

Mine the Mountain

Nicholas Hedges

1 - 8 October 2008

The Gallery, Oxford Town Hall

Deadman's Walk near Christ Church Meadow

University of Oxford Botanic Gardens

www.minethemountain.org



George White
(1843-1901)

Great-Great-Grandfather



Elias Jones
(1882-1929)

Great-Grandfather



Elizabeth Stevens
(1878-1975)

Great-Grandmother

Mine the Mountain

The journey into my own past and that of my ancestors began following a visit to Poland in October 2006, during which time I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. There are, as far as I'm aware, no familial connections with the camp or indeed with the Holocaust, and yet, after visiting Auschwitz and other camps, such as Majdanek, Belzec and Natzweiler-Struthof, I began to search for my own heritage – a search which has enabled me, in some small way, to resolve what I can only describe as my confrontation with History at the site of the infamous death camp.

One of the many difficulties facing the visitor at Auschwitz-Birkenau, apart from the sheer, overwhelming, tangible horror of the place (its physical presence, the documentary evidence and the exhibits of possessions and other human artefacts) is the enormous numbers with which one is confronted. How can one possibly imagine over 1 million dead? How can one, amongst that mountain of disappeared people, find the individual to whom one might, in some small way, relate? After all, with the exception of a relative few who wrote about their experiences (Anne Frank, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski and so on) all that remains of millions of people are mountains of shoes, mountains of ash, lists of names, or maybe nothing at all. So how could I find the individuals amongst the mass of a

million dead? By considering the essence of what makes us individuals, and the obvious place to start was with myself.

So having stood upon the Ramp at Auschwitz, and having walked away again, I wanted to explore my relationship – as an individual – with the past, with History itself, and so I began to mine my own past; the mountain of anonymous people I call my ancestors.

I joined the Ancestry website and soon began to build my family-tree; great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, great-great-great and so on, tracing all four lines to the end of the eighteenth, beginning of the nineteenth centuries. In all I amassed almost 500 names, the vast majority of whom, of course, no-one knew; they were names and nothing more. But as these names – these pieces - were placed in the puzzle, as relationships were re-established so they began to live again. Movements between counties and countries, across the UK, from one generation to the next, augmented this sense of my ancestors' reawakening and soon I began to see the tree as my own geographic biography; I was able to map my own coming-into-being directly onto the landscape; a coming-into-being that was, as I began to see, always wholly unlikely.



Majdanek, Poland

Photographed in May 2007



Belzec, Poland

Photographed in May 2007

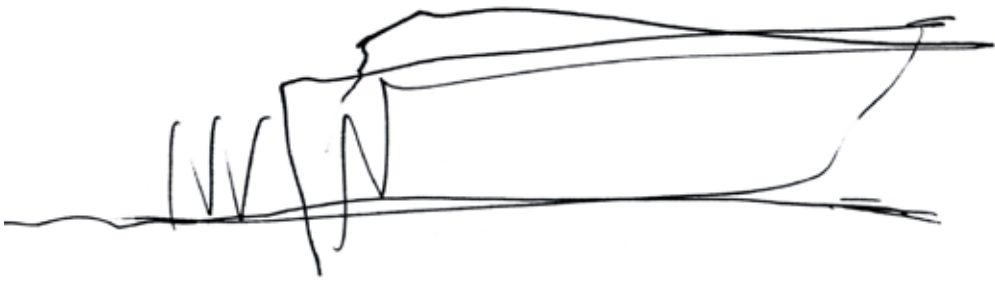


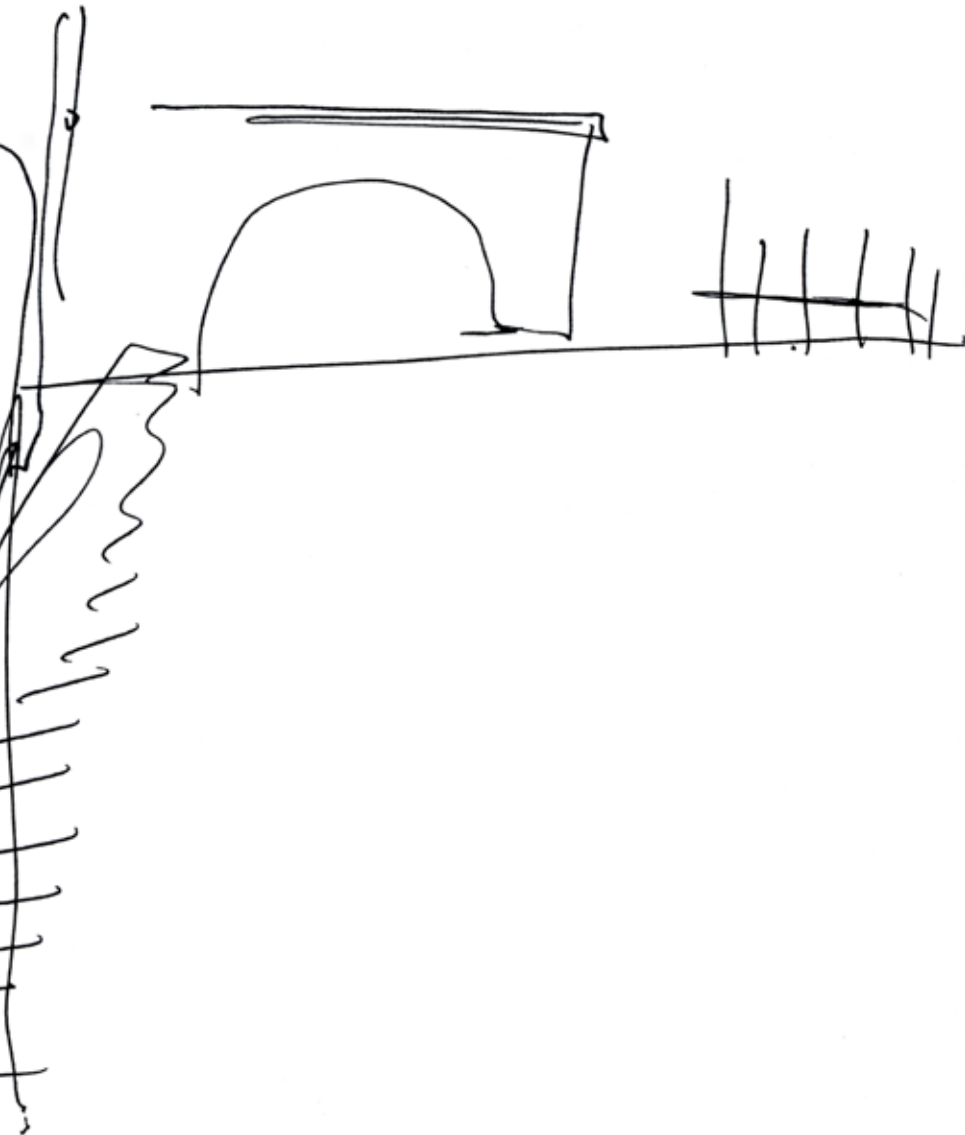
Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland

Photographed in October 2006

On October 20th 2006, I stood on the Ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau and since that day I've sought to unpack the moment, to resolve in part this confrontation with History. When I returned home, I wrote about my journey and drew what I could remember over and over again, hundreds of images, each much the same as the other.

Why I drew them, I didn't know then. I couldn't explain why I was drawn to visit the camp in the first place. And the more I saw at camps such as Majdanek, Belzec and Natzweiler-Struthof the more I asked myself, why did I go? Only through my research, through this unpacking, was the answer slowly revealed. And the answer is in part what this exhibition is about.





Reflections on History

“Is history not simply that time when we were not born? I could read my nonexistence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her.”

Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*¹

The study of history (that time when we were not born) necessitates the consideration of our own non-existence, for to imagine a past event as it was before our birth, requires us to see that event without knowledge of what was to come, much as how we don't know what is coming tomorrow. But to imagine our non-existence, our being not-yet-born, becomes in our conscious minds nothing less than death; such is why perhaps we sometimes struggle to comprehend the past, to look at objects in museums or a turn of the century photograph wherein our coming-into-being is so precarious.

History is not simply the study of the past in documents and archives. To fully understand an event we must understand it as a moment in a past-present, re-witnessing it along with the trappings of ordinary existence with which all our lives are unconsciously encumbered. History brings us face to face with the possibility, or rather probability, of our never having been born. It reveals our precarious existence as having been determined by millions upon millions of unconscious decisions



Queen Street, Oxford 1897

Photographed by Henry Taunt. © Oxfordshire County Council

made by each and every one of our ancestors, decisions themselves informed by the ordinary, the banal and seemingly insignificant.

At the moment the above photograph was taken, when all those pictured were going about the business of their daily lives, the chances of my being born was practically nil. Now, as I look at the photograph I know that everyone pictured is dead; I can read my non-existence in the clothes they are wearing, in



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the flags and the clock frozen at 9.35, just as they might have read their non-existence in the photograph itself, for, as Barthes writes, death is present in every photograph; "every photograph is this catastrophe."

One might add to that the potential catastrophe of never-being-born. Again in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes states that:

"From a real body, which was there, proceed

radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze - light though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed."

When we look at a star in the night sky, we can be assured that in some cases the light which hits our eye is hundreds of years old. It might even be that the star no longer exists, yet we can be certain that it did exist. The same can be said of those we see in the photograph; somehow the light is like the delayed rays of a star - an umbilical cord which links us with them and vice-versa (if any of those pictured are indeed my ancestors, then the metaphor becomes even more vivid). The moment the light left the bodies of those photographed in 1897 we did not exist; the moment we receive it via the photograph, they no longer exist, and yet here we both are and aren't at the same time.

This umbilical light which springs from each of us, links us all to our own non-existence and death.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The imagining of my own non-existence or death, and the fragility of my coming-into-

being was nowhere better illustrated than in a visit I made to Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 2006. How was it I could stand in a place where over a million people were murdered? In order to understand Auschwitz-Birkenau and its appalling place in history, I first had to imagine its past-present (almost 30 years before I was born); I had to consider my own non-existence.

As I have said above, that consideration in my living, conscious mind, becomes nothing less than the image of death and in Auschwitz-Birkenau of course, this fact takes on a much graver, more disturbing, starker and more tangible dimension.

Yet this dimension has helped me in some small way to better contemplate the suffering of all those who were prisoners there; who died or survived.

Of course I can in no way know what it was like to be there. I can only in the words of survivor Elie Wiesel writing as regards the visual representation of the Holocaust "come closer to the gate, but not inside, because [I] can't go inside, but that's close enough."²

I took part of Wiesel's quote as the title for a piece of work which I made on the nature of history and place and which I presented at a Travel and Trauma conference in Oxford in April 2008. As part of a text on the piece, I wrote how it was in part the individual

tourist's resolution of a disquiet resulting from a shift in the status of a place (in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, from Death Camp to Memorial/Tourist Attraction), and the act of leaving or being able to leave which in some respects makes such places 'popular' today, heightening as they do our sense of existence, of life.

But one can also look at this another way. Having contemplated my non-existence and death when I entered the camp, so when I left did I begin to contemplate my existence and my life.

When I left, I was in a kind of limbo which I could only leave behind through an unpacking of my 'coming-into-being' and an understanding of what it is to 'Be' (something which has inspired much of my research into my Family Tree).

Uncertainty, Hope and Suffering

Although in Auschwitz-Birkenau I might consider my own death, what I cannot do is comprehend the degree of suffering inflicted upon those incarcerated there. No amount of thinking or imagining, no film, photograph or artwork will get me anywhere near that terror (I think again of Elie Wiesel's quote) but of course there is nothing wrong in trying, as long as I keep that point in mind.

Unlike many historical places (certainly of



The Gate (The Ordinary Language of Freedom)

Pen on Glass, St. John's College, Oxford 2008

this magnitude) Auschwitz-Birkenau and other camps have a very particular temporal dimension. Castles and palaces were active over centuries and had many different uses. Auschwitz-Birkenau however was built for mass murder over a short period of time. This in part explains why we sometimes see its victims as having only ever been victims (photography, too, has a part to play in this). Such places seem to have sprung from nowhere complete with their dead.

But of course we know this wasn't the case, yet to fully understand the victim as a living being and make a connection with their individual suffering, I first had to leave the

camp; I could not make that connection inside the barbed-wire perimeter.

Having considered my own non-existence and death, on leaving the camp I re-considered my existence and what it means to live; by leaving the camp I performed an action which millions could not do; I walked away from death, and as such my sense of life was heightened; all those unconscious decisions by which we live our lives became conscious.

As I've written above, to fully understand a moment in time, one must see it first without the knowledge of what was to come. We must see the moment in all its uncertainty, not in the



A Visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau

Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 2008

certainty afforded by hindsight. Through our knowing what was to come, those inhabiting the past appear to make decisions based on some kind of script; they become characters in a film we can play over and over again and are therefore divorced from reality.

In order to know them and the moment fully, we must uncouple their future from their present and in that uncertain space (which we perpetually inhabit) locate their fear, their suffering and hope. As Tadeusz Borowski, himself an Auschwitz survivor wrote in his book, 'This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen'³:

"Do you really think that without hope such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for a day? It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into

numb inactivity... Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp."

Hope is not something one locates in the past, but in the present.

“Is it possible that the whole history of the world has been misunderstood? Is it possible that the past is false, because one has always spoken of its masses just as though one were telling of a coming together of many human beings, instead of speaking of the individual around whom they stood because he was a stranger and was dying?

Yes it is possible.

Is it possible that one believed it necessary to retrieve what happened before one was born? Is it possible that one would have to remind every individual that he is indeed sprung from all who have gone before, has known this therefore and should not let himself be persuaded by others who knew otherwise?

Yes it is possible.

Is it possible that all these people know with perfect accuracy a past that has never existed? Is it possible that all realities are nothing to them; that their life is running down, unconnected with anything, like a clock in an empty room?

Yes it is possible.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge⁴