

Glengormley CIPS

Newtownabbey



**PACT3 Project – 09 Trip to Poland
with Glenann PS**

**THE MARCH OF THE LIVING 09
OSWIECIM (AUSCHWICZ),**

With the Financial support of the IEF's PACT3 programme that Glengormley Integrated PS had entered from 2008-11, we and our sister Glen, Glenann PS from outside Cushendall, worked throughout the year on a range of integrated activities including an in-depth study of the Holocaust, through the medium of the novel "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas."

This focus culminated in a joint residential trip to Krakow, Poland in the spring of 2009. The trip included all the major tourist attractions in the area including the Wawel, Wieliczka Salt Mines, a beautiful raft ride down the Dunajec river bordering Slovakia in the Tatras Mountains and the educational highlight of the trip had to be a very moving visit to the infamous Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration / extermination camps.

The children had been well prepared for this specific part of the trip and with a large collection of parents making up the party also, we were both logistically and emotionally equipped to deliver an educational in-depth study to the P7 children who were with us. Everything was going to plan until our coach arrived in the town of Oswiecim on the morning of our visit. Then potential disaster struck!

We had learned that leading up to the day we had planned to visit, the Polish Curator of the Auschwitz Museum had been in contentious discussions with the agency that represents "The March of the Living." This event which had been happening for some years in advance was an annual pilgrimage of Jewish communities from all around the world who would descent on Auschwitz 1 camp and march through the town of Oswiecim to Birkenau (Auschwitz 2) where they would then hold a service of remembrance. This particular year, the curator had indicated that he would not permit this event to take place, however at last-minute notice, he had reversed his decision and it indeed allowed it to take place on the two locations....on the same day we had arranged to visit!

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Our group were very excited to make this very pertinent part of our trip happen and with the journey time and tight programme for the week in place we had no alternative but to attempt to complete our visit. On arrival to the town, there was a frenzy of activity in the area, and many roads were closed with police present on the streets. Our coach driver was ably assisted by the Principal's wife, Mrs Arnold, who spoke fluent Polish to "blag" our way into the coach park, even without a sticker on the front of the bus! We said, "What badge, we never got a badge!" We then decided, rather than take our group of 49 adults and children into Auschwitz 1 in small family groups (as had been agreed earlier in the week, hence no entry fee!) we would instead move in as a group. All was going well so far!

Unfortunately as we advanced along the route to the visitor entrance, we realised that the large numbers of groups, who were all dressed for the occasion in pale blue, carrying emblems such as the Jewish Star and banners representing their home nations, also all were wearing coloured wristbands! Of course we had none!

Once again, Mr Arnold and Mr Close the two Principals set the wheels in motion. We explained to the stern security guard that we had travelled all the way from Belfast in Northern Ireland, (reminding him that it was a divided country still coming out of conflict and we represented the two main traditions in the country. (well, partly true – Glenann were Catholic and we were 57 different varieties!) The nice man was still not prepared to let us pass. The children then were encouraged to put on their saddest faces of disappointment, whilst Mr Close and I asked to speak with the Curator of the Museum, who apparently was the only man who could authorise our entry.

Ten minutes later, along came the curator and to cut a long story short, after an in-depth discussion of Irish and Polish Football between he and Mr Close, (Mr Arnold was at a lose end as he knows nothing of football, being a rugby man), we were authorised safe passage into the Museum on the grounds that being such a very busy day and we having the youngest group of people there, we must stay together as a party. Of course we fully agreed his terms and conditions.

The rest of the morning passed without drama, and the adults and children alike experienced a deeply moving yet massively educational journey through the museum exhibits, learning in a way they never could have in the classroom, together. If the first part of the day was not memorable enough, the latter certainly was, but did not go without drama!

Shortly after mid-day, the groups from all across the world gathered in procession as they were called into place to begin the March of the Living to Birkenau, some 2 miles across the town. Given that we had contributed to the occasion this far, we decided to join the march. We slotted in at the tail of the procession, between Montreal, Canada and Gdansk, Poland as the March prepared to move off. One problem now was that the entire group had left their lunches and supplies of water on the coach, hoping to retrieve them at lunchtime, but due to the special circumstances, we had not been able to leave the park and get access to them, so everyone was not only hungry, but especially thirsty as it was about 28 degrees and very hot in the beautiful sunshine. However this did not deter our group and march we did!

We proudly represented Northern Ireland as the only participants from our small part of the world as we marched through the filled streets of Oswiecim to the infamous Birkenau camp. With sweaty matted hair, sore feet and dry throats, both adults and children alike felt a pride taking part in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and also to be the only participants from Northern Ireland present.

This was a unique moment in the recent history of Glengormley Integrated Primary School. A memory for families and children hold onto for a lifetime and one that will never be forgotten by all involved. The whole experience deepened our understanding and broadened our awareness of conflict, hatred, healing and compassion in a living way that only a trip of this magnitude could and has made a mark on all our lives. Since then, we have completed the same trip in 2011, 2013, and just recently again in 2015.