



Monarch School traveled to Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland.

Each trimester, as Monarch School students approach graduation, a group from Monarch School takes part in a "Gift Trip," a trip that allows graduates to give back to communities in need.

In November, the Monarch School graduating class of December 2016 had an incredible experience traveling to two different cities in Poland, Oswiecim and Krakow. Our Monarch School group joined with Amizade, a global service-learning non-profit based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for a week-long study tour of the Holocaust history grounds and museum at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Our students had the unique opportunity to work with the preservation and archives team assisting with cataloging, cleaning, and preserving the museum's collection of Holocaust artifacts. The group also toured important sites that focus on Jewish life and the culture of Poland, including other historical sites in Krakow; the Wawel Castle and Cathedral; the largest medieval market square in Europe; the Rynek Glowny; and the Wieliczka Salt Mine.

After thorough preparation, including a Skype orientation with Amizade, internet research, journaling, reading articles and a guided discussion, the group made their way across the globe for an eye-opening experience. The Monarch School group traveled nearly twenty-four hours before arriving in Krakow, Poland, where they met their Amizade guide and native Pole at the airport. Immediately, they traveled to Oswiecim, about an hour from Krakow, where they spent the next two days studying and touring around Auschwitz (the German spelling and pronunciation for the Polish town of Oswiecim). On the morning of their third day, the group braved the cold air and snow flurries for a six-hour walking tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The group had an English-speaking tour guide who led them through the two camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. They witnessed the barracks; torture and execution areas; offices and administrative buildings; gas chambers; crematoriums; and other historic yet horrific sights. Though there were thousands of visitors present, the entire program was conducted respectfully: it provided a sobering experience that informed without exploiting. The group agreed that one of the most eye-opening parts of the trip was the sheer size and vastness of the camps, especially considering that ninety percent of arrivals at these camps were sent straight to the gas chambers. The group also had the incredible experience of volunteering in the collections department. They received the rare opportunity of glimpsing some artifacts which are not in public view as well as organizing and cleaning items that are being prepared for exhibition.



Following the two-day tour of Oswiecim, the group traveled on to Krakow and received a beautiful night tour of the old town. Krakow was relatively untouched by WWII as the Germans planned to use it as their capital, so it remains a gorgeous city with extremely old architecture. On Tuesday, the group enjoyed a bit of a lighter day by touring the castle and cathedral in Krakow. Wednesday morning included a tour of the historic old Jewish neighborhood and several of its synagogues. This was a neighborhood that existed before the war, and at that time it was seen as a relatively safe place to live a publicly Jewish life. During the German occupation, Jews were pushed out of their neighborhood and across the river to what became the walled-in Jewish ghetto, which the group toured on Thursday. Thursday afternoon also included an extensive tour of Schindler's Factory, which has been turned into an enormous museum on WWII and the Holocaust.

Friday saw another lighter day, with a tour of the underground salt mine just outside of Krakow. This absolutely massive mine is over 178 miles long, but only a small percentage is open to the public. Particularly noteworthy are the sculptures that miners carved into the mine walls and an entire church carved directly into the salt wall, where mass is still held every Sunday.

One of the highlights of the trip was the time students spent at the Jewish Community Center in Krakow. Despite Krakow boasting over 65,000 Jews prior to WWII, there are currently only about 150 practicing Jews living in Krakow today and about 200 current members of the Jewish Community Center. It took many decades before any Jews would dare identify themselves in Krakow, let alone actively practice. It was encouraging and exciting to see the work that the JCC is doing in Krakow today. Our students spent time with young volunteers, learning about why they choose to spend their time working on outreach and education about Jewish history and culture. They were honored to spend an evening hearing a Holocaust survivor share her story and answer questions. And finally they were invited to take part in a traditional Shabbat dinner at the JCC on Friday evening where they participated in prayer, and heard stories over their shared meal. They met more Holocaust survivors and actively practicing Jews, and our students agreed that this experience helped enhance their understanding of Auschwitz and its history.

I've never experienced the level of thoughtfulness that was attained over the duration of the Poland Gift Trip. Things were put into perspective like nothing else I can compare. It was absolutely incredible to understand the events of the Holocaust from different points of view: Jews, Roma, Native Polish People, two survivors... The impact this trip had on me has been the most influential lesson I've learned about humanity. I feel so privileged to have seen and learned the things I did on this Gift Trip. It truly has been a gift, and I'm looking forward to sharing my knowledge with others. ~ Monarch School Graduate

The students unanimously stated that this is a trip they will never forget. Of course, the cultural experience that travel offers impacted them all, and all agreed that the traditional Polish and Jewish food was absolutely amazing! But even more, the history they learned has given this group insights that they will not soon forget: to be grateful for what they have, to look out for their neighbors, and not to be so quick to judge. They returned to Monarch School humbled by the intense scale of their experience.

The service portion of this trip was minimal, focusing on Holocaust education, preservation and remembrance. The group realized that their real service began when they returned, to keep the perspective that has changed the way they view the world, to share their experiences with others, and, most importantly, to tell the stories of those who are no longer here to tell them, stories they feel honored to pass on.

The city of Krakow is suffused with a fairy tale feel, with every cobblestone street and ancient building leading to another adventure. The tragic backstory is countered by the active community that spreads a message of hope. ~ Monarch School Graduate

Monarch School is a co-ed Therapeutic College Preparatory Boarding School established in September of 2000 in order to promote academic excellence, positive self-image, strong character and sound reasoning. All students are taught to build the necessary foundation to support these goals and fulfill their individual visions. Students learn to persevere, problem-solve and develop strong leadership qualities, all while assisting others in learning to help themselves. With the proper mentoring and guidance, our students become powerful role models and lifelong learners with a sense of personal investment and accountability to self and others.

Visit us online at www.monarchschool.com to learn more about Monarch School and the several opportunities we offer.



Monarch School - Heron, Montana

www.monarchschool.com

email: admissions@monarchschool.net

phone: 406.847.5095