

Fall/Winter 2007 TAP 41/4
Pyles Berlin
Wolff 9/20/07
Approx 1000 words

Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through – the IPA in

Berlin

Bob Pyles

In a remarkable act of courage, vision, and hope, the IPA held its 45th Congress in Berlin, hosted by the German Psychoanalytical Societies. This is the first congress to be held in Berlin since 1922, more than 80 years ago and more than 60 years after the fall of the Nazi regime. Beginning with the staged “Reichstag fire” in 1933, the Nazis began a campaign of genocide, terror, and domination, resulting over the next 12 years in the deaths of more than 55 million people.

Like most of our colleagues, it was with considerable foreboding that I anticipated attending the congress in Berlin. I remember vividly as a child being riveted to the radio to hear the latest broadcasts about the struggle for Europe, the menacing pictures of Hitler and the goose-stepping German army, and the first horrifying pictures in *Life* magazine of the death camps. In our small southern town, it seemed that at least one member from every family was in the military, and service stars, many edged in black, hung in the windows of most homes.

In the last few years, I had had considerable experience with what the French writer, Romaine Gary, called *A European Education*. An IPA board

meeting was held in Paris in a hotel that turned out to be the former headquarters of the SS. It is an unnerving experience to sleep in a room previously occupied by SS officers. During the European Psychoanalytic Federation-North American Psychoanalytic Confederation (EPF-NAPsaC) meeting last year near Vienna, the city of Freud, I found the anti-Semitism palpable and disturbing.

Taking a night flight to Berlin, in retrospect, was a bad idea. My anxiety and dread had free reign. Also a bad idea was seeing Berlin initially by night, particularly the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate. Seeing the Brandenburg Gate, I could practically hear the echo of jackboots and tank treads.

The congress began the next day and, despite my concerns, proved to be a remarkable event. Along with the usual presentations were many that dealt with trauma, the Holocaust, and the effect of extreme traumatization on the descendants of both the victims and the perpetrators. I was surprised by how moving, frank, and open the discussions were. In particular, I would single out Mary Ann Oliner who told her story under the title, "Personal History and the Third Reich; Excuse Me for Having Been Born; the Fate of a German Jew during World War II." Oliner spoke movingly of being sheltered, moved from place to place, and the deaths of her family. The pain was palpable; there was not a dry eye in the room. There were presentations on the difficulty of working with the children and grandchildren of perpetrators, given the fact that they had been trained to not remember and to not know. There was much discussion of how to think and know the unknowable.

One of the keynote speakers, past president of the German Society (DPV), Werner Bohleber, presented a paper on the specific problems of recovering memory in the face of massive societal trauma, and how very different techniques are needed in order to work with this specific kind of problem.

After these experiences, Berlin itself began to take on a different perspective. As we later toured the city, it was clear that Berliners seemed to have been doing everything they could to confront and deal with the horrors of the past. The Jewish museum was the most vivid and thorough I have ever seen. It told the story of the Jews from the beginning to the present. I was particularly moved by the history of the Jews in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It seemed that laws of tolerance were finally in effect. Middle- and upper-class Jews seemed fully integrated into German society and felt, not only Jewish, but German. This must have made it even more difficult to grasp the horror of the Hitler regime.

Similarly, the recently completed Holocaust Memorial was deeply moving. It consists of a series of dark granite monoliths arranged over several acres, with narrow undulating avenues through brooding stones of ever increasing height. The overwhelming effect is one of being buried alive. Underground there is a museum, with pictures of individuals and families, and their stories narrated. There are so many stories that it would take six and a half years to go through one full cycle. Ironically, discovered during construction, were the remains of the bunker of Herman Goering.

Another point of great interest on the theme of human survival was the remains of The Wall and Checkpoint Charlie, with a museum telling moving stories of the flight to freedom by East Germans, and the ingenuity and courage they showed in doing so.

With these experiences more internalized, I began to look at Berlin in a different way. The Berlin people themselves were quite remarkable in their courtesy, graciousness, and willingness to help. When I looked back at the Reichstag, I saw it in a different light. Over 70 percent of Berlin had been destroyed during the War and the Reichstag itself was a burned-out shell. Rather than rebuild it, the Berliners restored the historic outer walls. Instead of replacing the granite dome, they built instead a cylinder and dome of glass and light. The effect is one of liberation and elevation.

I took one last look at the Brandenburg Gate. Suddenly it no longer seemed so menacing. I could even begin to accept that the statue on top was a monument to peace. I came away feeling a deep sense of gratitude to the IPA and the German Societies. Gradually during these few days, it did indeed seem that healing, “repeating and working through” was taking place. We were all together, sharing the remarkable experience of speaking the unspeakable, and knowing the unknowable.

Bob Pyles, M.D., is chair of the Committee on Government Relations and Insurance and a past president of APsaA.

