

A Trip to the Camps

By Rudy Owens

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The first day I visited Auschwitz in July 2000, six tour buses sat in the parking lot. A small line of visitors waited at the lot's hot-dog stand. A few visitors looked at post cards at the nearby kiosk. That day, I counted well over 2,000 visitors at the concentration camp's museum, just during the morning. They were among the facility's half million annual visitors.



Inside the most notorious of the Nazis' 10,000 camps, the tourist traffic was brisk that morning. I was pushed and shoved in block 11, Auschwitz's so-called "death block," where mostly Polish political prisoners were tried by impartial courts, tortured, and then shot in a courtyard outside. About 850 Soviet and Polish prisoners were killed here in September 1941 during the first tests using Zyklon B gas pellets, later used for mass extermination of Jews and, to a much lesser extent, other undesirable persons.

The Auschwitz camp complex claimed more victims than any other Nazi camp. Up to 1.5 million persons -- most Jews -- were systematically murdered by the camp's monstrous personnel in the most efficient death factory ever built.

Today, prominent Holocaust sites like Auschwitz have become popular travel "destinations." Lonely Planet and Let's Go highlight these places in their publications, as do specialty tour books like *Concentration Camps: A Traveler's Guide to World War II Sites*. Prominent Holocaust historian Martin Gilbert has written his own historical guidebook called *Holocaust Journey*.

Tourist agencies, like Jarden in Krakow, Poland, also offer informative Jewish heritage trips and walking tours at "sites of the former World War II Ghetto, [Oskar] Schindler's factory, places relevant to events in *Schindler's List*," according to the company's brochure. In Warsaw, the Our Roots agency takes visitors to the old Warsaw ghetto. These companies are targeting the American



Jewish market and the Israeli groups who are visiting the now extinct Jewish communities in Poland. I met one such Israeli group at Auschwitz doing a small tour, with an Auschwitz survivor among them.

But at old Nazi camps and former Holocaust sites elsewhere in Europe, where the Nazis murdered 11 million persons in a dozen years, the story is different. Tourists are not crowding into crematoria found in concentration camps like Stutthof in Poland and Mittelbau-Dora in Germany. Near Linz, Austria, a new subdivision has been built inside Gusen, a notorious subcamp of the Mauthausen concentration camp. Two-story homes literally sit next to an old crematorium once used to burn murdered humans. And just outside Hamburg, Germany, a criminal prison operates inside the Neuengamme camp and uses its original Nazi buildings.

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe helped to open this once closed-off camp world in Poland and the former East Germany where many of the "big" camps are found. In 1979, UNESCO added Auschwitz to its list of world heritage sites, increasing that camp's fame. More than any other event, Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List* threw the Holocaust on the world-travel scene.

Today, camps like Dachau, near München, are routine tourist stops on daylong city tours that include beer halls and cathedrals. Like Auschwitz, Dachau also draws thousands of tourists daily. They come from around the world. Some visitors are survivors or descendants of those slaughtered. Others have come on group tours, or individually, like me.

But few persons will do a tour like me, or want to. By the time I reached Auschwitz in late July 2000, I had seen 20 major concentration camps. I had come to photograph the main Nazi camps and to learn first-hand about places that shattered contemporary notions of progress and human decency, and far older ideas of God and morality.

Auschwitz was essential to my project. The complex is found in the small industrial city of Oswiecim, about 40 kilometers west of beautiful Krakow, Poland's top tourist city. The camp is easy to reach by train, which is one reason the Nazis put it there, to centralize their systematic exploitation, robbery, and murder of Europe's Jews.

Under the Nazis, Auschwitz became an industrial zone, where the Third Reich savagely exploited slave labor for profit and for war production. The Germans actually built three camps. Auschwitz I is the original concentration camp, converted from a Polish military barracks to a prison for Polish political prisoners. Next, the Nazis built the much larger 420-acre Auschwitz II, or Birkenau (literally translated as "birch tree alley"). That's where the real genocidal murdering occurred. They also built a large industrial slave factory called Monowitz, or Auschwitz III. The first two camps are open to the public as a museum, with educational displays housed in Auschwitz I.

I was glad to see so many people at Auschwitz I, but I was saddened by the children running inside the rebuilt gas chamber and crematorium I. A sign by the front of the camp asks that visitors respect those who perished here. Polish regulations forbid kids under 13 from visiting the old camps. These were overlooked by some Polish families with children not even 10 and too young to understand the oven room in which they were yelling.

Old camps can leave a visitor confused how to behave. Do I treat this as a museum or graveyard, or both. Do I dare laugh or talk? Though I took pictures of the Auschwitz I camp gate that bears the now infamous inscription in metal lettering, "arbeit macht frei," or "work makes you free," I felt uncomfortable seeing a woman tourist pose for a picture under the gate.

Three rows of sturdy red brick barracks stand inside Auschwitz I. There are 28 identical structures in all. Each has a number. Some are used for displays. I remember block 4 the most. Here visitors see camp artifacts and evidence of the Nazis' outrageous crimes.

Curators have built glass-protected displays inside the rooms. I saw old prostheses, empty suitcases, babies' clothes, a huge pile of shoes, spectacles, and a massive pile of human hair. Most of the hair was from women, who were shaved bald when they entered the camp or after they were gassed. I saw gray, black, brown, and blonde hair. I even saw a foot-long blonde ponytail.

The Soviets found seven tons of hair packed into bundles in the camp warehouse after the liberation. Germans had shipped the hair and



everything else they stole from the prisoners back to the Fatherland. After all, the Holocaust was more than about killing. It also was one of the greatest thefts and slavery operations ever. The efficient Nazis used human hair to make clothing fabric. Some of that fabric lies in a glass case next to the hair display. The Nazis even lied in their manifests what was contained in those tightly packed bundles.

Confronted with this site of ruthless exploitation, I began crying.

I only had cried once before on this trip, inside the medical pathology room at the Sachsenhausen camp north of Berlin, where I saw a room that resembled the doctor's office I had visited as a child. To my surprise, I had controlled my emotions at 20 other concentration and death camps, where I saw thousands of graphic images at the camp museums. Yet this pile of hair did something I can't explain.



After I regained my composure, a German tour group entered the room and the guide explained the hair display, in German, to the 50- and 60-year-old tourists. I grew extremely uncomfortable.

I don't know who these Germans were or what their parents or relatives did during the war. Some may have had no connection to Auschwitz and the other Nazi camps. They were too young. At that moment I felt unforgiving. But they had come, and I knew that was good.

Documenting the crimes of some of these tourists' parents and grandparents took me to Nazi camps in five countries. On this historical journey, I visited other sites relating to the Nazi era.

In Berlin, I saw the Olympic Stadium, site of the 1936 Olympics, which showcased the Nazis' Aryan ideology to the world. Today, one still sees enormous marble statues of naked Aryan *übermänn* around the



sports complex. These embody the ideals of Nazi Germany and also its fanatical attempt to enslave or murder people who did not fit this narrow category of racial and genetic perfection, mostly the *untermensch*, or subhuman races like Jews. Today, German soccer teams play games on the stadium's pitch before tens of thousands of Berlin fans. The stadium also is a stop on most Berlin city tours.

The same day in Berlin, at Potsdam, I visited the Wannsee Conference House. At this exquisite estate on Jan. 20, 1942, 14 Nazi functionaries and SS officers bureaucratically planned the genocide against Europe's Jews. There's a restaurant next to the house, and several yacht clubs sit on the lake called Grosser Wannsee that the villa-turned-museum overlooks. This is an upscale German neighborhood as it was 58 years ago when mass murder was organized.

The Holocaust Memorial Center opened in the house nine years ago. The first floor has been converted to a museum, among the best I saw in Europe on the topic. The displays show graphic archival photos of Jewish women stripped naked on the streets of Lwow, Poland, and of Nazi soldiers laughing as they torment a Jewish man. The look of that laughing Nazi face, on the sadistic men and women who ran the camps, was to grow sickeningly familiar as trip wore on.

I also was haunted by sites I saw from the train windows in Poland. I spotted at least 10 camps and slave factories, all discernible by their concrete barbed-wired fence posts and architecture. The Nazis built more than 1,700 such camps in occupied Poland, according one Polish museum, and many were built by rail lines for logistical reasons.

Those I saw may have been the "collection camps" (*sammellager*), where prisoners were kept before transport. Or they could have been labor-education camps (*arbeitserziehungslager*), or transit camps (*durchgangslager*), or even collection camps for the dying (*sterbelager*).

The most famous sites in this barbed-wire world are the large concentration camps (*konzentrationslager*) like Ravensbrück, the subcamps administered by main camps (*aussenlager*) like Gusen, and the extermination camps (*vernichtungslager*) like Treblinka. Two camps in Poland, Auschwitz and Majdanek, functioned as both concentration camps, where slave labor was used, and as killing factories.

So it is not unusual I saw these camps. By the time I had reached Poland I knew how to spot them, having seen them in four countries already. Still, their frequency grew troubling, even 55 years since their abandonment. How many were out there, still standing and without any monument to the memory of the victims?

The uniformity of the Nazis' death machine still visible in Europe brings to mind America's monotonous, ugly fast-food restaurants and shopping malls. They look the same, regardless of their location. Their sole purpose is to make money from millions of consumers. By comparison, in Nazi Europe, the goal was to exploit and murder millions of innocent people, as efficiently as possible, and in some of the most creative ways ever conceived.

Before World War II began, the Nazis had centralized the camp system under the SS, using the first concentration camp, Dachau, as a training model. It opened on March 22, 1933. First, camps like Dachau inflicted terror on the population and held the political prisoners, unionists, Jews, and anyone else the Nazis didn't like. From 1939 on, their function switched from terrorist arrest and confinement to

exploitation and mass annihilation. The Wannsee Conference marked the most radical shift, after which the death camps in Eastern Europe began operations. In the words of Wolfgang Sofsky, an expert on the camps, "In the span of twelve years, the concentration camp metamorphosed from a locus of terror into a universe of horror."

The SS based their operation in the huge Sachsenhausen concentration camp. From here, the SS managed the large concentration and death camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, etc.). These in turn managed the hundreds and hundreds of subcamps throughout Europe. The Gross-Rosen concentration camp, inside present-day Poland, had nearly 100 subcamps alone. Three death camps in present-day Poland (Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor) were administered from Lublin, Poland.



It was not a perfect system, given the power rivalries among Nazi officials and organizations, and the greed of some camp commandants like Rudolf Höss of Auschwitz. But all ideas filtered straight from the top Nazi administration, from Adolph Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, the SS *reichsführer*, right down to the kapo guards, the prisoners who were masters over other prisoners. Camp officials were not required to be vicious, but were granted the initiative to become that way. They seized that opportunity -- and relished it.

The Nazis purposefully organized the camps as isolated worlds. They resembled towns, with mess halls, cinemas, infirmaries, sewage plants, brothels, and even prisons.

This community had a highly rigid caste system. At the lowest level of this hell were Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs. They received the cruelest treatment and suffered the highest mortality. All these groups were segregated into different blocks, often internally divided by barbed-wire fences. The prisoners' status, reflected by the symbol affixed to their striped prison uniforms, determined how viciously they would be beaten or worked or murdered. The other ranks included political prisoners, common criminals, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, asocials, communists, and more.

The Nazis built the camps uniformly to efficiently incarcerate hundreds of thousands of persons, but also to inflict the maximum pain and suffering through overcrowding and poor sanitation. Epidemics at the camps were rampant, especially at the war's end. The most famous Nazi prisoner of all, Anne Frank, died during such an outbreak in March 1945 at Bergen-Belsen.

Functionally, the orderly rows of barracks, barbed-wire fences, concrete walls, and machine-gun-manned towers kept prisoners from escaping, but they also exerted psychological control over them.

Those who came within 27 feet of the ditch in front of the inner barbed-wire fence at Dachau, for instance, were gunned down by tower guards. Signs mark that boundary line of death today. It's an eerie space, even now.

For fun, guards would throw a prisoner's hat into this no-man's zone and order a prisoner to retrieve it. If he didn't, he could be beaten to death, and if he did, he would be shot to death. That type of game further enhanced the Nazis' grip of power in the camp world. A prisoner literally feared a fence, and not just the sadistic men keeping him or her from it.

According to camp expert Sofsky, "The concentration camp is a system of rigorous surveillance, a receptacle for violence." You still feel that violence in each of the camps you visit. I felt it most viscerally at Mauthausen, with its massive granite walls and guard towers, all built by the inmate slaves. It scared the hell out of me. I am sure I would have died here, and probably any other camp were I a prisoner.

Unlike the concentration camps, the death camps in Poland like Chelmo and Treblinka were built to kill the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. Barracks were not needed, except for the few prisoners who manned the gassing facilities and themselves were killed later. So these camps were smaller. Belzec was just 200 by 200 yards in size, but about 600,000 Jews were murdered there. In comparison, Buchenwald covered 40 acres, though only 57,000 of its prisoners were killed.

The camp system throughout Nazi territories worked flawlessly right until the last day of the war, even with uprisings, revolts, and escapes. It was one of the world's purest expressions of absolute power ever conceived.

The camps worked so well thanks to the SS guards and their underling Ukrainian and prisoner kapo guards. These men and women were notorious for the ways they would torture and beat prisoners, force them to work like slaves, starve them, and murder them.

At Mauthausen, former prisoner Jan Makalous reported, "A transport of 150 prisoners, mostly recently seized Jews arrived in the washroom of Mauthausen concentration camp. These inmates were drenched with nearly boiling water, then beaten with cowhide whips until their skin literally hung from their bodies." Such inhumane incidents were daily occurrences in the camps.

So uniform was the brutality, that sketches, paintings, and artwork from prisoners now hanging in the main concentration camps reveal the same images of inhuman cruelty. The artwork I saw always -- and without any exceptions, anywhere -- showed identical skeletal human beings wearing striped uniforms. These images usually depict the prisoners being beaten worse than farm animals by hideous-looking guards, including women.

The German's efficient prison system also required log books that normally listed the prisoner's names, nationality, status or crime (being a Gypsy for instance), date of entry, and also dates of death and type of death. The dishonest Nazis would usually list fictitious deaths, marking another lie in a massive web of lies that aided their crimes.

Later, at the death camps, these records were not kept, as the flow of mostly Jewish prisoners was too large and too fast to record. This is one reason tattoos were used for the prisoners not immediately killed at the largest death camp, Auschwitz II, Birkenau. Many records in fact were destroyed at the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland to hide these crimes against humanity. At the Sobibor, Belzec, Treblinka, and Chelmo camps, not a single camp building was left standing when the Germans left, yet these facilities killed nearly 2 million civilians, mostly Polish Jews between 1942 and 1944.

So what are the surviving artifacts of the Holocaust besides these ledgers and pieces of art? They are ordinary things -- practical, sturdy, and highly functional structures and objects.

At the camps, a visitor sees old barracks; gas chambers; crematoria that burned bodies of people who died from starvation, disease, slave labor, torture, beatings, shootings, hangings, and gassings; guard towers overlooking compounds bigger than five football stadiums at some of the largest camps; thousands and thousands of gray concrete fence posts and miles and miles of barbed wire -- much formerly



electrified to keep prisoners from escaping at night; and old brick factories next to camps and inside camps where prisoners were forced to make war material, guns, planes, V-2 rockets, counterfeit currency, clothes, bricks, and other items for the Nazis' war machine.

The Nazis always adopted items with proven efficiency. Once a camp tool was shown effective, it would be implemented in the larger camp system. I saw the same concrete fence posts at nearly every camp I visited. One also sees hundreds of these posts at former camps along the Polish railway system.

Entrances to the camps always bear the same simple architectural style of a simple two- or three-story structure, with an A-frame roof. Often a clock is on a tower atop the building. One still sees the duplicitous words "arbeit macht frei" that decorate entrances to camps (Auschwitz I, Dachau, Gross-Rosen, and Sachsenhausen).

Inside the camps one sees nearly identical medical pathology rooms. In these tidy rooms Nazi doctors, scientists, and nurses performed criminal experiments on live patients and dissections on corpses. These well-documented experiments ranged from forced sterilizations (to figure out how to exterminate the Slavic people of Eastern Europe, an inferior race), to hypothermia tests that killed human subjects, to tuberculosis injections of children who were later hung from rafters once their usefulness had expired, to

poisoning, to forced abortions, to vivisections of the endless supplies of bodies that piled up in the morgues next to pathology rooms. They also made lethal injections to kill sick prisoners.

One usually finds the medical rooms next to the ovens and to the rooms once full of freshly killed humans, like the crematoria at Terezín. You still see the medical tools such as scalpels and clamps behind glass cases, like those on display at Sachsenhausen. These chambers are almost like the examining rooms one remembers from one's childhood pediatrician.

A visitor also is struck by the similarity of the ovens, such as those made by a German firm Topf and Söhne of Erfurt. The firm's name is on furnaces found at Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, Gross-Rosen, and Auschwitz -- all ovens I saw first-hand. They were designed by complicitous German technicians like Kurt Prüfer, the company's senior engineer, who helped the Nazi state develop the most efficient system possible of cremating human cadavers.



Today, the ovens usually are found in big barren rooms in large brick buildings, always located some distance from the barracks. Gas chambers, if there were gas chambers at the camp, are either in the same building or nearby. The ovens nearly all follow the same design, with heavy steel doors and solid brick foundations. Earlier models were solid metal and had curved tops. Smokestacks made of brick rise above the buildings -- at least those the Nazis did not have time to destroy before they fled the camps.

At every crematoria I visited in four countries, flowers or burning candles had been placed on the sliding trays of the opened oven doors. Not once did I see a person light a candle or place the flowers. They must have come early, before the tourists arrive. On walls next to the ovens one sees plaques honoring the deceased who died at these camps and likely were burned into gray ashes in these furnaces. Terezín's crematorium had a wall full of memorial plaques. Majdanek, Sobibor, and Flossenbürg have large piles of human ashes as memorial displays. Bones are visible at Majdanek's.

These ovens were operating at full capacity after 1943 as the Nazis implemented the "final solution" against Europe's Jews at the death camps. Sadly, as the war was being lost on all fronts, the Germans speeded up their murder their Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners. These included Soviet POWs, communists, intellectuals and political prisoners, priests and ministers who spoke up against the Nazis -- Dachau had thousands -- other prisoners of war, citizens from every country in Europe. The efficiency of this killing has been unmatched by any other criminal state in sheer volume of victims.

On April 13, 1945, in Gardelegen, Germany, for instance, 1,016 prisoners forced on one of the many “death marches” from the camps were locked inside a wooden barn and burned alive. German soldiers shot those trying to crawl out from underneath. The very next day American GIs found the charred barn and bodies. Similar atrocities occurred everywhere where emaciated prisoners were forcibly marched or where they were interned.

Like the ovens, the German barracks for camp guards always look the same. They are usually three stories tall, or four. They are practical buildings built of brick and usually covered by plaster. They have the same A-frame roofs like the entrance buildings. During the war, some families of the SS stayed here with their spouses, next to the camps. Today, some barracks house museum facilities, like at Buchenwald. Some are empty. One, also at Buchenwald, was used as a Youth Hostel as late as 1987, according to a Dutch woman I met who said she stayed there.

Other Nazi buildings, like old storage units next to Auschwitz I, are family apartments today. These apartments are lined up in neat rows, and they are painted pink and have flowers in the courtyards and in the windowsills. There are two little corner stores inside the old storage buildings that sell Coke and Zwyec brand beer. I bought a soda at one of them. These are good solid buildings, and Poland is not a rich country. It suffered tremendous destruction during the war and later under communism. So why not put old camp building to practical uses?

I saw at least two McDonald’s restaurants: next to Dachau, near Munchen, and next to Plaszow, in Krakow. To find the old Plaszow camp, made famous by *Schindler’s List*, my Polish guide to Jewish Krakow, a graduate student named Anna, said, “Take any tram going to the Plaszow Railway Station and get off at the McDonald’s. The camp sits just behind it.” This is where thousands of prisoners used to exit for internment under the sadistic administration of Amon Goeth, the SS commandant played by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler’s List*. Because some of these old camps are in business areas of cities, and also in neighborhoods, why not have a fast-food place close by? Amon Goeth’s home today is still used. Flowers sat in the house’s front windows when I walked by to take a picture.

A housing subdivision has been constructed on the main square of a notorious camp complex near Linz, Austria, called Gusen I and II. Next to the crematorium, marked with plaques and memorials, you’ll see these homes, a restaurant, and a hotel-restaurant just across the street.

In Germany, in Flossenbürg, new houses on a hillside look down on the main plaza and entrance to the old Flossenbürg camp. The camp’s fences used to stretch behind this neighborhood. The street to these houses runs by the gate to the old camp. Seeing three SS guard towers, all imposing structures with granite foundations, apparently isn’t a deterrent to the new neighbors. A small grocery store inside the old camp boundaries is opposite the gate and serves as a de facto tourist shop and bookstore. I bought cheese, bread, and fruit there for lunch. The owners were extremely friendly.

The history of the German camps proves that former prisons make for excellent prisons later. The Soviets knew this in their day. They used Buchenwald to house 28,000 enemies of the state. These included ex-Nazis and internal enemies of the old East Germany. Under Soviet administration, 7,000 people died from 1945 to 1950 while housed in the old Nazi camp. The Nazis killed eight times as many under their rule from 1937 to 1945.

One of the most disturbing sites on my trip was the Neuengamme concentration camp, near Hamburg, Germany. It is in a rural area one half-hour by train and bus southeast of the port city. For seven years, the camp and its subcamps held 106,000 persons, of which 55,000 died.



Neuengamme stands next to the Elbe River, the waterway the prisoners improved by digging canals as slave laborers, in full view of the local Germans nearby. War material made by the prisoners' slave labor was barged down the Elbe's connected waterways. Many former brick buildings are still standing, including the brickworks slave factory.

About one-quarter of the old prison facility is still used as a German prison, the Vierlande correction center. That center has barbed wire fences, tall guard towers, and visible inmates walking the track built on the site of former concentration camp barracks. Two of the former camp barracks (block 1-4 and block 21-24) are still used to house prisoners today. One of the former SS guard towers by the entrance to the old camps is an entrance to the current prison.

I saw three tough-looking German guards built like professional weightlifters laugh at me as they walked into the prison. I was photographing the SS tower. I felt a chill run through my body.

Those were the same snickering expressions of the SS guards I had seen a half hour earlier on an archival photograph on display in the camp museum. That image was a group shot of Neuengamme's SS personnel, some of whom were smiling like fraternity brothers at a party. Except these were bullies who reveled in torturing and murdering people.

I repeatedly saw those bullying smiles on hundreds of archival pictures at more than a dozen camp museums I visited. It reminded of the bullies from my childhood. The main difference under the Nazi rule was that bullies were encouraged to inflict suffering. Imagine a universe controlled by psychopathic thugs, and then you are beginning to imagine a Nazi camp.

As I waited for a bus to take me back the Bergedorf train station to return to central Hamburg, I met Marelis. She is a German woman in her 40s. We had not spoken to each other as we silently toured the camp museum.

We began talking about the horrible things we had just seen. When I asked her if she knew how big Neuengamme was, she said no. I said the same thing. “I have lived in Hamburg for 30 years, and this was my first time visiting,” she told me. She could say why she came this Sunday afternoon, on June 4. She just did. She told me her now-deceased father told her he was a cook in the German army during World War II. She said the two of them never talked about his wartime experience. When I asked her if she believed his story, she simply said, “No.”

Other Germans told me similar tales about the silence surrounding their parents and grandparents’ wartime experiences. In Weimar, the charming German city near Buchenwald and former home to Frederick Nietzsche, Johann Goethe, and J.S. Bach, I was befriended by two German men in their 20s, Martin and Roy. They bought me beers at a local pub and shared stories about local skinheads, who are still common in the old East Germany, where both grew up.



Both men were adamant in describing how terrible Buchenwald was. “The Nazis were far worse than the Russians who came after them,” Martin said.

I asked what their grandfathers did during the war. Martin said his family, ethnic Germans from Romania, or *volkesdeutsch*, were forcibly moved after the war to East Germany. During the conflict, his grandfather was told to join the SS and was sent to Finland. I believed Martin when he said his grandfather never told him what he did there.

Roy’s family were Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia, also forcibly moved after the war to East Germany. He said his grandfather also never said a thing about his war years, except that he took care of stables in Albania and walked to Germany at the war’s end.

I imagine these are similar stories found in millions of German households. One doesn’t talk about the Holocaust lightly, if at all. That goes for the victims, liberators, and maybe the perpetrators, though I never talked to anyone who claims to have been a guard or assisted in the Holocaust.

Some of the people who talk about the camp experiences are former inmates. Some lead groups of young people from European countries and abroad to the camps. Others come with friends and families, like the men I met on my second day at Birkenau.

That late July day it was raining hard, and the camp was a muddy mess. It originally was built on a swamp. The insect infestation was wretched for the thousands held here.

I was the first visitor at Birkenau in the morning. I walked the route marked in the camp by placards that show where Jewish prisoners were unloaded from trains and divided into lines by Nazi guards and doctors for slave labor or for murder in a short while at the gas chambers.

As I completed my journey past one of the four crematoria, I saw a group of men approach the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, located between the former gas chambers and ovens II and III. A man in a blue cap, Tadeusz, 72, was giving a tour of the camp with his childhood friend Aleks, 73. They were explaining the camp to Doron, a 23-year-old Israeli man and Aleks's grandson.



I learned that Tadeusz lived in Birkenau three years and miraculously survived. Aleks's immediate family fled the Nazis in 1940 after four months living under their terror. His immediate family survived the war in the Soviet Union. The rest of his family was gassed and burned in Birkenau. Aleks emigrated to Israel in 1965, while Tadeusz stayed in Poland.

Standing in the downpour, Tadeusz explained in Polish the unimaginable cruelties the Nazis practiced on their prisoners. Aleks translated those stories into Hebrew for Doron, who then translated for me into English.

By the two demolished crematoria, II and III, that were dynamited by the fleeing Nazis in January 1945, Tadeusz said Nazi guards forced the *sonderkommando* (prisoners forced to work in the gas chambers) to check the corpses for possible hidden jewels. They searched women's vaginas and men and women's rectums and mouths. Valuable gold teeth were extracted, too, and later melted into ingots sent to Swiss banks. Bodies were then hauled by large metal clamps to be burned.

"The stories I have heard the past two weeks are simply too impossible to imagine," Doron said as we walked around the gas chambers to where Tadeusz showed where Zyklon B gas tablets were poured. "In Israel I have studied the Holocaust all my life. But to hear these tales and see these places in person is another thing."

As we walked to the area of the camp where there were brick barracks, section B I, Doron told his grandfather and Tadeusz I was American. Both men were glad I had come to learn about the camp.

Tadeusz was smoking nonstop. All of us were soaked when we entered a former barracks used by women. Tadeusz explained that 30 women could sleep in a space barely six feet wide, stacked three high on wooden shelves. Windows were removed in the winter to make life more horrible for the skeletal prisoners. Standing by a bunk, we all heard the door slam to the barracks. I saw Tadeusz wince in visible pain. We quickly left the building.

Outside, Tadeusz rolled up the jacket and shirt on his left forearm and showed me his blue tattoo that Nazis had stamped him with for life. I thought about asking him for a photograph of this brand, but I also realized that this man who had endured the impossible deserved my respect more than I needed that one image of man's complete depravity to his fellow man. He then turned around and began walking quickly to the gate.

"He comes here every year to tell people about this place," Doron said. "Each time it makes him cry. He can only stay here for so long."

We exchanged names and addresses in the small bookstore located in the former entrance complex to Birkenau. They shook my hand warmly and smiled. I felt something electric with this contact. It was unlike few things I had felt in my life, equaled perhaps by my meeting with a Tutsi genocide survivor in Kigali, Rwanda, in June 1997.

Doron told me that both Tadeusz and Aleks were very happy I could join them for the tour. They told Doron it wasn't important that I'm not Jewish or that I did not have relatives who died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. "The suffering here was endured by more than the Jewish victims. My grandfather and Tadeusz both feel this very strongly. There are very pleased you and other people come to learn about what happened here."

By now, my tour was almost over.

The next day I completed my documentary project at the Gross-Rosen camp, near Rogonizca, Poland, an hour from Wroclaw (Breslau in German). I felt nothing there. I took my pictures, saw the museum and crematorium, and left quickly.

On the train back to Wroclaw I thought about all I had seen at more than two dozen places where the Holocaust was planned and implemented and where nearly 11 million human beings were murdered by the German nation with the belief that some Germans were a master race. I realized that I would have a hard time taking things seriously -- my job, my love of the outdoors, my concerns about worldly things. How can one be worried about such things after seeing this, after meeting a man who spent three years in Birkenau?

I also thought about the question people always asked when I told them I was documenting the camps: Why are you doing this, because it's already been done. My answer now is clear. I did it to see for myself what had happened, so I could understand. I think have a better understanding now, which I want to share.

The Germans were not the first people to murder on a genocidal scale, just as others have committed the same crime, and likely will do so again. Nor will they be the only people who hurt others because it gave them pleasure. That is something any of us can do, and do very easily. It's a part of who we are as human beings. I've seen the camps, and I know this in my bones.

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