Postcards from a journey of remembrance and hope

Twelve Boston rabbis visited Munich and Berlin last month at the invitation of the German government to see, firsthand, Germany’s efforts to confront the history of the Holocaust. Amid painful reminders of the past, the rabbis found a vibrant community of some 200,000 Jews, many of them immigrants from Russia and Israel. They also witnessed the country’s efforts to help Syrian refugees and other asylum seekers integrate into German society. Here, in their own words, they share reflections on their journey and its moments of anguish and optimism.

Compiled by Lisa Wangsness | Globe Staff

I went to witness once again the astounding integrity of modern Germany’s embrace of the evil in its past. I went as a survivor, as a reminder to Germany of what it had wrought, and found that it didn’t need any reminders. I went to be a resource for my fellow rabbis, and they used me well. I went to commune with the victims of the Holocaust and found them at my
murdered father’s grave deep in east Germany. I went to see Germany’s struggle with its present, its refugees, its role as a sanctuary for people who are lost politically and existentially, and I was deeply moved.

**Rabbi Joseph Polak**, a rabbi emeritus of the Hillel House at Boston University and head of the Orthodox Rabbinical Court of Boston. Polak survived two concentration camps as a young child. In the video above, he recites the Kel Malei Rachamim prayer, which petitions a merciful God to guard the souls of the dead, at the Jewish Memorial at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. (Video credit: David Lerner.)

The group gathers at Logan Airport before departing for Munich. Top row, (from left): Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, Rabbi Joseph Polak, Rabbi Andrew Vogel, Rabbi Michelle Robinson, Rabbi Ron Fish, Ralf Horlemann, consul general of Germany in Boston, Rabbi Braham David, Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Rabbi Benjamin Samuels. Bottom row, (from left): Rabbi Laurence Bazer, Rabbi David Lerner. (Rabbis Daniel Lehmann and Victor Reinstein met the group in Germany.)
We are embarking on a most incredible journey to a country that some of us did not always want to visit. Growing up in New York in the 1970s, I remember shopping one year for school supplies. Scissors were on the list, so I chose the best one I could find and showed it to my mother. Quietly, but forcefully, she shook her head and said, “No, you can’t get those; put them back.” When I questioned her about why, she simply said, “They were made in Germany.” That was it. All things from Germany were verboten. . . . Today, Germany stands as a beacon for new immigrants and has a struggling, but rejuvenated, Jewish community that we are eager to see.

Rabbi David Lerner, president of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis and the spiritual leader of Temple Emunah in Lexington, in a reflection he shared with the group before they departed from Logan Airport.
Arriving at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site from modern Germany, we stepped into a zone where there were no more piles of bodies visible, but the groans and cries were just under the surface. My family, who were political prisoners here, shared tight quarters, lice, and unimaginable brutality — this place where humiliating and terrorizing practices were developed for all the camps. Time passes and truth stays still.

Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, director of spiritual care, Hebrew SeniorLife, Boston.

The group pauses by the main gate into Dachau, inscribed with the words “Work Sets You Free.” The gates of many other Nazi camps, including Auschwitz, bore the same message.

The group walks slowly, reflecting after its memorial service at Dachau. The rectangles are the outlines of where the prisoner barracks stood during the war.
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t had rained most of the day. The rain would do what I could not bring myself to do. I had never cleaned off the dust of Dachau that had caked onto my shoes the previous day. . . . As I wanted to leave the dust on my shoes, I have wanted to hold the pure emotion felt at Dachau, to hold it in all of its pain and release, never to let go of those for whom I cried, to feel the catharsis of hot tears streaming down my face. It is the feeling of not wanting to leave Shiva, to go out from the house of mourning, wanting to remain close in time and place to the dead. But we have to go on. We get up and go outside, squinting in the light, realizing that somehow there still is light, light beyond the flickering glow of the memorial candle.

**Rabbi Victor H. Reinstein, Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue, Jamaica Plain.**
We were led on a guided tour of the formerly Jewish neighborhood of Munich by an extraordinary couple, two sexagenarian activists who have dedicated a tremendous amount of time to the documentation of the lives of Jews in Munich who became victims of the Nazi regime. They introduced us to the Stolpersteine (Stumbling Stone) Project, first conceived by the German artist Gunter Demnig. . . . Cities throughout Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, have attempted to remember and honor the lives of those victims of the Holocaust by inserting in the street, near their last known address, a square, bronze cobblestone with the name and spare details of the life and death of the victim.

Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Temple Israel, Boston.
In the center of Berlin, we stand among 2,700 gray cement slabs, each the size of a coffin. No tourist can avoid the city square where the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe stands. . . . We crowd in between the symbolic graves, the concrete stelae that rise up from the square. The memorial is shaped so that I cannot see where it ends; it goes on and on. . . . I enter into the lanes and alleys of stelae that form the memorial. I am walking through an enormous gray cemetery that has no names, no personal headstones, and yet, each concrete slab rises from the ground at its own unique angle, slightly different from the one next to it, as if to say that each Jew who was murdered by the Nazis was unique and different. Slowly, as I proceed deeper into the memorial, the ground slopes under me. Before too many steps, I am dwarfed by the stelae which rise above my head, and I feel engulfed by the death brought by the Holocaust.

The group tours the 2005 Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a 5-acre field at the center of Berlin of some 2,700 concrete blocks, or stelae, set slightly askew in a grid pattern. Peter Eisenman, the architect of the memorial, wrote: “In this monument there is no goal, no end, no working one’s way in or out.”
Rabbi Andrew Vogel, Temple Sinai, Brookline.

I was deeply impressed by the vitality of Jewish institutions we observed. We enjoyed spectacular kosher restaurants in Munich and Berlin. We were witness to typical struggles among Jewish communal institutions and leading figures. We saw true and self-confident Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. And perhaps most encouragingly, we were nudged by kids in the Kiddush line at a synagogue led by a dynamic woman Conservative rabbi, ordained in Israel. The Neue Shul on Oranienburger Strasse had been a center of
liberal Jewish life in a massive, exquisite facility that could seat 3,200. It was destroyed during World War II, abandoned for half a century under Soviet control, and yet it pulsates with the beginnings of a new vitality today.

**Rabbi Ron Fish, Temple Israel, Sharon.**

Perhaps one of the most powerful moments was our meeting with a Syrian refugee who escaped Aleppo with his family after his home was destroyed by government bombs. Here, he shows the rabbis photos on his phone of his young children wearing lifejackets during the perilous crossing to Greece.

A Syrian refugee who met with the rabbis described his family’s flight from Aleppo after his home was destroyed by government bombs. Here, he shows the rabbis photos on his phone of his young children wearing lifejackets during the perilous crossing to Greece.
inner tubes on a small, rubber boat crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece. It was incredible to think about this Syrian Muslim man sharing this experience with me, a rabbi from Boston, as part of an encounter in a German refugee facility outside of Berlin.

Rabbi Daniel Lehmann, president of Hebrew College, Newton.

We saw the good and bad, beautiful and ugly of 20th- and 21st-century Germany. We witnessed remnants of a world destroyed and flowerings of a Jewish community renewed. We experienced a Germany with a strong moral conscience, an activist on behalf of Israel, Jews, and humanitarian efforts more generally. The enduring question that I left with
is, given the incredible repentance and resolve of the German government and its people, and their apparently strong moral conscience, how did the Holocaust happen in the first place?

**Rabbi Benjamin Samuels, Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, Newton Centre.**

The Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue in Berlin, completed in 1912, was damaged in a 1938 pogrom but survived World War II. It is a liberal synagogue, but men and women sit separately.