

TO THE INDIANAPOLIS LITERARY CLUB      RICHARD K. CURTIS    11-5-12

“NEVER AGAIN?” DACHAU, THE HOLOCAUST, AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN  
THE THIRD REICH”

It was a bright, sunny July day in 1973 as Beth and I, and 11-year old daughter Laurie, boarded a train in Munich for Dachau, a little village 20 miles away. Soon we were in the museum, formerly the administration building of the first of more than 200 concentration camps started by Hitler and his right hand man, Heinrich Himmler, the former chief of police in Munich. There in the museum we were shaken to see the ghastly sights of men, women, and children, shriveled to the bone, awaiting their execution or - as Hitler put it - extermination. As though these were insect pests! Leaving the garish photos and instruments of torture that had been used some 30 years before, our tour group walked over the concrete floors, all that was left of the long barracks that had housed the prisoners awaiting their certain death. Ahead of us lay a long, low brick building with five chimneys: the crematorium. Once inside, the door clanked shut, and we found ourselves facing five huge furnaces, now cold, and into the waiting room where prisoners, on the pretext they were being deloused, had stripped and fallen to the floor as the deadly poison gas took its toll. Then anything with gold or silver was taken from them - rings and other jewelry - even gold fillings torn from their mouths. They were then shoveled into the furnaces by other prisoners who hoped against hope that they would still live if they cooperated with their German overseers. Once outside, we confronted a huge pile of ashes, all that was left of them. And onto three chapels, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, to emphasize no religion

sponsored this kind of barbarism.

Then, as we walked the exit path, I couldn't help but look up and wonder if the residents of Munich in 1944 had made out the vapor trails high in the sky as our bombers, B24s and B17s, escorted by our fighters, including my P51 Mustang, laid waste to the huge factories turning out the new ME 262 German jet fighters. Two my most important missions, escorting the bombers there, were when I encountered those same jets, not only 100 miles per hour faster than our Mustangs, but packing heavier firepower. Hitler had gone on record as predicting that if he could have a thousand of these jets operational by the end of 1944, he would win the war. We were determined he would not get them, and we succeeded.

As we three headed down the exit path from Dachau we ran into a five-foot monument, inscribed with the cryptic message, "NEVER AGAIN," in five languages to assure most if not all would understand this warning. Or was it a prayer? Or perhaps an ultimatum? One thing for sure, when James B. Conant, president of Harvard, heard rumors that millions were being executed by Hitler, he could not believe it. Was not Germany a premier contributor of civilization? Had it not provided significant advances in science and technology, in the fine arts as well as the liberal arts? Had not our universities, and particularly Indiana University, looked to Germany for leadership? Had not its president, David Starr Jordan, a scientist, looked to Germany to learn how to develop a graduate school, by establishing schools and departments, breaking down disciplines into ever smaller sub-disciplines? Did he not go on from I.U. to Stanford to serve as president for

22 years, retiring to serve as chief director of the World Peace Foundation? .  
Though these graduate schools would reveal more detailed pictures of the world about us, they posed a mortal danger, suggested by the renowned Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset in his essay, "The Barbarism of Specialization." Could this help to explain the reason "well educated" medical doctors could deliberately infect children in these concentration camps with smallpox to experiment with various treatments? Or throw them into freezing water to see how long they could survive?

Surely another factor in Hitler's calling a nation to arms is suggested by Nassir Ghaemi, who pointed out that Hitler, from 1937 until his suicide in 1945, was administered intravenous shots of amphetamine by his personal physician. To these Hitler was "especially susceptible because of his bipolar disorder - worsening his manic and depressive episodes, impairing his leadership skills with catastrophic effects." (N.G. A First-Rate Madness. Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness. Taken from the last page of his chapter, "Hitler Amok." NY: Penguin Press, 2011)

Yet another precipitating cause was surely the cruel treatment of the Allies at the end of World War I, when they left Germany in shambles, made no effort to help the defeated foe, but simply kicked them when they were down. Fortunately, following World War II, we had the immense good fortune to have George C. Marshall with his plan to help our defeated foes as well as our Allies.

Of course, James Conant in 1943 knew nothing of this. But he asked if

the advanced nation of Germany could succumb to such savagery, could America also suffer the same fate? So he established a commission in 1943 to confront the question: what should a college education do for a student in a free society? Two years later the commission released its report, identifying four goals for higher education in our nation: 1) to think clearly; 2) to make sound judgments; 3) to distinguish among values; and 4) to communicate effectively. We easily see that the last three goals depend on the first, clear thinking. By the same token, the last three become criteria of just how clearly we are thinking. It is noteworthy that none of these goals had to do with making a living, with being promoted or getting a raise in salary. Was this perhaps because the latter are byproducts of these four goals? Do we achieve happiness by striving to be happy? Or do we achieve at least a measure of happiness as we become involved in goals bigger than ourselves and with people beyond ourselves?

So how has “Never Again” fared? A glance at the daily headlines would seem to say we have been repeating the holocaust - in Vietnam, in the former Yugoslavia, in Congo, Somalia, and Sudan, and in other nations. Yet it must be admitted that these do not begin to approach the scale of the holocaust. Indeed, there are those who make the case that, whereas the 100 million or more who died as a result of wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - more than in all previous wars put together - are on a vastly different scale than the relatively few fatalities of the wars since World War II.

Is it possible that we are learning to resolve our conflicts more peaceably? We will surely be tested far more as we face drastic climate change.