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Remembering the Nazi Concentration Camps

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on MAY 25, 2015

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps by American and Soviet forces. It is a fitting time to reflect on this horrific chapter in our human history. Why dwell on something so gruesome? One reason is this: So that the phrase “never again” may become part of our very identity as human beings.

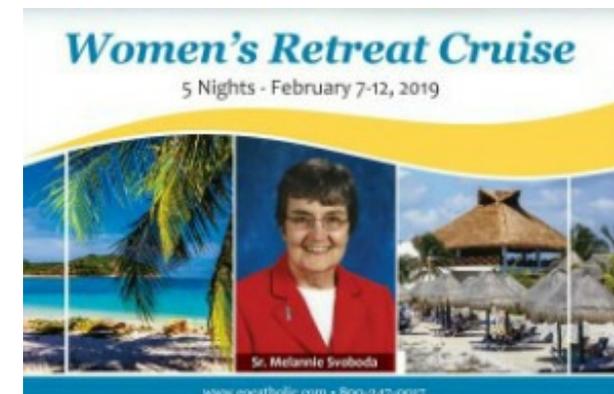
Let’s begin with a few facts. The Nazis built the first concentration camps in 1933 primarily to hold, torture, and execute Germans who opposed Hitler’s regime. Soon other “undesirables” were sent to these camps: Roma (gypsies), Jehovah Witnesses, homosexuals, the physically and mentally disabled, and eventually Jews. Some camps were designed for “the industrial-scale mass executions” of human beings—predominantly Jews. These camps were part of Hitler’s “Final Solution,” a euphemism for his plan to eradicate all Jews from the face of the earth. An estimated 6 million people (mostly Jews) were killed in these camps.

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame,
teacher, student, author,
speaker, listener, friend,
poet, farm girl.



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Six million. It is such an abstract number. How many is 6 million people? An analogy might help. If we recited one victim's name every 3 seconds, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it would take us approximately 7 1/2 months to recite the 6 million names.

I am not including pictures of the horrors of the concentration camps here. But here is a description by Col. William Quinn, US Army 7th division, who participated in the liberation of Dachau. He wrote, "There our troops found sights, sounds, and stenches horrible beyond belief, cruelties so enormous as to be incomprehensible to the normal mind."

When I reflect on these concentration/extermination camps, these four thoughts come to mind. First, *these camps arose in an essentially Christian country*. Germany was mostly Lutheran and Catholic. This fact greatly disturbs me. Where were the churches when Hitler was rising to power? Where were the Christians when people were being rounded up, herded into railroad cars, and hauled away? There's no simple answer to these questions, of course. A significant number of clergy were imprisoned or killed for speaking out against Hitler. And many Christians risked their lives hiding Jews and working in the resistance movement. But the frightening reality is that many Christians (and much of the rest of the world) were fooled by Hitler until it was too late.

Second thought: *The people who rounded up the Jews and who ran the camps were not monsters; they were human beings*. A few years ago, 116 photos were made public by the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

The photos, taken in 1944, show SS officers (some of them guards at Auschwitz) relaxing and at play. There they are lying on canvas chairs in the sun, participating in sing-a-longs, and laughing and enjoying themselves at Solahutte, a resort near Auschwitz where guards were sent as a reward for their hard work. One picture shows twelve female SS Auxiliaries perched on a fence and smiling. One

About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality– the everyday kind of spirituality that includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.



Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life–this spiritual life–together!

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commentary noted that “the blithesome daily lives” of the Nazi guards were a



Female auxiliaries from Auschwitz enjoying a break from their hard work.

“macabre contrast” to what was happening in the death camps a few miles away. The photos also show the “disconnect” between people and their actions. They could be participating in atrocious acts and appear perfectly normal. One observer concluded: “Anybody is capable of committing genocide under the right circumstances.”

animosity toward the Jews; he kindled the anti-Semitism that was already present in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. This raises the question: What animosity toward certain individuals or groups is present in me or in my country right now? Can I honestly acknowledge my own racism, for example, or other prejudices I may be harboring?

My fourth thought is this: The Nazi concentration camps demonstrate that we human beings can get used to great evils and grave injustices. Recently a former Auschwitz

Thirdly, Hitler did not invent



Workers from Auschwitz enjoying a sing-along at Solahutte.

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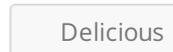
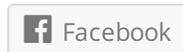
guard, now 93, was on trial. He said the killing of 300,000 Hungarian Jews was “routine.” The gas chambers were “clean” and “orderly.” He said, “In 24 hours you could take care of 5,000 people.” (Notice the phrase “take care of”...) Then he added, “After all, that’s how things went in a concentration camp.” His calm remarks make me ask myself: What grave injustices or evils in my world today have I gotten used to?

I am concluding this reflection not with a song, but with a short video of Auschwitz today. The pictures, taken by a drone, are shown with a simple musical accompaniment. The camp, located in Poland, is maintained as a World Heritage Site. Each year thousands of tourists and survivors visit Auschwitz where over one million people died between 1940 and 1945. As we watch this video, let us pray for all the victims of such heinous crimes, both the victims in the past and the victims in our own times. And let us beg God to give us faith and courage to replace such atrocities with love, understanding, and compassion.

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What in this reflection moved you or touched you?

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Kathleen Magiera May 25, 2015 at 5:35 am



Thanks for sharing Sr. Melanie. The whole reflection was eye opening but the video was particularly moving. It reminds me of how we can set the humanity of others aside in our daily lives and on a bigger scale too.

Good thoughts to ponder on Memorial Day

Kathleen

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 9:07 am



I too found the short video "particularly moving." There are many other videos on Youtube about these camps in case someone would like to learn more... Thank you for your response, Kathleen. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Jean Hartl May 25, 2015 at 10:15 am



Sr. Melanie,
Thank you for the reflection on this Memorial Day.
Jean

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 9:04 am



You're welcome, Jean! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Maggie Dunn May 25, 2015 at 2:41 pm



Interesting reflection for Memorial Day. I would not have equated this horrific tragedy with this day had you not written this piece. Thank you, Sister. Never too old to learn another way of remembering!!all those who gave their lives, willingly and unwilling. God blesses them ALL and us too. Maggie

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 9:03 am



Dear Maggie, Yes, there are some things we must never forget... Thanks for writing! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Ed Johnson May 25, 2015 at 2:56 pm



Thank you, Sister. Sometimes the terrible acts of humanity are almost too much for the human heart to bear. And yet, the atrocities continue in many places throughout our world even now. May we never forget.....and may we always remember those who work for peace and reconciliation in our troubled world. Ed J.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 9:02 am



Dear Ed, I agree that such inhumane acts “are almost too much for the human heart to bear.” Well said... And thank you for the reminder to pray for those who work for peace and reconciliation—often through meetings and conversations and discussions that get little attention from the media. Sr.
Melannie

REPLY

bozo May 25, 2015 at 6:05 pm



Let us never forget...and God bless those who risked their lives to provide safe harbor and other heroes of that era who took people into hiding to escape the Nazis.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:58 am



In times of widespread evil, good individuals do rise up, don't they?
Yes, we must thank God for these heroes...Thank you for writing, Bozo. Sr.
Melannie

REPLY

Mark Watkins May 25, 2015 at 7:36 pm



Beautifully done. What affected me the most was the invitation to

examine my own prejudicial attitudes and actions...and how I, who long for inclusion and understanding, may be marginalizing others without even realizing it. I hear it as a call to further and deeper conversion. Apart from everything else, the music on the video is hauntingly beautiful and (speaking as a life-long musician) perfectly appropriate for its purpose. Thank you.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:56 am



Yes, Mark, we are always being called to deeper conversion. It's humbling to admit that, but it is also the truth... I too found the music on the video "hauntingly beautiful." The short video is so understated, it speaks poignantly and powerfully of the atrocities once committed here... Thank you for your words, Mark. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Loretta May 26, 2015 at 9:36 am



God forgive us and teach us how to open our hearts and love one another.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:51 am



Amen!Amen! Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Kathy Hassink May 26, 2015 at 12:20 pm



Thanks for your words and the video... it reminds us of the horrors of long ago as well as those going on today. Will history books of the future ask how we let these other atrocities take place? the Mid-East, Africa, Central America...

Love to you cousin on this Memorial Day weekend!

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:51 am



Like you, Kathy, I often wonder what history books of the future will say about us and our times... Thanks for raising the question...And I hope you, George, and your family had an enjoyable Memorial Day weekend! Your cousin

REPLY

Diane Butler May 26, 2015 at 12:28 pm



While I agree we must never forget the horror of the holocaust, man's inhumanity to man, I am focused today on the Assyrian Christians. The horrors being committed there are being ignored by main stream media. These brothers and sisters of ours have lived in these land since their conversion by St Phillip. I believe. They have been mill d forced from their homes. The ones who have survived are refugees. Why is there no outcry for these people and why is the media silent? In this age of information, we are more ignorant than ever.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:49 am



Thank you, Diane, for reminding us of this current “holocaust” against our fellow Christians... I am at a lost to explain the media’s silence. Sadly, we are often more interested in viewing a celebrity’s 6 million dollar mansion than in reading the real news of the day... Sr. Melannie

REPLY

M Dolan May 26, 2015 at 3:29 pm



Have you seen the documentary called Paper Clips? It helps with the idea of what does 6 million look like.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:45 am



I saw this quite a while ago. Thank you for reminding me of it. I’ll have to check it out again. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Stephanie May 26, 2015 at 4:50 pm



What touched me in this reflection was the question asking me to reflect upon my own prejudices. What prejudices do I hold? How can I uncover them? I’m not sure I know exactly. May God’s mercy empower me to see them and may His grace give me courage to root them out.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 27, 2015 at 8:44 am



Dear Stephanie, You focused on a good point. The first step to eradicating prejudices, is to be aware of them within ourselves. Self-reflection is so important to growth in our Christian faith, isn't it? Thanks for writing. Sr. Melannie

REPLY

Julie May 27, 2015 at 10:51 pm



This video was very moving and brought back memories when Ed and I visited Dachau prison camp. I will never forget the gas chambers and ovens. But you made me reflect on what I may be apathetic about that I need to change. Thanks.

REPLY

Melannie Svoboda SND May 28, 2015 at 5:09 am



Dear Julie, I can't imagine what it must be like to have seen Dachau in person... I visited the National Holocaust Museum in D.C. when it was first opened. We walked through an actual railroad car that had been used to transport people to the camps. We also saw walls of hundreds of family photos of people who had been killed. And we also viewed huge piles of shoes and eye glasses the Nazis had carefully collected from their victims. By the end of my tour, I could only sit in the hall of prayer and sob... Thank you for writing, Julie... Melannie

REPLY

Jim Smith June 19, 2015 at 5:47 pm



These reflections on the camps are moving. I worked with a teacher whose parents were hidden by Christians and eventually got to the U.S. he would bring survivors to talk to students in our inner city high school. It was courageous and inspiring. We must educate all to echo and to live out those words "Never again".

REPLY

Carm June 23, 2015 at 7:37 am



We say we do not want history to repeat itself, however, how can one person stop it from happening again? I can't help but think of what is happening in the Middleeast. We hear of the atrocities on the daily news and just watch in horror! All I can do as an individual is pray.

REPLY

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