

Study Abroad as Moral Exploration

by

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Study abroad, even short-term study abroad, almost always leads to some form of discovery – certainly of a new cultural setting, sometimes of facility in a language other than English, even of self-discovery. It is a truism that we only truly know our own culture by being outside it and seeing it with new eyes. But sometimes the discovery is awful, even terrifying.

Over the years I have led study abroad courses to the Europe I know best, German-speaking Europe. But the self-discovery component of the course was never explicit and most often only a gratifying by-product of the course and travel. Discovering that they are globally mobile is a very common outcome for students who have traveled little prior to study abroad. For study abroad professionals, this is most telling when the student returns for another, and longer, study abroad sojourn.

The single most enduring moral issue in the history that I have taught off and on over thirty-five years – modern German history – is, of course, the Holocaust. I included the Holocaust as one of several key topics every time I taught 20th century Germany. But in Spring 2006 I felt a personal need to focus on the Holocaust in my last teaching opportunity at Old Dominion University (Norfolk, VA) prior to my retirement. For this reason, I offered “Germans, Jews and the Holocaust” as a spring semester study abroad course.

I was much encouraged when the student group met in late-January- in fact on the 63rd anniversary of Hitler’s coming to power - for the first orientation to the course and to travel to Europe. One after the other expressed a quest to understand the Holocaust at a quite personal and even moral level. One said simply: “I want to understand why this terrible thing happened.”

As the students gathered for pre-departure class sessions in late February, I found myself emphasizing the analytical problem – fascinating in itself – of how the Holocaust (and Auschwitz as the symbol of the entire process) could have happened. This led to an exploration of the “intentionalist” view

that Auschwitz flowed logically and inevitably from Hitler's fanatical anti-Semitism and the "functionalist" view that mass extermination developed only after a "twisted road" of contradictions and failures in Nazi policy toward the Jews. In this latter view, now widely accepted in one form or another among specialists, Auschwitz was not inevitable and was not even imagined until late in the Nazi era.

But this approach inevitably focused more on the *how* rather than the more philosophical *why* of the Holocaust. I was going down the wrong path to my own self-discovery. Perhaps I was too focused on the historical subject matter itself to accept that the process of reflection on issues of good and evil might be more central to the experience.

When we arrived in Berlin on March 3, however, I realized that I would be sharing a different kind of exploration with my students.

We read the letters from families on the way to the camps in the new Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate (and the future US Embassy). We heard Stephan Kramer, Executive Director of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, rail against the new memorial as a sham. Why did an American architect have to design the memorial? Why did an American choir have to sing at its dedication? Are there no Jewish singers to commemorate their own dead? Go to the places where the murders took place, Kramer said. "The Germans did not invent anti-Semitism. But Germans did invent Auschwitz."

And on our final day in Europe, my students and I walked the two hundred yards along snow-packed paths from the infamous "ramp" where the trains halted in Auschwitz-Birkenau to the gas chambers and crematoria. Here in this place over 1 million human beings were worked to death, executed or gassed and died of disease and starvation. One student drew on Biblical imagery to understand what she was experiencing: ". . . it felt like walking in the shadow of death. So much death that you can feel it in the bitter wind. The silence that hangs in the air like a fog is a testament to the millions of cries and screams that echo in my heart." Another wrote of the knowledge that can come only from confronting evil: "It's grotesque, it's disgusting, it's hateful, and it's absolutely necessary. . . Without seeing this, it is impossible to see the Holocaust for what it is. . . . You can see a picture of a dinosaur, but it's not like seeing the bones of a dinosaur. Auschwitz is the bones [of the Holocaust]."

And most asked about the perpetrators as well. Who were they? Were they “ordinary” Germans – as Daniel Goldhagen infamously claimed ten years ago? Or were they extraordinary Germans – even men with advanced university degrees? And could this crime have been possible without countless indifferent Germans, collaborating French and Hungarians and many other enablers, such as the Poles and, most tragically, even the victims themselves. But this line of thinking takes us back to the *how* and avoids the *why*.

When Elie Wiesel spoke at ODU later that month, the entire campus community had a chance to listen to a master of this kind of exploration. Few can hope to achieve his depth of thought, and few can bring his own experience literally from the hell of Auschwitz to this questioning of both human degradation and human hope. When he spoke of memory as a shield against indifference, hatred and violence, Wiesel captured the heart of the matter on why confronting the Holocaust is so important. That there are so-called Holocaust deniers as heads of state (for example, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Iran) and elsewhere in Europe and the US (including in universities) only shows that education cannot guarantee a wiser, more humble, understanding of human nature. But directly confronting Auschwitz, as the deniers have not done, reveals both the potential for evil and potential for heroism and good in our nature.

I want to thank my ODU colleagues David Metzger, Cathy Banks and Elizabeth Lipsmeyer who shared all or part of this exploration with me. Each in his or her own way helped sharpen my questions about the Holocaust – and offered many insights that had escaped me along the way.

But my special thanks are to my students who spent their spring semester asking some of the most difficult questions about one of the great crimes of human history, trying to imagine themselves in the place of the victims – and of the perpetrators and collaborators – in order to experience history as far more than names and dates, more than the *how*. To experience history as moral exploration.

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