

Spielberg's Abandoned Film Set, Krakow, Poland

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Just twenty minutes south of Krakow city centre in the district of Podgórze are the haunted remains of Liban Quarry (Kamieniołom Liban). Located alongside the former Płaszów Concentration Camp, the place has seen its own share of Nazi atrocities. Enclosed and eerily oppressive, it's not surprising that film director Steven Spielberg chose it as a location for his hugely successful film *Schindler's List* about the destruction of the city's Jewish community.

The limestone quarry was established in 1873 by two local Jewish families named Liban and Ehrenpreis. By the turn of the 20th century they had erected administrative buildings and laid a railway line to remove the quarried materials. Business continued to prosper until late 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland.



In 1942, the Nazis built the Płaszów Concentration Camp on the hillside overlooking the quarry. A year later they populated it with some 6,000 Jews following the liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto. In its role as a labour camp, Płaszów supplied 800 of its youngest and fittest inmates to toil as slaves in the quarry (a hard-to-find memorial to 21 of them executed on 22nd July 1944 has been erected at the northern end of the quarry).

Fast forward now to 1993 and Spielberg has arrived in Krakow scouting for locations for *Schindler's List*. Much of the film was to be set in the Płaszów Concentration Camp but that had been razed by the Nazis as the Red Army approached Krakow. Consequently it was now little more than a grassy hillside although the incinerated human remains known to lie beneath the grass precluded the site's use for filming. Instead Spielberg looked to the abandoned Liban Quarry.

Here using original architectural blueprints he set about building an exact replica of the Płaszów Concentration Camp replete with 34 barrack blocks, 11 watchtowers, gates and barbed wire fences (to date it remains one of the most expensive set builds in Polish cinema history). Although the buildings were torn down once filming was complete, traces of the set can still be found, including parts of the electrified perimeter fence. Most chilling is a path running down the centre of the quarry paved with broken Jewish gravestones. These are, of course, just film props but they are a reminder that the Jews who once really toiled here were forced to lay roads in the camp using headstones uprooted from nearby Jewish cemeteries.



Another surviving part of the film set can be found on the cliff above the quarry's rusting refinery towers. Reached by a steep flight of dangerously collapsed metal steps are low foundations that once supported a replica of camp commandant Amon Göth's villa. The distinctive curving wall would have supported the balcony from where Göth (played by Ralph Fiennes) is shown taking pot shots at his prisoners. Göth's actual home (the so-called Red House) still stands at 22 Wiktora Heltmana Street near the former camp entrance. The building alongside the foundations doubled as Göth's stables in the film.

Interesting as the site is to film buffs, it should be remembered that the Liban Quarry is first and foremost a place of remembrance for those who suffered here. With this in mind, it



seems fitting that the quarry machinery and the film set are now slowly being engulfed by vegetation, which in turn is attracting wildlife. In this way life is returning to this former place of torment. This sets the place apart from the unrelenting horrors of Auschwitz–Birkenau, to where many of the inmates of Płaszów were eventually sent.

There are plans afoot to eventually turn the old quarry into an official green space, with bike paths, climbing walls and an outdoor cinema. It would be a great pity if the film set remains were not included, too.

To visit Liban Quarry (Kamieniołom Liban) take Tram 3, 6, 13 or 24 to Cementarz Podgórski then walk to the Krakus Mound (Kopiec Krakusa). From there follow the trail leading behind the New Podgórze Cemetery (Nowy Cmentarz Podgórski) and down into the quarry. Please note that the paths through the quarry are unmarked, uneven, overgrown and in some cases flooded.



This article has been adapted from the book *Only in Krakow: A Guide to Unique Locations, Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects* by Duncan J. D. Smith and published by The Urban Explorer. Duncan is the sole author and publisher of the *Only In Guides*, a series of city guides aimed at independent cultural travellers. You can find out more about his work at www.duncanjdsmith.com and www.onlyinguides.com.