



THE MEMORIAL THAT ISN'T

POST-WAR GERMANY HAS BEEN DEFINED IN TERMS OF ABSENCES: IT IS NOT WHAT THEY BUILT. IT'S WHAT THEY KNOCKED DOWN. IT'S NOT THE HOUSES, BUT THE SPACES BETWEEN THEM. IN BERLIN TODAY, IT'S NOT THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL, BUT THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL THAT ISN'T.

Berlin is a city giving birth to itself. Streets and subways now run unhindered

between East and West, bullet-strafed facades are undergoing renovation. Potsdamer Platz, Europe's largest building site, is where the city really trembles. The Reichstag had its insides and outside remodeled in preparation for the federal government's move from Bonn in April. Daimler-Benz and Sony are erecting soaring national offices here. Above it all, cranes hover over workers toiling day and night, readying Berlin for its future.

Amid this frantic construction is a parcel of land—just south of the Brandenburg Gate, one of Germany's most famous landmarks, and a bit north of the bunker where Adolf Hitler committed suicide—that remains conspicuously quiet. But the debate about what to build here has been anything but quiet.

In a city and country struggling to look forward, this is where Germans are one day supposed to remember their

BY ERIC TRUMP

anguished past. It is the site of Berlin's planned "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe."

A memorial to Jewish victims of the Holocaust has proven difficult to envision: where should it go, how should it look, is it for Germans or their victims? A citizens' initiative and the municipal and federal governments have been trying to shape their country's collective memory (by no means monolithic) into a memorial that will speak to present and future generations about a crime of unprecedented barbarity. A monument to a victory would surely be easier to build than a self-inflicted mark of Cain.

In his "German Requiem," the British poet James Fenton defines post-war Germany in terms of absences. "It is not what they built. It is what they knocked down," he writes. It's not the houses, but the spaces between them. In Berlin today, one could add that it's not the memorial, but the memorial that isn't.

The memorial project began in 1988, one year before the Berlin Wall fell. Lea Rosh, a prominent television journalist, organized a group of intellectuals and industrialists called "Perspektive-Berlin" to lobby for a national memorial to Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Rosh writes in her group's brochure that the idea came to her while visiting Yad Vashem in Israel: If the victims had a memorial, the perpetrators should, too, she writes. Also, she felt "Germans need a visible sign to tell the world we have taken up the burden of our history and want to begin a new chapter."

When the Wall fell and Berlin began suturing itself back together, Rosh's project received more attention. More than 10,000 people, among them Gunter Grass and Walter Jens, who judged the first design competition for the memorial, signed her petition. National politicians viewed a memorial as a vital addition to the new capital, since it would counterbalance the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and the Wannsee Villa, where Hitler activated his Final Solution.

In 1992, then-chancellor Helmut Kohl donated five acres of prime real estate for the cause. The time came to choose a memorial design. A worldwide competition in 1994 attracted 528 entries. Many were so huge or odd that some judges wondered whether the Holocaust could, or should, be commemorated at all. One artist proposed a giant Ferris wheel on whose rim would swing 16 cattle cars resembling those that transported Jews to the camps. Another plan envisioned grinding down the Brandenburg Gate and spreading the dust over the site. One more likely to provoke cursing than remembering suggested paving a portion of German's highway system with boulders, so motorists would slow to a repentant crawl.

The winning design proved to be the beginning, not the end, of the national debate. Christine Jakob-Marks's artists' collective proposed a tilted tombstone the size of a city block upon which they wanted to engrave the known names of 4.2 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. In addition, the collective wanted to import 18 stones from Masada, Israel's historic shrine, to lay on top.

The criticism and contemplation this

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GERMANY DEBUTS NAVIGATING THE BIBLE

NEARLY 55 YEARS AFTER NAZI Germany tried to destroy Judaism and its people, the ancient Torah is making a very modern re-entry as ORT's new German edition of Navigating the Bible, "Tour durch die Bibel," hits Berlin.

In March, ORT Germany Director Eli Kligler presented Andreas Nachama, chairman of the Jewish Community of Berlin, with the first German-language copy of Navigating the Bible, the ORT-developed software that allows users to explore the Five Books of Moses as history, literature, and religion. The text is written in Hebrew, and is accompanied by transliteration, translation, commentaries, essays, illustration and a glossary of terms and concepts.

The original English version of Navigating the Bible was developed as a web site (<http://bible.ort.org/>) and was then launched as a CD-ROM in 1998. Russian and Spanish versions of Navigating the Bible are in the works and should be available next month.

Women's American ORT's Navigating the Bible campaign is raising funds to support this and ORT's other distance learning projects. For more information and to contribute, call (800) 519-2678.

design unleashed made it clear that a memorial was more than stone: It was the prism through which Germans were viewing their past, their future, themselves. Berlin's cultural senate wondered why the country needed a memorial at all, when Berlin already had 11 memory sites. Also, the country's nine concentration camps were in need of funding.

As Austrian novelist Robert Musil observed, "There is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument." This encapsulates another worry intrinsic to commemoration, that the memorials discourage a genuine grappling with the past and mark an end to mourning. They become what Germans call "wreath dumping grounds," as year after year their symbolism grows more threadbare. Perhaps with this in mind, Ignatz Bubis, leader of Germany's Jewish community, said he needed no memorial; his memory was in his heart. Who, then, was this memorial for — the Jews of Europe, or Germans searching for an emetic to purge their national conscience?

Three days after Jakob-Marks was pronounced winner of the design competition, Kohl vetoed the design. There followed countless podium discussions, teach-ins, and, in 1997, three international symposia. If this sounds extreme, imagine the trauma America would go through trying to commemorate the tragic history of Native Americans in the United States.

The practical result of the discussion was a new competition with stricter guidelines and fewer (19) participants. Of the four finalists, among whom was Daniel Libeskind [see page 13], the judges chose a design by Richard Serra, the sculptor, and Peter Eisenman, a New York architect. Originally, it consisted of an undulating field of 4,200 pillars, some up to 20 feet high. The spaces between were narrow, forcing people to enter alone and wander in contemplative solitude.

Although Kohl and Rosh generally liked the plan, there were plenty who didn't. Gunter Grass and Walter Jens, among others, warned against an "abstract and monumental installation." At Kohl's suggestion, Eisenman reduced the number of pillars to 2,700 and reduced their height, prompting the uncompromising Serra to withdraw. Still, people were unhappy.

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'THE BUILDING THAT CRIES 'NEVER AGAIN'



The design of Berlin's new Holocaust Museum may be more symbolic than the representational art yet to grace its walls

slopes upward to a stairway and the museum's interior exhibition areas, which will eventually display artifacts of German-Jewish history from Roman times to the present. This is the axis, or "road," of continuity and hope.

Two other passages veer off from the central path. One shoots straight toward the "Garden of Exile" outside, where 49 cement columns tip precariously from tilted cobblestones. It is disorienting to walk among the pillars, but from their crowns sprout a

sanctuary of Russian olive trees. At the end of the other, darker passage, a steel door opens into the Holocaust Tower, an unheated emptiness of raw concrete illuminated by a thin spear of daylight. The tower dwarfs you, surrounds you with the absence — the void — that the Holocaust left behind.

Libeskind calls this tower a "voided void," since it corresponds to but is fully detached from the five other voids that form the museum's physical and symbolic backbone. A fragmented line of empty, sealed-off space inside counterbalances the arrangement of explosive angles outside. The voids, whose shafts pierce the museum from ceiling to basement, are painted black and remain free of art. For Libeskind, they embody that which cannot be exhibited but must be remembered: murdered and unborn Jews.

After seven years of construction and 120 million marks (\$60 million), Libeskind's museum is not without its critics. Amnon Barzel, the former director, wonders whether the architect's cerebral ground plan is just a pose (a Schonberg opera and a Walter Benjamin essay guided him in his design). John Czaplicka, a Harvard University cultural historian, calls the museum a "curator's nightmare" since exhibitions will have to be adapted to an awkward "amorphism."

But for Libeskind, museums are not just storage space. Patrons should respond creatively and emotionally to "the cathedrals of today." He declares in a written introduction that he has sought to create a new architecture that is "not a response to a particular program, but an emblem of hope." — *ET*

Daniel Libeskind has written that Berlin is as much a mental space as a physical one. The same is true of his new Jewish Museum, opening in October 2000, the first the city has had in over 60 years. With its lightning bolt turns, window-slashed zinc skin and absence of any visible entrance, the structure is an emphatically physical presence in central Berlin. Yet Libeskind's design does not merely enclose space. In the way he chose to cut, angle and sequester his materials, he has turned his first commission into a symbolic testimony to the persecution, exile and flourishing of Jewish people.

Nothing about this museum is typical. Visitors enter not through a grand portico, but a subterranean tunnel that begins next door in the baroque-style Berlin Museum, which is dedicated to municipal history. Once inside, no signs tell you which way to proceed. The slate floor



HANS-JOACHIM BARTSCH

THE COLLECTIONS

Building on a collection begun by the Berlin Museum's Jewish Division in 1962, the new Jewish Museum has a substantial permanent collection, which includes: Judaica, portraits of Jewish nobles, works by Jewish artists and depictions of Jewish life, maps and views of Palestine and Jerusalem from the 15th century to the present; documents, rare periodicals, photographs and family memorabilia — much of it donated by Jewish emigrants from Berlin.

Above, from left: Julius Moser, *Portrait of the Moritz Manheimer Family*, 1850; Torah Shield, Berlin, circa 1810; Ludwig Meidner, *Self-Portrait Before the Easel*, 1912.

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Berlin's mayor did not want the capital to become a "city of remorse."

Martin Walser, one of Germany's leading authors, was another critic. He called Eisenman's work "a nightmare and a monument to shame." Speaking in Frankfurt's Paulskirche, he went further. The Holocaust's legacy was becoming a "routine threat, a moral cudgel, a compulsory exercise." What he called the "Auschwitz industry" was preventing Germany from becoming "normal." After Ignatz Bubis accused him of "spiritual arson," a furor raged for weeks.

By the time the Social Democrats took office in September 1998, no one could agree. There was even talk of abandoning the project altogether. Michael Naumann, the cultural minister, brought about a third compromise: Eisenman's field would stay, but it must be combined with a House of Remembrance, a garden, a library of one million volumes, and a "genocide watch" institute. Naumann insisted on a didactic element, despite the construction price rising from 15 million marks to 100 million marks (approximately \$7.5 million to \$50 million). [There is already a garden of exile at the new Jewish Museum of Berlin. See page 13.]

The German parliament is expected to take a final vote this month. That a memorial will be built seems likely; to call it off now would be politically embarrassing. Yet as the preeminent American scholar on Holocaust memorials James Young wrote in the Berliner Zeitung, perhaps the best part of the past 10 years has been the debate, the confrontation with the past, which, he writes, can be an example to other nations on how to deal with their own crimes.

Keeping memory alive is more important than ever: A pig with a Jewish star painted on it was set loose in Berlin, and the tomb of Heinz Galinski, former leader of Germany's Jews, was recently destroyed by a bomb.

"It is not your memories which haunt you," the British poet James Fenton says. "It is ... what you must go on forgetting all your life." ♦

Eric Trump is a Fulbright scholar living in Berlin.



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