

I am proud to say that I come from a family of survivors. Yet, the memories of others often do not spring to life unless seen by our own two eyes. This summer, I had the life altering experience of traveling to Poland and witnessing the aftermath of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Even before my trip, I recognized the impact such a trip would have on me. My Great grandparents had been imprisoned in the death camp that was Auschwitz Birkenau, and I knew that I would be viewing their trials and tribulations, and walk the same path they perched precariously on, unsure of their fates. However, there was one difference. I knew I was going to walk out.

Throughout my one week journey in Poland, I was confronted with a multitude of emotions, which washed over me and penetrated my mind constantly. As I walked, hand in hand with other Jewish teenagers from around the country, the memories my great grandparents had related to me suddenly struck me. Immediately, I saw their memories come to life, whether it was in the gas chambers of Auschwitz or in the barbed wire fences of Majdanek. One of the most powerful moments of my trip was in Auschwitz, when I entered a room in which stood a book, among bare walls, containing the names of the six million who were murdered mercilessly. Immediately, the experience turned into names, not numbers. This book was haunting in the sense that I could not seem to pry my eyes from it, for it contained names upon names of those who were killed simply for who they were.

After leaving Poland, I wasn't sure what to think. I was filled with a myriad of memories; and I knew that my task would be to keep them alive and ingrained in my heart, but I had not truly realized the impact of my trip until I arrived in Israel. That is when I saw the light, the life that came after the Holocaust. I witnessed generations of families who, like me, were still here because of the strength and resilience of our ancestors. Life during the Holocaust was unspeakable, yet after liberation came an entirely new fight, one that continued for eternity.

For my Bat Mitzvah, my family and I traveled to Israel to celebrate with family and friends in our homeland. Over the trip, we visited my great grandparents and decided to record their story so that we would have it in our own reach for many years to come. Toward the end of our conversation, my great grandfather spoke of his decision to emigrate to Israel following the Holocaust. To him, there was simply, without any question, any other place to be. Despite the profusion of challenges they encountered, my great grandparents settled in Israel and contributed to the establishment of the State.

Several years ago, my father told me a story concerning my great grandfather. As a young boy, when he and my great grandfather attended shul together, my great grandfather's eyes would always swell with tears each time Hatikva was sung. When my father asked where the tears were coming from, my great grandfather responded: "When we were in Auschwitz, we couldn't even dream of the Land of Israel, much less the State of Israel. And now, that is a reality."

To me, life after the Holocaust resembles hope. Hope in the face of uncertainty, and hope for a better tomorrow. These Holocaust survivors had just endured the most inexplicable horrors, yet they kept persevering. When I witnessed the concentration camps, I envisioned the march to death, but I also envisioned the march to hope. I am proud to say that I come from a family of survivors, who have taken hope and transformed it into a reality, and am proud to be part of a nation that, even in times of suffering, continues and endures, because they see the beacon of the future, and the light of hope.

Noga Finkelstein
Margolin Hebrew Academy, 11th Grade

