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Ghosts of Berlin

By STEPHEN GREENBLATT

BERLIN -- A few years ago in Berlin I picked up an innocuous-looking pamphlet marked "Bus Stop" and threw it on the passenger seat of my rental car, along with a handful of similar brochures.

Stuck in a traffic jam a few days later, I began to leaf through the bus schedule's departure and arrival times, with the thought that I might find a more convenient or at least less stressful way to get across town. But I couldn't find my destination listed, and the more I looked at the schedule, while inching my car forward, the more peculiar it seemed.

Some routes were local to the Wannsee, for example, the city's loveliest lake, or to the town of Oranienburg, a few kilometers to the north, but others were to cities at some distance from Berlin, like Weimar, Ravensbrück and Dachau, and still others crossed national borders, heading for destinations in Lithuania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, France.

Though my attention was distracted by the traffic, I began to get a funny feeling about this bus schedule, a feeling that many visitors, and certainly Jewish visitors, to Germany at some time or other experience. It is the sensation of being haunted.

In the neighborhood where I am staying I get it every time I walk through the long tunnel that leads to the Grunewald S-Bahn station: a queasiness that came over me even before I learned that many of the 55,000 Berlin Jews who were killed in concentration camps began their journey from this spot.

Back in my apartment I looked more carefully at the list of destinations and saw that the dozens of detailed arrivals and departures included Babi Yar, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz. The small print below each entry did not, as I had first assumed, include further ticketing details but rather information on the crimes committed by the Nazis at these sites.

Bus Stop was not the workaday timetable I had taken it to be; it was a provocation, a reminder, a memorial. It was, it turns out, a failed proposal, passed over by the commission responsible for judging the entries in the international competition for the Holocaust Memorial. The creation of the Berlin conceptual artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, Bus Stop finished in 11th place among the 528 entries submitted to the jury. For more than a decade, Germans have been discussing, planning, revising and debating the construction of a Holocaust memorial at the center of their new capital.

The issue is not, as you might think, a reluctance to commemorate the Holocaust. Though most traces of the past have been covered over in Berlin, many Germans seem committed to acknowledging repeatedly, volubly, at times even obsessively the crimes of the Third Reich.

The generation born here during or just after the war largely defined themselves against their parents and grandparents -- not only against their acts but against the subsequent silence about those acts. For all its cosmopolitan energy, Berlin sometimes seems one huge, eerie memorial, from the museum west of the city in the Wannsee villa, where the Final Solution was formally planned, to the aptly named Topographie des Terrors in the east, where the Gestapo had its headquarters.

On the way to the opera, you see the empty shelves that mark the site where the books were burned in 1933; on the way to the new boutiques on the Sophienstrasse you pass the plaque commemorating the Jewish old-age home that the SS turned into a deportation center; on the way to the Winterfeldplatz Market you see a brightly painted sign recalling the Nazi regulations forbidding Jews from buying fresh eggs and milk.

There are plenty of nasty exceptions in Germany, of course, but no society has more thoroughly and systematically repudiated its past and sought to remember its victims.

This self-definition has made the Berlin Holocaust Memorial seem at once so important and so impossible to build. One after another, the designs have run into trouble: the giant concrete plaque on which the names of millions of murdered Jews would be inscribed has given way to the giant steel cube that would bear the names of the concentration camps; this has given way to the giant field of broken Jewish stars and this in turn to the giant labyrinth of pillars that is the current choice and the current object of anguished debate.

It has become increasingly apparent that no design will ever prove adequate to the immense symbolic weight it must carry. And perhaps the long, unhappy debate should be seen as a sign of maturity: after all, gravestones were originally meant to keep the ghosts of the dead in their proper place, below the ground, but these ghosts cannot ever be laid to rest.

One day last week I stood in line, with thousands of Berliners, to see the newly reopened Reichstag, with the huge letters on its facade proclaiming its dedication "Dem Deutschen Volke" -- to the German people.

On my way, near the triumphal Brandenburg Gate, I walked past the site of the proposed memorial, a huge empty field of mud with puddles of dirty water from the spring rains. Perhaps the best course at this point would be to leave this site at the heart of Berlin and of Germany empty, to abandon it to weeds and, in Hamlet's words, to let things rank and gross in nature possess it merely.

All it would need then, as a German acquaintance of mine suggested, is a simple sign noting that the German Volk had tried to create an adequate memorial and had failed.

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