

Berlin, Prague and Poland – 2014

By Jules Bernstein '57

Linda's and my trip from April 29 to May 9, 2014, to Berlin, Prague and Poland was quite extraordinary. The idea of the trip began for us when we received a notice from my alma mater, Brandeis University, that it had put a trip together to Poland for about 25 alumni and University friends to explore Holocaust- and Jewish-related issues in Poland. Brandeis President Fred Lawrence originally had proposed the trip, and he and his wife, Kathy, would lead it along with Brandeis Professor Antony Polonsky who wrote a three-volume history of the Jews of Russia and Poland. Polonsky, born in South Africa in 1940, has had a distinguished academic career and is about to retire from his Brandeis professorship.

It occurred to Linda and me that we ought to make the most of being in Europe, so we worked out an itinerary that took us first to Berlin for about five days, Prague for three and then to Warsaw, where we met up with the Brandeis group and spent four days touring, including the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. Linda and I then flew to New York on Friday, May 9, to attend our cousin Walter Goldberg's Bar Mitzvah in Brooklyn.

Linda and I had never been to any of the places on our itinerary so we didn't know exactly what to expect. My own expectations for Berlin were ominous considering that for 12 years it had been command headquarters for Hitler's Third Reich and the Holocaust for which it was responsible. As a child growing up in Brooklyn between 1941 and 1945 (I was 6 to 10), the Nazis and Germans, as depicted in American popular culture, the press and radio, and as referred to at home, were the incarnation of evil to young Jewish and all other American children and people. Later, Berlin was the site of the Berlin Wall, put up by the Russians in 1961 to separate divided East and West Berlin and prevent East Berliners from escaping to the West. The Wall famously "fell" in 1989, and the Cold War between Soviet Russia and the West ended as Soviet Communism collapsed.

Like many Jews, I previously had had no desire to visit Germany because of its

war crimes. Still, I was curious, and had heard and read good and interesting things about Berlin more recently, including its “must-see” Holocaust Memorial and Jewish Museum. Also, our son, Michael, had been there on an investigative assignment a couple of years ago and had been impressed. I also realized that Hitler’s Germany, despite the incredible damage it had done to the Jewish people and millions of others, including more than 8 million Russian soldiers, and millions of other soldiers and civilians, lasted only a few years out of Germany’s long and eventful history. And anti-Nazi leaders like Socialist Willy Brandt, the German chancellor from 1969 to 1974, had been heroes of mine.

As for the Czech Republic, it had achieved independence and democracy after World War I under its great leader, Thomas Masaryk, as a result of actions taken at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. But it had been gobbled up by Hitler 20 years later, in 1938, after he met with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin, who declared when he returned to London from Munich that he had “achieved peace in our time.” Soon thereafter Hitler attacked and quickly conquered Poland in September 1940, and World War II began, although the United States did not enter the war until after Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

After World War II, Soviet Russia moved in and made Czechoslovakia a satellite country (we called it a “captive nation”). The Soviets crushed a revolt by the Czechs in 1968 by sending their tanks into Prague to put down the insurrection. It was not until the fall of Soviet Communism by its own anti-democratic and bureaucratic weight in 1989, and the Czech “Velvet Revolution” led by Czech playwright and later President Václav Havel that Czechoslovakia regained its independence and democracy. Later, in 1993, Czechoslovakia peacefully was split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Poland also fell behind the “Iron Curtain” after World War II and became a Soviet satellite. It was the struggle of the Polish shipyard workers of Gdansk; their union, Solidarity; and its leader, Lech Walesa, beginning in 1980, that resulted in Poland’s restoration of democracy and independence in 1989.

Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland together had been home to millions of Jews over a thousand years, and while Jewish existence in Europe seems generally

to have been precarious at best, and while Jews suffered varying degrees of discrimination, persecution and hostility throughout, their contribution to the culture and quality of life of their "host" nations had been extraordinary. Indeed, in Germany in the 19th and early 20th century, Jews had been integral and influential members of German society, although they accounted for less than one percent of the German population of about 65 million in 1933 when Hitler came to power (for more, see Amos Elon, "The Pity of it All"). For example, in 1933 more than half of the 3,400 lawyers in Berlin were Jews. When Hitler took power, they were prohibited from practicing law. In Poland on the other hand, the number of Jews in 1933 was about 3 million out of a population of 33 million. Today, the population of Germany is about 80 million, Poland 40 million and the Czech Republic 10 million. The combined Jewish population of all three countries today is less than 150,000, with most in Germany. In contrast, the Jewish populations of the United States and Israel today are each about 6 million.

Thus, to see the places where Jewish civilization had once flourished (even though Linda's and my forebears had come from further east, namely Russia and Ukraine) was irresistible. We sought to discover how the departure of the Jews from Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland, either by the great waves of emigration to the New World and Israel in the 19th and 20th centuries, or by the mass extermination of European Jews by the Nazis, affected Europe, when a group that had been an important part of prewar European life disappeared but the memory of the Holocaust lingered.

Berlin

For the five days Linda and I spent in Berlin, we were aided by two excellent guides for three days and toured by ourselves for the other two. Berlin is a very large, vibrant and most beautiful city, which was rebuilt after WWII because of the heavy aerial bombings by the allies and the Battle of Berlin when the Russian troops arrived and attacked. The weather was perfect while we were there. The temperature was in the 60s and low 70s. Berlin is clean, modern and uncrowded despite the large number of tourists and citizens. It appears to be most livable and congenial. The Germans we met were gracious and welcoming. There are about 3 million Berliners.

We saw a great deal, but I will focus on the three most impressive Holocaust-related sites that we saw with our guide, Burkhard Heyl, a Berliner whose main occupation is as a stage and screen actor but who doubles as a guide. He was recommended to us by our friend Susan Goldart. The three sites in question are the Holocaust Memorial, the Jewish Museum and something called Track 17. It is worth mentioning that Burkhard is not Jewish but his grandfather had been a pacifist who had been arrested in the early 1940s by the Nazis for distributing anti-war leaflets and had been in a concentration camp for political prisoners until the end of the war. His grandfather survived but had been physically and emotionally destroyed, and he never spoke again.

The Holocaust Memorial covers a huge expanse in the center of Berlin right near the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, Unter Den Linden (Berlin's Champs-Elysees) and the American Embassy. There is a visitor center below. You can see photos of the Memorial on Wikipedia. It was designed by American architect Peter Eisenman, who won a competition conducted by the German government, which erected it.

For me, the Memorial was as stark a statement of apology, contrition, shame, remorse and regret as is imaginable. I know that others (including Eisenman) have described and analyzed it in many ways, but for me it stands as a true memorial to the Jewish victims of the Third Reich erected by a people whose sad legacy it is to have to face and publicly admit in the middle of their capital that their government and many of their people were enlisted into, and participated in, the most massive evil enterprise for terror and inhumanity that was ever conceived and implemented by man in human history. I believe that it took great courage for the German people to commission and erect it. However, I think that it was rightfully criticized for being limited to memorializing the Jewish victims of Nazism since the Third Reich also systematically killed the physically and mentally disabled; Gypsies and gays; its political opponents, including 80 members of the German parliament; and many other groups. Memorials to several of these groups also have been erected.

Also striking is Daniel Libeskind's extension to the Jewish Museum, which was originally established in 1933 and closed by the Nazis in 1938. A tunnel in the old

museum leads to the new structure. Wikipedia and other web sites depict and describe this remarkable museum and structure better than I could, but let me relate one personal incident that occurred while we were there. As I turned a corner, I saw an exhibit of sketches that looked familiar to me. Looking more closely, I realized that they were the work of a Jewish artist and illustrator known as Fritta, who had been interned at the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. He was not killed immediately because he worked as an illustrator for the Nazis while in the camp. Secretly, however, he did illustrations of camp scenes, which were on display at the museum. He was killed by the Nazis later. Linda and I had been given a Fritta illustration of a grim-looking slave laborer depicted marching and carrying a shovel over his shoulder. We received it over 30 years ago as a gift from an appreciative union leader client. He had received it as a gift from a woman who had been in the same camp but survived. It had been given to her by Fritta. She hid it in a camp wall and came back and retrieved it after the war ended. Linda and I contributed our piece to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington many years ago.

The third memorial site we saw in Berlin is known as Track 17. It relates to the fact that prior to 1941 the Jews of Berlin had been seriously mistreated by the Nazis, although they were permitted and even urged to leave. Being told to leave your homes and country behind was hardly an act of kindness. However, it proved to be a blessing in disguise. When Hitler came to power early in 1933 there were some 180,000 Jews in Berlin. By 1941, more than half had fled Berlin for what they hoped would be safe harbors. But 70,000 remained. At this point, the Nazis rounded up Jews, and on a weekly basis they would send them from a suburban train station to a place where they were told they would be with friends and family. Indeed the Jews were required to buy their own tickets for their transit. In groups numbering from 60 or 70 to a thousand, they were shipped out by train to many ghettos and concentration camps and most were later liquidated. The railroad recently erected a memorial at the location where the Jews had been shipped out. It consists of metal grates along the tracks that record each of the departure dates between 1941 and 1945, the number of Jewish passengers on each train, and their destinations. It is a site at a still-functioning suburban train station near lovely old homes that is chilling and heartbreaking.

Prague

From Berlin, we traveled for three hours by train to Prague. It can only be described as a beautiful ancient town right out of a fairy tale that needs to be seen to be believed. Endless castles, palaces and museums can be viewed for miles from various locations high above the city, including our hotel. It was the capital of the Holy Roman and Hapsburg empires. It was not bombed or shelled during WWII so it did not have to be rebuilt after the war like Berlin and Warsaw.

As for the Jews, they appear to have begun arriving in Prague in 970 and lived to be victimized there by pogroms, crusades and expulsions over the centuries. A brief but interesting synopsis of Jewish life in Prague can be found at the website of the Virtual Jewish Library. We visited ancient synagogues there that had been untouched by the Nazis during their occupation of Czechoslovakia because they wished to preserve artifacts of the Jews as an extinct people that had once existed. In one such synagogue, there were painted on the walls the names of approximately 80,000 Czech Jews who had perished at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. The family of Madeleine Albright was included. As we left the museum-synagogue, we entered an ancient Jewish cemetery in which the gravestones were so crowded, old and worn that they were unreadable. To me, however, the gravestones represented Jews of Prague who had at least died of natural causes.

Warsaw and Krakow

After three days of touring Prague, we flew to Warsaw, where we met up with our congenial Brandeis fellow travelers. With two guides from an Israeli company that had organized the logistics of trip, we numbered about 30. To say that we hit the ground running is an understatement. The itinerary of the trip had been planned by Professor Polansky and others with incredible knowledge and insight into what would be most valuable for us to see and do.

Our first stop in Warsaw on our first afternoon was at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is presently unfinished and is scheduled to open in the fall. We met with the museum's program director, who gave us an illuminating guided tour of this ambitious and impressive project. Professor Polonsky has played a

significant role in the museum's development, as he has with many of the other places we went and things we saw. At all of our subsequent lunches and dinners, whether in Warsaw or Krakow, we met and heard from leading academicians, diplomats, NGO officials and others who focused our discussions on the past and future of Jewish life and culture in Poland and efforts to improve Polish-Jewish relations. In our travels in Warsaw and later Krakow, we visited many sites, including the former site of the Warsaw Ghetto, the amazing Oskar Schindler Factory Museum, ancient synagogues and cemeteries, and even a restored synagogue-museum in the town of Auschwitz, which was established by an American Jew named Fred Schwartz who once was known in TV commercials as "Fred the Furrier." Schwartz more recently has established an Institute for Genocide Prevention. The director of the Auschwitz synagogue foundation is Tomasz Kuncewicz, a former Brandeis student of Professor Polonsky.

On our last day in Poland, we traveled by bus from Krakow to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex and spent several incredible hours there. During the one-hour bus ride, Professor Polonsky delivered an extemporaneous lecture on the history of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler that was unexcelled. I thought I was back at Brandeis.

As one who has read a fair amount about the camps, I would have to say that no book or documentary is capable of preparing one for the horror of actually being there. It has often been said that the Holocaust can only be approached glancingly. A visit to these two camps is overwhelming and defies description, and I will not try. But a couple of things that surprised me are worth noting. First, the entire complex is funded by the Polish government and is free to the public. At least 1 million people visit each year. And there are about 200 highly trained guides who escort visitors through the complex. Ours was an extremely bright, sensitive and thoughtful Polish young man who knew his subject quite thoroughly, so much so that our two Israeli guides from our travel agency were so impressed that they said they would seek him out in the future. At the conclusion of our visit, we were led in prayer by President Lawrence in memory of the Holocaust's victims.

We were at Auschwitz and Birkenau on a Thursday. The next day, Linda and I flew from Krakow by way of Frankfurt to JFK in New York so that we could

attend the Bar Mitzvah on Saturday of Walter Thurgood Goldberg, the son of our cousins Wesley Weissberg and David Goldberg. To go from two of several 20th century death factories to a family simcha in a lovely synagogue in Brooklyn almost overnight was, to say the least, jarring and unnerving. As I watched and participated in the service, and listened to Walter's inspired Bar Mitzvah speech about debt and its forgiveness in Jubilee years, which related to his haftorah portion from Leviticus, my thoughts went to the contrast between the lives and fortunes of those Jews (like many in the synagogue) whose forebears made the brave decision to leave their European homelands behind and come here, as against their co-religionists and family members who remained behind. And I looked at all the children, and also a baby girl who was being named in the synagogue, and thought about those children and infants who were sent with their parents on a Shabbat to the gas chambers and were then incinerated by their captors. It made me think about how precious our lives are and how we are obligated to those we lost to do the most we can in their memory to make life on this planet better for all.