

Visit of the Mauthausen Memorial by the Students of the International Semester Thursday, Dec. 6th, 2018

On December 14th, 1751 Empress Maria Theresa gave the first commander of the Academy, Field Marshal Leopold Joseph Count Daun, the order “Make me fine officers and righteous men.” The purpose of officer training at the TMA is also to sharpen the historical awareness of all students. History is not something irrelevant to us; it is the facts of humanity’s past, in all its conditions, mechanisms, meaning and value. The permanent effort to seek knowledge and understanding of historical matters marks one important step towards acquiring the necessary skills and competences of a future officer. One cannot understand the present and build the future without having a distinct knowledge of the past, as the condition of people’s knowledge and sense of history affects the way in which they can understand and conceive the world. This was the main reason why the students of the International Semester, together with their German teacher Roswitha Geys, went to the Mauthausen Memorial on December 6th, 2018, where they were confronted with the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi Regime.



When arriving at the former concentration camp, the group of Officer Cadets and civilian students of eight different partner nations (Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, and the US Military Academy in Westpoint) were overwhelmed and deeply grieved, because the thick stonewalls and guard towers create a nightmarish atmosphere. All of them were fully aware that they were going to visit a former crime scene and at the same time the cemetery of the mortal remains of thousands of those murdered here and burnt in the crematoria. Split in two groups, our guides Mr. Klemens Knopp and Mr. Martin

Kagerer showed us around. The Officer Cadets and students were struck dumb with horror when they realized that some of the local farmhouses are so close to the concentration camp that their inhabitants became eyewitnesses to atrocities perpetrated every single day in the quarry, when weak prisoners, breaking down under their burden, were shot by the SS, pushed over the edge of the quarry or pushed down the long “stairway of death”. A thing that the murderers ironically called “parachuting”. What is the responsibility borne by perpetrators and onlookers? What does courage mean in a political system whose pillars are hatred and fear? The two Westpoint Cadets, Jason Brodeur and Ethan Blum, had watched before in their German lessons the movie “Hasenjagd”. Now they were remembering on the premises the courage of the family Hackl, hiding two of the escaped Russian prisoners, while other inhabitants of the nearby villages hunted them “like rabbits”. In this atmosphere of fear, suffering and death, soccer matches took place every Sunday, attracting many people... This is beyond imagination. The most horrible part of Mauthausen is the crematoria and the gas chamber. A black path leads to the killing facilities, through the “Room of Names”. For the first time, this room displays the names of all those known by name who died in the Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camps and in the subcamps. In total, the names of nearly 90,000 people who died between August 8th, 1938 and June 30th, 1945 are to be found here. For many descendants of the killed, this is the only place to commemorate their beloved family member.



Westpoint Cadet Jason Brodeur wrote down his impressions:

“Mauthausen was an eerie experience for me. At first glance, it seemed that Mauthausen was closed to the public - the site was surrounded by massive stone walls. During the tour, we were told about the terrible events in the camp. Prisoners had to stand outside for hours in the freezing cold, share a room with over a hundred roommates, or work themselves to death with

hard labor. The most frightening part of the tour was the quarry. The quarry was open to the public. Everyone could see what was happening in the labor camp and there were even houses that could see into the quarry. However, there were very few people who talked about the atrocities of the camp. People supported these acts, but did not want to see them. It is scary to know that people are able to be so cruel to others. Another powerful scene was in one of the cellars of the camp, where over 90,000 names are inscribed on stone to commemorate them. The room is dimly lit, and the only light emerges from the names carved into the black stone. Of those dead, less than 10 percent were killed by gas. This means over 90 percent have been killed by cruel methods or hard work. The sheer size of this room and the amount of names left me breathless.”



When leaving the concentration camp again, one look in the faces of the future officers and students was enough to understand, that they were fully aware of their future responsibility as officers: “Never again!”

(Text and photos: Roswitha Geyss)