

My overall trip to Germany was a glimpse into a culture I never fully understood. Steeped in stereotypes of a Bavarian lederhosen-wearing, beer-drinking man and immediately remembered in history for the brutal genocide of the Jewish population in the Holocaust, the average American does not truly understand the country as it stands today in the world, let alone the people. With an ocean and language separating the two countries, America does not stand a chance.

Entering the country from the beginning, I was introduced to a very loving family that happily accepted me into their home and poured me all my drinks at meals. They packed me food and encouraged me to speak German with them, translating into English things I was unable to understand. And on the fifth day of my trip, all of the German hosts and American delegates visited Dachau.

I had only learned of Dachau shortly before I left to go onto the trip. Like most others I know, when I think of a concentration camp my mind immediately goes to Auschwitz. I imagined as the days came closer, foolishly, that it wouldn't be that bad. If I hadn't heard of it, I figured it wasn't the worst one and I'd be able to move on quickly with my day after a couple hours of contemplation of what others in bigger camps went through.

But as we entered Dachau I began to realize how incorrect I was. I had drastically underestimated the scale of death that had occurred in the camp, in addition to overestimating my own apathy that fuels Holocaust jokes among American youth. Every step I took reminded me of the others that had been corralled into this same space, working long hours and sleeping in barracks. As we passed the foreboding, infamous gate that stated "Arbeit macht Frei" in large iron letters (which translates to "work makes free") I saw the friendly, seemingly always upbeat Germans begin to quiet.

We walked the grounds and read of the camp. Dachau, the first and longest running concentration camp during World War II, served as a model for others. Thousands had passed through the ovens. A nearby village constantly dealt with a thin layer of ash that hailed from the camp. When Dachau was discovered by American troops, they discovered a collection of bodies that hadn't been burned yet in one of the chambers, carelessly strewn.

The group later watched a video that was comprised entirely of original footage. Leaving the theater, we were asked which of us felt able to walk through the gas chambers and ovens. Our German hosts stayed outside, squinting at the building in the sunlight or looking downward. One, Johnathan, walked into the area that the bodies had been burned in. Looking at the original ovens before him, he stood silent before quietly exiting and standing with the others. A girl, Katja, had to be consoled by another.

This experience, more than anything, helped me understand the guilt and pain Germans carry as a country and individually. My host family never talked about the camp after I got back home. They asked me how Munich was and what I bought, they made plans for tomorrow. But one student's host father did, saying at one point "what we did" in reference to the Holocaust so naturally that it took the student aback. And this is what Americans are unable to understand. Germans are some of the most giving people I've ever met; they are quiet and mean what they

say; they laugh with their friends and play sport. And throughout sixty years of history they have taken responsibility for one of the most, if not the most, horrific atrocities, in the 20th century, bearing it with a guilt and seriousness that takes even the least empathetic person away.