

Museum Review

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM WASHINGTON, D.C.

"The things I saw beggar description."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

Dachau

April 15, 1945

I have an uncle who, along with Eisenhower, was present at the liberation of Dachau. He has only spoken of his experiences there once, after he was among the first visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

He told me of eyes, bulging from invisible bodies shrouded by rows and rows of bunks, eyes that stared at him fixedly with no expression. These were the living of Dachau, whom my uncle helped to their salvation. Of the dead he remembers the mass graves of freshly dumped corpses; the bodies of young and old, silently screaming testimony to the inhumanity of so many—the guards he would arrest, the Nazis, the anti-Semites of Germany and Europe, the Americans leaders and others in positions of power who turned their back on this horror during the period of the Nazi regime before and during World War II.

My uncle will not say anymore about those days he spent at Dachau, but he will talk about the Holocaust Memorial Museum, what it meant to him and what it signifies to the rest of us. Never before, he reminded me fiercely a few days after I had been to the memorial, has an entire group of people been singled out for systematic extermination based on physical

characteristics (or for any reason, I added to myself silently).

And that is the overwhelming impression I took away from this ineffably powerful experience of spending one day at the Holocaust Memorial. The designers of the Memorial, as closely as possible, have attempted to recreate the feelings experienced by Eisenhower at Dachau, filling the immense spaces with things which beggar description. Images of horror are piled atop one another—a mural of hair taken from victims of the crematoriums, actual suitcases left by Nazis by the side of the trains that unwitting Jews and other persecuted people took to their deaths, a railroad car that carried Holocaust victims to their death, which we were forced to walk through on this narrative of hatred and death organized by the Memorial's founders.

Perhaps the most poignant physical objects are thousands of shoes—some of them children's sizes, which line a narrow walkway. These shoes were worn by persons gassed in the crematoriums of Europe in the 1940's, left behind when Jews and other victims were told to undress to prepare for a delousing shower, a shower that sent them to an agonizing group

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death. There are models of the crematorium which show vividly the bureaucracy of extermination.

Witnessing the orderly stages that those to be gassed were ushered through on the way to their end, it is clear how much the Nazis needed their victims to believe that everything was going to be all right (for instance, telling victims who had undressed to remember where they had left their clothing, just before they were gassed); how loathe they were to expend the energy, resources or emotion to confront those they were about to kill with the truth.

The entire "final solution" was carried out according to a false narrative of work: death camps became work camps for the victims, death trains became trains taking them to work camps, gassing became showers. The cowardice of the horror affects the visitor strongly. While Hitler was forthright about his hatred of Jews from the beginning of his life, while the Nazis gave every warning to the world that something terrible was happening beginning in 1933, with the segregation of Jews from the rest of Germans and the burning of suspicious books, after 1940, when it came to implementing the final solution, the great lie of work camps was summoned to lure Jews ineluctably to their grisly deaths.

Everyone who visits the memorial no doubt has their own view of the most searing, terrible image of evil. Mine was the archival film of Jews in the Soviet Union forced to line up, undress and face their graves as the SS guards blasted them into eternity with rifle fire. Such footage "beggars description." The infamous Babi Yari is depicted with still photographs, particularly painful to those who have read D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, which tells the story of this massacre so beautifully. Another searing still photograph shows the frightened face of a 7 year old child as she is held by her neck, nude awaiting her death, in a facility for "mentally handicapped persons" in Berlin in 1939.

There is more than one set of tears for visitors to the memorial; we contemporary witnesses are silent as we shuffle from one moment in history to another. Many of us weep; always by ourselves. One room is filled with pictures of laughing, alive families from a village

subsequently wiped out by the Nazis in a massacre; the photographers too were killed, the text informs us.

The power of the memorial comes from the juxtaposition of a fully informed historical account built upon three narratives that accompany the images. One is the narrative of the rise of Nazism in Germany; the second is the story of anti-Semitism in Europe from 19th century forward, and the most personally disheartening is the narrative of the United States response to Nazism and anti-Semitism through the 1930's and early years of the war. It is made manifestly clear by headlines from American newspapers that public officials were aware of the persecution of the Jews, that American and British commands knew about the concentration camps through espionage and routine air missions over occupied countries during the war. Yet as the exhibition makes viscerally clear, America and other countries that could have served as places of refuge for the Jews fleeing Hitler refused to intervene. FDR refused to consider lifting the refugee quota to save Jews literally fleeing for their lives. While Britain did allow approximately two thousand children to emigrate, effectively saving their lives, the United States offered no parallel response, even turning away a shipful of refugees searching for safe harbor during the war, most of whom would be later gassed in concentration camps. Many Americans knew what was happening, including all the most powerful ones who were in a position to take actions that would have mitigated the disaster.

As an American historian, I have found a bounty of reasons not to be proud of my country's past. As a non-Jew, I thought I understood the injustice and horror of the Holocaust as much as any person in my situation could. After spending a day at the memorial, I realized that there was a great deal about these matters that I have never understood. There are several stories intertwined in the story of the Holocaust, and at least one of them is my story. My story and Pius XII's story and FDR's story and everyone's story who has and continues to witness evil and human suffering and does nothing to stop it. Every American who experiences this memorial is likely to feel the same way.

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