EARTH DO NOT COVER MY BLOOD;
LET THERE BE NO RESTING
PLACE FOR MY OUTCRY!

JOB 16:18
"Holocaust Poland" pilgrim Natalie Ward reflects on her visit to Błocicz in 2011.
FOREWORD

IN 2015, TWO EXPERIENCES profoundly changed my life—and ultimately would help transform the lives of others.

That spring, while pursuing a master of liberal studies degree at SMU, I took my first human rights course: Prof. Rob Halperin’s comprehensive class, “America’s Darkest: The Struggle for Human Rights.” I found it triggering for a number of reasons.

Mainly, at 47, why was I just learning about so many humanitarian atrocities? Why wasn’t I more aware of ongoing human rights abuses? And why wasn’t this subject something we taught our children? I wanted to learn and experience more, so in December I took myself and my two sons on SMU’s two-week “Holocaust Poland” trip, which Dr. Halperin had been leading for nearly a decade.

Our travel group was comprised of about a dozen people—willing to spend the holiday season seeing where the Nazis systematically murdered 5 million so-called “lesser” people—Jews, Slavs, political dissidents, homosexuals and others—during World War II.

Reflecting on that time, my mind takes me to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where, during a walk through the killing complex, I was both alone in my thoughts and surrounded by the dead, whose fears and sorrows were palpable.

Entering the crematoria, where ovens had incinerated more than a million people, a wave of grief washed over me. I made my way to an empty, adjacent room—and in that space, I became so overcome with emotion and nausea that all I wanted to do was get out of there. I didn’t think I could last. I left. Only later did I learn it had been where the bodies of the dead were piled up before being burned.

Though that’s just one of many powerful moments I’ve had during my human rights education, it was the first time I recognized the value of witnessing—understanding how atrocities continue to affect our lives and how important human rights awareness is.

I also realized how vital such educational opportunities are to ensure we confront and prevent human rights crises. I knew I wanted to provide this learning opportunity to young people.

So at the start of 2016, my sister, Gayle, along with our family foundation, would push human rights education to the forefront. We chose to fund the groundbreaking, interdisciplinary Embrey Human Rights Program at SMU.

The Dedman College of Humanities & Sciences program, directed by Dr. Halperin, makes SMU one of only seven universities in the U.S. to offer an undergraduate degree in human rights (plus minor- and graduate-level studies). It provides more than 100 human rights and social justice courses; student and teacher scholarships; engaged learning trips in this country and abroad; community-service partnerships; and compelling public events.

Our mission: To help SMU students become socially responsible global citizens—and to have accomplished that: hundreds of enlightened and engaged “world changers” have used their human rights degrees to build personally and professionally rewarding careers in law, government, business, education, nongovernmental agencies, engineering, you name it. That’s immensely encouraging, given our imperative to never allow any generation to forget what happened during the Holocaust—and more important, what caused it.

We hope this book, and everything our program offers, will encourage you to see the world in a different light. Let’s convert ourselves to cultivating open minds and hearts, boundless curiosity and social activism, and exemplifying our program’s credo: There is no such thing as a lesser person.

— Lauren Embrey
SMU ’84, ’89
The Embrey Family Foundation
Dallas, Texas
INTRODUCTION

RIDDEN BY A MYTHOLOGY of racial and military might, Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, ignited two episodes of cataclysmic destruction. The Second World War, which left 60 million dead and Europe in ruins—and the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” the Third Reich’s industrialized slaughter of 11 million Jews—was unspeakably wrong.

As the most meticulously documented genocide in history—recognized by the Holocaust (Greek for “burnt offering,” or Shoa (Hebrew for “catastrophe”)—the Nazi-led racial war of annihilation would consume 6 million Jews and 5 million other imagined enemies: ethnic Slavs (Poles, Czechs, Russians), Romani (Gypsies), homosexuals, people with physical and mental disabilities, prisoners of war (Generals’ Society), and political and religious dissidents, from Communists to Jehovah’s Witnesses.

As Reich leader Adolf Hitler had expounded in his 1925 treatise, Mein Kampf, for Germany’s ethnic “Aryan master race” to survive and flourish, it would need to acquire resource-rich “Lebensraum,” or “living space” in the east. Colonization would allow the incoming “superior people” to clear the territory of its inferior ones—directly, those Jews Hitler deemed mankind’s mortal enemy: the Jews. And since Poland had allowed Europe’s largest population of Jews to thrive there for more than eight centuries, it would sadly become the epicenter of their extermination.

Poland will forever grapple with its forced role in hosting the Nazis’ expansive network of gas killing fields and ovens, ghettos and prisons, and more than 450 concentration labor camp complexes—six designed solely for killing: Chełmno, Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek. In these places alone, more than 3 million people would be sadistically murdered in terrifyingly quick or agonizingly slow ways.

In each German-occupied country, Jews and others labeled as biological or ideological threats underwent an elaborate bureaucratic process of statelessness and dehumanization, in which they were classified, publicly humiliated, disenfranchised, robbed of their possessions, rounded up, crammed into ghettos and, amid Waffen SS and SS Einsatzgruppen, were forced to provide slave labor. Those who survived that cruel met the “extermination” to the east, spending days or weeks in cramped boxes, enduring conditions far worse than German animals fitted for slaughter.

Once at their final destination—a place of unimagined cruelty—the majority of people were stripped of their belongings (including their hair), beaten, shot in mass graves they themselves had dug, or likely by poison gas, torture, hanging or lethal injection.

These regimes to provide slave labor likely died from exhaustion, starvation, exposure, medical experimentation or outright murder before they, like their fellow prisoners, would be reduced to ash and bone in furnaces or pyres, and their remains dumped into giant pits or waterways.

The Nazi-organized mass murder efficiency proved horrifically successful. In one eight-month span, from April to November 1942, 2.5 million people were killed in about 250 days, accounting for the brutal murder of some 10,000 people each day.

While it’s easy to become numb to the overwhelming inhumanity shown to Shoah victims and survivors, we need to learn why such crimes have occurred and, more important, how to prevent them.

Born from the epic tragedy of the Holocaust was a global framework of international and humanitarian law that was created for genocide prevention and accountability.

Actually, the term “genocide”—rooted in the Greek word “genos” (for “race or class”) and “holos” (for “killing”)—was first coined in 1944 by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, whose research aided the Nuremberg Trials, at which top Nazi officials were prosecuted from 1945 to 1946. Two years later, the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide would follow, as would our world’s first moral compass: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Though humanity vowed “never again” to allow atrocities such as the Holocaust to occur, they have—Cambodia in the 1970s, Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s, Darfur in 2003—resulting in 3.2 million more brutal and senseless acts of murder.

“The road to Auschwitz was built by hate but paved with indifference.”—Historian Ian Kershaw

In remembrance lies the secret of redemption.

—Rabbi Yaakov Tov (1700-1760)
Compared to Holocaust sites in Germany, which seemed eerily sterile, Poland's sites were more raw—open wounds—physically neglected and emotionally rejected. After finding our bus driver to take me to the former camps, what I discovered shook me to my core.

Some places looked as though the Germans had only recently left. At Majdanek, for instance, mounds of shoes stretched as far as the eye could see. Other sacred sites had become makeshift dumping grounds or dog parks. In some cases children could be heard shouting near covered hills of compacted bits of human ash and bone; and people with trowels, pulps and metal detectors were digging for valuables. It was beyond disturbing. How could so many millions who died in these places be remembered, or not remembered, so callously? I committed myself to returning to these places and paying my respects each year forward, which I have done.

Poland's acceptance of its traumatic past has ebbed and flowed, but it's made monumental strides to expose and preserve Holocaust sites, remember the victims and recognize the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Poles who risked their own lives to save Jews and others.

In keeping with my visits to Poland over the past 30 years—and trips led there on behalf of SJU for more than 20 of them—is the first part of this book's title, "No Resting Place." Inspired by an inscription on a wall at Belzec, the Old Testament passage from the Book of Job best conveys the physical and mental commitment many of us have made to never forget the 11 million victims of the Holocaust, and the millions who continue to be impacted by it.

Since no amount of ink and paper can adequately express the incomprehensible, this book strives to be a work of heart and art. It's the Embry Human Rights Program's effort to empathize, via sensitive words and pictures, what hundreds of us have experienced over the years.

Many wonder why we travel to Eastern Europe this time of year, but pilgrims consider the timing inviolate. Even relatively brief exposure to the fragility conditions camp prisoners endured makes an immediate and lasting impression. So does spending the last two weeks of December 5,000 miles away from loved ones, whom we all vow never to take for granted.

Certainly we'll never take for granted our program's champions, Lauren Embry, her sister Gayle and the Embry Family Foundation, who were inspired to give our program life—and want us to continue making a meaningful impact via such projects as No Resting Place.

While most Holocaust-related books depicting the camps are produced in black-and-white, this one isn't. It's in color—because the Holocaust happened in color. Thanks to the soulful photography of my colleague Sherry Abman—longtime "dien mother" to our trip-givers—you'll see the last places ever witnessed by the millions of deserters who didn't want to die there, or didn't think their nightmare would ever end.

Knowledge of troubling current and past events can engender a sense of hopelessness, but I'm heartened by the increasing number of eager minds, young and old, who are empowered by the most dangerous phrase in the English language: "I didn't know." That's indeed true for my friend and SJU colleague Doreen Cox, who has dedicated herself to Holocaust studies, and creating this book, since traveling with us to Poland in 2012.

I'm proud to see all our "families" members go forth into the world as positive forces for change—and spread the universal truth our program wholeheartedly embraces: There is such a thing as a lesser person.

— Dr. Rick Hagerman
Embry Human Rights Program Director
Dallas, Texas
Mourner’s Kaddish
(Source: ReformJudaism.org)

Exalted and hallowed be God’s great name
in the world which God created, according to plan.

May God’s majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime
and the life of all Israel—speedily, imminently, to which we say Amen.

Blessed be God’s great name to all eternity.

Blessed, praised, honoured, venerated, glorified, adored and lauded
be the name of the Holy Blessed One, beyond all earthly words and songs of blessing,
praise and comfort. To which we say Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and all Israel,
to which we say Amen.

May the One who creates harmony on high, bring peace to us and to all Israel.
To which we say Amen.

Our “Holocaust Poland” pilgrims often recite this ancient Jewish prayer,
in Hebrew and English, to honor the dead at sacred sites.
ONCE THROUGH THE GATE of Stutthof, “a feeling of sorrow grabbed me by the heart,” says 2015 pilgrim Ogulcan Kalkanlı. That emotion, plus helplessness and hopelessness, was precisely what the Nazis wanted prisoners to carry with them into the camp.

Constructed two weeks before Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Stutthof would become the Third Reich’s first concentration camp in the country.

Its hulking brick administration building, epitome of bureaucratic rigidity, ushered in the Nazis’ notorious “architecture of doom”—serving as a model for the seven other camps, and hundreds of smaller ones that the Reich would operate in its newly acquired “living space.”

Several years before the invasion, the Nazi special forces known as the “SS” (for “Schutzstaffel”) began identifying exactly which “undesirables” they planned to detain once Poland was in their grips. They built the camp in secrecy to ensure its readiness for political dissidents, prisoners of war and others.

Logistically the Nazis favored Stutthof’s location, 20 miles east of Gdańsk, for its prime access to transportation: The Baltic coast, Vistula River and major rail lines were as close as three miles away.

Despite their planning, German occupiers miscalculated the number of people Stutthof would need to hold. Though initially designed to house 3,500 inmates, it would ultimately hold some 37,000 people during peak operation, leading to the 10-acre site’s expansion to more than 100 acres—with the population strain being alleviated by regular executions.

Any discomfort experienced by Stutthof’s prisoners was seen as a positive by the Nazis, who considered the wet, nearly terrain of northern Poland to be well suited for hastening the demise of those they deemed “disposable.” Mosquitoes and intense humidity created oppressive summers. Conversely, sub-freezing temperatures caused a dense, icy fog to hover above the surface, which amplified the bone-chilling cold.

The latter is instantly understood by EHRP “Holocaust Poland” pilgrims who visit each December—and it makes an enduring impression on them.

“Walking the grounds of Stutthof in my scarf, earmuffs, down-filled jacket, gloves, thermal, jeans, shirt and boots, I can’t imagine only being allowed to wear a thin uniform, hat and wooden logs,” says 2015 pilgrim Patricia Lund in a Slidr “Adventures” blog. >> 16
In the first barracks at Vernich, a massive mound of shoes has been behind a glass wall (here reflecting photographs). A top coordinator, Hersh Akerman, (far left). In 1972, Akerman stated (and remarked at the time) “Many shoes belonged to people who had a dream, job, dance, played with friends, lived their significant other and had dreams and goals.” In another barracks, a wooden post (left) bears the scars-like scratches of former inmates. Some 85,000 of the camp’s 110,000 prisoners would die from starvation or from the ‘frantic’ forced ‘hunger of work’ that supported German naval armament and construction projects.
One of the most haunting faces of innocent people brought to Stutthof is Prisoner No. 31796 (right). His hollow gaze transmits impending doom. The Nazis would reduce him and others to a mere number, then bone and ash.

Ignoring the Hippocratic Oath, Nazi doctors conducted heinous medical experimentation to ensure survival of the German military in the short term, and the Aryan race in the long term.
Stutthof

I'm a man of the Earth,
So to the Earth I shall lay.
I know this is it,
I know this is my day.
Rewarded with life,
If you act with compliance,
Our pain screams not help,
But our voices remain silent.
Give me a number, take my name,
Take my freedom, make me a slave.
Harden my heart till it's black,
Black as a burning grave.
I knew that was it,
Knew that was my day.
As a man of the Earth,
In the Earth I now lay.
— Jayce Miller, 2014 poem
As disease and death ravaged Stutthof’s prisoners, the Nazis built a gas chamber (far left) and crematorium to eliminate their remains (above). In such sacred spaces, YIAP coordinator Sherry Almazan is moved by the orbs of light that appear in her photographs.
"I felt ashamed to be looking at the ashes and chunks of bone on display—of people who not only deserve rest and peace, but also our respect. The anger I felt while viewing their remains is important for me to acknowledge."

— Grzegorz Miu, 2011 pilgrim

Black painted stripes on surrounding trees resemble armbands of death.

Behind a massoum window, 2012 pilgrims Sabine Aven finds another unsettling view—victims’ remains.
Exacerbating the prisoners’ punishing conditions was starvation, slave labor, rampant disease and medical mistreatment that caused disfigurement and death. Prisoners also were killed by gun, rope, torture or poisonous gas.

Just reading about the camp’s history can be intense, but seeing where the Nazis’ cruelty was meted out instills a much more powerful understanding of it,” recalls 2013 pilgrim Jasmin Fras.

“I saw shoes from children who were brutally murdered, uniforms with blood stains, beds—if you could even call them that—where many people were piled together, transferring diseases to one another, and a place for thousands of innocent civilians to be executed. I could finally put a face to all the research I had done,” she adds. “And I’m extremely distraught to know such torture occurred.”

When Russian soldiers reached Stutthof on May 9, 1945—a full day after Germany’s surrender to Allied Forces—only about a hundred people were found at the camp, clinging to life as living corpses (who often died within days of liberation). Meanwhile, Stutthof’s tens of thousands of other inmates—anyone who could still walk, even barely—were being forced to endure a “death march” to the west—an evacuation process that claimed more than 25,000 lives.

Ultimately the world would learn of the horrors that occurred at Stutthof (including the fact that Nazis tested making soap from victims’ fat). While the site isn’t well publicized, it communicates a message that rings loud and clear: State power, when unchecked by the global community, can lead to the gates of a place like Stutthof.

“Our guide says, ‘The camp’s going to us in the weather.’ I agree. In the distance I can almost hear the anguished cries of the dead,” says Giacyn Mies.
Chapter Two – complete
A LARGE HEART-SHAPED SCULPTURE at the Holocaust memorial in Lodz evokes a sense of peace until we recognize what’s at its core: the hollow outline of a starving child. The monument symbolizes not only the human heart injured by the loss of a child, but also the pain felt by the region of central Poland.

In the spring of 1940, the Reich’s governing body established the Litomierzecz Jewish Ghetto in Lodz—Poland’s second largest city after Warsaw—to house slave labor within the country’s key manufacturing realm.

Prime targets for forced labor were the city’s 160,000 Jewish residents, who were evicted from their homes and robbed of their possessions before being jammed into a one-and-a-half-square-mile slum surrounded by barbed wire fencing and machine guns.

Living conditions within the Ghetto’s jumble of dilapidated wooden buildings were beyond squalid. As many as 10 people were made to occupy each room of a building, which lacked basic plumbing and provided little to no clean water or fuel for heat.

Pervasive disease and starvation claimed the lives of more than 20 percent of Ghetto inhabitants, most forced to work 14-hour shifts in more than 100 factories that produced wartime supplies such as German army uniforms.

In December 1941, German authorities ordered the Ghetto’s first mass deportation. More than 77,000 people were told they were needed for work in the east, but in reality, their destination was the death camp Chelmno, 40 miles to the northwest.

Each day at Lodz’ Rudegost train station, some 6,000 Ghetto inhabitants were forced into freight or cattle cars and taken to Chelmno. That number rose to 10,000 daily transports until ultimately more than 200,000 people met their deaths in the back of mobile gas vans—or by outright murder before, during or after their journey.

By August 1944, the Ghetto’s remaining 70,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where all but 6,000 died shortly after arrival.

Soviet liberation of the Ghetto came within months. But on January 19, 1945, only 870 Jews were found there—alive, but barely. Nearly all of them were adults.

The Ghetto’s youth—unable to provide the labor demanded of a Reich that considered them “useless”—comprised the largest number of Holocaust victims.

Contemplating the children’s loss deeply affects EHR pilgrims.

“Children were deprived of their childhood, their innocence,” recalls 2013 pilgrim Alma Ruiz. “Who could they have become, and what good could they have done if their lives hadn’t been cut short?”
At the Lodz ghetto train station memorial, logbooks list the names and identifying information of 213,100 people, mostly Jews, forced to live and work in the Lodz Ghetto. Pogrom victim Robert Franklin was grateful to revise the book during his 2015 visit. While both his Lodz-born parents survived imprisonment, the books revealed that more than 30 other family members didn’t.
Nearly 85 percent of Warsaw was in ruins after Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. After the war, the city was rebuilt to look as it did before the war.
A cemetery memorial (far right) honors Polish-Jewish educator Janusz Korczak, who refused freedom in order to die at Treblinka with 200 orphans in his care. Before their departure, Korczak reportedly asked them to wear their best clothing; they were going to a special place.
The Ghetto Heroes Monument in Warsaw honors Polish resistance fighters—including one who used words as weapons. In April 1943, poet-journalist Włodzimierz Siemigiel wrote before his death in the final Ghetto Uprising: “We beg you for a violent death. But before we perish... let us, oh Lord, take good aim.”

The Warsaw Jewish Cemetery has a symbolic mass grave of Ghetto victims and 200,000 headstones dating to 1809—many reclaimed from use as Nazi-era road pavers.
As a truck rumbles past on a nearby road, “I’m transported back in time, and see Chelmno as it was,” DeMerritt says. “Brown—dead earth lies open, and truck tires run ceaselessly back and forth, stopping only to pack the wound in the earth with pink human gauze. Drivers then return for more ‘supplies.’

For the Nazis, “This place was the first” site in Poland intended to kill on a mass scale. “Had it failed, there may have been no more like it,” she says. “But it worked, this damned place of dead skin and dead grass. And they killed.”

Depoted to Chelmno were more than 200,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia and Luxembourg, as well as thousands of Roma or Sinti (“Gypsies”) and several hundred Poles and Soviet prisoners of war.

In a manor house—reception center known as “The Castle” or “The Palace”—arrivals were ordered to undress and leave their valuables for safekeeping until later departure. First, though, they would need to shower—or so they were told—before guards herded them, 50 to 70 at a time, down a ramp leading into a chamber with metal walls.

Once the doors behind them were sealed, an engine started, and soon, the dark compartment they were in jolted forward. As the driver of the gas van headed to a clearing camouflaged deep within Chelmno’s surrounding forest, the confused and terrified passengers would begin to asphyxiate from poisonous carbon monoxide fumes being piped in from the engine’s exhaust.

En route to the mass grave site, the driver turned up the radio to drown out the screams and pleas of those who banged on the van’s walls for mercy. Upon arrival, anyone found still alive in the back compartment was immediately shot in the head.
Some 17,000 granite shards represent all the Jewish villages (shetels) from which Treblinka’s victims originated. One marked “Ostrowiec” is especially meaningul for EHRC pilgrims. It’s the small Polish town in which Mike Jacobs, late founder of the Dallas Holocaust Museum/Center for Education and Tolerance, was separated from his immediate family and forced to become a slave laborer. Jacobs later learned his immediate family, and 70 other relatives, were murdered at Treblinka.
Based on Sobibor’s remote location in eastern Poland, MPs typically arrive here in the afternoon, when December’s daylight fades early.

On snowy days, the setting sun casts an ethereal glow behind an immense mound of victims’ ashes and crushed bone.

In warmer weather, the grim reality of what took place at this death camp is easier to visualize. The site’s crematorium pot memorial is a stark, open tomb.
“The cut and open earth uncovers the hidden elevation of the terrain, revealing the dimensions of the crime. Through the towering height of the walls blotting out the sky, it evokes the terror of one of the greatest graves in the world... to demonstrate the exceptional nature and enduring memory of this place.”

— Before designers Andrzej Sokola Zdzisław Płdrek Marcin Kostczyk

Bielca’s monumental memorial is embedded with the ash-and-sand remains of hundreds of thousands of camp victims, atop which rocks serve as organic grave stones. A 400-foot-long path known as the Schlosser (“the Tunnel”), flanked by gently sloping cement walls evoking the victims’ belittling walk to the gas chamber. Wide steps on either side of the memorial seem never-ending (far left) and above them lies trees in evidence during the Holocaust.
“The last exhibit, The Prayer Room, is huge, probably 40 yards long, with walls of solid concrete and a ceiling of about 25 feet. A dim light is projected onto a quotation on a far wall as I enter, alone. The rest of the room is solid dark. My first thought is, “This is how you feel when you’re dying” I reflect and pray, then head to the tall, heavy steel exit door. My instinct is to pull it open, but it doesn’t budge. Thinking it’s a trick, I pull again without success. Finally I push, and am able to leave.”

— Robert Rosenberry, 2011

The “Prayer Room” (far left) eerily evokes the darkness and fear experienced in a gas chamber.

Rail tracks and edel used for cremation pots (left) are near a wall recognizing an unfinished poem by Romanian poet Ion Pagis. It was discovered in a boxcar that transported nearly a million people here. White Pagis survived by being sent elsewhere, only two people managed to escape from Birkenau—and live to tell about it.
“We came to a pile of bodies. As soldiers we couldn’t cry, but we knelt and prayed. Jews and Christians alike.”

— Bernhard Storch  
Holocaust survivor and former Russian soldier who spoke at UMK in 2015
“The beauty of mist and morning do not support the terror that shaped this place, or what was witnessed by those sent here to die. In the distance we see towers and church spires, each reminding us that Majdanek was no isolated island.”

— The Rev. William Forein (former US Army chaplain and 2002 pilgrim)
AUSCHWITZ
A reconstructed “Death Wall”—the grey, bullet-riddled backdrop for prisoner executions—stands between Blocks 10 and 11, the former used for lethal medical experiments, the latter outfitted with savage torture chambers.

Hallways lined with prisoner photos force pilgrims to confront headlong the shaved heads and wizened faces of Auschwitz’s victims—along with the ashes of their bodies, animals and dead bodies secretly noted by the Nazis. Polish photographer and inmate Wilhelm Brasse (focus of the documentary “The Portraitist”) was forced to photograph incoming prisoners as well as subjects of medical experimentation from 1940 to 1945—after which time he never took another photo. He died in 2012.
In "success" led to the use of Zyklon B in all Auschwitz gas chambers, and ultimately in numerous other camps.

In Block 10, SS physicians, including Dr. Josef Mengele, conducted pseudo-scientific medical research focused on the "hereditary biology" of infants, twins, and dwarfs. Mengele and his team also were responsible for forcibly committing castrations and sterilizations, and injecting lethal doses of carbonic acid straight into victims’ hearts.

Between Auschwitz Blocks 10 and 11 was "The Death Wall" where SS guards publicly executed thousands of inmates.

Nearby was another barbaric place, where a 10-foot post had a top hook that was used for backward hanging. With their arms tied behind their backs, victims were lifted up and hung from their bound hands, causing their arms to snap at the joints. This led to agonizing deaths from immense pain and shock.

As Soviet forces closed in on the region in mid-January 1945, SS leaders began evacuating the Auschwitz camps while working to destroy evidence of their crimes.

The Nazis sent nearly 60,000 prisoners on a death march 30 miles west, where 43,000 boarded trains bound for other camps in Germany—and ultimately 15,000 would die during the ordeal.

Despite the odds, some 200,000 people managed to survive Auschwitz. Most of them were Hungarian Jews, the last groups to be deported to the camp because of continued stalling by their government.

Auschwitz’s January 27, 1945, liberation date marks Holocaust Remembrance Day, which is now commemorated around the world.

While the number of visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau is on the rise, another figure is diminishing: The number of Holocaust survivors.

For the 70th anniversary of Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2015, only 300 survivors could attend, only a quarter of the 1,500 able to visit a decade earlier.

For the 75th anniversary in 2020, "there may be almost no survivors," says Ronald Leiser, president of the Jewish World Congress, which helps fund survivors’ travel.

"They are coming now because they want to bear witness—to stand there and say, ‘We outlasted Hitler. We made it.’"
# AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

**MUSEUM HOLDINGS (minimum totals)**

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Struck with fear, those slated to be gassed often would be heard asking a nearby guard where they were headed. The response? With a wide smile the guard would point his finger toward the following chimneys of the crematoria.

Once asphyxiated, the victims’ inhumane treatment didn’t end here. Cantles of their still-warm bodies would be searched for hidden valuables, and gold teeth or fillings yanked out with pliers.

Afterward their remains were shoveled three at a time into one of five furnaces operating day and night. And when Birkenau’s crematoria were full to overflowing, or not working properly, their bodies would be thrown atop gigantuan pyres.

Under SS supervision, the grim work was conducted by Jewish Siemianowikos ("special units") in and around the camp’s four permanent crematoria buildings labeled “I,” “II,” “IV,” and “V”—the first being the killing chamber at Auschwitz (shown pages 133–135). And within them, as many as 20,000 bodies could be processed each day.

The living, or barely living, existed in the miserable conditions of Birkenau’s 300 plus barracks, many of which were repurposed horse stables. During the camp’s peak of operation, it held more than 90,000 prisoners—mostly Jews, but also Poles, Roma/Sinti and Soviet POWs. (By comparison the largest number of people ever detained at one time at Auschwitz was 20,000.)

Each day, inmates provided slave labor for industries supportive of the Reich (e.g. Farben, Krupp, Siemens and others) as well as nearby produce and livestock farms.

More than 300 barracks (far left) held as many as 90,000 prisoners, each transported to Birkenau in horrifically overcrowded and understated “gas vans” (“gaskampf” like this one by the camp’s “Autosammel“ (Transport cars). Here, transports were selected to die immediately by gas chamber, beating or bullet, or move slowly from slave labor, hunger and disease.
“We’ve stood in some of the harshest conditions Poland has to offer. We’ve connected with the pain, sorrow and immense misery of each site. None of our lives will ever be the same. And this we know: We will never forget.”

— Tony Kukajdzis, 2016/June
Prayer for The Suffering & The Witness

Creator God, it has been said Heaven and Earth are full of Your glory. But for the past two weeks, we have journeyed across a country that was plagued by suffering: where millions of innocents, your children, were stripped of their dignity and lives. Some of us may have asked, "Where then, O God, is Your glory?"

Perhaps, God, Your glory is revealed by those who refused to be consumed by hatred and intolerance, who risked everything to alleviate suffering or to suffer alongside others.

Perhaps Your glory shines as brilliantly as the stars in the sky when we choose to love radically, with patience and kindness, to speak out against injustice. This is when Your glory is revealed.

May those who suffered here, and suffer everywhere, be wrapped in a quilt of Your peace, comfort and love. And may the things we have seen motivate us to forever be movers for justice. Amen.

— Chance Wilkins, 2016
As one of only seven U.S. universities to offer a major and minor in human rights, SMU is inspiring a new generation of world changers to understand and defend the dignity of all people thanks to the Embrey Human Rights Program.

Created in 2006 after a $5 million gift from sisters Lauren and Gayle Embrey, the innovative Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences program offers a compelling mix of curricular and public events while supporting meaningful community partnerships and student-led activism. The EHRP also leads trips across the globe to confront past or present humanitarian crises—from Rwanda and Cambodia to this country’s Native American West and Deep South.

The “Holocaust Poland” trips, held each year from Dec. 10-30, is the centerpiece of EHRP travel opportunities. Since EHRP Director Rick Halperin began leading the trip for SMU in 1996, the pilgrimage has grown from only a few participants to, as of the 20th anniversary trip in 2016, more than 330. The life-changing experience takes people to more than a dozen concentration/death camps and memorials in Poland, where, during the Nazi occupation in World War II, nearly half of the 11 million victims of the Holocaust were murdered.

To purchase No Resting Place: Holocaust Poland, or to learn more about the trip, visit smu.edu/humanrights.

Keep in touch: Visit smu.edu/humanrights, drop by Clements Hall Room 109 at SMU, or contact 214-768-6347 at humanrights@smu.edu.

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