

Raised as a Muslim in Istanbul, Turkey, I did not have the chance to experience any religion or religious belief other than Islam. After taking Prof. Viroli's course on Religion and Politics, I developed an interest in other religions that I did not come to contact before. Moreover, in this course, I realized that the notion of religion had a pivotal role in the conduct of politics and even public policy today. Therefore, I thought that it would be beneficial for me to learn more about other cultures and religions; so that I could appreciate and understand their cultural and religious heritage more closely. With this in mind, I attended to a Jewish Studies program in Prague this summer in order to learn more about the history and culture of the Jewish communities that still exist today. In this summer program, not only did I study the history of European Jewish communities, but also experienced their religious and cultural life firsthand by attending to the Shabbat services and festivals (Prague and Krakow Jewish festivals) as well as working in elderly people's house where there were Holocaust survivors. The best thing about the program was its academic quality. I had the chance to take classes from very important professors. Especially, both of my Jewish studies professors were leading figures and academicians in their fields. The classes were academically stimulating; and the ideas presented in the classroom were intriguing. It was not only the classes, but also the cultural life of Prague that added a lot to my learning and experience in this program.

Especially, at the elderly people's house, I met a British lady who was a survivor of the Holocaust originally from the Czech Republic. Interestingly, this person was one of the seven hundred Jewish children who were taken from the Czech Republic to the United Kingdom by a British philanthropist, Sir Nicholas Winton. After they were taken from their homes, they were adopted by British families who were living in different parts of the United Kingdom. Most of the students lost track of each other and after the break of the Second World War, they even lost their parents in concentration camps. The lady that I met lost her parents in Auschwitz by the end of the war. Even though her parents managed to escape from Prague under the Nazi rule, they were caught in Oslo and taken to Auschwitz, Birkenau. She told us that she did not have any contact with her parents during the war; however, she had always hoped that they were alive. Learning about the Holocaust from a person who had experienced it firsthand was an unprecedented experience for me.

The trip to Poland during the fourth week of the program was a great experience as well, because we learnt a lot about the Jewish communities in Krakow, and also visited the Nazi death camps in Auschwitz where the most horrible crimes of human history took place. In the Izaak Synagogue of the Jewish district in Krakow, we were lucky to witness the first Shabbat service that took place after the Second World War. The Izaak Synagogue was one of the few synagogues that were not demolished during the Nazi invasion and used as a warehouse for the Nazi army.

In addition to the courses on Jewish studies, I took classes on Central European Politics after the First World War and Czech language from Charles University; and in this way, I had a chance to trace the dark history of Europe during the Second World War and its effects on the Jewish communal life. Particularly, in the Jewish history class, I was introduced to Jewish philosophy, *kabbala*, and recognized that this core understanding of Judaism is still present in today's political expression of Israel. Therefore, this year, as a Politics major, I decided to study Jewish theology and mysticism in depth, and explore its intersections with politics and international relations by taking classes from the Judaic Studies department.