

Randi Wedekind

Nie Wieder: Never Again

*Arbeit Macht Frei*: Work will set you free. Those words stared out at me from the iron gate at the entrance to the Dachau Memorial Site, the same gate through which thousands of prisoners passed upon entering Dachau Concentration Camp. It's true that I went to Munich, in part, to have a good time, see the Christkindlmarkt (Christ child markets), and drink some German beer, but I felt compelled to visit Dachau as well.

Tecwyn, my program director in Wales, sniggered at me when I told him I hoped to visit Dachau. He told me, rolling his eyes, "That's where *everyone* goes when they visit Munich," as though I should find something less touristy to do with my five days in Germany. Maybe Tecwyn doesn't understand because he's Welsh. Not that there's anything wrong with being Welsh; after all, Wales is now my second home, but he's not *German*. Granted, my family is not made up of Nazis, and never was, to my knowledge, but this very German name I carry around, Wedekind, is the only piece of pre-American family history that I have. For me, Dachau is not simply a "tourist destination." For me, it is a piece of history that is simply unfathomable, something one must see to believe. Visiting this camp was something I needed to do for myself, regardless of whether my own family took part in the persecution of those interned at Dachau. It is important to understand and remember that history, regardless of how terrible and tragic it may be.

The Dachau site sits on the fringes of the town of Dachau, Germany, less than twenty miles from Munich. The population of Dachau is around 40,000. It's one of those towns you see on the front of postcards. The houses are massive – four or five stories high, with walls covered in windows and painted in bright yellows and oranges, plunked

right onto large lawns. It looked just as I imagined, the German landscape, like the kind of place I would want to be if I lived in *die Deutschland*. The town looked so cheerful; this couldn't possibly be the same town right next to a camp in which thousands had perished – the town was simply too pretty.

I visited in the middle of December when snow covered the ground in patches. The trees were lightly coated in ice which, as it melted in the sunshine, drip-dropped onto the remaining snow. A sense of serenity hung over the camp, save the loud, obnoxious cries of the out-of-place tour guides, eager to make their hefty tips. It seems ironic to think that such tragedies had occurred in a place so strangely beautiful – a place that looked like a German winter wonderland fairytale. And at the same time, it felt more real because of that. How had those innocent prisoners felt, waking up to a gorgeous, sunshiny, Dachau day, knowing they would receive little to no food, and yet would be expected to put in a full day's work of rigorous, back-breaking labor just the same? Maybe their gorgeous day would consist of pulling a plow meant for animals to grade the roads in the camp; perhaps the SS officers would bring in a load of sand and force the prisoners to make a mountain of it; certainly it would be something that served no further purpose than to entertain the guards and SS officers around them.

The ovens were the worst. I knew it would be difficult, but I never expected to feel so hopeless. I read the signs as I walked. One told me that this small, unassuming red-brick structure had been constructed in the summer of 1940 and was used until April 1943. In that time, 11,000 people were cremated there. Eleven thousand people cremated in the two ovens, which stood open for visitors to view. I then walked through the *Krematorium*, which from the outside looked like a large brick house with a big chimney

in the middle, in use up until the end of World War II. The first room contained the disinfecting chambers where the prisoners' clothes would be sprayed with "prussic acid poison gas" to kill any lice in the clothing, and hooks for the clothes hung from the ceiling where ventilators opened, allowing gas to escape following the disinfecting process. I couldn't help but cringe, and yet, this was just the beginning. I walked through the "waiting room," where prisoners contemplated what was to come before they were informed about the supposed showers they would soon take; the walls completely bare and whitewashed. As I read the placard about the room, my stomach began to churn. Next was the disrobing room, very similar in design to the previous space; here, prisoners removed their clothing before "taking showers."

The strong, metal door leading from the disrobing room to the gas chambers had *Brausebad* painted above it to reassure prisoners they would receive a real shower. Those words, painted so plainly in black upon the white wall – those traitorous, betraying words. I didn't want to walk into the *Brausebad*, and neither had they. But I did, following the example they set decades before. The gas chamber resembled a tiled shower and even had showerheads from which poison gas, not water, flowed. A small black box inserted into the wall revealed a nozzle used for washing the room following gassings. The sign outside stated that this gas chamber never operated to commit mass murder, but that camp survivors testified the SS used the chamber to murder individual prisoners and small groups by poison gas. My throat tightened as my eyes welled with tears. The next room contained, of course, the ovens.

After American soldiers liberated the camp, they made the townspeople of Dachau come bear witness to the existence of the crematorium. They made them view the

bodies that had been stockpiled in and around the crematorium at the end; all the dead with nowhere to go. The townspeople watched the prisoners of the camp leave daily to go to work. The prisoners were led out of the camp day after day, right past the pastel houses of villagers, off to carry out various jobs under the watchful eyes of the SS. All this time, the residents of Dachau were content to ignore what was happening right under their noses. The residents claim to have known nothing about the horrid acts the Nazis committed in the Dachau camp. According to Peter Wyden, in his book The Hitler Virus:

a few of the Dachau notables, who were forced to view the corpses, fainted. Some cried and many shook their heads. Most of them turned away, eager to avoid the scene. Afterwards, they were heard to whisper, 'Unglaublich!' (Unbelievable.)

The Dachauers could not understand how the prisoners could have starved to death since the townspeople had regularly sent food packages to the camp (Dachau).

I think they knew what was happening, but perhaps not to the full extent which they were afterward forced to witness; I don't think they could have faked the reactions of which Wyden speaks. More likely, their horror reflected feelings regarding their own humanity – even with small amounts of information, how human can one truly feel knowing that he or she allowed such a tragedy to pass?

Why didn't they do something? Fear probably. It's easy, from the outside looking back, to point fingers and accusations, but would I have done anything differently?

Would you?

I went to Dachau to, in some way, try to pay my respects to those who suffered, those who I had heard of and read about since I was young, and I did that. It makes me ill

to think about Dachau, to wonder whether I would have stood up and tried to stop those atrocities from occurring. It makes me question my own sense of humanity. Though I know the political, ideological, and historical reasons behind the Holocaust, I don't think I can ever get past those questions. I don't think I would want to try. Had I been one of the Dachau townspeople, my own personal guilt, founded or not, would surely have driven me to my own self-destruction. But I would not trade the experience of my visit. The German culture is a part of my family's past. I will remember those people; I can never forget. The important part in remembering them is not to punish people like me who have connections with Germany, or even to punish the Germans themselves; no, it is to remind us never to allow something like this to happen again.

Now, near the crematorium, memorials to the victims and survivors of Dachau Concentration Camp stand beneath a canopy of trees. One of these is a Star of David representing the Jewish prisoners. Another memorial consists of a cross, memorializing the Christian prisoners. These illustrate the diversity within the camp itself, something not many people realize. There were the political prisoners, those that spoke out against the Nazi movement; "asocials," who were non-conformists, beggars, alcoholics, prostitutes, and gypsies; Jehovah's Witnesses; homosexuals; "preventative custody" prisoners, simply people with previous criminal convictions rounded up by the Bavarian police; emigrants; Czechs; Austrians; Polish priests; and Jews. And they all suffered together under the same hands of cruelty.

Works Cited

Dachau Concentration Camp, Gas Chamber, SS Training Camp, Dachau Trials, Town of

Dachau, Memorial Site. 2008. 1 March 2009.

<<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapBook/index.html>>.