I am a white woman with an African American name, which opens the door for inappropriate questions. A white woman by all appearances, in a sea of white faces, rarely experiences race discrimination, sexual harassment but that’s another story for another time. Personal experiences influence all decisions, whether big or small.

In the Fall of 2016, I helped facilitate a conference for ATYPi in Warsaw, Poland. This was our annual conference, with over 600 attendees, sponsors from all over the world, from Google, USA to Morisawa, Japan. I was the treasurer of the board, and I worked with an amazing local team, consisting of professionals, educators and students from three universities. This was always one of the highlights of my year when we gathered for 5 days of workshops, talks and evening key-notes in a new city. That year I brought my 16 year-old son with me, he was having health issues and I did not feel he could be left in the care of anyone else. When I asked him, he said on one condition – we need to go to Auschwitz. I asked why, and his response resonates with me even 6 years later “to ensure what happened there never happens again”. I was never planning to go, it was not an experience I wanted, but given his response, it was one that we were going to take together.

Our journey began at 5 am, meeting a black car on a very dark corner in front of our hotel, we picked up another couple from their hotel and then dropped at a very deserted train station. I knew this was to be a journey of lifetime, but I did not know what would come next. It started like most journeys a train ride, another bus to our destination and then walking a lot of walking and the beginning of the realization that this was greater journey than I had taken in the past. I have been many places, seen poverty, famine, the aftermath of war, oppression, but to see evil under the façade of beauty was unexpected. I watched my son’s shoulders start to slump over the course of the day as he absorbed the weight of the world onto them, the children’s barracks almost broke him, he would not look me in the eye for minutes after hearing about crushed children and the experimentation they suffered from. I was stunned to see children from Israel taking laughing selfies in front of the sentinal posts that when in operation held machine guns to shoot escaping prisoners from the gas chambers, but it was after we left the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, for a walking tour of Krakow I realized its far reaching implications.

We were to meet our tour guide at 4:30pm, in the square, the bus driver dropped us off and said “go to the south entrance and your guide will meet you there, they know you are on your way”. Off we went, tired, just looking for a relaxing historical tour, and a bite to eat before our 8pm train back. 5pm they are late. I call the tour agency, they are there, where am I, this goes on f0r about 10 minutes, finally I am approached by a woman, yes, I am she, we have finally connected. Off we go.

She is adamant on taking me to churches, I have seen churches, I am not interested in churches, I am interested in the history, the buildings the people, slowly she realizes this and begins to open up. We have been talking for two hours and she confesses “I saw you, but was unsure it was you, because you look European and you son is also European”. She had been expecting a woman in a burka. Ok, I get that. We then started talking about the economy and she says very casually “the economy has never been the same after the SS left” I was stunned, 70 years and there is still a longing for the past. I switched subjects, to the new laws on repression, abortion and politics, they felt safer and I did not have the courage to dig further. Shortly thereafter I made excuses and we made our way to the train station and back to Warsaw.

Back in Warsaw I now noticed things, I had not given much thought to. Warsaw was completely bombed during the last days of the war, much as Berlin had, but where Berlin incorporated the damage into new developments, buildings and monuments so the war would never be forgotten and part of their recovery, Warsaw’s approach was quite different. Warsaw was completely restored to the days before WWII, down to the 12th century facades and squares, removing all traces of the war. There was no indication that the Poland had suffered any damage from the invasion or the withdrawal, either in Warsaw nor in Krakow, and this strong sense of denial was evident in conversations with locals.