

## **National Perspectives in an International Setting: The Exhibitions of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1945-1955.**

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The idea that the exhibition of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau underplays the fate of European Jewry in favour of the Polish victims of Auschwitz has acquired the status of social fact. This paper will argue that this reputation is, if not totally undeserved, then at least exaggerated and misunderstands the forces at work on the Museum.

Auschwitz is the central Holocaust site in Poland, and generally one of the most-visited tourist attractions in Poland. Estimates of visitor numbers vary but it is safe to say that millions have toured the site of the former camp since the opening of the Museum in July 1947. A more qualitative measure of the site's centrality can be seen in the attitude of guidebooks for tourists to Poland, which advise visitors to make sure that they see the Museum, but provide a very flawed picture of it. Their presentation of the Museum will serve in this paper as the 'case for the prosecution' since they both reflect popular understanding (as they are written and published by members of particular societies) and shape it (because they tell tourists what to visit and, in many cases, what to think). They are therefore a bridge between popular understanding and the facts themselves, and as such very useful in understanding how misunderstandings such as those which surround Auschwitz arise.

The *Lonely Planet* series publishes guidebooks for destinations around the globe, and is very popular. Its guidebooks to Poland and Kraków<sup>1</sup> identify Auschwitz as an essential part of any tourist's stay in Poland. It does this both directly, by describing it as 'possibly the most moving site in Poland'<sup>2</sup> but also indirectly by including it in all of the itineraries of varying lengths suggested in the Introduction. It also places Oświęcim directly behind Katowice as the next-most important place to visit in Silesia, though in terms of size it is dwarfed by either Opole or Wrocław. *Lonely Planet Eastern Europe* is even more frank, saying that 'The Auschwitz Museum is the most vivid reminder of the atrocities which occurred during WWII.'<sup>3</sup>

The *Rough Guide* series is younger but, at least in Britain, just as popular as the *Lonely Planet* series. The *Rough Guide to Poland* is currently in its fifth edition and places considerable emphasis on the Auschwitz Museum, emphasising it in several ways. Firstly, it places the Auschwitz Museum in its list of '28 things not to miss', the only Holocaust site on the list, with the comment that it 'offers the profoundest of insights into human evil and demands to be visited'<sup>4</sup>. Second, it devotes far more space – eight pages – to Auschwitz than to any other Holocaust site. Thirdly, its sole references to the sites of Bełżec, Chełmno, Sobibór and Treblinka, (the pure extermination camps) are made in a text box with the heading 'Concentration camps in Poland' in the midst of the section on Auschwitz. Fourthly, the text-box 'Auschwitz-Birkenau in postwar Poland' explicitly equates the controversies which have surrounded the site with 'the difficult and emotionally charged issue of Polish-Jewish relations' (p.468). The reader is left in no doubt as to the central importance of Auschwitz in comparison with any other Holocaust site.

The information about this major site is, however, suspect. While keeping up-to-date is the major challenge for such an ephemeral form of literature, there is a consistency to the comments which is noteworthy, particularly since some of them are consistently wrong.

*Lonely Planet Poland* makes very little editorial comment, sticking to a (generally accurate) history of the camp. *Lonely Planet Kraków* is more polemic, noting that 'a dozen of the 30 surviving prison blocks today house the museum: some blocks stage general exhibitions, while others are dedicated to victims from particular countries which lost citizens at Auschwitz.' It is noteworthy that the guidebook confuses the institution of the Museum

(which exists throughout the site) with its exhibition (which can be found in the blocks among other places). The following paragraph describes the history of the exhibition.

During the communist era, the museum was conceived as an anti-fascist exhibition and the fact that most of the victims were Jews was played down. Prominence was given to the 75,000 Polish Catholics killed here, at the expense of the Jewish dead. This approach has changed: block No 27, dedicated to the 'suffering and martyrdom of the Jews', now presents Auschwitz more correctly, as the place of martyrdom of European Jewry.<sup>5</sup>

The visitor is therefore prepared for an exhibition where the fate of the Jews is only discussed in a block which has never been part of the permanent exhibition, which he or she is unlikely to visit with a guide, and which does not present the fate of Jews in Auschwitz except tangentially. The exhibition in Block 27 describes the fate of Jews in Germany and Poland before and during World War II and the assistance given to Jews by gentile Poles, finishing in a space intended for meditative reflection. The visitor who judged the exhibition's presentation of the fate of European Jewry on the basis of Block 27 would not be impressed. The impression left by the guidebook is that one should visit the site not the exhibition, which as this paper will show has never been the intention of the Museum organisers.

The current *Rough Guide to Poland* paints a similar picture to the *Lonely Planet* series, but in more detail, and offers a far more critical viewpoint (in both senses) when trying to explain 'the glaring omission of the Jewish perspective in communist-era Polish guidebooks and tours of the concentration camps.'<sup>6</sup>

Essentially the *Rough Guide* explains the problem in the same terms as *Lonely Planet*, but is more concretely damning about the present exhibition. It explains the rationale behind the communist-era Museum in the following way.

The Soviet Union, aided by loyal national communists, were the people who had liberated Europe from Hitler, and as inheritors of their antifascist mantle, the newly-installed communist governments sought to portray themselves as heirs to all that was noble and good. In this schematic view of the war, there was no room for details of the racial aspects of Nazi ideology – people were massacred in the camps because fascists were butchers, not because the victims were Jews or Poles or Romanians. Hence the camps were opened up first and foremost as political monuments to the victims of fascism rather than the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

The key comment is in the final sentence. The authors assume that in the absence of the antifascism of the 1950s the site would have become a monument to the Holocaust, despite the fact that the idea of 'Holocaust' did not emerge until the early to middle 1960s. By imposing their current understandings on the past site they obscure the degree to which the central historical event in Auschwitz – the killing of approximately 900,000 Jews from all over Europe – was not yet deemed a central part of the history of World War II anywhere, even to a large degree in Israel.

Despite (inaccurately) acknowledging a 'symbolic intellectual clean-up' of the site in 1990, the *Rough Guide* also leaves its readers with an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps the Museum has not really changed, again by focusing on the exhibition in Block 27.

Despite the strength and power of this memorial, some still find it disconcerting to see it lumped in among the others, as if Jews were just another nationality among many to suffer at the hands of the Nazis. Despite the recent changes in the way Auschwitz are officially presented, this is one aspect of the old-style presentation of the Jewish dimensions of the camp that you may feel has still not been fully addressed.<sup>8</sup>

This last comment is perhaps the key to what follows: the idea that the exhibition has changed in the last ten years (which it has, but not in the way many imagine), and a failure to

understand the nature of the exhibition before 1989, which brings us to the subject of this paper, which needs to be defined negatively to quickly master some common misunderstandings.

This paper is not concerned with the national pavilions erected between 1960 and 1985 by Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, Denmark, Bulgaria, Austria, France, Holland, Italy and Poland. Due to the political changes of the 1990s, many of these exhibitions are closed. In any case, they were (with the exception of the French exhibition) designed by organisations and ministries from the exhibiting country and therefore tell us little about the Museum's presentation of the site. While detailed analysis of these exhibitions would make an excellent future project, they are distant from the concerns of the average visitor.

This also applies to the exhibition in Block 27, entitled the "Martyrology of the Jews". Opened initially in 1968, and then closed completely until a redesigned exhibition was opened in 1978, this block is rarely visited by the average visitor.

Nor is this paper concerned with the exhibition which existed on the site between 1946 and 1950 in five of the Auschwitz I blocks. This is because this exhibition was never intended as permanent and, while it shows the basic pattern of the exhibition – starting in Block 4 and finishing in Block 11 – it is not the root of the misunderstandings.

The exhibition opened in fifteen former prison blocks in 1950 is perhaps more deserving of attention. It contained the antifascist content that both the Rough Guide and Lonely Planet series find objectionable, and started (in the eyes of many commentators) to blur the nature of the victims.

The exhibition opened in 1950 was the largest of all the exhibitions to be opened on the site. It started in Block 15, entitled *The Roots of Genocide*, proceeded through blocks devoted to historical camp themes, and finished in Block 21, entitled *The Struggle for Peace*. Teresa Zbrzeska describes Block 15 in scathing terms:

The exhibition in Block 15 depicted camps that the English set up for Boers in the time of "imperialist wars" as the first concentration camps. Impoverished black districts in New York were shown as the first ghettos and epitomised the evils of the capitalist system. The appropriate commentaries were appended. Space was also found for the October Revolution and the counter-revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding Block 21, she merely notes that the exhibition was "particularly strongly imbued with diverse socio-political information about events in the contemporary world." These blocks would seem to lend weight to the idea of an antifascist exhibition which was less concerned with the reality of what had happened in Auschwitz than with scoring political points. In opposition to this idea, photographs of the rest of the exhibition show a display of vast quantities of relics taken from the victims displayed in such a manner that left little doubt that the victims of Auschwitz had not been 'antifascists' but had been to a large degree Jewish men, women and children from across Europe. Their suitcases inscribed with their names and points of origin, their clothing, their prayer-shawls, all displayed in such quantities and with such directness that would have left the visitor with the strong impression that these victims had been murdered because of race, regardless of the political commentary that book-ended the exhibition.

In any case, this exhibition was dismantled within five years, to be replaced with the subject of this paper, what is known in the Museum as the 'Permanent Exhibition', erected in 1955 and largely still intact. The exhibition was intended to present Polish stewardship of the site – the Polish national perspective on Auschwitz – to the visitors who came to the site for

the tenth anniversary of the liberation. It is this exhibition which gives the paper its title, because the task facing the Museum was to steer a middle course between the requirements of the Polish government and the expectations of the survivors who would return in greater numbers than before for the tenth anniversary. By virtue of its longevity, furthermore, this exhibition is the basis for the understandings of the site now to be found in travel guides.

This paper has been guided by the idea of basic ‘charges’ against the site, derived from both travel guides and other literature dealing with reception of the site: that the exhibition of the Auschwitz Museum presented the victims of Auschwitz purely in political terms, thus obscuring their ethnicity and the racist basis of Nazism; and that (to a lesser extent) the fate of Polish victims was given undue prominence. The hypothesis of this paper is that the exhibition told as much of the truth as the Museum authorities could manage in a climate of close political supervision.

Three sources are central for understanding the exhibition erected in 1955. Firstly, the scenario written in 1954 by Kazimierz Smoleń, which details the content and explains the intent behind much of what was erected. Secondly, photographs of the exhibition document what was actually erected. Thirdly, guidebooks to the exhibition written by Smoleń and still available in a revised form, are important because the exhibition was always intended to be viewed with a guide who would offer explanations. These two sources give us a good idea of what was deemed to be important and how the visitor would have been told to view certain objects. Also, both the *Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet* guides suggest that visitors buy the guidebook as an alternative to joining a guided tour. As the *Rough Guide* puts it: ‘If you want all the specifics on the camp, you can pick up a detailed official guidebook.’<sup>10</sup>

The scenario starts with an introduction which sets out what Smoleń deemed central to any exhibition on the Auschwitz site. He argued that the significance of Auschwitz was that it was ‘a gigantic, never-to-be-equalled factory of death of millions of people and only secondly a typical Hitlerite concentration camp.’<sup>11</sup> Regarding the nature of the victims he stated that ‘They were for the most part Jews, as well as Russians, Poles, Gypsies, French, Italians, Dutch, Belgians etc.’ and he called for the focus of the exhibition to be their fate, as well as documenting the fate of ‘the nearly 300,000 numbered and evidenced prisoners of the concentration camp in Oświęcim and Brzezinka.’ He proposed that the exhibition would fit into about six blocks, on the following plan: one block of historical introduction, ‘the source of Hitlerism’; one and a half blocks devoted to ‘The Destruction of Millions’; half a block concerned with ‘Plunder’ (containing the relics of the victims); 4 blocks devoted to ‘The Prisoners’ Path of Suffering’, describing the lives of registered prisoners. Finally there would be sections describing ‘Hitlerite plans for the expansion of Oświęcim’ and ‘The Danger of the Rebirth of German Militarism’. The eventual exhibition fell into seven blocks. What follows is a description of their content.

Block 15 was no longer titled *The Roots of Genocide*; the guidebooks refer to it simply as a ‘Historical introduction’. It presented the Nazis’ rise to power as the result of German militarism assisted by German industry. There were sections on the remilitarisation of Germany, pre-war discrimination against the Jews, and the outbreak and course of World War II. It dealt mainly in slogans: beneath a picture of *Kristallnacht* in 1938 ‘Racist Persecution is the First Step to Genocide’; the invasion of the Soviet Union ‘The invasion of the USSR was the beginning of the defeat of Hitlerism’; occupation policy ‘The Hitlerite terror went mad in all the occupied countries’; resistance ‘The Polish People did not cease in its fight with the occupier: in the forefront of the struggle was the Polish Workers’ Party’. The rhetoric was unambiguous but did not exclude the Jews: rather it placed the fate of German Jewry into a wider picture – a symptom and major part of Nazism rather than the main event.

The importance of this exhibition is in any case open to question. Firstly it has to be questioned how seriously the political rhetoric was taken. Secondly, the placement of the Jewish tragedy within the context of the regime as a whole has to be seen as a common approach of 1950s historians. Thirdly, one has to acknowledge that the block did not stay open, though intended as a permanent display. The precise date remains unclear, but between 1968 and 1971 the block was closed.

Block 21 suffered the same fate and was closed even sooner because in the words of Zbreska 'parts of the exhibition... became out of date rather rapidly.' The exhibition was free of these political blocks by 1971.<sup>12</sup> The Museum authorities clearly felt no inclination to keep the blocks open through renovation and preferred to present the exhibition without them, lending weight to the idea that they were originally included to satisfy ideological requirements imposed from outside.

The closure of the political blocks left Block 4 as the beginning of the exhibition, as it had been in 1946, under the same title, *The Destruction of Millions*. Because it is the heart of the exhibition, and sets out the priorities for what follows, it will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

Block 4 opened with a room containing a map showing the points of origin of the victims all over Europe, an urn with ashes in an alcove with the words 'They were four million'.

The history of estimates of the number of Auschwitz dead is complex. Robert Jan van Pelt in *The Case for Auschwitz* describes three estimates of the number of Auschwitz dead current between the end of the war and 1989:

[...] a high one of 4 million based on the assumed capacity of the crematoria, a low one of around one million based on the number of transports and Höss's final assessment, and a middle one of around 2.5 million, based on Eichmann's number as related by Höss, which he initially substantiated in his Nuremberg affidavits.<sup>13</sup>

Van Pelt notes that 'most historians in the West...tended to accept, with reservations, the middle figure' with the exceptions of Raul Hilberg (who argued for a total of not more than one million) and Gerald Reitlinger (who proposed a total of 840,000). The high figure of four million was adopted by the communist authorities as a political move against the Federal Republic of Germany's non-recognition of the People's Republic of Poland, after being calculated by the Soviet State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of German-Fascist Aggressors in early 1945 on the basis of projected crematoria capacity.

It is therefore curious to find a western-European guidebook repeating this figure. 'Poland: The Rough Guide', published in 1991, begins its section on Auschwitz – the only former camp described in the entire book – with an extract from a travelogue describing Auschwitz which starts with the words: 'When you go in there's a sign in five languages that says "There were four million"' <sup>14</sup> The following text mixed high and medium estimates of the number of victims, saying that 'something approaching four million people – two and a half million of them Jews – were imprisoned and systematically murdered.'<sup>15</sup>

It is even more striking that subsequent editions of the guide repeated the error. In the 1996 (third) edition of the *Rough Guide*, although the text referred to 'somewhere between one and a half and two million people' <sup>16</sup>, the entry was still prefaced by this reference to a sign bearing the four million figure, and the same text was reproduced in the fourth edition in 1999. Only in the current edition (2002) have the references to four million finally been removed, almost ten years after they left the site.

Even when four million was the official figure of the Polish state, it was not always presented as set in stone. The *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide*, published in English in 1966, described the issue as follows: 'The exact number of victims is difficult to establish. Höss, the former camp commandant, put the figure of 2½ millions; other calculations approach rather 4 millions.'<sup>17</sup> Museum guidebooks were less apologetic, stating baldly that '4 million persons perished in the "Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau", 4 million persons from all the countries under Nazi occupation.'<sup>18</sup> Later informational material would state that 'From 1942, the camp also became the largest centre for the mass extermination of European Jews, of whom the majority were killed in the gas chambers immediately after arrival'<sup>19</sup>. In either case, what is interesting is the presentation of the nature of the victims in the exhibition and guidebook.

The second room of Block 4 was dominated by 28 flags and a sign saying that "In Oświęcim died people of 28 nationalities" (*W Oświęcimiu ginęli ludzie 28 narodowości*)<sup>20</sup>. This might lend weight to the idea that the Museum wanted to conceive the victims of Auschwitz as 'citizens of occupied countries' thus disguising their Jewishness. The *Rough Guide* quotes the decree establishing the Museum in 1947, noting disapprovingly that it 'captures the ideological leavening succinctly'<sup>21</sup> when announcing that 'The site of the former concentration camp in Oświęcim, together with all the buildings and facilities to be found there, is to be preserved for all time as a Monument to the Suffering of the Polish Nation and other Nations.'<sup>22</sup> Thus the emphasis was placed by the State on both countries of origin and on the Polish nation above the others who perished. What is interesting is the way in which this was subverted by the Museum.

Firstly, the use of the word *narodowość* (denoting cultural belonging) as opposed to *obywatelstwo* (denoting legal citizenship), far from excluding the Jews (and Gypsies) in fact facilitated their inclusion. The official state formula employed in official documents and early guidebooks to describe the victims of Auschwitz 'citizens [*obywateli*] of all the countries occupied by the Hitlerites'<sup>23</sup> did disguise the victims' Jewishness, but the formula in the exhibition did not.

Secondly, the guidebooks explicitly mentioned the Jews as the major victim group in the context of this room.

The citizenship and nationality of the prisoners was stated in various Nazi documents. They show that Auschwitz was selected as the place where the programme of complete extermination of the Jews was to be realised.<sup>24</sup>

After the Jews, the guidebook identified only the 'Extermination of Soviet POWs' and the 'Extermination of Gypsies'. The fates of Polish prisoners were not addressed, nor were nationalities identified individually. The scenario emphasised furthermore that the purpose of the room was not to repeat the information on the map in the first room showing points of origin: 'There we'll say "where people were brought from", here "what nationality".'<sup>25</sup> The documents that were to accompany the sight of the flags were arranged to show 'The Extermination of the Jews', 'The Extermination of Soviet Prisoners' and the 'Extermination of Gypsies' before moving to issues of class or religion. The overall message of the room was that, within the citizen-state paradigm laid down by the state, the truth could be told. This was also true of the next room.

The third room of Block 4 was and is devoted to the issues surrounding transport to the camp, and was given the title 'Transports to Death' by Smoleń in the scenario. It called for large photographs of Jews walking to a transport, Jews waiting at the French transport camp in Drancy, and enlargements of the tickets sold to Greek Jews for their deportation to Auschwitz. A photograph of the deportation of Poles from the Zamość region also occupied

one wall. A painting by Jerzy Adam Brandhuber, a former prisoner, was to augment the historical photographs, as were stills taken from the 1946 film *Ostatni etap* (The Last Stage), directed by Wanda Jakubowska, another former prisoner.

This arrangement lasted until shortly after the opening of the exhibition, when the Museum was shown pictures from what has since become known as the 'Auschwitz Album' showing the arrival and selection of Jews from Hungary in May 1944.<sup>26</sup> The room from that point on (probably about 1957) showed historical images of Jews arriving and being selected for the gas chambers. The guidebook mentioned in passing the transports of Poles and moved to the point:

Deported people were told they were taken to settle in another place and were sent to the Auschwitz camp. Jews from France, Holland, Hungary and other countries were deceived in a similar manner. Greek Jews were given railway tickets with Greek and German inscriptions.<sup>27</sup>

The next stage in the process, selection, was a ritual endured exclusively by transports of Jews. The guidebook made this clear, citing Höss: 'The vans were unloaded one after the other. After depositing their baggage, the Jews had to pass individually in front of an SS doctor, who decided on their physical fitness as they marched past him'.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, the guidebook utilised documents referring specifically to the fate of the Jews to illustrate these processes.

The room finished with a large map painted on the wall which survives to this day, entitled 'Extermination Factory'. The guidebook describes the map, noting that the 'places where mass extermination was conducted' were marked in red. It then described the extermination facilities in neutral terms of 'people' and 'transports' until concluding:

The vastness of the pyres might be gauged by the fact that a strong stench of burning flesh was carried for many miles. The entire population of districts, lying at even some distance from Auschwitz, began to talk about the burning of the Jews.<sup>29</sup>

The Jews were the victims of the Extermination Factory, just as they were the majority of those deported.

The upper floor of the block was concerned with what the scenario called 'The Extermination Process' and 'The Economic Exploitation of Corpses'. But whose corpses? Although the first room was dominated by a model of Crematorium II and photographs of naked women being chased to the gas chambers and of corpse-burning, there was no explicit mention of Jews – except in one crucial spot.

The form of killing with which Auschwitz is particularly associated is gassing with a hydrogen-cyanide compound sold in the 1940s as Zyklon-B, in specially-constructed gas chamber/crematorium buildings. The model which still dominates the first upstairs room of Block 4 illustrated the second part of this. The gas was represented by empty Zyklon-B cans. Given the centrality of gassing to Auschwitz's reputation as a killing centre, it is significant that the guidebook very precisely identified Zyklon-B as an agent for killing Jews, again by citing Höss:

...we had shortly to begin a mass killing of the Jews and up to that time neither Eichmann nor I had had any idea how to proceed with it...

Now we had discovered the gas and the means as well.<sup>30</sup>

The gas had been used against Jews. The gas had been used in the gas-chamber/crematorium complex. The previous rooms had shown how Jews were in the majority of those brought to the camp. The visitor must have been left with the impression

that the victims of Auschwitz had for the most part been Jews. The next room would make clear what that meant.

The second upstairs room of Block 4 is largely empty. It contains, on the left-hand side as the visitor enters, approximately 2,000 kilograms of human hair. On the display now as in the past is an extract from a report of a chemical analysis of the hair, stating that ‘analysis of hair has shown the presence of hydrogen cyanide, a poisonous ingredient proper to compounds known as cyclons.’<sup>31</sup> The visitor was expected to connect this to the previous exhibit of empty cans – which had been used to kill Jews by gassing – and come to the realisation that this was not simply human hair, but hair cut from the Jewish victims after they were gassed.

The block finished with a room devoted to the looting of property from the arriving Jews. A placard explained the significance of the next block.

**29** full warehouses were burnt by the Hitlerites during the evacuation.

In the **6** left standing after the liberation of the camp was found among other things:

Men’s clothing and underwear	348,820 sets
Women’s clothing and underwear	836,255 sets
Women’s shoes	5,525 pairs
Bedding	13,694 items <sup>32</sup>

As now, this room was intended as an introduction to Block 5, where the visitor would see the property of the victims whose transport, selection and murder Block 4 had described.

The artefacts speak for themselves in Block 5: very little commentary intrudes on the visitor as he or she contemplates the ‘Material Proofs’ that give the block its name. But material proofs of what? The guidebook did little more than direct the visitor’s attention to the significance of the quantities on display.

These huge quantities, although comprising only a small percentage in relation to the scale of the plunder, testify to the number of those murdered, show their names (on the suitcases are inscriptions), often allow us to ascertain on the basis of the inscriptions that they were children.<sup>33</sup>

The only objects on display which gave any indication of the origin of their owners – apart from the inscriptions on the suitcases – were the Jewish prayer shawls, hung open at the end of the first room, unmistakable testimony to the nature of the victims of Auschwitz.

The next blocks in the exhibition, 6, 7 and 11, were intended to document the experience of registered prisoners of Auschwitz, especially those who were imprisoned for their political affiliations, religious beliefs, resistance activity, and for committing crimes. During the life of the camp, approximately 400,000 such prisoners were taken into the camp and issued numbers. Only very few statistics concerning their demographic characteristics have survived, so we have to trust the words of Tadeusz Iwaszko, director of the Auschwitz Archives before his death in the 1980s, who wrote that ‘As a result of growing numbers of arriving Jewish transports in mid-1942 (the first registered mass Jewish transport arrived on March 26, 1942), the number of Jews equalled the number of Poles. From then on, the proportion of Jewish prisoners rose steadily.’<sup>34</sup> But these blocks were not, in any case, devoted to the experiences of any one particular ethnic group. Indeed, such differences were the antithesis of what the scenario aimed to show: ‘The man becomes a nameless slave (a

number)' <sup>35</sup> Some elements however remained ambiguous and these blocks demonstrate another key aspect to the site in this period: that, if one had the slightest idea of what had happened, then the exhibition and the guidebooks told the story.

One of the issues considered in Block 6 was the processing into the camp of new arrivals. The first room was dominated by a large mural quoting the words of Karl Fritsch, Deputy Commandant of the camp, to a group of prisoners.

You have come to a concentration camp not a sanatorium, and there is only one way out – through the chimney. Anyone who does not like it can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this draft, they have no right to live longer than a fortnight, if there are priests, their period is one month – the rest, three months. <sup>36</sup>

The block thus displayed the racial aspect of the camp apart from the Final Solution. With this came description of the system of identification used in Auschwitz: tattoos and triangles. The guidebook explained:

The triangles were of different colours, depending on the so-called reasons for detaining the prisoners and for sending them to the camp. Red triangles were most frequent – they denoted political prisoners. <sup>37</sup>

This indeed generalised to the exclusion of the Jewish inmates – whose stars were composed of one triangle denoting their nationality – in the sense of citizenship – and another yellow triangle to indicate that they were Jews. The illustration facing, however, showed an arm tattooed with a number starting with B – a Jewish male numbering series. <sup>38</sup> To the expert, this was a signal that the Museum authorities were aware of the real tragedy but were prevented from explicitly describing it in an exhibition which sought to emphasise the fate of the nameless and nation-less numbered, registered prisoner.

This note was struck in the final room of the block, entitled 'The fate of mothers and children'. The scenario was ambiguous, merging the mothers and children, both Polish and Jewish, murdered in the camp, into one whole.

In the guidebook, however, above the heading 'The Fate of Women and Children' was a photograph from the Auschwitz Album. A woman stands, looking at the camera, surrounded by her children. The yellow stars on their chests are clearly visible. The reader would have been in no doubt as to the message.

Block 11 was one of the most feared sites in the camp during its existence. The scenario's comments identified seven reasons why it was particularly important:

1. It was the place of the penal company.
2. It was a site for quarantine of new arrivals and prisoners released from the camp.
3. It was a subsidiary jail for the Katowice Gestapo, which sent thousands of Silesians here for summary trial and execution.
4. It was the place where workers from various nations were sent for 'education'.
5. It was the place of arrest for those accused and punished (the bunkers).
6. It was a site of mass shootings and punishment.
7. Through these rooms and bunkers passed the remainder of the camp resistance movement. <sup>39</sup>

The scenario did not mention that Block 11 had also been the site of the first experimental use of Zyklon-B for killing in September 1941, when Karl Fritsch sealed 250 prisoners selected from the camp hospital and 600 Soviet prisoners-of-war into the basement of Block 11, after throwing in gas. <sup>40</sup> One can speculate that it would have confused the visitor regarding the use of Zyklon-B after its central place in the Jewish genocide had been established in Block 4.

Block 11 would also be a logical place to make reference to the Polish victims of Auschwitz as Polish Catholics, as the site of martyrdom of Saint Maksymilian Kolbe. The scenario noted that in the cell where he was starved for six weeks before being killed in Block 28 by phenol injection to the heart there was to be a plaque 'to the heroic death of Fr. M. Kolbe, who of his own free will asked to receive the punishment of another prisoner.'<sup>41</sup> Apart from this, the Catholicism of the inmates was symbolised by artefacts used in religious services – Jewish as well as Catholic – as part of the section on prisoner self-help<sup>42</sup>, itself part of the broad definition of resistance espoused by the Museum organisers.

The exhibition concluded in the reconstruction of Crematorium I, where the guidebook told visitors: 'Here in the years 1941 and 1942 were killed Soviet prisoners of war as well as Jews from the ghettos organised by the Hitlerites in Upper Silesia.'<sup>43</sup> From there the visitor was directed to Birkenau which, because it has only recently become the site of an exhibition (in the former Central Camp Sauna) is beyond this paper.

## Conclusions?

A Museum is, as the *Rough Guide to Poland* says, 'a place where objects are chosen, arranged and displayed with a purpose'<sup>44</sup>. In the words of James Young, we should recognise that in a Museum we enter a narrative matrix – where an exhibit should be taken in the context of those that surround it rather than in isolation. This I believe is the key to comprehending the Museum and its exhibition: that in the communist era it was impossible to make the bold statement of what happened that we see today. It should also be borne in mind, however, that the major tasks of the 'symbolic intellectual clean-up' undertaken as a result of the 1993 Yarnton Conference were to change the captions of the existing exhibition and re-write the inscription on the monument in Birkenau. A major re-write of the exhibition has been pushed to the end of the Museum's long list of priorities in restoring and maintaining the site. The only major new exhibition project undertaken by the Museum in the last ten years has been in the former Central Camp Sauna, focusing on the photographs of Jewish prisoners transported to the camp in 1943 from the Będzin and Sosnowiec ghettos, as well as on the processing of prisoners into Birkenau in the final year of the camp (the time of the building's operation) – when the vast majority of arrivals were Jewish.

One must also, however, question why these misunderstandings have arisen. In his expert report for *David Irving vs Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt*, Robert Jan van Pelt summarised the problem facing anyone who wishes to consider the history of Auschwitz:

...a historian who makes any judgement about any aspect of the history of Auschwitz must take into account an often labyrinthine context, which is made even more difficult to negotiate because of intentional camouflage of certain aspects of the camp's history during the war and the wilful destruction of archival and other materials at the end of the war.<sup>45</sup>

Jonathan Huener identifies 'the lack of a convenient master narrative'<sup>46</sup> as one of the besetting problems of commemoration. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the lack of a master narrative for the site clashed with the vivid memories of those prisoners who took it on themselves to preserve the site and its memory.

*The Museum in Oświęcim under the care of State and Society*, a pamphlet produced by the Museum in the early 1960s, began with the statement that: 'The Museum in Oświęcim is a document of Hitlerite Fascism.'<sup>47</sup> Leaving aside the question of fascism, the idea that the Museum is a document is a key concept – informing not only the exhibition but also the extensive publishing and educational work the Museum has engaged in throughout its existence. Kazimierz Smoleń, author of the exhibition and Director of the Museum until 1990,

wrote in the early 1990s that the intention was always to 'present detailed documentation of the Nazis' premeditated crimes.'<sup>48</sup>

This emphasis on the Museum as a document perhaps leads logically to considering Auschwitz as not just a document but as a sacred text. Jonathan Webber has considered this:

One of the central features of a sacred tale is that it contains internal contradictions. It is quite likely that it is this very potential for conveying or incorporating multiple meanings that makes it possible for a sacred tale or sacred text, be it scriptural or vernacular, to carry authority over time. Circumstances change, but the text remains changeless, as it stands, for ever, brooding over the generations as they come and go.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps it is this quality that we must recognise more than any other in Auschwitz: its diversity of function, history, and meaning. Perhaps by recognising with Webber, that 'its essential nature today is that it possesses a series of internal contradictions, each element of which, though true in its own way, is not exhaustive of the truth.'<sup>50</sup> An exhibition must, by its nature, choose which truths it tells. As long as reported facts continue to be checked against the reality we must perhaps trust the tale not the teller.

## NOTES

This article presents some of the research done for the author's MA Thesis, 'The Iconography of Destruction: A Historical Portrait of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum' (Centre for European Studies, Jagiellonian University 2001) supervised by Dr Marek Kucia, whom I would like to thank for his unfailing support. Dr Annamaria Orla-Bukowska also contributed useful comments to the structuring of this paper for the conference 'The Legacy of the Holocaust: National Perspectives' (Krakow, May 2003), where it was first presented. I would also like to thank the staff of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for their support and enthusiasm, in particular Teresa Świebocka, Teresa Zbrzeska and Wojtek Smoleń.

1. Dydyński, Krzysztof, *Lonely Planet Poland* (London: Lonely Planet Publications, 2002) is currently in its third edition. *Lonely Planet Kraków* (same author and publisher, 2000) in its first. It has not been possible to inspect all the volumes of any series (travel guides are a very ephemeral literature) but the most current have been seen in all cases.
2. *Lonely Planet Kraków*, p.134.
3. *Lonely Planet Eastern Europe*, (London: Lonely Planet Publications 2002), p.430.
4. Salter, Mark, and Bousfield, Jonathan, *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Fifth edition), (London: Rough Guides, 2002), p.xxiv.
5. *Lonely Planet Kraków*, p.134.
6. *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Fifth edition), p.466.
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*, p.470
9. Zbrzeska, Teresa (trans. William Brand), 'Bringing History to Millions', *Pro Memoria* 7, p.96.
10. *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Fifth edition), p.469.
11. Smoleń, Kazimierz, "Scenariusz wystawy stałej Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu" *APMO syg. S/Smoleń/6*, p.1.
12. The precise date remains unknown due to lack of documentation, despite research by this author and Teresa Zbrzeska. However, the Museum guidebook for 1966 lists the Permanent Exhibition as starting with Block 15 and finishing with Block 11, indicating that Block 21 had closed. The Museum guidebook for 1968 lists the blocks in the same order. Lorentz, Stanisław, *Przewodnik po muzeach i zbiorach w Polsce*, (Warszawa: Interpress 1971), however, does not list Block 15 as part of the exhibition. It therefore seems reasonable to date the closure of Block 15 to the period 1968-1971.

13. Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2002), pp.108-109. Van Pelt acknowledges the debt to Dr Franciszek Piper of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, whose article 'Estimating the Number of Deportees to and Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp' was published in *Yad Vashem Studies* Vol. XXI in 1991, and constitutes the Museum's official adjustment of the number of victims, though Piper had given interviews in 1990 describing his research and conclusions. Piper, Franciszek, *Auschwitz: How Many Perished. Jews, Poles, Gypsies...*, (Oświęcim: Frap-Books 1996) is a reprint of the Yad Vashem article, which researchers unable to access Polish-language material should consider the start-point for research into the number of victims.
14. Mark Salter and Gordon MacLachlan, *Poland: The Rough Guide*, (London: Harrap Columbus, 1991), p.213. The extract is from *All Played Out* by Pete Davies (Heinemann).
15. *ibid.*
16. *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Third edition), Rough Guides 1996, p.419.
17. Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, *Scenes of Fighting and Martyrdom Guide: War Years in Poland 1939-1945*, (Warszawa: Sport i Turystyka, 1966), pp.103-104. The text was a translation of a 1964 Polish edition. The Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom was created in 1947 to supervise the Museums in Auschwitz and Majdanek.
18. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Auschwitz (Oświęcim) 1940-1945 (Second Edition)*, (Oświęcim : Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1966), p.13.
19. *Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka*, 1987 leaflet, author's collection.
20. Photographs of this arrangement can be seen in issues of the guidebook at least up to 1980.
21. *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Fifth edition), p. 466.
22. *Dziennik Ustaw* Nr.52, 8 sierpnia 1947, nr.265.p.826-827. 'Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu'.
23. *Muzeum w Oświęcimiu pod opieką państwa i społeczeństwa*, undated pamphlet found in the Publications Department of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 25.4.2003. Teresa Zbrzeska concurred that it was probably written by Kazimierz Smoleń in 1961. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Auschwitz: State Museum in Oświęcim* (trans. Krystyna Michalik), a short undated English-language leaflet, also employs this formula. The publication is undated, though it must have been at least 1961, since it refers to National Exhibitions of the USSR and the German Democratic Republic, which were erected that year.
24. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Auschwitz (Oświęcim) 1940-1945 (Second edition)*, p.14.
25. Smoleń, "Scenariusz wystawy stałej...", p.19.
26. The album was discovered by a former Auschwitz inmate, Lilli Zelmanowic-Jacobs after her liberation in Buchenwald. She returned to Prague where the State Jewish Museum made copies of some pictures before she took the album with her to Israel. In the 1950s, Otto Kulka and Erich Kraus, researching for their book *The Death Factory*, found the negatives and showed them to the Museum in Oświęcim, which made further copies. For a more detailed history of the album in addition to superb reproductions of the photos, see Avner Shalev (ed.), *The Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem/Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2003).
27. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Auschwitz (Oświęcim) 1940-1945 (Second edition)*, p.18.
28. *ibid.*, p.19.
29. *ibid.*, pp.23-24.
30. *ibid.*, pp.28-27.
31. *ibid.*, p.28.
32. Smoleń, "Scenariusz wystawy stałej...", p.33. The text as erected can be seen in APMO DZ.IX/1: 19289.
33. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Oświęcim 1940-1945: Przewodnik po Muzeum*, (Oświęcim: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza 1980, p.37.
34. Tadeusz Iwaszko, 'Reasons for Confinement in the Camp and Categories of Prisoners' in *Auschwitz 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp. Volume II: The Prisoners*

- Their Life and Work ed. by Waclaw Długoborski and Franciszek Piper (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2000), pp.12-43.
35. Smoleń, Kazimierz, “Scenariusz wystawy stałej...”, p.42.
  36. Text taken from Otto Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, (London: Penguin Books, 1994) p.36. The placement of the text on the wall is not alluded to in the scenario (where it appears as a document in a display cabinet) but was reported by Wojtek Smoleń, the son of Kazimierz Smoleń and a long-term Museum guide.
  37. Smoleń, Kazimierz, *Auschwitz (Oświęcim) 1940-1945* (Second edition), p.38.
  38. The numbering of Auschwitz prisoners was done in nine series, of which four were for various kinds of male prisoners, one was for all female prisoners (until May 1944), and one was for Gypsies (starting with a Z). The remaining three were started in May 1944 specifically for Jews from the RSHA transports from Hungary. The intention was to create series of 20,000 prisoners, starting with an A-series. Male Jewish arrivals were also given B-series numbers up to about 15,000. Female Jewish arrivals continued to be numbered with A-series until this series ran to about 30,000 at the end of the camp’s existence. For further details, see the article by Iwaszko cited in note 00 above.
  39. Smoleń, Kazimierz, “Scenariusz wystawy stałej...”, p.90.
  40. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*, (New York: Owl Books, 1997), p.85.
  41. Smoleń, Kazimierz, “Scenariusz wystawy stałej...”, p.91.
  42. *ibid*, p.119.
  43. Smolen, Kazimierz, *Oświęcim 1940-1945: Przewodnik po Muzeum*, p.91.
  44. *The Rough Guide to Poland* (Fifth edition), p.466.
  45. Robert Jan van Pelt, ‘The Pelt Report’, available at [www.holocaustdenialontrial.com](http://www.holocaustdenialontrial.com), Emory University’s site devoted to the trial, including evidence and a complete transcript.
  46. Jonathan Huener, *German Deeds, Polish Soil, Jewish Shoah: Auschwitz Memory and the Politics of Commemoration*, University of Vermont (MS). Dr Huener’s permission to use this material is very kindly appreciated.
  47. *Muzeum w Oświęcimiu pod opieką państwa i społeczeństwa*, p.1. See above for questions of dating and authorship of this pamphlet.
  48. Kazimierz Smoleń, ‘Auschwitz Today: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum’ in *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs* ed. by Teresa Świebocka, Jonathan Webber, and Connie Wilsack, (Oświęcim/Bloomington and Indianapolis/Warsaw: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum/Indiana University Press/Książka i Wiedza, 1993), p.262.
  49. *Muzeum w Oświęcimiu pod opieką państwa i społeczeństwa*, p.1. See above for comments on dating of this pamphlet.
  50. Webber, Jonathan, ‘Creating a New Inscription for the Memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau: A Short Chapter in the Mythologization of the Holocaust’, *The Sociology of Sacred Texts* ed. by Jon Davies and Isabel Wollaston (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1993) pp.47-58.
  51. *ibid.*, p.50.