

Please Highlight a Situation from your Voluntary Service

After nearly two years in Germany, it is hard to pinpoint only one experience to talk about. The work in Dachau is varied and interesting. Our time here is split between two projects. The first is the work at the Protestant Church of Reconciliation. Our main task there is to lead groups of visitors on guided tours through the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. We also serve by staffing the church during the time that the Memorial Site is open, answering questions and just talking to visitors. The other project is called “The Remembrance Book for the Prisoners of Dachau Concentration Camp.” In this project, volunteers (mainly students) research and write the biographies of former prisoners. My responsibilities there include finding new exhibitors in North America for the traveling exhibit of this project (Names Instead of Numbers), and supporting the students in their research, especially those who are working with survivors living in English speaking countries. I have also chosen to research and write the biography of a former prisoner, and will have that completed by the time that I leave for home. The two projects are linked, as the idea for the Remembrance Book came, in part, from the Deacon at the Church. The completed biographies are also displayed and can be read in the community room of the Church.



Holding One of the Banners for the “Names Instead of Numbers” Exhibition

That being said, one of the experiences which has left a lasting impression has been the opportunity to listen to and talk to survivors of the Holocaust. Due to the passage of time, these survivors are dwindling in number. Whenever possible, I took the opportunity to attend talks by various people who had experienced life in the camp.



Max Mannheimer

Survivor of Auschwitz, Dachau and Dachau Death March

The opportunity to learn from these people is rare and the experience is one that I will always treasure. Many of these talks were sponsored by the Church, but there were also many sponsored by the Memorial Site Administration as well as the city of Dachau.

Expectations and Goals – Results

When I came to Germany in September, 2012, I really didn't know what to expect. Of course, I had received a description of the projects here, as well as a summary of the duties. I just wasn't sure how they would look in the real world. Would I be able to actually lead a tour in German? What exactly was the Remembrance Book? As trivial as it sounds, I was almost the most worried about preparing coffee and tea for after the church services!

As it turned out, I didn't have to worry about those things. The people we worked with are very used to having ASF volunteers as part of their team. They knew exactly how to provide the training that we needed. I think this is a strong point of this project – caring, informed co-workers. If I needed it, I always had someone that I could turn to. It also helped to have a second ASF volunteer in Dachau. There are some things only another volunteer can understand! I was very lucky during my two years here to have two very good ASF volunteers as partners. We had no conflict in our apartment and had the opportunity to do things with each other when we wanted to. We also had the space to retreat into our rooms to reflect and spend time alone when we needed it.



The Ecumenical Team from the Protestant Church of Reconciliation
Team "Ausflug" to Chiemsee, 2014

As I said, my fears turned out to be unfounded. I have given many tours, most of them in German. It is very interesting to meet the various groups that I am to lead through the Memorial Site. Most of the time, these are groups of German 9th and 10th graders. They seem to relate well to me, as I have a grandson the same age. I can use his experiences with racism to connect the history of the Memorial Site to the reality of the present day. The Remembrance Book project has also turned out to be very interesting. I enjoy working with the students, perhaps because I worked as a teacher. I also find the whole process of researching

the past to be very interesting. In addition to the biography that I am writing, I have been asked to interview a survivor who lives in the United States. I am looking forward to taking on that challenge.

By the way, it turns out that coffee making for after the church services is not as difficult as I feared! One of the regular attendees makes a point to tell me how much he enjoys the coffee when I make it!

One of the things that I appreciated most about my project was the flexibility. We had certain set hours, but the rest of our time was adaptable. For example, at the beginning of the year, there was more free time. This was great, as we were also taking German courses as well as the “Ausbildung” for giving tours. We also had a little more time to get to know Dachau and Munich. The end of the year gets to be a little busier, with increased numbers of tours and projects to complete. I think this is a good arrangement, as long as it doesn’t get too overwhelming at the end.

One thing that I think the partners here in Dachau should do is to encourage the volunteers to find some interests that have nothing to do with the projects. They are very good at suggesting events that are related to the Memorial Site – survivor talks, exhibitions, and so. This is good, but it can become a little depressing to only deal with this sad history. On my own, I began



Lynn Williams, Speech at the Memorial Service for the Death Marches
May 3, 2014

taking lessons on the recorder. This introduced me to a whole different circle of people and to the whole calendar of concerts, art exhibits, and theater offerings, both in Dachau and in Munich. Reminding the volunteers to expand their interests while here in Germany would help them to maintain balance.

The Concentration Camp in Dachau was one of the first to be established by the Nazis. It makes a great deal of sense for ASF to have volunteers in place here. Working with the Protestant Church of Reconciliation ties in closely with the goals of the organization. I never saw anything but respect shown for other religions and backgrounds. In addition, the team is very skilled at

incorporating the volunteers into their ranks. From day one, I never felt like an outsider – even when everything was strange and new.

Cross-Cultural Interfaces

I have been to Germany many times since the age of 16. During these many years, I feel that I have gotten to know Germany well. What has been new during these two years has been the opportunity to learn about the remembrance culture here. My previous visits did not expose me to this aspect.

My views on the United States have not changed drastically. I have always been able to see both the good and bad points of my country. At the same time, I have gained a greater appreciation of “home.” I can’t say that there is any particular aspect of life at home that has had me yearning to be there, outside of missing my family. I could easily remain in Germany, if only they were here!

For me, history came alive during our seminar in Oświęcim. It was the city more than the visits to the Camps that did it. At one time, there was a thriving community of Jewish residents. Now there are no Jews there. They are gone. What I knew in my head became reality in my heart. This was strengthened by the many opportunities here in Dachau to hear the first-hand stories of survivors. I guess I can say that history came alive for me by becoming personal through these narratives.



Jan Kwiatkowski (ASF) and Lynn Williams
Memorial at Herbertshausen, SS Shooting Range, May 4, 2014

Prospects for the Future

These two years in Germany will always stay with me. I have learned so much and met so many wonderful people. I will always be grateful to ASF for taking a chance on me at my age. I think that I brought a different perspective than the younger volunteers – not better, necessarily, just different. Above all, I will treasure the friendships I made among the two groups of ASF volunteers that I was fortunate enough to work with over the last two years.

My plan when I return home is to first spend lots of time with my family, especially my grandkids! I am looking forward to celebrating a birthday in person with my youngest grandson

for the first time. Because my two oldest grandchildren also know German, I will be able to share my knowledge of the language and culture with them.



My Son and His Family

I will not, however, forget my work here. I am planning to prepare a presentation about Dachau that I can give to high school students in my city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I would like to make the history of this place more than just pages in a history book. I have gained the permission of one survivor to include parts of his story. I hope that will make history come alive for them.

I will also continue to work with the Remembrance Book project. As I mentioned, I will be interviewing a survivor who is now living in the USA. In addition, I will be taking charge of the exhibition itself, making sure that the banners are clean and in good condition. I will also be in charge of making sure that the exhibition gets from place to place at the right time, and for storing it in between times.

I look forward to these new tasks. Most of all, however, I would like to thank ASF for the opportunity to have grown and learned so much.

