

THE INADEQUACY OF BERLIN'S "MEMORIAL TO THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE"

Just south of the Brandenburg Gate is Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, with its two thousand, seven hundred and eleven gray concrete slabs, or stelae. They are identical in their horizontal dimensions (reminiscent of coffins), differing vertically (from eight inches to more than fifteen feet tall), arranged in a precise rectilinear array over 4.7 acres, allowing for long, straight, and narrow alleys between them, along which the ground undulates. The installation is a living experiment in montage, a Kuleshov effect of the juxtaposition of image and text. The text in question is the title of the memorial: in German, Denkmal für die Ermordeten Juden Europas—a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

Without that title, it would be impossible to know what the structure is meant to commemorate; there's nothing about these concrete slabs that signifies any of the words of the title, except, perhaps, "memorial"—insofar as some of them, depending on their height, may resemble either headstones or sarcophagi. So it's something to do with death. And as for the title itself—which murdered Jews? When? Where? Does the list include Rosa Luxemburg, who was killed in Berlin by rightist thugs in 1919, or the foreign minister Walther Rathenau, also killed here by rightist thugs, in 1922? Or Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam, who died in Soviet captivity? Or, pardon my sarcasm, Claude Lanzmann's uncle, who was (as Lanzmann writes in his autobiography) killed in Paris by his jealous mistress?

The title doesn't say "Holocaust" or "Shoah"; in other words, it doesn't say anything about who did the murdering or why—there's nothing along the lines of "by Germany under Hitler's regime," and the vagueness is disturbing. Of course, the information is familiar, and few visitors would be unaware of it, but the assumption of this familiarity—the failure to mention it at the country's main memorial for the Jews killed in the Holocaust—separates the victims from their killers and leaches the moral element from the historical event, shunting it to the category of a natural catastrophe. The reduction of responsibility to an embarrassing, tacit fact that "everybody knows" is the first step on the road to forgetting.

The omission is all the stranger inasmuch as the experience of traversing the field of stelae, which was designed by the American architect Peter Eisenman, is, in itself, strong and complex. In the shallow corner of the plaza, tourists sit and chat on bench-high stelae, children climb, all enjoy wide-open and thrillingly grand perspectives on the surroundings, including the Tiergarten to the west, and the installation takes on the cast of an austere yet pleasantly welcoming park. But, upon entering the narrow alleys and plunging between higher and higher slabs, perspectives are sliced to a ribbon, other visitors are cut off from view, and an eerie claustrophobia sets in—even as some visitors (not just kids) play little games of hide-and-seek in the rectilinear maze. And the title, striking against the experience, creates sparks of metaphorical extrapolation: The Jews of Europe lived carefree, as in a park, until they wandered into frightening canyons of shadows from which the escape routes were narrow and distant. Yet, even then, amidst terrors and dangers, children played and families cohered, citizens from whose midst neighboring Jews were deported and slaughtered continued to frolic with indifference, exactly as many living in relative comfort do nowadays while political depravities are inflicted daily on far too many in places around the world. When my family and I got back to the bench-high stelae, I, too, sat down and checked messages.

The memorial also evokes a graveyard for those who were unburied or thrown into unmarked pits, and several uneasily tilting stelae suggest an old, untended, or even desecrated cemetery. The metaphorical possibilities are varied—too much so. The play of imagination that the memorial provokes is piously generic: something to do with death. It contrasts unfavorably with, for instance, the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. The latter is, in its details, an imperfect exhibit; there's a little too much information dispensed with encyclopedic authority, a little bit of kitschy curatorial cleverness; but it is a true and specific memorial. It recreates the persecution, the flight, the refuge, the life in danger and in hiding, the arrest, and the murder of Anne Frank as well as of other members of her family and their fellow-refugees in the secret annex. It's a memorial to one of the murdered Jews of Europe. Eisenman's installation commemorates the six million murdered Jews collectively; but there is no more a collective death than there is a collective life; an appropriate memorial would commemorate six million times one.

I was astonished to find that the exhibit didn't even offer the names of those who died in the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, in Israel, has a record of the names. It would have been fitting for six million names to be engraved, individually, into the stelae—

maybe individual Germans could have volunteered to take part in the engraving. (After the visit, I learned, while reading a guidebook, that the list of names from Yad Vashem is in fact present at the exhibit—in a separate information center, located under the field of stelae, that is also said to contain a diverse and generous measure of historical documentation. It's not marked prominently, it's not easy to find, and it's not integral to the display.) And if abstraction were deemed absolutely necessary, why not six million stelae to convey that there were six million individual people who were treated with savage contempt by Germany and its satellites? The very act of manufacturing, counting, and placing them would embody something of the scale of the crimes.

The passive voice of the title—"murdered Jews"—elides the question that wafts through the exhibit like an odor: murdered by whom? At the Anne Frank House, persecution was incarnated, and, together with the sad celebration of the lives of its victims came another thought: How fucking dare they—"they" being the Germans, who elected a violently anti-Semitic government and participated or acquiesced in its exactions. Certainly Germany looks hard, elsewhere, at its poisoned heritage, yet it would be morally fitting to add another emotional component to the commemoration—to link the evocation of a general grief in the face of haphazard fortune with an enduring historical anger at the murderers of the murdered Jews of Europe.

Of course, the very placement of such an exhibit at the heart of the German capital hints that the commemoration is a distinctively German subject—but there's nothing about the stelae themselves to indicate that the murderers were German (or worked for Germany) and that the murdered victims were Jews. Before the Nazis came to power, Berlin had the largest Jewish population in Germany; in "Shoah," a German Jew who survived the war in hiding explained that Germans found the city embarrassingly empty when its Jewish residents vanished, seemingly overnight. The restoration of that prominence, in a symbolic form, would make sense—maybe by way of a gigantic Star of David, occupying the entire ground and standing many stories high. That symbol would also be a fitting provocation: if it proved irritating, that feeling of irritation might stand most evocatively for the history in question.

In any case, the memorial, as imposing and as memorable as it may be in itself, hardly serves the function for which it was intended. That night, I went with my family to a pleasant little restaurant where the spaetzle, served au gratin with zucchini and tomatoes, was delicious; it was on Oranienburgerstrasse—even the

street names are redolent of death. The city is heavy with history, the importance of which is in its specifics, regarding the brazen will and vast exertion to commit murder in the name of race hatred. The mollifying solemnity of pseudo-universal abstractions puts a great gray sentiment in the place of actual memory.

P.S. I've visited the U.S. National Archives and seen U. S. Army Signal Corps footage filmed in Ludwigslust, in northern Germany. There was a concentration camp there, where many Jews were interned and many died. After Germany's surrender and the liberation of the camp by American soldiers, the local residents were compelled to exhume bodies from pits, to dig graves in the town square, and to bury the victims prominently, at a service that all residents were required to attend. Put compulsion aside, of course, and imagine six million cenotaphs, actual size, constructed by paid professionals. They could run throughout Berlin and on to Wannsee, along and across actual roads, protected by speed bumps, and every time a driver slowed down or a cyclist pumped a bit harder or a pedestrian shifted his path, it would be an act of memory. Compared to the commitment of land, time, money, and will that such a full-scale memorial would require, the existing one is merely symbolic, an affecting ersatz; Eisenman's display is not just a symbol, but a symbol of a symbol.

P.P.S. This discussion is in no way intended to impugn or to doubt Germany's overall commitment to the discovery, the study, and the consideration of its history (which, in any case, I'm not competent to discuss); it relates solely to the aesthetic qualities and moral implications of a single memorial.

Photograph by Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum.

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