5-1-2011

Freude Macht Frei

Erika Doremus

Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Doremus, Erika (2011) "Freude Macht Frei," The Promethean: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol19/iss1/9

This Story is brought to you for free and open access by CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Promethean by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
Freude Macht Frei

Erika Doremus

_Arbeit Macht Frei_ was brazen in the massive, iron gate that I was about to enter. It is German for _work makes you free:_ just one more thing that the Nazis could do to antagonize the Jews and others deemed subhuman before reaching their imminent fate. Gravel crunched harshly under my feet and I had to think about the 68,000 souls that were held here against their will; 68,000 who were scared and beaten, 68,000 who were victims of their own government. But I was not one of those thousands. I was an American student studying in Germany on an eight week foreign exchange program and that day I was on a field trip with a group of other American high school students. We were visiting Dachau, the first concentration camp built for Hitler’s Reich, located in southern Bavaria.

Dachau was not originally designed for Jewish people. In fact, the Jews were not even the Nazi’s initial enemy. Previously, during the disintegration of the Weimar Republic, the Communists and the National Socialists were engaged in a brutal rivalry. Then, as history would have it, during the elections of July 1932, the Nazi Party effectively took over Parliament forming a fascist regime. Once Hitler had become the Führer he had his party round up every single political enemy in Germany and Dachau is where they went. Communists, homosexuals, Catholic priests, Social Democrats, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the disabled were the first to populate the camp; it was not until after 1938 that Jewish people were actually imprisoned there.

I’ve got to go in now. The gates open and my group shuffles through. Upon entering, Frau Reichstein, the group leader, announces that we must meet back here by half past two. With an hour and a half to explore on our own I turn to my friend Katie and ask, “Want to go into the museum?”

“Haven’t we seen enough museums on this trip?” she answers. She is right; we had visited at least five different museums by our third week. How much more still life history could a person take? So instead of following the rest of our classmates to the flat, beige building we turn south towards the barracks.

The barracks reminded me of long houses, the traditional shelters built by the native Suquamish people back near my home in northwest Washington state. Instead of families though, these buildings housed up to two hundred prisoners. They spanned about three hundred feet, looking hastily thrown together with dull, brown sheets of wood and never any windows. Katie stepped through the barracks’ single door first with me following behind. Row after row of bunks, three beds high, lined the walls just as the barracks lined the gates. Everything was meticulously measured with not even a hint of luxury. There were a few other tourists trailing in the far end of the barrack. One woman ran her hand along the plywood of the bottom bunk. Her fingers must have told her how difficult it would be to sleep on such a hard surface, because she pinched her eyebrows down and her mouth tightened as she caught up with her party. That was when I felt a presence. No sudden wind, no fingers tracing my arm; the emotional climate of the room had simply changed. Before the room was stale, just like the wood that made the room itself. In that second though, after the pinch-faced woman left, the air had existence. As if someone had laid their hand on my shoulder to say _let me show you this place._

“Do you feel that?” I ask Katie.

“Feel what?” she answers.

“Just something different, almost like we are not alone.”

“I think that this place is just getting to you”

“Yeah, you are probably right,” I lie. I know that someone is here. They might not be with us in an earthly sense, but still I feel it. Feeling queer, I say while heading for the door, “Alright, let’s see something else.”

From the barracks we walked along a path that others seemed to be following—more gravel, crunch, crunch, crunch. Everything was still when we paced down the path. I could think deeply, as deep as in yoga mediation. Another fifty or so feet down the path there was a beautiful brick
memorial surrounded by flowers. Levitating among the bricks was a golden Star of David. I paused to appreciate the shrine and realize how warm it was that day. The sun was directly overhead, bearing its worst upon us. Katie started again down the path and I followed a few steps afterward, but not before surveying the feeling of the air to make certain my impalpable companion was still with me.

Showers and ovens are two devices most people in the developed world have in their own homes. They are nothing to be afraid of—that is unless you are in concentration camp. At the end of our route stood the largest building on the compound. It was constructed of cement walls, and two wide double doors outlined in brass stood in the center. It looked industrious with twin smoke stacks attached to the far end. I knew that this was where the mass tragedy took place. I did not want to go. I did not want to voluntarily walk into a place where so many were forced to go. I did not want to feel guilty for being allowed to walk out of a place where so many were denied that option. When I stopped, my presence had stopped with me. It was patient, but urged me forward. You have to go; you have to make it real, it told me. In an internal fight between my gut and my brain I decided that I did not travel 3000 miles just to drink bier and practice my German on the locals, I also had to experience this heinous part of Germany’s past.

The gas chamber itself was cold and cramped, but mostly I noticed everyone else’s silence. A thick door was propped open, allowing visitors into what actually did look like a locker room shower area. Its floors slanted towards a center drain, half a dozen shower heads lined the ceiling, and the walls were tiled in various shades of brown. As I stood there the top of my head brushed against the low ceiling and I fought the urge to run. I knew nothing was going to come out of those shower heads; not water, not Zyklon B, but still my chest felt heavy and goose bumps covered my arms and legs. Fear was not what I felt because I was not spiritually alone. My body just seemed to understand the magnitude of this reality. Today, I am still convinced that in order to learn about the Holocaust one can watch films such as “Schindler’s List” or read memoirs of survivors, but none of those mediums can compare with how I felt walking the same steps that the victims did nearly 70 years ago.

At 2:30, Katie and I met back up with the group near the entrance and we prepared for departure. The staff would not let us leave through the iron gates, because before liberation no prisoner ever got to go back through those doors. As I pushed the revolving door, about twenty feet down from the original entrance, I looked back at those iron gates. In fact, it made us all pause. We are leaving; we are living; we are experiencing freedom when so many, 68,000 to be exact, were denied that right. As soon as I crossed the barbed wire, the air changed again. Its steady stillness was gone and a bustling city, complete with tour bus traffic and travel schedules met me on the other side. My presence had not followed me, but stayed within the walls of the camp. I looked back to whisper aufwiedersehen under my breath.

The train lurched to a stop once we had reached Odeonplatz, the main train depot in Munich’s city center. There had not been much conversation along the ride. Everyone’s face seemed to be wearing a grim expression, so thankfully our teachers were allowing us to relax in the Englischer Garten for the rest of the day. The Englischer Garten is an enormous park in downtown Munich. It is similar to New York City’s Central Park. From the depot we followed our teachers two-by-two, resembling ducklings more than students. Our procession was coming up to a bridge which spanned across the swift, cool Ismar River. Its water looked even more inviting following our afternoon in the 100°+F heat. Maybe it was the heat or the fact that we had visited a concentration camp just hours earlier, but an idea occurred to me. I turned to Dennis, one of the German students in the group, to ask how deep the water was. Dennis chuckled and replied, “Deep enough; go swimming.”

That was all the reassurance that I needed. Instantly, I was kicking my sandals off and unbuttoning my jean shorts. “What are you doing?” Katie shrieked. However, Blake, my daredevilish friend had already caught on to my idea and was losing his shirt as well. We both climbed up to stand on the railing. I was down to my pink striped bikini bottoms and tank
Doremus: Freude Macht Frei

The medieval age stone felt warm beneath my feet, but the bridge looked as if it had grown taller in the last thirty seconds. By now, Frau Reichstein had made it back to the crowd that formed around our ankles.

"Are you going to jump, or just stand there?" she chided. Everyone was shocked that she did not try to talk us down. With that I looked at Blake. One, two, three, we swung our arms back and launched into freefall. The pure exhilaration only lasted a few seconds before I pierced the refreshing water below. When I surfaced I looked up at all of the eyes watching me from above. They must have been waiting to see if I survived, because when I smiled they started clapping and yelling. Then it dawned on me—I just stripped down to my underwear in the middle of a major city and jumped off a bridge.

I let myself float with the cordial current for another minute to reflect. I am the greatest skeptic in the world, but I will never deny what I felt at Dachau. I cannot deny that someone, something is still there. I experienced a place whose purpose was to create terror and commit murder. Yet, I did not come away from it depressed and angry like I thought I would. Arbeit Macht Frei: work does not make you free. The German word for joy is freude; joy is what makes you free. Dachau taught me the greatest lesson a seventeen-year-old could learn—live life to the fullest and have an appreciation for your own freedom and ability to choose. I chose to jump off that bridge simply because I could. But I think I also did it for them, the ones that never walked out of Dachau: for Jakob Alber, for Wilhelm Bach, and Eugene Dangel. I jumped for number 131099—Emil Fischer, and for Franz Detmar, who arrived at the camp with just his wedding ring. May I never forget that joy makes you free—freude macht frei.

Purity

Benjamin Fitzgerald

there is a sort of peace
not to be found
but in the company of puppies
kittens
and small children

a gentleness of love
a sweetness of sincerity
a purity too often lacking
in the minds of students
scholars
and knaves

i am a knave
but when i am found
in the company of puppies
kittens
and small children
Death
doesn't feel quite so cold
(if for but a moment)

and i
i remember myself
and for a moment am pure
once more