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## Conclusion: Memory and the Study Abroad Community

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Brett Bebber

## Conclusion: Memory and the Study Abroad Community

One of the things I was most struck by on this trip was how well the group came together as a small community. We talked before the trip about the importance of offering a helpful hand, respecting that each of us came from different backgrounds, and recognizing that we were making the journey for different reasons. Dr. Finley-Croswhite and I hoped that the students would consider themselves a community in which each offered unique perspectives and talents. A Study Abroad course is obviously much different from a regular class conducted on campus. Rather than mostly offering their intellectual acumen, students also have the chance to bring other aspects of themselves to bear on the shared experience: their humor when travel plans go awry, their unselfishness when others need direction or help, their sympathy when the experiences of learning about the Holocaust become overwhelming. Students have the opportunity to reveal themselves not just as thoughtful learners but citizens and people as well.

It is deeply rewarding to see students from many different backgrounds help each other learn about a topic related to questions of cultural and religious sensitivity, and social justice. For me, it was just simply fun to watch one of our students who is a member of the Virginia Beach School Board chat about history and memory with young and ambitious graduate students ready to start their careers; to observe a young engaged couple share dinner and conversations about mass violence with a retiree from the Navy; to encourage young students from all walks of life to empathize with the experiences of our Jewish student confronting the historical trauma of the Holocaust on-site for the first time. Our hope as teachers, of course, was to encourage these connections, although our direction was not the only reason they were achieved. Our students often reached out to others and created this inclusivity on their own. In fact, we were so focused on getting our students to think about cultural sensitivities and Jewish life, and making sure they had a profoundly transformative encounter abroad, that I was surprised when our trip made an impact on others.

Alain Bernstein, a Frenchman whose mother hid him as a baby in the French town of Blois shortly after the Germans invaded in 1940, spoke to us on our first night in Paris. We met in the basement of our hotel in a stuffy room with no windows, and most of our students had not slept much in the previous thirty-six hours. We were, I'm a bit ashamed to admit, tired, dreary-eyed, and looked a motley crew when we met with this Holocaust survivor.

Nonetheless, Mr. Bernstein told us his story, shared some family photographs, and was extremely kind with his time and expertise on the French Holocaust. He had taken the train all the way from Tours, about two hours away from Paris, just to meet with us. He patiently answered questions and told us about the organizations he participated in which look to raise Holocaust awareness in France and throughout Europe. At several points throughout the evening, Mr. Bernstein seemed absolutely moved when we showed interest in the French experience of the Holocaust. He nearly wept on several occasions, noting how unique it was for students to travel across the globe to learn about an event he could not get enough of his own countrymen and women to recognize. Mr. Bernstein, I understand, is not in good health as is true of most Holocaust survivors because of their advanced age. Our students were fortunate to meet him and learn about his mother's desperate search to find a place to hide him in 1940, and the simple farmer's wife, his "Maman Charlotte" who took him in and loved him not only for the duration of the war but throughout his life. Even after the war, we learned, he and his mother stayed in close contact with the family who saved him.

Our time with Mr. Bernstein will stick with me, like the little community our course created; it was compelling evidence of the unique opportunities Study Abroad trips provide and a special moment of this particular course, "Paris/Auschwitz," and the occasions offered to our students to interact with Holocaust survivors. In the years to come as Holocaust survivors pass away, I'm sure that our students will look back on the time spent with Mr. Bernstein and realize how fortunate they were to have met with him and listened to his story.