

Stockton Study Tour Shaped by Lives of Local Holocaust Survivors on Trip to European Sites

Stories of Victims, Survivors and Meeting Rescuers Inspire Students

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Contact: Maryjane Briant
News and Media Relations Director
Galloway Township, NJ 08205
Maryjane.Briant@stockton.edu
(609) 652-4593

Galloway Township, NJ -The past lives of local Holocaust survivors and their families shaped this summer's Study Tour, taking a group of 46 from The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey to sites in Poland, Lithuania and Germany.

The students, faculty and others explored Vilnius, Lithuania with Holocaust survivor Donald Berkman of Margate, who was 3 when he escaped from the ghetto to the forests of Lithuania with his mother. They were constantly on the move, sometimes sheltering in root cellars and barns, and living for over two years on potatoes, bread, and even grass.

Second-generation Holocaust survivor Gert Novin of Margate found records of where her family had lived both before and after they were forced into the Vilna Ghetto in Vilnius. The group explored the areas where her mother and grandparents had lived, accompanying Novin and her husband, former Atlantic County Assemblyman Ed Kline, on the journey.

The tour visited the Warsaw Ghetto, the Museum of Jewish History and other sites in Poland before exploring the Treblinka memorial with Dr. Michael Berenbaum, a world-renowned scholar and author who is the former project director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. The group saw four Nazi death camps in all.

The wall at Belzec, a concentration camp in southeastern Poland, lists the first names and family names, in Hebrew, of Jewish people killed there. "Belzec was the most powerful memorial I've ever been to," said Gail Rosenthal, director of The Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center at Stockton, which sponsored the trip.

"Having Dr. Berenbaum as our guide, who is the prime consultant and chief curator of the Belzec Memorial, was a privilege," said Rosenthal.

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Nicholas Hitzel, a Computer Science major minoring in Holocaust and Genocide Studies from Weymouth Township, NJ was among the 28 undergraduates and nine graduate students earning credit on the Study Tour.

Hitzel came to Holocaust and Genocide Studies after he took a Holocaust course and realized that much of what he was learning would help in his career goal: developing video games that tell life stories.

He said he has focused a lot on children of the Holocaust and the games they played. These were “a big source of therapy for them under stress,” he said, and also introduced them to some tools of survival, by making looking for food into a game, for instance.

Visiting the orphanage founded in Warsaw before the war by Janus Korczak was an eye-opener. The orphanage is still operating and includes a memorial site, one of several the group visited.

Korczak was an important pediatrician in Poland, and he stayed with the children rather than escape the Nazis when he had the chance, Hitzel explained. “He went to Treblinka,” he said.

Treblinka, the death camp in Poland, deeply affected members of the study tour.

“I couldn’t hold back my tears,” said Irvin O. Moreno-Rodriguez, a Ventnor, NJ resident. “That was the first time I’ve cried in years.”

Moreno-Rodriguez, a Criminal Justice Major minoring in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, noticed a change in his responses this time, compared with his previous 2010 Holocaust Study Tour to Germany, when he accompanied two local Holocaust survivors.

“The first time I came to learn, the second time, I came to feel,” he said.

Dorene Sellarole, a Master of Holocaust and Genocide Studies graduate who volunteers at The Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center, was on her third Study Tour. This time was different, she said, because she wasn’t in a class.

“I could relax and listen in a different way,” she said. “I watched the students learning - I saw people ‘get it’ and that was incredible.”

In addition to the Master’s program, more than 1,000 Stockton undergraduates take courses in Holocaust and Genocide Studies each year.

Support for the Study Tour came from the Office of Global Engagement, which received funding designated by President Saatkamp for international study. Other funding came from the Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, College Foundation scholarships and an anonymous donor, said Rosenthal.

Berkman and his wife, Nan, who was on the trip along with his sister, Riva, have established the Joseph Berkman and Michael & Sarah Chipkin Holocaust Award at Stockton, providing scholarships to matriculated students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Holocaust and Genocide Studies program. The scholarship award honors the heroism and memory of Berkman’s mother, Sarah Chipkin, who hid him in the woods and the memories of Joseph Berkman, Donald’s father, and Michael Chipkin, Donald’s stepfather.

Dr. Michael Hayse, associate professor of Historical Studies and also a group leader, said part

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of the Study Tour focused on the rescuers, such as Marion Golebiowski, 94, whom the students met while visiting Poland.

Dr. Hayse said another interesting aspect of the tour is “life after - how these countries have dealt with it and continue to struggle with the past.”

Dr. Hayse said the group met with the chief rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, an American who is part of a rebirth of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe.

“In Wroclaw, Poland, we met with Katka Reszke, who grew up Catholic and later discovered her family was Jewish and had hidden it” to escape persecution, Hayse said. Reszke and her fiancé, both New Yorkers, are reconnecting with their Jewish roots. They plan to be married in Wroclaw, “the first Jewish marriage in the synagogue there since the war,” Dr. Hayse said.

This tentative revival of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe is small and not without controversy, Rosenthal said. “A number of Jewish Americans have moved to Lithuania and elsewhere to help with the revival,” she said, but others think the history of persecution is too great to start anew in the same old places.

The Study Tour included moments of stark reflection, contrasted with the physical beauty of some towns and the inspiring stories of victims, survivors and rescuers.

“It wasn’t all sadness and death the whole time” said Hitzel. “It was a good balance,” Sellarole agreed.

“I find it important that we got to go with Holocaust survivors,” Sellarole said. “We don’t know how long we’ll be able to do this.

“I feel lucky to be witnessing history with people who were there.”

For more information and photos, visit: <http://studytour14.tumblr.com>

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