

UNDER GOETHE'S COOL GAZE

CONTROVERSIAL HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL: SIZE AT WHAT PRICE?

by Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock

Who wants to be reminded that as a German -- not that long ago -- one wouldn't be served at a restaurant in a Peloponnesian village, or that there would be no vacancies at a half-empty hotel in Lisbon? Standing in front of the cathedral in Laon, one glances automatically at a small placard with the inscription, "Here on ...the family...was maltreated and deported by the Gestapo and in ...was murdered."

This strikes deep, changes the surrounding view and disturbs one's peace as a friend of art. Everywhere in France one finds signs in memory of the citizens' suffering, whereas here we are reminded of places we should never forget. In Weimar all is great German culture. Only a few visitors are aware that Buchenwald is only a few kilometers away. In this idyllic setting, who wants to be reminded of such a past, eye to eye with Goethe? Isn't it time to relegate this chapter to history, now that thanks to reunification and the restoration of castles and churches, the years 1933-1945 have been covered with the patina of time.

We know well the depth of Germany's guilt. For the "Memorial for Murdered European Jews" great international art is called for, and the whole giant monument for the new capitol does not come cheaply. A preliminary selection of twelve internationally known artists is to give shape and weight to the contest. Those artists nominated by the recently deceased Eberhard Roters and by Hugo Borger and Peter Raue are well known to the artistic community; they are artists who know how to work with quantity and material in large dimensions. Other branches of art were not considered -- what could musicians, writers, or philosophers add to this theme. The names Esther and Jochen Gerz and Hans Haacke, all artists who in recent years reformulated ideas about memorials and freed them from nineteenth century conventions, are also missing.

Diverse opinions were sought, and more than 500 were received. Nonetheless, one can't avoid the impression that a certain type of memorial was envisioned, one that reconciles the vast sorrow for the past with the size of the nation. Michael Berenbaum's remarks (Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.) could indicate that the only possible form for a memorial is, "It must be big." Perhaps the historically significant area between the Brandenburg Gate, the new American embassy building, the academy of art, and Goethe's cool gaze down from his memorial all suggest the belief that physical size equals impact.

Berlin prides itself on its internationality, therefore it is astonishing that except for German artists, only those who could prove they had been in Germany for at least six months would qualify -- a truly European idea. It remains incomprehensible why among others Polish, Russian, French, Dutch, American, Czech, or Hungarian artists are excluded from taking part. Doesn't the rift which national-socialism caused through family, space, and time call for a truly open contest? During an interview, James Young, a specialist in Holocaust memorials, expressed his wish that all such projects should be preceded by a discussion process. For

Young the ideal situation would be the memorial as "work in process," in which every succeeding generation took part.

A long discussion is called for here. It is clear at the end of the twentieth century that no topic, particularly the Holocaust, can be approached through purely formal means. What a wretched idea, that incomprehensibly vast human suffering can be subliminated by its portrayal (see Neue Wache), or that the guilt and sin of a nation can be depicted through large granite walls. If such truths are laid open, one is quickly accused of emotional coldness.

Why are the remains of concentration camps so assiduously avoided? One often hears, "Don't go there, it's truly awful." What is so terrible, since one sees so little there and cannot grasp the implications of the remains without explanatory signs? Is it the earth that resonates there, the vague recollection of the gruesome events, or documentaries that once seen, cannot be forgotten?

Many think it a scandal that there is still no central Holocaust memorial in Germany. Certainly it is scandalous that the former concentration camps are falling into decay, instead of being preserved, instead of asking the great companies who once employed forced labor to provide for actual information in historical context. Some call panic-stricken for American-style Holocaust museums in Germany. We do not need that here. Much more energy should be devoted to the maintenance of authentic memorials as well as for existing Berlin installations such as "Topography of Terrors," the house where the Wannsee conference took place, and the center for antisemitic research.

One wishes that instead of monumental stars of David, polished marble and deep trenches, there could be a discussion which excludes gigantomania. This is important for citizens' consciousness, so that they can and will confront the past in many places.

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