

Never Again

I have been to the Holocaust museum three, maybe four times and seen the horrors that transpired in Auschwitz concentration camp. I have read books on Anne Frank and others who tried to hide Jews, the “inferior people,” from the Nazis. I have watched *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, but nothing compared to visiting the Dachau concentration camp.

“This isn’t the place for cute-selfies, this is a memorial and should be respected,” Myers, our professor, told all 16 of us as we huddled closed together in a group outside the entrance of the Dachau concentration camp. I knew this excursion would be emotionally and mentally unpleasant, but I wasn’t prepared for what was ahead.

We all broke into smaller groups of two to three people, sometimes just one, and started the journey. I stopped and read all the information plaques leading up to the gate of the camp. *Wow, this actually happened... here. This is all real.* I kept thinking in my mind while I read the depressing facts of how Dachau was erected.

After I read all the information to the left and right side of the sandy path, I finally made it to the daunting gate. I stared through the spaces of the cold, metal bars of the gate which had a quote in the upper, center portion of the door. The quote said, “Arbeit macht frei” which translates in English to, “work sets you free.” This was the Nazi motto for all the workers in the camp. If they worked hard enough, they would be free. Well, that’s what the Nazis told them – which couldn’t have been further from the truth.

The gate was closed. Groups from all around the world were taking pictures. Then they walked through the gate and closed it gently behind them. I watched. I debated. I tried to mentally prepare myself to enter this place of unthinkable wrongdoing.

Someone opened the door to the gate and I made my move. As soon as I stepped inside the camp, my eyes developed a mind of their own. I started tearing up, but I hardly ever cry. I didn't even know these people – or anyone that had relatives who went through this gruesome genocide.

But my eyes still watered up. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed – they didn't. *Pull yourself together, Bethany. You haven't even gone through the camp yet.* I thought to myself as I looked around at the colossal space that dehumanized so many lives. I was in awe, in the most abominable way possible.

I walked through the camp mostly alone and barely spoke to anyone. I purposely did not speak to anyone for fear someone would say something ignorant or disrespectful and in return I'd say something I'd later regret. I was humbled, I was depressed, and I was confused.

Throughout this time at the camp I was a sea of emotions. Sometimes, my emotions were calm. Other times, they were crashing down all around me. For example, a story I listened to on the phone in the “special bunker” (the bunker where the Nazis kept political figures, priests, and other important people they kidnapped or arrested) triggered a strong emotional response. Then I had to fight back the tears – or try not so hard to put myself in these peoples’ shoes that lived through this unbelievable tragedy.

I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't understand how anyone could not care AT ALL about another human being. No, not just another human being; an entire race, an entire religion. How could Hitler, and the Nazis, not see these people as *humans*, just like them? Every person that they starved, beaten, raped, or hung from a pole by the wrists for hours (pole hanging) had two eyes, one nose, two ears, one mouth, and a family. These people were fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, grandparents, and the list goes on. These were *people*. They had feelings and emotions just like Hitler, just like the Nazis, just like everyone else in the world. How could Hitler not realize this? How would he feel if someone did the horrific things to his mistress, or himself, that he was doing to entire groups of people?

I didn't understand how anyone could do such sinful things to another person – even if they did deserve it. Wait, no, no one deserved this treatment. There was nothing a person could do, ever, to deserve what happened in Dachau.

Dachau changed me. It made me thankful for the freedom and security that I have. It made me thankful that I, nor anyone I care about, had to endure any time in a concentration camp. It made me more aware that there is awful sin in this world. Sin that can poison a human being so deeply that it leads to genocides. I also realize that we are all vulnerable to this sin. No one is safe, no one can hide from this poison. It can infect any one of us if we are not careful. It can slowly infect us if we do not watch what we say to others, if we do not treat others the way we want to be treated, and if we do not choose love over hate.

Presently, my eyes, again, have overcome my mind multiple times while writing this reflective essay. I have discreetly dabbed my eyes to relieve my tear ducts of the salty water

accumulating as I think about what Dachau means to me. Thinking about how extremely inhumane the guards at the concentration camps treated the occupants there still has an effect on me. I hope it always does. It still makes me depressed. It still makes me want to vomit. It still confuses me. I do not think I will ever be able to grasp how one could dehumanize another person to such ends.

I know this experience will change my thoughts and behaviors in the future, at least I pray it does. I now know how important and powerful our minds, our mouths, and our hands are. These tools can either be utilized for good, or for evil. I know I need to always choose good over evil and love over hate. I will be more mindful of what I say to others – even if it is a joke. I will be more careful about my thoughts towards others. I will be more kind and caring towards others. I hope, one day, everyone will display the same actions as these. Maybe this isn't possible, but I can dream. Until then, I will try my hardest to do my part to make the world a better place and to ensure that Dachau never happens again.