

The day starts with a train trip from Berlin Hauptbahnhof to the town of Oranienburg. Through snowy suburbs, past schools with white ovals. Heading northwest, newer, optimistic architecture replacing post-war gloom.

Finally, the station, DB-clean, although a McDonald's has colonised the arrival hall. Out to catch the 804 to Sachsenhausen. And straight away, the feeling. The groups lined up for a public bus, or boarding tourist coaches. A dozen twenty-somethings wearing orange caps and lanyards, so they can be seen, led, informed.

The feeling that visiting a concentration camp should be, somehow, a private affair, quiet, contemplative? Can it be this way with an orange beanie? The whole experience part of some package? But what's the difference between them and me? It is, in a way, our own personal attempt to come to terms with the fallout, two generations later, from Hitler's shiny, new autobahned Germany (or is theirs a school trip?). Given, we've seen the documentaries, studied (or taught) the facts at school, but we haven't been here. And in a way, only being here can tell you. Can make you feel, smell, see what the prisoners (and guards, perhaps?) knew.

A 10-minute drive through town. More proud houses, frosty lawns with bikes, bakeries, a railway yard. All so ordinary. As I think, "Was it like this then? People going about their business, aware of what was happening a few minutes away."

The bus drops you, and then it's the usual ticket counter, book shop with plastic-wrapped nightmares in a dozen languages, the black box that'll tell you about the horrors of the camp. In a neat, clipped voice; matter-of-fact. As though, sticking to the facts is necessary. Along an icy road (named Camp Street), the block wall of the camp and its guard towers, so unremarkable, with all the bare-limbed winter trees shaking in the breeze. As I wonder, "Why did they allow trees?" It wasn't like the inmates would feel any better. And on the other side of the road, the SS command headquarters. Still fenced off, although I fancy I can feel the warm linen, smell the hot meals, even hear the roulette from the SS casino.

Then you turn the corner to see the gatehouse. The small, efficient windows to keep out the cold, the gap for the truck to drive through, ARBEIT MACHT FREI ("Work will set you free") on the gate. Of course, everyone's taking a photo. Like you do when you first see Big Ben or the Eiffel Tower. But this seems different. Someone asks a stranger to take his photo in front of Camp Tower A. Selfies, even. It doesn't feel right.

Beside the gatehouse is a Cold War-era building, a stark, concrete reminder of the Soviet Special Camp (1945-50), when the NKVD took over operations, kept Sachsenhausen going in much the same way as the National Socialists. Two 20th century nightmares sharing the same real estate, propagating the same disease. This time, the Nazis were the ones locked up. By the time the Russians left in March 1950 they'd imprisoned 60,000 people, 12,000 of whom had died of disease and malnutrition.



DAYTRIP *to* HELL

In Germany the past is not yet past. Trials of Nazi guards continue even today, and here at their first concentration camp, Sachsenhausen, the horror is preserved as a warning to all: do not forget

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A beautiful, quiet memorial garden sits beside the gate. Pine trees, birds, and soft needles under your feet. It commemorates individuals and groups who were locked away here, many never to re-emerge. Music plays, recordings of voices reading testaments of suffering. A moment of contemplation before the camp. The sort of place where you feel like being alone, listening to the voices from the past, still trying to warn us. Like they still roam these woods, overlooked by more guard towers. I feel like they are saying, 'You can never really know what happened here'.

And then in, through the gates. A large, triangular-shaped field dotted with the few remaining buildings from the camp. Only two trees now, but a big, cold blue sky. In the distance, the wall, and beyond, forest. Forest. Like you see everywhere across Germany.

I pull out the brochure, because, faced with the immensity of the place, the emotions, I feel I need facts. Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp was built during the summer of 1936 ... It was the first new camp to be established after the appointment of Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler as Chief of the German Police in July 1936. The complex was designed and laid out by an SS architect as a model for other concentration camps. It was intended to give architectural expression to the Nazi world view ... The place seems innocuous.



Main image: Tourists walk through the gates of Sachsenhausen concentration camp past the words "Work will set you free"; and, top, visitors in sombre contemplation behind the camp's barbed wire fences



The foundations of buildings that might have been shops, homes, factories. But, of course, weren't. Tens of thousands died of starvation, disease, forced labour and maltreatment, or were murdered systematically by the SS.

The facts don't help. Standing in a puddle of melting snow, the place seems peaceful, almost pleasant. So, how to reconcile the two? This, in a way, is why I've come. Why anyone comes. To try and see hell as a real place, full of real people, staffed by guards who had wives and children and grew vegetables.

I start off in the roll call area. Where the prisoners were lined up, three times a day, in the rain and snow, so the Germans could confirm they were still here, suffering. This knack for efficiency is everywhere. Like, if you prepared enough lists, ordered enough potatoes, sewed enough uniforms, everything would work out just fine.

I study the site of the gallows, and try to imagine watching someone I know, a friend, being led out, killed, for some non-reason. Mainly, just to set the tone, show who is in charge. I hear the story of a group of new arrivals who were made to stand here for a day and night. Thinking what? As I hear the voices from the memorial garden, telling me.

Into the museum, where you descend into a basement, watch a short film about the history of the camp, beginning in the town of Oranienburg in 1933. Here, local SA Stormtroopers locked up their opponents in a disused brewery. I look around, notice a few orange caps. We, the visitors, are becoming a community. Upstairs to the displays: a rack where prisoners were tied and beaten. Again, innocuous. Made by an apprentice carpenter, perhaps? With the history cleaned off, forcing us to make our own remembering.

“..Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew, Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

But to help, a large photo of a group of SS officers standing around a prisoner, on his knees, his head bowed. The officers are smiling, laughing. This is what I don't get.

The basement, again, into what had been the kitchen. A large concrete vat for cleaning potatoes, as I hear how prisoners were thrown in, their heads held under the water by the guards.

There are some old barracks (the “Small Camp”, for Jewish prisoners), so visitors can see how the prisoners lived: slept, washed, toileted. And although the conditions are primitive, we can see that perhaps these men laughed, told stories, remembered their families, talked politics, about what they might do after the war. Perhaps. Some of the walls are burnt, kept this way from a 1992 anti-Semitic firebomb attack. It's admirable, how these uncomfortable memories are protected, reminding us that history never stops.

The prison within the prison. A cell block used by the Gestapo and camp authorities for “special cases”. Reading each of the displays, it becomes clear there were thousands of ordinary Germans who spoke out against tyranny. People like Hans von Dohnanyi, a German jurist and anti-Nazi, who was executed in Sachsenhausen in April, 1945; Reverend Martin Niemöller, theologian and pastor, who spent seven years here:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Socialist, Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Trade Unionist, Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew, Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

A Spanish prime minister; SOE agents. Basically, anyone Hitler didn't like: political opponents, Jews, homosexuals (who were made to run up to 40km a day testing Wehrmacht boots on a special track), Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists and prisoners-of-war.

Then, to “Station Z” (named because there was no letter after this, no hope beyond it). Here, I see the execution trench. One can't help but feel this small, muddy piece of land has a special claim on history. Where one sees how prisoners were led down, waited, and where the execution squad stood. The sky is still blue, the woods visible, and strangely, the homes of Oranienburg are not far away from this part of the camp. Why could this happen within earshot of people's back yards, children playing, washing on lines? A burial ground with ashes. The crematorium, its foundations sunk, its floor collapsing. But intact. A commemoration for the victims, with real and plastic flowers, stones, hand-written notes, so raw, all these years later. A small toy, objects of meaning.

We spend the day at Sachsenhausen. We don't say much. We don't stop at the bookshop on the way out. Maybe all we do is honour these people. The importance of visiting these places is about trying to understand what humans are capable of. Walking towards town, I'm left with the feeling it could all happen again. My wife disagrees. The act of remembering will make it impossible.

We ask a local man on a bike the way back to the town centre. He just points. No words, no eye contact. I guess he knows where we've been. Maybe he's done enough remembering. ●
Stephen Orr's most recent book, *The Hands*, (Wakefield Press, \$29.95) was long listed for the Miles Franklin Award.