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Tova Rosenberg's Holocaust Film Premieres in NYC

By Dassi Lewis

This past Sunday evening, at the Center for Jewish History in downtown Manhattan, the New York premiere of "Can These Bones Live Again" took place. This powerful documentary by Tzvi Simchon chronicles the March 2023 trip of 15 seniors in MTA (Yeshiva University's High School for Boys) to Poland. The evening was hosted by Names, Not Numbers®, in collaboration with the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University.

Dr. Shay Pilnik, director of Holocaust and genocide studies at Yeshiva University, opened the program by introducing Names, Not Numbers, a groundbreaking initiative that has been running for 21 years. "It's a powerful program that has grown exponentially," he noted. Designed to educate students about the Holocaust through experiential learning, the initiative has engaged 6,000 survivors and reached about 10,000 students.

Rabbi Michael Taubes, the rosh yeshiva of MTA, then introduced the film. He elaborated, explaining that the core of the initiative of Names, Not Numbers is simple yet profound: Students prepare and then interview Holocaust survivors, documenting their stories to ensure their voices are preserved for future generations.



Rabbi Michael Taubes, rosh yeshiva of MTA (Manhattan Torah Academy), speaks before the documentary is screened.



Shay Pilnik opens the program.

Rabbi Taubes said that several years ago, Names, Not Numbers founder Tova Rosenberg suggested taking the initiative a step further in MTA. "Perhaps we can show the students some of the places they learned about," she had said. Rabbi Taubes agreed: "The Talmud teaches us that you can't compare hearing about something to seeing it with your own eyes." Rosenberg's idea led to the creation of a 10-day trip for MTA seniors to Poland, allowing them to witness firsthand both the remnants of Jewish life and the devastation of the Holocaust. In 2023, Simchon joined the journey, capturing the students' experiences, creating the documentary "Can These Bones Live Again, " which was an official selection of the Miami Jewish Film Festival, premiering virtually in January 2025.



Dr. Shay Pilnik (far left) moderates a panel with (l-r) filmmaker Tzvi Simchon, Rabbi Daniel Mayer (board member of Names, Not Numbers), Rabbi Michael Taubes, and Holocaust studies scholar Dr. Michael Berenbaum.

The film opens with students expressing their hopes for the trip. "Hearing stories from other people and seeing pictures is one thing," one young man said. "I wanted to be able to go to these places and see them firsthand."

Their journey began at the Poland Museum, where they learned about the once-thriving Jewish communities that made up 10% of Poland's population before the war. "It was incredible to see how our ancestors were coming from these areas, which were thriving Jewish communities," said a student.

As they stood in the Umschlagplatz, the square where Jews were rounded up for deportation to concentration camps, the tour guide explained that the Jews were crammed into cattle cars that brought them to the camps. They were not told what to expect.

The Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, built atop a mass grave, left one student shaken. "Seeing these sites—there's an

emptiness, a void. You know something happened here, and it makes you feel empty."

The gravity of their journey deepened when they entered Majdanek. "To walk into a concentration camp is surreal," a student shared. "You can only try to imagine what it was actually like, 75 years ago." The gas chambers were particularly harrowing. "I'm not gonna lie," admitted another young man. "When we walked into the gas chambers, I thought I was going to throw up. Thousands of Jews were murdered there like it was nothing. It's hard to comprehend."

In the barracks, students learned how prisoners endured freezing winters without heating, relying on body heat to survive. "I didn't realize how cramped and small everything was," one student reflected. "Everything here was designed to be torturous." Another student was shocked by the location of the camp: "We are literally standing in the middle of a city. Look at these buildings all around us! They put up this large camp in the middle of a city, and it stayed here for three years without anybody stopping it."

Standing before the crematoria, Rabbi Taubes read a passage from Yechezkel:

The hand of God was upon me ... And led me to the valley which was full of bones. He led me round and round, and behold, they were abundant and dry. And behold, God said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live again?" And God said, "These bones are the people of Israel. They have said, 'Our bones have dried and our hope is lost. We are doomed.'" Thus said God: "I shall open your grave and I shall raise you from your grave and I shall put spirit into you and you shall live."

As the students sang "Vehi She'amda," a song of resilience, some people in the audience joined in.

The group's next stop was Lublin, once a center of Jewish learning and culture. They prayed at Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin. "It felt good," said one student, "as if we were carrying on a legacy."



The group walking in Poland.

At Belzec, they encountered an empty space. Unlike Majdanek, where remnants remain, Belzec was erased, its history reduced to emptiness. "You try to imagine the 500,000 people who were killed there, and you feel the death surrounding you," one student said.



The audience listens to the panel.

In Krakow, they visited the Jewish Community Center, where Rabbi Avi Baumel spoke of a surprising reality: Jewish life in Poland is experiencing a revival. "There are 8,000 members of the JCC, and 1,000 practicing Jews in Krakow," he shared. "Hitler wanted to erase the Jews. But now we have a chance to do tikkun—to fix that. When Jewish people visit Poland, the general narrative is: Jews lived in Poland and were killed in Poland, but survived elsewhere. But Jews live in Poland now! So, change the narrative. If they can survive an hour away from Auschwitz, it shows our power to look forward, bring light to the world, and be able to rehabilitate ourselves. Instead of saying, 'I went to Poland and saw the death camps,' you should say, 'I went to Poland and learned about the tragedy but also about a miracle.'"

One of the final stops was Auschwitz. One student struggled with the experience: "Walking through Auschwitz was emotionally challenging for me. I felt like, how can I be here walking as a tourist when others have been here as victims? It feels horrible."

Survivor Dov Landau joined them that day. "Seventy-nine years ago, I was brought here," he said. "I don't understand how I got through it, and am here now with a group from Yeshiva University. Only God knows."

"The Poland trip was an experience I will never forget," said one student. "It was a hard pill to swallow. But as a Jew, it's important to know who we are and remember where we came from."

After the film, a panel discussion, moderated by Dr. Pilnik, helped contextualize the documentary. Filmmaker Tzvi Simchon emphasized the urgency of preserving these stories: "Unfortunately, in a few years most Holocaust survivors will be gone and it will fall to the newer generation to share the story. We are already seeing now how so much of our history is constantly being challenged. We are experiencing antisemitism. This documentary is a powerful story from the perspective of the boys—a younger generation. How are we, the new generation, going to portray a story? How will we tell it to the world?"

Dr. Michael Berenbaum, a world-renowned Holocaust scholar, highlighted the power of Names, Not Numbers: "What makes Names Not Numbers unique is it makes the student an active participant. It's not that you absorb the material but you create with the material. It gives them a double literacy—literacy of the Holocaust and with media. We are now two minutes if not 30 seconds to midnight in the life of the survivors. We are undergoing a monumental transition from lived memory to historical memory."