

Lernen aus der Geschichte e.V.

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<http://www.lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de> veröffentlicht.

Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

Searching for Survivors of the Holocaust

Recently, an eight-year-old boy I care for in the evening asked me where I work during the day. "At the Holocaust Memorial Museum" was not a satisfactory answer for him, and he asked me what the Holocaust was. While I talked about the mass murder of Jews in Europe, about that past, I became increasingly aware that words, with few exceptions, cannot adequately describe what I was attempting to tell him about. Beyond discussion itself, comprehension of this topic seems impossible. I cannot confront the entire extent of the catastrophe — the entirety of it is so bleak and dark as to destroy any glimmer of hope. Acceptance of what we humans are capable of suffocates any feelings of security. It is just this security which mankind seems to be searching for. The consequences of this dilemma are simplification of the issues, suppression of the past or controlled neutrality — means of perception which allow us to face the horrors of the past.

My desire to learn more about the history of National Socialism was one of the main reasons I applied for a volunteer position with *Aktion Sühnezeichen/Friedensdienste* [Action Reconciliation Service for Peace]. I wanted to understand the past and hoped to learn how to deal with the shadow of past events which is still attached to present-day Germany. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C. seemed to be an appropriate place to pursue these motivations. The recognition that our work here is not so much focused on the past, but rather on events that still radically

question our present-day existence, is an alarming one to make. I work forty hours a week at a place where a short conversation with a survivor of this time brings about justified questioning of concepts such as humanity or civilization. It is often false to call it a conversation, as the enormity of the stories told often forces us into silence.

I have worked in the Survivors Registry for a year now. This is the office in the museum that answers questions relating to individuals. Visitors are provided with numerous sources of information, among them the (incomplete) registry of survivors of the Holocaust, which gives the office its name. The emphasis on survival is a more pleasing focus, which can cause one to forget what the costs of such survival often were and what position this holds in the larger picture. Most of my time is devoted to personal research. My investigation is based on the "SS St. Louis," a passenger ship that sailed to Cuba in 1939, with more than 900 Jewish refugees on board. However, Cuba, as well as the United States, refused to accept the refugees, and the boat had to return the 907 passengers to Europe. I am investigating the fate of those people. After ten months' involvement with the material, the cloak of methodology allows for the chilling assessment that more than half of those people in question survived the war. The individual truths are less easy to face. I can recount what a former passenger of this ship told me personally. He and his brother survived the Nazi regime, while their parents and two sisters were arrested, imprisoned, and then later deported to Auschwitz, where they were killed. Words again are hopeless attempts to capture the unimaginable. The purpose of the survivors registry is to represent history from the perspective of the individual. In light of the background I am aware of, I can only capitulate before this attempt.

The Holocaust illustrates the extremes to which mankind can go. We cannot deny that we harbor aspects of these extremes. Even if we, consciously or unconsciously, deny the existence of these darker elements in our nature, we should never forget that they exist.