

Educational Visit to Dachau

This fall, I received a Bogdanow grant to make a visit to a concentration camp. Those grants were endowed by Fanni Bogdanow—a late professor of French and medieval studies and survivor of the *Kindertransport*. This spring and summer, I was able to visit Auschwitz, Birkenau and Dachau. The grant supported the last of these visits.

As an American and as a historian I have studied the Holocaust often (the United States has either the largest or second-largest Jewish population in the world, depending on how one counts). Many times through grade school, high school and at university, my courses devoted time to explaining the Holocaust. We read memoirs by Holocaust survivors. In our English classes we read historical fiction that explored the Holocaust. Survivors visited my school. My education illustrates a difficult reality and a serious problem for Holocaust education: Most survivors of the Holocaust live very far from where the events of that era took place.

The Bogdanow grant allowed me to bridge these ways of learning. In addition to meeting survivors of the Holocaust and growing up in a community (in the suburbs of New York) where Holocaust education was taken seriously, I have now walked where it happened.

I visited Auschwitz and Birkenau in March, after travelling by bus from Krakow. Those sites I visited with a guidebook. The two camps formed only part of a much larger complex: a constellation of detention centers, administrative sites, slave-labor factories and extermination zones. The museum at Auschwitz shocks visitors with its scale. The traces of death and evil there exist in staggering amounts: amounts of hair, of teeth, of shoes, of glasses, and of branded canisters of Zyklon B. Across the ground of Auschwitz, exhibits and placards describe the huge array of ways in which terror was inflicted upon the Nazis' prisoners: summary executions, impossible labor, suffocating crowdedness, and of course the gas chamber.

Where Auschwitz makes the Holocaust legible in a confined space, Birkenau testifies to its scale. I visited Birkenau on a cold day. In the cold, Birkenau's extent can be felt. The camp seems to stretch on and on; I walked for at least twenty minutes to traverse the former camp's southern edge.

Birkenau is much more decrepit than Auschwitz 1. At Auschwitz, brick and concrete barracks were repurposed into a concentration camp. At Birkenau, wooden sheds, modelled on stables, were erected hastily after the Nazi leadership at the Wannsee Conference determined they would attempt to eliminate Europe's Jews by murdering them. Many have been preserved, but for the most part Birkenau is a field of crumbling brick chimneys—the most durable part of the miserable lodging's for the Nazi's victims.

At Birkenau, visitors arrive through a gate, under which passes a rail line. That line becomes the center of the camp: an enormous platform where victims of the Holocaust arrived in the camp. On the platform, members of the SS and their staff and collaborators sorted and herded the newly

arrived into two groups, those who would die immediately and those who would labor in the camps. Visitors proceeding through the site follow the path used by the former, towards the gas chambers and crematoria. It is difficult not to be shaken by the experience.

Auschwitz and Birkenau collectively represent a distinct moment in the Holocaust—one that is well-known and nearly iconic. Ask a stranger about concentration camps, Holocaust memorials, or the nature of the Holocaust itself and their answers will often reflect the specificity of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Auschwitz is shorthand for the Holocaust, and for evil itself. Dachau is in many respects different.

I visited Dachau and Munich—the center of National Socialism in Germany—in late May. Although Auschwitz and Birkenau are by no means isolated (peer through the gates of Birkenau or Auschwitz and you see the town of Oświęcim), Dachau is only twenty minutes outside of Munich by train. The Nazi regime opened Dachau almost as soon as they took power. Unlike Auschwitz, which opened in 1940, and Birkenau, which was constructed in October 1941, Dachau began to receive Nazi prisoners in 1933. The role of Auschwitz/Birkenau (although the complex initially held prisoners of war) was primarily the extermination of the Jewish people. Dachau was more unstable, and transformed over the course of Nazi rule.

Initially, Dachau housed political prisoners of all stripes. In particular, it was an instrument of Nazi rule—a way to eliminate opposition. After the passage of the Reichstag Fire Decree, the Nazis simply imprisoned those who opposed their political agenda in their concentration camps, including Dachau. Theologians (including Martin Niemöller), academic, politicians and others who opposed the regime were imprisoned at Dachau.

Dachau also propped up the Nazi economic program. By forcing occupants of the concentration camps to perform labor and considering them employed, the Nazis could manipulate employment statistics. So, too, with statistics for homelessness and crime. The “socially undesirables” or “asocials” were rounded up by the regime, put into camps, and written off to provide support for Nazi propaganda.

All this was visible, if distorted, to the German people. At Dachau, the rail line was not extended into the camp until the end of the war. So prisoners disembarked in the center of town (Dachau is both the name of the town and the camp) and marched past shops and people to the camp. Townspeople welcomed the arrival of a prison camp, which jumpstarted the local economy. In 1933, the town of Dachau suffered the highest rate of unemployment in Germany; they were happy to have jobs.

The prison population at Dachau shifted with history. First with opposition, then with “asocials.” Next, prisoners of war began to swell its barracks. And finally the Nazis began to fill Dachau with Jews. Consistently, the regime utilized incarceration, terror and execution to achieve its major policy goals.

In addition to the ways in which it changed over the course of the regime, several things struck me about Dachau in particular. At Dachau, there is a central administration complex, including prison cells (where human experimentation and executions took place) and a kitchen. Starvation

killed huge numbers of inmates, and so proximity to the kitchen was extremely desirable. For those furthest from the kitchen, even the meager food on offer might be gone by the time they arrived. Thus the camp was hierarchized. Political prisoners received good first. Prisoners of war, by country. Asocials. Homosexuals. Roma. And last, Jews. Hierarchy served Nazi aims by both imposing order on the camp and dividing the loyalties of their victims, to breed resentment.

The danger of this approach is visible in the way Dachau was memorialized. I remember at one point facing a wall, designed to show and commemorate the different groups of people imprisoned at Dachau or victimized by the Nazis. Not everyone made the cut. The fact that Dachau imprisoned and killed gay men (and sometimes women) was ignored. It reminded me that choosing to remember some things too often means forgetting others.

The fact that Dachau is and ought to be a memorial seems obvious to us now. But it nearly didn't happen. After the war, Dachau was converted to a refugee camp. It received and housed German refugees, primarily from Czechoslovakia (which expelled the Sudeten Germans in 1946). Many times after the flow of refugees abated, Dachau was slated to be destroyed. But a committee of survivors managed time and time again to save the site. A memorial was not established until 1965—twenty years and many political upheavals after the camp's liberation. Even now, the SS training grounds are in use as a training site for the German police. The optics of that choice are grotesque.

All these sites testify to the horror of the Holocaust. They each underscore the gravity of the phrase “never again.” But Dachau is somehow more banal and recognizable. Although the killing grounds of Birkenau are vast and alien, the choice to imprison one's enemies or to manipulate economic statistics through mass incarceration has not gone away. Dachau reminds us where “never again” begins; how the slow drip of authoritarianism and prejudice can, even within the confines of familiar institutions and in plain view, transform into a program of much more profound evil.

I am grateful to the late Fanni Bogdanow and to the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester for making my trip possible. I hope that my reflection can help demonstrate the value of these trips and this type of learning. I hope it may also help show the importance of Holocaust education generally.