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Andrea Schlabach

Wide-Awake

As I look back, when I decided to go on this study abroad, I definitely was not ready for what I was about to experience. When most people learn about the Holocaust, people say it is sad and they cannot believe something like this could have happened in the world, and for myself, I thought each of those things. But it is more than just that. While I was in both Paris and Kraków, one of the most important things I discovered was how the world reacted to the Holocaust. Paris especially bothered me.

Before this class I had no idea how the French lived after World War II. The country did not publicly acknowledge their part in the deportation of their Jewish population until the mid-1990's and until then not much was done in Holocaust remembrance. While in Paris, we visited many sites dedicated to the memory of lives lost and the atrocities that occurred, but to my surprise, every monument or memorial was relatively small and often hidden around an out-of-the-way corner, and just walking down the street one might never know it was there. I was appalled; it truly bothered me that so little is being done to remember innocent lives lost. While at the Holocaust Museum next to the Drancy deportation camp, we learned that they are having trouble keeping funding and being able to remain open. For everything that happened, I could only wonder why is more not being done? But the most memorable part of Paris to me was hearing survivors of Auschwitz speak. Sharing their stories and hearing the despair yet strength in their lives was awe-inspiring. They mentioned that antisemitism in Paris is on the rise again, and it feels like a return to past times. Hearing that made me want to tell their stories just so much more.

Kraków was a completely different from Paris. Anywhere and everywhere there was history about the Holocaust, and the Poles were very open about speaking on the atrocities that happened in their country. That is partially due to their recent independence and Holocaust sites bring in money to the country, and although that isn't a great motive, at least the history is being discussed. What was fascinating to me though is how they treated the sites. While visiting Auschwitz, much of both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz- Birkenau remained in great condition and hundreds of people were there while we visited. But at the site of the Płaszów concentration camp, nothing remained but a few memorials and the land was in horrendous condition. It was confusing to me why one place was rebuilt and maintained so carefully and another major site wasn't. When I asked our tour guide, he even said, "The government doesn't care as much about Płaszów like

they do Auschwitz because it doesn't bring them as much money or attention." For a country that is so open to talking about their history, it was interesting to me that many people really only cared about parts of it that would help them prosper. The benefits of what is called "dark tourism" were everywhere in the newly renovated Kraków, and the prosperity that tourist travel to Auschwitz has brought to the city was obvious.

But I was not ready for Auschwitz. I thought I prepared myself for days to experience the camps but it was more than I could have ever imagined. From Auschwitz I, in the prison cellars where there were scratch marks on the walls or bullet holes on the wall of death outside, to Auschwitz-Birkenau where confined quarters, small bathrooms and destroyed gas chambers were on display, I could not fathom what happened in this awful place. My mind kept saying there is no way this happened, it is not possible. This was not Holocaust denial, but I knew my mind didn't want to believe the horror of it. I did not feel ready for the enormity of the experience. For the first few weeks after we returned to Norfolk, I had nightmares almost every night about Auschwitz.

So Dr. Finley asked us how we continue after visiting these sites? This is a difficult question to answer. This trip will remain with me for the rest of my life; I will never forget each of the experiences in both countries and how they left a mark on me emotionally. I want the world to know what happened and how the world is living with the memories today and that there is so much more that could be done to keep the memories alive. Many survivors are in their 80's and 90's and will not be around for much longer. I hope I continue on from this trip by spreading their words and teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. I am now wide-awake now with a greater awareness that the slippery slope towards inhumanity revealed in the Holocaust is an easy descent for humankind. We must work consciously to prevent such downward spirals.