

# Guardians of the Rule of Law

**It took a visit overseas to bring home the significance of our own democratic rights and how important and fragile democracy is.**

BY LARRY J. MARTIN

It took 60 years, but this past year I finally traveled abroad. Raising kids, tight family budgets, and work always seemed to provide an excuse to defer what has been a dream of mine: to venture out and experience for myself the broader world.

This past November, my wife, Martha, and I along with some friends traveled to Luxembourg and Austria. For nearly two weeks, we enjoyed the Christkindl markets, Wiener schnitzel, apple strudel, live Vivaldi and Mozart concerts, and simply walking the streets enjoying holiday window shopping.

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On our drive from Vienna to Salzburg, Austria, we stopped in the village of Mauthausen to tour the Mauthausen con-

centration camp, a site of mass imprisonment, torture, and murder by the Nazis from 1938 to 1945. The camp sits on a hill overlooking the village just a short distance away. It was cold, gray, and raining, and we were just about the only visitors.

The physical presence of the camp bears testimony of the past and allows visitors to personally witness the systematic, calculated atrocities that occurred within its walls only a couple generations ago.

Walking the silent grounds and entering the unheated buildings was a profound experience. What struck me was how intentionally, deliberately, and methodically the camp guards and authorities carried out its horrific mission. One of the last buildings I entered included a room with the "ovens," in which the Nazis hoped to destroy evidence of their atrocities. It was unnerving. What I was not prepared for was what lay around the corner. There I found a simple metal door that opens to a gas chamber. I was alone in the room, and in that moment felt a rush of emotion.

One of the displays in the Mauthausen museum refers to how Adolf Hitler came to power via a democratic process. However, when he became chancellor of the German Reich, he stripped Germany's democratically elected parliament of its powers, suspended basic civil rights, and manipulated the rule of law to his personal advantage.

My visit reminded me not to take for granted our own democratic rights and how important and fragile democracy is. Good people of all political and ideological thought must continuously work together to preserve, protect, and defend democracy's underpinnings and ensure that the rule of law continues to ensure accountability in our governmental institutions, just laws, open government, and accessible and impartial justice system.

It is these principles that are enshrined in the State Bar of Wisconsin's vision and mission statements and shape our work, as we support our 25,000 members who every day act as "the respected guardians of the dignity and integrity of the rule of law within a fair and accessible justice system." **WL**



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