

### We Must Remember Lidice: June 10, 1942

They came in the early morning hours, a column of Nazi SS troopers, and they surrounded the tiny Bohemian village of Lidice. The people of the village were roused from their beds and made to assemble in the town square. The men and boys aged fifteen and above were marched into a barn owned by the Horak family. The women and children were forced onto trucks and taken away. Once they were gone, the men were brought out of the barn in groups of ten. They were shot by an SS firing squad. Fathers and sons held hands as they were killed. Each group stood in front of the group that had been shot before it. Altogether 173 men and boys died.

When the men were all dead the Germans set about destroying the village. Every structure was set on fire. Sappers placed dynamite around the stone buildings that would not burn. Every single building was destroyed. German newsreel cameras recorded the destruction. By the time the Germans were finished, only a few stone foundations remained. So complete had been the destruction that years later, when some of the survivors returned home, they could not find where their homes had once stood.

The following day thirty Jewish prisoners from the Theresienstadt concentration camp were brought in to bury the bodies. "I saw five extremely young boys, almost babies, a white-haired priest...and a policeman in his uniform," one of them recalled many years later. "One dead man had his hands clasped together in prayer..."

Lidice had stood for 500 years. It was one of those storybook hamlets that dotted the Bohemian countryside. It had been known for its rustic charm and the good beer served at the Stag's Head Inn. Nestled on the side of a hill within a small green valley, Lidice had sandstone and stucco buildings with red tile roofs, brightly colored cottages, and trees dotting the rolling landscape. There was a beautiful baroque church in the center of town, a school, and a gymnasium. Surrounding the village were farms and orchards, owned by families like the Horaks and the Stribneys that had lived in Lidice for generations. At night from behind the hills came the glow of the blast furnaces from the Kladno steel mills, where many of the men from the village worked. A feeling of peace and tranquility hung over the town, as if the tumultuous events of the outside world could not penetrate here. Sadly, this turned out to not be the case.

The Nazis did not hide what they had done in Lidice. They trumpeted it to the world, for their intention had been to show the world what happened to people who defied the Third Reich and were bold enough to assassinate one of its leaders. To a world that did not yet know what was taking place behind the gates of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Dachau, Lidice was proof of why Hitler's Reich had to be destroyed. Frank Knox, the American secretary of the Navy, said, "If future generations ask us what we are fighting for, we shall tell them the story of Lidice." The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a poem, "The Murder of Lidice": "Not stick, not a game and stone remain/There to mark where the fair Danubian Plain/Was rich in cattle and rich in grain/Far in Bohemia/In the village Lidice."

Lidice was destroyed in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, 1904–1942, the architect of the Holocaust and one of the great villains of history. On May 27, 1942, Czech resistance fighters had thrown a bomb at his car as he traveled toward Prague. Badly wounded, Heydrich lingered in agony for over a week and died on June 4. The Czech government-in-exile in London had ordered the assassination to show the world that the Czechs, although occupied without firing a shot in their own defense on March 15, 1939, were still willing to defy Hitler, even though the Czech people paid a terrible price. Part of that price was Lidice.

If the Germans had hoped to erase Lidice, they failed. "Lidice Shall Live" Committees sprang up in England and in the United States. In Illinois a small town called Stern Park changed its name to Lidice. In Mexico the village of San Jeronimo did the same thing, and so did a suburb of Caracas, Venezuela. In Havana a square was renamed Plaze de Lidice. In Ecuador, Chile, Peru and Uruguay villages changed their names to Lidice.

For reasons I can't explain, I can never talk or write about Lidice without shedding a few tears. It was the story of Lidice, which I came upon many years ago, that spurred my interest in the Holocaust. While there are hundreds of similar stories in the narrative of World War II, this one touched me in a profound way. I have no connection to Lidice that I am aware of. My ancestors came from Germany and England, not Bohemia. But the wanton destruction of this small village and its people, who had done nothing and were simply trying to live out their lives and survive the conflict raging all around them, so unnecessary and so wantonly cruel, made an impact that will always be with me.

Lidice was never rebuilt. Today grass grows where the village once stood. Over the years markers have been placed there to recall what was, and now a lovely memorial garden and a monument to the children mark the place where Lidice stood.

Lidice must be remembered, for it is a reminder of what human beings are capable of when blinded by a belief system that tells them they have a right to rule other people, that tells them their race or country is superior to others, and that tells them they have been horribly wronged and have the right to make others suffer for what has allegedly been done to them. Above all it must be remembered because what is past is prologue, because the past is the best predictor of the future, and because as been famously said, those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.