

Reflections on Memory, the Common Good, and Being Human

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INTRODUCTION

The following is an exercise in the communication of memories; a group of young adults, all graduate students from the University of Notre Dame, traveled to Germany and Austria for a week in spring 2018 to experience Holocaust memorial sites. The immersion was part of the “Common Good Initiative” and intended to provide access to the cultivation of a “thick sense” of the Holocaust, a creative understanding of an ethics of remembering and its connections to Catholic Social Tradition.

Remembering can be understood to mean: putting the fragments of the past together; making memories whole; healing memories; connecting the past and the future. A proper culture of remembering is an important aspect of the common good. The common good, in turn, is all that is required for an individual to flourish within a community and for a community itself to flourish. A flourishing community is as much a community of hope as it is a community of memory. The identity of a community is essentially linked to its cultivated memories, i.e. memories that have become part of its culture: “We define ourselves by what we remember and forget collectively” (Aleida Assmann). Maurice Halbwachs famously stressed the function of memory as a social means for cohesion and introduced the terms “communicative memory” and “cultural memory.”

The Catholic Social Tradition is not particularly explicit about the ethics of memory; the *Compendium for the Social Doctrine of the Church* makes two statements about the ethics of memory in the context of social justice: (i) We remember the Covenant and the Covenant remembers the Exodus in the spirit of social justice: “To eliminate the discrimination and economic inequalities caused by socio-economic changes, every seven years the memory of the Exodus and the Covenant are translated into social and juridical terms, in order to bring the concepts of property, debts, loans and goods back to their deepest meaning” (CSD 24); (ii): We remember the Sabbath as part of the creation story in order to have a proper understanding of work: “The memory and the experience of the Sabbath constitute a barrier against becoming slaves to work” (CSD 258).

The Jewish-Christian tradition, more broadly, is based on a strong commitment to remembering. The biblical tradition of remembering has established the imperatives of not forgetting history and of cultivating tradition; many religious celebrations serve the purpose of keeping connections to previous generations alive. This allows for what can be called an “ethics of memory.” Building blocks for an ethics of memory would be questions like: who is obliged to remember what—and how?

Individuals as well as communities are agents of memory; they make use of memorials and museums, symbols and commemorative ceremonies to keep memory alive. Milan Kundera compared living memories to plants: plants have to be watered in order to survive; memories have to be shared in order to be kept alive. Important ethical questions of remembering have been raised by Avishai Margalit in his *Horkheimer Lectures* in Frankfurt. He pondered the question of the importance of remembering names, of the importance of not forgetting “radical evil” — “radical evil” as the kind of evil that undermines humanity. The Holocaust has been described as “the second fall” by Robert Nozick; it is one of the most prominent examples and realities of “radical evil.” It can be argued that we must pay special attention to “radical evil” for a better understanding of the moral vulnerability of humanity.

The following are reflections, mostly from participants' journals (in italics); they express the belief that there cannot be social justice without just remembering and no just remembering without social justice.

Our itinerary: Immersion March 10-17, 2018

March 11: arrival in Munich

DAY ONE (March 12): Concentration Camp Dachau

DAY TWO (March 13): "White Rose" –exhibition, University of Munich; Nazi Documentation Center Munich; transfer to Salzburg

DAY THREE (March 14): Obersalzberg

DAY FOUR (March 15): Hartheim Euthanasia Center; Concentration Camp Mauthausen

DAY FIVE (March 16): Concentration Camp Ebensee, encounter with holocaust survivor Marko Feingold (Salzburg)

March 17: departure from Munich

Brief Description of the Sites:

Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp, located in the small German town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. The camp was established in March 1933 and liberated in April 1945, so it was operational for the entire 12 years of the Nazi regime. Altogether, more than 200,000 prisoners passed through the camp.

The "White Rose" exhibition is a permanent exhibition at the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich; it reconstructs the lives and actions of the "White Rose" resistance movement, led by students from the university, especially Hans Scholl and his sister Sophie Scholl. The exhibition is close to the "Lichthof," where Hans and Sophie Scholl were caught distributing leaflets on February 18, 1943 —both were executed four days later on February 22.

Obersalzberg, an alpine area near Berchtesgaden, a mountain village, was Hitler's holiday resort since 1923; Hitler bought a house in the summer of 1933, a property he had been renting since 1928. In two construction phases, between 1933 and 1936, he had it rebuilt into an impressive residence, the "Berghof" which served as a second head quarter.

Hartheim Euthanasia Center is located in Hartheim Castle, a Renaissance castle that became a euthanasia center for persons with disabilities in the spring of 1940; between 1940 and 1944, around 30,000 people with physical and mental disabilities, as well as with mental illnesses, were murdered.

The Concentration camp at Mauthausen was opened on August 8, 1938, a few months after the Anschluss of Austria and Germany; it was the site of a quarry that supplied the city of Vienna with granite stones, in isolated farm country. It was built to resemble a fortress on top of the steep hill overlooking the quarry. Close to 200 000 people, from more than 40 countries, suffered in Mauthausen; at least 90,000 people were killed.

Concentration Camp Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen, served the main purpose of providing slave labor for the construction of the enormous underground tunnels in which armament works were to be housed. Between 1943 and 1945 the Nazis deported around 27,000 male prisoners from more than 20 countries.

A Note on Marko Feingold

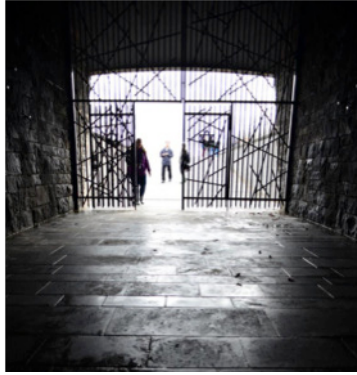
Marko Feingold was born on 28 Mai 1913; he is the oldest Austrian Holocaust survivor and President of the Jewish community in Salzburg; he was arrested in Vienna in 1938, escaped to Prague and was expelled to Poland; in 1939, he was arrested again and deported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He was also imprisoned in the concentration camps at Neuengamme and Dachau and finally the concentration camp in Buchenwald in 1941, where he stayed until his liberation in 1945. He moved to Salzburg; between 1945 and 1948, he supported Jewish survivors and organized the emigration of Jews from middle and Eastern Europe to Palestine. Since his retirement in 1977 he has dedicated his life to giving lectures about his time in concentration camps, the Holocaust and Judaism. We met him on March 16 in the synagogue of Salzburg; he himself opened the door for us and spent two hours with our group.

Organizing Our Reflections

We decided to organize our reflections along the following headlines:

1. A Sense of the (Un)Real
2. Living with Memory: Un(Raw) Remembering
3. Decisions and Design4 A Sense of Evitability
5. Roles and Responsibilities
6. Interpretive Freedom
7. Commemorative Equilibrium
8. “Meaning,” “Point,” and “Purpose”
9. The Common Good
10. On R(e)Turning to the Normal and the Everyday
11. On Being Human

1 A SENSE OF THE (UN)REAL



In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi imagines how members of the SS would boast themselves of defeating their victims:

We have won the war against you, none of you will be left to bear witness and even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will be perhaps suspicion, discussions, research by historians but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And if even some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed.

This captures one of the many feelings we experienced throughout the immersion. Not all of the evidence was destroyed, we visited several sites, we stood there where everything happened. We talked to Marko Feingold, and yet there was a part of it that was not comprehensible for us. This experience gave us a sense of the darkness into which humans can descend and how hatred can bring hell on earth. In the end, this sense of unrealness gave us some relief because in a way, it is desirable that we can never come to understand their twisted logic and the evil of their actions. Below we present some very raw quotes from our journals that capture this feeling:

Passing through that gate and into the grounds of Dachau Concentration Camp, it felt like I was witnessing something that was not real, something that was an aberration, a denial of reality. The way into the camp is, I was surprised to see, hauntingly beautiful—I heard the song of birds, I saw the sun shining through the still-wet leaves of the trees after the rainfall, I smelled the freshness of the air and took in the sight of the first blooming plants of spring. And I thought: how is it possible that, in a place of such natural beauty, human beings have constructed a hell?

When we started walking inside the camp [Dachau] I was feeling goosebumps. There was an energy, an environment that is hard to describe. Maybe I can't find the words or maybe words are not enough to explain it. There is something really meaningful about being there, that forces one to reflect about human nature. How can human beings do that to other human beings? How can such level of meticulous planning and execution take place to intentionally and deliberately cause human suffering, in a way never imagined before?

Gas chamber: Goodness, no words. I've read about them and seen pictures of them before. Actually standing there, thinking about what must have went through the minds of the victims, stunned by the callousness of the perpetrators—all this can only be experienced. I wish every person on the planet could have the same experience, if only so we are all reminded of the preciousness of life. How can we transmit memories and lessons that are felt as much as learned?

There was something different about Hartheim... people where only brought here to be killed in gas chambers. Right after they arrived at this place, they were undressed and taken to the gas chambers that were disguised as showers. Part of the evil bureaucracy that kept this killing machine going, also produced false death certificates... they were all murdered under the arguments of the Nazi euthanasia program where those lives that "had no chance to get better, had to be ended." Just writing this gives me goosebumps. How can one just decide that there are lives not worth living and take the opportunity to take life away from someone? Handicapped people did not have a place in the ideology of the strong German race and they had to be eliminated also as a matter of racial hygiene. Every step I took in that place felt more like I had fallen asleep and was having a terrible nightmare. I could not understand how such horror could be true.

How can it be true? Too horrible to be true. But it happened. In reality. It was real. In a reflection on doing historical research on Auschwitz German (*From Athens to Auschwitz*) historian Christian Meier mentioned the importance of being startled and horrified, again and again, in the midst of applying sober historical methods in a sober way. We must not lose the sense of the (un)real.

2 LIVING WITH MEMORY: UN(RAW) REMEMBERING



Munich Old Town Hall (Left-Our Group in March 2018, Right- the same building during Nazi Occupation)

Just as each member of our group is diverse in our backgrounds, studies, and beliefs, our reactions and takeaways from the memorial sites we visited was just as disparate. While some felt angry, or overwhelming sadness, others were called to action and motivated to

keep fighting against injustices around the world today. It is in these different emotional experiences and the intellectual conversations spurred from them that we found a way to live with the memories we made and the delicacy it requires to share what we observed with the outside world.

Shortly after the war, people didn't or wouldn't believe the survivors and what they endured: how could humans do that to one another? The events were so horrific that one couldn't bring themselves to actually listen to those that lived it- it shocks me.

We spent the day looking at exhibits carefully conceived and meticulously constructed after the events which they memorialize, not at the real physical artifacts of the Nazi horror. It was of course quite intellectually stimulating, but for me, at least, not as emotionally resonant.

I am becoming numb after visiting the third concentration camp and this emotion bothers me- isn't it my duty as a visitor here to feel the pain and overwhelming emotions? I hope this goes away.

In the museum at Dachau, they had two enormous photographs next to each other. The first was of a group of prisoners that had just arrived at the camp just prior to their "welcome" speech. There they stood, strong and determined with life still running through their veins. However, the next photograph was of that same group of prisoners some time later; they were in prison uniforms, head's shaved and possessed ghoulish eyes. It was clear that they had been broken, beaten, and the great fire of life was put out inside of them. It is that image that haunts me at night and motivates me "never forget."

What do you do when horrific memories surround you in your daily life? For instance, no matter where one goes in Munich, there seems to be an old Nazi site there. How can we commemorate the past without being consumed by it, ignoring it completely, or simply self-flagellating ourselves out of a sense of guilt for the past while not taking any steps to correct evils still alive in the present? In what sense do we have to "forget" in order to "remember?"

How can we commemorate the past without being consumed by it? Is the exercise an attempt "to make sense" and reflect on "the banality of evil," as Hannah Arendt famously stated? Or are we challenged to live with the silence facing the inexplicable?

3 DECISIONS AND DESIGN



Our reflections on "decisions and design" encompassed and related two aspects of what we noticed on our travels: both the design of the historical concentration camps made by the Nazi party and their strategic decisions about how their party was run and tasks undertaken, and the design of the memorials today and the conscious decisions made in

honoring each person who died and conserving each site from degradation. While the Nazi design was shocking and abhorrent—showing us the cruelty that human nature is capable of—the decisions made today by the German and Austrian people help to conserve these sights and memorialize them in a way that, in some ways, reclaims the autonomy of the victims.

Perhaps the most interesting thing our tour guide [Obersalzberg] talked about was the portrayal of Hitler as a leader in the public eye. He was always portrayed a certain way to appeal to the public—as a strong man, without flaws, devoted only to Germany, and with a caring heart who loved Germany.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of the Obersalzberg documentation center was the opening image of Hitler striking a Christ-like pose, combined with later images of the “children” being “brought to him.”

I reflected very heavily on the purpose of law (to protect human dignity) and why the camp had a “feigned penal system” — one that seemed to portray a system of actions and corresponding punishments, but was strictly perverted in a way that gave the prisoners no real escape from their torture.

Another interesting psychological fact was the idea the castle [Hartheim] medical workers put up barriers in the castle to protect themselves emotionally from seeing the entirety of the horrific events. For me, it appears as if these “barriers” were there to make both the medical staff and community feel like they didn’t actually know everything that was happening.

After seeing these disturbing images of the Nazi regime during the war, we also noticed strategic decisions made by conservators and memorializers (“memory keepers”) that held symbolic purpose. We can see that the Nazis designed in a way to torture, cover up their deeds, and present themselves in a certain way to the public, while the act of memorializing for many in Germany and Austria presents a way to make decisions and designs that both conserve the space, so as to “never forget,” and to honor and respect those who suffered and perished under the Nazis.

I took notice of the decisions that officials at the site [Dachau] obviously made concerning the placement of exhibit space and whether to reconstruct portions of the camp. Interesting that they chose to place the main exhibit in the old SS offices. Partly, I imagine, this was because the old offices were some of the only remaining original buildings on the site. Yet on a more symbolic level, it’s as if by telling of the prisoners’ experiences there, they are helping to reclaim that space on behalf of the survivors and victims. Likewise the decision to reconstruct only two barracks, and to use them to discuss prisoner life rather than events at the hospital and medical testing facility that actually stood on that spot, seems the right one to me.

Many believe that after the last survivor dies from a specific camp, how they are memorialized will be altered to reflect more of “today’s” needs at the memorial. I find this disturbing, in a way we would be rewriting the history to reflect our story instead of theirs.

Part of our challenge was not only to experience the sites, but also to reflect on our experiencing these sites. The designs of the sites shaped the design of our experiences. There were many and heated debates about decisions and designs around the Holocaust Memorial Site in Berlin that made people ask questions about ownership of memories as well as about the normative question of what should be evoked through the design of the site. Who has the authority and power to define and decide? A famous example of “anamnetic resistance” was the work of Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum who

sensed the risk of rewriting history and decided to put together an archive, an “oral history”, code named *Oyneh Shabes* of the every day life in the Warsaw Ghetto; he collected reports, letters, poems, photographs, official documents. He was determined to let the victims write their story, our history; Samuel Kassow aptly entitled his book about the Ringelblum Archives: *Who Will Write Our History?*

4 A SENSE OF EVITABILITY

Often, when we look at events from a distance, they seem to have this sense of “inevitability.” The sense that some event is certain to happen and nothing can get in its way. Like a train barreling down the tracks towards a car stuck in the middle of the tracks. There is no escape for the car, there is no changing direction of the train and there is no stopping the train. The collision between the train and the car are inevitable. This can also be said of events such as the Holocaust. The rise of Nazism was inevitable. Hitler was inevitable. Anti-Semitism was inevitable. The concentration camps were inevitable. However, when I look closer at the events of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany there was a sense of “evitability” rather than inevitability. These events of history were not destined to happen; rather we got a greater sense that the events were allowed to happen.

Obviously, the Nazi party did a lot to ensure that no one got in their way and prevent any dissent from the public, but a part of their rise was also the German people’s willingness to submit to the party. They were promised economic revival and chose to ignore the oppression of other groups. Of course the Nazi regime did not appear overnight. It was a process that took many small steps that gradually took power away from the people and into the hands of the Nazi leaders. Although the German people may not have supported everything the Nazis did, many of them thought they were powerless. Before the people had even noticed, the Nazis had taken their voice and their ability to dissent. The Nazi party did an exceptional job in isolating and detaching the German person from their community. However, if the German people were able to come together and regain their voice, if they were to come together to speak against the oppression of the Jews, the course of history may have been different. Rather, the events were allowed to happen. This is banding together is something that we saw from the prisoners at the concentration camp Ebensee. At the end of the war when the Nazis were trying to escape, they were going to send all the prisoners into the tunnels and blow them up to get rid of any evidence. However, the prisoners from many different backgrounds stuck together and refused to give in.

This led us to think about our own society and the wrongdoings of our own society. Although some of these wrongdoings do not necessarily affect me such as racism against blacks, bans against refugees, or discrimination of immigrants, we personally have a duty to speak out for their sake, just like the Germans should have for the Jewish people. We cannot sit idly by as society takes its course. Rather, we have a stake in our society and a responsibility towards it. We have a duty to change the direction society is heading when that direction is towards an evil. We have a responsibility to speak out and change things when there is a sense of evitability and before the inevitability sets in. Our reflections

express this sense in various ways:

It was striking that it just took a lot of small steps in order to transfer the power out of the people's hands into the hands of a few.

At the documentation center, throughout the exposition, I found a deep critique not only to the Nazis and the horrors they committed, but also on the German willingness to submit to a strongman and his promises of salvation in times of crisis. I felt as if they wanted to scream: His rise to power was not inevitable!

This exhibit [White Rose] illustrated for me the power of the intellect—the power of ideas—even in a time where freedom of thought was suppressed.

I was encouraged to hear the prisoners at Ebensee had avoided death in the tunnels during the end of the war by refusing to enter the tunnels in which the SS planned to blow them up and eliminate any evidence of wrong-doing.

The sense of evitability is a sense of contingency—it could have happened differently, it could not have happened at all; it was not necessary, hence it was avoidable and the product of many decisions and non-decisions. Bert Brecht called his 1941 “parable play” about Hitler, for good reasons, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

5 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

We have to preserve this strong sense of evitability; we need people who feel responsible for safeguarding and protecting this sense as a precious and fragile idea. We may also call them memory keepers.

How do we treat the memory keepers of our society? How do we treat those like Taft [our tour guide at the Dacau Concentration Camp], who store up all this information to give to us? —to give to me? It almost reminded me of the children's book The Giver by Lois Lowry. Do we at times shunt our memories onto select people to be keepers? Who are these people? How are they chosen? Are there times when I “opt out” of remembering something? We can't all remember all the time, so is this okay?

One exhibit [in the Documentation Center] mentioned the “silent resisters.” These silent resisters were defined as those people who critiqued the NSDAP amongst friends, who created a small “second street” so they wouldn't have to salute while passing the Nazi center. I recoiled at this. Silent resisters... after the war, did everyone claim to be a silent resister? Is this where we get the extraordinarily (falsely) high numbers of people who were involved in the Nazi resistance? Can we all claim to be silent resisters when we engage in slightly subordinate acts? Is that what the world needs? Or does the world need active resisters?

It became clear that Hartheim had an “agenda.” I do not mean this in a pejorative way: we all have agendas. We all have reasons for being, things we want to accomplish. In academia, I often see people pretending that they are third party observers to whatever they are studying, mere minds seeking to understand something outside of themselves. But this is just not the case! Hartheim was just honest about where they stood. They were open about how they designed the memorial, and why it was designed that way (for example, why there was a walkway crossing over the gas chamber).

How long do reparations last? How many generations should take the fall for their ancestors' sins?

He [Marko Feingold] has chosen to tell his story so many times— it suggests that remembering the event, no matter how awful, is necessary for him. Maybe it commemorates friends/ family who died, maybe it

cautions from never letting this happen again—but no matter the reason why he remembers, it is clearly important that he goes on remembering, even at 104. Maybe this culmination of personal remembering illustrates for us the ethics of memory in action.

Visiting the White Rose exhibition at Ludwig-Maximilian University reminded us of the imperative to remember not just the barbarism of the past but also the heroism. It is important to internalize the fact that human beings can muster the daring and courage to stand for the good even in the midst of intense and towering opposition. And if it is humanly possible, might it not be our responsibility to do the same type of thing if a similar situation arises? There is clearly a responsibility of those who cannot claim ignorance.

6 INTERPRETIVE FREEDOM

The tour guides we met and the exhibits we examined during our immersion did more than relay historical facts and figures. They interpreted these details, not only in the sense of providing English-language tours and bilingual exhibit captions, but just as importantly by translating facts and accounts about the past into stories, themes, and emotions we could connect with in the present. Site managers exercise significant oversight over the ways in which this interpretation occurs, and for good reason, as the case of a former Dachau tour guide being outed as a neo-Nazi suggests. But such efforts to standardize visitors' experiences bring their own set of challenges and questions. For while members of the visiting public can be told—either explicitly, or implicitly through the way exhibits and tours are designed—what they should think and how they should feel, they cannot actually be made to think and feel in these ways. And what might be lost when the general public is given no choice but to accept the historical and interpretive consensus? How might those interested in developing an ethics of remembering foster respect for diverse viewpoints without resorting to creating a false equivalency between, say, scholarly and neo-Nazi perspectives?

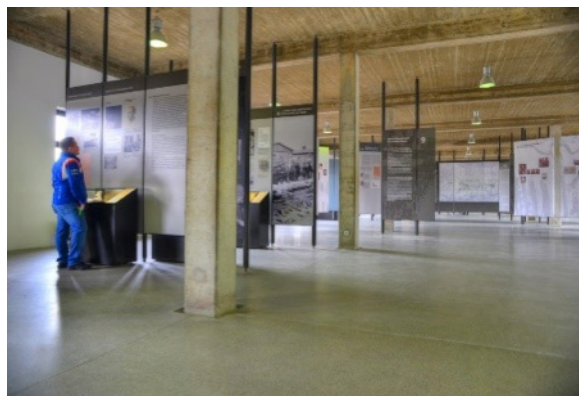
Members of our group reflected on these issues throughout the immersion, particularly during visits to Dachau and the Munich Documentation Centre. One participant made note of how *“it is clear that in these places there is prescribed a normative mode or fashion of remembering.”* *“At Dachau,”* this journal entry continued, *“the exhibits are highly structured and the tour guides tightly regulated,”* while at the Munich Centre, *“one’s visit is in effect arranged to trace a precise chronology in which the primary mode of interaction with exhibits is reading carefully crafted texts.”* These experiences left the writer struggling *“with this concept of telling people exactly how to remember.”* Museum staff and guides experience the same tensions, as a second participant noted. Taking our Dachau guide’s self-professed aversion to “preaching at” visitors as a starting point, this entry wondered

to what extent can we trust visitors with complicated narratives and nuance? Should historians tell people what they should glean from a site, at risk of them either ignoring it or intentionally pushing back, or try to get visitors to wrestle with questions, at serious risk of them not having the details or analytical frameworks with which to think through such dilemmas?

This reflection concluded by asking whether *“historians and curators have the right to impose a particular reading onto the past, no matter how convinced they are that it is the right and morally*

justifiable view,” especially given that “previous officials at the sites we’ve studied took steps to change landscapes and develop exhibits in ways that we now look upon as misguided.”

These thoughts and questions speak to the urgent need for an ethics of remembering grounded in notions of mutual respect and dialogue. At its best, memory work can proceed in tandem with community building, with members each bringing their unique perspectives to bare in the search for common identities and deeper truths.



L and R: Our tour guide at the entrance gate to Dachau; A visitor ponders the exhibits at Dachau.

7 COMMEMORATIVE EQUILIBRIUM

Reflective equilibrium is the idea of reaching a balance between general principles and the dynamics of a particular situation. There is a sense of balancing different perspectives and different aspects; there is an ambition to balance “cold data” and “hot information,” i.e. facts and figures and data sets on the one hand with faces and voices and stories on the other. Is this kind of balancing the appropriate way of going about remembering the Holocaust? Is it a matter of reaching well-balanced judgments? Do we face the challenge of negotiating the abstract with the concrete, the anonymous with the personal?

“Information”: The documentation center was overwhelming for me, as there was so much information everywhere I got lost in the details at points. Reminds me of the old National Park Service distinction between “information” and “interpretation,” which favored interpretation’s ability to make emotional connections with visitors. And yet, given the rise of neo-Nazi groups, I can see the reasoning behind presenting every bit of information concerning Hitler’s regime to document its existence and evils.

Again and again we encountered the challenge of “tangibility,” the challenge of making the times and experiences concrete in the stories of real persons in their particular circumstances and in their uniqueness.

These young students [White Rose] were able to write extremely moving pieces of literature that openly opposed the Nazis and they successfully opposed the Nazis for years. The legacy of the group was so powerful, that individuals continued to distribute the pamphlets after the core group was executed by the Gestapo and was quoted “but their spirit lives on.” I thought the exhibit’s presence in the University was very important and the use of personal stories and lives to be a strong way to protect memories. As opposed to many exhibits that focus on numbers of deaths and lives impacted, this exhibit focused exclusively on the stories of a select group of resistance fighters.

I think that Mauthausen did a good job in emphasizing the personal. I was very touched by personal

memorials at the crematorium site. Most of all, I was touched by the list of names of all the victims who had died.

What is the connection between personal agency and systemic structures? How do we deal with the challenge of not reducing a person to an epistemic object such as a “representative” of the vast category “victim” or the vast category “perpetrator”?

What is the place of the perpetrator in memory? When we remember these atrocious events, how should we speak of those that caused that much pain? Should we speak of them at all or should we dedicate our space completely to the victims whose dignity was denied in the perpetrator’s narrative? Do we taint places of memory by remembering the perpetrator or does not considering the perpetrator at all lead to impunity and the denial of their responsibility? How do we find a balance? These questions haunted me as we were walking through Dokumentation Obersalzberg. I was really shocked when we entered the place and there has a gigantic painting of Hitler on the wall... How should we remember the perpetrator?

I have been thinking a lot about how to balance the memory of mass murders with the fact that these were all individuals who were murdered. This has obviously been something that the designers of these memorials have also been thinking of, as many featured places of names of those killed at the camps. Mauthausen’s Room of Names: looking out upon as I walked through, there were so many names that it looked like a pattern etched into the stone. Ebensee’s list: elegant in the peacefulness of the cemetery. Hartheim’s pictures and lists and roses. However, I was reminded again of the differences of the sites. Whereas Mauthausen’s list could be found online, and the names at Ebensee were arranged in alphabetical order by year, Hartheim’s list was intentionally disorganized. Our guide said that this was done to protect families. It reminded me that the stigma of disabilities has lasted until today.

Emphasizing individual agency and the dense net of many, many decisions is one way to talk about responsibility and freedom and the chance of a “never again.” Clearly, moral philosophy would suggest that we cannot expect heroism to be the norm and moral saints to be the standard. We cannot expect all to act like the members of the “White Rose” resistance movement. But there is a unique responsibility in each and every case, so it seems. And pointing to this responsibility helps to show that the pointlessness we experienced in the camps had a point, and was constructed. Writing history, and the hard work of remembering, are also explicit ways to create meaning.

8 “MEANING,” “POINT” AND “PURPOSE”



Above: Italian monument at the Mauthausen concentration camp, affirming that Italian nationals who suffered and died there did so “for human dignity”

On the grounds of the Mauthausen concentration camp stand several monuments erected by countries whose citizens suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis. Those erected by France and Italy bear striking inscriptions that attribute purpose to the victims' deaths: the French monument is dedicated to those French individuals who died at Mauthausen "for liberty," while the Italian monument renders homage to the Italians who "for human dignity" perished at the camp. Death, here, is given a purpose; these monuments attest that the victims of the Nazis did not die for nothing. Yet the imposing sculpture that dominates the concentration camp at Dachau, a fearsome work that portrays bodies twisted into the shape of barbed wire—recalling thereby the prisoners who committed suicide by throwing themselves desperately into the electric fences—evokes the sense of emptiness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness of dying under such unimaginable circumstances. The following journal excerpts struggle with this tension between meaningless and meaning, evident in the memorial sites that we visited. One student was struck by the "lack of hope" that drove prisoners at Dachau to suicide, envisioning the camp as a "kind of hell"—that is, as a place of emptiness. Another is taken by the barbarity of indexing human lives to the value of eggs, as the Nazis did at Schloss Hartheim. While some students confronted the meaninglessness and the absurdity of Nazi terror, others were captivated by the imperative to inscribe meaning to the suffering and deaths of the victims. One student concludes that the victims of the Holocaust were witnesses, or 'martyrs,' to humanity—dying actively in testimony of a greater ideal, rather than meaninglessly—while another highlights the irreducible, intrinsic value of the victims themselves: *"It is important to remember... for the very people themselves."* Remembering the Holocaust must mean living with this tension, between the meaninglessness and absurdity of evil and the profound meaning and value of the people who suffered on its account.

At the center of the camp [Dachau] was a large statue depicting prisoners of the camp who had committed suicide by throwing themselves onto the electric barbed wire surrounding the camp. This was the most emotionally charged site at the camp for me ... provoking thoughts of this site as a kind of hell—hell as a lack of hope, as despair.

One of the artifacts that struck me the most was the "Hartheimer Statistik" which described the Euthanasia statistics by camp. Victims of these euthanasia centers were valued by how many eggs/\$ were saved by killing them off. In other words, the human life was cruelly given an economic value by the Nazi party. (See photo of human life value chart below).

Unter der Voraussetzung, dass die Ernährung der Anstaltsinsassen - auch nach Beendigung des Krieges - dieselbe bleiben wird, wie zur Zeit, so würden die Rationen an Lebensmittel (bei 70-77) befristeten und einer Lebenserwartung von 10 Jahren folgende sein:

Lebensmittelart	kg	Stk	W
Kartoffeln	109.737,160	7.799.747	34.000,00
Fleisch-,Wurst-	12.492,640	260.249	74.000,00
Ei	59.009,200	1.190.296	20.000,00
Wehl	12.449,200	892.999	9.000,00
Butter	4.216,640	84.299	10.000,00
Butterfett	421,660	8.429	1.000,00
Margarine	2.794,760	79.899	1.000,00
Speck	191,240	10.629	1.000,00
Wurst	1.054,080	21.080	84.000,00
Eier	1.054,080	21.080	1.000,00
Mehlmittel	1.686,600	72.712	84.000,00
Teigwaren	1.479,760	27.119	1.000,00
Brot usw.	421,660	8.429	210.000,00
Kaffee-Prepate	2.779,080	67.629	7.000,00
Wurstwaren	2.909,200	116.029	7.000,00
Dunkel	7.599,200	151.979	2.000,00
Bier	12.771,080 Stk	---	1.000,00
Gewürz	8.216,640	21.080	1.000,00
Brotfrucht	1.054,080	21.080	210.000,00
Salz u. Gewürzsalz	1.054,080	21.080	210.000,00
Gesamt	400.244,200	8.000.000	141.775.573,00

There is a clear desire to cast the deaths of the innocent as a kind of martyrdom for some greater ideal—liberty or human dignity—when what historically caused such deaths was the adherence of evil people to perverted ideals, like injustice and racial supremacy. In remembering, we would like to affirm that the victims died not meaninglessly but rather for something. And it strikes me that the thing for which they died—or more precisely, the things of which they were witnesses or ‘martyrs’—was humanity.

It definitely made me think of yet another aspect of the importance of remembering. Yes, it is important to remember for “never again.” It is important to remember for those still living. It is important to remember for those still being affected by injustices. But it is also important to remember for those who died. For the very people themselves. We must remember the dead for their own sake.

Remembering the dead for their own sake is one way to honor the dignity of a person who must never be reduced to a means to an end; not even to the noble end of striving towards a common good.

9 THE COMMON GOOD

The framing idea of our immersion was the concept of the common good. Within Catholic Social Teaching, the common good is said to be “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Gaudium et spes*, 26). When we recognize the human dignity of each and every person, recognizing that our lives are bound up with the lives of all others, we can then commit to the common good. The horror of the sites we visited showed us what happens when the common good is eroded.

The parallels seen in the Nazi Propaganda [at Obersalzberg] had me feeling déjà vu for what I see at home: rise of anti-semitism, police brutality, tensions rising between population groups, civil unrest, riots. Maybe it is true what they say: “History always repeats itself but what side of history will we be on?” How can I take the messages and all that I have learned from this trip and teach others, motivate others, to fight for the common good for all on our planet?

I left Dachau stunned by the cunning of the SS in setting prisoner groups up against each other, taking advantage of every divide—religious, national, political, etc.—to produce maximum suffering and limit any possibility for collective resistance. How easily humanity can come to resemble the disparate groups gathered under the Tower of Babel!

There has been very little solidarity between the groups. I am surprised that there has been no coming together after such tragedy to support each other, because only they know what they went through and that is a powerful thing to share. But instead they have been fighting about who was more or less victimized. Thinking about the ethics of remembering and memorializing, this poses a strong question: Who deserves to be remembered as a victim?

The question of remembering and memorializing also became a question of the common good: how do these sites work to promote the common good and community today? How do we remember in a way that is at the service of each and every human?

One of the key challenges of a Holocaust memorial, as we discussed numerous times within our group, was how to remember groups without insulting other groups. The two memorial sculptures at the center of the camp had two different messages for me. The large statue (built by a prison survivor) signified

prisoners taking control of their own deaths by committing suicide by running into the barbed wire at the edge of the camp. The second statute included a collection of triangles which each signified various groups within the camps. However, we discussed the fact certain groups were excluded from the art including anti-socials and homosexuals.

Monuments [in Dachau] were divided by religion. This was interesting to me, also how the Christians had the “center” memorial which upset a lot of Jews. This brings up the ranking of victims idea. Even seeing the Jewish memorial off to the side upset me ... but why?

Throughout this trip, I’ve become less and less convinced about the importance of the specifics set-up of each site—precisely because each site has been pretty well done—and more convinced on the importance of personal interaction with these topics. The tour guides have been indispensable to my learning, to my remembering. I am reminded again that relationships come first and learning comes second. I’m wondering now if perhaps this is true for memories too. Perhaps it is the relationships we have with people connected to a topic that enable our ability to remember well. I’ve been thinking a lot about the priority of truth in remembering and wondering how we get to that truth. I think relationships and community may be one way to do this.

Yet even in these places where horrors had occurred, we found people working for the common good—in the past and in the present.

The White Rose Memorial Museum was a way of remembering a few of those who did work for the common good at the time, those trying to make society back into something at the service of every individual. The Scholl siblings and the rest of the White Rose group realized the evil of the regime, but didn’t just rest knowing that they knew the truth of this evil. They also realized they didn’t exist apart from others, that they existed with and for others.

The atrium [at the White Rose exhibit] was startling. I walked right past it as we went to the exhibit. Only later did I realize that this was where the Scholls were arrested. I realized it was RIGHT HERE where people sought the common good—in the entryway of a university building, an everyday place.

How far I would go to stand up like the Scholls and others did. To be honest, I do not know if I am brave enough if I were in their shoes. They threw out all concerns for their families’ well being to fight for the common good which I find so honorable. I also ponder the idea of friendship and resistance. There is strength in numbers and if they didn’t meet others with the same ideas would this [White Rose resistance] have even happened?

So many sites had an unspoken mantra of “never again.” Schloss Hartheim was different. Schloss Hartheim seemed to be saying, “It’s still happening.” People with disabilities are still being treated as less. The people who worked at Schloss Hartheim seemed to me to be working for an acknowledgment of the fundamental dignity of all people. This was done in word and action; not only did they call attention to the similarities between the past and the present, the site itself was accessibly designed, with ramps and sign-language interpretation videos. This was an organization utilizing memories to work for the common good today.

As communities of memory we are also communities of hope and aspirations.

Memory holds, as James Booth argues in *Communities of Memory*, a defining place in determining how justice is administered; memory is linked to the very possibility of an ethical community, a community responsible for its past, a community able to make

commitments for the future, including the commitment to seek justice.

10 ON R(E)TURNING TO THE NORMAL AND THE EVERYDAY

And after the immersion we emerge and we get re-immersed in our daily, ordinary lives. We return to “the normal.” But what exactly is normal? Normality can be defined as *individual behavior that is consistent with and conforms to the most common behavior in society*. In some sense, what happened during the Holocaust was perfectly normal. In fact, any evil and destructive behavior can become normal through consensus. It is no surprise that many citizens living in Nazi Germany didn’t take any sort of action, and instead went along with the mainstream narrative. Maybe some had mixed feelings about it, but it is difficult to challenge consensus. Others fully supported it. With this in mind, how does an individual who was a former supporter of the Holocaust return to normal? Is it even possible to truly rehabilitate a Nazi supporter? Perhaps the best we can hope for is for them to recalibrate their behavior out of fear, without really changing their minds; “think as you like, but behave like others.”

One danger of trying to rehabilitate is that it leads to emotional numbness. This is true about exposure to any stressor. Rehabilitation involves education, and an overexposure to a topic, such as the Holocaust, will lose its effectiveness over time for several reasons. First, through generational/temporal distance, the reality of the Holocaust fades and becomes almost like a movie for younger generations, almost like reading mythology. Second, overexposure can lead to indifference or even resentment over the constant forcing of information upon an individual. The fading/numbness can be seen by comparing the local population to foreign visitors:

My heart was pounding faster when we were in the bus getting close to Dachau. In my mind this was an isolated and dark place, so I was really surprised when I saw houses very close to the camp. Some of them were right next to it, and their balconies were facing the camp. I thought to myself that I would never want to live in a place that had a view to a setting where such atrocities had happened. Although this is not a judgement to the people who live there, I just found it very shocking that the city had approved an urban development so close to the site, that houses were built, and that people actually lived there. This leads to a deeper question? What should be done in places like this? How do we incorporate them into life? There is a tension between remembering and forgetting, continuing to feel the pain or moving on and building houses.

A visitor is overwhelmed, whereas people in the neighborhood are living their lives as if Dachau wasn’t even there:

What shocked me more, and what became a recurrent issue in some of the later visits to other sites, was how the “separation” never really existed. This was also evident in Mauthausen, where people had lived near concentration camps, and the local population went to soccer games that the SS organized. They were able to see the sanitary unit where prisoners were being held. There is also some information on locals that showed the prisoners how to do the work on the quarry. People knew what was going on, but they decided to look the other way around and do nothing.

Perhaps the most shocking instance of dampening the reality of the Holocaust is seen in cases where people live on the actual camp grounds:

In Ebensee, where the concentration camp was destroyed, people's houses stand right above the former concentration camp site and overlook the small cemetery which stands as a memorial to those who died. I understand the need to refrain from judgment, of course—I am not a cash-strapped Austrian looking for a place to live, so who am I to say anything?—but I found it deeply disturbing that the history of the place can be so relegated to the wayside that people can just live normally where a concentration camp once stood.

There was something more poignant about Ebensee than the other concentration camps we have visited, for neighborhoods have choked out much of the site. There is no dominating stone guard tower here, just a gate in the middle of the street, a cemetery that at first glance seems like the community graveyard, and tunnels that only those who are looking for them will find—as if memories of the Nazi terror are slowly, imperceptibly drifting away and being replaced by the “stuff” of everyday life. What will the world be like when we pay no more attention to the Holocaust than, say, the Thirty Years War?

Sadly, I could see myself moving to this place [Ebensee] more so than into the houses overlooking Dachau. I can hear myself thinking, “So many others are doing this. It must be all right.” But it's not. How can we live in houses facing a concentration camp cemetery like it is some kind of park or town square? Like it is an ordinary cemetery and not a mass grave? Do we not remember?

We went into the gas chamber it was very shocking. When I was inside I felt I could not breathe. When I close my eyes I still can see the sign that said “Brausebad” (which means showers) above the entrance door. When we left the camp, I kept asking myself how could one make sense of all this. How do we transition into normal life as if nothing had happened? How do we laugh, eat, live after this?

11 ON BEING HUMAN

“How do we laugh, eat, live after this?” We are human beings; we need to laugh, eat and live. Even after this. But we will be transformed. And we have learnt so much about what it means to be human. This is maybe the key question: what does it mean to be human? It is shocking and amazing to see what human beings can do to other human beings. If we were to tell aliens about the human condition—what would we say? If we were to teach a course “On Being Human” —what would we teach? How do we think about being human, being “more than” human, being “less than” human?

A few key words come to mind: human beings have a vulnerable body; they depend on external circumstances; they seek recognition; they have a history and a story to tell; they live interdependently in special relationships; they know and create darkness; they are able to be moved and touched and hurt; they show an ability for the good; they have inner lives; they are finite and mortal and limited; they have desires, some of which beyond the finiteness and mortality; they are open to the intangible.

Hitler in the propaganda was portrayed as Jesus-like, as positively divine, and yet clearly in reality he was subhuman. Propaganda elevates the animalistic and beastly tendencies of human nature to divinity – and so a proper remembering of the evils of Nazi propaganda must humble us all by affirming the difficult truth of our capacity to reject of the good that we each have as a primordial memory, an anamnesis. Ratzinger said in “Conscience and Truth” that conscience must accuse us and not justify us—these sites form part of the collective conscience of humanity, for the silent echoes of the victims that emanate almost from the very walls indict human nature itself.

Amazing how here [Mauthausen], as well as at Hartheim and Dachau, the SS placed sites of horror in close proximity to civilians. I had always thought they placed these centers in restricted areas far from sight. And yet local farmers here could look straight down into the quarry! What does that say about the human ability to rationalize horror and distance ourselves from those considered “less human?”

Naming the people and hanging their pictures is a claim of their uniqueness and human dignity. They were not numbers anymore, they were people. They also had a room that displayed some of the objects that victims carried with themselves when they were taken to Hartheim: the most frequent objects were glasses, rosaries, and toothbrushes. This conveyed a sense of the horror committed because it personalized and humanized the people who were killed there. They wore glasses to see better, they brushed their teeth, they prayed, they were just like you and me.

In recounting Auschwitz, some of Marko’s comments included “worst thing you can imagine,” “there is no escape,” and “you can’t imagine what people do to people.” Marko sadly noted that this was the first place he considered taking his life but was giving strength by the idea his brother was alive. After two years in concentration camps, Marko finally saw himself in a mirror and noted he didn’t recognize himself.

Human beings want to survive, and more than that, we want to live. Human beings are curious; we like to know, we like to understand – and then we have to live with this knowledge. Knowledge is power and knowledge is a burden.

Beneath the manipulation, ideology, and barbarism of the Nazi regime lay fear of free thought. Why else spend so much time tracking down a bunch of university students who could oppose Gestapo guns only with paper and ink? Why else burn books or remove paintings? These sites are powerful reminders to me of how totalitarianism thrives only to the extent it cuts off the light of debate and inquiry.

Ideas are powerful; and some ideas continue to be powerful; there is this powerful idea that some lives matter more than others. Greg Boyle in his book *Tattoos on the Heart* characterizes “kinship” with these very words: it is the refusal of the claim that “there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives.”

At Schloss Hartheim, I was brought back to a recent conversation I had on what it meant to be “healed.” Jesus healed. He reunited families, sent out demons, and commanded the crippled to walk. Yet, today, healing is mostly thought of in a simple “biomedical” sense. People are examined, diseases are diagnosed, and medicine is prescribed. This is all wonderful. But healing doesn’t end there. And just because a disease isn’t diagnosed, or a person isn’t cured, doesn’t mean healing didn’t happen. True healing is something different. True healing is living a fulfilling life. What does it mean to have a fulfilling life? What are basing this on? The practical “eradication” of Down Syndrome in some countries shows that some people think that having an extra copy of chromosome 21 somehow puts a limit on a fulfilling life. After today, I’ve realized this is even more present than I thought.

Being human is not just a descriptive state, something that can be described; there is also a prescriptive side, an imperative that follows from being human: value the human person for she is human.

[The exhibition Hartheim] brought the memory of the event into the present day. I enjoyed having an explicit discussion about how we can treat people today to ensure that no life is ever undervalued again.

EPILOGUE

One quotation particularly resonated with us, a famous poem by German pastor Martin Niemöller who spent years in the concentration camps of Sachsenhausen and Dachau:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.