

Trente Christyne Blonski
Dundee-Crown High School
Carpentersville, Illinois
Grade 12

First Place

Emptiness

The people who came to Auschwitz lived an average of a few hours, maybe a few days. I actually spent less time there than they did. But that place became a beginning for me, not an end.

My great-uncle had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. He was a Polish resistance fighter who died just weeks before the camp was liberated. We still don't know exactly how he perished. All we know is that he died somewhere within the iron gates of Auschwitz.

We walked through the concrete doorway and into the gas chamber and crematorium, like mice walking into a lion's den. A single, bare light bulb protruded from the side of the wall, illuminating the stained floor below. The extreme eeriness of knowing what the room was used for could not mask the truth of what it really was: a concrete room. That was all, just a concrete room. But that room, like hundreds of others like it, was a murderous cavern for thousands of people. I was trespassing in a world my eyes were never meant to see. A world that shouldn't have been meant for anyone but still existed. A world that existed for the countless who gave their lives to it. Those who were too young, too old, unfit, or uncompromising. Those like my great-uncle.

I sprinted out of the chamber, keeping my eyes fixed on the floor. Rushing through the stone doorway, a gentle gust of air blew my coffee-colored tresses off my sweaty forehead. The minute I had spent inside seemed like a lifetime, for everything around me had changed.

I could not stop and stare like the other tourists. We weren't looking at the same place. I could see apparitions of the souls lingering in the shadows, but they were still invisible to those

who could not understand. The other visitors wandered through the buildings on the typical cookie-cutter tour, riding on invisible moving sidewalks that barely gave them enough time to absorb the feelings of this place, let alone its true meaning. And they would never know it, never truly let it touch them.

They all followed the same path, clearly shown by the meticulously marked signs and the places where the gravel avenue had been trampled deeply into the earth. They saw the empty cans of Zyklon B but neglected to think about what their contents had actually been used for and why they were empty. They wept at the execution wall, but scampered past the field where hundreds died during the daily prisoner counts. They thought it was just an empty meadow, now covered with petit blue flowers. They sobbed at the sight of hundreds of suitcases and thousands of shoes without owners. But they could not see the grandfather reluctantly laying down his suitcase with all his possessions in it. He was old and decrepit, much like the large iron gate at the entrance to the camp. Their minds ignored the little girl leaning against the barrack's wall bawling as her mother removed her shiny satin shoes. Her tears were sopped up thirstily by the ground as she crept barefoot towards the concrete room from which I had just escaped. They were oblivious to the lone man who waited beneath the giant ash tree near the gas chamber, the man with the coffee-colored hair and the brown eyes that were the mirror images of mine.

I must confess, I had not seen him either when I first entered the chamber. But now, there he was, plainly visible in the August haze. My innocence had blinded me, like the dazzling flashbulbs of the cameras kept the others from seeing what was really there. He had been standing alone for decades, waiting for someone to see him, waiting to reconnect with the world. And now he had; I finally understood.

Thousands of pictures of prisoners hang on the walls of the barracks. When my grandfather returned to Poland for the first time since he and my grandmother immigrated to the United States, he journeyed to Auschwitz. He had searched up and down all of those hallways for a picture of his long, lost brother. No face went unchecked, no name unnoticed. But he never found him.

My father went with him the next time. He too examined the walls, hoping for a glimpse of John. He hoped to see another pair of our same brown eyes staring back at him from one of the carefully hung black and white photographs. But no color could ever be found. It had been drained from these pictures; much like the surrounding countryside had become a consistent shade of nothingness gray.

This trip was my turn to scour the crowded walls, searching for a face that I had seen only in old, dusty photo albums. It was my turn to carry on the family legacy: a legacy of fruitless searching, of hoping and praying, of looking, yet never finding. But unlike those who came before me, I did find. He was not in any of the barracks. His name had vanished from the record books. But his spirit was still there.

I know that someday my children will stand there, as well. They will explore the grounds, walk through the doorway of the gas chamber, cry at the now silent execution wall, and comb the walls of the empty barracks, looking for someone they have no memory of, looking for the same brown eyes. They will learn what it means to feel incomplete, to have a hole in their lives that they did not even know existed until they set foot on that hallowed ground. They will connect as I did; they will see those the Nazis deemed imperfect, feel their spirits, though the buildings now stand hollow and devoid of life.

The camp was completely empty, except for the history and tragedy it still held.