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Learning the Holocaust by going there

By Norm Oshrin

Silence dominated the room at the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for Jewish Life as 40 sets of eyes focused on slide and film images of former eastern Europe Jewish communities and Nazi death camps.

The June 1 presentation was the product of separate European trips by two New Jersey schools — Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington and New Milford High School in Bergen County.

Eighteen teenagers and faculty were there at the invitation of Karen Small, associate director of the Rutgers-based center.

“These are the only two public high schools (in New Jersey) that take students to trips to study the Holocaust, the only two public schools doing it,” Small pointed out.

“They wanted to get their kids together to meet each other” — and to reflect on what they had seen and learned, she explained.

“We met there (at Rutgers) for the first time,” said Max Chanoch, of Readington, the only Jewish student of the nine on the trip from Hunterdon Central.

“We wanted to talk.”

And talk, they did, seated in a circle around the room — and prompted from time to time by William R. Fernekes, Hunterdon Central's supervisor of social studies, and teacher, Paul Gorski, both of whom accompanied the students on the trip.

“The purpose of the meeting is to provide a forum for exchanging views about their respective experiences and to deepen their collective understanding of how site visits to Holocaust memorials, camps and other locations helps them educate the broader community about this history,” said Fernekes, who also participates in the annual “Learning Through Experience” program at Raritan Valley Community College.

Present at the Bildner center gathering — and prompting, too — was Colleen Tambuscio, the New Milford teacher who accompanied her students on the journey — and who is president of the New Jersey Council of Holocaust Educators.

“It was a great opportunity for students who have had a common experience to get together and talk about what they learned,” Tambuscio suggested. “To kind of debrief their experiences.”

Of Fernekes, she explained, “we know each other through our Holocaust work.” And while it would have been nice for the students from the two schools to have met before their trips two weeks apart, she said: “We just didn’t have the time. So we thought it best to meet after ward.” Besides, the students “didn’t grasp what they were doing until they did it.”

During the session, one of Tambuscio’s students, senior Jonathan Silver, was particularly animated and emotional in recounting his experience — most notably, to the “Fallen Leaves” exhibit in the Jewish museum in Berlin.

Elaborating later, Jonathan recalled how “it’s a huge room that spans 100 feet. On the floor are 10,000 cast-iron faces. You walk on them and it gives you a sense of stepping on people. You look down, their mouths are open, and it looks like they are screaming.

“For me, I’m Jewish, so it was hard to be on the opposite side of the spectrum. I felt I had to go on this trip because of who I am.”

Characterizing himself as “a representative of the Jewish community in my school,” Jonathan said he “was nervous about how (his non-Jewish classmates) were going to react (and) how I would react to their reactions.

He was pleased with his classmates.

“They really, really took in everything,” he said. “I was so proud of them how they felt. When they signed up for the trip, they didn’t know the full extremity of what it was.

“During the trip, I’d really say they felt the inhumanity and torture of it all, too. I was so pleased to be with the other eight kids.”

As for his decision to go, Jonathan said, “she (Tambuscio) understood why it was important. It all worked out and will be with me and I’ll make sure my children and grandchildren.”

In reflecting further on the experience following the program — at which he shared some of his thoughts — Max Chanoch explained how “it’s hard to describe your emotions with some-thing like this. It’s so far out there. The hardest thing is the absence of Jewish people there,” referring to Prague’s former Jewish quarter.

“So many Torahs, but actually the people are gone. There’s only memorabilia to remember them,” he said of the “prayer shawls and “beautiful artifacts” — all that was left. Now “they are just museums, a wonderful showcase...”

Max’s visit to the Majdanek death camp was emotionally draining.

“It was so real, so preserved,” that he had the feeling “this camp could be running again in a week,” he said. “They kept it like a museum. The guard posts are still there, even the crematorium. You’re walking where they were walking,” he said of the former camp inmates. “That’s the scary part. The smell you smell was the same smell they had.”

In a piece she wrote reflecting on her classmates’ reactions, Hunterdon Central’s Meredith Fear concluded how: “Suddenly being able to walk in the footsteps of the victims opened their eyes to a whole new world. By seeing the culture of the people who were massacred and walking the same streets they once trod, the students were given an invaluable opportunity to create a special connection to the victims and their heritage.

“It was now possible to assign 6 million faces to what was once just a number.”

Meredith also quoted some of her classmates:

- Meredith Schimelpfenig: “The trip was valuable because we not only got in touch with all we learned, but we got to see the culture around the people involved. We were no longer being told about it. We weren’t just reading about it — we were seeing it, breathing it, taking it all in. The most important thing we did was to experience the culture of Prague and Krakow. Without a basis of cultural knowledge, how could you understand what was destroyed in the Holocaust? You just wouldn’t be able to appreciate it. What’s done is done. We can’t undo this horror, but we can honor and cherish the victims.”

- Cecelia Angelone — “All I can say is that reading a textbook is nowhere near anything that can ever be experienced where the Holocaust took place. I learned more than I could have imagined. I think it’s up to our generation to educate ourselves and others ... so that the people who suffered and perished will not be forgotten and that something this horrific will not happen again.”

Also invited to the session was Eva Stahl, of Highland Park, a survivor — who, with her husband, Ted, has been involved in supporting Holocaust education.

“What happened was we contributed to a program on Holocaust education for high school teachers a while ago,” Ted explained. “How to approach these kids, talk about images...”

Of the Bildner get-together, Eva said: “I was very impressed. I felt some of them (students) were a little uncomfortable, but they really got to talking about what they saw and felt was important.”

Like Meredith Fear of Hunterdon Central.

“Finally faced with returning to the normalcy they left behind, the students nevertheless carry with them memories that continue to guide their lives,” she wrote. “Now that all is said and done, each student reflects on the trip as an incomparable and transformative experience.”

—Cecelia Angelone Student, Hunterdon Central Regional High School schools doing it,” Small pointed out.

“It’s up to our generation to educate ourselves and others ... so that the people who suffered and perished will not be forgotten and that some-thing this horrific will not happen again.”