

# The Ghosts of Auschwitz-Birkenau



Cole Thompson

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by Cole Thompson

What can be said about Auschwitz-Birkenau that hasn't already been said?  
What can be photographed at those sacred places that hasn't already been photographed?

As I thought about what had occurred there, I wondered how any human could do such inhumane things, and then I recalled "The Mysterious Stranger" by Mark Twain. In this story a young boy named Seppi is talking to Satan about a man who had brutally beaten his dog. Seppi declared this man's actions "inhumane," and Satan responded:

"No, it wasn't Seppi; it was human - quite distinctly human."

Satan goes on to explain that no other animal on the planet would treat another creature this way, except humans.

I had not intended to photograph during my tour of the camps but after being there a few minutes, I felt compelled. With every step I wondered about the people whose feet had walked in exactly the same footsteps as mine. and I wondered if their spirits still lingered there today.

And so I photographed ghosts.



Birkenau No. 1



Auschwitz No. 11



Auschwitz No. 1



Auschwitz No. 5



Auschwitz No. 15



Birkenau No. 2





Auschwitz No. 14



Birkenau No. 3



Auschwitz No. 9



Auschwitz No. 8



Auschwitz No. 2



Auschwitz No. 12



Auschwitz No. 3



Auschwitz No. 4





Auschwitz No. 13

# The Story Behind the Images

In 2008 my wife and I visited our son in Ukraine, who was serving in the Peace Corps. We had a couple of extra days and decided to visit Poland, and stayed in Krakow. Once there, we began discussing what to do with our free time.

I knew that Auschwitz-Birkenau was nearby, but did not want to visit. I am an empath and take on the sad feelings of people, stories and places, and I sure did not want to go to a place called a “death camp.” But the family outvoted me, and so off we went.

We took a tour bus to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and on the ride over I began to think about where we were going. I thought that if there were a sacred place on earth, surely this must be one of them, and so I decided not to photograph there...I thought it might be sacriligious or at least disrespectful. And so as we got off the bus, I asked the driver if I could leave my camera equipment onboard, to which he replied “no.”

And this is how I came to be on a tour at Auschwitz-Birkenau with my camera gear in hand.

We begin the tour by being shown a book, with a portrait of each

person. I was immediately impressed with the photograph, it was well done and clearly this was a skilled photographer who took pride in their work. But it also caused my head to spin: why are they taking such care to document someone that they will either work to death or murder? Why?

Then we were taken into the room with the iconic piles that we've all seen: the pile of glasses, the pile of human hair, and the one that deeply affected me: the pile of human bridgework, yanked from the mouths of the dead.

I am not claustrophobic, but at that moment, I could not breathe. I signalled to my family that I was going outside and that they should continue the tour.

Once outside, I found myself walking slowly and looking down at my feet. After a bit, I began to breathe easier and found myself thinking about my feet: who else had stood here, but was now dead? Who else had walked the path that I was walking, on their way to the gas chamber?

And then I began wondering if the spirits of those who lived and

died at Auschwitz-Birkenau still lingered?

And then a whisper in my head said: you need to photograph their ghosts. And so I began photographing ghosts.

Using the visitors at the camp and a long exposure, I turned them into ghosts. But I faced two challenges: first, each time I set up my camera, people would clear out of the way, not wanting to ruin my photograph. They didn't understand that I needed them in these images!

And so I had to quickly devise a technique to solve this problem. I would turn my back to the camera, and play the part of the "loud American" by speaking loudly on my cell phone. Once people would wander back into the scene, I would trigger my camera with a remote shutter release.

The second challenge I faced: I only had 45 minutes left at Auschwitz and then an hour at Birkenau...

Once being concerned about being disrespectful by photographing at the camps, I now found myself running from location to location in order to capture these images that I could visualize in

my head. I had to record them, because I knew that I'd never be back...could never go back.

In the hour and forty five minutes there, I created fifteen images...perhaps the fifteen most significant images I will ever create. I believe they were inspired images.

One of the blessings that has come into my life because of this project, is meeting survivors and hearing their stories. These have been both horrific stories, and inspirational ones.

The Ghosts of Auschwitz-Birkenau turned out to be a “successful” project, not because of any accolades it received, but because it was a project borne of Vision, Passion and Inspiration.

And that is my definition of a “successful” project.