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Sites of Memory: "Hopefulness"

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Stephanie Hawthorne

Hopefulness

I have had the opportunity to participate in this study abroad class twice, once as an undergrad and again this year as a graduate. As a rather sensitive and empathetic person, prior to the trip last year, I was afraid that I would be too emotional to appreciate the intellectual aspects of my experience, and I was also afraid that I might have strangely been de-sensitized as a result of the many classes I have taken at ODU in studying the Holocaust. As it turned out, I was often moved to tears on that first trip and even overwhelmed could contextualize my prior learning with what I was seeing in front of me. I gained a new perspective of the world and an appreciation for my studies beyond anything I knew before, but although I felt it was the opportunity of a lifetime, I told myself I would never return. The reason for my inability to foresee a future visit was a result of a sudden emotional reaction to a Shabbat service that the class was invited to in France following our trip to Poland. On this last night abroad all that I had studied and all that I had experienced over the course of the trip was realized with despair while I simultaneously observed the warmth and love of the Jewish community as they came together to celebrate. As the bar-mitzvah boy, who was the focus of the celebration, and the Rabbi turned away from the congregation in prayer, I realized they were wearing traditional and splendidly radiant Jewish prayer shawls. The same prayer shawls that I had seen examples of the previous day on display in Auschwitz. I was incredibly overwhelmed emotionally and intellectually just from the sight of the shawls. They had real power over me, but I returned home unable to articulate this experience or the context of the trip to others only that I realized the prayer shawls in that display case at Auschwitz as reminders of Jewish destruction that the Nazis and their collaborations enacted during the Holocaust but also in the Shabbat service as beautiful emblems of Jewish survival and the endurance of Judaism as well. The juxtaposition of these mixed messages left me confused and full of despair. I felt a profound sadness that haunted me for months after the trip. I continued to rely on my studies as a means of dealing with my thoughts and emotions.

The next fall I started at ODU as a graduate student. Early in my first semester I felt compelled to again travel abroad and thought about how it might be good for me to embark again on this challenging program. The fears I had this time were that not only would I further my still festering despair from the previous year, but that I would further distance myself from those around me in an inability to communicate my thoughts and feelings. The trip this year offered even more

experiences, more places to visit and people to meet. I realized how different it was compared to last year. I think what ultimately provided a new experience was that almost everywhere we went and almost everyone we spoke to emphasized not only understanding the tragedy of this history, but also in appreciating life and culture and the resilience of the Jewish experience and religion.

What was most meaningful for me was the appreciation of the lives of those who survived, those who were lost, and those who were resisters as it helped me to put into perspective the overwhelming emotional reaction from last year that I had been unable to understand. The Holocaust survivors that we met empowered us as students and charged us with the task of communicating this history to future generations. They emphasized that they continued to live, that they had children and grandchildren. I could now look at the prayer shawls at Auschwitz and focus on Jewish survival. On this year's trip, there was a new exhibit from the State of Israel at Auschwitz that began with a powerful film. This film was about the interwar years and the lives of Jews who lived throughout the various European countries. In the footage and the song that played, viewers were witnesses to their joys and happiness in life. They were dancing, singing, playing, praying, and celebrating. While this simultaneously devastated me as it brought the reality of the inanimate objects and stories to life, it ultimately helped me to understand that it is important to honor the lives of victims and survivors in articulating their stories. Remembrance and awareness, as well as, hope and appreciation, as opposed to despair, are what I came away with this year.