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The Bushes Tour Auschwitz

By DAVID E. SANGER

KRAKOW, Poland, May 31 — The train tracks into Birkenau were quiet, leaving President Bush and his wife, Laura, to imagine this morning what it was like 60 years ago as hundreds of thousands of people came off the cattle cars and were corralled into the "bathhouse," the gas chambers.

Today those tracks still run long and straight through the barbed-wire fence dividing the brick women's barracks, the way stations of death that still stand, from the ruins of the wooden barracks for the men. The rail spur dead-ends at the ruins of the crematories, where Mr. Bush, after walking the length of the tracks, laid a wreath this morning.

He glanced around at the vastness of the place — and it is the enormousness of the place that no visitor can prepare for even after seeing the pictures of the desperate and the dying.

Mr. Bush made the Auschwitz complex of slave-labor camps and extermination camps, of which Birkenau is a horrific part, his first stop in Europe. This morning he called it "a sobering reminder of the power of evil and the need for people to resist evil."

So it was that a president who rarely talks in public about the influences of history, but who has several times compared the mission of his presidency to the mission of those who defeated Hitler, appeared this morning under the gate that still reads "Arbeit Macht Frei," or "Work Makes You Free."

It was one of the more unusual moments in the 28 months of Mr. Bush's presidency. Never one to linger at sightseeing, he took in the camps, the barracks, the gas chambers and the scenes of torture in about an hour and a half. Grim-faced, walking slowly as he held hands with his wife, Mr. Bush listened to the senior curator of the Auschwitz Museum, Teresa Swiebocka. He said little. In the dark, low-ceilinged crematory, the president shifted his weight from foot to foot restlessly and did not stay for long.

Mr. Bush is not the first president to tour Auschwitz while in office — Gerald R. Ford made a much briefer stop, under half an hour, in 1975. President Ronald Reagan visited the Bergen-Belsen death camp in Germany 10 years later, during a raging controversy over his decision to visit the Bitburg cemetery that contained the graves of Nazi Waffen SS troops. Mr. Bush's father came here to Auschwitz a few years later, when he was still vice president.

But those visits were in the midst of the cold war, and Mr. Bush arrived here today in a far different, transformative moment in America's relationship with Europe, in which Poland is being hailed as a far better NATO ally than France or Germany. The president himself frequently uses the image of confronting evil to explain the pre-emptive turn in American foreign policy, and to force Europeans to make choices that, in their view, are far less stark than the one that confronted the world in World War II.

So for Mr. Bush, Auschwitz today served not only a symbolic purpose, but a diplomatic one. He arrived here today to drive home his argument — without ever quite saying so directly — that America's traditional allies made a huge historical mistake when they opposed decisive military action against Saddam Hussein.

In a speech at Wawel Castle here a few hours after leaving Auschwitz, he cited the experience of prisoner A70713 — Elie Wiesel, the writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate — and said the death camps were a reminder of why America and its allies could never again make the mistake of waiting too long to confront a tyrant.

"All the good that has come to this continent — all the progress, the prosperity, the peace — came because beyond the barbed wire there were people willing to take up arms against evil," Mr. Bush said.

It was a searing indictment of modern France and Germany, though not as blunt as those of his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, who still seethes when she talks of how some of America's traditional allies tried to organize the world against a confrontation with Iraq. On Thursday, she told European journalists that "there were times that it appeared that American power was seen to be more dangerous than, perhaps, Saddam Hussein."

She was recalling a time before the Iraq war when Mr. Bush openly likened Mr. Hussein to Hitler, a comparison that fell flat in much of Europe though it was embraced here in Poland. In the weeks since the military phase of the war ended, Mr. Bush has cited new evidence of Mr. Hussein's atrocities in Iraq to vindicate his decision to oust him — especially in the absence, so far, of compelling evidence of vast Iraqi stores of weapons of mass destruction.

The parallels were obvious in his tour this morning. Mr. Bush's press secretary, Ari Fleischer — whose maternal grandfather lost most of his family in the camps — described to reporters this morning how Mr. Bush walked into the "Extermination Building," one of the series of long, redbrick buildings in the first of the Auschwitz camps, and looked at spent canisters of gas. Then Mr. and Mrs. Bush moved to an exhibit of the hair that was shorn off the condemned, a pile of their artificial limbs, and the Jewish prayer shawls that were confiscated from their spare luggage.

"All the little baby shoes," Mr. Bush said at one point, looking at the exhibits, Mr. Fleischer said. (His comments were out of earshot of the small group of reporters who trailed behind and a separate group that included Ms. Rice, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and the White House chief of staff, Andrew H. Card Jr.) Mr. Bush walked into the small cells where, his guide said, 39 people were kept, claw marks from their fingernails still visible on the wooden door.

At one point Mr. Bush turned to Ms. Swiebocka and asked, "Do people challenge the accuracy of what you present?" Mr. Fleischer, who was accompanying the president a few paces behind, said he could not hear the answer.

Yet what was also so striking during Mr. Bush's visit, apart from the vastness of Heinrich Himmler's death factory, was how much ordinary life has crept back up to the edge of the barbed wire.

The village of Oswiecim has grown so close to the scene of terror that some residents could step out of their front doors to see the president walking around the remains of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. Once the village was deliberately cut off from the world.

But on Friday afternoon as workers prepared for Mr. Bush's tour, a visitor saw from the guard towers the chimneys of the barracks and the ditches dug by prisoners on one side, and then turned around for a vista of modern, neat houses with satellite dishes on every roof. Boys performed wheelies on their bicycles not far from the Birkenau gates, and songbirds chirped from the tall trees around the execution sites, all the louder in the human hush.

Those birds were chirping again this morning, members of Mr. Bush's entourage said, as the president viewed the site.

Outside the camp, the trains were running again on the same main lines that once carried prisoners and now take the commerce of a bustling economy. The tourist buses were beginning to arrive, as they do each day.

At the end of his visit, Mr. Bush walked nearly half a mile along the Birkenau rail spur. He spoke briefly to reporters, but seemed unable to describe his emotions in any detail. He inscribed the words "never forget" in a guest book, and alighted his motorcade to return to Krakow and make his argument that America was remembering, but much of Europe was not.

