

History and the Holocaust

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While on a German Marshall Fund Fellowship, I had a unique opportunity to visit three places integrally connected to the Holocaust. I did not set out to see the three places, nor did I start with an idea to connect them; it just happened. Each place resided in a different country -- Holland, Poland, and Germany -- geographically depicting the immense effect of the Holocaust. The emotional impact of these three places, even after sixty years, demonstrates the power of history to keep its lessons alive.

First, in Amsterdam, Holland, I visited the house where Anne Frank and her family hid during World War II. Perhaps more than any other victim, Anne Frank personalizes the Holocaust, her angelic young face and voice allowing millions to experience the life of a Jew during the Nazi campaign. The most moving aspect of the house is the place on the wall where Anne's parents periodically measured her and her sister's height. Something so ordinary, yet at the same time significant, as I realized Anne's growth marks occurred over the course of two years during which she spent virtually every day confined to a small space with only a covered view of the outside world. Tragically, Anne died only a few months before the Allies liberated her concentration camp.

I next traveled to Auschwitz, Poland. As has been written many times before, there was a silence among the groups touring the Auschwitz II site. A gloom surrounded me as I walked through the barracks, along the rail tracks, and down toward the crematoriums. In the distance, I heard the faint sound of church bells. Those brought here must have heard the bells hour after hour and wondered where God was, and whether the ringing signaled salvation or death.

I looked at the pictures of the people with confusion and fear in their eyes and saw my own daughters, wife, brothers, sisters, and parents. My eyes brimmed with tears as I imagined what it must have been like for the parents of the children as they arrived in the cattle cars. Standing in the offload area, I could almost hear the countless voices asking questions in quivering voices revealing the terror they all felt inside. I wondered what the men said to their wives and children as they were separated, hands torn from hands. And then I wondered what went through the minds of the German soldiers as they carried out their gruesome duties. Surely they had wives and children, too. Yet, they sent them to the crematoriums -- day after day, month after month, year after year.

The crematoriums were underground -- almost as if in recognition of the shame and depravity of their purpose. The last sight the victims would have seen before entering the steps down to their deaths would have been of a small tree to the right

of the stairs, and behind them a grove of trees with birds singing. One can only hope the birds sang beautiful songs to speed them on their way, freeing their souls joyously. The Germans built one of the crematorium shaped like a perverted cross, with the smaller cross section shorter on one side and higher on the other. On the right side was the room where the Zyklon B did its work on the helpless victims; on the left side, Dr. Josef Mengele conducted his shocking experiments on the victims, both alive and dead.

A group of Israeli teens toured the site as I did. They come all the time to see what the world did to their people. It is considered a rite of passage. Wrapped in Israeli flags, they defiantly walked with spines stiffened to show their killers that they failed. Toward the end of my time, the group gathered and said a prayer to the dead. A single voice rang out in pain and anger. The group cried in unison with the rabbi's prayer. Sadly, no words or tears could ever bring back the dead or adequately commemorate all the suffering and death that occurred in this place. Over one-and-a-half million Jews died here. The group walked back from the crematoriums on the railroad tracks, as if to take back or cleanse this place. To undo what was done here. The rest of us walked along where the killers would have walked, as if to atone for our part in this tragedy.

My final stop was in Wannsee, Germany. Most Americans have never heard of Wannsee. But for one copy of notes found later, history would not have known of the Wannsee Conference. On January 20, 1942, fifteen high-ranking Nazis gathered in a mansion surrounded by beautiful trees on the edge of a picturesque lake; their topic of discussion that day: the final solution to the "Jewish problem." The juxtaposition between the serene beauty of the place and the unthinkable ugliness of their topic was still striking as I stood in the meeting room and looked out the window.

After seventy years of Germans talking about "the final solution," coupled with their euthanasia activities from 1933 and other efforts to purge Germany of Jews, the Wannsee Conference almost seems like the inevitable, horrible conclusion to many decisions made in many different places over many years. After all, what else do you do with the Jews after you have "evacuated" them out of Germany, have "concentrated" them in ever-eastward camps as you gained more territory, and then reached the limits of that eastward expansion? The Nazis concluded after the Evian, France conference in July 1938 where countries, including the United States, refused to take additional immigrants that only they could address the "Jewish problem." So, they did.

At Wannsee, the intersection of the old German institutions of bureaucracy met with the new institutions created to implement "the final solution." The bureaucrats knew that dealing with eleven million Jews would require enormous, brutal efficiency. At the same time, the implementers knew that they had to make it emotionally easier and cleaner for the men executing their plans, so as to blunt the emotional effects of mass murder. They had seen an increase in alcohol

consumption and barbarity by the soldiers who up to that point had been shooting the Jews in cold blood.

The two parts of the German war machine needed each other. The new institutions needed the old German bureaucracy to change the laws so they could operate with the force of law, to draw-up the lists, and to create the labor markets so they could profit from their actions. In a perverse way, this compartmentalized approach allowed each of the Wannsee participants to deny he was responsible as he only liberalized the laws, created the lists, or opened the markets.

In these three places, I saw the Holocaust. It was frightening, raw, and real. History has provided us with these lessons we must learn. Yet, as we saw in Rwanda, Kosovo, Sudan, and elsewhere, ethnic cleansing -- while not as horribly efficient as the Holocaust -- is still with us. Anti-Semitism, too, is alive and well. A recent poll in Germany showed that thirty percent of Germans still possess latent anti-Semitism. Just as Hitler blamed the war on the Jews, parts of America's intelligentsia today blame the Jews for America's war in Iraq and the problems in the Middle East. More frightful is the fact that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeatedly calls for the annihilation of Israel as most of the world remarkably waits for the Chamberlainian results of soft power to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions before it is too late.

Sadly, these anecdotes demonstrate another lesson of history: we often fail to heed history's lessons. Let us hope we recall those lessons before more memorials get built in remembrance of genocide.

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