

# TRAVELING THROUGH HISTORY: DELTA SIG VISITS HOLOCAUST SITES

► BY LARRY KOLANO, WASHINGTON STATE '69



Central corridor through Auschwitz-Birkenau

Before the school year ended, my teaching partner, DJ, asked me how I was spending my summer vacation. I told her I'd be going to camp. She asked what I meant, and I said I'd be off to Dachau, Buchenwald, Majdanek, Treblinka and Auschwitz.

DJ nodded, gave me a puzzled look, and said, "Oh, sounds like fun."

Little did she know how stimulating it would be. Not in the "Oh boy," laugh-out-loud sense of fun, but in the sense of "Wow, this is really interesting."

On my vacation, I would visit the Nazi death camps of Germany and Poland, and meet 40 of the "Rescuers" – elderly people who are the only living members of families who saved Jews from the Nazis.

I first heard about the European

study program after attending a week-long Holocaust Seminar sponsored by the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous (JFR), at Columbia University in 2005.

The JFR has two goals: to train teachers to teach the Holocaust, and to provide pension-like payments to those individuals who risked their lives to rescue Jews during World War II.

The people who attend the week-long seminar are known as Alfred Lerner Fellows, and the seminar is a requirement to be included in the summer program. About 60% of the trip expenses are paid by JFR.

In 2008, seven classroom teachers and three representatives from US Holocaust centers made the journey. Of the teachers, a Kansas woman and

I were the only ones from west of the Mississippi.

Leading the group were Stanlee Stahl, executive director of JFR, and noted author and Holocaust historian Robert Jan van Pelt. We prepared by reading two books by Holocaust survivors, one a lengthy study of the town of Auschwitz from 1270 to the present, and several articles on the development of the Nazi Party and its policies.

Not your typical summer reading. The first book was assigned because Auschwitz was the farthest eastern outpost of the Teutonic Knights, land destined to belong to them, Germans believed.

We flew from JFK airport to Munich. And for 14 days, we walked



Treblinka Memorial

– and climbed – to Holocaust sites in and around Munich, Nuremberg, Weimar, Warsaw, Krakow and Oswiecim. We began our days around 8 am, and rarely ended them before 10 at night. It was exhausting and exhilarating.

#### JULY 15: MUNICH

Our introductory lecture was given on the steps of the Feldherrnhalle, the site held most sacred by the Nazi Party. It provided the backdrop to the ending of the 1923 Putsch, an attempt to overthrow the government of Bavaria and the seminal event in Nazi mythology. Sixteen of Hitler's revolutionaries were killed here and became martyrs. The blood they shed on Nazi banners "sanctified" them, and the location of their deaths became kind of a shrine – the only site in all of Nazi Germany where people could be arrested for not giving the outstretched Nazi salute as they passed by.

#### JULY 16: NUREMBERG

Nazi Germany's second most revered place, this is the place where "we" (collective leadership) became "I" (Hitler's absolute rule). Annual Nazi rallies were held at Nuremberg, in the Zeppelinfeld and surrounding landscape, with thousands of Nazi Party faithful gathered to worship the Fuhrer.

It's also the city where the Allied Powers later decided to put top Nazis



Ovens at Majdanek, near Lublin, Poland

on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

#### JULY 17: BUCHENWALD

At this concentration camp in Weimar, the slogan "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work will make you free") did not frame the entrance to the camp as it did in Dachau and other camps. Over this gate, written in iron were the German words for "You wouldn't be here if you didn't deserve it."

Dachau meant imprisonment and terror with the possibility of release. Buchenwald meant death.

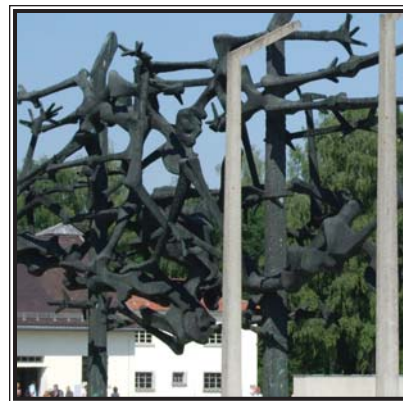
#### JULY 18: GRUNEWALD TRAIN STATION

The station right in the middle of an upscale Berlin neighborhood is nevertheless under the radar of most Germans. Very few Berliners in the area can direct tourists to it, although 50,000 of Berlin's Jews were marched down these streets from 1941-1945, to trains that would take them to death camps.

Along the tracks, one hundred metal grates, fifty on each side, record the dates and numbers of people transported. You just get a sense of the numbers of people and families affected by this.

#### JULY 19: BAYERISCHER PLATZ

This neighborhood was the first in Berlin to be declared Judenfrei – "free of Jews." As part of the neighborhood's reminders of its past, signs highlighting



Dachau Memorial

anti-Jewish laws are printed on signposts along the streets.

#### JULY 21: WARSAW

In this capital city, we were invited to the residence of the American Ambassador to Poland, Victor Ashe. Over glasses of ice water, he talked about the long and storied relationship between the US and Poland.

Afterwards, we rushed to the Marriott Hotel in Warsaw to set up for a very significant luncheon. Stanlee had invited all the Righteous Gentiles (Rescuers) in the Warsaw area to attend a banquet in their honor. Each of the Fellows would act as a table host during the event.

I was honored to have at my table Irena Bylica and Stanislaw Roztopowicz-Szkubel, two white-haired grandmothers.

Each of these women was a teenager when her family rescued Jewish people and saved them from being sent to a concentration camp. Irena was 15 when her parents hid two families, five people in all, in their cellar. Her father was taken and killed by the Gestapo. Irena has kept in touch with both families.

Stanislaw was 16 when her parents "adopted" a baby girl whose parents were sent to Lodz from 1943-1948. In '48, the little girl was "adopted" by a Jewish couple who were told to have no contact with the Polish family. They reconnected in 2000.

I told Irena and Stanislawa that I was in awe to be in their presence, that they were heroic. They told me they did nothing heroic; they simply acted like human beings should act. They were very hesitant to talk to me. All the rescuers told the hosts the same thing.

Of the sixty people invited, forty attended, including one woman in her 90s. Some have been disowned by their families for what they did or ostracized by neighbors, so the JFR no longer sends the pension checks in marked envelopes.

### JULY 21-25: TREBLINKA, MAJDANEK, BIRKENAU

These sites were not operated as internment camps or punishment centers. Their purpose was to kill people as effectively and efficiently as possible. Some Jews were worked to death. Others were murdered within hours of arriving.

Thousands of tourists visit the sites;

German schoolchildren are required to go on field trips there to be exposed to the history of the Holocaust... We spent a couple of hours at the first ones, then a day at Auschwitz and Birkenau.

It was a beautiful morning when we arrived at Birkenau. We covered the women's camp area, saw the crematorium 2, had lunch, and saw crematorium 3. That afternoon, a big electrical storm came up. The rain came down in buckets, and we huddled in a forested area... I thought to myself, there must have been storms that hit just like this from 1941-1944...

In a building called the sauna, the men were taken to have their hair shaved off, tattoos put on, and showered before being sent into the camp. Everything was taken from them. The man responsible for burning all the photos did not do it. They have put them up on the walls in there. It takes your breath away.

I walked away, on a path the Jews never had a chance to take, seeing these forests in a way they didn't see them. They faced death. I at least could turn around and see some hope.

### JULY 27: FLYING HOME

What did I learn in this process of Holocaust travel? That all people have the capacity to do good or evil... It's an important part of the history of humankind. Many of these issues still come up. How do we treat people who are minorities? How do businesses act ethically? What part does science play?

Two museums brought it all home. At the House of Wannsee, we went into the room where the Wannsee Conference took place in 1942 to draw up plans for the extermination of all European Jews. This was where they decided, "How are we going to go about this? What steps can we take?"

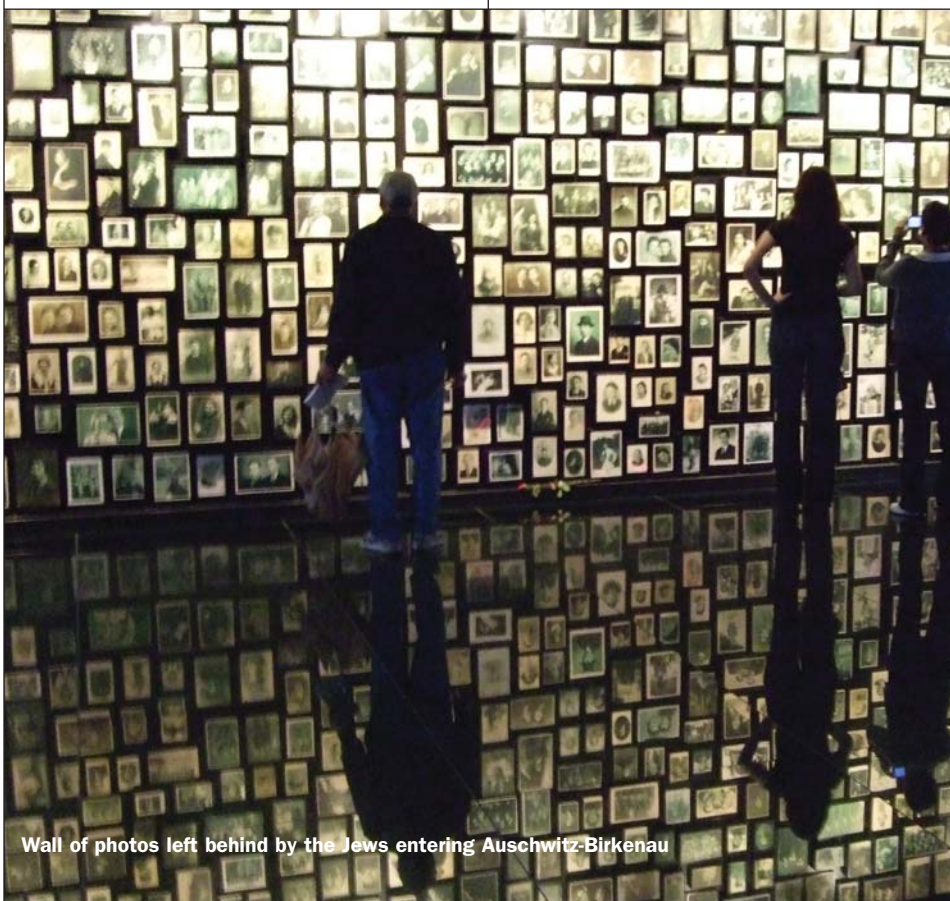
There's a picture I have of me with Jan van Pelt, standing in front of the fireplace. That's where Heydrich and Eichmann sipped brandy, and said to each other, "How do you think the meeting went?" so casually.

At another museum, below the Berlin Memorial, you go into a room and watch the stories of the people. It takes all the numbers out of it...

I fed my last name into a computer there, and 15 Kolanos came up who had died in the Holocaust. These were Jewish individuals... My branch of the family is Roman Catholic from southern Poland. I also found evidence of Catholic Kolanos who died in camps in 1940 and 1941.

As a teacher, I've learned to be objective. When we visited some of these places, I started not focusing on the numbers and started seeing people.

*Larry Kolano retired in 2008 as a middle school teacher in Longview, Washington. He has been giving presentations on his trip to Europe at local middle schools since he returned. For more information, please contact Larry at [lkolano@msn.com](mailto:lkolano@msn.com).*



Wall of photos left behind by the Jews entering Auschwitz-Birkenau