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## Introduction: Memory and Reflection

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## Introduction: Memory and Reflection

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**D**uring the spring semester of 2014, Old Dominion University offered a Study Abroad course called “Paris/Auschwitz” that I designed with funding from the Curt C. and Else Silberman Foundation and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Over spring break, I led a group of eighteen students to France and Poland to study sites of Holocaust memory along with faculty team member, Dr. Brett Bebber. Dr. Bebber and I are both professors in the Department of History. The Study Abroad course was part of my attempt to create more Holocaust courses at Old Dominion University for the History major and Jewish Studies minor as well as contribute to the University’s emphasis on innovative international programming through Study Abroad. In addition, we secured funding from the Tidewater Jewish Foundation to support one student scholarship for the class and trip, and honor student and college senior Emma Needham won the scholarship. We also embedded service learning and interfaith activities into the course with post-trip opportunities for reflective commentary at an event organized on campus and another one held at a local synagogue, Temple Israel in Norfolk. Students produced research papers as part of the course, and the finest two undergraduate papers are published here. This journal also includes student “Reflections” produced for the post-trip campus event held on April 9, 2014. The Study Abroad class included thirteen undergraduate and five graduate students, and while this is an undergraduate research journal, we are publishing the reflection pieces of the entire group.

“Paris/Auschwitz” explores the history of the French Holocaust or “Shoah” as it is known in France, the Hebrew word for catastrophe. Nearly 350,000 Jews lived in France in 1939 but the

Nazis deported 75,721 of them almost exclusively to Auschwitz, and they did so with the collaboration of the Vichy state, the French police force, the French national railroad, and many French citizens. Only 2564 deportees returned. After France was liberated in 1944, the national hero Charles de Gaulle crafted a national myth of France having been a nation of resisters during the war, and although that myth has long been dismissed, discussions of French collaboration with the Nazis during World War II are still difficult. French politicians and polemicists continue to argue that France sacrificed its foreign-born Jews in order to save its French-born Jews, a justification that sounds bizarre to most Americans. The persistence of this narrative is seen in right-wing journalist Eric Zemmour's 2014 international bestseller, *Le Suicide Français*, in which he maintains Vichy worked to save its Jews.<sup>1</sup> While French president Jacques Chirac formally apologized in 1995 for French complicity in the Shoah, Holocaust denial and antisemitism remain strong in France today.

The structure of the trip is to travel to France and explore the history of French pre-war and wartime Jewry before heading to Poland to confront Auschwitz and compare French and Polish memory of the Holocaust. In Paris we visited the *Pletzel* in the *Marais* district of the city that was historically the heart of Parisian Jewish life. We toured the largest and most spectacular synagogue in France, the Grande-Synagogue, the seat of the Grand Rabbi of France, as well as the Copernic Synagogue, the seat of the *Union Libérale Israélite de France* or what is known as Conservative Judaism in the United States. In these great houses of worship we also began our exploration of the Shoah since both of these synagogues were bombed by French antisemites just after Yom Kippur in 1941 and both were sites of round-ups leading to deportations during the war. We explored Drancy, the deportation camp, often called the “antechamber to Auschwitz” that sits on

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Zemmour, *Le Suicide Français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014).

the outskirts of Paris in a poor immigrant neighborhood that is extremely difficult, even somewhat dangerous, to visit. A modern research center opened there in 2012, but on most days it is largely empty, its funding having been compromised by the Bernie Madoff investment scandal. We toured the Mémorial de la Shoah, the national Holocaust museum in France with its exquisitely haunting “Wall of Names,” listing the names of all Jews deported from France. On the wall we searched for the name “Hélène Berr,” the young college student from a prominent Jewish family whose journal we read as a class. Hélène had opted to stay in France to find hiding places for Jewish children, but she was caught and deported to Auschwitz on her twenty-fourth birthday. She died at Bergen-Belsen just five days before the camp was liberated. As a class we had grown close to Hélène through the words in her journal. Beneath her name on the Wall, we lit a candle in her honor. In Paris, we also meet Holocaust survivors including M. Alain Bernstein who was hidden as a baby during the war with a Christian family in the Loire Valley and M. Raphaël Esrail, who at 92 is President of the “Union of Auschwitz Deportees.” Our visit with M. Esrail also included Auschwitz survivors M. Jacques Altmann and Mme. Ester Sénot.

After Paris we flew to Kraków where we studied the history of the Holocaust in Poland and juxtaposed the French and Polish Jewish experiences and the ways the Holocaust is remembered in these two countries. We attended a class at the “Center for the Study of the History and Culture of Krakow’s Jews” at Jagiellonian University and heard a lecture by Professor Edyta Gawron. We spent a whole day at Auschwitz/Birkenau, the largest extermination camp built by the Nazis during World War II where around 1.1 million Jews died, and we spent much of another day on the site of the Płaszów Concentration Camp made famous in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* as the place where the sadistic commandant, Amon Göth and members of his command shot over 9000 Jews. Thousands more died there of disease, starvation, and other forms of abuse. We

stood in front of Göth's villa, a public eyesore known as the "Red House," its dilapidated facade and "For Sale" sign evoking a sinister feel and a sense of the crimes committed there. In Kraków we toured the Oskar Schindler Enamel Goods Factory, explored synagogues and cemeteries, and examined fragments of the Podgórze ghetto wall. Following the route of the victims, we stood in Bohaterów Getta Square, site of the May 30, 1942 roundup that sent 4000 Jews from Kraków to the Belzec death camp. Seventy empty chairs stand in the square representing the 70,000 Jews who lived in Kraków before World War II. These sites and people are referenced here because they figure either in the student reflection pieces or in the photographs that follow.

Sites of Holocaust crimes and Holocaust commemoration raise complex and conflicting questions within any serious student who undertakes a journey to these places of death. The journey itself engulfs the traveller in the trauma of the Holocaust, and students must grapple with their own feelings and emotions even while negotiating appropriate responses by the group. Tears, anger, pain, fear, grief, and guilt, are only a few of the reactions a visitor to Auschwitz might have. We discussed in our pre-trip meetings, for example, that we would not take group shots at Auschwitz, the backdrop deemed inappropriate for a typical Study Abroad class photograph. Once at Birkenau, nonetheless, with reverence and respect we spontaneously joined Emma Needham as she recited the mourner's kaddish prayer near the ruins of Crematorium II.

"Dark Tourism" and the more complex, "thanatotourism" are terms often used when discussing the phenomenon of travelling to places of great trauma be they battlefields, crime scenes, cemeteries, or in this instance, Holocaust sites. Dark Tourism is both a field of scholarly inquiry and a subset of the tourism industry marketed to travellers as heritage, commemoration or even pilgrimage tours.<sup>2</sup> Thanatotourists, however, often seek out the macabre as a form of

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<sup>2</sup> For a few sources on Dark Tourism see: Malcolm Foley and John Lennon, "JFK and Dark Tourism: Heart of Darkness," *Journal of International Heritage Studies* 2, no. 4 (1996), 198-211. This article is generally considered to be the first to discuss

pleasure, and while at the ramp at Birkenau, the train platform where selections were made that sent victims to their deaths, our class saw a young man dressed in a doctor's lab coat clearly pretending to be Dr. Josef Mengel, the "doctor of death," notorious for his selections of twins for his horrific medical experiments. Our group constantly had to negotiate between the horror of the past, the subject of our study, and the reality of what is remembered from the safe distance of over seventy years. This made the collective assimilation of Holocaust history even more disturbing than we might have been able to imagine in our pre-trip meetings.

The edition of this journal is entitled "Memory and Reflection," and the memory of the Holocaust was certainly one aspect of the trip that students found especially thought-provoking. Sites associated with the Shoah have not been great draws for commemoration or dark tourism in France, and most of these sites are really quite inaccessible. The *Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation*, for example, sits just behind the Cathedral of Notre Dame, the latter being one of the most frequented tourist destinations in the world. The Mémorial is positioned underground, however, in a crypt-like building located on the site of a former morgue, and if one is not looking for it, the monument disappears into the broader riverscape along the Seine. Indeed, I crossed the street that runs between Notre Dame and the Mémorial on my numerous trips to France during my lifetime without ever having seen it at all. It was only preparation for this Study Abroad that brought it to my attention. Once inside the Mémorial, moreover, one finds that it commemorates all wartime deportees, not specifically victims of the Shoah. Opened in 1962, it includes a tunnel lit by 200,000 tiny electric bulbs representing the number of persons deported from France and

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the idea of "dark tourism." See as well, Chris Keil, "Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead," *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 4 (August 2005): 479-94; Philip Stone and Richard Sharpley, "Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective," *Annals of Tourism Research* 35, no. 2 (April 2008): 574-95; Derek Dalton, "Encountering Auschwitz: A Personal Ruminations on the Possibilities and Limitations of Witnessing/Remembering Trauma in Memorial Space," *Law Text Culture* 13, no. 1 (2009): 187-225; Tim Cole, "Crematoria, Barracks, Gateway: Survivors' Return Visits to the Memory Landscapes of Auschwitz," *History & Memory* 25, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 102-31.

reminiscent of Jewish memorial plaques often found in synagogues for visitors who make that connection. But not all the bulbs are working, and the presentation of much of the Mémorial seems antiquated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a structure in need of serious renovation.<sup>3</sup> The students realized that the memorial had been hidden in plain site, obscuring a national narrative that certainly in 1962 was engulfed in denial.

Our group was even more perplexed by commemorative sites association with the Vel d'Hiv roundup, a particularly notorious event in the French Shoah when on July 16-17, 1942 4500 French policemen rounded up roughly 13,000 foreign Jews, detaining most of them for five days in a bicycle stadium known as the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* without food, water, or sanitation before deporting them to French internment camps en route to Auschwitz. The Vel d'Hiv was torn down long ago, and ironically the building that houses the French Ministry of the Interior was erected in its place. The site of the roundup is marked off by a short wire fence that butts up against the Ministry's exterior wall denoting the place where the entrance to the stadium was located. A plaque installed in 2009 on a low wall facing the street details what happened there, but the day we visited the site, dead flowers on a broken plastic ring left from an event held the previous July made the place seem that much more obscure, insignificance visible in the broken flower ring no city official had thought to remove. The site is most unimpressive, even ugly. Not far away in a small park adjacent to the Quai de Grenelle stands a more formal monument inaugurated in 1994 commemorating the Vel d'Hiv roundup. Located in close proximity to the Eiffel Tower, it is nevertheless isolated and rarely visited, an empty juxtaposition to the tourist-packed Champs de Mars a few blocks away.<sup>4</sup> A tree-lined garden shields the Vel d'Hiv sculpture from view making it a dangerous place at night, the haunt of thieves and prostitutes. The topography of these and

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<sup>3</sup> The Mémorial recently did in fact close for renovation after our visit and will remain closed throughout much of 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The Eiffel Tower stands on the Champs de Mars, a large park and open public space.

other French Holocaust sites reveal a France still struggling in 2014 to come to terms with its past. The monuments and plaques serve more significantly as symbols of forbidden memory, political nods to what happened tucked away in the shadows of the City of Light.

The contrast between Dark Tourism in Paris and Kraków is profound. Kraków thrives on the tourism industry associated with Auschwitz-Birkenau that is located about an hour away. Posters advertising group tours to Auschwitz are visible throughout the city, and buses leave every morning from the various hotels to shuttle school children and tour groups to the infamous factory of death. Once there, a parking lot filled with buses await the return of the thantotourists. Our driver passed his time on our visit rifling through our backpacks that he had insisted we leave on the bus for safekeeping, making a good lunch off of our many snacks. Once inside the premises we entered a building to get our tickets and headphones, a building where one could further purchase soft drinks, candy bars, and guidebooks. Research revealed this building had been the original selection station at the work camp of Auschwitz before the ramp was built at the extermination camp at Birkenau, three kilometers away. It was hard for us to inculcate the significance of being able to buy a Mars bar on the very spot where Nazi officers tortured and traumatized Jews and other prisoners before sending them on a death march to Birkenau.

Throughout the trip students received mixed messages about Holocaust memory. On the one hand we were on a solemn journey and following a course curriculum meant to teach Holocaust history and offer insight into the genocides of yesterday and today. On the other hand we accompanied an Auschwitz tour guide who gave his speeches with such theatrical and well-rehearsed delivery that one could not help but realize that we were spectators in an open-air drama carefully marketed and staged for public consumption. Hans Kellner has defined such representation as “the desire to repeat the Holocaust in a suitably altered form to meet complex,



often contradictory sets of present needs.”<sup>5</sup> The complexities and mixed-messages about Holocaust memory were everywhere. On the streets of Kraków, antisemitic graffiti is clearly visible, especially in the former Jewish Quarter of the city, Kazimierz. We were constantly told, however, that these scrawls were not racist sneers but rather the taunts of rival soccer teams. Images shocking and visible to Americans, therefore, were routine and unremarkable to the Poles. For the students, realizing this disconnect between the graffiti and its meanings was disturbing enough on its own.

For me the complexities of Holocaust memory were most visible and moving at the site of the Płaszów concentration camp. Płaszów is located about ten kilometers outside Kraków on the site of two desecrated Jewish cemeteries and adjacent to the city’s stone quarries. Between 1942 and 1945 it was a forced-labor camp and then a concentration camp. Bleak and barren, it feels like a death-scape standing outside time. It reminded me of the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann’s emphasis on the “presence of absence.”<sup>6</sup> In theory the bodies of Płaszów victims were exhumed and burned in 1945 as the Germans prepared to flee the Russian advance. Even so, there are still strange mounds and sunken pits marking the landscape where one feels bodies still lie. We also know it is here that the ashes of victims were strewn. Płaszów is a huge cemetery with no map; isolated, abandoned and even after *Schindler’s List* largely forgotten. Yet the presence of absence is profound.<sup>7</sup> The students were overwhelming quiet as we wandered the empty grounds encircled by the stillness of this geography of oblivion. We all had lumps in our throats. There are only

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Kellner “Never Again,” *History and Theory* 33, no. 2 (May, 1994), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, “Preface to Shoah,” in *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985, iii-vi. Lanzmann was fond of quoting Emil Fackenheim who appears to have first used the phrase “presence of absence.” Raye Farr, “Some reflections of Claude Lanzmann’s Approach to the Examination of the Holocaust,” in Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (ed.), *Holocaust and Memory in representations on film and television since 1933*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 164.

<sup>7</sup> For more on geographies of the Holocaust see, Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, ed. *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014).

three monuments at Płaszów, two small ones erected fairly recently to honor Jewish victims and one massive Soviet-style granite tribute created by Witold Cęckiewicz and unveiled in 1964. Cęckiewicz's sculpture features five giant figures with bowed heads and is called the "Monument of the Torn-Out-Hearts" because one can see through the figures at a point on their chests. It commemorates the five nations of people killed at Płaszów, and an inscription on the back reads: "To the memory of the martyrs murdered by the Nazi perpetrators." Here once again, we have the presence of absence. On this monument all victims are conflated, no acknowledgement of collaboration is given, no mention of Jews is made.<sup>8</sup> The monument sits atop a site where a large burial pit was located and serves as a giant tombstone, one massive marker for thousands and thousands of unmarked graves. Silence abounds.

When I looked over my pictures of Płaszów on our return, I realized that off in the distance from the monument my camera had captured a huge "Castorama" sign, the European equivalent of Home Depot. That huge blue and yellow logo represented to me a kind of callousness towards the horror of the Holocaust that we felt elsewhere in Kraków. There in the shadow of these killing fields people now buy refrigerators and lawnmowers. I felt that haunting sense of absence again as I examined the picture. Płaszów certainly feels like a place that is nearly forgotten. We were told the city of Kraków wants to do more with it but lacks the funds. Should funds be secured, what would Płaszów become, another site of sacred commemoration and pilgrimage or a commodity for tourist consumption? From what we learned at Auschwitz, undoubtedly it would be both.

History is more than a written record; it is impressed onto landscapes as well. I took my Study Abroad students to France and Poland to grapple with the meaning of Holocaust memory in

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<sup>8</sup> The conflation of victims of Nazi aggression on post-war monuments erected before the 1980s or later is quite common, even typical.

our world today and how it has been commemorated, to contemplate the crimes of the past still marked on these topographies of terror and to acquire a spatial sense of what happened in history by way of encountering these geographies of the genocide. I also wanted them to be able to articulate what they saw and heard. *Old Dominion University Undergraduate Research Journal* offers the opportunity for my students to share their reflections of their Study Abroad trip. What follows includes a section on “Commemoration and Memory” featuring the research papers of two students, Emma Needham and Nichole Delasalas. Next there is a photo essay by Tonya Schmehl and Sherry Dixon. Individual student reflection pieces follow and are grouped into four sections: “Remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau,” featuring Luran Henderson, Rachel Anderson, Nichole Delasalas, and Ciara Clark; “Sites and Memory,” featuring Sherry Dixon, Tonya Schmehl, Stephanie Hawthorne, Emma Needham, and Chelsea Patten; “Dark Tourism,” featuring Jackson Blaschum, Andrea Schlabach, and Suzan Czoschke; and “Reflective Insight,” featuring Raven Bland, Thomas Tucker, Julius Lacano, Stephanie Walters, Robert “Bobby” Melatti, and Ross Patterson. These reflections are followed by a conclusion by Faculty Team Trip Leader Dr. Brett Bebbler. Author bios are also included. A final piece by Study Abroad Director Steve Bell brings this edition to a close.