To Each His Own
Volkhard Knigge

To Each His Own – is there any more beautiful and more compassionate promise than that justice be done to one and all, that every human being’s personal interests, proclivities and needs be respected, that no one be disadvantaged or debased, damaged or injured, that people be honoured and respected in their equality and diversity, individuality and singularity, that each and every person be guaranteed a place and a voice in society? “The precepts of the law are these: to live honourably, not to injure another, to give each his due.” It is thus that the mid-sixth-century Roman Corpus Iuris Civilis expresses the legal principle abbreviated in the phrase To Each His Own. At the behest of camp commandant Karl Otto Koch, the latter formula was inserted in the concentration camp gate in forged letters, as the motto of the SS, in the spring of 1938 – a few months after construction got underway on Ettersberg Mountain outside of Weimar, on the grounds of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Installed in such a way as to be read from within, from the muster ground, by the inmates there, the inscription imperiously demonstrated the supposed right of the SS and Nazi Germany to the brutal ostracism of people from society – for political, social and racist reasons.

The purpose of exhibitions at the sites of former Nazi concentration camps in the Federal Republic of Germany has always been to counter the belittlement and denial of the crimes committed there with irrefutable evidence and examples of those crimes, and to give the victims of persecution faces and voices. They are forums for reflecting on and discussing, transnationally and interculturally, the meaning of the past for the present. In the past, they served this purpose primarily by calling upon contemporaries who had lived through – if not actually contributed to shaping – National Socialism, who had been influenced by it and, after 1945, had come to terms with it as part of their lives, or engaged in critically examining and appraising it. To a considerable degree, until a few years ago, the visitors to concentration camp memorials belonged to the generation of the people involved, or that of their children. For them, the past was directly or indirectly present as an experience or a memory, however fragmentary, coloured or distorted. The history of Nazi Germany, World War II and the crimes committed against humanity was not solidified history, remote from the present. Its vibrancy and relevance was evident in the reluctance to face it.

The fact that, by now, decades after the end of World War II and the liberation of the camps, this has changed as a consequence of emigration and immigration is a banal observation, but one to be taken seriously. As the distance between past and present grows – temporally speaking but also in terms of the history of origins – there are three ways of reacting, as we see if we take a look at the culture of remembrance and recent and new exhibitions on the history of the twentieth century, the Holocaust and other crimes committed by states and societies: One can intensify the normative rhetoric and the pathos of the memory. One can pretend that the past can be authentically brought to life with the aid of the digital media, and experienced as if one was in the midst of it. Or one can ask, and try to make tangible, what part of history and historical experience is and will be virulent and relevant for the present and future.

The exhibition Buchenwald: Ostracism and Violence 1937 to 1945 takes the last-named route. It chooses that route because, in the long run, moralistic pathos engenders aversion and fails to bring about a true understanding of history. The past cannot be brought to life and experienced because, even in the form of an exhibition, the reproduction of the past is not a reflection but a construction and an interpretation. Yet it is a construction that, if it exercises methodological care in how it presents the historical testimonies and makes them accessible, is not arbitrary or purely fictional. By means of exhibitions, historical experience can be made roughly comprehensible. What is more – and this is an elementary aim of the new permanent exhibition at the Buchenwald Memorial – with the help of exhibitions, people can gain an un-
derstanding of what we had better not do if we want to keep nations and societies from suddenly lapsing into inhumanity: had better not do in everyday life and direct contact with others, but also in the realms of politics and state constitutions, society, culture and law.

Yet there is also a further requisite, which this exhibition takes into account in explicit disassociation from a current trend in the culture of remembrance: the critical reassessment of National Socialism must not confine itself to the horrors of the camps in such a way as to decontextualize them. The camps were not isolated islands of nameless evil. The crimes were not committed in some remote, secluded place, but – as the Auschwitz and Mittelbau-Dora survivor Jean Améry put it on the basis of his own bitter experience – “in the midst of the German people”. The exhibition therefore interweaves a look at the camps with a look at German society, a society that, for the most part, accepted the camps and the ostracism, considered them justified and necessary, hardly objected to their existence, liberally availed itself of the camps and the inmates, and – in conjunction with the “total war” – ultimately accommodated a dense network of camps. The congenial adjacency of Weimar and Buchenwald is a striking example.

Against this background, the ongoing relevance of the history and experience of National Socialism lies not least importantly in the realization of just how poisoned was the propagated aim of creating an ethnically homogenous, “racially pure”, harmonious “people’s community” free of social and political conflicts. To Each His Own, in the National Socialist sense, meant nothing other than creating circumstances that were based on violence and relentlessly generated violence. This was because, on the one hand, the foundations of a peaceful order had been destroyed – that is, democratic division of powers, equality before the law, freedom of opinion and all other civil rights – and the media, judiciary and public administrations had come to function solely as dictated by the National Socialists. On the other hand, it was because the classification of people as supposedly more superior and more inferior – indeed, the denial of indivisible human dignity – fuelled violence and declared it imperative.

In view of those phenomena, the aim must be to preserve the sense of shock and dismay that ensues when we realize how rapidly the upheaval and the establishment of National Socialist authority took place, and how little resistance was encountered in the process, and apply that shock and dismay to the benefit of civilization: “Again it’s astounding how easily everything collapses”,1 noted the Romance languages scholar and philologist Victor Klemperer in his diary on 10 March 1933. The writer Robert Musil also summed up the events of those weeks and months: “Freedom of the press, of expression of any kind, freedom of conscience, personal dignity, freedom of spirit etc., all the liberal fundamental rights have now been set aside without one single person feeling utterly outraged, indeed by and large without people being strongly affected at all.” These are two examples of a state of shock that, in response to the easy surrender of power to Hitler and the Nazis, was an exception in the Germany of the period in question. Yet they can serve to sensitize us to the fragility of our own time – a time in which populist nationalism, racist ideologies of inequality, cultural illiberalism and anti-democratic thought have by no means been overcome.

It is also for that reason that survivors have the last word in the exhibition – but not so that we will be uplifted by their words or prematurely consoled by the fact of their survival. Rather, the exhibition aims to raise and anchor in us an awareness of the fact that they were survivors who, from the start – let us recall, for example, Eugen Kogon, Bruno Bettelheim, Benedikt Kautsky or Robert Antelme – not only reported on the camps and what happened there but also sought to question and penetrate the experience of the camps in terms of what it meant for the present and future: from the political, moral, sociocultural, anthropological or aesthetic perspective. The mere description of the terror appeared inappropriate to them, the mere
mirroring of violence and suffering, without deeper insight, entirely adequate as a means of ruling out similar occurrences in the future. Despite all the suffering and all the anti-humanity practised by the National Socialists, Buchenwald is also associated with fundamental impulses for a more just and caring world.

The permanent exhibition *Buchenwald: Ostracism and Violence 1937 to 1945* is the last major exhibition in the Federal Republic of Germany to have been initiated jointly by survivors, historians, museologists and history educationalists. It unites *taking leave of the past* with *looking ahead to the future*:

*taking leave of the past* in the form of living memory, but not in the sense of its absolute historicization – the political and moral impulses associated with the reappraisal of National Socialism can no more be historicized than the abovementioned sense of dismay – and *looking ahead to the future* because its emergence goes hand in hand with the firm intention of all involved not to let an anti-humanity legitimized by the state and backed or tolerated by the society have the final say.

This book documents the permanent exhibition in its fundamental facets. It adheres to the exhibition’s thematic structure and mirrors its three individually designed core means of access. To begin with, it presents the history of the Buchenwald concentration camp and its integration in German National Socialist society in four chapters with the aid of key testimonies, objects, photos and documents. The supplementary epilogue (“After the Liberation”) focusses on the post-history of the camp. More than eighty biographies of inmates – the stories of their lives and persecution – form the second means of access. As representative examples, they provide an overview of the constitution of the Buchenwald concentration camp inmates’ society. Thirdly, material testimonies originating in the camp or the inmates’ possessions tell their own stories about fundamental aspects of everyday life in the camp: clothing, undernourishment, self-preservation. As in the exhibition, the book comes to a close with someone who was forced to experience the Buchenwald concentration camp first-hand. The former diplomat and writer Ivan Ivanji revisits his experience with Weimar – as a historical city, as a symbol, as a Janus-faced experience and orientation.

The essays, which were written especially for this volume, place the specific history of the concentration camp in the context of previous and subsequent phenomena that are of relevance for more comprehensive understanding: from the history of modern racism and populist antidemocratic thought to that of the testimony of survivors after 1945. At the same time, they deepen our insights into German society in National Socialism and the emergence and function of the concentration camps before and during the German-initiated Second World War.

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