

A Jewish Writer Criticizes the Holocaust Memorial (December 19, 2004)

Abstract

After the completion of Peter Eisenman's Holocaust memorial in Berlin, Jewish writer Rafael Seligmann expressed his unease with the efforts of German intellectuals to atone for their country's sins by building a massive installation of approximately 2,700 stelae (pillars) in the center of Berlin, singling out Jewish suffering.

Source

Sealed Stone

Feelings cannot be decreed. Rafael Seligman on Peter Eisenman's field of stelae.

The last, the 2,712th stela of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe has been put in place. Time for an inspection of the memorial site in Berlin. Bundestag President Wolfgang Thierse shared his impressions with *Bild-Zeitung* readers: "This monument opens up, almost silently, the possibility of establishing a personal emotional connection – to the field of stelae and to what it represents: the genocide against the Jews of Europe."

That is presumptuous. Thierse stands for many Germans who are all too well-meaning, but too narrow in their thinking, who do not wish to content themselves with Germany's national responsibility for the genocide. Rather, they yearn for guilt, from which they, as members of a later generation, are free, and for great emotions. That, however, leads to the need to delve into the genocide. Lea Rosh once professed to the journalist Gabriele Riedle that she could imagine being murdered. That is shameless. No living person can imagine death – least of all her own murder.

Lea Rosh organized the "Association for the Promotion of the Establishment of a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe." Her armor-piercing energy got the project under way; forced parliamentarians and the federal government to approve the building of the memorial and provide the necessary funds. What were the motives of the Berlin journalist?

"It always consoled me, even drew me back to Berlin, that the wounds of the war were not healing here." Lea Rosh had to renounce this consolation after the fall of the Wall and the gradual growing-together of the German capital. Therefore, she forcefully called upon the federal government, the federal states, and the city of Berlin "to finally erect a memorial to the millions of murdered Jews in Berlin . . . to document to the whole public that we accept the burden of our history; that we intend, however, to write a new chapter in this history of ours."

And now, thanks to Lea Rosh and her comrades-in-arms, Germany has almost accomplished this goal of writing and building. The memorial at the Brandenburg Gate is close to completion. It is immense in its dimensions. Rosh argued that the Holocaust, after all, was also immense. Architect Peter Eisenman also believes that he needs to make the loneliness and folornness of the victims demonstrable to the Germans.

I am greeted at the site by Hans Haverkamp, the managing director of the Foundation for the Murdered Jews. An upstanding M.B.A. graduate. On the way to the field of stelae he explains the architectural

subtleties to me. I remember an earlier visit to the construction site with a Sinti woman. It was her heartfelt wish that the memorial be dedicated to all groups of victims. When I ask why the foundation couldn't bring itself to include the other victims of Nazi persecution as well, Haverkamp runs into intellectual trouble. You cannot lump all the war dead together. No. But didn't the Gypsies suffer just like the Jews? Weren't they murdered in Auschwitz just like the Jews? The managing director fights against the logic of an undivided humanism just as futilely as historian Eberhard Jäckel did before him.

I enter the gray, intentionally undulating forest of concrete. Feel the wet stone, Degussa^[1]-sealed against graffiti. It is not the architecture that depresses me, but rather the insularity of the Shoah-zealots, an insularity that has congealed into hard-heartedness. Men and women like Rosh, Jäckel, Eisenman, who seek to monopolize the remembrance of the victims. And to select them! Wasn't it bad enough that the Nazis separated their handpicked victims from those they kept alive? Do we today have the right to decide who is remembered where? Does a murdered handicapped person count less than the highly educated Edith Stein?

The Center of Remembrance is being built underneath the field of stelae. Once again I am given long explanations about "outstanding" achievements in construction technology and a modern museum concept. New images of horror are being prepared. Is there really a lack of them in Berlin, where, along with the Wannsee Villa, where the Holocaust was planned on January 20, 1942, numerous memorials give residents of the capital and visitors cause to reflect?

Unlike the local commemorative sites, the immense central memorial was decreed by the Bundestag over the heads of the people of Berlin. The parliamentarians didn't want to be considered anti-Semites abroad. Thoughts, the sense of being moved, feelings – these things cannot be decreed. The task now is to live with the memorial. To win people over to it.

NOTES

^[1] To protect against graffiti, the stelae were covered with a coating produced by the chemical company Degussa. During the Nazi period, Degussa owned 42% of the company Degesch, which delivered the poisonous gas, Zyklon B, to concentration camps. When Degussa's role as a supplier to the Holocaust Memorial became known, Jewish groups, Holocaust survivors, and members of the public responded with protest – eds.

Source: Rafael Seligmann, "Versiegelter Stein", *Welt am Sonntag*, December 19, 2004.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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