An Albuquerque 8th Grade Class’ Trip to Visit a Concentration Camp in Poland

By Diane Joy Schmidt

There is a school in Albuquerque that studies the Holocaust and sends its eighth graders on a two-week trip to Poland. They visit a concentration camp and the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, built on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as other cultural sites and museums. This is the Montessori Elementary and Middle School in Albuquerque, a free public charter school, where entrance is by lottery. The school participates in an exchange program with a Montessori school in Poland, whose families host the American students, and who in turn sends a group of their students here to New Mexico in the fall. The voluntary trip to Poland costs each student $2,500, and they raise money throughout the year with craft and bake sales in order to go. About 25 students attended this last year.

Three eighth graders, Aiden, Alyssa and Jaycee, who are preparing to go to Poland this year, along with two alumnae who already went, Sophia, now a high school freshman and Mikeala, a sophomore, met with the Link and talked about what they have been studying in preparation for their trip, and why. Their language arts teacher, Amanda Hagerly, who goes on the trips, brought the students together to share what they have been learning.

All of the students demonstrated an astonishing adult-level maturity of character, thought and openness during the discussion. They were very present, forthright and articulate. They made a positive impression on this visitor, an impression that lingered for days, and that revitalized her sense of hope for the future of humanity.

One student, Aiden, explained why the school is studying genocide: that one of the cornerstones of the school is peace-building, and that they have been learning about genocide “so that it never happens again.” In sixth and seventh grades, they visit the New Mexico Holocaust and Intolerance Museum. One display, entitled the six stages of genocide, made a particular impression on Aiden, as its first stage was simply bias.

This year, the students read The Sunflower. When the New Mexico Jewish Federation learned about the Montessori school’s program this last year, they allocated funds to pay the entry fee for the students to visit Auschwitz, and purchased copies for the school of The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, a true story by Simon Wiesenthal. They also read Milhoffer, a novel about a boy’s experiences of the Warsaw Ghetto in WWII. However, they all said they got more out of The Sunflower.

Aiden said, for one thing, because it had real characters with real dialogue, it hit closer than a novel could. The students all said they had to think about what they would have done in Wiesenthal’s place. As a young man, he was in the Lemberg concentration camp working in a labor detail at an army hospital, when a nurse brought him before an S.S. officer who was dying and who had asked to talk to a Jew — he wanted a Jew to forgive him. The officer was haunted by a crime he had participated in committing, when a building filled with 300 Jewish people was set on fire and as the people tried to escape, they shot them.

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barely survived. Kors chose in later life to forgive her torturers. She has spoken publicly about her decision, which remains controversial -- many could not understand how she could do that, or that she should.

The students discussed how they understood her choice also. Alyssa said that it wasn’t easy, that it took time over many years, that it required deep inner work of her own, so that she could be free of the experience. She was impressed by what Kors said -- it was a choice she herself could make, with meaning, whereas as a child victim, she had no power over the meaningless acts done to her. “I felt it was really hard for her to forgive; and I would like to be able to be that way.” She felt it showed a lot of strength of character.

The students agreed it would be much harder to forgive someone if they denied their actions.

Sophia, now a high school freshman, visited the Stutthof concentration camp with her class this spring. She said “it changed the way I think about history.” Instead of just studying facts “that seemed to have happened ‘oh, so long ago,’ you could actually feel some of the sadness, so you really felt the impact of it all.” Sophia was also struck by what was left today, knowing all that had happened ‘oh, so long ago,’ you could see the impact of it.

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Mikaela, now a sophomore, said that nothing could prepare them for the reality of being at a concentration camp and the profound experience of seeing the place and the exhibits there. She remembered seeing the suitcase of Otto Frank, father of Anne Frank. Today when she hears news she says, “Oh, this is happening. I think deeper, what is their life, how bad it really is, how much pain.” She said that it makes her ask, “How can we make things better?” Both students feel they have a greater awareness and understanding of world history than others at their high school.

During the trip, the students keep daily journals. Immediately after visiting the concentration camp, they spent time with a theater troupe that incorporates therapeutic activities. The students join with Group Próg, as they sing and dance to gypsy music. The activity helps to integrate their emotions after the shock of the visit, explained Stan Albrycht, the Montessori school’s finance administrator, who has organized the group each year. Albrycht said that parents are not allowed on the trip, as their presence would interfere with the students’ experiential learning.

Jaycee explained that they don’t only study the Holocaust. They learned about genocides in Rwanda, Armenia, and here in New Mexico. They go on a field trip to the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona, where she was impressed seeing the large-scale historic photographic display there devoted to the Long Walk. Beginning in 1864, thousands of Navajo people died when they were marched in winter over four hundred miles to Bosque Redondo, near Portales, imprisoned and starved for four years.

The students also read a story in seventh grade, “The Last Snake Runner” about when the conquistadors decimated the Acoma people here.

In a statement of purpose about reading The Sunflower, Hagerty explained that “students will contemplate the events that happened throughout the Holocaust and their impacts on individuals and the world; discuss their thoughts about forgiveness and what it means to forgive those who have done something that many would say is unforgivable; do close reading of high level text that has content that is difficult to comprehend… and participate in multiple Socratic discussions.”

The students clearly demonstrated that they succeeded in fulfilling this, and more, they are seeing its relevance in current events.

**Werner Gellert, museum founder, dies at 93**

**June 14, 1926 – November 9, 2019**

It is with great sadness that the board, staff, and volunteers of the Holocaust & Intolerance Museum of New Mexico accept the recent death of Werner Gellert, the last of our institution’s founders. He taught us that indifference to the persecution of others always has tragic consequences. Werner died Saturday, November 9, at the age of 93, and will be honored and remembered for his legacy of love, devotion to humanity, and vision.

In his lifetime, he experienced how hate and intolerance can trigger the destruction of families, cultures and nations. Not only did he observe mankind’s capacity for infinite cruelty, he endured it. Eighty years ago, he was witness to Kristallnacht (November 9–10) in Germany when his synagogue was burned and his father arrested. The family later was able to flee the Holocaust in Europe to Shanghai where eventually they were placed in an internment camp by the Japanese.

The museum and community in Albuquerque that he and his wife, Frances (Franke), along with Julia K. Lerner created is intended to bring about harmony, understanding, and an atmosphere of mutual respect through education and exhibits. The museum displays feature all groups tortured and killed by the Nazis, examples of other genocides, and contemporary issues of social injustice. Our educational outreach programs, predicated on Elie Wiesel’s concept that “silence and indifference always help the tormentor, never the tormented,” use art integration to empower students to stand up for social justice issues today.

The lesson we learned from Werner is that every single person can make a difference, as he did.

Werner is survived by a daughter, Julie Gellert, and a grandson, Brandon Ligon, both of Arizona, and the rest of us who will “never forget.”

Donations in Werner’s honor can be sent to HIMNM, PO Box 1762, Albuquerque NM 87103-1762 or online: nmholocaustmuseum.org. The museum in Albuquerque at 616 Central Avenue SW is open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. It is closed Mondays and federal holidays.