

Mauthausen

by Sheila Luecht

The first time I was there in Mauthausen, I was twenty years old. I was full of all sorts of feelings as it was my first time to Europe and I was there to study for a year. I was a student who was particularly interested in history. I had done all the required reading for a good background on WWII. I was particularly interested in it because both of my parents were, in fact, WWII veterans. My mother was a WAVE in the Navy and my father was in the Air Corps. They talked about some of their experiences but since neither had been in Europe during the war, I was charting some new territory.

My earliest introductions to the war in Europe were through the writings of Anne Frank and the Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. When I was growing up the war had just recently ended. Neighbors, friends and family were often survivors of one sort or another. There were displaced persons who made their home across the alley, there were veterans across the street and next door, there were members of the army and navy and air corps in the family. It seemed that it was so common that no one took notice.

I was born just ten years after the war ended. I lived in the time past the initial housing shortages for those returning GIs and into the turbulent sixties and the wild seventies when everything was about more. Through it all I was sequestered by my older parents into a half world between this war and whichever would come next, always tinged with a bit of melancholy and foreboding because war was not a simple thing. It took everyone and everything in its path. Moving forward in school put so much into a historical context, but I never really knew too many Jews or their special stories. Then exposure to Jewish classmates in high school and college brought Anne Frank's plight to life. I could see these people, just people and I could move beyond the narrative and attach people to the suffering. I always

had a gift for empathy but now it was going to confront me in a way that I could have only imagined.

There was a trip for a couple of weeks through Germany and Austria on our way to school in Salzburg. This Mauthausen was one of the stops. It was a former concentration camp, a death camp. I was with forty or so students. If you can imagine a range of all humanity in that group you might have it visualized. The only thing is they were all white, all privileged in some way and in various stages of personal development as humans. Some were very financially spoiled, some were very sheltered, some were there on loans and pennies and some were German or Austrian ancestry but American. For some it was a European drinking adventure, for others it was a return to a place where they might have visited family and friends before, to others like me, it was a sudden immersion in a place that was known directly through family connections and history. It was the history, it was a kind of living history, it was a kind of stepping backwards in time for those like myself.

While most of my family had immigrated from central Europe at the turn of the century, family connections at that time still existed and through a large group of relatives here in the U.S., there were people there who were directly connected to me, there. One of my aunts had visited family in Europe ten years before I arrived, ten years after I was born, being at that time twenty years after 1945. I never felt then to be too foreign on this soil, I probably felt more foreign with these fellow students.

On that day when we visited Mauthausen, I was feeling a bit introspective. I was busy in my own mind assembling the history of the place and getting ready for the visit. I was naturally not someone who would cluster up with a bunch of people I had just met and had arrived to participate in this education abroad venture without friends in tow. Many of the people knew each other, were from the same school, or even had their best friends along. So in effect, many

were already in their unique little groups and it was early in the game so I was, as I am often, a loner. It was fine for me because my mind was so full of bits of knowledge and the ability to attach this encyclopedic trivia to a place that I was just bumping along getting further and further steeped in the kind of 'emotional heaviness' of the place.

Before long I was realizing that while I knew of numerous camps, I did not have too much in my head on this particular one. I started to apply what I suspected were commonalities to them all and was wandering, taking pictures here and there outside in the memorial area.

As part of the 'tour' we were walking down a path which seemed calm. I noted that we were not all marched together, but kind of clustered along, each at his own pace. While it seemed calmed it was not as I was just realizing where we were. At that time you could go into the chambers where people were gassed and walk through the various rooms where people hung on meat hooks and pass a dissecting table. No one from my group came in with me in the gas chamber part.

I was in a bit of shock once I got there and I was overwhelmed with an internal quiet sobbing, with tears running out of my eyes. I did not look like I was an emotional wreck, I was fighting to keep my self in a rigid, socially acceptable gait as I pushed through. It was a farce of control because I had seen the scratches on the wall, I noted the shower heads on the ceiling. I could feel the oppression of that first room and for me the ovens which I saw later were not as horrifying, because when they were so long ago burning those bodies, they were already dead. I was feeling the death itself in the chamber and it was curiously strange for me, as I felt an identification with those murdered there, and in years later when I would read more about descriptions of this kind of death, from witnesses who watched to see when the gasses would take effect, it

remarkably seemed to match what I was feeling and noting at the time.

