

A Trip in the German Countryside by Kathleen Seward Stokes

I am not Jewish. Nor am I a survivor of Auschwitz. Yet, in a way, I am just that. What follows is the story of a Sunday afternoon outing when I was a child of eight. The events of that outing will remain with me until I am gone from this earth. I will try to tell the story from my recollections at the time -- from a child's point of view. Some of my recollections may be inaccurate, but the following is what I remember.

My father was a radar technician in the U.S. Air Force, stationed in Germany after World War II. It was our family's habit once or twice a month to pack up a picnic, jump in the car and go for a drive to tour the many sights of Germany. We had seen wondrous castles galore, the fantastic Oktoberfest and other marvelous things on our excursions during our two years in Germany. Daddy's tour of duty was almost over now, but I didn't know that at the time.

On this particular Sunday afternoon I don't recall whether we packed a picnic, but I certainly remember the sense of excitement as we (my Father, Mother, older brother, younger brother and me) scrambled into the car and away we went. Daddy's usual jaunty starting comment of "Off, like a herd of turtles" was absent on this trip, as was the chatter between my mother and father in the front seat. But that made little impression on me at the time. Even then I knew everyone has days when they don't feel like talking.

I remember the drive through the park-like, perfectly manicured countryside. Even the woodlands had an "arranged" look in postwar Germany. The hills rolled gently, covered in green, with neat patches of forest. There were farms with precisely laid, tilled fields. It was spring and the whole place was alive with the joy of renewal. One of us kids asked where we were going and we got a rather hushed answer from Mamma -- something to the effect that they would let us know when we got there.

And finally, there we were! There was a roadway through a large gate with lots of lawns around a number of rather ugly, gray-green buildings. The gate was a large and wooden, with an archway across the top. My older brother said the German words across the gate meant something like, "Works makes Freedom." Okay. We drove through the gate and debarked the car.

I was young at the time, and I don't recall the precise layout of the place. I remember asking what seemed like a million questions, which my mother answered calmly, quietly and without the impatience in her tone which often followed my asking too many questions in too short a time. She told me this place we were visiting was called a concentration camp, and it was where prisoners were kept by Germany in World War II. We walked on into one of the buildings.

I remember seeing a room with thousands of shoes, stored on almost bunk-like wooden shelving. The shoes were old leather, cracked and dry. In some of them you could see sweat marks on the inside. I asked Mamma why they were there. I don't remember precisely her answer, but it seems that there were other camps like this one and all the shoes the people wore were gathered in from all the camps and brought here to be sorted and organized and then handed back out. I thought at the time she meant they were to be handed back out to the people of the camps. The whole process just didn't make any sense to me. Did the people just need jobs? Was that why they all had to take off their shoes, pass them around and then put on somebody else's shoes -- just to keep the people all employed? Only later I learned that the shoes were given to people outside the camp and those inside had none at all.

The next thing I remember is going through some large steel doors, one with a sort of porthole in it, into a shower room. The whole building seemed dark, and kind of dank smelling. By this time I had begun to feel that this trip was something out of the ordinary definitely, and I was just too slow to figure it out. My older brother would often just "humph" when I asked too many questions, but my parents were both unfailingly quiet and patient. Now, that told me loud and clear something was not normal here. When I asked Mamma about the showers -- why did they all have to take showers together, and wouldn't that be terribly embarrassing -- she told me that they were not water showers, but gas. The way she said that, like she was choking or something, made me stop asking questions right then. I thought perhaps the people were extremely dirty and that the gasoline was necessary to get them clean; just like when Mamma cleaned Daddy's very dirty woolen slacks with Kerosene.

By this time I knew there was something terribly out of place going on, but I thought I was just slow in catching on -- or perhaps it was one of those nasty jokes that two brothers will sometimes play on a sister. I remember hearing my mother say that the people all died after being gassed. I also remember quite clearly that I simply didn't comprehend what she had said. This whole place didn't make any sense and it wasn't fun, or pretty or anything. We walked on through the dark halls while my brain whirled with trying to figure out just what this was all about and **WHAT IS GOING ON HERE!?** The next thing I remember was walking into a room that had windows with sunlight flooding in on the right hand side of a sort of hallway. Bricks were laid neatly into the wall on the left hand side, with two big iron doors and one smaller one set into the brick. I recall Mamma talking about them being ovens, so I asked if they baked the bread for all the prisoners there. I knew what ovens were, and the doors looked just like the door on the oven in the Hansel & Gretel story. Again, my older brother had that look on his face that said, "You are just a girl and really too dumb to know what is going on even if we answer you." I am afraid he was quite right in this case. My mother said to me that this was where they put the bodies of the dead people. To burn them. Cremate was the word she used.

Understand -- I was young enough that I simply couldn't accept what my folks were saying as having anything to do with real life. So even though they said the words explaining everything, it was as though my ability to understand the words was held in suspension. I remember looking at the oven doors carefully. They had big crosspieces with heavy bolts on them, and handles. Then I asked Mamma what the little oven was for, expecting her to tell me that it was for pastries or something like that. She told me it was to cremate the bodies of the babies and young children.

Like the clang of those same oven doors thudding shut, suddenly everything that I simply had not understood or comprehended became horribly, nastily real. I knew for certain that the sense of wrongness was not because my brothers were about to play some trick on me -- it was because somebody **KILLED** people here, and **ON PURPOSE**, and **BABIES, TOO!** The sense of horror was so deep I asked no more questions until we left Dachau.

But still my parents went on with their commentary of what they knew about the place. They took us outside where there was a kind of a long runnel in the earth. It had flowers similar to daffodils growing around it, but there were no blooms. Mamma and Daddy explained that the place was a mass grave, where the cremated bodies were dumped. Naked. And then buried with a bulldozer. Unmarked. By this time I was pretty well numb with shock and horror. In all my life I could never, never imagine that such things would happen. It was worse than the awfulest Grim's Fairy Tales, which were sometimes pretty gruesome, but always make-believe. Mamma and Daddy were telling us this was **REAL!**

It was about that time that the impression I remember most vividly clarified about me. I have always been aware of weather and birds and wind and bugs and other minutiae of the earth. I recall

looking up from the grave and knowing suddenly that the whole place was a bad place. There was not a bird singing or twittering anywhere around, nor the buzz of a bee nor the sigh of a single breeze to be felt or heard. It seemed to my childish perceptions as if the whole Universe, God himself, was holding his breath and looking away from this place. And that's what I wanted more than anything at that moment -- to be away from this place. I recall that sense of stillness, unreal lack of life, more vividly than any other thing about the trip. It's not like it was threatening. More like waiting -- perhaps hundreds of years -- before anything ALIVE could again find comfort in a place so foul.

Looking back, I know my parents were unusual and wise to make sure that a child growing up in an almost-fairyland Germany should see the other side of the picture. We talked a little about the place on the way back. The way it must have smelled for miles around when the ovens were going. My parents said that the people who lived around here were probably just ordinary folk. I remember asking then one more question: Why didn't the good German people stop the bad ones who were killing the babies? My folks waffled about answering that, as parents always do when they have no good answer. Has anyone ever answered my question? I still want an answer.

In the many years since that trip I have thought on it often. I always am amazed at how long it took me to catch on to what the place was. And yet, should a little child be even able to imagine such horrors? Did Hitler have such "fantasies" at the age of seven? And now I hear many reports of people who declare that the entire Holocaust was just some kind of political hype. It makes me both furious and so very, very sad. Furious, because that kind of a nasty lie is exactly the kind of lying that led to such a place as Dachau ever existing. And it makes me very sad because some people would rather believe it was all a sham than to face reality. I grieve for those people. I remember quite well what it was like to not believe my own eyes and ears. I also remember clearly the horror of sudden truth. God forbid the world shall ever have to face such sudden truths again.

I am aware that over six million Jews died in such places. But 14 million people altogether died, which makes eight million people who were not Jewish. Such numbers are truly incomprehensible, even as an adult. What I do comprehend is that I was there, not as a sufferer, but as an observer, for a purpose. I remember, and I have told my children what I remember. And I will tell my children's children. I want us to NEVER FORGET.

So even though I am not a Jew, nor was I imprisoned to suffer in one of those camps, I know the aftertaste of what it might have meant. I was there. Even years afterward, it was a place of dark horror. And I will never forget.