

Leaving Auschwitz

Carly Cohen | August 1, 2016

I cannot unsee what I have seen.

I have been studying the Holocaust since I was a child at the Milwaukee Jewish Day School. It has always been a large part of my life, and I have made sure to dedicate part of my time to remembering the horrors that happened and educating others to prevent it from ever happening again.

I was given an incredible opportunity to travel to Poland and Lithuania as part of a study abroad program in May for two weeks. Our group of 14 students represented three schools: UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh, and UW-Milwaukee.



The study abroad course was titled, “20th Century Eastern Europe and the Holocaust.” From the beginning, I knew this was the ideal trip for me since it would provide me the opportunity to see the things that I have been learning about my entire life. During the two weeks I spent in Poland and Lithuania, there are two specific days that had an emotional impact on me.

The first emotionally draining experience I had on this trip was the day I spent at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. We began our tour at Auschwitz 1, and I had no idea what to expect or how I was going to feel. When we arrived, the bus pulled into a parking lot and I saw snack/souvenir shops and what looked to be a huge tourist site. We walked in and around all the buildings located behind the famous gate that reads “Arbeit Macht Frei” (work sets you free). The tour was guided in such a way that made it feel like a museum. Each building seemed to be preserved with its original brick, and there was a different “exhibit” in each building that housed a topic relating to the Holocaust. We saw where the prison inmates were held before execution, where the belongings of the prisoners such as pots, pans, *tallitot*, suitcases, hair, toiletries, shoes, clothes and finally the gas chamber and crematorium building. This was by far the most intense part of the tour, an experience that I would rather not go into too much detail as it would be too painful and difficult to explain.

After we drove to Birkenau, the second part of Auschwitz, I immediately noticed the train tracks that I had seen so many times throughout my research and education of Auschwitz. We walked to the unloading platform where an original railcar was sitting. We saw the unchanged barracks that had dirt floors, wooden bunks, cold air and a horrid smell. I felt like I was walking through death.

The sheer size of both Auschwitz I and Birkenau were larger than I could have ever imagined. It felt as if both camps went on forever, with no end in sight. At points, it felt like every step I took was a desecration to those that had walked to their deaths on the same ground. I experienced a roller coaster of emotions that day, ranging from being happy, confused, surprised, upset and angry.

You might be wondering why I put happy as one of the emotions that I had experienced. I was part of 7,500 people who toured Auschwitz-Birkenau that day. Over 1.7 million people visit every year and that makes me

happy. I'm happy that our world is not forgetting the horrors that happened and that so many people travel there to see the places where such atrocities occurred ensuring that this never happens again.

As I sat on the bus pulling out of Auschwitz-Birkenau, all I could think about was that I could say that I left the camp... alive. Roughly 1.1 million people walked past the same gates I did; they never walked out.

I did not think that the experience of seeing a concentration camp could get any worse, but I was very wrong. A few days later we went to Majdanek. I had heard of this concentration camp before, but I did not know too much about it. Majdanek was much more emotionally draining and far more challenging than Auschwitz. This was not because Auschwitz was less horrifying, but the entire camp of Majdanek had been preserved even more so than Auschwitz. Also, there were so many other people at Auschwitz when we toured; it was positive to see that the memory was living on. At Majdanek, there was no one touring or visiting there: it was my group, just the 16 of us. For the few hours that we spent there, we only saw four other people visiting the memorial site.

One aspect of Majdanek that stood out to me was that there was a town overlooking the camp. People's balconies looked out to the gas chambers and the barracks in which thousands of people were imprisoned. It is mind-boggling to me how people can wake up, make coffee, and sit on their balconies and welcome in the morning by staring death in the face. I never thought I would experience a place that could prove to be more emotional than Auschwitz. I thought I had experienced the worst of the worst while at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but when I went to Majdanek, I proved myself wrong.

I was nervous at the thought of entering into both of the camps. It felt like I owed it to my beloved friend and a Holocaust survivor whom I had spent a great deal of time talking with, Alfred Kahn (z"l), to see and learn as much as I could and to bear witness by being present at these terrible places where millions perished. I will forever be grateful that I had the opportunity to go on this trip. I learned so much about Poland, Lithuania, my family's history, and the countless stories of those who survived, and those whose lives were taken during the Holocaust. I left Auschwitz with a broken heart – but I left. I have a renewed sense of purpose, and an immense appreciation for every moment of my life.

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Jordan and Carly in Poland

Carly Cohen and Jordan Pachefsky both write about their trip to Poland in these pages today. Their study-abroad trip for 14 students from three Wisconsin campuses – Milwaukee, Madison and Oshkosh – was subsidized by an anonymous donor through the Jewish Community Foundation of Milwaukee Jewish Federation. The course was designed and led by Shay Pilnik, executive director of the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, and Karl Loewenstein, associate professor of history at University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh.

Bearing Witness

Jordan Pachefsky | August 1, 2016

Seventy-eight years after the beginning of the Holocaust, I returned to Poland and Lithuania as the descendant of immigrants forced into exile. A group of University of Wisconsin students traveled alongside Dr. Karl Loewenstein and Dr. Shay Pilnik – professor of history at UW Oshkosh and director of the Holocaust Education Resource Center, respectively – to learn about the Holocaust and gain a better understanding of the life that remains.



Nothing could adequately prepare me for this experience.

Not the in-depth Holocaust course taught by Laurie Herman, nor speaking with survivors, nor reading “Night” by Elie Wiesel (ז’ל).

Although the atrocities committed by the Nazis and collaborators occurred nearly seventy-five years ago, the waves of the Holocaust still ripple throughout Europe. Before 1939, thriving Jewish communities existed in every city we visited. From Zamosc to Warsaw and Kovno to Krakow, it was difficult to imagine life in prewar Eastern Europe especially in cities where synagogues stand as monuments. Shay led our group to the center of Lublin with a pre-war Jewish community of 42,000 that was decimated. I then understood his comment, “This is the real genocide.”

Never again. I bear witness to the places of genocide at Auschwitz, Majdanek, The IX Fort, Ponary and Belzec. No longer are they names in a book, or photographs on a page, but now are living experiences permanently etched in my memory. On our last day in Warsaw, we heard from the Forum for Dialogue about their mission to educate teenagers throughout Poland about the Jewish communities that existed within their hometown. No survivors remain, but this organization ensures their stories prevail.

“The road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference.” This quote by Ian Kershaw took on an entirely different meaning as I walked down this very road as a free Jewish man at the Auschwitz-Birkenau. Years of Jewish education and Holocaust studies couldn’t prepare me for what it actually felt like to walk the path where the millions were led and would never return. It was difficult to imagine the horror of the victims and the strength of survivors. While wearing a kippah and wrapped in an Israeli flag, I understand the value and importance of religious freedom as well as having the privilege of living the life denied to six million.

As a minority on the trip but the majority of those persecuted, it gave me an interesting perspective to see the Holocaust through my eyes as well as the lens of my non-Jewish counterparts. For them, it was seeing humanity at its worst. For me, it went a step further because I could have been one of the six million. Walking out of Auschwitz and walking into a synagogue for Shabbat services in Krakow, is a testament to the importance of my heritage, the strengths my people, and in the words of Elie Wiesel, “We must bear witness.”

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