

May Legacy Live On – Abbie and Farah (PHSG year 13 2020 leavers)

“What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it happening again.” - Anne Frank.

Why do people choose to visit the site of a former concentration camp? What is there to learn from visiting such a site?

Despite there being no structural remains of the former camp, visiting Bergen-Belsen allowed us to understand what happened here through exploring the empty landscape and listening to the testimonies of those who survived.

But what was Bergen-Belsen and what is left of it?



Bergen-Belsen was initially a barrack camp (made in 1935) for the workers building a new military training base in the area. In June 1940, the camp was converted into a concentration camp for POWs (Prisoners of War) mostly filled with Soviet and Italian inmates. By July 1941, there were over 21,000 POWs forced to survive in the barracks - far more than the original 80 people per housing block limit. Unlike camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was built as an extermination camp, Belsen was not built to be a death camp. Despite this, by April 1942 14,000 Soviet POWs had died from starvation and disease caused by the poor living conditions of the camps.

When the camp came into use for Jewish prisoners, at least 85,000 prisoners of the Nazis were transported to Belsen. The British Army liberated only 53,000 remaining survivors on the 15th April 1945. Most of the people who died, died from neglect. It's perhaps the sheer number of deaths that made Bergen-Belsen so chilling during our visit.

As the camp was burnt to the ground to eradicate disease, there are no remaining structures or buildings. Bergen-Belsen doesn't look like a concentration camp upon arrival, rather more like a forest/park area where you'd go on a family walk. With a main road outside, you could just be driving past a National Trust site, not a place of mass suffering.

Where there were once tall, heavy, electrified gates surrounded by guard lookouts at the entrance to the camp, there was now a simple barrier, much like one at the entrance to a car park. The lack of physical obstruction felt odd, particularly because we knew how well protected the Nazis had kept it. As a POW camp, those inside needed to be kept alive.

While walking through the grounds, our group's Educator would stop and explain to us where different buildings had been before they were burned down. In a strange way, the experience was made more harrowing by the fact that we couldn't physically see these places of suffering, for the imagination fills in what the eyes can't see. One of the most horrific parts of this walk was when our Educator had us stand around a large square of grass, marked by the empty reservoir behind it and explained to us that this was once where the kitchens had been. This didn't feel like an upsetting thing to look at until our Educator explained to us that Germans living in the local village were the individuals who sourced, provided and delivered food to the camp's kitchen. To do this, the Nazis would open the gates to the camp and let the delivery men into the camp grounds to transport the food from their trucks to the kitchens. After the camp was liberated, British soldiers went to the village to ask the locals if they knew such an atrocity had occurred only ten minutes away from their homes. They all said they were unaware and would have taken action had they known.

From our understanding now, some of the villagers knew what was happening inside the camp and ignored the suffering they saw when they delivered their goods. Knowing that people had seen the grotesque actions of the Nazis first-hand, and chosen to ignore the suffering, was heart-breaking.



Beyond the Exhibition Centre is a vast, open space of mounds and paths - these mounds were the mass graves of victims. There are a few headstones, and a small area of commemorative plaques, where people who survived had placed them in honour of those they lost, but there are no bodies under the headstones, or ashes by the plaques. Most of the people are buried in the mass graves dug by the British. The other graves made by the Nazis have no markings, and while we know they exist, we don't know their exact location.

Seeing the graves was possibly the hardest part of the day. It was hard to comprehend the reality of the events at the camp, but the mass graves were a reminder of the atrocities that had occurred at

Bergen-Belsen. The graves are marked with a number; this is a rough estimate of how many people lay in each one. But those numbers are more than just a figure. There are not 800 people in the grave, but 800 individuals - roughly the same number of people as in our school. They were 800 people with their own stories, families and lives. And the most difficult thing of all, is that nobody knows who lies in which grave.

Around all the graves, headstones and plaques, people have laid stones in remembrance of those who died. Some of them may have been laid by family members, and others by visitors who just wanted to leave something there as a symbol of respect and remembrance for all who suffered at Bergen-Belsen. To see so many stones was in some ways uplifting, to know that people still remember the Holocaust and those who suffered.



And that is why we took part in the trip, to remember and pass on the experience to others. We are fortunate, as a generation, to still be able to hear survivors share their testimony with us directly, but are also the last generation to do so. With this in mind, we are given the duty to listen and make sure the stories of these incredible individuals are passed on and not forgotten

As part of the Belsen-75 project (the commemoration of 75 years since it's liberation), we were honoured to meet a Holocaust survivor, Mala Tribich MBE. In June 2019, we were fortunate to be able to invite Mala into our school to deliver a talk to staff and students. For those of you who were able to hear her testimony, you will know it is a privilege to hear Mala speak.

For those of you who haven't heard Mala's story, she was born in 1930 in Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland. When the Nazis invaded Poland 1939, Mala's family had to move into the ghetto established in her town - the first in Poland. Her family paid a couple, the Maciejewskis, to take Mala and her cousin Idzia to Częstochowa, and stay there until deportations in the ghetto were over. For the girls, life was, at times, uncertain; they sometimes had to hide in wardrobes when there were visitors. Idzia told the Maciejewskis she could stay with good friends of her parents. Supposedly they took her there. When Mala was eventually taken back to Piotrków where her father was waiting for her with Idzia's father, he turned white with shock and said, "Where is my daughter?" Idzia was never seen again.

Shortly after, there were further roundups. Mala's mother and eight-year-old sister were taken and murdered in the local forest. Following this, Mala had to care for her five-year-old cousin Ann, whose mother was deported to a concentration camp. When the ghetto was liquidated, Mala became a slave labourer until November 1944, when the remaining Jews were deported. Mala was separated from her father and brother and was sent with Ann to Ravensbrück concentration camp. After about 10 weeks they were transported to Bergen-Belsen where Mala contracted typhus.

At the time of the liberation Mala was transferred to a hospital/children's home. Three months later she was sent to Sweden, where she spent nearly two years. Mala received a letter from her brother, Ben, in England; the only other member of her close family to have survived.

In March 1947, Mala came to England to be reunited with her brother Ben. She learnt English, attended secretarial college and within a year was working in an office. In 1949, she met Maurice, whom she married in 1950. Whilst her children were growing up, Mala studied and gained a degree in Sociology from the University of London. Today Mala has two children and three grandchildren and works with the Holocaust Educational Trust, sharing her testimony to make sure the history of the Holocaust is not forgotten.

We often think about the numbers who suffered in the Holocaust as simply that, a figure. But it is crucial that we all remember each digit represents a person just like you or us, who didn't deserve the fate they were given. We must not forget this; it is crucial that we continue to remember and rehumanise the Holocaust by listening to survivors share their testimonies. People like Mala were targeted for no reason other than they were who they were. The spread and acceptance of prejudices is what ultimately leads to genocide. The Holocaust was not an overnight occurrence, it started slowly. We must make sure we are never in a similar position. From my visit to Bergen-Belsen I have learnt that it is crucial to be respectful and welcoming to everyone in society. By choosing to be kind and accepting of others, no matter who they are, or what their background is, we can help to alleviate the spreading of hate.

If any of you are interested in learning more about Belsen, Mala or any other survivors, we have a few links to some excellent resources:

<https://www.het.org.uk/survivors-mala-tribich> - Mala's Story

<https://www.het.org.uk/education/outreach-programme/survivor-stories> - The Holocaust Educational Trust's link to other survivor stories

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbKX5Jh8GF8&list=PLve4PNfeGLS10YK2p8pxSq171wIS4CAy&index=16> - This is the recording of Mala sharing her testimony with HET Ambassadors at the end of the AmConAtHome series this summer.