

Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust

Seong-Jin Moon, Kacey Bayles, and Matthew Mulholland were winners of an essay contest on Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust. Winners attended an international conference in Germany and France dealing with this theme. The following three essays are their reflections on the conference. Many thanks to the Holocaust Education Committee at Penn for helping to bring this contest to *Kedma's* attention.

Seong-Jin Moon

I grew up learning of the Japanese atrocities against my homeland. As a young and avid reader of history books, I would often come across the major historical period during which Japan annexed Korea into its empire (1910-1945). At the time, I did not have a complete understanding of the texts I read, but I had some conception, in my mind, of who was good and who was bad. Fifteen years and many history books later, I find my childhood view quite naïve, and I realize that there is a much more complex underlying situation than had first met the eye. What constitutes abhorrent and inhumane practices against other humans, enough to call it genocide? I still have no clear conception of this, although much of the hazy cloud has been cleared since the first time I opened a history book as a child.

Much of this can be attributed to a history class I took in which my wonderful professor, Professor Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, was able to enlarge the sheer magnitude of what genocides were and how they are interpreted throughout history and the world. As I read from the articles and books dedicated to

genocide scholarship, one question remained paramount in my mind: will all the genocides recorded in history only be determined in hindsight? It was only after the murder of six million Jews that the international community acknowledged the Holocaust as genocide. Is the purpose of using the term genocide only a label then, to be applied in future history books?

People have debated the use of the term “genocide.” My genocide class discussed the term, referencing such works as Yehuda Bauer’s *Rethinking the Holocaust* and Israel W. Charny’s *Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide*. National television has broadcasted recent events concerning Darfur, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although broadcasting of genocides is much more prevalent today than in previous generations, the Western world and the public still responds with general indifference. Ethicists and genocide scholars appear on national television debating whether certain repulsive actions constitute genocide, and, in the meantime, people continue to die. It is imperative that awareness of genocide and active participation in its prevention be felt throughout society.

The program I attended in Germany last spring was dedicated to dialogue on the ethics of genocide and specifically on the Holocaust. This seemed to me like the best way to learn more about the Holocaust. I felt that having discussions with other scholars from around the globe would be a great learning environment to foster awareness of the Holocaust and a multi-varied approach to genocide.

The Holocaust was a truly terrible and shameful act of humanity against others; there are really no words to describe it. When asking about the Holocaust, a response I often receive is that it is comprised of a staggering and appalling conglomeration of acts. But the Holocaust was more than just a coming together of acts. What separates the Holocaust from other genocides is the utter lack of feeling, the sheer magnitude of scale, and the frigid coldness of the Nazi perpetrators, devoid of any hint of human warmth.

I consider myself lucky and fortunate that I was able to attend this

conference to meet and discuss viewpoints on how ethics and morals are and should be situated in the post-Holocaust world. I was able to meet students from such countries as Germany, Latvia, and Israel. Many of the talks focused around philosophical or theological discussion of the ethics of the post-Holocaust world. But what really grabbed my attention was the interaction between students. I remember a German student mention that when Israel denied German President Johannes Rau's apology for Germany's actions during World War II, some of the German populace did not understand. While I do acknowledge that this apology will not bring back the victims of the Holocaust, Rau's sincerity as a representative of the German nation and of the German people should also be acknowledged. When an Israeli student responded that Israel cannot forgive on behalf of the dead, some of the German students were not sure why forgiveness could not be given. In this case, I understand that one cannot act on behalf of the dead victims. But I also feel that this might cause misunderstanding and miscommunication, making it longer and harder for wounds to heal. I am not saying that the Jews should forgive Germany for its actions, and I am not saying that we should stop remembering the Holocaust. It is important, however, that in our remembrance, we seek to honor those that have suffered by building a life of peace and safety, a world that was not available to those who have passed on.

The Jewish Museum in Berlin is a remembrance museum for German Jews who suffered during the Holocaust, but its scope is not limited to only the Holocaust. Jewish culture and heritage of both pre-World War II and post-World War II Germany are shown, and all the exhibits are carefully constructed so as to serve as a memory and guide for others wanting to learn more about the rich and full culture of the German Jews. One thing that stood out for me about the Holocaust section in particular was the arrangement of exhibits and memorials in such a way as to represent a gradually narrowing passageway, symbolizing the steadily tightening grip German Jews began to experience under the Nazi regime. One exhibit remains in my mind – “The Tower.” A

dark place with no window save for a sliver of light that creeps in from the far top end, I remember entering the room and thinking there was no one else there, until I noticed a grandmother who was sitting in the corner, like a frightened child, staring emptily at the light that played far away. This was my realization of what the Holocaust symbolizes: an emptiness that goes beyond what words can describe.

My first impression of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin was that there was something very ordered, something...scientific about it. The central theme of the memorial was to serve as a reminder to the German people of the Holocaust, attributed in part by its symbolic location in Berlin near the Brandenburg Gate. Nearby were the offices of representatives of different nations, so as to serve as a daily reminder that Germany does live, and remember, what it had done during the Holocaust.

Natzweiler-Struthof was a completely foreign, an almost alien experience for me. Situated near the border of northern France, near the city of Strasbourg, the concentration camp was hidden away from view, concealed in the foggy and mountainous Vosges Mountain range. A concentration camp mostly dedicated to imprisoning resistance fighters for medical experimentation, Natzweiler-Struthof was so still...so shockingly quiet....so...*dead*. I felt that by entering the camp, I was violating an inner space that was frightfully natural. I had to take a second look at what I thought was an ordinary mess hall table to realize it was actually an operating table for medical experiments. The pathway towards the gas chambers, the actual gallows used for hanging prisoners...all of these items seemed so out of place, so foreign, in such a natural location seemingly removed from society.

I thought of how what I learned of the concept of remembrance could be applied in my own life, and the lives of others around me. As a Korean, I still remember Japan's history with my country, but this does not deter me from learning Japanese or making Japanese friends. It is not that I am forgetting what my forefathers suffered under the Japanese – I merely want to live a life

that tries to bridge different cultures. There was, unfortunately, a tension that was evident at the conference between members of different nationalities, and I hope this can be remedied in the future. I remember a German friend telling me how he “hopes that Israel and Germany would be able to work towards a favorable relationship, such that our children will be both mindful and respecting, but also that they will learn to love one another.”

There are still strong prejudices and intense hatred felt against the Japanese in my homeland of Korea. Japan, to this day, has yet to apologize for its actions. As a student who lived and studied in Korea, I remember a general sense of foreboding and a sudden stillness when the teacher mentioned the Japanese acts against the Korean populace. The funny thing is, I feel the younger generation, who did not directly suffer, has stronger feeling concerning Japan’s past actions. I fear that with successive generations, these feelings within the younger generation will only grow stronger. It is our duty to learn from events such as the Holocaust, not only to prevent such acts from ever occurring again, but also to move forward with goodwill and forgiveness. Future generations will remember us and judge what we do now, as they read about us in future history books.

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Kacey Bayles

In 1949, Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno stated: “After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry.” Although Adorno later retracted this statement, the meaning of his words is not diminished; rather, the statement testifies to the rawness that characterized the state of Europe and its Jews in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Today, the Holocaust has become, if anything, even more central to American and European life. It is for this reason that I attended a student conference on “Ethics in the Shadow

of the Holocaust” in the spring of 2007, for I desired to witness for myself the enduring scars of the Nazi atrocities.

I left Germany with a fuller comprehension of the Holocaust’s place in both European and American history, while, at the same time, I felt more confused and conflicted than I had ever been previously when considering this catastrophic event. During my time at the conference, I was forced to reconcile my anger towards Germany with the genuine enjoyment of touring its cities and befriending its people. It is safe to say that I suffered from an extreme case of “Jewish guilt.” However, as I traveled to various sites of significance to the Holocaust and World War II, I embarked on a separate yet parallel path to greater self-discovery. It is this path to which I will now turn, as I attempt to make sense of the overwhelming sensations and conflicts that I experienced as an American Jew in twenty-first century Germany.

When the conference began, I was surprised and troubled by the fact that among approximately 35 conference attendees hailing from the United States, Germany, Israel, Serbia and Latvia, only the three Israelis, another Penn student, and I were Jewish. I was eager to discuss the Holocaust with the German students, as I was incredibly curious as to their perspective on the event. I will admit that, in a bizarre way, I was relieved to hear the eloquent German students admit that they continue to carry the weight of their nation’s guilt on their shoulders. After all, shouldn’t someone continue to pay for these crimes? My bitterness was only softened by the acceptance of their total innocence and the realization that the legacy of the Nazi atrocities is a crippling burden to bear. In interacting with these students, with whom I quickly became friends, I shattered any preconceived notions that I had held and wholeheartedly understood that the Germany of today is certainly not – and never will be again – the Germany of the Second World War. I could feel the German students’ sense of relief when I voiced this recognition.

Midway through the conference, I traveled with half the group to Berlin where Tobias, a young Jesuit, led our tour through the city and its outskirts. I

was skeptical, to say the least, about Tobias' view on the Holocaust as a Jesuit. However, as our tour progressed, I grew quite fond of Tobias, especially after engaging in a stimulating conversation about the role of the Catholic Church during World War II while at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. We continued through the city, and I found myself thoroughly enjoying our tour of the Potsdam Center, the remnants of the Berlin Wall, and the Brandenburg Gate. As soon as we arrived at the pinnacle of our tour, however, I felt an immediate wave of guilt rush through me. Every building in the surrounding area faded into the background as I stood facing the Holocaust Memorial.

As I walked through the lifeless gray pillars of the memorial, I looked up at the sky for any sign of color or life. I felt the overwhelming magnitude of the victims' sense of helplessness and fear. As we proceeded to the underground museum, I remained unconvinced that the German students could understand my ache for the six million Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis. As I wandered through the various exhibition areas, I stepped into a dark room where a voice recalled the names and stories of individual victims. I saw David, an 18 year-old German student with whom I had become particularly friendly, slumped on a bench listening to the stories. I will never forget the look of utter dejection on his face and the redness of his welled-up eyes as they met mine. I could sense his grief for the Jewish victims and his deep shame at the crimes committed by his country.

During the penultimate conference excursion, we traveled to the Alsace-Lorraine region of France to tour the Natzweiler-Struthof Concentration Camp. The majority of the barracks in this camp had long been destroyed, yet sufficient physical evidence supplemented by informational panels gave testimony to the evil that had flourished at the camp during WWII. As I stood on the empty space once occupied by a barrack, I looked out beyond the camp's enclosures and was nauseated by the breathtaking beauty of the French landscape. The mist-laden mountains and rolling hills intensified my sense of claustrophobia. The endless clear blue sky teased me as I visually traced the barbed wire fence

that enclosed me. I had never witnessed a place characterized by such a caustic dichotomy: the beauty of the French countryside made the camp's horrific past seem even more incomprehensible. Quite simply, I hated the breathtaking view.

I doubt that I will ever consider Germany without immediately thinking of the Holocaust. As an American Jew, the images of Nazi Germany and its infamous crimes have been burned permanently into my mind, even though the present-day nation in no way resembles its World War II self. I still feel a twinge of guilt for enjoying my trip, but I refuse to see Germany through a viewpoint of perpetual bias and anger. Had I refused to change my perspective, I would have learned nothing from the most potent message of tolerance the world has ever known. I only know that I will never forget the six million who died, and I will do everything in my power to keep their memory alive for future generations.

Kacey is a senior history major concentrating in American Studies and a music minor. She is actively involved with both the campus and community divisions of Penn's Holocaust Education Committee. She has interned at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

Matthew Mulholland

The extent to which the Holocaust forced the prevalent ideas of war and genocide to undergo a dramatic shift has always been a fascinating topic for me. Last year, as a junior majoring in linguistics and creative writing and minoring in Germanic languages, I received a unique opportunity to study both the ways in which war has been thought about after the Holocaust and the ways in which, specifically, Germany has had to come to terms with its past in light of the Holocaust, a process that, in German, famously has a long word all to itself: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In Dr. Amy Kaplan's upper-

level “war and memory” seminar, we learned, in particular, how the Holocaust changed the perception of literature and also perhaps of literature’s goals in general. On the one hand, Theodor Adorno claimed that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” On the other hand, literature and the arts is all we have to express ourselves: nothing is inexpressible in the sense that we can overcome that very inexpressibility by describing it. Hence, in his later years, Adorno claimed, “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream...hence it may have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz.” We also saw later works of literature that attempted to portray the Holocaust in revolutionary ways. One such work was a pair of graphic memoirs by Art Spiegelman, whom I had the pleasure of seeing when he gave a lecture here at Penn two years ago.

Inspired by Dr. Kaplan’s course, I decided that I would take a course that dealt directly with Germany’s process of coming to terms with its past. I signed up for Dr. Philipp Gassert’s seminar “Coping with the Past: Postwar German Debates about National Socialism,” taught in German. In this course, I not only received the opportunity to strengthen my German speech and comprehension, but I also received the opportunity to read some intriguing texts in their original language.

My intense, yearlong study of this one topic led me, in turn, to write about it in and out of the classroom. An essay I wrote for the class, entitled “The Power of Remembrance: Memorials and the Holocaust” was published in the fourth issue of *Kedma*. In this essay, I explored the ways in which Germans have memorialized the Holocaust, and I analyzed the debates ensuing from this memorialization. In particular, I looked at a specific monument in Harburg, Germany, a suburb of Hamburg.

However, all of this happened before I went to “Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust,” a conference last spring that I was gratefully able to attend with a few other students from Penn, which took place in Germany and France. Up until my departure, I felt that, as a result of my intensive studying of the

Holocaust, this trip would substantiate my beliefs and ideas and that many of the places I was to visit and many of discussions I would take part in would all be familiar ground for me.

I learned firsthand of the absolutely horrible complexity of memorialization in Germany even today. At Dachau, we found out that a proper memorial had not been erected until many years after the Holocaust and that, furthermore, the camp was being used as a temporary housing facility for refugees, which appalled the survivors of Dachau. The barracks had long ago been torn down, the walls painted, and the history seemingly scrubbed away. However, this place of iniquity eventually had to be reckoned with by the Germans. Like the Harburg monument's reflection of the often contradictory notion of Holocaust memorialization in Germany, Dachau came to represent something much larger: I felt not as though I were on "familiar ground," but rather as though this ground could never be familiar to me, or anybody. Standing in front of a row of human ovens built long ago by local bakers, looking at barbed wire passed through concrete pillars and connected to terrifying watch towers, observing the actual instruments of torture, which weighed so heavily with pain, and looking out past the iron gates, where new houses stood close by with people living in them so happily, I realized that this could never be familiar ground. Suddenly, all of the books I had read, all of the movies and images I had seen, and all of the papers I had written were of little value – vain attempts to interpret the uninterpretable. Each second observing Dachau and Natzweiler-Struthof, another concentration camp in France, was worth more than all of my studies. Now, it is hard for me to write this, since it feels like I'm making nothing of something, when I know I'm making something of nothing.

The experiences I gained on this trip were invaluable, for they have kept me from being a comfortable and aloof judge who analyzes from afar: what I had theorized about in my essay was realized right before my eyes. As I reflect on the sites I have seen, the people I have met, and the information

I have learned, I have come to realize how incredibly unique this opportunity was. When learning about the history of the discourse on the Holocaust, I always had to imagine the different voices; this conference allowed me to hear them. When we visited Dachau, it was freezing cold and raining steadily and I remember feeling slightly annoyed, wanting to sit down or just be warm. But as we entered the main gate, it suddenly all felt so appropriate. Not as if it were an inkling of the suffering that had happened there, but rather as if it should not be experienced any other way. Suddenly, facts about hard labor and thin clothes and hunger began to materialize. When I felt cold and miserable and saw the barbed wire, I knew why I had come here.

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