

The Significance of Personal Encounters for Public History and Education

By Gabrielle Johansson

Supported by the Selden K. Smith Foundation, a local educator in South Carolina attends a Maymester on the Holocaust with the College of Charleston

You who live safe

In your warm houses.

You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:

 Consider if this is a man

 Who works in the mud

 Who does not know peace

 Who fights for a scrap of bread

 Who dies because of a yes or a no.

 Consider if this is a woman,

 Without hair and without name

 With no more strength to remember,

 Her eyes empty and her womb cold

 Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about:

I commend these words to you.

Carve them in your hearts

At home, in the street,

Going to bed, rising:

Repeat them to your children

 Or may your house fall apart,

 May illness impede you,

 May your children turn their faces from you.

- Primo Levi

Primo Levi's urgent message above demands education on the history Holocaust – the systematic murder of over six million Jewish men, women, and children by the Nazis during World War II. He demands an education that encourages a personal encounter with this history rather than reducing it to page 357 of any world history textbook.

As an education specialist at the Anne Frank Center at USC, I work to educate South Carolina students and local communities on the history of the Holocaust by telling the story of Anne Frank. Anne Frank, a young girl who received a diary and confided in journaling, addressed her "Dear Kitty" each time she felt the need to write to her dearest friend. From talking about newsy news, to sharing her deepest feelings to her dearest friend, Anne's diary offers readers

an intimate glimpse into the life of this young girl who was forced to go into hiding, for fear of death, for 25 months. Encountering the thoughts and feelings of this young girl renders an opportunity to begin to understand the magnitude of what it would mean to come to know the hopes and dreams, family squabbles, irritations, and passions of six million individuals.

The message of Anne's father, Otto Frank, echoes and complements the urgent message of Primo Levi in powerful ways. Otto, like Primo Levi, was one of the approximate 7,200 survivors of Auschwitz. Until the very end of his life, Otto had a passion for children and teaching the history of the Holocaust to young people in such a way that teaches the "lessons of history" rather than simply the particular facts which pertain to the history. In the passage above, Primo Levi does not simply request acknowledgement that the Holocaust happened; but rather, he urges a confrontation with the reality of this horror and a personal encounter with individuals lost to the death machine of the Nazis. He urges us to imagine what it would be like if the "friendly faces" of loved ones were violently forced to be "without name and without hair." He urges us to "meditate that this came about," to properly honor those who were murdered during this time. For both men, to teach and to learn the lessons of this history is a process that inspires a personal encounter with the history and is deeply connected with honoring those lost who were murdered by the Nazis.

Supported by the Selden K. Smith Foundation, I had the opportunity to personally encounter the history of the Holocaust by physically visiting sites of Nazi atrocity with the College of Charleston. A personal encounter with a history that has a darkness exceeding what is humanly possible to understand is precisely what Primo and Otto urge and precisely what the Selden K. Smith Foundation afforded me an opportunity to do.

In this 18-day long study abroad, I, along with colleagues from the Anne Frank Center at USC, joined historians Ted Rosengarten, Dale Rosengarten, Chad Gibbs, and Ashley Walters to meet this history in its physical spaces and walk in the footsteps of the individuals murdered. Our group began in Poland, continued through Germany, and ended in the Netherlands. After concluding the Maymester, our Anne Frank Center team met with our colleagues in Amsterdam at the Anne Frank House to discuss our activities in the US as well as share our experiences. One colleague noted how amazed he was that our team saw "in 18 days what [he'd] seen in 30 years." Our study abroad group visited places of remembrance and museums unique to national endeavors of confronting local histories of WWII and the Holocaust. We paid special attention to public national memory politics and studied the various forms of remembrance that exist in each country. The physical traces of Nazi horror that comprised our itinerary were the death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chełmno, and Treblinka, the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Ravensbrück, the House of the Wannsee-Konferenz, and the Jewish ghettos of Warsaw and Łódź.

From the Łódź Ghetto, through the Radegast station, and to the death camp of Chełmno, our group walked in these spaces in the same order as hundreds of thousands of victims, mostly Jewish but also among them the Romani, the Sinti, and others. On arrival to Chełmno, our

group grasped the remoteness of this location; the death camp was placed far from any large city. The estimated number of victims range from around 150 thousand to 340 thousand (the official Polish estimate). The death camp of Chełmno was one of the first prototypes of the death camp. Instead of chambers, Nazi perpetrators used gas vans. Individuals from the Łódź Ghetto were encouraged to voluntarily leave the ghetto for Radegast station. They were told the trains would take them east where there would be work and opportunities for living better lives. Instead, taken on trains from Radegast station they were brought to Chełmno, where they were immediately brought to a church to drop off their belongings, then to a manor house, where they were told they had sleeping arrangements. The church, its tall walls, and white exterior, which were once within eyeshot of the manor house, remain. The manor house on the other hand was destroyed by the Nazis, with the only remains being the surface of the basement floor. We learned that after they were led into the manor house they were brought to the basement and forced to walk through a narrow, dark, and damp hallway. This hallway is still visible today as a long brick strip running through the middle of the ruins. We meditated on the fact that, as hundreds of thousands of people were forced to walk through this brick hallway, they were trapped – behind them were armed Nazi guards and before them were death vans. After the crimes were committed, the Nazis sent forged letters to the victims' family and friends still in the Łódź Ghetto, telling them how wonderful it was in the east and to bring their entire families.

We also traced the steps of hundreds of thousands of people killed at the death camp of Treblinka. Estimates range from 800 thousand (the official Polish estimate) to 925 thousand people. Pictured below is the Treblinka stone memorial at which our group spent an afternoon being led by Professor Gibbs, one of the only specialists in the world on Treblinka.



Treblinka Memorial. At this memorial, there are 17,000 stones to represent the victims of the death camp, whose number is estimated to total nine hundred and twenty-five thousand individuals. Based on this number, each stone would represent fifty-six individuals. From the few who escaped this camp, less than eighty have been named to have survived the war.

Visiting sites of Nazi atrocity and tracing these steps also afforded a small glimpse into everyday life before the war, family, love, and friendship, particularly in places where our Maymester group witnessed evidence left behind by the Nazis. There was a mug in Auschwitz (pictured below) that allowed me a glimpse into its possible past and that of its owner. It was a little green mug painted with flowers. Perhaps carefully selected from a little pottery shop or maybe even hand painted by its owner. I imagine hands wrapped around it to access the warmth of hot tea or coffee from the inside. I imagine how, if this little green mug was animate, maybe it would remember the conversations had over tea-time with dear friends. Conversations perhaps about family, friends, romance, life – or perhaps over ever-increasing fear – fear over the rise of the Nazis, their occupation in Poland, or rumors of death camps.



This picture was taken at Auschwitz I from their historical collections of artifacts from the death camp. Along with the kitchenware seen above, the Memorial and Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau displays spectacles, clothes, shoes, and luggage stolen from victims and collected.

On this Maymester, we were walking the same paths, seeing the same buildings, touching the same walls as millions of individuals had not even 80 years previously. At every moment, I was keenly aware that each participant of this program was personally processing this history at different times and in different ways.

I am still processing this Maymester experience and will be in a constant state of process. As an educator, student, and future historian, who is pursuing a Master's degree in Holocaust and Genocide studies, this state of being in process demarcates an important element of this field of study: the fact that learning about the Holocaust and other genocides demands a particular and unique pedagogical approach. This approach, exemplified by both Otto Frank and Primo Levi, encourages a personal confrontation with this history.

I have a unique opportunity to teach the lessons of history to students around South Carolina and to share the story of the Holocaust on guided tours of our exhibition at the Anne Frank Center. I have a passion for teaching young people this history in such a way that inspires within them a passion for learning "the lessons of history," according to the philosophy of Otto Frank. This Maymester experience was not only personally life-changing but also, as an educator, will

have a powerful effect on the students I teach in South Carolina. From field trips to trainings, the way I teach the story of Anne Frank and the history of the Holocaust has been strengthened by this experience.
