

OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2 *Memory & Reflection*

Article 20

2014

Reflective Insight: "Lessons Learned"

Stephanie Walters
Old Dominion University

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Recommended Citation

Walters, Stephanie (2014) "*Reflective Insight: "Lessons Learned"*," *OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 20.

DOI: 10.25778/zvkk-jb59

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/ourj/vol2/iss1/20>

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Stephanie Walters

Lessons Learned

After returning from my study abroad experience, many people have asked me how was the trip? What did you experience? Was it fun? Not many people asked me what I learned, or how I felt. The emotions and knowledge that I have encountered on this trip is a complex subject to grapple with. The Holocaust, or Shoah as Europeans call it, was a tragedy that devastated millions of families. I often thought what would I have done if this happened to my family? How would I be able to move forward after the slaughter of the people that I held near and dear to my heart? The sadness of Auschwitz, Drancy, and Płaszów will never leave me nor will the knowledge I have obtained. I felt a great sadness visiting the locations of these devastating events, but I also feel that I accomplished something. I mean accomplished in the sense that while the trip was difficult and emotionally exhausting, I have also learned a great deal. I have learned that ignorance can turn a mole-hill into a mountain. I have learned to not be afraid to move against the grain. I've learned I must listen to my conscious. Many perpetrators of the Holocaust did not necessarily hate Jewish people, they just turned a blind eye and allowed the ignorance to continue or went along with the crowd. They were ambivalent or did not care. I have definitely learned to treat others with the respect that I want to be treated with. That simple command comes from the Bible, it figures in both testaments. I have learned I want to live out that command.

This trip put many people of different personalities together for an extended period of time. It wasn't always sunny skies the whole time but in small ways, we all showed how much we cared and respected each other. From handing out tissues to crying classmates or offering advice and hugs when the time was needed, the Paris/Auschwitz "family" has taught me the importance of not just sympathy but empathy as well. All of the Paris/Auschwitz family can empathize with each other. We connect emotionally with each other because of the experiences we had on this trip. We have a bond that cannot be broken. Many people do not really know much about the Holocaust, just that it happened and Jews died, others just don't care. This trip has encouraged me to spread the knowledge that I have gained so that other will know more. It is often said that we need to study the Holocaust so that it will not happen again, but we also need to study the Holocaust so that we will realize the ramifications of indifference and the utter relevance of being consciously aware of our responsibilities as human beings.