

My March of the Living Experience May 25, 2012 /
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By Nate Warszawski

A month ago, I came back from history, a time that most of us never knew and never will know or fully understand. I was a witness. I smelled, saw, and touched the Holocaust. With the help of my synagogue, I was privileged with the honor of going on March of the Living. March of the Living is a trip for over 10,000 Jewish teens, Holocaust survivors, and veterans of World War II who meet in Poland to rediscover the horrors of the Holocaust. This is followed by a week in Israel to see the rebirth of the Jewish people and the rebirth of the Holy land.

Let me start from the beginning though. I said when I started that I came back from history. I said this because when we got off the plane it was as if we were no longer in 2012, but I was back in pre-World War II Poland. We went straight from the airport to a tiny Jewish day school. We played games, sat, ate, chatted. It was like a normal day! A great day. After school, we went to the cemetery in Warsaw, the side of the cemetery in the Jewish ghetto. The War had started. The truth is that there is nothing left really of the ghetto besides some really old buildings so to see the ghetto, you had to go to the cemetery. We saw two great depressions in the ground that seemed so out of place... and were. During the War, when the ghetto was up and running, too many people were dying at too quick a rate for the cemetery workers to be able to keep up with the

burials so that everyone got the appropriate burial. So, the Jewish council decided to dig a massive pit and bury the bodies in there. There were three such pits. Each as big as a tennis court, maybe even wider, and each deep enough for two full grown men to stand on top of each other. It was an awful sight. At the same time, the cemetery is also quite a fantastic place. We are a religion of poets. Every tombstone is carved differently. No two are truly the same. There are carvings on the tombstones that tell us more about who the person was. For example, a tzedakah box decorated the tomb of a philanthropist, a mother had her grave decorated with an anchor. It was so cool.... But, I think I'll start getting a move on, I could be here all day giving you details about the cemetery.

What comes next? The cars. The trains. We visited a place called the Unschlagplatz. That is the name of the platform where the Nazis loaded the trains and sent them off to destinations unknown. On the site of the memorial they have a large three walled structure made of marble-like stone. On one wall they have engraved the names of all the people who passed through the station. On it was Meshoulam, Nadav, David, Nataniel. Those are the names of my cousins, father, brother, and the last name, is my own. That was eerie. That was creepy. The next day, we went to Tikochin, a tiny village outside of Bialystok. We walked around and visited the city and saw the Jewish quarter which really is no more. We saw the synagogue which still stands and we saw where they walked when the Germans came for

them. It was a very touching, an indescribable experience. The next three days we spent at the camps. First we went to Treblinka which no longer stands. Treblinka is now the site of memorials at which we placed stones and said Kaddish. At the beginning of the trip each participant was given a name tag and on the back was the story of someone from the Holocaust. Mine was of Albert Florentine, a 12 year old from Yugoslavia who was sent to Treblinka. I said a prayer for his memory when I was there.

Next was Majdanek, this was the most powerful experience of the whole trip. We saw the dome of ashes which contains TONS and I mean tons of ashes. Not just ashes for show, but the real ashes. The same ashes the Nazis tried to hide while scrambling to hide their heinous crimes before the Russians came. My group leader Joel explained to us that it is Jewish tradition that upon someone's death, we try to get them to Israel to be buried, but if that can't be done, we bring Israel to them. That day 42 of us took sand from Israel, land of our ancestors, and spread it over the pile of ashes. That was the most important part of my trip. That was the moment when 6,000,000 went from 6 0 0 0 0 0 0 to Mr. and Mrs. Yakov and Rahel Stein and their daughters. Mr. and Mrs. Shlomo and Rivka Gold and their sons, not just numbers, but real people with real lives.

The next day- Auschwitz. We met in Auschwitz to march. We marched from Auschwitz to Birkenau. We marched from the gates of Hell inscribed with the

words Arbeit Macht frei into hell itself. We marched the same steps my great-grandfather marched. This was followed by a memorial ceremony in memory of the 6,000,000. It was an incredible scene! Can you imagine? Over 10,000 voices reciting Kaddish at once? Over 10,000 voices singing at the top of our lungs the Hatikva? Mind-blowing, breathtaking- and that's an understatement!

After that, we were liberated. We went back to the city, this time Krakow, and tried to resume our daily lives. We went to the famous pharmacy where Tadeusz Pankiewicz worked and that served as a meeting place during life in the ghetto. We saw the plaza where the market was, the river near which the kids played. It was amazing, too. After liberation, we flew to Tel Aviv. We arrived to the port of Tel Aviv and more importantly the door to the Promised Land. After touring old Yaffo, we went to spend the day in Jerusalem. That was fun. Jerusalem is always fun. I love Jerusalem. We then went to the Kineret where we went on a disco boat. Hehe that was FUN! But the party mood changed on our way back to Jerusalem when we stopped for Yom Ha Zikaron. On memorial day here, we host a big shindig with barbeques and parties, but not in Israel. In Israel, air raid alarms sound for two minutes. And during those two minutes, all, and I mean ALL of Israel stops. Drivers stop their cars, kids stop playing in the parks, people stop their work. Everything stands still. And the whole country is quiet for two minutes. It was awesome. Not in the sense like "awesome dude!!!" but literally- awesome. We then went to

Jerusalem for the next big highlight, the march from Safra Square, the Wall Street of Israel, to the Kotel. Imagine: a week earlier, 10,000 teens walked from Auschwitz to Birkenau. Now one week later, 10,000 teens are meeting in Safra square, we listen to a concert with amazing Jewish music (what beats a good dance of Hava nagilah with your closest buds from New Zealand?) and then continue to dance and make our way to the Kotel for a memorial service. That was a once in a life time experience. That was... there's no real adjective for it... Marvelous. Stupendous. Fantastic. Wonderful. All of the above... But it was in general a trip that is like no other. A little bird told me it would change my life. And I doubted him. I mean it's just a trip? But it's not just a trip. It's an experience. It's living history and it really did change my life. Thank you.