

Thirteen Washington University Students and their Deep Dive into the Study of the Holocaust

Reflections from a trip to Germany,
Poland, and Lithuania
and a year of intensive study

February 2 to March 15, 2017

at the

Holocaust Museum & Learning Center



Washington University in St. Louis

Introduction

As part of Washington University's first-year FOCUS program "The History, Memory, and Representation of the Holocaust," we began our study in the fall with the History seminar, "The Holocaust: a European Experience," taught by Dr. Anika Walke. Our spring seminar "Representations of the Holocaust in Literature and Film" with Dr. Erin McGlothlin gave us insight into depictions of the *Shoah*.

During these courses, we grappled with such provocative questions as:

- Why did Germany turn to a dictatorship of racism, war, and mass murder?
- Why did the Nazis see Jews as the supreme enemy while also targeting Poles, Ukrainians, Soviets, homosexuals, the Roma, and the disabled?
- How was the Holocaust different and similar in Western and Eastern Europe?
- Which experiences of the Holocaust are represented, and which are ignored and repressed?
- What happens to the history of the Holocaust when it becomes part of a fictional text?
- Are representations of perpetrators appropriate?
- Can there be a "master narrative" of the Holocaust?



These courses were supplemented by a visit to the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center, during which we were fortunate to meet Hedy Epstein (1924-2016), a local survivor. Hedy escaped Nazi Germany in a *Kindertransport* in 1939 and later settled in St. Louis.

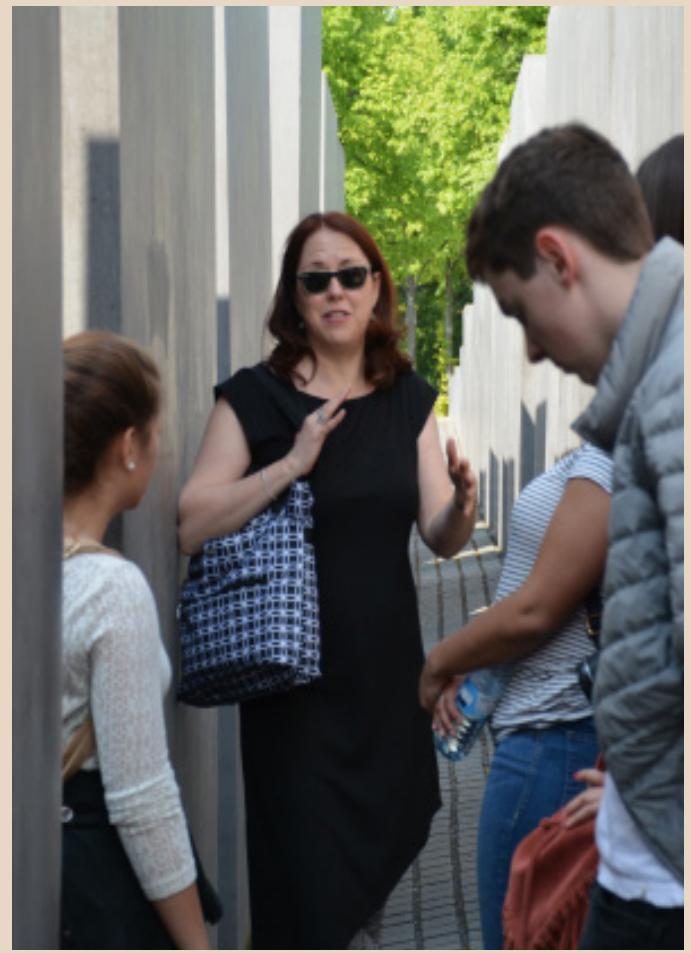


Germany



Memorials in Berlin

Berlin has many Holocaust memorials and commemorative sites scattered throughout the city. We visited a few of these and were impressed with the city's dedication to remembering the events that occurred during the Holocaust.



The Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism, which opened on October 24, 2012, consists of a reflecting pool (below) and honors a group of victims often marginalized in contemporary Holocaust memorial culture. The triangle in the center represents the badges worn by concentration camp prisoners, and a fresh flower is placed on the stone each day.



The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, inaugurated on May 10, 2005, evoked a sense of disorientation, isolation, and unease as we walked among its large, concrete blocks. The feeling is cemetery-like, and it is easy to get lost. Peter Eisenman, the architect of the memorial, claims it has no symbolic significance, leaving room instead for interpretation.



The Topography of Terror museum 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 police institutions played under the Nazi regime. We found out that many regular police joined the Gestapo even though they were not ardent National Socialists. The museum focuses on Nazi propaganda and perpetrator biographies. Pictured on the right are index cards of former SS members.



Located in the middle of a park across from the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism (left) is easily overlooked but no less powerful. It opened on May 27, 2008, and although there is controversy surrounding the memorial, its square design reflects the difficulties of homosexual life during the Nazi regime. Visitors to the memorial look inside the large box to see a video of a homosexual couple publicly displaying affection, but the video is hidden from view to the public walking by.



Scattered throughout Berlin are Stumbling Stones, which are small plaques dedicated to victims of the Nazi regime. One FOCUS student, Rachel, was able to locate the Stumbling Stone that marks the place her great-grandfather, Leo Adler, once lived.



As we walked through Berlin, we noticed numerous memorials and informational plaques regarding the Holocaust. As we traveled eastward on our trip, this was not necessarily the case. Although most of the exterminations were not done in Germany, we found the public memory of the Holocaust most prevalent there.

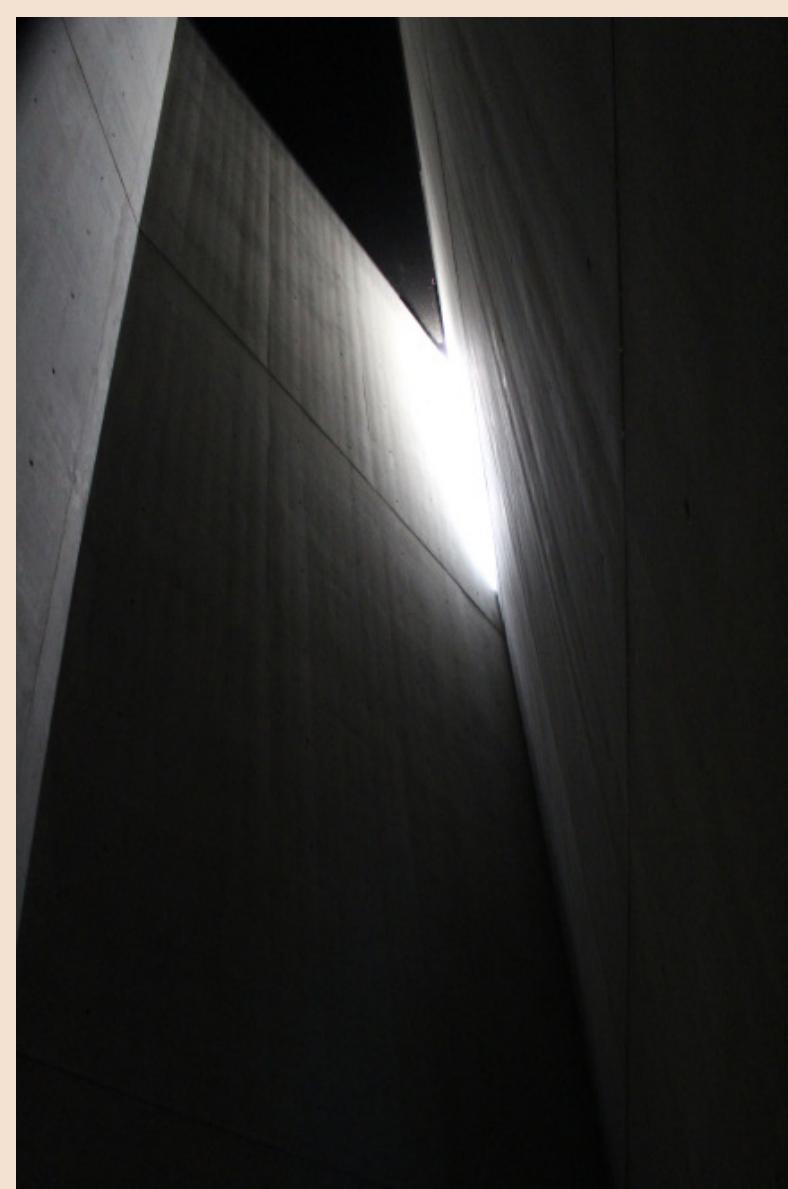
Jewish Museum, Berlin



The Jewish Museum in Berlin, designed in the shape of a broken Star of David, presents intersecting axes to symbolize three paths of Jewish life in Germany: continuity, emigration, and the Holocaust. We learned about the history of Jewish life in Germany and saw numerous ways to represent the experiences and suffering Jewish people went through.



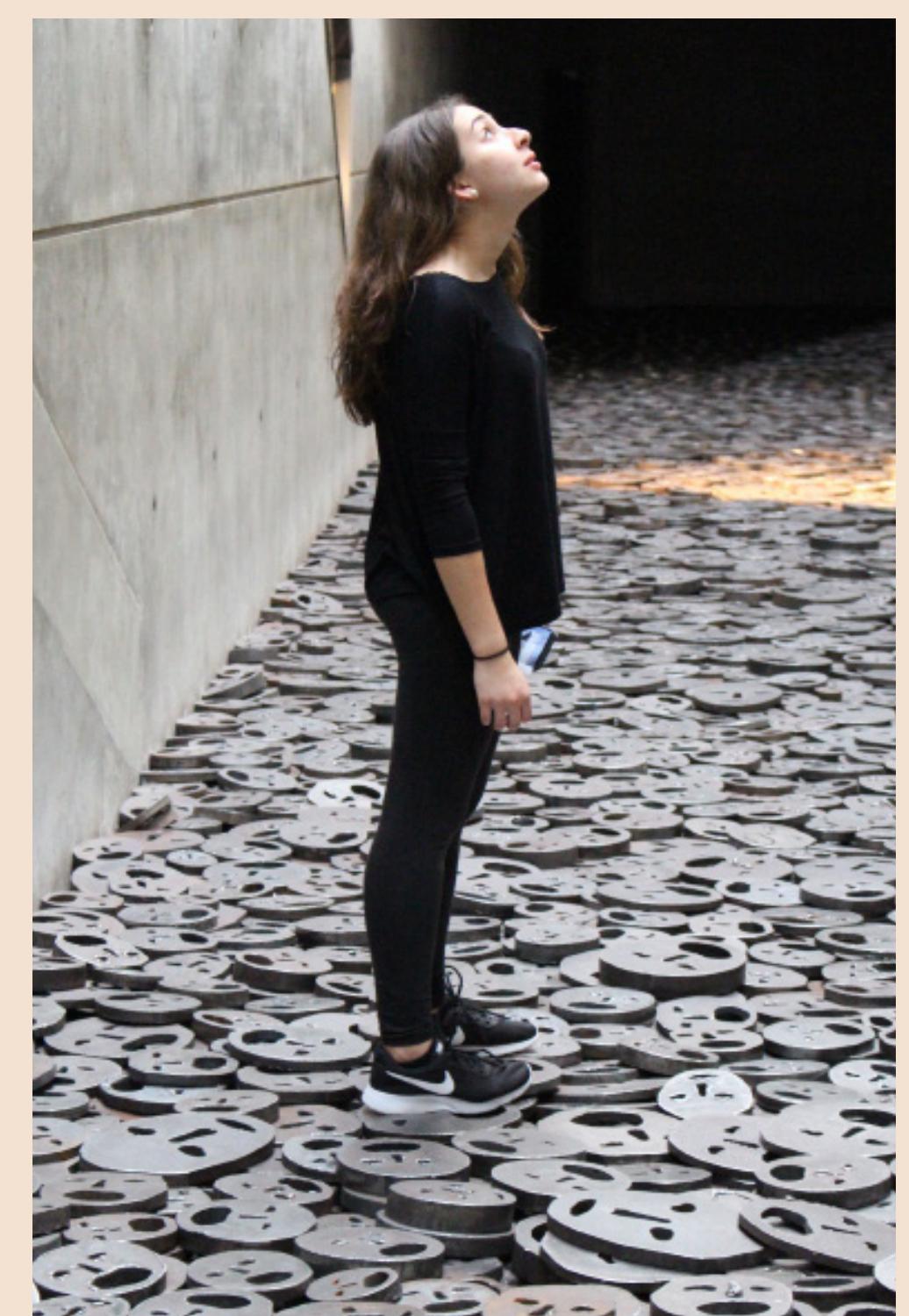
Garden of Exile



Holocaust Tower

The exhibits and interactive activities at the Jewish Museum in Berlin helped us learn about the long and complex history of Jewish life in Germany. Anti-Semitism did not just start with the Holocaust, and this museum presents Germany from the perspective of a Jewish minority throughout history.

The Holocaust Tower and Garden of Exile are two other exhibits we found particularly impactful. The Holocaust Tower is an empty silo, 79 feet tall, with no heating, cooling or light besides natural light. The Garden of Exile is an outside exhibit with a tilted foundation; it often makes visitors feel queasy as they walk through the tall concrete pillars.



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 through the metal, the faces produced an unsettling noise resembling screams.

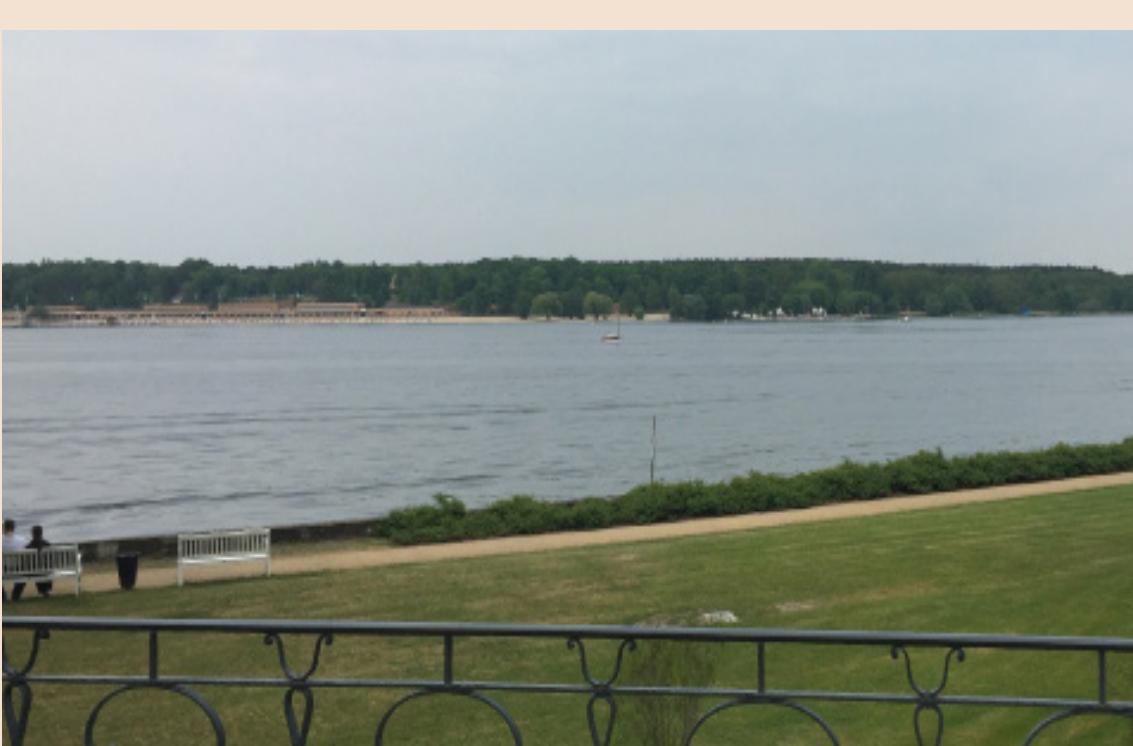


Wannsee



The men attending the conference did not discuss whether a plan of "Final Solution" should be carried out; instead, they coordinated its organization and implementation. Although many Jews had already been killed, the conference allowed for efficient transportation plans to be made. Extermination was never explicitly mentioned, but shortly after the conference, gas chambers were deployed into camps in Poland.

We went to the outskirts of Berlin one day to visit the location of the Wannsee Conference, where high-ranking Nazi officials met in 1942 to formalize their plans for the "Final Solution." We viewed documentation of the conference, including memos that discussed the mass murder of European Jewry as if it were normal business practice.



The conference was set in a scenic suburb of Berlin along a lake. The house was used as a guesthouse for the SS during Nazi rule.



The House of the Wannsee Conference is now a museum that holds maps, exhibits, and documentation of the conference. We were able to look through the minutes, letters, and exact plans the men worked on while attending the conference.

Sachsenhausen

KZ Sachsenhausen was built as a “model camp” and site of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate, which was responsible for running all the camps of the Third Reich. For many of us, this was our first exposure to a concentration camp. We took the S-Bahn train with our guide, WU Ph.D. graduate Russell Alt-Haaker, from Berlin to the town of Oranienburg and then walked a kilometer to the camp.



Before we entered, Russell showed us a surface map displaying the expanse of the camp. The camp was designed for order and efficiency in achieving the Nazis' ultimate goal, and every building had a particular purpose.



Our guide gave us disturbing descriptions of the torture of political opponents, Jews, homosexual men, and Red Army soldiers that occurred here. The SS had different methods of torture and execution at KZ Sachsenhausen, including shootings and the use of a small gas chamber (right). Prisoners were led to believe they were getting their height measured, but an SS officer would instead shoot them in the back of the head.



The camp was arranged in a large, semi-circular design, reflecting the Nazis' sinister intentions and allowing the guards to easily keep watch over the entire camp. Although only a few buildings remain today, we were able to see the vast expanse of land the camp occupied, which revealed the precise organization that the Nazis used to keep order.



We walked through a serene neighborhood (above) with houses lining the streets on our way to and from KZ Sachsenhausen. The gates of the camp lay at the end of this neighborhood, and it surprised us all that the camp was so close to these houses.

Poland



Kraków



Kraków was a center of Jewish culture before the war. After being dropped off in the center of the current Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, we toured the few sites that survived the war.



The Remah Synagogue (above) is located in Kazimierz. We were permitted to enter it and, once inside, fell silent with an overwhelming sense of respect. The synagogue was founded by Rabbi Moses Isserles, whose grave was one of the few to survive the war in the cemetery outside. The inside was restored after the war and now contains ornately decorated walls and a reconstructed *bimah* (raised platform for Torah reading). The synagogue was destroyed during the Nazi occupation of Poland but is now in use again. Below, FOCUS student Noah stands inside.



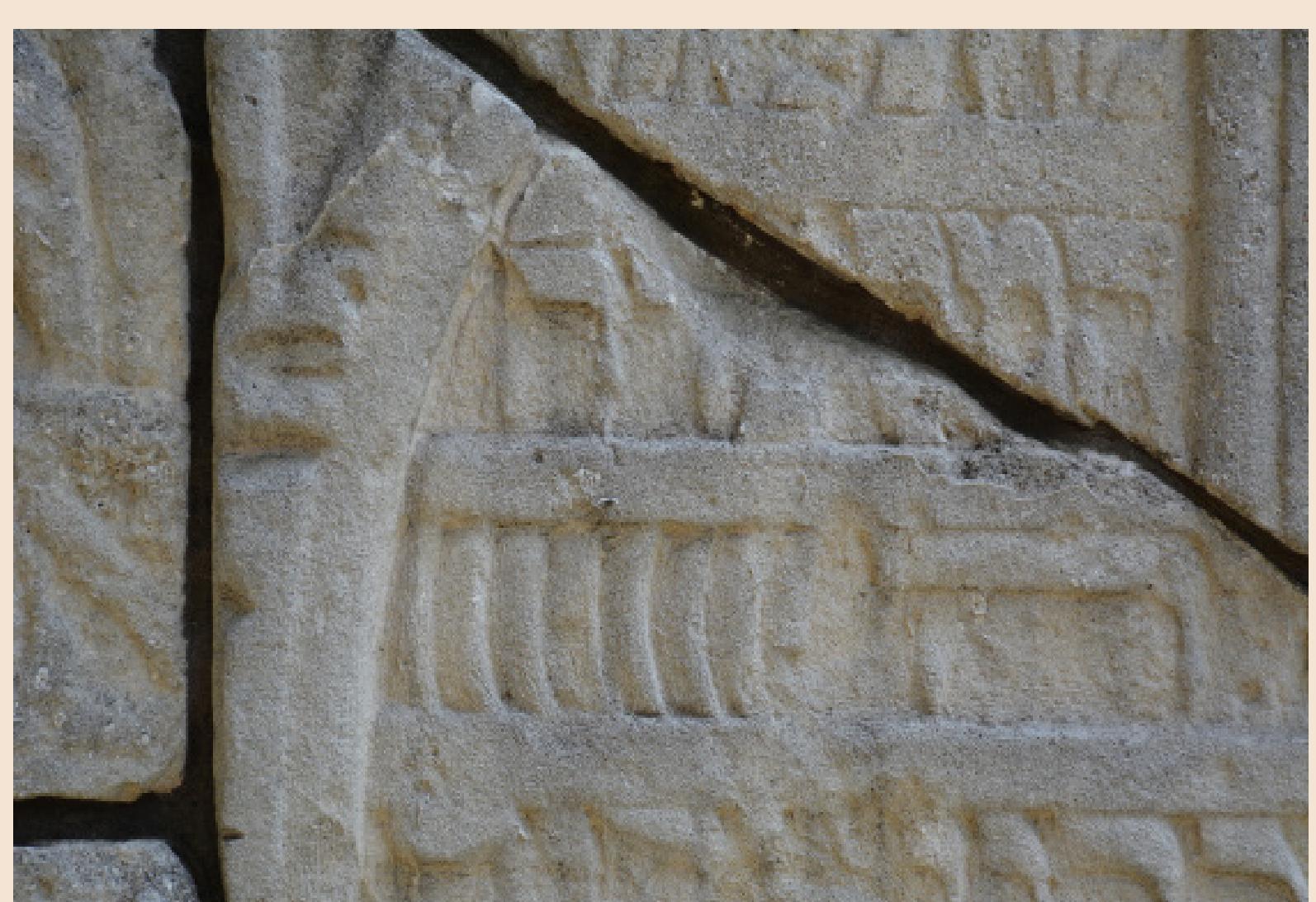
After exploring Kazimierz, we traveled to the territory of the former ghetto in Kraków. One of the key remaining features of the ghetto is a memorial in the former deportation square named Plac Zgody or Peace Square, consisting of 33 empty chairs that symbolize Kraków Ghetto residents who were murdered. This is pictured below.



Another of the remaining features of the ghetto is the *Apteka* (or pharmacy) that was in service during the war. Pictured above, it was owned by a non-Jewish Pole named Tadeusz Pankiewicz, who helped Jewish Ghetto residents in various ways, such as providing hair dye for elderly Jews so they could look younger and medical aid after roundups. He was the only Pole to live within the boundary of the Ghetto.



This Jewish cemetery is connected to the Remah Synagogue, which we were permitted to enter. The cemetery consists of traditional Jewish gravestones. Its wall (below) was created out of debris of Jewish gravestones destroyed by the Nazis during the war.



While in Kraków, we passed through a courtyard where Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* was filmed. The movie was set in Kraków's Ghetto in the Podgórze district but was actually filmed in Kazimierz. The staircase pictured below (left) was used in a scene. Near the staircase are pictures from this scene, as shown below (right).



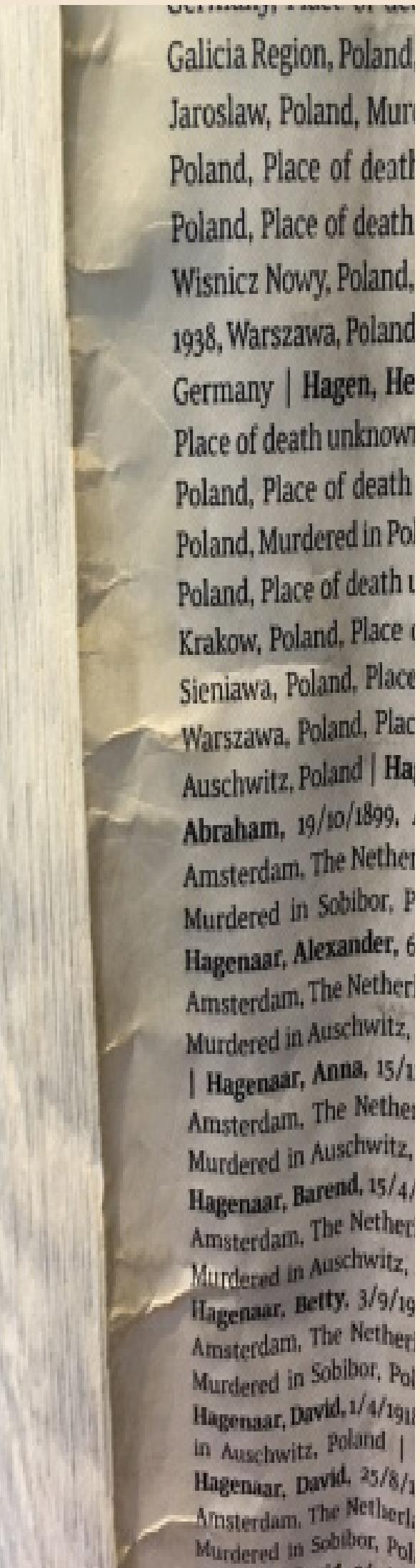
Auschwitz



We walked through the iconic gate above the entrance to Auschwitz emblazoned “Arbeit Macht Frei,” which translates to “Work Liberates.” The same inscription appears on the gate to the Sachsenhausen camp in Germany.



The pictures above were taken of some of the first prisoners in Auschwitz I. At this time, the number of prisoners was small enough that photographing all of them was practical. To the right is a picture of the “Book of Names” on display at Auschwitz, which displays the personal data for Jews known to have died during the Shoah.



Auschwitz is one of the most well known Nazi concentration and death camps. However, on our drive to the site, it came as a surprise to the students when Auschwitz appeared nestled in a scenic town in the Polish countryside. Separated into two smaller camps, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II or Auschwitz-Birkenau, Auschwitz I was primarily used for POWs while the Jews, Roma, and other victim groups were housed exclusively in Birkenau. Auschwitz housed millions of people during its use, and it is estimated that around one million people died in its gas chambers.



The picture above shows the inside of the barracks in Birkenau, while the picture below shows the rows upon rows of buildings that housed the prisoners. During the period of the camp’s operation, the walls were lined with narrow bunks.



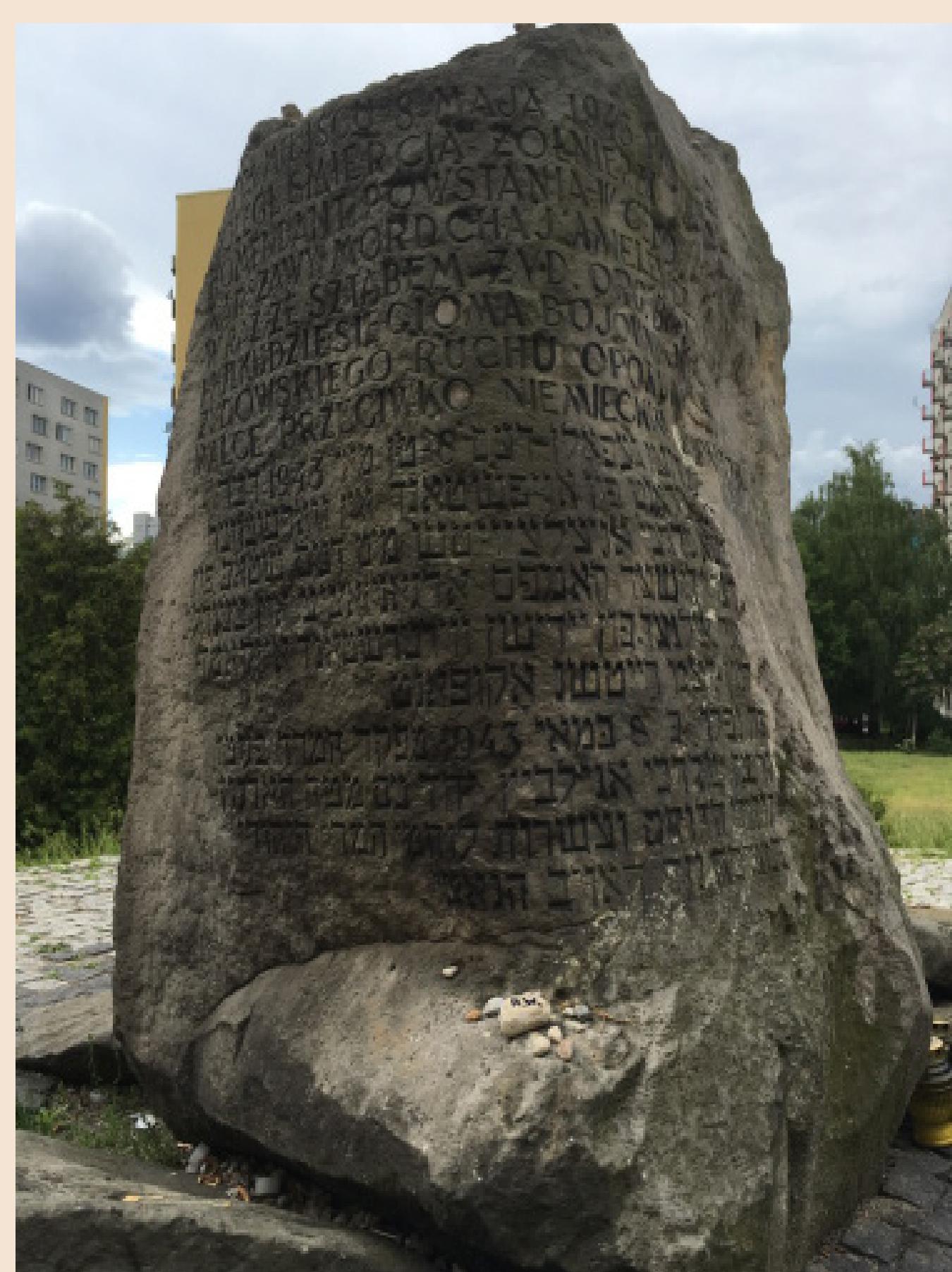
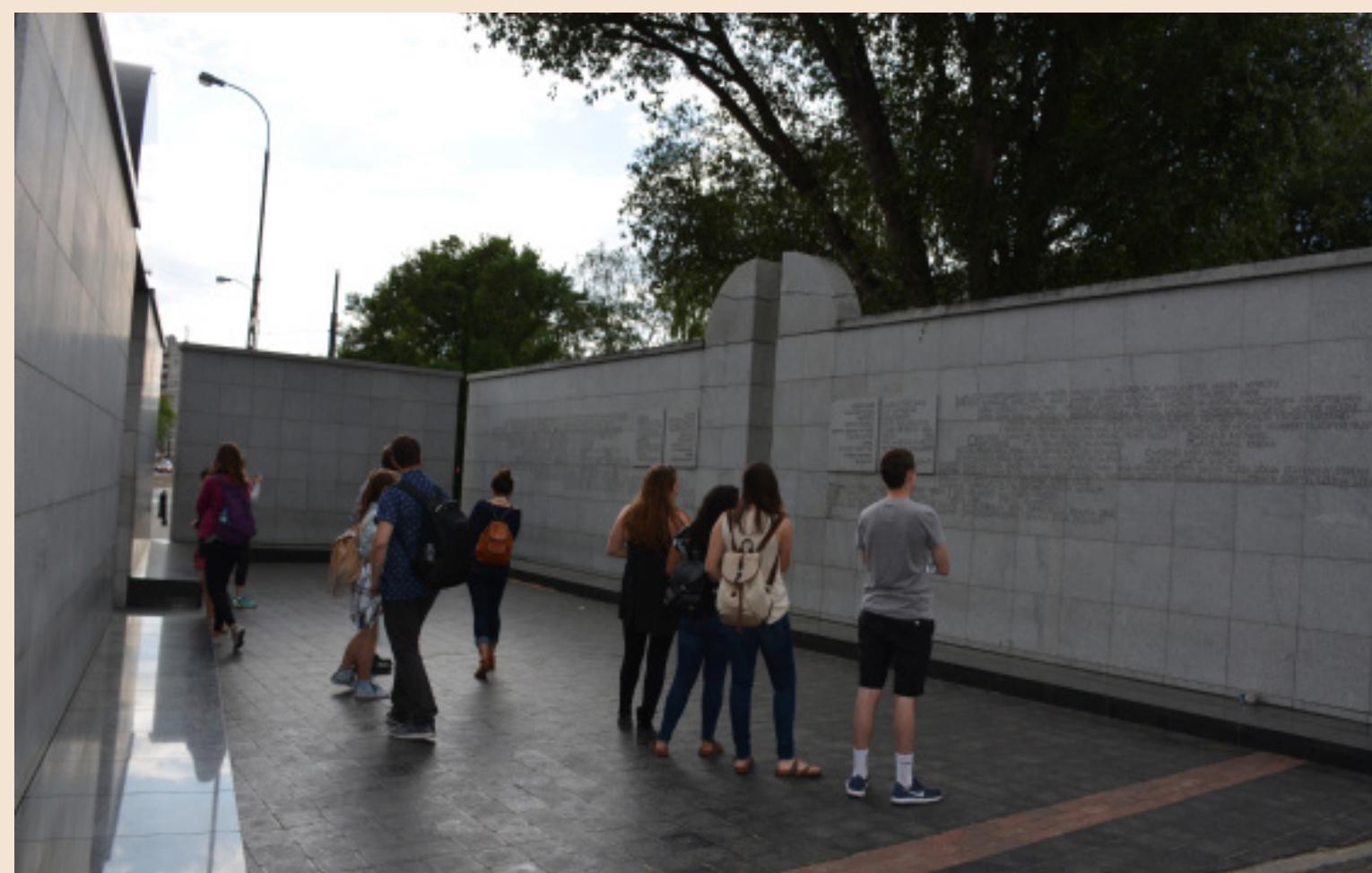
A unique experience on the trip was a workshop at the youth center located in Oświęcim. The youth center was built to facilitate conversations about Auschwitz among younger generations. FOCUS students Jay, Mariel and Gina are in deep conversation about the pictures’ content and purpose (right). At left is a Hebrew note left by victims’ descendants.



Warsaw

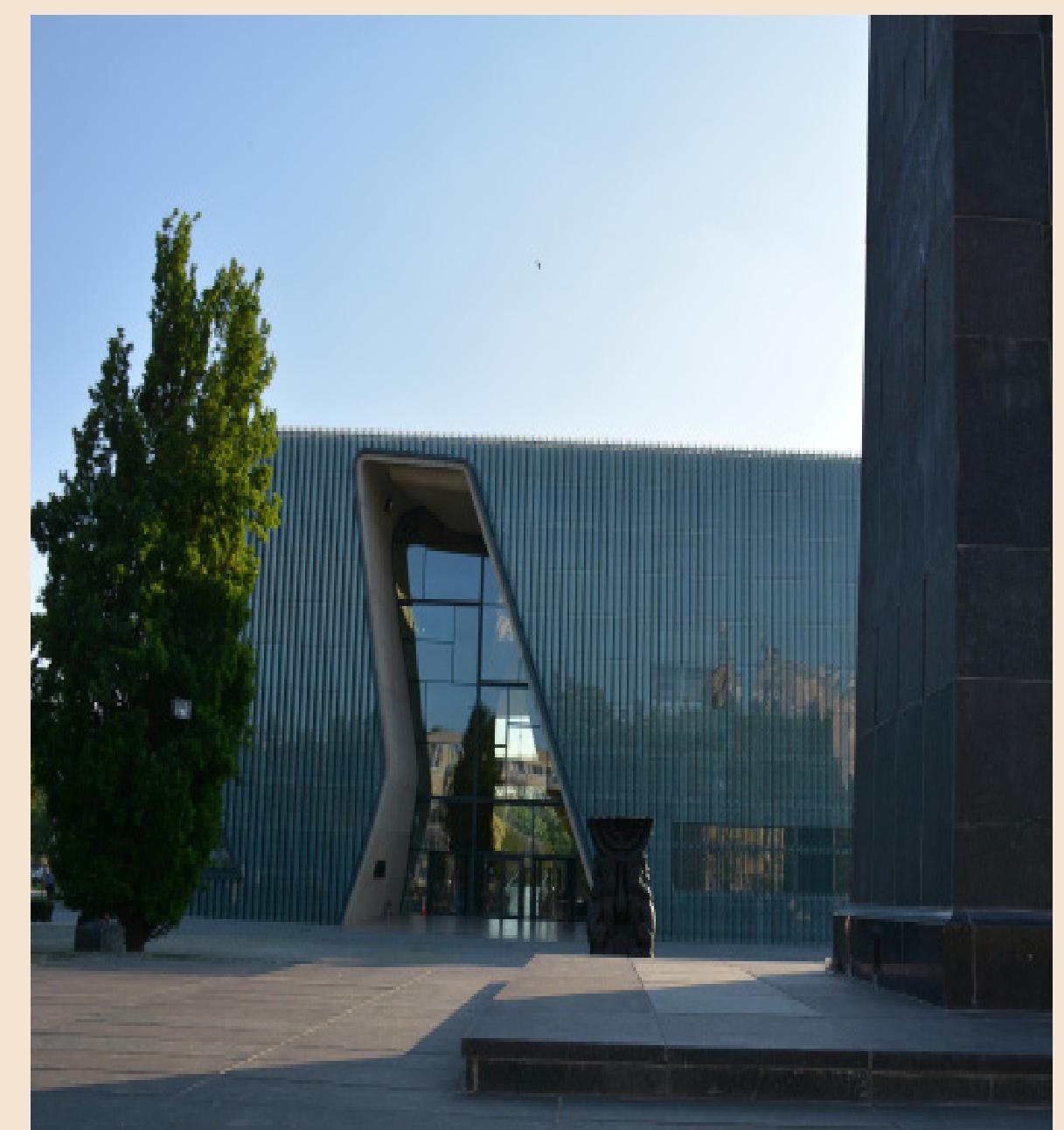
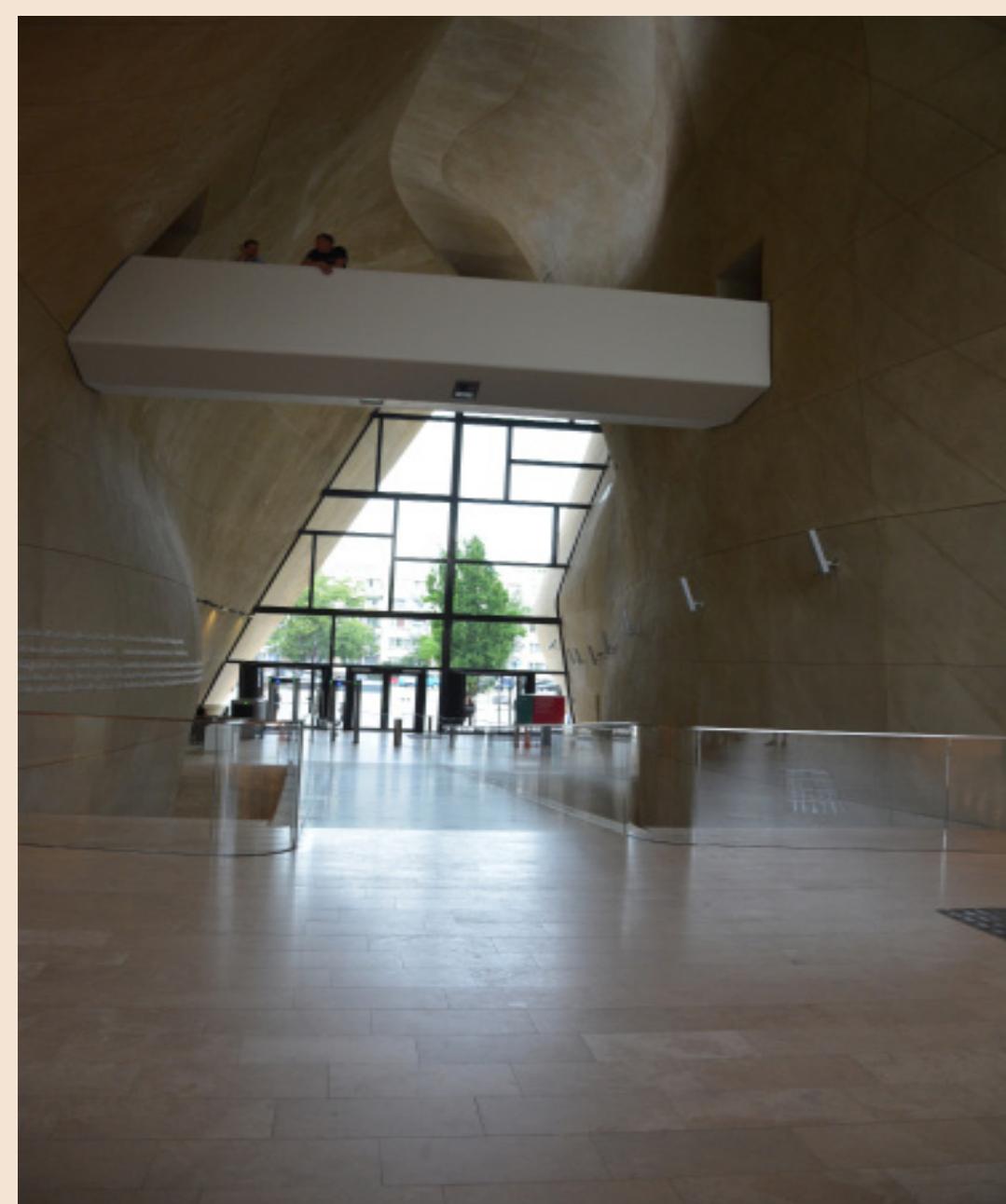
The parameters of the Warsaw Ghetto are mapped out on a marker (below) located at one of the boundaries. After the war, high demand for housing necessitated developments that covered the area of the former Ghetto, which had been reduced to rubble after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Residents have even reported finding items from former Ghetto inhabitants buried underneath their buildings. Because the remains of the Ghetto are now buried under this housing development, it is hard to picture what the former Ghetto truly looked like.

In Warsaw, we embarked on a search by foot throughout the city for the remaining traces of the Holocaust. The ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto are buried under the foundations of a massive post-war housing project in the neighborhood of Muranów, leaving few sites to memorialize.



The *Umschlagplatz* (above) was the primary site for deportations out of the Warsaw Ghetto. A majority of Jews deported from here were sent immediately to the Treblinka death camp. This memorial was built to resemble train cars used in the transportation and now stands in the place of the old deportation square. Traditional Jewish names are written across the memorial to symbolize people taken from this place and later killed.

The stone above sits atop the Anielewicz Mound, which marks the site of the Mila 18 bunker. In early 1943, Jews trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto organized an uprising against Nazi forces. The leaders of the uprising holed up in a bunker on Mila Street before blowing up the bunker themselves rather than being captured by the Germans.



Above, a monument stands outside the new POLIN museum, aptly named after the Hebrew word for Poland which, translated, means “Here you shall dwell”. The museum creates an interactive experience that took us into the lives of Polish Jews throughout history through activities such as operating digital versions of medieval printing presses and recreating a traditional Jewish wedding. In the middle far-right is the museum’s entrance which is in the shape of the Hebrew letter *tav*.



Treblinka



Next to the spot believed to be the location of one of the gas chambers, this stone now serves as a reminder in several languages that this should never be allowed to happen again.

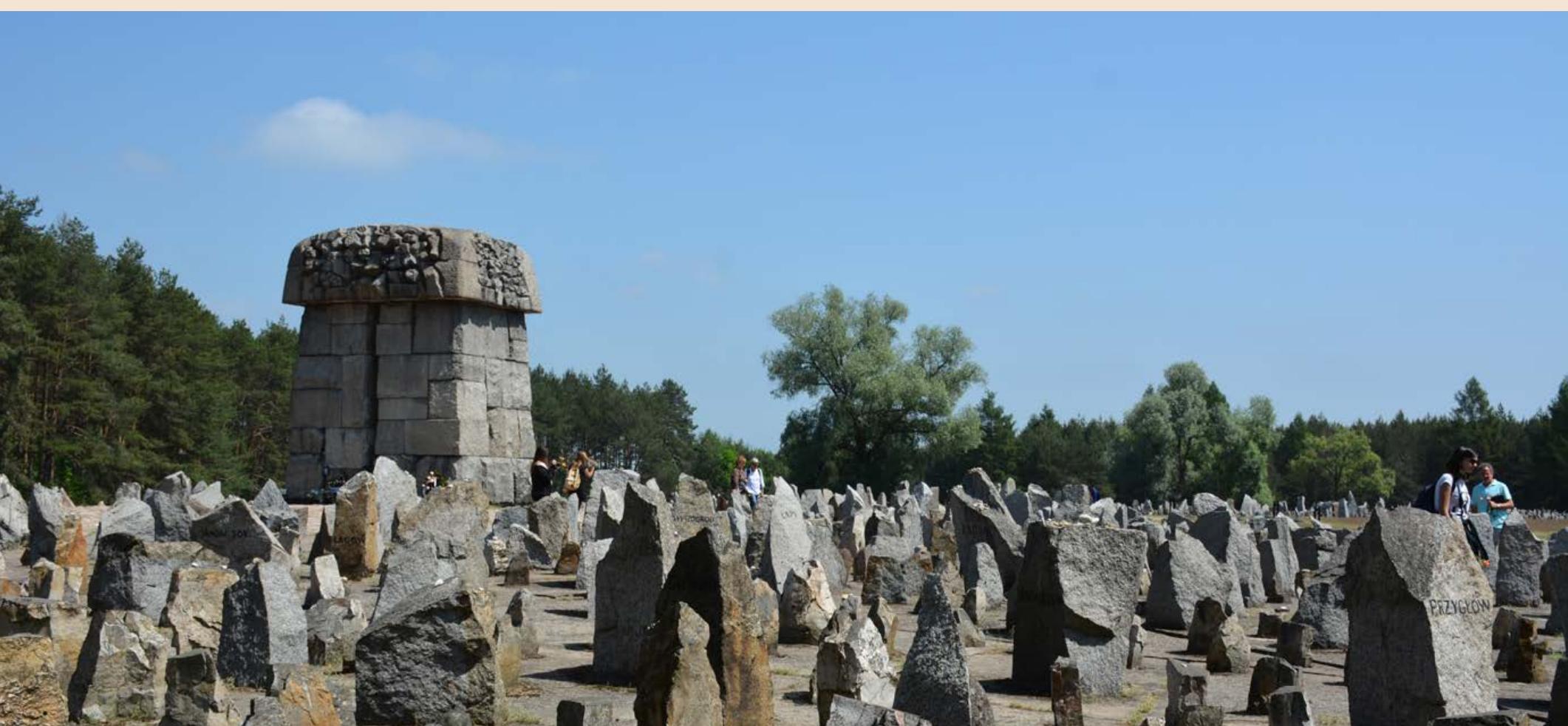


Stone sculptures fill a large portion of the footprint of the former camp. Some are engraved with the names of cities from which Jews were deported, while most are left blank to serve as a reminder of the many people who were killed there. The overall effect is reminiscent of a graveyard with each stone representing a headstone.

Treblinka left a lasting impressions on all of us. Its sole function was that of a death camp, meaning that no labor was kept other than a *Sonderkommando*, or work group, that helped with the operation of the gas chambers. It is estimated that between 870,000 and 925,000 people died in Treblinka's gas chambers during its one year of operation between 1942 and 1943. After the August 1943 uprising by a small squad of Jewish prisoners, the Nazis destroyed the camp and erased most traces of it. Today, a memorial stands where the camp was located. Below is a model of the camp.

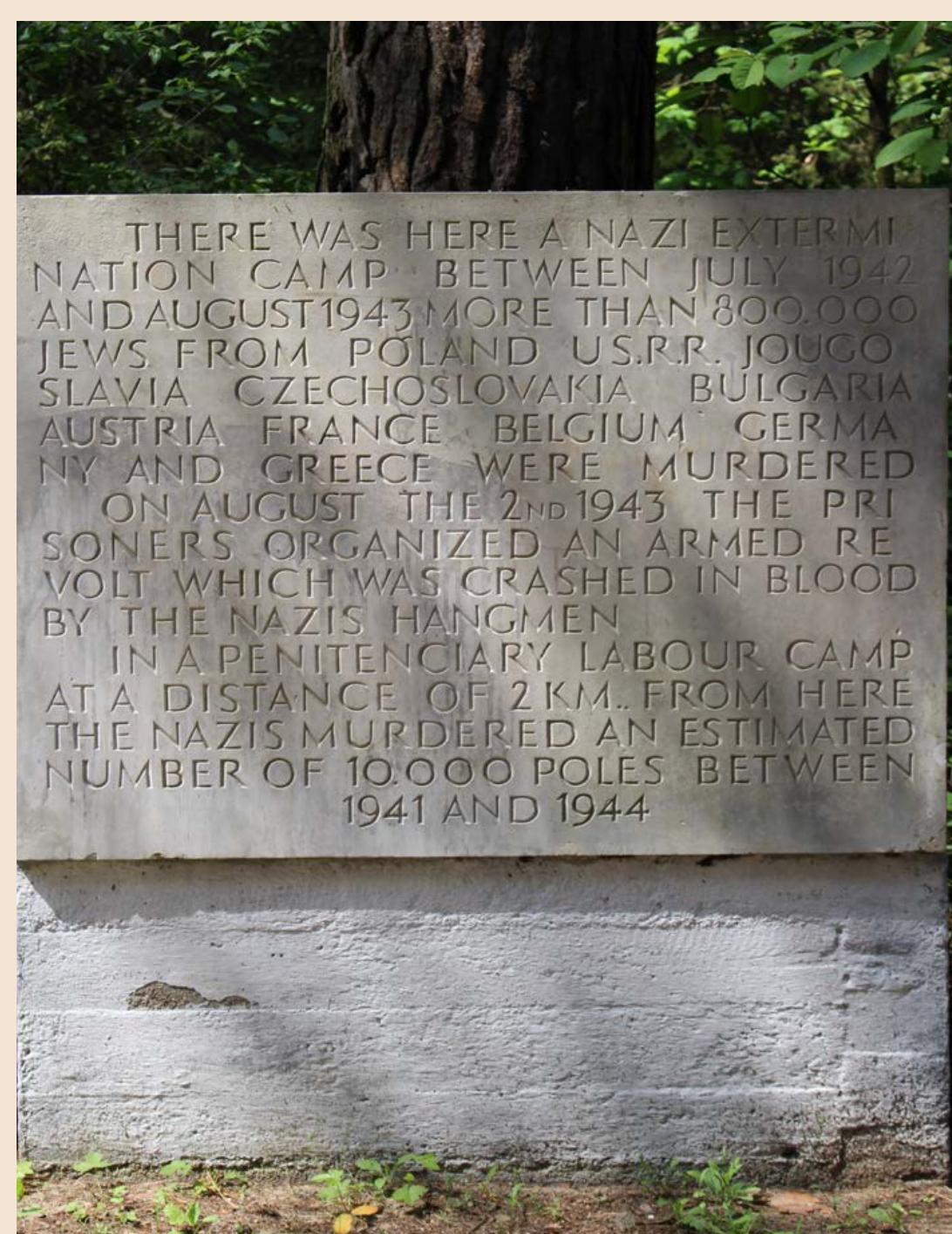


These artifacts were found during archaeological excavations. The tiles above (right) lined the inside of the gas chambers and mimicked the style of a traditional Jewish bathhouse. This is just one of the measures that Nazis took in order to deceive the Jews into believing that they would not be killed.

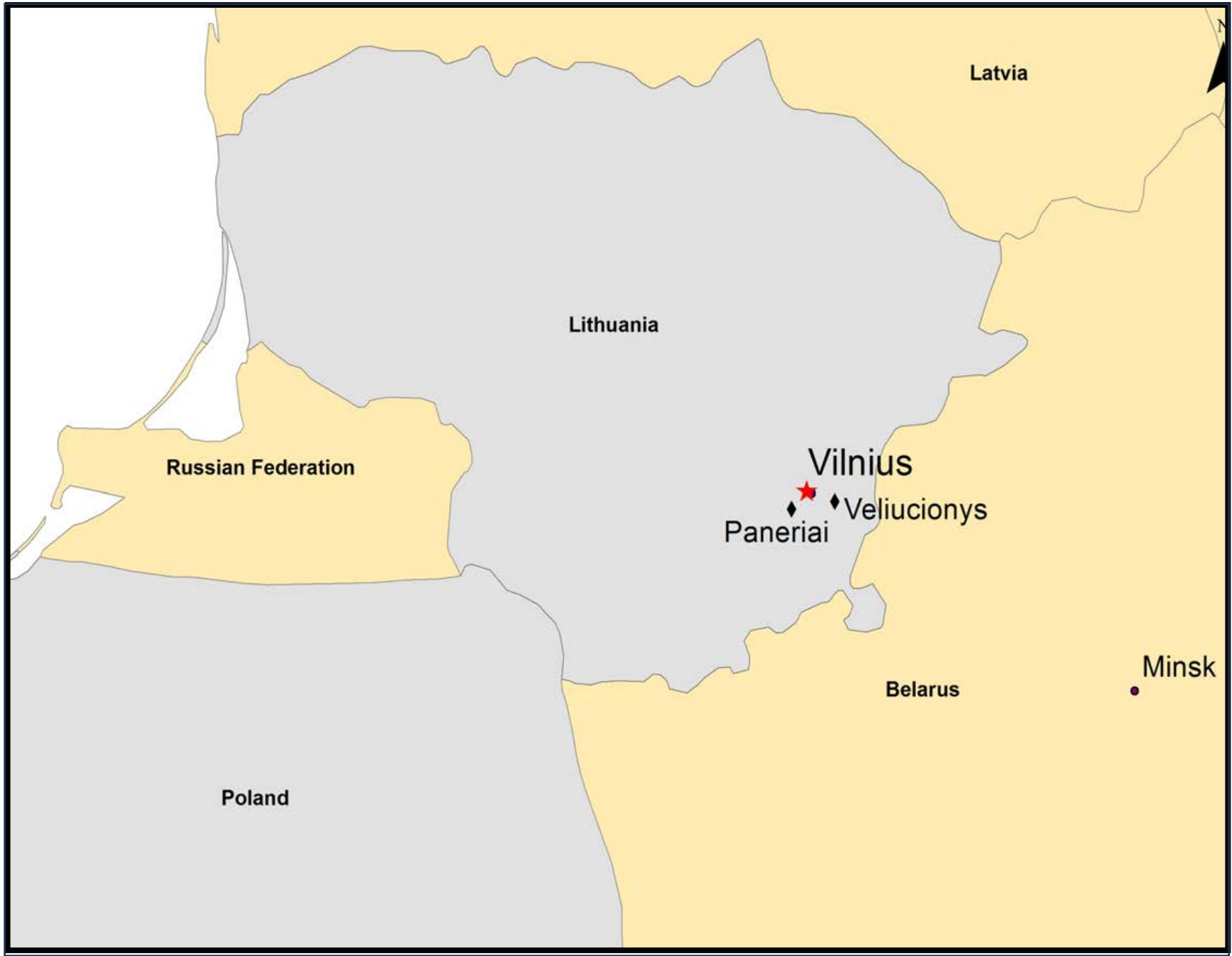


We walked along wooden beams now used to symbolize the railway that led into Treblinka. During the camp's operation, the railway ended at a building camouflaged as an ordinary train station.

The picture below (left) shows the markers of the camp boundary. To the right of that is a stone plaque, built as part of the memorial, giving a short description of the camp. At the far bottom is a panoramic view of the stones.



Lithuania



Vilnius



The Nazis established the Vilnius Ghetto, which was divided into two parts. Ghetto #1 was for people deemed incapable of work and were soon thereafter killed at Paneriai. Those in Ghetto #2 were forced to work in factories or construction projects outside the Ghetto.



The few streets which made up the Ghetto were the heart of Jewish Vilna, centered around the Great Synagogue. The synagogue pictured is the Choral Synagogue, the only active one that survived both the Holocaust and Soviet rule in the city. It is a small reminder of the once vibrant Jewish life that existed before the war.

Vilnius (or Vilna) was the center of a thriving Jewish community in Lithuania before World War II. In fact, it was known as “the Jerusalem of the East.” There are only about 2,500 Jews left in Lithuania today, as opposed to the 210,000 at the time of the German invasion in 1941.



Markers of the former Ghetto in the streets of Vilnius 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. While touring the former Ghetto, we learned about the Jews' efforts to maintain some sense of normal life with a hospital, library, and synagogues. Such efforts can be seen as a form of spiritual resistance. More physical resistance was practiced by the partisans in the Ghetto.



Map of the former Ghetto



The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) achieved international fame as a rabbi and scholar; we saw many memorials to him while touring the former Ghetto.



We had the unique opportunity to meet with Belarusian students from the European Humanities University in Vilnius to discuss different perspectives on the memory of the Holocaust (above). It was interesting to see how our backgrounds have shaped the ways in which we engage with history.

The Holocaust Museum in Vilnius is quite small and humble compared to the other museums we visited. Memory of the Holocaust is not as prevalent throughout the city, compared to other cities like Berlin and Warsaw. It should be noted though that this museum was the first institution in the Soviet Union to openly address the Holocaust. During our visit, we learned about Fania Yocheles Brantsovskaya pictured here in this family portrait. She survived the Ghetto and eventually joined a partisan unit. Individual stories like hers humanize Jewish Lithuanian victims.

Paneriai

An aspect of the Holocaust that is less recognized today is the systematic killing of groups of people, mostly Jews, during the German invasion of the Soviet Union, beginning in 1941 in or near their hometowns. Mobile SS killing squads known as *Einsatzgruppen* conducted mass shootings in the former USSR and buried victims in numerous mass graves dispersed throughout Eastern Europe, many of which are unknown and unmarked. It is estimated that over 1 million people were murdered during these actions. Even when these sites are memorialized, there are no detailed records about the events that happened there, making it nearly impossible to determine who was killed and where.

Paneriai (or Ponary) was an execution site in a forest near Vilnius. Between July 1941 and April 1944, it is estimated that between 70,000 and 100,000 Jews, Poles, and Soviet POWs were executed there. Their bodies were buried in mass graves, indicated now by pits like the one pictured to the right.



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. The site at Paneriai contains a number of memorials commemorating different groups of people. Pictured below are the memorial to Lithuanian partisans (left) and the Jewish memorial (right).



During our visit, we learned about the Burners' Brigade, a group of male prisoners tasked with burning the bodies of 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 escape tunnel. Since our visit, researchers have been able to locate the actual tunnel that was used.



Veliučionys

One of the most profoundly disturbing experiences of the trip was our hike through a forest near the village of Veliučionys to find a mass shooting site. We struggled for approximately 20 minutes before locating the site. This experience allowed us to take note of drastic differences between globally recognized memorials such as Auschwitz and the numerous neglected ones in many parts of rural Eastern Europe.



The memorial included a small gravestone for the 1,159 Jews murdered in Veliučionys. Our local guide, Milda Jakulytė-Vasil, who published an atlas of Holocaust sites in Lithuania, mentioned that we were probably the first group to visit the site that year and most likely the last. We were struck by the diversity among Holocaust sites and by the fact that so many of the sites of massacres and smaller camps are unknown to the general public.

This modest trail marker (left) is partially obscured by weeds, and the mass grave itself (right) is very hard to find.



Thanks and Credits

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All the Participants on the 2016 WU FOCUS: Holocaust Trip

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In Memory of Gloria M. Goldstein
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Read our trip blog at <http://wuholocausttrip.wordpress.com>

A PDF of the exhibit posters is available, contact Brian Vetruba (bvetruba@wustl.edu)

(* of blessed memory)