courtesy AP

Preserving America's Heritage Abroad

Sometimes a smell, a song, or a scene conjures up images of certain people and places from our past. For many of us, memories are the key to feeling connected in our present lives—even when some of the memories are painful.

Warren L. Miller, SGPA/BA'66, understands the importance of memory. The former federal prosecutor serves as chairman of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. Appointed by President Bush, Miller works to ensure that the cultural heritage of hundreds of thousands of people, whose roots were left behind when they came to America, will not be forgotten. Many of his endeavors are important to the more than 150,000 Holocaust survivors now living in the United States, as well as the survivors' extended families, and the families of those who didn't escape the death camps or other places of mass murder.

Warren L. Miller

"The Nazis not only wanted to kill the Jews, they also tried to destroy their culture," Miller said. "Today, in many places, no one is left to care for these sites."

Although no one in his family was a victim of the Holocaust, Miller is deeply committed to the cause of remembrance. "The enormity of the crime and the injustice is overwhelming. Millions of innocent people were killed, not for anything they did, but solely because of the religion into which they were born," Miller said.

While maintaining his law practice, Miller negotiates with the governments of 28 countries to identify, protect, and preserve monuments, cemeteries, and historic sites important to the heritage of Americans.

Initially appointed a member of the commission in 1992 by President George H. Bush, Miller now spends most of his time working, unpaid, to obtain government to government agreements and implement preservation projects in Europe. Since Miller became chairman in 2001, the commission has concluded 10 of its 14 agreements, including an historic agreement with Germany signed at the White House in May 2003. These agreements commit the governments to assist preservation efforts, prevent discrimination against minority groups and their cultural sites, and establish bilateral Cultural Heritage Commissions.

Miller has completed several important Holocaust projects, including seven years of work to build a memorial to the notorious "Little Camp" at Buchenwald, where tens of thousands of Jews were tortured and killed. When the memorial was unveiled in 2002 the ceremony drew more than 1,000 people, including many dignitaries, survivors, and liberators. Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate and former inmate of the "Little Camp," wrote Miller a letter, which he read at the ceremony:

"I so wish I could be with you today to take part in the ceremony at Buchenwald. I am sure it will be a meaningful event; it corrects an injustice. It also brings back memories . . . My sick father, tormented and humiliated before my eyes. His feverish whispers. His pain. His helplessness and mine. My father, dying. My father, dead. He entered darkness without leaving a trace. But he left a scar. On my whole being."

Personal stories like Wiesel's help Miller put a human face on the memorials and agreements he helps to construct. "I remember after one speech, a small elderly woman came up to me sobbing," Miller said. "She hugged me and thanked me for what I was doing. She said she was one of [notorious Nazi doctor Josef] Mengele's twins at Auschwitz."

Knowing that people rely on him to keep their memories alive, drives Miller, and as anti-Semitism has increased in Europe, the importance of his work has become more apparent. "Many Europeans do not know or refuse to admit what happened. History must be truthfully acknowledged if we are to prevent genocide in the future," Miller said.

Above, Warren L. Miller and the German ambassador to the United States, Wolfgang Ischinger, sign a historic agreement in May 2003. Below, president of the Polish Senate, the Honorable Longin Pastusiak, presents Miller with the Commander of the Cross of the Order of Merit, one of the Polish government's highest honors.

The importance of memory isn't lost on Miller. He lost his father when he was 13 and watched his mother suffer from cancer for three years before she passed away when he was 17. Still, when Miller arrived at AU, he forged a new life. "I loved school . . . I look back, and AU was home for me." He keeps his own painful memories to himself, but Warren Miller has made sure that the memories of thousands of others will be kept alive for future generations.

"It's the least we can do to endeavor to bring dignity to the memory of so many and give them the respect they deserve," said Miller. —MR

The memorial to the Little Camp at Buchenwald