In Poland and Japan, students grapple with tragedy and resilience.
A Princeton education doesn’t all take place at Princeton.

During the summer, 74 Princeton undergraduates traveled abroad as part of the Global Seminars program, immersing themselves in the language, culture, and history of one of five countries — each group with a different academic focus. It’s one component of Princeton’s recent push to produce what President Tilghman has called “globally competent citizens.”

The Global Seminars program just celebrated its fifth birthday. It began in 2007 with one seminar in Vietnam; this summer, students traveled to Greece, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, and Japan. The students explored topics that were central to these places: ancient drama in Athens, for example, and Islam and empire in Istanbul. Six seminars are planned for 2013. Topics and locations change often, with seminars having been offered in 16 countries on four continents.

More than 350 students have participated, with about 70 percent receiving financial aid. Trap Yates ’14 traveled to Rome, Venice, and Krakow in 2011 for a seminar on the “global ghetto,” and recalls examining bullet holes in the walls of the World War II ghetto in Krakow and visiting Auschwitz, of which he says, “No textbook or photos can convey just what that place is.”

Each global seminar is taught by a Princeton professor, with additional lectures by local scholars, along with visits to museums, events, and historical sites in several towns and cities. Students have daily instruction in the local language, spend time with local students, and participate in community-service projects such as tutoring children in Vietnam and working with the homeless in Rome. They also have free time to explore. By taking place in the summer, the global seminars address some students’ reluctance to leave Princeton for a semester of study abroad.

“The students are learning how to live abroad and gaining deep knowledge about another society,” says Mark Beissinger, the director of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, which oversees the seminars.

In the following pages, PAW profiles two of this summer’s seminars: “Hope as the New Normal: Tokyo after the Disaster,” which looked at Japan one year after the tsunami, and “Polish Jews in the 20th Century: Before, During, and After the Holocaust,” which examined the difficult trajectory of Jewish life in Poland. Each offered Princeton students a life-changing exploration of resilience in the face of adversity. By J.A.

View slide shows from the global seminars in Japan and Poland @ paw.princeton.edu
‘Respect the grievous history’ of this place
In Poland, students reconcile a horrific past and a puzzling present

By Jennifer Altmann

A few miles outside of Krakow, Poland, in a wide field covered by wild grass and overgrown weeds, a part of World War II history lies buried. The 200-acre expanse housed the Nazi labor camp Plaszow, where, starting in 1942, some 150,000 people, mainly Jews, were slave laborers. Thousands died of disease and at the hands of the camp’s sadistic SS commander, Amon Goeth, who is depicted in the movie Schindler’s List shooting prisoners from the balcony of his house.

Amid Plaszow’s bushes and weeds, people walk their dogs and go jogging; children play. One sign reads: “Please respect the grievous history of the site,” but those in the park seem not to notice. When a group of Princeton undergraduates studying the history of Polish Jews visits the site of the camp in June, the students are stunned by the way it is treated.

“It shocked me, how it’s been forgotten,” says Lydia Demissachew ’15. “Unless somebody points it out, you don’t know what it is.”

For Iwa Nawrocki, a Princeton graduate student who accompanies the students and who lived in Poland as a young child, Plaszow opens a window into questions haunting the Polish people about the scars of the Holocaust etched into their land. “Some people don’t realize or don’t care about the history,” she says. “They can let the grass grow over Plaszow and walk right over it.”

But even while they mourn over the horrible history of the field, the students are witnessing an astonishing revival of Jewish culture. Before the Holocaust, in which 90 percent of Poland’s Jews were murdered, this country was home to a diverse, vibrant Jewish community, Europe’s largest. Living for six weeks in a hotel in Krakow — with study trips to Warsaw and the Galicia region to visit former Jewish shtetls — the 15 undergraduates immerse themselves in that rich and painful history, exploring how Jewish life in Poland once thrived, how it was annihilated, and how that history has been preserved — yet at the same time, forgotten.

The students are guided through this maze of contradictions by Princeton history professor Jan Gross — a native Pole who is reviled by many in his homeland, and admired by others, for his searing work on the relationship between Jews and Poles. The complex history of what happened to the Jews in Poland “has not been worked through in many ways,” says Gross, though it lurks in the fields of Plaszow and
Students visit Birkenau, part of the Nazis’ Auschwitz concentration camp. From left, professor Jan Gross, Eric Silberman ‘13, and Lydia Demissachew ‘15 examine the barracks where Jewish prisoners were housed.
in so many other places the students visited. “It’s everywhere, or it’s very actively avoided.”

Only a few of the students on the trip are Jewish. Rachel Neil ’13, a mechanical engineering major from Minnesota who is earning a certificate in African-American studies, explains she came to Poland because she is interested in relationships between minority groups and dominant societies. Bradley Yenter ’13 grew up in rural Stevens Point, Wis., eating his grandmother’s Polish cabbage rolls in a community where “almost everyone is Catholic and has a name ending in ‘ski.’” 

“I had an idealized picture of Poland from my childhood,” he says. “I’m very proud of my Polish heritage, but it’s hard to reconcile that with what happened here.” The course makes him think about relatives who lived in Poland during the Holocaust. “Obviously I still had extended family around during the war,” he says. “Would I be proud of how they acted? There’s no way to know.”

The trip also is personal for Eric Silberman ’13, who is Jewish: All four of his grandparents were Polish. A grandmother was hidden in a barn by a Catholic woman; a grandfather, a tailor, survived five concentration camps. Silberman has studied the Polish language at Princeton, and in 2011 he traveled to Poland and other Eastern European countries to research his family’s roots, as a recipient of the University’s Martin Dale Summer Award.

“People back home say, ‘Why are you going to Poland? You know what happened there,’” Silberman says. “But I think the connection to Poland still needs to be kept, even if it’s a hard thing.”

For the first four weeks, the students study Jewish life before the events of World War II. The idea, Gross says, is to provide context for what comes next. “When American students learn about the Holocaust, it’s often taken out of the experience that precedes and follows it,” the professor says.

“It overshadows almost 1,000 years of a very rich Jewish life that went on here.”

Indeed, Jews settled in the area known as Poland as early as the 11th century. By the 17th century, there were hundreds of small towns — known as shtetls — where the Jewish, Yiddish-speaking population made up a majority of the residents. Jews also congregated in cities such as Warsaw, which had 400 synagogues and prayer houses before World War II. By the 1930s, there were 3.5 million Jews in Poland, making up more than 10 percent of the population. Then came Hitler, and as the people perished, Poland also lost a colorful part of its culture: music, art, literature, food. Today, about 10,000 Jews live in Poland, out of a population of 38 million.

In the United States, World War II may seem like ancient history for those who didn’t live through it; in Poland, it feels present in people’s lives. Perhaps that’s because it is terrain that has not been fully discussed and understood. With some exceptions, studies relating to the Jewish community and wartime and postwar anti-Semitism were taboo during the decades of Communist rule after World War II, and anti-Semitic outbursts accompanied Polish political crises. During one, in 1968, 20,000 Jews — the majority of those who had remained — fled the country, and Jewish historians were fired and some imprisoned. “Communism was 40 years of amnesia about Polish Jewry,” says Nawrocki, whose parents grew up under the regime.

That began to change with the easing of censorship and the fall of the Communist government in 1989. And a major catalyst to that reconsideration was the publication in 2000 of a book called Neighbors by Jan Gross.

Neighbors ignited a firestorm in Poland and beyond with its account of the mass murder of 1,600 Jews on July 10, 1941, in a small Polish town named Jedwabne (yed-VAHB-nay). Gross’ research revealed that the perpetrators were not German Nazis, but the Polish citizens of the town, who forced their Jewish neighbors into a barn and set it on fire.

“The image Poles had of themselves was as victims of the Nazis,” says Princeton history professor Stephen Kotkin. “Jan wrote about them as perpetrators, too, and it’s been very difficult for a lot of people in Poland to hear that story.”

Poles have felt great pride in how they behaved during World War II. Poland was the only Nazi-occupied nation in Europe without a collaborator government, and it had Europe’s strongest resistance movement. At Israel’s Yad Vashem, that nation’s memorial museum to victims of the Holocaust, Poles make up the largest group of non-Jews recognized for saving Jews during the Holocaust. Gross’ narrative complicated that picture.

Controversy over the book raged for more than a year. The government launched an investigation into the book’s assertions, and in 2001 Poland’s president apologized to the world for the murders at Jedwabne. The storm of debate made Gross a household name in Poland and “a deeply polarizing figure,” Kotkin says.

Looking back on that period now, Gross says that Neighbors laid the groundwork for Polish historians “to write with complete honesty about the most fraught aspects of wartime history in Poland. That’s a fundamental change.”

Gross’ work continues to ignite tempests. Six years after Neighbors came the publication of Fear, about the pogrom in the central Polish town of Kielce, in which about 40 Jews and two Poles were killed — a year after the war’s end. Italian Holocaust scholar Carla Tonini wrote in the journal Issues in Contemporary Jewish History that while Gross’ book did not offer new insights, it was striking for its “outright denouncement of the perpetrators and their accomplices: the Catholic Church and the police,” changing — again — the debate in Poland. Gross’ latest book, Golden Harvest, centers on a photograph of peasants near the Nazi camp Treblinka who appear to have dug up the remains of murdered Jews and are searching for valuables. Gross’ opponents jammed his email account and sprayed graffiti on his publisher’s bookstore, but this time, in his interactions with Poles during a book tour, the professor saw a greater willingness to accept tough truths about their countrymen. “I’m no longer the one crazy guy saying absurd things,” he says.
Still, traveling through Poland with Gross can be provocative. Michał Zajac, who booked local guides for the students’ trip, says, “In many cases, we just said it was a group from Princeton. We didn’t tell everyone it was Jan Gross.” When a museum guide in Warsaw learns Gross is leading the group, she admonishes Nawrocki that when the students visit Auschwitz, “make sure they understand that Poles died there also, not just Jews.”

That sensitivity over who suffered more under the Nazis is an underpinning of the Polish-Jewish relationship. About 2 million non-Jewish Poles were killed during World War II, as were 3 million Polish Jews. Some Poles have been “resentful of what they perceive as Jews’ monopolization of the legacy of suffering during World War II,” writes scholar Marcia Shore in “Conversing with Ghosts,” published in the journal Kritika. “A somewhat perverse competition over martyrdom has long been a trope of Polish–Jewish dialogue.”

This uneasy relationship also is haunted by another legacy of the war: the appropriation by some Poles of Jews’ possessions. In his book Fear, Gross writes about Poles plundering Jewish houses after their owners were rounded up by the Nazis. As with many vestiges of the war, the issue still haunts some Poles. When a Warsaw guide learns the Princeton students are studying Jewish life in Poland, she is fearful that they are coming back to reclaim property. “I live in a Jewish house,” she tells Zajac.

There are places throughout Poland that serve as touchstones of the history of the Jews — some exist as erasures, some have been seamlessly incorporated into daily life, and some stand as awkward reminders of the war’s brutality. Gross wants the students to see “what remains, how it remains, and in what fashion it is preserved.”

On a sunny, humid afternoon in July, the students embark on a walking tour of Warsaw to learn about the Jewish ghetto created there by the Nazis in 1939. At the start of the war, Warsaw was home to about 350,000 Jews, the largest Jewish population in the world after New York City. As in other cities, the Nazis forced Jews into one area and built a wall surrounding it. Eventually 400,000 Polish Jews were forced to live in the ghetto, often with several families in one apartment.

Agnieszka Haska, a Polish graduate student who serves as the group’s guide this afternoon, stands in front of a 28-story skyscraper built on the site of the Great Synagogue of Warsaw, once one of the largest synagogues in the world, with seating for 2,400. It was blown up in 1943 by the Nazis, “an unforgettable allegory of the triumph over Jewry,” an SS officer said at the time. Plans for the skyscraper began in the 1950s, with construction stalling repeatedly. The work was not completed until 1991. “The Polish legend is that they tried to build for 20 years and couldn’t, because it was cursed by the rabbis,” Haska says.

Several blocks away, she brings the group to the lobby of a movie theater. It’s on a busy street with lots of people rushing by; the McDonald’s next door is doing a brisk lunch business. During the war, the theater was inside the ghetto walls, and Jews clandestinely put on plays here, including one titled “Love Is Looking for a Flat,” about a young couple who long for a room of their own, a hopeless daydream in the overcrowded ghetto. A plaque in the lobby that honors the memory of “the murdered actors and musicians” from the ghetto hangs next to a poster for Ice Age 4. Mothers and their children push past the Princeton students huddling by the plaque as they make their way to the show.

“There is no right way to commemorate something like the Holocaust,” says Rachel Neil, the student from Minnesota. “It’s important to put physical things to remind you. More important is to understand why it happened.”

Stacey Menjivar ’14 read several books about the Holocaust before participating in the seminar in Poland. “You feel if you go there you’ll understand, but I still don’t understand,” she says.

In Krakow, the students visit areas of the city’s former ghetto with a guide named Gosia Fus, who became interested in studying Poland’s Jewish history as a child growing up in a small town near the Tatra Mountains. “In my town there is a Jewish cemetery, and the former synagogue is a cinema,” she says. “In school, there was nothing about the town’s Jewish past. You grow up and you start to ask questions. My grandmother would tell me where the Jewish families lived.”

More than 20,000 Jews were taken to the ghetto in Krakow before being deported to Nazi death camps. In a few places the ghetto walls still stand, and they have an arresting shape — alternating grooves at the top look like headstones. One section of the wall stands outside a school; on the other side is a playground where parents push their children on swings this overcast day. The neighborhood is populated by rundown four- and five-story apartment buildings built before the war, all once part of the ghetto. In one building, some windows remain cemented over, a security measure instituted by the Nazis. Some of Fus’ friends, most of them students, live here. Do they know their apartments were once part of the Jewish ghetto?

“Some people are aware of where they live; some don’t care,” she says. “Life goes on.”

An hour’s drive from the former ghetto, crowds pay witness to the destruction of Poland’s Jewish community at Auschwitz, which receives 1.4 million visitors a year, more than 40 percent of them Polish. There are so many people lining up to get inside each barracks “you have to keep moving, you can’t reflect,” laments Ben Goldman ’15, who had come to better understand the life story of his grandmother, who grew up in Yugoslavia and survived a series of Nazi work camps. When the bus pulls away after a three-hour visit, the students are silent. The next day, they spend hours at the Birkenau death camp — which was part of the Auschwitz complex — walking the length of the camp in the rain.

“It’s overwhelming,” says Aleks Taranov ’15, reflecting on both sites. She is especially stunned by the piles of hair collected when prisoners’ heads were shaved and sold by the Nazis to make rugs. “The efficiency, the disregard for human life — I feel a lot of anger,” she says.
Top, the students spend hours walking the length of the Birkenau camp. “The efficiency, the disregard for human life — I feel a lot of anger,” says Aleks Taranov ’15.

Above, a guardhouse at Auschwitz.

Left, Ben Goldman ’15 and Stacey Menjivar ’14 snap photos in the Old Town of Warsaw.
Besides the anger, however, the students appreciate that so many people are at Auschwitz to learn of the Nazis’ crimes. Despite the fact that so few Jews remain in Poland today, interest in the country’s Jewish past — particularly among young people — is on the rise, manifested in major cultural events and new institutions, publications, and scholarship. In recent years, Poles have been working to reclaim the nation’s rich Jewish history, even though so few Polish Jews remain to participate.

The 22nd Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow — where the Jewish population shrank from about 70,000 on the eve of the war to several hundred today — attracts about 25,000 people, most of them Polish Catholics; the Princeton students perform Jewish dances and sing Yiddish songs with the crowd. The festival rivals any cultural celebration in the world: 10 days of exhibitions, concerts, parties, tours, films, and lectures, 213 in all. There is a performance by visiting cantors; workshops for klezmer musicians, cooks, and artists; meetings with the descendants of well-known Polish Jews; and lectures on topics ranging from Polish-Jewish history to the requirements of religious observance to Mideast politics and international Jewry. Participants tour synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, and take day trips to nearby shtetls.

In Warsaw, the Princeton students see the building site for a planned $60 million, 130,000-square-foot museum devoted to 1,000 years of history of Jewish life in Poland. They meet students at Jagiellonian University, the country’s most prestigious place of learning, who take classes in the Department of Jewish Studies, studying Hebrew and Yiddish, a language taught in few universities around the world. A Polish magazine about Jewish life claims 10,000 subscribers, and five years ago launched a publishing house to publish books of Jewish interest in the Polish language.

Many festival events take place at Krakow’s 400-member Jewish Community Center, which opened in 2008 in the heart of Kazimierz, once the hub of Krakow’s Jewish community. Its executive director, Jonathan Ornstein, is a transplanted New Yorker who says “people are completely blown away” when they see the new four-story building and learn of the JCC’s Hebrew classes, Shabbat dinners, and baby nursery, which are funded mostly by donations from overseas.

“They come here expecting to see only sadness and destruction, and they see one of the most vibrant Jewish communities, down the road from Auschwitz,” Ornstein says. “They see that these days, it’s not scary to be Jewish here.”

On the final day of the Jewish Culture Festival, Jagiellonian professor Annamaria Orla-Bukowska stands outside the Tempel Synagogue passing out a four-page survey. A social anthropologist who studies Polish-Jewish relations, Orla-Bukowska was born in Chicago to Polish parents who were war refugees. She came to Krakow in 1985 and never left.

A question on the survey asks for reactions to statements such as “Jews stick together,” “Jews covertly aim to control the world,” and “Jews have too much influence.” With so few
Jews left in Poland, could there still be anti-Semitism? Yes, according to Orla-Bukowska. Not knowing Jews personally “doesn’t have anything to do with people’s stereotypes,” she says.

Though the Jewish population in Krakow is small — including about 150 who survived the war — that number is growing with the addition of Poles who are just learning that their families have Jewish roots. The Princeton students hear stories about this phenomenon from guest lecturers and guides throughout the trip.

“People find a letter written in Hebrew,” says Zuzanna Radzik, an activist who works on Polish-Jewish dialogue, during a lecture on Warsaw’s Jewish community. “A young man said, ‘I think my grandmother is Jewish. She has two sets of dishes.’ Another said, ‘When we were doing something wrong as a kid, my grandmother would say, ‘Mesheugenah!’” (The Yiddish word means “crazy fool.”)

“Jewish life went underground, and now it’s re-emerging,” Ornstein says.

Most of the community center’s 40 volunteers are not Jewish. Likewise, a number of non-Jewish Polish students are drawn to study Jewish life. Robert Siudak, who just completed an undergraduate degree in European studies at Jagiellonian, spent a semester at Tel Aviv University in a program that pairs 10 Poles and 10 Israelis. Siudak is one of two Polish students who participate in the Princeton class, attending lectures and sharing meals with the students. He sees an increasing fascination with Judaism among his friends.

“It’s getting cool to be interested in Jewish culture,” he says. A friend who discovered her family has Jewish roots changed her name to Esthera (Esther in English) to highlight her new identity. Siudak is drawn to Jewish history, he explains, because “this is our history. We didn’t ask for this kind of history, but we have to deal with it, even if it’s tough history.”

So much of what Eric Silberman experiences during the trip — from talking with Polish students to watching filmed testimonies of Holocaust survivors at a museum near Auschwitz — makes him feel “Jews have not been forgotten here, and things are being preserved well. It’s a small Jewish community, but it’s growing and becoming more visible. That’s something I know my grandparents would have appreciated.”

He is especially intrigued by a presentation on the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, set to open in Warsaw in 2013. Organizers expect several hundred thousand visitors a year, most of them Polish, and will offer tours in English and Polish. Silberman plans to study the Polish language at Princeton again this academic year, and is certain he will be back in Poland soon — perhaps even playing a role at the new museum.

“Wouldn’t it be cool,” Silberman says, “if a grandchild of survivors could lead a tour in Polish?”

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This page: The ruined remains of a guesthouse and bayfront walkway in Kamaishi, Japan, 16 months after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated the country’s northeastern coast.

Opposite page: Princeton students search for personal effects among the foundations of homes swept away by the tsunami near Otsuchi Bay in Kamaishi.
The way back
In post-tsunami Japan, Princeton students find hope, despair, and many questions

By W. Raymond Ollwerther ’71

On a hot July afternoon, Princeton students wearing protective rubber boots, gloves, and paper masks make their way carefully through a broad clearing bounded by hills and tall pine trees about 275 miles north of Tokyo.

Before the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan’s northeastern coast March 11, 2011, there were dozens of homes in this clearing near Otsuchi Bay, one of four bays of the city of Kamaishi. Now all that remain are concrete foundations overgrown by tall weeds and pockets of wildflowers. Across the road, the gutted ruins of a three-story bayfront guesthouse tilt into a pool of water. Much debris has been removed, but the students are taking part in volunteer efforts to look for personal effects that still might be recovered.

“This place is a battlefield,” says a white-goateed man wearing an orange jumpsuit who introduces himself as Monjii. “Seventeen people died where we are right now, and two are still missing. Be aware.” A volunteer himself, he over-sees groups who come to lend a hand, and he wants them to know that this is sacred ground.

Jessica McLemore ’15 spots a folding chair jammed between a low stone wall and a tree, and pulls it out — it looks like it belongs in a kitchen. “I was reminded that the area I was standing in used to be someone’s home,” she says.

Sophie Moskop ’13 spots a water-damaged comic book, and thinks: “Oh God, that was a kid’s.” She is struck by how much was lost in the disaster. “We got a very real sense of what Kamaishi is. A sense of loss — not just houses and material objects, but a sense of place.”

The students are among 14 participants in a Princeton global seminar titled “Hope as the New Normal: Tokyo after the Disaster.” For the first half of the six-week course, the students attend sessions at the University of Tokyo, with daily language instruction preceding discussion of lectures and readings on the issues facing post-tsunami Japan.

But the seminar comes to life during a five-day visit to Tohoku, the region that includes the northeastern coast of Japan that was devastated by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. It is here that the students come face to face with the hope, resilience, and despair of those who survived the disasters — and those who dream of a onetime opportunity to revitalize a part of Japan that was in decline long before the disasters hit.

Leading the seminar is David Leheny, a Princeton professor of East Asian studies. Leheny led the global semi-
nar in Hanoi in previous years, but he has a special feeling for Japan: He has spent eight years in the country, written two books and edited a third on Japanese politics, and says he knows Tokyo “better than any large American city.”

Leheny was reading a book in a Tokyo coffeehouse when the March 11 earthquake struck, and in the aftermath he worked as a volunteer in Tohoku cleanup efforts. Students praise him as brilliant and funny (a longtime colleague, Professor Mark Beissinger, says Leheny could have had a career in standup comedy), as well as for taking them to a karaoke bar and joining in a duet with McLemore. He is a leading scholar in contemporary Japanese culture and politics, and delights in sprinkling his lectures with pop-culture references — he is teaching a freshman seminar this fall called “Bad ASS Asians: Crime, Vice, and Morality in East Asia.”

During the course, students hear from national politicians, local officials, relief workers, and scholars on the questions confronting Japan today: caring for an aging society; loss of trust in government; questions of what the government can afford to do when faced with a staggering national debt. Interwoven with these is the question of nuclear power’s role in Japan’s future. And perhaps the biggest question of all: Can the country come together once more to meet the challenges of March 11?

The seminar — funded by an endowment from Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wendt ’55 and a gift from Michael Lerch ’93 — has attracted students from a variety of backgrounds. Ken Jean-Baptiste ’15 is a molecular biology major who first learned Japanese while watching anime — Japanese film and TV animation. Vincent Castaneda ’14 is a computer science major who hopes for a social-gaming job in Japan after graduating. Juliette Levine ’15 became fascinated by Japanese culture when she took a fifth-grade Japanese language class in England. Sophie Moskop, the class’s only rising senior, is a politics major who had thought she would never see a natural disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina — where her aunt’s home was uprooted from its foundation — until she arrived in northern Japan.

The Great East Japan Earthquake, as the March 11 events are referred to officially, left more than 19,000 dead and missing and more than 6,000 injured. More than 100,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed; some towns simply disappeared. If the numbers seem too big to comprehend, three stops in Tohoku — the cities of Kamaishi and Ishinomaki, and the smaller town of Onagawa — bring the tragedy home to the students.

They get a sense of the special role that the region plays in present-day Japan — Leheny explains that Tohoku is often understood as the heart of “old Japan.” Agriculture and fishing are economic mainstays. But the students also see evidence of the region’s sharp decline before the tsunami. In Kamaishi, local officials describe how the city’s population plummeted from 90,000 to less than 40,000 in five decades as the steel plant, long the major employer, shed all but a few hundred of the 8,000 jobs once provided there.

Mirroring many other towns in Tohoku, Kamaishi has been losing its young people to the cities, while the population that remains gets older.

The region’s economic woes provide a grim backdrop to the raw reality that the students experience. Onagawa was a town of about 10,000 people, stretching inland about three miles along a narrow valley bounded by steep hills. It was known for its fish-processing plants and a small nuclear plant that, while closer to the epicenter of the offshore earthquake than the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, was largely undamaged by it. Now Onagawa is known for what is missing: Much of the town was wiped off the map by the tsunami. The earthquake and tsunami took 595 lives here; another 340 people are missing. More than 3,200 homes and other structures were damaged or destroyed. What was once the thriving town center near the inlet is a vast field of gray gravel and small pieces of concrete.

The bus carrying the Princeton students stops to take in an eerie sight: a small three-story building that was pushed off its foundation and onto its side, its steelwork mangled by the force of the tsunami. Though countless ruined structures have been cleared away, this one remains as a kind of stark memorial. The students gaze quietly at the building, then walk over to a small grouping of flowers in memory of 12 bank workers who died at the site.

To accommodate residents who lost their homes, the government built nearly 53,000 temporary housing units across the region. Onagawa alone has more than 1,300 units in 30 complexes, and the students are on their way to visit a group of elderly residents who live in temporary housing.

The road winds past long mounds of debris that follow both sides of the road. The piles of trash are found throughout Tohoku — the disaster created an estimated 25 million tons of refuse. About 15 feet high and hundreds of yards long, these somber man-made hills are a constant reminder of the scale of the destruction. The neat piles are in stark contrast to Leheny’s visits to the region in the weeks following the disaster: “It feels empty and it’s clear that something terrible happened, but the big difference is that you are not confronted with the shell shock of complete disorder and devastation. It was just overwhelming,” he says.

After rounding a couple of broad curves as the road rises, the bus turns left into a clearing that houses the Shinden and Shimizu housing complexes — about 230 apartments...
made from converted shipping containers with white exteriors, gray roofs, and windows shaded by small overhangs, arranged in neat rows. Close by, a portion of a gravel field strewn with rocks has been turned into a small oasis: The seniors are cultivating a thriving garden, with a bamboo framework supporting climbing vines. The Princeton students lend a hand — some dig rocks from the next portion of the field to be cultivated and cart them away by wheelbarrow, while others help plant rows of flowers.

Working with elderly evacuees is a priority of the Association for Aid and Relief in Japan (AAR Japan), which organized the students’ visit; one of the nonprofit’s projects is called The Heart-Warming Flower-Delivery Campaign, which encourages residents of other parts of Japan to donate flowers, purchased from local shops in the hard-hit areas, with a personal message to Tohoku residents. “I hope these flowers will bring peace to your heart,” says one message. “Be strong. We always will be watching over you,” reads another. “Please be happy” is the simple message of a third.

The students and residents sit down together for lunch on a large tarp spread over a gravel parking area; the residents share fresh produce from their garden. Before the students leave, they sing “Don’t Stop Believin’” and “Lean on Me” — songs with uplifting lyrics that they had performed a day earlier at a senior day-care center in Ishinomaki. While the residents of the complex may not understand much English, their smiles and occasional handclaps convey their pleasure. After the songs, they offer each student a handmade gift — a wooden back-scratcher, created as part of a project to get residents out of their apartments to work together.

Tohoku has a higher percentage of elderly residents than the rest of Japan, but the aging issue faces the country as a whole. Japan’s population began falling in 2004; studies show that it is getting older more quickly than any other nation. A recent report estimates that the current population of about 128 million will drop to about 87 million by 2060, and nearly 40 percent will be 65 or older — changes that would bring major economic and social consequences.

Kamaishi officials hope to reverse the downward spiral by remaking their city as “an environmental city of the future, where people live in harmony with the natural environment.” The students meet with officials on the top floor of a downtown office building; 20 percent of the city center was inundated by the tsunami, and among the buildings that survived are a mix of weed-strewn lots where buildings have been removed, scaffold-covered buildings under repair, and ruined structures being dismantled by workers.

The city officials are pushing energy self-sufficiency and technology that would help the elderly remain in their homes, but also have hopes for a new shopping mall and a new stadium. Leheny later helps put the plans in perspective: The three areas visited by the students have received government support, and that’s likely to continue. But small towns in the region — that are harder to reach, and with worse infrastructure — may not be rebuilt substantially, and their residents may be encouraged to move to larger areas.
After Kamaishi’s mile-long breakwater, completed in 2008 at a cost of $1.5 billion, broke apart in the tsunami, the national government quickly announced that it would commit as much as $650 million to its rebuilding. But for many other towns seeking funds, the result has been frustration. “Everyone here has hope, and is doing their best to move forward,” an Onagawa city councilman tells the students, “but it will take time.” Asked about conditions in the temporary housing, he responds with the term gaman: perseverance. The students ask if local officials generally are happy with the support they have received. He replies firmly: “Not satisfied.” But he adds that he understands the magnitude of the tasks ahead and the needs of other communities.

“The forests are embracing a wounded ocean.” Akiko Iwasaki is talking to the students in front of her Houraikan inn in Kamaishi, where the students are spending two nights. The inn, just a few hundred feet from the edge of Otsuchi Bay, is an evacuation center in case of a tsunami alert; Iwasaki’s message is that natural disasters will come from the ocean, and that the people of Tohoku must accept and embrace them as part of their environment.

On March 11, Iwasaki had climbed with other evacuees to safety up the hillside behind the inn, but she came back down when she saw neighbors below. A brief video taken by the manager of the inn with his cell phone shows the frightening scene that followed. The water from the bay suddenly appears on the road in front of the inn; there are screams; cars and a bus are swept up by the surge of water and slammed against the hillside. The images become chaotic as the phone’s owner runs for his life. Iwasaki was swallowed by the rush of water, but found an air pocket under a capsized boat and was pulled to safety by neighbors.

The tsunami heavily damaged the first two floors of the four-story hotel, which reopened in January after a complete renovation. The Houraikan is a traditional Japanese inn: Students leave their street shoes by the door and wear slippers throughout the inn, sleep on bedding on the floor, and dress for dinner in casual summer kimonos called yukata.

Kneeling on a concrete platform in front of the hotel, Iwasaki tells the students that before the tsunami, there were 64 homes and other structures in the area around the hotel. All but a single store washed away.

Why, then, remain and rebuild? Iwasaki speaks of a deep connection with the region and its people. “Our ancestors living on the land, a life energy in this land — all that supported us after the disaster. So it’s very important to stay there. Even though the disaster took so many lives, it’s not just death, but a rebirthing,” she says. Those who live in Tohoku are part of nature, and nature is part of them. “We have to live on; we will live on. Disasters are inevitable.” Her message resonates with the students.

Iwasaki sees the recovery efforts as a way to create opportunities for the next generation. She holds up a rendering of her dream project: to replace the narrow pathway used as an evacuation route behind the hotel with a broad stairway that
Because so many houses washed away,” she says, “we wanted to make this a place where people could come to pray, to relax their souls.”

Nestled in the sand among the tall pines in front of the Houraikan inn, a few yards from the seawall that rises up from the edge of the bay, is a tall black stone monument carved in both Japanese and English. The following is inscribed:

Memorial Stone of the Tsunami

Just run! Run uphill!
Don’t worry about the others. Save yourself first.
And tell the future generations
that a Tsunami once reached this point.
And that those who survived were those who ran. Uphill.
So run! Run uphill!

The message at first reading seems cold and self-centered, and the students debate its meaning. One says that in the wake of the failure of Kamaishi’s sea wall, it’s a warning not to be so confident in technological and safety mechanisms. So the message is not so much to be selfish, but rather to do something to actively protect yourself. Another student offers two interpretations: Don’t rely on others; and don’t be a burden on others. A third student reads the inscription as similar to the message that airline passengers hear at the beginning of every flight: In case of emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. It means save yourself first, she suggests, or you can’t help anyone else.

The original Japanese on the monument is more caring than the English translation, Leheny says: “Take care of yourself; it’s coming — run away.” He says the term tendenko (save yourself) was applied to tsunamis after a major tsunami 400 years ago; it still is emphasized because in each tsunami, people die because they try to save others or don’t get out fast enough. Confirmation of this is seen in the March 11 “Kamaishi miracle.” After hearing the tsunami alert, students at the junior high school just up the road from the Houraikan convinced elementary schoolchildren not to wait for their parents near the school but to climb up the nearby hillside. The school was destroyed, but all the children were saved.

During the first week of the seminar, the Japanese government announces that it has approved the restarting of two nuclear power plants for the first time since all of the country’s 50 operating plants were shut down in the wake of the Fukushima Dai-Ichi disaster. Two weeks later, in the third-floor classroom of the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, a Princeton student wants to know what a spokesman in the prime minister’s office has to say about the Japanese people’s lost trust in government.

The core issue relating to the government, says Noriyuki Shikata, the deputy cabinet secretary for public affairs, “relates to the issue of lack of transparency and lack of accountability.” Many Japanese people are concerned about radiation issues; he says: “We have gone through Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” Food safety is a particular concern, he says. The “very difficult” decision to restart two reactors was made by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda himself, Shikata says, and there is the risk of blackouts without bringing nuclear reactors back online. He admits that the question is divisive.

The government is considering three options for nuclear power by 2030: providing 20 to 25 percent of the country’s energy needs; 15 percent; or a complete phase-out of all nuclear plants. National polls have shown that a majority of Japanese oppose a return to full use of the reactors.

Well-known for his anti-nuclear stance is Kono Taro, a member of Parliament who speaks with the students over dinner. Kono opposes a rush to restart nuclear plants before thorough safety checks are completed, and advocates getting rid of all nuclear energy by 2030 and replacing it with renewable energy sources.

During the seminar’s final week, anti-nuclear protesters organize the largest demonstration in Japan since 1960 — estimates of the turnout range from 75,000 to 170,000. The protest spotlights the debate over Japan’s energy future and raises the question of whether dissatisfaction with the government’s response to the events of March 11 will bring a resurgence in civic activism, an area in which Japan has trailed other industrial nations. “The big anti-nuclear demonstration in Tokyo was an impressive showing of public discontent,” says Ken Jean-Baptiste. “The question is, will this last?”

For Asumi Shibata ’14, the seminar has a strong personal dimension. Born in Japan to a Japanese mother and a Chinese father, she moved with her family to the United States when she was 4, but Japanese was spoken at home. On March 11 she watched the Japanese newscasts, hearing the alerts in real time, and saw the videos of huge waves rolling across the land. “I felt like I was watching the country disappear,” she says. “I hated the feeling of helplessness.”

Many Americans were familiar with the Japanese legend of the thousand cranes: If you fold a thousand origami cranes, you will have a wish granted. Shibata, vice president of Princeton’s Japanese Student Association, launched an effort to collect one million paper cranes from across America as a show of support for the people of Japan.

Princeton alone created more than 20,000 cranes. When cranes from all locations were counted, the total was more than 250,000. Classes had ended; the cranes were sent to a festival in Sendai, the largest city in Tohoku, and then distributed to local homes and businesses. “In the end, if it makes one person smile, it’s worth it,” Shibata says.

While she returns to visit with family in Japan each summer, Shibata never has been to the Tohoku region before participating in the Princeton seminar. Because of her fluency in Japanese, she acts as translator several times for residents who talk with the students. “I can’t hope to understand what these people have gone through,” she says. “It’s not over at all.”

Especially moving, she says, is a conversation she had with the owner of a small shop that sells fried noodles and ice
cream in downtown Kamaishi. Before March 11, the woman had planned a trip for her daughter to the United States, but after the family lost their home in the tsunami, that plan seemed out of reach. Now, the woman told Shibata, her daughter’s trip has been scheduled. “I was really moved by how they overcame everything and were continuing to move toward the dreams they had prior to the disaster,” she says.

Noting her parents’ heritage, Shibata says she likes to say “I’m a mix of everything, and proud of that.” But the seminar has helped to reinforce her feeling that “if I had to identify one, I would say definitely Japanese. It’s a huge part of me.”

Is hope the “new normal” in Japan, as the seminar title suggests? “With hope comes struggle,” says Jean-Baptiste, adding that the course is “not a fairy tale of a country experiencing its happily-ever-after.” Vu Chau ’15 finds that “Japan as a nation is willing and has the ability to overcome any disaster.” Moskop says that she sensed disappointment “from a lot of people who are too tired, or too old, to be hopeful.”

But Shibata says “endurance” might be a better word.

For McLemore, the people of Tohoku give meaning to the seminar’s title: “In situations like these, hope becomes the new normal. It’s all that most victims have, and it sustains,” she says. “Believing that getting through the present will lead to an ultimately better future became the norm; it gave people courage, determination, and a purpose.”

University of Tokyo professor Jin Sato cautions the students that there is a great diversity of experience among Tohoku’s residents. Visitors tend to meet people who have hope, who want to talk about their future plans, he says, but he describes a Japanese word, karagenki, for someone who puts on a brave face.

Leheny is working on a book that deals with Japan’s use of emotion in national political rhetoric. In the wake of March 11, he is analyzing the “contested and troubled efforts to construct the disaster as a national rather than a local one.” One example of this was the banners and signs that sprang up across Japan reading “Ganbarou! Nippon” — which means roughly “Let’s do our best — we can do it!” and uses the more nationalistic term for the country of Japan.

But soon it became clear that certain needs could not be met, Leheny says. “The frustrations of the people in the disaster zone were going to start to turn against the other people in the country for not helping enough,” he says. “That was going to make it harder to maintain this idea that we’re all in this together.”

The students see the changing attitude in Tohoku as their bus passes a large sign, painted in bright blue and black characters, that stands among concrete foundations and sprouting weeds not far from the water. In the distance behind the sign are long rows of debris, waiting for disposal. The sign says: “Ganbarou!” But the “we” that follows no longer is Nippon, but the name of the local community. The sign reads: “Ganbarou! Ishinomaki.”

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