For the first half of my independent research trip, I traveled to Warsaw and Krakow, Poland to investigate the cities and camps of Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

In Warsaw, I witnessed the anniversary of the 69th Warsaw Uprising. The entire day had citywide events beginning with a commemoration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Soldiers laid wreaths at the tomb and read out the names of the resisters, rescuers and fighters, including Irena Sendler. I visited the Warsaw Uprising Museum downtown, a museum dedicated to chronicling the efforts of the Poland Underground and Home Army. The exhibits were very interactive, which helped engage younger students, but much of the information was muddled by too much stimuli.

On my way back from the museum, at 5 p.m., known as the “W” hour, cars on the street stopped regardless of traffic light color, and men on the sidewalks removed their hats. All at once car and bus drivers pressed on their horns, creating a siren effect. The city originally wanted to sound a siren and have planes drop flyers about the Uprising but the mayor vetoed the idea, citing insufficient funds. For about two minutes, everyone in Warsaw stood and sat still, listening to the ingenious “sirens” of the W-hour.

Back in Old Town, I visited the sculpture of the Little Boy Soldier, a symbol of freedom and the Polish Underground, and the mermaid statue, a symbol of the Uprising. At the Little Boy Soldier, locals had placed candles and flowers at his feet. A festival in the Old City square also commemorated the anniversary and entertainers wore Polish Underground armbands as they marched and sang on stage.

Marta, a Lodz native, gave me a private tour of Jewish Warsaw and Treblinka. Except for a few buildings, most of Warsaw has been reconstructed post-WWII, because 85% of the city was destroyed in the war. I toured the heart of Jewish Warsaw, beginning with Grzybowski Square. I visited the memorial to Janus Korczak and the children of his orphanage. This year in Poland is dubbed Janus Korczak year because it is the 70th anniversary of his death in Treblinka. The Poles love Korczak, an assimilated Polish Jew, because of his decision to go with his orphans to Treblinka when he could have been hidden.

The only surviving street of the Warsaw Ghetto is surrounded by original buildings, which people still lived in until only two years ago. Large photo banners of individual Jews from the ghetto hang from one building, remnants of an exhibition 10 years ago called “I see their faces.” The street is called Próżna, meaning “empty,” which now symbolically stands for the void in the city of the vibrant Jewish community destroyed in the Holocaust. The square now seems to be a very small center of contemporary Jewish life, with a theater, two restaurants and the only remaining open synagogue in Warsaw that survived the war, Synagoga Ortodosyjna. Unfortunately today, the Jewish institutions are selling their land to companies that are building high rises, which largely hide the square.

I visited the Bank of Polski, a building with a facade dotted by bullet holes from the Nazi guns during fighting with the Polish resistance. A large sculpture of the Polish Underground symbol stands on the side of the bank, surrounded by flower beds of Poland’s red and white colors. The symbol, a P with an anchor at the bottom, is visible on many buildings in Warsaw, a prevalent reminder of the Warsaw Uprising.

We headed to the Jewish Historical Institute, where Jewish teenagers on a birthright tour slept through a Holocaust documentary. Marta recognized the tour from the security guard waiting outside of the Institute. She said she was not alone in her frustration of the negative connotation of Poland portrayed to the Israeli students through the tours. She thought the tours,
always with high security, only gave the teens an impression that Poland was anti-semitic and unsafe.

We visited the Umschlagplatz, where the deportations occurred to Treblinka. Marta said at the July 22nd commemoration ceremony the street was shut down for the crowds, many people brought candles and flowers, and a chief rabbi spoke. The Umschlagplatz seems to straddle the line of individual and collective commemoration. Engraved on the marble are rows of Polish names that Jews were allowed to have, but the names did not belong to any particular individuals.

Lastly, we visited the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial, the Jewish Cemetery, Korczak’s Orphanage and the Wall of the Ghetto. The Memorial, in the middle of a residential area, is made of black marble from Sweden. The Germans meant to use the marble for a monument to the victory of Hitler, so it is a bit of poetic justice that instead the marble was used for the Uprising memorial. On one side is a relief of the heroes and on the other a relief of the elderly and children that could not resist. Many of the Holocaust memorials, like this one, have been paid for by the City of Warsaw and the State of Poland.

The Jewish cemetery is the second largest Jewish cemetery in Europe, and bullet holes in the stones show that here too the resistance fighters combated the Nazis. In the cemetery, Poland memorializes the children who died in the ghetto with a sculpture. There is also a wall upon which Jews thank Poles who hid them and Poles remember Jewish families who were deported.

Korczak’s orphanage was being reconstructed, but on the fence hung many colorful ribbons to commemorate the orphans sent to Treblinka. My favorite stop on the tour was at the only remaining wall of the Warsaw Ghetto. The wall was on the backside of a building, and is now hidden behind a supermarket and between apartment buildings. The wall was found and cleaned up by a Polish man who lives in a neighboring apartment. Now 92-years-old, he still maintains the wall and came to talk with me through Marta as a translator. He created a map of the site, has allowed museums around the world to take bricks from the wall and planted a tree in front of the wall, given by the Japanese. During the war he was forced to fight in East Germany for the Third Reich.

An hour out of Warsaw is Treblinka. The camp, part of operation Reinhardt, was razed by the Germans in an attempt to destroy evidence. Memorial stones now stand on the campgrounds, representing the people, train tracks and camp. At the end of the symbolic stone train tracks stood a stone platform and ten stones, each bearing the name of one of the nations from which Jews were deported to Treblinka. To the left of these stones in the middle of an open field was a giant stone monument with carved reliefs of mangled people. Scattered in a circle around this monument were several stones engraved with the names of the villages the prisoners came from. Warszawa was the biggest stone since the largest population of prisoners was deported from that city. Janus Korczak was the only individual remembered, and a stone carved with the words “Never Forget” in several languages was located nearby.

I also visited the site of the penal work camp and gravel quarry down the road from the monument. Only the brick foundations remained, marked by signs of the role of each block. Marta’s grandfather was sent to work at a penal work camp and she said Pope John Paul II was sent to a quarry when he was still named Karol Wojtyla. At the lookout over the rock quarry, an engraved stone said “Slavery work” in polish.

I took a 25 zloty minivan to Lublin, two hours outside of Warsaw, to visit Majdanek. During the war, the Lublin castle was overtaken by the Nazis and Hitler believed Lublin to be a strategic city for the Reich. A 15 minute bus ride from the foot of the castle took me to the entrance of Majdanek. The camp was hard to miss; a gigantic stone monument with an abstract relief loomed over where the gate of the camp once stood. I received a map of the camp in
English and made my way around the camp along a square path. Former barracks, the crematorium and gas chambers had been maintained and repurposed into exhibition spaces. Each room in each building had plaques with testimonies from survivors of the camp mixed with plaques of information about the facility itself. I found this presentation of information especially profound because the testimony descriptions matched the details of the camp and buildings to a T. These testimony-room pairings powerfully stand in the face of accusations of false testimony.

The gas chambers, washing chambers and crematorium were maintained the way they were found. The walls and ceilings of the gas chambers were splotched with blue stains from use of the Zyklon B. The barracks were hot and the walk around the camp was long. I realized the prisoners not only suffered under hard labor, starvation, sickness and Nazi cruelty, but also from hot summers with stagnant air and excessive body heat, as well as the cold winters.

Only one information board I read mentioned the cruelty of the Poles. Otherwise, I observed many Poles, like Marta, greatly downplayed the role of Poles as perpetrators. They preferred rather to see their family members as victims and highlight the few Poles that were resisters or righteous gentiles. From the moratorium atop a hill at the end of the camp, I had a view of not only the entire camp, but also the town of Lublin. I could not help but think the Lubliners must have seen the dark smoke from the chimneys of the crematorium.

In Krakow, I found a five hour bike tour, in which Sylvia, a Warsaw native, pointed out the highlights of the city. Highlights particular to Jewish culture and history included the first Jewish district and still active Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, Schindler’s Factory, Wawel Castle (home of General-Governor Hans Frank during the war), the Jewish Ghetto wall, the Jewish Heroes Square, the famous staircase from the movie Schindler’s List, and Jagiellonian University. The Jewish Heroes Square now is memorialized with about 50 large metal chairs. The chairs symbolize the people who were gathered in the square prior to being deported to forced labor camp Plaszow or to Auschwitz.

I visited Schindler’s Factory, which I honestly found disappointing and underwhelming since it was presented more as a run-of-the-mill Holocaust Museum rather than as a museum on the history of the factory. Only one room included information specific to Schindler, his factory (a branch of the Plaszow labor camp) and the Jewish workers he saved. What was most disappointing was the rooms were completed gutted for the exhibitions, leaving minimal traces of the former enamel factory Schindler ran.

After my visit to the factory, I ate in a Jewish restaurant in Kazimierz. The restaurant, named Esther, definitely catered to tourists, but I was able to eat Chulet and listen to live Klezmer music.

I rode for an hour and a half to Auschwitz via a group tour company van. Beata, an English-speaking tour guide, first gave the group a tour of Auschwitz I. I had two immediate reactions to the camp. First, the camp was eerily beautiful, with its manicured greens lawns, large brick barrack facades and the flowers of summer in bloom. Second, there were an incredible amount of visitors. Everyone in the group wore headphones that received Beata’s transmitted voice from her microphone, so she could speak in an indoor voice. All the tour groups wore headphones, so the camp was relatively quiet and organized.

The tour was mostly indoors, inside the barracks. The famous “Arbeit Macht Frei” sign loomed over the entrance, though Auschwitz I was never a work camp. A room in one barrack memorializes the 1,100,000 Jews who were cremated with a symbolic grave. The group was led through rooms of photos, jail cells and artifacts such as hair, utensils, bowls, hair brushes, shoes, luggage, wire spectacles and artificial limbs. Of all the piles of artifacts, I found the luggage and shoes most touching. Auschwitz, like many other museums, camps and
memorials, remembers the Holocaust victims collectively. However, the shoes forced me to think about the individuals; each shoe was so different in size, design and color. The luggage also presented an element of individual memorialization. Written on each piece of luggage was a surname and address because the Nazis told the Jews to label their luggage so they could find it after the “resettlement.”

Another powerful site of remembrance was the execution wall. We first walked through the jailhouse, tracing the steps of “arrested” inmates. Cell 20: Dark room. Cell 22: Standing cell. Cell 18: Death by starvation. In Cell 18, Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe was commemorated, because he volunteered himself to die by starvation in the place of another prisoner. At the execution wall, Beata told us the proceedings of the execution and the torture associated by a nearby structure. Flowers, wreaths and candles lined the foot of the wall, and some of the visitors were brought to tears.

At Auschwitz-II Birkenau, most of the tour was outside. We traced the path of the Hungarian Jews, one of the last groups deported to the camp, by matching photographs of the site and their arrival with points of reference still on the camp grounds. Most of the buildings had been destroyed, with only the foundations, the barracks’ chimneys and the train tracks left.

At the end of the tracks was a tall commemorative stone representing the crematorium chimney, and plaques in 21 different languages (plus one for English), for the 21 nations from which the prisoners were deported. The gas chambers were destroyed before liberation so only rubble remained. The crematoriums also were destroyed, but their remaining pits of ashes were commemorated by four stones.

The biggest surprises for me so far have been both historical and societal. Historically, I did not know Auschwitz was the only camp to tattoo numbers on the inmates’ arms (and legs of small children). I also did not realize how many Polish citizens and priests were in the concentration camps. Beata said her great-uncle was deported to Auschwitz and then Mauthausen simply because he was out in the street after curfew. I learned the selections often resulted in only 25% deemed fit for work. The Nazis also went to great lengths to deceive the Jews. Nazis told Jews to remember which peg they left their clothes on for when they return from the “showers,” and the Nazis ordered Jews from Greece to buy third class rail tickets to Auschwitz for their “resettlement.”

Societal surprises include the minimal admittance of wrongdoing by the Poles. Poles still hold a grudge toward President Obama for mistakenly saying “Polish death camps.” Poles try to include Pope John Paul II in every Holocaust museum and often conflate memory of the cruelty of the Soviets (such as at Katyn) with that of the Nazis. The birthright tours are not unwelcome, but rather seen as unfair to the Poland. Though Treblinka and Majdanek hardly had any visitors, at Auschwitz, each tour group had approximately 15 people and there would at least be four groups to a room.

Poland confronts the Holocaust head on, and for Krakow, Holocaust tourism seems to be its main industry. In Krakow, the sites of the Holocaust are easily accessible through tours offered by electric carts, private guides, and group vans. Today, Krakow’s Jewish quarter seems to be a lot more vibrant than Warsaw’s. However, in spite of the open discussion of Holocaust memory in Poland, I quickly learned that the chief goal of the Poles was to compel visitors to appreciate their culture and recognize how they had grown from the past.