

Reflections on a visit to Holland

When most people think of Holland they think of Dutch chocolate, wooden shoes, canals and dykes to redirect water and reclaim land from the sea. Growing up as a kid in NYC, Holland was very important in my life. My parents surrounded me with various surrogate aunts, uncles and cousins that they referred to as the Dutch crowd. It was not immediately understandable to me as all of the grownups were actually from Germany or Austria- so why did these gatherings involve prattling in that guttural language and relishing Dutch treats like herring salad, Dutch cocoa and pancakes?

I later came to learn that this Dutch Crowd was not a social club from some summer camp near Amsterdam- instead they were survivors of Kamp Westerbork, a transit camp first organized as a refugee facility by various relief organizations trying to save German Jews after the night of the broken glass, Kristallnacht, in December of 1938.

After Holland was overrun by the Nazi Blitzkrieg in just 5 days in 1940, what **was** a displaced persons/internment camp functioning much like Manzanar in our own sordid treatment of Japanese-Americans post-Pearl Harbor, (or dare I say today's immigration centers on our southern border) became a concentration camp that held over the 5 years of Nazi Occupation as many as 240K denizens of which only 5K survived by war's end. 102K of the fatalities were Dutch Jews. The rest were non-Dutch Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, Political prisoners and Resistance fighters. When the camp itself was liberated on April 12, 1945, only 800 people were still in the camp- my parents being two of them.

As a kid my parents did not share a lot about their experiences in Kamp Westerbork. But over time more and more they became willing to share their stories. After my father passed away in 2006 my mother actually gave an oral history of her experience to the Leo Boeck Society whose mission was to record the histories of Austrian Jews. Listening to the tapes gave me a much better understanding of their suffering and their triumph. Even more so when my Mom, still alive and going strong at age 94, gave a different oral history to a grad student from the Strassler Institute of Holocaust studies at Clark University.

So when my wife and I decided to take a European vacation this summer with visits to Belgium and Holland, I cautiously booked an excursion to see the Kamp, as it now has a commemorative center there. My Mother advised against it saying there would be "nothing to see" and that it would nonetheless be upsetting to me. I have never felt that I was anywhere as tough as my my parents, so for better or worse I decided to challenge myself to handle a visit to a place where only ghosts could harm me.

My wife and I were fortunate to have picked a beautiful day to drive from Amsterdam to Westerbork- about 2.5 hours to the northeast. Fields of farm animals and vegetable harvesting were to our left and right. We arrived to the Kamp Westerbork and walked around their museum. We saw diorama mockups of the camp, re-creations of the triple bunk bed living in the barracks. A Nazi produced film created to absolve the Kommandant of atrocities (he produced it once he knew the German war effort was failing) portrayed the camp as a work camp- farming (my Father, a city kid from Berlin who knew nothing about farms, was in charge of a farming detail) and weaving and sports activities and even a weekly Cabaret night on Saturday night featuring some of the top German and Dutch performers of the now defunct Weimar age depicted by Bertholdt Brecht and the movie Cabaret. It showed the excellent hospital facilities at the camp- so good that non-Jewish German war casualties were frequently brought there and the Nazi staff of the camp and their families were treated there. This medical information heartened

me as my mother was trained as a nurse there when she arrived at the camp in 1942. Both my parents were lucky to have been given vital functions that helped the camp to continue to be self-sufficient. This helped to keep them off the train that ran through the camp every Tuesday- destination Auschwitz. The Memorial they erected consisted of two WW2 German box cars and a section of train track that consisted of 49 railroad ties- one for each of the transports that carried approximately 2000 Jews to Auschwitz from 1942-1945. The last transport sent Anne Frank, possibly Westerbork's most famous resident (albeit for only 5 weeks) to her death at Auschwitz (along with her Mother and sister).

Walking around the now grassy fields with mounds of grass-covered earth where the many barracks stood (1/2 of a barrack had been preserved) where nearly 700 residents were crammed sharing a single toilet - looking at the trees planted on the perimeter that had replaced the barbed wire and the watch towers (one watch tower had been preserved)- it was hard to picture the evil and sadness that had once filled this place. The central path that led to the cattle cars that departed every Tuesday was called the Boulevard of Misery, especially after returning empty train cars were found to be filled with feces and urine and small notes of warning surreptitiously hidden in the slats of the railcars. The notes were depicted at the camp as saying things like - "we have been traveling for 5 days without food or water or light. This cannot be good". Even till the end the Westerbork denizens thought there was still a chance they were truly being sent to work in Nazi Germany rather than to end up in some crematorium in Poland. The 102,000 little red stones laid about on a field near the train tracks showed how wrong they were.

We hooked up with a guided tour. The tour guide was 81 years old and had been a school teacher for over 40 years. Encouragingly, the attendance for his and subsequent tours was quite numerous. People in the region were reverent and taking heed of these events. They wanted to know what happened. The guide tried to put the emphasis on the stories that would mean the most to kids- the deprivations, the lack of hygiene, the monotony and the terror. When speaking to him afterwards, I told the guide of my personal history. He told me as a little boy his grandmother would bring him down to the train tracks to retrieve notes thrown out of the trains as they departed Westerbork. He would gather them and some which were written on postcards he would help his grandmother stamp and actually mail. Most landed up back in the camp. But some got out and alerted family members in hiding or in the Resistance to avoid coming to the camp at all costs.

We left Westerbork and returned to complete a few more days of our vacation in Amsterdam. We visited the Anne Frank Huis with a new understanding of her history and that of my parents. 4000 visitors a day come to visit the Anne Frank house, another sign that perhaps the "never forget " slogan is more than that for people around the world.

The people that lived the events surrounding Westerbork are almost all gone now. When the horrible anti-Semitism wave that seemed to be sweeping Europe and now My beloved country, the USA, hit, my mother said " I have seen this all before". After this visit I feel personally committed not to stand by and allow this to ever recur. I told my mother of my resolve and said if beautiful trees can grow on the soil of Westerbork, might there not be hope that we can avoid this again? She sighed and said- "your father planted those trees".