

PERSPECTIVE: REMEMBERING THE REASON WHY
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I was deeply moved by SGI President Ikeda's recollection of Rabbi Marvin Hier (Aug. 21, 1998, *World Tribune*) and his message there: to never forget the victims who cry out to be remembered.

The year before I began practicing Buddhism, I was hitchhiking around Europe (the college student thing to do in those days) and made my way to Germany. One of my goals was to visit a concentration camp. When I was 10, my mother had taken me to see Anne Frank's house in Holland, and I had read her journal/autobiography. I wanted to see for myself the kind of place where she had ended her precious, young life.

My traveling companion at the time was a young man from Australia. Mick and I reached Dachau on a gloomy, drizzly day near the end of our time together. We were becoming tired of each other's company, and altogether it promised to be a gloomy experience. Not speaking, we toured the facility. In one structure, we saw the wooden bunks — shelves, really — where families would live together. Maybe 4 feet wide, 6 to 8 feet long, three levels about 3 to 4 feet apart, a whole family would huddle in this space at night, or all day when there was no place else they were ordered to be.

The camp had been surrounded by high fencing strewn with razor wire. Displays of photos showed a dead man of indeterminable age, skin barely stretched over his bones, thin, black-and-white striped clothing hanging off his limbs like a shroud, caught in the rolls of this barbed fence, in the snow, one of who knows how many failed escapes. All the faces of inmates who had been alive for the camera were gaunt skulls — pitiful children, ageless adults with thin hair or shaved heads and missing teeth. There were photos of pits where dozens of stick-like bodies lay discarded atop countless more before the grave was bulldozed closed. Image after shocking image displayed to remind tourists of Germany's humiliating and shameful past. Depressing, surreal.

Finally we reached the "showers," a small, out-of-the-way building, where innocents were herded ostensibly to be washed, but in truth, to be killed. The mass gas chamber.

Until then, I had toured the buildings numb and dreary. Entering this building, however, I had a different experience. Mick heard them, too: a hundred, a thousand voices screaming out of the past. Barely audible, sounding inside my head, the haunting of the sacrificed, the murdered. I trembled.

Somewhere it was posted — I forget where, it was 16 years ago — that the whole camp had actually been razed; a few structures had later been rebuilt in replica as an eternal monument to ensure no one would forget the horrible atrocities committed there. The whole camp — except for the gas chamber. That alone was original. The one place where Mick and I had both experienced an apparent auditory hallucination of the echoes of slaughtered prisoners. We saw this announcement after our tour.

The following summer my sponsor, Dalila, a young woman from Algeria, took me to an SGI exhibit at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, where a traveling exhibit displayed the results of an A-bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Melted spectacles and bottles, photos of the horror. As a result, I began my Buddhist practice, chanting for world peace.

Dalila disappeared a few years later. I tried to find her on my visit to France in 1994; they said they think she went back to Algeria, a land marred by its own hellish war in recent years. I'm grateful to her for having escaped long enough to awaken me to this

practice. And I thank the *World Tribune* for publishing President Ikeda's essay and helping me remember why I joined the SGI.

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