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Obama visits concentration camp with Elie Wiesel

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BUCHENWALD, Germany: Elie Wiesel was too afraid to move as he lay in his bunk at the Buchenwald concentration camp when his father died in the bed below, one of the darkest days of his long life.

On Friday, the 80-year-old Nobel laureate returned, this time with Barack Obama at his side, the first US president to visit this camp in central Germany where more than 56,000 people perished between 1937 and 1945.

"As I came here today it was actually a way of coming and visit my father's grave – but he had no grave. His grave is somewhere in the sky," the 80-year-old said.

"The day he died was one of the darkest in my life. He became sick, weak, and I was there. I was there when he suffered. I was there when he asked for help, for water. I was there to receive his last words.

"He called my name, and I was too afraid to move. All of us were. And then he died. I was there, but I was not there."

For Obama, the visit was part of a history-laden tour of Europe that also took in the German city of Dresden, which was flattened by Allied bombs in 1945 killing an estimated 35,000 people.

On Saturday, he was due to attend ceremonies marking the 65th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France, the Allied landings that Obama said on Friday "marks the beginning of the end of World War II".

For Obama, the link is clear between what he said in Cairo about the Middle East and about the rift that has grown between Christians, Jews and Muslims in recent years.

He said he had come to Europe to "celebrate how out of that tragedy you now have a unified Europe, a Germany that is a very close ally of Israel, and the possibilities of reconciliation and forgiveness and hope".

Flanked by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and another Buchenwald survivor, Frenchman Bertrand Herz, Obama listened intently to Wiesel's harrowing recollections of camp life as they strolled around the site.

All four laid white roses at a stone memorial.

"When you put your hand on the memorial you can feel that it has warmed up – it is kept at a temperature of 37 degrees, the body temperature of a living human being," Merkel said.

"This, however, was not a place for living, but a place for dying."

Obama used a speech at the camp gates – inscribed with the words "Jedem Das Seine" ("To Each His Own") – to hit out at those who question the horrors meted out by the Nazis.

"To this day, there are those who insist that the Holocaust never happened – a denial of fact and truth that is baseless and ignorant and hateful," Obama said.

"This place is the ultimate rebuke to such thoughts; a reminder of our duty to confront those who would tell lies about our history."

Obama's visit to Buchenwald has an important personal element as his great-uncle, Charlie Payne, took part as a US army private in the 1945 liberation of Ohrdruf, a forced labour camp that was a satellite of Buchenwald.

Payne, now 84, "returned from his service in a state of shock saying little and isolating himself for months on end from family and friends, alone with the painful memories that would not leave his head", Obama said.

"And as we see – as we saw some of the images here, it's understandable that someone who witnessed what had taken place here would be in a state of shock."

- AFP/so



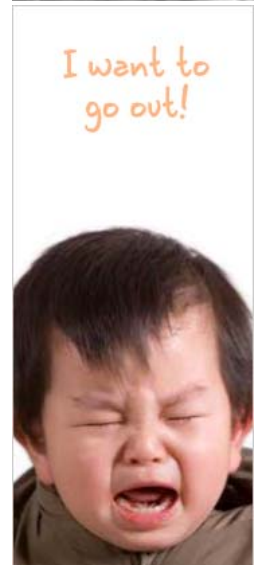
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Elie Wiesel makes a speech while US President Barack Obama stands by his side.

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