

LEAVING DACHAU

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The day was cold and overcast as a drizzle continually came down from the grey clouds. When leaving the hotel that morning, I was not thinking about the dreary weather. On the long bus ride to the camp, I was as happy as a child would be knowing she was going to Disney World; however, by the time I reached my destination my mood had drastically changed. I was visiting Dachau, the first World War II concentration camp.

I went to Germany for a class trip with my German class in the summer of 1993. Before my adventure at the camp, I had already seen the wonderful sights of Berlin and Nuremberg. As we rode the ICE (Inter City Express) trains through the beautiful scenery, I could not help thinking about what an awesome country it was. The rolling green hills and crystal clear lakes along the train tracks gave me the impression that Germany was like a wonderland. The camp, however, has changed my views on what I had thought was a beautiful country.

We marched into the camp through ten-foot tall gates still equipped with barbed wire. We then proceeded to the museum, which was located in the original headquarters building. The first picture I saw was a map with hundreds of tiny dots covering the country of Germany. It showed where the concentration camps were located and how many prisoners were held at each. This was just the beginning of the horrifying pictures. I can recall one picture extremely vividly. It showed the frail bodies thrown one on top of another, left to rot in the heat of the sun. These bodies were of prisoners who had suffered, many dead from starvation, others dead by torture.

At first I stared at every gruesome picture as if I were studying for a test, translating all the captions word for word. By the time we reached the second wing of the exhibit, many members of the group had been so emotionally moved that they sped through the remaining horrifying exhibits. We all congregated at the end, and went outside to see the light grey, concrete, still-standing barracks and the dreadful torture chambers.

We walked across a vast gravel-covered field to the barracks. Only two remained standing; however, around sixty other foundations filled with small rocks remained as a grim reminder of the great number of prisoners who were kept and tormented at the camp. When walking down the never-ending trail, I could not fathom the events that had happened in exactly the place where I was strolling. At the end of the aisle were torture chambers.

This building was equipped with a gas chamber, ropes for hanging people, and ovens where humans were tortured and killed. An empty room consisting of nothing but two doors and four walls with small holes in the corners was the gas chamber. Even though this room was never used as a gas chamber, the thought of what could have happened was incomprehensible. The ovens lay one on top of another looking as if meals were cooked there. These ovens, however, were used to broil living humans into ashes. Before I saw the remaining rooms, I ran

out, feeling sick to my stomach. I could not believe the impact it had on me. The once beautiful country I had pictured in my mind was gone. The mortifying experience had left me in disgust after learning how inhumanely the prisoners were treated.

As we walked out, we passed by the barracks site, across a field of gravel, and through the barbed wire gates. From the time we arrived in the museum until the time we left the camp, not one of the stunned students or chaperons spoke or took pictures. No one thought it was right to take pictures where such horrible acts had occurred.