‘How could they do this?’

Lawyers, doctors on SIU trip to Germany contemplate role their fields played in Holocaust

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
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Katherine L. Pine had to see the courtroom.
The founder of the Carbon-dale branch of Sandberg, Phoenix & von Gontard PC, Pine was in Germany on a trip, coordinated by Southern Illinois University School of Law, in which professionals in law and medicine learned about the harm their respective fields caused in Germany during the Holocaust.

The courtroom she wished to see was Courthouse 600 in the Palace of Justice, site of the Nuremberg trials. At the time of the group’s visit, the room was closed to tourists. So she returned the next day apart from the group.

She was glad she did. Seeing the history of the Holocaust through her own eyes helped her understand the event’s true weight.

“I’ve known a lot of people who said, ‘I can’t do it. I can’t even go to the Holocaust museum (in Washington, D.C.).’ I understand that, but I think it’s important to teach our children about it,” said Pine, who brought her mother and two children with her on the trip.

“They should read about it and go to these museums and understand it in order to form their own moral compass.”

Pine, who earned her J.D. at SIU in 1982, was one of 15 legal or medical professionals who received continuing education credits for the trip, which ran from May 31 to June 7 and took visitors to Munich and Nuremberg.

It is one of many international trips that Illinois law schools are offering this summer.

Loyola University Chicago School of Law and The John Marshall Law School are each sending students to China for study-abroad programs, while students at DePaul University College of Law went to Beijing for a moot court competition May 24 and 25.

John Marshall is also sending students to Scotland, as is IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, while Northern Illinois University College of Law has study-abroad programs in France and South Korea.

There are others, though the purpose of all the programs is the same: Teaching through experience.

For Pine, the most powerful lesson was how easily Adolf Hitler manipulated Germany’s legal system to create the circumstances needed to support state-sponsored murder.

“That’s what’s frightening. That some good people, some intelligent people in our society — lawyers, judges, doctors — could support such a hideous regime.”

Kathleen L. Pine

“I’ve been drafted as a Ph.D. biochemist scientist,” he said, telling his story in staccato bursts. “1968, Vietnam War. It was after the Tet Offensive. Lots of people were drafted. I was not yet 26. Couldn’t avoid the draft. Well, what happened at Edgewood Arsenal?”

He described the medical experiments conducted by the U.S. government on “medical volunteers.”

“They were enlisted men, and the choice was simple,” he said. “Do you want to go to Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and be there for six weeks and they’ll test some drugs on you? Or you can go to Vietnam now. It’s your choice.”

Many men chose Maryland. Dorsey and the other doctors stood idly by.

“I was an enlisted man, I was a scientist, I was 26 years old, but did I raise my hand (in protest)?” he asked. “I didn’t. Nobody did. Not one person.”

Dorsey’s conclusion during the Germany trip was, he said, as simple as it was frightening.

“If I had been in Germany, I think I would behave like most people did,” he said. “What makes me think that I’m better than masses of people?”

There was another conclusion reached by both Dorsey and Pine. This one was not hypothetical.

“I was impressed that the German people have, quote, ‘owned’ the Holocaust,” Dorsey said. “And I wonder to what extent have we as Americans owned slavery?”

“It’s so easy for you and me to say ‘Hey, that was 200 years ago. My forebears weren’t even in this country. ... So don’t blame this on me.’ I wonder, do we have to own this more? Do we have to stop telling African-Americans in effect to ‘Get over it’ — that was a long time ago?”

Pine agreed.

“I don’t think we’ve done that well in our country,” she said. “I’m not sure we’ve atoned in anywhere near the same way or the same level as the Germans have for the atrocities they committed.”

When the trip ended and Pine returned to the U.S., the lessons of history — and how they play out in the present — were on her mind.

“I am now approaching 60 years of age, and that whole era of our civilization just seems so unbelievable,” she said.

“You would like to think that protected in our United States of America that’s not something that can happen, or that it could never happen again. But when you’re there and you hear about how people got caught up in Hitler’s groupie experience, it worries you that it could happen again.

“You’re on guard. We know that genocides have happened since then, so it wasn’t the end of it. We always have to watch for it.”

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