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Point of View: In the Footsteps of the Holocaust

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In the Footsteps of the Holocaust

BY AILEEN EVANS '12

My body shook as I walked along the train tracks that led to the terminus. It was hot and muggy, not unbearably cold, as I had read in books.

With each step I drew closer to the ultimate symbol of human destruction. Fear and sorrow overcame me and I was struck silent. I could not put my feelings into words, but could the old woman beside me? She was repeating a walk she had taken more than 60 years before. I was walking into the infamous Nazi death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time.

This was in June 2009, but the memories still are vivid. I crossed into the camp with five other students and a woman who spent six months in the camp where more than a million others perished.

As we walked through the camp, our survivor recounted her daily routine in Auschwitz—nothing but obeying Nazi orders. She described the brutal treatment of the inmates and rolled up her sleeve to show me the number the Nazis tattooed on her forearm when she was a teenager. It still showed plainly.

She was sent to Auschwitz with two of her sisters, one of whom was sick and spent time in the camp “hospital,” though this did not mean she was granted any privileges. In fact, death was imminent for almost every Jewish prisoner. However, in January 1945, as Soviet forces approached to liberate Auschwitz, this woman and her two sisters were marched back through the camp gates by their captors. Unlike many Auschwitz inmates, the three survived their last trial—a forced march through the brutally cold Polish winter.

We approached the other side of the camp, where the remains of the former crematorium can still be seen. Lighting a candle to commemorate all of those who perished in the Holocaust gave me an inkling of hope. So did the woman standing next to me, who showed enormous strength as she relived her past. Memories of this place and time are part of her legacy.

But how should we remember the Holocaust, an event so historically important and equally traumatizing? Do some of us have more of an obligation to study this event than others? On my trip to Poland and to Auschwitz, I was the only non-Jew in our group. I felt a sort of disconnect from the rest of the group in that

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respect; people would talk about their relatives who perished during the Holocaust, and some were even able to find their tombstones in the Warsaw cemetery. Part of me felt guilty that I could not relate.

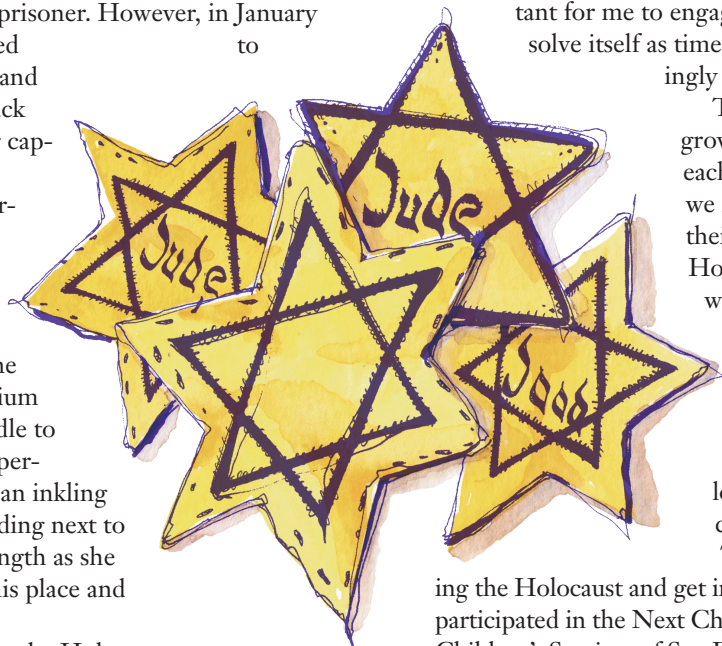
But my experiences have taught me that the Holocaust was a tragedy that affected humankind as a whole, and it is important for me to engage with it, too. Does history silently resolve itself as time passes? Do these issues become increasingly trivial? I don't think so.

The last of the Holocaust survivors are growing old, their numbers diminishing each day. Consequently, it is essential that we listen to survivors' stories and record their testimonies in order to document the Holocaust. I have had the opportunity to work with a couple of survivors and to listen to many others share their stories.

Awareness of Holocaust history and human rights is an ongoing project for me; it should be for all of us.

I first became interested in the Holocaust in a high school history seminar called Genocide and Human Behavior.

This class inspired me to continue studying the Holocaust and get involved in related projects. Senior year I participated in the Next Chapter Project through Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco and the Taube Foundation. I interviewed a Polish Holocaust survivor and documented her story in an essay that is now in the California State Archive. Before making this connection, the Holocaust was an event I had read about and studied in textbooks; it quickly became something much more.





Last summer's trip to Poland and Hungary was sponsored by the Taube Foundation in conjunction with the Next Chapter Project. The focus was Holocaust memorial sites in Poland and Hungary and also the vibrant Jewish life that has revived there today. I traveled with five other San Francisco students and one survivor from Warsaw to Krakow, Poland, and then on to Budapest, Hungary, stopping at the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in between. This trip taught me a lot about both human cruelty and resilience. I see that there is ultimately a recovery from such horrific events, as evidenced by the rich Jewish life in these places.

I didn't know I would have the opportunity to continue my Holocaust studies at Colby, but last fall I enrolled in Professor Audrey Brunetaux's French class, *Shadows of the Past: Remembering Vichy France and the Holocaust*, which soon became my favorite. My understanding of the subject matter, especially the French-Jewish experience, was further expanded in October when a French Holocaust survivor came to speak (in French!) to our class about her personal experience as a child during World War II. Our study of Vichy France and the Holocaust was accompanied by a visit to the Michael Klahr Holocaust and Human Rights Center in Augusta, Maine, last November. This spring the HHRC is hosting Series 360°: Human Rights from All Angles, a new, public program designed to increase awareness of the Holocaust and human rights.

The series will focus on Hollywood and the Holocaust, offering movies, lectures, roundtable discussions, and workshops. In February, two other Colby students and I led the roundtable called "The Holocaust on Screen: History, Art, or Profanity?" I am excited to have the opportunity to be involved in Holocaust studies outside of Colby; having these continued discussions with other Maine community members and other students will bring different perspectives to the conversation.

Some people ask how I can be so engaged with a subject that is horrifying and depressing and with which I have no direct personal relationship. But the more I learn about the Holocaust and the more I engage with it, the more I want to know. Studying the Holocaust goes beyond examining a historical event. How was humankind capable of destroying the lives of so many other human beings? Will we ever be able to recreate this world, through testimonies, literature, art, or film without distorting or trivializing it? Or can it only be truly understood by those who survived?

I think and hope not. The woman who walked that path at Auschwitz agreed and smiled at me as I showed a dedication to understanding her past.

Aileen Evans '12 is a human development and French studies double major from San Francisco. Evans spent a semester in Dijon, France, and will study in Senegal next fall.