I-Witness holocaust Field School:

Reflective Essay

Is their truly a way in which to define ‘memory’? Is it possible for a memory to stand the test of time, or is it as finite as the oil our society revolves around? How can an individual contribute to the extension of memorializing, well, memory? For such a seemingly limitless complexity of an idea, memory can also present a more straight forward approach: for something to live on in memory, it must continue to be present in the minds of people. Memorialization has the ability to both amaze and frustrate an individual; which made the task for the students participating in the iWitness field school almost too difficult to put into words. I will begin by stating the reasons behind my own personal desire to be a part of such an experience as well as what I had hoped to gain. Then I shall share the details of what I believe to be a life changing journey that created a worldly feel and emotional connection to places and situations that seemed, at times, beyond human.

Here is a snippet from my “Statement of Purpose” which was submitted in November 2010.

“An experience such as the I-Witness program is a once in a lifetime opportunity in which I would love to be a part of… To witness firsthand the concentration camps, meet survivors, discuss the Holocaust with students and teachers from around the globe and experience all this trip has to offer would be supremely beneficial to my attempts at grasping such a watershed moment in human history.”

These were the words I chose to represent my desire to be a part of the class and the experience as a whole. In retrospect, these feelings were honest and legitimate. However, the more I consider the implications that have risen from such a venture; my thought process has been focused into a different direction. I feel now that I held a firm grasp of understanding when it came to Holocaust studies, what I did lack was a real understanding of the memorial process which still resonates with countless people across the globe. This trip presented an opportunity, one which at the time I was not fully aware of: To become a part of the process of perpetuating knowledge and dismissing ignorance. To work first-hand with those who are trying to keep one of the most horrific and wasteful events in history from becoming a footnote in the vast chronicle of man-kinds warring nature. This was the first epiphany I discovered when reviewing my time on hallowed soil.

When considering an undertaking such as the iWitness field school, one cannot dismiss the overall process which formed the foundation that the class was built upon. My background as a history major had conditioned me to look at things as fact or fiction. Events throughout history are recognized and documented, then it is up to the historian to critically consider sources and events and determine what was cause and eventual effect. It must be dissected in the most impartial way possible, with potential biases being scrutinized until a proper picture has been drawn. However this was neither your typical history class, nor a history class at all. This program was designed to discuss, reflect, and critique the memorialization of one of the darkest blemishes in recent history. It demanded a different thought process. The intricacy of memorials is in no way straight forward. Questions of who is truly being represented, who is profiting and how a particular memorial is being perceived was considered at great length and discussed in great detail. It was certainly a challenging position to be in, but one that I relished.

Looking back, our class found any opportunity to discuss the minutia surrounding these sites, whether it was on buses, trains or in hostel lobbies. However the opportunity given fourth by the Synagogue in Berlin to allow us a ‘home base’ in order to attempt to wade through the opinions and emotions that boiled to the surface during our many excursions to sites and monuments was very beneficial. It took less than 24 hours on European soil before our group truly became that, a group. The first classroom setting in Berlin epitomized the level of knowledge and desire in which our class contained. A two hour debate fixating on a wide range of focuses to do with the memorialization process exploded in mere moments. It was as if we had known each other for months and the comfort level was as surprising to us as it was to our Professor, Helga. To me, education is the expression and consideration of other people’s thoughts and ideas towards common facts. To be able to argue one side, all the while truly listening to the counter-arguments and believing it possible to argue that side as well shows a great understanding of the subject and a respect for others points of view and feelings. The memorialization process is and never will be black and white; it is an impossibly grey area that contains infinite strains of thought which can all be justified as appropriate. Despite the criticisms towards some memorials and the praise given to others, all of these sites have been put forth with a common goal, to remember the lives lost and those still left with the wounds of the past. And when you boil it down to that common goal, all of the memorials are appropriate.

The recommendation by Helga Thorson and Michael Gans to keep a personal journal throughout the trip was a wonderful idea. To be able to put into words the thoughts and emotions that arise while dealing with such heavy content has become a window into the experience in which I can look back now and attempt to make sense of it all. My journal in particular displays a consistent overview of the events mixed in with colourful quotes from some of our mates on the trip. However, what seems to be the common theme throughout is the question of how these memorials can affect life today? Sadly there is no answer on the back page that can be checked or even an explanation that will jump up on a Google search in mere seconds. Nevertheless I thought I would take a crack at answering here, while in reflection. These monuments to the Holocaust are representative to the victims of Nazi genocide on a mechanized scale the likes of which the world has never known, however the memorialization process seems to be more for the benefit of outsiders then for those who see them on a daily basis. As is the case with most things in life, the more often you see something, the less compelling it becomes. I recall on Monday May 9th, on our first walk to the Synagogue in Berlin when we passed the memorial to the children of the kinder transports. It was immediately noticed by our group that the locals seemed not to notice it all, while we tourists were instantly captivated and intrigued by it. You see, the impact that it held for us was tangible; we wanted to stop and think about it and we did, however as the days passed and the walks to the Synagogue continued, the memorial seemed to fade in the background and appeared to lose its self-worth. Robert Musil wrote: “There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention...” [[1]](#footnote-1) At this early stage of the trip, it led me to wonder whether any monument had the capabilities to provoke thought at an infinite pace. It took until May 16th, 2011 for me to realize that it was possible.

In the minds of many, Poland seems to be the forgotten entity while discussing the narrative of the Second World War. Germany was the antagonist, Western Democracies the protagonist while Italy and the Soviet Union were the bad guys who had a change of heart and switched teams. It had all the intrigue needed for a tightly spun yarn. But Poland was the scene of the crime. All six extermination camps were located within the borders of the Polish nation and as such it is a vital component in Holocaust studies. Our trip to Krakow brought an entirely new perspective to us as a group, one that I will never forget. Auschwitz-Birkenau is possibly the most famous concentration camp, which is illustrated by the over one million visitors that come from all over the world to bear witness to the immensely vast camp. With such a propensity for attracting tourists, the idea that the camp has become “The Disneyland” of concentration camps, set me up for an experience that would not be as pertinent to our emotional connection than a smaller more intimate memorial. My personal experience while visiting the camp was anything but theme parked. It was thought provoking, emotional and awe-inspiring.

The immensely vast grounds that made up Birkenau demanded respect. To witness firsthand the epitome of large-scale mechanized murder in which the Nazis implemented at this camp brought goose bumps to my skin and a cold chill down my spine. Our tour guide Wojtek provided us with a very straight forward and knowledgeable tour of the camp. His honesty was well received by our group and I respected the way he handled the difficult questions that our group enjoyed to inquire upon; for instance, his stance on the rights to belongings now a part of the exhibit. Did those survivors or their kin have a right to personal items that were taken from them sixty years ago? Absolutely, but without most of these items on display, would the exhibit command such awe? What struck me most while visiting the Auschwitz memorial museum was the sheer amount of the items on display. Heaps of broken classes, countless hair combs, an immeasurable amount of shoes and of course the mountains of human hair that stands alone as the depiction of degradation and humiliation that the Nazis held in such high stature. It is sad to say, but even for someone like myself who is well educated on the subject and emotionally committed before walking in the door, the volume of the display items certainly added to my experience in a way that a single suitcase or hair brush or shoe likely could not have.

From the time I was accepted into the program in November of 2010, whenever I would discuss my future trip with people I was always met with a similar response, that the experience would change my life, that visiting former camps such as Auschwitz would be incredibly emotional and moving. However, the experience of visiting Auschwitz left me in a peculiar state. While I was immediately struck by the sheer size of Birkenau as well as the incredible torture and degradation that personified the smaller Auschwitz 1 camp, I could not help but notice a lack of true connection to the hallowed grounds. I was physically walking on the same land that millions of persecuted prisoners had some sixty five years earlier but it somehow felt hollow. I was sombre and even angry by what I was witnessing but I did not feel the presence of evil or even the innocence that had been lost there. I felt empty. At that point I considered the possibility of too much academic discussion and enlightenment may have overwhelmed my appreciation for the here and now, for the moment at hand. I wondered if it were similar to an over-hyped event that could never live up to the expectations set forth by others. Would someone with a basic knowledge of the events of the Holocaust gain more from a tour such as this; discovering for the first time the details of ‘roll call’, the deprivation cells, or the cattle cars that had brought the prisoners to this home of death? It’s difficult to know, but looking back I would have to consider it a very personal experience that education and familiarity would play a part in but would not necessarily dictate. I realized this from my own experience several days later while visiting the former camp of Mauthausen in Linz, Austria.

The Mauthausen Concentration Camp was the site that I chose to research before the trip and provided a presentation to familiarize the group with an overview of the history of the former camp. It was also the day that I chose to write my blog entry and this has become an invaluable source for me to look back on and reflect. Here is an excerpt from that blog entry:

“At first glance it was plain to see the area held a natural beauty that transcended across the rural expanse. The close proximity to the surrounding homes made it clear that those who had lived there had likely known quite well the actions of the prison that stood above them as an ever-present reminder of the strength of the occupying power.”

The rolling hills of the Austrian landscape provided the camp a bird’s eye view of the farm houses below. It also led to conclusion that the town surrounding the camp became reliant on the producing and selling goods to the regime, boosting their economy. The camp was not built on a hill, but on a society. As we walked through the Memorial Park, I could not help but feel in awe of the tragic monuments erected by over twenty nations as well as monuments for Jewish, Sinti and Roma and Homosexual victims. While the sheer amount of monuments seemed intimidating at first, when we took our time and walked through the park, I quickly discovered the diversity that made each nation and ethnic group unique was very present in each memorial. One specific memorial that stood out for me was the monument dedicated to the Roma and Sinti victims. The memorial is cantilevered over the edge of the cliff with a glass wall that is the only separation between the visitor and the ground many meters below.

Our tour guide, Berti, was excellent in his approach and delivery of the information. He posed his questions in a manner that demanded real thought and contemplation. After his guided tour, we were given some time to explore the grounds on our own. Many of us decided to walk down to the granite quarry which was home to some of the most severe labour conditions of any camp within the regime. The walk down featured the 186 ‘Stairs of Death’, which created a sudden feeling of vertigo as you tried not to fall forward. Once at the bottom, the few of us who had made the trek down instantly became introverted as we read the sign indicating the “Parachutists Wall” which was aptly named for the psychological attacks that guards would impose on the prisoners. After forcing inmates to carry stones, some weighing more than one hundred pounds, up the stairs, the SS guards would give the option of either pushing the prisoner in front of them over the portentously named cliff or be shot. It is beyond contemplation to be faced with a decision as impossible as that, and it exemplified the horrors that were produced at the Austrian camp. I described the walk back up the stairs as such, “As unimaginable as camp life is to a non-survivor, the walk up those steps in the midday heat gave a miniscule glimpse into what a Mauthausen prisoner may have felt. It was the first time I actually felt a connection to a camp and it was quite moving.”

My experience at the Mauthausen Memorial site was a truly eye opening experience. I must reiterate that I do not believe to have felt anything near what a prisoner of the camp may have felt, but visiting that former camp and seeing the landscape which made up their daily work environment struck a chord inside me. I will never forget that experience and plan to continue sharing that experience with anyone who is gracious enough to allow me to. I believe that is my best chance at truly memorializing the victims of the Holocaust; not to segregate them into groups and categories similar to the way the Nazis did, but to remember them as a group of individuals, brought together by common persecution and misery. Each of their lives were worth the same, and each one that was lost was a tragedy. To remember them as human beings rather than as Jews, Homosexuals, Poles, ‘Gypsies’, Asocials…etc. is the truest way to memorialize the loss of their lives. That has to be my greatest realization when looking back on my experience with the iWitness program. These were people, just like you and I, and they were murdered for senseless and hate filled reasons. We must always remember them as people first, because the sheer volume of people who were lost tends to weigh down the individual loss. Eleven million lives is simply too large a number to comprehend, so we must consider each person as their own entity and always remember.

1. Kattago, Siobhan *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity,* Westport CT.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001. 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)