

The Delray Democrat

Atonement¹

Michael K. Cantwell

The past isn't dead; it's not even past.

William Faulkner

Whenever I'm subjected to Ron DeSantis's poisonous lies about Critical Race Theory, I'm reminded of a trip my wife and I took through Central Europe in 1984.

While in Prague, we visited an exhibit of artwork and poetry created by the children of the Terezin ghetto who were awaiting shipment to Auschwitz. It was inspiring to see the capacity of the human spirit to produce art amidst the most appalling evil. And it was devastating to see the life dates of each child identified under their work – none survived the war and none lived to see their teens.

Then we were struck by the sound of German being spoken. It came from a group of schoolchildren on a class trip to bear witness to some of the atrocities committed by their forbears. They were scarcely older than the children whose art they were viewing. It's impossible they would not have been profoundly disturbed by what they witnessed.

Such an awakening would have violated the Florida law that DeSantis bumptiously refers to as the "Stop Woke Act" but is more appropriately labeled "The Snowflake Protection Act." It riles up his troglodyte base and distracts them from asking the man who runs Florida like his personal fiefdom why homes, homeowners insurance, and apartments have become unaffordable under one-party Republican rule.

Keeping Floridians asleep, ignorant, even comatose, may win votes in the short term but is no way to prepare children for the world they will inherit. Only through knowledge of the past can reconciliation be achieved, as Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl unwittingly demonstrated the year after our harrowing visit to that museum in Prague.

As part of Europe-wide celebrations commemorating the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, Kohl proposed the two leaders lay a wreath at the German military cemetery in Bitburg, demonstrating reconciliation between the former enemies. Kohl suggested they visit a concentration camp, but Reagan demurred, saying he wanted to avoid "reawakening the passions of the time."

Of course, such a reawakening is exactly what happened after it was reported that the cemetery contained the graves of Waffen SS, the military arm of the organization most responsible for the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel implored Reagan to "do something else, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place."

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Reagan refused to cancel, opting instead to tack on a last-minute trip to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. He defended himself by claiming “history will prove I’m right. If we can’t reconcile after forty years, we are never going to be able to do it.”

Actually, history proved that the Germans who refused to deny their past were right. Reagan was ready to ignore the victims of the Holocaust, who were only belatedly added to the visit. And he made things worse by claiming that the Germans draftees who had died in the World War II “were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps.”

It was left to the German President, Richard von Weizsacker, in a speech for the ages delivered to the West German Parliament, to explain the relationship among guilt, remembrance, and reconciliation:

The vast majority of today’s population were either children then or had not been born. They cannot profess a guilt of their own for crimes that they did not commit . . . But their forefathers have left them a grave legacy.

It is not a case of coming to terms with the past. That is not possible. It cannot be subsequently modified or made undone. However, anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.

The schoolchildren we met in Prague were having their eyes opened to the past, not being taught to be ashamed of being German. By attempting to blind Florida’s schoolchildren to the past, DeSantis and his minions are blinding them to the present as well. They are not protecting them; rather they are adding to the grave legacy bequeathed them by infecting them anew with the inhumanity of racism.