

Remembrance in Schöneberg

(...) In the twenties, the Bayerisches Viertel was known colloquially as "Jewish Switzerland" since so many well-to-do Jews had settled there after the turn of the century. The neighborhood's inhabitants of that time, for the most part doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and architects, had done well in Germany and were thoroughly integrated into its social network; they felt themselves to be not German Jews but Jewish Germans. The census count of May 1933 revealed that 7.4% of Berlin's Jewish population, or 16,261 "Germans of the Jewish faith" [*Deutsche jüdischen Glaubens*], lived in Schöneberg, predominantly in the Bayerisches Viertel. To judge from letters and oral history accounts of the pre-war period, relations among Jews and non-Jews were harmonious. With Hitler's rise to power on January 30, 1933, came the first anti-Semitic laws, and this comfortable world began to crumble. Many of the first laws were *Berufsverbote* or blacklists of one form or another, and as such quickly undermined the core of bourgeois integration. In March and April of 1933, Jewish shops and businesses were boycotted; Jewish judges, teachers, and lawyers were, with few exceptions, removed from public office; Jewish physicians ceased to be reimbursed by the national health plan; and Jewish enrollment in German high schools was restricted. Further marginalization and isolation of the Jews in the first years of Hitler's reign were assured by ordinances which were, relatively speaking, only a passing humiliation. Described by Goebbels as a "politics of organized chaos," ordinances which, for instance, forbade Jews to swim in the Wannsee or excluded them from the national chess association, detracted from the severity of the others and indeed were received by many as harbingers of possible political improvement. Much more damaging and far-reaching, however, than the actual inconvenience they caused was the message to the German people inherent in the rules: their government sanctioned the isolation of an entire race. By the time of the public pogrom, the Reichskristallnacht, of November 9, 1938, the Jewish population had been so thoroughly marginalized and the image of the Jew as inferior so thoroughly imbibed by much of the German population, that no large-scale protest followed. From then on the laws took on a more menacing tone, as Jews were deprived of their most basic social rights. In 1939 the superintendents of buildings were required to hand in new census questionnaires on which the tenants had to enter proof that they were Aryan; Jewish homeowners lost their property (in the Bayerisches Viertel, twenty-four houses were taken by force, and twenty-one other homeowners were urged to sell); and so-called *Judenhäuser* were designated in the district, where families from all over Berlin were crammed together into single rooms to await deportation.

Deportation itself had assumed the face of normality. The Jewish *Kultusvereinigung*, in charge of notifying its members of their date of deportation, included the following instructions:

A list is enclosed in the notice which contains all pertinent orders. We ask you kindly to follow these orders exactly and to plan for the transport carefully and calmly. Those of our members affected by emigration should realize that their personal behavior and the orderly fulfillment of all instructions will contribute decisively to the trouble-free execution of the transport. It goes without saying that, insofar as we are allowed to do so, we will assist our community members as much as possible and that we will do anything in our power to help them.

Even when the first rumors of mass destruction and gassings began to spread, the forced participation and repression on the part of the Jewish organizations evident in this notice had become so common, and the danger associated with resistance of any kind so great, that there seemed to be no other

choice for those who received this harbinger of death than to adopt its matter-of-fact tone and prepare for departure. Many of their non-Jewish neighbors, in the meantime, looked on with indifference. "They say they didn't see," says Inge Deutschkron, who relates going into hiding in Schöneberg in her book *Ich trug den gelben Stern* (I wore the yellow star). She describes the attitude of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the district in an interview with Claude Lanzmann for his film *Shoah*: "They say they didn't see. 'Yes there were Jews living in our house, and one day they were no longer there. We didn't know what happened.' They couldn't help seeing it. It wasn't a matter of one action. These were actions that were taking place over almost two years. Every fortnight people were thrown out of the houses. How could they escape it? How could they not see it?" [see Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 50] While the memorial installation at the Bayerischer Platz is dedicated to the victims of the quarter, it also asks precisely this question: How could thousands of people ignore the politics of marginalization and destruction? How could they look away while people were gradually dehumanized, until finally they appeared simply as objects to be destroyed?

(...) in June 1991, the first phase of a Berlin wide contest to erect the memorial at the Bayerischer Platz was announced. (...) Ninety-six designs were submitted, and the jury selected eight finalists. After a second round of consideration, the proposal of Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock was unanimously chosen on April 1, 1992. Their design, an installation consisting of eighty signs bearing stylized images on one side and the texts of Nazi laws and decrees on the other, incorporates these basic ideas into a memorial which re-creates on linguistic and pictorial levels the political violence that had gone on in everyday life. The governing principle of the memorial is, in Stih's words, to "make visible the conditions which led in an insidiously logical way to the destruction of the Jewish inhabitants." The memorial is meant to show, in other words, that the destruction of the German Jews was not a sudden, irreversible occurrence, but rather a slow process consisting of dozens of rules and laws - some quite petty - which culminated, after a number of years, in the deportation and murder of thousands of people. (...) The web of signs moreover does more than reinscribe the neighborhood with its history. The simple items and pictograms mimic the informational aesthetics of today's advertising, and of public announcements; the sign's neutral images obey, as Stih puts it, an "aesthetics of normality", an aesthetics that allows them to blend into the iconography of today's urban text in the same way that anti-Semitic sentiments and decrees had blended into public consciousness fifty years earlier. The information that accompanies the unremarkable imagery, however, is anything but bland: acting as a disintegrating agent within an otherwise integrated landscape, the semantic recreation of the socio-political circumstances leading up to the deportation of the quarter's Jews unmasks the guilty surroundings of the past, even as it suggests that today's society is vulnerable to similar affront.

Not all of the signs have an equal rapport with the present; the temporal specificity of the information varies from sign to sign. While some of the laws take the form of a simple statement without quotation marks or a date to situate them within a historical context, others are clearly tied to a specific historical time, safely insulated from the present by quotation marks. The strategic placement of the signs in relation to contemporary social structures further underlines the memorial's significance for the present. In front of the post office, for instance, a lamp post holds the stylized picture of a letter bearing the inscription: "The time has come, tomorrow I must leave and that

of course is very difficult, (...) I will write to you. Before the deportation, 16.1. 1942."

The image of a bench hangs near the green at the Bayerischer Platz and bears the notice: "Jews may only use those benches at the Bayerischer Platz which are marked in yellow. Eyewitness report 1939."

A little further down the road, a sign in front of a children's playground says, "Aryan and non-Aryan children are forbidden to play together. 1938."

By this direct association of anti-Semitic rules with today's world, the conditions of fifty years ago are re-staged, and beholders are forced to come to terms with their own reactions to violence that is presented in such a matter-of-fact way. The signs in front of the park and the children's playground were originally mounted without any dates at all, thereby not merely contextualizing the past within the present social structure but actually re-creating the social conditions of the past. The dates were originally omitted in a search for what Schnock calls "the actual borders of this project," a search that quickly came to an end after immediate and vehement reactions from the public.

To add to the complexity of this "sign language," the relationship between the information given and the image presented varies from sign to sign. One group of signs shows a one-to-one correspondence between picture and information. An empty ashtray, for example, is coupled with the inscription "Jews are allowed no more cigarettes or cigars. 11.6.1942"; a pair of swimming trunks adorns the decree "Berlin public pools may no longer be entered by Jews. 3. 12.1938." Other signs consciously and ironically make clear the discordance between image and inscription: the most poignant of this group is the picture of a door bearing a sign hung slightly askew which reads "*Herz-lich Willkommen*" (Heartfelt welcome). The reverse reads "In order to avoid making a bad impression on foreign visitors, signs with extreme content are to be removed; signs like 'Jews are not wanted here' are sufficient. 29.1.1936." Another group of signs consists of symbols for public services which remain the same today. Included in this group are the Berlin subway's white "U" on blue ground, an "H", the symbol for a bus stop, and the letters "DR," for Deutsche Reichsbahn. These signs are particularly impressive, since the restrictions noted on their reverse show the gradual removal of Jews from all public and social life. And, since the symbols are still used today, their status as quotation remains open-ended, suggesting a possible - and actual - rekindling of xenophobia. One of the signs is hardly illustrated at all: the law stated bears implications that go beyond pictorial comment and can only give way to visual silence. A solid black rectangle commemorates the day on which, for many Jews, all hope of escape was lost: "Ban on Jewish emigration. 23. 10. 1941," is the text.

The memorial is not entirely decentralized; the eighty scattered signs are gathered together on three large billboards placed in the memorial area on three sites: the Rathaus Schöneberg, the Bayerischer Platz itself and in front of the Gymnasium Münchener Strasse. Each of the billboards shows pre- and post-war maps of the area, one from 1933 and the other from 1993; they are superimposed upon each other. Together they produce a topographical palimpsest of the past and present contours of the area which reveals that sixty percent of the neighborhood was totally destroyed as a result of the war, partly by the Nazis themselves during *Kristallnacht*, partly by the Allied bombing of Berlin towards the end of the war, and partly by the process of demolition after the war. Green dots mark the signs' locations, inviting an exploration of the Bayerisches Viertel in both its past and present forms. Like a frame narrative, the eighty images serve as a border around the jumbled lines of the two maps as if to form a link between the social and political violence committed by the Nazis against the Jews and the physical destruction of the Bayerisches Viertel by the Allies.

Bearing all of the pertinent material - the signs' images and texts, their location, and the historical information about the quarter - each poster becomes a mini-memorial. There's an instructive difference, however, between reading the poster itself and actively seeking out the signs amid the quotidian sights and sounds of the quarter. Unlike the billboard, the memorial installed throughout the quarter does not provide an even text to be read and understood immediately. Every sign creates its own fields of tension between image and script, between script and content, and between sign and site, to be interpreted each time anew. Moreover, the memorial "works" and literally requires "work" from its observer through a clever mechanical circumstance: to emphasize the signs' doublesidedness, the artists attached them to the lamp posts facing in alternating directions, so that walking along the same street, one is presented once with the text side, once with the image side. The passer-by chooses between a double vision, or a bunch of half-truths depending on the manner in which the offered information is handled, for in order to get the full picture, she must pause and turn around to find either the written complement to an image or the illustration of a text. The effort to see both sides of any given sign represents to the artists the overcoming of a one-sided perception of the area's history, and as such assists in the demystification of both past and present.

Experienced together, the three aspects of image, text, and location powerfully restage the persecution of a people within the space of the quarter. Conversely, each of the three billboard maps can turn the quarter into a mnemonic landscape par excellence for those who want to explore the past in the present.

Along with the re-staging of past events in the present goes the role assignment to the passerby. This role is not an easy one to play. In contrast to more traditional memorials, for instance the one at the Vélodrome d'Hiver, which ask simply that one be a rememberer, a mourner, or even a survivor, this memorial, by matter-of-factly presenting the anti-Semitic rules and laws from the point of view and within the context of an orderly and safe modern environment, asks its beholder to assume the role of a potential collaborator or *Mitläufer*. Wandering along the streets collecting one sign after the other, one also comes to know the intertext of the memorial narrative, that is, the sights, sounds, and social structures of the quarter today. And it is in this intertext of normality and security that the insertion of the laws and decrees takes on its most monstrous shape. After the first shock, even the alert stroller begins to assimilate each successive law more easily. The memorial manages in this way to transform a temporal experience into a spatial one, as it reviews synchronically what happened in the Bayerisches Viertel over several years during the Nazi rule. The role of *Mitläufer* literally unfolds as one walks along the memory lines created by the memorial. The realization of the extent of *Mitläufer* among the former inhabitants of the quarter results naturally in the question of what one's own reaction might have been had one lived during that time, and finally what one's reaction is to xenophobia in Germany today. (...)The memoryscape created by Stih and Schnock is complex: it shapes a cultural memory of the past even as it borrows a system of references which tie it to the present. The memorial rewards those who consent to participate in it with a new knowledge of the quarter and its involvement in the years of persecution, as well as with the mnemotechnic to store that new knowledge. (...)

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