



Immanuel College Poland Trip 2009 Diary

Day 1

Rabbi D Riffkin



The Group at Schindler's Factory

We have arrived safely in Poland and the students have settled into the hotel in Krakow after a very busy day. We have toured the old Jewish quarter of Krakow, visiting the Isaaca Synagogue and the Synagogue and Cemetery of the Rema, one of the most influential Rabbis within the Jewish history of Poland. Following this we were given an inspiring talk by Rabbi Lieberman at the grave of Sara Schneirer, the founder of the Beis Yaakov movement (the first Jewish learning institution for women). Finally, we heard from our tour guide, Sara Pellach, at Schindler's factory which was followed by a talk at Plaschow concentration camp. We concluded with a moving ceremony and Kaddish prayer next to the only remaining memorial.

We are waking up very early tomorrow for what promises to be an incredibly powerful and emotional day.

Shabbat Shalom.

Day 2

Jonny Black 12VSG

Friday was the most powerful day of my life. We arrived at Auschwitz and it was the most daunting sight. You see the train tracks leading into the world's largest death camp. Just staring at it sends shivers down your spine. The camp is so surreal, its size and structure is mind blowing.



At Auschwitz

The entire group was silent as we walked through the gates towards the barracks, where we would be praying. The first song we sang, Adon Olam, Master of the Universe, was particularly emotional. Seeing the group all stand united, as proud Jews, gave me the strength to continue singing and praying. Following a moving Tefillah, Sarah, our informative tour guide, began taking us through the camp, explaining how her mother spent two years in Auschwitz. I still cannot comprehend how anyone could have survived Auschwitz and listening to the stories of Sarah and Rabbi Lieberman really got me thinking. We then went to Auschwitz II, where Dr. Mengele carried out his unthinkable experiments. Walking through Auschwitz II, which is set out as a normal looking neighbourhood, nothing like Auschwitz Birkenau, made me wonder how such animals, like Mengele, could act in such an inhumane way. We concluded the visit with a well presented ceremony, paying our respects to the millions of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis. Concluding with the singing of the Hatikvah, made me realise that the IDF would guarantee that something like this would never happen again.

We then made our way back to the hotel for Shabbat. As our tour guide told us, the mood changed from 'hell on earth to the heaven of Shabbat.' We prayed together in the Isaaca Synagogue in Krakow, before making our way back to the hotel for an enjoyable dinner. At dinner we were able to express our pride in our religion through loud singing, bringing back Jewish life to Poland and proving that the Nazis failed to extinguish the Jewish way of life.

Shavua Tov.



Celebrating the end of Shabbat with a moving Havdalah Service.

Day 4

Emily Lewis 12LS, Jenny Goldberger 12MG and Daniel Turek 12JM

Today, like the others, was an emotional day. Wake up was 6am, typically before sunrise and we set off ready for a long coach journey. Our first stop was Ziblitovska Goura, where we viewed the mass graves of thousands of Jews, who were brutally murdered during the Holocaust. There were two memorials, the first being for the adults. We stood around a large pit, where the bodies of around 10,000 people were buried. It was extremely hard to comprehend the extent of how many Jews were inhumanely slaughtered. A sense of eeriness surrounded us as we gazed across the pit; only able to imagine the pain and suffering that they were forced to endure.

Next, we were taken to one of the most emotional sights that any of us had ever been to- a grave for 800 children murdered by the Nazis. As we stood, we were completely overwhelmed by our emotions and brought us to tears. The fact that many of us have younger siblings, made it far more painful and emotional, and it was heart braking to hear how parents were forced to abandon their children, or both face torture and murder by the Nazis. We were read a letter from a mother to a child, explaining the reasons why she had to give up her daughter in order for her child to have a chance of survival. It's beyond the scope of human nature to be able to understand how man could commit such a crime against humanity. It sickened us to discover how many of the Nazis would return to their children at the end of the day after slaughtering hundreds of other people's children. The contrast between the tranquillity of the woods and the destruction of the European Jewry emphasises the loss of lives which could have changed the world.

To conclude the day, we visited the graves of two extremely important and inspirational Rabbis. It was good to end the day on a better note, as we learnt that their teachings had been passed on to the present day and that they were fortunate enough to have been given the chance to fulfil their lives, unlike many of our ancestors who perished in the Holocaust.

Even though misery and destruction played a vital role in the course of our day, we realised that as undefeated Jews we have to fight for our future and make sure that our ancestors did not die in vain.

Today, after an early wake up, we left our hotel in Lublin and embarked on a day that would change us all. We experienced two conflicting emotions that would take us from one extreme to another on an emotional rollercoaster.

Day 5

Nathan Pomerance 12MG

The short journey to Majdanek, a death camp in the suburbs of Lublin, surprised us all. Having been to Auschwitz, we expected this death camp to be secluded and hidden from everyday life. However, whilst listening to our Ipods on the main street of Lublin, anticipating a long journey, Sarah announced over the microphone that to our left was the hell of Majdanek. Unlike Auschwitz, we could make out the borders of the camp and with the majority of the barracks remaining it was easier to envisage the horrors that occurred there.



The Valley of Death Memorial

We started our visit by a memorial, in the shape of a 6 branched menorah, representing the 6 million lives lost. In order to get into the camp we needed to walk through the memorial which consisted of 'the valley of death', a downward slope followed by a steep set of steps. My initial thought was that this represented how easy it was to end up in the valley of death and how difficult it would have been to survive it and escape with your life.

Sarah led us into the camp and we followed in the footsteps of our ancestors whom were brutally murdered by the Nazis. They were forced into one of two 'bath and disinfection barracks' where they would be told to undress, be shaved and then shower. The Nazis deceived their victims claiming that these were necessary precautions to avoid disease in the camp. It amazed me how disgustingly efficient the Nazis had prepared for the final solution. For example, the hot water in the showers was supplied by the heat of the crematoriums and its purpose was to ensure that their bodies were more susceptible to the gas that awaited them in the chambers directly next door. As we walked into the next room, stained blue as a result of the gas used, we sat on the floor and listened to the song 'Rachem', which asks G-d to have mercy on the Jewish people. Whilst trying to comprehend where we were sitting, I could not stop imaging what would have been happening in this very room only 67 years ago. The ability to get up, leave this room and breathe fresh air, reinforces the responsibility we all have in maintaining our Jewish identity and deny the Nazis a posthumous victory.

The next barrack we visited consisted of what seemed like millions of shoes. In our subgroups we discussed the idea that each shoe represents a **real** person, with hopes and dreams just like us. It was hard to understand how each of these shoes represented a Jewish life, so similar to ours.



Birkenau

We concluded our visit with a ceremony inside the crematorium and standing next to the ashes of the victims. It was extremely powerful and the group managed to sing together the Hatikvah and say the Kaddish prayer, whilst confronting their emotions from our experience in Majdanek.

Following lunch, we travelled to Ger - A town which was once filled with Chassidim who flocked to hear the wise advice of their Rebbe. On arrival we were greeted by the staff with food and music, which helped create a positive atmosphere celebrating our Jewish heritage. We brought the old Yeshiva of Ger back to life with Rabbi Lieberman leading a Tisch with inspiring stories from the past to inspire us in our future. It was good to conclude this difficult day with the opportunity to increase our morale, singing, dancing, learning and eating together as a group.



Dancing in Ger

We are looking forward to tomorrow, where we have an opportunity to teach Jewish children in a local primary school.
Good night and see you on Thursday.

Day 6

Lillie Miller 12LS, Ilana Green 12JM and Abigail Sofer 12LS

Today was a day where we celebrated life in Poland rather than focussing on the terrible tragedies that plague this place.



With pupils in the Jewish School in Warsaw

We started off by going to a Jewish school in Warsaw. We were split up into groups of seven and taught the children Chanuka songs and Chanuka activities. At first it was difficult to communicate with the students from Poland, however, after a while with a few hand actions, smiles and the odd Hebrew word we managed to create a relationship with the children. The school had a small intake and was made of mostly Jewish children. The head teacher explained to us about the founding principles of the school and how its mission is to revitalise Jewish life in Poland. We found it particularly interesting to find out that Holocaust studies begin in year 4, culminating with a visit to Auschwitz at age 16. It is scary to think how young children are when they learn about the horrible events that happened on their doorstep. We concluded our visit at the school, dancing and putting smiles onto the children with our Immanuel ruach.

We then went to the Warsaw cemetery, the largest Jewish cemetery in the world. It contains 250,000 graves, including righteous Gentiles and a mass grave of 7,000 people who were murdered at the start of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940.

We were privileged to hear 10 survivors of the Holocaust at a beautiful synagogue nearby. It felt moving to be in a standing, living synagogue in a country full of Jewish ruins. These survivors were all given to non- Jews during the war and only discovered their true identity as a Jew after the Holocaust. It was powerful to hear how some of them didn't even know their real names. Singing "Am Yisrael Chai" with these survivors seemed an apt way to conclude this powerful day.

Day 7

Elliot Werth 12VSG



Today we started off by visiting the remains of Treblinka. Before I visited Poland, my perception of the concentration camps was that they were all secluded and remote in the countryside, away from civilisation. However, when I saw Auschwitz and Plashov I realised this was not the case. Treblinka, on the other hand, revived this opinion, as it was secluded in a deep forest away from the rest of civilisation. Treblinka was a primitive camp, unlike Auschwitz Birkenau; for instance, it did not have a crematorium and therefore the bodies of the murdered Jews were just left in piles around the camp. I felt distressed to believe that I was walking on bodies that were just buried under sand. This was horrifying to me and I felt that I had to watch where I stood because it felt that I was walking on an uncovered mass grave. Treblinka began its operations in June 1942 and by the time of its dissolution in 1943, 800,000 Jews were murdered there. When I walked through the camp and saw that there were no remnants of any barracks or gas chambers, I felt that I did not actually gain an adequate understanding of what happened within the camp. All that remained of Treblinka was a railway platform that hundreds of thousands of people stood on to meet their deaths. I felt shocked that I was making a similar journey but, unlike the Jews who were transported there, I had the luxury of not fearing impending death. When I entered the camp, I noticed that there was nothing but memorials (in the form of individual rocks, all of different shapes and sizes, reflecting the individuality and size of these towns, villages and settlements) to the 170,000 villages and other settlements that were dissolved of Jewish life at this time. When I looked at the field of sharp-edged rocks I thought about the people whose lives were torn up by the Holocaust. When surveying these rocks, I realised how huge a figure 800,000 is. The number is too immense to comprehend even in the context of these 17,000 rocks.

At the camp we all individually placed a candle at a rock of our choosing to remember the dead. At this moment we walked on our own and said our personal prayers. When walking around I noticed our seclusion and was oppressed by the silence. I felt at this point our group was at its closest and during the Tekes, at which I spoke, I felt proudest that I have been on the Trip to be standing in a camp where 800,000 of my people had perished. I tried therefore to comprehend why I felt proud to be in a field of evil. None the less, I still felt pride in being a Jew and to be in a location where the Nazis tried to annihilate us. Despite their best efforts, I was still as a Jew able to stand there.

After leaving Treblinka and continuing our journey through Poland to Tycocin, a shtetl near the eastern Polish border, I saw how a Jewish settlement that was vibrant before the War had been destroyed. In Tycocin, the Jewish population prior to the War was 3,000, 50% of the population. The Jewish population started in 1522 and it was a spiritually rich community.

When standing in the Shul I was amazed at its beauty and uniqueness. As the Jewish community there was exterminated in 1941, the synagogue is now a museum. We traced the journey that the 3,000 Tycocin Jews were forced to make in 1941 into a forest where they were murdered; bringing to an end a community that had flourished for over 400 years. The fact that this community had such a precise terminal date was a hard fact to grasp. However, such a time span of 1522-1941 does not apply for all Jews, as the Jewish nation still lives on. And this perhaps sums up one of the main purposes of the Immanuel College Poland Trip: as a Jewish nation, we do not have an end date, and as such our strong and thriving community shall live on, despite the intentions of our enemies.