

Buchenwald

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I'm standing just inside the gates of Buchenwald concentration camp, a few kilometers outside Weimar, Germany. It is a cold, gray, windy day in January, 1997. The wind is cutting through my thick wool coat and the bulky sweater underneath. I look down at my clothing and wonder how anyone survived a winter here 55 years ago wearing the thin prison uniforms given to them. I shudder, not being able to imagine life in this place. Death, however, seems to surround me.

The barracks are now destroyed but their locations are carefully marked in a broad semi-circle opening in front of me on the rocky ground. The crematorium still stands, as does the warehouse and a few of the guard towers. The officer's quarters lie just outside the fence that once enclosed over 200,000 prisoners. Next to the officers' quarters was the zoo for the entertainment of the officers and their families. The animals were treated better than the humans kept inside the other fenced area.

The concentration camp sits on a hill, above Weimar, with a pastoral view. I think about the cruelty placing the camp where the prisoners could clearly see what lay outside the rows of barbed wire. I wonder if the human beings trying to stay alive in this awful place could smell the fertile soil in the distant valley? I'm sure they could smell the stench of bodies burning in the crematorium located footsteps from the barracks.

Inside the recently constructed auditorium in the officer's quarters, I watch a video about the liberation of the camp. The Allied officers arriving here at the end of the war decided that the citizens of Weimar needed to be confronted with what had been going on at the camp for over a decade. As they are marched through the camp, they see prisoners who are starving, dead bodies piled 4 and 5 high, bones and ashes from the crematorium. Some of the citizens faint, others appear to be appalled, some seem to put a mask on their faces and show nothing. They all claim that they didn't know that this was a concentration camp. This is 1945. Then, in an interview from a few years ago, a man, now 65, shares his suspicion that the villagers really did know.

I wonder: perhaps they didn't know. Perhaps they knew and believed that imprisonment, forced labor, and execution of Jews, Romas, foreigners, and political prisoners was justified, believing that these prisoners had committed crimes worthy of their punishment. Perhaps they knew what was happening and the truth was too painful to bear; they must have smelled the burning bodies, had contact with the soldiers, seen the trains bringing their human cargo to the camp. Perhaps they were too scared to admit the truth to themselves, knowing that the penalty for speaking out could be imprisonment, and possible death, in this very camp.

And how could the SS guards stationed at this camp commit these crimes and then live

with themselves? What did it take for them to stop feeling so that they could brutalize other human beings? I know that soldiers are taught to dehumanize and objectify others, but it still doesn't make sense to me how people could participate in this much destruction of human life.

As the video ends, my German friends begin talking. One says that she feels ashamed to be here with me, an American. She's been at Buchenwald before, but only with other Germans. What does this camp say about her people, and what am I thinking about her? I admit to the stereotypes I have of Germans: stern, coldly rational, authoritarian. I don't see her, or her friends as fitting those stereotypes, and yet I'm struck with how easily I know the stereotypes. It dawns on me that the information I have about Germany is limited to food and Nazis and probably comes from two sources: restaurants in the United States and documentary films of Hitler's speeches. Even when I hear German spoken casually, on the street, I'm aware that I'm filtering it through my stereotypes so that I hear a voice like Hitler's. It is appalling to me how little I know about German history and culture; if I weren't aware of my stereotypes, it would be easy to see Germans as the embodiment of evil.

My friend wonders out loud what she would have done if she had been alive in the 1940's. I begin to do the same. What would I have done if I had been living in Weimar with some intuition, or knowledge, of the atrocities at the military installation on the hill? I'm afraid to admit that I'm not that courageous a person, but I don't lie either; I don't know what to say.

I notice how eager I was to visit the camp and how eager I am now to leave. I don't want to think anymore about this place or the people who lived and died here. But the memory of standing inside the gate and seeing freedom in the hills beyond, refuses to go away.

Suddenly I have another memory of standing on a highway a few miles outside Oglethorpe, Georgia, looking across an empty field at Macon State Prison, trying to imagine life for the men held inside those walls. The prison was constructed in 1994 for 800 prisoners but is already holding 1100 in overcrowded conditions.

I'm on a 4 day walk to protest racism in the so-called criminal justice system. The prison population is overwhelmingly African-American, like many prisons across the United States. These men are being held on charges --- some serious, some petty -- often without much evidence, usually with inadequate legal representation. Regardless of the severity of the crime they have committed, the level of punishment they receive is due in large part to their being Black and poor. Lately, the punishment has become harsher, in the belief that life has been too easy for them. Georgia is considering eliminating parole. I'm wondering if there will be time when the prison is closed for prisoners but opened to the public as a memorial to the men who struggled to survive here? Will we walk through the corridors and be reminded of the destruction of these lives?

I share my thoughts with my friends and we begin to note the similarities between Germany and the United States. Both countries have a history of state-sanctioned genocide within their borders. Although the Holocaust often gets portrayed as a unique historical event without precedent, it was preceded by the systematic confinement and killing of Indian people in the United States, reducing the Native population to a fraction of what it once was, and the enslavement of people of African descent, millions of whom were killed on slave ships before

they even reached North America. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, scientific racism was popular in both countries and used to justify public policy. While Germany was persecuting Jews in preparation for the "Final Solution," the United States has had its own versions of anti-Semitism: in the 1920's, it took the form of anti-immigration laws and discrimination in college admissions; in the 1930's, it was an official policy of "doing nothing" as reports of the persecution circulated; in the 1940's it was the decision to enter the war after Pearl Harbor, not particularly because of what was happening in the camps, but to stop Nazi aggression in Europe.

While the war was being fought against fascism in Europe and Asia, Constitutional rights were being denied to people of color in the United States. African-American soldiers returning home found only a different form of persecution than the one they had been fighting against. Jim Crow was alive and well in the United States, both in terms of official segregation in the South and unofficial discrimination in the North; GI benefits largely went to white soldiers. Anti-Asian persecution took the form of imprisonment of Japanese-American citizens with no evidence that they were a threat to the United States.

All of this suggests that there is much more similarity than difference in how Germany and the United States have treated minority populations at home. When it comes to the question of responsibility for genocide, have people of European descent in the United States really acted any differently than the citizens of Weimar? I push the question of complicity for genocide to the present, and ask myself, is there any parallel today in the United States? What am I denying? What do I know and yet believe is justified? What am I seeing but ignoring?

Is the incarceration of African American men simply a new form of racial genocide? Is putting Black men behind bars another attempt at a "final solution" for white America's race problem? Many white Americans, and some people of color, argue that the disproportionate and growing numbers of Black men in prison has nothing to do with race, but is a reasonable response to criminal behavior. Many people believed the same thing 50 years ago, that those murdered in the holocaust deserved their punishment. With hindsight, some of us now believe that people were imprisoned simply because of who they were. Are we in the United States also using our "reason" to justify our biases? How, do we reconcile the fact that African Americans get arrested, convicted, and sentenced more harshly than White Americans for the same or similar or even less severe crimes? Are African American men being punished based on who they are rather than what they have done?

How do we explain the growing repression in prisons that has the effect of increasing violent behavior among inmates and increasing the chance that inmates will continue to commit crimes when they are released? Why is it we refuse to address the root causes of crime? Why are we building prisons instead of creating jobs and improving schools? It all becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, in which we create the conditions to justify locking up Black men so that they can be removed from society. The result is a largely Black prison population growing at an annual rate of 6%.

I imagine a time 50 years from now. I'm near the end of my life, being interviewed about the loss of a generation of Black Men at the end of the 20th century. The interviewer asks me, "Did

you know what was happening?" I answer, "yes." Then I'm asked, "What did you do?" The question haunts me.