

"Look not mournfully into the past.

It comes not back again. "

From "Hyperion" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The entrance to Terezin is frighteningly menacing, befitting a once impregnable military fortress, by 18th century standards. On this day, near the end of the 20th century, I am standing on a bridge across a moat. Massive brick walls rise 30 feet from the bottom, forming a grassy rampart atop the walls. A gate cuts through the red brick battlement. Framed by whitewashed stones, it is like a giant eye unblinkingly challenging me to walk through.



The Nazis turned this forbidding fortification into a concentration camp in 1941. More than 10,000 children were among the inmates who walked through this arched gateway over a four-year span. Barely 100 of the children survived.

On this summer day of 1996, more than half a century after being freed from Terezin, I am about to walk through this gate again, no longer a child, but forever a survivor.

I have returned to Terezin for the first time since fleeing Communism in the Czech Republic IN 1948. When I came to the United States as a teen-ager, I was determined to start a new life, with a slate wiped clean of the horrors of the Holocaust.

Now with my wife, our daughter Michelle and her husband, John, I am standing at the gateway to my past. This trip is a contradiction of Longfellow's prediction about the past in his "Hyperion".

Michelle wanted to see where I was born and learn firsthand how the Holocaust ripped apart our family. We knew this would be no ordinary sightseeing tour. It would reopen the painful past, revealing to Michelle an extended family reduced to barely legible names on the walls of Holocaust memorials and on crumbling gravestones in decrepit cemeteries.

My wife and Michelle walk into Terezin ahead of me while I gaze through the gate.

Everything looks as it did when I was 9 years old; yet nothing is the way I remember it now at age 63. I need a few moments alone to sort out that incongruous mental mismatch.

Just to my right, at the bottom of the weed-covered moat, nestled into a right-angle made by the steep walls, are remnants of the crematorium. The smell of burning flesh that once blew over the walls in bluish-gray smoke washes over me again.

My nose forces me to remember how the adults would tell the children it was garbage being burned. A few kids believed it. The rest of us knew that garbage didn't smell like that.

I shuffle through the gate into the town where my family had its final reunion before disintegrating in other concentration camps. Just inside the gate stand the huge, block square Hamburg barracks. This was my first stop even then, the place where families were separated: women on one floor, children on another, everyone jammed into small rooms filled with triple bunks that were infested with fleas and bedbugs. Men were sent to live at the opposite end of Terezin.

There is no life inside the Hamburg barracks on this day. The windows have been blinded by years of filth. The walls are too solid to tumble, but the orange and brown paint has faded with age and the stucco has lost its grip in many places. The enormous wooden gates, two on each side, are locked as if to keep the past hidden from all.



The only reminder is a small bronze plaque near one of the gates. It gives no clues to help understand what went on inside, no description of the long lines of women and children snaking through the courtyards in single file, waiting to be served the one meal of the day from black metal drums.

But then, what words could replicate the conditions that were meant to break the will to live? My mind refuses to be stirred into telling Michelle. I was 9 years old then. Why would I want to recollect that now?

As we walk down one of the streets, we pass another building that has been left untouched all these years. I gaze at the grimy gray exterior. My eyes rest on a small basement window with a big spider's web in the upper left corner, opposite a crack in the glass.

When I was 10 years old, I worked in that basement with a young woman and a shoemaker. I remember two dim bulbs hanging from brown wires casting wild shadows over the room. There was no heat. An unorganized pile of shoes filled the middle of the room. The woman's job was to find and match up pairs and tie the shoes together. I measured the soles, converted the centimeters to shoe sizes and marked the size on the shank of each shoe. It was my math lesson from the shoemaker.

The old man -- at least he seemed old to me then -- sat under that basement window, breathing new life into shoes by stripping their soles and slapping on a new piece of leather. He would pierce the new soles with an awl and fasten the leather to the shoes with tiny wooden pegs that he spit from his mouth, one by one. I loved to watch him, fascinated by his craftsmanship.

The woman and I would stack the renovated shoes on shelves that lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Each month, the shelves were cleared. The shoes would be shipped to Germany and another stack of odd shoes would wait to be sorted. I never thought about where those shoes came from.

One day I found a pair of scuffed high-topped shoes that I thought would keep my feet warm and dry over the bitter winter. I hid the laceless shoes in the back of one of the shelves, waiting for an opportunity to sneak them out. When I walked in the next day, the shoemaker called me to his window spot, held out those same shoes, now looking almost new with shiny brown uppers, new soles, heels and laces.

"I think these will be good for you," he mumbled. "Get them out of here and don't ever tell anyone where you got them."

I have kept our secret to this day. The shoemaker didn't live through the winter he helped me survive.

My family and I stop at what originally was a schoolhouse for the children of soldiers stationed in Terezin, back when it was a military fort designed to protect Prague from attackers.

I remember the school as an ugly building, similar in design and drab color to the soldiers' barracks. It became home for the surviving children of Terezin in the closing months of the war. I lived there to the end.

Today, the two-story school has new windows, a fresh coat of sand-colored stucco, contrasting straw color trim around the entrance and windows, a new red tile roof, and a flagpole in the fenced front yard.

Two evergreens frame the entrance. A hand painted inscription in Hebrew above the door spells out "YISKOR." It means "REMEMBER." I think about how few of us are left to remember, to recollect, to recognize.

On this day, the inscription brings reminiscence. Tomorrow, it will become a requiem.

The school is now a museum. Inside are drawings by some of my contemporaries that tell a story I haven't been able to tell. These pictures are not childish scrawls by any definition.



Many of the drawings are in pencil, a few in watercolor, every one of them artistic reminders of what passed for life in Terezin. I marvel at the talent of kids, most of them not even in their teens yet. How many of them might have become adult artists? In the background, I hear TV sets playing back videotaped recollections of Terezin survivors. I wonder if anyone is listening?

As we continue walking through the town where I had spent three years, I suddenly realize that Terezin today is a metaphor of my mindset. It is a town not much different from the town where I now live.



All around us, children are playing on the streets. I see a small grocery store, drugstore, bike shop, and across the street, clothing and furniture stores. A few cars are parked on the streets. The residents, even if they are aware of Terezin's past, are not letting that knowledge interfere with their daily lives. They are giving the town a new life, helping to erase the scars that exist only in the survivors' memories.



I take Michelle across town to the Small Fort. That's where those who didn't conform or who resisted were jailed, tortured, and if they survived, shipped out to other concentration camps. I tell Michelle of visiting my father in one of the cells of the Small Fort, bringing him extra food just before he was shipped off to Auschwitz and then Dachau, the concentration camp outside of Munich, Germany, where prisoners were forced to build underground factories that would be hidden from Allied bombing raids.

Dachau becomes another stop on our trip. It was the first concentration camp built by Hitler. Ironically, I was born the year Dachau opened to house political dissidents. My father died near there four months after arriving from Terezin. The war would end four months later. His bunkmate told me after the war how he had tried to keep my father from falling asleep on a bitterly cold January night. But sleep was a blessing for a body starving for food and warmth.

There is no grave for my father in Dachau. No place for us to stop and grieve, to point out to Michelle that this is her grandfather's final resting place. There is only a memorial to all who died here, an impersonal marble marker covered with flowers and small stones left by visitors.



Most of the barracks in Dachau are long gone, leaving a vast empty courtyard where thousands once were housed. The barbed wire fence and a guard tower remain, but they threaten no one. We walk through the remaining structure that has been turned into a museum, joining hundreds of German schoolchildren who are looking at photos that tell them a story they probably find incomprehensible.



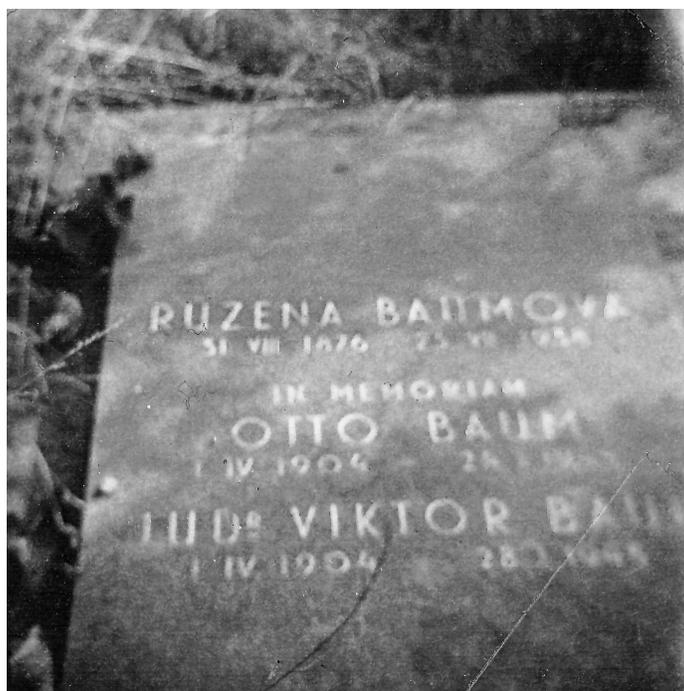
Thousands of German youngsters come to Dachau by bus each week. They are free to walk in, free to walk out. As I listen to the sound of their feet shuffling against the gravel path at the entrance, I hear the footsteps of my father and thousands like him, marching in under watchful eyes of SS-men, never to walk out. It is just another metaphor.

For the many busloads of schoolchildren, this is a history class outing. The students are not wearing the striped uniform of the wartime inmates. They don't look emaciated. They don't look frightened. All I can think of is, where is the smell of death? Where is the feeling of desperation? Where is the anguish? How do you put those into a museum?

Those are my impressions and I am able to share them with Michelle as we drive from Dachau to Prague.

In Prague, at the cemetery frequented by tourists visiting the grave of author Franz Kafka, we have our only pleasant, though mournful, encounter with the past. We haven't come to see Kafka's grave. Rather, we stop here to find the graves of my paternal and maternal grandparents. No one had visited the grave of my father's parents in almost 60 years. That explains why it is so thickly overgrown with ground ivy, the years of neglect hiding the headstone completely.

We pull away the ivy carefully, expecting to see my grandparents' names engraved on the headstone. But as we slowly make out the faded inscription, it shows a name I don't recognize - DR. JAKOB BAUM. It was the wrong gravesite. I had forgotten that Grandpa Wolfgang is buried in the town of his birth. Only his widow, Grandma Rose, is buried in Prague. The names of my dad and his twin are engraved in memoriam on her gravestone.



We had far less trouble finding and identifying my maternal grandmother Klara's grave. Although the main stone covering the grave had been stolen 20 years ago, my mother's cousin, who has since died, had it replaced with a smaller headstone.



He had it engraved with my grandmother's name, and in memoriam, the names of five of her children and their families who had died in concentration camps -- my aunts, uncles, cousins.

We plant a pot of geraniums in the ground. Michelle gropes for the words to the Hebrew prayer for the dead—our last respects for a close family that enjoyed togetherness for such a brief time. The oldest of my aunts and uncles wasn't even 40, the youngest of my cousins not even 4.

Their names are also on the walls of the Holocaust Memorial in the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague's Old Jewish Ghetto. What had been such a large part of my childhood is here reduced to small lettering on the walls that are inscribed with the names of tens of thousands of Czech Jews who had died in the extermination camps. It takes considerable effort to find the many names we are looking for in the mass of tiny letters. There are 20,000 more names on these walls than are inscribed on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.



As in Dachau and in Terezin, thousands of visitors pass through this Holocaust Memorial in Prague. For many, it is a visit to a place where the past seemingly exists only as a ghost. Even if the visitors try to touch it, most will feel nothing. There are not many survivors left. Soon, the experience of visiting these museums won't be much different from that of a family visiting Williamsburg, Va., the Lincoln or Vietnam Memorials in Washington, or Pennsylvania's Gettysburg Battlefield. Those are similar places where we have tried to preserve history, but where we have only managed to re-create our vision of the ghostly past.

So it is with the Holocaust. I cannot re-create it for Michelle, nor would I want to.

Perhaps I have locked my memories into a concentration camp of their own and have guarded them too well for five decades to let them escape now.

Despite my original hesitation about the trip, it has been more difficult for me to write about it than to have completed it. Everything looked as it did when I left the old country. Yet nothing was the way I remembered it.

It was the Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber who said "It's a wonderful thing to grow old each day if we have not forgotten what it means to begin again."

His words have defined survivorship for me.

Memories. To me, they're just the road-kill of history.