

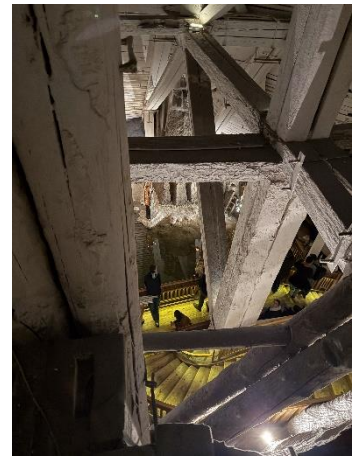


**QUEENS' SCHOOL**  
*Dare to be Historical*

**Year 10 Poland trip**

From 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> February, some of our Year 10 students embarked on an unforgettable educational trip to Poland, exploring its rich history, cultural heritage, and poignant past. This journey provided a profound learning experience, reinforcing the importance of remembrance, reflection, and respect.

Our adventure began on Friday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, as we gathered at London Luton Airport for an early morning departure to Kraków. Upon arrival, we wasted no time immersing ourselves in Poland's unique history, heading straight to the famous Wieliczka Salt Mine. Students were captivated by the vast underground chambers, intricate salt carvings, and the breathtaking Chapel of St. Kinga.



Saturday was a day of exploration, beginning with a guided walking tour through Kazimierz and Podgórze, two historically significant districts in Kraków. The students gained a deeper understanding of the Jewish community's history and the impact of World War II. Our visit to the Galicia Jewish Museum further enriched their knowledge, offering powerful exhibitions that showcased the resilience and cultural contributions of Polish Jews. After lunch, we continued to the renowned



Schindler Factory, where students learned about Oskar Schindler's heroic efforts to save lives during the Holocaust.



Sunday was undoubtedly the most moving and reflective day of our journey. We travelled to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp: the site of the mass murder of approximately 1.1 million people in a factory of death, where an English-speaking guide led us through a 3.5-hour tour of one of history's darkest sites. This visit was an emotional experience for all, highlighting the importance of remembrance and educating future generations



**Daring to be Great by pursuing our values of Scholarship, Tenacity, Altruism and Respect**





about the atrocities of the Holocaust. It was just a few weeks after the 80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2025. After lunch, we had the extraordinary opportunity to meet Stefania Wernik, a living witness of these historical events. Her story, shared through a translator, left a lasting impact on our students, providing a personal connection to history that they will never forget.

Stefania Wernik was born into the most unimaginable of circumstances. In the bitter cold of November 1944, she entered the world not in the safety of a home but in the heart of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a place synonymous with death and suffering. Her mother, Anna Piekarz, a Polish woman from Czubrowice, had been arrested while attempting to bring food to her family. Unbeknownst to the Nazis, she was already two months pregnant when she was deported to Auschwitz, where she became prisoner number 79414.

Upon arrival, Anna faced the same dehumanising process as thousands of others—stripped of her belongings, her head shaved, and given a striped uniform that symbolised her imprisonment. Despite the brutal conditions, she managed to hide her pregnancy, fearing that the discovery would mean immediate death for both her and her unborn child. She endured forced labour, exhaustion, and malnutrition, clinging to the fragile hope of survival.

By August 1944, as her pregnancy became harder to conceal, she was placed on a truck bound for Ravensbrück concentration camp. It was only the intervention of a fellow prisoner, Hela, that saved her—she revealed Anna's pregnancy to the Kapo, and instead of deportation, Anna was reassigned to Barrack 15, where she was spared from hard labour and given a ration of thin, white soup.

A few months later, amidst the filth and freezing temperatures, Stefania was born. There was no warmth, no comfort—only the cold trickle of water from a tap as she was bathed. The prisoners around her mother did what little they could, sewing makeshift clothes and a blanket for the newborn from scraps of striped uniforms. Within days of her birth, Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous "Angel of Death," took an interest in the newborn. He and his assistant conducted pseudo-medical experiments on the infant, causing her to cry relentlessly when returned to her mother's frail arms. Despite the horrors, Stefania survived, a testament to resilience against all odds.

By January 1945, the Germans, desperate to cover their crimes, were destroying documents and setting fire to barracks. As the camp fell into chaos, the gates were left open, and prisoners stumbled into the snow-covered landscape, searching for escape. Anna, weak from hunger but driven by the primal instinct to protect her child, found an upturned stool, placed Stefania inside, and tied it securely with string. In this crude sled, she pulled her infant daughter through the snow, step by agonizing step, towards freedom.

They eventually reached the town of Libiąż, where compassionate strangers sheltered them. After some time, word reached Anna's husband, and he took his wife and miraculous child back to Czubrowice. The news of their survival spread quickly, and the villagers gathered, astonished that they had returned from what was thought to be certain death. Fearing that the Germans might still come for her, Stefania's birth was officially registered in Czubrowice rather than Auschwitz. It was only in 1977 that she corrected her birth certificate, formally acknowledging that she had been born in the hell of Birkenau.



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Despite surviving the war, Stefania’s early trauma left deep scars. As a child, she was often sick, and the memories of fear and suffering lingered. Yet, she built a life beyond the horrors of her infancy. She married and became a mother and grandmother. Despite the pain of losing loved ones—her daughter, daughter-in-law, and son-in-law—she remained steadfast in her faith, finding solace in her family.

Today, Stefania Wernik carries her story forward as a warning to future generations. Her words echo with urgency: **“No more war, no more fascism, no more genocide. The ideologies that led to such horror are insidious. Be vigilant. Be wise. Do not let history repeat itself.”**

From a newborn marked by cruelty to a survivor who speaks for those who never could, Stefania’s life is a testament to resilience, memory, and the unbreakable human spirit.



This journey was not only an educational experience but also an opportunity for personal growth. Our students demonstrated maturity, empathy, and curiosity throughout the trip, embracing every opportunity to learn and reflect. We are incredibly proud of their engagement and the respect they showed for the significance of the sites visited.