



*...the words remain...*

On July 2-4, 2007, an international conference entitled “Remembrance – Awareness – Responsibility” was held in Oświęcim. It was organized as part of the observance of the sixtieth anniversary of the creation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum on the site of the former Nazi death camp.

The idea of commemorating the victims of the camp was discussed even before its liberation. A proposal to create a museum on the grounds of the camp was made publicly for the first time by former prisoner Alfred Fiderkiewicz, at a session of the National Council on December 31, 1945. He put forward a draft law which was approved by a legislative committee and then sent on to the Polish legislature on February 1, 1946. Although no decision had yet been made, as early as February 26 the government directed the Ministry of Culture and Art to secure the former KL Auschwitz-Birkenau and to organize around-the-clock protection for it. This was to be done by the Protection Authority. Former camp prisoner Tadeusz Wąsowicz, who later became Director of the Museum, was placed in charge of the Protection Authority. He and the group of people who came with him, mainly former prisoners, arranged for the area of the former camp to be guarded continuously, and for guides to assist the increasing numbers of pilgrims wishing to pay homage to the camp victims.

The Polish legislature created the Museum by an act of July 2, 1947. According to its provisions, “the grounds of the former Nazi concentration camp in Oświęcim, together with all the buildings and equipment located there, shall be preserved for all time.” The act also provided that “The State Museum is tasked with collecting and assembling evidence and materials concerning Nazi crimes, making them accessible to the public, and conducting research on them.”

Despite the difficult and complicated situation in postwar Poland, despite the twists and turns of history, for sixty years the Museum has been taking care of what remains of the camp. As the years have gone by, the range of activities has steadily expanded, with new collections acquired, a huge archive created, and a professional conservation department organized. The work on research, publishing, exhibitions and education has developed apace.

Today Auschwitz is a memorial. It is the largest Jewish cemetery, the largest Polish cemetery, a monument, a museum. The remnants of the German Nazi concentration camp and death camp recall the darkest moments of human history. In this place, functionaries of the Third Reich slaughtered more than a million Jews, and murdered tens of thousands of Poles, Roma and Sinti, Red Army soldiers, and other innocent people.

After sixty years Auschwitz has become a symbol for all humanity, a reference point for every debate about the extremes of human behavior. A symbol of the Holocaust. This place should speak to us constantly. Its dark depths hold lessons for present and future generations. That is why for this anniversary conference we invited former camp prisoners and the greatest world authorities on the Holocaust, genocide, and totalitarianism and its effects. Their discussions were aimed at deepening reflection on the future directions of the Museum’s work, in the context of the new challenges and threats posed by the modern world.

A visit to Auschwitz shapes people’s attitudes, opinions and views of the world, but also affects emotions. It brings out fears, anxieties, and ambivalent feelings at times. The conference participants considered how the history of Auschwitz, the darkest chapter of human history, can be incorporated into a shared history without creating divisions. Academic teachers and the staff

of memorials shared their experiences as they responded to the question of how the ever-receding history of Auschwitz can be conveyed to succeeding generations while keeping the character of the memorial uppermost in mind, without detracting from its authenticity.

Although historical research on the causes and conditions that led to the tragedy of Auschwitz is essential, the recommendations for the future articulated by the conference participants, and particularly by those who survived the nightmare of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, are no less important.

More than thirty million people have visited the Museum since 1947. Interest in this subject matter has not lessened with the years, as indicated by the fact that recently more than a million of them have been arriving annually. Visits to Auschwitz are a powerful experience for many young people, affecting their future moral choices. The conference participants considered how the work should be carried forward, so that a visit to the Museum will make the next generations become more responsible for their contemporary world.

In his address, Elie Wiesel reminded us that buildings can disappear but words remain. Words spoken during the conference in the form of lectures, presentations, recollections, discussion. Words heard here in the former German Nazi death camp and concentration camp. For Jonathan Webber the voice of Auschwitz is a voice of extraordinary power. That is why it was worth recording that voice and conveying it to others in book form.

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