HANDOUT 3.4.4

GERMAN SECONDARY STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON A SCHOOL VISIT TO AUSCHWITZ

Students in Marlise Kasper's English class at the Albert-Schweitzer-Gymnasium in Gundelfingen, Germany reflect on their visit to Auschwitz. These essays were a class assignment completed by German secondary students learning English.

A Visit to the Museum Auschwitz

In Museum Auschwitz I felt terrible and was really ashamed to be a German. It was much crueler than I had ever expected. It was a scary place because it isn't a museum; it is an authentic place and I couldn't understand what happened there. When we walked into the room with thousands of hairs I got tears in my eyes. The worst was the smell in it, I was overwhelmed. I think it was a good experience for me, because we are Germans and we must live with our past, even when we all weren't born in this time.

September 29, 2010
Frederieke, 15

Day in Auschwitz

This year we went with an exchange to Poland, Bierun. Our experiences about this week there were very good. One day we went to Auschwitz. I always knew something about the time in this century and I'm interested to know more. Only the German pupils went there by bus because the Polish pupils had already seen it and didn't want to go there another time.

When we were there we had seen a little film about Auschwitz. After this film we went with a woman who's telling us about this place in front of a gate. When I read the words "Arbeit macht frei" it was depressing. We had seen the whole arrangement and it was terrible to know what's happened in there. In the rooms there were many real old things of those people were left there introduced. We had seen old kids' shoes and when we think about that those little children also come there like their parents and they don't know what's happening with them it was really frightening. There also were many suitcases with names and the birth date from these people, toothbrushes and old pots.

On the walls of the corridors hang pictures of men and women. Some people died 6 days after they came to Auschwitz. It was difficult and sad to see what the German men those who were officers there had done and sometimes I was ashamed that I'm German and go those terrible arrangements. But we have to know all and we don't have to be ashamed. There I still ask myself the question: "Why nobody had done something against these terrible events!"

October 27, 2010
Lara, 15

A Visit to the Museum in Auschwitz

On our way to the museum in Auschwitz the group was good-humored yet. When we arrived suddenly everybody was quiet. We all listened interested to the woman who showed us the museum. Everything was so terrible and expressive. The most upsetting thing was the hair from the women and from the little girls. Also the shoes, first of all the shoes from the babies were very upsetting. It was so sad to see what the people did with the Jews. You have a completely different view if you were there than if you just heard about it. It was a very good experience to have been there. Because before I was there, I couldn't imagine what happened in the Holocaust.

September 29, 2010
Julia, 15

Day in Auschwitz

A few days before we went to Auschwitz, I was scared because I didn't know how I will handle this extreme situation. It was hard to see all the suffering. It was so real; there were suitcases, toothbrushes and even real hair of the victims. Although I know I'm not guilty, I felt ashamed. I felt ashamed, that Germany did something that was so inhuman and cruel. We should never forget it and think about the victims.

October 27, 2010
Anne, 15

Our Visit in Auschwitz During the Poland Exchange Program 2010

When we arrived at the museum I was interested to learn, but at the same time I felt uncomfortable to go there as a German student, especially when we met a group of Israelis who wore their flag around their neck and shoulders. I found it strange that they were so proud of their country and I couldn't imagine doing something like that. I thought it was very amazing that the prisoners had such a strong will to survive, although their situation was so horrible. Some people even smiled on photos taken before they were brought to Auschwitz.

Very touching and sad was a little girl's doll with a broken face. Next to it the little girl's clothes were shown. I wondered if this little girl would have wanted her doll to stay at that place forever which was so horrible for her and where she died.

But, at last, I wasn't ashamed to be German because I thought it was better to deal with our own history and learn from it than just ignore it.

October 27, 2010
Lea and Isabel, 16

Auschwitz

"I wouldn't even have related Berlin to the Holocaust" was the answer a friend of mine recently got from an Israeli when apologizing for her German nationality. This is an experience I have often had since graduating from high school. Several times, I have even found myself being the only one in an international group of people not being able to laugh about a joke about Jews.

We were confronted with our legacy from World War II very early in school and the Holocaust came up again every year in every subject – often we felt it was too much. The setting in which we discussed these matters was always purely German. All of us knew that we were not guilty but still had to assume a special kind of responsibility. Our visit to Auschwitz was the culmination of this: I can't even describe the feeling of being in a foreign country, benefiting from the outstanding Polish hospitality, with a group representing the country that brought so much horror to others. Spending some time as exchange students in a small Polish town not far from Krakow was a turning point in the sense that my 22 classmates and I also exchanged views with non-Germans on the matter for the first time. We came to realize that people do not judge us according to our past, but according to what we are now.

Sometimes, people from other countries ask you "do they teach you that in school at all?" and then I am very thankful for the way the Holocaust is mediated. German students know all about the matter and the international community respects that. I still become uneasy when the subject comes up although meanwhile, I have come to understand that the issue is one of international importance and will be increasingly regarded as that. It took me a while to realize that other countries have difficult histories as well and that a lot of them do not deal with them as responsibly as Germany does. It is essential that Germany does not forget. Others, however, do. As the Israeli told my friend: "We don't talk about Germany anymore; we have other enemies now."

October 27, 2010
Julia, 15