

YLD Journey to Poland Reflections
From the Perspective of Becca Nooromid

How do you prepare for a journey that will change the way you understand yourself?

I really didn't know what to expect for our Journey to Poland. I was anxious, but excited. Excited is a weird word to use to describe what you think you're going to experience on a tour of remembrance for the Holocaust. I was constantly challenged by using that phrase because how can you say you're excited to experience and relive such mass devastation?

But something in me kept choosing that word.

There was also a level of anxiousness. I was leading a group on this trip. Knowing it would be emotionally challenging, I was anxious to experience it for the first time while also needing to be a professional. How do you hold both roles, participant and leader, at once?

Then, two weeks before we left, everything became more personal.

I had gone down a rabbit hole trying to learn whether any members of my family had been impacted by the Holocaust. What I discovered surprised me. I learned about twelve family members who were murdered. Some perished in Auschwitz. Others died in Jasenovac in modern-day Croatia. Only one survived.

His name was Otto.

I didn't really know what to do with that knowledge. I've always felt a deep connection to learning about the Holocaust because of what it meant for the Jewish people. But now I had names. Real people. Family members. I had spent twenty-seven years mourning alongside the Jewish people for six million lives. Suddenly, I found myself mourning twelve who shared my last name.

The Holocaust was no longer only our story. It was my story, too.

Before we left, our group gathered at the Breman Museum. As an icebreaker, I asked everyone to share a word describing how they felt about the journey ahead. Words like *sad*, *anxious*, *questioning*, and *solemn* filled the room. A few people admitted they were struggling with the same feeling I was: excitement.

How could we be excited for something like this? Looking back now, I think the answer is that we weren't excited for the suffering. We were excited for the opportunity to learn, to witness, and to better understand our history. What none of us knew was that the journey would teach us just as much about Jewish life as it would about Jewish death.

In Warsaw, we began confronting the weight of history.

We visited the Jewish cemetery, which was both beautiful and overwhelming. Gravestones stretched endlessly in every direction, many dating back to the 1800s. For some reason, seeing dates that old surprised me. Maybe because so much of the conversation around Poland focuses

on the destruction of Jewish life that we forget how much Jewish life existed before the Holocaust.

As we walked through the cemetery, we passed gravestones scarred by bullet holes. We visited the graves of those who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and learned about Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the resistance. We learned about Adam Czerniaków and the impossible burden he carried as head of the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish Council before taking his own life rather than comply with Nazi orders to deport Jewish children to their deaths.

And then there were the mass graves.

In a cemetery.

Mass graves.

No names. No remembrance. No peace.

Later, standing at Umschlagplatz, where Jews were gathered before deportation to Treblinka, I found myself thinking again about Czerniaków and the choices he faced. History felt less like something I was learning and more like something I was standing inside.

Yet only hours later, we found ourselves laughing together while making pierogies at the JCC Warsaw.

The contrast was jarring.

How could we move from a cemetery to laughter? And yet that became one of the recurring lessons of this journey.

At JCC Warsaw, we met young Jews building community. We learned about summer camps, Jewish schools, BBYO, young adult programs, and a kosher coffee shop. In other words, we learned about things that sounded remarkably familiar. Things we have in Atlanta.

Of course they have that too. People invest in building Jewish life there, just as we do in Atlanta. Why had I assumed otherwise?

We met leaders from JDC and the Jewish Agency and heard stories that brought Federation impact to life. One beneficiary shared how Federation dollars supported her growing up in Minsk and continue to support her now as an adult living in Poland.

There are Federation stories everywhere. Suddenly, the work we do back home didn't feel distant from this place. It felt deeply connected.

If Warsaw taught me about the persistence of Jewish life, Treblinka taught me about the persistence of memory.

The evening before visiting Treblinka, I shared a poem with our group called *The Butterfly*, written by a young boy imprisoned during the Holocaust. The poem captures loss not through statistics, but through something small and fleeting: a single butterfly that could not survive in a

world that had lost its humanity. At the time, I had no idea how profoundly this poem would shape our experience the next day.

We began in Tykocin.

What struck me most was how normal it felt.

There were convenience stores, people walking through town, and everyday life unfolding around us. At one point I bought an iced coffee and a bag of chips. It felt strangely ordinary. Perhaps that was what made it so unsettling. Looking around, it was easy to imagine what Tykocin could have been today had its Jewish community not been exterminated. Jewish children would have been playing in the streets. Families would have walked to synagogue. Businesses would have opened their doors each morning.

Instead, their absence lingered in every corner.

The synagogue remains, beautifully preserved and restored over time, but it exists as a reminder of a community that was largely erased. Standing inside, I found myself thinking less about what was there and more about what was missing.

From Tykocin, we traveled to the Łopuchowo Forest.

It is one thing to learn about mass murder in a classroom or read about it in a book. It is another thing entirely to stand in the place where it happened.

The Jews of Tykocin were brought there under the pretense of relocation. Instead, they were marched into the forest and forced to dig three enormous pits. Over two days, approximately 1,400 Jews were murdered. If the bullets did not kill them, they were buried alive.

As we walked toward the execution site, butterflies surrounded us.

Not dozens. Hundreds.

They fluttered through the wildflowers and drifted between the trees as though they were leading us forward. The forest itself was beautiful. Tall trees stretched endlessly into the sky. Wildflowers covered the ground. It was almost impossible to reconcile such beauty with the knowledge of what had taken place there.

I remember thinking: How can a place hold both? How can a forest be both a graveyard and beautiful? How can life continue to grow where so much death occurred?

I couldn't answer those questions. I still can't.

The butterflies followed us to Treblinka.

Standing at Treblinka felt different.

At Łopuchowo, the tragedy felt intimate. At Treblinka, the scale became incomprehensible.

More than 900,000 Jews were murdered there in a little over a year. The camp existed for one purpose: death. Everything about it was designed to erase human beings as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Nazis later dismantled the camp, burned evidence, and attempted to erase the very existence of what had happened there.

Yet despite their efforts, memory remains.

Today, thousands of stones cover the grounds of Treblinka. Larger stones bear the names of destroyed Jewish communities. Smaller stones represent towns and people whose names may never be known. The memorial transforms an empty landscape into something impossible to ignore.

And once again, there were the butterflies.

They landed on our backpacks. On our hands. On our arms. They stayed with us for minutes at a time.

I don't know why. I don't know whether it was coincidence or symbolism. But by then they had become deeply meaningful to our group.

In places where the Nazis tried to erase every trace of Jewish life, these fragile butterflies seemed to embody remembrance itself. Small enough to overlook if you weren't paying attention. Persistent enough that you couldn't ignore them if you tried.

Like the few survivors who escaped Treblinka.

Like the testimony left behind by those who endured.

Like Otto.

Like Jewish memory.

To finish the day, we had dinner with the Chief Rabbi of Poland and the Director of Hillel Warsaw. After spending hours confronting places built for death and the attempted erasure of an entire people, we ended the evening hearing about Jewish life in Poland today.

We learned about people discovering their Jewish identities after decades of not knowing, families reclaiming traditions that had been hidden for generations, and communities creating spaces where Jewish joy can once again flourish.

It felt like another echo of *The Butterfly*. The Nazis sought to ensure there would be no future for the Jewish people in Poland. Yet here we were, ending the day not only remembering those who were murdered, but witnessing a new generation choosing to live openly as Jews.

Krakow felt like the embodiment of that lesson.

Unlike Warsaw, which often felt shaped by destruction and reconstruction, Krakow felt warm, vibrant, and alive. History lived in its streets, but so did the present. Jewish life was not simply something being remembered there. It was actively being lived.

It was also a reminder that Jewish history does not stop with the Holocaust.

Just as we had spent the week learning about survivors, resistance, and resilience from eighty years ago, we were about to hear a story that connected that history directly to our own generation.

After checking into our hotel, we had the privilege of hearing from Nadav Tzabari about surviving October 7. I could write an entire chapter about his story, so I'll keep it brief.

I first met Nadav in December 2024 when Young Leadership Division took a group to volunteer in Israel. During that trip, we visited Kibbutz Nahal Oz, Atlanta's newly adopted partnership community. We were the first non-Israeli delegation to visit the kibbutz after October 7. Nadav walked us through the events of that day, sharing his remarkable story of survival. He invited us into his home, where he showed us the damage caused by a Hamas missile that struck his house. At the time, he was living in Mishmar HaEmek, in the Megiddo region, our other partnership community, after being displaced from Nahal Oz.

When we began planning this Poland journey, we invited Nadav to join us. It was an honor that he accepted.

As he shared his story again in Krakow, just hours before we would visit Auschwitz and Birkenau, he reflected on how October 7 had forever changed the way he understood Jewish history. He spoke about feeling as though October 7 now sits alongside the Holocaust in his mind. Not as the same event, but as another chapter in the long story of Jewish trauma, resilience, and survival.

Listening to him, I realized that the Holocaust was no longer something we were going to learn about as a distant historical event. Over the course of the week, we heard stories of resistance fighters, survivors, and communities that rebuilt after unimaginable loss. Now, sitting in front of us, was someone who had his own story of survival. Someone whose life had been forever changed by antisemitic violence. Someone still living through the aftermath.

Hearing Nadav the night before Auschwitz created a bridge between past and present that I carried with me into the camps the next day.

We were no longer walking into a historical site disconnected from our own lives. We were walking into the physical remains of one of history's darkest chapters while carrying with us the story of a Jewish survivor from our own time.

Nothing could have possibly prepared me for what I would feel there.

I walked through the gates of Auschwitz hand in hand with my husband.

Above us hung the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*: "Work Will Set You Free."

I immediately started crying.

As we crossed through the gate, I couldn't stop thinking about what that same walk would have meant eighty years earlier. Had we arrived there as Jews in the early 1940s, it likely would have

been the last time I ever held his hand. We would have been separated within moments. There would have been no walking through the camp together. No pulling each other close. No leaving hand in hand.

I instinctively squeezed his hand tighter.

Standing there, I became overwhelmed by the privilege of that simple act. In a place where so many husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters were torn apart, I was able to stand beside the person I love. I could hold his hand. I could pull him close. And when the day was over, we would walk out together.

It is a feeling I will never forget. In a place built to strip people of their humanity, I found myself profoundly aware of my own, and deeply grateful for what so many others were denied.

Walking through Auschwitz was deeply disorienting. It looked like a museum yet constantly reminded you that it was a crime scene.

Seeing the exhibit of hair from hundreds of thousands of people and the shoes of men, women, and children was beyond devastating. We weren't looking at artifacts. We were standing in front of pieces of people's lives. Thousands of stolen belongings from our people. It was overwhelming.

Walking through the last intact gas chamber was chilling. Our group was silent. There wasn't much to say. You could almost hear the tears streaming down our faces. The unimaginable had happened in that room.

What struck me most, though, was how oddly normal parts of Auschwitz felt. There were brick buildings, tree-lined pathways, and green grass. At moments it almost resembled a college campus or a Jewish summer camp. How is that even possible? How can a place built for such evil look so ordinary? I couldn't stop thinking about that.

Then we went to Birkenau.

I had always heard about the size of the camp. I knew it was big. But the sheer vastness of Birkenau is incomprehensible.

You approach it by walking along the train tracks that once carried people directly through the gates and into the camp. As we walked, we were surrounded by fields of wildflowers. Again, I found myself asking the same question: How is it possible for a place that witnessed so much tragedy to hold so much beauty?

We visited several of the barracks. In one, toilets ran down the center of the building where hundreds of people were once crammed together and given no dignity, even for the most basic human needs. I immediately thought of the scene from *Schindler's List* where the little boy hides in a toilet to avoid being killed. Standing there, it was a haunting thought.

We walked nearly the entirety of Birkenau. My feet hurt. My back hurt. I stopped to drink water. And then I immediately felt guilty for even noticing those things. How dare I complain about

being tired while standing in a place where people were deprived of food, water, dignity, freedom, and ultimately life itself?

We visited the remains of the gas chambers and the processing center where new arrivals were sorted upon entering the camp. Inside that building, one of our participants shared the story of her grandfather, Martin Brown, who had survived Birkenau. Rich Walter, a Federation colleague and our tour educator throughout the journey, also shared the story of his father-in-law, Pincus Kolender, who survived the Holocaust.

There was something almost liberating about hearing those stories in that place.

In a place that confronts you with death at every turn, we found ourselves talking about two men who lived.

Martin lived.

Pincus lived.

They survived a place designed to ensure they wouldn't.

For a moment, their survival felt louder than the horror surrounding us. It didn't erase the tragedy, but it was a reminder that even in a place built to extinguish life, there were people who endured. People who rebuilt. People who had families. People whose stories are still being told because they survived long enough to tell them.

There wasn't much talking among our group that day. Just internal reflection, sorrow, and silence.

The silence was truly deafening.

More than anything, I felt like we were walking through a preserved crime scene. Not a museum. Not a historical site. A crime scene.

It was numbing. And then together, we stopped to remember.

We approached the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism and lit memorial candles in honor of all those who perished in the Holocaust. Together, we recited the Mourner's Kaddish and then sang *Hatikvah*. I struggled to sing aloud. My voice cracked as tears streamed down my face.

Just moments earlier, we had been talking about Martin Brown and about Pincus Kolender, and I was thinking about Otto Langfelder. About survival. Now, standing before the memorial, I found myself thinking about all those who never had the chance. The parents, children, husbands, wives, siblings, and friends whose stories ended here.

Several members of our group draped themselves in Israeli flags as we began our walk toward the front of the camp. The walk was quiet until, out of nowhere, a woman passing by us began screaming, "Free Palestine," while recording us on her phone. She kept shouting the phrase over and over.

Then she laughed.

I was overcome with anger.

How could anyone stand in Auschwitz-Birkenau, a place where more than a million people were murdered, and choose that moment to say that to us? We were there to mourn. To bear witness. To honor the victims. Her actions felt like a desecration of sacred ground.

Some members of our group yelled back at her. I called her pathetic. We reported the incident to the police and gave them her description. I hated that this was how our visit to Birkenau ended. After everything we had seen and felt that day, I didn't want my last memory of that place to be anger.

As we reached the entrance to the camp, though, our group gathered once more. We sang *Am Yisrael Chai*. Then we recited the *Shema*.

Those words cut through the anger I had been carrying.

They reminded me why we had come. The woman wanted to disrupt. Instead, we chose each other. We chose remembrance.

We chose Jewish joy.

As I walked away from Birkenau, I realized that was the final lesson Auschwitz had to teach me. The Nazis failed to destroy the Jewish people. We are still here. We still mourn. We still pray. We still sing. And we still live.

That night, we joined more than 200 people at the JCC in Krakow for Shabbat dinner. It was an incredible way to end one of the most emotionally challenging days of my life. People from around the world gathered to welcome Shabbat together. I remember sitting there, taking it all in, smiling. Earlier that day, I walked through Auschwitz-Birkenau. How could I possibly be smiling now?

The answer was pride.

Throughout the week, I had been trying to understand why so many moments of Jewish life felt just as significant as the places of remembrance we visited. Sitting in that room, I finally understood. The purpose of remembrance is not simply to look backward. It is to ensure there is a future worth building.

That room was full of that future.

As dinner came to a close, the Executive Director of the JCC introduced his friend, a 93-year-old Holocaust survivor, who taught us a simple song with only three words: "Why," "Because," and "Goodbye." I later learned it was from a Woody Guthrie song. I still don't fully understand it, but everyone was laughing and singing. It was beautiful.

As the evening continued and many people began to leave, our group stayed behind. Before long, we were singing, dancing, and celebrating together. One of the volunteers who had been helping

throughout the evening joined us. He quickly became the life of the party, leading songs, dancing with everyone, and filling the room with contagious joy. It was one of the purest expressions of Jewish joy I have ever experienced, and once again, I found myself in tears.

At one point, we jokingly asked the Executive Director if we would ever be invited back after the amount of noise we had made. He smiled and said, "This community has a history of Jewish death. It's nice to see so much Jewish life."

That sentence has stayed with me ever since.

After spending the day walking through places built for death, we ended it singing, dancing, laughing, and welcoming Shabbat together. It felt like the perfect answer to everything we had witnessed.

Earlier that day, I had stood in Auschwitz-Birkenau. That evening, I was surrounded by more than 200 people celebrating Shabbat in Krakow.

The contrast felt impossible.

And yet, perhaps that was the lesson.

The Nazis sought to erase the Jewish people. Instead, here we were in Krakow, nearly eighty years later, celebrating Jewish life in the very place they tried to destroy it. That is the power of resilience. That is the power of joy. And that is one of the reasons I am so proud to be Jewish.

The next morning, as we prepared to leave the hotel, we experienced one of those moments that felt too improbable to be a coincidence.

A woman in the lobby recognized someone from our delegation. I learned that she was Nadav and Rotem's host mother from Mishmar HaEmek.

On the evening of October 7, she had opened her home to them, providing safety and becoming an extension of their family during one of the darkest moments of their lives. And now, thousands of miles from Israel, in a hotel lobby in Krakow, their paths had crossed again.

How could something like that happen?

It felt *besheret*.

Throughout the week, I had been thinking about the connections that hold the Jewish people together across generations and across continents. Standing there, watching that reunion unfold, felt like another reminder that Jewish history is not only a story of loss. It is also a story of connection, survival, and the bonds that continue to hold us together.

As we left for our final day, I felt a growing sense of sadness. I had learned so much about myself, about the Jewish people, and about the vibrancy of modern Jewish life in Poland. Part of me simply didn't want the journey to end.

Our final morning brought us back to the JCC in Krakow, this time not to learn, but to serve.

We participated in a volunteer project packing meal kits for Ukrainian refugees now living in Poland. I knew about the impact of Federation's Ukrainian emergency response efforts. Seeing it in person brought that impact to life.

The JCC in Krakow has supported more than 500,000 refugees since the war in Ukraine began, nearly 90% of whom are not Jewish.

It felt like another example of how Jewish organizations transform values into action. Throughout this experience, we learned about the consequences of indifference, hatred, and silence. Here we were witnessing the opposite. A community that once needed the world's help was helping others rebuild their lives.

That felt deeply Jewish.

That evening, we gathered for our closing dinner. Of all the moments during the trip, this was one I had quietly been anxious about.

From the very beginning, I had wrestled with how to be both a professional leader and a participant experiencing these emotions alongside everyone else. How was I supposed to help others process what we had witnessed when I was still trying to process it myself?

The truth was, I didn't have the words.

So, I returned to where we began.

Before the trip, I had asked everyone to share one word describing how they felt about the journey ahead. Now, I asked them to reflect on that original word and then share a word they were taking home.

The answers were very different this time.

We had spent the week experiencing the lowest of lows and the highest of highs. We had walked through cemeteries, forests, death camps, community centers, synagogues, and Shabbat tables. We had learned about destruction, but we had also witnessed revival. We had learned about loss, but we had also seen resilience and renewal.

What struck me most was that nobody's final word centered on death.

After everything we had seen, no one chose despair.

Instead, the words people carried home reflected something else entirely.

Hope. Pride. Purpose. Responsibility. Life.

Afterwards, we went to a concert for the Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival.

The concert took place in the streets. It was free. No ticket required. Very different from what we would experience in Atlanta. Sure, there was security. But we walked up freely. There were no snipers on the roof. Nobody was checking IDs before we entered.

I felt on edge.

Then, somehow, there we were again. Singing. Dancing. Becoming the life of the party.

We started doing the horah. Slowly, people around us joined in. I found myself holding hands with someone I had never met before. She didn't speak any English. Yet somehow we were singing the same words, moving to the same music, and expressing the same Jewish pride.

Then someone from our group brought out an Israeli flag and held it up while others danced underneath it. I'll admit it made me nervous.

People were watching. People were filming. In a climate of rising antisemitism and anti-Zionism, especially in Europe, I didn't know what to expect. Raising an Israeli flag in a public square can feel like an act of vulnerability.

Instead, something remarkable happened.

A mother grabbed the hands of her three young children and walked them underneath the flag. Singing. Dancing. Smiling. Then others joined.

Before long, complete strangers were chanting with us, holding our hands, and sharing in our celebration. The low-energy concert we had arrived at suddenly felt vibrant and alive.

At one point, a man approached us while filming. Then he joined in. He danced. He sang. He waved the Israeli flag. Eventually he introduced himself as Janusz Makuch, one of the founders of the Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival.

He is not Jewish.

Yet there he was chanting "Am Yisrael Chai." He proudly waved the flag. He hugged us. He was an ally.

Earlier in the week, I had found myself asking the same question repeatedly. How can places that witnessed so much devastation also hold so much beauty?

I asked it in the cemetery in Warsaw. I asked it in the Łopuchowo Forest surrounded by butterflies. I asked it walking through the wildflowers at Birkenau. And now I found myself asking it again while standing in the streets of Krakow singing with strangers.

For the first time, I felt like I was beginning to understand the answer.

History leaves scars. But it doesn't get the final word.

People do.

Jewish life does.

This is a feeling I will never forget. Even now, I can still feel myself smiling when I think about it.

As I sat on the plane coming home and read an oral testimony that my cousin Otto had given in 1945 to a criminal tribunal testifying against the Nazi regime, I felt a profound moral obligation settle over me.

Otto survived because he resisted. He fought back. He lived. He went on to build a family. Because he survived, I was sitting on that plane reading his words.

I arrived in Poland expecting to learn about destruction.

I left understanding resilience.

I learned about death, but I learned even more about life.

The Holocaust was no longer only our story.

It was my story, too.

By the time I left Poland, I understood that remembrance carries an obligation. The stories we inherit are ours to protect. The future they made possible is ours to build.

I am charged with ensuring that the stories of Martin Brown, Samuel Willenberg, Adam Czerniaków, Marek Edelman, Pincus Kolender, and so many others continue to be told.

And that includes Otto.

The Nazis tried to erase the Jewish people.

They failed.

We are still here.

We still remember.

We still build.

We still sing.

We still dance.

We still live.

Am Yisrael Chai.