

# A visit to Dachau by the daughter of a survivor

*Janina Moninska*

On March 6th 2007, the day after my deceased father's birthday, I walked through the now famous Iron Gate that leads into Dachau Concentration Camp memorial, the place in which he spent 5 years of his youth from 1940-1945 as prisoner 12133. I expected darkness; all my life I had been carrying around an image of blackness and suffering. The word Dachau epitomized for me all that was evil. I was finally going to confront the dark place I had discovered as a young child: the terrible place that was always too painful for my father to talk about and from which he had to be protected.

What I discovered was whiteness: a place filled with white stones and white walls and the white spirit of the people who seem to hover in the air: ghosts who for me celebrate the strength of the human spirit to survive and transcend the evils of the dark side of our human nature.

## **Day 1: A scarred and broken heart**

The first thing that confronted me was the hoards of people visiting. Thousands of people visit this place very year. Mornings in Dachau Memorial are filled with groups of teenagers standing in clusters around their group leaders, listening to horrifying stories. Like seeds blown by the wind they move from place to place, colourful and restless. The air is filled with their high voices and bursts of laughter. Although they are horrified, this is a school trip and they cannot suppress their youthful vitality. Afternoons are filled with respectful silence and the sound of little Dictaphones as individuals and couples walk around listening to the stories.

Dachau Memorial, like other camps, has been stripped to the bone. Two Barrack blocks have been rebuilt as museum pieces to show what the original buildings looked like. The rest has been torn down and only the foundations remain, filled with little stones like huge graves with engraved headstones that mark the number of each block. The building that contained the rooms where new prisoners were stripped of their clothes and identities, showered and shaved, the punishment rooms, the Kitchen and the Laundry, have also been gutted and turned into a museum. So where was I to find my father? In the place where barrack 14 used to stand? In the Laundry where he worked which has been transformed into the museum archives and offices? For the first hour I walked around feeling lost. Disconnected. But I kept on returning again and again to the foundations of block 14. After a while I estimated where Room 4 would have and sat in the middle of it and took out the letters he had written there to his mother. As I read them to myself slowly I began to feel his presence. When I had finished I decided to write him my own verbal letter, and began, Dear Daddy ... I told him where I was and how he was still very much loved and missed and more. As I finished I picked up a stone. I wanted something to prove that I had visited this place, something to help me remember. I looked at the stone in my hand and noticed that it was in the shape of a broken heart scarred with lines. I felt overwhelmed. My father had not only had his heart broken by the separation from his beloved mother, but as a consequence of the 5 years of physical suffering in the camp he had suffered from a lifelong heart condition that eventually shortened his life. A scarred and broken heart. I felt this stone was his gift to me.

## **Day 2: Skipping**

The second day I returned. In one of his letters my father describes with love and longing his image of his mother wearing a flowery dress standing in a field and when I saw the huge stone foundations of his barrack I decided I wanted to skip around them. A woman two generations on who embodies both mother and daughter that gave my father the hope to live and continue living after the war. As I skipped on the concrete wall containing the stones, on the opposite wall to me, 8 young girls appeared also skipping, laughing and imitating me. After this spontaneous interaction they approached me and asked what I was doing. So there I stood in front

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of a group of 14-year-old girls visiting from Austria. Smiling at me. When I told them I was in Dachau because my father had been a prisoner here for 5 years their faces fell in shock: there was a deathly silence. However I then told them that it was fine because he had managed to survive. I also told them about the letters and the image of his happy mother in her flowery dress. I said he would have been thrilled to see them skipping along the wall of the block where he had been held a prisoner, so happy and free and full of life, and they laughed at this and felt instantly relieved. Then they left: I watched them walk away as a group along the camp road, a road known as the spirit road of the camp as it was a place where prisoners met and chatted on their way from the barracks to the roll call. Just before they reached the corner of the reconstructed barracks they all turned in magical unison and waved goodbye to me and then disappeared into the sunlight. I still carry this experience with me.

### Day 3: Blackbird



On the third day we returned for the last time. Having dreaded coming to Dachau I now dreaded having to leave. I was not looking forward to saying good-bye again to my father with whom I felt reconnected. Again I sat on the foundations of Block 14 with the letters. I decided to use the letters to protect my bare feet as I walked on the stones that fill the foundations. As I prepared for this, painting my toenails red, a lone blackbird appeared, attracted to the rustling sounds of paper. It came quite close to my hand, and at one point perched cheekily on the engraved number stone looking at me. Then it flew off. After this special meeting I selected 3 letters and began my journey, balancing from one letter to the

other as I moved along the stones. By chance the huge Dachau memorial bell began to ring. I knew instinctively I had to continue this action of walking on the stones until the bell stopped ringing. This bell rings once a day for 30 minutes to remember the people who died in this place, and I became more and more tired, bending over, balancing on these 3 tiny letters. When the bell finally stopped ringing I was exhausted and my leg muscles ached. I felt broken. During this action images of the hard physical labour of the camp and the thousands of deaths had been streaming through my mind. I felt this action had been some form of penance. It was finally time to leave.

Half an hour later I stood ready to walk out of the famous Iron Gate and close it behind me. I wanted to mark the moment. However this is what a lot of visitors like to do: take a photo of themselves standing at the gate. Look, I was here. So I had to wait my turn. Eventually the people before me had finished and there was a moment of silence. Just as I was about to walk toward the gate a blackbird suddenly took off from the roof of the stone archway above and flew low over my head trilling with excitement. I followed it with my eyes and it landed on a piece of grass quite far away. I wondered if it was the same blackbird I had encountered earlier. I wondered why there was only one. Meeting this blackbird a second time filled me with joy. Happily I walked out of the gate, just as my father must have done when he was finally liberated, to my freedom.

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Picture by Kate O'Donnell, 2007