

'A moving experience' of the Holocaust



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The group Police Chief Rick Bourassa was with for the From Compassion to Action tour put on by the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies stand on Mt. Scopus overlooking Jerusalem. / Submitted photo

Police chief travels to concentration camps, Israel on a group tour

When Police Chief Rick Bourassa visited Birkenau and Auschwitz with a concentration camp survivor, it was cold and damp outside.

"What really struck me was how quiet it was. There were no birds. There was no noise. It was eerily still and quiet the whole time we were there and we were there for the entire day," he said. "It was just a stark reminder of what it must have been like and a horrible set of circumstances."

He was one of a group of 24 Canadians, comprised primarily of senior police and government officials, who went on the tour, From Compassion to Action, put on by the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies. Bourassa's daughter, who was a history major in university, also accompanied him.

While he was only gone from Oct. 11-18, he toured Austria, Poland and Israel in 16-hour jam-packed days.

"It was about exploring the factors and the consequences of some of the policies and decisions that were made back in the war years that led to the Holocaust and the results of that," said Bourassa.

He had a hard time describing what it was like touring the concentration camps.

"It was an eerie feeling to be standing there on the platform where the boxed cars loaded with people stopped at and where the people were unloaded and sorted out who was going to survive, who wasn't going to survive ... and standing there listening to a fellow who had gone through that whole process, was disturbing," said Bourassa.

"It was disturbing to stand there and almost feel a little bit of what he must've felt and what the others must've felt there."

He passed under the gate with the sign over top marked, 'Arbeit macht frei' - meaning "work makes (you) free" - and said it was strange knowing that 70 years ago, "the gates behind were slamming shut and there was no leaving," he said.

The experience had another level to it, as their guide was a survivor who was a teenager when he was taken to Birkenau and then Auschwitz.

"With him giving us a very personal tour and describing what it was like to actually be an inmate there, it was quite a moving experience. We've all seen the videos. We've seen the photos. We all know what happened, but to actually be there with someone who experienced it was a very different and very unusual kind of experience," said Bourassa.

"There were times I almost had the feeling that we were there with him and it's still fresh for him in his memory, all these years later."

The group also spent time at the Israeli Parliament, toured the Holocaust Memorial, met with the mayor close to Gaza, toured an airbase, saw some of the Dead Sea Scrolls and "floated on the Dead Sea," he said.

The group spent three days in Jerusalem and toured the Old City.

"We never encountered anything and I never at all felt unsafe. There was a really strong police presence," he added, "but we were able to see parts of the city where those difficulties are happening and some of the security processes put into place to keep people as safe as they can."

He also learned what measures government officials are taking to "prevent something like the Holocaust from happening again," he said.

Looking at it from a police perspective, there were principles in Israel that would apply to Canada.

"It was a reinforcement of how critical it is to work to create, to ensure that we have inclusive communities. There are always consequences when segments of a community are marginalized or feel marginalized and those consequences can be really devastating," said Bourassa. "To enhance community safety is really equivalent to enhancing inclusion in society."

The trip was "busy, eye-opening and informative," he said.

"It was expensive and it was worth it," said Bourassa. "I would do it again."

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