SKJ Travel Fellowship Report – Summer 2014
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I have had the privilege to work in Holocaust education in different contexts, each shaping what is important to me about connecting to teachers and students. Prior to attending University of Wisconsin – Madison, I worked for a Holocaust survivor at Boston University, as a museum educator at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, and as a Culture and Communication teacher in Radom, Poland. The students and educators I encountered in these various educational settings inspired me with the tenacity, curiosity, and complexity with which they addressed learning about the Holocaust. Since coming to UW – Madison, I participated in a teacher training program, sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in which I developed teaching frameworks for novice teachers to use in the classroom when teaching about the Holocaust. In my Holocaust course here, we gained a broad knowledge of the history of the Holocaust and interrogated its varied forms of representations. Perhaps the greatest thrill in teaching that course was to witness students from different majors, heritage backgrounds, perspectives, and religions learn about this history with and from each other.

These experiences helped me understand that at its core, good Holocaust education – as good history teaching writ large – is rooted in collaboration amongst educators and alongside students, provocative curriculum, challenging discussions, and the exploration of our varied and complex relations as individuals and members of multiple groups to this history.

This, in part, led me to my dissertation project in Germany, for which I am studying how high school history teachers and educators at memorial sites can come together to create a new learning experience for their students rooted in classroom and site learning. I will be looking at this from the perspective of teacher education: what does this new process of collaboratively writing curriculum look like and what understandings can be generated from it?

Notably, I am engaging with a research methodology that supports research questions that are rooted in a pedagogical need identified by the participants and facilitated by the researcher. I will not be instructing the educators how to teach, but rather supporting and giving them the space to reflect on and improve their practice. The rigorous, empirically-based, participant-driven, and researcher-facilitated orientation towards understanding collaborative work in teacher education has never been done in the field of Holocaust education. No academic scholarship to date details the complex methodological processes involved in a truly co-constructed teaching collaboration. Additionally, my work will address how the teachers’ relationship to the memory of the Holocaust impacts how they are able to create curricula with and for others, what comparisons to the Holocaust, if any, they might use to make sense of this history, and what new possibilities this collaboration could open up (and what opportunities could be limited) through the enactment and exploration of Holocaust memory across their pedagogical negotiations. My ultimate aim, and I imagine the aim the educators as well, is for that process to improve student learning.

Thanks to the generous support of the fellowship, I was able to split my time in Germany between the republic of Nordrein Westfallen and the city of Berlin to begin to develop the relationships necessary to conduct my project.
The first part of my summer was spent in contact with Holocaust education scholars in Frankfurt, Cologne, and Bonn about my work. The ability to be in country and meet with them in person was tremendous in helping me understand the academic conversations around Holocaust education and memorial site pedagogy and establish myself as an emerging scholar in the field. I gained a more detailed understanding in where Holocaust education stands in relation to broader context of German secondary education.

The second part of my summer was spent at the memorial site of a former Nazi concentration camp near the Berlin where I will be conducting my dissertation research. Here, I engaged in ethnographic research. I spent my days becoming intimately acquainted with the sites museum exhibitions and the educational staff. I was constantly amazed by this deeply devoted and progressive group of educators. Their commitment to critical thinking, to using complex personal narratives to teach about one of the twentieth century’s greatest acts of inhumanity, and to investing in each and every student or teacher to connect them to the history of the Holocaust (in general) and the site (in particular).

Moreover, I had the opportunity to participate in the site’s flagship educational program: the Generational Forum. Over the course of four days, a group of approximately 100 teachers, undergraduates, master’s students, and high schools students came together to leave about the history of the site from the site itself and four of its survivors. I spoke with Germans across all walks of life about why they chose to spend four days of their precious summer vacation at this site and the ways in which they felt compelled to and by the history of the Holocaust. It was a tremendous privilege to hear the survivors speak about their experiences during the Holocaust in the very place in which much of their own personal horror of that time occurred. However, it was also incredible to sit outside of the barracks where the SS once slept – now turned into a canteen – and share a simple dinner with a group of college students and two survivors talking about our personal lives and the reasons that brought us to this place in 2014. To hear them talk and laugh and let loose in the place where their oppressors once reside, to hear them talk about their children in the place where others once plotted their death, to hear two women approaching their 90s insist we all stay out for another drink to keep talking as midnight approached – this is a moment I will take with me to my classrooms, my research, my writing, and beyond.

It was a beautifully humanizing moment. While I also work to capture those humanizing moments in this tragic history in my classroom and in my research, it was striking in this context to, in part, experience it as a student.

In sum, much of my summer was spent taking the time to forge lasting, meaningful relationships with the scholars and educators with whom I will be working for my dissertation. I could not have done this without the support of the fellowship and am truly, truly grateful.