

## ***A Post-Katrina Visit***

Peter Grumbacher – December 2021

I was determined to see if the congregations in which I spoke during my 2003 sabbatical were still “operating,” and to continue my mission/obsession of speaking about my father’s experiences in the Holocaust. What I didn’t expect are the following...

I-10 is the interstate highway parallel to the Gulf coast. I flew into Mobile, Alabama and drove along I-10 to what I remember was the perpendicular highway to Gulfport and the areas destroyed by the hurricane. All along the way I saw mobile homes on either side of the highway; they were FEMA “homes” to be given to those who became homeless in so short a period of time. There were hundreds upon hundreds of them. (A fruitful aside: when I was in Baton Rouge I met a FEMA official and inquired as to why those trailers were just sitting there. He said, *“Well, you need running water and a gas line to make them livable. There are no means at this time to accomplish that. That’s why!”*)

I exited onto the perpendicular road even though quite a number of signs along I-10 told me the Gulf coast road was “CLOSED.” The same held true driving down that road, and each sign was larger than the previous one. Suddenly I arrived at a barrier with a police officer guarding the barricade. *“Sir, haven’t you read the signs? The road is CLOSED!”* emphasizing that operative word.

I told him why I was there and truly wanted to see for myself what damage had been incurred in Gulfport and Biloxi. In this snippet it is difficult to replicate my “conversation” with him, but here’s a taste.

*“Sir, it’s CLOSED, and if I let you through the cop at the other end will just send you back to me because the highway is CLOSED.”*

*“I understand. I’ll take my chance though. I’m not worried about being embarrassed when you tell me, ‘Told you so.’”*

I persisted. He let me by. *“See you in a few minutes, sir.”*

*“OK.”*

Well, you’d think with all that back-and-forth I’d have learned my lesson. Let me tell you, THERE WAS NO ONE AT THE END OF THE HIGHWAY. I was able to drive towards either Biloxi going east or New Orleans going west. I decided on Biloxi as I had spoken there.

I was the only car on the road, an eerie feeling. Suddenly I saw a humongous “thing” on the side of the road heading west. Honestly it reminded me of an upside-down stadium and I couldn’t imagine what it was (A fruitful aside: on my way back I came to the conclusion it had been a floating casino. I was right!).

When I came to the entrance to Biloxi I saw the very, very tall icon of the Hard Rock casino, the guitar. It survived, the casino didn’t, but that wasn’t the one that was on the road. And truth be told, I began to understand the power of Katrina when I realized that casino had to fly over the highway and miraculously land where there was no road. Unreal!

I had to turn around because a bridge was out. “Out” means the bridge disappeared and I’m very glad I didn’t ask to go through that barrier though no person was there to yell at me.

So I passed the overturned casino and passed the entrance to the road I had originally taken to get to the Gulf highway. I got off the next exit just to see what the damage had been in a non-urban location. I saw what the natives refer to as “stairways going nowhere,” the front stairs of homes that no longer exist! But in the back of virtually each of those homes was a bonfire. The owners camped there to keep thieves away...as if there was anything to steal in the first place.

Since it was late November or early December – I don’t recall which – there were some decorations I could make out. I saw a roof...no house, just its roof – similar to something that killed the Wicked Witch in Wizard of Oz – and “climbing” up the chimney of that roof was Santa Claus. In spite of the tragedy I had to laugh out loud. Oh, yes, I also saw a sign in front of one of those “stairway to nowhere” which read, “Dan and Mary’s super yard sale.” I realized if you don’t have a sense of humor you can go stark-raving nuts!

So I drove back up the perpendicular road and saw my friend, the police officer. He said, *“Well, I was right, right,” moving the barrier for me to drive through.* I replied, *“No, sir, I would have been back in five minutes had you been right. There was no one all along the road...but thanks anyway for giving me the opportunity to visit.”* He was absolutely shocked, bid me a fond farewell (in so many words) and I went on my merry way.

One more thing...I had found an open restaurant. It was saved because it was located directly behind a very sturdy building. Across from me in the next booth was a forlorn woman. I asked her if she’d mind if I asked her a few questions. *“What did you lose?”* I inquired. She took out a photo of her home before and after. Demolished! *“My son has a service station. I’m living on the concrete slab on its side,”* she told me. When I offered her money (I had taken some discretionary funds to distribute if I found someone such as this woman), she said, *“I’ve never taken charity and I won’t start.”* I had to think quick. *“You have grandchildren, right?”* and when she answered in the affirmative I said, *“This isn’t for you, but Christmas is right around the corner. It’s for you to buy gifts for your grandchildren.”* She thanked me profusely.

What an experience that was! All of it.