The History, Memory, and Representation of the Holocaust: Reflections on a Yearlong Freshman Seminar and Study Trip

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A year-long intensive experience for WU first-year students consisting of two seminars and a study trip, the FOCUS program engaged intensively with the history and memory of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews and other groups between 1933 and 1945 and with representations of the Holocaust in literature and film. Students gained a more thorough understanding of better-known histories and narratives of the Holocaust, but they also explored aspects that are underrepresented in contemporary American culture or that have otherwise been marginalized. Classroom engagements were supplemented by a visit to the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center, during which students met with a local survivor of the Holocaust to hear her personal perspective on wartime experiences and postwar rebuilding. The program culminated in a 12-day trip to Holocaust-related sites and memorials in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania.
Overview of Courses

Semester 1: The Holocaust: A European Experience
with Professor Anika Walke

Professor Walke introduced us to issues central to the Nazi occupation and extermination regimes. Course materials made use of recent advances in scholarship to study the role of racist ideology as well as economic and political considerations for the dynamics of persecution. New ways to understand and represent the mass murder, for instance, through oral history or geo-visual tools, were employed during the course. We looked at survival strategies in Western Europe, including emigration, resistance movements in Eastern European ghettos, local residents’ reactions to the murder in their midst, and non-European governments’ reactions. The course ended with an analysis of survivors’ efforts to rebuild their lives after the war and of distinct patterns of cultural memory in different parts of Europe and the world. We used primary source material, oral histories, films, news media, and scholarly analysis, and explored diverse experiences and memories of the Holocaust. Course material highlighted the role of gender and ethnicity as well as ideological paradigms for the construction of memory.

Semester 2: Representations of the Holocaust in Literature and Film
with Professor Erin McGlothlin

As the Holocaust recedes into the historical past, our knowledge of the event becomes increasingly dominated by literary and cinematic representations of it. Professor McGlothlin focused on such depictions of the Holocaust in literature and film and raised a number of provocative questions: Can one effectively depict the event in realistic terms, or do unrealistic representations work better? What happens to the history of the Holocaust when it becomes the subject of a fictional text? Who is authorized to speak for the victims? Are representations of perpetrators appropriate? Which experiences of the Holocaust are most often represented in the contemporary public imagination, and which are ignored or repressed? Can one speak of a “master narrative” of the Holocaust? In our examination of literary texts from a range of genres—including survivor memoirs, wartime accounts, journalistic explorations, fictional narratives, a graphic novel—and documentary and feature film, we analyzed in particular three related elements: narrative framing, perspective, and rhetoric.

Some topics of student papers from both courses

- How the Technology of Trains Shaped the Holocaust
- Antisemitism Through Pre-War and Post-War Emigration
- Resistance in Western & Eastern Europe
- The Role of Circumstance and Technological Advancement in the Holocaust
- Refuge and Resettlement: The Driving Forces of Nazi Germany
- An Extensive Search for Recognition of Various Holocaust Victims
- Jewish Resistance Against the Holocaust: An Analysis of Goals in Different Movements
- Undermining the Nazi Regime: Resistance Efforts in World War II Europe
- The Role of Sexuality and Gender in Holocaust Persecution and Memory
- Homosexual Prejudice and Sexism in Nazi Germany
- Memory Over Time: An Analysis of Narrative Differences Between Two Testimonies
- Poetry After Auschwitz: A Human Response to Atrocity
- Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust in Primo Levi and Ruth Klüger
- The Ambiguity of Hope’s Effectiveness as a Coping Mechanism
- Scenes of Deportation to and Arrival at Concentration Camps Through Fictional and Autobiographical Lenses
- Tense Ties: The Relationship Between Holocaust Survivors and Their Children
- Creatively Coping: How Holocaust Survivors Cope Through Their Writing
- Memory vs. Knowledge: Tensions of a Traumatic Narrative Frame
- Ethical Dilemmas in Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah
- The Archive in Yael Hersonski’s A Film Unfinished and Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah

Hedy Epstein (née Wachenheimer; August 15, 1924 – May 26, 2016) was born in Freiburg, Germany to a Jewish family. She escaped Nazi Germany with a Kindertransport in 1939. After the war, she immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in St. Louis, Missouri, where she regularly spoke about the Holocaust and became a human rights activist. The students were fortunate to meet Hedy and hear her personal story in February 2016 during their visit at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center.

Image credit: Andreas Thum (2010); source: Wikipedia.
KZ Sachsenhausen, built as a “model camp” and the site of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate, was for many of us our first exposure to a concentration camp. We took the S-Bahn train with our tour guide, WU Ph.D. graduate Russell Alt, from Berlin to the town of Oranienburg and then walked a kilometer to the camp. The entrance displays the same motto as the gate at KL Auschwitz.

Upon entering the main camp, we noticed its large, semi-circular design, which reflected the Nazis’ sinister intentions. We heard disturbing descriptions of the torture of political opponents, Jews, homosexual men, and Red Army soldiers.

We began our trip with a visit to the location of the Wannsee Conference, where high-ranking Nazi officials met in 1942 to formalize their plans for the “Final Solution.” We were able to view documentation of the conference, including memos that discussed the mass murder of European Jewry as if it were a normal business practice.

We toured the grounds and museum and learned about the roles different police institutions played under the Nazi regime. The museum focuses on Nazi propaganda and perpetrator biographies and displays, for instance, a TIME magazine cover depicting Reinhard Heydrich, one of the main architects of the “Final Solution.”

This exhibit stands on the site of the former headquarters of the SS, the Gestapo, and the Reich Security Main Office. We toured the grounds and museum and learned about the roles different police institutions played under the Nazi regime. The museum focuses on Nazi propaganda and perpetrator biographies and displays, for instance, a TIME magazine cover depicting Reinhard Heydrich, one of the main architects of the “Final Solution.”

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Holocaust Memorials in Berlin

Our tour of the Holocaust memorials in Berlin included the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism, the Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism, and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, shown in order above. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews evokes a disquieting sense of disorientation and unsettlement. The Memorial to Homosexuals is easily overlooked but no less powerful. Finally, the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, consisting of a reflecting pool, honors a group of victims that is often marginalized in contemporary memorial culture of the Holocaust.

The exhibits and interactive activities helped us learn about the long and complex history of Jewish life in Germany. One exhibit that profoundly moved us was Menashe Kadishman’s “Fallen Leaves,” an installation consisting of 10,000 metal faces twisted in agony. As we walked across the metal, we produced an unsettling noise resembling screams.

Stumbling Stones

Stumbling Stones, brass-plated cobblestones sunk into the sidewalk or street in front of the last residence of individuals deported during the Holocaust, are found throughout Berlin. One student located the Stumbling Stone commemorating her great-grandfather, Leo Adler.

The stone was a constant reminder of what was...we will never forget.

-- Rachel Berger, student and great-granddaughter of Leo Adler
Auschwitz & Auschwitz-Birkenau

Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau are located close to Oświęcim, a beautiful town in the middle of Poland. We were struck by the sheer number of people touring the main Auschwitz camp. Its popularity left many of us uneasy, as this place of mass suffering and death is now a tourist destination. We noticed that far fewer people visited the much larger Birkenau death camp.

Some of the most troubling elements of the exhibition at Auschwitz I were the items left behind by the millions who were murdered. The mounds of documents, shoes, glasses, and suitcases are a solemn reminder of the genocide.

Kraków

In Kraków we were struck by the rich history and architecture of the Jewish quarter. We visited an old synagogue and were amazed by the interior details that had been preserved. We also stood in the ghetto square from which Jews were deported. Now, the square contains an installation featuring a number of empty chairs that symbolize the people who were rounded up and eventually killed during the Holocaust.

Warsaw

Our Warsaw visit included a search for traces of the Holocaust with our guide, Beata Chomątowska, from the Stacja Muranow culture project. The ruins of the destroyed ghetto are buried under the foundations of postwar housing projects, leaving few sites to memorialize. We visited the Umschlagplatz, the main deportation site for transports to Treblinka, as well as the Anielewicz Mound, the site of a bunker in which leaders of the Ghetto Uprising hid and perished. These places could easily be passed by without pedestrians realizing their significance. We enjoyed the interactive nature of POLIN, the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Treblinka

Our visit to Treblinka left a strong impression on us. Even though the site contains no visible traces of the death camp that was located there, the memorial affected us deeply. Names of major cities from which Jews were deported are inscribed on stones that dot the landscape. We spent time walking through the stones and contemplating a place that we had previously known little about.

Outside the entrance to the Treblinka memorial is a little house that contains a small museum. Among the objects in the museum are artifacts that archaeologists had excavated at the camp site; for instance, this tile lined a gas chamber at Treblinka.
We had the unique opportunity to meet with Belarusian students from the European Humanities University in Vilnius to discuss our different perspectives on the memory of the Holocaust.

Several pits mark the mass graves in Paneriai, where 100,000 Jews, Poles, and Soviet prisoners of war were executed. Various memorials speak to the complex, overlapping, and at times competing national and local memories of the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe.

During our visit, we learned about the Burner’s Brigade, the group of male prisoners who were tasked with burning the bodies of the victims shot at Paneriai. Some of these men managed to escape by digging a 100-foot tunnel through the forest. We saw a model of their living quarters and of the escape tunnel.

After having visited Paneriai, we could see the drastic difference between a globally recognized memorial and one of the numerous neglected ones in many parts of rural Eastern Europe. The memorial included a small gravestone for the 1,159 people murdered in Veliučionys. Our guide, Milda Jakulytė-Vasil, mentioned that we were probably the first group to visit the site this year and most likely the last.

We were struck by the diversity among Holocaust commemorative sites and by the fact that so many of the sites of massacres and smaller camps are unknown to the general public.

One of the most profoundly disturbing experiences of the trip was our hike through a forest near the village of Veliučionys to find the site of a mass shooting. This modest marker was partially obscured by weeds.

In the streets of Vilnius, markers of the former ghetto reminded us of a film we watched as part of our first semester course, *Partisans of Vilna*. We saw the balcony from which the first shots of the revolt were fired in response to the clearing of the ghetto. We also visited important sites such as the Jewish Ghetto Library and the Ghetto Hospital.

While visiting the Holocaust Museum in Vilnius, we learned about Fania Yocheles Brantsovskaya, pictured in this family portrait. She survived the ghetto and eventually joined a partisan unit. Individual stories like hers humanize the Jewish victims.
The experiences and conversations I’ve had because of this class, and especially over the past week [during the trip], have opened up a series of small windows to the personal ties that intimately connect those of us growing up in the United States in the 21st century to the genocide that took the lives of 11 million people in Europe. -- Mia Sitterson, student

Flowers have no place in Auschwitz. The bright green, tall trees that marked the entrances to the beautiful red brick buildings on a sunny May morning felt extremely out of place in a context of mass murder. We were reminded that the scenery was often used to deceive the victims. -- Isa Bergonzolli-Jaramillo, Ariel Miller, and Jay Schroeder, students

Many of us thought about the difference between sites built to teach and sites built to commemorate and how each site we have visited has a different perspective. The way each camp memorializes the victims is a reflection of its historical background and geographical location and the number people who survived it. These sites stand as reminders that the Holocaust was a very complex, transnational event. By visiting several sites, we learned about the different ways people have chosen to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. -- Cecily Hibbs, Mia Sitterson, Abigail Wippel, students

A gaggle of American college students — some with personal connections to the killing fields of Europe, but most without — voluntarily took on the responsibility to remember. -- Dean Michael Getty

Exhibit created by WU FOCUS students Cecily Hibbs, Talia Wazana, and Abigail Wippel; and WU Germanic Studies Librarian, Brian Vetruba.

Trip blog available at wuholocausttrip.wordpress.com.

Full exhibit on display in early 2017 at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum & Learning Center.

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