

A small ray of hope at Dachau

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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

The word “Dachau” has become one of a handful of words symbolizing the Holocaust. The mere mention of this word recalls images of concentration camps often seen in books and movies. As a Jewish woman born more than a decade after the end of the Second World War, I can only view the Holocaust through other people’s words and images.

Until recently, I was among an untold number of Jews who refuse to visit Germany or any place where Jews were annihilated in enormous numbers. For decades, I questioned whether a visit to a German concentration or extermination camp outside of Germany would be beneficial or evoke unnecessary stress.

But by adding Dachau to the itinerary of a recent trip to Germany, I was forced to step outside my comfort zone. Jews, political prisoners, people considered asocial, Jehovah’s Witnesses, gays and lesbians, Roma and anyone considered an enemy of the Nazis were unmercifully tortured and murdered at this concentration camp. Visiting the Dachau Concentration Camp



The pathway leading to the religious memorials. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

Memorial Site offered a connection to the past that is impossible to obtain by merely reading a book or watching a movie.

Instead of taking a group tour, my husband and I arranged a private tour with Chaim Eytan, a licensed Jewish guide with over 40 years of experience. Eytan

was born in Milan to Holocaust survivors who traced their heritage to Italy and Germany. Having grown up in postwar Europe, Eytan willingly shared his perspective throughout our tour.

The site has undergone a few modifications since it first opened as an inter-

national memorial in the 1960s. On the 20th anniversary of the camp’s liberation, survivors gathered at the newly created memorial site. Over the next few decades, changes were made to honour the memories of those who perished and survived. Stanislav Zamecnik, a Czech historian known for his research on Dachau, estimated that more than 41,500 people died in Dachau.

Our half-day tour started near the road used by prisoners to enter the camp. We walked through the arched opening of the entrance building, known as the Jourhaus, and passed by the infamous gate bearing the slogan *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work sets you free). After taking photos of a few memorials, we walked into the former maintenance building to watch an informative short film and then quickly viewed the permanent exhibit designed to educate visitors about Dachau. A diverse group of people, speaking an assortment of languages, filled the large room containing oversized display boards showcasing vivid pictures and facts of the harsh realities of the war.

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The political engagement people

Starting in 1933, the Gestapo used concentration camps to impose terror and fear into the population. People entering Dachau could be executed without any trial. During the war years, prisoners were tortured, murdered, used as human guinea pigs for horrendous medical experimentation and deployed as slave labour for nearby factories. Women did not become inmates of Dachau until the summer of 1944. Many of the images that are embedded in my brain derive from the footage filmed by the American war reporters who accompanied the liberators on April 29, 1945.

We strolled across the rollcall area to enter two reconstructed barracks where signage and images helped our understanding of the prisoners' horrendous life during three distinct periods: 1933-37, 1938 and 1944-45. By 1944, Dachau incarcerated about 30,000 people. Starvation and deplorable living conditions led to typhus fever epidemics throughout the latter part of the war. All that remains of the original barracks, torn down between 1962-64, are reconstructed perimeter footprints identifying where the structures once stood.

A long pathway anchored with mature poplar trees on either side led to an area where religious memorials stand. Eytan directed our attention to one of the seven guard towers off in the distance, once staffed by teenaged boys who had the power to kill prisoners who entered the prohibited area.

As we came closer to the end of the path, the gold-coloured menorah atop the rooftop of the Jewish memorial could be distinguished against the sapphire blue sky. We slowly followed Eytan down a ramp whose upper railing resembled barbed wire, into an area where a *ner tamid* (eternal light) was a focal point in the cavern-like room. He pointed upward toward a blast of bright sunlight shining through a grey-coloured opening. When we squinted, we could see the menorah. Apparently this is meant to symbolize a small ray of hope. We stood in complete silence as we paid our respects to the Jews who perished at Dachau.

We paused in front of a reconstructed wall once riddled with so many bullet holes that it had collapsed. The blood-stained ground was now buried under grass, weeds and vegetation.

Time seemed to stand still as we walked to the gas chamber and the crematorium. In 1940, the SS built the first crematorium. Within a couple of years, the SS expanded their killing apparatuses to include a larger crematorium and gas chamber. Within 20 minutes, the SS could kill up to 150 people from the toxic fumes of Zyklon B. Tears welled up in my eyes and cascaded down my face as I tried to imagine the unthinkable. To this day, the image of the crematorium can be recalled in a flash.

After the liberation of the camp, memorials were created from the massive piles of ashes. Eytan guided us to a Jewish gravesite memorializing "a grave of thousands unknown" and a monument titled the Unknown Prisoner. Another plaque recalled the memory of four female officers of the British forces who were murdered and cremated in September 1944.

Eighty-six years after Dachau opened as a concentration camp, few want to be associated with this infamous place. Today, the nearby town boasts one of the lowest unemployment rates in Germany and has many historical sites, but very few of the multitudes of daily visitors to the memor-

ial site show any interest in exploring the town, which is also known for its inexpensive housing. Most of the local women prefer to give birth in another city so that their children will not bear the stigma of having Dachau as their place of birth.

The word "Dachau" will hopefully continue to strike a sharp chord in humanity's moral compass for generations to come. Ignorant individuals who fail to study history and prefer not to visit places evidencing the Nazis' reprehensible behaviour should refrain from comparing any present-day event to what occurred at Dachau and the other camps. The magnitude and scope of the Holocaust atrocities are incomparable to anything else in modern times.

By touring Dachau, I stood together with the camp's survivors who worked for decades to keep the memory of the Holocaust from sliding into oblivion or being minimized by uninformed remarks. These survivors' efforts mirror Elie Wiesel's words, "It is memory that will save humanity." ■

Munich Tourism sponsored the author's private tour of Dachau and Munich.

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