

## Fr. Jason's Wishful Thinking, Eastern Europe Travel Diary, Part 3

Saturday, October 21st--Krakow and Auschwitz

Our last full day in Krakow was a long one. We boarded the bus at the Holiday Inn and were dropped off outside of the "Franciscan Church" where we had Mass on the main altar. It was a dark and cavern-like church and the sun came through the windows beautifully. This church is known as the church where Cardinal Wojtyla liked to pray in private during his years as the Archbishop of Krakow before becoming Pope John Paul II. There is a silver plaque in the spot where he sat for those who wanted to sit there! Most of us delighted in doing so. It was a Saturday, so we did Mass in honor of the Blessed Mother. After leaving the Franciscan church, Julia (our guide) treated us to these yummy Polish doughnuts near the main square. Then she gave free time to shop or see more churches. I brought a group to the "Dominican Church" which was a block away from the "Franciscan Church", then we took a little hike over to a lovely Baroque-period church called St. Florian, where young Fr. Karol Wojtyla served as a parish priest. The church had many side altars, but a really nice one with an oil painting of their former pastor when he was young. After all, these folks knew John Paul II as a priest long before he was a pope. You could kneel there and venerate a relic from his earthly remains. We couldn't stay long since two families arrived for the private baptisms of their children. On the way back to the Holiday Inn, we stopped and ordered Greek kebab sandwiches from a street vendor.

We boarded the bus about 1:00 for our tour of Auschwitz. We met Anton our private guide who was actually a native of South Africa. The ladies on the bus saw Anton and found him "easy on the eyes". Anton turned out to be an excellent guide who showed us a film on the way to the concentration camp to prepare our minds and hearts for the atrocity of what happened at Auschwitz. The film was a Russian documentary narrated by a former soldier whose job it was to capture on film and video what Auschwitz looked like on its day of liberation. Most of us found the film morbid, depressing, sad, and beyond words. The scenes were graphic and mind-numbing. Upon arrival, we took a tour of Auschwitz 1 (which is quite small), then we boarded the bus for a 5-minute drive to Auschwitz 2 (called Birkenau). Auschwitz 1 was established as a concentration camp in 1939 and couldn't meet the extermination quotas set by 1941 with only one gas chamber and three incinerators. So the larger Auschwitz 2 was built down the road, and it was about 20 times larger than Auschwitz 1 and had four gas chambers which could handle the killing of up to 8,000 people per day. Auschwitz 1 is the place where Zirkon gas pellets (rat poison) was used for the first time on human beings. Tragically, the Nazis didn't use enough of it on their unfortunate test subjects and they suffered for two days before finally dying. By the time Auschwitz 1 received its first large group of prisoners, the Nazis knew just how much to use so they kill 800 people at a time within 20-30 minutes.

Auschwitz 1 contained several buildings filled with items left from just the last few weeks of its operation--a whole room filled with human hair, then adult shoes, children's shoes, pots and pans, suitcases, shaving kits, Jewish prayer shawls, combs, and eyeglasses. All were just piled in large stacks... room after room of people's possessions, taken from them before they were executed. We went to the building where torture and extreme punishment was carried out, including the dark and starvation chambers. Fr. Maximilian Kolbe was placed in one of these starvation chambers, standing up, along with three other men, all who eventually died in the chamber before him over a two-week period of time. This was a punishment because someone attempted escape from Auschwitz. To send a message to the other prisoners, four men were randomly selected to die for the choice of that one who would escape or attempt escape. When a man with a wife and family was chosen one day randomly and broke down, begging the guards to spare him, Fr. Kolbe willingly offered to take that man's place. While Fr. Kolbe was in the starvation chamber, he spiritually prepared the other three men for death. The Nazis were tired of the fact that this priest was still living in the end, so they took him out and gave him a lethal shot of poison to kill him. Like all other executed prisoners at Auschwitz, his body was incinerated. Other prisoners at Auschwitz would enter the same building as political prisoners, have a quick "trial", and be sentenced to an immediate death. They were marched down the hall, told to disrobe of all their clothes (men and women alike) and marched outside and shot in the head from behind. Thousands died at this death wall. Each group was allowed about 30 seconds to meditate silently at the death wall. Our last stop at Auschwitz 1 was the gas chamber and the incinerator ovens in the next room. The gas chamber is the original one, without renovation or upkeep. The incinerators were rebuilt from blueprints as the Nazis attempted to destroy any evidence of the mass murders they carried out. The gas chamber was such an evil and eerie place to be. The walls were filled with scratches and peeling paint.