

Shadows in the City of Lights

An Embedded Course in Paris, Mar 4-12 2016



Through immersion in memorials, historical sites, museums, tours, and survivor testimonies, this embedded course trip provided an unparalleled exploration of the nature of the Shoah in France, then and now.

Encountering the Marais and Child Survivors

SUNDAY, MARCH 6

I am not new to Paris. I have spent many weeks (months?) there while visiting our dear family friends (Isabelle and Bernard) in Sartrouville, but much of this involved either going to big tourist spots (Eiffel Tour, Orsay, Louvre) or just chilling in their house watching disney movies with their grandchildren. So, on day 1, I was eager to experience

a new, “realer” version of Paris. I was not disappointed.

The first thing on the agenda was already something new for me: a walking tour of the Marais. My only knowledge of the area up till that point was that it was close to the Notre Dame/ Hotel de Ville area and that Bernard joked that it was where the "nancy boys go to dance" (old Irish Catholic that he is). I had no idea that it was traditionally Jewish, and the police around the synagogues especially came as a shock.



I found myself learning about both the current and the past of the Jewish community: We went into hidden synagogues and spiritual centers, leftover from ages when the religion was tolerated if kept private. We mentioned France during the war, including the Vel D'Hiv and other roundups,

and the statue of Dreyfus in the Jewish art museum. And all the while we confronted modern antisemitism and current events as well. Soldiers in front of synagogues, more armed than I've ever seen law enforcement in France, restaurants and businesses shut down by terrorism, talk of the Israeli-Palestine conflict and ISIS and the anti-jewish terrorism that clearly exists today.

I was very surprised and more than a little unsettled to find a Paris that I had never seen before, hidden in plain sight. We saw a statue depicting the blindness of Judaism on Notre Dame, reflecting the old idea that Jews were Christ-killers. I was shocked to find plaques, statues, and memorials, such as the Shoah memorial behind Notre Dame, that I had walked past on many occasions without batting an eye. Most disturbing of all was the sight of impassive soldiers in the streets and throughout security measures, an undercurrent of fear and violence that was definitely not present the last time I visited Paris... or was it?



It was eye opening to say the least. I was dumbfounded and almost ashamed to have not noticed such historical evidence before. The ghosts of Parisian Jews are alive and well, hidden in seemingly residential apartments and tucked away statues. And the idea that antisemitism, whether a different breed or not, exists today was alarming. I got my wish: this was a new Paris, seen through the

eyes of a community I am utterly unfamiliar with.

The lives of these people were further elucidated in the afternoon when we met with a group of elderly child survivors of the Holocaust. We were able to hear their stories in a powerful way as we retraced their footsteps through the streets, finding violence in seemingly quiet and harmless areas. I spoke to two survivors in French, asking them about their stories and telling them about mine. I was struck by how different our worlds were and how fascinated we were with each other. Both were hidden children during the war, and they told of their parents and schools and fighting in the resistance.



I especially enjoyed talking to the gentleman, who was an engineer and was very interested in CERN. He pointed out something very hopeful and promising: how such a scientific undertaking created such incredible international collaboration that shows just how far we have come. I also found it powerful how passionate these people were about remembering the lost children of the Shoah, and how much they had to fight for their memory, in putting plaques on schools and in parks. I felt a very strong connection to these people through their stories and the streets we traveled. They truly were living treasure troves of history, proof of the relevance of the past today.



So there we were in this new Paris: a contradiction of the past and the present, hidden and seen, remembered and ignored, the living and the dead. I began to recognize it as insight into peoples' lives that would be impossible without walking in their footsteps.

Eyewitness Testimonies at the Shoah Memorial

MONDAY, MARCH 7

The Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris is a curious place. Much like the Jewish cultural centers we saw on Sunday, it is ominous from the outside, tucked away in a side street with considerable security and stern looking gendarmes at the door. Disturbing, I remember thinking, that this is still hidden and protected when it should be an integral part of the historical scene in Paris. The somber and tense atmosphere did, however, lend itself to the testimonies we found inside.

The museums and memorials we encountered on this trip, no matter how many lights or stones or iron spikes were involved in their representation were far less life-shaking than the testimonies of living Holocaust survivors. We met Bertrand Herz in the morning, a survivor of Buchenwald. Like many other survivors, he was a little old man, visibly indistinguishable from any other Parisian, but his story was extraordinary. A survivor of the death marches, he escaped at 14 after losing his fa-

ther and being on one of the last convoys of Jews deported from France.



His account was similar to others we heard in many respects. He was from a nonpracticing Jewish family, and like every other survivor of the camps with whom we met, he was faithless. He was unable to tell his tale for almost twenty years, and noted how at the time people did not want to hear it. It sounds insensitive to us now, but I think I understand. The common citizen suffered hardship and pain in the war as well, and although it isn't an excuse, and of course it was nothing compared to the suffering of people like Bertrand, I just don't think they could bear talk of any more death. France, Europe and the world in general needed to move on from the war, and wrap the wound up to let it heal in a way. I know we say Chirac's speech came late, but I think it had to happen that way almost, especially after listening to Bertrand. Survivors and governments alike needed time in order to gain new perspective and hindsight on the horrors of World War II.

Bertrand also expressed anger over what he'd been put through. Most survivors had this sentiment as well. He still did not forgive the Germans, although he said that he of course can't blame the young people who didn't participate. This is understandable, and was striking to me as someone

who has lived and worked in Germany and has several German friends. Funny though, he didn't blame the French as much as others. Although the government rejected him, he received support from friends and neighbors and so stood by his French identity and pride.

The message I got from Bertrand and the museum in general, I think, was the vital importance of educating about the Holocaust. I saw all these schoolchildren, and receptive or no, they were getting exposure. And we talked about police learning about the history of occupied France as well, and learning that they should "disobey orders that are contrary to human rights". This is important: this is progress. It is the education and education alone that stands a chance to prevent these events from happening again.



Our second testimony was an entirely different perspective. We heard from Frida Wattenberg, a Jewish Frenchwoman and resistance fighter who joined de Gaulle's cry to the resistance. She worked to smuggle children across the border into Switzerland, and even helped relocate Jews after the war. She was one of the only members of her family to survive, and lost fellow resistance fighters and child rescuers as well. She was an energetic and fearless woman who brushed aside her incredible courage. Of course she joined the resistance. Of course

she was scared, but she did what she had to do. And I have to wonder. Would I have done the same? The answer is that I don't know. Maybe her Jewish heritage is what propelled her into action. Maybe it's her personality. But I have to admire her and people like her.

We have talked about many kinds of resisters with many motivations, from the priest in *Au Revoir Les Enfants* to Mémé or the sketchy rescuers in *Les Violins du Bal*. Religious motivation, selfish motivation, and monetary motivation did save lives, and arguably did good no matter the cost. There were the communists with their political agenda, there were those seeking revenge. All are valid reasons to revolt. But then there are Les Justes: people like Frida who acted purely because it was the right thing to do. It is those people who can't be thanked enough.

Tales from Birkenau and Mt. Valérien

TUESDAY, MARCH 8

The morning held another testimony, delivered this time by Ester Senot at the Union des Déportés d'Auschwitz. This one was on the surface the same as the others but at the same time unlike anything I've heard before.

Ester was a survivor of Birkenau, a calm but firm woman who told her story with cold determination. Her parents were Polish immigrants to France, happy to live peaceful lives in what they thought was a tolerant state. They were not prepared for war or the antisemitism that seeped into France in the 30's. At the age of 12 Ester began to be impacted by the racial laws: the curfew, the pa-

pers, the star. Then her family was torn apart. Her brothers were sent to internment camps, her parents and other brother taken from her in the Vel D'Hiv. Separated from her sister, she was all alone. Ester was plunged into a life of fear and hiding, staying with her brother or in orphanages or in prison cells. She did not escape.

Ester was sent to Drancy summer 1943 and deported to Auschwitz a month later in September on Convoy 59. For the next few years she would experience nightmares the likes of which very, very few have lived to describe. She would soon witness the death of thousands. The cattle car to Auschwitz was the harbinger of what was to come: 3 days in the dark and the heat and the stench, with babies and the elderly the first to die in the cars. They were greeted by German dogs and bludgeons, and guided into two lines: left and right. Just as so much of her survival hinged on chance before, not getting caught at the Vel D'Hiv, successfully hiding, then getting arrested, so Ester's fate was decided by a simple command. She was one of the "lucky" 106 women and 220 men marched into Auschwitz II Birkenau. Only two of those 106 women, including Ester, would march out.

Ester's story reached me to a depth more profound than any of the others. Perhaps it was that her tone was so rehearsed and commanding. She was determined to tell her story as a responsibility to the listener to tell it again and feel its meaning. And her story scraped to the bone. I was exhausted by its burden, and some words were difficult to hear. And they ended on a less than encour-

aging note, with worry about current affairs and the danger of being forgotten. Ester's story was her resistance, and her revenge on humanity for what happened to her in a way. Just knowing it makes the world seem a little darker. But I have gained understanding and perspective, and for that I am grateful.



My exhaustion carried on to our visit to Mt. Valérien. Despite the enthusiastic tour guide, I just felt like I couldn't absorb any more. Maybe it was that my lungs were resistant themselves, and I was more focused on oxygen deprivation than love letters to executed resistants. Nevertheless, one thing that stuck in my mind was the idea that we had mentioned many times in class of conflicting claims to memory. Do executed resistance members or victims of the Shoah have a greater claim to remembrance? I had had a certain sentiment in class, but it was more developed now after transitioning so abruptly from a survivor testimony to talks of bravery from resistance members condemned to die, and that sentiment is this: it is not a contest. Both groups suffered, for different reasons and in different ways. But pain is pain. Death is death. To devalue the suffering of one group just because another suffered "more" is frankly an insult to their memory. And really they can't be compared. Resistance members chose their fight. They died for a purpose. Victims of the Holocaust

died meaninglessly. I don't mean to say their deaths were insignificant, but that they were unrelated to the victims themselves. It was thoughtless murder in which no choice was involved. Just purposeless and hateful chaos. And so victims of the resistance and victims of the camps are not at all the same, and to compare them would, to me, be extraordinarily oversimplified.

Representing History Today: Père Lachaise and Lunch Near the Panthéon

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9

Wednesday was a rainy day befitting the gloomy atmosphere at the Père Lachaise cemetery. I've known it as a graveyard for the famous or the rich, but it turns out that it also includes memorials for those who had neither names nor headstones, including deportees to the many death camps.

I was very interested in the statues and artwork used to represent victims for these memorials. Most seemed to involve dark and skeletal figures, carrying fallen brethren and clearly suffering. They evoked sorrow and pity and spoke of tragedy and suffering, without the comfort of angels wings or pretty decorations or flowers that adorned the other graves. I saw them as a sort of general apology in the form of a reminder. Images of suffering with the names of the camps, with the prominent lack of names or individuality.



One stood out to me as oddly victorious. It was another emaciated figure, but this time he was raised up, almost victoriously, from a spikey ring of oppression. This I found odd. Isn't the point of the Shoah that the victims suffered without cause? This seemed almost an attempt to contradict that, to give their deaths a brave new purpose and promise alleviation of suffering in death. It was a more hopeful image, but I'm not sure it was justified. In an odd way though, I liked it better than the simpler huddled silhouettes of the dying. Maybe this was more for the families of those lost. It could be seen as a reassurance that their suffering is over, and a hollow promise that they did not die in vain because they are remembered. The tragedy of course is that they did die in vain and their individuality was indeed lost, but at least it drives the viewer to hope for (and hopefully fight for!) better times. Pity doesn't help anyone, after all, living or dead.

Our attempt to visit the Panthéon was unfortunately thwarted, as it was closed. I was disappointed because I always enjoy the big pendulum that shows the coriolis force of gravitation. We weren't only there for cool physics demonstrations though. Four members of the French resistance are honored at the Panthéon representing four pillars of the resistance: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*

and the Republic. This monument is also home to Jean Mulin (famously killed by Klaus Barbie) and some of the righteous among the nations. It also has some nice authors, and my hero Marie Curie, the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, the only woman to win two of them, and the only person ever to win two in different sciences. She was also the first woman to be buried at the Panthéon, of which there are NOT many.



Fangirling aside, we also got the chance to have lunch with Pierre Birnbaum, a historian and professor studying the history of the Jews in France. He offered a different perspective on the culture surrounding Jews in France. He pointed out for example that although the Vichy regime was obviously antisemitic and there were many Jews deported from France (including, as was so heartwrenching as described by Zucchotti, thousands of children who were deported at the suggestion of the French government) France actually had one of the highest Jewish survival rates among occupied countries, with 3/4 of the Jews surviving. This was important context. I'd be curious to learn more about the situation in Poland or elsewhere.



He also pointed out that many Jews were able to protect themselves, especially if they were more wealthy or had friends in the French community. I will say that I was disappointed by his focus on the wealthier Jews rather than the poorer, foreign ones. He seemed far more interested in the rich or established Jewish families who managed to escape than the thousands of poorer families who had no one to protect them. Historians often seem to focus on those who have the money or influence to justify their tale as more important while brushing aside the fates of the majority. Although his insights were interesting I found some of his comments slightly elitist, which I found counterproductive to the whole purpose of remembering victims whose identities the Nazis tried so hard to erase. The survival of several "more important" people does not justify the demise of others. But it was still a very pleasant lunch discussion.

Busses to Drancy

THURSDAY, MARCH 10

On our second to last day we ventured out to the banlieues of Paris to the site of Drancy, the most major internment camp in France turned apartment complex. It was a particularly striking place to visit because without already knowing its violent past is not at all obvious. The museum across the street is almost unidentifiable as such, and the camp has been turned into low income apartments. Only an old cattle car and memorial reveal the nature of the site.



There was a sentiment initially, from the documentary we watched on the subject I think (*If Walls Could Speak*), that it was wrong to have people live on a former camp site without caring. Should they live there at all? Should they at least care the memorial is there? Should more people visit? After visiting, however, I feel strongly that it's fine if people live on the site. Just like the flowers growing in Auschwitz, life goes on. And it would be stupid to set the land aside as sacred or some big memorial. There is scarcely a square inch of habitable land on Earth that hasn't witnessed some small horror, and the only way to truly respect the memory of Drancy's victims is to grieve them, and part of that is moving on. It's ironic that the camp should become the (often temporary) home of poor immigrants, yes, but why not? In a way it is a form of redemption for the camp. Besides, it's progress isn't it? What was once a place of fear and injustice is now just a benign part of people's lives.



I also thought about whether people living there should acknowledge the memorial. I think it is pretentious to say that it's wrong for them to be indifferent

towards it. Yes, I think memorials are important to encourage education and respect for the past but I do not believe people should be obligated to pay their respects to them. I don't pretend to know what these people's lives are like, and so I think it's wrong to judge them for living in a former camp or their indifference towards the memorial. It is not my job to tell them how it should affect their lives. It is the purpose of the memorial to encourage education and respect. Maybe those people have greater troubles than worrying about a cattle car. After all, the situation of immigrants in France is subject to similar intolerance and nationalism as the Jews prior to World War II. Maybe the immigrant tenants are living reminders that the past has every possibility to repeat itself. How many degrees of separation are there between boring residential complexes and camps of imprisonment and despair? So no, I don't think it's right to force memory upon people. But the memorials must be there should someone come looking for them.

A Call to Justice and Remembrance: Marcelline and the Klarsfelds

FRIDAY, MARCH 11

On this, the last day of our trip, we were fittingly called to ponder how we would carry our experience forward. We talked to Marcelline, the Klarsfelds, and Stéphane Cojot-Goldberg transitioned us from past to present to future in thinking about the nature of memory of the Shoah today and the responsibility we have to act on that memory.

In the morning we met with Marcelline, a Birkenau survivor, whose testimony was unique, especially in regards to focus on the present rather than the past. Instead of telling her story like the other survivors we met over the course of the week, she said she wasn't prepared to talk about it, and if we really wanted to know we could read her book. I was shocked. Here was this feisty little old lady openly relating the toll the memory had on her and focusing on her hopes and concerns about the present. I respected her instantly, and recognized this encounter as the perfect transition back to our daily lives. As I first noticed in watching *Night and Fog*, the horror and scope of the Holocaust is so unfathomably great that the knowledge itself has a terrible weight. It is indeed a "cry to the end of time" that not only is the burden of knowing but a command to actively remember and prevent recurrence.



Walking into Marcelline's apartment, I admit that I myself felt weighed down by all the talk of death over the course of the week, and had almost taken in so much that I was desensitized to it. I thus admired Marcelline's refusal to revisit her past. I can't imagine what weight the camps had on her and the other survivors. Maybe what was different about her was that she was perhaps less confident that retelling the story would do anything for her or us. She expressed her frustration with

the resurgence of antisemitism in France and around the world and that she “wasn’t sure if the world wouldn’t end in violence.” This powerfully emphasized how important it is to actively remember, to educate about the Shoah and other historical events in order to honor the victims and avoid repeating history. But frankly, like Marceline, I’m skeptical. In this course we’ve talked a lot about the idea that maybe the Holocaust is impossible to understand. “Is it in vain that we try to remember?” In a way, yes. We cannot know what it was like, and soon (as she pointed out) Marceline and the other witnesses will no longer be with us. Our collective understanding will diminish where it was already limited. And I think that as Marceline pointed out, maybe there is “no exorcism possible”. Of course we must try to remember and warn against a repeat of such events, but it’s naive to think that in the end we will succeed. After all, the Rwandan genocide and other such horrors have already happened since. Violence is a part of human nature that we can at best be aware of but not eliminate. And quantum mechanics has the last word: the universe is not deterministic. It is governed by chaos, chance. Still, there is no reason that our generation at least can try to remember, can recognize the importance of civil liberties. Marceline, for example, believed in human resilience even if she didn’t have faith in God. She embodied fighting for freedom and taking action and responsibility for your life where you could. She was an amazing model of human spirit and bravery. And that, that is what we can take from this. The determination to fight for our lives

and what we believe in no matter what the outcome.

Such activism was emphasized by the Klarsfelds. They were another reality check in that we didn’t quite get what we expected. My image of them was from the film we watched: Passionate fighters for justice, tireless documentarians of memory, the people who wrote the memorial for children of the Holocaust and convicted Barbie and slapped the chancellor. But in reality, they were more businesslike than passionate. Activism was just what they did for a living. And they were good at it. No bells and whistles or righteous messages, it was just what you do. And this was just as striking to me as Marceline’s matter-of-factness. It’s stupid to praise or condemn the good and bad in history without doing anything about it. They embodied the importance of doing what you can to make the world a better place in your own way, no excuses. And they were striking, I think, because they and all of the figures we learned about - the Klarsfelds, the victims, Barbie, Hitler himself - are just people. Like us. And elevating them larger than life is just an excuse for the evil that was done and the justice that came so late.



Our final meeting was an upbeat discussion with Stéphane Cojot-Goldberg, a photographer and son of a deportee who wanted to but ultimately didn’t kill Klaus Barbie. He set our eyes firmly on the future as we ended

our trip, encouraging us to keep up with news and caring about causes that mean something to us. His was the same message as the Klarsfelds’ and Marceline’s and all of the people we met on the trip. We have a responsibility to the memory of the Holocaust. But not just that. In general we have a responsibility to act when we are called to act. Be a resistant, not a bystander. And to acknowledge the inevitability of violence and even genocide in our own nature. Ignorance and indifference must be fought with knowledge and empathy. We pondered human psychology with mention of Milgram’s experiment and how it is easier to support violence if one can shrug off personal responsibility. Overall the discussion reminded me of the importance of staying informed and caring about others as a citizen of this Earth.



Overall, I value this trip for giving me knowledge and experiences that I would never otherwise receive, in order to better feel and understand the weight of my responsibility to do what I can to make the world a better place. I will never forget my encounters with the survivors who will soon be lost to us. I am not the same person having heard their stories. I choose to move on, educated and active rather than ignorant and passive, having accepted the horrors of the past and the reality of the darkness in this world, with respect for the people who came before and readiness for whatever the future will bring.