

SPECIAL REPORT

Christian and Muslim leaders joined the Chief Rabbi for a historic visit to Auschwitz

A shared vigil that unites us all in hope

BY SIMON ROCKER

A PALL OF fog had settled over the birch forests of south-west Poland as the distinguished party from Britain headed towards its destination. Headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, it comprised 14 other representatives of the UK's main religious communities: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Bahais and Zoroastrians.

Together in a show of interfaith solidarity, they were making, in the words of the Archbishop, a "pilgrimage not to a holy place, but to a place of utter profanity".

As the Chief Rabbi was later to tell them among the wasteland of Birkenau: "This is the first time, in Britain certainly, that we have come together—not one faith but the leaders of all nine faiths in Britain... because the tragedy of Auschwitz transcends this people or that. It touches on what is human in all of us."

"Therefore, may the fact that we have come together in this moment of grief remembered lead us to come together in future for the sake of hope, friendship, tolerance and life."

They came on a one-day visit last week as guests of the Holocaust Educational Trust, along with 180 teenagers and teachers from south-east England who were on of the Trust's *Lessons from Auschwitz* programmes for schools.

Accompanying the party were MPs Chris Huhne (Liberal Democrat) and former Conservative Party leader, Michael Howard.

For Dr Williams, it was his first visit to the site of the death camp, and the only time this year he had departed



Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks and Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, at Birkenau—Auschwitz II

from his ecological abstinence and boarded a plane.

The Chief Rabbi had been only once before, in 1995 to make a television documentary on the 50th anniversary of the Second World War, when he had overcome his inhibitions about going to a place, "the very thought of which chilled my soul".

About an hour after arriving at Cracow's John Paul Airport and having just crossed the river Vistula—where the Nazis dumped the ashes of the victims—they were in the town of Oswiecim, on a grass bank where once stood the 1,000-seat Great Synagogue.

On the eve of the war, two-thirds of Oswiecim's then 12,000 inhabitants had been Jewish. It was "one of the few towns where there was incredible harmony between Jews and non-Jews", said Rabbi Barry Marcus, of London's Central Synagogue, who pioneered the concept of day visits to Auschwitz from the UK 10 years ago.

Five minutes by coach and they were in Auschwitz I, the brickwork camp which now houses the museum recording the killing of 1,100,000-1,500,000 people at the complex during the Second World War.

Some of the visitors gasped as they moved from wall maps and photographs to their first sight of the glass cases containing the relics stripped from the victims—the suitcases, the massed hair, the talitot or like macabre installations, the piles of spectacles or artificial limbs.

"I don't think anything can prepare you for a roomful of human hair," Dr Williams later reflected.

As he emerged from the cells in the basement of the prison block where inmates were starved or suffocated to death, the Venerable Bogoda Seelawimala, chief incumbent of the London Buddhist Vihara, said simply: "This is the most terrible place I have ever seen. It's hard to bear."

For Rabbi Dr Tony Bayfield, head of the Reform movement, whose daughter-in-law's grandfather had survived Auschwitz, this was his third visit but "the sense of shock and anger and disbelief" returned, if anything more powerfully than before.

Signing the remembrance book, Sir Jonathan wrote: "From their tears may there come hope, and from death, a new commitment to the sanctity of life." Dr Williams wrote: "Out of the depths I have called to you, Lord. Lord, hear my voice."

But still ahead lay Birkenau (Auschwitz II), the vast death camp that the Nazis began building in 1941.

In contrast to the cheerful village churchyards brimming with flowers that were visible earlier along the road

EVIL FOR EVIL'S SAKE

IT WAS not just the sheer scale of the extermination: some one-and-a-half million innocent victims, 90 per cent of them Jews, but also Poles, Gypsies and Russian prisoners of war, gassed, burned and turned to ash.

"It was also the madness of it all, the lengths the Germans and their helpers went to search out every single Jew, to make sure not one would remain alive. At the height of the destruction, German troop trains were diverted from the Russian front to transport Jews to Auschwitz. The Nazis were prepared to put their own war effort at risk in order to kill Jews. This was, as one writer has put it, evil for evil's sake..."

"We cannot change the past, but by remembering the past, we can change the future..."

FROM CHIEF RABBI'S MESSAGE

from Cracow, the countless dead could be mourned here only among the desolate stillness and the sinister symmetry of rail, watchtowers and wire.

Ranged across the fields were neat rows of chimney stacks, the remains of the barracks' heating—grim echoes of the demolished crematoria.

As he walked along the railway track towards the ruins, Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, from Leicester—one of three Muslims—said: "What one sees with one's eyes is very different how a book or pictures might try to portray it."

"Walking the very path where those poor souls were marched to their end, no book can help you understand."

But the sheikh, who chairs the Muslim Council of Britain's interfaith committee, was left wondering how far the cry of "never again" had been taken up.

"We have seen genocide and ethnic cleansing in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and indeed, in the Holy Land, in Palestine, Sabra, Shatila, India, Gujarat... the list is a never-ending list, sadly and we haven't learned the lessons", he said.

"What troubles me is the fact that a vast majority of people murdered here were Jewish, yet we find in the Holy Land, in Palestine and in the Occupied Territories, it is the Jewish people, the Israeli army and the Israelis, who are mistreating fellow human beings in an unacceptable manner, ghettoising,

BOUND IN PROTEST AND GRIEF

"THE NAME has become so much a shorthand for the worst atrocities of our age that we can almost forget that it is a real place where real and a particular people perished..."

"Our faiths speak of God through telling the stories of specific people in actual places..."

"This is a pilgrimage not to a holy place but to a place of utter profanity—a place where the name of God was profaned because the image of God in human beings was abused and disfigured. For many, the name of God has become something that cannot be uttered... because of what was done here. Yet our hope is that in making this journey together we also travel towards the God who binds us together in protest and grief at this profanation..."

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP'S MESSAGE

discriminating, demonising, isolating." It was, he added, "sad" to have to make such comparisons.

"I know there is a huge difference in how the Jews, and indeed the Gypsies and the others, were systematically rounded up and the whole machinery of exterminating them was put into place. But there was a beginning of all this, where the Jewish person was demonised, portrayed as vermin and unfit for society."

Night had fallen by the time a short memorial service was held. The Archbishop of Canterbury recited Psalm 23, "The Lord is My Shepherd", and the Chief Rabbi told them: "Friends, in a place like this, on a day like this, it is very easy to be overwhelmed by the presence of death, the evidence of hate and the temptation to despair. That would be precisely the wrong message to take."

Highlighting the display of interfaith unity, he said: "I hope you take away from today what I take, an extraordinary signal of hope."

Then, stopping every so often to leave a yartzheit candle by the rail track, they proceeded back in darkness and in silence, punctuated only by the sound of a barking dog or a train rattling in the distance.

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