Matthew Walsh was an Osaka-based global educator who passed away in October this year. To commemorate his contributions to our Global Issues SIG, we here reprint a description of his trip to Auschwitz in Poland, taken from his EFL / ESL website <http://walshsensei.org/index.html>.

As the days passed approaching the trip, a dark cloud on the horizon placed a lump in my throat. It would be a busy time adjusting to the environment of an unknown country while taking on the challenge of an intensive teacher-training program. On top of this, I knew that Krakow, Poland was near the legendary Auschwitz. There was no escape from the realization that as a human, I had a duty to confront directly one of the greatest acts of evil in human history. It was vexing but I knew I had no choice but to look evil directly in the eye.

A respect for the unknown had always made me suspicious of the simplified black and white image of the vicious soldier-beast committing atrocities, as if to suggest that a whole nation had simply all gone crazy at the same time. The picture could not have been so simple. The average person must have been there, then just as everybody is here, now. The time and place would have had its own explanation, justification, and concession.

There was no such thing as a nation that had gone crazy. A subjectivity hidden in that time and place must have made the holocaust seem normal or logical, given the chain of events. Anybody who was there would have been part of this without noticing that anything was wrong. This I did not want to understand.

Such deep cultural factors, and the story leading up to the holocaust surely could not be understood within a short month's stay but talking to my fellow teachers had revealed some interesting facts. The Polish government had the policy of avoiding referring to the Jewish people as being the main victims of the holocaust. Furthermore, in the Auschwitz museum, the guides had been instructed to avoid exclusively talking about the Jews and would often change the subject when asked about them. The tragedy was not the sole propriety of the Jewish people. This was a Polish tragedy and a European one that had engulfed a whole continent. What had led to it was not exclusively an Anti-Semitism but a much broader institutionalized 'racial mania'. Governments had gotten into a meticulous process of trying to determine the ethnic origins, or 'race' of all of its citizens by classifying people into groups according not to their country of birth, or native culture and language, but by their family history and physical features. One image that left a strong impression was within the building at Auschwitz that was dedicated to the Gypsy, or more accurately Sinti and Roma people, victimized by this racial mania. There was a black and white picture of a doctor using a caliper device to measure the distance from the center of the eyes to the chin in order to determine the 'race' of an unknowing middle-aged housewife.

This reminded me of the present day practice in Japan where the city hall fingerprints and issues special ID cards to citizens it has determined to be 'foreigners' based on family records that have been meticulously kept. These people are born in Japan and, for many of them, the issuance of the card and the directive that they use their foreign names for all official documents is the first time they realize they belong to such a classification. If one doesn't know his or her foreign name, one will be provided by approximating a name in the foreign language similar to the 'Japanese' one they have known themselves throughout childhood. Being a member of such a classification also results in being treated differently under the law and, among other things, being entitled to less social welfare from the government.

For the Sinti and Roma peoples, the issuance of the card was a first step. Next came compulsory sterilization; they were not to reproduce and dirty society with their offspring. Finally, it meant the gas chambers.

What then is the next step for the Japanese government? What is the purpose of keeping such meticulous family records of its naturally born citizens and imposing unfamiliar names and pseudo-nationalities on them? In the end, isn't this the same sort of 'racial mania' that swept across Europe? Here in present day Japan too, the average person is trapped in the here and now, and cannot see how ridiculous and dangerous such institutionalized discrimination is. We are blind. No government has the right to collect such data because there is no telling what it may be used for. The danger is clear and foreboding. Auschwitz bears witness to this.

When I was new to Japan, I studied martial arts in a temple for several years. I remember the head priest explaining how within Buddhism there was also a tradition of holding family records for
Global Issues in Language Education

In Memoriam: Matthew Walsh (1966 - 2011)

All of us in JALT’s Global Issues in Language Education Special Interest Group were shocked and saddened by the death of Matthew Walsh from cancer on October 6, 2011. He was 45 years old. Matt was an invaluable member of our GILE SIG who brought a unique blend of energy, commitment and passion to his life, his work and his friends. He was a dynamic language teacher, global educator and social activist who was involved with a variety of projects ranging from helping the homeless and organizing Pan-SIG conferences to presenting on global issues for our JALT 2010 SIG Forum and volunteering to help tsunami victims in Tohoku. He was a hard-working educator, a compassionate citizen, a warm-hearted human being... and an inspiration to us all. He will be sorely missed. The best tribute we can pay, perhaps, is to re-dedicate ourselves to promoting the ideals that Matt lived and worked for – peace, tolerance, justice - that form the basis of our mission as global educators working for a better world.