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Immanuel College Parents Poland Trip 2010

By Sonya Daniels

Despite the fact that I do not have any Polish ancestry, as a Jewess I have felt for a long time a compelling need to visit Poland. Immanuel College provided this opportunity for me and off I went with my husband and a group of like minded parents. I wanted to learn to learn about the life in Poland in the last century and before, to learn how they lived, their culture and to envisage how they lived their lives living in the towns, villages and shtetls; to imagine them walking in these exact streets going about their business, learning in the yeshivot and interacting with their families and neighbours, feeling them alive and vibrant and so real.

I also went to see what happened, to see the places where mass annihilation took place; to walk in the forests of mass graves, into the camps of death and murder and to imagine the enormity of the tragedy for each individual person, for each family and finally for the Jewish people.

I came to say to these victims, those that starved, those that were humiliated, those that perished and those that were murdered and massacred and whose ashes lie in this land, that despite this all we the Jews are still here and that they are and will be remembered.

It was an emotional three days, full of pain, sorrow, hurt, sadness, anger, confusion, disbelief and despair but also a three days where we learnt that as a Jew we must now hold our heads with pride, to be proud of our heritage, proud to belong to a people, a family who respond to such a tragedy, not with violence, not with destruction and anger, but by building a new home, by building a new country by building a new life and creating a new family in which we have learnt to love and laugh again and to forgive but never, never to forget.

Thank you Immanuel College for this opportunity.

By Julia Alberga

I sit on the plane to Katowice, a place I have never heard of, a city in Poland where we start our ICPPT 2010. It is a journey I have always wanted to take but have never had the courage or drive to do.

A chance conversation with Louise Norton sparked a flame that gave us the will to join a group of Immanuel parents on a 3 day mission to learn about the history and tragedy of our ancestors.

I read through the pack that I am given by Rabbi Riffkin, and I am already filled with emotion and fear about what we are about to encounter.

I have seen Schindler's List, read Anne Frank's diary and I am now going to experience for myself what really went on in Poland during those dreadful years.

We meet Sara, our guide, and are escorted straight onto the coach for a 3-hour drive to an unknown destination. Sara gives us a brief history of Poland before the war and how life for Polish Jewry was relatively good for 1000 years.

All Jews had been religious and all had 'portable' trades such as tailors, shoemakers etc. The Jews lived comfortably in self sufficient shtetls with their own Mohel, Rabbi, Shochet, schools and yeshivot.

The Germans began their invasion into Europe with Poland as it had the largest Jewish population of three and a half million Jews.

It is a beautiful day as we are taken to a forest in Zebilitovska Goura. Rabbi Riffkin leads us to two partitioned areas. These are the mass graves of 8,000 Jews of Tarnow. On Sunday June 11th 1942, 8,000 of the 25,000 Jews of Tarnow were marched into the forest and shot for being Jewish. Their bodies fell into the mass graves in front of us. 850 of them were young children.

At the site of the graves 7 women from our group, emotionally attempt to read a letter from a mother to young Mirele whom she held before she had to give away one night, knowing she would never see her again. Rabbi Riffkin emotionally shared with us his feelings as we all, as parents, wept to think of the tragedy that befell these innocent Jewish children. We each lit a candle and placed stones around the sacred ground where the children were buried. There was silence on the coach as we made our way to the nearby city of Tarnow, where before the massacre, 45% of the 56,000 population had been Jewish. Today there are no Jews in Tarnow.

As the sun goes down, we daven Mincha at the remnants of the bimah of the Old Synagogue of Tarnow, which was destroyed on the 11th November 1939.

We journey back to Krakow and watch Schindler's List. We pause the film to stop at the site of Oskar Schindler's factory where so many Jews were saved from a journey to the death camps. We pass the huge walls to the Krakow ghetto which are shaped as tombstones, a reminder of the final plan for the Jews of Krakow.

We arrive back at the hotel hungry and shattered after a long and emotional day. We eat and are then privileged to hear from Paulina Kishlevska, awarded the honour of Righteous Gentile from Yad Vashem, for playing her part in saving up to 17 Krakow Jews from extermination. Her parents put their family's lives at risk to hide, feed and save Jewish children. They did it because they knew what was going on was wrong and inhumane. The family kept their story a secret for 45 years for fear of recrimination, until the Jews they had saved brought their story to Yad Vashem.

The evening drew to a close with each member of the group speaking openly and honestly about our own feelings and experiences of the day. Although we barely knew each other we had already shared this unique experience.

An early wake up call alerts us to the start of a long and gruelling day. After breakfast we start our journey to Auschwitz Birkenau.

We arrive at the same time as a group of 250 young adults from a high school in Tel Aviv, all wearing white and blue sweatshirts and waving Israeli flags. We stand alongside the train track that brought so many of our ancestors to the death camp. I watch the young Israeli girls taking photos of each other and imagine the girls, the same age, arriving to have their belongings taken away, their heads shaved and their clothing stripped from their bodies.

We hear how trains arrived at Auschwitz Birkenau, each cattle car crammed with up to 170 people. Trains arrived full but all left empty. When they arrived, some having travelled without food or water for days, they came out relieved to be in the fresh air. Only moments later they were separated into men and women, (boys over the age of 12 were sent with the men,) about to face the 'selection' process.

With a point of the finger, left or right, they were sent straight to the gas chambers or to work if they looked strong enough. 70% of those that arrived were sent immediately to their death.

The 30% that were sent to the labour camps had to be put in quarantine for a week to be rid of any lice or diseases they had picked up on the journey. From there they were sent to the 'Sauna,' where they were shaved and tattooed with their numbers. From then on they were referred to by their number, their individual identities having been taken away from them.

We enter the men's barracks. Each bunk is 3 beds high. It is so cold and we imagine men, 4 to a narrow bed, on damp straw in temperatures that could reach as low as -20 degrees celcius. Every morning there would be a roll call. Numbers had to be exact. If someone had died during the night, or had committed suicide, his body must be outside the barrack to be counted. There was no sanitation in the barracks. Some relieved themselves in their bunks; others desperately waited until they were allowed to use the toilets. The toilet barrack had no privacy, just rows of benches with holes.

Sara kept referring to Auschwitz as "another planet," a place that is so alien to us we will never be able to understand what went on there.

We hear from Rabbi Riffkin of a story about a boy and his father, who were saving bread prior to their journey on the death march. One day the boy finds the bread has gone. He runs to his father to tell him, when the father admits he sold it for a Haggadah that had been smuggled into the camp. At that point, the young boy was furious with his father; a few nights later it was Pesach, and the father read the story of the Exodus from Egypt to 400 prisoners as they crowded around him. The son understood the importance of what his father had done.

Sara tells us of the 400,000 Hungarian Jews that arrived in Auschwitz in 1944. 90% of them were taken directly to the gas chambers, the Jewish orchestra having to play Bach or Wagner to drown out their cries. The infamous Dr Mengele would stand at the selection looking for twins, pregnant women or dwarves to perform his tortuous experiments on.

We walk along as a group of Jewish parents, along the paths surrounded by barbed wire fences, and we start to imagine the fear that they must have felt as their children and spouses were separated from them. Yet we feel a sense of victory that we are here at Auschwitz as free Jewish people with the pride of our heritage and of our future generations since this tragic time.

We arrive at the remnants of the gas chambers and the crematoriums, both of which were destroyed by the Germans before the camp was liberated. We stand on the sacred ground and Rabbi Riffkin recites a memorial prayer and those who have lost a family member insert their names. As we leave Auschwitz Birkenau we again observe the young Israeli teenagers linked together in a circle, singing Israeli songs as they wave their flag with pride.

We arrive at Auschwitz 1, which is much smaller and at first seems more like a village as it had previously been Polish army barracks. We tour the museum where we face mass exhibits of hair shaved from women, piles of shoes, pots and pans, reading glasses, shaving brushes and Talittot. These everyday belongings had been brought by the Jews on what they thought was just a short trip away from their homes. As they got off the trains, their cases were removed from them and their belongings taken to 'Canada' barracks, where they were sorted. Everything was used for some purpose, the hair for textiles and furnishings, the Talittot for clothing for the prisoners.

On the walls we see many quotes...

"Jews are a race that must be totally extinguished." – Hans Frank 1944 – Governor General of Nazi occupied Poland.

We stop outside Block 10, the clinic of Dr Mengele where he performed horrific forms of medical experimentation particularly on women and children. We hear of Ruth Eliaz, who goes there to give birth. Her breasts are bandaged after the birth so that Mengele can observe how long her baby can live without food. She decides on advice from a Jewish nurse to kill her baby before she suffers anymore.

Before we leave, Rabbi Riffkin takes us to a dark room where by torchlight we read some testimonies and poems from survivors. We finish by singing Hatikva – The hope. It has been an emotional journey but we end our visit to Auschwitz filled with pride of our Jewish identity and the hope that it will never happen again.

We are taken on a tour of Kazimierz, an area in Krakow where so many of our ancestors had once come from. Although there are few Jews left, the city is alive with Hebrew writing, street names and Kosher style restaurants. We visit the beautiful Isaac Synagogue and daven with Rabbi Eliezer Gur Arieh from Chabad. The building echoes as we sing and dance to Am Yisroel Chai.

Back at the hotel after dinner, we again reflect on the day. We talk about the horrors that we have seen, but also about the uplifting feeling that we will go home as better Jews having seen and understood what our ancestors had to suffer for our religion.

Day 3 begins with a long bus journey to Warsaw. We watch a fascinating film about a mission in 2005 by the Israeli Air Force, to fly their planes over Auschwitz. From the film we learn that Britain and the USA knew about what was going on in Auschwitz as early as December 1942. We question, "Why did they not bomb Auschwitz?" Roosevelt knew that 2 million Jews had already been murdered with a plan to exterminate another 5 million. It seems the allies were too busy fighting the war to worry about the Jews. Was the real reason that no one was willing to take in all these displaced persons? No one wanted the Jews.

Jews who had managed to escape Auschwitz had delivered detailed plans of the camp to Roosevelt, but he still did not bomb the railway lines or the actual camp. Survivors tell how they saw American planes flying overhead imagining that American soldiers were coming to save them or bomb the camp, but they would watch above, in despair, as they would fly past and bomb just a few miles away. 2,800 times the British and the Americans dropped bombs on the surrounding areas but never on Auschwitz. Just one bomb landing on the gas chambers could have stopped the murder of 18,000 Jews a day.

Until the end of 1944, Auschwitz was still operating at full capacity.

In 2005 the Israeli Air Force flew their F15's over Auschwitz as 200 soldiers salute from the ground. The pilot said that they flew around Auschwitz leaving a signature in the sky signifying that this atrocity would never happen again.

We arrive in Kielce, at a memorial. We hear the story of 700 Jews, who after the war, chose to return home to Kielce after their horrific years in the Concentration Camps. They fear anti-Semitism and keep weapons in their homes. On July 2nd 1946, a Polish boy goes missing from his home. On his return 2 days later he tells his father that he had been kidnapped by the Jews. The Jews are required to hand in their weapons and a rampant pogrom begins. For 5 hours the Jews are attacked with nothing to defend themselves. 42 Jews are killed. Days later the boy admits that his story was a lie.

After the events at Kielce, Jews were no longer comfortable to stay in Poland and in the summer of 1946, 50,000 Jews left the country. This was a year after the war had ended.

During the years following the war, Jews were resettled in displaced persons camps. We hear of Nazis who ironically pretended to be Jews, and succeeded in hiding in these camps, to save their lives. Ben Gurion comes to visit the camps and sees people fighting to get on the boats to Israel. They learn Ivrit in preparation for their new lives.

We reach Warsaw and visit what remains of the ghetto wall. Sara paints a picture of life inside the ghetto. In November 1940 all 380,000 Jews in Warsaw had to enter the ghetto, together with an additional 120,000 from surrounding cities. Conditions in the ghetto were very poor with little medicine, food or sanitation. Disease was rife. In July 1942, 300,000 Jews were transferred from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka, where they were quickly exterminated. We visited the Umschlagplatz, the site of the station that took them to Treblinka.

As we walk around the city we see 18 stones commemorating 18 righteous individuals from within the ghetto.

We visit Mila 18 and hear of the heroism of the men and women who fought in the Warsaw uprising. These heroes knew they were not going to change the fate of the Jews but wanted to stand up to their aggressors and be proud of their identity. Most died but a few managed to escape through the sewers.

In 1948 Natan Rappaport was chosen to design a monument to those that perished in the Holocaust. On one side the monument depicts Jews being sent away to the Camps. A rabbi clutches a Sefer Torah as he looks up to G-d, women and children are surrounded by soldiers. Our group stands on the other side which shows a group of strong men and women prepared to fight back for what they believe in.

Our ICPPT group stand together, arm in arm and sing Hatikvah loud and with pride. We thank Sara Pellach for being such an inspirational guide and Rabbi Riffkin for his spiritual leadership and his warmth. We discuss how fortunate we are that our children have the benefit of his Jewish knowledge and guidance at Immanuel College.