Student Group #1, January 2013
Over the years, we have all learned about the horrors of the Holocaust at different times during our lives. However, today we had the incredible opportunity to see first hand one of the most famous concentration camps...
The rubble of the gas chambers and crematoriums destroyed by the Nazi’s to get rid of evidence lies near a beautiful memorial to all those who had died. There were 22 plaques, one for each language of the people who died at this camp. Translated they say, “forever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women and children, mainly Jews, from various countries of Europe.” Words cannot describe how different visiting these camps is from learning about them in a class or from a textbook, we recommend it to any who get the chance.

Student Group #2, January 2013
Today was by far the most difficult to sum up in just one short blog post. How do you encompass an entire genocide and the preservation of it with just a few paragraphs? Last night’s snowfall has given Krakow a whimsical “winter wonderland” feel, but it was a strange juxtaposition against the skeleton-like buildings of Auschwitz-Birkenau...
In the hour ride back to our hotel, most of us sat in silence. This wasn’t just a cue for our usual afternoon naps—but a time when the history of Poland showed through to the point of provoking emotion.
Today we traveled to the small town of Oswiecim. However, the town’s Polish name is often disregarded and the German name of the city shines through. Auschwitz was a concentration camp set up during World War II to house Jews, Poles, Gypsies, prisoners of war, and the handicapped. 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz. 70% were immediately sent to the gas chambers and crematoriums. 30% of people, generally men, were put to work building parts of the camp and materials to benefit the German war efforts. The Holocaust, a word meaning “death by fire”, is a dark time in humanity’s history where millions of innocent victims were stripped of their freedom and put to death. Auschwitz is the largest, and most well-known concentration camp during the Holocaust.

... This experience was humbling, emotional, and overwhelming. The images of the empty barracks and barbed wire fences will never leave our thoughts. We hear stories, see pictures, and even visit the camp, but we will never begin to imagine what those innocent people went through. Man’s inhumanity to man is an astounding thing and can only be understood if we do not forget. It is our job, in this generation, to remember those who suffered. We must remember their death to bring a new life to our eyes. We must prevent this tragedy from ever happening again. The country of Poland is slowing moving on through its suffering to build a better world but this does not mean forgetting the past. It is a part of our history as a lesson to be learned. I believe these Drake University students and teachers will remember this day for the rest of their lives. Our hearts extend to those who have perished and to those who are still living with the nightmares of the camps. This history should never repeat itself because we are here, and we will never forget.
Today we went to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, on the site of the largest Nazi-run extermination camp during World War II. Auschwitz-Birkenau has been a museum and memorial since 1947, just 2 years after its liberation by Soviet troops. It was very unnerving to be apart of and watch groups of visitors get herded through the entrance, under the infamous sign that reads “Arbeit Macht Frei,” which translates to “Work Brings Freedom.” This phrase greeted prisoners at the gates everyday as they entered and left the camp. This was by far one of the most moving experiences I imagine I’ll ever have. I don’t have the confidence to put this experience into words. But I will try.

The significance of each and every item is somehow too great to take in. The gas chamber seemed like an almost painless room, until you step through a small doorway and see the body burning ovens, rigged with metal stretchers for the more efficient incineration of the murdered victims.

… It is hard to fathom how a single being could brainwash the masses and institute a sort of mass normalized insanity. Millions participated in the mass genocide, killing thousands of men, women, and children each day. Seeing mangled bodies being shoved into cremation pits every day, a smell I could not even begin to comprehend. The taste of bitterness, hatred, anger, and immense sorrow lingered on my tongue as I thought about all that happened where I was standing just 70 years ago. I was outraged to learn that many of the war criminal Nazis were never brought to justice for what they have done.
Student Group #5, May 2015
We all felt anxious, horrified, and even a little fascinated to finally see a place that brought so much evil and despair upon the innocent.
When we arrived at Auschwitz it was silent, except for the soft whistle of the wind. It was as if the entire camp was in a standstill. A place that felt cold and terrible, yet it looked peaceful. It was difficult to imagine that the very paths our feet were standing on were the remains of innocent civilians.
Many times have we heard about the Holocaust and the terror associated with it, but the only way to understand it is to be there. Just being there today for several hours we could better understand the hunger and starvation of the victims as the labored eleven hours a day, the close proximity of the quarters the lived in, the fear of dying and the horror of watching people die daily in front of their eyes. We were able to almost feel this. But in this case, “almost” is the operant word. We will never be able to fully comprehend what occurred during the Holocaust. All we can do is make sure it never happens again.