

The Greatest Lesson

Becoming a member of People to People Student Ambassadors gave me the opportunity to learn about the world through new and powerful experiences. I was given the rare chance to travel beyond the borders of my country, and visit most of Western Europe as a representative for the United States. As such, my job as an ambassador was to build upon the hopes of President and founder Dwight D. Eisenhower for a more peaceful world. To help accomplish his dreams, I met and spoke to local people and learned about their customs, culture, and history. To attain his goal, Eisenhower felt that if people could meet face to face, or people to people, that misunderstandings and prejudices could be overcome by our nation's young people.

President Eisenhower's determination to ensure that the horrors of World War II were not repeated meant that I and other students should be taught about the mistakes of past generations. Often the most important lessons, such as the Holocaust, are the greatest and, for some, the most difficult to face. As human beings we have a built-in aversion to unsettling information. My greatest lesson about the Holocaust was taught to me at Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria.

The road twists and turns along a green country side resembling a Monet painting; however, what awaits at the summit is anything but picturesque. Towering above the town concert walls and guard towers stand at silent attention waiting for the return of escaped ghosts. Built from granite harvested at the nearby quarry and mortared together by a mixture of water and local sand, the camp was conceived by the Nazis in 1938 and designed as a work camp to house political opponents. According to the official Mauthausen Memorial website, ninety thousand people had passed through the camp gates by its liberation in 1945 by the 11th U.S. Armored Division. And in 1999, I had the chance to visit the camp.

When visiting a concentration camp, each person has his or her own reactions and experiences. For me it began with the sound of the wind as it whipped and whistled between the buildings. It blew my long hair over my shoulder and back as if someone were tugging at me and saying, “Come here. Come this way. Let me show you where I slept, where I worked. This way. This way.” Our guide through the camp explained the history and pointed out many details. One that has stayed with me over the years is an image of the American flag carved into the inside of a barrack door. I always wondered, was it carved by an American interned in the camp, or by an American soldier after liberation? The guide didn’t have an answer. She told our group the SS kept German Shepherds, and they would often sic them on prisoners. Then she led us into the barracks. Before entering, I remember stopping, listening, and hearing dogs. I asked some of the others if they too could hear them, but they didn’t. I was the only one who heard them barking.

The barracks were small and cramped places with wooden bunk beds. The beds were meant to hold two people, our guide said; however, when the camp was in full operation overcrowding was an issue, forcing six or more people to share. The wooden planks that made up the floor beneath our feet creaked and cracked and popped as we made our way through single-file. On tours, I was often the last in line not because I was unenthusiastic, but because I wanted the opportunity to look at my own pace, unhindered. Mauthausen was no different.

We saw the crematories. A set of double red brick ovens. Their insides were still stained black from constant use, so it was strange to find them filled with lit candles and fresh flowers resting on the gurneys. Peaceful offerings, I thought. Summer flowers bursting with pinks and yellows and greenery. Peaceful offerings, I thought again. To this day I’m not sure if the others noticed or not, but the candles were the single source of light. Adjacent to the crematory is the gas chamber. It’s not large; however, the glossy walls were painted a strange mixture of grey/green, a non-color that reflects misshapen figures back to the viewer. The tile floor

beneath my feet had long been scrubbed clean. Still, even with its claim to cleanness and safety, I watched as my fellow travelers scampered through eager to find the exit door open, but I couldn't help pausing in this space. The room had a feeling of emptiness, yet it threatened to suffocate its occupants. This room was no larger than my nursery when I was a baby. When I looked up the shower heads that had released Zyklon B loomed over me. They were small and had also been scrubbed clean, and I wondered in twisted and fearful fascination at the high silver shine on those disks in the ceiling.

Exiting the chamber through a secondary door, I stepped out onto a wooden plank floor and entered a viewing room filled with folding chairs facing a projection screen. The film we as a group viewed was optional due to the strong and graphic nature of the material. The footage had been recorded by the Nazis before the US 11th Armored Division liberated the camp in 1945 as well as additional material documented by the division. The kinescopes captured in black and white, the skeletons in striped rags shuffling, crawling, reaching, grasping at our soldiers for help; the grainy quality could not hide the protruding rib cages, gaping mouths, and sunken eye sockets of the living dead. I took a quick look around in the dim light, and I could see many hiding their eyes, crying, sitting on the floor trying to escape the images.

The film continued with images of the liberation intersected with interviews from survivors, and there is one I remember vividly. An older woman dressed in a maroon overcoat and a pale white scarf over her hair recalled what happened when she and her family were herded into the camp: "A guard pointed to the smoking chimney and told me you come in through the gate, but you leave through there." The chimney puffed dark smoke in the background reminding me of a train's smokestack. I slide my eyes from the screen again to check on the kids around me. No change. A voice caught my attention and I turned to see a woman from the village nearby recounting the night she and her family encountered escapees from the camp: "They had run into our barn, and they were so

hungry that they ate the fat and lard right from the barrels.” Bones pushing through skin, ready to burst at a touch. Her family clothed and hid these people from the search party.

Shuffling caught my attention. I glanced at one of my two teacher/adult chaperones and watched him adjust his sunglasses in a nervous gesture. I turned back to the screen and the woman in the maroon overcoat was recalling the night she and the rest of the camp were awakened by screams. The guards had gathered several children and were throwing them, live, into the ovens, two at a time. For some reason, I leaned forward and looked over the shoulder of the boy in front of me; I saw that he was shaking. I turned, looking over my right shoulder, and watched my second chaperon gasp and cover her mouth. Her eyes widened in personal terror. Was I the only person prepared for Mauthausen?

There was more of the camp to see, yet the group was ready to leave and we exited out a side door that somehow brought us back to the front. While waiting for the bus I spoke to the boy who had sat in front of me, and he was still nervous. He had been so upset he had torn the yellow plastic band off his watch, and didn't know until that moment. Strange how it took the sunshine to illuminate an act that was lost in the dark.

While we waited, the wind was blowing, sending the long green grass swaying and dancing upon its roots. I stood listening to the leaves rustling and watched the limbs bending in the oncoming storm. The scenery was such a beautiful, strange contrast to the camp. The area was bursting with color and movement, yet it was silent. To this day, I can't recall hearing a single bird. Perhaps in a strange twist the evil sown and reaped has chased away all God's creatures, leaving remnants of both worlds.

Sitting on the curb of the road leading into Mauthausen, from the corner of my eye, there was movement. There, perched on a tall green weed, was a child's hat. It was for a small child, a baby perhaps. It was blue with white and light green splashes, and

it sat on top of the weed, swaying gently. It occurred to me that it was like so many other objects left by the people who had entered this and other camps. It was still waiting for its owner to return.

While writing this it hit me, it's been almost twenty years since my visit. That day has forever stayed with me as a lesson of just how far hatred can take us. I look and listen to the world around me, and realize this is a lesson so few have learned. In a time of rising violence, groups using words and carrying symbols that trouble me, and those who oppose them using words and symbols of their own to harm them, I can't help but worry that while I may have learned the lesson that hate and prejudice destroy all, my heart breaks at the thought that others have not and may not learn this lesson. Will we be forced to repeat the sins of our grandparents and great-grandparents to understand what they tried to teach us? When do we finally learn our lesson?

by Shelby Phillips

Further Reading may be found at:

The Mauthausen Memorial website



The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

