Ladies and Gentleman,

Thank you for the invitation to this international meeting, during which we are going to consider the ways of how to speak about the history of the second world war and how to share it. I’ve come from Auschwitz, the site so recognizable all over the world, which is a symbol of mass murder of European Jews. It is also, the place of martyrdom of Poles, cruel crime committed on the Roma people, and the place where Soviet prisoners of war suffered an indescribable tragedy. I will try to convey what I consider to be the most valuable and most important in educating in authentic sites of memory, and also indicate its main guidelines. Also I will try to describe the requirements that we should meet educating the generation which already belongs to the 21st century. It is more than 70 years after the outbreak of World War II. My speech is entitled "Words and Stones". The tile of my speech is “Words and Stones”.

Words

Five years ago, during the international conference organized at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, one of its participants, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and a former camp inmate, Elie Wiesel said:

_The words I’m saying here_
_I could say nowhere else,_
_not in the same way._
_Maybe they should be in the form of a prayer,_
_A silent prayer,_
_And I am someone who believes in prayer._
_They should be a poem,_
_A silent poem,,_  
_A poem of silence, almost close to Paul Celane.”_

Words, comments, conversations, questions and answers are the most common images associated with those visiting memorials. Groups visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, Treblinka, or Gross Rosen look exactly the same. The narration of a guide, teacher or educator – is supposed to catch the attention of those who came to learn the history of the place, or as some educators say: face up to truth troth about the nature of these places.

The words said here by educators take on a special meaning. Behind the historical message enclosed in specific data, concepts and names are hidden words of exclusion, intolerance, anti-Semitism, tragedy of deportation, fear of separation, pain, loneliness, ruthlessness of perpetrators and hopelessness of victims. The educators comments contain the words relating to the hope of survival, solidarity, love, attempts to preserve human dignity. Such as a strong
comment addressed to the very depth of human consciousness and human feelings should not be excessive or pushy. Every word has the weight difficult to assess.

„Just to throw out the words „Auschwitz”, „Birkenau”, as if they were nothing but words – they would be the wrong words. This place, therefore, this space here, which contains such memory, should be a place of truth, for a terrifying truth, has been revealed in this place”.

Formulated sentences should not go beyond the framework of legibility and clarity of communication. The history known from school textbook is illustrated here with the example of real children, women and men. The educator in turn is not only someone who shows and explains but becomes the kind of a spokesman for the victims. Education understood in this way avoids routine and it’s power is derived from the power of the event.

Paradoxically, the most important part of the education is silence. Elie Wiesel often quoted in my presentation says:

"Can I say therefore that the memory of Auschwitz is Orly here? On one level I say “Yes, here,” because in this place – because of its memory, its silent memory – there is more silence, there should be more silence in this place than words."

All the other properly commemorated and clearly described former camps and death camps retain this "silent memory". Silence sometimes is an expression of the lack of appropriate, adequate words.

Emptiness and silence of memorial sites, the mood of contemplation, recollection and reflection make visitors reflect on a human being, his role in and responsibility for the modern world. In which other museums can we learn more not only about the State of affairs: facts, concepts and dates, but also human condition, where else can we find out more about ourselves? Not without a reason Elie Wiesel, accompanying my presentation says:

“I would like to believe that one Day the famous G8, the G8 which is annual meeting of the presidents of the most important, the most powerful nations in the Word – and they usually meet in each other’s country – that they would come here to have a meeting here, in Auschwitz. Let them come. They will know here what is substance and what is not, what is futile and what is not.”

STONES

Many sites, structures, material traces of history of the death camps/mass killing sites have completely faded away. Mostly, perpetrators contributed to this, they had more time, they had enough time to effectively remove those traces out of the landscape emerging from the post-war ruins. Also often the post-war activities of the new administration led to modifications which made it impossible to read the history of the crimes on the basis of surviving material remains. The largest preserved German Nazi Death Camp Auschwitz Birkenau is an
exception. Over 300 pieces of ruins, including the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria, 155 buildings as well as hundreds of thousand different objects which belonged to victims. It is worth mentioning about 110,000 pieces of shoes, 3,800 suitcases, over 12,000 pots, 470 prostheses, 350 pieces of camp clothes and 250 prayer shawls. The Museum exhibition includes the shocking collection of about 2,000 kilograms of human hair which was shaven after victims had been murdered in the gas chambers or during registration in the camp.

During a few hour tour visitors have a possibility to see the museum exhibitions, original buildings, preserved authentic sites and material traces of the camp. Additional information boards filled with photographs, which were taken when the camp was in operation and historical narration, help to learn the history of the Shoah. The boards do not interfere in the post-camp landscape but complement it. Their form serves an additional function of commemorating the camp victims. There are not much left at the other sites, at some of them almost nothing. However, everywhere prevails the similar silence of the Site. Successful attempts have been undertaken to explain and commemorate them in such a way to be able to understand and “read” their history. Certainly, the former camp at Bełżec is one of such sites, where commemorative boards are inscribed in the huge and really impressive monument adjacent to the building of the museum and educational rooms.

The meeting, which takes place at the authentic spaces, the meeting with original remains and words from survivors’ testimonies as well as attempts to find answers, creates a unique and nowhere else experienced entirety. The site is authenticated by words, and words fulfill the site with meaning. It is the reason why we go to Auschwitz, Ponary, Bełżec, Treblinka or Babi Jar.

**Memorial Sites and Present Passivity**

Passing time, almost 70 years after the war, threatens not only the material evidence of the crimes. It is more difficult to preserve what is left. However, a motto, “Never Again”, acquires different meaning, the motto which became the foundation for establishing museums and commemorations at the sites of camps and mass killings. The memorial site was different, straight after the war, when the history of World War II and the Shoah was a personal experience for both visitors and guides, and it is different for the generation who knows the tragedy of Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur, Srebrenica or the 11th of September.

Perhaps, this is why an American historian Michael Berenbaum writes, “The generation that experiences therefore an ongoing problem has much less ease accepting the notion of „never again” and may at most be able to say, hopefully, „not on my watch””.

“All on my watch” means a possibility and willingness to build, among others, thanks to education at the memorial sites, the sense of responsibility for yourself and your environment to other people.
Powerlessness and passivity are the problems which people have been facing for thousands of years. A female slave Hagar, who was thrown out of her house, wandering around the Beersheba desert not being able to find water for Ishmael,’ … she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.”

Luke in the Christian Gospel about seeking a shelter for Joseph and Maria writes, “there was no room for them in the inn.”

Powerlessness, passivity and indifference were common also during the Shoah. Waclaw Długoborski, a Polish historian and former prisoner of Auschwitz, writes, “Not the blackmail and denunciations, not the collaboration, because those were phenomena on the margins of the main current of society’s attitudes. Indifference, on the other hand, was universal, even in Poland, even in Auschwitz. We were witnesses to the Holocaust, we saw thousands of Jews going to the gas chambers: Slovakian, Dutch, French. We saw the mass murder of the Roma and we looked upon it with indifference. In this lies one of the tragedies of our generation.”

Overcoming passivity should begin with confronting fully with all aspects of history of Shoah/Holocaust in particular parts of Europe, emphasizing the role of perpetrators, suffering of victims and passivity of the others.

Education for responsibility should become a component of visits at Memorial Sites, preparing young people for living in a civil society, so that the largest possible number of people would be on constant “watch” mentioned by M.B.

Therefore, young people must be taken not only to Auschwitz, but also to such centers as Ponary, Treblinka, Babi Jar or Belżec. Every visit of young people should be very well prepared. The Auschwitz Memorial together with the Ministry of Education of Poland and Council of Europe has prepared and published a special educational kit to help teachers and educators to properly carry out and evaluate visits at these sites. Educational proposals of the Auschwitz Memorial are targeted at visitors from all over the world as well as various age, social, cultural and religious groups. There have been developed and implemented projects for the mentally and physically challenged, diplomats and soldiers, officials and politicians, high school and university students. However, mainly, the Museum educational program is targeted at teachers and educators, because mostly they contribute to organizing visits to Auschwitz and other sites.

Thank you very much for your attention, I hope that together we will be on our “watch” in Auschwitz, Ponary, Murambi in Rwanda, Srebrenica, Perm in Russia and other places.

Andrzej Kacorzyk