Sarah: Could you start out by talking about what you did overseas, where you were, and what you were studying?

Britten: I have always been really interested in World War II...and I knew I wanted to study literature because it’s what I love, so I did an interdisciplinary honors thesis. It was able to incorporate aspects of not only literature, but also history and art and cultural theories of memory and representation, which I find really fascinating. I developed this project to study the cultural memory of World War II in the Netherlands. [I] went to the town of Leiden, a suburb of Amsterdam, [and] stayed there for ten weeks. My project meant that I had to travel, so I got a train pass and went all around the country. I was able to travel from the very top [of the Netherlands] all the way to the borders of Germany and France.

S: Why did you choose the Netherlands?

B: I picked the Netherlands because nobody has really studied it. I decided to go there, and find out what the cultural myths were, what people actually believe happened, how that compared with the history, and how those developed over time. I traced through the war memorials and what the designs of the memorials said, what the texts of the memorials said, and how they evolved from right after the war until the present day. I also used museums, but I didn't use museums for their content. I read them like texts. I read their layout, how things were situated, the colors [used], the presentation and what they said about the topic.

S: While you were there, were you interviewing people?

B: Yes, I had to go through the human subjects protocol [and] an online tutorial, submitted a protocol to a committee, then they reviewed it and sent back comments and questions. Since my project was potentially involving Holocaust survivors, they wanted to make sure that it was really safe, because [interviews] could put people under severe psychological trauma. I made a pamphlet of resources in case anyone became upset or distressed talking about anything related to the Holocaust, and got it translated into German, Dutch, and English. I actually had to use it once. The curator of one of the national museums became very upset and actually starting switching between German, Dutch and English. It was a little scary.

S: How did you benefit from researching overseas? What did you accomplish that you couldn’t have accomplished here?

B: Personally, I think the experience of living overseas was more beneficial to me than any other type of research experience I’ve had, because it put me out of my normal environment. It made me very aware of the cultural and social heuristics that I use to navigate everyday life, because they become very evident when you’re put in a different place and they don’t apply anymore. It also made me very politically aware about what it means to have an American identity. People would come up to me and say, "After 9-11, why does America do this? Does America hate Islamic people?" It made me think very critically in ways that I wouldn't have if I had just stayed here.

Memorial, Kamp Westerbork: These bricks are part of a memorial on the Appelplatz, or area for daily line-up. There is one for every person who was transported through the camp and killed. The metal symbols on the tops represent the three major populations processed through the camp.