitant about entering it. Now I had my bicycle I could move fast around the perimeter and explore the nearby villages. The interior seemed less important. The surrounding countryside opened itself up to me. I crossed the marshes and streams and looked for the places that Charlotte had walked to. It was very hot and I drank endless bottles of sweet fizzy orange from the multitude of small shops that litter the Polish countryside.

Being on a bicycle changed my interaction with the landscape. Rather than looking constantly at a map and choosing carefully what I was walking to, what I was seeing, I moved fast and carelessly, shooting up and down roads without much attention to direction. The countryside was flat so cycling was easy, but at the same time I constantly got lost. I travelled miles away from the camp and then turned and swooped back upon it, trying to comprehend it from different viewpoints, to pin it in the topography, but I'm not sure I made any progress.

The approach to the Birkenau gates was a disgrace. What should have been a calm, reflective walk up to a site of immense dignity and sorrow had become a dangerous, dirty, messy, confusing babble of cars, buses, local traffic, VIP taxis, throngs of tourists, roadworks seemingly abandoned. There was no place for thought, no dignity or grace to anticipate what you were about to see.

It is a very flat world. Partly it rained, partly it was very sunny. I started to think how much I liked this town, how it felt mellow and dreamy. Parts of it were attractive to me. I started to wonder how it would be to live here, to write here, to find a studio. Maybe to live on the edges, maybe out of town.

The town was a puzzle. To solve it I had to traverse it endlessly, picking up a hint here, a fragment there, and assembling them. Things were hidden in plain sight. The things that want to be seen were there but things that nobody wanted to see were ignored. Even for the things that everyone comes to see, there was little signage, they were half hidden in plain sight, hidden in a different way.

Looking at the landscape from far above and from within the history I felt very close and also very far away. I saw the pattern of fragments that surrounded me. Even within a blasted place, there are gradations of blast.

What was I doing? I was constructing a deep map without much knowledge of what such a map might be, of what text I intended to make. I anticipated a well annotated and mapped landscape in the traditional sense, full of information and fragmented history. I didn't anticipate emptiness or absence or hidden things, I thought this space was well worked over. I was wrong.

Which has to do with a mirror and its fragments

It didn't matter who I was or why I thought I was there or even why the world thought I was there. Why I was there would be revealed in the work, it was show not tell. My aim was to find a way to tell a story, not to work out what I was doing there. I had to work with the landscape, the topography and the topology, the remains. If it is to be written, it needs to be written from the perspective of now, of how that place is now. Even before the end of the war voices emerged and efforts were made to tell what was happening.

After the camp closed an explosion threw fragments into the world, into every corner of our world. We live with those fragments, they are lodged within us from birth, in our stories, in our tales. Auschwitz sucked you into its maw with no consideration of who you were or what you had been, merely fitting you into a template, fleetingly assessing you before destroying you.

‘On a dark, dark hill, there was a dark, dark town. In the dark, dark town, there was a dark, dark street. On the dark, dark street, there was a dark, dark house. In the dark, dark house, there was a dark, dark staircase. Down the dark, dark staircase, there was a dark, dark cellar. And in the dark, dark cellar, some skeletons lived’ (Ahlberg and Ahlberg 1990: cover).

In Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Ice Queen* they attempt to carry a mirror into heaven in order to make fools of the angels and God, but the higher they lift it, the more the mirror shakes. They laugh and it slips from their grasp and falls back to earth, shattering into billions of pieces, some no larger than a grain of sand. The splinters are blown by the wind all over the Earth and get into people's hearts and eyes, freezing their hearts like blocks of ice and making their eyes like the troll-mirror itself, seeing only the bad and ugly in people and things.

I won’t tell you what went on here. You know, anyway, or you think you know. You’ve spent your life looking away, knowing and not knowing, not wanting to know while wanting to know. Anyway, you don’t know. Nobody knows. You can go and read about it, at great length and from many witnesses, they will give you chapter and verse. I don’t know what went on here, though I do know. I know as much as it is advisable to know. Here (if this is) a man sank as low as it is possible to know, a formula for pitting human against human was devised that ran out of control, amok, for many years and devoured, consumed all of humanity. That story is within us, we have absorbed it with our mother’s

milk, it floats within our bodies, that knowledge. We know and we don't need to know because the fragmentary remains of the enormity are lodged within all of us.

I collected press cuttings, scraps from magazines, prints of maps and other detritus that pointed a way to a place in Eastern Europe that no longer seemed to exist. I had no idea I could visit. The place only existed as a jumble of iconic fragments in my head, although I had spent thirty years constructing a view of it. At first I collected because I liked the aesthetic of the material, it seemed to open a view into a void. It was a way of looking into the past without having to engage with that past. I hadn't worked out what that relationship was, I just had some idea that eventually I would, in my role as artist, use elements from the collection to produce work. I found that the more powerful each shard was, the harder it was to use it, *to use it up*. So long as my collection remained in its folder, growing and nestling with its siblings, it had potential, it retained its power. If I started using it that power dissipated. I was frightened, or too in thrall to the power of the collection, to make a start. None of it was used, largely because I never could fix a methodology for the production of that art. I failed as an artist because I was scared to say what I wanted to say. I collected and assembled these textual fragments with a view to making artwork or creating a narrative of some sort. I wasn't clear. I mostly collected newspaper cuttings and magazine articles that impinged on some ill formulated zone of interest, of darkness. Only in retrospect did it become clear that this interest was the gamut of human experience, manifested in dark yet quirky stories and, as often as not, in tales from the enormity, from the Holocaust. I amassed these cuttings for thirty years without much idea of their purpose. Eventually they ran to ten binders. The regular collecting only stopped as newspapers and magazines started to recede from my life, although I still slip the occasional piece into my cuttings box. The accumulation included maps, cuttings regarding post-war Holocaust stories, resurfaced children of Nazis, dark stories of life before and after. The past was in the present. This semi-persistent theme arose

unintentionally within the accumulation. I was constructing a story for myself from the fragments that I barely recognised.

In addition to this library, I started building a book collection around the Nazi period. A lot of associated texts were eventually added to this core collection. I was inching towards the place without really knowing where I was going. All collections proceed from fragment to constellation. Words emerge from fragments that are letters, sentences from words, paragraphs from sentences, chapters from paragraphs, books from chapters. Eventually the whole world is written from fragments. This text is a constellation of ideas. Maria Stepanova wrote in *In Memory of Memory*, 'I am talking far too much about objects, and perhaps it is inevitable. The people I wrote this book for died long before I started writing it and objects were the only permissible replacement' (Stepanova and Dugdale, 2021: 87).

My collection of cuttings has more a feeling than a theme. The collection became full (in the sense of the French word, *plein*) when newspapers and other printed materials started to die out. I had been reading and then buying newspapers all my life. My father worked in Fleet Street and brought them home with him every evening. Newspapers were everything, they provided the measure of a day. Then I stopped buying the *Guardian* every day. I stopped buying weekend newspapers with colour supplements, the source of much material. My sources of disposable (or demountable, fragmentable) material came to an end and the collection slowly stopped growing. I still add to it on rare occasions, but something has ended. My convolutes made a record of a view of the world. They not only mapped the past, they mapped my life and my view of what I thought was important in the world. They provided a chronicle of a trip foretold.

Tim Robinson spent thirty years walking around the perimeter of the island of Lewis before writing his map. My accumulations gave me the material to build a deep

map, but I had to initiate the process with a visit to a site, a walk on the perimeter. I had to annotate them literally to set them into context. This process generated this text so, finally, here I am.

The Holocaust is probably the subject for the greatest act of collective remembering in human history: the flood of research, books, texts, films, websites seems unstoppable. Auschwitz actively militates for remembering. Auschwitz lives from unforgetfulness. Forget-me-not.

The end of remembering is considered a danger, we have no memory, we remember only what we have heard, what we have been told. We have to remember what others remember. This is the entire point of the exhortation *never forget*. All of our cultural products, from songs to scientific papers, ‘follow a universal decay function’ (Candia et al. 2019): for about five to 30 years people and things are kept alive through oral communication. As they pass into written and online records there is a slower, longer decline. ‘Changes in communication technologies, such as the rise of the printing press, radio and television’ (Candia et al. 2019: 83), affect our degree of attention. I examined the fetishization of the place through a roundabout route. I understood the risk, the place is untouchable, unquestionable and, as Elie Wiesel said, ‘to use special effects and gimmicks to describe the indescribable is morally objectionable and indecent’ (Weissman 2018: 51).

The Heart of Darkness

All Holocaust stories are told in flashback. In Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, although the narrator is sitting on the deck of a ship on the Thames when he starts his tale, he understands that he is linked inexorably to his destination. ‘The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the

earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky' (Conrad, 1999: 123). That story is narrated between two episodes that take place in the present. Like a classic movie script, the story flows in a giant arc geographically from one place to the other. The narrator sets out the scene, explains who is present and how he has come to tell this tale. Then he tells the tale, and we forget that it is being recounted as we fall into the hypnotic grace of his story. As it ends, we are flipped back to the present and we remember that it is all being recounted on the Thames. Is it true? We can't know. Do we believe it? Do we have a choice?

In *Exterminate all the Brutes* Sven Lindqvist uses a peripatetic structure to draw out and examine the direct and indirect linkages between the Holocaust, the death camps and the Nazi project. 'Auschwitz was the modern industrial application of a policy of extermination on which European world domination had long since rested' (Lindqvist 1992: 160). He points out, the step from mass murder to genocide was not taken until the anti-Semitic tradition met the tradition of genocide arising during Europe's expansion in America, Australia, Africa and Asia.

I couldn't see where my fascination with Auschwitz came from, or when it turned from a vague fascination with the Holocaust to a specific interest in the metonymic figuration of the great death camp. I didn't understand how or why I was connected to the place, what could lead, in the closing words of Conrad's journey into the abyss, 'into the heart of an immense darkness' (Conrad 1995: 124). I found myself stabbing at this knowledge in an attempt to reverse time and link myself into and out of the darkness. Where even was the darkness? With the lost madman, Kurtz deep in the Belgian Congo, where the horror, the unworlding, is revealed? Or is it in the hearts of the European traders who pillaged the centre of a continent? Or with Kurtz, or Marlow, or my Jewish grandfather Leopold, named after the genocidal Belgian king, in Africa,? Or in his childhood Poland with Conrad, born Korzeniowski? Or in the pale, the shtetl? The darkneses multiply and fold in on themselves.

Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man*, also told in flashback, cuts in two directions. If the camp inmate is a man, then what is the camp guard? If the guard is a man, then what is the inmate? How can they both be men at the same time?

After thirty years collecting fragments I arrived at the place that they all pointed to, the origin, the ground zero. My collection filled ten binders, one for each few years as the clutter accumulated. I wondered what the first fragment was and why I had spent a large part of my life assembling shards of knowledge, pica, transient ephemera, all of which reinforced my vision of this place and fatally undermined it. 'I think I must have read all the books—memoirs, documents, scholarly essays and testimonies written on the subject. I understand it less and less' (Friedrich 1996: 103). I collected maps to make maps and to remake maps. Eventually I amassed a huge assortment of maps – and still they came. Carl Knappett said while 'object' is something named and transparent and 'thing' is opaque and resistant to categorisation, they can be both aspects of the same artefact.

Eventually I realised that my assemblages pointed to a place, either real or imaginary, known to the world as Auschwitz. After I had recognised the message I had written to myself I could not put off visiting forever. I knew that eventually I would visit for a first time.. My arrival would link me with that great darkness. My long interest would expand to cover the world, and the world's darknesses.

When I finally went I thought I was going to a single unbroken container for the grief of an entire world, but the fragments did not add up to where I had laboured to arrive.

I thought I would stare into the abyss and have the abyss to stare back.

I enter, what strikes me is the absence of abyss.

As I enter the abyss what strikes me is the absence of space.

There is no abyss, so either

I have no self-knowledge when I enter the space or,

I am the abyss.

When Primo Levi first saw the name of his destination it had no meaning to him, but the fact of a place was reassuring. ‘Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but it at least implied some place on earth’ (Levi 2013: 23). As a world we have long ago gone in to this place and long ago come out the other side. Everything in our world contains fragments of Auschwitz. Like the way that fragments of plastic are now found at the bottom of the deepest oceans, in the intestines of the smallest animals and at the most extreme frozen wastes, we live in a world in which there is Auschwitz in everything. We are in its world and it is in our world. Levi said ‘Consider that this has been, I commend these words to you. Engrave them on your hearts’ (Levi 2013: 17).

Charlotte Delbo replied, ‘Try to look. Just try and see.’

Visiting

For my second trip I took my bike and camping equipment so I would be more mobile. I intended to explore the area around Auschwitz, to get out into the countryside and to visit some sub-camps, traverse the roads and get a feel for the landscape, speed back and forth across it rather than slow plod. By crisscrossing the space, maybe a visual palimpsest would start to be revealed, a constellation delineated by the marks of my tyres.

I flew to Krakow and stayed at a cheap hotel in the heart of the Jewish quarter. Local marketing touches on a Jewish theme but does not mention Jews. All across Eastern Europe such quarters thrive as the money-making bohemian zones — without Jews. “The Salt Mines and Auschwitz in a day — a bargain”. Once in Vilnius I climbed down into a subterranean bar for a beer and while drinking it realised that I might be sitting in a ghetto hiding place. I knew how Jews were discovered in such places. Every place is implicated.

Krakow is a strange town. In many ways it is a normal East European town, there are similar across the entire continent of Europe, but imagine growing up here, falling in love here, making a family here — with the remains of death camps as your main tourist attraction. And no Jews in the Jewish quarter. Oświęcim is the Auschwitz town but Krakow takes all the visitors and the money.

I cycled sixty-nine kilometres from Krakow and at sixty-four kilometres a pedal fell off my bike, almost making my journey fail. It was my own fault, I had surrendered my pedal spanner at the airport, a security measure I didn't anticipate. The pedal slowly loosened itself, shredding and shedding the thread in the crank and by the time I noticed it was too late to save. Eventually I took the pedal out and half pedalled, half pushed my overloaded transport for the last few kilometres. I felt there were parallels with the expulsion of Jews from towns across this land but I didn't want to draw them.

When I arrived it was a Friday evening and I had to wait until Monday to find a repair shop. I left my bike to be fixed. I did a lot of walking during this time. This was not my plan.

I had made some vague plans based on my memories and experience of the site. Now I had been there, had walked around and felt the relationships between the camps, between the parts of the museum, had walked around the town and out of the town, I realised how much there was to investigate. I had no grasp of the whole but I had noted various aspects that might offer a low door in the wall.

In software, from the comfort of my home, I created routes within the site, possibly the shortest routes I would ever make. I wanted to explore the perimeter of Birkenau. I made a map of 38 sub camps planning to visit them all. I knew this was improbable even with my bike. Some are hundreds of kilometres away.

I wanted to look for the remains of a railway line between the Judenramp and Birkenau. I had identified this, a 'missing link, on Google maps. It was a first result of my field work, of standing in the place itself.

I didn't visit Auschwitz itself, the barracks camp, on my first trip. It is hard to get tickets without hiring a tour guide or booking long in advance. I wanted to see the museum library, if only to see what such a thing looked like. I was a scholar after all, I think. This was my habitat, my right, the books.

Charlotte Delbo took me to Auschwitz. After all the accumulation and all the wondering over the years as this place became more remote, I finally decided to follow in her footsteps as she left the camp and walked to work, tore down villages, returned carrying the bodies of her comrades on boards they tore from the demolished houses.. I identified the sub camp where she worked. I studied her texts. I looked at pre-war maps of the countryside. Which gate did she leave by? Did she go right, did she go left? Where were the paths, where were the streams? How much of what she saw could I see? I wanted to follow in her footsteps, to see the views she saw, to visit the places she cried in, but the landscape was unfulfilling. The buildings were all gone.

Eventually a photographer pointed me to Raijsko, the experimental centre which saved her, where the Germans were growing latex-generating crops. An array of redundant greenhouses still occupied the site. I looked out across the fields, across the marshlands, imagining what she'd seen. To try to look, to just try and see.

The town of Oświęcim is triangulated by the camps: Auschwitz, Birkenau, Monowitz. I came believing that being in the place would activate the place. I was ready to do my research, to understand how the landscape would generate my text. I had no idea what anything was or where anything was. I didn't know where the edges were, but the finding

of the parts, coming to understand the location, that would generate this text. Lack of understanding fell away.

I expected to stare into the abyss but when I came here for the first time I could not locate the abyss. There did not seem to be a pit. If there was one, it did not stare back. Perhaps I was a monster already.

Inmates of the camp called this place the anus mundi, the arsehole of the world. Abyss, arsehole, neither can see. Both are blind. How many awful things can you know before you become inured to them, before you become a monster? Was I already a monster/are we already monsters?

The Nazi extermination system, the ultimate moral lacuna, the black hole of the soul, did not stare back at me. I had been reading about this for almost my entire life, now the abyss wouldn't look back. Maybe I needed to spend more time here.

Charlotte Delbo wrote the most terrible thing. For any survivor who was truly in the camp, surviving was the most terrible thing. Surviving through total abasement, almost to the point of death. Surviving to feel the guilt that you survived. Surviving to watch the camp remain. Surviving to know what man can do – knowing, if this is a man, or a woman or a child.

Auschwitz has become a metaphor of all that is unapproachable, of the void inside, of all that is unexaminable and I go there in more than one way, giving myself time to consider those who suffered and died in their own mire. Nothing can compete with Auschwitz for attention.

Hitler imposed an imperative on us: arrange your thought and action so that Auschwitz does not repeat itself.

What is this autobahn to the lizard brain?¹⁰

Can I ride that road?

What territory does it pass through?

Are there hotels or

camping sites.

Holocaust sites.

Ruins.

Memorials.

Death mounds.

Auschwitz is a place with many formal boundaries: you can be within and without it at the same time.

I came late to this subject, in the dog years of Auschwitz when the final survivors were coming to the end of their lives and the question of how to keep it in the present was unvoiced but everywhere. Surprisingly they were still uncovering and trying camp personnel, a bookkeeper here, a low-level flunky there. Surprising because, while an inmate may have been a child and thus younger, someone who staffed the camp was, by definition, already an adult.

I may have come late to the subject but the subject itself was flowering, expanding in all directions, as if in a vigorous attempt to stave off the inevitable slide into history. Inevitable. The Holocaust forgotten. Unlikely.

Each time I visited, more of the site came into focus, more of the patchwork fell into place. As I read more I realised that much of the site was never mentioned, had no memorial, no memory. It became more of a crowded place and the geography of the soglia

¹⁰ 'The National Socialists found the core of the reptile brain, and built an autobahn that went there.' (Amis, 1992: Afterword: 176)

became more complex. It wasn't that nothing was known of all these places, but that the focus was always on Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II and everything else fell away from consideration. Now I start to see all the streets and roads and connectors that lead from place to place and the memoirs of people who were present start to make some sense. They weren't always in the camp, they moved about. There were factories everywhere and prisoners were moved around from here to there and back to the camp again. This is well attested, but it doesn't seem to have become part of the iconic mythology of the camp.

All memory is the collection of fragments, the pulling out of fragments from the store and an attempt to re-join them, to cohere them into a story, a narrative, a text.

I set myself the task of looking for pieces that had been thrown out by the explosion. When I got home I searched for fragments in that world, the world outside Auschwitz that is connected to it.

Did anybody ever crawl to Auschwitz after the war and weep for forgiveness? The roads to the camp should be filled with penitents, crawling on their hands and knees, mortifying the flesh, slithering into Auschwitz on their stomachs, bleeding and broken, begging for forgiveness.

That is what I would like to have seen.

The environs

At the beginning of 1918 [...] Oświęcim ceased to be a border town (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 59). The town of Oświęcim had no great claim on history, but it was a border town at the edge of the Austro-Hungarian empire where the authorities built accommodation for the migrant workers who would arrive to cross over into Germany looking for work.

‘Special trains with workers could go from Zasole straight to Germany’ (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 59). This role on the edge of a vast land of opportunity brought checkpoints, bureaucracy, entrances and exits. Barracks were erected to accommodate migrants who waited to pass on into the interior.

Joseph Roth claimed that the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire led to the destruction of the Jews. They didn’t get a country, were left defenceless, and became a ‘problem’ to a reordered Europe.

Auschwitz is a complex messy place that has evolved constantly both pre- and post-genocide and which continues to evolve today. To the Nazis it was the focus of a huge area containing many sub-camps, industrial workings and other projects, The Zone of Interest. The non-Jewish population were cleared from this area, ethnically cleansed we would say now, but the Nazi machine didn’t build a camp at Auschwitz just to clear the Jews from Europe. The camp continues to exist though its definition comes from outsiders. It fights to narrate its own story as the world changes around and within itself. There has never been a true definition of the camp, Auschwitz is a name that refers to no particular place but to an idea of a place, to a process in history, to an enormity that we carry inside us.

It is all still there. The land is the same land, the markings that define and delineate it still exist. Fragments remain in the landscape. Fragments have been harvested here since the very beginning — or the very end.

In texts written by survivors of encountering and leaving Auschwitz, many of these places are conflated. In a world separated by many decades and by many countries from the anus mundi, the confusion is even more extreme. Many places co-exist within a single site and within a single compressed time frame. It is not Auschwitz, not Birkenau, not Monowitz, not Oświęcim, not the Judenramp. These places co-exist within a single

place. To the world this singular place is called Auschwitz although the closer one gets to addressing this place the more varied the naming of it becomes and the less superimposed they seem to be. I impose my own confusion on the site. The camp itself narrates its own story using fragments.

My text is narrated from the camp, the landscape and the last Jew of Auschwitz. It is a narrative of the echoes of the chaos and inhumanity of those years. It is a story of what came after. I will not dwell on the horrors of that place, on the day-to-day death that took place there and which made it into a metonymic figuration of the Holocaust.

This is a deep map, a structure that is not linear or chronologically based. The deep map immerses the writer in its subject, seeks a new way to reveal the subject, is exhaustive in the areas it traverses, has only one subject, does not proceed from A to Z either geographically or chronologically, it does not have to be textual.

The place I am examining does not even have a name, being merely what lies outside the fence but which is related to the inside of the fence. It is a deep map of an empty place that is full.

The town of Oświęcim shuns the camp as they shun it. There are three camps, each on a different radial spike out from the centre. It is, like most Polish towns, heavily Catholic, yet before the war it was also heavily Jewish. Now it is a provincial town of around fifty-thousand people. There is nothing out of the ordinary about it — it has an old town square, some civic pride based on its ice hockey team and the chemical works — and the requisite amount of modern shopping centres. Cycle lanes run into the countryside around it and a huge power plant with twin chimneys sits on the horizon. A casual visitor here would not notice much out of the ordinary, yet after a short time spent in the place, and a modicum of interest, of nosiness, things start to emerge. There are traces left from the war. Mostly they do not reveal themselves simply but are camouflaged within the landscape.

The landscape around Auschwitz-Birkenau is flat and featureless, no hills or mountains. To the south it is watery with large pools dividing up the countryside. To the north it is flatness. All around is affluent farming country. There are few buildings older than the war, almost every single one was torn down to build the camp. The camp is thus a detournement of the landscape in a very literal fashion. The materials it was constructed from, apart from the human flesh and bone, are a re-imagining of the local villages into a hellscape of German imagination.

I came by train from Krakow on my first visit. The line looped around the town, enfolding it and dropping off a vast array of sidings near to the industrial zone before resuming its journey as a normal line. At the station of Oświęcim it again separates into multiple lines. It passes the huge camp of Birkenau and the village, now more of a suburb, between the railway line and the camp, from which it takes its name. The old railways lines, which are preserved to some degree, spin away from the main line here, north and south, to Auschwitz II and Auschwitz I. The town is riddled with tracks and the remnants of tracks. At some places they are venerated, embedded in the memorialising of history, in other places they are ignored, allowed to fade slowly into disquietude and to crumble and rust. But wherever one goes, there are the lines.

Before I went to Oświęcim I emailed an organisation that I had come across online, the Foundation for Memory Sites Near Auschwitz-Birkenau (“Fundacja Pobliskie Miejsca Pamięci” n.d.). The Foundation seemed to have responsibility for some other sites in the area. My aim was to visit and mark sub-camps on my map, to build some sort of meshwork within which Auschwitz would be revealed. In the British Library I found a book which listed every sub-camp across Europe including the thirty or more satellite camps of Auschwitz, I didn’t understand how they related to Auschwitz, or even where they would be. Eventually a man called Ivo replied to my emails, saying he was happy to

show me around. Then, when I got to town, he ghosted me. We played email and phone tag but couldn't make proper contact. His English was weak and my Polish non-existent. I waited.

From the first moments of the post-camp world, the fragments left behind there were recognised and preserved. Later the pieces that had been taken for use without recognition perhaps of their significance, or maybe because they had no significance, were discarded and abandoned. The generation that had looted the site on their return to or arrival at the town started to die out. In a wealthier age, their children had no interest in such detritus and no interest in their significance. But this rubbish was collected and continues to be collected, because everywhere there are people who look beyond the surface, who are intrigued by the clutter of the past and don't wish to see it return to the soil. I've visited small museums across England (and in every country that I've been to) with their particular and amateur efforts to replicate 'real' museums without the funding or professional services. These museums represent the humanity of the locality. And so it was with the Foundation for Memory Sites Near Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The museum at and of Auschwitz was born out of collected documentation and inherited buildings, a sort of infrastructure of death that has informed and formed a superstructure for the museum ever since. The first scholarly studies of Auschwitz-Birkenau were published in 1957 in the periodical *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie (Auschwitz Review)*. The only publications before the *Auschwitz Review* had been an eight-page guide to the Museum in 1947, a fold-out photo collage of various locations and buildings in the camp and an album with reproductions of paintings by former prisoner Janina Tollik entitled *Nigdy więcej! (Nevermore!)*. I can find no evidence that any copies of these publications still exist. I collect guidebooks. I have a desire to see how people looked at this place before I got here, what they were told and what they saw. Guidebooks are a unique class of object

made for a specific purpose, to fulfil a need although that need remains unarticulated. I buy what I can find. Older guides are hard to find, not because they are expensive but because nobody thinks they have value so few are put up for sale. Nobody is an Auschwitz historic guidebook dealer, though that might be a good profession. I dream of finding a copy of the original museum guidebook with its fold out photographs. I need to get close to the source.

My collection is a mix of contemporary books, two dozen or more, bought at Museum shops and from eBay. I set up fixed searches on eBay: Auschwitz, Oświęcim, Birkenau, Monowitz. These bring me a steady flow of dross and the occasional treasure. I want guides, the closer to 1945 the better, but even publications from the nineteen-seventies and eighties seems old, seem to have gravitas. These things were not meant to last, they were ephemera, meant to serve as a reminder, proof of visit, something to show friends and family, evidence of a descent to the darkest place, a tchotchke, remnant, fragment.

I'm not sure what I expect to find if I do push this documented material back to the source. The place was built quickly upon the bones of the soon to be dead, a story of unimaginable privation. Russian prisoners of war were brought in their tens of thousands and left in an enclosed field to die. This is never mentioned in the guidebooks. Out of over 13,000 Soviet POWs who were brought to Birkenau, only 92 were alive on January 17, 1945, when the last roll call was taken. The Germans did not feel the need to treat the Soviet soldiers in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1929, because the Soviet Union had not signed the Convention and was not treating German POWs according to the laws of the Convention.

For many years, although survivors of the Holocaust told their stories nobody was interested. Books were published from the start, and newspapers reported the story, then it retreated into history. It was too big and people wanted to remake their lives. Slowly,

stories started to emerge from hiding. The earlier books were forgotten as new authors came to the fore. Now Auschwitz is a selling point and Amazon lists thousands of books with it in their title. There is even a design style that signals an Auschwitz book, a background of pale blue and grey stripes.

In 2003 I first tried to get within the early days of the aftermath, to penetrate that enclosure that seemed to have been defined by survivors speaking. I bought some random volumes from a book dealer in New York. These included a first edition of Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Lengyel 1947). It's not really a first, except of the UK version. Originally written in Hungarian as *Memoirs from Beyond*, she produced it less than a year after being liberated at Auschwitz. It was published in French in 1946 as *Souvenirs de l'au-delà* and in English as *I Survived Hitler's Ovens* in America in 1947 by Ziff-Davis. More recent editions have used the title *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*. Five Chimneys does not figure prominently in Holocaust scholarship. Petra M. Schweitzer, devoted a chapter to Olga Lengyel in her book, *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust* (Turda 2016).

Primo Levi was in Monowitz, the chemical works outside town to the East of Auschwitz. His book, *If This Is A Man*, both terrible and something of a boy's own tale at the same time, has become a standard text of Auschwitz, describing it for generations of readers. It describes one man's version of the place. Maybe it is inevitable that every book about the camps descends at some point into tales of derring do, of how survival was procured against all odds. The mechanics of survival, of life and death, become interesting in their own right. It is as if the reader has to be taken on the same journey as the writer, into the unfathomable and unimaginable depths but, having survived this induction, can be allowed some pleasure in learning how a man even at the remotest end of his tether can be nimble in thought and learn how to survive. But Delbo did not allow herself this escapism.

If This Is A Man reminds me of the eponymous Robinson Crusoe. Levi sees a footprint in the sand and knows he is not alone. There is another man on his island, if this is a man

Levi wrote a sequel to *If This Is A Man*, *The Truce*, the story of his journey back to Italy. I wish he hadn't. The publishers do us a disservice by publishing it with *If This Is A Man*, as if it was a sequel to a Boy's Own story. It is not a sequel. Levi's life was the sequel, our world is the sequel, this place is the sequel.

All these books are written by those who survived, None of the dead, the Muselman who collapsed into the mire, who were dead before they were dead, wrote how they failed to work out where a tiny extra ration of bread came from, how to get reasonable shoes, how they ended up in the laboratory to survive the winter. All Holocaust literature is biased towards survival by definition.

When I was young I was briefly in love with the writing of James Clavell, who wrote *King Rat*, the story of a man who survives a Japanese POW camp with all its attendant horrors, by being the best at trading and controlling other men. The only thing I remember now from this book is the description of how he gets to cook and eat an egg. It is a symbol of all that is impossible yet possible for those who have cracked the code. Levi tells the story of Henri who 'fights to live without distraction with all the resources that he can derive from his quick intellect and his refined education' (Levi 2013: 104). Henri was once seen in the act of eating a real hard-boiled egg. Maybe Clavell had read Levi. Maybe the camps were similar. Maybe all camps are similar.

In *But You Did Not Come Back* (Loridan-Ivens 2015), Marceline Loridan-Ivens tells how she and her father were both in the Lager. He was in Auschwitz, she was in Birkenau. When she went out for work she could see the other camp, where she knew her father was. Her father sent an electrician carrying a message to Birkenau. She carried this

scrap of contact for months but eventually it was lost, not just the note itself, but the content as well, and as much as she desired to remember her father's last message, she could not. It never came back. But you did not come back, she tells herself, although he promised to.

In *Fragments of Isabella*, Isabella Leitman describes how her brother invented a postal system to pass messages across the camp day after day.

'He was in the men's Lager some distance away, separated from us, as each Lager was, by electrified barbed-wire fences. One touch meant electrocution. Somehow Philip acquired a knife. He found pieces of wood and began to carve messages: "My four sisters are in Lager C. Their name is Katz. Whoever finds this piece of wood, please keep tossing it over the fences until it reaches Lager C." And miraculously, the messages always reached us. Daily, the "mailmen" of Auschwitz, an unbroken chain of sufferers, would deliver the wood communication' (Leitner 2018: 36).

I use my Jewish father as a placeholder for people I could never know, for situations I never experienced. If I want to know how it would feel to see your father forced to scrub the pavement with his toothbrush, or to have his beard cut off in the street, or to be beaten to a bloody pulp merely for walking along the road, then I can imagine my father into the situation and gauge my response. The humiliation of human beings is the worst crime.

It is possible to have an emotional relationship with the Holocaust. It seems that this might be the thing that is missing, in the way that it is not possible really to have an emotional relationship with history until someone comes along and writes a story or makes a film that you can weep at.

The Rynek

For my first visit I had booked a room to stay in a hotel (or is it a hostel?), the Polin, on the Rynek, the main square of the old town. Oświęcim was partly a Jewish town. Here in

the centre, it was largely owned by, and delivered a way of life for, Jews. Of course, this way of life along with much of the infrastructure was destroyed during the Nazi period, and there is little in the way of commemoration or marking left behind. It was up to me to search out the smaller details, the fragments, of that time. This wasn't my intention. I had no idea really that this town was of any interest. I went at first only to visit the camps and stayed there only because it was convenient. I had not considered there was a town, or that it would reveal anything, that it was relevant to my research.

The open space of the Rynek between the old town hall and the town museum is littered with stands holding reproductions of old postcards. The Polish word for postcard is *odkrytka* 'a thing revealed'. I take photos of these reproductions to add to my own growing collection of postcards. In these images of a lost world, traders and locals and Jews gather, banter and barter and go about a normal life.. These displays are for tourists more than the Polish residents, the usual paraphernalia of good intent. This is an interesting town, they say, look over here, not over there. There are Jews in these images, they say, residents of the old town. Ninety percent of the buildings around this square were occupied by Jews, but now they are ghosts.

Around the square, a bar, a pizza restaurant, banks. Ice cream shops. My hotel. Temporary structures, more beer, more ice-cream. Water-spraying fountains, an illuminated hand, sculptures, information stands. Dalek like flower displays. A tidy town square, bourgeoisie, solid, affluent. I look back at my hotel and am pleased that I chose so well. I feel at home in this town, although there are no Jews here. No Jews remain in Oświęcim although on any given day the visiting Jewish population of the area must be fairly high. It might even be the most Jewish town in Poland on a rolling basis.

The Polin was a brand-new hotel, just opened when I got there. I may even have been their first guest. They gave me the best room, at the back with a small balcony, overlooking a tree filled park on the riverside. Although I couldn't see the river, I knew

it was there. To the right was the bridge I had crossed over to get there and a modern hotel. It was a perfectly normal view on the edge of a small town, a park, in which the citizens of the town walked and cycled, a bridge that crossed high above the river, an enterprise that marked an attempt to modernise the small town, to encourage visitors who would no doubt benefit the local economy with their spending.

Polin is the Yiddish name for Poland. Oświęcim is the Polish name for Auschwitz. The Yiddish name for Oświęcim is Oshpitzin. I was staying in a topographical relationship with my research but it had not occurred to me that I was staying in my research target. My mapping had begun.

The route to the camp that every tourist will take, whether they arrive from Krakow by bus or are on a shuttle bus, crosses the railway via a concrete bridge. This bridge and road circulation system had clearly been built after the war. Wartime maps showed that the road crossed the railway at this point but the road layout had changed. When I had my bicycle in town I would always use this route over the tracks. I once carried my bicycle over the railway footbridge but it was difficult.

Oświęcim was built at the confluence of three rivers on an alluvial plain ripe for the construction of industries despite a large part of the area being marshland. The river Sola, which separated Zasole and the old town, created a barrier with few crossings. I walked or rode over the footbridge that ran past the Haberfeld hotel. I rode alongside the river and crossed on a wooden footbridge where I also had to hump my bike up and down the stairways. the river is a line of demarcation that runs to the east of Birkenau through the countryside, a tributary of the Vistula. I walked between the old town square, and the camp with no idea where anything lies in relation to anything else. I didn't really know what I was trying to achieve or what I wanted to see, where I wanted to end up, or how

tired or excited I was. I traversed the town and surroundings in different ways. I was ignorant of the parts and the relationship between the parts.

These journeys held out the option of investigating other fragments of the camp years and understanding the landscape. Each of these journeys takes me through the hinterland, in and out of the camp. Post 1945 Birkenau slumbered, empty.

From the old town of Oświęcim your journey might take you

1. Over the Sola
2. Through the new part of Oświęcim
3. Across the railway lines
4. Into the village
5. Out from the village into the camp

The Holocaust lies at the edge of our consciousness and at the edge of our memory. It's hard to place it.

I write

the pathway between the heterotopia and the exeterotopia.

Each scratch, each mark, each line

The map is emergent, an emergency.

Am I marking the map or is the map marking me?



Figure 6 Soup kitchen on the Rynek during wartime. Authors collection.

On eBay I found a small black and white photograph and bought it for a few pounds. It was listed as ‘Auschwitz’ which was how it came to my attention, but often images that attach themselves to this magic word are unidentifiable. This time I recognised the buildings. The photograph was of a soup kitchen surrounded by soldiers and civilians. In the background the corner of the square. I went to check my own photographs and, sure enough, they matched. I had a verifiable fragment from the war.

Zasole

When I arrived at Oświęcim I walked from the station in the direction of the old town. I was passing through Zasole although I wasn’t aware of it. Tadeusz Borowski remembered ‘before the first Poles were beaten to death in Zasole [...] there were villages and farms. There were rich meadows, shaded country lanes, apple orchards. There were people no better nor worse than any other people’ (Pelt and Dwork 1996: 277). I didn’t know this place had a name. I noticed that the roads were being rebuilt, the pavements repaved. The houses were neat and well kept, there was an air of quiet prosperity, of progress. I noticed the sound my wheely case made as I dragged it over unfinished pavements. Later, when

I cycled through the district and got lost, ending up amongst the remains of fields and hedges, small semi-agricultural plots, it seemed very different to the rest of the town. The remnants of the orchards were still there.

Zasole is the part of town bounded by the river and the railway north and south of it. It links Auschwitz I and Birkenau. You could say it links the town with the camps. It is a dull, anonymous area. In 1940 Polish residents were forced to abandon their houses, as the Germans wanted to keep the area around Auschwitz concentration camp empty. In the Plawy and Harmeze districts, more than 90% of the buildings were destroyed. The residents were transported to Gorlice to fend for themselves and eight villages were wiped off the map. The population of Oświęcim shrank to 7,600.

I crossed Zasole repeatedly, first in one direction and then the other, marking out the long miles, letting my feet work out what was where, what connected to what. I realised there weren't many route variations from site to site but most of them passed through this anonymous area.

Beyond Zasole, the railway acted as a barrier. To get to the right side of the tracks there were few choices. I could cross at the railway station, via a long footbridge, and descend through the quiet back region of the village to the camp. I could take the road to the west and climb up over the concrete road bridge. Once, on my bicycle, I took the road north-west through Babice towards Tychy, turned left towards the camp, and approached it across the fields getting lost several times in the flatness. There is a crossing to the South as well. Birkenau is to all intents and purposes merged with Oświęcim but the railway lines provide a clear separation between them. The hamlet of Birkenau is a separate administration. This causes problems with regard to the camp administration but not to my investigations or to the millions of tourists who probably don't even see the railway line, let alone know that they are crossing between municipalities.

Between visits to the town things changed rapidly. The railway infrastructure was being rebuilt. I realised that modern Europe, post-Soviet Europe, was arriving. Oświęcim was becoming a Europeanised town. Fuelled by European Union money and the Poles' capacity and desire for capitalism, it was changing fast. In the countryside huge new houses being constructed.

Great Synagogue and the Street of Jews



Figure 7 Dismantling of the Great Synagogue, 1939. (Auschwitz Jewish Center)

The Great Synagogue, which had been on a hill between the Rynek and the river and which was destroyed by the Nazis, wasn't signposted anywhere. I didn't know it had existed there. A memorial was built at around the time I first arrived. Perhaps they were building it during my first visit but to me it appeared as if by magic.

The destruction of the huge building soon after the Nazi invasion is widely documented. It was a traumatic event, a precursor of the destruction of much of the town. Because I couldn't find where the Grand Synagogue had stood I imagined all sorts of sites

for it. In the end I went to the museum on the hill opposite and ask them where it had been. They drew me a map and when I walked back, following it, I discovered it in the alley that I overlooked from my hotel room, literally beneath my balcony. The street runs between a Catholic church at one end to a church at the other end, an enfolding within the establishment. It isn't much of a street anymore, one side of it having been demolished during the war and never reconstructed and the other now the back yards of shops. It did give a view of the park that ran down to the river but was sad empty place with few signs of life. The absent synagogue is now literally represented with its footprint laid out on the ground. It is about as unassuming as a memorial could be, a shape, some sheets of material, a box containing an optical illusion. There was nobody else present. While I stood and tried to imagine it crowded and coursing with life, church bells started pealing loudly, overwhelming the sad markers of the synagogue. I recorded the sound.

Before the war it had been a Jewish street with religious schools, synagogues and businesses and life. I had been overlooking it since my arrival in Oświęcim but it was unsignposted, as if the town is happy for this place to remain hidden. There didn't seem to be any interest in bringing tourists to an empty street.

I walked to the edge of the hill that ran down to the river and looked over. A steep drop. The synagogue must have been imposing, it would have occupied the central position in a row of three churches up above the waterline. The church to the east still controlled all the land down to the riverside. Now the middle tooth was knocked out, the balance of the town destroyed.

The Roma Museum

Outside Birkeanu a sign for a Roma museum points vaguely towards town. Find it yourself, seems to be the challenge, but if you try there is no further signage. The Roma

who were destroyed at Auschwitz play a secondary role in the memorials. There is a Roma museum in Oświęcim, a Roma barracks in Auschwitz and a memorial within Birkenau. None of them is prominent or signposted.

I found the museum by chance in a large red brick building opposite the empty space where the Great Synagogue stood. I didn't know what the building was, but I read a notice on the facade about who had funded it. I wondered what it was that had been funded. I knocked on the door. Eventually a man came and let me in. He pointed out the exhibits in the sombre grey space, then disappeared, leaving me completely alone to explore. It was a proper museum. After looking around the exhibition I thought I should tell the man who had let me in that I was leaving. I climbed a large staircase to the offices upstairs but I couldn't find anyone. I walked around from space to space and eventually found myself back at the front of the building so I let myself out into the light. Later, I wondered whether it was a dream and the man who admitted me a ghost. I've never knocked on the door again.

The Haberfeld Vodka Factory Museum



Figure 8 Haberfeld museum display, 2020

At the Birkenau coach park, I picked up a leaflet for the Jakob Haberfeld vodka museum in the town. It turned out to be part of the new hotel development that I could see from my balcony. The derelict building was demolished in 2009. They are still building apartments on the site. While I'm sure the building could not be saved, history does have a way of dealing with irksome Jewish buildings. Initially it was proposed to build a museum within the site eventually this devolved into a bar and an exhibition of bottle labels from the factory. I spent an hour examining this array of labels from the many spirits that the Haberfeld factory produced for brands across Europe. It was like a virtual tour of the history of Joseph Roth's travels. They also had objects that had been found in the cellar of the derelict building before it was demolished, ledgers and flavourings for drinks, fragments of a thriving business. My ticket included a shot of vodka of choice. I bought a fridge magnet with Haberfeld's name on it and some caramels, which I ate.

When Poland was occupied Jakob Haberfeld and his wife were on a journey back from New York. They disembarked in Scotland and never returned to their hometown. Their baby daughter died in Auschwitz. Afterwards I looked again at the leaflet that I'd picked up at Birkenau. It didn't mention that Haberfeld was a Jew.

The small rynek, synagogue, museum and café

Behind a church at the edge of the old town on the lip of a steep drop as if the world is falling away there is a cluster of buildings which are all that has been allowed to remain of Jewish institutional life before the war: a museum, a synagogue and a café built within the house of the Last Jew of Auschwitz. The square is now named after a Catholic priest who was said to be friendly with the Jews.

The synagogue beside the small rynek has been resurrected since the fall of the Communist regime in 1990.

The museum in a tower

There is just one hill here, next to the river and old town, a bailey of some sort, a man-made hill. It is across the road from and above the Hilton. It is across the road from Syzmon Kluger's house and towers even higher above it. The hill mirrors the crater in the graveyard, yin and yang, both innocent. The hill has an ancient, medieval building on the top, a museum. I was aware that I should visit but never did. The building was once owned by the Haberfeld family who used it as a warehouse for their spirits factory across the road. I climbed the hill to ask where the Grand Synagogue had been. They drew me a helpful map. It was very close, just across the road. I kept the map as a fragment.

I visited the museum and paid for the privilege. It is a local museum and does not focus on the camps or the Holocaust, but why would it? They are allowed to have museums here with little interest in the enormity. Local museums for local people. They like them and are building more.

I started to feel as if the whole town is slowly converting itself into a cluster of museums.

The Jewish graveyard

The graveyard is not a museum, though it could be. It's on the road between the old town and Monowice and easy to walk to. Much of it is a ruin, overgrown, quiet. The Nazis did their best to destroy it. They demolished all the graves. Many stones have been stood back up in serried ranks, numbered on the reverse. It is littered with fragments of stones and partly consists of a huge crater, the result of an Allied bombing run that commenced too early. The aim wasn't to bomb the camp, they were aiming for the rubber factory, a high value industrial target (although it never produced any rubber). Instead, they bombed the camp of the dead, the graveyard.

After the war the same graveyard was looted for materials and for fun by the local populace. Maybe they couldn't differentiate it from Auschwitz and Birkenau. After a while a new wall was built, first by local Jews, then with money from emigrants in America.

The graveyard is self-service. To visit you borrow a key from the Jewish museum and let yourself in. For an hour or so you can be the sole custodian of the site. Across the main road a petrol station dispenses reasonable coffee, but inside the graveyard time is frozen. Not frozen. Abolished. All these people lived and died and then the cataclysm

came of which they knew nothing. Bombing a graveyard is cultural vandalism but you can't kill the dead.

Behind the walled graveyard is the District Hospital built on the site of a wartime subcamp, the Jewish Cemetery camp, itself built on part of the graveyard. This way land is stolen, graves are stolen. The hospital has recuperated the heterotopia of the camp, sites retain their state functionality over decades and regimes. Land has memory.

Syzmon Kluger is buried here, the last Jew to be interred. He has his own olim, a small stone house commemorating his life. He was buried here in an act of will. It is said there was an earlier Jewish graveyard which is now lost. Nobody knows where it was. Much Jewish history is lost. As I walk around the town I wonder whether I'm walking over it, whether it's below this building or in that square. In one way it doesn't matter, but in another it reveals the loss of knowledge. They tried to lose this graveyard, too.

Where are Jews buried now? There are no Jews now to bury.

Monwice

Out from Oświęcim, past the Jewish graveyard and a huge colourful swimming pool, past the ice rink home of the hockey team that gives the town national fame is a huge industrial site. It is separated from the town by forest and the town of Osiedle Chemików which was built around the IG Farben German managers' housing after the war by the Communist authorities. Monowice is still the town's industrial zone and contains infrastructure that dates from the war alongside more recent and new industrial plant. It has been called 'the largest monument to the Third Reich in the region and a memorial to all those slave labourers' (Charlesworth *et al.*, 2006: 161).

At The Foundation museum they display a panel that Levi mentions in *If This Is A Man*. Later while I was driving with Ivo around Monowice he pointed to the remains of a demolished building. This was the hut where Primo Levi saw their panel. They have the whole hut in storage, he said.

I walked deep into the contemporary industrial zone of Monowice along a road framed by factories. Thirty-eight British prisoners of war were killed in an air raid here in 1944, but they are buried in Krakow. The POW camp at Monowitz is not marked.

As I walked I wondered which buildings were witnesses, which remained from wartime, if any. They looked ancient, as if they had been here forever. I examined every inch of the route for traces of the origins of the site. It was unclear from a distance what was old and what was new. A beautiful, elevated pipeline still carried evidence of wartime bombing damage. When I came to a barrier across the road a guard told me to stop and go back. No photographs he said, although I had been photographing the entire way. I turned and walked back.

Everything is a successor and everything is evidence.

There is a Holocaust memorial outside the Monowice industrial park which I didn't come across until my second or third visit. I'm not sure how I found it, probably by chance while looking at maps. I located it on Google maps and cycled out to it. It was hiding in plain sight, slightly set back from the main road, indented into the bushes, just far enough back that it wasn't obvious from the road. I must have walked almost past it before. It is not signposted. It is a 1960s memorial of twisted bodies and tortured wire in the semi-abstract style, the sort of construction that carries weight, that seems pertinent and very Soviet. I climbed about on it with no sense of shame, photographing all elements, trying to fix it in my memory. Through the bushes behind it I could see the chemical works.

Each time I visited, there was nobody else present. I felt a sense of abandonment, as if this place was something of an embarrassment, that it is best ignored. When I came back the next year there were pots of white carnations left on the memorial.

Two years later I came across another memorial, of similar vintage and design, behind Auschwitz I. Nobody here likes these monuments, they remind them of a regime that they were glad to see the back of.

The industrial site of Monowitz, far larger by several orders of magnitude, is said to have enveloped the original village. When I placed a pre-war map over a contemporary satellite view of the site it seemed that old Monowice was outside the industrial zone. I cycled out to see and along a set of quiet back roads, abandoned country lanes, I found wooden houses slowly disintegrating among the trees. The village was still there, it had not been destroyed, only largely abandoned. After the war the village grew back displaced to the south of the industrial zone which itself continued to grow and prosper. What you can see from maps is that the original village was displaced across the road but never completely destroyed.

Hidden in a residential backstreet is a shrine, a Catholic memorial, to the residents of this village. I visited it on my bicycle. It took me a long while to find. I cycled up and down the hot empty streets until I found it set beside the road, obscured by pine trees.

There is also a huge concrete bunker set incongruously among the fields and houses. It is one of those buildings that is too solid to remove, that nobody has ever been made to blow up or dig it out, and so it has been left as part of the landscape. I climbed into the dark musty interior, littered with empty alcohol bottles. I had that childhood feeling, a mixture of trepidation and excitement at penetrating a dark concealed space. Inside it is entirely empty and uninteresting. It's not obvious what it would have been for, unless it was part of a bigger structure or a tiny shelter for itinerant troops. Across the

fields there is an even smaller concrete enclosure, a one-man dome shelter for a single sentry.

Out here in the fields it's almost impossible to imagine Birkenau in operation a few miles away. These remnants have sat here since the war but their time is ending as redevelopment encroaches on the rural setting.

A brain wider than the sky

To write the history of the Holocaust, to rewrite it, to refresh it. I grew up with a father who was born in 1920 and had his bar mitzvah in 1933 as Hitler came to power, who joined the army at 19 in 1939 and who took part in campaigns across Africa and up into Egypt and Palestine. I say took part in campaigns though I don't believe he ever fought. When I was little I asked him if he'd ever shot anyone and he told me he'd always aimed over their heads. When I was older he told me he'd joined up to learn to play the trumpet and had marched on parade grounds up and down Africa. He caught malaria and was invalided out in 1942. He never mentioned the Holocaust. In our family it was an absent subject, a non-subject. I can't even claim that my father had a view, let alone transmit a direct connection. And yet. And yet. It seems to me that in the silence there is a story.

My father wanted to be a writer but became a journalist. He had an interest in the world, in literature, in humanity. I have a Collins' *Complete Works of Shakespeare* that he bought in Egypt and carried in his pack for the rest of his war. His silence was deliberate, but I can now never unpack it. This sort of response had an effect on me. It unsettled me and made me examine my own motivations, to try and work out what I actually was doing. Because, on a slender and nebulous level, I did have a connection to this part of the world and this connection probably played a bigger part in my internal workings than I allowed. It wasn't a Jewish thing but it might have been an exile thing. I

wasn't brought up as a Jew. Far from it, my family was resolutely secular. My father came from a liberal Jewish family in South Africa, my mother from an Anglo-French family. They were both displaced, both hybrids by the time I was born and I came to see how I was twice, three times displaced. I grew up feeling like an exile who had no place or origin. I was just floating. I always knew I was a Jew, except that I wasn't. The exile lives in the soglia.

My father was fully a Jew, although he had divested himself of Judaism and deliberately integrated with the modern world that he loved. I knew that his family, or a part of it, had originated in Lithuania. I carried a fragment, a possible figment, of the past, a scrap of a map, a wedding invitation, a copy of a copy of a communication that had come from the old world to the old world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Written in German, sent to South Africa, copied and copied and copied, it seemed to be all that was known of the family origins, of the shtetel. It did give me two names though, a place and a person. I knew that one day I would visit. Lithuania is one of the Baltic states that suffered terribly during the Nazi invasion, losing over 90% of its Jewish population, the Litvaks, to a combination of local and imported ultraviolence. It had been for a long time in a fluid relationship with the much bigger Poland, combined in a federation for many years as parts were broken off, captured in war, reclaimed. I decided long ago not to differentiate much between Lithuania and Poland and the federation. All of Eastern Europe had suffered in the Ostacaust, the Holocaust of Bullets, that took place beyond and before and after the camps. Am I making a case here? I don't feel I need to explain myself; I don't feel I need permission to examine this world. And yet.

Although I had been, on and off, throughout my lifetime a paid writer, I wrote on specific non-fiction subjects as a journalist and author without considering whether the form had more potential. At the same time, I had long been a reader of fiction based entirely in non-fiction and it was largely this that inspired my ambitions as a novelist. At

a young age I read Ian Serrallier's *The Silver Sword* (Seraillier Ian 1960), a story based in Poland during the Nazi period. I found a book, a collection of short stories all based firmly in non-fiction events around the Second World War. Long after the book had disappeared and I could not even remember what it was called, the stories of German political prisoners being dressed as Polish soldiers and forced to 'attack' a radio station and of a driver picking up a strange couple, a bossy Eva Braun and an Alzheimer Adolf Hitler, hitchhiking around post-war Europe stayed with me. The book had embedded in me the notion that there was mileage in taking real events and basing fiction on them, in segueing the two sides into one, fiction and non-fiction.

While struggling to complete a novel based in the London of the 1970s and events at Ponary Wood in Lithuania during the Holocaust, I started to wonder what the relationship of a novel was to memory and family and history. I was sent Robert Macfarlane's *Landmarks* and recognised in this book both a direct link to the psychogeographic approach of my earlier artwork and a somewhat different way of constructing a book. Macfarlane concentrated on the language of landscape, on 'how we are landmarked as much as how we landmark' (Macfarlane 2015: 13).

'As Proust notes, there is always a sharp dissonance between the feelings and imagery the names of the places conjure in your mind and the physical reality of them [...] it's the suggestion and then the initial frustration that excites our imagination as it seeks to reconcile place and name' (Alsander 2021).

My long-term interests always seemed to point towards the Holocaust but never quite landed precisely on that subject. I looked for an approach that could encompass my understanding of the world but mediated through psychogeography. The answer came from K. Zetnik¹¹, who said in evidence at the Eichmann trials

'This is the garb of the planet called Auschwitz. And I believe with perfect faith that I have to continue to bear this name so long as the world has not been aroused after this crucifixion of a nation, to wipe

¹¹ Yehiel Dinur, who used the pen name K. Zetnik

out this evil, in the same way as humanity was aroused after the crucifixion of one man. I believe with perfect faith that, just as in astrology the stars influence our destiny, so does this planet of the ashes, Auschwitz, stand in opposition to our planet earth, and influences it' (*The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture* 2020: 616).

Krakow is a tourist town, modern and buzzy and full of movement and life. There is money here, you can see it everywhere. That money comes from an industrious people and from tourists and from the European Union. But the government is controlled by the countryside, by the conservative parts of the country, not by the cities. Essentially there are two Polands, I tell myself, the cities and the country. A bi-polar place. I am going from the modern to the conservative. In Krakow there was a large Jewish quarter, later a ghetto, now a tourist ghetto. But there are no Jews. As in Vilnius, the modern population prefers their ghetto with no Jews present. Or maybe this is too harsh. It just seems convenient to have a tourist attraction with no awkward indigenous population to keep its exploitation on the straight and narrow.

At Auschwitz I knew I was in the West of the country but little else about that place. I flew in to an airport just outside Krakow, caught a modern shuttle to the city, stayed in a modern hotel, I took a walk around a pleasant city. I was in Krakow but I considered it as an adjunct to my journey, an arrival point, a stopping point. I had no time or inclination to examine it for evidence of the enormity. It was clear, as I drifted in Krakow, that it was contemporaneously connected to the place I was visiting, even that it lived off it, grew fat from it. I didn't judge. Krakow is a modern town. I was seduced into its modernity, its pleasures, its self-regarding image as a place to carouse, for pleasure. I found the Jewish quarter that is part of this self-image yet contains no Jews. As I crossed Krakow it held its thin places to itself, not keen to divulge them. Only at the vast railway station which doubles as a shopping mall did I first encounter the name of the place I was headed. Only after I had boarded a clanking old-fashioned train and was proceeding

through an antiquated landscape along a bumpy railway line to a town with a nightmare as a name did I get an inkling that I might be entering the past.

I'm left with not much to say about Poland itself. Eva Hoffman says the children of Holocaust survivors have a tendency to see it as a 'sinister and forbidden landscape; the place where one would not set foot' (Hoffman, 2005: 135), but I never thought of it like that. I remember the east opening up. It was a surprise to everyone. I was an art student at the end of my degree, immured in the world of London art scene and Damien Hirst and Goldsmiths, when the dominoes started to fall. We would go and get drunk at the Flask at Hampstead and talk about what was happening. I knew there was something wanting to emerge, that an opening was being made, and I knew I had a connection, however tenuous. When the Berlin wall came down, the wall with which I shared a birthdate, I should have jumped on a train and shuttled out to Berlin, to the remains of Nazi Europe. I should have seen the lacuna in the lacuna for myself. I should have fixed the end of the war in my memory. But I didn't.

I never tried to find out much about it. I still don't know much, not even how big it is. I do know where it sits in the geography of Europe, at the historic centre. I know the countries it abuts. I have another project ongoing in Lithuania to the north and an interest in the countries of the Pale where the Jews lived and died in huge numbers during the war, but I don't know anything about the rest of the country. Where is Warsaw? That is a terrible thing not to know. I don't know about Poland because I don't see it as a modern country. To elaborate on that, I don't think of Poland outside Krakow as part of the modern world. Perhaps I carry a shade of Hoffman's 'sinister and forbidden landscape' within me. My mission is to visit the past, to look at a town because of its history. It is a fearsome history, although I'm interested in the present and linkages to the past, but not the literal history.

I spent thirty years collecting material that pointed to Auschwitz but none of it contained directions to Auschwitz. There were maps but no maps. When I started my collection this place was still constrained behind the so-called iron curtain which meant in essence that the war still continued in this place. I walked from the station through a series of streets that were being renovated, which had freshly laid block pavements and unpaved roads, streets that seemed to be closed but which also seemed to be having a lot of money spent on them. The town is still changing. Much has changed even in my short relationship with it. At first I saw no evidence of the camp. I was intending to visit the next day. I didn't really, at that point, know what any direction was. Although I had arrived at the town I had no idea where Auschwitz was. I trundled through the small town and crossed the river, climbing up high on the other side. I walked through the edge of the old town, past the remaining Jewish buildings, into the town square, through what had once been a Jewish town. I didn't know that. The Polin had just been renovated, or perhaps constructed from scratch, that year and I may have been one of the first guests and I liked it, it was modern and clean and cheap and quiet and they gave me my own room with a small balcony which overlooked the river.

Auschwitz and the salt mines in a day



Figure 9 Krakow signage, 2019

I arrived at this place where so many arrived and never left, from where so many ardently desired to leave, to which many would never return and to which millions come every year. I'm at a place that it has taken me thirty years to arrive, even though getting here was not difficult. I could have come any time, I could have never come. Now I'm here I have to do something with this place but it seems you can reach Oświęcim only through Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a stigmatising name and, in the material sense, the remains of the camp in the city space.

The city lives in the shadow of Auschwitz. Where does the former camp end and normal life begin? I could have come here any time during my adult life, even before this country was liberated, before it became more easily accessible, but I didn't. This place waited for me as I waited for it through the long years. I watched and collected and considered and observed it. How did I get here? Slowly at first and then all at once.

I came to Oświęcim station by train from Krakow and walked through the town and across a bridge into the old town, a complex landscape which should have given me pause for thought. Arrival at the place brought the necessity of an increased focus on what

was actually here, what was here beyond what was apparent, what I could easily find by a simple process of walking around town, from site to site. I soon realised that much was not signposted, that there seemed to be no overarching management of visitors, that there was no tourism plan or unified direction. I find it hard now to look back and remember what I thought I was going to arrive at. It's as if I was blinded by thirty years of collecting material that all pointed inexorably to this place. I had attempted coming here before, I had wanted to make it difficult, and I had failed. Now I was here I couldn't remember what I came for. Nothing is as simple as it seems.

In 2016 a retired candy maker and Auschwitz survivor, Yisrael Kristal, born near Zarnow, Poland, in 1903, was declared the oldest man in the world. It seems incredible, an impossibility, out of all the people in the world, that he had managed this. How do you emerge from Auschwitz to become the longest-lived person in the world? What is the mechanism for this? You make sweets, you have a trade, you are toughened by experience, you just go on and on. He said he did not know the secret for long life. He said he believed everything was determined from above. After the German invasion he had continued to manufacture candy in the Lodz ghetto. His two children died there. Kristal and his wife were deported to Auschwitz during the ghetto liquidation in August 1944. His wife was murdered but Kristal was liberated by the Soviets. He weighed 82 pounds. He said 'There have been smarter, stronger and better-looking men than me who are no longer alive. All that is left for us to do is to keep on working as hard as we can and rebuild what is lost'.

His position at number one on the leader board of old men was gained after the death of Japan's Yasutaro Koide. By definition, nobody keeps that title for long and he died on August 11, 2017. He managed to be the oldest man in the world for longer than he was in Auschwitz. Maybe he had touched the hem of Mengele's coat as only 'some five and twenty aged men, their withered hands interlinked to form a chain, would be

enough to establish an unbroken contact between Hadrian and ourselves' (Yourcenar, 2000: 321).

The last commandant of Auschwitz, SS-Sturmbannführer Richard Baer, was also a professional confectioner. After the war he lived near Hamburg under an assumed name and was arrested in 1960. He died in prison in 1963 before the start of his trial.

There is a finite amount of material showing the camps at Auschwitz when they were operational and all that material is used repeatedly as part of the process of never forgetting. It is shown again and again. Click, click, click, it passes again and again past our eyes like a movie, as if we can reverse time and send ourselves back and understand. But we cannot understand.

If we can reverse this process, if we can start from the camp, which is all we have, and push the flow of time backwards then maybe we can arrive at that single death, that tragedy.



Figure 10 Sky above Birkenau, 2020, author

There are no mountains around Oświęcim, nor even hills. It is a flat land: there are small mountains off in the distance. Tadeusz Borowski described it in his story, *The People Who Were Walking*: ‘Birkenau was situated near the foothills of the mountains. During the day the mountains could be seen very clearly in the transparent air’ (Borowski, 2021: 51). The sky is the sky, as it would have been to inmates of the camp. In Birkenau I looked at the sky and wondered who had looked up from the same spot as free men flew over and photographed the ground, the people. The sky is always the sky, even over a death camp. It stretches away from the trauma and invites connection to a bigger world, to the existence of others. Spaceships and airplanes come from the sky, in the sky, and rescue. The sky is a place of hope and we stand now under the same sky.

Otto Dov Kulka, as a small boy in Birkenau, stood and stared at the bluest sky during the summer of 1944 and although it is difficult to imagine a beautiful sky over Auschwitz and although it is difficult to imagine a beautiful summer during that time of grey death, Kulka never forgot that year. ‘Silver-coloured toy aeroplanes carrying

greetings from distant worlds pass slowly across the azure skies while round them explodes what look like white bubbles. The aeroplanes pass by and the skies remain blue and lovely' (Kulka 2014: 75).

Looking up implies release, a world that is different to the world we are in. I look up at the sky, it is blue, it is a sunny day. Sunny days here are deceptive. Our folk memory of Auschwitz exists in a concept of cold and wet, of driving rain and snow, of people dying in the snow. But there were hot days, there were summers and sunshine and blue sky. The summers were as lethal as the winters.

In 1943 planes arrived high over Oświęcim. A South African reconnaissance detachment, sent to photograph an industrial target, the Monowitz area. They started their camera rolling ahead of time and the camps at Birkenau and Oświęcim were photographed, not accidentally but as a by-product. They bequeathed us images of the enclosed space, sealed against the world, seen from a great height by airmen from the warm clear air of Sicily.

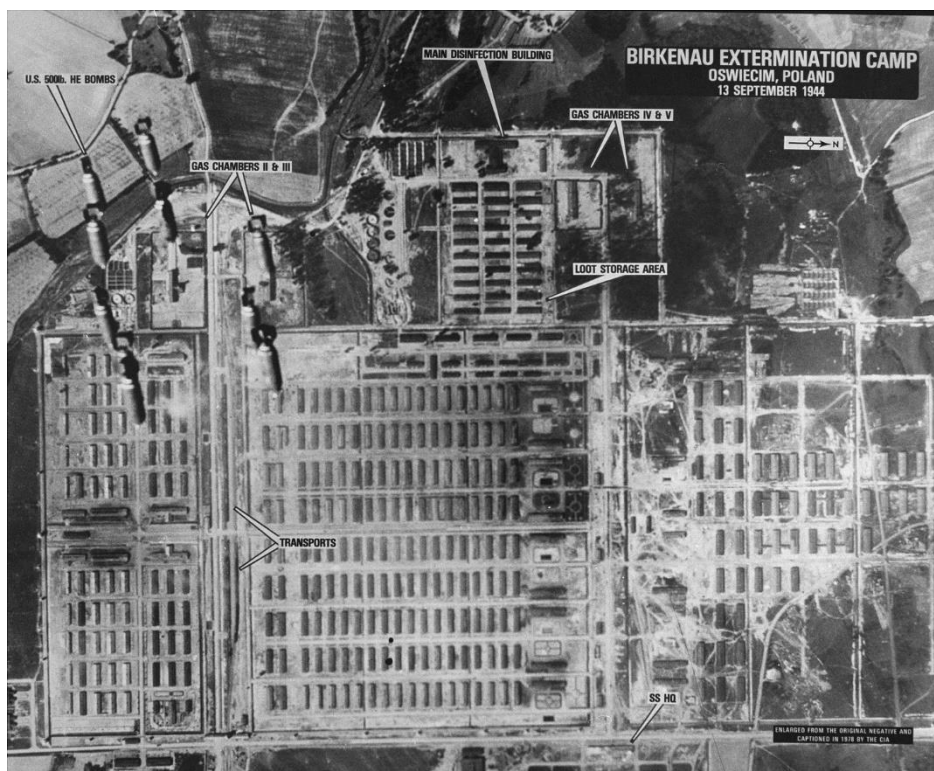


Figure 11 *The camp with bombs.*

They produced gloriously clear images of the camp, later analysed and marked up dispassionately: Death centres; Footpaths; Crematoria; Loot stored here. This marking was done long after the war. The images remain a window from the air into another world, capturing what was unseen except by those who were present, rows of prisoners on their way to the extermination chambers, smoke issuing from the chimneys of the crematoria. Only the resistance within the camp managed to perform a similar task, the photographing of burning bodies, of the Sonderkommando. Neither of these images produced the result we might desire, the camp went undisturbed, unbombed, but the pictures leave us a time machine, a way of seeing (“Aerial Photographs of Auschwitz: Through the Lens of History” n.d.).

Neither Birkenau nor Auschwitz were ever bombed. They were not military targets, the allies didn’t think the camps worth destroying. They were photographed incidentally from the sky. Within one photograph bombs stream towards the gas chambers at Birkenau. Go, bombs, go, you think. Go back into the past and destroy that place. It’s an emotional thing to see, but it’s not real. The bombs were on a trajectory for Monowitz, the chemical works where Primo Levi worked. Evidence of this bombing is still visible in the infrastructure of the works.

In 1978 two aerial photo-analysts, Dino Brugioni and Robert Poirer, re-analyzed the photographs housed in the Defense Intelligence Agency Archives in Washington. These photographs became political leverage and in 1980 were passed to Yad Vashem in Israel by President Jimmy Carter.

Inside Birkenau I stopped to change the film in my big old-fashioned camera and while I was doing so, I phoned my sister who was working in China. I have no idea how the signal reached her, by what route it crossed the planet, passed from node to node, from relay station to relay station, through exchanges and transmitters to satellites circling high above the earth and down again and by a process of alchemy in reverse, to her phone and

we spoke, I told her what I was doing in the sunshine there and she told me what she was doing where she was. I had called her before while on a research mission to the ghetto in Vilnius. As I walked past the ghetto library where the remains of books and library cards had been found a passing man excitedly drew my attention to faint markings on a wall. It was a swastika. I passed this information on to my sister.

That first time in Birkenau it was a beautiful sunny summer's day and although I was standing and then sitting surrounded by foliage that had grown rich upon the dispersed ashes of human beings, I felt something of peace and joy, as if I was finally of the world. I was in a place that contained such strong gravity that no energy could ever escape from it. I lay on this soil in this sun and went to sleep. I dreamt that I was in the camp talking to an inmate. It may have been Primo Levi. He told me Birkenau is not one camp, within the camp smaller camps are replicated and inside those camps, more, identical in all details, exist. Again, and again, camp after camp, the perimeter and the blockhouses and the gates and the wire and the latrines and the gas chambers, all are replicated within the preceding camp. Camps within camps unending. He took me across the yard and into a hut where he reached under the bunks and pulled out a model of the camp. In this model he pointed out the very yard that we had just crossed, the very hut within which we now stood. He removed the roof from that hut and standing there within the hut were representations of us looking at a replica of the very model that we stood in front of. He reached into this small replica and removed the tiny roof of the simulacra and, if I squinted closely, I could see another tinier representation of the scene we had started with.

‘And on?’ I asked.

‘And on, forever,’ he replied. ‘It is the work of god.’

Primo Levi said that at liberation he would have been in favour of burning the whole camp, the infected barracks, the ovens, the gallows. ‘Get rid of everything, raze it to the ground, along with Nazism and everything German’. Later he acknowledged it would have been a mistake, saying, ‘These are not mistakes to efface’¹².

Brought up in long shadows, it was visible
first in the topographies, then the topologies.

Living with the existence
of the post-war enveloped pre-war and
the pre-war enveloped post-war,
my task as Ancient Mariner is to
retrieve this place,
convert the relict
enmeshed in our world.

Pausing for breath,

‘A dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. [...] as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds; a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “Wstawach”’ (Levi 2013: 379).

‘We continuously return in a roundabout way to the object of contemplation’ (Rose Hill 2019).

¹² Primo Levi, *Revisiting the Camps*. Originally printed in the catalogue *Rivisitando I Lager*, which accompanied an exhibition of photographs of the camps held in the galleria san Fedele, Milan, in 1986.

Chthonic Auschwitz

Ivo, my man from the Foundation for Memory Sites Near Auschwitz-Birkenau, eventually appeared. ‘I’ve been guarding the President,’ he announced. He is a policeman and the President had passed through town, so I took his word for it. Presidents are always passing through this town. We arranged to meet the following morning outside my hostel on the Rynek. Unsure of what I was getting myself into, I forwarded our emails to my daughter. I wanted to create a paper trail ‘in case I don’t reappear’. I realised that Ivo and the Foundation were engaged on the same process as me. They are looking for what remains, for the solid objects in the landscape that still exist. Objects do decay but they can’t be wished into history. This place is littered with them. Our job is to spot the overlooked, the uninteresting, the discarded, the hiding in plain sight, and to raise them back into the storyline.

The next morning, he was there with an ageing and dodgy sports car which he grumbled about constantly. It was as if he felt that he must have a sporty car although he cannot afford one on a policeman’s salary. He greeted me cheerfully and asked me where I wanted to go. I had no idea. I told him I wanted to visit some sub camps. I got into his car and we set off out of Oświęcim at high speed. He drove like an East European policeman on his home turf, which is what he was. The country roads reminded me of Kent where I grew up, small lanes with a lot of greenery alongside them and not much line of sight. I expected us to crash, but we didn’t. Ivo kept up a cheerful conversation in broken English, obviously proud of the work his organisation was doing. I had no idea of his role or how he had come by it. We passed a field containing an array of military lorries and armoured vehicles. I admired them, but Ivo disparaged the owner. ‘He is an idiot,’ he said, as if this display somehow competed with his offering of a variety of Auschwitz sub-camps.

It seemed like a long journey. After a while we drew up alongside a single storied building that sat behind a hedge on a small plot of land. I had no idea where we were or what we were looking at. Ivo jumped out and we entered the front yard. In the forecourt was an array of red and white wreaths, memorials in the Polish flag colours from the Polish state. The door was also hung with wreaths and wide ribbons in the same colours. I had missed an anniversary, a memorial event of some sort. Ivo led me around the corner. Lines of concrete objects were laid out: fence posts and water tanks along with small railway carts and other objects. 'All these collected by our founder,' he said.

The place was Budy-Bor, a small camp at which a massacre had taken place during the war. The massacre was what had been commemorated earlier in the month. The building was now under the management of the Foundation and they had turned it into a small museum, although it was hard to see how there could be many visitors or how they would gain access. I wandered around the gardens photographing the array of detritus that was lying there, carefully arranged. Ivo followed me and explained many things. Then he asked if I want to go inside. An older man joined us. It was the founder. He spoke no English, but I gathered he had started the entire collection. Ivo told me I could ask questions through him. The founder had been collecting objects that had originated in the camps for many years. They formed the basis of The Foundation. The locals and farmers, who had scavenged materials from the camp after the war, were dying out and their children, the inheritors, were throwing out what they considered garbage. 'We pick it up from the fields,' he told me. Over time they had grown closer to the official Auschwitz museum and had become some sort of support network, taking over important historic buildings that the museum itself could not or would not manage. The Foundation seemed to be on an expansionist binge. Each time I visited Ivo would show me more trophy sites added to their collection. Yet they seemed hugely underfunded. I tried to offer

help, perhaps I could provide a UK outpost, maybe to fundraise, but they weren't interested. A few years later I realised that the founder I met that day was Ivo's father.

Eyes watch and monitor this place

Auschwitz-Birkenau has been a World Heritage site since the 1970s. UNESCO chooses sites to which they give their imprimatur. They allow the government (the 'state party') to attach the designation which is usually used proudly as a marketing tool. Designated sites include the Taj Mahal in India, Angkor Wat in Cambodia and, until recently, the seafront at Liverpool in the United Kingdom. Sites can, although they rarely do, lose their listing. Listing has economic, cultural, and political value. Liverpool seafront lost its listing in 2021 because it allowed development to mar the historic view of the site, and, despite warnings, the national government did nothing to halt this. The loss was signalled well in advance, but, perhaps believing that nobody would take such a liberty, the Liverpool City Council continued to allow large developments to impinge on the site. Eventually the listing was withdrawn.

The formal UNESCO name for the site is Former Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. The name was changed in 2006 at the request of the Polish authorities for various reasons, all listed in bureaucratese: 'the importance of the information and education efforts, directed in particular to the youth, undertaken by many State Parties in order to denounce the atrocities of the Nazi regime', but the state party made its reason clear. It was 'in order to promote adequate historical understanding of its creation', to absolve any role Poland may be thought to have had in the atrocity.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau listing 'relates to the events of outstanding universal significance that not only depict an evil period of history but also to serve as a beacon of warning'. UNESCO's agent in this process, the World Heritage Committee, is concerned

with the landscape within which the camps sit and the encroachment of modern development. Poland is a fast-growing country. Since the opening of Eastern Europe and its accession to the EU it has been turning itself into a modern state. Auschwitz-Birkenau has had its own run-ins with UNESCO although it is hard to imagine anything that would lead to it losing the designation. The site is too politically charged, the government of Poland is too aware of the significance of the listing.

Poland (known as 'the state party' in UNESCO documents) is largely concerned with its programme of ensuring no blame for Auschwitz ever attaches to the country. The World Heritage Committee, on the other hand, is concerned with the wider picture, with the landscape within which the camps sit. In this landscape are forty sub-camps along with countless unacknowledged fragments that relate to them. A new motorway, S1, in planning and construction for decades, is planned to run past the town of Oświęcim, past the camp sites and through the landscape.

I watched a news video in Polish about this bypass extension. Although I didn't understand the language, it was clear that this was a complex and contentious local issue. Everybody wanted modernisation but nobody wanted to live under a motorway interchange. Yet they live under the shadow of the camp. Like a motorway, the camp brings both benefit and negativity. It is interesting to watch local arguments about roads in obscure parts of Europe, places where nobody outside the town would care were it not for Auschwitz. The proposals would run through the footsteps of Charlotte Delbo, putting Harzeze and Rajsko on the map while potentially obliterating them.

Everything is political outside the Lager. The State Party is concerned with the heterotopia, the camp itself. UNESCO is concerned with the exeterotopia, the wider world within which it is knitted.

Everybody maps a wider Auschwitz, whether they know they are doing it or not. The fences, the gate, the entrance to Birkenau, the railways. The route to the gas chambers, the deportation trains from other countries. All narrations of the place map, but the maps are irrational, unreadable, complex, messy. The maps we need to draw are construed from time as well as space, from the topology as well as from the topography.

Security

‘Until recently, Museum authorities provided very few security measures at the site and relied on visitors’ common sense. To minimize the sense of visitors being watched constantly—a highly inappropriate feeling at Auschwitz—security guards were almost invisible’ (*The Guardian* 2015).

I went to see the eponymous birches of Birkenau. On my first visit I walked quickly through the site along the line of the railway, past the absent unloading ramp. I didn’t pay much attention to the groups of tourists with their guides. Each group wore a badge of a different colour and shape so that their group leader can identify them, knows who he is talking to. I was my own guide.

At the back of the site, between the ruins of the gas chambers, is a huge stone platform, built in the sixties to replace an original small monument. It envelops the ground, hiding anything that may have been left behind, that may remain buried. Fence posts emerge from openings in the structure. There is a wooded area and an open gate leading to the outside world. I wanted to look back at the camp, to look for birch trees. I was interested in what the camp looks like undisfigured by a coach park.

I followed a concrete road that curved gently away from the camp into an agricultural landscape. I walked for a while and then turned to look back at the camp with its row of flagpoles. A man in a black uniform was on the road some way behind me. He had followed me out of the site. I pressed on, but he followed and eventually, as I glanced

round at him, gestured to me. Come here. I turned back towards him. He asked me who I was. I asked him who he was. He pulled out an identity card. I told him I was looking around, to see the camp from the back. He pointed at my little rucksack and said I'm not allowed to carry one in the camp. It is forbidden. I told him I hadn't seen any such notice and, anyway, everyone has bags like this. We had a small argument before walking back to the gate. Another guard was waiting in a small electric cart. He got out of his wagon and, approaching us, asked if he could look in my rucksack. I took it off and he rifled through it. Finding nothing of interest, they both told me again that it is forbidden to wear rucksacks on the site. I pointed at some other tourists who are wearing them and they shrugged. Then they let me go and I continued my wandering.

Around this place, because there is no place without it, there is a fence. It is imperfect and it is two hundred feet thick. It is porous and permeable yet nobody ever penetrates this fence. Where the fence ends, is there a place? I walk alongside this fence counting the posts, marking the boundary. I gauge the distance from the fence to the edge of the penumbra. Maybe twenty paces, it varies. It is a variable penumbric space. I'm in the limen, the land that hugs up against the void, the lacuna.

When the site was closed for the seventy-fifth anniversary of liberation I decided to circumnavigate it. The absence of roads and a mixture of rivers and farms in the area behind Birkenau made it a daunting prospect. Daunting and pleasing. I would immerse myself in the landscape behind the site. Had anyone ever looked this place from the back? I had walked out of the back door on my first visit and been chased back in for my sins, but I still had no idea what was out there.

Auschwitz is a place of many parts on the edge of town which has come to represent the civilian town of Oświęcim and became a tourist attraction. The museum at Birkenau occupies simple space, the space of the barracks, the area of the camp. It is not a building or compound that can be sealed and preserved, with a route through it, in, out,

arrivals, departures. It is not a space that is easy to identify as a museum. The starting date of the museum of Auschwitz is given as 1949 although the process of museumising the place began within weeks of the closure of the camps. Auschwitz was the first museum of the Holocaust, the first formal designation of a site as a museum. There were issues. At first the accommodation was still needed by prisoners who had nowhere to go and there were more refugees who needed to be housed. The town of Oświęcim also needed housing for its citizens and the barracks that made up Auschwitz I were tempting. A large part of Birkenau was burnt to the ground. Much more was stolen, liberated, for the vast task of reconstruction.

When I first went to visit the town, the camp, I didn't think I was visiting a museum. I told myself that I wasn't a tourist, I didn't need the organised tours that came in from Krakow for a swift perambulation of horror guided by someone who had done it hundreds of times before. My aim was simply to spend some time 'at Auschwitz', not knowing that I didn't know what Auschwitz was. I knew many things about the place. As I was to find out, they were fragmentary things, minor or iconic attributes of the geographical heart. In truth, I knew nothing about Auschwitz.

It is a museum and a cemetery and memory monument and many other things, all wrapped up together. It is a living example of Foucault's 6th principle of the heterotopia (Foucault 1984), it can be many things at the same time. It became a museum from the first day of liberation. By this method the detritus of annihilation was saved. Materials that were gathered from Birkenau and transported to Auschwitz became emblematic of the entire enterprise.

Further museums have sprung up around the site. There is now a town museum. The organisation for the preservation of 'those other bits' has its own museums in sub-camps and in the bus station. Many fragments are outwith the museum or abandoned.

Don't we all want to make our own museums, to display the bits that we collect as a child, for the grownups to visit? When I became an artist, or at least when I realised what an artist was and did, I wanted to have my own shows, to put on my own exhibitions and to be in exhibitions with others, to have a space to display my assembled bric a brac: these were my museums. All art is fragmentary. The oeuvre of an artist gets sold off piecemeal and reassembled with the works of others, if they are lucky, into a form of museum.

In the first half of the 1950s, the Museum received little money. As a result, the majority of the blocks and the Birkenau main gate were in danger of collapse, and the roof of the so-called sauna building fell. The kitchen building at the main camp was also in danger of collapse. Many blocks and crematorium I fell into ruin as a result of a lack of basic maintenance. The government was more interested in limiting the activities of the Museum, or even liquidating the Museum. The rebuilding of the chemical plant in Oświęcim caused an influx of new workers who needed somewhere to live. In 1955 the exhibition in the main camp was completed forming more or less the exhibition that exists to this day ("Visitor Numbers / The First Years of the Memorial / History of the Memorial / Museum / Auschwitz-Birkenau" n.d.).

There was no work done on the history of Auschwitz, or on completing the exhibition, until the mid-1950s. There were one-hundred and seventy thousand visitors to Auschwitz in 1947, and between two-hundred and two-hundred and twenty-five thousand in the years 1948-1951. It rose to four-hundred thousand by 1953. Access to the camp records was limited; the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland controlled the documents.

Pandemic

I visited in the midst of the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, taking my bicycle. Flights had been shifted from Luton or Stansted to the North terminal at Gatwick, which is my local airport, a short train ride away from my home. When I arrived at the airport it was clear that things were seriously awry. The entire South terminal was closed and the North terminal was eerily quiet with very few passengers. Most of the shops and cafes were closed and getting a coffee entailed a long journey through a strange corridor of darkened outlets. It seemed as if some sort of apocalyptic scenario had unfolded. I was pleased to be travelling for research but unsure of what was going on.

I went through the long process of partially dismantling my bike and packing the various panniers so that I would get through the checking in process without running into the dreaded overweight charges. I was so concerned to sort things out properly that I arrived at the airport several hours early. Masks were mandatory. It was the first time that I had worn a mask for an extended period of time. In the end, including the flight and exiting the airport at the other end I was in my mask for about five hours. It seemed a lifetime.

Now close, now far,
 the penumbric space,
 the Museum of Holocaust Museums.
 a spatial rhythm,
 heterotopia of heterotopias,
 mise en abyme.
 i/o,
 a computer simulation,
 procedures,

inputs,

outputs.

Any fragment can be an input but

where does the first fragment come from?

Standing enclosed by the remains of the fences of this site, enveloped by the history and the story and the ghosts.

Without borders we don't know

what is inside and

what is outside.

Looking at the outside of the camp.

Arriving at the camp.

Considering the camp from a distance.

Travelling to the camp.

Camp as mission.

Camp as pilgrimage,

Camp as life eternal.

Putting myself in the landscape,

becoming an object in the landscape,

examining myself as an object.

Objects remaining within the camp,

in the penumbra of the camp,

further remove.

To write this I had to know who I am and how to relate to the field.

I'm an outsider,
a visitor,
a human.

If this is a man I'm a man.

We have all been to Auschwitz.

It's a simple statement,
people have or
people haven't.

Those that went,
where do they think they went?

And those who didn't go,
where do they think they didn't go? (and did they think they escaped it?)

Feeling both very close to my subject and very far from it, I started to construct my text, entire of itself. I inscribed the landscape, placing each fragment in a mesh that linked it to all other fragments, The repeated visiting, the repeated looping around the sites, the repeated examination of sites, the repeated reading of the site, all of these are a methodology for textual production, for repeated repeating.

I was travelling to visit a place, the centre of something, the record of something. I didn't realise that I would have to do the work of (re)assembling this place for myself, that the fragments that remained were scattered so far and wide through time and space. Geographically arriving at a town called Oświęcim did not magically reassemble something that had never really existed in the first place, but when I stepped into that place the topology and the topography did come together, 'into a kind of expanded spazio-soglia, where topographical and topological rationalities were intertwined in an inextricable way' (Giaccaria and Minca, 2011: 10).

This was my task: to go to a place and encounter it and write a text from that encounter and to observe and record the process of the writing of that text. The recording of the process of generating a text, the encounter with place, is the text, like a seismograph chart recording each ripple and shudder of the earth's crust.

What did it mean, to transport myself into the field, into the zone of interest? I stepped into the landscape imagining that I would find the edges. By a process of walking from a transportation hub towards a camp as museum, somewhere along the way, I would encounter the abyss. Instead, I entered an endless liminal zone I didn't even know I had entered.

Firstly, a place has been chosen

The place is known about by myself

It is known about by the world

It has been in my life for a long time

It has resonances for the world

Many others have already been to this place and recorded those visits

I plan a trip thinking I know what I am going to

When I arrive I find a more complex and fragmented place.

I cannot make simple sense of the place.

There is more to it than I expected, and less

I'm not sure where the edges are, or the centre, or the inside or the outside.

All of these issues become clear as soon as I start activating the place

It is hard to know where the edge is,

where the in and out is,

where the gate starts and ends,

where the cafe of arrivals and the cafe of departures is situated.

I arrived at the place of which I had been dreaming for many years and
it turned from a dream into
a real place
which would not quite emerge.

If I hadn't determined to write about the post-war period, about how the site came to be in our world, I would not have written about it at all. It was easy to assume that the text would flow from it. De Certeau suggested that the story becomes a sort of 'crossword decoding stencil'. George Steiner said that 'on hearing whisperings out of hell again we would know how to interpret the code' (Seymour and Camino, 2016: 194) but this can only be so if the decoding stencil is available, if it is kept current. Where is the key to be kept so that it remains at hand when the whisperings start?

I chose a subject that has a vast hinterland,
one that I am unlikely to make an impact upon.

I wanted to find a way
to approach the subject from a different direction.

For the survivors who emerged from Auschwitz there was a terrible desire to leak the internals of the camp into the world. Those who attempted to tell the story were, like Levi's guest at the wedding, unwelcome bringers of unpleasantness to a world that just wanted to press on into the new order of things. The survivors did not even share a common language with the rest of the world, the unsurvivors. Their determination to commit what they remembered to memory was admirable, but within the geography of those memories opened a lacuna, a gap.

Everyone who visits a shadow space visits two places:

the topographic space and the topologic space.

This occurs even when no travel is involved.

You do not have to go to a place to visit it,

the topologic informs the topographic even without being in the field.

No man is an heterotopia, entire unto himself.

I like to spend time trawling through the detritus of a town. I have done and can do this in almost any location in the world: there are always antique shops and junk shops, boot fairs and weekend markets where the populace come to dispose of inherited junk or the overload of their own lives. There are other ways: skip diving to retrieve what is being thrown out, local for sale publications and the Freeview type of online services that redistribute the no longer wanted. In Oświęcim there was none of this. Nothing for sale. Nothing, except the ever-proliferating museums, opens the cover and allows a peek back into the past. There is no way to access the ephemera of the place, to collect the junk that would have meaning only to me. This has been my life, my way of addressing the world and I find its absence here deeply disturbing. Where everything is second-hand there is no second-hand stuff.

In *Checkout 19*, Claire-Louise Bennett makes the connection between our piled up stuff and death camps. She is thinking of the camp storage zone of Canada but could equally be referring to the Foundation or the museums with their accumulated loot. The museums are junk shops, they take the place of junk shops for me.

‘Jumbled up footwear of any sort piled high all the laces trailing and the rumpled tongues spilling makes me think of the Second World War and when I say that what I really mean is the death camps. Heaps of clothes and personal belongings, especially watches and umbrellas and shoes, always made me think of the death camps and the first time I went with my grandmother to a jumble sale in the community centre the sight of all those thin cardigans and nylon scarfs and gaping shoes heaped up on the trestle tables end to end the length and breadth of the

hall made me short of breath with thoughts of all the hundreds of thousands of women and men and their children who were dispatched in those wretched cramped cattle cars from all across Europe week after week straight into the barbaric ineludible core of the death camps' (Bennett, 2021: 22).

A typecase of forgotten things

When I visited the archives at Auschwitz. I was told to wait in the corridor. Aware that I was in the heart of the beast I examined and photographed my surroundings, the institutional tiled floor, the metal hand rails, the electrical boxes and a solid metal door under the stairs, my heart in my mouth. I met with the deputy Director of the archive and was told to return the next day. I thought of Sebald's 12 Sporkova Street, and by association, Austerlitz and Walter Benjamin. I was rag picking history.





‘the metal box for the electrics built into the wall beside the entrance with its lightning symbol, the octofoil mosaic flower in shades of dove grey and snow-white set in the flecked artificial-stone floor of the hall, the smell of damp lime wash, the gently rising flight of stairs, with hazelnut-shaped iron knobs placed at intervals in the handrail of the banisters – all of them signs and characters from the type-case of forgotten things’ (Sebald 2011: 213-214).

Before the losses of history, we remain inconsolable, to mourn is to bear witness to our inability to fully know these losses in the present, let alone begin to remediate them. The irrecoverable, unknowable, and irreparable character of the past becomes manifest through the necessary recourse to invention, supposition and fiction itself, resulting in a narrative that houses, often times in more ways than one, loss at its core. We build houses of artefacts to link us to the enormity, the rupture, the caesura. We fill these houses with objects that have a mystical or prosaic link, to recuperate the events. It is unclear as to whether we can achieve our objective. I trade in artefacts and stories; each probably the same as the other. I create a history of the collection and display of artefacts, of the consolidation and presentation of ourselves, of the institutionalisation and naming of collections. I watch the emergence of symbolism and fixity in the field of memorialisation.

When I was little and I went to the local primary school we all sang Christian hymns and I didn't understand what or why we were singing but the imagery remained with me. I had my first psychogeographical imaginings. When we sang 'there is a green hill far away without a city wall' I mistook the word without to mean not having and pictured a green hill with no wall around it. But it didn't make any sense to me. Why would a hill be supposed to have a wall around it, and yes, I was cognisant with the idea of three bodies being crucified on this hill, but even so, I always wondered why we were so bothered about the wall *that didn't even exist*.

I wasn't a Christian, as far as I knew, but we all sang along anyway. I certainly wasn't a Jew, there were no Jews in my world. There was one Chinese girl at my school who sat out assembly, but I had no idea why. Christian words were what we sang, it was our iconography and our mythology and I learnt everything from it until David Bowie came along.

What is it to you?

Barbed wire fences, gas chambers, striped clothing.

Where is it?

How far does it stretch?

Who does it encompass?

When did it start, when did it end?

Who did it?

Why?

What was the Holocaust?

Do you know anything about Auschwitz?

Probably not.

How many dead.

How many passed through.

How many returned.

How many were gassed.

How many beaten to death.

How they got there.

How many left for other camps.

How many staff.

You know no/thing.

What was this thing.

How did it get there?

What is it now?

And how did it get to here.

How did we get there and how do we get there and how did we get here and
how did they get there.

The policeman's wedding

Ivo told me that he had found his girlfriend a job but she didn't have a driving licence. He'd worked out a back road route for her to drive to work and told her that if she got stopped she should phone him. I hadn't expected to have such dodgy practice revealed to me, but it made me affectionate for this backwater.

Oświęcim is a tiny town with a huge international memorial at its heart. Ivo's life as a provincial policeman was far less boring than it would have been. He often guarded the President of Poland and other notables who passed through – and they all passed through. Oświęcim is a performative stopping point on the European circuit and politicians feel the need to demonstrate that they have no fear of visting. 'That's why I couldn't meet you in January,' he said. I believed him. I'd spent my time dodging cavalcades of politicians going from one event to another during the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the camp. He told me he'd booked two weeks off work to get married but the wedding had been cancelled due to Covid. Now he wasn't sure that he actually wanted to get married and he'd forgotten how to be a policeman. In our broken English I tried to reassure him. I told him that if he didn't want to get married he shouldn't get married, but if he did it would work itself out. I wasn't cut out to be a marriage counsellor.

Pictures at an exhibition

'Sooner or later everyone discovers that perfect happiness is unrealisable, but there are few who pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable' (Levi 2013: 23)

Nobody seems to regard the routes between the parts of this atrocity exhibition, between Birkenau and Auschwitz I, or the route from the Judenramp to Birkenau, or from Monowitz camp to the IG Farben site, as sacred. None of this is looked at. Visitors are brought close to get in and get out without even knowing as they cross the landscape that forms the site. I look for ways to knit this tangle of situations into a whole. I walk, then cycle, then ride by electric scooter, these routes, back and forth, up and down, cutting between the sites and crossing around them and each time something emerges from the mire. Perhaps the only route that exists is within Birkenau, the journey from the gatehouse

to the remains of the gas chambers, the ruins, and their accompanying memorial which blankets the land. There cannot be routes within the soglia.

When I first aimed myself at Auschwitz I used a bicycle to make the journey, giving myself time to consider those who were taken in extremis or death, packed as cattle into wagons, standing for days in freezing sidings, never fed or watered along the route, who suffered and died in their own mire. Later, in the area, I cycled past a poster lauding the President and his wife. This is a conservative part of the country.

Nobody talks about Auschwitz anymore, there are too many people talking about Auschwitz. When did you last have a conversation about Auschwitz? We only have a previous generation's way of talking about Auschwitz.

There is of course Primo Levi's way,
then Elie Weisel's way,
Charlotte Delbo's way,
the survivors' way,
the academics' way,
the journalist's way,
the tour guide's way and my way.

Nobody lives at Auschwitz. Auschwitz exists in our minds, not in territory or in space. Nobody talks about Auschwitz anymore. Can you imagine discussing it at the pub, at work or during a family gathering? It is an untouchable subject, something that everyone knows about but nobody can broach.

How much can you know before you become inured to it, before you yourself become a monster? Perhaps I am already a monster. When I came here for the first time I expected

to stare into the abyss but there did not seem to be an abyss. If there was, it did not stare back. I realised I wasn't looking for an abyss but a thin place, where two sides came close together. The abyss is within yourself, the thin place, external. I am at a thin place trying to feel the other side. I put my hand out. The Nazi extermination system, the ultimate moral lacuna, the black hole of the soul, looks at me unblinking. The abyss blinks slowly. The abyss is human.

Nothing can compete with Auschwitz for attention. It is a metaphor of all that is unapproachable, of the unexaminable void inside. I go there in more than one way.

Adorno said 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will '(Adorno 2005: 365). Do we choose to rewrite it, to create new meaning, to be meaningful, to add to the thousands of books on the subject that already exist? What do we have to say and why do we, who have no connection to the events, write about it? It is our job and there is clearly nothing more important if this story is not to lapse into silence.

Auschwitz museum has a collection of art from the camp, the biggest of its kind in the world, but it is not on display. It is kept out of sight, archived and cared for. There is no art gallery of the Lager. Not quite.

Gerhard Richter made *Abstrakte Bilder 937/1-4*¹³ based on seven pictures taken by a Sonderkommando 'from a hiding place showing, among other things, undressed women on their way to the gas chamber and members of the Sonderkommando burning bodies in the open air. 'The Sonderkommandos blew up the crematorium, blew away their shame, for every day they carried the bodies from the gas chambers and threw them into the fire'

¹³ "'Birkenau' by Gerhard Richter." n.d. Accessed July 16, 2020. <https://www.porta-polonica.de/en/atlas-of-remembrance-places/birkenau-gerhard-richter>.

(Loridan-Ivens 2015: 22-23). Santiago Sierra turned an ex-synagogue in Germany into a symbolic gas chamber. It was a protest against the banalisation of the Holocaust. Then he tried to abandon it. He did not create a gas chamber but ‘a work of art with the gas chamber as its theme’¹⁴ in the synagogue. There is a difference, he said.

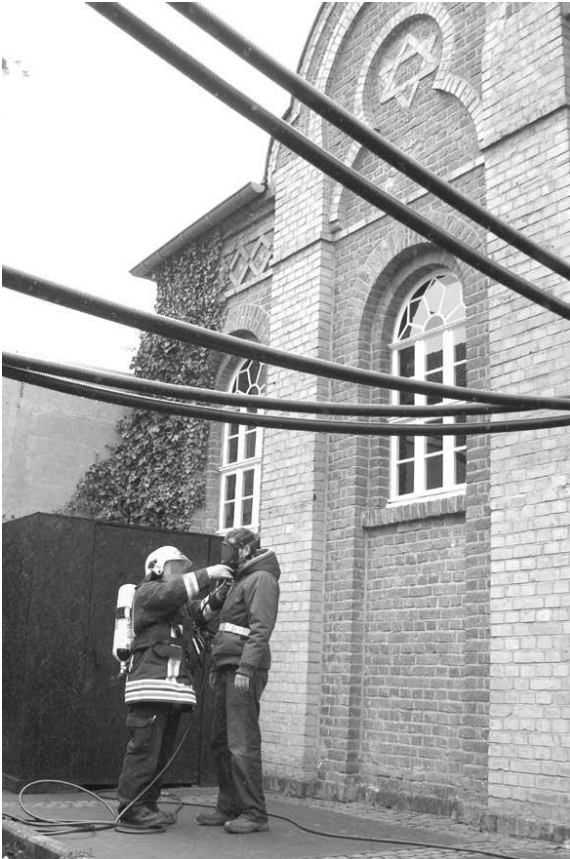


Figure 12 Installing a gas chamber in a synagogue

The project will
pump the
lethal exhaust
fumes from
six car engines
into the synagogue.

¹⁴ “Santiago Sierra.” n.d. Accessed September 30, 2022. https://www.santiago-sierra.com/200603_1024.php.

The first museum exhibition at Auschwitz, entitled *Kanada*, contained objects stolen from Jews—prayer robes, backpacks, prostheses, kitchenware, spectacles, photographs, banknotes, letters, documents found in the clothing of the deported, baskets, cutlery, shoe wax cans, combs, lipsticks, mirrors, thermos flasks, shoes, clothing, suitcases.



Figure 13 Clothing displayed in Kanada, the first exhibition at Auschwitz museum, 1947

Dinah Gottliebová from Brno was twenty-one when she survived the camp by painting portraits of Romani inmates in order that her mother might survive. After liberation her pictures were given to locals. In 1963 and 1977 her paintings were sold to the Auschwitz museum and in 1997 she demanded the portraits be returned to her. The museum rejected her claim, (“Dina Babbitt” n.d.)convinced that objects and documents found in the area of the liberated camp should be protected for further generations, as this site forms part of the World Heritage¹⁵

¹⁵ “Dina Babbitt.” n.d. Accessed June 11, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dina_Babbitt.

Auschwitz always produced art. It produced art while it was functioning as a death camp, it produced and exhibited itself soon afterwards, it became a subject for survivors and then it became a subject for the art world.

The first exhibition was within the camp itself in 1946. Maps were displayed in the first room on the ground floor. The yard, the gas chamber and Crematorium I were made accessible. Only a fragment of the intended exhibition was made available for visitors on the day of opening of the Museum.

‘The cellars of this block reflect the whole vastness of crime committed in Auschwitz. Individual niches hold symbols of all the layers of the society that found their death here. There are peasant threadbare coats next to Highlander garb. Robes of the clergy of all confessions. Children’s slippers in one of them speak for themselves, while the hair of murdered women next to them inspires horror’¹⁶.

In the section underground

on eight tables surrounded with barbed wire:

children’s shoes and clothes,

women’s hair,

prostheses,

robes of clergy of various denominations,

a Jewish khalat,

a Polish Highlander costume,

a peasant’s threadbare coat,

a worker’s overalls.

in the background was a cross,

an urn with the ashes of the victims.

¹⁶ “THE FIRST EXHIBITION: 1947.” n.d. Accessed January 13, 2022. https://lekcja.auschwitz.org/en_22_muzeum/sco_7.html.



Jacques Biederer dirty pictures Czech photographer

a smiling ingenue

or a dominatrix – the emotions of his subjects, then
sexuality—rather than simple sex mechanics.

Dames, doms, whipping male slaves,

safe for work

more explicit stuff

never hardcore

giggly stag films,

cutesy, sapphic slap and tickle

spanking and

when France was occupied by the Nazis, Biederer was sent to Auschwitz, where he died (The Gorgeous Vintage S&M of Trailblazing Pornographer Jacques Biederer | Dangerous Minds, n.d.).

The largest railway station in the world

There is a café called “Arrivals” and a café called “Departures”.

There are people who arrive and people who leave.

But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving, a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never come back.

It is the largest station in the world (Delbo, 1995: 3).

I was attuned to Charlotte Delbo, a non-Jewish French resistance survivor of the camp who I had read recently and who had left detailed impressions of leaving and entering the camp. How detailed, I intended to find out.

The trains came from across Europe. The rail system had been built up over many decades, a hundred years or more. Each part of Europe is joined to every other part by a sophisticated network of rails. These rail ways intersect, cross, split and re-join each other. From any point in the continent and actually far beyond you can entrain with the cafe as your destination. We all understand the methodology of crossing countries by train. A timetable exists which we need to access, the nervous among us repeatedly. Some carry it on paper, maybe an official publication, a leaflet picked up at the station, a list printed out at home from the internet. Some carry it digitally, susceptible to the risk of battery expiry or network collapse. Even a temporary glitch, the failure of small parts of the whole exposes these travellers to the risk of losing knowledge. Where am I, where do I

dismount, what comes next, what time, what platform? You need to accumulate and track a lot of knowledge, many points of information in order to cross a continent by train.

When I came here I didn't want to come here in the same way as everyone else. I wanted to come in the night, to slip like a ghost into the site, to wander lit only by moonlight to feel the space to look into the abyss. Maybe then the abyss would open up for me, it would look back. I wanted to come in the rain and stand by the fence, to sit in the mud, to set up a small tent by the entrance to Birkenau and protest, to build a protest camp, to accost the visitors from their coaches on their day trips, who were carrying their sorrow but not really feeling sorrow, who were talking to their friends and chattering and appreciating how intense it was to finally arrive at this place but also anticipating the meal they would be at later and the comfortable hotel bed they would sleep in that night and how they could still flirt with that person, how being in this place heightened the sexual tension and although they knew it was a bad thing it didn't seem so bad really, everyone knew what this place stood for and it was just one more notch on a societal belt to come here, finally, at last.

I've been to Auschwitz, they would say. It's a horror. That's what they say, they say it to me now, I've been there. But they never flitted in at night they never stood in the mud they never walked the abandoned spur or built an artwork in the lee of an abandoned building. They never did that. This place militates against such behaviour. Everything that points inwards to this place is designed to stop independent thought, to push a visitor into thinking and feeling something that isn't feelable.

I'm in the zone. The ground is chalky, dusty, dry.

I'm looking now at the remains of something but I don't really know what it is, or why.

The word Birkenau means birch tree meadow.

I'm looking for birch trees.

The Birkenau camp covers 425 acres.

The boundaries of Birkenau stretch a mile in one direction and a mile and a half in the other direction.

I walk a lot. It is hot. The ground is uneven.

I wait for the abyss to appear.

Charlotte Delbo went to Auschwitz and came home again. She wrote her story and waited thirty years before publishing it. She wanted to be sure it would sustain.

She saw Auschwitz as a huge railway station. Her Auschwitz was Birkenau. It is doubtful many saw the actual railway station, though they saw plenty of railway lines. 'This is the station they reach, from wherever they come. They get here after days and nights having crossed many countries they reach it together with their children, even the little ones who were not to be part of this journey. They took the children because for this kind of trip you do not leave without them. Those who had some took gold because they believed gold might come in handy. All of them took what they loved most because you do not leave your dearest possessions when you set out for far-distant lands' (Delbo 1995).

The railway station at Oświęcim gives an indication of the liminal nature of the place, how you can be inside and outside the camp at the same time. It is not part of any camp yet it plays a key part in the functioning of the camp sites. It sits on the railway line, the route of which divides the two primary camps, Auschwitz I and Birkenau. It sits within a corridor of buildings that run alongside the town, and which contains many more buildings and industrial premises. And still there are places that carry residues. In 1952 a store of control tickets used during the deportation of Greek Jews was found in a warehouse at the station.

When travelling, if I have left home entering the hours of darkness, a certain terror of displacement will sometimes overwhelm me, a feeling that I have left security and safety and am heading towards the unknown. Something deeper nags at me, that my mission is a fraud, that my reasons for travelling are a fraud, that by association my entire life is a fraud. I suppress these intimations of failure, I have to, otherwise how could I ever go anywhere? I have a mantra that I repeat to myself when travelling in less known territory: don't get off the train/bus/vehicle until you have to. Don't dismount early on a whim, while still safe in the carriage, even if you have overshot. Once you dismount you are in danger from all directions. It is Delbo's cafe of arrivals and departures.

The Auschwitz II camp location was decided on March 1, 1941, when Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, the head of all the concentration camps, visited Auschwitz for the first time. He stood on the railway overpass in Auschwitz and decided that, because of its proximity to the railway lines, the village of Birkenau would be an ideal place to expand the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The Polish name for the village was Brzezinka. The land is flat, empty. Himmler could see for miles. He didn't need to. A small town stood before him, the flood plain of the Sola which was already being used for the disposal of ashes. Expansion was needed, huge expansion. The rivers met here; the railways met here. There was agricultural land, coal, power. Did he raise his rod and declare, *Here we shall build our city?* There is only one overpass at Oświęcim. It has been moved, the road realigned and the junction remodelled. Next to it is the stump of an earlier bridge. This is where he stood. At that point the entire past and the entire future met at a single point. Himmler had absolute power, total power. He may not even have known it, it may have been an administrative choice, a diktat by a busy man, to establish a new camp on the flat land he observed. Anyway, there are few high points in this landscape, few viewing points. The castle in town owned by the Jew, Haberfeld, was another, much higher. The churches had steeples,

not towers. He had no doubt flown over the landscape but now he was in it, inside the heterotopia of his imagination. Behind him was the already functioning camp, the disposal camp. Ahead of him lay the site for a new even more fearsome place. He may not have known it, but the village he looked over at was called Brzezinka, the place of the birches.

Where he stood is a fragment in close proximity to the boundary or within the boundary, inside the camp. When he stood on the bridge he was outside the camp, up the road, above the railway. He looked out over the flat land and decreed a camp, decreed a nightmare, a horror, history. He stood on the mobile moving border, he expanded the border which at that time was flexible and unfixed. Himmler took out his field glasses and studied the landscape. He could see for miles across the marshes, across the bodies of water, across the river. If he looked back he could see the first camp. In front of him was a ghost camp, an emptiness, space to build.

The bridge that remains only as a stump sticking out of the embankment is recorded in the archive because the final dead were brought across it courtesy of a Catholic church that had finally regained its dignity and composure. I climbed down onto this fragment. I spent some time staring out across the landscape towards Auschwitz. The roads and the railways are still there, the inexorable logic is the same, the breaks and mends of history are apparent here.

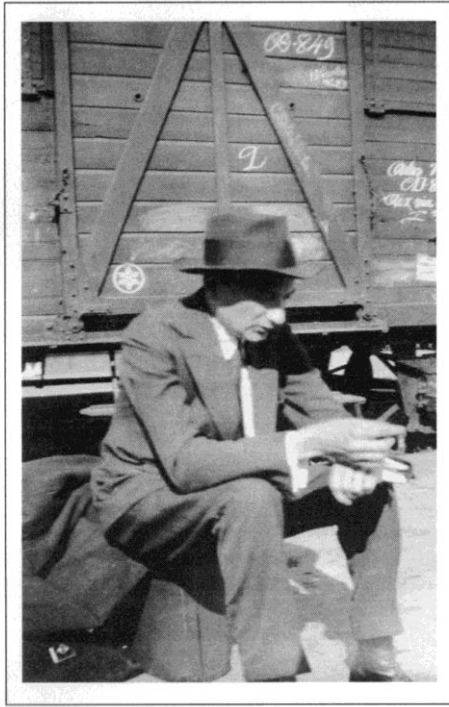


Figure 14 Joseph Roth waiting on a train platform while traveling in France, Joseph Roth Collection, AR 1764

Joseph Roth was photographed sitting on his suitcase next to a wooden sided railway wagon. It was before the deportations started but long after the Nazis had come to power and threatened everything. Roth marked that threat constantly but eventually he ran out of time and space. Deportations via railway marked a systemic shift from mobile murderers and stationary victims to stationary murderers and mobile victims.

There are six wagons at Auschwitz-Birkenau. I map them in relation to each other and in relation to all the other wagons that continue to appear around the world, wagons that I have seen, others that are on my list. There is one at Birkenau, two at the Judenramp and two newly arrived at the Kanteen. I only find the last two by the process of constant revisiting. One time they are not there, then there is one, finally two. They will at some point be gone again, on to their final destination.

In my travels I see a railcar at Drancy in Paris, from where Charlotte Delbo was deported. There is a meshwork of rails that stretches out across the world and they all sit on it. There are more in museums across the world and, I imagine, many standing abandoned in huge railway marshalling yards across the continent, waiting to be found,

to be declared of the type, to be shipped West, to become part of history. The Birkenau wagon was brought in the autumn of 2009. A group of workers pushed it through the brick archway to the ramp, and then locked its wheels. In April 2010, a ceremony took place, dedicating the wagon to those who had disappeared as smoke, into the gray skies above. This wagon was made in Germany in the early 20th century. The same type as carried people from Hungary to their deaths in Birkenau. Always the same type. In the Holocaust exhibit at the Imperial War Museum in London there is a partial wagon, cut apart to satisfy demands of space and display. At Yad Vashem a wagon sits above the void on an unfinished bridge.

There are no bike racks at Birkenau.

People come by bus.

There are bike racks at Auschwitz,
crammed in behind the security hut
alongside the buses, cars,
and people.

The crowd,
eager to enter where previously they were crowding to get out.

There are bike lanes in Oświęcim.

They are good with cycling here.

They have a good life to live.

But at the camps,

not so much,

which is striking.

In August 2020 I found bike racks at Birkenau, outside the bookshop by the main entrance. I am sure the bike racks are there for the shopkeepers because nobody cycles to Auschwitz but all the same, I leave my bike there. This entrance is now referred to as The Gate of Death, though the pedigree of this term is uncertain.

We know what Auschwitz is, we understand the place and its place in our world. It is both tiny and huge. It is tiny insofar as it represents a single notion of man's inhumanity to man. It is vast in that that horror can never be understood or contextualised. It is small as we understand the camp, the museum, but it is huge when we understand the events that it was at the core of. It is small as part of the much larger Holocaust but it is huge in relation to the local population, to each individual who passed through it and to our sense of the world. Dov Kulka saw it on arrival,

‘of course, we did not know where we were - the first signs were chains of flickering lights, lights hanging from a grid of electrified barbed wire and stooped concrete columns, all fashioned in the same patterns, and the rows - the rows stretched onward, as it seemed to us, for kilometres. All around we saw camp after camp, a grid of rectangles illuminated by lights, and rows of wooden barracks’ (Kulka, 2014: 25).

I spent thirty years collecting materials around this subject. When I went to visit I didn't find what I was looking for. I experienced a sort of abyssal falling away. I uncovered something far more complex, far bigger (and far smaller) than the world had led me to believe.

Auschwitz is a difficult and dangerous place to write about. It is hedged about with political consideration, with the pain of mass extermination, of Jewish suffering, of Israeli nationalism, of Polish pride, of local sensitivity, of historian endeavour, of commercial exploitation, of literary production, of symbolic and metonymy import. All of these things clash and overlap and provide a fertile marshland replete with chasms and booby-traps and petards and embarrassments through which I must pick my way steppingstone by steppingstone. I ignore much of what has come before, the niceties of Auschwitz writing,

the polite acceptance that all is simple, the desires of the museum or the state or the keepers of the flame that only certain things are of interest. I cast my net of interest far and wide to discover new things within a worn-out landscape, to walk psychogeographically within and without the environment, to examine what might go unexamined, to produce a deep map.

The environs of Auschwitz are freely accessible. Poland is a free country now, there are no controls for any visitor who wants to wander in the landscape. You can go where you wish. There are controls, apparent and not apparent. The museum sites are free to enter, but you are not free to enter them. Auschwitz I is hugely popular. Access is controlled, it is impossible to turn up and gain admission. There is a business of bringing paying visitors to the site and these businesses control the tickets. The museum encourages visitors to join a guided tour and, although it does not make this mandatory, the effect is that the site is closed to anyone who turns up on the off chance, closed to all except those who come from Krakow, who have paid for a one-day visit.

This has a knock-on effect on the town itself and on the other sites. Paying visitors come from Krakow and to Krakow they will return. From Auschwitz they can get to the expanse of Birkenau on free shuttle buses that run all day between the two sites. These tour companies have a method of obtaining the admission tickets for their customers — otherwise, how would they survive? The camps are both freely accessible and closed to casual visitors.

I arrived at Auschwitz as a trifecta: tourist, researcher, writer, the guises overlapping with each other, they are not all the same but they are not all different. Each requires something slightly different from me. I keep the roles in mind as this project progresses. As a tourist I come in the footsteps of millions, from the very earliest days.

I can't say I'm looking for the abyss. It's not acceptable, it's not the sort of behaviour that is wanted in my world. It's hard enough to tell people that I'm researching

Auschwitz, that I'm writing Auschwitz. I have a subject that is entirely respectable and normalised yet outside the boundaries of respectable interest, certainly in my part of the world. Nobody knows why I am writing this. I carry the abyss within myself, we all do, though mostly we don't go looking for it, and, if we do, we don't find it. I went looking for the void, how I expected the abyss to look back, and how for all my efforts, there was no abyss. Eventually I came to realise there was no abyss, there was simply a way in and a way out, a spatial difference.

The Auschwitz museum was founded in 1947 in the barracks at Auschwitz. Birkenau remained a camp, occupied first by refugees and later by squatters. A museum implies visitors. Who was the first tourist to Auschwitz? Even to ask the question is to pick at one of the difficult aspects of visiting this place — when did the camps change from being a hellhole from which the only logical response was to flee into a site of interest, that would reward the idle curiosity of a visit? Martin Gilbert first came in 1959: 'when the doors of the huts blew stutteringly in the wind and all was desolation. Inside the huts were mounds of rubbish left by later, post-war, dwellers there' (1997). The thought that this place would be visited, needed to be visited, that the visitors should be catered for, that what they would come to see must be preserved, that was present from the start. From day one. The originators of the museum project were themselves ex-inmates. We may even surmise that the notion of a museum pre-dated the closure of the camp, that it gestated while the camp was still doing its deathly work. I try to imagine a prisoner, working perhaps in the camp office, typing up the records of those who have died and making secret copies which would be smuggled out, thinking of how this place might be preserved, but I fail. My mind will not go there, yet.

I went to Auschwitz. I felt that because my subject was Auschwitz that I should keep myself out of it, that to allow anything personal into the text would be *lèse-majesté*,

a claiming of connection to something to which I had no literal connection. Except that I was a human and I do connect, or constellate, with this place.

Primo Levi recalled the Ancient Mariner and his need to tell his story to any that would listen. He shot the albatross of Auschwitz but it was a mistake, nobody wanted it. Afterwards he carried the camp strung around his neck for the rest of his life. He could only escape the bird by jumping off his balcony. I too carried Auschwitz around my neck like the albatross, hung there for the audacity of being if this is a man. I felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story. But my story is orthogonal to his, it is a constellational tale, created from time and place.

I am half a Jew, or a whole Jew, or not a Jew at all, depending on where you start from. People assume that I am interested in the subject because of a Jewish heritage. I tell them that it is not a project born of Jewishness, determined that my Jewishness, and possibly any Jewishness, has nothing to do with this project. They look at me sadly and try to explain to me how it is indeed some form of internal Jewishness that drives me on. Some people can't handle Auschwitz not being a purely Jewish story. Some can't handle it being a Jewish story. Personally, I don't even believe in Jewishness. The antisemite defines the Jew.

It's a lot of Jewspaining: explaining to the Jew what the Jew thinks.

I have no direct connection to this place. My connection is as a human being. If I am a man. I appreciate the danger in making this leap, but it is a leap that has to be made. I am allowed to make it. I don't need my Jewish father, my half-Jewishness (whatever that means) to validate or explain this work. It is natural work, work that needs to be done.

Consider if this is a woman

After I lost a pedal on the way to Oświęcim and my broken bike was repaired and returned to me with a second-hand crank I took with pleasure to the country roads around Birkenau. I got lost immediately in the baking sun and flat landscape but it was pleasant cycling. I sped from hamlet to hamlet looking for the places where Charlotte worked outside the camp. The weather is all wrong but the landscape can't have changed that much, can it. I was landmarking but was I landmarked?

In the countryside around Oświęcim almost all buildings were torn down during the war, the materials used to build Birkenau. After the liberation the camp was partially torn down and the process reversed. I find myself paying close attention to anything that looks old. Was it here during the offence? Did it witness the events? Did the events witness this building? All buildings here are suspect, complicit.

I stared at older houses around the camp. Old is a relative term here where everything is post-war. Some houses are shoddily built with a particular type of brick and concrete. I imagine people arriving, claiming parcels of land and scavenging to build new houses using whatever came to hand. Even bricks from the crematoria. I studied post war images of the ruins and compared them to what exists today. Was the rubble stolen?

I realise how much is lost or missing or simply unsignposted in this place. The first synagogue of Oświęcim is lost, nobody knows where it was situated. Not an unusual situation for old places, and this is an old place. But the modern synagogues are missing too.

By April 1941 some 17,000 people in Oświęcim itself and surrounding villages had been forced to leave their homes and eight villages were wiped off the map. The population shrank to 7,600. In the Plawy and Harmeze districts, more than 90-percent of the buildings were destroyed and the residents of Plawy were transported to Gorlice to fend for

themselves. The old town is bounded by camp parts: to the West, Birkenau, to the South, Auschwitz I and to the East, the chemical plants that originated at Monowitz.

In the town itself there is a roundabout on the road that leads from the old town and the river up to the main road and the railway. The road runs up from the old town river crossing to the railway line north of the station. The road has been modernised and barriers built to protect buildings from noise pollution. It's now a standard road with small roundabouts. There are supermarkets and petrol stations along the way including a Lidl that I sometimes shop in and a small cycle shop where I once bought a new bell for my bike. Mundanities. The road has some remaining old buildings on it and I try to gauge which might be pre-war, which might have memories. At a roundabout, surrounded by high fences, there is some sort of large brick-built school. It says Gymnasium on the front. At home I have a set of photographs that I bought from eBay as part of my mission to accumulate fragments. I think one of the photographs might be of this building, so I take a photo through the opening in the fence. When I get home I show them both to my daughter. 'Of course it's the same building,' she says immediately. I am pleased to have overlain something from the wartime period over the contemporary world. At the West end of this road before it joins the main road into town and encounters the railway line the buildings peter out, becoming more redolent of the pre-war town. I spend a lot of time sitting in the McDonalds at the top of this road.

One morning, en route to Birkenau on my bicycle from the Rynek on the main road that runs along the route of the river, I encountered a cyclist who warned me to get off the path. I refused to cede my right of way. Further along I met a long line of singing pilgrims carrying signs and loudhailers, escorted by priests. They passed the walls of Auschwitz without a glance as if it did not exist.

What is left, I asked myself as I cycled through the landscape. What remains embedded in the landscape. Anything? Everything? Does the landscape retain traces of the infamy? When ninety-year-old camp administrators are put on trial, what do they still carry that is punishable?

At a fundamental level there are no borders. Brexit puts back the borders, the EU removes them, there is a tension between those two desires.

I wanted to find a thread to pull. Everybody who wrote about Auschwitz, who left a clue, left a spatial clue. I started to assemble them, to map them, to landmark them and be landmarked by them. Not everyone who wrote about Auschwitz knew where they were geographically. That didn't matter. They all identified something.

The railway line to this place is being modernised. I track the progress on each visit. They seem to be electrifying the line and building bigger stations. Huge fence like barriers are being built along the line. When I first see them they are embryonic, lines of girders embedded in the soil, but on later visits they are both finished and the white barriers despoiled with graffiti. I'm not sure what they are for, but the Poles seem to like building these tall fences around transport routes.

Charlotte Delbo walked out of the camp, walked out into the empty landscape, as part of a work duty. The fences were not impermeable. Later she explained where she was going. She was going to work, of course, but she was also going to die. They tore down buildings with their bare hands and carried those who died back to the camp on doors.

It was the first mapping I found, the first memory of walking outside the camp. The words gave direction and I immediately wanted to walk her route, to immerse myself in her world, to see what she saw, to measure the distance that she travelled. That would be a spatial undertaking. The first issue is which exit she came from because, turning left

or right, it matters. Where are the plains. She describes everything and she describes nothing. Where is the water, her streams?

I ordered a book of photographs of the Holocaust, *A Wounded Landscape* (Wilson et al. 2021), by a photographer called Marc Wilson who specialises in this subject. Marc is renowned for this work. The book contains a photo of abandoned greenhouses at the site across the marshes from Birkenau where she worked on an experimental rubber crop. I looked for this site for a long time, undertaking my own research on the ground by walking up and down the main road. He seemed to have found what I was looking for. I asked him how he found the site and he replied, 'My notes were quite sparse for some locations but I have it just north of Raijsko off the main 933'. The place he indicated is very close to where I had marked a potential site directly onto the map, although I had never been there. I wondered if it can be the farm that Delbo describes. If so it has survived in the manner of Monowice to provide employment to the new population. I make a note to visit the site.

We turned either to the right or to the left. To the right were the marshes. To the left the houses to be demolished, the tipcarts to fill and push. For weeks I was hoping we would turn right because then we would walk across a small stream where I might get some water to drink. Most of the time we were taken to the marshes.

The marshes. A plain covered with marshes. Marshes as far as the eye can see. An infinite expanse of icy plain.

[...] You walk on. You go toward the marshes drowned in fog. You walk without seeing anything, eyes riveted to the feet ahead of you. You go on. You walk through the plain covered by marshes. Marshes reaching to the line of the horizon. In the limitless plain, the frozen plain. You walk.

We were walking since daybreak. Today the road is iced over, polished like a mirror. We slide on this icy surface, fall. The column keeps on going. There are those we must carry because their legs are so swollen they are unable to take a step. The column keeps on going. We reach another turn in the road, apprehensive because there the wind shifts. It blows straight into our faces, cutting, icy. We know we are drawing close to the marshes because of the fog. We walk in the fog where we see nothing. There is nothing to see. An infinite expanse of marshy land, the plain drowned in fog. The plain wrapped in icy cotton.

We are on our way. We keep on walking, intent on feet alone. We have been walking since early daybreak.

We walk.

We keep on walking

We walk through the icy plain (Delbo 1995).

Consider if this is a woman.

I have a photo, bought as part of a set from an eBay auction, which shows two soldiers standing near to a building. On the back is written Raisko, the sub-camp where she worked on an experimental farm. These men might have guarded Delbo herself. Why not? I feel closer to my subject even while I'm not sure what my subject is.

Forensics

For every Holocaust museum in the world there is the original signifying precursor, the macabre simulation that the escaping Germans left behind in 1945, a place that the foresighted remaining prisoners claimed as their own. The existence of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum sanctifies and challenges every other Holocaustian museum, howsoever they justify themselves. Every museum is a site of forensics, a rhetorical device asking again, what if this is a man.

Forensics derives from the Latin term 'before the forum'. It refers to making propositions through objects. The Holocaust museum is neither elusive nor contingent. It is an expanded field of spatial investigation and enquiry.

A superstes is a witness who has lived through something and testifies about it. A terstis is a third-party witness proffering hearsay. Levi was a survivor witness. We are busy building memorials to memory, third party shrines to the enormity. As the superstes die out the terstis hold court. We venerate survivors despite being told by Levi that the

true witnesses were the ones who died. We allow the survivors a get out of jail free card although they have emerged from 'the gray zone in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims' (Agamben, 1999:17).

Forensic archaeology is a methodology aimed at narrating histories from the things that it saturates. The objects/things or structure should not be seen in isolation, but as a part of a complex assemblage. The discipline concerns the presentation of spatial evidence as digital models, maps or simulations. It is a new language which is elusive and contingent.

The Holocaust exhibit at The Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London was opened in June 2000, the first permanent exhibition in a UK museum dedicated to the Holocaust, fifty-five years after the liberation of Auschwitz. It is not a Holocaust museum but a part of a museum of war.

I first visited this exhibit within a few years of it opening. It made me cry. Suddenly I saw the Holocaust as organised theft, as a system for stealing the wealth of a continent by disposing of the owners. All for that? I thought.

The IWM has been to generations of schoolboys (and I use the gender specificity here deliberately) a place of immense pleasure and excitement. School trips there were inevitably the highlight of the year. I can recall visiting it myself as a schoolboy and barely being able to believe the treasury of war vehicles and armaments that it contained. Even today, stepping through the doors excites me far more than it should do and I have to remind myself not to become entranced by the technology on display. Of course, I would not have visited the Holocaust exhibit as a schoolboy as it did not exist.

Founded in 1917 to record the civil and military war effort and sacrifice of Britain and its Empire, the museum is located in a building in South London that was originally a Victorian asylum, the Bethlem Royal Hospital, which gave us the term bedlam. I have never understood whether it is supposed to be a museum of Imperial wars or a War

museum that has an Imperial nature. Neither version gives a very welcoming account of the origin and purpose of such a museum and both clashes severely with the subject of the Holocaust, which was in itself a colonial undertaking. Look at how good we are at war, it seems to say. Look at our colonial success, our imperial splendour, our colonial history.

In 2021 a new set of Holocaust galleries opened at the Imperial War Museum, replacing the existing exhibition and reinforcing the ‘importance of the Holocaust in World War II’. I saw this as an attempt to bring the Holocaust home, to Britishise it, as this country has never really understood or felt innately any connection to the events in Europe. ‘The galleries will aim to show how the Nazis not only used concentration camps to murder more than six million Jews, but also used them as part of its war effort, forcing prisoners to build the bombs that fell on Britain (Morrison 2019).

The people you see at the beginning are the people you see at the end



Figure 15 The People You See At The Beginning Are The People You See At The End, Ivan Pope 2016

The town changes even as I visit. There is some effort to reveal new aspects of the past. New signage appears around the sites. It is random and doesn't add much to anyone's ability to find anything, pointing only in vague directions. At Birkenau, outside the rerouted and redesigned main entrance plaza, a sign for the Roma museum was added to one for the Jewish museum. You only see it when you exit the camp and it's not clear what effect these signs are supposed to have. They point to the road from the camp and say the sites are three kilometres away, which I suppose they are, but nobody would find either of them from such a starting point, even if they had the means to set out towards Oświęcim. Mostly they will never see the town, dependent as they are on their coach drivers to whisk them back to Krakow.

Few people come individually to the town, though this may be changing. Birkenau has acquired a set of electric carts for park and ride. I see them sitting on the new entrance roadway, sitting in fact over the railway tracks which are now set in concrete where they cross the road. Nobody takes much notice of parking protocol in this place.

There is a dowdy park and ride operation at the far corner of Birkenau, opposite the desolation of Meksyk (Mexico), next to the old SS headquarters which has been converted into a Catholic centre.

Meksyk has acquired a fence since I first visited, closing off an alternative way into and out of the site, a route that had the potential to undermine the museum's control and its focus on rail lines and gas chambers. The entrance at Mexico is a long way from the bustle of the gatehouse with its bookshop and coach park closed off. I have no idea if this is a temporary coronavirus solution or a permanent clampdown of control. Everywhere the remnants are being brought in house.

From inside the fences of Birkenau a long vista with railway tracks can be seen. Depending on where a photographer positions themselves, and what time of day or year the photo is taken, they can include the railway wagon and crowds of visitors – or none of these things. The iconic view of Birkenau always looks back towards the gate and never, for example, towards the monument at the back of the site or across the camp. These alternative views are not so well known. Views from inside the camp are more photogenic than views from the outside. A photograph taken from the front of the camp (and plenty of them exist) doesn't have the same opportunity to set up an emotional vista. There is less track on the outside and it curves gently into the entrance. There is a bookshop and other detritus on the front of the building but little or none on the back. It is hard to keep this clutter out of a photo and harder to explain why it is there.

The gate at Birkenau is well known globally and rivals the Arbeit Macht Frei sign at Auschwitz for fame. The gate at Birkenau has recently started to be called The Gate of Death. This seems to be a recent coinage but it is now used as if it is an official and longstanding term.

Objects have always been taken from the site, now they are also returned. There is a regular drumbeat of people caught removing artefacts. Acts of theft and vandalism have forced an increase of visible and hidden security. This makes me nervous. Is it legitimate to remove an acorn? A leaf? A soil sample? I was chased out of the back entrance to the

site on my first visit. The guards probably thought I was stealing something. I was stealing knowledge, looking for a tree, for trees, for birches.

There was an Auschwitz museum of the mind before most surviving inmates had got home. At liberation, staff of the future museum tried to protect the grounds and buildings of the former camp and keep them tidy. They had barely any influence on the institutions that administered the premises. Under Soviet control buildings were stripped of furnishing and equipment. Even the Arbeit Macht Freguards, was taken down by the Soviet forces in 1945 and prepared for transport East. Following the bribing of guards it was recovered and reinstalled over the gate by the nascent museum authorities.



Figure 16 Main gate to Auschwitz with removed Arbeit Macht Frei sign

In 2009 the Arbeit Macht Frei sign above the gate at Auschwitz was cut down in the night and spirited away by thieves. It only took a couple of ladders and some spanners to remove it. Like stealing the *Mona Lisa*, the thieves must have known it could never be sold on the open market and rumours of some Nazi Mr Big ordering so he could re-erect it over a gate in his lair deep in their country estate abounded. Police found the dismantled

lettering hundreds of miles away in the backyard of a shop belonging to one of the thieves. It had been broken into three pieces. A spokesman for the museum said that it would be reassembled and re-erected as quickly as possible, but this was not the case.

The sign you now see over the gate is a replica, a forgery.

The recovered sign converted into a work of art by the placing of it on easels.

The studio assistants in tasteful white coats.

Large scale drawings framed on the wall.

A revelation before an expectant international audience.

A repaired fragment from the offence.

Theft liberates,

makes free.

It is said that the prisoners who made the sign deliberately fitted the B of ARBEIT upside-down as a protest against the entire enterprise. Whether this is true or not, it has entered the mythology of the place and is now taken to be part of the fragmentary tale of resistance. A large stainless-steel three-dimensional inverted B sits in front of the coach-park restaurant at Birkenau. It was made by apprentices at BMW in Germany.

In 2008 I made a font from the lettering of the sign. This font gave me the ability to play endlessly with the text. It feels to me like another dangerous element in my lifelong collection of Holocaust symbols and portents. In this font you can see the upside-down B.

objects, make trades, wheel and deal to fill the exhibition space. I wasn't so far from the truth, although I didn't discover this for many years.

My first trip to a Holocaust site in East Europe was not to Auschwitz but to Vilnius in Lithuania, to visit the killing pits at Ponary, outside the town. I was trying to write a novel, *The Librarian of Ponary Wood*, which mixed memories of being a teenager in the 1970s with memory and a familial absence of talk about the Holocaust. The structure for this book had been with me for a long time. It was taken from a situation described by my friend Robbie years before on the kibbutz in Israel. His father had lost an entire family in the Holocaust, he said, and he was part of his father's second family. That concept had stayed with me.

I was never completely confident that I was allowed to address this subject. I am not alone in my qualms though I can at least claim a Jewish connection if I have to.

'for a German gentile to write about Jewish lives is not unproblematic. There are examples of that, writers attempting this in Germany in the 1960s and 70s, and many of these attempts are — one can't say it really otherwise — shameful. In the sense that they usurp the lives of these people [...] It's very, very difficult terrain' (Sebald and Schwartz, 2007: 110).

Everything here is, at its base, a desire to talk about being a thing and not being a thing at the same time. Jews who are not Jews. My father who was a Jew who was not a Jew. How the people murdered in the Holocaust were just people. How I am a Frenchman and not a Frenchman. Who we are and why we are that. How the antisemite defines the Jew. How Auschwitz is not Auschwitz. The interpenetration of things.

Writing about the Holocaust is difficult, visiting seems to need even more explanation. Not a single visit, that is almost a duty, but repeated visits raise questions, become suspicious, if only to myself. Why would I go back again and again, stay in the town of Oświęcim, trawl the spaces around the camp, enter and re-enter the dark spaces? What

am I looking for? To understand the lay of my land, the conjoined nature of camp and person, to examine the topography and the topology of myself? I end up desiring to live in the vicinity, on the edge of old Europe, in the midst of old nightmares. This activity starts to generate a new view of the place, the places. I'm not clear whether I should be doing this or writing this, but as I am engaged in the process it has to run its course.

My interest in the subject is not new or even recent, it flows back to the early days of my life. It is so embedded that I fall naturally into being a visitor, a researcher, even though nobody takes me seriously.

When I was a young man a fierce anger swept through me alongside the love that I felt for the world, and I liked to go out into the adult world and pick fights in pubs. The concept was cinematic, the intention that I would engage in a fistfight of the sort where chairs got broken over people's heads but nobody ever suffered real damage, least of all me. I wasn't a coward, but I didn't like being hurt. I was taller than many people but slight and a fairly bad fighter and if matched against anyone bigger and heavier almost inevitably lost. I hated bullies, have always hated bullies, and will always defend the powerless side. I know that I view the Holocaust as bullying and that I support the weaker side. Is that wrong? How else can one rationalise such an event?

A hatred of bullies may have come from being bullied. For a long time, I denied even to myself that I was bullied, and what I suffered wasn't overly violent, but eventually I had to admit to myself that the way my friends treated me when I was young probably amounted to bullying. They taunted me, they ganged up on me and sometimes they kicked me. They kept away from me and refused to let me join in their games. Maybe I was just too different, the classic outsider, like an autistic child in a field of ordinariness. What I do know is that by the time I left my little primary school (that I loved dearly) I was coursing with anger and had enemies beyond my years, scores to settle. Even then I feel that my life was set on its course, to lash out, to refuse, to seethe, to fight.

I found it hard to believe that within my lifetime (using a lifetime as a measure) we are worrying again about the Baltic states, about whether Russia might attempt to pick them off from their new orbit in the west, to reabsorb them (relating the past and now to a lifetime). Everything revolves around bullies, those who can bully.

Some part of my family left Lithuania towards the end of the 19th century and emigrated to South Africa, as many of their countryjews did. They left the Pale, left the contested country, the shtetl, the mix of languages, and went to a place where all this still existed, of course, yet as white Europeans they could safely ignore it and be ignored by it.

There is so much of Europe that has transitioned across borders, seized, returned, fought for, spilled blood for, died for. I was born in a period of peace, the war seemingly over, and unlike my parents I didn't expect to go through conflict. In the second part of my life, after the Soviet Union fell apart, wars raged briefly across Eastern Europe. In the West we tended to look away, to pretend they were nothing to do with us. Small countries far away relearned the art of scapegoating, of murder and dying, of torture and agony, of suffering and woe.

Russia has seized Crimea, there's no other way to put it. They invaded a landmass of a neighbouring country under cover and annexed it. They further invaded the same neighbour, creating an army of supposed dissidents, arming and training and supporting them and creating a confusing morass of tales so that internationally nobody had much of a clue what was going on. This seemed to work reasonably successfully, although as we know from history, these things have a short half-life. They start to fall apart fairly quickly.

The Pale of Settlement stretched down the middle of Europe, from Lithuania in the North to Ukraine in the South, joined by Belarus. None of these countries are known to us here. Within the Pale Jews could largely find permanent residency, though not in many cities.

Pale, from Latin palus, is a wooden stake, a fence, a boundary, a threshold. This rhetorical and practical boundary held Jews in and when the Nazis came with their Einsatzgruppen, the organised military extermination squads, the Jews were there, sitting ducks. Where is the war now? Where are the tension points? Where did the Holocaust occur? The Holocaust was not a top-down project, it grew in the soil, ideas were dug up and replanted. The Holocaust was made from a thousand, from a million small actions. No one thing set it on its way, it was an accumulation and probably from a thousand years before. The parts were lying around, embedded in the culture, there for the finding, for reuse, to be assembled into a new thing.

Fragments of Auschwitz are everywhere. Auschwitz is in us, it has been for seventy-five years or more, in our bloodstream, in our consciousness, making up our consciousness. It is the topology of Auschwitz that is within us. The topography is elsewhere. Only by visiting do we bring the topography and topology into alignment to create Auschwitz.

That spoon there,

in the soil.

That's somebody's spoon.

It was probably picked up in haste from the kitchen drawer and put into a suitcase. Everyone needs spoons, spoons are an old tool, easy to understand, useful for many things. Of course, we expect to eat, but we need our implements. Put some spoons in, and some knives, we'll need them wherever we end up. And now here is a spoon at my feet, in the grass, emerged from the soil of the camp, the broken remnants of a spoon. Everything of use, of value, ended up in the warehouses called Canada, the land of plenty. Spoons were doled out randomly. To have a bowl was sometimes to live, to have a spoon was to be elevated above the mire. To have access to Canada was to have currency.

When I arrived at Auschwitz I did not at first see the constellation so keen was I on locating fragments. How does the process of investigating the environs of a site translate into a text: how is the site chosen; how is the site defined; what part do the fragments play in the space, the boundaries, the text; what is the text? The text emerged from the map.

We remediate fragments.

look back through the mists

try and discern

the landscape of memorialisation,

emerges,

in the period during which

the need to memorialise

emerges.

Who first kept a banal artefact from the camp? Who made the first display, why?

It is always important to commemorate.

As I moved around, now closer, now further from the centre, edges, markers, fences, signs, guides, memories, recollections of the place, I collated fragmentary elements with a view to compositing them into a text. The form was unclear, but the landscape, the topography and the topology, prompted a form and the text emerged.

I start to move the mass of fragments.

I start to move within the mass of fragments.

I remembered things I have read from the past alongside new texts that I read in the present. My digital devices collected data as I moved, they tracked me, recorded my progress, referenced images against locations, against time, against my communications

with others. From this digital record I could extract a flow of data and reconstruct my psychogeographical progress. I surveyed my collection from multiple perspectives, assembling the parts in this way and then that, always hoping that a form would emerge, that I would stumble on some sort of coherent world. I felt like Olga Tokarczuk as she worked towards her constellation novel, *Flights*: ‘I desperately tried to find a form for such a book, and I couldn’t [...] To determine the final form, she spread out the book’s fragments—a hundred and six of them—on the floor of her workroom and stood on a table so that she could survey them from above’ (Franklin 2019).

From my fragments a whole is composed,
 by larding them with the experience in the field I am recast
 by moving in the landscape,
 by my investigation
 by my understanding of the relationship between myself, the place and the
 rest of the world,
 between history and the present
 a constellation constellates.

Nothing is a single event but a complex multiplicity from which fragments can escape, like during the smashing of electrons in an accelerator. Even seemingly simple events are not a single event. The pattern that is revealed can be examined as evidence. ‘Proust could not finish things [...] his vaunted “unity” was nothing but dissimilar fragments (Maddocks, 1971: 9). In *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus asked where two Kitaj paintings, *The Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)* and *If not, If not* existed in history, ‘I question the sense of historiography that installing them this way implies. As if there’s any correlation between chunks of history, past events’ (2016: 177). And there it is, wedged up against the remains of the wire fence at Birkenau, the mobile boundary which

has expanded to this point as I thought it would. We are at Auschwitz, in an Auschwitz state of mind. The site and the world are full of fragments: in the soil, in the buildings, in the stores, in the locality, in houses and in hidden places, they are unavoidable. This past returns regularly, one way or another but never in one lump.

In 1967 archaeologists dug up more than 16,000 small
objects,
put in boxes,
shelved,
forgotten.

The missing artifacts were recently found
tucked away in
48
cardboard boxes.

Holocaust collection,
an appalling trade in Holocaust memorabilia.

Dolls clutched
children in Nazi death camps
money used by inmates in medieval-style ghettos
yellow Stars of David
set the enthusiasts' pulses racing.
the ID papers of inmates of the Lodz ghetto and the Auschwitz camp,
Nazi death camp armbands
cash used by the inmates
an entire Auschwitz striped uniform
"cheapens the memory

of all that” .

In May 2020 Austria's National Fund for Victims of National Socialism discovered a number of knives, forks, scissors and tools hidden beneath a chimney in Block 17 at Auschwitz. Workers exposed a chimney flue and found the objects. Reasons for their concealment could include making and repairing clothes, locksmithing or to prepare for an escape – or for use in barter.

The rhizomatic expansion of Holocaust stories started slowly. Primo Levi wrote his first book in 1947 and found no buyer, no interest in his experiences. The rhizomes spread into the global sphere, extending and reinforcing themselves each year, building on what always had come before. More than twenty-five years after the end of the nightmare, Primo Levi dreamed of the Lager, a mise en abyme, a scene within a scene. In his dream is he remains in the camp, in the world he knew he could never escape from what he experienced. Although it is unavoidable, impossible to not be like this, it is his own work that has littered the world with fragments from the Lager. Levi has built his own prison for himself, he is both inside and outside the camp eternally. The exeterotopia has formed itself around him, there is no escape.

Levi died in 1987
in a fall from his apartment
he may have killed himself,
probably killed himself.

Rosenberg's father
drowned himself
in a lake

in Sweden

while committed to an asylum.

Szymon Kluger returned from Sweden,
to Oświęcim, to Auschwitz, to live next door
to reclaim his family home, to become a hermit,
to not kill himself.

Brief pauses.

I collected fragments for thirty years.

adding to my store, my convolutes,

day on day,

month on month,

without a feel for where it would end.

It seemed like a long time.

I wasn't thinking Auschwitz

although

all along

Auschwitz was thinking me.

How strange those events are when considered within the present. Life goes on. I was an artist, an entrepreneur, a writer. I was engaging with the world, not trying to disinter it, to dig into the darkest of the past but not to tell the story of that past. That seemed impossible.

I was aware that slowly, layer of dust by layer of dust, I was building my own history, a history of the present. When Walter Benjamin fled Paris to escape the Nazis he left his manuscripts to Georges Bataille who distributed them to hiding places around Paris. After the war many parts of Benjamin's work could not be found. In 1981 Giorgio Agamben, while poring over Bataille's correspondence [in the Biblioteque National]

found a clue, and then another. A few months later he held five folders (Leland de la Durantaye 2013):

1. Typescripts
2. fair copies
3. notecards
4. observations written on café stationery
5. drafts made on the backs of letters
6. outlines
7. schemas
8. tables
9. and colour-coded indices

It was the lost book, the last work. He found them within a penumbric space. Benjamin had died in the soglia. Benjamin had listed the contents, the fragmentary detritus of life itself. His work became the bible of rag pickers, fragment collectors. What my own convolutes reveal is how we look at that past from within our present, how stories emerge from the dark and become something else within that knitted framework.

Joseph Hirt fabricated stories of being in Auschwitz using the well-known iconic imagery.

[He] ‘told people that he was arrested by the Nazis, sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, and met Mengele, the SS physician who tortured prisoners of the concentration camp. Hirt claimed to have escaped under an electric fence at the camp (Yuhas 2015).’

In an insane act of hubris, he had the camp number of Primo Levi tattooed on his left forearm. When Hirt was exposed he said it was ‘in no way an attempt to take on his identity, but in an effort to incorporate his symbol as a way of remembering him’. This progenic lying, the incorporation of symbol upon symbol, did not expose him: nobody knew Levi’s number anyway. The very existence of a number tattooed in blue ink on the

forearm conferred survivor authenticity. Herman Rosenblat, a Polish survivor, also embellished his memoir and made up some parts entirely. In the *New Republic*, historian Ken Waltzer wrote that he was alarmed by how quickly people accepted the story. It was all the more important, then, to have real memoirs that tell of real experience in the camps.

Lockdown now seems to have stretched on for ever
but I don't notice,
my days are spent deep inside an Auschwitz world.
I don't talk about it, much.
there is nobody to talk to.
who needs to know the details?
Already they know everything, what more can there be to learn?
time passes
my high-level view of the place,
my constant passes over the landscape,
start to unfold
like the long mile.

I accumulated photographs and guidebooks and as many maps as I could find. I collected objects of no value related to a subject that the world knows only too well. Trying to collect as much material as I could about the town, the camps, was a strange pursuit.

I set alerts in eBay and wait. Auschwitz. Birkenau. Monwice. Oświęcim.
Every few day new items popped up
generally cheap
(photographs are expensive).
Objects from the camp are rare.

I take a punt,
spending money I don't have
on objects with no use.
I can't get close to the source, don't want to.
I am building my own small museum. A museum of a museum of a
Holocaust.
I assume the detritus will reveal something as it accumulates.
eBay is an archive for rag pickers by rag pickers.
One day it may disgorge more of Benjamin's work.
I buy a 19th century map,
it shows
the area around Oświęcim
before the war,
a connection to Oświęcim in which Auschwitz does not exist.
It's too expensive for me,
But I have to have it,
it was what I was looking for, looking back for
it is time travel.
details emerge from it.
history and events are grated and graded by location, by boundings, by
roads and railways.
fragments of the landscape don't move,
even over hundreds of years
what was there before, what is there now,
features were interpolated by the Nazi machine,
into their zone of interest.

I pick out details, begin to understand

I try to look, just try to see

the camps were not built randomly in empty fields.

Buildings, entire villages, were cleared to make way for murder

the German war machine had any resources it wanted,

used the most brutal techniques on the population and the workforce,

but the landscape retained its imprint.

Nothing came from nothing.

The town and camps today

the town and camps of wartime

are very different, yet overlap

Topology begets topography. I learn the names of the parts, the districts of

Oświęcim.

the soglia rises,

the theory becomes fact,

visible.

I find

a palimpsest written over the obliterated maps

of that place in Poland

that the world knows as Auschwitz.

It took me the best part of a lifetime to write this text

I had to come to this place.

I didn't know I was headed here

everything has been preparation,

a quest,

my Robinson Crusoe moment.

When a crack appeared in my scriptural empire I became interrupted and haunted.

If this is a man's footprint.

thirty years collecting fragments to define this non-place.

I am writing a text by accumulation.

Nobody knows what I am doing,

there is no opportunity to let this text leak out.

My thing.

when I read Marc Augé's book, non-places.

I dreamed the place into being.

I knew I was getting home

Auschwitz was my non-place.

Entropy

I was changing and was changed by Auschwitz, it tugged at my roots. I walked over it as it slumbered in the soil, dug in, holding fast against modernity.

When the guards disappeared and the gates swung open and the Russians appeared, on that day the perfectly ordered universe started to unravel.

The elements that made up the camp became disordered and exploded and they could never be put back together again.

Time moves in only one direction, energy runs down. Through the saeculum¹⁷, the State Of Mind would dissipate. Nothing could happen overnight but it was inevitable that dissipation would occur.

¹⁷ A saeculum is the tick of a single lifetime or, more usefully, the period of time over which a city entirely renews its population, or the time from when a thing happened to the point at which all people who had lived in that first moment were dead. In the Romance languages it has become the word for century. A saeculum can be divided into four seasons, youth, rising adulthood, midlife and old age. A saeculum lasts for around ninety years.

When the camp closed a new saeculum started, the saeculum of Auschwitz, in which we are living. The living and the dead flowed outward at the moment of closure. Some were dead within hours, some were still on the road, on death marches, drifting around the countryside, for weeks. Some survived. A life force drove them on, outwards, back into the world in which the word Auschwitz meant little. Some ended up in the new nation of Israel, many in America, a few in Germany. Those that returned to their homes were rudely disabused of the notion that they could remain there. Europe had become hostile to survivors, violently so. There are too many vested lives in stolen properties, too many assets that nobody wants to return.

They are detritus, adrift
before settling and rebuilding.
All are broken
the process of recuperation
beginning.

Primo Levi took years to return home. Eventually he wrote a book about his journey. Many took similar circumlocutory journeys. The human survivors are the fastest moving and most widespread of the fragments that the camp blows out into the world, and soon they started to tell their stories, but nobody was interested.

The charnel clock ticks survivors into their graves, into a city of the dead defined by mortality. That clock counts down the hours and stores bones in the exterotopia. People never stop dying, they die because they are alive, they die because of what happened before they died, they die because of new events. The revenants of Auschwitz stumbled back into the world. Many had gone before, now dead or dying or about to be liberated from other camps or onto the roadside. Death marches set out in the winter cold, spectres driven by fanatical frightened guards who shot anyone who slipped back. The arm of the

charnel clock sweeps survivors into the ossuary. The arm of the charnel clock never stops moving but it slows and becomes predictable over time. Each year there are fewer survivors although there always seemed to be more survivors. 'History is on our heels, following us like our shadows, like death' (Augé 1995: 26-27).

Assuming advances in medical ability and the extension of life expectancy the saeculum of Auschwitz may last until the end of this century. Then the last Holocaust survivor will be gone. Everybody that was alive at the start will have died. The entire planet will be comprised of new people. Nobody alive in those days will remain. There will be no witnesses, the saeculum will be complete.

At some point the last person to be born in Auschwitz was born and survived to live to adulthood and to never be able to shake off that gnostic nomination. At some point the oldest person to enter the camp entered the camp and, no doubt, died there swiftly. One Auschwitz survivor become, in the fullness of time, the oldest man in the world. The oldest person ever lived to be over 122 years old. If they had been born in 1945 during those last terrible days at Auschwitz, the saeculum would end in 2067. Advances in medicine, the ability to keep people alive for longer and longer, means the real ending may well come even later.

Fragments are slotted into my algorithm and processed repeatedly, looped, assessed to fit within or between one or more parts of the site: the penumbria; the Zone of Interest; the heterotopia; the exeterotopia, the saeculum, the old town, Birkenau, Monowice, Auschwitz I. Fragments cross over or lie on the boundaries of the parts. How these parts relate, overlap, feed on and inform each other, how they negate, amplify, prove, cancel or elevate each other, and where the fragments lie is a key issue in this research. Inside the perimeter of Birkenau I found my own flatted spoon.

Each object carries a particle of the text. It is marked to identify its position both within the topographical parameters and on the meshwork or network. Things become fragments and the meshwork becomes constellations. We build houses of fragments which are supposed to link us to the enormity, the rupture, the caesura. We fill these houses with objects that have a mystical or prosaic link to the events we wish to recuperate, but it is unsure as to whether we achieve our objective.

To create this text, which is aiming towards a deep map, I traded in artefacts and stories, each probably the same as the other. To create a history of artefacts, of the collection and display of artefacts, of the consolidation and presentation of artefacts, of the institutionalisation and naming of collections of artefacts, to the emergence of symbolism and fixity in the field of memorialisation.

When nobody was looking at the camps they were
emptied of their occupants,
put to use for new residents,
new classes of the unwanted and corralled,
abandoned and stripped for materials
forgotten,
starting subsidence
into ruin.

Remember that when you enter the museum the people you see at the beginning are the bodies you will see at the end.

Auschwitz

‘A red bus crammed with people was approaching from the town. Leading to the museum is a small section of greenery. Beneath some

poplars there are bright colourful benches. Fiery red flowers glow in the dry faded grass. Past the shrubbery, two-storey brick buildings are visible in neat rows. The buildings are surrounded by barbed wire. Under one poplar there is a small table. An elderly woman is seated. On the table are guidebooks to the museum, books, photo albums' (Rózewicz 2013: 100).

Tickets for Auschwitz are almost impossible to come by unless you plan a month in advance or buy your way in via a tour from Krakow. There is some sort of racket operating below the surface, but I can't work it out. The travel companies have all the tickets. I decide to see if I could get a ticket first thing in the morning. Nobody can get from Krakow to Oświęcim by 8am, I think. I am wrong. A line of visitors stretches all the way around the car park, standing in the early morning sun. A familiar crowd throngs the entrance. The car park is ringed with queuing visitors and filled with coaches. They must have got up very early to be here. I ask the ticket office about the library. They tell me there is a bookshop inside. I don't want the bookshop. I insist there is a library and I am a research student and I want access. They point me to security but that's not what I want.

I sit outside and phone the Auschwitz office. This is a strange thing, I tell myself. I'm sitting outside Auschwitz trying to organise admittance to Auschwitz. They answer the phone promptly and put me through to the library. Everyone is very polite. They are in Barrack 23. If I present myself to Reception, security will let me through. Finally I gain entrance to the site and pass under the famous sign. I make a note to ask the archivist about the railway that connects the Judenramp with the Birkenau camp.

Who visits Auschwitz? What is the profile of the visitor? There is a
Holocaust educational Auschwitz — obviously but also
there is a Jewish/Zionist
/Christian/Humanist
/Polish/German/fascist
/English/survivor

/historian/artist/family

/curator/archivist/preservationist

/mapmakers/miserabilist's

Auschwitz.

Barrack 23 is close to the gate. I make my way straight there. I don't want to abuse the privilege of being admitted this way when crowds are queueing around the square outside. The library is elegant, old fashioned and full of books, a repository of collected texts on the subject at hand, in all languages, a Library of Babel of Horror. But the librarian isn't interested in letting me hang out in his space. I ask about maps and he tells me that maps are held in the Archive, one barrack block over. He directs me to it and I leave, after taking a couple of surreptitious photographs.

At the Archive I am met with consternation. I do not have an appointment and I am not a formal research student with access. They are not sure what to do with me, I do not compute. I wait in the corridor while they confer. The floor has red lozenge tiles, the window frames, the long narrow space. All this is original, I tell myself. I am at the heart of Auschwitz, the abyss, the nerve centre. It is cool, quiet, formal, bureaucratic. I photograph everything. Then I am introduced to the Director who listens politely to my requirements and takes notes. He says that if I come back the following day he will ensure that the maps and plans I am interested in will be made available to me.

A lot of people work inside Auschwitz I. Day after day it is their workplace. They check in to an office in one of the barracks that have not been converted to exhibitions. Many of the barracks are offices, workplaces for bureaucrats and administrators who come to that site day after day and spend their working life there.

When my business is done I take a walk around the camp. It would seem churlish not to, although I gained admittance as a researcher. I other myself: I am not a casual

visitor. I am different. I didn't come here on a bus from Krakow and I will not be returning there. I've been wondering about this sanctum for a long time although it is not my focus. It is a strange busy place. There is no weeping in the crowds, no shocked silence. The groups walk from iconic site to iconic site. They cluster on doorsteps or in corners with their guides and are told the same old stories, I guess. They come from all over the world: this is a must do stop. They take endless photographs of the iconic views but they don't stop to let the enormity sink in. They shoot and move on, crowding to keep up with their group as if they might get unutterably lost if they relax for a moment.

Some national pavilions are more crowded than others. The Greek barrack is empty. There is a crowd at the door of the Israeli building. The Roma barrack, elegant and beautifully presented, is silent. It does a good job of making me cry.

In the archive I'm at ground zero with all the documented detail, beautifully drawn plans of every building and barrack and crematorium are available to me, scanned in high resolution. They even provide one original map, rolled out on the table. I am forbidden to photograph it. What I'm after was probably never documented — the villages torn down, the buildings demolished for the Lager, the views that preceded this place. What I am looking for is only documented by the fragments, the remains, by the actions of the Foundation and of outsiders.

The archivists in their Lager are concerned in keeping their knowledge safely within strictly prescribed bounds. They are only concerned with the period of German occupation and they are only concerned with the immediate confines of Auschwitz I, II and III. Issues of how their camp connected to other camps, to the outside world, to the populace, to history, maybe these are issues that concern them, but it is hard to discern.

I discover that the archive at KL contains only documents and plans from the camp years, with few exceptions. The archive, the museum, simply has no interest in the wider world, the parts of the Lager that ended up outwith the museum grounds. The Judenramp,

the railway spur, the potato warehouses, the old town, not their concern (though they do have maps that show these areas, they admit). They are sealed off from the bigger picture. In their worldview, nothing is a grey area. I am only interested in the grey areas.

I was always alone at Auschwitz but I wanted to be a tour guide, to gather others around me and walk with them and tell them stories, to show them the edges, the hinterland, the connective tissue, the limina, the penumbric spaces. I wasn't interested in the wildlife, I passed over it without seeing, without noticing. Again, I remembered that birds are said not to sing in Birkenau? I was interested in the birches, the trees from which Birkenau took its name.

The Castle of Oświęcim, Dukes Castle, Museum in Oświęcim,
The church of Our Lady, Help of Christians and Saint Jack Chapel.
Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue. Jewish Museum and Center.
Jewish Cemetery.
Bulwary Park,
Murals,
Main Market Square.
Slebarskis' House,
Former Town Hall,
Former Herz Hotel.
The parish church of the Assumption of Holy Mary,
Wedding Palace.

(From a map produced by the Municipality of the Town of Oświęcim)

The Auschwitz Cross

In 1979 Pope John Paul II held a mass for 500,000 people on the grounds of Birkenau. The slow painful removal under international pressure of a controversial convent within the boundary of the Auschwitz camp took until 1993. In 1988 the Carmelite order of nuns erected a large cross to commemorate the Pope's visit and hundreds of additional crosses were erected around it despite the opposition of the country's bishops and the international Jewish community. The cross was not removed when the nuns left, it still sits within a small fenced off site alongside the road that runs from the river Sola up past the camp entrance and on to the main road and the railway. It is probably not seen by many visitors.

Between Auschwitz I and the railway

The undelineated area between Auschwitz and the railroad, the space more or less between the river and the rails in the direction of Birkenau, was developed by the Germans into an area of armaments factories and workshops called the Industriehof. The buses that ply for free between Birkenau and Auschwitz barrel down the long straight road that runs through this zone. There are multiple abandoned railway lines that run into and out of industrial zones, following them becomes one of my methods of exploration. To the west is countryside, fields and then Raijsko where Charlotte Delbo worked in the research facility, the agricultural stations at Plawy, Harmense, Raisko, and Budy, with greenhouses, fish farms, cattle and pig farms, and chicken and rabbit farms, along with gravel works. Many of these were sub-camps.

It is a classic edgeland, the periphery that every city has, a semi-industrial zone made up of working factories and abandoned facilities, new developments, redevelopment sites, cheap premises for tyre companies and window makers and the like,

patches of scrubland filled with dumped materials, a disused power station towering over the area. It's almost impossible to work it all out by wandering around, but at least nobody cares when you do.

The road is not claimed by the museum, which shows scant interest outside its legally prescribed boundaries. The road is dotted with signs for parking. The camp entrance is industrial and gaping, signposted in many different ways. It opens onto a scruffy tarmac car and bus park. Across the road from the entrance is a small industrial park which includes eating places and a hotel or motel. These places have sprung up in response to the flow of tourists across the way, an opportunity. On the road that runs orthogonally away from the camp there is a food wagon at which I once ate an approximation of American street food. There was such a lack of casual food outlets in Oświęcim that I had to try everything I came across. It crossed my mind that a decent food wagon would be a good business investment here, then it occurred to me what a strange thought that was. I spent some time pondering setting up a bike hire service in the town and running tours of the environs of Auschwitz. It's not a terrible idea except that I don't speak Polish and don't have any money. Nevertheless, I can't quite shake the idea off.

The Supermarket

In 1996 in response to an article about a plan to build a supermarket, a home and garden centre, a supermarket and a fast-food restaurant 'right outside the gates of the former Auschwitz death camp' Andrew Charlesworth wrote a letter to *The Independent* newspaper. The story neatly delineated the various powerful elements that interacted in the story: local private industry; the town council, formal protection agreements and the Auschwitz museum: the project would be housed in existing buildings just outside the

main camp gate, it was approved by local authorities in the nearby town of Oświęcim, it did not contravene a 1979 Unesco order establishing a 500-metre protective zone around the camp, it had the backing of the director of the Auschwitz museum.

In his letter, Charlesworth pointed out that the dividing line between the 'secular world' and the 'sacred space' of the camp was ill-defined. Visitors were not 'guided' to understand when they crossed from one to the other and wouldn't be as offended by this development as those complaining were making out. His point was that the 'pass had been sold a long time ago'.

LETTER: The pass has already been sold at Auschwitz

Sir: Reports ("This is the man who planned to open a supermarket at Auschwitz", 13 March) on the development of a supermarket in factory buildings opposite the main entrance to the site of the concentration/death camp at Auschwitz have understandably raised concerns for those who do not know the landscapes of the camp and its environs.

This development would be offensive if the whole of the SS complex of camps had been preserved at liberation in 1945. From the very outset, however, the landscape has been altered. At Birkenau (the death camp for the extermination of Jews and gypsies) many of the wooden barracks were shipped off to provide temporary housing for Warsaw's homeless. At the Auschwitz main camp the SS housing was occupied by the local Polish population, the prisoner reception building became the museum visitor reception area with refreshment facilities, bookstall, cinema and a hotel.

All of this was done without explanation to the visitor so it is no wonder inappropriate behaviour sometimes occurs; visitors are not guided to understand when they cross the divide between the secular world and this more sacred space.

Since the fall of Communism this has been exacerbated by entrepreneurial ventures: hot dogs and ice cream can be purchased by the main entrance. Booksellers now almost crowd up to the Arbeit macht frei gate.

So what's new about this supermarket? The pass has already been sold. The tragedy is that the whole thing is being played out as a slanging match between Jews and Poles, which will perpetuate Auschwitz as a site of contestation rather than reconciliation.

Andrew Charlesworth

Reader in Human Geography¹⁸

The letter laid out what was always obvious about the areas that abutted the camp. They were valuable to the local community in many ways yet they were also too close to the sacred land of the museum for comfort. While it has always been clear that overdevelopment up to the boundaries of the museum would be unacceptable it has also been hard to draw enforceable lines to control a natural desire to develop. Charlesworth says the pass was already sold. He also understood the inevitability of this process and how it continued to play out into the present.

The Krupp factory



Figure 18 Figure 18 A work painted by inmate Władysław Siwek to the commission of the SS while working as part of the Werkhalle construction work squad.

I asked Ivo about a huge concrete building that I could see alongside the road, surrounded by woodland and a decaying fence. He told me he didn't know anything about it, then decided that it was accessible and swiftly pulled over into a small industrial site across the road. We climbed through the broken fence like schoolboys penetrating a dangerous

¹⁸ "LETTER: The Pass Has Already Been Sold at Auschwitz." 2020. The Independent. 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letter-the-pass-has-already-been-sold-at-auschwitz-1342730.html>.

yet alluring site, through a small forest that had grown up on the site and into a huge space, the floor littered with fragmented glass from the roof. Ivo told me he thought it had been a munitions factory built by the Germans. Huge amounts of graffiti indicated that the site was used by locals for recreation and other nefarious activities. Every town has this place. I doubt those who used it cared what its origins were, but to me it was like a huge spaceship that had been abandoned on the edge of town. Later I discovered the building was built by Auschwitz prisoners as a Krupp armaments factory. There were also buildings for concrete production and the camp fence posts were produced there. Everything here is linked, everything is knitted together and everything is complicit.

While we were threading our way in, Ivo told me that his father would know more about this place. I asked him when his father had come to the town, suddenly wondering whether he predated the Nazi period. Ivo said he had come to Oświęcim after the war. I realised that it was his father who had started the collection and the Foundation and was the man I had met on my first trip, to Body Bor.

Everything here is suspect and needs to be dated and cross referenced.

NKVD building

By the flyover that takes the road from Auschwitz I over the main road and the railway towards Birkenau is a building that was used to house civilian workers during the war and by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, after the war. Behind the building there is still a bunker used as storage and workshops by the inhabitants of the block. There are two plaques on the front of this housing block. They say:

In memory of innocent victims of communism who died at forced labour camps of NKVD and the Office of Public Security operating

here from 1945 to 1946. This tablet was erected by victims' descendants from Bielsko-Biala.

In the years 1941-45, these facilities housed both the "gemeinschaftslager" civil workers employed in the construction of KL Auschwitz. Prisoners' commandos were directed by the SS authorities to perform post-labor work in this camp.

Most of the remaining wartime buildings in the town are not marked as such. They do not carry plaques 'explaining' them. In fact, the entirety of Birkeanu is almost untroubled by memorial plaques. It is barely signposted as a camp. Auschwitz has some monuments in the coach park at front. Birkenau is unmarked, But this building contains multiple textual and informational markers, as if this place is an exception.

The dead may be invisible but they are not absent



Figure 19 Vintage silver print, tirage postérieur, author's collection

Andrzej Wajda's 1969 film, *Landscape After Battle*, although based on the liberation of Dachau, was shot in the grounds of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. The remains of the wooden barracks in Birkenau are clearly visible in the background. This is 'a choreographic fantasy of the liberation' (Lysak 2013). From the first moments the chimneys, all that remained of most huts after they were set alight, became an iconic, a metonymic signifier of Auschwitz. I walked across the acres of the empty site, from foundational ruin to foundational ruin, marvelling at the piles of bricks, the fragments of drinking vessels, the sanitaryware and the pipework that remained. Mostly I was intrigued by the emptiness of the site, of how the remaining wire fences divided it into a labyrinth, a puzzle into which it was easy to enter but from which it was hard to emerge. A maze that made any notion of visiting all parts of it almost beyond possibility. A forest of brick chimneys and concrete posts.

Reaching out to touch the hem of Mengele's coat, I sought objects from the first moments of liberation. On eBay, after my lower offers were rejected, I managed to buy a photograph, The liberation of Auschwitz re-enacted by Soviet troops. It cost me eighty-two Euros.

There were no photographers on hand when the Russian liberators arrived so this image is an authentic choreographic fantasy, an exhibit from post Holocaust Birkenau. It is the first post liberation performance at Auschwitz, but far from the last.

My friend Ivo took me on a tour around a variety of sites. He'd obviously forgotten where we'd been to before. I'd been out on my bicycle to some of them, but still Ivo knew a lot more than me. Apart from being a policeman and guarding the president when he visited, this was his life. We drove out to see the Foundation's new acquisitions including the huge concrete pithead of a coal mine. I wondered what they were going to do with the huge industrial site. I suspected Ivo was wondering the same. 'Maybe take people up to the top to see the view'. I felt they were building a tourist organisation from the ruins that they were accumulating, but I didn't say that. I didn't want to annoy him.

He showed me the best of the Foundation that was on public display, always hinting that this was only the tip of their collection. There was more, buried, hidden somewhere, or in many places. Auschwitz had been operated in the light but now much of it seemed to exist in the dark.

I still had little idea what The Foundation was. It seemed a fairly amateur operation. I imagined it was an association of locals who spent their time collecting material and obsessing over it in the way steam engine enthusiasts might. I started to think that they were either out of their depth or they were being used by the authorities for other purposes. I read their entire web site without getting much clarity, but got the feeling there was something hidden, something behind a curtain that I wasn't supposed to see. I was being shown a simulacrum of an organisation. I couldn't work it out and still haven't.

I tried to engage with them, hoping they might take me on as a representative or give me some sort of privileged access to their secret archives, but no luck. I only ever encountered Ivo and he formed an English-speaking barrier. He was clearly a part-time worker at the Foundation as he was a full-time policeman. Although I had met the founder, he spoke no English and my attempts to infiltrate them went nowhere. I watched visitors while they arrived, on air-conditioned coaches from Krakow or on shuttle bendy buses from Auschwitz I. They would disgorge from the coaches and emerge from the coach-park, turning towards the camp. The access route was badly designed. They had to cross the road in clusters and walk down the pavement on the opposite side. There was no protected route. Often there would be so many people they would spill onto the roadway. Groups coming would meet groups going and bulges would fill the tarmac. I felt they were in danger of getting killed by the fast-moving VIP taxicabs, buses or local traffic going about its business, but this never seemed to happen.

The groups varied, but the most consistent types were middle aged Europeans and groups of Israeli youth. The groups would move slowly, individuals continuing to talk to each other, not paying much attention to the vista. Sometimes the groups would be wearing some form of uniform, by which I mean a printed sweatshirt. Some carried flags. The religious groups, obvious by their head coverings and behaviour, might cluster and pray and sing ostentatiously. But on the whole visitors moved as if they were having an interesting day out.

Birkenau lies alongside a road that runs north-south and divides the camp from the village that gave it its name. It is not a museum but part of a 'museum', tightly defined by the Polish government which constrains its activities to this definition. It is part of a metonymic museum that the world uses as shorthand for the Holocaust. And it is part of a museum archipelago that now stretches across the world. There is not much that is easily recognisable as museum, though there is much that an archaeologist would be interested

in: buildings, landscape, ruins, subterranean remains. There is no technology, no elegant toilets, no audio-visual presentations in well-engineered spaces. There is one enclosed space with a display of photographs. For the rest, it is a natural space where the remnants of the camp exist and are respected and where the grass is well manicured and where obedient tourists summon what emotions they can. It is not Auschwitz. It is an empty shell, acres of space fence with gently mouldering wire, an iconic landscape that is etched into our minds and which welcomes millions of coach party visitors each year.

At 10.00am on the first day of my first visit I walked down Męczeństwa Narodów. I read a signpost on a lane to my left:

NO BUSES.

NIE DOTYCZY PAŃSTWOWEGO MUZEUM

AUSCHWITZ - BIRKENAU.

It was the first naming of the site I had seen in the field. Before this point the place had seemed theoretical, as if I was chasing a chimera. Although I knew it was here, that I was going to arrive where I was headed, there were no clues until I read this sign in Polish. I could only understand the name of the site. It was as if nobody had considered a non-Pole might walk into the zone. Surely everybody would come on a bus driven by a knowing driver. The signage accelerated.

MUZEUM AUSCHWITZ BIRKENAUPARKING 100m.

I was on the right track. The sun was almost shining, the sky was almost blue. It was a perfect day to encounter what I was about to encounter. Four minutes after I photographed the first sign, I saw the gatehouse in the distance. To my right I passed a modern coach park. The road I was walking on curved gently towards the entrance, crossing a rail line embedded in the tarmac as it did so.

I had seen many pictures of this place. I'd seen pictures of the gatehouse, the neat rows of brick chimneys, remains of huts, wire that would once have carried electricity, concrete posts and the white insulators that had scared me since I was young.

The fences stretched out of sight in both directions. I felt nervous, like an interloper among the clusters of tourists who were disembarking in the coach park and streaming towards the site, led by their cheerful guides.

There were no controls at the gate. A single policeman or security guard paid no attention to me. There is no charge. I make my way through an archway through the red brick building, one of two openings into the acreage of Birkenau. Through one runs the railway line, under a gate, through the other flow tourists.

Where I was

I knew where I was and I didn't know where I was. I had chosen to come here. I was on my own, the only person who knew where I was. I have to admit that, if I had been questioned I wouldn't have been able to answer.

Technically, I am within the 191.97-ha serial property,
which consists of three component parts:
the former Auschwitz I camp,
the former Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp,
a mass grave of inmates.

My arrival activates the place, turning it from an idea into a space. Walking in was like saying the word. I realised that I didn't understand the activated place. I didn't know where it began and where it ended, where it transitioned, where the frontiers and bridges were, how it came to be here, how it came to end.



Figure 20 Postcard, Birkenau, author's collection

Birkenau was empty, is empty, has always been empty. It is an empty space. Ghosts lurk in the abyss but the enclosure itself is remarkably tidy and clean, laid out on a grid, demarked by fences, but absent of life. It is said that there are no birds at Auschwitz. I cannot vouch for this specifically, not having listened for them at Birkenau or Auschwitz I, but it seems unlikely.

In the years after the war, people lived on the site. The museum was so short staffed there was little they could do to maintain order. Now the site is cleared of any occupants and kept very tidy with short grass and elegant signage. Few venture off the main thoroughfares. The site wasn't always immaculate and the ruins weren't always sacrosanct. In 1967 young German volunteers from Aktion Suhnezeichen came to Auschwitz and

'devoted long hours to maintenance work at the site. In the case of this first group, the volunteers spent eight hours a day, in silence, removing grass, weeds, soil and accumulated debris from the rubble of the Birkenau crematoria II and III, uncovering in the process dozens of artifacts such as toothbrushes, spectacles, coins from the Lodz ghetto and even bones' (Huener 2001: 524).

Over the years I walked at great length around the site, learning where the gates are, where the paths run. It is not a straightforward place to traverse and it is tiring, the pressed stone paths make walking an effort. The site seems open, you can see right across it from one side to the other, but it is constrained by wire fences and there is a process, an order to getting around. Once engaged on this process you have to make your way from the railway ramp across to the far side of the site, to Mexico. There are three ways of doing this. Then you are far away from the tour groups, far away from the clusters of students all marked with the coloured badge of their guide's company. Here you can stroll in peace and total quiet, only occasionally encountering other visitors who seem somewhat surprised as if they were lost and not expecting to find me there.

There is wildlife in Birkenau. I often see small groups of muntjac deer in the distance. They are bold but do not allow me to get anywhere near them. When they hear me coming they start running. They know the route, they know how to exit through gaps in the fences better than I do and I can only watch them disappear into the distance.

I wonder who cuts the grass here. Although there are ruins scattered in a grid formation throughout the site, barely anybody visits these ruins: the place is empty and fades to incoherence and emptiness at the margins. The grass is always cut short and weeds do not grow through the remains of the huts. As historic images show, grass once grew over the ruins of Birkenau. It was a cluttered, untidy place, filled with the detritus of the huge number of humans who had lived and often died here. Now the documentary quality of these remains has been diminished by tidiness.

The Kanteen

The first time we went to visit a site outside Oświęcim, Ivo drove me back at high speed through the countryside and pulled up at the gates of a compound that ran alongside the road. Behind the fence was a large wooden building and a clutter of objects strewn around the area in front of it, some covered in tarpaulins. He opened the gate and we drove in. An old man came out of the building and greeted us. We walked past him and entered the dark coolness of the interior. The man we had met at the door was the watchman, Ivo told me. 'He's a drunk, but he guards this place.' The inside of this huge wooden building was filled with an endless array of wooden parts. The roof was propped up with wooden scaffolding on the stone floor. Sunlight projected in through the slatted and barred windows creating a psychedelic effect

He led me casually around the space and tried to explain something about it in his broken English. The Foundation had taken over responsibility for it and had found it in a state of terrible disrepair, hence the propped roof and the acreage of retrieved materials. It was the rest and recreation centre for the camp guards, a canteen and a cinema and no doubt it had other functions too. Light filtered in through myriad slits in the construction, creating an eerie interior. After a tour we exited and he led me round the back of the building where an old railway line ran alongside a loading bay. He pointed to another building in the grounds, a large grey stone edifice. 'This was the SS house,' he told me, giving me no idea what an SS house was.

The site seemed to be a combination of an historic site and a storage junkyard for the Foundation. Although I assumed that we were still in the countryside between Budy-Bor and Oświęcim, later I found out just how wrong I was. This site was adjacent to Auschwitz I, just across the railway tracks which ran in several streams down from the main line, down to the unloading bays that fed the camps. The Kanteen was where the guards went to relax, to eat, to party, to watch movies. They must have walked from the

gate, from the Arbeit Macht Frei gate, there must have been tracks that they followed. Off work, off to party, off to see a movie, back to work, back to the Lager, back to the deathly halls.

There are no tracks leading between these two sites now. The Kanteen is off the tourist route, it's derelict. The Foundation wants to renovate it, to restore it. They have propped it up, stopped the disintegration. It's hard to envisage what it would be used for, what casual interest it might have. It's a vast space and although it's filled up with stored materials, if it was empty it would be dull. Who wants to see this sort of thing?

The Kanteen is at the end of a rail spur that ran past a modern school. I followed this track into a lush, wooded area and, just as I approached the fence and realised what I was looking at, a minibus entered from the front gate that I had previously come in through with Ivo. I had completely confused myself about where this place was. In reality it lay on a road that ran parallel to Auschwitz I, between the camp and the religious centre where I would later camp.

Ivo took me deeper into the place, both up and down. I realised it's not just a wooden box. Set into the side of the Kanteen building is a brick structure. Ivo led me upstairs. The floors here are rickety, perhaps about to fall down. The ceilings are ropey too. They don't have enough money to repair the place, he told me. It's filled up with objects from other places, fragments of the camp and sub-camps that the Foundation has accumulated. There are inscriptions from wartime above the doors.

Up the stairs he showed me some small rooms from which even the plaster on the walls had been stripped. In a wall facing out over the open plan space below is a pattern of small square openings cut in the brickwork. I recognise the array from visits to projection booths in London where my cousin once worked as a cinema projectionist. I'm standing in a Nazi projection room. The projection booth of Auschwitz. The projectors were long gone but it would have been a hot close space containing a pair of halogen

projectors, probably some good German brand, pointing out through the projection slits. Huge reels of film would have been made up by the operator and shown for the pleasure of the off-duty camp guards gathered below on a night off. I look out into the space below and try to imagine it filled with drunken off-duty German soldiers. I think about Leni Riefenstahl and *Triumph of the Will*, but realise they were much more likely to be dumbly watching some popular hit of the year.

When the Americans analysed the aerial photographs that they had accidentally taken of Birkenau in 1944 they realised that they could see columns of prisoners walking between parts of the site and between the internal ramp and the death chambers. They marked these photos up as they marked everything else. Because it was snowy they could see the routes, the paths, from place to place, marked as tracks in the snow. What they could not see was the misery, the cruelty, the casual death coming unexpectedly. Also, they did not see the tracks between the death camp and the Kanteen, from the death camp to the rest halls for the guards.

In 1996 UNESCO's Bureau met in Paris and

‘commended the Government of Poland on halting the construction works in the immediate vicinity of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp and urged the authorities to devise a plan for the preservation of the site and its immediate surroundings and keep the Committee informed on this matter’ (“UNESCO World Heritage Centre - Decision - 20 BUR IV.7” 1996).

Although assurances had been given by the Polish authorities that construction works had stopped, the Secretariat was informed that the Philip Morris Company has announced its intention to go ahead with the construction of a cigarette factory adjacent to the Camp. The Secretariat informed the Polish Permanent Delegation of this event. The Observer of Poland told them that the project was not a new construction, merely the transfer of ownership of a tobacco factory which has been functioning for eighty years under State

monopoly. It was situated 300 metres from the former camp in the wooden building which had been the wartime rest and recreation centre for Auschwitz guards, the Kanteen.

Foundation for Memory Sites Near Auschwitz-Birkenau

In November 2021 I was back at Auschwitz and keen to revisit the Kanteen. I had an idea to make a model of the cinema projection booth and for this I needed to measure it and take some specific video. I asked Ivo if he could give me access but he was busy. He told me his father, Dagmar, would be there the next day and would show me around.

When I arrived outside the compound I noticed various things. The building next door had become a major building site and was separated from the Kanteen by a new fence. The museum that was advertised on banners hanging from the fence was well underway. The Kanteen building itself was undergoing dramatic building works, though on a lesser and more specific scale – a large trench had been dug around the collapsed wing of the building. I noticed that there were now two railway wagons ‘of the type’ in front of the building.

After a while Ivo’s father, Dagmar, arrived in a beat-up van. I followed him on to the site. It dawned on me that he was the founder of the Foundation and also the man I had met on my first visit at Budy-Bor. He had become the figure behind many sites in the environs of Auschwitz. I’m not sure what the reasons for his commitment, his endless backbreaking work, are, but then I’m not sure what my reasons are either. After a long conversation I come to believe in him as a hero, someone who is saving a different Auschwitz, foregrounding the grey areas of the established story. He has a huge task, his Kanteen is collapsing into the ground, his line of twenty warehouses is full of trees and soil with no roofs, he has a minehead in the countryside, an impossible project, many far flung huts and stores to protect, and a small museum which he cannot staff. He has the

buildings at Budy-Bor and their own sub-museum of artefacts and industrial junk, and there is more, the objects in storage that I have not yet seen. He has no money; the state would rather pour cash into its Disneyfied version of a museum telling its own version of history.

Dagmar is a collector, a hoarder, and a grafter. He showed me around the Kanteen, pointing out 'authentic' details, signs left over by the Nazis. He gave me a tour of the huge collection of artefacts stored in this warehouse. They include all the parts of the wing that they are rebuilding (this is a wooden building, remember) and hundreds of objects salvaged from a huge area of the countryside. He is proud of his collection and we bond over our common knowledge of the landscape and the things in it. He takes me to see his two railway wagons. It turns out (I think, his English is not much better than my Polish) that they are both being looked after for other organisations. One is a German wagon that was converted into living accommodation. The other is a French wagon that was built near Drancy. I feel I have come full circle since I started this expedition.

He told me that he would be working in the potato warehouses at Birkenau the following day. In the morning I took an electric scooter and went to find him. When I arrived he was working with a single volunteer helper. They were clearing a small roofless building behind the warehouses. He explained that these had contained storage vats for pickled cabbage, huge square tanks dug into the floors, and pointed out the visible outlines of these tanks on the floor. He told me that next year they would dig them out. They have already taken hundreds of trees out of the line of warehouses, he said, and assured me that they will eventually re-roof them all. It seems an almost impossible ambition but I suppose he will achieve it. I offered to come back and work with him the following year, to help dig out the pits.

The ramps

‘The first unloading ramp is here, behind the Kanteen’, Ivo’s father, Dagmar, told me proudly when I first met him. It was as if he was saying ‘I have the first ramp, everything else is subsequent and lesser’. There is a slow-moving power struggle being fought over custodianship of the territory. A transport of Polish prisoners was unloaded at this first ramp in June 1940 and then, from 1942, mass transports of Jews. At this same ramp during 1941-1942, before the building of the Buna sub-camp, the prisoners constructing the IG Farbenindustrie plant at Monowitz boarded the train that carried them to labour and returned survivors to the camp.

The fourth ramp was built inside the Birkenau camp in May 1944, in connection with the anticipated arrival of transports of Hungarian Jews. 430,000 Hungarian Jews, 67,000 Jews from the Łódź ghetto and some of the transports from the ghetto in Terezin and from Slovakia were unloaded at this ramp. Transports of Poles from Warsaw during the were also unloaded there.

The line from Krakow runs between the two main Auschwitz camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau, then on West into Slovakia. It is a small, quiet, line with old fashioned trains, connecting modern Oświęcim to the world. It is of course the same route that brought prisoners for the camps from Europe, the same meshwork that was connected to it then connects to it now. During my repeated visits I noticed this line was being reconstructed, electrified and modernised. At stations and road crossings large scale works were underway, new tracks were being laid and endless sound barriers were being erected. By my fourth visit these white constructions were already disfigured by graffiti.

The Lager was never contiguous and, even when operational, contained a series of parts between which inmates and staff passed regularly, enclosing far more than the three

formal sites that surround the town. The Lager was divided by this line. To get from Auschwitz to Birkeanu as a visitor it is necessary to cross the modern railway by way of a concrete bridge that arcs up from the flatlands beside a coal yard. The smaller rail lines that fed these parts still exist, running down to Auschwitz I itself and into Birkenau. These arteries are generally overlooked, unconsidered as part of the tourist agenda, but they are sleeping indicators of what happened here and where it happened. These lines are extant in isolated stretches but do not quite enter the caps. They are there, all around the town, truncated but accessible. You can see them alongside the road, the remains of an industrial meshwork in various states. They are bywaters of the camp.

The rail spur

At the entrance of the arcades (one could just as well say “exit gates”, since, with these peculiar hybrid forms of house and street, every gate is simultaneously entrance and exit)—at the entrance gates one finds, on either side, remarkable and sometimes enigmatic inscriptions and signs. (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999: 932).

Everyone knows the iconic rail tracks running through the gates of Birkenau, whether they have visited or not. These lines, upon which people sometimes engage in the supposedly sacrilegious act of making selfies, emerge from the camp, cross the road and terminate by the roadside, behind a bush. The tracks don't seem to come from anywhere or go anywhere.

Transports is a euphemism for people. Women, men, children, grandparents, bankers, maids, hospital patients, pregnant women, new-born babies, dying aunts, dead mothers. All of them disappeared into the camp, into the gas chambers.

Inside the camp the lines run across the site to end at the huge stone monument built between the ruins of the gas chambers. They are granted a respectable terminating gesture, hanging loose, although this ending is false, constructed as part of the memorial

site. Outside, the short section of track fizzles out in a puddle and some bushes, as if the camp is connected to nothing, as if the railway lines are symbolic of delivery but never delivered anyone. This is a different sort of false, a bureaucratic choice to ignore the connection.

There is a wagon positioned by the Birkenau unloading ramp, the scene of recreated horror in many books and films. A single wagon representing a train, majestic but ineffectual. It does not give an idea of how long a train would be, how many souls it could contain, how arrivals dominated the site. A single wagon is an aesthetic statement, a surprisingly beautiful object stranded for ever on the rails as similar cars are set on rails at the Judenramp and at Drancy and at Yad Vashem. None of these wagons are authentic except by age. They telegraph a common understanding, that people were conveyed here in them. They are a shorthand for something complex and messy and unsayable outside a museum or a book.

Termination is and was a feature of the site, termination was the game here. It is the literal end of the connecting tissue, the link to the world. Here are remnants of the ingathering of people for mortification and death. The rail tracks, by their connection to the European rail network, formed part of an infinite passageway by which this place did its work, yet outside here they seem to disappear. I was perplexed. All the infrastructure cries out to be understood, to be known and to be remembered, but at this juncture the network is ended before it has begun. The anus of the world farts gently and fails to connect.

I didn't find the Judenramp until my second visit. I read the name on the map along with a variety of other intriguing sounding places, but it meant little to me. I knew that these places were nearby but I didn't know how to access them so that first year I let them go. I had no spatial understanding of the site. In that strange interregnum where I knew the layout of the place and the names of the parts but I had not visited them I had no

understanding of how they all fitted together. Later I came to understand that places like the Judenramp were outside the remit of the museum, that there was little interest in my visiting it. It was outside the norm, a literal outlier. But that first time, standing in the field, I knew none of this, the divide between museum and not-museum, the multiplicity of sites, the overlying and overlapping jumble of history here.

When I got back to England I looked at Google maps to understand how the ramp related to where I had been. I examined satellite images of the camp and found a curving line marked by the growth of hedge-like foliage, apparent because it ran through cleanly ploughed land. It curved gently and ended in a line parallel with, but not connected to, the contemporary rail tracks. As soon as I saw those marks on the surface, that geometric progression, I knew it was a rail line. Even in the image taken from miles above the earth's surface it was obvious. The track itself was not signposted at the camp, I was sure of that.

At Birkenau the following year, I stood on the short length of railway lines outside the camp entrance. As I remembered, it terminated abruptly and strangely, just across the road. Behind me visitors streamed from the coach park and crossed the road before entering Birkenau through the famous brick archway. Some stopped to take photographs of each other standing on the rails with the iconic gate behind them. This image has been taken a million times. I looked at the scrubby edgelands, part carpark, part farmland, with no clear separation. Bendy buses turned and waited for passengers before returning to Auschwitz, travelling the same circuit all day long.

The rail tracks did disappear behind a bush as I remembered. It still seemed strange. It was just after noon on a hot day under a clear and blue sky above Birkenau. I looked around nervously, mindful of my encounter with security guards on my previous visit, and strode across the scrubland, away from Birkenau, the camp and the tourists. Apart from a line of bushes I had seen on a satellite image I had no idea of what I was about to encounter. Nobody paid me the slightest attention.

Within moments I was in a different world. I stumbled slightly across the dry and rutted ground, picking my way around small piles of detritus that had been fly tipped in the space. It could have been any edgelands anywhere, on the edge of any town. I pushed through the undergrowth and along the edge of a field of stubble that made walking difficult. It reminded me of exploring in the South of England, of barley fields and hot dusty days. I walked on a bit, avoiding the spikey stalks and the evidence that this place had been used as a toilet. The embankment rose slightly from the level of the field and, as I got further from the worldly hubbub of the tourists the foliage disappeared. I climbed up the small incline and found proof that the line remained.

I stood on the wooden sleepers, decomposing but still largely present between the rusty rails. I started walking along the track towards the forest of trees that had enveloped it. To my left I could see the Birkenau coach station, to my right the field of stubble. In the distance, various houses. I was insulated from the noise of the busy camp. I had entered a kind of urban highline of horror, a bank built for one purpose only, raised above and separated from the landscape to convey people to death. It was so calm here that I could not connect with that past. Like so much of this town and its surroundings, it takes a force of will to make the connection between the bucolic present and the nightmare past.

I walked along the rails, reaching down and touching the metal parts. Nothing had been replaced since the war. These were true relics, although nobody seems to care. I reached a section of impassable tangled growth and climbed down from the line to walk along the edge of the field until I could climb back up. Large trees grew through the track. Clearly nobody came here, nobody had walked this line for a long time. I was walking in a different world, I have slipped away from the known world of Auschwitz and its endless stream of visitors, I thought. I came across a huge array of empty glass bottles scattered along the tracks. I couldn't think of a reason for them to be here unless a rampant alcoholic has been using this part of the track as a hideout for years.

The line ran up to and under a home-made fence into a back garden. I stopped. A dog started barking and a man emerged from the house and shouted at me. I'm not doing anything, but I decided to leave the line and cut around the house. There wasn't much else I could have done.

I crossed a field to the road and walked until I reached a sign for the Judenramp. I walked along this small road until I noticed a raised hump in the road off to my right. When I walked to it I found the raised railway track again, this time in open land. It emerged and disappeared, rising and dipping in and out of the land. It ran through clear flat ground, behind a house then in front of one, modern buildings put up around the line after the war. The line runs under a paved front yard where the line of the track is carefully marked out with darker slabs. The buildings look as if they are avoiding the tracks.

This connecting tissue, from the ramp to the inside of Birkenau was built towards the end of the war as the mass of Jews from Hungary threatened to overwhelm the system. Before the spur existed no trains entered Birkenau, no prisoners were unloaded from trains within the camp. Transports were unloaded at the ramp alongside the railway tracks and trucked into Birkenau. It is the connection between Birkenau camp, the fourth ramp, and the world. The line is closed off, overgrown, hidden. Disappeared.

These are possibly the only original death tracks. What should be sacred and walkable ground is a patchwork of appearing and disappearing fragments, a patchwork of history and farmland. It is a missing link. At Birkenau the lines are venerated yet truncated. The tracks at that end run into the camp, up to the ruins of the chambers. On these tracks is set one wagon, isolated, elegant, sticking out like a sore thumb. At the other end of this curve are the restored tracks of the Judenramp, a confected replica, representing the second ramp where hundreds of thousands were detained and taken onward by truck. The rail lines are not quite private property, not quite public property. They are ignored, abandoned perhaps, by the infrastructure of public remembering. I

asked the museum who owns the spur railway what their plans are for them and they told me they are on private property and outside their purview.

In the mid-1990s, the historian Martin Gilbert talked to Teresa Swiebocka (in charge of publications and exhibitions at Auschwitz) for his book, *Holocaust Journey*. She told him they had plans for Birkenau, they would enlarge the parking area and build a small by-pass around the entrance gate. ‘The spur railway will be opened up as a route for visitors to walk along,’ she told him. She ‘is pleased to say this area belongs to the museum’ (Gilbert 1997: 173).

The front of the site runs alongside a road on which cars shoot past at speed. At the main entrance there is a T junction without road markings. It looks as if they are making a new road, a semi-circular swath that cuts away from the camp. When I visited in 2019 bulldozers and construction materials sat on the site.

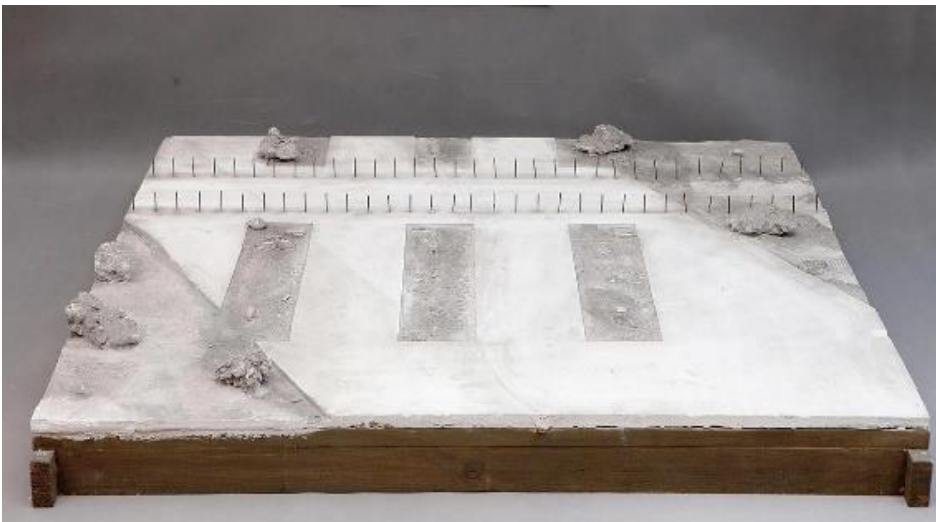


Figure 21 Model of the proposed Antimonument, Warsaw

An Antimonument

In 1957 the International Auschwitz Committee announced a competition to select a monument appropriate for the end of the Auschwitz-Birkenau railroad tracks. The

competition was chaired by Henry Moore. Polish architects, Oskar and Zofia Hansen, proposed an antimonument: the sealing of the camp and the construction of a vast elevated slash stretching from one side of the site to the other, from the fence at the front to the remains of the gas chambers and crematoria at the other. It would be the only part of the camp that visitors could walk on. From it they would see the rest of the site subsiding into ruins. The proposal would close the gates to the site forever. Nobody would ever pass through them again. 'People would have come to perform individual commemorative actions using the road as a background' (Fabrizi 2016). The camp would decay into nothingness and, hopefully, take the interest of the world with it.

Framed as if this was some Roman city, abandoned by its inhabitants and ignored by subsequent generations, the proposal would remove a few metres of the barbed wire, create an illusion that visitors were sneaking in, lay a path of granite sixty metres wide and one thousand metres long diagonally across the grid of the camp toward the ruins of the crematoria. This elevated diagonal would float over the camp floor, framing the remains of the barracks in cut-outs to set the foundations and chimneys as precious relics. The idea was that this would let nature regain possession of the site, leaving the layers to be excavated by archaeologists in the distant future. There would be no monument, no inscriptions, nothing

'Their design refused to allow the ruins of the camp to become objects for others to arrogate. It made no suggestion that there was some way in which the living could trace the steps of the victims, understand their experiences, or share their memory. It was their goal to confront the living with oblivion, to bring them face to face with the essential truth of the site: the fact that, ultimately, no memory could connect them to Birkenau's past' (Bezwinska 1959: 67).

On a visit I paced out the dimensions of the proposed slash, measuring out the size and shape of it within Birkenau, trying to gauge what it would have meant if it had been built. It seemed to me this had been the last opportunity to seal the site, to prevent it becoming

– what? Something empty yet sacred, devoid of life yet devoid also of ghosts? Something like what it has become?

‘[An empty museum] offers the chance to accept doubt and to project questions into the spaces in which history is narrated. Which, in turn might lead to a different kind of public space in which many more narratives might be explored’ (“Could Empty Museums Be a Good Thing? - ArtReview” n.d.).

I walked back and forth, measuring by thumb the distances and angles, taking photographs forward and backward to gauge the direction and width of the gouge. I reached the far back corner, past the remains of the crematoria, the chambers, to a green field where an oak tree grew. I stood in the quiet shade of the corner of the camp and watched other visitors perambulate from object to object, never penetrating to the deep green space I stood in.

An antimonument might reveal nothing, it might be a haiku of Auschwitz, a burst of light into the darkness which seems to reveal the past and the future but which ‘is only a flash, a slash of light, which illumines, reveals nothing: it is the flash of the photograph one takes very carefully but having neglected to load the film’ (Barthes and Howard 1989: 167). The Hansens’ project was chosen by the competition jury, dignified by the unstoppable force of Henry Moore, but it never won the support of Auschwitz survivors. A compromise was offered, to combine The Road with an Italian proposal, but the Hansens withdrew their entry considering it impossible to combine it with a figurative design.

In their landscape, fragments.

In their landscape, particles that can kill.

In their landscape, particles with a half-life of a thousand years.

In their landscape, a pattern of detritus.

In their landscape, a search for matter.

In their landscape, a pattern of people.

In their landscape, escape.

A stone trough emits radiation for a thousand years.

Do not approach.

Do not bathe in it.

It watered the cows.

It fed the imagination.

It bathed the dying.

Do not approach.

A fragment stuffed in to prop up a beam
once the life saving outer wrapping of a child
from Paris
who wore it on release
into the arms of a local farmer
who nursed the babe unto death,
later wedging the garment in his loft.
Remnants
in their landscape.

Robert Jan van Pelt said letting Birkenau disintegrate completely would be a more fitting memorial than constantly repairing the scant remains. Birkenau is

‘the ultimate nihilistic place. A million people literally disappeared. Shouldn’t we confront people with the nothingness of the place? Seal

it up. Don't give people a sense that they can imitate the experience and walk in the steps of the people who were there' (Robert-Jan Van Pelt, 2010: 93).

It's a place that constantly needs to be rebuilt in order to remain a ruin for us.

Bookshops



Within the buildings that form the entranceway of Birkenau, next to the ionic gateways there is a bookshop. It is crammed with product. There are bookshops at all the Museum sites, it must be a decent source of income for an organisation that does not formally charge for entry. They open portals to different worlds, make a connection to things outside this place, even though they are ostensibly about this place. There is a bookshop at the Birkenau coach park, several bookshops at Auschwitz I. There is no bookshop at Monowitz.

The Birkenau bookshop is divided by language: Polish, German, French, Italian, English and others. The areas vary in size depending on the industriousness and

receptiveness of their respective national audiences and, of course, their visitor numbers here. Someone has crunched the numbers, it's like walking into a bar chart of the history of their sales.

Many of the books are multi-lingual publications, designed to appeal to visitors. I spent a lot of time in the bookshops, drawn back again and again to these islands of sanity. To me it is also an opportunity to browse a specialist supplier, to find things that I haven't come across before although, as my collection expands, this becomes less and less likely. The industry of Auschwitz publication is revealed. I wish I could read all European languages, there is a project within this small space, a world of exploration.

Alongside the big picture books, that I want to acquire, and the memoirs including, of course, Primo Levi, which I do not, there are more esoteric books and journals. I take photos to jog my memory when I get home, then spend an hour or so flipping through these histories, looking for alternative approaches to my subject, looking for people who aren't historians or archaeologists or Holocaust researchers.

This place has to earn a crust. It is aimed mostly at tourists. Mostly, but not completely. It also sells a small selection of cold drinks and snacks. Everyone has to snack, even at Auschwitz. At Birkenau there is fridge on the counter to keep the chocolate chilled. Burn, it says, in large letters. The word is surrounded by flames. It's a standard marketing message, but nobody sees the irony, the insult. In this place of all places.

Bookshops represent the start point of the endless accumulation of texts, the telling. Every book has a story of its own, encapsulates a process of encapsulation, a collection of parts that has been brought together into a single volume and offered for sale. The bookshop itself is a collection and, in this case, a rarefied, filtered, sorted collection. It might be labelled 'all the books about Auschwitz that a visitor to the actual site might buy'. A textual taxonomy of Auschwitz. In this bookshop I remember something that occurred to

me long ago while travelling: there are few things sadder than a bookshop in a language that you cannot read. Here, of course, was something far sadder.

At Birkenau there is a huge book for sale. It details all the good Poles who helped the poor Jews. There are no books about the bad Poles who helped murder them. As far as I can see there are no poetry books.

Coach park

At the entrance to the coach park there is a bagel seller who hawks his wares from a small, enclosed cart. He has a captive audience though I never saw anyone buy anything from him. I bought one and it was delicious.

The coach park is built on a small piece of flat land (all land is flat here, that's a meaningless distinction yet somehow it seems important just for this fragment). It is fenced in, has parking for about forty coaches and a hundred cars, a bookshop, a café, a restaurant, toilets and, hidden upstairs and unvisited, the little museum built by the Foundation.

Visitors to the camp arrive here in their air-conditioned coaches. They disembark into the carpark and make their way out onto the road. There is a bottleneck at the pedestrian exit from the park, as if nobody ever considered how visitors would get to the camp. They have to cross the road and walk on the footpath on the opposite side, sharing this narrow strip with people coming the other way. They often overspill onto the road, which is then shared with buses, taxi-buses, taxis, cars, motorhomes and anything else that has come to visit the site.

A few years after my first visit I find there is a new forecourt to Birkenau and a new road loops traffic away from the front of the site. The route for visitors has got more complex. Private taxi cabs ignore the restrictions and drop their paying customers close to the

entrance. I believe that a new pedestrian route in and out of the coach park will be constructed shortly alongside the new road. This new curve of road has been a long time coming. Martin Gilbert mentions it in the 1980s when in conversation with a museum curator. But it took almost another forty years to get built, doubling its distance from the offence, and cementing Birkenau further into the landscape. But this road and the changes to the forecourt did not exist on my first visit: they came later.

On a small patch of grass at the entrance to the coach park a small group of people clustered under an umbrella and around a set of display boards that were recognisable from many encounters on city streets. They were Jehovah's Witnesses en masse, perhaps joined together for safety in numbers. The opportunism offended me. What are they doing here, I thought, impinging on this sacred site (or as sacred as the entrance to a coach park could ever be). I took a beautiful picture of them, as keen to exploit them as they were in exploiting me.

Later I realised that Jehovah's Witnesses were as much victims of the Nazis as anyone else, and were cruelly persecuted. They were there for that reason and I felt ashamed.'

The secret museum



Figure 22 Exhibit in the Foundation museum above the coach station

Ivo took me to the Birkenau coach park. We drew up behind the modern building that provides a bookshop, bar and restaurant for visitors to Birkenau. Because we entered through a small door behind the building, I didn't realise until later that we were climbing up above the coach station itself. Ivo didn't tell me we were going to a museum, or who ran it, or why. He just ushered me into the space and let me wander around, looking at the treasure that they had assembled. And it was treasure. I'm not sure whether anyone else ever gains access to this place, although it's not a secret. Its existence is listed. On subsequent visits I noticed a sign by the door, but there was never anyone present to give access. It was a secret museum even if this was not the intent. It was hidden from the public, existing above their heads in the upper rooms of the coach station building. Below us books and badges and fridge magnets were on sale.

He showed me the treasures, hovering behind me, anxious that I didn't miss anything but keen to let me make my own discoveries. The display was like any local underfunded museum that I like to visit in towns and villages when travelling. A mixture of glass cases scrounged up from various places, objects of dubious provenance displayed with handmade signs, donated junk and real treasures, all displayed with a pride that says, this is our museum, this is our world. They had trawled through attics and basements around the town and collected a lot of material that had been left behind at the end of the war: crockery with the I G Farben logo, identity cards, signage, a typewriter, medicines, IG Farbenindustrie-advertisements. A wooden crate containing an electric motor was marked up with a Moscow address, war booty that never started its journey, like the Arbeit Macht Frei sign.

Explaining the chemistry books marked with a variety of 'Property of Auschwitz' stamps, Ivo told me how they'd trawled the libraries in the chemical works at Monowitz looking for books left over from the war. I realised that he had the sort of privileged access that only immersion in the local community can give you, being close enough to hear rumours and stories, and having enough authority to gain access without causing alarm. Perhaps being a policeman also helps.

They had collected a lot of the sort of junk that I always spent my weekends sorting through at boot fairs, the detritus of dead people heaped up for sale, but this stuff had import, it connected to a global story. Their collecting instincts were pure, the junk that they displayed had a purpose, if only to say, look, things remain, it still exists, we are linked to the atrocity.

Ivo guided me gently to their star exhibit, a panel that Primo Levi describes in *If This Is A Man*. Suddenly here in front of me is something Levi saw during those terrible years and considered important enough to write about. The impossible past reaches out to me, punches me in the gut. For a moment the past interpenetrates the present. They have made

a bad translation of Levi's reference to this object and use this to assert 'genuinnes' (sic).

The caption points out that the images and several words are missing, correcting history and Levi's own memory.

'Under the first caption: *So bist du rein*, (annotation: the author falsely remembered word *bist*, originally its *wirst* – fot.) under the second: *So gehst du ein*; (annotation: today only the last word remains, *ein*)' (Levi, 2013: 45).

I look for this in my own copy of *If This Is A Man* and find it on page forty-five, In a chapter titled 'Initiation', Levi describes the panel in a washroom 'full of draughts, with the brick floor covered by a layer of mud':

The walls are covered by curious didactic frescoes: for example, there is the good Häftling, portrayed stripped to the waist, about to diligently soap his sheared and rosy cranium, and the bad Häftling, with a strong Semitic nose and a greenish colour, bundled up in his ostentatiously stained clothes with a beret on his head, who cautiously dips a finger into the water of the washbasin. Under the first is written: '*So bist du rein*' (like this you are clean), and under the second: '*So gehst du ein*' (like this you come to a bad end); and lower down, in doubtful French but in Gothic script: '*La propreté, c'est la santé.*' (Levi, 2013: 45).

A memory has emerged from the past to be placed in front of me. I am touching the hem of Mengele's coat.

The White House and the Red House



Figure 23 Picture hanging in author's Oświęcim accommodation, 2021

In January 2020 when I went to visit with a list of places my research had thrown up I messed up my booking for the hostel I usually stayed in and ended up booked into the next cheapest place. It was a room in an old house with an uncomfortable bed and a terrible stink in the ensuite bathroom. Downstairs in the kitchen provided for the residents hung a painting of a small farmhouse in the woods. I wondered if this is what the little red house, the first death bunker constructed inside a farmhouse at the edge of Birkenau camp, had looked like.

The site is today marked only by foundations. The second death bunker, The Red House site is a vacant plot in a row of houses in the penumbra of the site, across the road from the ash pits and the Russian monument. The soil remains, of course, although even this is sometimes open to interpretation. All this land was briefly busy with people, skeletons, ghosts, lost souls. Where did they go? They descended into the earth as ash or were marched West or fled or remained in situ, the few survivors who were still alive when liberation came. Alongside the Russian memorial, across the road from the site of

the Little Red House, runs a chain of small lakes and ponds which are marked on the guides as ash pits. The ground here is laden with ash, with the chemical remains of people, of Europe sunk in pools and ditches and lakes and rivers and all the lush greenery that now grows on the periphery of the site (because the site itself is now kept neat and clean) returns the elements of death to the world. I walked in the field that received the ashes from this early killing house and considered that everything growing here contained fragments of bodies, of people from across Europe.

Canada

Just before the camp closed the Germans burned down the section known as Canada, the great shopping mall of stolen goods, the sanctuary for the fortunate few, a warehouse of Nazi ideology and a revealing feature of the entire Holocaust, that stealing the possessions of an enslaved and murdered people was the *raison d'être*. They burned the looted goods almost but not quite entirely. Canada was a precursor of the museum that we know now. Remains were transported to Auschwitz and became the metonymic symbols of the Holocaust: the mass of hair, the higgledy-piggledy suitcases, the meshwork of false legs. The representations of entire nations burned up.

In the remains of Canada I found a broken spoon and a rusted pair of scissors emerging from the mud. It was as if these items had just emerged, digging their way out of the soil. The paradoxes abound, as so often with this place. Those sent, always women, to work in this place, were far more likely to survive and tell their tale, so we know about Canada. The site is empty, it was burned by the Germans, there is nothing to see, no buildings to visit. It is a far-flung part of the site and not interesting to the endless parties who come to mourn and hug each other and be mortified by aspects of the site. A Frenchwoman, Marceline Loridan-Ivens, worked there.

‘We were going to Canada, which is what the Polish women had named the place where we sorted through the clothes. The French women among us would have called it Peru. Strange geography in the miniaturised world of the camp’ (Loridan-Ivens, 2015: 16).

In 1991 she returned to Birkenau for the first time since the war. The site is open to the world, it is not sanctified, to her at least. ‘I saw a fox sleeping in the ruins of the crematorium. People who lived nearby went through on bicycles, the way you take a shortcut’ (Loridan-Ivens, 2015: 94). She walked in the place that had tormented her. The fragments are easy to come by, but they have to be assembled. That is the easy bit. She wrote ‘I picked up a music stand the camp orchestra had used, and a spoon, so precious in the past – they were both rusted and half-buried in the ground’ . Loridan-Ivens made a film, *La petite prairie aux bouleaux (The Birch-Tree Meadow)*, about that fragment (Stéphane Bou 2012).

Otto Dov Kulka recalled finding fragments at Stutthof where he had gone to find his mother’s grave after they were separated in Birkenau.

‘Returning, my eyes were fixed on the ground. And as I scour the grass like this, aimlessly, almost every few steps I encounter strips of leather – dark, some rotted, dried out. I picked up one or two of them without knowing what I was doing, but, as in the return to Birkenau, when I picked up the fragment of a brick from the remnants of the youth and children’s barracks and another fragment of brick from the rubble of the crematoria and took them with me to Jerusalem, this is undoubtedly what I wanted to do, and did, with these strips of leather. Because they were the only distinctive thing in that grass’ (Kulka, 2014: 64).

Later at the edge of Meksyk, at the ditch between the main body of the camp and the half built, half abandoned part, I found a piece of shoe leather lying on top of the grass. I knew that this ditch was dug by prisoners, that digging this ditch was part of the death sentence, of being worked to death. I don’t know if this leather piece is someone’s shoe that has emerged from history. Did the prisoners have leather shoes? Maybe this site, which is bordered, encroached upon at one corner by modern housing, maybe this site was used after the war as a dumping ground. The sort of information that is almost impossible to

find. I'm not a historian, not a researcher proper. I don't speak Polish. I wonder what happened in this field in the period between the abandoning of the camp and the sacralisation sometime later. There was a gap when nobody really cared, certainly not for this fenced field on the wrong side of the tracks. In this gap I might find things if I try to look, just try and see.

The ground here is full of lost objects, of treasure. Nobody has ever looked for it. There has been no archaeological excavation of this site. How could there be? All the fragments that went missing, that fell into the mud, remain down there. Maybe even bodies, like First World War trenches where objects still emerge a hundred years after the act. Auschwitz will continue to give up ghosts far into the future, throughout the saeculum and beyond.

Mexico

Walking around the perimeter of Birkenau I realised that there is no real perimeter, it is not contiguous, it breaks, is pierced, turns in on itself, repeats and distends. At the front of Birkenau (the tourist zone, the arrival space, the place of visitation) the museum presents a seamless wire fence with concrete posts and watch towers, but at the end of this fence the fiction of this arrangement is revealed. I headed east. At the end of the original compound, suddenly there is no more fence. Although the camp extended past here, now there is simply an open field and a notice warning that this is sacred and untouchable ground. I climb across the ditch anyway and take a walk around it. This field was called Mexico. In the camp signage, the Polish version of the word, *Mercyx*, is used. A large area here has been sundered from the site and used for housing. Looking at an old map I see that a road ran here before the war and this was probably the return of what was there before the Germans demolished everything.

There are houses along this road. It is typically suburban despite overlooking Birkenau. The field could almost be mistaken for a golf course. Maybe the fantasy is necessary because who wants to wake up overlooking a death camp? Signs caution against despoilation. From a Catholic shrine Jesus watches the empty zone.

Birkenau was intended for 60,000 prisoners. Construction began in mid-1943, but by January 1944 only 32 of the planned 188 barracks were complete, with a further 35 in the assembly or outfitting stages. Following the construction of a spur line, connecting the main railway and thus the world directly into the camp, Jewish women from Hungary began being quartered there. There were no kitchens, washrooms, or latrines, and many of the barracks had no bunks in them. The prisoners received bedraggled summer dresses, and some of them went almost naked with only rags and scraps of blankets to cover themselves. The name given to the segment may reflect the image of Mexico in the pre-war press as a poor, restless country with a disorganized administration.

There is a corner of the site that I know well. It forms the end of the wire fence that runs along the front of the site. It ends before the area known as Mexico, after which the space is unfenced and reverting to countryside. Across the roadway the main historic camp areas remain fully fenced and closed to visitors out of hours. Concrete posts, insulators and wire are replaced as needed to maintain the illusion. Standing at this corner looking either inwards or outwards, back or forth, it's hard to know what I'm supposed to know as a visitor. There is some signage, but not much. Where am I, what year am I in, what happened here.

This may be the 'real' entrance to Birkenau. It is the SS gate. Across the road are their barracks, now a Christian institution. The Auschwitz gatehouse of a billion photographs was of course where the inmates entered, so perhaps that is the 'real' entrance. It's hard to know.

I found my ruined spoon here, lying on the ground near the foundations of a building that had been destroyed. The bowl was flatted and bent backwards. It still had evidence of elegance, like a spoon that has been brought here from a house elsewhere, not an army spoon, not a utilitarian issue. Somebody's possession. I imagined a prisoner guarding it fiercely, eating with it and then losing it, or leaving it when the end, or liberation, came. How else could it have got here? Later I came across a pair of rusted scissors. The ground seemed to be full of detritus from the past. The ground is, of course, full of the people who lived and died here. It is full of death and suffering and memories. Only the top surface is visible. I'm walking in an empty museum.

The Fountain of Tears



Figure 24 The Fountain of Tears sculpture at Birkenau

From home I tried to work out how places related to each other. I was trying to recall where I had stood and why I hadn't found many places while I was on site. I had noticed a place called The Fountain of Tears on the map between the Judenramp and Birkenau. It

was my first indication that where things were not signposted, they were often not signposted for a reason.

By the time I returned to Oświęcim I had largely forgotten the existence of this strange name, but I saw it on the map I knew I had to visit. I walked down from the Judenramp in the direction of Birkenau and found a modern building, a large shed, nestled close to the curve of the railway spur, within sight of Birkenau and within shouting distance of the Judenramp, as if it was holding all these sites in place. I rang the bell and after an age and a lot of pacing up and down on the gravel in front of the building a man appeared on the balcony. I told him I wanted to visit. He asked if I could come back the next week. We agreed on the following Tuesday.

Later I found out his name was Rick Wienecke. Rick came from Canada. He had ‘found Jesus’ as a young man and then gone to Israel where he joined a kibbutz and then the Israeli army. The Fountain of Tears is his life’s work, a way of squaring his love for Jesus with his understanding of the Holocaust. The sculpture exists now in two places, Arad in southern Israel and Birkenau, near the camp.

The Fountain of Tears in Arad has six olive trees that are a part of the display. The trees represent the promise of God to bring life to the number six million; to take this number of death and turn it into a number representing life, but specifically back in the land of Israel. In Birkenau there are no olive trees. (“Fountain of Tears by Rick Wienecke” n.d.).

He showed me around his gallery which was built specifically to house a copy of his original Fountain of Tears. As an artist and an atheist the work did little for me. I wondered what Rick thought he was doing, conflating the passion of Jesus with the death camp, but his enthusiasm and pleasure in talking about his work was undeniable.

The Potato Warehouses

The Kartoffel Lagerhalle, translates as the Potato Warehouse. Kartoffel is also a derogatory slang term for Germans, a sort of ethnic slur based on the prevalence of potatoes in German cuisine. The long row of roofless, decaying, buildings in the rural landscape, tucked away just beyond the Judenramp shocks on first encounter. They were built to store root vegetables, not for the inmates of the camps but for the Reich, for the German people. The rotting hulks are impressive even in their ruined state, an industrial estate in the middle of the countryside. Both Auschwitz and Birkenau are visible in the distance if you know what you're looking for.

When UNESCO came sniffing around, wondering why there is so much in the vicinity that is unprotected, unmanaged, uncared for by the Museum, the State Party started to give responsibility for the warehouses and other sites to The Foundation's growing empire of atrocity.

Ivo proudly took me to visit the warehouses. I had been to see them the previous year and had wandered around their vastness, cycled up and down the road they sit on, a country lane where the quiet is broken only by birdsong and the occasional passing train. Barely anybody visits the Judenramp and nobody visits the warehouses, but they will be preserved. Ivo took me into the first space and ran through a little performance that he had clearly rehearsed. Picking up a stone and placing it on a brick, he asks me to look at the tiny stone and to consider how many potatoes the space could contain and then how many people this quantity of potatoes could feed and then to consider the whole row of warehouses. That's a lot of people that could be fed, he says. I'm not sure he gets it. These potatoes were never destined for the inmates of Auschwitz.

The Remembrance Museum of Land of Oświęcim Residents

‘ a museum devoted to the brave Polish citizens of the city and the region, who did assist the prisoners of the Auschwitz camp and participated in the resistance movement within the camp’

The Auschwitz museum authorities offer a homogenised experience. Their camp stands in isolation from the Polish experience, as it should be. Theirs is a museum for the world. To the nationalist government of Poland this is not enough and they demand a notion of Polish heroes to counter the horror that took place on Polish land. This new museum is needed to balance the antisemitism that riddled pre-war Polish politics and society.

The Lagerhouse building is adjacent to the wooden Kanteen. It that looks like an abandoned school. When I first saw it, it stood grey and mysterious in the trees. Over the next few years it turned into a building site. Eventually I realised that a mysterious new museum had started to evolve, The Remembrance Museum of Land of Oświęcim Residents. Google calls it the Memorial Museum for Auschwitz Residents. Does the archipelago need any new museums?

Ivo’s father, Dagmar, and I stood outside the Kanteen. We looked first at Auschwitz, then the new museum being built across the way. Do they help you, he asked in his fractured English. No, I said. He laughed. ‘They would prefer my building to be bulldozed. It does not fit with their plans.’ His work sits in the way of sanitised modernity.

‘The initiative aims to commemorate the heroic inhabitants of this Land [...] We want to tell of their life and suffering and show that the Land of Oświęcim is not only a place marked by a painful history, but also an area of beautiful history and traditions’(“Beyond Auschwitz ‘Stammlager’: Sites next to Auschwitz-1” n.d.).

I took a trip to Poland specifically to visit the new museum but I had misread their website. I turned up on an electric scooter, my new preferred way of moving between sites, and found myself in an uncompleted car park. As I stood there trying to work out where the

entrance was a man emerged from the Lagerhaus. He told me to go away. The museum was still being built.

Secondary Auschwitz matrix reality

The vodyanoy appears as a naked old man with a frog-like face, greenish beard and long hair, his body covered in algae and muck and black fish scales. He has webbed paws instead of hands, a fish's tail and eyes that burn like red-hot coals. They have a completely human constitution and habits. Their overall dress and appearance are bizarre, resembling a vagrant with patchy shirts and odd hats like boaters with long speckled ribbons. Vodnici spend their time running their territory, playing cards and smoking pipes or just sitting at the water surface on rocks. They can withstand lingering for hours outside their ponds. Their faces are usually unshaven; it is not uncommon for vodnik to have large, wet, tangled beards. They ride along their rivers on half-sunk logs, making loud splashes. Local drownings are said to be their work. When angered, the vodyanoy break dams, wash down water mills and drown people and animals. Fishermen, millers and beekeepers make sacrifices to them. They drag people to their underwater dwellings to serve as slaves. Vodnici store souls of the drowned in porcelain teapots. They consider these to be their most valuable heritage and the number of these pots as representative of their wealth and status among other vodnici. If the lid of a pot is removed the soul within will escape in the form of a bubble and be liberated.

Doctor Mengele suffered a stroke while swimming in the Brazilian coastal resort of Bertioga in the State of Sao Paulo. He drowned on Wednesday 7 February 1979. The water there was warm and the beaches long, sandy and white.

He liked this place,
 the endless warmth,
 the easy-going life.
 His previous world almost forgotten
 He drank with friends,

lived anisolated life,
far from
He drank several rum and cokes
before walking into the sea
for his swim.
doing a lazy backstroke,
he felt a jarring
in his right eye
his arm stopped lifting
His body rolled over
and over
in the waves.
he was unconscious.
A few minutes later he was dead,
drowned
or killed by an infarct,
who cared.



Figure 25 The pope at The Wall of Death, author's collection

Auschwitz is not supposed to be a contested space but in 1984, five years after Pope John Paul II prayed at the Wall of Death, a Carmelite convent was established on the camp periphery in a theatre that had been used to store poison gas used in the gas chambers. In 1986 a large cross was erected on the grounds of the convent. When the authorities started proceedings to remove this Christian incursion, over a thousand inhabitants of the town protested the 'illegal' demands of the Jews to carry out an 'unwarranted' eviction of the nuns. In response an undertaking was given to create a centre of information, education, meeting, and prayer, but outside the area of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps. In 1989 an American rabbi, Avraham Weiss, and six colleagues dressed in concentration camp garb scaled the walls of the convent, blew a shofar and screamed 'Nazi anti-Semites'. Polish workmen at the site poured paint and water on the protesters and physically removed them from the site. The archbishop of Warsaw called on the Jews not to talk to Polish Catholics

‘from the position of a superior nation and not to dictate terms that cannot be fulfilled. Your strength is in the mass media, at your disposal in many countries’. In 1990 the new Polish regime, recognising Jewish sensitivity set up a commission to prepare new texts so due prominence would be given to the Jewish aspects of the site.



Figure 26 Islamic mission to Auschwitz

Sheikh Mohammed al-Issa, an influential Muslim religious leader and secretary general of the Muslim World League, led a mission to “build bridges” with Jews and Christians (Joel C. Rosenberg 2020).

The Auschwitz Museum Twitter account posts a regular stream of the short histories of real people who entered the camp, along with an image. Often these are the official camp photograph, often they are a family photograph. The biographical information is by necessity truncated: so-and-so was born here on this date, on this date they entered the camp, on this date they died or simply they did not survive, or, happily, they were

liberated on this date. Even the simplest biography is complex. The last baby and the man who went on to be the oldest in the world. Humanity in all its richness, and why not? These people had all the genetic variety of any other population thrown together, they had no common points, or few. When will the last survivor of Auschwitz die? That time must be close. At that point a new saeculum will open.

In 2017 twelve people (Poles, Belarusians, Germans) protesting war in Ukraine, stripped naked and draped a banner saying 'love' over the the Arbeit Macht Frei gate. They killed a sheep, launched a firecracker and chained themselves to the fence. Convicted of profaning the site, a court jailed two for more than a year and fined the rest. The person who killed the sheep faced additional charges under an animal protection law.

To address dark tourism a tour firm used a bus with images showing the Nazi death camp as a fun tourist destination.

In 2016 on the popular celebrity skating TV show *Ice Age*, the wife of Vladimir Putin's spokesman dressed in a concentration camp uniform smiled and pantomimed shooting in front of an imaginary child, exiting to the sound of machine gun fire. The judges gave the pair perfect scores.

Angela Merkel toured the camp's crematorium, walked through the camp's iron gate, visited the barracks. Poland's foreign ministry called her visit 'historic', the third visit to the camp of an incumbent head of a German government.

The head of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum asked to be jailed in exchange for the release of a teenager sentenced by a Sharia court to 120 months in jail for blasphemy. 'I cannot remain indifferent to this disgraceful sentence to humanity' wrote Cywiński, who is not Jewish.

Günter Grass wrote,

‘from the middle of fourteenth century to the time of Tulla’s birth in 1927, Osterwick was written as follows: Ostirwig, Ostirwich, Osterwigh, Osterwig, Osterwyk, Ostrowit, Ostrowite, Osterwieck, Ostrowitte, Ostrów. The Koshnnavians said: Oustewitsch. The Polish root of the village name Osterwick, the word ostrów, means an island in a river or lake; for originally, in the fourteenth century that is, the village of Osterwick was situated on the island in Osterwick Lake. Alders and birches surrounded this body of water, which was rich in carp’ (Grass 1997: 133)

Auschwitz had no meaning beyond the historic endless varying of a place name. Its name seems unassimilable. The Germans called it Auschwitz, the locals called it Oświęcim or Oshpitzin, depending on their ethnic origin.

The historic names of Auschwitz are Oспенchin, Osvencin, Hospencin, Osswetem, Uspencin, Oswentim, Wswencim, Auswintzen, Oświęcim, Oswencin, Auswiczin, Awswiczin, Uswiczin, Osvietsim (used on maps between wars), Oświęcim (during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Auschwitz, after 27 January 1945) and Oshptzin (in Yiddish).

A name with no significance,
signifying nothing,
no sound and no fury.

A macabre simulacrum of
the great death camp.

And did those feet.

There is a green hill far away.

A foreign word,

feared and expected,

the dawn command:

get up.

Wastawach.

in some place on earth

I went back to Auschwitz hoping to see Birkenau in snow and ice as classic photos show. Instead, the sun shone. It was my longest stay in the town. I didn't know, nobody knew, that we were on the cusp of a changed world, of a virus that was already sweeping through the global population.

By chance I had booked that trip over the 75th anniversary of liberation of the camp. I was emailed an invite to a ceremony at Budy Bor. I wanted to go, but the sub-camp is several miles outside town and I had no transport. I hoped that Ivo would turn up and take me there in his dodgy car, but he didn't. He was guarding the celebrities who would descend on the town for the day. He was a good celebrity guard.

When I got there the entrance to Birkenau had a new appearance. The gatehouse had disappeared and a vast white tent had been built over the entrance buildings creating a theatre and ensuring that the remaining survivors did not die during the ceremony. Concrete had been laid around the rail lines and that new road, which had been talked about since the 1980s at least, had appeared around the front of the camp.

As the public were not invited nor allowed onto the site during this day, I decided to make a circumnavigation of the camp. This is not an easy undertaking, there are no roads that circle the perimeter of the camp. It is not a perimeter that is supposed to be walked, it is an infinite perimeter.

There are only entrances and exits. The museum at Auschwitz is a Café of Arrivals and a Café of Departures. Emily Dickinson said the abyss has no biographer.¹⁹

We carry an internal map of the place called Auschwitz. Around the world Holocaust museums are still being built. The museums examine the internal mapping of our relationship to the place called Auschwitz. An archipelago of museums is slowly extending its tentacles around the world. These museums replicate a gulag of memory. I suggest the notion of collecting Holocaust museums for a Museum of Holocaust Museums. A mise en abyme of museums, museums within museums, a Russian doll of museums. A Typecase of Forgotten Things.

‘The historical exhibit in Auschwitz I does not offer a coherent narrative. There are almost no descriptions of sites, pictures, documents and artifacts [...] The ashes of the majority of camp victims have been deposited in what is today the green, serene and almost idyllic forest, landing and water pond landscape’ (“Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Visitor’s Manual” 2011).

When I was younger and I wanted to feel something about the Holocaust I would imagine my father being humiliated, made to clean the pavement with his toothbrush. I would think of my big strong father and imagine a soldier beating him, of his inability to defend himself. In this way I understood what had happened. I imagine my father and his three brothers in the camp, turning first slowly and then quickly, to spectres, dying in their own mire.

The faces that we see bulldozed into pits are the same well-dressed cheerful family groups that we see in black and white photographs. We don’t need to know them as family because we know our own family.

¹⁹ From a letter written by Emily Dickinson in 1884: “To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no Biographer-Had it, it would not be Abyss.” (L899)

I have always hated bullies, something deep inside me and atavistic fears the bully or maybe fears being the victim. Maybe I fear being in an impossible situation, watching someone else that I cannot save, being bullied.

There was me and the place and all the texts about the place. I hadn't read any of the texts that would later come to reveal the site to me. Of course, I had read Levi, many years before, and I was reading, re-reading, Delbo. It was her telling of journeys out of the camp that had given me a clue regarding the geography of the place. I had read a lot and I had read nothing, because I had not visited, I had not walked across the lines and until I did everything meant nothing. As soon as I went to the space everything changed, slowly, but that was the point. Before I set foot in the landscape I had only my imagined landscape.

I spent years making a collection of 'fragments that have regard to the notion that there is a strangeness in the world'. Over time I realised that this ephemera related, either directly or indirectly, to the Holocaust. I started the collection as material for making art with, but I could never use it. Using it equalled using it up, having one shot at making it work. When it was gone, it was gone. This attitude crippled my working process for a long time but slowly I learnt to transfer the production of work to text, thus preserving the fragments that I accumulated. Writing allowed multiple goes at the source. I still have the fear of wasting the good stuff, I still feel quoting or reproducing a fragment 'uses' it up.

Looking through my collection of cuttings. I can identify in retrospect what I was doing. It contains largely pieces about weak people committing unfathomable sins and strong people allowing weakness to overcome them. Everything I collected had an angle on this world of strangeness, an attribute that I never recognised although it was the unifying

strategy in my choices. Some of this collection I remember and much I do not, though I remember all of it in one way or another. All of it seemed to point to home.

If. This. Is. A. Man.

If this prisoner is a man, then what?

If this guard is a man, then what?

If they are both men, where does this leave us?

The uncanny valley hypothesis predicts that an entity appearing almost human risks eliciting cold, eerie feelings in viewers.

‘There is certainly something that the weird, the eerie and the unheimlich share. They are all affects, but they are also modes: modes of film and fiction, modes of perception, ultimately, you might even say, modes of being’ (Fisher 2016). Humanoid objects which appear almost, but not exactly, like real human beings elicit strangely familiar, feelings of eeriness and revulsion in observers. Like the camp guards or inmates, ‘Muselmann and witness, the inhuman and the human are coextensive [...] the non-human is the one who can survive the human being and the human being is the one who can survive the non-human’ (Agamben, 1999: 151).

History exists as a distant and decaying star whose event happened eons of ago and whose aftershocks we only see through the time it takes for the passage of light to complete its long journey to our present age. If you hold your hand up against the world you can feel the heat of Auschwitz, of the Holocaust. It emanates a burning sensation to those who want to feel it. Otherwise, it is quite cold. There is nothing in our world that is not touched by this, nothing that cannot be traced back to that abject place where three rivers met, where the process of creating death was practised remorselessly until it was understood by all and accepted by all,

‘just as in the expanding universe, the farthest galaxies move away from us at a speed greater than that of their light, which cannot reach us, such that that darkness we see in the sky is nothing but the invisibility of the light of the unknown stars, so the complete witness, according to Levi’s paradox, is the one we cannot see’ (Agamben 1999: 67).

What is a Holocaust survivor? Any Jew born before 1945? Anyone born before 1945? My father, born in the Republic of South Africa in 1920, is one. He was never in the camps and he comfortably survived the war, but he was at risk. His homeland was in danger of falling to Nazis. He served in the army, in Africa. He was in Palestine, guarding wells. But even if he'd been at home as a baby, safe from all potential harm, living in Iceland or Canada, he would be in my eyes a survivor merely because he was a Jew who didn't fall into the abyss. Fern Chapman wrote

‘I never thought of my mother as a Holocaust survivor. She was one of the lucky ones. She had been spared, had never faced the horrors of the Nazi death camps. Yet, when she was only twelve, she lost everything but life itself: her home, her family, her language, her loyalties, her identity.’(Chapman 2000: ix).

My father was a Litvak, the Lithuanian subset of the Ashkenazi Jews, born in nineteen-twenty, a Holocaust survivor in my definition. But that's not it. He never mentioned the Holocaust to me. The Litvaks originated in Lite, an area broader than interwar Lithuania, stretching to Vitebak in the east and as far south as Minsk and Bialystok. The Litvak was ‘smart, analytical, learned, worldly, skeptical, proud, stubborn, dynamic and energetic.’ (*The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1916). Also dry, rational and unemotional. They prepared their gefilte fish savoury rather than sweet.

My father never talked about Jewishness or his family or any other Jews but he occasionally made jokes about gefilte fish. He seemed complete and entire of himself, not needing to relate to anyone much outside of himself, except perhaps for his family, which consisted of three brothers and their wives, all of whom formed a tight bond, and with some work colleagues, mainly the creatives such as cartoonists and funny writers.

Looking at his first passport, issued in South Africa in 1939, I recognise what a valuable document it is, how he was able to get that passport as a human being. He wasn't refused it because of the ethnic origins of his parents, or because of the religious preferences of his forebears. It doesn't mark him as a Jew. He was almost as safe as it

was possible to be, largely because his grandparents had decided to leave Lithuania and move to Africa. Most of his cousins were not so lucky.

They are still trying people for crimes committed at Auschwitz. In fact, they are trying more people now than they did for the first fifty years, when many of the worst offenders slipped quietly away and renewed their lives either in Germany or in the United States. Old men on the verge of death are certified fit for trial, trials that can only end with symbolic convictions. Nobody is sending men of almost one hundred to jail.

My father would have been 102 this year. I sometimes imagine him as a victim of the Nazis. If I want to feel hatred course through my veins I imagine him, old and frail as I knew him towards the end of his life, kneeling on a freezing pavement cleaning the street with his toothbrush while a jeering crowd jostle to kick him and spit on him. Putting your own parent into that situation is a simple way of evoking raw seething hatred. I have also (sorry Dad) placed him on death trains to Auschwitz, on the selection ramp and gasping for death in his final moments as Zyklon B enters his lungs. I've put him in the fire and into the ghettos, all in the name of mental research. I have always considered him someone who lived through the Holocaust period. He spent his war as a young Jew in the South African Defence Force, playing in bands and marching up and down Africa.

Despite the impression often given that almost all Jews died in the Holocaust, many survived one way or another, either through late arrival in the camps or by missing out on the main highways of extermination, being off the Einsatzgruppen routes. Those survivors are now thin on the ground and we shall soon live in an era where there are no direct witnesses to this disaster. Even so, these events continue to reverberate, to exist, within our lived experience, in the same way that slavery lived within the American experience well into the last century, or that the slaughter of the first war was still echoing in my own youth. As with American slavery, there will be people about whom it will be

pointed out that their grandparent was killed in the gas chambers so recent was this cataclysmic event even as it fades from memory.

I decided that I should visit every Holocaust museum in the world. I had no idea if this was a plausible ambition or how many Holocaust museums there were, or how fast the number was growing. Wikipedia has a List of Holocaust memorials and museums (“List of Holocaust Memorials and Museums” n.d.), but it is not really a useful list for my purposes: it does not separate huge museums from tiny memorials. Maybe it is not necessary, but the human completist desire leads to a lot of clutter. There are several memorials listed in the UK although we have no national museum. For example, in Stamford there is a memorial stone in St Michael’s Churchyard, off the High Street.

My first Holocaust museum was Yad Vashem in Israel but my local Holocaust museum is the permanent exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London. There is a human desire to collect objects in a museum, to call that place a museum. We institutionalise these desires. The word museum in its Greek form, *mouseion*, meant “seat of the Muses” and designated a philosophical institution or a place of contemplation.

Soon after the camp was liberated surviving inmates looked at the piles of possessions, the piles of artificial limbs and suitcases and hair and children’s toys and recognised the evidence, the exhibits, the forensics that they had been bequeathed. Auschwitz became the ur museum of the Holocaust, the starting point of the memory industry, the spatial ground zero of the dust that now carpets the world. ‘In March 1946 prisoners’ organisations and the Polish authorities came up with an initiative to set up a museum in the camp grounds’ (Steinbacher 2005: 132). Auschwitz I was museumised. Birkenau was made into a museum of space. Other parts of the Auschwitz estate were not considered worth preserving.

The Foundation For The Preservation of Memory Sites Near Auschwitz collects objects that originated in Auschwitz. They also collect buildings and other properties. Their collection is extensive and eclectic. They cast light onto what Auschwitz was in its entirety but not the entirety of Auschwitz. Would you want to preserve your entire world, your whole landscape, as a death camp?

In 2022 war returned to the Pale, to the lands in which the Holocaust continued by other means. A Holocaust survivor, Boris Romantschenko, 96, died during Russian shelling of his apartment block, relatives said. The memorial at Babyn Yar has been damaged by shelling. In a feat of time travelling, the President of Russia told the world his aim was to de-Nazify Ukraine'. The President of Ukraine is Jewish.

You can go to Auschwitz for the first time only once.

When you look out of your door you see the landscape, you see the worn paths, the generalisations, the denial, the acceptance, the memorials. You see how the past is used to shore up the present. K. Zetnik, the pen name of Yehiel Dinur, wrote 'I believe with perfect faith that, just as in astrology the stars influence our destiny, so does this planet of the ashes, Auschwitz, stand in opposition to our planet earth, and influences it' (Patterson, 2018: 15). You can choose to look the other way, but then you are not living in our world. I walk to and stare into the void and try to get the void to stare back.

When I walked out from my hotel I didn't know anything. I didn't know that my hotel, the Polin, carried the Yiddish name for Poland. I didn't know that behind my hotel, below my balcony, was the remains of Jew Street, where the biggest synagogue had been until destroyed by the Nazis. I didn't understand that the huge new hotel that stretched from the riverside to the top of the hill was built on the site of a Jewish business. All I knew was that I could walk from here to the remains of the camp known as Auschwitz. I had a plan, to walk through town, cross the railway lines and on towards Birkenau. I

didn't think much about what I was going to encounter—I thought a lifetime of pictures and books had prepared me. I was looking for what I knew was there.

There are many things I don't know and no simple way of learning them. These are the unknown unknowns. I don't know how many ways there are to cross the river. I head down to the road bridge that spans the Sola in front of the new hotel. I don't know that the hotel replaced the Haberfeld house and factory. I don't know that the Haberfelds were Jewish. I set out to walk to Birkenau. There are several possible routes and my approach is random. I do know the rough direction. I cross the river and cut through Zasole, the new town on the West bank of the river. What I'm hoping is that whatever route I take will throw up remnants of the past, fragments of buildings, sites, roads, signs, the detritus of development. I'm searching for my palimpsest on the ground.

I can retrace my route that day in 2018 by looking at the photos I took, each of which is timed and geolocated within the automatic archive that these devices create. I took my first image at 9.02 and then one at 9.07, outside the Youth Centre. I later emerged opposite the station and took a left on the Krakow road that runs parallel to the tracks. After that I didn't take anything more until I reached the overpass that takes the road to Birkenau over the m. Kolbego main road and the PKP railway line.

The huge Soviet railway station did not have much time left in this world. By the following year it had been demolished and a new, smaller and modern station was being built to go with the modernisation and electrification of the Chrzanow-Krakow line. The line from Katowice and to the Czech Republic meet here. Three rivers, three rail lines.

The road crossing between Auschwitz I and Birkenau has clearly been rebuilt since the war. There are the remains of a previous bridge emerging from the undergrowth on the West side. The bridge crosses from the Zasole district towards Auschwitz II Birkenau, but no signs point this way on the main road.

I didn't think much about where I was or what else was in the landscape, but I quivered with anticipation of seeing the camp appear ahead of me. Although everyone knows the image of the gatehouse, I can't say I had a picture in my head of what I was going to see. I knew that I was walking into the past, slouching towards the abyss and that this time there was no distance between me and it.

In Birkenau,
built anew on the site of a displaced village,
I'm looking for Charlotte Delbo.

Only a small number of historic buildings have survived.
In these temporary structures erected in a hurry
the natural degradation processes
has been accelerating.
Many historic artefacts from the camp
have survived.
Its inmates are gone from this world, though
some are exhibited in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

Few places can rival Auschwitz for mythic power. But there are contradictions. The reality of the site clashes with an essential aspect of the myth: the idea that it was quite literally 'the end of the world,' a place far away from everywhere else. But there is a town. People. People live here, around and almost within the boundaries of the camp. They encroach on the boundaries in the way of people everywhere, eager to expand their opportunities, to use the resources they find around them. There is pressure on the sites, on the edges, and there is unthinking absorption of history.

I was surprised by the juxtaposition of a centre of extermination and a major town. The issue of place, the location of Auschwitz under the sky on Planet Earth, raises the issue of space, the relation of the camp to the human body. I arrived at the place and thought it would be obvious where I was, that the sites would be clearly visible. That wasn't true. I'm not sure I had any idea of what I was going to see except that I'd seen a lot of photographs of aspects of the site and knew I could recognise it.

I walked over the railway via a high-flown bridge and descended onto the plain which holds the camp. Seeing the arched entrance from a distance, I started to photograph it. I waited for tears that never arrived. Was I in Auschwitz? It didn't feel like it. Was I there all the time, since I had arrived on the train from Krakow, since I had left home, since I was born? Was I now entering the place or was I entering and exiting it all the time? Perhaps I crossed an invisible boundary. I was in the zone, triangulated, my presence articulated by reference to one or more named and unnamed places.

The town had no fence. Auschwitz had a fence and guards at the entrance. Although it was free to enter it was not easy to enter. Birkenau had a fence but no controls, it was simple and free to enter. Monowice had no fence and no boundary and no guards. As a mixture of public spaces and private commercial spaces, it was both easy and impossible to enter.

Here, I can walk everywhere, no distance is not too great, although it is tiring. Eventually I walk from the ruined death chambers to the Arbeit Macht Frei gate, from the chemical factories to the railway station of the town, from the ash pits to the stolen property collections, and I can never escape from being within the smallest iteration of Auschwitz.

When the guards disappeared and the gates swung open and the Russians appeared the perfectly ordered Nazi universe was unravelled. The elements that made up the camp became disordered and exploded and they could never be put back together again. Time moves in only one direction, energy runs down. Nothing could happen overnight but it

was inevitable that dissipation would occur. Birkenau was abandoned, lay empty, derelict. Farmers took wood, barracks, everything to use in a fractured landscape that had been denuded for years by the invaders. Later builders scavenged and removed building materials, bricks, stone, wood, rubble. Hordes of Polish men invaded the site carrying shovels and spades, digging, looking for valuables concealed by long dead Jewish detainees.

Oświęcim is near the Czech border, it is unstable as part of Poland but stable as part of Europe, part of history. The town is unremarkable and little visited, but pleasant enough to pass through. Pleasant enough to visit, but nobody visits to see the town.

In this area people live. They live and die. They are born, they go to school, marry, get jobs, start businesses, go into politics, fight, steal, lie, go to jail. Lives are lived in the vicinity of the enormity, of the void that represents the enormity. These are not special people. They are not connected to the events of wartime. On the whole they are not connected in any way to the population who were present during those terrible years and, even if they were, what of it? They could not be culpable. Populations drift in and out of areas over time. Some are stable and remain constant, others change quickly or violently due to war or famine or social actions, or political actions.

Just as the SS were never in absolute control of the spaces of the camps, the post-war authorities never were either. There were visible and invisible boundaries that divided the site into differing zones and the prisoners knew full well what these meant. They developed 'spatial strategies of survival' (Cole 2016). All Holocaust places of containment and confinement were permeable, which meant that they had no absolute borders, no absolutes of being inside and outside. The core space of control was always surrounded by grey area, neither fully inside nor outside the controlled zone. These were never contiguous and never constant, they fluxed in a temporal fashion. These areas have

been transmitted to our present understanding of such spaces. Thus, Auschwitz is a melange of competing and conflicting areas, many of which are neither wholly 'Auschwitz' not wholly 'not Auschwitz'.

a shadow,
a shape like a person
sitting on a rock
at the edge of the marshes,
a naked man with
a frog-like face,
greenish beard and
long hair.
a vagrant in a patched shirt and
hat hung with speckled ribbons
he stared at this apparition,
he had met it before,
he remembered
his mother
the Vodnici,
the water spirits
bodies covered in black fish scales and webbed paws,
a fish's tail and eyes like red hot coals.
dragged people down to their underwater dwellings
to serve as slaves.
stored the souls of the drowned
in porcelain teapots,
here on the marshes

where the cremated remains of
thousands of others.

In my hostel off the staircase on the first floor at the back there is a tattoo parlour, Studio Tatuazu, marked by a dark gothic poster on the door. I passed it every time I walked up the stairs. I had been passing it and wondering about it ever since I first arrived. The door is barred with a heavy steel frame as if they fear somebody might rob the tattoo parlour or attack the biker tattooers. I didn't know much, if anything, about where I was that first year. I didn't know what was in front of the hostel or what was behind it.

For a long time I didn't understand that my residence overlooked the remnants of the Jews of Oświęcim. At first I had an unaccountable lack of interest in my immediate surroundings, as if the geography I had come to visit was outside the town, delineated as camps. It eventually occurred to me that I was now staying deep within the remains of what I had come to see.

When I left Poland the first time I had broken the void and forgotten that I had wanted to make a hard journey to Auschwitz, that I had intended to cause myself pain to arrive at this place. I had got to know the shape and the constituency, the viscera, the connective tissues, the good parts and the bad parts, the remains, the museum, the railway, the gates and fences, the void.

I was empty but I had not been horrified by my encounter with the site. I had no visions of the horror, of the prisoners, of the murders.

I could see that Auschwitz is inescapable. It exists, embedded in our everyday discourse, in our politics, our art and our literature, our work our geography. It is buried in our souls, in our deepest thoughts as much as in our insults, our arguments and our hatreds. Auschwitz is taught as a warning, a challenge, a disaster.

I can talk about the place without attempting to say what it was. We think we know what it was, but what is it now? We have turned the place into a stop on our bucket list, an outing to a safe theme park of death that only exists far away in place and time, if we go at all. My aim is to examine how the name of this death camp has come to stand for the unknowable, the unmentionable and the unrepeatable. At the end of my first trip, I understood that I had learnt a lot but also that I had merely scratched the surface of this place. I had walked over the top of the past, through the contemporary mapping that was laid out for me, that it was intended for me to see. Now I had to dig.

I returned to Britain with the mud of Auschwitz on my shoes
And the boom boom boom of Brexit both barrels a lost cause
And a separation between mind and liverwurst
And my identity card playing footsie with my passport
And my past life in cahoots with my presents
And Oświęcim and Oshpitzin,
Ospenchin,
Osvencin,
Hospencin,
Osswetem,
Uspencin,
Oswentim,
Wswencin,
Auswintzen,
Oświęcim,
Oswencin,
Auswiczin,
Awwiczin, and Uswiczin on my shoes.



Everything is a text of the after of the Holocaust.

It is nearly over, although over does not mean diminished or nullified, just that the human condition is to let the past slide into the past. The Holocaust started on a continuum and will end on a continuum with nobody being able to pin down the precise dates for either. Entropy drives this thing, the amount of energy available will diminish, although there is still plenty of fuel left.

What is the half-life of a Holocaust?

This thing, one of hundreds of local names, angry names, made up expletives.

I became obsessed with the idea of marking my body, of putting something in my skin that I would have to take to my grave, of being tattooed. Tattooed in this place at the

tattoo parlour that overlooked a holy site, the site of the grand synagogue, of the street of Jews.

The tattoo shop didn't seem to understand its role.

Nothing lasts forever.

The thing is coming to an end,

But who can say such an enormity ends?

What is the Holocaust to us, now, in our age,

if it is over,

if everybody has died.

yet the camps still exist.

The Holocaust is bigger now than it was for decades after the war, after the camps were closed. At first, nobody except survivors wished to care, nobody wanted to be interested, to be told. When Primo Levi first published his book, nobody wanted it and no English language publisher could be found. Camps were closed, bulldozed. Artefacts were burned. The shame burned on both sides, nobody had time for this stuff. There were no Holocaust museums until the 1990s. The term was invented then.

Svetlana Alexievich called Chernobyl 'above all a catastrophe of time' (Vergara 2022). I took a journey to Auschwitz. I had set out to write a deep map of Auschwitz and now that map was almost complete.

On the twenty-fifth of January 1945, the explosion that had been building during the previous five years finally blew. On that day the world revolved around a town in Poland, although it didn't know it yet. That town revolved around the camp, the Holocaust revolved around the town, the war revolved around the Holocaust, the world revolved around the war. The last Jew of Auschwitz was en route to Sweden, to work in a radio

factory, he was also en route to returning home, although it would take him sixteen years to do so. Like a volcano, like Chernobyl, this explosion occurred in a secret place but it revealed the truth. It scattered the truth worldwide. Thousands of fragmented objects were blown high into the atmosphere, into the world. These fragments ranged in size from protean specks so tiny that they could be breathed in with the morning air to lumps of concrete sizeable enough to form a cattle trough. Those fragments swirled and danced and were blown in the atmosphere and slowly descended, landing in farms and cities and on governments and on families, were absorbed into minds, into written language, into memory, stories, histories, warnings, literature, slang and all the institutions of the world, all the stages of the world. Over the next seven decades as those fragments re-entered the atmosphere and settled in to take their place in the history of our world we came to know the place, to know what happened in old Europe, there, by three rivers, outside an old town, to the people of Europe, to the humans of the huge territory.

The camp had built unbearable pressure. It had been leaking people and information for years. In January 1945 it blew. With the Russian liberators within sight the containing guards were removed,. The explosion that followed was a slow-motion blast.

‘I have never since heard sounds like those we uttered, sounds released from the very depths of our being. The sheer force of it must have scattered the ashes of Auschwitz to every corner of the universe, for our cries of joy suddenly turned into a bitter wail: “We are liberated! We are liberated! But where are they all? They are all dead!”’ (Leitner 2018: 987).

The events of 1945 spread fragments across Europe and, eventually, across the world. These particles settled quietly into the landscapes and went un-noticed, in some cases for decades.

Back at the source, even before, the closure/opening of Auschwitz, a decision was made by the inmates to create a memorial, a museum. Materials left by the departing Nazi quartermasters were transported from Birkenau to Auschwitz I. There were the premises

and the landscape and the people and the knowledge and the concept. A new brand was brought into the world, Auschwitz, the Death Camp.

The struggle to preserve Auschwitz is a struggle against the instinct to let it crumble into dust. Allowing Birkenau to crumble into dust was present as a concept from the earliest days.

The Holocaust is now in everything. Auschwitz was in the Holocaust and is in everything. Every fragment is linked, creating an endless meshwork. Every fragment was a node and we all lived in a node on the meshwork of Auschwitz. All the energy fell out of the Nazi project and all the energy fell out of the war and all the energy fell out of old Europe. We may live in that non-place forever.

In 2019 at Birkenau camp, a five-minute shuttle-bus ride from the Auschwitz visitor centre, the scene is so peaceful it is almost impossible to imagine the sea of stinking mud that survivors describe. The vast expanse is covered in neatly mowed grass. Flocks of teenagers in matching hoodies wander from ruin to ruin. As I stand at the stairs leading down into the ruined gas chambers, a dozen Brits pose for a group picture on the steps of the memorial a few yards away.

When I first stepped into that space known as Auschwitz I knew nothing of its topography but I knew a lot of its topology. My aim was to map the space by a process of wandering across its boundaries and fragmented spaces. I put my foot into the territory stepping down from the Krakow train. Other passengers dismounted far faster than I did and ran across the multiple railway tracks towards the station building and were gone, as if into history. I was slow and considered and felt I had reached the wild west, somehow. I took my pull along case and climbed down from the train and meandered my way past the 1950s modernist station and, navigating by Google maps, found my way to the old town,

to the Rynek. I didn't know it, but the station was seeing its last days. On my next visit it was partly barricaded and after that it was gone. A smaller elegant station swiftly replaced it alongside a corridor of development on railway land heading east. This is what happens here, the town changes fast. It is attached to a different Europe.

How did this start? Is it because it is easy, or because it is hard? Is it an obvious subject, or an obscure one? Because so much has been written already, what more can be added? Because you want to use your Jewishness even while you deny it and while you deny it, it is relevant.

I built my map piece by piece. This process showed me how to reveal other fragments of the landscape that had changed or not changed in revelatory ways, so I continued, building a patchwork of map parts, laying them over and over on each other until a new topography was revealed.

Auschwitz is a conjoined space, a town with a death camp attached. A Jewish town empty of Jews, empty even of its original population. The town predates the state it is now part of. It was chosen as the site for the greatest of the death camps because of an idea that it had once been a German town, because it was situated in an industrial area, because it was on the railway line, because it was on the river (three rivers), because it contained a set of barracks. But once that was done, and none of those reasons were enough in themselves, once that was done, a momentum took over. The town must live through eternity conjoined with a terrible twin just as the twin must exist conjoined with the banal town.

After the war Kitty Felix, who later became Kitty Hart-Moxon, came to London and trained as a nurse. People made comments about the number on her arm, suggesting that she had a bad memory as she had written her boyfriend's phone number on her arm, so

she had her tattoo number, 39934, removed by a plastic surgeon. 'I'd had enough of the silly questions and whispering, and of people not wanting to know the truth. I just wanted to get rid of it to stop all that: the numbers had become a burden' ("Tattoo That Auschwitz Survivor Cut out of Her Arm Features in New UK Exhibition" 2021) she said. She had the skin bearing the ink preserved in formaldehyde. Her mother would not remove her tattoo. When her mother died, in 1974, Moxon had the tattoo removed and both the pieces of skin embedded within a resin block as 'proof of the camp'. I had never heard of such a thing before, the removal and preservation of this marker of Auschwitz.

In a process known as progenic tattooing people put the camp number of a family member into their skin by tattooing.

I had dreamed myself to this place, I had sleepwalked myself here. It was the outcome of a lifelong desire. You can only approach Oświęcim through Auschwitz.

The remains of the death camp had seemed enough. I knew the place existed only by the guttural horror name, Ausch-witz, and by the images, that sign, that entrance, those fences, those victims. Nothing more. I was barely aware that there was a town with the same but different name, names from which I would have to disentangle the camp. I didn't see that naming the place, the places, the elements, would be the most difficult part. And then I got there and everything changed.

A railway station.

A road.

A suburb and a wheely case.

A hostel.

A town square.

The rynek.

A river.

A bridge.

The word Auschwitz.

I dreamed again that the roads to Auschwitz were filled with penitents, crawling on their hands and knees, whipping themselves as they went, begging for forgiveness. This never happened. Not when the war ended and the horror was revealed. Never. Just as well. I needed to make my own memorial.

Charlotte Delbo told us how to die in Birkenau.

‘Skin ceases to be the tight protective covering for the body. The cold strips us nude, down to the bowels. The lungs flap in the icy wind. Wash out on a line. The heart has shrunk from the cold, contracted, constricted till it aches, and suddenly I feel something snap there, in my heart. My heart breaks loose from my chest and everything that holds it in its place. I feel a stone falling inside me, dropping with a thud. It is my heart. I am filled with a wonderful sense of well-being. How good one feels, free of this fragile, demanding her. One sinks into a soft lightness which must be happiness. Everything melts within me, everything assumes the fluidity of joy. I surrender, and it is sweet to surrender to easeful death, sweeter than to love, and to know that it is over, no more suffering and struggling or requiring the impossible from a heart at the end of its resources.’ (Delbo, 1995: 64)

One of us must survive, she said. Then we take all the others home with us. She went home, eventually, from the Café of Departures. She spoke of two selves, her Auschwitz self and her post-Auschwitz self. ‘I live next to it. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory.’ (Ibid: xi)

In the tattoo parlour overlooking the destroyed, stolen and abandoned street of Jews which hid a relict of the Grand Synagogue for seventy years, I put a text under my skin, a fragment that could never be removed.

I went to get needled at the source, marking my visits on my body, under my skin, making a record that I would take with me to my grave.

Taking Charlotte Delbo's injunction back to the source, I had myself tattooed on my forearm because forearmed is forewarned.

Auschwitz always leaked inwards and outwards and continues to do so.



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