“Only memories:” place-based holocaust education in contemporary Poland

Anna Marisa Yonas
University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this self-study is to analyze my experiences learning in Poland, the country where Nazis imprisoned and murdered my family. I share findings from multiple museum locations, including implications for history teachers, teacher educators and visitors to Holocaust museums.

Design/methodology/approach – I participated in a ten-day professional development seminar designed for American teachers to visit Poland. To allow for self-study after the trip, I maintained a reflexive journal and photographic records of each day I was in Poland. I analyze these data in conjunction with publicly available data from the museums and historical sites I visited in Poland.

Findings – The findings suggest that teachers can face many challenges when learning in a land of traumatic absences. Many challenges stem from the absences of buildings and survivors, as those may be integral to place-based learning. Testimonies and first-person accounts may ameliorate these challenges for teachers engaging in place-based learning. Additionally, teachers may use these accounts to bring a pedagogy of remembrance from Poland to their classrooms.

Originality/value – This study is not under review with another journal.

Keywords Testimony, Holocaust, Place-based learning

Paper type Research paper

I’m writing my testament during the deportation of the Jews of Warsaw. It has been taking place since 20 July, constantly. Now, when I’m writing down these words, one cannot even go outside. Nobody can feel safe even at home. … We have decided to write our testaments, collect some evidence from the deportation, and bury it. We have to rush because there is no certainty … What we couldn’t scream out to the world, we buried in the ground … We stand little chance of surviving and that is why I am writing this testament. May this treasure fall into good hands, may it survive until better times, may it alarm the world to what happened in the 20th century. … Let history bear witness to that.

-Dawid Graber, Last Will and Testament, August 3, 1942

In the summer of 1942, nineteen-year-old Dawid Graber prepared for his death as Nazis increased deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto. Graber drafted his last will, added it to other records of Nazi oppression they compiled as members of a secret group of archivists, then buried it under their school in hopes that future students of history could learn from the records they compiled (Ringelblum Archive, n.d.). This burial preserved the subterranean archives when the Nazis destroyed more than 85% of the city (Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.; UNESCO, n.d.). In better times after the war ended, some of the buried records were uncovered by the few surviving members of the secret group. Contemporary visitors to Poland have the...
opportunity to fulfill Graber’s will and bear witness to the atrocities Nazis perpetrated in the Warsaw Ghetto.

More than eighty years after Graber wrote his will, sites of Nazi atrocities are now educational travel destinations. In the four years before the COVID-19 outbreak, more than 2,000,000 people visited the Auschwitz Memorial each year (Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, n.d.). Many visitors travel on educational trips designed for students and teachers of history to learn the history that Graber tried to scream out to the world. Research has examined European students’ experiences and teachers’ designs of such trips (e.g. Bussu et al., 2022; Cowan and Maitles, 2011; Flennegård and Mattsson, 2021), American teachers’ and teacher educators’ experiences in place-based Holocaust education is largely unresearched. In the summer of 2023, I participated in one such professional development seminar trip to Poland designed for American teachers.

In this self-study, I analyze how a place-based professional development seminar designed for American teachers to learn in and from places of Nazi murder and oppression in Poland builds on and challenges literature of learning in and from museums (Handler and Gable, 1997; Marcus et al., 2017; Simon, 2011; Trofanenko, 2010). I frame my analysis of opportunities for learning in and from specific locations through the conceptual frame of zakhor, the obligation to actively remember oppression and repair the world (Simon, 2005; Simon et al., 2000).

Acting as both the participant in place-based education and the researcher of the experience, I examine the challenges of place-based Holocaust education in Poland at different categories of location and my evolving understanding of how and why to utilize testimonies to develop a pedagogy of remembrance. I conclude with implications for researchers and teacher educators, including how we can bear witness to Nazis’ attempted destruction of Polish Jewry and act towards a better future.

Pedagogy of remembrance
Jewish cultural tradition holds that we should learn about historic oppression and actively confront contemporary oppression. Zakhor, a pedagogy of remembrance, provides a framework to consider whose perspectives we memorialize and how their experiences in the past can inform how we confront injustices today (Simon, 2005; Simon et al., 2000). In his seminal work on remembrance in history education, Simon (2005) argues that students read or hear first-person accounts from historical traumas, such as testimonies from Holocaust survivors and victims, can engage in “the transitive testamentary act” (p. 5). This transitive act suggests that hearing or reading a first-person account obligates any witnesses to act on behalf of the person who recorded the account. Teachers, therefore, can teach using first-person narratives from those who were oppressed during the Holocaust so their students can become active participants in remembering and re-telling the experiences of the Holocaust.

Researchers suggest that learning first-person narratives of the Holocaust can improve students’ historical empathy and concern for the needs of others (e.g. Haswell, 2005; LaCapra, 1998, 2001; Naïshtat-Bornstein and Naveh, 2017; Zembylas et al., 2020). The framework of zakhor suggests that developing an affective connection to historical oppression can pose a benefits and challenges of historical empathy: learning about oppression can traumatize learners, hardening their hearts towards ongoing oppression (Simon et al., 2000). Teachers and students alike face the potential for emotional traumatization in Holocaust education. Consequently, some teachers teach the Holocaust as a neutral, unemotional history due to their defensive avoidance of acknowledging emotion (e.g. Britzman, 1998; Zembylas, 2014, 2017). Holocaust educators, therefore, may benefit from engaging in repeated critical self-reflection on their positionality, biases, and fears as part of their preparation to teach the Holocaust.
Zakhor suggests that bearing witness to historical trauma includes three pedagogical components: developing knowledge of the historical events, remembrance of individual narratives, and demonstrating the consequences of bearing witness through contemporary civic actions (Simon, 2005). The first component of this pedagogy of remembrance, developing knowledge of the historical events, can be addressed through sharing information through exhibits, artifacts, or secondary sources. The second component, remembrance of individual narratives, is dependent upon records from people who experienced oppression during the Holocaust; these narratives may be handwritten, recorded, or live testimonies from survivors or victims. The final component, contemporary civic actions, can be addressed by teaching about the causation of genocide as well as individuals’ role in confronting discrimination and genocide today.

Students who learn about the Holocaust will not necessarily connect the events of the Holocaust to their contemporary obligations, however (Totten and Feinberg, 2016). Students’ understanding of the Holocaust and its implications is influenced by their teachers’ instruction and choice of pedagogical resources when teaching the Holocaust (Schweber, 2004; Totten and Feinberg, 2016). Consequently, teachers utilizing this pedagogy of remembrance should provide students with accurate historical context, testimonies and first-person accounts from people who experienced the Holocaust, and strategies to improve injustices today. These pedagogical principles apply to classroom learning, learning in museum settings that feature artifacts or survivors’ testimonies, and learning in the locations where the Holocaust occurred.

Pedagogies of remembrance at Holocaust museums

One way that educators can enact pedagogies of remembrance in their instruction is by providing students with the opportunity to learn at a Holocaust museum. These museums commonly include informational exhibits about the history, artifacts from victims and survivors of the Holocaust, and audio and video recordings of survivors’ testimonies; there are more than sixty such Holocaust museums on all continents except Antarctica (Israel Science and Technology Directory, 2024).

Holocaust museums outside of Europe are what Marcus et al. (2017) describe as “artifact and display museums,” as visitors learn about the Holocaust through specific artifacts and narratives that museum curators chose to display in a location where the Holocaust did not occur. Research of Holocaust tourism suggests that remembrance, including zakhor, is a central theme of Holocaust memorials and museums (e.g. Ashworth, 2002; Reynolds, 2018). Many Holocaust museums in the United States are updating their holdings to focus on the third component of zakhor – focusing on contemporary civic actions – by incorporating exhibits that share information about human and civil rights across a range of historic events (Popescu, 2021).

Because Nazis perpetrated the Holocaust in Europe, many European Holocaust museums may be categorized as a different type of museum even though they contain artifacts and displays (Marcus et al., 2017). Some European Holocaust museums, such as the Grodzka Gate NN Theater, are local history museums where visitors can learn about historic events as experienced by the residents of the local area. Other European Holocaust museums, such as the Treblinka extermination camp in Poland, are primarily monuments or memorials to the Holocaust, where visitors can learn from artistic representations of the events that occurred in that location through a broader national perspective. Monuments and memorials need not be large locations, as even small plaques marking where Jewish people lived prior to the Holocaust can be categorized as memorial or monument-style museums.

Museum curators select artifacts, narratives, and displays to teach specific perspectives on history (Handler and Gable, 1997; Marcus et al., 2017). For example, museums may
promote patriotic perspectives on history and may minimize the perspectives of historically marginalized groups (Handler and Gable, 1997). Visitors may be unaware of these narratives, as Trofanenko (2010) cautions that museums seldom offer “opportunities for the visitor to actively question the overall narratives of the displays themselves and the specific texts presented on panels and exhibit documents” (p. 271). Teachers who learn from museums before teaching students and/or bring their students to learn from museums have a particular burden to critically examine whose perspectives on history each museum emphasizes and consider why the museum centers those perspectives. Teachers may face an exponentially larger burden at Holocaust museums that can trigger strong affective responses among visitors and an even larger burden in Poland, where museums often contain more absences than presences.

Place-based learning about the Holocaust in Poland

Many of the best-known Holocaust museums are in Poland, where remembrance of Jewish life in Poland includes roughly 1,000 years of Jewish presence (POLIN, n.d.). At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, approximately 3,300,000 Jews lived in Poland. Jews comprised roughly one-tenth of the total population of Poland. Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, however, Nazis systematically isolated and murdered the Jewish population of Poland. The Nazi destruction of Polish Jewry is perhaps most notable in Warsaw, where nearly half a million people were confined in the walled Warsaw Ghetto with little access to food or water beginning in 1940. Nazi Germany accelerated its oppression of Polish Jewry in 1941 when it implemented Operation Reinhard, a plan to establish killing centers to murder the Jews of Poland. These plans were largely successful: by 1944, Nazis murdered nearly 90% of the Jewish population of Poland (POLIN Museum, n.d.). Remembrance in Poland, therefore, can attend both to the historical richness of the community and its subsequent devastation.

Historians often describe learning Jewish history in contemporary Poland as learning from the absence of presence and the presence of absence (e.g., Tych and Adamczyk-Garbowska, 2014). Visitors traveling through Poland encounter very few spaces where they can bear witness to the physical remnants of the Holocaust. Nazis destroyed more than 85% of Warsaw and much of the physical evidence of Operation Reinhard, including their attempted elimination of gas chambers, killing centers, and the exhumation and cremation of corpses previously buried in mass graves (POLIN Museum, n.d.). The remains of death camps constructed in Operation Reinhard were further ransacked by local Poles scavenging for materials after the Holocaust and again during the antisemitic campaign of 1968 (Kuwalek, 2014). These absences complicate the process of learning from museums (e.g., Marcus et al., 2017), as these absences require visitors to remember places that are effectively gone.

Some business owners in Poland created a tourist industry that capitalizes on these absences (Ashworth, 2002). Research of “dark tourism” suggests that visitors flock to sites of death and atrocities, often resulting in economic benefits for people who run Holocaust-related tourist destinations (Magano et al., 2023). These museums, shops, and restaurants were developed in the 1990s as “Schindler tourism” for visitors to imagine they are in a historic Jewish community portrayed in the film Schindler’s List (Ashworth, 2002, p. 365). The Kazimierz region of Kraków has been described as “Jewish Disneyland” or “Auschwitzland,” as the dark tourism industry is thriving in some parts of Poland.

Holocaust tourism is not only a private enterprise. The Polish government regulates what words Holocaust memorials and monuments can use, what teachers can say about the Holocaust, and what narratives will be presented to visitors to state-run museums of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek (Donadio, 2018; Kuwalek, 2014). In other words, the public history of Poland is subject to the interests of the Polish government, not subject to the interests of the residents of Poland, descendants of Holocaust victims or survivors, or people...
who visit the museums. The official state narrative in these facilities heavily emphasizes Polish martyrdom and Nazi oppression of Christian Poles (Kuwałek, 2014). This obfuscates the statistical reality that most people who Nazis imprisoned and murdered in Poland were Jewish people who neither Christian Poles nor Nazis perceived as “Poles.” As a result, people who learn Polish narratives of history in Poland will not have the opportunity to develop knowledge of the historical events – an essential component of zakhor.

In addition to these state-run museums, the Polish government operates a state-run memorial on the site of the Treblinka II death camp, where Nazis murdered an estimated 900,000 Jews. This location is a memorial-style museum (Marcus et al., 2017) because there are few artifacts that visitors can see when they visit. Instead, visitors see many artistic representations, such as a large stone marker that vaguely proclaims, “never again” (Plate 1). Visitors who see this marker are unlikely to realize that the Polish government rejected proposals to explicitly reference that Nazis murdered Jews in the camp (Kuwałek, 2014). In this regard, people who visit state-run museums in Poland learn a “Polonized” narrative of history (Kapralski, 2014).

While Polonization is unique to Poland, literature suggests that many museums simplify histories of oppression (e.g. Handler and Gable, 1997; Marcus et al., 2017). Trofanenko (2010) cautions: “Each museum will have an ideological framing of what history it seeks to tell. In the interests of the nation, these versions of history can distort and obscure current realities and historical truths. It is important to question what events are covered, what the source tells us, when the display was created, and the reason for its inclusion in a present-day exhibition” (p. 282). The Polish government heavily regulates and restricts what Polish institutions may teach about the Holocaust and Poland’s role in the Holocaust (Donadio, 2018), including narratives of Polish victimization and excluding narratives of Poland’s role in oppressing Jews in Poland. As a result, Polonized narratives limit pedagogies of remembrance, as they shift learners’ remembrance away from the Nazis’ primary target for destruction.

Plate 1. Memorial plaque at Treblinka II

Source(s): Authors’ own work
Place-based Holocaust education

Most research of students’ experiences in place-based Holocaust education examines visits to a Polonized site: European visitors to the state-run Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. Roughly a quarter of all Swedish teenagers visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum each year (Flennegård and Mattsson, 2021). Additionally, the Holocaust Educational Trust has sponsored travel to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum for teachers and students from the United Kingdom (Cowan and Maitles, 2011). One Scottish student explained that place-based learning in Auschwitz “changed my attitude towards genocide . . . it helped me a lot to understand how it must have felt to have been Jewish at the time and what it would have been like not to be Jewish, and either be at risk of supporting Jewish people or just going along with the crowd” (Cowan and Maitles, 2011, p. 177). Students who visit Holocaust sites demonstrate improved zakhor due to increased content knowledge and a stronger empathetic connection to contemporary oppression (Bussu et al., 2022; Cowan and Maitles, 2011).

Place-based Holocaust education can lead visitors to arrive at the other side of the paradox of zakhor: despair and nihilism. While secondary traumatization can occur in Holocaust education that does not include place-based learning (e.g. Schweber, 2008), place-based learning may intensify the potential for secondary traumatization. A recent study of 686 non-Jewish Polish high school students found that 13.2% demonstrated a secondary post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom after traveling to Auschwitz on a school tour (Bilewicz and Wojcik, 2018). Students who reported an increase in empathy for the victims of the Holocaust were more likely to develop secondary PTSD symptoms, including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hypervigilance (Bilewicz and Wojcik, 2018).

Research of students’ learning and emotional reactions after visiting Holocaust sites is geographically limited to European teachers and students; little is known about how American teachers or students experience Holocaust education at Polish sites. Nevertheless, this research suggests that visiting Holocaust sites in Poland helps students bear witness and consider how their historical content knowledge connects to their contemporary obligations to protect others. Additionally, teachers may be able to minimize students’ secondary traumatization experiences if they prepare for visits with instruction on the scale of the Holocaust and the types of artifacts visitors will encounter (Bilewicz and Wojcik, 2018).

Research of teachers’ discourse about Holocaust study trips suggests that teachers may view the site-based tour guides – not themselves – as responsible for preparing students for such visits (Flennegård and Mattsson, 2021). A study of Swedish teachers’ discourse about trips to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum indicates that teachers most frequently spoke about place-based learning as an opportunity for students to develop empathy and democratic ideals (Flennegård and Mattsson, 2021). Because most teachers in this study had participated in five or more Holocaust educational trips before being interviewed, however, the study does not aim to explore how visiting changes teachers’ understandings or pedagogical choices. Consequently, there is little empirical evidence of what teachers themselves learn from place-based Holocaust education or how those experiences inform their subsequent instruction.

Methodology

In this work, I utilize an autoethnographic self-study methodology to analyze how my experiences on a Holocaust education trip in Poland inform my understanding of my work as a history teacher and teacher educator. Authors utilizing this research methodology examine and write about personal cultural experiences to understand a broader phenomenon (e.g. Ellis, 2004). Brunet and Currie (2021) argue that autoethnographic methods are a reflective process that can provide teacher educators “a means of improving the way they handle the
teaching of difficult topics” (p. 105). I utilize this methodology as a teacher educator to analyze my experiences in Poland, analyze how learning in Poland can empower and limit pedagogies of remembrance or zakhor, and propose ways that educators can incorporate zakhor in contexts outside of Poland.

Holocaust educators and researchers have utilized autoethnographic methods to recount their experiences bearing witness to and teaching survivors’ testimonies (e.g. Elkad-Lehman, 2018; Ellis and Rawicki, 2013; Waterston and Rylko-Bauer, 2006). This self-study allows researchers to bridge the gap between academic accounts of Holocaust history and how survivors and their descendants understand the events today (Kidron, 2009). These analyses allow authors to present their experiences of witnessing and teaching testimonies in the cultural context of their own lives.

Self-study is not unique to Holocaust education, however. Social studies teacher educators often utilize self-study methodology to analyze how their knowledge, skills, and mindsets impact their instruction (e.g. Reidel and Salinas, 2011, 2022; Ritter et al., 2007). I draw on the work of teacher educators and Holocaust researchers to examine how my traveling to Poland, where Nazis murdered my great-grandparents, shaped my perspective on Holocaust education.

Context for study and sources of data
I traveled to Poland on a professional development trip designed for American educators in the summer of 2023. This trip brings teachers, administrators, and students to Poland for a ten-day tour.

Prior to traveling, we attended six seminars on Zoom. In these preparatory seminars, participants discussed contemporary antisemitism in the United States, listened to lectures on the history of the Holocaust, and discussed ways that we could incorporate primary and secondary sources into K-12 instruction. Our preparation specific to place-based learning was limited to a caution about Poland’s regulations against saying certain terms, like “Nazi collaborators,” and a logistical discussion of money and electric adapters. The preparation before the trip did not include an explanation of the locations we would visit, goals for what we could learn at each locations, or cautions of what to be aware of in each location.

While in Poland, we traveled with a historian of Jewish history in Poland, a tour guide, and a Holocaust survivor named Howard Chandler. Howard was born in Wierzbnik, Poland, a small town south of Warsaw. Howard has recorded his testimony for various historical records (e.g. National World War II Museum, 2015; USC Shoah Foundation, 2017), but traveling in Poland allowed me to bear witness to his testimony at multiple locations, observe Howard’s reactions at each site, and interrogate my reactions at each location. During this ten-day professional development seminar, we traveled to museums, ghettos, labor camps, concentration camps, and death camps.

My primary data source is a reflexive journal that reflects my experiences and reflections (Brunet and Currie, 2021) on place-based learning in Poland. I wrote daily journal entries about the places I visited that I could analyze after I left Poland. I chose to write entries each day to examine how I learned within each museum space before I had left the area, addressing Trofanenko’s (2010) call for “research on how history knowledge and learning occurs within public museums (p. 279). Additionally, the daily journal addresses Handler and Gable’s (1997) call for research of audience experiences throughout visits to museums rather than exclusively after a visit is completed.

In each entry, I recorded descriptions of each museum and site, what I learned at each location we visited, and my emotional reactions at each location. I paired these descriptions with reflections on how the locations I visited impacted my reflections on zakhor and the extent to which I felt I could participate in or enact a pedagogy of remembrance. The
questions that I raised in this journal formed the basis of what ultimately became my research questions.

At the conclusion of this trip, I sought additional sources of data to examine my experience in Poland and how my experiences in Poland can transcend and transform my work as a teacher educator. I re-examined my digital records and publicly available resources from the locations I visited (e.g. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, n.d.; Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.; POLIN Museum, n.d.).

I deductively coded my data by site, as previous literature on history education in museums has similarly organized museums into category of site (Marcus et al., 2017). I first separated locations into categories of ghettos, camps, and locations not connected to the Holocaust (Saldaña, 2021). I further coded the data about ghettos for what features were absent and present.

Finally, I analyzed which components of zakhor I engaged at each site. Using Simon’s (2005) components of zakhor, I coded the data from each site for whether each site offered knowledge about the events that occurred there through exhibits or artifacts, individual narratives through recorded or live testimonies, and suggestions that visitors should act upon their knowledge to confront contemporary discrimination. I utilized a constant comparative method to analyze my journal entries and historical evidence (Creswell, 1998). I subsequently analyzed Holocaust testimonies and historical research on Jewish absence in Poland (Birenbaum, 1996; LaCapra, 1998; Lanzmann, 1985; Tych and Adamczyk-Garbowska, 2014) to seek confirmatory, contradictory, or explanatory evidence for my self-study.

Author’s positionality
As the researcher and subject of this study, I begin by analyzing how my connections to Poland and prior Holocaust education inform my place-based learning. I am a Jewish woman raised in America. My paternal ancestors are from Transylvania; many were imprisoned and murdered in Poland in 1945. Like the descendants of Holocaust survivors in Kidron’s (2009) “ethnography of silence,” my family would reference “the war” without explaining what happened to our family. While my family taught me to be proud of my Judaism, their silence taught me that being publicly Jewish can be dangerous.

I learned the reality of this danger at my public elementary school in northeast Ohio. There, teachers briefly mentioned the concept of the Holocaust without suggestions that it was a terrible event. Consequently, some of my classmates became enamored with the ideas of the Holocaust, espousing neo-Nazi beliefs at a young age. On a “Heritage Day” when students were required to dress up like their ancestors, a classmate dressed as Adolf Hitler. He chased me around the playground, throwing wood chips, and saying that he would chop me down like a weed with his weed whacker. Other classmates would suggest that I smelled like smoke and would whisper, “You’re next,” alluding to the crematoria in which Nazis burned many Jews.

Literature suggests that my educational experiences are, unfortunately, commonplace. Like the elementary school students in Schweber’s study of elementary Holocaust education, I was expected to “play Holocaust” on the playground (2008, p. 2074); unlike those children, my classmates threatened to murder me when I refused. Consequently, I came to understand my grandparents’ cautions that publicly discussing the Holocaust or disclosing my Jewish identity put me at risk of further discrimination.

In this work, I challenge transgenerational trauma that influences me to hide my Judaism and perpetuate silences about historical trauma. As I engage in an ongoing process of learning to bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust and publicly address my Jewish identity, I grapple with the limitations of my K-12 Holocaust education in America, the narratives my family refused to share, and my emotional responses to learning Holocaust history in situ.
By traveling to Poland, I faced the paradox of zakhor in person: I attempted to bear witness to testimonies to inform my contemporary actions without succumbing to “the psychic burden of a traumatic history” (Simon, 2005, p. 53). My emotional responses to learning about the Holocaust in Poland included panic, despair, anger, shame, and emotional fatigue. These are common responses when learning about the Holocaust (Levy and Sheppard, 2018) and may be even more pronounced for those visiting locations from the Holocaust. My Jewish identity and knowledge that Nazis murdered my great grandparents in Poland may intensify my emotional responses, particularly as research suggests that Jewish people engage in Holocaust tourism for different purposes and to different emotional ends than learners without specific connections to the Holocaust (e.g. Ashworth, 2002).

Consequently, I coded my data not only by location (Marcus et al., 2017) but also by my emotional responses. In this analysis, I attempted to distinguish my affective responses from my analysis of place-based learning in Poland. I caution that I did so to suggest more universal challenges to place-based learning rather than suggest that these challenges do not exist in a broader emotional context (for research of the relationship between Holocaust tourism and visitors’ emotional well-being, read Magano et al., 2023).

Findings
My data analysis revealed that teacher learning in a land of traumatic absences poses challenges during place-based learning and subsequent opportunities to improve Holocaust education. First, I share some challenges of place-based Holocaust education in Poland, including data from my experiences supplemented with data from historical records.

As other literature of museum education has suggested that teachers may benefit from considering the affordances and limitations of specific types of location (Marcus et al., 2017), I organize these findings into three categories, suggesting that visitors may face similar challenges in some types of locations: ghettos with few physical traces (i.e. Lublin, Warsaw), ghettos with physical remnants but without Jewish occupants (i.e. Kraków), and traveling with a survivor to their hometown (i.e. Starachowice/Wierzbnik).

I analyze my experiences to suggest challenges that other visitors may face when attempting to learn from or bear witness to literally and figuratively buried histories. I conclude with implications for remembrance-based Holocaust education that teachers can implement in and out of Poland.

Challenges of place-based Holocaust education in Poland
Ghosts of ghettos. Nazis established roughly 600 ghettos in occupied Poland to separate Jews from the Christian members of Polish society (POLIN, n.d.). In ghettos, Germans forced strict restrictions on Jews’ movement, economic activity, and travel. Ghettos ranged in size based on the Jewish population of the town before the war. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, in which an estimated 460,000 Jews were crowded into a small, walled-off area. Jewish residents of ghettos faced terrible conditions, including starvation, rampant disease, and Nazi violence. Ultimately, Nazis deported most ghetto residents to camps, where many would be murdered.

I visited the locations where of former ghettos in Lublin, Kraków, Warsaw, and the small town of Starachowice/Wierzbnik. Nazis established each of these ghettos between 1940 and 1941 to relocate Jewish residents from their homes and move them to a centralized location for easier deportations and systematic murder at the Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Belzec camps. Contemporary visitors to the locations where ghettos once stood may encounter plaques indicating that a ghetto was once there, but each of the cities has been rebuilt without their once-thriving Jewish populations.
Visitors to the Lublin ghetto may not realize that they are at the location where roughly 40,000 Jews lived before Nazis murdered the Jewish and Roma residents of Lublin (Grodzka Gate – NN Theater, n.d.). The local synagogue, residences, and shops in the former Jewish quarter – then Jewish ghetto – are buried under parking lots and roads that were re-routed after World War II ended. Although some archivists are assembling records of testimonies, photographs, and addresses of the Jewish residents who once lived in Lublin, these records are all that remains of the Jewish community. Following their establishment of the Lublin Ghetto, the Nazis utilized the great synagogue of Lublin, constructed in the 16th century, as the primary location from which they would deport Jewish residents; the location is now under a road with a small memorial plaque noting its location.

While this plaque denotes that the location is a memorial-style museum (Marcus et al., 2017) and one can visit the physical locations where Jewish residents once lived, visit these memorials did not contribute to my understanding of the Jewish and Roma communities that once lived in Lublin. I struggled to learn about the Jewish history of Lublin, often feeling disconnected or bored by discussions that emphasized architecture rather than individual stories. Consequently, people hoping to learn from or enact a pedagogy of remembrance in Lublin may be limited by both the physical absence of history and a paucity of local testimonies from which one can learn.

Unlike Lublin, where the absence of the Jewish ghetto contrasts with the presence of many homes and businesses inhabited by Christian residents during World War II, Nazis destroyed more than 85% of Warsaw (UNESCO, n.d.). Before Nazis invaded Warsaw in 1939 and destroyed the city in 1944, Warsaw had roughly 350,000 Jewish residents; Jews consisted of roughly 30% of the total city population (USHMM, n.d., a). At the peak of the Nazis’ relocation of Jews into ghettos, roughly 400,000 people were forced to live in horrific conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto; fewer than 20,000 survived. Modern Warsaw stands atop the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto with few visible indicators of its past.

Despite the physical absences of pre-war buildings, Warsaw provides ample opportunities for visitors to engage in place-based remembrance and learning, as Warsaw has many archival-style museums with a comparatively large amount of testimonies, photographs, and other documentation of the experience within the Warsaw Ghetto (e.g. Birenbaum, 1996; Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.; POLIN Museum, n.d.; Ringelblum Archive, n.d.). Many of the records assembled by Dawid Graber and other members of a secret group of archivists in the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, can be read by visitors to the many museums located over the former ghetto (e.g. Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.; Polin Museum, n.d.). Some museums and historians are attempting to digitize records from the Warsaw Ghetto, but many film strips and photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto are available only to visitors to these museums (e.g. POLIN Museum, 2023). Because archivists in the Warsaw Ghetto thought to bury the records they assembled, I was able to bear witness to these testimonies in the city in which they were recorded – an opportunity only available to people who visit the archives in person.

Physical presence without residents. Some ghettos were not fully destroyed or razed after the end of the war. Place-based learning in these locations can include visiting the remaining buildings as museums of local history, albeit rarely with Jewish occupants. As a visitor to these locations, the presence of buildings without Jewish residents left me feeling hauntingly empty.

This phenomenon is perhaps most pronounced in the Kazimierz district of Kraków, parts of which have been restored to emphasize the neighborhood’s Jewish history. Most buildings in Kraków survived the war, including multiple synagogues; the population of approximately 60,000 Jews did not similarly survive (Ashworth, 2002). When I entered the Old Synagogue in Kazimierz, I was dismayed to walk into not a synagogue, but a museum of what a synagogue was and who the Jews were. The museum included items behind glass cases, such as candle sticks, yarmulkes, and dreidels, with explanations of what Jews once used these items for. I
was horrified to see items that I have in my home portrayed as though they were ancient artifacts of a society gone by. Although this museum did not explicitly focus on the events of the Holocaust, the Holocaust was the subtext of why Jewish life is historical rather than present in this area. This museum did not include artifacts that can support a pedagogy of remembrance, such as information about how or why to confront contemporary antisemitism.

My dismay intensified as I left the museum and walked to a commercial area outside the Old Synagogue, where many shops sold Jewish-style food and Judaica. These can mislead people hoping to learn the Jewish heritage of the city, however: these are not historical sites and businesses are neither owned nor operated by Jews. Although these businesses nodded towards the history of the area, they did so without incorporating the lived experiences of real people. I approached one restaurant that had a sign advertising it was “Kosher;” this restaurant did not serve any Kosher food and used Kashrut as a catchphrase to lure tourists. I was able to identify that the restaurant was did not follow the rules of Kashrut because I keep Kosher, not because there was any information at the site to indicate otherwise. It is easy for a visitor to mistakenly believe that these businesses, like the Old Synagogue, are museums or historical sites.

My disillusionment increased as I saw how souvenir shops in Kraków and in Warsaw acknowledge the Jewish heritage of Poland. In addition to common tourist gifts, such as postcards and keychains, many gift shops in these large cities sold small magnets with figures intended to represent the historic residents of Poland. These magnets represented Poles as blonde cherubic figures in traditional folk dress and Jews as antisemitic caricatures with large noses and buck teeth, often holding money (Plate 2).

I struggle to understand the creators’ and shopkeepers’ intent in offering these: if Polish gift shops want to acknowledge their Jewish history, why is this how they do it? Is this blatantly antisemitic caricature a Polish acknowledgment that nearly one in ten residents of Poland was Jewish before the Holocaust or is it Poles’ celebration that there are few Jews left in Poland?

Plate 2. Antisemitic souvenirs

Source(s): Authors’ own work
Businesses and museums in Kraków implied that Polish Jewry as an absent and historical group, but these magnets indicate that antisemitism remains present. Because these items were sold in privately owned shops and not in official museums, they represent residents’ understanding of the past. Nevertheless, people who engage in place-based learning in Poland may encounter such artifacts outside of official museums.

*Zakhor* and a pedagogy of remembrance depends upon learning about the history from the perspective of the people who experienced it. In Kraków, I learned about Jewish history from the perspective of the non-Jewish residents. The presence of physical space with the absence of Jewish residents inhibited my ability to bear witness to the history. Consequently, my attempts to learn about the history of the Jewish community in Kraków led me to the undesired outcome of *zakhor*: I am unsure how or if I, as an outsider to these places, can improve this situation.

People who travel to Poland hoping to engage in a place-based pedagogy of remembrance should be wary of who was involved in curating the histories they learned, lest they learn about Jewish former residents without learning from Jewish former residents.

* A Survivor’s return. Literature suggests that learning from the testimonies of Jewish survivors and victims of the Holocaust is an essential component of Holocaust education and a pedagogy of remembrance (e.g. Simon, 2005; Totten and Feinberg, 2016). While many Holocaust museums offer opportunities for visitors to view artifacts or recordings of Holocaust survivors delivering their testimonies (Marcus et al., 2017), witnessing a survivor’s testimony in the location(s) where they lived during the Holocaust has long been a mainstay of place-based Holocaust education (Totten and Feinberg, 2016). As there are few survivors alive today, this opportunity is quickly disappearing. Near the end of the seminar, we had such an opportunity and traveled with Howard to his hometown of Wierzbnik, now incorporated into a larger town named Starachowice.

Howard’s visit drew lots of public attention. In addition to two documentary crews recording Howard’s return to Wierzbnik/Starachowice, Polish news agencies reported on Howard’s visit and Howard was accompanied by many dignitaries, including the town President and members of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries (e.g. Spotted Starachowice, 2023; Starachowice, 2023). These recordings and public attention may be used as testimonial archives so others can bear witness for years to come. By traveling with Howard, I was able to learn from a pedagogy of remembrance more fully as I could connect his testimony to the physical locations in which we stood.

Howard was raised in a house on the market square in Wierzbnik. Howard’s childhood home, now a shop that sells window dressings and curtains, was the last place he lived before he was enslaved in a labor camp and later at Auschwitz II Birkenau. Howard described how his hometown changed when the Nazis created a Jewish ghetto, forcibly relocating many who lived on the outskirts of town to move closer to the market square, the center of the new ghetto. Howard, now 95, turned in circles as he pointed to different buildings, explaining who lived there before and after the ghetto was created. With his back to his home, Howard vividly described the traumas he witnessed during the Nazi occupation, including the last time he saw members of his family. Howard gestured towards the small gutters intended to divert rainwater away from the square, describing how they overflowed with the blood of his neighbors as Nazis beat and tortured them before deporting them to Treblinka.

As I stood behind Howard in the market square, I grappled with the essential role of testimony in place-based Holocaust education: memorials can enable learners to develop an awareness of historical events (Marcus et al., 2017) but visitors affectively connect with individuals’ experiences during traumatic events, not the place alone. When a visitor asked Howard if any of his former neighbors live in Starachowice today, Howard replied, “There are no Jewish people here. Only memories.” In the absence of Jewish people in many parts of
Poland, memories recorded by Jewish people from Poland are essential to enacting pedagogies of remembrance. We visited labor camps in Starachowice at which Nazis enslaved Howard and other Jewish men between 1941–1944. In one camp, Howard was forced to crawl through and clean pipes that fed a furnace Nazis used for steel production. As I listened to Howard’s experiences and fear of dying in this factory, I struggled to connect Howard’s testimony with the physical location in which I heard it. Although the factory still stands and is a museum in the location of a former Nazi forced labor camp, it is not a Holocaust education museum. It is now a museum of nature and technology with statues of dinosaurs and posters from science fairs (EKOMUZEUM, n.d.). Were I traveling to this museum without Howard, I would not have been able to engage in a pedagogy of remembrance because there was no display of Holocaust history from which I could learn.

Inside the factory, Howard met with the president of Starachowice to answer questions from the media about Howard's visit and collaboration with the president’s office. The historian with whom I was traveling mentioned that the president’s translator did not fully translate what he said, omitting statements that criticized Polish education policies and the president’s claim that he was not taught about the Holocaust until he was in college. Despite the president’s efforts to improve Holocaust education in Starachowice, the translator Polonized his claims to speak glowingly about Holocaust remembrance in Starachowice. Had I not been traveling with a historian who speaks Polish, however, I would not have realized that I was receiving a Polonized narrative.

We closed our time in Starachowice by visiting a recently discovered mass grave located outside one of the labor camps in town. When Howard was working at the factory labor camp we visited, he had heard that Nazis shot and murdered a large group of Jews working at the labor camp near the firing range. Howard recalled hearing that blood pooled and bubbled up in the sandy soil, but he was not able to leave the labor camp in which he was enslaved and never confirmed these rumors. After the war, a forest was planted adjacent to the labor camp near the firing range, which is still home to indoor and outdoor shooting ranges. In the past year or so, a construction crew was digging a new exit off a highway, cut down the forest, and uncovered numerous bone fragments in their construction: they found the site of the undocumented mass grave of which Howard had not known a precise location.

We walked toward the grave – now somewhat of a meadow, as grasses have grown in the area after the deforestation and before the construction of any roads. The current and former presidents of Starachowice brought a wooden tombstone-shaped memorial with them to mark the grave (Plate 3). As some dug a hole into which this tombstone could be placed, I overheard one person whisper, “Oh, there’s another piece of bone.” I realized the mass grave consisted of far more land than the area designated. I felt that all of Poland was a mass grave, haunted by the absence of buildings, people, and traditional grave sites at which I could mourn.

The memorial plaque, written in Polish, says the following: “Here they rest. Jews of blessed memory murdered during the Holocaust in the German labor camp shooting range. May their souls share in eternal life.” The local government officials demonstrated the opposite of Polonization by re-routing the highway exit and creating a memorial to the mass grave. Instead, they developed a memorial-style museum and engaged in the final component of a pedagogy of remembrance like zakhor: They developed knowledge of the presence of a mass grave, bore witness to Howard’s testimony, and changed policies to account for historical wrongdoing.

**Discussion and implications of place-based Holocaust education**

Visitors to Poland and can learn from the actions of Howard Chandler and the government of Starachowice, as their collaboration represents the enactment of zakhor and addressing the
wrongdoings that happened in that site. Museums, memorial sites, and locations that capitalize upon memories have ideological goals in the histories they share; visitors should question which events are included, which people are represented, and why the site displays history in that way (Trofanenko, 2010). If visitors to Poland ask those questions from the available museums and memorials, they may be able to address the first component of zakhor: developing knowledge. Despite the importance of teachers in incorporating their own museum-based learning into instruction and their role in mediating their students’ learning from, research has not yet analyzed teachers’ knowledge of the limitations of Polonized narratives or how teachers use place-based pedagogies of remembrance.

The second component of zakhor, remembering individual narratives, is challenging in Poland, as there are few Jewish residents and even fewer survivors of the Holocaust (Tych and Adamczyk-Garbowska, 2014). The challenges of physical destruction and the paucity of Jewish narratives strengthened my understanding of the importance of learning from a wide range of testimonies. These records, as noted in Dawid Graber’s (1942) will, can, and should be shouted out to the world, not limited to place-based education.

History teachers and students of history can learn from digitized archives without traveling to Poland (e.g. Ringelbum Archive, n.d.; USHMM n.d., b; USC Shoah Foundation, n.d.).
While in Poland, I realized that the instructional resources I have previously used in my instruction as a history teacher reflect a small subset of available records and testimonies. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers lesson plans and curricular resources related to survivors’ testimonies and Anne Frank’s diary (USHMM, n.d., b, c). These testimonies are valuable but do not represent the more common experiences of people who were murdered. Traveling to Poland allowed me to learn about and from the un-buried records of those who died in ghettos and were murdered at death camps (Jewish Historical Institute, n.d.; POLIN Museum, 2023). Future research can support this work by empirically examining whose narratives Holocaust museums emphasize and whose they minimize.

Teaching students narratives and testimonies from multiple acts of genocide is one way teachers can enact the third component of zakhor, taking contemporary civic actions to confront discrimination and genocide today. Additional research may examine how or if educators and museum employees challenge Polonized narratives, as research has depicted ways that other museum employees have expanded the narratives they taught at a public history museum (Handler and Gable, 1997). Although governmental policies in Poland may prevent systemic change (Donadio, 2018), individual educators can embody the principles of zakhor by teaching historical perspectives beyond a Polonized narrative.

Learning to translate knowledge of the Holocaust to zakhor and active remembrance does not depend upon learning in ghettos, death camps, or unmarked mass graves. In fact, learning in person may pose additional risks. Visitors who are unaware that they learn state-supported narratives of Polonization may unintentionally teach historical inaccuracies that emphasize Polish victims of the Holocaust and obfuscate Polish collaborators in Nazi oppression. This awareness will be particularly important as the state-run Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum has a growing social media presence that teachers may not realize promotes a Polonized narrative (Manca, 2021).

Furthermore, those learning Holocaust history should be aware of the potential for great emotional distress during and after their time in Poland (Bilewicz and Wojcik, 2018; Magano et al., 2023). While I knew to expect some emotional distress, the government-run museums in Poland offer neither emotional preparation nor debriefing support for visitors (e.g. Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, n.d.; Grodzka Gate – NN Theater, n.d.; POLIN Museum, n.d.). My lack of formalized preparation likely increased my anxiety, shame, and anger.

Teachers and tour providers coordinating trips to Poland, therefore, may consider explicit preparation for visitors to understand the affective dimension of remembrance. For example, the pre-seminar Zoom calls about the history of antisemitism did not prepare me for the experience of seeing shops selling antisemitic magnets. I suggest that teachers may instead benefit from preparation that previews the experiences visitors may have while in Poland so these do not come as a “shock” (Simon, 2011).

History teachers, teacher educators, and researchers can heed the words of Dawid Graber’s (1942) last will: be alarmed and bear witness to work towards a more just future. Teachers need not limit this pedagogy of remembrance to learning in Poland or learning from survivors’ testimonies. By teaching accounts that reflect the varied experiences Jews faced during the Holocaust and cautiously examining accounts for Polonization, teachers may be able to help their students bear witness and connect their understanding of history to their obligations to confront oppression today.

References


Birenbaum, H. (1996), Hope is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age under Nazi Terror, M. E. Sharpe, Armonk.


EKOMUSEUM (n.d.), Core Exhibition, Starachowice, Poland.


Jewish Historical Institute (n.d.), Warsaw, Poland.


Lanzmann, C. (1985), *Shoah [Film]*, Criterion Collection, (Director).


Ringelblum Archive (n.d.), “Jewish Historical Institute”, Warsaw, Poland, available at: https://cbj.jhi.pl/collections/749436


USC Shoah Foundation (n.d.), “Visual historical archive”, available at: https://vha.usc.edu/home


**Corresponding author**
Anna Marisa Yonas can be contacted at: amy9qr@virginia.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeralddgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeralddgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com