

Students see dark side of history at Auschwitz

By Judy LaPietra

PUBLISHED IN: FAITH & VALUES

It was a sunny, crisp early spring day in Oswiecim, Poland, as we set out to enter the camp.

But the weather, which put us in high spirits, would not sustain our mood. My students were soon quieted by the realization of where they were. We stood at the entrance gate of Auschwitz, and it was clear to all that nothing, no text or testimony, had prepared them for the impact of being there.

While many college students would opt for spending spring break on a beach, these 16 UNC Charlotte students chose to participate in a historical study abroad program that would leave a lasting impact on them. Spending a week in Poland to study the Holocaust would provide them an experience that would exceed their expectations.

Our journey began in Krakow, Poland, an important starting point for understanding prewar Jewish culture.

We toured the former Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, and followed the historic timeline that would eventually lead us to Auschwitz.

We walked through the former Jewish ghetto in Krakow and learned of the eventual liquidation of approximately 20,000 people. We followed their journey to the Plaszow concentration camp (made famous by the film "Schindler's List"), which was established in 1942 as a forced labor camp for Jews, and where thousands perished at the hands of the Nazis. The empty fields of this site today were sobering to behold.

Leaving Krakow and traveling through the Polish countryside we arrived in the town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz in German). It was here in 1940 that the Nazi regime established the largest concentration camp system of its kind, and where over 1 million people perished.

Our days at the camp site included study tours of Auschwitz I and Birkenau, workshops and

Related Stories

Related Images



presentations, including one with a Holocaust survivor. We were given access to archives and collections, and viewed the belongings of former prisoners – shoes, suitcases, glasses.

Each night, as we met to debrief our day, the students grappled with that they had seen. What emerged from these discussions was an awareness of the depth of this history, a realization that while it is difficult to fathom the number of Holocaust victims, it is equally difficult to put a face to that history.

The students were asked to listen and to imagine what the soil at Auschwitz could tell them. Throughout our journey, they presented to the group stories of individuals who survived Auschwitz. As a result, a personal connection was made.

My students came away with the powerful lessons that Auschwitz gives us, and a determination to change the world in their own way. Joining us on this journey were ceramic butterflies created by Charlotte schoolchildren to commemorate the Holocaust. The Butterfly Project, a worldwide project supported by the Charlotte Jewish community, has resulted in the creation of thousands of butterflies as a response to Pavel Friedman's poem "I Never Saw Another Butterfly," which he wrote while in the Terezin ghetto.

Pavel Friedman would later perish at Auschwitz. We left butterflies in Auschwitz and returned to Charlotte with the remainder of them to be placed at the Butterfly Memorial at Shalom Park.

As an educator, such an opportunity to impact the lives of students is rare. Where they take this experience, only time will tell.



[Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer.](#)