

The City of Remembrance (continued)

By Amy-Jean Singleton-Polster

Editor's note: In the July issue on page 19, we published an article by Amy-Jean with this same title. It was recently brought to my attention that her article was incomplete. We had not noticed that it had somehow been cut off in transmission. We are therefore offering you the rest of this fine article.

From the outside, the Anne Frank House looked typical. The only thing distinguishing it from the other houses in the region was the long line of people snaking from the front entrance and around the corner. We had a large group and a reservation so we only waited a few minutes before we were admitted into the house. After an introduction we left the museum section and headed up the steep narrow stairs to the area of the house where the Frank and Von Pels families lived for two years. The heat was stifling and the air in the room remained stagnant despite the fact that the windows were open with fans feebly blowing fresh air in. A thought skittered through my mind that at least we could open the windows and after the tour, go outside. On the walls of Anne's room, pictures from magazines of actors and actresses were still pasted to the walls. In her diary Anne said

how the pictures made the room so cheerful:

"Our little room looked very bare at first with nothing on the walls; but thanks to Daddy who had brought my film-star collection and picture postcards on beforehand, and with the aid of a paste pot and brush, I have transformed the walls into one gigantic picture. This makes it look much more cheerful ... " (July 11, 1942)

To me the tiny black and white photos were lost amidst the grey wallpapered wall of the tiny room. The floors squeaked as I walked slowly about the room, the air stuck, hot in a lump, in my throat and my body felt immensely heavy. A quotation on the wall from an Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, captured my thoughts:

"One single Anne Frank moves us more than the countless others who suffered just as she did but whose faces have remained in the shadows. Perhaps it is better that way. If we were capable of taking in all the suffering of all those people we would not be able to live." (1986)

The next few days were filled with laughter and fun, but with

an air of seriousness as we were all affected in some way or another by the heavy content we were dealing with. Two older Quakers, who had been alive during World War Two came and spoke with us. One of the men was from the Netherlands and had gone into hiding with his mother when his father had been taken for resisting the Nazis. Luckily, they remained undiscovered throughout the war. He recounted how the day after the Netherlands was liberated his grandmother, who had been sending them food in hiding, arrived to see him and his mother. When they went to open the door to her carriage she was sitting there dead. She had starved to death, having sent all her food to her daughter and grandson.

The other Quaker man had actually been a photographer for the Nazis. He grew up in Germany, not as a Quaker, but as a member of the Nazi youth. Of course, like the majority of young people at the time, he was completely entranced with the idea of a powerful Germany, and believed the ideas he was taught at school. A seed of doubt was planted in his mind when he was 15, when his father took him out into the forest, and explained to him that perhaps the Nazis weren't always right. His father used an example of a recent hanging where the men hadn't been given a trial. Thus, however small, the seed had been planted, and throughout the war, the idea that maybe his country was not always right began to grow. After the war he took many of his photographs to international papers to share the horrors, although they were mostly photos of the soldiers and training, not of concentration

camps.

We traveled to Camp Westerbork the next day. Westerbork was a transit camp where over 100,000 Jews, Gypsies and resistance fighters were taken and then shipped in cattle cars to concentration camps, most often Auschwitz, Sobibor or Bergen-Belsen from 1942–1945. We looked around the museum and with pride I took a picture of the Canadian uniform in the display case. The Canadians had liberated most of the Netherlands, including Camp Westerbork.

We walked about two kilometres to the actual location of the transit camp. As we walked, the sun beat forcefully down upon us. We stopped to eat our packed lunch just outside the camp and were surrounded by swarms of wasps. They were everywhere. These were not normal wasps either. They seemed to have the preemptive strike technique, loved by leaders worldwide, perfected. One girl was stung on the tongue, another on the eyelid and many more of us managed to be stung. It wasn't just in that area either; the entire camp was hot, shadeless and filled with wasps and horseflies. Some barracks had been partially reconstructed and in the centre of the camp, there was a monument for the thousands of Dutch Gypsies and Jews who were deported from Westerbork and never returned. One of the families deported was the Frank family. From a group of eight, only Otto Frank remained at the end of the war. The memorial was a city of bricks, of all varying heights, that

stretched ten square meters. The red bricks had symbols in brass on the top, each representing a dead Dutch Jew, Gypsy or resistance fighter. The Jews had a Star of David on their bricks; the Gypsies, flames; and the resistance fighters, blank bricks. The Gypsies and resistance fighters were in one small section, and the rest of the area was filled with skyscrapers, houses and small apartment buildings with the Star of David on the top creating the miniature city of the dead. They created a map of the

Worship. A few lone tears trickled down my cheeks before the hot sun evaporated them leaving salty tear tracks along my face.

We walked back, parched, to the bus, and I was delighted to buy a Sprite, get into the air-conditioned bus and head back to the community center where we were staying. As a child I had read books about the holocaust, and in Social Studies 11, we had briefly studied World War II. But all of it seemed distant, a story.

I knew it was real, but to me it was only as real as the Greek myths we also learned about. On that hot day in August, the actuality of the horrible deeds people can commit finally sunk in. Back home, re-reading Anne Frank's Diary I was amazed at her optimism:

**“It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned
all my ideals, they seem so
absurd and impractical.
Yet I cling to them because I still
believe, in spite of everything,
that people are truly good at heart.”**

Netherlands, with small pathways to walk along, and the sheer number of them blew me away. Then I remembered, six million Jews were murdered in World War II. The memorial city at Westerbork was only for 100,000, a mere 1.6% of the six million people killed.

We had Meeting for Worship by the partially ripped up train tracks where 100,000 people had been separated from their loved ones and shoved into cattle cars to go down the train tracks to their deaths. The heat was intense, and still the wasps buzzed around, ready to sting, and the horseflies hummed, biting chunks out of our flesh as we stood in traditional silent Quaker

“It’s difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” (July 15, 1944)

These words also ring true for the Quaker ideal of goodness, or God in everyone. As George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, said “Walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.” 🌿

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