

The Road They Traveled

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"Are you sure this is this the right road?" I asked, as we jostled along the unkempt highway further and further from civilization. When we disembarked the tram, there was only one way to go, up. With no buildings in sight and no one to ask for directions, we had little choice, so off we went. Kicking myself that I had not invested time in researching this excursion, there was no turning back. I followed my husband and our travel companion into the unknown, something we had done before but never quite like this! The decades long friends often took off walking, not caring how long we trod, nor how far, acting like they forgot that I was along.

I wondered, "Why is the road winding back and forth up this steep accent?" Clearly, I had not studied a map nor investigated the geography of our destination. Since there were no other pathways or roads, I had to assume this was the right route to get there yet, the homes along the way seemed so normal. "Surely it can't be much farther," I thought. I tried to enjoy the gardens along the way, occasionally saying, "Guten Morgen," to the home owners tending them, but I dared not stop to admire for the guys were by now, way ahead. What must these Austrians be thinking of the three strangers trudging up the hill?

The road seemed endless, even more so after the drizzle began. Carefully trying not to fall on the now slippery pavement, this was not fun. My hiking boots, walking sticks, and rain gear were all back at the hotel in Linz, a place we might never see again at this rate! Fortunately, my inhaler was in my bag so I stopped to take a couple of puffs which helped in the thinning air. "How high up are we?", I wondered, as I lagged further behind the others.

We knew the entrance was near when the road flattened, framed by overgrown trees, sunlight now creeping through the boughs. Stopping for one last puff of my inhaler, I breathed a sigh of relief that we had to be close. Little did I realize what was ahead.

The last ascent took us to a foreboding entrance but we were relieved to be inside a building. Since there was little information, we headed toward a larger structure, stumbling into an empty theater, where we watched the feature that revealed the history of this place on repeat as we rested on the hard benches and warmed up. The black and white film set the dismal tone for the day ahead, Mauthausen Concentration Camp, the last gulag to be liberated near the end of World War II. Situated high above the market town of Mauthausen, in the state of Upper Austria, it was a forced labor camp and the final operating gas chamber.

Upon reflection, I came to realize that unlike those traumatized travelers, most likely poked and prodded up the mountain in all sorts of weather, my miserable trek only gave us an inkling of what those poor souls endured on their long journeys. The last concentration camp to remain open as the Allies were closing in, these prisoners had already endured unthinkable torture and torment. The living beings from the other death camps were transferred here, forced to work in even more difficult conditions. The stone quarry had to continue operation. If a weak worker fell backward under the weight of his load to the depths below, others were forced to carry on.

Between the crumbling walls, where their inhabitants had been crammed into tight dingy spaces, the rooms were now clean, a sharp contrast to how humans had lived in squalor. Newly constructed layered beds attempted to erase the reality of the crowded dormitories whose occupants would have huddled together each night in an attempt to keep warm. Even bleach could not erase the reality of what had happened here.

Near the end of our visit, we wandered into a large room of flags from all over the world. “Why are they here? “, we wondered. Later we learned that in addition to Polish and Hungarian Jews, Spanish, Swedish, Soviet, Yugoslav, Czechs, British, Dutch, Belgian, French, and yes, US citizens had been held captive there.

Further inland and less accessible, Mauthausen was the last working death machine. Thousands of prisoners, transported to this final destination to be murdered, were never registered in the camp. The Allies, hoping to liberate them, had been too late arriving at the other locations. Ten thousand souls are buried in one small garden alone, the green grass belying its occupants. It is estimated that almost 200,000 prisoners passed through the Mauthausen camp system where at least 95,000 died. Everywhere we walked, every building, field, and quarry, I heard the echoes of those poor wretched souls.

Late in the day, drained from our exhaustive explorations, we finally found a way to call a cab. After a long, damp wait, we numbly crawled into the car in the full realization of how fortunate we were. We could leave.