

FAMILY REUNIONS: SOME SCENES FROM MEMORY

By Peter Thompson

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Chicago. One of our kids has traced and found her birth mother. Vanessa then learns that she has a half-sister living in Baltimore. Telephone calls. The two half-sisters arrange to meet at our family reunion in Annapolis. As we leave Chicago, I telephone my distributor to check on the German and French versions of UNIVERSAL HOTEL (a film on a Nazi medical experiment at Dachau) scheduled to air in December on European TV. Nothing new--but Chris Hoover will call with news the moment it arrives. When I ask to be telephoned in Annapolis, Chris invites me to visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., and to write something about the experience.

Wilmington, Delaware. Approaching Annapolis, we turn onto a dirt road and drive up to the farm where my wife and our children lived before *I* was adopted as their father. It's no longer in shambles: the 1790 Quaker home has been restored and converted into the headquarters of a nature preserve. Our three adult daughters are thrilled, and run to reclaim memories. "It was under *this* porch that the snake bit the kitten". "It was to *this* door that Vanessa was delivered by that lady from the adoption agency." "Yeah! She was wearing a pink dress, remember?" But Vanessa, who comes to this family reunion to recover memories from her past, who in 1968 was delivered to her third mother and lived in this farmhouse until she was three--can remember *nothing*.

"Don't you remember we used to put the kittens under the porch?"

"No."

(silence)

"You must be tired of our saying, 'Don't you remember?'"

"No. I'm tired of not remembering."

Annapolis First day of family reunion--housewives, nudists, fundamentalists, psychoanalysts, military--the spectrum and spectacle of American lives and politics. I make my excuse and drive into DC to the Holocaust Museum.

Holocaust Museum Walking toward the entrance doors on 14th Street, I pass hundreds of people queued for the 10am opening, and stop at the Information Desk. "Seven to nine thousand on weekends," she replies. "On weekdays?" "Five to seven thousand."

As the elevator rises to the fourth floor, a video screen lights up: American GI's standing at the edge of a pit look down at us, troubled. The voice of a good old boy, one not prone to exaggeration: "They were sick, dying. You can't imagine it. Things like that don't happen...."

We step from the elevator into the grim exhibition on the 4th floor. As I circulate from videoclip to objects to photographs, I suddenly realize that I'm in the *midst* of another exhibit: people who lived inside these exhibits. This is the experiential difference between this museum and most others: here an object on view has a permeable boundary extending forward through

the glass to include its viewers. *Which ones?* I am mindful not to stare but look around discretely for signs of authenticity: ethnicity and age. Those whom I deem likely candidates are often *very* quiet, and surrounded by deferential family members, hands placed supportively on shoulders or arms. Clearly, families have reunited to stand together in front of these objects and to remember and speak of experiences embodied in them. In overhearing fragments of their conversation, I hear deeper echoes of my daughters' struggles to reclaim their memories and to speak of them to me.

Annapolis. Day 2, 11 AM. Mary and I sit with Vanessa on the lawn and wait for her half sister Shavaun, who will arrive at noon. In the background, the remaining forty-odd members of the family play softball. All anticipate this small family reunion. As we wait, they look at us periodically but are discrete, and try not to stare.

Holocaust Museum Great consideration for others is shown within this museum. As people circulate, whispered "Excuse me's", are proffered. At the high concrete walls shielding children from video clips of the *Einsatzkommandos* at work in the killing fields of Russia, and from photographs of the medical experiments of Dr. Sigmund Rascher at Dachau, and from photographs of the cadaver collection of Dr. August Hirt at the University of Strasbourg's Anatomical Institute, people wait for limited viewing space. 1 minute, 2, 4. We crane our necks, shift our feet. No one --not once--ever asked a viewer to move.

When I finally get to a "privacy wall", I recognize the photograph of Dr. Sigmund Rascher sitting with Dr. Erich Holzloehner on a bin above a Testperson floating in icewater at Dachau in February of 1942.

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I used that photograph within my film UNIVERSAL HOTEL, and used the Dachau Archive's own negative to strike the photographic print. This photograph on video is *so* much better that I hear myself murmuring "Digitally cleaned!" Heads turn. Embarrassed, I move on.

As I move from the 4th floor through the second, the videos increase in length. Average times for the 4th floor: 40 seconds; 3rd floor: 2 minutes; 2nd floor: 7 minutes, max. On each floor talking among the viewers is reduced, as is our speed of walking. By the time we come to the end of the exhibition, the Hall of Remembrance, we are silent, and many simply sit down on the marble floor.

Annapolis Day 2, 1 PM. One hour later and Shavaun is still not here. We've moved from the sweltering lawn to the shade of a tree on a low hill to scan the length of the country road. Dust in the distance. A car.... Clenched thumbs. But *white* hands--not black and Puerto Rican--return our waves. Family members bring glasses of iced tea, stand alongside Vanessa briefly, place a hand on her shoulder or arm, and withdraw.

4 PM: a Toyota with 8 occupants pulls into the driveway. Vanessa approaches--the two new sisters embrace, then walk slowly to the porch, staring at each other. They sit in two facing chairs. Shavaun is crying. We stand back to extend to them privacy. I pick up a softball bat and

invite the two men and three little kids out on the lawn to play. Both contingents are uncomfortable but know that each has made sacrifices to support the uniting of the two sisters and that each side needs to witness it. Vanessa and Shavaun talk quietly, laugh. Shavaun daubs tears. She talks about their birthmother; both tell their stories in bits and pieces.

Holocaust Museum I emerge from the walkthrough exhibition, "Daniel's World", the composite narrative of Jewish children's experiences to be experienced *by* children. In the exhibit, though, there is only one child and his mother and the rest of us are adult men. Instinctively, we hang back, allowing the mother and child to precede us--yet we follow them, stopping respectfully at every wall entry from Daniel's "diary" as the mother reads them aloud. I think we luxuriated in the feeling that Something Very Large was being Explained to Me by Mother.

Annapolis 4:30 PM: Shavaun's girlfriend stands up and announces their return to Baltimore. All stand. From the eyes up, Shavaun and Vanessa are alike: beautiful dark eyes, high forehead, luxuriant black hair. Two sisters. One a MacDonalds worker with two years of high school. The other a graduate student and a social worker with a caseload of abused children--some up for adoption. Two worlds so connected, two so far apart.

Holocaust Museum In one corner of the fourth floor stands a Gypsy wagon. Behind glass a Gypsy mother's dress. On the video monitor is a 4' 30" video: Gypsy children caring for each other, Gypsy children's games, horse trading by Gypsy men, mug shots of Gypsies arrested and registered, incarcerated Gypsy children playing while waiting for medical experiments to be visited upon them.

I am relieved to find this part of Holocaust history represented. Next to Jews, the race most proportionally decimated by Nazis was the Gypsy. As I continue on through the four floors of the exhibition I increasingly think back to this Gypsy exhibit--and become increasingly aware of its *mini*-ness.

I think of the following story:

Dachau Archives, Dachau, Germany, June 1980 When Mary and I arrived, Gypsies had just ended a hunger strike within the Dachau Memorial. It was disruptive, but supported on principle by Barbara Distel, the heroic Director of the Memorial. At issue: Gypsies were lobbying for the same monetary restitution given to Jews by the German government because they felt equally persecuted by Nazis. Gypsies had been the first race of the 1930's chosen for genocide. Years before the Final Solution, Rumanians cleansed their cities of Gypsies, packed them into trains, shut the doors--then realized they had not thought to locate the "away" towards which Gypsies should be "thrown". So, because of this failure of bureaucratic imagination, locked trains taking priority over all other passenger, commercial and military ones, crossed and re-crossed country and entered and re-entered cities until the cargo was silenced by starvation.

The Gypsy hunger strike at the Dachau Memorial did not result in payments. Restitution payments, like space in Holocaust museums, are awarded to those with education and its concomitant political clout. This museum cost 168 million dollars. Jews--not Gypsies--paid that bill. Two worlds so connected, two so far apart.

Gouldsboro, Maine For the rest of the vacation, Vanessa is quiet. She is perhaps balancing several tensions: joy at finding blood relatives, discomfort with the degree of difference between her class and theirs; relief that she escaped, and guilt that she did. She tells us that she needs to stay within herself before talking about the experience.

From the book I took on vacation, Susan Griffin's A CHORUS OF STONES: The Private Life of War, p. 179. "What is buried in the past of one generation falls to the next to claim. The children of Nazis and survivors alike have inherited a struggle between silence and speech."

Holocaust Museum Young woman on entering the Final Solution portion of the exhibition: "This is the good stuff."

The motto of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum: "For the dead and the living we must bear witness." The nature of witnessing lies not only in observing, remembering and reporting but in exposing oneself to cross-examination. As a witness what can be testified to, legally? No conjecture or rumor, only facts within one's personal knowledge. Personal knowledge as mediated by memory (I think back to my daughters and to their struggles with the kittens, the door, the toolshed). Witnessing to large themes (like Evil, like Memory, like Family) by embodying them in space and time are endeavors to which an enormous amount of disorder attaches; and the results will *always* be partial successes of both memory and representation. Givens. A theme park dedicated to witnessing a particular historical memory and funded by those who have that memory? Why not, considering that this event is arguably the defining event of the 20th Century; that witnessing to this event is not for court; that this remembering is not a functional matter to lift shame or relieve sorrow but serves the purely moral function of being a right thing to do; that it's an affirmation of the memory of the woundedness of a particular people. Does this memory need to be located in a museum space?

I flash on Cicero's DE ORATORE that relates how Simonides invented the art of memory. After he was called away from a dinner table the roof fell and crushed the diners beyond recognition. Simonides remembered who sat where and thus reunited bodies with families. In order to remember, he wrote, you must have a space to put the mental images of the things you wish to remember--one rationale for the Memorial. It also follows a particularly American tendency toward exposure to historical knowledge through theme parks and theme towns. It's true that the Holocaust as such is not a particularly *American* memory (although within the Museum there *are* surprisingly frank video exhibits showing the ways in which Roosevelt and Congress denied U.S. entrance even to Jewish children), and it's true that we've had a generation's bellyful of exposure to the Holocaust: indeed, 53% of Americans surveyed by a Gallup poll in 1991 thought it was high time to forget about it. And we know that the writings of Holocaust Denialists such as Arthur Butz of Northwestern University or former professor of literature Robert Faurisson of the University of Lyons can be dismissed as perverse products of academic gamesmanship. So maybe there's no real need for this Museum. It's been done. Everybody *knows* this stuff, already.

Yeah? Then I'll tell you the following strange little story:

Siena, Italy, July 14, 1981 Mary and I receive a card from Barbara Distel, Director of the Dachau Memorial and Archives.

Dear Peter and Mary:

That was a lovely surprise arriving on my birthday! Thank you very much. I envy you, hope you really take advantage of the time you can spend away from 'reality'. Last week a U.S. senator from Nebraska came to visit the Dachau Memorial and I took him around. He had not the faintest idea of historical facts, had never heard the name Auschwitz, did not know that there are two Germanys with two different political systems, etc. When I asked him why he had come to Europe he said "I am in the Nuclear Commission." These are the people deciding our future.

I am looking forward seeing you on the 24th. If you want to stay overnight please stay with us.

Barbara Distel later shows me the very considerate thank-you note sent to her by the U.S. senator, Larry Pressler. Written on stationary emblazoned "United States Senate", it is dated July 17, 1981:

Dear Frau Distel:

Thank you very much for your help during my recent trip to Germany. I learned a great deal about nuclear forces and other issues facing our country and our world.

Thank you again for your help. Your tour was most impressive.

This letter was signed by a man currently serving in the U.S. Senate.

Throughout the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in July 1993, one could see Senator Pressler on television querying Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg as to her fitness to serve upon the U.S. Supreme Court. He always sat surrounded by a large pile of black briefing books and asked his questions with great civility and seriousness.

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