

Miriam Itzkowitz's Drash

Teen Torah Tag Team – 1 June 2019

Anti-Semitism is alive today. San Diego, Pittsburgh, France – everywhere. It is very much alive. So much so that the Anti-Defamation League conducted a massive survey worldwide, which came back with these shocking statistics. As of 2015:

- Less than fifty percent of those surveyed under the age of thirty five have ever heard of the Holocaust.
- Two out of every three people surveyed have either never heard of the Holocaust or do not believe the historical accounts to be accurate.
- Overall, fifty four percent of those surveyed are aware of the Holocaust. That figure drops to twenty four percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and thirty eight percent in the Middle East and North Africa.
- Thirty two percent of the people who are aware, think it is either a myth, or has been exaggerated.
- Eighteen percent of respondents believe that the total worldwide Jewish population exceeds seven hundred million people. The actual number of Jewish people in the world is around thirteen million seven hundred thousand – three million fewer than what it was *before* the Holocaust.

I'm not here to spout out statistics, but I do think that this is highly relevant today in the world we live in. Thankfully, the Australian region is one of the highest in terms of Holocaust awareness and knowledge, and as a result, also one of the lowest in Holocaust denial.

I recently went on March of the Living, a two-week immersive educational programme in Poland and Israel to learn about the Holocaust. Being the grandchild of two Holocaust survivors, both of whom are members here, I felt a longingness and necessity to participate in March of the Living because I wanted to seek closure as a way to better understand what they could have gone through, but also to see the atrocities through my own eyes and not a textbook.

The Holocaust was always very relevant to me from a young age. When I was younger, I watched *The Sound of Music* quite frequently, and when the Swastika Flag hung from the von Trapp home, by the Nazis, my mother would always tell me that it was the "bad flag" or when we went through my father's flag book, and we'd see the flag with the Reichsadler, it was another "bad flag". Obviously, I wasn't ever told much about the Holocaust itself, but I was made aware that these flags were bad because there was some ideology which was anti-Semitic behind these flags.

We also had a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* with a picture of Anne Frank on the spine. I was always intrigued by that picture, so when I was seven, my father borrowed a picture book about Anne Frank from the library for me to read. Instantly, I was dragged into the world of anti-Semitism, and I was intrigued. I read every single book I could possibly find on Anne Frank and the Holocaust.

I was eight when I found out my grandfather's story and read it at the Yom HaShoah event in 2011. I continued to read and read and read all about the Holocaust, simultaneously, exploring Holocaust fiction and finding out about my other family's experiences.

So when I found out about March of the Living, I knew I had to go.

Before we left, we had a Shabbaton in Melbourne with the other Australian participants. There we learnt more about the Holocaust, and discussed how we felt about partaking in such an intense experience, as well as bonding with each other and getting to know each other better.

As soon as Pesach finished, we were off to Poland to meet our group – five Australians, two Kiwis and seventeen Americans – and we were thrown into the deep end straight away.

On our first day, we went to Jewish Cemetery, Warsaw, a cemetery which had been in use since three hundred years before the Holocaust. Currently there are over three hundred thousand bodies buried there – over two thirds of which are as a result of the Holocaust. Due to the rapid level of deaths during the Holocaust, especially in Poland, there wasn't enough time to organise funerals for each person, so rather than having one grave for each person, they dug up three giant pits and buried seventy thousand bodies in each of them. This was extremely confronting, understanding the fact that all of these people who were murdered are anonymous, and we will never know who they were or anything about them. We also explored a lot of Warsaw Ghetto, and we were yelled at by a Polish man for "trespassing" on where he was living, which was actually quite a significant part of the Ghetto. We didn't enter his house or property – it was part of a complex of houses which is open to the public for the exact reason of learning about the Holocaust. Evidently, anti-Semitism also still exists in Poland.

Even though Warsaw Ghetto was intense for the first day, the next few days became progressively more intense. On our second day we went to the Lopochova Forest in Tykocin. Again, there were three giant pits, except the people there were marched to the pits in rows of five and shot dead into the pits – there were no survivors. It was a really bizarre feeling walking there with an Israeli flag, to the very place where no Jews survived, yet I left as a Jew. The trees also have a reddish tinge to the bark, and some people say that it's because of the amount of blood that was in the ground that spread into the roots of the trees. Later that day we went to Treblinka, a concentration camp which was destroyed by the Nazis to eliminate evidence of its existence. It was deep into a forest and there was nobody around to stop the atrocities that occurred there due to the obliviousness of the public of the goings on there. Due to the lack of remains and proof there, it was hard to imagine the deaths that occurred. There were a number of memorials and dedications to the Holocaust there like an abstract sculpture of train tracks and stones of various sizes with the names of Jewish towns on them.

Day three for me was definitely the hardest. In the morning we went to a synagogue in Lublin, where I was asked to lead a service, which felt amazing. Then we went to Majdanek, where only a third of the people murdered there were Jewish. The camp was initially intended for Poles and socialists, but eventually expanded to Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and disabled people. It was in a highly populated metropolitan area and people were riding through it on their bikes. No one could ever guess from looking at it from the outside today, that anything bad ever happened there. But during the Holocaust, it would have been pretty obvious, with the smells of gas and cremation and the sounds of screaming and gun shots, it would have been very difficult – practically impossible – to not have known, so anyone claiming that they did not know what was going on, would have been more than certainly lying. Majdanek is huge and has dozens of barracks. Each barrack was accessible and contained information and artefacts about and from the time Majdanek was used as an extermination camp, such as shoes and bunks. One thing

which was so bizarre to me was the black soil, which was coloured by human ash and will take a thousand years to return to its original state, which had yellow flowers growing out of it. It was odd to me how life could grow out of people's deaths, but at the same time, the concept is quite beautiful. The gas chambers were difficult to be in because of the scratch marks and it almost felt as though you could hear and see everything that happened. The crematorium was also quite traumatic because the ovens looked like one in which you would cook a pizza. The heat of the ovens was used as the heat source for a sauna which the Nazis sat in while they waited for the bodies to be completely burnt to ash. The end of Majdanek is a huge mound of ash, which would have been thousands and thousands and thousands of bodies. And it wasn't all of the ash either. A lot of it was used as fertiliser and has been spread around all over the camp, as well as has been placed in a memorial statue.

Day four was the day of the March. We had a tour of Auschwitz, which was also quite intense, seeing the shoes and hair and possessions, which are a superficial legacy for these people. When the March started, there was an immense amount of pride we felt. We marched from Auschwitz to Birkenau and we met Jews from around the world, and we all marched in solidarity. Our unification and leaving Auschwitz alive was the best revenge we could ever have on Hitler and the Nazis as a people. The ceremony was huge and honoured the Greek Jews, who very few people know about in terms of the Holocaust. The Head Priest of the Greek Catholic Church spoke and we heard from many speakers. It was amazing and surreal to be where so many people were ruthlessly murdered, but to be alive there and celebrate being alive and commemorating them. On Day five, we heard the Head Cantor of the IDF sing at a synagogue which had been burnt down. We also went to Plaszow which was just a memorial at the front of the camp.

Israel was incredible as well. We went to Yad VaShem and Har Herzl and were there for Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'Atzma'ut. Hearing the siren and seeing everyone stop everything and just listen and pay their respects to their soldiers was absolutely mind-blowing. We met Israeli kids our own age who have to fight in a year or so, and that was so confronting, knowing that they have to fight for us, but we don't have to. It really put life in perspective for me. Yom Ha'Atzma'ut was so much fun. We partied on the Kinneret and did our second March through Jerusalem, again, unifying, but in our homeland. I did have a couple of bad experiences at the Kotel though. I went to pray in a tallit – which women are allowed to do – and I was also carrying my siddur, which is the same siddur as the one we use here at NSTE, and one of the workers told me that reform Judaism is bad and that I was practicing the wrong type of Judaism.

While I could stay here and talk about my experience for hours, I think that it's important that we accept everyone for who they are, so we don't create hate between Jews because that gives non-Jews the prerogative to do the same thing. What I saw was real. The Holocaust happened. It wasn't exaggerated and as Jews we have responsibility to not only remember those lives that were lost, but also carry on the Jewish flame and visit these places, but also spread awareness. People need to know that the Holocaust happened. It cannot be forgotten. I have come out of this experience with a much bigger sense of Jewish pride as well as a new found responsibility for ensuring that we keep their memory and legacy alive forever, as well as Israel.

Shabbat Shalom.