

## **Seminarreflexion von Ebru-Merve Akpınar**

### **IPS-Lehrveranstaltung**

#### **„Germany Today: Lessons from the Past, Perspectives for the Future”**

##### The HAWK+ Study Trip to Bergen-Belsen on 27 May 2019

##### A Personal Reflection

In the following I will share with you my trip to Bergen-Belsen Memorial. Though everyone's experience will be influenced by different factors, maybe you will find food for thought in this report. My hope is that after reading, you can decide if or why visiting a place like Bergen-Belsen would be rewarding for you and why you shouldn't shy away from it.

There were four people on this trip: three students and our teacher. The small number of the group made the experience more intimate and we were chatting in a relaxed manner.

To my surprise, the location of the cemetery on the historical grounds of the camp was all peaceful and conveyed some absurd sense of poetry. The sun was shining and its light kissed the mass graves, nature was blooming and long blades of grass were embracing the tombstones. Everything was summery and green—all giving a picture as if life was overshadowing death, and the memories of the souls were mingling in the presence of newness. A quote by Anne Frank seemed very apt:

"The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be."

Ironically, she was lying there, her memorial tombstone adorned by the gifts of those whom she inspired.

The mysterious quietness in this place was not of a scary kind. However, I can't say the same about the atmosphere in the documentation center. It evoked many disturbing emotions concerning the struggle to accept and understand this part of history in black and white.

It was not hard to have your mind penetrated by thoughts about the victims' death. Because of what I have learned in my university seminars about resilience, this place brought up questions like: "What gave them the strength to survive? What acts of kindness from another soul would be a source of strength for them?"

And because I am also someone who likes to look at the spiritual side, I was wondering in which ways faith could have played a role in these people's lives. So I deliberately looked for all of this, as a way of coping with what I saw.

On the walls next to alienating photos of beaten men or women, naked bodies where you can't tell whether they're alive or dead, the "luxury" of being cleaned after the victims were saved by British forces, I found prayer booklets and letters where God would be described as all-merciful, good and protecting, where rainbows would be seen as hopeful signs and gloves presented as a gift would leave an impression on you for the rest of your life.

When you are outside on the grounds and see the mass graves, after having watched the historical film clips inside the documentation center, you will not just know that there lie thousands of corpses, but you will connote it now with inner pictures and the realization that they were dragged down there, in a way that sends shivers down your spine. If you are a sensitive person, this may be something you don't need or want to experience.

The one thing I will remember about my trip is that having been a second-hand witness to the suffering of the people then has made me more conscious about the different reality I live in today and the changes we as a society go through.

It was not guilt or fear of loss that these impressions ultimately inspired in me, but more a humble gratitude for life itself, for loving relationships, for the intrinsically resilient nature of humans despite oppressive conditions and destructive forces.

The world we live in is not the mere dream of tolerance and diversity, but a passed-on experience of human decency that all of us are part of. We likely know this better now than ever before in history. People will unfortunately still face hostility in their lives. But Anne Frank, wise beyond her years, reminds us in her diary that faith in the goodness of people comes naturally.

The personal testimonies of the victims have shown me that all of us can contribute to the well-being of one another—by a simple smile, a little gift, kind words that may be remembered when they are most needed; a seed planted that will blossom and grow in meaning in its own time. Thus, my experience has been coloured by introspection – and a heartfelt connection.