

CONTRASTS

Am I glad to be here? No, no one surely could be glad to be in this place. Yet, it would have been cowardly not to have come. That I made the effort, I am glad. It is too easy to avoid what we would rather forget.

I have seen before in pictures, on television, that gate with its infamous "Arbeit macht frei." Yet nothing prepares one for the actual sight, for passing beneath those words, that mocking lie. More truthful were the words Dante once read: "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate" (Abandon all hope, you who enter).

How different this is from yesterday. Then we were in Kraków, in St Mary's Basilica, looking at the wonderful 15th century wooden altarpiece carved by Veit Stoss. We saw Mary assumed into heaven, and the bewildered apostles below. There at the top Mary is crowned Queen of Heaven. The assumption and coronation of the creature, Mary, seem to speak of the reconciliation and eventual divinization of creation itself. We glimpsed heaven; we had hope.

But here I have seen barrack blocks where people were packed like cattle, the shower blocks where the naked were crammed and cleansed with Zyklon B, and the ovens where the dead and dying were burnt. I have glimpsed hell.

Those heaps of suitcases and heaps of shoes – how many were there? It was impossible to count. What were all the sad stories behind each? Where had they all come from? As I stared at all the piles hair, the hair cut from the heads of men and women and children – the hair too useful to be burnt – I remembered the golden flowing hair of Mary on Veit Stoss's altarpiece. Here in hell I remembered heaven. Can it really be that only some fifty or so kilometres separate them?

I remembered the apostles standing bewildered. What would they make of this? The people here ascended heavenwards through the great chimneys. Where had their ashes fallen? Surely we walk through the dust and ashes of saints and martyrs? I owe it to their memory to confront this place.

Lasciate ogne speranza? No, not all hope. I have seen Auschwitz. I will not be the same again. But I remember also Veit Stoss's altarpiece. I will not abandon all hope.