

April 2017 will live in the memories of all of us who were part of an incredible, and important trip in to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Students from year 9 and 10 went on a trip to Berlin, Germany's capital, and Krakow in Poland to visit Auschwitz, the Nazi Concentration camp responsible for the deaths of over 1.2million Jews, gypsies and homosexuals during World War 2, a massive part of the 6 million killed by Hitler's Nazis.

Our trip began at 2am on Friday morning as we boarded the coach to take us to Stansted Airport. After a quick check in and security we were on our way to Berlin. This was the first giant step for some of our students flying for the first time and they did very well.



We arrived in Berlin at 9.30am and easily got through security and collected our bags to begin our trip. We boarded our coach and travelled to the hotel to drop our bags off and sort our rooms out. We then arrived at the corner of the last remaining part of the Berlin Wall ready to meet our guides for the day to take us around Berlin.

Brief History – You may be aware that the Berlin Wall was built in Berlin in 1961, pretty much overnight to keep the people in Eastern Berlin in the East. The East was controlled by a Communist Soviet (Russian) government following WW2 and the West was controlled by Capitalist America, Britain & France. Communism offers a very basic life and in a dictatorship, every part of life was controlled, so thousands of young and intelligent East Berliners were escaping to the West which Russia just couldn't allow as it undermined Communism. The wall separated families and friends for nearly 28 years and saw over a hundred people murdered for trying to get over the wall.



You can see in the above pictures what is left of the 100-mile wall that circled West Berlin and was ripped down in 1989 at the end of the Cold War. The area between the 2 walls was covered in sand so the guards could see if anyone had got over, but they wouldn't have made it that far anyway as at the bottom of the walls if a person had gotten over they would find massive spikes that would probably end a person's escape efforts. We saw a remarkable memorial with the faces and stories of the people who were killed by the guards.

Following this visit we went into the centre of Berlin and found ourselves at the Brandenburg Gate, a famous and symbolic place to visit. We learnt about the history of Germany and were then shown the Reichstag building that played such a massive role in Hitler's rise to power when it was "set on fire" in 1933. One of the most fascinating parts of this tour was the complete lack of Nazi symbolism left in Berlin. The tour guide made it very clear that there is a real feeling of collective responsibility in Germany to reflect on what happened, and actually an incredible fact that I didn't know was that if you publicly deny the Holocaust you can be arrested and put into prison – interesting thought for debate! We then visited the biggest Holocaust memorial in Berlin (see below), it is hundreds of massive concrete blocks standing up in different heights and it was designed to offer an abstract self-reflection; when you visit, you have your own interpretations of what it represents.

Next to the Brandenburg gate was all of the worlds embassies, and one of the coolest parts of that was the American Embassy that had a real 'cop' in the famous blue American police uniform.



Having some free time, it was time now for the magic of 'Curry Worst' – a German traditional dinner that really is a taste sensation. Those who tried it will never be the same again! 😊

We then continued our tour around the centre of Berlin seeing the key sights, one of the most interesting and significant was the sight of Hitler's bunker and where he had committed suicide with his new wife of one day, Eva Braun. An eerie place but one that will stick in our memories for a long time. This was one of those moments where there wasn't a lot to see but there was definitely a feeling of awe to think we were standing in such an important place. We then set off back to the hostel, relaxed, played football and got some drinks &

ice creams then had our dinner and off to bed. A long, but good first day

Day 2 started nicely with a decent little lie in, breakfast then we headed off to Wannsee House. This place is one of best examples of an oxymoron; it is a beautiful building in a stunning location yet was the place of one of the most evil decisions ever to be made. In 1942, the Nazi's superior officers met here to discuss what they could do with the Jews in the Ghettos. After a discussion and some ideas they decided on the 'Final Solution' which was very simply the most effective way to exterminate and remove 11 million Jews. The most heart-breaking part of the decision was the simplicity of it and the 'matter of fact' nature despite the fact they were discussing how to exterminate human beings.



We were able to read some incredible details from this meeting, and see incredible photographs of the key Nazi officers. There was a good discussion to and some of us were able to chat to a German gentleman who commented on the importance of what we were doing and how well our children were behaving and reflecting.

Following this visit, we were on our way back into Berlin to visit the DDR museum which is a set-up of what life was like in East Berlin. There was a mock up house, kitchen, the cars they had in the East and photographs showing exactly what it was like to live under the Communist dictatorship in Eastern Berlin.



Following this really cool experience we had some more free time in Berlin then to head off to the Steak House restaurant where we indulged in well, chicken and chips and onion rings, obviously! 😊 It was now time for the surprise. I had told the students we were doing something on the Saturday night before we travelled through the night to Poland... There was a lot of speculation with some people guessing correctly and others way off, but in the end they seemed to be happy enough with... Ten Pin Bowling and drinks!

“I really enjoyed walking around Berlin & Poland and seeing the differences in cultures, and it was nice to spend time with people I don’t usually spend time with at school”

Abi Marshall, Yr10



We had a 20-minute walk to our coach, plenty of time to prepare for the overnight travel to Poland. Apart from 40 minutes of driving over what felt like a million pot holes, we arrived in Krakow. We got our bags dropped off and then had breakfast straight away, much needed for some of us and very impressed we were too. Our guides then met us at the hotel and took us off into Krakow city centre. Today was always going to be a hard day as it was the journey into the story of the Krakow Ghetto and the Jews there. We heard some horrific stories, that brought some of us to tears and the rest of us shock, particularly the story of the speakers announcing the arrival of the Krakow Jew's children to the camps. We also heard stories of bravery and heroism that was simply inspiring. Part of our tour was to go into Oscar Schindler's factory where we learnt about how he rescued 1100 Jews from going on the trains to Auschwitz and other camps. One of the hardest things to hear today was the deception and lies the Nazi's told the Polish Jews before they found themselves at the gates of the death camps.

Following a walking tour of the Jewish Quarter, we met our Holocaust survivor. She was a very lucky baby and she told us her story which was moving and so very close to being very different and ending in tragedy. Our students asked some very mature and poignant questions which she answered honestly and it really did set our context for Auschwitz the next day. After visiting an 850-year-old synagogue and Jewish graveyard we made our way back to the hostel.



Auschwitz day had arrived and we made our way. As we know, Auschwitz was one of the most famous and devastating of the Nazi death camps and we were ready to take this difficult but important journey.



We collected our headsets, met our guide and began walking through the famous gates with the words "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work sets you free), which is one of the first signs of deception in this place as the people who entered here would not be set free by work and most wouldn't leave again.

Our guide took us into various rooms telling us the stories from the walls of this evil place. We saw artefacts, hair, suitcases and personal belongings in their masses that really gave us a sense of scale.



This suitcase belonged to a 12-year-old boy who had packed his belongings and was told he would soon be with his family. The difficult part of his story, was the selection of these suitcases in their hundreds were from people who never left again.

We then continued around the camp each step taking us deeper into one of the biggest tragedies of human history. Next was into the gas chambers with an eerie coldness greeting us as we entered, getting harder as we followed through into the crematorium. We learnt that the Jews were told they were just going for a shower, they even had shower heads in there to add to the deception.





Thank you for your patience and reading our report following our journey on this trip. I would like to choose this picture as the most poignant and reflective of our collection but also as a symbol of how incredibly mature our students were in this very difficult place. I know we say we're proud of our students a lot, and we are, I can honestly say, on behalf of all staff, they were amazing in this place.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Mrs Drake, Mr Osler, Mr Brooks, Miss Franklin and Miss Ballard for their help on this trip and once again, our young people; it was a pleasure to share this journey with you all and hopefully your experiences this weekend will be life changing and give us that extra depth of empathy and understanding as we go forward into your futures.

Mr Modica

Our full photo album can be found on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/stchistory) as well as our main website www.stchistory.com

