Encounters with the Holocaust
Memories from study abroad in Berlin

By: Mark Davis, Weinberg '16

As we walked down the hallway towards the exhibit, the clanging grew louder and louder. Our tour guide, Tommaso Speccher, challenged us over the din to take part in the exhibit.

“If you do it, think about it – why, why would he want you to walk on the faces of the survivors?”

We turned left to see a long, cavernous room with cold concrete walls. On the floor, we saw a layer of thick metal plates cut like masks with eyes, noses, and mouths – mouths open in screams. The floor was open for visitors to walk across, hence the clamor we heard in the hallway.

A few of us chose to walk; others, overwhelmed by the exhibit, stood to the side.

Bill Hoover (Weinberg '15) looked on, pensive, then slowly lowered his head.

In an interview a few minutes later, Hoover described it as “like the most demented musical instrument you could ever hear.” He paused, before reflecting almost in disbelief, “just stepping on their faces.”

Shalechet

This exhibit, Menashe Kardishman’s “Shalechet (fallen leaves),” resides in the Jewish Museum Berlin. Ten thousand loose metal disks, carved as faces, coat the ground for visitors to walk across. According to art historian Ulrich Schneider, the installation “involves the observer as an active culprit who is obliged to walk over the heads” to personally connect visitors with Holocaust history. The installation forces visitors to interact with symbolic memorials of the individuals and their suffering, and by the extreme discomfort of doing so, makes it personal for each visitor.

I encountered this exhibit while participating in Northwestern IPD’s “Berlin: Global City in the Center of Europe” Summer program in 2013. Seventeen undergraduate students from Northwestern and one from the University of Chicago traveled to Berlin to take courses taught by Northwestern faculty and by professors at the local Humboldt Universität. Beyond that, we engaged in a foreign culture, traveled, made friends – and perhaps most of all, made memories.

I had a familiarity with the country unique within our group. My father was in the U.S. Air Force; while I was in high school we were assigned to a base in rural southern Germany. Regrettably, after three years in the country, I barely learned the language.

For most students, the trip to Berlin was exposure to a new country; for me, it was a second chance to engage with my second home. What amazed me most, though, was how much I realized I still had to learn.

Challenging Memories

In Berlin, the lessons I found about the darker side of German history stand out to me as especially vivid. Although the program was incredibly fun and positive, reminders of Berlin’s painful past were scattered throughout our program just like their memorials are throughout the city.

Our encounters with the Holocaust brought a unique weight to the program. For a long time, I wondered why they moved me more than our study of Soviet-era East Germany. Both periods in German history are remembered for atrocities committed and heroic resistance. Why should one seem more powerful than the other?

Something about the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Buchenwald concentration camp seemed to contain the answer. Our group visited these two engaging and powerful places, and they made the Jewish-German struggle personal to us.

Both the interviews I conducted and my personal experience support the idea that these places uniquely moved us to connect with history, making them among the most valuable experiences – although also the most painful – in our program.

The Jewish Museum Berlin

The museum’s jagged, angular construction, designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, mirrors its challenging, non-traditional approach to documenting Jewish-German history.

By: Mark Davis, Weinberg ‘16

Above: From left to right, Linnea Heichelheim (Bienen ’15), Dawn Scotland (SESP ’14), and Bill Hoover (Weinberg ’15) listen to tour guide Tommaso Speccher in the Jewish Museum Berlin.

Background image: The Buchenwald crematorium, from the outside.
The three intersecting hallways of the building represent the "axes" of Jewish life in Germany – German history, emigration, and the Holocaust. These axes guide visitors to a mix of art galleries, multimedia exhibits, and interactive installations. Empty "void" spaces wait in between the building's twisting lines. Visitors cannot enter most; Shalechet fills the only one they can.

The Holocaust axis dead-ends into the Holocaust Tower, a tall concrete structure, neither heated nor cooled, with a single hole near the top for light. The tower's inside isn't claustrophobic, but it still gives visitors a feeling of being trapped.

Immediately after leaving the tower, Zach Elvove (Weinberg '16) commented, "that room is enough to make you feel it – the temperature being cold enough, the darkness with the little bit of light, the ladder to nowhere... that tells you exactly what it was like."

**Buchenwald**

We visited the Buchenwald concentration camp halfway into our trip, in what proved perfect timing. Had we gone any sooner, we would not have been prepared for what we saw.

Entering the camp, the iron gate reads "Jedem das Seine" – literally, “to each his own.” But as Michael Dreyer, professor at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena and a former Northwestern professor, explained, "the slogan... was meant to convey religious tolerance... here it was totally cynical, of course, telling the prisoners 'this is exactly what you deserved.'"

Professor Dreyer guided us through the camp. A vast field, its ground marked with massive squares of brick, is all that remains of the rows of barracks. Across it, visitors can see the old guard house, now a museum.

But to the right, visitors can also see the telltale smokestacks of the crematorium.

In the crematorium, Professor Dreyer showed us the wall against which prisoners stood to have their height measured – and the slot behind it through which they were shot.

We walked through a medical examination room and found ourselves in a plain, unassuming room. After a moment, we realized it was a gas chamber.

In the next room, in between two of the cremation furnaces, a concrete slab had become a makeshift memorial. Cards, flowers, and candles covered it. Several members of our group stopped by it, kneeling. None of us had been so moved at any other memorial.

In that moment I had the feeling none of us would again.

**Homecoming**

At the end of the program, no matter how much we wanted to stay, we had to come home. That speaks to an inherent irony of study abroad; it means moving somewhere for an extended period knowing you may come to love it, yet also knowing that your days there are numbered.

That may be what made the Jewish Museum Berlin and Buchenwald so moving. We came to Germany in the dual role of visitors and students, seeking to grow as much as possible in nine weeks. We wanted memories.

But when I think of how I grew, the memories that come to mind are of the stunned looks on my fellow students’ faces as they stepped out of former gas chambers. The memories that come to mind are quiet hallway interviews as we struggled to grasp how it must have felt to survive genocide.

The memories that come to mind are those of challenging myself to face some of the darkest chapters in human history.

These places challenged us like nothing else had – to face history personally, to consider the lives behind the faces of the dead, to walk where they lived and died. I feel the power of the Jewish Museum Berlin and Buchenwald, for us, came in that challenge.

We learned to connect history in the books to history as it was lived in a way only study abroad can – going there. Coming home, we learned that those encounters will stay with us as reminders of our connection to history – no matter where we go or what we do from here.

--Mark Davis is a current sophomore in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences studying Psychology and Media Studies.