

Preparing for the Adult March of the Living (AMotL) 2005

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How can the 72 participants and staff from Melbourne, Sydney and Perth best prepare themselves for the challenges ahead on the AMotL? The two-week journey takes in Poland and Israel. This year a special highlight is the meeting with 18,000 people from all over the world who will gather to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of WWII.

Three generations, from survivors (child and adult), second generation to grandchildren will face the extremes of human emotions as we 'return' to sites of wordless losses. Our personal reasons for confronting such a welter of intense feelings of anguish, fear, vulnerability and grief to the joy and celebration of survival depends on our personal and intimate links to the Holocaust.

At the first of four education meetings, members of each generation offered personal motives for taking part: survivors who 'want my children to understand the past'; grandchildren wishing to 'connect with my grandparents, feeling a pull, wanting to do something physical about'; a child of survivor was 'not sure what to expect, I know it will be painful and difficult' while many simply say 'it's my roots, I feel I have to go.'

Pauline Rockman launched the AMotL in 2004 as a joint initiative between the Jewish Holocaust Centre and the Descendants of the Shoah. This year repeats last years successful preparation with four carefully planned Educational Meetings to ensure that the 72 participants are thoroughly equipped for the double journey ahead: to visit 'outer' and 'inner' landscapes engraved with images and memories of personal experiences of humanity lost. The AMotL offers participants a second look and a second chance to recover some of that lost humanity.

Ordinarily we don't revisit places where trauma obliterated such vibrant Jewish communities and lives. The experiences on the AMotL are beyond the ordinary. To face those experiences requires special courage. Special preparation is needed to enter, engage and emerge from such intimately traumatising spaces, spaces that disrupt our very continuity of being.

Three generations after provides a distance in time and space from the Holocaust to take a second look. To cope with the impact of immersing ourselves in such

fraught physical and mental landscapes, individually and as a group, a multi-skilled Staff Group will provide support and guidance. Specialist staff includes coordinators, educators, a spiritual and religious guide, logistics manager, medical support and seven facilitators to provide psychological support.

During the weeks prior to departure we find ourselves on a dizzying and steep learning curve. We speak with each other and with last year's participants. We learn how they managed, can we improve on what they did, and wonder why are they still so excited about their experiences, months after returning. We prepare in different ways for our intense mental and physical journey, the day-to-day roll-a-coaster of emotions that are bound to surface: stress, compassion, joy, surprise, shock, tears and many wordless states of awe.

Each phase of our preparation has special highlights: the initial excitement of meeting other participants, coming to terms with the detailed itinerary, deciding what to pack. Once there, being immersed in the emotion-filled evocative places and spaces; after our return, having reunions with endless informal and some formal 'debriefing' sessions. These complex layered experiences with feelings and thoughts impact differently on each participant and the group as a whole. Hence the need for special group meetings before, during and after the two weeks.

Daily 'Reflection Groups' on the AMotL will provide participants with a safe space to connect with each other, share and come to terms with each days new thoughts and feelings. Mindful of the passion and controversy both within and beyond the Jewish community the AMotL has triggered, great care is taken to respect all viewpoints.

The AMotL thus provides a unique life journey for participants to directly experience the impact of the Holocaust, three generations after. How memory, trauma, and its legacy reverberate from generation to generation will be experienced day by day. The organisers hope that the AMotL will fulfil expectations and wishes as well as to inspire a resolve to make a more strenuous effort to honour, celebrate and tolerate the rich diversity and differences between people. History teaches that the alternative is a horrible possibility. We have a choice.