

Protagonist Corner

What If We Are Guilty?

William C. Goettler

Hanover Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware

Early last spring, when it appeared that we were going to have the chance to do a summer pulpit exchange in an international congregation in Munich, Germany, I began reading travel books about Bavaria. There were palaces to see, and the Alps were just an hour to the south. As necessary, we decided almost immediately, was a trip to Dachau, just thirty minutes north.

Dachau. The word alone conjures frightening images of the barbarous death camps of Nazi Germany. An odd place to go during such a trip, we admitted to ourselves. The guidebooks said that it might be inappropriate for our young child. But my wife, Maria, and I feel a deep love for the Jewish people, for their culture and theology, for their humanity and for their special place in the heart of God. We felt a need to better understand the terrible crime that was committed against them. How could we go to Germany without spending at least a few hours at one of the most infamous sites of that terror?

Our plan seemed to be confirmed when, on our second day in Germany, a church member from Ghana said that he wanted to take a day off from work to take us to see Dachau. "You must see the place," he said, "if you are to understand this country. You must see it if you really want to learn about what it means to be Christian in Germany. And don't worry about your Anna. She will be fine. I will sit with her when you go into the more troubling parts of the camp." And so our plans were made for the following Thursday.

On the bookshelves of the home where we were living was a book by Simon Wiesenthal, known as the "Nazi Hunter." I had read one of his books years ago, but now I read with a new sense of purpose. Dachau had been among the first of the internment camps where Jewish men, women, and children were taken following the ghetto uprisings and the violence of Kristalnacht. The camp was also used for Catholic priests and other troublemakers who thought that their faith led them to challenge the rise of the Nazis. There, professionals and laborers alike were forced to work on the armament assembly lines. Thousands were killed when they resisted. Many more thousands began their time of imprisonment at Dachau, only to be moved on to death camps like Auschwitz.

After the war, Wiesenthal wrote, Nazi leaders who were war criminals continued to live in comfort in Germany. When the more aggressive prosecutions began, they found it easy to hide in their old neighborhoods; when it became necessary for them to flee, many of their friends and families offered them aid. They passed right through the heart of Munich (right through the neighborhood I was sitting in as I read, I imagined), and then south into the Alps and on to Italy, from whence they made their way to South America.

It was just that sort of quiet support that had allowed the atrocities of the Nazis to take place in the first place, Wiesenthal went on. After the war, townspeople would insist that they had no idea what had been going on out in the death camps. How could

they have not known, the Nazi Hunter insisted. Their farms bordered the camps. They sat at nights in the beer halls with camp guards, who must have told stories about the work they were doing. The railcars filled with families of Jewish people rolled through their train stations. And finally, they must have smelled the burning flesh from the crematoriums, a stench that would have made clear to all just what was going on.

Searching our little house for more to read about this reign of terror, I came upon a booklet that had been printed by the people in the present day town of Dachau, Germany. It was the sort of publication that one picks up when visiting a tourist site. "We know that you are in our area to visit the Death Camp of Dachau," the narrative began. "We hope that the visit will be meaningful to you, and help you join us in our resolve that such a thing must never be allowed to happen again." Then came the tourist pitch: "While you are here, we hope that you will spend a bit of time in the town of Dachau. Our town has a long and wonderful history, as a center for farming, as an internationally known artists' colony in the 1880's and 1890's, and now as a delightful suburb of the city of Munich. Come and have lunch and see our art galleries, shops and neighborhoods."

I was astounded, filled with a sense of righteous indignation. Not only had the people of this town lived just a kilometer from one of the most reprehensible scenes of human horror known by modern society. Now, their heirs were seeking the business of those who had come to honor the memories of the murdered ones.

Those thoughts were on my mind throughout our first week, as we began our exploration of the city of Munich, as we began to get to know the wonderful international congregation with whom we were visiting. One evening I was paging through the phone book as I like to do in any city other than my own, and I came upon an entire column of "Goettlers." Mine is not a common name; occasionally I will find one in the phone book of an American city. Most who share my name can be traced back to my great-great-grandfather Joseph Goettler, who emigrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, around the 1830's. But our family genealogy has always stopped there; we have never known our connection to the old country.

Something moved me to begin calling these families who shared my name in Munich. After several tries, I reached Frederick Goettler, a delightful man of about seventy, whose English was pretty good and who informed me that he had recently completed a full genealogy of the family, dating us back to the late 1600's. We made plans to meet several days later. I was filled with excitement at this possibility. What would it be like to meet a distant uncle, a man who shared my name and who knew about my family's heritage. Maria smiled a big smile as he walked in the door. He looked, she proclaimed, not unlike my father, not unlike my uncle. He was undoubtedly a Goettler!

Before us, Herr Goettler spread out a sheet of family history. He had served in the war, of course. His father had been killed on the Russian front. He had been a prisoner in Italy. Then he had moved to Munich. But his father, and all of the generations before him, were not from the city of Munich. They were from the countryside of Bavaria. They were, he said, from the region of Dachau.

I stood, staring at the pages of genealogy, utterly frozen. *Dachau*? My family, the Goettlers, were from the region of Dachau? He pointed to the tiny towns on the map. "Would we like to go and see those towns," he inquired? Minutes later, we were traveling north in his car. The hillsides were indeed beautiful, the sort of countryside

that an artist would love to paint. We turned off of the autobahn, rounded the corner and came upon a grocery - Goettler's Grocery. We went to tiny country churches and found Goettlers in the cemeteries. In chapels, we came upon old mass cards listing the names of boys from the village who had died, and including the names of young Goettler soldiers who had been killed in the war.

I didn't know how to absorb what I was seeing. I was delighted to learn about these possible ancestors. And I was astounded to think that they had not only fought as Germans in the wars, but had lived in the region of Dachau. Goettlers had been in the beer halls, hearing the stories of the guards. Goettlers had farmed the land as trainloads of Jews had passed by. Goettlers had smelled the stench of the crematoriums.

Two days later, we were again in the region, this time at the Dachau camp with our friend from Ghana. He knew a bit about oppressive systems, he said. But nothing could ever equal the evil that had been done in this place. The site is a museum now, of course. Pictures in the main hall tell the story of the horrors. We walked through the buildings that had once housed prisoners, peered into the ovens where bodies had been cremated, walked the paths where prisoners had trod.

Not all was sterile, however. Standing before the crematorium was an old Jewish man, a survivor of the camp. He spoke in German and in English, in Polish, and in Italian. He had learned the languages, he explained, so that he could tell the story to all who came to this place of terror. He stood as a living witness, as an interpreter of events. "Walk down that way," he would say to those reluctant to continue on. "Go down the path of death, so that you can experience this evil." I walked down the path, covered now with summer flowers. And I could almost feel the hurt and hear the cries of those who had suffered there.

It was not my fault, I knew. It was not the fault of my father or his father. But still, I was haunted by the thought that Goettlers, that people who were in some way my own family, had stood by while this evil had taken place. We know well the evils that we are responsible for. We know the ways that we have sinned against God, and sinned against one another. Sometimes we repent of those sins, and seek to live in new ways. Sometimes we find ourselves unready for such repentance, and we live on with our sin, hopeful that we will not be found out, hopeful that we will put aside those habits before it really matters. Those are personal sins, for which we anticipate God's forgiveness if we will but seek it.

Then, there are societal sins, corporate sins, if you will. Those are the big ones, for which we bear responsibility not individually, but as a people. When children die of hunger, we who have plenty share some responsibility. When gunfire is heard on the city streets and youngsters are drawn into lives of drugs and violence, we who have unused energy and underutilized safe space share some responsibility. When we use our votes to elect those who will care more for our wealth than for the well being of the weakest in our midst, we take part in a kind of corporate sin.

I agree with that friend from Ghana. The Holocaust was the most horrific example of corporate sin in this century. And until that week, it had always been the sin of another people, a sin that my own family had fought against, a sin that my nation had sought to end. But there, standing under a grey sky, looking out at the barbed wire fence and the intimidating guardhouse, I suddenly wondered, "What If I Am Guilty?"

After that desolate, grey sky morning of touring the camp, we began our journey back to Munich by driving into the town of Dachau. I suppose that I was looking for

some bit of the evil that had gone on just beyond its borders, fifty years earlier. But there were no signs of the Nazi barbarians I somehow expected to encounter. It is a pretty town, with the red clay roofs of Bavaria, and pretty flowers in front of well-kept houses. Walking through the town, I wondered if the citizens of Dachau, if the Goettlers of the nearby towns, were a people whom God could forgive. And then, I forced myself to recall a bit more of Dachau's history.

In April 1945, the people of the town of Dachau banded together, with some advance Allied troops, and sought to free the prisoners in the camp. The attempt, though long-planned, was a terrible failure. Dozens of townsfolk were killed by the brutal guards. Three days later, their attention drawn by the failed attempt, American troops who had now overtaken Munich moved north and liberated the camp. They opened the gates to find the broken and hungry men and women who had survived the brutality. The long nightmare of Dachau's prisoners was drawing to an end.

But the story was not over for the people of the town of Dachau. The camp would sit empty for twenty years, untouched by neighbors who did not know what to do about the place. Germans were to enter a period of self-reflection and rebuilding, a time of introspection and confession as they sought to understand what had gone so wrong in their midst. Some would still defend the Nazis, and give them the refuge that Simon Wiesenthal wrote about. But most of the rest were willing, even anxious to talk of the horrors of the war, and of their accommodation to the war and to the evil of the Holocaust. Their tourist brochures did not seek to hide the past. Instead, they told of a desire to host those who came to honor the dead. And further, they were willing to talk of the horrors. They were not unacquainted with corporate evil. They had participated in it. Looking into the face of it, the people of Dachau, like so many Germans after the war, sought the forgiveness of God, the forgiveness of the Jews, and the forgiveness of the rest of the world.

A sign of their willingness to be transformed was this openness to all who now came to their town, to look upon their former shame. Inviting those whose ancestors had been so hurt there, the townsfolk were proclaiming that a new day had dawned, even in Dachau. These were a people, I realized as I sat on a bench in their town center, who understood themselves forgiven by a merciful God. The sins of the past were not forgotten. And they would never be forgotten. But the God who makes all things new had accepted their confessions, and offered a new day to a repentant people.

The question suddenly changed from one of German guilt, one of the guilt of my far distant Goettler uncles, to the question of my own guilt, my own ways of living in personal and corporate sin. I wonder if you, like me, sometimes question God's willingness to forgive. To forgive me. To forgive us. If God's mercy is so great that it extends even to those who participated in the greatest crime known by humanity, if God's mercy is so expansive that even those who fought on the side of the Nazis are able to find new hope and the forgiveness of sins, then might not our sin be forgiven? Not forgotten. Not made meaningless. Not ignored by a careless God. But forgiven by a God who is willing to move even in the midst of the worst of human evil, that new life may come out of old life, that redemption may come out of suffering.

Give thought this day to the sins of your life, to the personal sins and the corporate sins, to the places that you fall short and to the places that we as a community and as a people fall short of God's intention for human life. But don't dare to stop there. Instead, know in the wondrous God of Creation an unlimited capacity to love us and

to redeem us, to aid us, and to make us whole once more. Look for the movement of that God in every nation and every people, and in your life as well.