

Story of Auschwitz strangely incomplete



Prisoners at Auschwitz shortly after liberation in 1945.

STAR FILE PHOTO/AP

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The glaring difference between Berlin's depiction of the Holocaust and that of Auschwitz in Poland is in the details of how the story is being told. Berlin's museums and memorials challenge visitors to understand the rise of the Third Reich and the horrific antisemitism that led to the Holocaust and its end game - the killing of millions of Jews and other 'undesirables' in slaughter houses like the Auschwitz concentration camp.

At Auschwitz, however, the start and finish of the Holocaust was Auschwitz. Visitors to this notorious camp must dig deep for an explanation of why Auschwitz became the world's largest cemetery.

Auschwitz I - where political prisoners and labourers were held and medical experiments conducted, now houses a "museum" visited by an astounding 1.3 million people a year. The exhibits, largely unsophisticated, remain relatively unchanged since the communist era in Poland. At that time, reference to the murder of 900,000 Jews out of 1,000,000 people killed at Auschwitz was virtually non-existent. The communists did not distinguish between the victims - despite the fact 90 per cent were murdered specifically because they were Jewish.

Twenty years after the fall of communism in this country, one wonders if the Poles still hold on to that view. For example, of the hundreds of pictures of victims (all Polish political prisoners) lining the walls of one of the exhibit barracks, only one Jewish name can be easily identified. The pictures have been hanging there since the 1950s, reflective of the political history the communists wanted to project.

The disproportionality of remembrance in this case is quite apparent and the political implications - stretching onward to this day, cloud historical understanding.

How do thousands of Poles visiting Auschwitz yearly understand the horror that unfolded here? What is the history they are told? If there is no significant mention of Hitler, the rise of Nazism and the Nuremberg Laws, are they aware that Auschwitz was the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem"?

One answer can be found at the "shooting wall" where Polish political and military leaders were executed. It has become a symbolic place of Polish nationalism. Its importance (over other spots in the camp) is quantified by the piles of flowers lining its walls and the Polish flag flying high above.

And what of Jewish history in Poland where nearly three million Jews resided prior to World War Two and less than 1000 reside today? Only a short drive away, Krakow was once a central hub of Jewish life; it is now virtually "Judenrein" (free of Jews). Most of these men, women and children ended up at Auschwitz. Their story remains untold.

Auschwitz is hallowed ground. The curators and leadership of its museum and sites have a sacred responsibility to ensure substantive context about the rise and fall of Nazism does not continue to be ignored. Greater attention must be given to the truth about Auschwitz - that it was mainly a Jewish death camp.

Germany gets it.

Now it's time for Poland to face reality.