**Germany and Poland Dialogue Reflections:**

**ANNA MEYERS, Jewish Studies Major**

I have been lucky enough to participate in two Dialogue of Civilizations programs at Northeastern, first in Israel with Professor Lori Lefkovitz and then this past summer in Germany and Poland on the Holocaust and Genocide Studies Dialogue with Professor Natalie Bormann. During my month in Europe, I learned so much about not only the Holocaust, but also about German and Polish culture and the history of the Jewish people in these places. The trip deepened my knowledge and understanding of the countries, their histories, and their people both in the context of the Holocaust and the present day.

Very little time on the Holocaust Dialogue was spent in the classroom; rather, learning occurred through historic and modern city tours. A significant highlight was the week and a half we spent in Berlin. Not only did we gain incredible knowledge about the city’s Holocaust history, but we also learned about the history of the Berlin Wall and traced the city's transformation from the early twentieth century to today. Our experiences in Berlin were unforgettable, including witnessing Germany win the World Cup! Our explorations and tours changed my view of Germany tremendously. Through speaking with Germans around my age living in Berlin, I began to see Germany as an incredible country with a rich history and people that extend far beyond the Holocaust. The Germans cope with their history every day and work to overcome the trauma endured during and after World War II. The city of Berlin is filled with memorial sites and the history of the place is inescapable. Berlin’s embrace of its past helps it move forward beyond its history, which I found very meaningful.

The most moving and influential moment of the trip, however, was our final experience, our visit to Auschwitz. When I entered the camp it was exactly how I had imagined it and learned about it in books and classes, but actually setting foot where so many had perished was life changing. My connection to my Jewish identity and my understanding of the Jewish people were solidified at this culmination of the trip. I have a deeper grasp of the power of anti-Semitism and the challenge of confronting it. I have a more nuanced view on the creation of the state of Israel following such a tragic moment in history. I know that I still have so much more to learn and comprehend, but that moment represented everything I have studied and everything I am working toward in my time as a Jewish Studies major at Northeastern.

Along with travel and study, one of the best aspects of the Dialogue was sharing the experience with other Northeastern students. Students learned not only from the tour guides and professor but from one another as well. By having conversations with other students and sharing the same challenging experiences, my understanding of what I was learning was deepened and my education was incredibly affected. I encourage anyone interested in history or Jewish studies to come on this Dialogue.

**DAYNA ALTMAN, Human Services Major**

*Dayna chose to share with us a blog post she wrote on a particularly meaningful day during the Dialogue.*

*Krakow, July 29*

This morning at breakfast in the hotel in Krakow, Poland, I was speaking to one of my friends and a man noticed that I was speaking English. He immediately came up to me as he was from the US as well and we exchanged some small talk. He then asked me why I was in Poland and I told him I was with a group from school studying the Holocaust. He replied, “Why would you want to do that?” and I replied “Why I wouldn’t I?” I would have never had the bravery to make this kind of remark to anyone before coming on this Dialogue but I guess it is a reflection of how much I learned through this experience and how passionate I have become. His remark made me want to cry (as I have done a lot on this trip), not because I disagree with him but because I am sad for him that he cannot look at this history and remember how important it is “to remember.” I am not saying that I am leaving this trip completely understanding the Holocaust, and if I knew that when leaving this trip I would feel that way, I would have thought this to be a bad thing or mean that I had “failed”; however, now I see it so differently. Rather than understanding, I am leaving remembering. I am remembering the victims and also the perpetrators, I am remembering to take my responsibility for the Holocaust and feel my guilt without being burdened by it. I am remembering even in my darkest days that even in a world that may seem so evil, there are still helpers and I am remembering that I am going to be one of them.

I am leaving changed.

And to the man in Poland, I hope that someday you will have the opportunity I did and remember when getting your fruit at the breakfast buffet, you will say, “I am so glad I learned, for I have become a better person because of it”; I know that’s what I am saying.

**REBECCA SINGH, English Major**

The Germany and Poland dialogue is by far one of my favorite experiences that I have had in my undergraduate career at Northeastern. The program gives students the unique opportunity to learn not only about the Holocaust but also how it has continued to shape history not just in America, but also abroad.

Prior to traveling on this dialogue, I, like many students, had read numerous books on the Holocaust. However, this program makes concrete and even eclipses anything that could be articulated through the written word. Academically, I do not think that I can sufficiently put into words the impact that this program has had on me. The lessons I learned from this trip can only be taught through experience. They cannot be learned in the classroom, from a teacher, or read in a textbook. At the program’s end, many of us grappled with the idea of leaving and returning home with all of the information and stories we had become witness to. Obviously, one can never be the same. From this experience, I developed a better understanding of empathy. Empathy is the emotion we feel when we are so deeply moved by someone else’s burden, story, or emotions that we take on their emotion and their pain as if it’s our own. Leaving this program, I felt that I must now physically do something. I felt a call to action. But, what I learned was that the emotion of empathy itself is something that we often do not credit enough. I learned that we should abandon the idea that a physical action is the only worthwhile action that we can take after experiencing a program such as this one. It is arguably harder to feel and exercise genuine empathy than it is for someone to be the catalyst of an action worth remembering. I think it’s important to understand that there will never be a sufficient answer to “How or why did the Holocaust even happen?” Instead this program requires that you engage with the trauma caused by the Holocaust not only so that we understand its lasting impact, but also so that we can prevent a life-altering event such as this one from happening again.

My only advice is this: Go. This Dialogue in particular provided me the opportunity to learn many invaluable lessons that have shaped me not only academically but also personally.