

Poland Mission: A Life-Changing Experience

BY SARAH FUCHS

HAFTR High School's first annual Abraham Scharf, z'l, **HAFTR** Poland Mission took place in late March. Rabbi Oppen, Rabbi Hubner, Ms. Shira Oppen, Yehuda Moseson (tour organizer), Dr. Marvin Wertentheil, a Polish tour guide, and two security guards, escorted seniors Max Borgen, Sara Cherson, Corey Friedman, Joseph Greenstein, Riana Harari, Amanda Kanefsky, Jenna Kaufman, Eli Kleinworm, Daniel Margareten, Jesse Margareten, Stacie Michael, Lauren Planko, Gabriella Shimon, Jaimee Schwartz, Blosson Soifer, and me on an unforgettable journey.

We landed in Poland in the morning on March 31 and went straight to the Rama shul in Krakow, the oldest shul in Poland today. The place where the chazzan stands has a little ditch. In *Tehillim*, we say, "Mima'amakim k'rati-cha Hashem"—from the depths we call

out to you, Hashem. The Rama believed that you need to call from the depths of your soul, as well as physically. In the Rama cemetery, we said *Tehillim* and *davened* at the graves of the *Megaleh Amukos*, *Tosfos Yom Tov*, and Yossele the Miser.

Yossele the Miser was a wealthy man who refused to share his money with anyone. When he died, the townspeople buried him in the corner of the cemetery, a place reserved for paupers and other social outcasts. A week after his death, all of the poor people in the town went to the rabbi in search of money because the anonymous benefactor who had been assisting them had suddenly stopped giving money. The rabbi realized that Yossele was the source of this *tzedakah* and was a great man. The rabbi told all of the townspeople to go to Yossele's *matzeivah* and beg for forgiveness; the rabbi also added the word "hatzaddik" to his *matzeivah*. The *Tosfos*



Yom Tov said that he wanted to be buried next to Yossele the *Tzaddik*, and he is indeed buried next to him in the back of the cemetery.

We then visited the JCC of Krakow in the Jewish Quarter. The JCC is new and thriving with classes for children, teenagers, and the elderly. We saw the

remaining wall of the Krakow Ghetto and the pharmacy where the pharmacist risked his own life to bring medication to the Jews in the ghetto. The Jewish Deportation Holocaust Memorial consists of steel chairs lined up in rows. Each chair represents 1,000 victims of the Nazi terrors. The chairs are lined up sparsely in an open field to represent the feeling of emptiness. The Jews were a major part of the community, and many Poles realize it.

We saw the building where Sarah Schenirer created Bais Yaakov, school for young women to learn Torah. We walked from Bais Yaakov past the Castle to the New Square. While walking around the New Square, we discovered some markets. Proprietors were selling little figurines of Jews with big noses holding zloty coins. It hurt to see how outright and blatant some of the Polish people are about their feelings toward the Jews. When we got back to the hotel, we all sat in a circle and reflected on our day, *davened Ma'ariv*, ate dinner, and rested up for another long day.

The following day, we went to Auschwitz and Birkenau. Walking through the gate that stated "Arbeit Macht Frei"—work brings freedom—felt surreal. Jews walked through that exact same gate terrified and unknowing of the fate that awaited them. Adorned in an Israeli flag, I felt as though I was representing the strength and perseverance of the Jewish people. Auschwitz has a book of the names of 4.2 million of the six million Jews who were killed during the Holocaust and what happened to them. Seeing the pages upon pages of individuals who had lives, families, and jobs made the concept of each of these names representing an individual more tangible. In Auschwitz, we went to the Death Wall where thousands of Jews were shot. We said *Tehillim* and *Kaddish* and lit candles that we placed in the shape of a *Magen David*.

In Birkenau, we saw where the Jews were housed. We saw the bunk beds and the rows of "toilets," or long rows of marble with holes cut into it. We were told that the 30 seconds that the Jews had to use the bathroom was the highlight of their day. A major part of Judaism is a sense of community and this bathroom break gave the Jews a chance to catch up with the person sitting next to them.

Standing next to a memorial and a pond that still contains the ashes of Jews whose bodies were burned, Rabbi



Oppen made a *siyum* on *Masechet Pesachim* in honor of Abraham Scharf, z'l, and in memory of the six million martyrs. We sang *Hatikvah* to show the hope that we have as a Jewish nation to continue on and we sang *V'hi She'Amadah* because the *v'hi* represents Judaism. The *vav* is the six orders of the *Mishnah*, the *hey* is the five books of the Torah, the *yud* is the Ten Commandments, and the *aleph* is one, which represents Hashem as our one G-d (*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem echad*, which were the last words uttered by the martyrs).

Though we didn't realize it at the time, we were told that as we were walking back to the entrance, some Polish teenagers threw rocks at some who were wearing Israeli flags. Anti-Semitism and hate is still alive in Birkenau.

Next, we went to Ropczyce and then Lancut, where we visited the grave of Rabbi Naftali of Ropczyce. We also visited Lizhensk, where the Noam Elimelech is buried. We went to the house in which **HAFTR** parent Josh Wanderer's parents had lived before the war. Walking through the town at night with the narrow streets and no streetlights was scary. I could not even imagine how the Jews felt on those exact same streets, running for their lives. That is when the entire trip hit me and we walked with our arms linked together. We went back to the hotel and reflected on our day.

On Wednesday, we saw Majdanek, a small concentration camp. The Poles lived, and currently live, right next to the camp. They watched the Jews being marched through their towns, forced to work or be killed, and did absolutely nothing. Their silence is almost as bad as the acts committed by the Germans. When we walked through the showers and gas chambers, we saw the bright blue stains on the walls from the Zyklon B rat poison that was used to kill the Jews. The poison, though not deadly anymore, still remains on the walls at that spot where so many of our brothers and sisters were gassed. We recited *Tehillim*.

In the barracks, there were exhibits that showed where the Jews came from, the blue and white striped pajamas that the Jews wore, and what the Jews brought with them. There was one barrack filled top to bottom with shoes. These shoes were taken from the Jews when they were told they would be "taking showers." We discussed the value of shoes and how the

Germans were trying to make the Jews feel as though they were the absolute lowest animals who did not matter. There is a monument with the ashes of Jews whose bodies were burned in the ovens. We made another *siyum* and Yehuda Moseson, our tour organizer, said *Kaddish* in memory of his grand-

father who was killed in Majdanek. We also said *Kel Maleh* and sang the *Hatikvah* and *V'hi She'Amadah*.

After an emotional morning, we went to the Chochmei Lublin Yeshiva, whose *rosh yeshiva*, Rabbi Meir Shapiro, initiated the *daf yomi* program. Dr. Marvin Wertentheil, our doctor, made a *siyum* on *Masechet Sukkah*. He has completed the *daf yomi* cycle three times. A group of girls from seminary and a group of Israeli boys joined our *siyum*. Having a large group of Zionist Jews in the heart of Poland all taking part in a *siyum* showed that no matter how hard a people can try and eliminate us, we are strong and cannot be silenced or destroyed.

We visited the cemetery in Lublin, where we *davened* at the *kever* of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, the Chozeh of Lublin. Then we went to the town of Kotzk and visited the *kever* of Rabbi Menachem Mendel (Halperin) Morgenstern of Kotzk. He believed in being true to yourself and your Judaism, nothing fake. This is a statement that I, as well as others, stand by and can

identify with. After a long day, we all reflected, *davened Ma'ariv*, and went to sleep.

We began our last day in Poland in Treblinka. The Germans bombed this death camp in the midst of the forest to hide the terrors that they committed there. Now there is a model of what Treblinka is believed to have looked like based on the testimony of two escapees and pictures that a Nazi took in an album called "A Beautiful Time." There is a monument of stone with names of cities that were destroyed by the Germans engraved on it. We learned *Mishnayot* and said *Kel Maleh, Kaddish, Hatikvah*, and *V'hi She'Amadah* in memory of those hundreds of thousands of Jews who perished there.

We returned to Warsaw where we saw the two remaining parts of the ghetto wall. This wall kept thousands of Jews detained in very close quarters. These walls were attached to apartment buildings. Poles live in these apartments and see these walls on

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a daily basis, and yet may not think twice about it. Even while we were standing there, an elderly lady opened her window and told us to move away. Rabbi Oppen told the story of his wife's step-grandfather who would sneak out of the ghetto, get supplies, and sneak back in. One time, while he was going back under the wall, he was caught by the Germans. They held on to his legs outside of the ghetto while his Jewish friends were pulling his arms inside of the ghetto. The Germans whipped his legs and eventually his Jewish brothers were able to pull him in and hid him before the Germans came around and found them.

We visited the Umschlagplatz of the Warsaw Ghetto. Here, the Germans gathered Jews for deportation to Treblinka. The memorial symbolizes an open freight car and has the most common Jewish names of the time engraved on it. Down the block is where the Warsaw Ghetto uprising occurred. There

are two monuments in honor of these brave souls who decided to stand up, fight, and do everything they could against the Nazis' terrors.

The last stop on our trip was the Warsaw Cemetery. There are 350,000 Jews buried there, including many *gedolim* such as the *Netziv*, Rabbi Soloveitchik, and the *Amshinover*, *Slonimer*, and *Biala Rebbes*. We lit candles, said *Tehillim*, and *davened* to Hashem for their *neshamot* to have an *aliyah* and to be *meilitzet yosher* for us, our families, and *Klal Yisrael*. We then concluded our trip and went to the airport.

Our mission to Poland was a life-changing experience. A huge *hakarot hatov* goes to Mr. and Mrs. Marty and Melody Scharf for sponsoring this trip and giving us a chance to connect with our past and influence our present and future. On the wall of Auschwitz it says, "The one who does not remember is bound to live through it again" (George Santayana). After this trip and seeing everything with our own eyes, we will never forget, nor will we allow others to forget. ♦