

MISZELLE

Holli Levitsky

Provoked by Metaphor: Holocaust Memory in the New Germany

For Israeli writer and Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld, “the Holocaust... has become a metaphor for our century. There cannot be an end to speaking and writing about it.”¹ Germany’s current Holocaust memorial culture bears that out. With much forethought and intention, public monuments and memorials continue to be planned, created, discussed, and visited. They take many different shapes; some name murderers and their victims, dates and places of deportation and death; others attempt to engage the viewer through feelings and impressions; still others exist solely to teach, or to create a new Jewish practice after the death of 6.5 million Jews.

With new generations however, come new narratives about the history that came before. As Holocaust memory is being re-imagined, choices about inclusion and exclusion become paramount. In consideration of its memory, the Holocaust is not different from other national traumas, after which nations must find ways to re-think, re-build, and remember the past. Indeed, Germany barely had time to consider its National Socialist past when it was forced into division between East and West. The nation had to re-think its distant past more clearly after re-unification. In “(Re)Visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium”, Robin Ostrow notes that the re-shaping of Europe into the European Union has made it “urgent to reconfigure national discourse, circulate new national values, and develop new histories and images to reflect the changed realities.”² The development of this discourse, those values, histories and realities are varied and unsettled, moreover, controversial at national and local levels. Not only in Germany, but across Europe, commemorative space is often – almost necessarily – in conflict with the commemorated trauma. It is in the nature of commemoration to offer redemptive space – and this is not what traumatic memory demands.

Not without irony, Germany stands as an example of a nation that has been wrestling with its past for decades. Even though Germany offers a model for other European countries, like formerly German-occupied Poland or Hungary, it is difficult to see Germany as a standard-bearer for Jewish memory. In Poland, the notion that Germany can be a model for redemption, is rejected outright: “You come in, you show us how to kill the Jews, and now you come in and show us how to be sorry ... It can’t work”³ Despite this, there are hundreds – if not thousands – of

¹ Appelfeld, Aharon, quoted in Herbert Mitgang: “Writing Holocaust Memories.” The New York Times, November 15, 1986. Section 1, page 11.

² Ostrow, Robin: (Re)Visualizing National History. Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium, Toronto, Buffalo, London 2008, p. 3.

³ Hockenos, Paul: Can Germany Help Central Europe Confront Its Dark Past?, in: The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 4, 2012, online see <http://chronicle.com/article/Can-Germany-Help-Central/130970/> [23.08.2012].

publically-funded Jewish commemorative sites across the country, including museums. In fact, Holocaust commemorative sites have become an industry of sorts all over Europe, and some would argue that Germany leads the way. Others see Germany on even broader terms as a universal model for redemptive memory-building. Paul Hockenos writes that, “So exemplary is the German experience that it has been adapted...in post-totalitarian societies from South Africa to Chile.”⁴ Thus the world watches as the modern nation of Germany re-assesses and re-builds its identity. Indeed, given its current status as a major world power, it is imperative that the world observes and assesses how the German memorial landscape is re-built on the burned-out mounds of the past: How does it recognize its long and rich Jewish history? How does it speak about itself as a perpetrator nation? What does it say about these things to its future citizens? On the positive side, many projects are collaborations with Jewish community members, which at least lead to discussions on history. Holocaust survivors are frequently part of the planning of memorials and museums, so that the search for redemption doesn’t suppress the need to remember. Utilizing international scholars in the disciplines of history, architecture, and trauma studies affirms the seriousness of the endeavor and the need to get history “right.”

However, several recent developments raise questions about the future of Holocaust commemorative space in the new Germany, even in light of Germany as a model nation of historical re-assessment. These developments suggest that Germany is moving from representing history to provoking history – using metaphor to transform meaning from historical reality to metonymic association. The problem is that the further away from historical reality we are, the harder metaphor has to work to suggest meaning. I’d like to suggest several examples of this problematic.

For the first example, I would like to turn to the complicated history of Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. Officials who were ordered to start the process in 1995, attempted to look both narrowly at Berlin as the capital city of the National Socialist regime (not yet the post war capital), and broadly at German culpability for the millions of murdered Jews and other groups. They convened a *Findungskommission*, which included the internationally recognized Holocaust expert and American James Young. The work of the commission was to judge the competition to select a design for the planned national Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. There were a number of problems with early designs – the first competition produced no winner – and the complexities attached to the winning competition are detailed by Young in his essay, “Peter Eisenman’s Design for Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: A Juror’s Report in Three Parts”⁵. It took ten years to complete the Memorial.

Young argues that Eisenman’s winning design satisfies – or is at least adequate to – the conditions for ritualizing Holocaust memory: 1) the design must be anti-redemptory; in other words it must resist a consoling function; 2) the memorial should provide an individual rather than mass path to the memory of the murdered

⁴ Hockenos, Can Germany help, 2012.

⁵ Young, James E.: Peter Eisenman’s Design for Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: A Juror’s Report in three Parts, in: Ostrow, (Re)Visualizing, 2008, p. 200-214.

Jews; 3) the memorial should ask questions and offer an ongoing process, not supply an answer to the questions provoked by memory; 4) the space must offer visitors an actual experience, not a vicarious one; given the nature of the content, it should actually feel threatening.

Sandwiched between the East and West of the Cold War in an historic and central urban space, visitors find the Memorial unsettling. There is a disorienting number of entry points into the rows of 2711 imposing concrete stelae; in fact, one is unsure how to begin the tour. The stelae suggest a disorganized mass of grey stones such as one might find in a mausoleum—some the size of individual coffins, others tall enough to mark a mass grave. Each path through the steel field takes the visitor to an unknown destination in an indeterminate amount of time. Once inside the Memorial, the remaining light flits menacingly off the steel pillars while the ground undulates, leaving the visitor feeling both dislocated and trapped.

Yet the casual or off-hours visitor, or Berliner on his/her way across the city, will not enter the Information Centre beneath the Memorial to get the historical information about the Holocaust. Instead, they will wander through or around the above-ground public space and leave only with impressions. Is it meant to represent a graveyard? (Kind of.) Are the numbers of stelae significant? (They are not.) Will each visitor understand the connection between the Memorial and the murdered Jews of Europe? (Not likely.) Visitors to the site feel unsettled, disoriented, dislocated, and even trapped – but they do not learn about the role Germany played in the Holocaust. They are not given any names, dates, or places which would pinpoint Germany, and its National Socialist regime, as the perpetrator of the murder of over six million European Jewish citizens. Certainly, the subterranean space is filled with those details; but memorials impress first on a symbolic level. Observing the many entry points into the structure, it is clear that the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe falls short of providing a path to the memory of the murdered Jews.

The mass murder of German Jewish citizens and the loss of each individual Jew's contribution to Germany and German life ought to concern and startle each successive generation. The personal nature of these acts demands that memorials and commemorative spaces fit the specific locations, even if only to show the loss of life from that place. Indeed, a site specific memorial occupies an in some ways sacred space, investing it with the breath of the living past that once stood there. In such a place, the traumatic past is essentially connected to the present moment, and will always be a conduit from past to present, provoking an actual memory of its inhabitants through the landscape.

A second example considers this personal and geographical facet – that individuals, families, friends, and neighbors, were taken from their communities by force and murdered. A popular children's picture book, *Die Straße* (2011)⁶, allows for a discussion of this absence of Jewish life. The theme of the book is: How does life on the street in one town in Germany change over 100 years? There are 7 chapters, beginning with 1911, and ending with 2011.

⁶ Raidt, Gerda/Holtei, Christa: *Die Straße. Eine Bilderreise durch 100 Jahre*, Weinstein 2011.

For our purposes, let us look at the second chapter, 1933. Our eyes are drawn to the center of the right side page, where a small band of Nazi youth marches with a drummer and a flag with a swastika on it. Behind them other children play on the street and look curiously at the group. Two brown-shirted soldiers are in the intersection behind the marching youth – and two other soldiers walk near the intersection in front of them in the foreground. None of the four soldiers looks particularly menacing, only sober and directed.

For the most part, people on the street seem cheerful, purposeful, or singularly needy, as in the group of three adults and one child in the foreground, cut partially from the page, waiting patiently for food from the soup line. They look wistfully? Longingly? Hopefully up at the reader as if these hard times are not their fault. The woman serving soup, in her starched white uniform and cap, looks more purposeful than compassionate. Between the brown shirted soldiers and the people in line for food, life goes on just as it did in 1911. A well-dressed woman pushes her baby in a pram, another walks her schnauzer. Businessmen stride toward their offices in the well-tended building, and an old man in a fine overcoat, hat and gloves, uses his cane to cross the street slowly, admiring the baby just as they pass.

It seems that from 1911-1933, the street – indeed German life – changed only on the surface. Bicycles and automobiles replaced horses and buggies, clothing styles became more modern, and domestic life had more conveniences. Factories replaced some of the farms, and a park was installed where a “Gasthaus” once stood. Apart from this modernization, how does the reader know that it is 1933 in Germany, a critical year for the future of Germany, and a deadly beginning for its Jewish citizens?

Let’s consider the differences between the first two pictures of the street: in 1933 the brown-shirted children march cheerfully as if playing a game of dress-up; on the same spot, the children of 1911, wearing petticoats or shorts, seem equally invested in a game of hopscotch. A soldier patrols the street atop a fine horse in the earlier scene, just as the later soldiers do on foot. One addition in 1933 is a large black Zeppelin, above and behind the church steeple, seemingly displacing the frolicking pigeons; another is the toy tank played with by the boy in the upper apartment on the left page. The marching, uniformed children, brown-shirted soldiers, zeppelin and toy tank are the only indicators that a war might be on the horizon, although it remains unclear, against who the war is. There are signs of a depressed economy, and that hard times have hit this community: the soup kitchen, the beggar seeking a handout or work, smoke from the factories spewing a gritty haze over the top half of the picture. But these link metonymically only to the economic situation, not the political situation.

Certainly the swastika, the very center of the right side page in 1933, carries heavy political weight. It was the symbol of the new government and is pictured here as representing this government and its political policies. There is only one overt indicator that the Nazis’ threatening and ultimately murderous campaign against the Jews was acted out in this town. The one shop with a Jewish name, “Loewenstamm” sits darkly beside its neighboring shops with a cracked window.

Never mind that it is still 5 years away from the Night of Broken Glass, where Jewish shops, synagogues, and businesses were brutally vandalized and destroyed. The shards lay in a pile, ignored by the family walking by.

The German children who read this book will see a homogeneous nation in 1933, kept in check by the National Socialists. Yet in January 1933, the Jewish population of Germany was approximately 523,000, out of 67 million Germans. One out of five German Jews lived in small towns.⁷ Represented in the book only by Loewnstamm's broken window, the small scene stands almost imperceptibly as a metaphor for Hitler's murderous campaign against the Jews.

By 1945, spread across the next pages, the war has clearly ended.

German couples reunite, (non-Jewish) citizens, who were forced out of their homes and relocated, return, and a victorious American flag hangs limply over a shop. While men engage in black market transactions more or less openly, women dance in the street. Homes, businesses, churches, and the street itself have been bombed, but the children continue to laugh and play. One draws a picture of the sun though it is clearly a grey winter afternoon. In the lower apartment on the left side, the children engage in a pillow fight or read under a portrait on the wall, clearly of a family member, which carries the black banner of death. In the attic, a discarded painting of Hitler sits against an old chair under the rafters. A real-life version of the boy's toy tank in the 1933 picture guards the back end of the town (perhaps by the boy himself). A one-legged war veteran sells something from a stand on the sidewalk and a woman with a chisel hammers out bricks. Generally, those on the street seem to be seeking some kind of redemption.

Onto this post-war landscape, no Jews are returning. They cannot return; the Loewnstamm's, their families, Jewish friends and neighbors, were by law and by force, removed from the town, and the country. They were murdered in death camps like Auschwitz, Mauthausen, etc. Loewnstamm's is gone, the Jews are gone, synagogues and other Jewish institutions which were inevitably part of such a town are gone, and no one who reads this book will know how or why. No reader will know that Jews formed a robust community in towns like this. Indeed, the town in *Die Straße* is large enough to house stately buildings, many fine shops in a bustling shopping district (it is unlikely that only one would be Jewish-owned), a large church, a windmill, parks, factories, and people actively engaged in business, communication, culture and family-raising.

Die Straße could be a site-specific memorial to the Holocaust, but it is not. Neither does it teach anything about the vanished Jewish citizens of its town, district or the nation of Germany. Rather, that history is channeled into a broken window, which must bear the weight of a metaphor far too heavy for its size and location. The children who read the book will not be provoked by the memory recorded within to know their nation's past, and to consider what that past means for the future. They will instead see a nation cleansed of its surface troubles, redeemed by hard work and

⁷ Holocaust Encyclopedia. Online see <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005276> [23.08.2012].

good investments. The question is, will metaphors be enough to make the Holocaust never happen again?

Holocaust commemoration must be purposeful, even if we follow Young's guidelines to neither offer universal truths nor console the visitor. What, then, should the purpose of such commemoration be in the new Germany? The same loss and absence of Jews and Jewish historical life needs to be commemorated, but how to do it in the face of new generations? To continue to teach about the absence of Jews and Jewish life in Germany – this clearly needs to remain a significant part of the memorial landscape. After all, it is German history, and teaching is a forceful form of memory. In fact, it was research done by German historians in the early post-War years that “played a critical role in probing and questioning the taboos of [the Holocaust], at a time when politicians and society alike preferred to concentrate on economic recovery”.⁸ Their research significantly shaped German national memory about the Holocaust.

One can find both commemoration of the Jews and a small, but growing Jewish presence in Germany today. That said, a closer examination of German national identity reveals that while commemoration of lost Jewish life is spread out all over Berlin, and further afield, on neighborhood signs and in front of individual homes, at local institutions and in public spaces, the nature of commemoration is turning towards metaphors. Once we are no longer provided a guide to the past through careful representation of the facts of history, what then provides the imperative to remember those facts?

Thankfully, there are sites which educate the public about the crimes of the Nazi regime. *The House of the Wannsee Conference: Memorial and Educational Site*, just outside of Berlin, is an example of such a site. As the location for the conference where the Final Solution for the Jews of Europe was formalized, it plays both a concrete role in teaching the history of the Nazi era and a significantly symbolic role in the post war education of the German population. It carefully details the officious piece of Holocaust planning, the people and policies which led to the murderous campaign. Funded by the German foreign office, the site established a permanent exhibition with a specialized library in 1992. The Wannsee House then began to offer guided tours of its exhibition space, and seminars to individuals and student and occupational groups. By specifically targeting police officers and other civic and professional groups, including Germans and foreign citizens during their job training, the seminars address citizens whose occupations could be positioned in relation to the crimes of the National Socialists.

Moreover, the loss of Jewish life in Germany is being redressed in particular ways by the creation of new Jewish practice. *The Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam* (1999), which also has a Berlin center, is now fully active as the first training seminary for rabbis and cantors in continental Europe after the Holocaust. The co-directors of the College represent the two groups providing much of the ground support for new Jewish life and ritual Jewish practice in Germany:

⁸ Hockenos, *Can Germany help*, 2012.

Russian Jewish immigrants and non-Jewish Germans highly invested in Jewish ritual practice.

The Abraham Geiger College is also part of a multi-university center for Jewish Studies being planned in Berlin-Brandenburg. The Technische Universität, university of technology, one of the university partners, has a notable center for research on anti-Semitism that includes a focus on the Holocaust in research and teaching.

My understanding of German national identity is necessarily limited by my own identity as an American Jew. Still, history teaches us that the Holocaust qua Holocaust must be remembered so that we never forget the process that led to the murderous National Socialist regime. Further, our humanity necessitates that we honor and commemorate the loss of each Jewish life and subsequent trauma experienced by the survivors. Memorialization must continue to be part of the campaign to remember the Holocaust. Abba Kovner, leader of the Vilna ghetto resistance movement, a partisan and a major Hebrew poet, said that, “to remember everything can drive one crazy, but to forget everything is a betrayal of life.”⁹ Of course, Kovner was referring to the madness of the survivor who continues to live in Auschwitz, but so too can we apply this thinking to a nation forgetting its past and betraying the life that once thrived there.

Bibliography

Davies, Marion: *Absence and Loss: Holocaust Memorials in Berlin and Beyond*, London 2007.

Diner, Hasia: *We Remember With Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, New York and London 2009.

Smith, David Gordon: *Tackling Germany's Nazi Past in a Children's Book*, 2011, online see <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/where-s-adolf-tackling-germany-s-nazi-past-in-a-children-s-book-a-788117.html> [18.09.2012]

Ostrow, Robin (Ed.): (RE)Visualizing national history: *Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, Toronto, Buffalo, London 2008.

Peck, Jeffrey M.: *Being Jewish in the New Germany*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London 2006.

Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians. Ed. Signer, Michael A. Bloomington and Indianapolis 2000 .

Jewish Social Studies. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. Volume 6, Number 2. Winter 2000. Dalia Ofer, “The Strength of Remembrance: Commemorating the Holocaust During the First Decade of Israel,” pp. 24-55.

⁹ Quoted by Ofer, Dalia: *The Strength of Remembrance: Commemorating the Holocaust During the First Decade of Israel*, in: *Jewish social studies* 6(1999/2000) 2, pp.24-55, see p. 28.

Quotation Holli Levitsky: *Provoked by Metaphor: Holocaust Memory in the New Germany*, in: *MEDAON – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, 6. Jg., 2012, Nr. 11, S. 1-8, online unter http://www.medaon.de/pdf/MEDAON_11_Levitsky.pdf [dd.mm.yyyy].

The author Holli Levitsky is Professor of English and Director of the Jewish Studies Program at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Her research interests include American and Polish literature about the Holocaust. She held the 2001-2002 Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Poland in American Literature.