

# Visiting Holocaust-Related Sites with Medical Students as an Aid in Teaching Medical Ethics

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**ABSTRACT:** During the Nazi period numerous doctors and nurses played a nefarious role. In Germany they were responsible for the sterilization and killing of disabled persons. Furthermore, the Nazi doctors used concentration camp inmates as guinea pigs in medical experiments for military or racial purposes. A study of the collaboration of doctors with National Socialism exemplifies behavior that must be avoided. Combining medical teaching with lessons from the Holocaust could be a way to transmit Medical Ethics to doctors, nurses and students. The authors describe a study tour with medical students to Poland, to the largest Nazi extermination camp, Auschwitz, and to the city of Krakow. The tour is the final component of a formal course entitled: “The Holocaust, a Reflection from Medicine” at the Autónoma University of Madrid, Spain. Visiting sites related to the Holocaust, the killing centers and the sites where medical experiments were conducted has a singular meaning for medical students. Tolerance, non-discrimination, and the value of human life can be both learnt and taught at the very place where such values were utterly absent.

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The Holocaust was one of the foremost historical events of the 20th century. Between 1933 and 1945, millions of people – Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and gravely ill and handicapped individuals – were exterminated. The racial policies that were instituted in 1933 during the Nazi period led to the marginalization and exclusion of several social groups. It began with the forced sterilization of people born with disabilities and culminated in the killing of those whose lives were considered worthless.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 prompted the beginning of the planned and medically supervised murder of sick

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and disabled citizens. These extermination efforts were carried out with the active cooperation of physicians and nurses, many of whom had participated in the sterilization programs. The fact that thousands of citizens were deprived of their rights allowed the Nazi regime to experiment on them with the purpose of advancing their military capabilities, such as testing chemical weapons, new drugs, and the limits of human endurance. Another objective of their experiments was to justify their racial beliefs.

What we have learned about the behavior of doctors and nurses during the Nazi period spurs reflection on several aspects of today’s medical care [1,2]. The latter include research limits, decision making at the beginning and the end of a life, and the relationship between the physician and the State. Some authors contend that teaching about the role played by Nazi doctors during the Holocaust could serve as a new model in physicians’ and nurses’ education regarding Bioethics [3]. Educational programs for health care workers must include cross-curricular subjects that encompass respect for diversity. Studying the Nazi period provides an example of behavior that must never, ever, be permitted.

## TEACHING MEDICINE AND THE HOLOCAUST

In 2011 the Autónoma University of Madrid, Spain, announced a call to faculty members for the creation of elective formal courses related to human rights, combating hate and discrimination. These elective courses are complementary curricula included in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). We responded and submitted our project, “The Holocaust: a Reflection from Medicine.” Our application was approved, and since 2012 we have been engaged in teaching ethical values to medical students using this weighty subject as the model [4]. Each year the class comprises 70 students, the maximum number allowed per class.

## THE COURSE

### Objectives

- To compare the characteristics of current professionalism with actions carried out by doctors during the National Socialist period
- To develop respectful attitudes towards differences – whether gender, cultural, health or other.

**Figure 1.** Reading the testimony of Mrs. Eva Mozes Kor, survivor of medical experiments conducted by Dr. Mengele on twins (Auschwitz-Birkenau)



**Figure 2.** Paying tribute to the victims at the International Monument (Auschwitz-Birkenau)



**Figure 3.** Visiting Oskar Schindler's Factory Museum (Krakow)



### Content

- Historical introduction
- Role of doctors and nurses in Eugenics and Euthanasia
- Jewish doctors in ghettos and camps
- Nazi doctors in concentration and extermination camps
- Medical experiments in camps
- Traces of Nazi medicine today
- Psychology of Nazi criminals
- What can we learn from the Holocaust for medicine today? What should we teach?

### METHODOLOGY

Our methodology is active, encouraging participation and debate. Every week each student prepares an assignment on one of the five case studies presented and uploads it to the online learning platform, *Moodle*<sup>®</sup>. The case studies include testimonies of victims, statements by Nazi doctors, and ethical dilemmas. In the last module, under the title “What can we learn from the Holocaust for Medicine today?” students are tasked with finding news in the media on the degradation of professionalism, misuse of the physician’s power, research limits, or physician-government collaboration. Our aim with this activity is that the students comprehend that some of the events discussed in class could in fact happen again.

### EVALUATION

There is no exam. The final grade is an average of all the assignments. Every year the university conducts a satisfaction survey for all students, where the highest score is 5; the average of our last three courses was 4.81. In the comments section the students stated that the class gave them a more humane perspective of medicine, they realized the importance of learning from history, and that the subject is related to current events (unpublished data).

### STUDY TOUR TO HOLOCAUST-RELATED SITES: AUSCHWITZ AND KRAKOW (POLAND)

At the end of each course, we offer a study trip to Auschwitz and Krakow (Poland) [Appendix 1] [5-20]. Although the

majority of students are interested only 15 students on average participate, the reason being that the trip takes place during the summer vacation.

Visiting authentic sites creates a unique learning environment, far different from that in the classroom. Being present at the very sites that heinous medical experiments were conducted has a particular meaning for medical students. It is a place where the values we want to transmit in our classes – such as tolerance, non-discrimination, and the sanctity of human life – can be both learnt and taught. Clearly, teaching and learning of Bioethics during a tour of a concentration camp is not only possible, its impact is enormous.

We provide the students with educational material about the camps and ghettos, as well as testimonies of the victims. However, apart from the information that we provide it is essential that the students be prepared emotionally and psychologically for the trip. The first day includes a seven-hour tour of Auschwitz. Stopping at several sites, the students read testimonies of victims, complementary information about the site, or poems [Figures 1-3]. We are fully aware that students are deeply affected by what they see, especially at the gas chamber and the barracks. Their reactions vary – some cry, some become physically ill, and some are unable to speak for a while. Clearly, the teachers should be trained to cope with such situations.

The students are asked to personalize the victims in order to see them as living beings and not merely a name or number. That is why, when viewing some of the exhibits at Auschwitz, we encourage the students to focus on a shoe, a suitcase or a photo, and try to envisage the owner and the kind of life she or he lived.

On the second day, we walk through what used to be the Jewish Ghetto in Krakow. We also visit the Schindler Factory Museum. These places provide the students with an idea of what life was like in Krakow before and during the war. We talk about how Jewish doctors in the ghetto hospitals had to deal with the shortage of medical supplies and the associated ethical dilemmas, i.e., decision making and priorities. We also remind our students how, despite the horrendous circumstances, they

managed to conduct seminal research (for example on Hunger disease) and succeeded in creating an underground medical school in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Although it would be more logical to start our trip in Krakow and finish at Auschwitz, we decided on the reverse so as not to end with the memory of Jews as victims but to acknowledge their lives before the Holocaust.

We would like to make a suggestion to teachers who decide to visit Holocaust-related sites. It is vital to meet every day before and after visiting each site. This allows the students to talk about their impressions and emotions, and thus exteriorize their feelings.

### THE OUTCOME

We have conducted two trips so far. Each year the students who traveled with us share their experiences with those in the next course, encouraging them to participate in the study trip. When the course “The Holocaust: a reflection from Medicine” is completed by a visit to the actual places where the events occurred, the students who participated describe it as an overwhelming experience, emotional and moving. In fact, they consider it a pivotal event, demarcating a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in their lives. Visiting Holocaust-related sites may create a special desire to learn and to reflect further about the role of physicians in society.

The students who travelled with us have achieved a heightened sense of community which could increase their awareness and desire to act against discrimination, Human Rights abuses, and the degradation of professionalism.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our plans for the future include writing a study trip guide directed to health care professionals and students. Although various organizations have written recommendations for study trips to Holocaust sites [21], designing specific resources for physicians, nurses and medical students is warranted. For a study trip to the Holocaust and Medicine-related sites to be complete, we believe it should include a visit not only to Auschwitz and Krakow but also to one of the facilities in Austria or Germany where disabled patients were murdered (Hartheim, Hadamar, Sonnenstein, Grafeneck, Brandenburg or Bernburg).

Unlike other experiences for doctors [22-24] and medical students [25], our trip is unique since it is part of a comprehensive curriculum. To close, a comment by Beatriz, a 2nd year medical student who participated in the trip to Poland:

“I have learnt a lot of things studying the Holocaust. But to me the most important thing was the possible dehumanization of Medicine. It happened once, so it could happen again.”

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**Appendix 1. Study trip plan**

Seven-hour visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau		
Auschwitz	Places	Readings
	Main entrance	Testimony of Jacques Stroumsa [4], violinist in the inmates’ orchestra
	<b>Visit to the exhibitions:</b> Block 4. <i>Extermination</i> Block 5. <i>Evidence of crimes</i> Block 6-7. <i>The life of prisoners</i> Block 7. <i>Living and sanitary conditions</i> Block 11. <i>The Death Block</i>	
	Block 10. <i>Medical experiments</i>	Testimony of Tadeusz Kopyta [5], victim of typhus experiments
	Block 21. <i>Hospital</i>	Testimony of Dr. Ella Lingens [6]: selection of patients for the gas chambers
	Block 27. <i>Jewish Holocaust</i> Block 13. <i>Genocide of Roma people (gypsies)</i> Gas chamber I. Crematorium	
	<b>Birkenau</b>	Block 30. <i>Sterilization experiments</i>
	Twins experiment block	Testimony of Mrs. Eva Mozes Kor [8], victim of experiments with twins
	Dwarfs experiment block	Testimony of Mrs. Perla Ovitz [9], victim of experiments with dwarfs
	Block at the women’s camp	Testimony of Dr. Gisella Perl [10]: ethical dilemmas of imprisoned doctors
	The unloading ramp ( <i>Judenrampe</i> )	Testimony of Mrs. Violeta Friedman [11]: selection at the platform for forced labor
	Memorial at the Gypsy Families camp	Testimony of Dr. Lucie Adelsberger [12]: the life at Gypsy Families camp
	Gas chamber II. Crematorium	Testimony of Dr. Miklos Nyszli [13], Dr. Mengele’s assistant
	Central camp sauna building. Family photographic exhibition	
	International monument to victims	Poems <i>Remember (Yizkor)</i> by Abba Kovner [14], and <i>Auschwitz</i> by Charlotte Delbo [15]
Six-hour visit to Krakow		
Krakow	Places	Readings
In the morning	Visit to the Museum at Oskar Schindler’s Factory	
	Visit to the old Jewish District (Kazimierz)	
	Visit to the old hospitals at Krakow Ghetto	Testimony of Dr. Avraham Veinreb [16]: ethical dilemmas of Jewish doctors in the ghettos
	Heroes of the Ghetto Square (Old Jewish Ghetto)	Jewish doctors in the Warsaw Ghetto: The underground medical school [17], Hunger disease research [18]
	“Under the Eagle” pharmacy in the Krakow Ghetto	Poem dedicated to Tadeusz Pankiewicz [19]: the Righteous Among the Nations
	Plazsow Camp	Poem: <i>If This is a Man</i> by Primo Levi [20]
In the afternoon	Jagiellonian University	Sonderaktion Krakau: The story of Polish professors taken to Sachsenhausen concentration camp (Berlin).
	Krakow Old City	
	Wavel Castle	