

Bridge between dual realities

Dana Greene | Jan. 22, 2010



A view of the Klosterstrasse, a street in Dachau's historic Altstadt (Old Town) (Courtesy of Stadt Dachau)

One travels to Bavaria to revel in Oktoberfest, to experience elegant palaces and red-roofed towns with cobble streets and sturdy pastel colored houses, where geraniums drip from window boxes. There the landscape is green, bucolic and soothing. The food is delicious, and art and music are abundant. One such town on the Amper River provides glorious views of Munich, some 17 kilometers to the south. Although small, the town is venerable; its founding dates from the time of Charlemagne. For nine centuries the princes of the Wittelsbach family that ruled Bavaria resided here. Their last *schloss*, a baroque, 18th-century summer palace, is perched high above the town. It and the late-Renaissance, onion-domed church of St. Jakob are the town's landmarks. For some 50 years this town was home to one of Europe's most important artist colonies. Artists were attracted to this rural setting because of its marshlands and the particular light and refraction of color it provided. The artist colony flourished up through the Great War, but its legacy can still be appreciated in the permanent exhibit of the town's handsome art gallery. In every regard this town is the tourist's dream, a place full of aesthetic charm, a beautiful landscape, and an interesting history.

But its name, Dachau, is etched in the imagination as synonymous with evil, torture and inhumanity. Here, in a dilapidated World War I armaments factory, the first Nazi work camp in Bavaria was founded, the only one to operate from 1933 through 1945. Although almost everyone directly associated with the camp is now deceased, the residents of the town of Dachau bear the ongoing burden of their past. Dachau is a place both of beauty and of horror, and it is the particular responsibility of its citizens to acknowledge both legacies. The poet Denise Levertov, writing in response to the Vietnam War, captured their conundrum:

Joy
is real, torture
is real, we strain to hold
a bridge between them open,
and fail,
or all but fail.

Although tourists are attracted to Dachau's *schloss*, its landscape and art galleries, some 600,000 come each year to encounter and learn at its Concentration Camp Memorial Site, which opened in 1965. Dachau was a work camp, an SS training site, and an administrative center for dozens of satellite camps providing slave labor to Germany's industry. Through its gates passed more than 200,000 prisoners, most of whom were Soviets, Germans, Poles or other Eastern Europeans. Many were Jews, but there were also homosexuals, gypsies, the mentally ill, enemy soldiers, so-called "asocials," and political and religious dissenters, including the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller. It is estimated that more than 2,500 priests were incarcerated in the Dachau camp. Unlike many other camps, Dachau was principally a labor camp, although it is estimated that as many as 40,000 died there -- several thousand Soviets through extermination, but most others from disease and overwork.

Dachau's prisoners arrived at the town's railway station and marched through the streets to the camp on the outskirts of town. As they passed through the camp's heavy metal doors they encountered its motto: *Arbeit Macht Frei*, "Work Makes One Free." In the camp work kept one alive; work was its *raison d'être*. Anyone who could not work was allowed to die or was sent to an extermination camp.

As the war accelerated, the demand for workers became insatiable. Prisoners worked at the camp, were sent to subcamps, and labored in the local industries of meat-processing, weaving, and shoe and screw production. Daily, inmates were marched from the camp through Dachau's streets to their local employment.

After liberation in April 1945, the camp continued as a home for refugees until 1964. As such it was a permanent fixture in the landscape of Dachau and in the psyche of its inhabitants for more than 30 years. It is this reality, and the acquiescence of the citizens of Dachau for reasons of necessity or of fear, that is the underside of community life in this beautiful place.



A visit to the camp is a stark experience. The place is large with high

walls and sentry guard houses on its perimeter. Most of the barracks have been removed. The experience is one of barrenness and desolation. The ground is covered with small gray pebbles and there is no color except for the green leaves of the poplar trees that line the main street of the camp. Memorial sites have been erected by Jews, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, and a Carmelite convent adjoins the camp's exterior wall. There is nothing that draws one's attention; there is only a silent emptiness. Even though visitors arrive by the hundreds, the ethos of the camp is pensive and meditative. To come to Dachau is to make a pilgrimage, to learn in the camp's museum of the history of National Socialism, and to reflect on the potential for both good and evil of which each person is capable. To visit Dachau is to learn that torture is real and to juxtapose that with the reality of joy, straining to find some bridge between these two human experiences.

For the inhabitants of the town of Dachau that bridge must be built on a daily basis. The landscape and history of the place makes that necessary. The town's mayor, Peter Burgel, insists that the first obligation of the town is to be a place of peace, learning and remembrance for the world's youth. To this end the town has established the Dachau Youth Guesthouse in which young people from Germany and abroad come to take on critical investigations of the history of National Socialism. The town has also established a Department of Contemporary History and annually hosts a symposium on this subject. Efforts have been made to embed

aspects of the town's history into its landscape. A Path of Remembrance snakes from the railway station to the camp, commemorating the route arriving prisoners took to their incarceration. Two bronze plaques on the Town Hall recall the 1938 expulsion and later assassination of Dachau's Jewish citizens.

Recently the town developed a dual traveling exhibit. One section entitled "Dachau before Dachau" highlights the artistic heritage of the town. The other, in juxtaposition, examines its infamous legacy in "Concentration Camp: Years of Destruction, 1933-1945." This exhibit, like its other efforts, is an attempt by the town to bridge, to hold open its double inheritance, to confront the whole of its past, the two poles of the human condition.

Controversy swirls around attempts to interpret the Holocaust. Dachau offers no exception. How is evil to be represented and remembered? What can one learn from evil? Where does such inhumanity reside? On whom does judgment fall? The perpetrator? The bystander? And what is the implication for those who behold?

The people of Dachau have taken up the burden of their past. There is a necessity for them to understand themselves within the context of their immediate environment -- physical, psychological and historical. The philosopher José Ortega y Gasset asserted: "Tell me the landscape in which you live and I will tell you who you are." The people of this Bavarian town live with the legacies of beauty and of horror. That reality shapes who they are. It is in their interest, as it is for all humans, to strain to create a bridge between these dual realities, to imagine a "Dachau after Dachau."

[Dana Greene is dean emerita of Oxford College of Emory University in Atlanta.]

Information for travelers

Getting there

The nearest airport is in Munich. A taxi ride from the airport to Dachau costs approximately 50 euros. Public transportation is convenient and much less expensive. Allow 50 minutes for the trip. From the Munich airport take S Bahn train 1 or 8 to Laim, transfer to S 2 direction Petershausen. From downtown Munich take the S Bahn 2 train toward Petershausen. The ride from central Munich takes about 20 minutes. Buses and taxis are available at the Dachau station, but it is an easy walk to the center of town.

When to go

The tourist season runs from May through October. Popular times to visit Dachau are during the Munich Oktoberfest, which begins in mid-September continuing through early October, and during Advent for the Christmas Market.

Accommodations

Dachau has a variety of hotel options ranging from four-star hotels to hostels. Prices range from 88 euros per night to 20 euros. One can find current availability and hotel rates through the Dachau lodging inquiry system on the information Web site www.dachau.de/en/tourism.html.

Money matters

ATMs are scattered throughout the town.

What to do

Although packaged group tours available, Dachau is easily accessible. Most people speak English and venues are well-marked. The Tourist Information Office, at Konrad-Adenauer-Strasse 1, is open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday and Sunday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. (May through October, with more abbreviated hours the rest of the year). Its staff is knowledgeable and helpful. The office offers an audio guide for a one-and-a-half-hour self-guided tour (2.50 euros), town maps, and guidebooks.

The charming Altstadt (Old Town) includes the castle with its restaurant, view of Munich, and lovely garden, as well as St. Jakob's Parish Church and the Rathaus (City Hall). There are more than 10 art venues in the town. Especially important is the Dachau Picture Gallery (Konrad-Adenauer-Str. 3), which displays landscape and genre paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries. Interesting natural sites for exploration are the Dachauer marshland and the Amper River.

The Concentration Camp Memorial Site is a short distance outside of town, accessible by bus, car or on foot. The site is open every day except Monday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is no entrance fee and guided tours are available from May through early October. An excellent museum exhibit traces the history of the camp from its beginnings. Various commemorative sites related to the camp are in the town.

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