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Sites of Memory: Some Seen, Some Forgotten

When I first decided that I wanted to take part in a study abroad trip I figured that I would travel to another country, explore a new culture, eat some good food and maybe practice some new language skills. I had no idea that I would end up on a trip to France and Poland to study the Holocaust. I have been on many trips in my life, however the depth and emotional experience during this study abroad class surpasses pretty much every other trip. Admittedly during the trip I was not able to show much emotion, that's just the way I am; however, that did not change the fact that I did absorb the academic side of the course and learned a great deal. There were many things during the trip that stuck out to me, but I will only speak about one.

I, like all of my classmates, have been educated about the Holocaust in America from an American point of view, so for me experiencing the way the Holocaust was represented and taught in France and Poland was interesting and shocking. The first day we arrived in France, Dr. Finley took us to a memorial located behind the Cathedral of Notre Dame. This memorial was for those who were deported from France during World War II. The first thing I noticed about this memorial is that it is hard to find, as if it was purposely hidden. One must climb down stairs into the ground to view the memorial. I find that this reflects the fact that the French for many years denied their role in the deportation and murder of the Jews during WWII. It was also interesting that this site is located very close to Notre Dame, which is a huge tourist attraction yet the memorial hardly had any visitors while there were throngs of tourists a few steps away at the cathedral. Throughout the trip we encountered more somewhat hidden memorials in France as well as signs that had incorrect information that the French seemed to not feel the need to correct. Whatever the reason for the incorrect information it nonetheless bothered me.

In Poland we encountered a different attitude. The Polish do not attempt to hide the atrocities that went on during the war. Indeed, in a certain sense, their tourism industry is centered on Holocaust remembrance. Even so, the Poles tend to emphasize the loss of Polish life over the loss of Jewish life during the Holocaust. Of course there are few Jewish voices in Poland today to counterbalance Polish egocentrism. This constant focus on Polish suffering led to a

division in victims that I had never really thought of until this trip. However, in my opinion it is important to not create arbitrary hierarchies in victims; those who died, died and it was a horrible atrocity. The main point that I took away from this entire trip is that one type of life is not more valuable than the other and the Final Solution targeted Jews, Roma, Sinti, Jehovah Witnesses, homosexuals as well as Polish and Soviet political prisoners and anyone else who opposed the Nazi regime. When one starts to qualify the value of individual groups lost it becomes easy to fall into the very thought that people are different which is what lead to the holocaust in the first place. For me the lasting impression of this trip is that it doesn't matter which lens one looked through, the fact is that millions and millions of people died because people divided each other up into groups and made decisions based on who was perceived as more and less valuable or in the case of the Jews, not valuable at all, a very dangerous mentality. This trip has taught me to be more vigilant the dangers of racism in current situations, and that is something I will never forget.