

Chapter 7

On Ravensbrück

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Dr. Matthias Heyl, born in 1965 in Hamburg, Germany, studied history, psychology, and education in Hamburg. He finished his doctorate with a comparative study of Holocaust Education in Germany, the Netherlands, Israel, and the US in 1996. He served as the Head of the Research and Study Center on Holocaust Education in Hamburg from 1997 to 2002, and since 2002 he has served as the Head of the International Youth Meeting Center Ravensbrück and Head of the Educational Department of Ravensbrück Memorial Museum. He is the author of several books and articles on the history of the Holocaust and Holocaust education.

Sites like the Ravensbrück Memorial Site can serve as an important source of education. It is different to learn about the Holocaust in a classroom compared to standing in front of the crematorium in Ravensbrück. It is necessary to teach about the Holocaust in the classroom, but it is an entirely different experience to be confronted with the place where the events actually happened, where history took place. A historic site does not speak for itself — especially years after the events, with all the changes that have happened since. The remnants of the past — buildings, walls, fences, and paths — have lost their former functions, and they need to be explained. In a kind of “forensic” approach, these traces can be used as sources. But we need narratives and narrators to be able to tell the stories; and we need other means of information to make the invisible visible, and thus be able to read the place and understand it as a source and resource for interpretation. What a privilege that I have had — and still have — the opportunity to speak to and to listen to Ravensbrück survivors.

But the Spanish writer Jorge Semprun reminds me of the limits of perception. He tried to “guide” a group of women around the Buchenwald camp, on April 13, 1945, only two days after it had been liberated. The women were absolutely not prepared for what they would be confronted with, just as Semprun was not prepared to tell them

(Semprun 1990, 70). The women, laughing and giggling in the beginning, were expecting something horrific and horrifying, an emotional sensation somehow, without really having in mind what this would mean to them, and to their guide, a survivor himself.

The place had changed: “The big square where they had the roll call was deserted beneath the spring sun, and I stopped, my heart beating. I had never seen it empty before; I must admit I hadn’t ever really seen it. I hadn’t really seen it before, not what you call seeing” (Semprun 1990, 70).

He found that the place was not perceivable as the place it had been until two days before. When one of the women stated that it does not look too bad, Jorge Semprun decided to show them a few things.

I take the girls into the crematorium, by the small door, the one leading directly to the cellar. They have just realized it’s not a kitchen, and they suddenly fall silent. I show them the hooks from which the men were hung, for the crematorium cellar also served as a torture chamber. I show them the blackjacks and the clubs, which are still there. I explain to them what they were used for. I show them the lifts, which were used to take the corpses to the second story, to directly in front of the ovens.

We go up to the second floor and I show them the ovens. The poor girls are speechless. They follow me, and I show them the row of electric ovens and the half-charred corpses, which are still inside. I hardly speak to them, merely saying: “Here you are, look there.” It is essential for them to see, to try to imagine. They say nothing; perhaps they are imagining.

In front of a four-meter-high mountain of corpses, he felt it was “nonsense” trying to explain it that way. His audience had already left, except for one woman.

“Why did you do that?” she asks.
 “It was stupid,” I admit.
 “But why?”
 “You wanted to visit the place,” I reply.

| “I’d like to see more” (Semprun 1990, 74).

137

You came to Ravensbrück, and you’ve seen more. Next time you come, you will see even more.

Ravensbrück is waiting for you, one by one.

References

Semprun, Jorge. 1990. *The Long Voyage*, New York. Schocken Books. [Translation of *Le Grand Voyage*. 1963. Paris: Gallimard].

