



Student Project on Antisemitism and the Holocaust

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C., USA

May 27 – 31, 2013

May 27th to 31th 2013 we had a history project in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C.. We were 21 students of the Goethe Gymnasium accompanied by Mrs. Kretschmer and Dr. Domke. The main purpose of this project was to learn more about antisemitism and the Holocaust in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We did not only have an interesting and above all labor-intensive time in the museum but we also made a lot of new experiences and learned more about life in the US.

After a nine-hour flight including a stopover in Paris we arrived at Dulles Airport, Washington D.C.. There we had to go through the immigration check, which was quite intimidating. There were several counters with officers sitting inside and we had to tell them how we planned to spend our time in the U.S.. Then they took a photo of each of us and saved our fingerprints.

Our hotel was right next to New York Avenue, which is a freeway. In our rooms we had two double beds, a bathroom, a microwave, a refrigerator and a TV. Also every room had an air-conditioning system, which turned out to be standard in Washington due to the hot and humid climate. In some places, however, it was actually uncomfortably cold due to the air-conditioning. But we got used to it.

Our daily routine usually began at 7 am when we got up for breakfast. At 8 am we met in the parking lot in front of the hotel and walked to the metro station. Taking the metro in Washington D.C. is really different from Berlin. For one thing, the stations are much bigger and almost monumental. The ticket system is also different: first you have to put some dollars into the ticket machine and then you are able to regulate the amount of money you want to have on your ticket. Before you are allowed to enter the platform you have to swipe your ticket and pass a barrier which only opens if you have a certain amount of money on your ticket. Before you can leave your target station you have to swipe your ticket again. When you get it back you can actually see how much you have paid for your trip.

On the first day of work in the USHMM we had to choose a topic connected to the Holocaust. There were four different research topics: NS racial ideology and laws + propaganda; life and response of the Jews to the infringement of rights and exclusion from society; deportation, life in the ghettos, forced labor, termination, death marches; Jewish resistance and help of non-Jews; genocides today. In that way groups formed naturally because everyone chose the topic he or she was most interested in. In our groups we then decided on guiding questions, a first structure and our working procedure. From Tuesday to Friday we had time to research relevant information and to decide on a reasonable structure. For that we were allowed to visit the exhibition whenever we wanted to and use the museum library, which is the biggest Holocaust library in the world and normally only open for researchers. The museum staff not only gave us access to their archive including all kinds of media but also supported us when we had questions and gave us space where we could analyze our material and work out a reasonable structure for our presentation.

In addition, we were allowed to visit the permanent as well as the current exhibitions in the museum, and we also met a Holocaust survivor (born and raised in Berlin) one afternoon, who was really glad to meet young students from Germany and talk to them. And we invited him to visit us in Berlin later on this year.

On Tuesday afternoon, May 28, we met a representative of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission of the US Government and Congress), who told us about the current human rights situation in the world and the activities of the Helsinki Commission. After this meeting we went to the Washington Office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, where we met two representatives of the Anti-Defamation League, who told us about racism and antisemitism in the US. And after that, Mrs. Bungarten, Representative to the USA and Canada, as well as two staff members told us about the activities and projects of the FES in North America.

Every day we also had lunch breaks of course. We went to the cafeteria of the US Department of Agriculture, where you can find many different kinds of food to choose from. There – like in most office or public buildings in the city you want to visit – we had to have our passports with us, our bags were checked and we had to go through a scanner. Actually, everywhere in the city there was security. It was also remarkable that a very high number of the inhabitants of Washington D.C are Afro-Americans.

After the project work ended between 3 and 4 pm, we either had free time and were allowed to do what we wanted to, or there was some activity the teachers had planned for us. We visited, for instance, the Smithsonian Institution, Arlington cemetery, and we had a walking tour through the city including a visit of the Washington and Lincoln Monuments. On Thursday afternoon we visited Dr. Kurt Maier (Director of the German Department) in the Library of Congress. He guided us through the building, told us about its history, function, architectural features, and we also listened to some anecdotes linked to the library and people who worked here. And he granted us a special honour: a tour of the President's Suite in the Library of Congress (see photo below). The White House we only could see from the outside.

In our free time we mostly walked or took the metro to the different parts of the city. As the area around our hotel and the museum was dominated by either business or government houses, full of monumental buildings with only officials and adults walking around, we wanted to see the other side of Washington D.C.. So we went to Chinatown, to the Pentagon and to Pentagon City, where you can go into a big mall, and to Georgetown, which is a really nice and lively part of the city at the river with many little brick houses, little shops and cafes.

On Saturday, June 1, there was a voluntary trip to Philadelphia, an American city of historical importance. Those who did not want to go to Philadelphia had a free day in Washington. Philadelphia is really different from Washington D.C.: there are a lot more people, many skyscrapers, and the area around the harbor gives you kind of a holiday feeling. The old city is really beautiful and interesting to see, especially Independence Hall, Liberty Bell, City Hall, Society Hill, and, of course, the bustling South Street. We had the whole day to explore the city on our own. So after we had visited the historical landmarks we walked around the harbor, went into different shops and made a tour through the whole downtown area.

In conclusion, even though doing research on European history in the U.S. might seem like a strange idea at first, for us it turned out to be a great and unforgettable experience. Especially the combination of two different aspects made the trip as special as it was: For one thing, we had the chance to work in an academic library with an unimaginable amount of material and could, at the same time, get into first contact with the American culture and way of life.

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Our project group visiting the President's Suite in the Library of Congress, Washington DC.