

# Bearing Witness to the Past: A Journey to Auschwitz

By Judy LaPietra

Thirty years ago, as I sat in a classroom at the City University of New York, I could have never imagined the path that my life would take. However it unfolded,

I made a promise to myself that I would bear witness to a history that confounds me to this day.

While many college students would opt for spending spring break on a beach, there were 16



The UNCC students at a train boxcar used to transport Jews to death camps.

(Auschwitz in German). It was here in 1940 that the Nazi regime established the largest concentration camp system of its kind, and where over one million people perished. We would spend the remainder of our time in Poland here, and begin to understand the Holocaust from as close a perspective as possible.

difficult to fathom the number of Holocaust victims, it is equally difficult to put a face to that history. The students were asked to listen and to imagine what the soil at Auschwitz could tell them. Throughout our journey, they presented to the group stories of individuals who survived Auschwitz. As a result, a personal connection was made.

My students came away with the powerful lessons that Auschwitz gives us, and a determination to change the world in their own way. I could not ask for more as an educator.

Joining us on this journey were ceramic butterflies created by Charlotte schoolchildren to commemorate the Holocaust. The Butterfly Project, a worldwide project supported by the Charlotte community, has resulted in the creation of thousands of butterflies as a response to Pavel Friedman's poem titled "I Never Saw Another Butterfly," which he wrote while in the Terezin ghetto. Friedman would later perish at Auschwitz. We left butterflies in Auschwitz and returned to Charlotte with the remainder of them to be placed at the Butterfly Memorial at Shalom Park.

As an educator, such an opportunity to influence the lives of students is rare. Where they take this experience, only time will tell. However, the vocation of bearing witness to the Holocaust and keeping the promise I made to myself thirty years ago has come to fruition. ✧

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UNC students who chose to participate in a historical study abroad program that would leave a lasting impact on them. Spending a week in Poland to study the Holocaust would provide them an experience that would exceed their expectations, as well as those of us who facilitated this trip.

Our journey began in Krakow, Poland, an important starting point for understanding prewar Jewish culture. We toured the former Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, and followed the historic timeline which would eventually lead us to Auschwitz. We walked through the former Jewish ghetto in Krakow, and learned of the eventual liquidation of approximately 20,000 people. We followed their journey to the Plaszow concentration camp (made famous by the film Schindler's List) which was established in 1942 as a forced labor camp for Jews, and where thousands perished at the hands of the Nazis. The empty fields of this site today were sobering to behold for my still jet-lagged students.

Leaving Krakow and traveling through the Polish countryside we arrived in the town of Oswiecim

It was a sunny, crisp early spring day in Oswiecim, Poland as we set out to enter the camp. The weather which put us in high spirits, however, would not sustain our mood. My students were soon quieted by the realization of where they were. We stood at the entrance gate of Auschwitz and it was clear to all that nothing, no text or testimony, had prepared them for the impact of being there.

Our days at the camp site included hours of guided study tours of Auschwitz I and Birkenau, workshops, and various presentations, including one with a Holocaust survivor. We were given access to archives and collections, and were able to tour the preservation department where we viewed the belongings of former prisoners – shoes, suitcases, glasses. With each difficult day, I noticed that a transformation taking place within our group.

Each night, as we met to debrief our day, the students grappled with the processing of all that they had seen. What emerged from these discussions was an awareness of the depth of this history - a realization that while it is

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## SYNAGOGUES & CONGREGATIONS

### Celebrate Shavuot with Your Family in Ballantyne

The Ballantyne Jewish Center invites you and your family to join us to hear the Ten Commandments read from the Torah and enjoy a delicious dairy meal in honor of the holiday of Shavuot. Shavuot is the time when we commemorate God's giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai and a time to

celebrate the true heroes of this holiday which are the children. Before God gave the Torah He demanded guarantors. The Jewish people made a number of suggestions all rejected by God until they declared, "Our children will be our guarantors that we will cherish and observe the Torah." God immediately accepted them and agreed to give the Torah.



Let us make sure to bring all our "guarantors" along on the first day of Shavuot to be present for the reading of the Ten Commandments. In addition, there will be a special program, fun activities and an ice cream party for them to enjoy.



Wednesday, May 15, 6-7:30 PM

\*\*Location TBA. Please check our website for updates.\*\*

In addition, there will be a Minyan and Yizkor service the following morning.

Thursday, May 16 at 8632 Bryant Farms Rd., 10 AM Service begins, 11:30 AM Yizkor. Followed by a Kiddush lunch.

For more information visit us online [www.JewishBallantyne.com](http://www.JewishBallantyne.com). ✧

**"I list blintz and blintzes together, because  
I never heard of anybody eating only one."**

—Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish