

TRAVEL

Every year survivors, now in their 90s, return to Holocaust sites to take visitors on tours. Daniel Edward went along

I'm not generally a nervous traveller, it would be something of a professional impediment, but I must admit to being nervous of visiting some of the most horrific sites of the Holocaust in Poland, with March of the Living UK. I wasn't nervous of the places themselves; I was nervous about how I would feel, or if I would feel anything at all.

March of the Living is an annual Holocaust education trip, led by expert educators and accompanied by survivors of the Nazi atrocities. Without these survivors, I doubt I would have visited these depraved sites. I don't see Auschwitz as a sacred pilgrimage as some do, and I avoid what I call "terror tourism", making a holiday out of someone else's tragedy. But to hear the first-hand testimony of Holocaust survivors back where it actually happened is a rare privilege and, with the passing of time, only getting rarer.

The 300-strong UK delegation is a mixed bag. There are plenty of Jewish people – of course – but also non-Jews. Some come for education, others to honour their families, others to learn something about themselves. But this trip really isn't about us, it's about victims who were murdered and victims who survived.

My group is joined as we journey from Warsaw to Krakow by Harry Olmer, who was 12 when war broke out in Poland. Taking a pit-stop in the grand Yeshiva (Jewish Study Centre) in Lublin, Harry starts to tell us his story. He speaks quietly, still with his Polish accent, and there's an urgency amongst the group to be close to him so as not to miss a word.

Originally from a small town called Sosnowiec, close to the German border, Harry recalls the "disorganised Polish army" retreating from the invading Germans and remembers not understanding why. His father, grasping the danger, split the large family of eight for safety and sent Harry's mother and older siblings ahead to stay with their grandmother in a neighbouring town, while Harry remained with his father and two younger sisters.

Harry's story is harrowing. There were countless brushes with death and months of torturous physical labour in a munitions factory, supplying weapons for the German army, and even being forced to build future concentration camps. In a twisted logic though, every minute of slave labour was saving his life – if you weren't useful, you were dead – but that's no consolation in the midst of the horror.

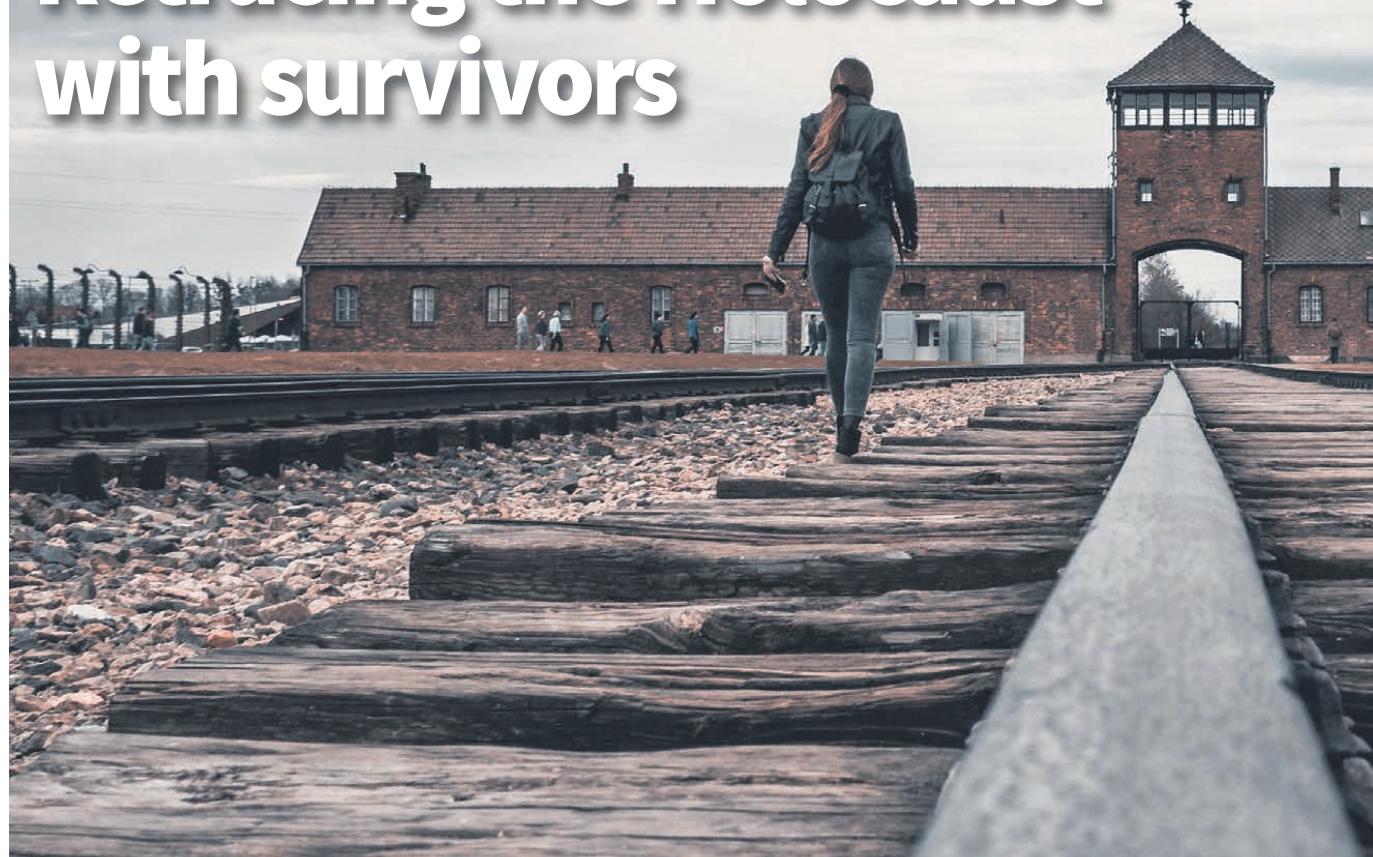
The last time Harry saw his mother was in a cold, damp field where they had camped for four days awaiting onward transport. When the trains arrived, prisoners were selected for different transportation: no one survived his mother's final journey.

The Nazis' gut-wrenching records show trainloads of victims – predominantly, though not exclusively Jewish – were murdered in Belzec. In muted horror, we join Harry as he returns to his mother's final resting place for a sixth time.

Belzec shocks me. Today, the site is covered by a memorial, protecting the 31 mass graves below from the ravages of wild dogs that Harry witnessed when he first visited three decades ago. The memorial itself is visually arresting: a blackened, almost volcanic landscape – but the real stop-in-your-tracks surprise is how small it is. Belzec is smaller than a primary school playing field, yet within just a year this

INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Retracing the Holocaust with survivors



Main picture: the entrance at Auschwitz II Birkenau. Above: Harry Olmer - Holocaust survivor. Right: The Book of Names at Auschwitz. Below: Walking through the Belzec Death Camp Memorial



very square exterminated 600,000 people. That's the equivalent of killing every single person who passes through Waterloo station (London's busiest) for the entirety of the next three days.

In 1942, no one stayed a night in Belzec. Unlike Concentration Camps, Death Camps had no need for barracks – they arrived, they undressed, they were gassed to death. Harry lights memorial candles for each of his family members murdered here and says a memorial prayer – he's not the only one crying.

Back on the coach, Harry tells us of the recurring nightmare that haunted him after the war. He could see his mother on the other side of a low brick wall, but the wall kept getting higher until she disappeared. This experience is clearly horrifically grueling, so I ask why he came back to Poland this year. Harry's answer is matter-of-fact: "In England, lots of people who've lost their family, their loved ones, they're buried in the cemetery and they usu-



THE TRAVEL HACK

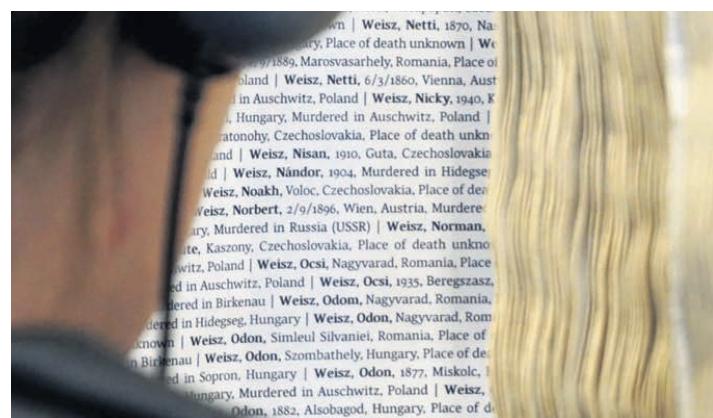
Spaces on the annual March of the Living trip book out fast. This year's event has already sold out, so now's a good time to book for the 2024 event

ally go and visit the grave. That's the reason I come here too." He's visiting his Mum.

Harry's answer drives home the personal grief attached to the Holocaust, an intensity of emotion that I was anxious I wouldn't be able to connect with, coming from a family that wasn't caught up in the Nazi Holocaust – though that is purely by dint of the fact that the Russians had taken a pop at my family in the 1900s and so they had already fled to safety in London.

The Holocaust isn't a holiday, it's not a place to visit architecture, cafes or art galleries, which is why our final destination – Auschwitz – troubles me so much. Without Harry, I doubt I could have connected with Belzec beyond it being a memorial site, so I can't help but feel uneasy when Auschwitz is pitched as a top tourist destination – it feels distasteful to rank it as a great day out near Krakow.

People have already desensitised to the



HORROR



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reality that this particular death camp – where the art of mass-murder was fine-tuned in the demented Death Block – is the site of the single largest systematic extermination of human beings the world has ever known. Within just 85 short years, tourists traipse through Auschwitz as they do the Colosseum in Rome or the Pyramids at Giza, oblivious to the number of slaves who lost their lives there. To add insult to injury, Auschwitz now has a restaurant and charges visitors to use the toilets.

Few signs of personal suffering remain – even before museum curators repurposed blocks for anonymous displays of spectacles, shoes, and mounds of human hair, the Nazis had blown up us much evidence as they could when they fled – but names etched into bricks speak of prisoners' haunting desperation to be remembered.

I was worried I wouldn't be able to muster the emotional response these hor-

rific sites warrant and in a way I was right. I feel very little in response to the mummified museum of Auschwitz, but I will never forget Harry's solitary voice as he prayed in memory of his mother at Belzec.

Hitler's death camps now lie silent and peaceful, in some cases, with wild flowers and skipping rabbits, they are serenely pretty. But these aren't places you visit with your eyes, they're places you visit with your heart and if you have the opportunity to become a witness with one of the surviving survivors, I urge you to take it.

NEED TO KNOW

Tickets for young adults (18-35) cost between £299-£649 and the full-price cost for adults (36+) is £1,899. This price includes all transportation, accommodation and food. For more information and to register an interest in the 2024 March of the Living, visit: marchoftheliving.org.uk



SHANGRI-LA QARYAT AL BERI ABU DHABI

Abu Dhabi is booming, so **Olivia McEwan** checked into one of the best hotels to get the lowdown

THE WEEKEND: The Shangri-La Qaryat Al Beri occupies a private stretch of beach on the Khor Al Maqta canal, positioned to offer views over the main island of Abu Dhabi from each of its 213 rooms. Its design boasts Arabian architectural detail and each of the hotel's individual villas have their own pool. The hotel is part of the Qaryat Al Beri complex, which includes a Souk offering shopping and dining experiences. You can walk there, but you should take the Shangri-La's Abra boat, which steers you along a charming mini canal weaving through the complex.

WHERE? Abu Dhabi is the second most populous city in the UAE after Dubai. Its government has been consciously investing in industry, real estate, tourism and retail in recent years, meaning it is rapidly becoming a go-to international destination. Visitors immediately feel the expansiveness of the land, with new developments mushrooming up; in its centre gleaming modern skyscrapers designed by Norman Foster share the sunny blue skyline with the ancient walls of its oldest rampart, the Qasr Al Hosn, now an excellent museum sharing the historical traditions of Abu Dhabi. The feeling of tradition remains strong; if cosmopolitan Dubai is party-central, Abu Dhabi is a more family-oriented affair.

THE FOOD: The Shangri-La hosts six different restaurants and bars spanning classic French to authentic Chinese. It hosts a Culinary Master Series which invites celebrity chefs from around the world for short-term pop ups, with each bringing their own signature menu. 2022 welcomed Chef Chatchai Klanklong from L'Orchidee based in Alsace, the only Thai restaurant with a Michelin star.

There is a pretty unreal breakfast experience hosted by Shangri-La at the Aquarium, where before opening hour you can enjoy a gourmet meal served in the aquarium's tunnel, the longest in the Middle East, where thousands of glittering fish swim over your head.

ASK ABOUT: New developments and urban plans so you can be first to see how the city is changing. The Al Qana is an enormous 2.6km long waterfront destination featuring new eateries, wellness centres and attractions for kids – notably the Middle East's largest aquarium – reached via picturesque walkways.

For art lovers, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is located in the Saadiyat Cultural District on Saadiyat Island. Opened in 2017 it operates in conjunction with its namesake in Paris, with its collection of both permanent pieces and rotating

loans from Paris museums. The building is as much of an attraction as its contents. Designed by Pritzker prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel, a breathable 'floating dome' roof of eight layers of geometric metal star shapes allows the sun to shine through in dappled effect onto the courtyards and waterways below.

MUST SEE: Most impressive and humbling is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a dazzling architectural feat conceived by Sheikh Zayed to symbolise peace, tolerance and coexistence. Built between 1994 and 2007, it is an extraordinary display of gleaming white marble and ornate Arabic decoration. Marble inlay work represents flowers from around the world and chandeliers imported from the company Faustig in Munich, Germany incorporate innumerable Swarovski crystals, and what is considered to be the world's largest hand-woven carpet made in Iran. The space can accommodate 55,000 worshippers; anyone can feel the deliberate openness and welcome of its intent, regardless of creed or background.

NEED TO KNOW: Direct flights via Etihad airways depart from London Heathrow; rooms at the Shangri-La cost from £100 per night