

Waterdown students experience 'life-changing' visit to Auschwitz



[Cara Nickerson](#)

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1 / 4 A Waterdown District High School student touches the rails going into Auschwitz on a rainy day in March. | Submitted photo

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It was pouring rain, cold and miserable when Addison Brunson visited Auschwitz with her classmates last month.

The former concentration camp is now the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, a place that preserves the painful reality of the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews were killed in a mass genocide.

“It was bone-chilling cold, and then when you walked into the camp, on the surface where these people walked, it was so incredibly depressing,” Brunson said.

Just remembering the day spent at Auschwitz was “really hard to look back at” for the 17 year-old, who was a student in Rob Flosman’s class on genocide at Waterdown District High School last year.

“It’s just a feeling that I don’t want to ever feel again... I felt so guilty almost, even though I didn’t do anything. Walking through that and realizing like what people actually went through, I just felt so guilty and honestly privileged to live the life that I live,” Brunson said.

The stop at Auschwitz was just one afternoon in a nine-day trip across Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, but it stands out in the minds of many of the 28 students who went, especially for the three who had previously taken Flosman’s genocide class. They said learning about the Holocaust from a book did not compare to seeing the evidence in person.

“It’s definitely different being there,” said Grade 12 student Ryan McCracken. “I’m really, really, really glad that I was able to go. I think everyone, if they ever get the chance, should be able to go there. Just to see that, and remember that it’s a real thing that happened.”

Emily Urbanic, 17, said the moment that stuck out to her the most while on the trip was a room in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum that displayed the shaved hair and discarded shoes of those killed at the concentration camp.

“I remember going in the room with the hair and the shoes and that’s just when I think all our whole class just broke down in tears. It was very sad,” she said.

For those not planning a trip to Poland, the Royal Ontario Museum is [running an exhibit on Auschwitz](#) from now until Sept. 1 in Toronto.

Trip gives students a chance to see the world

McCracken, 17, had never left Ontario before he went on the trip.

“I’d say my biggest takeaway overall, I think the trip broadened my sense of the world,” McCracken said. “It was really interesting to just see this whole other world, whole other continent and how just different everything was.”

The trip was organized as a community effort by Flosman and fellow WDHS history teacher Nathan Tidridge, who booked everything through EF tours. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board no longer permits the schools to run these trips, which Tidridge called "invaluable."

Urbanic was in charge of the group's Instagram account, which documented the trip.



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McCracken said his favourite stop on the trip was Prague.

"There was a lot of life and vibrancy there. There's so many interesting little shops and like there was a wax museum of celebrities that we found there, and we also went to this big castle where the rulers of Prague used to live," he said.

Brunson said Prague was a highlight for her as well. It was a chance for students to explore a little of Europe on their own. "We went out one night and just walked around the city," she said.

Plaque left at Flosman Mill

All three students said their visit to Flosman Mill was also a highlight.

Flosman's grandfather, Jiri Flosman, fled the Czech Republic with his family when he was a child. The Flosmans ran a mill during the Second World War, where they secretly produced grain for the Czech people, over and above the Nazi grain quotas they were meant to produce.

After the war, when communism overtook the Czech government, the Flosman family hid fleeing Minister Hubert Ripka.

The stop was a unique opportunity for the Waterdown students to connect history with their teacher.

"It was beautiful there. We got to meet like a bunch of Czech kids," Urbanic said.

The visit stuck out for Brunson as well. "We played football up on the hill at his mill, and it was just so much fun."

The trip was Flosman's last visit to Europe with his students before retirement, and the students on the trip left something behind to commemorate their visit.

"Before the trip, we had two plaques made to commemorate the high school students coming to see the mill. One we left at the mill, it's still there now, in the main room, and one we've taken back to the high school. It's on display here in a cabinet for students to see," McCracken said.



Waterdown District High School teacher Rob Flosman hangs flags outside Flosman Mill, where his grandparents lived during the Second World War. Submitted photo

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