



“The Mesorah Trip” To Poland

JUNE 28 to JULY 3, 2011

R' Elly Merenstein – Director
Yehuda Klein – Head counselor

Project Mesorah Staff

Mr. Ari Scharf –Founder
Rabbi Avrohom Moshe Kaufman –Executive Director
R' Menachem Klein –Director of development and programming

Our Guides

Rabbi Paysach Krohn
Rabbi Menachem Nissel
“Thomas”

Teffilos and nigunim led by

Reb Abish Brodt

Musical accompaniment by: Baruch Schwartz
Videography by: “Joe” and Boruch Heinemann
Tour Coordinator- Rabbi Yehuda Fried

This is a compilation of the e-mail correspondence between Camp Director Elly Merenstein and the parent body, documenting our trip to Poland. The e-mails have been slightly edited and have been reformatted yet the initial raw emotions and flavor is kept.

POLAND DAY #1

Wed. June 29, 2011

Re: Update from Warsaw

Dear Parents,

As I am wiped, I will not go into great detail though I thought it would be nice to give you a brief update about our trip so far.

Despite the delay our day was beautiful and uplifting. We traveled direct from the airport to visit the last remaining Shul in the Warsaw ghetto: The Nojik shul. After Mincha Rabbi Krohn gave a powerful introduction to our trip, its purpose and our collective responsibility in what we need to take out and grow and learn from. We then continued to various sites in the Ghetto. We visited the site where the uprising began, The Natan Rapaport Memorial and a remaining wall of the Warsaw Ghetto. We then went to a scenic park where the staff of Project Mesorah had set up a delicious BBQ with tons of food. After the BBQ we had a meeting with the Chief Rabbi of Poland Rabbi Michael Shudrich (originally from NY) who gave D'ivrei Bracha and greeted the boys.

We continued our journey to the town of Ger. We visited the Nazi razed remains of the Jewish Cemetery of Ger and davened powerful Tefillos at the Keiver of the S'fas Emes and the Chidushei Harim. We then went to what once was the Gerer Bais Medrish which is a grand big building in standing condition. After Ma'ariv we broke out into singing and dancing, it was really special. We travelled to Lublin which was a two hour drive. Tomorrow after Shacharis we will be learning a Seder in the famed Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin and tomorrow afternoon we will be visiting the concentration camp of Majdanek. Rabbi Paysach Krohn throughout the day has been on top of his game inspiring and connecting with all the boys. Rabbi Menachem Nissel has joined as a tour guide and has been focusing on explaining the history of every place that we visit. Reb Abish Brodt has been doing a fine job making sure music and singing accompanies where appropriate. The boys seem to be adjusting and getting along nicely. I hope to be able to continue this update so until next time...

Best regards,
Elly

POLAND DAY #2

Thurs. June 30, 2011

Re: Update from Lublin, Majdanek Lizensks and Oswiecism

It will be hard to properly express what a powerful day yesterday was. My words will cheapen what really went on; nevertheless I will try my best. Early morning, after a spirited Shacharis, we were off to Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. Project Mesorah had arranged to have a video playing on the bus which was an address to us from Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel the executive director of the Agudath Yisrael of America. Rabbi Zwiebel gave a brief history of the Yeshiva and its founder Harav Meir Shapiro. He explained to the boys that Harav Shapiro was the founder of the Daf Yomi and was an active member of the original Kenisia Gedola of the Agudath Yisrael in Poland. Rabbi Zwiebel explained how much the Agudah has evolved and developed into to the great worldwide organization it is today. As we neared the Yeshiva, Rabbi Krohn had a surprise in store for us. Rabbi Krohn explained that before this very Yeshiva existed most other Yeshivos were housed in substandard basements and shoddy facilities. Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin was the first of its kind to offer a beautiful building with electricity, bathrooms and all the finishings. To our great surprise at the Hashgacha Pratis we were witnessing, Rabbi Krohn informed us exactly to this day, many years ago, was the anniversary where they celebrated the "setting of the cornerstone" and opening of this magnificent building. As we realized that our humble group had merited coming to a full circle, we danced and sang our way up into the building. We sang songs that one would sing on Simchas Torah. Toras Hashem Temima and Seu Shearim Rasheichem resounded in the air as the locales looked on and a great Kiddush Hashem was made. After a grand breakfast in the Yeshiva dining hall, we were ushered to Seder. When we realized that we were echoing the footsteps Yeshiva Bocherim before us we were greatly inspired. Campers and staff members who had come prepared, taught us Mishnayos and Rabbi Krohn closed the Seder with a classic powerful Drasha. It was something else! What an experience and what a feeling!

We then left to what was the most difficult part of the day which we all knew was to be a defining reason of our trip here. We were off to confront the concentration camp of Majdanek. I can only tell you my experience which was very powerful and intense. Upon entering into the camp, I was gripped with fear and apprehension. At the entrance I froze. Any story, article or essay I had read on the Holocaust danced before me in terrifying and overwhelming way. I read so much and knew a lot of information but at that moment each story had

immediately become a searing and bitter numbing reality. The tears could not stop as I fought to understand this reality, something I was unable to begin to relate to or comprehend.

Remembering that I was one of those "leading" a group of teenaged Yeshiva boys i wildly grasped on to a makeshift sense of control to save me. The show must go on. Silently we walked through the camp, the barracks, the gas chambers and the crematoriums and I thought to myself what my uncle had told me of why he could never visit the camps. "I do not have boots high enough and earmuffs strong enough" The boots will never be high enough to wade through the rivers of blood that was shed by these vicious beast and the earmuffs will never be strong enough to muffle out the cries of their suffering. As I looked out of the window in the gas chamber I could not help but wonder what the Jews of those times were thinking as they looked out that window. They saw through the same windowpane, the same sky and desperately gazed at the nearby barracks, their last peek into a world gone insane. As we huddled together in the chamber, Rabbi Krohn spoke softly with tears streaming down his face. He spoke of Rav Elchonon Wasserman and his final words before getting killed by the Nazis. He spoke of the many Kedoshim who died saying Shma Yisrael with unstinting Emuna in Hashem. Together we were all Mekabol Ol Malchus Shmayim in their memory, in their honor. We continued onwards past the offices and towers of the guards, the barbed wire fences, more and more barracks. We saw a massive pond which the Nazis Yemach Shemam would place the ashes from the crematorium. I am doing my best to express my experiences but there are times that one can never find the right words and this is most definitely one of those moments.

I would like to point something out - In being an advocate of bringing the boys here I have always been concerned that if not presented appropriately, a great travesty would happen and were that to happen then perhaps better not to bring them at all! These were some of my fears in arranging for this trip to take place. Baruch Hashem I can now say that all potential was realized! With our experienced team and Rabbi Krohn at the helm, it was exactly what we had in mind. No doubt that this day will be ingrained on your sons minds forever. To know what they felt on this trip you will need to speak with them as I can only recount my experiences. Upon exiting down to the bus we broke out in emotion filled song, singing songs like Am Yisrael Chai and Yibaneh Hamikdash. In the planning stage of the trip I was a bit taken aback and even appalled at the very notion of bringing a guitar to such a place! It just seemed insensitive and wrong. On the way out of the camp I then realized there was a place for music and singing. We needed to realize what a Zchus we have to enjoy the lives we lead; we must perceive the miracle that we clearly witness and that despite all "Am Yisrael Chai". Despite whatever we go through we prevail and withstand and this is how it will be all the way to the times of Mashiach with the Binyan Beis Hamikdash and then we will certainly be able to sing joyfully realizing that it was always for the good! Az Yimaleh Schok phinu U'Lishoneinu Rina. We sang Ani Maamin with deep meaning and fervor. We danced out of the camp arm in arm, singing Am Yisrael Chai and Yibaneh Hamikdash. These seemed to me the bittersweet Nigunim and longings of a Yid throughout all the centuries and we too felt these strong and most potent emotions. I would like to say that as parents you should all be proud of the immense maturity and seriousness displayed by all of the boys today.

Afterwards we continued on to visit and daven at the kever of the Chozeh of Lublin and the Maharshal. Rabbi Krohn inspired us with segments and stories from the lives of these giants of men. Another great opportunity is to be able to Daven at Kivrei Tzadikim. Each Tzadik has their unique Kedusha and we let our souls be nurtured from each one. We then drove to Lizhensk where we had a filling and delicious dinner. We davened, sang and danced literally for hours. Rabbi Krohn told us the Kever of the Rebbe, Reb Elimelech would be a special place, and he was right. It was a stark contrast to where we had spent our afternoon but was an equally important component to keep ourselves joyous, uplifted and inspired.

Late that night we drove to the city of Ocweism where after Davening Vasikin we slept and slept and slept! We were knocked out! After waking up from our deep slumber we had breakfast and now we are going to visit the concentration camp of Auschwitz/Birkenau. We will continue on to Crakow for Shabbos and I hope to update you from there either later today or Motzei Shabbos

A gutten Erev Shabbos,
Elly

POLAND DAY #3 and #4
Motzei Shabbos. July 1, 2011
Re: Update from Crakow

It is 4 am over here in Krakow. I have been unable to update since Thursday and we have done a lot since then. Friday morning was a cold and rainy day and we started off our day in a Shul called Chevra Lomdei Mishnayos which is right next to Auschwitz and was reopened after the war. The Shul is also a museum which is dedicated to teaching about life before the war. A powerful video with live interviews gave testimony to a rich and vibrant frum life which we knew was to be destroyed. We realized quite eerily how similar our lives were to these people whose lives were centered around their shul, Yeshiva, and enjoying Shabbos and Yomim Tovim. We had our daily seder of Mishnayos in the Shul and at the end we realized we were ½-way finished the Mesechta of which our goal was to make a Siyum on Motzei Shabbos.

After Seder we left to visit Birkenau. Rabbi Nissel explained that Auschwitz was one of 3 camps the first was a "labor camp". The Nazis Yemach Shemam then decided to "expand" and they built Birkenau, which was the dreaded Auschwitz death camp. We visited 2 out of the three camps. Birkenau was one of the most difficult experiences of the trip. After hearing so many stories and now seeing with our own eyes the site where infamous evil Dr. Mengele Yemach Shemam stood and directed our Bubbies and Zaydies -Right or Left, was incomprehensible. Seeing firsthand the terrible large death factory, gas chambers and Crematoriums sent waves of terror and anger directed to these sick sick people, if they can even be called that.

We spent a chilling moment in the women's barracks and looked up at the same roof many holy women looked up at night, not knowing if they would ever get out of there alive. It was difficult to see and feel. We moved on and walked throughout the camp and saw many other heartbreaking exhibits. The highest and most uplifting moment was when we gathered in front of the memorial monument situated in middle of the camp. Reb Abish said the Tefilla of Kel Moley Rachamim for the 6 million and to the eyes of the many tourist and visitors we sang Acheinu Kol Bais Yisrael and Ani Maamin. We were almost able to hear the thoughts of these visitors saying "who are these people that after so much suffering and continual persecution can still exist, heads held high, and singing nevertheless!" We stood with great pride as we honored the memories of our lost brothers and sisters. An entire group of Polish tourist wanting to go into one of the barracks (turned museums) waited outside because, as Mr. Ari Scharf explained, we needed more time in this barrack because we were grandchildren of the people that were murdered here. With a shocked look on their faces, they respected this and waited outside for "the surviving family members" - in the words of their tour guide. We were moved to tears while realizing the gnawing and bitter truth to his words. These were our people, our Bubbies and Zaydies and we are their surviving children. From there we traveled to Auschwitz 1, well known for the treacherous deceitful "Arbei Macht Frei" sign. We were surprised to see an almost pleasant looking village type of area. We learnt that it was taken from the Polish government and turned into a labor camp. The entire place had been turned into a bustling museum which in itself was such a turnoff. We walked around and saw many more heartbreaking exhibits and left.

We left to Crakow and went straight to the factory of Oscar Schindler. We heard his story and all signed our names under Rabbi Krohns message which he left in the factory's guestbook. Here is what he wrote." G-D bless Oscar Schindler for his heroic efforts in saving so many Jews." Rabbi Krohn told us stories of other Righteous amongst the nations. Most notable mentioned amongst others were Raoul Wallenberg and Chiune Sugihara.

After the factory we continued on to the Kever of Frau Sarah Schneirer where Rabbi Krohn movingly said that we are here to represent our sisters and mothers in thanking Sara Schneirer. He explained that we would not be here today without her creating and building up the Bais Yackov movement. Being that it was actually hours before Shabbos, we sang Aishes Chayil to her and in her honor.

We pulled up to the beautiful Qubues hotel a half an hour before Shabbos. We had a stirring Kabbalas Shabbos and Shacharis the next day at the Rema Shul in the Jewish Quarter of Krakow. It was special knowing that we were davening in the same Shul as the great Rema. The meals were nice, the food and company great. I spoke Friday night connecting the Chok of Parah Aduma to the fact that there is much that we cannot understand about the holocaust, which was at the forefront of my mind that night. Zmiros led by R' Abish were sung with a new excitement and appreciation. It was so incredible that we were spending a Shabbos in Crakow. Shabbos afternoon Rabbi A.M Kaufman literally exploded us with the most amazing Dvar Torah. A Poignant story, a powerful message with a passionate delivery, I do not think that any of the boys will ever forget that speech.

Shabbos day after the meal we went for a walking tour which was incredible. It was a twofold tour. The first part was of the Jewish quarter. We were blown away to see the main area where Yidden lived their lives totally untouched. Batei Midrashim, Shuls and homes all in an upscale setting are still all there! We realized that so much of our culture came from here, and so much has been left on the Poles as well! There are stores that sell Challas called bilkilachs and little stands that sell CHULENT!! (This is apparently a polish delicacy). It just showed us what an indelible mark we had made here in Poland which still lingers to a certain extent and echoes on to this very day. We got the chills walking and seeing an iron wrought gate with a Magen David in it in the Childrens Park. That must have been where on an average day before the war, mothers took their children to play. This was the "Flatbush" or "Lakewood" in those times, it was the center. Everything was untouched with padlocks coldly locked, the cobwebs and dust setting on the doors of these shut down Battei Midrashim and Shuls. These once hallowed streets and halls are currently filled with Polish Goyim living in properties and estates belonging to our (not so distant) family members! We were able to vividly imagine what life was like back then.

The next part of the tour was sad. Just minutes away we walked to Cracow's Ghetto. We realized that Yidden were thrown out of their beautiful neighborhoods and tranquil lives and forced to live in these small and crowded sections. We saw this area filled with ominous grey tenement buildings enclosed by a high wall (of which is partly still there), a far cry from the beautiful Jewish quarter which was minutes away. The lower class Poles live in these very same apartments and buildings.

What an astonishing trip! Travelling around and seeing with our very eyes a vibrancy of life that once was and how our brothers and sisters were suddenly removed from their blissful fulfilling lives to a life of uncomfortable uncertainty. It was so powerful to see firsthand how much we had and only now we begin to fathom how great the loss truly was.

There is so much more to say. This trip really has B"H been an incredible success. I feel as everyone must go on such a trip. The question is why? Why is there such a great importance? Is it the many lessons that history provides us, seeing the habitat of over a thousand years of Jewish living? Was it the powerful array of emotions, whether it was deepened pain in learning so much about the Holocaust or the heightened joy of the Tefillas, dancing and singing? As much as I do place value to that, I do not think that it is either of these answers.

What I do feel is that here one can gain a certain appreciation of what a Yid is and what a Yid can be. We really did not come here by and large to focus and concentrate on the heinous and barbaric ways we were tortured and killed. It is important to note it, and we were brought to be made aware of the many who died Al Kiddush Hashem, but the main purpose and aim of our trip was to witness the place where many suffered yet remained steadfast in their Emuna to Hashem.

I think that we need to look inside and try and introspect about where we are holding in our Emuna and in our commitment to our relationship with Hashem. Do we have an appreciation for this rich and priceless heritage that has been handed to us on a silver platter? We are only the beneficiary of the herculean efforts of those before us.

Can we really comprehend the great destruction and near annihilation we experienced as a nation and the fact that a few starved, broken and nearly dead believers rebuilt literally from its ashes to a renewal of magnificent proportions? These are the people we come from! This is our faith! Our religion and heritage for life! Those who all died Al Kidush Hashem are an epic tragedy and we continue to mourn them, but we need to learn and be inspired by those who had an even harder path to take to continue **living** Al Kidush Hashem! I feel that this is the reason why this trip is a must for every Jew. We need to be reminded that whatever the difficulties we are up against we need to **live** Al Kidush Hashem. We need to remember that where we are today was all because of the few broken, near dead survivors who chose the path of **Living** Al Kiddush Hashem. And so must we, especially with the amazing life and opportunities that we have!

Just a few of my personal musings ☺

Until tomorrow,
Elly

From: Elly Merenstein
Sent: Monday, July 04, 2011 4:12 AM
Subject: **Welcome to Eretz Yisrael!**

POLAND DAY #5

Hi,

Just to let you all know that the boys have arrived safely and are happy to be here. They are unpacking and settling in quite nicely. Tonight we hope to bring them to Daven at the Kosel Hama'aravi. Here is a quick recap of the closing day of our Poland trip. On Motzei Shabbos we went on a walking tour to the Jewish quarter and the Remah Shul. We Davened at the Kever of the Rema, the Tosphos Yom Tov, and the Bach who are all buried in a cemetery right outside "The Rema Shul". When we returned to the hotel we had a Siyum/ End of the trip party. The Siyum we made was on Meseches Rosh Hashana. After the meal and final speeches, Rabbi Krohn and Rabbi Nissel asked each boy to express a bit of their experience in public. Many of your sons had beautiful words which were packed with meaning and depth. It was a night to remember. Although we knew we were going on to camp in Yerushalayim which was very exciting, we were sad that this extraordinary and monumental trip, filled with inspiration, deep ruchniyos growth, and introspection was coming to an end.

Some boys stayed up and davened Vasikin at the Rema shul with Rabbi Krohn as he was to leave in the early morning. Early next morning after the second minyan and breakfast we checked out of the hotel. We drove the long drive from Krakow to Warsaw and dropped off group of kids whose flights were earlier. Rabbi Nissel stayed behind with us and we went to the Bais Hakvaros in Warsaw. The Cemetery is in perfect condition and we davened by many Kivrei Tzadikim, most notable were the Kivarim of Rav Chaim Brisker Z"l, The Netziv Z"l, and the Chemdas Shlomo Z"l. There is a vast area marked off with a sign: Kivrei H'Achim which was mass graves for thousands of bodies that were killed in Warsaw. We davened and Rabbi Nissel said Kel Molei. After the Kever H' Achim we went to a heart wrenching children's memorial right near the entrance of the graveyard. On the bus ride to the airport the atmosphere was solemn as we knew that our spectacular trip into our history was coming to an end. Baruch Hashem we are going to continue onwards to an even greater journey which we all know as the pinnacle and climax of our past, present and future! We were off to spend a summer in Yerushalayim and Eretz Yisrael.

All the best!

Elly

