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The Second Time Around

Boarding the night train that went to Cracow, there was a whole array of thoughts running through my brain. The last time I was in Poland was already four years ago, and that time I had promised would be my last. Having spent most of our time based in Warsaw, the trip I went on when I was sixteen had left more than an imprint on my memory. This trip took us on a five day long tour of most of the big concentration camps in Poland. While impacting me tremendously, I was not comfortable with the lack of emotion I had towards the end and knew that I could only handle that kind of trip once. However, here I was, returning, to a land that had the ability in a previous experience to numb all of my emotions. I kept reminding myself that I was older now, that I had learned more about this area, and that the context of this trip was a little different. How this trip would be different was beyond my wildest imagination, but I had heard rumors that it was going to change my whole perspective, so I went on to the train with the most open mind that I could and hoped for the best.

Arriving anywhere at an early hour always makes any city look different. Early in the morning I was introduced to a cold and rainy Old Town Square of Cracow. I met a dragon, visited a castle, drank some coffee, and was surrounded by history; it was pretty much a magical place. I could not believe that this was the place that had made me shudder so many years ago; I was already beginning to see what this trip would do for me. Despite being cold and wet, I had already fallen in love with the quaintness and beauty of the gothic structures in the town square interspersed with modern cafes, restaurants, and shops. This was not at all the Poland I had left in my past, not to be forgotten, but never to be revisited. This was a Poland that was modernized, but one that displayed signs of past wounds on the places and the people that resided within its borders.

At one of the University cafes, I experienced an encounter that pulled on my heartstrings and did, indeed, change my perspective. Our groups meeting with a member of the Righteous Among the Nations, an award given by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Israel to gentiles who saved Jews during the Holocaust, was the impact I needed to appreciate what this country has gone through. As our guest spoke, it seemed as though saving people during the Holocaust was not even the most monumental moment of her life, also living through her own readjustments after the war, being a woman in a medical profession, and living through Communism I began to realize just how much has

happened here. That's when it dawned on me, when high school students go on these tours of concentration camps; they are missing the pivotal component that makes all of it a little more real and a lot less numbing...the life surrounding these events.

After our in depth, and incredibly informative tour of Auschwitz and Birkenau, our group concluded by looking at an exhibit in the sauna of Birkenau. This location where those who came before us lost their identities now houses a tribute to the personalities that walked through those very halls years ago. A photo display, comprised of photos found in suitcases brought to the camp added a new dynamic of life that was missing from my first trip. Even going to the town of Oswiecim, a town that was over fifty percent Jewish since Jews were allowed to live there, added a new dimension by being able to stand in the place where some victims of the Holocaust were from. I've always appreciated place reinforcement to education, knowing that it adds such a different relevance to the subject matter.

So focused on and overwhelmed by the destruction that occurred in this area, it seems like overexposure to explore the life that preceded the destruction. If my past trip was focused on destruction, while visiting some of the same locations, this trip focused so much more on life. I boarded the train to leave Cracow with an array of thoughts running through my mind. This time, I was almost sad to leave this area that I had grown to appreciate so much in the past few days. Now this time, instead of panicking for myself, I panicked for others. My mind flooded with how I was going to convey how positive this experience was, and ways I help other people have a similar positive experience.