

## TRAVELS

# ECHOES AND SHADOWS

## *A walking tour through a haunted town in Austria*

Mardith Louisell

*As a resident of many camps, I can say that Gusen was the worst. This is not to say that the conditions at the other camps were not dreadful. Compared to Gusen, however, one might almost say that those camps were paradises.*

—RABBI RAV YECHZKEL HARFENES,  
*SLINGSHOT OF HELL (BEKAF HAKELA), 1988*

When the bus arrived at the site of the Gusen concentration camp, instead of concrete walls and barbed wire, I saw a yellow church steeple on a hill and beige houses with geraniums in window boxes—this concentration camp was now a middle-class housing development dotted with parks, newly built houses and remodeled camp buildings on roads like Gartenstrasse where I would soon walk—as nondescript as the small town in the Midwest in which I grew up.

I had never wanted to go to Austria, but when my partner had to go to Linz for business I went, hoping I might understand more about how ethnic cleansings occur, and when I saw an audiotour of a concentration camp offered as part of the Linz Ars Electronica festival, I signed up.

Fifteen kilometers from Linz, the Gusen complex is the only extermination camp of significant size not memorialized as a site. Administratively the Gusen complex was categorized as a satellite of Mauthausen, but the three Gusen camps covered an area large enough to include four towns and in 1945 held 25,000 inmates, double the number of Mauthausen.

*Audiowalk Gusen: The Invisible Camp* is an art project by Christopher Mayer, who grew up in St. Georgen an der Gusen, which adjoined Gusen II; Mayer's grandfather had joined the National Socialist Party and his parents still live in St. Georgen. Mayer hadn't known about Gusen until he was fourteen years old when a neighbor asked him if he knew the town had been a labor extermination camp. In not knowing, Mayer wasn't unusual—Austrians didn't speak of Gusen for decades. The interwoven voices on the audio belong to Gusen camp survivors, past and current residents, former air force soldiers and SS camp guards, all of whom Mayer interviewed.

Mayer sets me up with my iPod. Two blocks separate each audiotourist so I walk alone. I press the iPod button and hear a narrator provide directions.

*Walk in time to the footsteps on the tape. Turn left at the end of the road. Keep walking.*

Beside a stone wall that lines the main business road of the village, I see terrain that seems innocent, orderly, even boring, but walking alone into a strange town with earphones, I can be singled out and I remembered the ugly yellow stars of the Reich. How quickly I absorb what I imagine is the prevailing norm. I feel I'm braving peer pressure—a nice person doesn't investigate the detritus of other people's neighborhoods. I try not to make a wrong turn on the spotless road, try not to annoy anyone.

*Turn left here. Continue. . . . Stop, here at the iron gate.*

Two surveillance cameras. No TRESPASSING signs. A clean gray garbage bin on wheels, except for color exactly like one in San Francisco.

This was the gate to the camp. Prisoners were deposited and informed the only way out was through the chimney of the crematorium.

This was true. At first, the camp worked prisoners to death in stone quarries; later inmates excavated cliffs to build a factory to produce jet fighters. When inmates' bodies were spent, they were exterminated, usually within four months of arrival.

The iron gate rests between two stone columns, probably supports for the original camp gates. A two-story affluent house rises on a hill at the end of the long driveway.

*Look up to the top. The basement of that stone house was the camp torture chamber.*

Nothing suggests its past. Only now do I notice that the stonework seems slightly older in the lower left portion of the house. The current owner had wanted to tear down the basement but his engineer said, "Use it. It's a good foundation." Is it a breakfast nook now? A family room? Who walks down those steps and watches television there, perhaps with a cup of good Austrian coffee? On the tape two men argue about whether the walls remember. One thinks the walls do, another thinks not—it's just a building.

*Continue walking down the road to the right. Stop here. Number 14. This was the whorehouse.*

I imagine Austrian guards walking into a small cubbyhole to have sex. With German prostitutes? Camp prisoners? Jews?

*I was done with my shift, time for someone else's. I walked up the four steps to the brothel.*

A small gray plaque neatly outlined in white, 14 UNTERE GARTENSTRASSE. One window of the barracks-style house ajar in the casual way of early fall. White petunias. On the front porch table, a green-and-white checked cloth. Two chairs—the owners' hope for a last meal outside before winter. A man walks out the door and down the four steps.

Mayer hadn't told us what to do were we to meet residents. I look at the man. He looks back. His face betrays nothing. Keeping my face also expressionless, I avert my eyes as though what I'm hearing has nothing to do with him, but it's his story on the tape.

*After we moved in, we wanted a party room so we tore down the walls because the rooms were so small. Getting a reasonably priced house in Upper Austria was a lucky break. Now I would never live anywhere else.*

Silence on the tape. I try to understand how landing an extermination camp warehouse in Upper Austria was such a good deal. Footsteps.

*I got my first job at the camp. Back then, everyone had been poor. The working people, even factory workers, had so much more with the Party. They could take their families for picnics on boats down the Danube, something no one had even dreamed of before.*

***I would like to condemn the people who lived here in the 1940s, but I have to consider my own desire to fit in, the small events where I didn't speak up, the times I asked if it was really my responsibility to act.***

They could also take weekend trips to Munich, train trips to Lake Garda and cruises to Madeira, all thanks to a Party-sponsored tourist agency that kept costs low.

In this village where people flirted, gardened and took boat trips down the Danube, where everyone wanted to fit in, inmates were gassed, drowned, beaten to death, bathed in

horses chasing men and children, forcing them to run from the camp to the work site.

*Look at the house in front of you, number 4.*

*In 1985, I was twelve, I learned to play the piano there, in the former SS-kitchen barrack.*

I turn the corner. Suddenly I see three women chatting on the front sidewalk. They look up and stop talking. I have to decide whether to greet or ignore them. I paste a pleasant look on my face, implying that I don't judge. Embarrassed, I continue moving, head bowed, preserving some tacit agreement I hope I have with them, although I'm not sure what it is or that they feel the same. Most of them were children during the war. For what exactly would I judge them?

I would like to condemn the people who lived here in the 1940s, but I have to consider my own desire to fit in, the small events where I didn't speak up for fear of sticking out, the times I asked if it was really my responsibility to act. I wonder how I would have stacked up in St. Georgen in 1943. It's easy to say people should have objected and fought. It's less clear when I'm the one who must act. Lynchings were normal in the United States until the 1930s and people went along to the extent that they didn't stop them.

I feel uncomfortably vulnerable when the women look at me, but as a villager in 1942 such vulnerability would have been not merely uncomfortable but terrifying. Some residents must have been horrified, but could they say so? To whom? By 1940, the Austrian handicapped had been gassed at Hartheim Castle just 40 kilometers west of Gusen. The gassings, camps and smells were already familiar as part of the daily lives of Austrians.

I took the tour hoping to gain insight about how this atrocity happened and the experience has thrown me deep into the mind of a run-of-the-mill Austrian in World War II. I can see how things creep forward, how you don't know when to say "Stop, enough!" and when you do, it's too late, you're in danger. Trying to understand his countrymen's actions, the German writer W. G. Sebald wrote that under the apparently inexorable power of the Nazi regime, "a basic stance of opposition and a lively intelligence . . . could easily turn into more or less deliberate attempts to conform."

Yet I also know Austria's history of antisemitism, that they might have been eager for a Reich that would eliminate Jews and that the economic wellbeing they so treasured came in part from looting the houses of Jews whom they knew would not return.

*Look on the building on your right. In 1943 I went to get my teeth fixed. We used the camp dentist and when I walked by the front to get to the side entrance, I saw guards unload sacks from a truck and throw them against the wall. I heard screams. I found that guards were smashing Jewish children to kill them.*

I look back at the three women. I'd like to stare, examine, interview them about their moral compasses. Instead I look down.

Pink chalk on the cement—kids' hopscotch. Laughing ten-year-olds whiz by on bikes. It almost seems that Mayer has orchestrated the scene, the contrast between the kids on bikes and the fact that sixty-two years ago Jewish kids were being murdered. I remember the black-and-white remoteness of war photos. I realize that this war, which I had imagined in grainy shadows, didn't happen that way at all but in color—yellow water hoses, red petunias, pink chalk, gray garbage cans.

As I avoid the bikes and traffic-abiding BMWs, I wonder if the camps inform a resident's every thought. Or are they as remote as slavery is for some Americans? Austrians I spoke with after the tour saw parallels in US history. "Look at what you did with Native Americans," one said. "You finished them off."

Mayer clearly intended the piece to be a confrontation with the townspeople, and at first they refused permission for the tour. He could have sued to gain access to the public streets, thereby generating substantial unfavorable publicity for the town; instead he requested a discussion with the town council. There the residents made the size of the tour groups the issue. Mayer countered that individuals would walk alone, no more than eight in a two hour period. The residents' real issue was their belief that this kind of



Then and now: Untere Gartenstrasse in Gusen in May 1945 and today

cold showers until they died, and killed with experimental heart injections (420 Jewish children between the ages of four and seven in February 1945). In time, camp authorities devised mobile gas chambers. In the winter of 1944-45, more inmates arrived than the work consumed so new prisoners were left at the train station in locked railway cars. Left to freeze, they died in days.

Where could a villager intervene? Could one give food to prisoners? On the tape, an old man said that as a boy he tossed an apple core into the woods; when a prisoner grabbed it, the man was killed.

*Walk down Gartenstrasse. To your right you see the cement walls of the quarry where prisoners dug stone for Munich and Linz buildings. Turn left and continue down the street.*

My feet scurry to keep pace with the prodding of the tape's footsteps. I learn that locals remember dogs and SS on

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remembrance shouldn't occur, but since no one could say that publicly, the tour was allowed.

*Continue. This gray concrete to your right was the camp crematorium.*

*I was a young boy in St. Georgen and I lived half a mile from the camp. I remember being in the house when they fired up the ovens. My grandmother paced restlessly. "The smell," she said to my mother: "I can't stand the smell. Why do they have to burn them?" "But what can we do?" my mother answered her: "They can't work anymore, we can't keep them." "Oh," my grandmother said, "I guess so. If they can't work, what can we do?"*

*Walk on. Follow the curve in the road.*

A railroad track: trains deposited 10,000 prisoners daily at the underground factories where they manufactured the Messerschmitt Me262s, the first operational turbojet fighter. Sputnik generation American teenagers worshipped this jet, it was "cool," way ahead of its time. However, this glorious airplane was built in factories carved out of stone in thirteen months by prisoners worked to death. *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*: "Destruction through Work," used more during the Third Reich than ever before in history. Already the Reich had planned that slaves would produce 1250 jets a month through the year 1955. The raised rail bed, now a leg of the Danube's cycling path, curves through the countryside of Upper Austria, green and fresh from the past week's rain. Sixty years ago, the rain would have eased the stench of burned fat from the ovens.

*I've lived here for sixty-five years. It's so peaceful here now, isn't it? Quiet. Hard to believe, almost like the past is no longer true.*

In 1945, the Russians looted the Messerschmitt underground plant, then locals looted what was left, and in 1947 the Russians blew it up. In the 1950s, when the terrain was privatized, Austrian authorities planned to raze the crematoria too, but French,

***"I've lived here for sixty-five years. It's so peaceful here now, isn't it? Quiet. Hard to believe, almost like the past is no longer true."***

Italian and Belgian survivors purchased the ovens and built a small memorial to those less fortunate.

**Mahnman** is a word that means "memorial" and "warning" simultaneously. It doesn't appear in a dictionary until after the war. Austria, like Germany, has several memorials about World War II and controversy surrounds many of them. At the *Mahnman* Memorial against War and Fascism in Vienna, two white stone monoliths represent, on the one side, Jewish victims of the Nazis, on the other, all victims of war and fascism. The figures are generic and stand on a granite pedestal cut from the Mauthausen quarry. The monoliths are controversial—they don't mention perpetrators and imply that Austrians and Jews alike were victims.

Close to the base of the white stone monoliths, a minuscule black statue made of bronze and the size of a German shepherd, shows a man flattened on the cobblestones and scrubbing the pavement with a brush. This man is neither large nor generic but obviously and stereotypically Jewish, downtrodden, bearded, as clear as a Kathe Kollwitz print. The statue memorializes an event that took place immediately after the Anschluss. Jews were forced to eat grass and remove anti-Nazi graffiti from the streets of Vienna with toothbrushes, and onlookers cheered; in fact, "they couldn't get enough of it." The small statue of a

Jewish man scrubbing is demeaning and controversial, because who would want to be debased, then have that debasement memorialized in a statue in which you look like a dog? But the sculptor got it right. In Austria, even in a memorial, the worst job, the worst caricature, goes to the Jew. When the statue first appeared, people sat on the man's back, so the statue is now covered with barbed wire.

The one-third of all registered Gusen II victims who were Jewish, including children, lived about half as long and were given the worst jobs—residents saw naked children emptying the latrines with buckets and standing in excrement up to their waists. People knew.

Yes, my parents' generation built memorials, Mayer told me, and Austria now takes some responsibility for these crimes: "Annexation" is no longer an accurate translation of *Anschluss*. "Joined," Mayer said, "not annexed. And Gusen, formerly a 'labor camp,' was recently declared an 'extermination camp.'" But, he went on, no one has done much research on perpetrators, and conflicts still smolder about postwar history and what to do with leftover camp buildings. Why, he asked, even now, do so few people in Austria talk about Gusen?

Although Mauthausen is one of the forty-five concentration camp names chiseled in the base of Rachel Whiteread's mausoleum-like memorial in Vienna's Judenplatz, Gusen is not—it was *only* an auxiliary, although it killed at least 37,000 persons—one third of all victims who died in the forty-nine concentration camps in Austria. The footsteps continue.

*Yes, I was a guard. Hitler did a lot of good things. I don't feel so bad. You had to have been there. All in all we can say we fulfilled this difficult task of love for our people.*

I stop, sit on a bench and look across the field, corn stalks turning beige in early autumn. Peaceful. I think about parallels in the United States, remember how during

the Depression Americans benefited from FDR's policies. Some loved him like he was God, couldn't imagine not supporting him, no matter what. Would they have followed him had FDR gone the same direction as Hitler? Maybe not, but what would have been the difference?

*Walk across the road to the end of the short road on your right.*

Behind me the cornfield, before me the underground Messerschmitt factory hollowed out of sandstone cliffs to hide it from the Allied pilots. It's an abandoned air raid shelter now, a locked iron gate across the door.

On the iPod, a guard hesitatingly describes prisoners who picked up dead comrades, inmates left to die in the cold, torture. It's what I've been waiting for—an acknowledgement of the enormity of Gusen. He talks of guilt. I ask myself how he lives with this. The narrator wants to know as much as I do and presses him.

*What else did you see?*

But the guard won't be prodded.

*You can't imagine. You had to have been there. I've taken you as far as I can.*

The narrator and I crave absolution, for ourselves, for the guard, for humankind. Or maybe it's justice we want. A tilting of the scales a millimeter closer to balanced because the guard suffers. But the guard doesn't have these illusions.

*There's nothing that can help me.*

*It's as though I go through a door to an empty room where no one can join me. Then there's another door. That too, I must go through by myself. And another. And another.*

The narrator asks again. *What do you think about now?*

*You cannot know.*

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*Mardith Louisell lives in San Francisco. More information about Gusen can be found at [www.gusen.org](http://www.gusen.org).*