An interview with Professor Edward T. Linenthal about historical relics and monumental protection of sites around Hitler's *Berghof* on the Obersalzberg near Berchtesgaden, Bavaria.

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Introduction

Edward T. Linenthal is Professor in the Department of History at Indiana University Bloomington and editor of the *Journal of American History*. Professor Linenthal has spent his career exploring how history is created and conveyed in the public arena and how people memorialize tragic events and sites of mass murder. He worked for NPS at the 50th anniversary ceremonies at Pearl Harbor and delivered the commemorative address at the memorial in 1994. He has also been a long-time consultant to the U. S. National Park Service on interpretation of controversial historic sites, and from 2003-2005, was a half-time Visiting Scholar in NPS's Civic Engagement and Public History program (the U. S. National Park Service serves as keepers of the National Register of Historic Places). His research interests include public history, war, genocide and memory, contemporary American religion and Holocaust studies. Since his first visits to Obersalzberg in 2001 he has been engaged in a long-term dialogue with the Obersalzberg Institut e.V. on issues of preservation and public history. Publication highlights include: *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory*. (2001), *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. (1996), *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (1997/2001), *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (1991).

Interview

Beierl: Are you surprised to learn that buildings on Obersalzberg were obliterated over the past decade despite the fact they were to be treated as registered monuments?

Linenthal: The Obersalzberg is a crucial part of the larger story of National Socialism. It is such a powerful place in the historic landscape. If I was a public historian in Germany I would say: Haven't we really answered the question of whether or not to preserve "toxic" historic sites by preserving the topography of terror museum in Berlin and haven't we answered that by preserving many of the camps where we remember the Holocaust? In this case where one of the most powerful men in the world had his favourite place and where he conceived so many plans, aren't these very important historical sites from which to remember? To do that at the actual site brings history alive in ways that museums, books and movies don't. I remember being at the Documentation Center and while very well done – with the exception of the bunker underneath – it did not seem site specific, it could have been anywhere.

Beierl: Research we recently conducted revealed that the site of Hitler's former home, the *Berghof* actually has enjoyed monumental protection status since 1978. This was not observed and parts of the ruins were obliterated in 1995. In 2001 you visited the site and were astonished that people could just take stones and bricks from there – what do you think today?

Linenthal: If it is important to maintain concentration camps and death camps and sites of Gestapo terrorism in Berlin, why is it not important to maintain the heart that pumped the blood to the life of all these other places? Why wouldn't this be a place to engage and think seriously about Adolf Hitler. Is there a better historic site from which to reflect upon the challenge to our conviction that beauty – here, the beauty of landscape – enobles the human soul?

Beierl: So the site could be used to interpret much more than just the fact that Hitler's home once stood there?

Linenthal: Yes, as a place of moral education. That's what the Holocaust museum is or what the Oklahoma City National Memorial is. Not just a place of mourning, not just a site of horror, it has archives, it has educational outreach. These are places that are rooted in horrific events, which seek to counter those events in an activist engaged way. One could design and interpret a historical program at this place that would talk about the struggles to understand human evil in the face of Adolf Hitler. Is there a better place in the world, anywhere in the world, to engage in the problem of evil? Where? The moral implications of – and the creative possibilities for doing that – are astounding. In addition to that you present to people the struggle over the site itself. That becomes a part of what's done here.

Beierl: I frequently observe people taking pictures of each other standing on top of Hitler's retaining wall or by a pile of bricks. I am not sure if they feel proud to be there or if they just want to document that they have visited the site of Hitler's home. What are your observations when it comes to controversial sites of history?

Linenthal: I don't know what those people are thinking but I think that places are symbolically transformed by the events or people that touch them. Battlefields, if you don't recognize them as battlefields, are just ordinary places, but they've been changed by the events that have taken place and I think there is an innate desire in human beings to be in physical proximity to places of power which is different from reading about these places, seeing them on photographs or watching TV; it's different to be there. Whether these places of power is walking on Jesus' steps in Jerusalem or go to Gettysburg or going to the Berghof. When the power is this incredible evil, it adds a dimension of contamination,

a dimension of stepping into a place where such murderous projects were planned; it changes the whole aura of the site.

Beierl: How did you feel when you first stepped onto the site?

Linenthal: I was thinking of this book – that had a great effect on me – by a veteran from World War II and also a philosopher, J. Glenn Gray. It was called "The Warriors – Reflections on Men in Battle" and the first chapter was called "The Enduring Appeals of Battle". It had to do with how people delight in destruction, this really aesthetic sense of the delight of power, of the destructive. The enduring power of Hitler and his symbolism of evil that is so powerful even if you're repelled by the ideology of the Nazis, if you've been trying to live your life in conscious opposition to everything they stood for, you're still in some sense responding to the power of that evil. I think there's a fascination with Hitler and the Nazis which is in a way pornographic; pornographic in the sense of revealing what you are not supposed to see. There is an enduring and disquieting power in these totalistic ideologies. I know what I felt – there was a sense of being in the presence of evil, embodied in this human being and a feeling of almost fear that one human life could have the reverberations that it did. Then a feeling of how this physical beauty could not have changed him into something else. I want beauty to medicate that. It's the same thing that bothered me in Poland where the gas vans were operating in 1941. People were gassed in these gas vans and then buried in mass trenches – and it was an incredibly beautiful location. Pine trees swaying, it was a place where you'd go with your wife to have a picnic. I wanted the place to be really ugly; I wanted the physical place to give a clue as to what happened there. The other thing that struck me at the Berghof site was the notches carved in the trees, the SS-lightning bolts and the runes. What's represented there is not in the past. It's still alive.

Beierl: Over the years I have watched quite many people feeling caught when they see me there. They turn around and leave. They feel embarrassed. Sometimes I even have this odd feeling there myself. One may be viewed as a nostalgic admirer.

Linenthal: The whole business of being caught or seen is really interesting. Here is a really interesting difference between the complex political situation of wanting to go there as a German or someone who lives in Berchtesgaden and me. I wouldn't worry about being caught at all. I did go back and tell everyone, including my class that I spent an hour talking about the impact of going up to the Berghof with Tim Ryback and Jim Horton. It is really an interesting difference. The idea of being somewhere where I'm not supposed to be. I felt this way a couple of times in the death camps. I didn't feel this way at the Berghof site though. I felt sometimes overpowered by being there, I couldn't make sense of this place the way I wanted to; but in the sense of being caught or being in some place I'm not supposed to be I didn't feel that way at all. It would never occur to me to worry about someone seeing

me there and mistake me for a devotee. Whereas if I had grown up here and we were friends I would naturally share that same sense. “If someone sees me here, what are they going to think?” and so on.

Beierl: Some visitors take pieces of rubble and bricks; they even remove rocks from the wall of the former driveway. I have a problem with this sort of ruin-tourism. What are the motivations?

Linenthal: There is an attraction in touching history. You want to be there because it helps you figure something out. You touch something much larger than yourself when you go there. People in the Holocaust museum often have bricks from the camps in their offices. There is a human impulse to collect relics. They connect you to a site of power when you’re not there. Something material, a brick or some other item. This is what relics do. It’s not so much different from the medieval fascination with the relics of saints. Still this is only two steps removed of – let’s say – collecting the relics of Elvis. It’s the feeling of being connected to something through the relic. It doesn’t seem odd to me at all that someone would stop and take a brick from the Berghof. That collecting of the brick as a relic is a confirmation of what kind of site this is. If we want a confirmation of the power of this place the human behavior that you’re describing is exactly revelatory of that.

Beierl: So if for example an American takes a brick from up there in his luggage back home to the States and states, “this is from Hitler’s Berghof, I personally picked it up”, wouldn’t you have a problem with this sort of collecting relics?

Linenthal: I think we must be vigilant about pillaging historic sites, of course. These kinds of relics are both commercial commodity and sacred relic at the same time, and there will always be a traffic in them.

Beierl: I was in a similar situation once in 2001, when the Obersalzberg was largely obliterated by heavy machinery and crushers. The workers operating the equipment commented repeatedly: “You shouldn’t just take pictures, you should take a jar of that pulverized brick material.” I never did this though.

Linenthal: They somehow knew that they were not destroying an ordinary place, they wouldn’t have said that to you if they were destroying a supermarket. You should have taken some of this material for use as a teaching object. It is not something you’re bringing into your home just to keep. If there is anybody that has deserved to have a piece of that place it would be you, given what has happened up there.

Beierl: What kind of memorial work could be done at the Berghof site?

Linethal: You need to read a particular chapter in James Young's book about a style of memorial in Germany by sculptors and artists that are suspicious of memorials as telling people what they have to think. They think that these memorials to the Third Reich are inappropriate because in a sense they are totalitarian in themselves. You go there and it tells you what to think. The Berghof site could in part be an honest memorial – which would show what the Neonazis have carved into the trees. It is a part of the living memory of this place. What happens up there, the lighting of gravelight candles and the knocking over and collection of the candles seems to me all part of active memory at these places. People go there to commemorate and other people find this commemoration intolerable. Of course, I wouldn't want to see formal birthday ceremonies up there.

Beierl: Are you saying that Neonazis could be part of any memorial – even if the site would be interpreted and more transparent?

Linenthal:.I understand the fear of having this become a pilgrimage site for contemporary Nazis, but that is not, in my opinion, a reason to destroy or fail to interpret an important historic site.

Beierl: I spoke to a Member of the Bavarian Parliament in October about the Berghof site and suggested that it is important to be transparent about it and put up interpretive panels and create public traffic there. He was afraid that this would attract more nostalgic Nazi-admirers up there. The government is extremely nervous.

Linenthal: That is not the reason to interpret history at these sites. It is a public site and it is publicly accessible to anyone. In the same way that a monument can be defaced or a swastika can be written or carved on a Synagogue it could happen up there. These people would come to the site, other people would see them and they would realize in a way in which they wouldn't otherwise that this danger endures. It is much like some people going to U.S. Civil War battlefields thinking that slavery was a really good thing. You could keep them from doing this by closing down all the Civil War battlefields but we are not going to do that. At some level I think you can trust the public and you help the public through signs, through modest exhibits, through posing questions. But could Neonazis come up there? Sure - they could. So what? It would be wrong to respond to this question by stating that they won't come or that there would only be a few of them. Maybe if they come, there will be some interesting conversations that will take place between people who are outraged by their being there. Maybe what you will see is how people who want to learn from this horrible past – and that this horrible past is not as much "past" as we would like to think. And this may be one of the very valuable lessons of a place like this. And that in itself is a comment on how history is never over and the dangers of the past are never over.

Beierl: What should be done next?

Linenthal: It is such a stunningly powerful place. There could be such brilliant historical interpretation. A project about interpreting the site should be launched. Of course, it is always a possibility that the wrong type of admirers will appear up there. But if the interpretation is done the right way it becomes very clear what the message of the place is and that is not designed to be a pilgrimage site. But - as for example in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington - there is no way for the people at the museum to control if a Neonazi person or a few of these people come in. That's the risk you take when you do history in public and I think at least in my mind I felt so strongly the two times I was there that the historical value of the site far outweighs that maybe a few Neonazis will come up there and wish for the good old days. It is important to have traffic and publicity up there. I am certainly interested in helping you and I am very interested in learning more about what there is going on.

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