

## Lessons from Dachau

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Dan, our German friend Freidrich and I stood silently, fixated on the Northgate. The wrought iron bars silhouetted by the gray overcast sky bore the greeting at the top “Arbeit Mackt Frei”- work makes (one) free. The ugly irony for the hundreds of thousands of Jews herded through these gates leaving only as ashes and wisps of smoke up a chimney was not lost on us. We began our tour of Dachau, the first of many concentrations camps built to fulfill the Nazi’s ‘Final Solution of the Jewish question’ (die Endlosung der Judefrage) – the systematic extermination of the entire European Jewish population.

Walking across the west end of the grounds, where the barracks held upward of one hundred thousand political prisoners, we stopped to absorb the magnitude



of the scene. Long slabs of concrete are all that remain. On these slabs sat long narrow barracks housing the people destined to have the life worked out of them then, when used up, to be exterminated. Looking across the rows of slabs, the length of perhaps two football fields, the precision of the layout and the systematic organization of the camp, for efficiency and utility of its purpose, struck me as otherworldly. It did not seem possible that human beings would deliberately build such a place for this

purpose, yet they had.

We stop in front of the museum before a macabre memorial. Cast in iron, forty to fifty feet long strands of barbed wire, four high. Draped randomly in, on and through the wire were twisted emaciated corpse like figures. Set against the gray skies, it is a ghastly depiction of Germany’s darkest era. I wondered what Freidrich’s thoughts were as he stood beside two Americans, both descendents of WWII Vets. Freidrich explained that after the war the government developed Dachau, Auschwitz and several other concentration camps into



historical sights for the sole purpose to remind the country of the evil of tyranny, and that they should never allow this to occur again.

Staring into the hollowed eyes of the life sized black and white photos of prisoners, you sense a hopeless resignation. The museum is full of these pictures. The eyes reflected lost souls, human beings herded like



cattle, treated like cattle, with lives worth less than cattle. Cattle have value; their lives had none to the Nazis. Faces of beings, human beings, with hopes and dreams, wishes and desires, love for their families, torn from their homes, assigned to Dachau for the *Final Solution*. The Gods of the Third Reich, elected by the people to restore them to prosperity and bring dignity back to Mother Germany, had decreed that this ethnic group, the Jews, no longer deserved to exist.

Standing in the gas chambers trying to imagine, what must have been their final thoughts? Where is the soap? This is a shower isn't it? Is this it? They were told they were to be given a shower, but shortly after the doors were sealed shut gas poured in from vents in the ceiling. What did they do? Did they hold their breaths until reflexively gasping filling their lungs with lethal vapors, hold their mouths to a crack in the door desperately sucking for clean air, hold a friend, or simply sit down and accept their fate – the final act of resignation?



A short walk from the gas chambers took us to the crematorium. Pictures show skeletons with skin draped over them being stuffed into the ovens, and then their ashes being shoveled into wheel borrows. Ashes were easier to conceal from the German population than piles of bodies being trucked out of the camp, easier to bury. There were pictures of Jews operating the ovens. Did they know the bodies they cremated had been deliberately exterminated and they served the master race just to save their own hides? It would be an awful burden to have to live with.



The most despicable, yet scientifically relevant act of the Nazis was the medical experimentation on the Jews, using them as human guinea pigs. Dissecting twins, people with deformities, pregnant women, they recorded the information for the advancement of medical science. Bodies and body parts discarded outside the doors of

these mortuaries in large piles. Sometimes the dissecting was done after shooting the victim in the head, sometimes while they were still alive, just to record how the human body reacted to such stress. Although I doubt that these poor souls would have considered their fate as having at least some redeeming



value to society, once the information

gathered fell into Western hands much was learned from it. Hence, their lives were not lost without at least a modicum of lasting value to mankind. A sad distinction, because their names were not recorded we do not know who they were. Imagine that at the end of your life, no one knew who you were or what you had done for mankind.

Our final stop was the Jewish Memorial. We walked down a long ramp into what symbolically represents a large chimney. Inside at the base of a wall a smoldering fire sent smoke spiraling up out of the stack thirty feet above us. The walls of the chimney were covered with soot and the dank smell of a thousand fires hung heavy in the air. Looking up, watching the smoke dissipate out of the chimney top, one could imagine Jewish souls evaporating into the atmosphere. Once they were happily living their lives, then suddenly, herded into box cars, sent to concentration camps where they were worked until they were lifeless, then exterminated and rendered to ashes and smoke, commanded so, by a country's leaders.



The lesson I took away from Dachau are these: No country's people should ever allow any political party, or person to become so powerful that they can assume absolute control of society. No country's people should ever hand over their freedom for the hope of the government taking care of all their needs. No country's people should hand over personal responsibility to the government.

Every citizen of our country should be required to tour Dachau, Auschwitz, or any of the other concentration camps, so that they will better understand their responsibility for upholding our constitution, and the democratic form of government that provides us protection from such a government taking control of our country. The prospect that at some time in our history circumstance could congeal in such a



way that it could happen is real. Assuredly, the German citizens in the early 1930s had no intentions for this sort of outcome, but it insidiously evolved to that point over a fifteen year period.

Freedom and independence require that people accept responsibility for themselves. The more personal responsibility we hand over to the government the closer we come to the tipping point such as the Germans did in the 1930s. Our democracy is strong, but like a dripping faucet, socialism and the inherent loss of independence and freedom is gradually increasing decade over decade. Eventually, the dripping faucet will fill a bucket. What could happen if our government controls everything?







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