

Short Story - 1795 words

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(Work makes one free)

You might recognize this famous sign from the World War Two (WWII) years, located at the entrance gates to AUSCHWITZ, the remnants of the infamous concentration camp located near Krakow, Poland. Why would I write a short story about such a sad episode that occurred during the war years and over in Europe? What historical value or knowledge does it hold for us here in this country of ours? Just to get started and to introduce the Holocaust, let me explain in simple terms... the awareness of this horrible event in history is disappearing... eroding throughout the whole world and that includes here in Canada. Regrettably, many recent surveys find dismal numbers of Millennials - those born between 1981 and 1996 and members of Generation Z (Gen Z) - those born between 1997 and 2012, have never even heard of the Holocaust, Canadians included.

Let me go back a few years and provide some background facts for our readers! As part of the NATO commitment that Canada was engaged in during the Cold War of the 50's and 60's, I was most fortunate to be stationed at the European Air Division Headquarters in Metz, France in 1965. I was only in my late 20's, newly married with a wife and two children and very eager to put my career ahead of everything in those years. While stationed in France, a country rich in history and close to other countries that had for years been involved in conflicts of one type or another, I often looked back at what I studied in history class in my small village high school of Northern Ontario. It became obvious to me that I had missed out on a whole big bunch of happenings throughout WWII and knew very little of the geography of Europe, to boot. It dawned on me that we, as students during the war years, must have been well protected from the release of news items, even towards the end of the war in 1945. Nobody, including the Veterans of the war themselves, wanted to talk about it when they came home or in the years that followed, either. I am quite certain, even the word HOLOCAUST was absent in my lexicon during those days. And so, regrettably, while being stationed in the middle of Europe where all the events of the war had taken place, I seemed not to be part of it. At that time, I simply was oblivious to the horrors of war.

It wasn't until my later years, following detailed studies, reading many books, and watching numerous movies that my interest at what had happened during

the war years was piqued. I realized a big chunk of my life, including my lack of historical knowledge, was leaving me perplexed as to what really had taken place during the all-too well known War Years in the late 80's, our first daughter had successfully graduated from Military College and learned her new profession of Air Traffic Control. She plied her knowledge in both Canada and Europe, so my wife and I, both, began taking more flips which offered SPACE AVAILABLE on military aircraft. This led us to more general tours of Europe for the first time. Now, we had a much different mission in our minds – that eagerness to step out into the world of real history and find out what life was really like during the War years.

Among the many countries, cities and towns, museums and memorials we visited in Europe, my wife and I made a pilgrimage to Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp, west of Strasbourg, France. We took in the long-lost horrors of what life then would have been like and educated ourselves about the annihilation of some 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews. We were able to pay proper tribute to the genocide of the European Jews. We read that some of these earlier concentration camps were built in 1933, during the early Nazi era. They would have been built for training centre purposes, later to become a standard for the SS in the perfection of the inhuman concentration system for the extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka and the like. Originally planned to accommodate 5,000 prisoners, when the Russians first liberated the prisoners of Auschwitz on 27 June 1945, they discovered more than 30,000 survivors of thirty-one nationalities. At that camp alone, in the twelve years of this type of existence, 206,000 prisoners were registered. A total of 31,951 deaths were recorded. Unfortunately, the total numbers, including the victims of individual and mass executions and the final death marches of many, will never be known. Later, I was fortunate to take two pilgrimages over to the Normandy Beaches with the Royal Canadian Legion and, again, we saw, heard and studied incidents that had occurred during the wars. They stuck in my mind and I'll never forget them.

At Struthof and in later years when I visited Dachau, north-west of Munich, as a Recruiter for the Armed Forces, these concentration camps took on a familiar pattern, one that was hard to delete from my memory. There were three different types of camps - a prison camp, an extermination camp, or a camp for slave labourers. There were often the tell-tale train tracks into the camp, on which the freight cars, sometimes opened, carried twice or three times what they were meant to carry – animals included. It was said that one in four prisoners often died enroute, either from the cold, starvation,

exhaustion, or despair; many were shot. The camps always had the remains of the prisoners' barracks, bath houses where the gassing took place, corps cellars where bodies were stored and cremation ovens. Any and all of the concentration camps still standing are furnished with many photographs of a prisoner's former years in captivity. They highlight how lean they had become, with shrunken frames or bloated stomachs. These photos really could pick away at your imagination!

As a result of all the horror, hundreds of Nazi officials and SS soldiers would be tried for War Crimes in connection with many of the atrocities committed. The Nuremberg Trials went on for months. Those charged varied in rank, from Generals to Privates, and punishment varied from hanging, to being shot or sent to prison. It was said that a few were privy to death by cyanide.

In the last decade that I have been back from my European excursions, one of the Letters to the Editor in the local newspaper that caught my eyes and now sits in one of my scrapbooks, states, "if you want our kids to remember the horrors of war, understand what loyalty means, and learn what putting your life on the line for the good of others is, then send them over to Europe. Let them see all the Canadian Maple Leaves on the headstones and read the ages of those who lie buried there (many of them would be their own age,) then they will START to remember. While they are in Europe, I would beg them to not only see the cemeteries, the memorials, the battlegrounds and the museums, but to visit the Nazi concentration and death camps, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau or the twenty-three other camps I have not listed. No, they will not see graveyards and they will not see headstones, because so many went up in smoke or were buried in mass graves. To repeat, six million Jews and five million non-Jews ended their lives in these camps after torture and starvation. I hope they, too, will also be remembered.

On the 27th of January this year, (2023) another Remembrance Day for the victims of the genocide of the Jewish people during the Second World War took place. Yes, as in many other locations in the world which were involved in the WWII, our modern-day population has been made aware of the dwindling awareness of the Holocaust. Even the people of the Netherlands (home to Anne Frank) have been affected according to the latest study. Still, 23% of the Dutch youngsters believe the Holocaust was a myth or that the number of those murdered was greatly exaggerated.

The sad aspect of all this according to the many surveys that monitor people's reactions and comments with regards to Holocaust Awareness, is that 22% of Millennials and Gen Z'ers hadn't heard of, or were not sure if they had ever heard of the Holocaust. During the Covid-19 lockdown, there has been a worldwide rise of anti-Semitism. Covid-19 has led to tremendous loss within the Holocaust survivor community because of age and illness. Finally, communities and policy-makers are recognizing the need for more Holocaust education. 1,100 Canadians were interviewed and half of them couldn't name any of the dozens of well-known concentration camps or ghettos like Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto. This is unconscionable considering that, in Canada, there are currently more than 10,000 Holocaust survivors that still share their stories of terror, bravery and resilience.

Having reported many of the sad aspects of news, I would like to end my efforts with something beautiful and positive rather than dreary and negative, just to leave you with a positive feeling of our humanity...

In 1947, a Dutch survivor of the Nazi Concentration Camp in Ravensbruck Germany, Corrie Ten Boom, gave a talk at a church in Munich about forgiveness and mercy. After she spoke, a former prison guard from the camp came up to her, extended his hand, and asked her to forgive him. He didn't remember her, but she remembered him vividly, along with all the cruelties he had imposed upon her and her fellow prisoners. "It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out," Ten Boom later recalled, "but to me, it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult decision I ever had to make. So woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. As I did, an incredible action took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm and sprang into our joined hands." She went on, "Then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you" I cried "with all my heart." For one long moment, we grasped each others' hands – the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then!

In closing, I am reminded, yet again, of what Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust Survivor and namesake of the organization once said ~ ~ ~

"Freedom is not a gift from Heaven. You have to fight for it every day! "  
He learned the timeless truth of those words, the hard way.