

Read the following account of a visit to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, written by Bryan Darr, a MCC student.

Once you go there, you will never be the same. Two summers ago when I was visiting Germany on an exchange program, a small piece of land changed my perception of life and history. The concentration camp, Buchenwald – located eight kilometers from Weimar in Thuringia, Germany – is not just a location, but rather an incident in my life that will haunt me forever. When I visited there on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000, I thought I was ready for what I would see: but truthfully, no one really is. If you ever spend time in these remains of death and despair, the atmosphere and memories will penetrate you, brand you and scar your soul, forever.

Our tour began that day in a fashion that was anything but depressing: we decided to first tour the city of Weimar. In its time, and even today, Weimar was a flowering cultural center. Countless celebrities and famous figures spoke from the balcony of the Elephant Hotel in the marketplace. Goethe, the German equivalent of Shakespeare, resided there, as well as his publisher. During the time of Buchenwald's operation, Hitler used Weimar as a focal center to promote his ideas. Unbeknownst to the people of Weimar, less than ten kilometers away a camp was running, holding political prisoners and burning its dead in the night. Undoubtedly the government officials knew, but on the larger scale, none of the citizens did (or admitted to it, ever.) With the thought of such mass ignorance and carefully constructed lies from the government, we climbed into our bus and drove a short ten minutes to the camp.

When we got to the camp, I was already aiming to be depressed. I knew that the sights and smells and sounds of the camp would bring with them great sadness, but I wanted to make sure that it hit home. In my opinion, every single person on the face of the earth needs to see what can happen when ideas go unquestioned and actions go unanswered. So with that in mind, I was ready for depression. We first saw a video explaining the operation of Buchenwald and its use. We learned that it was not a death camp, as many of us had expected, but just what it title said: a concentration camp. One of the first camps to be utilized, it was formed in July of 1937 to isolate opponents of the Nazi regime from the rest of society. Nevertheless, it was used on occasion for mass

killings of prisoners of war. As the time passed, more and more people, including Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and gypsies were sent to Buchenwald. With the video over, we walked three minutes to the main entrance to the camp. This is where the present melted away and the past took over.

From where I stood on the road leading to the main gates, I could see in the distance behind me what the arriving inmates must have seen. I couldn't help but think and feel some of what they must have felt. Masses of people on a narrow road, being marched towards an unknown fate. To the left were offices and to the right were interrogation rooms where the prisoners were registered and numbered. But straight ahead and a little to the right was the real point of interest. The gatehouse was about two stories tall, twenty rooms wide, and surprisingly simple. It did not, however, come without its own unique and frightening characteristic. On the cold iron gates, designed so that only those inside could read it, were the words *JEDEM DAS SEINE*. Directly translated this means "to each his own." However, the clearly implied meaning was "everyone get what he deserves." I couldn't help but wonder what sort of evil mind put that on the gates so that the prisoners would see it every day. In the gatehouse, we later learned, were small solitary confinement cells and pre-execution chambers. Visitors, however, were not allowed in that section. There was one other major point of interest on the gatehouse: a clock at the top, its hand forever frozen at 3:15 – the time the camp was liberated by the Americans. But it was what lay beyond the gates that we really had come to see.

The inside of the camp was much smaller than I had imagined, only stretching from the gatehouse to the tree line, about 200 yards away. As I stood on the empty grounds, I imagined what on earth could have happened, less than 100 years ago: hundreds of prisoners made to stand in the freezing cold for three hour stretches, or longer; officers barking out orders like demonic hounds; sirens going off in the distance. The ground on which I stood was covered with small stones, and the air was bone chilling. I thought about how I would have felt if I had been here during its operation, standing there in threadbare clothes. As I looked around, I saw that there were very few buildings remaining. Most of the buildings had to be burned because typhoid had become so rampant that they were deemed a major health hazard. In their place, black

stones marked the multitude of barracks that once housed the sick and dying, casting a subtle yet strong contrast to the gray of the rest of the camp. As I walked around, I couldn't help but think of the possibility of escape. A quick look behind me, however, made me wonder why the thought had even crossed my mind. The entire camp ran uphill from the barracks to the gatehouse and was surrounded by ten foot tall fencing tipped with razor wire. I saw a guard tower in one corner and was reminded of what I had learned earlier – that those prisoners who tried to escape were not shot to death, but wounded, left on the rolls of razor wire before the fencing to bleed and be torn apart by dogs. After a few moments of thought I turned around to face the other end of the camp and the ominous chimney in the distance. And so I stood there in the middle of the yard, hands in my pockets and my back to the howling wind, slowly growing numb.

As I returned to the group, we made our way towards a small corner of the compound. I was taken aback, however, when I saw the crematorium silhouetted against the gray afternoon sky. While I walked along the gray silent rocks, through the chilling winds, I couldn't help but think about the sadness of what went on there. Then as I stood outside the crematorium, I desperately wanted to feel the pain that must have been felt there. I wanted to cry. But the fact is, it isn't possible to feel the presence of the deceased by just standing there. You can't see what the walls saw just by looking at them, nor can you hear what the floors heard. You have to open yourself to as much pain as you can bear to enable you to take the message of this camp with you. As I walked towards the crematorium entrance, I knew I was growing more immune to my emotions. Maybe it's a mental safeguard, but after an hour in this place your brain starts to shut down. You go from active thought and observation to simply numb existence, passively allowing the memories and messages – of the prisoners who died here and the Nazis who should have – to crawl inside you where they will live forever.

The crematorium was surrounded by a high wooden fence, preventing anyone from looking inside and seeing what was really happening. At the entrance to the yard was a memorial for all of the Polish people detained and burned in the camp. Next to it was a plaque explaining the ultimate cruelty of cremation: denying the deceased recognizable graves and thus erasing all memories of them. Below that (in five different languages, just as the rest of the signs) the plaque asked that, out of respect and reverence

for the deceased, total silence be observed within the hallowed grounds of the crematorium. A shiver came over me as I read this. It made so much sense to pay respect to them with silence and contemplation, and it was strangely reassuring to see that someone else felt the same way. As I walked along though, I heard others talking and ruining the silence. Resentment flickered through me as their irreverence for the situation pulled me away from my silent mourning. Why couldn't they bother to respect the people who were incinerated here? My only hope was that they hadn't read the sign.

The first room of the crematorium complex I entered was sunk into the ground, with a step down in the entrance. Its walls were covered in smooth yellow tile, now cracked and covered with chipped paint. In the middle was a solid concrete table, covered by white tile, with slightly raised edges. It was the perfect size for a body. Laid out next to the table were instruments that wouldn't be found in the most primitive of hospitals today. On the back wall was a sink, and next to it a glass cabinet containing more barbaric tools. The plaque on the wall explained that along with holding prisoners, concentration camps offered unrestrained medical experimentation opportunities as well. I thought I was going to be sick. The cold and completely inhuman sterility of this room elicited thoughts of experimentation more evil than could be imagined. The next room was filled with urns behind a glass plate. These were some of the recovered remains from the yard outside.

The previous two rooms, however, could in no way prepare me for the shock of the third. Eight two foot tall, six foot long red-brick and black-steel ovens stood in two groups of four, doors open, feeding trays ready, overpowering the room. The presence of flowers covering the trays made the shock of sadness all the more powerful. To know that actual people were burned here, in this room, where I was now standing in total shock and realization, was overwhelming. I knew at that point that I had seen something that only a few privileged people ever get to. This was the stuff that history books are written about. As I walked by the ovens, I peered into them, consumed with the nightmarish thought of what it would be like to be pushed into that space, locked in, and burned. Such simple objects of brick, mortar, and metal. But that wasn't the worst of what I would see.

Moving past this room to the yard in back, I passed an elevator that led up from the basement. What was down there was bone chilling. From the outside, there was a chute leading down to the basement. As the inscription at the bottom of the stairs explained, the bodies were brought onto the elevator to be sent up to the burners. However horrific, this was understandable. What didn't make sense were the rows of black metal hooks on the tops of all the walls. The answer, however, was inhumanly simple. These were used to strangle and murder anyone who was still alive after entering this room. And there were a lot of hooks. I couldn't believe what I'd seen and read. The thought of all the people who died in this basement was overwhelming. Thus far, this room had the greatest impact, and all I could do was stand there and absorb it. I then realized that I was one of the few people who had ever made it into this dimly lit concrete hell and lived to tell about it.

There was one last building that we had to visit. This daunting structure housed the disinfectant tanks, clothing depot, and storage rooms. Seeing the disinfectant tanks was also painful. How could anyone throw someone, naked and cut, into a vat of flesh-searing liquid? And this didn't happen just once. It happened to every single prisoner who entered the camp – total, burning immersion. Still naked, they were herded through the other rooms. I could only imagine how humiliating it was to be robbed of their possessions, completely shaven, and issued their final set of clothing. In contrast to its original purpose of robbing people of their dignity, these rooms were now dedicated to celebrating their talents and immortalizing their thoughts and their memory. The walls displayed pictures painted by inmates during their time in, and after, Buchenwald. It also included works by other artists against the Nazi regime. It was strangely calming and reassuring to see this massive anti-Nazi display. Given the extreme subject of these displays, they were in no way a conventional art exhibit. These were a means of survival, as well as a testimony to the crimes committed by the Nazis. I continued through the sterile concrete halls, hearing my heels click on the floor, when I came to a horrifically disturbing display.

In order to capture the moment and memory of the pain and suffering of this camp, the government had hired artists to create sculptures, paintings and collages of the most disturbing and upsetting artwork imaginable. They were successful. As the plaque

entitled “Testimony” stated, these were not meant to be interpretive art, nor were they intended to be interpreted. Plain and simple, they were designed to distress and mortify anyone who walked past them. The first room, dedicated the evil of the Nazis, contained an assortment of frightening displays, torture devices, piles of prisoner belongings, sadistic human likenesses, and collages of suffering emotions. The second room was dedicated to pain. Some of the sculptures used Styrofoam representing people from the chest up. They were covered in blood, burned, stabbed, contorted, tortured, mutilated, and given expressions screaming silently of more pain than can possibly be imagined. Walking through this room, I was unable to feel anything but immense fear and pain and sadness, the sights before me piercing my mind and burning their memory within. The third room was dedicated to silent memories. Using thin plastic, the artists created inmate uniforms green and worn bare with age, hanging motionlessly from the ceiling. The silent room was filled with them. Some had hats, others had sacks resting on the floor below them. It felt like you were walking through the hall of the dead, their remains crying out for help and salvation. The final room contained quilts and pictures from the prisoners, made and confiscated during their stay.

After those rooms, I couldn’t take any more. I couldn’t feel, I couldn’t cry, and I could not stop thinking about the horror I had seen. I walked blindly through the rest of the museum, noticing a few things but mostly and involuntarily overlooking the majority of the display items. From there I walked through the main yard, alone, thinking about all that had happened in this evil place. The idea that anyone could suffer this much, or that anyone could create so much pain, hurt. How could an entire nation not know, or worse, look away? Walking back to the gate, I picked up a rock to take with me. I knew then once again why I had come here, and why everyone else should. To spend two hours in this camp where 50,000 people died did more for me and the people I was with than a lifetime of propaganda, and history lessons ever could. It is important that people see this horror and take it with them, sharing it with everyone they meet and thereby perpetuating the memory of those who might have otherwise died in vain. Just as the inmates of Buchenwald were trapped, haunted by their emotions and fears, so will the memory of human atrocity and injustice remain a prisoner of my mind, forever.