

A tale of the most romantic transaction in Paris

We strolled along the pavement with the Seine and the Ile de la Cité on our right, the Quai de Montebello on our left. We had yet to realise that the Musée Rodin was closing in only an hour and a half, so there was no urgency in our stride. My French-Canadian girlfriend wrapped her fingers into mine, sentimentally gazing into the Seine, reflecting on her past visits to this city.



For both of us, as it does for so many romantics, Paris represents an old idealism – a delicious feeling we experienced so fervently in our youths but fail to fully reconjure as we’ve aged. I tried to imagine, in the instant I recognised that sentimental gaze, how differently she felt the city then. With the sprawl of mostly American tourists behind me queuing for the Shakespeare & Co bookshop, I recognised how differently I felt as well.

She stopped at a stall along the river where a bookstand of French titles was neatly organised alphabetically, fully adorned with paperbacks covered in a thin, translucent paper wrapping. You could smell the musky age on the books despite the care they’d been given. I groaned a little.

“I told you I wanted to bought one more book.” Her Québécois accent was faint by comparison to her confusion in tenses.

I grinned a little as she eyed a novel by Marguerite Yourcenar. I stopped and perused while she was approached by the old man who owned the stall. I recalled the fecund literary history of Paris in the Twenties; Céline, Proust, Gide, and Bosco seemed so familiar yet so foreign.

I looked across the river, taking note of the various people squatting outside the brasseries with their drinks and cigarettes. From this distance I could see a young man in faded jeans and a grey shirt with a design I couldn’t make out rolling his own, speaking with a woman dressed in a similar style, already smoking.

My attention returned to my girlfriend, who appeared to be discussing two different titles by Yourcenar with the stall owner. He stood a few inches taller than her now, seemingly empowered by their conversation. His tweed flat cap that matched his trousers in the greys and browns was stuck just above his eyebrows which were signed on each end with curly grey wisps of hairs. He smiled as he spoke with her, his earlier wrinkled, weary expression transformed by a sudden lightness. I grinned a little more to myself, thinking about her ability to energise people.

They ended the exchange of money, books, and smiles, and he turned to watch her go as she crossed over towards me. He nodded to me, and we turned up the river towards the museum. I left feeling a bit envious of the interaction. Perhaps I should learn French.

Brantley Fraser

Memories of Auschwitz

"Everybody should go to Auschwitz once in their life," my mother told me. I didn't understand what she meant but here I am, on a cold bleak Monday in January, looking up at those famous three words: Arbeit Macht Frei ("Work makes you free").

As we walk under the main gate into Auschwitz I, which now makes up part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum & Memorial, we're faced with endless rows of identical red-brick buildings, a stark contrast to the snow and ice covering the ground. Originally designed as Polish army barracks before becoming "home" to thousands of prisoners, the buildings now house exhibits and photos detailing the atrocities that went on within those very walls. We walk around slowly and quietly, talking only in hushed whispers, simply because it feels like the right thing to do.



From the enlarged black-and-white photos hanging on the walls, the eyes of a young child stare back at me. As he climbs out of the train carriage his face shows a mixture of confusion and anxiety. The realisation dawns on me that he most probably died within hours of that photo being taken. The thought shocks me more than I could have ever imagined. Did he have any idea of what was to come? I hope not.

Within each building are more pictures, faces, personal belongings and with each one comes stories of

terror, torture and murder. The temperature seems to drop as we approach the death wall and gas chambers. Both are void of tourists and the signs request we remain silent as a mark of respect for the thousands who were killed here. They're not necessary; there is nothing to say.

A brief stop in the museum entrance gives a welcome opportunity to return to reality; it's surprising how quickly food, drink and warmth enable one to forget the horrors that lay beyond the door. Normality is resumed momentarily but the blissful denial doesn't last long as a taxi takes us the short journey to Auschwitz II (Birkenau).

Built as an expansion to the original camp, the size of Birkenau is truly staggering, and with it comes the realisation of how many people were imprisoned here. It takes an age to walk the length of the snow-hidden railway platform to the ruins of the crematorium which lay beside the International Monument. The plaque reminds us that more than 1.5 million lost their lives in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As I stand beside the memorial, I'm wet, cold, hungry and exhausted, yet I've never appreciated how lucky I am more than right now. Within the Auschwitz Museum hang the words: "The one who does not remember history is bound to live through it again". I decide my mother was right – everybody should go to Auschwitz. The world should never forget.

Katie Giles