

Heidelberg's Lessons on Literacy, History, and Understanding

By Jolayne Sillito Call

I am here in Heidelberg to attend a conference entitled "Global Conversations on Language and Literacy" at the University of Heidelberg.

It's much more than I expected. First, there is Heidelberg itself. It rains almost every day, so I always see the city in the rain: the town curving along the valley of the Neckar River, the forests and vineyards dark on the hillsides, mists rising to a picturesque structure known as the Heidelberg castle, with its massive battlements and its 49,000 gallon wine cask.

Heidelberg is celebrating its 800th anniversary. It is a magic place. No wonder it attracted so many writers and composers of the 19th-century German Romantic movement. Goethe fell in love here with a young woman, and Mark Twain came and fell in love with the city itself.

As the conference starts, I sit in a plush, straight-backed chair, a professor's chair, like the others

around me, arranged in rows on a level floor facing a podium. To the side, behind wooden partitions and in tiers, are student chairs, where students sit respectfully observing. Above, on the top half of the walls, is rich dark wood, paneled and engraved with elaborate carvings and pictures. I'm in the Aulte Ala, the hall that served as the first university 600 years ago.

Modeled on the University of Paris, the University of Heidelberg has faculties of theology, law, medicine and dentistry, philosophy, natural sciences, and mathematics.¹

Dieter Raff from Heidelberg University tells us his school's history. It's the third oldest university in Europe, the oldest in Germany.

The university was built by scholars from Prague and France in 1386 and began with 800 students. Scholars came in "the true spirit of inquiry" and established a tradition of a quest for religious and intellectual freedom that remained largely unbroken.²

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A building away is the museum, a repository for books and manuscripts of antiquity. I toured it yesterday to see diaries, letters, political documents, as well as the bardic manuscript from Switzerland: the *Codex Manesse*, a collection of about 6,000 stanzas from 140 poets covering the late 12th century to the beginning of the 14th century.

Written on parchment, the *Codex* contains the "most comprehensive collection of Middle High German songs and gnomic poetry."³

Scores of ancient manuscripts were tantalizingly just beyond my fingertips, behind glass, along with the jawbone of the Heidelberg Man.

Heidelberg University has the most postgraduate integrated research programs at a German university funded by the German Research Association.⁴ The European Molecular Biology Laboratory is currently based in Heidelberg.⁵ More than 200 corpses have been used over the last two decades at the University of Heidelberg for crash testing automobiles.⁶

On October 12, 1991, Erwin Neher of Gottingen and Bert Sakmann of Heidelberg shared the medical Nobel Prize for proving that "small pores dot the outer membranes of cells and allow them to take in and expel charged atoms."⁷

Maurice Howard, chief of the

Education Division for the U.S. Department of Defense, continues our opening session. He quotes Confucius: "Without knowing the force of language, it is impossible to know men."⁸

We are here, teachers of English from many nations and cultures: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Germany, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, and the United States. English is our connection. It draws us all to this conference. Without language, Howard tells us, there is no past and no future, only the immediate present.⁹

Dr. Terry Eagleton from Oxford University addresses us next.

"Technology allows us a great extension of ourselves, and we are in grave danger of overreaching," he notes, speaking of technology as giving us an "enabling distance" that is at once both our advantage and our danger, both power giving and potentially destructive. He warns us of our technological literacy.¹⁰

His speech poses an interesting contrast to the opening speech of an unknown professor at the University of Heidelberg around 1500. This professor speaks of the invention of the printing press.

Never in history have we had a technology that so assured the

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improvement of mankind. We are fortunate to have been born at so auspicious a time. We shall witness the abolition of Ignorance and poverty of mind and body.¹¹

Here in Heidelberg, almost 500 years later, we still strive for the same goals, share the same hopes. Much history has interspersed itself between then and now. Because of this history, some potential presenters and attenders for our conference had stated they would refuse to attend if it were in Germany. The Holocaust seemed sufficient reason to boycott both the country and the conference.

Miep Gies, the woman who was the link to the outside world for the Frank family, was invited to address the conference in a special evening session to address the issue.

Miep Gies is a small dignified lady with white hair who speaks clearly and slowly in very good English to an overflow crowd in the ballroom of the Heidelberg Renaissance Hotel. She speaks of a movie about one selfish Jewish landlord that is used by the German government to begin its anti-Semitic campaign.

Soon one landlord is generalized to include all Jews—a race

requiring extermination—and a concentration camp, the prototype for many more, is set up at Dachau.

Dachau, the first Nazi concentration camp in Germany, was established March 10, 1933, slightly more than five weeks after Hitler became chancellor.¹² Evidence indicates that at least 32,000 actually died in the camp. It was the first and main camp where German doctors and scientists performed medical experiments on involuntary inmates in the areas of atmospheric pressure, freezing, malaria, drinking seawater, going without food. "Such experiments and harsh living conditions made Dachau one of the most notorious of camps."¹³

Barnhard Lichtenberg, a Catholic Priest, died en route to Dachau after he "condemned the Nazi treatment of the Jews from his pulpit."¹⁴ Goffredo Raimo, police chief in Fiume, Italy, "saved 5,000 Jews from extermination" by "hiding them, issuing false papers and visas." "Eighty percent of Italy's Jewish population were saved from the horrors of the Holocaust" by interventions of politicians, army, clergy, and ordinary citizens. Raimo himself died in Dachau three months before the liberation.¹⁵

About 30,000 survivors of Dachau were liberated by Japanese Americans.¹⁶ By April 1945, 206,000 registered prisoners had

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passed through the camp, with 31,951 deaths recorded. "Mistreatment and killing of prisoners (through beatings, hangings, drownings, lethal torture) were daily realities."¹⁷ "They looked like firewood piled up and when we got closer they were all dead bodies. I went up to one of the living and the only thing keeping him alive was his skin; all skin and bones, nothing else."¹⁸

Dachau was torn down after the war and basically rebuilt. The present site is smaller than the original.¹⁹ A Harris poll found that 38 percent of Americans "have not heard of Dachau and do not believe in the Holocaust."²⁰

Miep Gies tells us about helping to hide the Frank family from the Nazis and their prison camps, about being their lifeline to the outside world. The small white-haired woman speaks of picking up the strewn pages of Anne's diary from the floor where the Nazis had scattered them after the Franks were captured and of giving them to Otto Frank, the only one to return from the concentration camps.

"After the war," she says, "there was only one thing, hate for all Germans."

Gies continues slowly, her words distinct in the silence of the hall. She speaks of groups of people who come to see the Franks' hiding place. Some of them are

Germans. Mr. Frank keeps her away from them because of her anger.

But one day she encounters a group of Germans and finally lets loose her hatred, her rage, and frustration, only to discover these Germans had spent the war in a concentration camp for opposing Hitler.

"I no longer accuse all Germans, just the Nazis," Miep Gies goes on. "Before Hitler, Germany was a fine place for Jews to live."

Then, looking out over the crowded ballroom, she gives us advice: "Do your human duty. Don't believe people in trouble did something wrong."

She tells us to return to the individual to see clearly. When we generalize, we create racism. When we see the individual in spite of his context, we push back misunderstanding and prejudice.

"Opinions must never be based on skin or country, only on them [individuals] personally," she points out. "Anne Frank would have been 67 years old today."

After the conference, my daughter, who has heard in school about Dachau, insists we take the time to travel there from Heidelberg. We travel leisurely through the day, stopping at the old Medieval town of Rottenberg, spending several hours there. I

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don't think I delay deliberately. We arrive at Dachau in the late afternoon, 40 minutes before closing.

We leave Dachau after our visit and travel to Heidelberg. But it is really days before I have left Dachau. In some ways, I think perhaps I may never totally leave it. Even after I return home, photographs are developed and I am there once more.

Yet time softens all things and now, almost a year later, I remember Heidelberg and the university and Salzburg, as well as Dachau. I think about the Franks and Miep Gies, about literacy and how, as Howard points out, without literacy there is no access to the past or the future. There is only the present. I think about Eagleton and his fears about technology allowing us to extend beyond our humanity. I think about literacy and about Dachau.

Dachau, itself, is gone. Only the few restored buildings remain and the pamphlets and literature that tell us what happened there, the anguish puddled in the rocks.

Social and political illiteracy set up the camps, peopled them, and ran them. But there, doctors and scientists, those we usually think of as supremely literate, practiced their own form of illiteracy in the involuntary human experiments they performed there. But surely

we have progressed beyond such things. It's true we've left Dachau behind. Now we have Hutus and Bosnians and Serbs. We have Afghanistan and Africa and Eastern Europe and Cambodia.

We have the United States of America. We have races fighting races. We have one culture opposing another, one religion at war with another, one sex in competition with the other. So where is our literacy? When will we achieve the literacy necessary for peaceful coexistence or even just continued existence?

Our world has become as obviously global and interconnected as Donne envisioned:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.²¹

Through language and communication devices we are connected

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to each other. What happens in one city or nation is immediately communicated and impacts all others.

The Berlin Wall fell not only in Germany. Our futures as nations and countries are tied together. And of course, as Toffler²² points out in *Future Shock*, even isolated past events are increasingly impinging on our present and future.

The Greek victory over the Persians had little effect on the Americas at the time. But that war decided the major direction of our western civilization. So even time has become global. We are essentially, perhaps even desperately, interconnected.

As Orwell noted in *Animal Farm*, the pigs should not be more equal. We cannot afford to demean other races, colors, genders, or religions, for by so doing we violate ourselves.

We cannot allow fear and illiteracy in its most dangerous form to continue to flourish. We cry and agitate over the loss of animal species on our earth. And we should. How much more should we do for a lost race?

So as teachers and at least partial keepers of literacy and humanity, what is our role? It seems tremendously presumptuous on my part to address this issue, yet extremely vital that we all individually do just that.

Looking back over my notes for this conference, I see that we have addressed critical, creative, functional, political, multi-cultural, social, ethical, and technological literacy. All are essential facets of today's literacy. But perhaps even focused teaching to accomplish these literacies falls short of the mark. So what is needed?

Miep Gies would say we must not generalize about people, or groups of people. We must interact not with the group, but individual to individual. I think we must go further. As teachers and partial keepers of literacy and the humanities, we must look down the road that humanity has traveled and consider what it means to be human.

In Germany, I went from the intellectual brightness of the universities to the emotional darkness of Dachau, then on to Salzburg and *Sound of Music*, where both heart and mind are merged in the arts in a synergistic relationship.

As I read about the medical experiments in Dachau, I could not but be appalled by what happens when one aspect of literacy is expanded while neglecting other aspects. In all phases of humanity's journey, as in our personal journeys, there must be included all aspects of being human, all aspects of literacy and enlightenment in

balance. We must be literate.

To be literate requires much of us. As well as subject, we teach who and what we are. Most of us would not pass on our illiteracies consciously, but I suspect we do so unconsciously.

If, like my Florida grandmother, I have a fear and a sense of African-Americans as being less human than I am, then that concept will come through my teaching, through my choice of text, of words, through my inflections, my sentence constructions. This perspective will show up in my comments and even in my grades.

As teachers, we are ethically responsible for what we teach. So we must understand our own illiteracies. I am learning mine. By so doing, those who leave our writings and our classrooms will not be "still in shadow," at least not ours.

To be literate also means that we, as teachers, do not force literacy. We offer to the individuals in our classes, to the readers of our writings, our literacies. But literacy is really a personal thing. If not accepted, there is no change. Even when academically or intellectually accepted, changes in hearts and lives come slowly and painfully.

Yet we must resist at all costs the temptation to force changes in our classrooms. This is more difficult than it sounds. If men and

women of Nazi Germany had been critically literate as well as functionally literate, if they had understood their connection to Jews and Gypsies, the Holocaust may have been prevented. That great darkness may have been avoided.

Surely such results could excuse a little force. Yet just as we demand academic freedom in our colleges and universities, we must allow those in our classrooms the same option.

To force literacy would be to increase the shadow. To force choice and change would violate literacy's underlying principal, the personal dignity and value of all. So we must offer, actively and interactively, with all the personal light and might we have, as untainted by shadow as humanly possible, but still offer, literacy.

I think of Heidelberg, the university, the conference. I recall Howard, Eagleton, Miep Gies, and Dachau. I think of Salzburg. I remember Donne and Orwell, that no man is an island and no man is more equal.

But, above all, I think of teachers and literacy. The quality of our lives, perhaps even our continued existence, depends upon how we, as teachers, perceive and accomplish our roles, how we achieve and pass on literacy. ■

Endnotes

¹ Hall, 1993.

² Raff, 1996.

³ Codex Manesse, 1996.

⁴ Beaming, 1996

⁵ Centofanti, 1995

⁶ Fedarko, 1993

⁷ Ezzell, 1991

⁸ Howard, 1996

⁹ Eagleton, 1996

¹⁰ Breinin, 1993

¹¹ Dressen, 1991

¹² Dachau, 1991

¹³ Dagan, 1996

- ¹⁴ Gallo, 1996
¹⁵ Uyeno, 1995
¹⁶ Zentner and Bedürftig, 1991
¹⁷ Uyeno, 1995
¹⁸ Shekel, 1996

- ¹⁹ Lessem, 1994
²⁰ Gies, 1996
²¹ Donne, 1624
²² Toffler, 1970

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