

Journey to Jewish Heritage Report

March 5 – 14, 2013

After a restful Shabbat in Prague and a briefing by the head of the local Jewish community we travelled to Terezin, the "model" concentration camp established by the Nazis to show the Red Cross and world how "humanely" the Jews imprisoned there were treated. As Elie Wiesel has pointed out, what the Red Cross failed to ask was why were Jews even sent and confined there? What "crime" had they committed? Seeing the stark barracks gave us a glimpse of the appalling conditions they had to endure and how they created art and put on plays and music as acts of defiance of the Nazi effort to humiliate and dehumanize them.

Prior to the war the Jewish population of Poland was an astounding 10%. In a number of large cities, such as Warsaw, it was 30% or higher.

Before leaving Poland for our final stop in Germany, we met an energetic young rabbi from the US, Tyson Herberger, who presented an overview of Jewish life in Poland today, and of the efforts to keep Judaism alive. A meeting at the office of a program that helps young non-Jewish Poles understand that their towns which are now Judenrein were once teeming with Jewish life gave us hope that the Jews taken away would not be forgotten.

One of the first places we saw in Berlin was at the powerful outdoor memorial to the Jews who perished in the Holocaust where you walk through roughly sculpted stones of varying heights in uniform rows. Each stone was different and unique, reminding us that each victim was an individual, trapped in the cruel regimented rigidity of the Nazi death machine.

While in Berlin we also visited the Jewish museum as well as the restored Central synagogue, a massive, beautiful grand structure destroyed during the war. Although it once had 3200 seats for worshipers, it now is a shell, a museum, a testament to a world destroyed. In fact, a painting of Moses Mendelsohn, the father of the Jewish Enlightenment showed him with his granddaughters, all of whom had crosses, for they had converted to Christianity.

Two individuals from the Foreign Ministry in Germany spoke to us at breakfast about their areas of expertise. One spoke about Jewish organizations and Jewish life in Germany, while the other who was responsible for Middle East affairs briefed us on Germany's policies towards Israel, Iran and its neighbors.

Our tour of Berlin included a visit to a neighborhood with innocuous signs that could easily be overlooked. They told the story in personal terms of the impact of the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws on the Jews who once were the primary residents of the area.

We went to Wansee, on a beautiful lake outside of Berlin, the site of the infamous conference coordinating the deportation and extermination of European Jewry by the heads of various bureaucratic departments, a chilling reminder of the detached way in which genocide of the Jewish people was planned and executed. We also stopped in nearby Potsdam, where Natan Scharansky was released, and I told the story of his courageous battle on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Our last stop was to the train station where German Jews were deported from Berlin and sent at first to ghettos and then directly to concentration camps. Our guide, Yael, a young energetic German Jew who is completing a Masters in Jewish studies explained the significance of the markings and the meaning of the numbers we saw on the railroad tracks.

Throughout our visit we shed tears, hugged and embraced.

But it is important to know we also laughed, drank vodka, and found moments of joy, hope and inspiration. We held memorial services at some of the sacred grounds where we stood and read poems by Herman Taube and other readings I prepared and brought with me to capture and express the power of what we were feeling. We return home with a new appreciation of our obligation to keep alive the memory of what happened, of those who died and of the world the Nazis attempted to obliterate, determined not to give Hitler a posthumous victory.

Trip Participants:

Annette & Frank Broner
Ron & Lori Bubes
Bruce & Lisa Cort
Norman & Susan Oblon
Cherry Goldblatt
Alison Greenhouse
Irv & Barbara Guterman
Henry Guterman
Jay & Robin Hammer
Jeffrey & Anna Norman
Natalie & Beth Spickler
Rabbi Stuart & Symcha Weinblatt

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