Michael Naumann, "Neither Answers nor Consolation" (May 4, 2005)

Abstract

Michael Naumann (SPD) was State Secretary for Culture from 1998 to 2001; undoubtedly the most significant decision of his tenure came in 1999, when he chose Peter Eisenman's final design for the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin. The memorial was unveiled six years later, in 2005. The inspiration and push for the memorial came from civic groups in Germany, not from the government. Here, Naumann recounts his role in the project, his thoughts on its development, and its meaning for Germany.

Source

Neither Answers nor Consolation

The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin is an enigmatic monument. But six million murdered Jews is no enigma.

The "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin is the Federal Republic's first national monument. It will be unveiled next Tuesday. The Bundestag decided to build it six years ago. The field of stelae at the Brandenburg Gate represents the culmination of a historical-political debate about the symbolic, artistic treatment of German guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust. The monument, in its present form, was roundly rejected by the Bundestag opposition with few exceptions, Wolfgang Schäuble, for instance.

It is also the highly visible emblem of a generation born during or shortly after the war, a generation that came into conflict with itself over the project. As though it were an interesting topic from the standpoint of communication theory, the participants—tired of the conflict in the end—contented themselves with the idea that the discussion itself was part of the memorial.

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There Was Great Fear that Berlin Would Draw a Line under the Issue

For many of today's 60-year-olds, the question "Auschwitz—how was it possible?" stood at the beginning of their "politicization," as the end of childhood innocence later came to be called. The obscene shock that, for example, reading the Gerstein Protocol engendered in a 15- or 16-year-old student led to the first critical views of the state in the late 1950s. Where were the perpetrators, where were those directly responsible for the murderous racism? It turned out that many were still in office, in government agencies, in courts, at universities, even in the Bundestag and the Chancellery; they were everywhere. Four decades later, they had disappeared from public life; if they were still alive, they were drawing their pensions. That was the seminal political experience of the by now much maligned 68ers. That some of them would develop a sense of principled moral superiority was not foreseeable at the time.

Was the Berlin monument supposed to serve as a powerful capstone to the disillusionment felt by the generation born after the Holocaust in light of Germany's policy towards its Nazi past in the early years of the Federal Republic? What exactly should "the message" be to its viewers? There were questions, but the militant tone of the memorial initiative led by Lea Rosh left hardly any room for questions in the election year. She already had all sorts of answers formulated in a sort of preemptive righteousness.

I was against the memorial because I believed that there was no architectural gesture that could represent the abyss of the act, the suffering, and the millionfold miserable deaths of the murdered Jews. Monuments, as one can read in Robert Musil, have the tendency to become invisible after a certain time. If that were one consequence of this project, then someday it would bring about the opposite of its intended effect, indifference and eventually oblivion.

When it became known that Lea Rosh had responded on occasion to critical objections by German Jews by suggesting that the monument should be a memorial for the Germans (so, not a memorial to the murdered Jews?), it became clear that very different ideas about a landmarked form of Holocaust remembrance were circulating in the country. After a dinner at the Frankfurt home of Ignatz Bubis, I realized that the dispute over the memorial in Germany's Jewish communities was more intense than I had suspected. Meanwhile, the volume level of the surrounding media discussion was in no way reminiscent of the silence that envelops anyone who visits one of the concentration camp memorials, whether in Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, or even Auschwitz.

In New York I had talked with Jewish friends about the memorial, with editors, authors, and artists. Some of them were children of concentration camp survivors, and the monument did not seem to make sense to any of them. Everyone had different reasons. Henry Kissinger, for example, considered it dangerous to build a monument to a nation's historical infamy in its very own capital. Some feared that new antisemitism would rise from the field of stelae. At this point Martin Walser had not yet delivered his controversial speech in Frankfurt.

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The Serious Playfulness of the Stelae Will Impress Visitors

However, the hopes of its advocates, that a feeling of existential discomfort might set in while walking through the labyrinth of stelae, seemed ill-conceived. It was meant to empathically replicate the fears of the doomed Jews in the extermination camps. That sounded presumptuous, no, unbelievable. On the contrary, the sheer impossibility of such an abstract reenactment could at best result in vague insights for enlightened visitors. Perhaps it was precisely this wafer-thin dialectic that was appealing enough to get the art critics of the major feuilletons excited about the field of stelae? If this was indeed the case, then a remark by the new Cultural Committee Chairwoman Elke Leonhard seems to have struck at the core of their hermeneutic emphasis. She embraced the memorial in "its provocative incomprehensibility."

And indeed—whoever walks through the narrow corridors between the concrete blocks today, will be, if not provoked, then very deeply impressed, if they are sensitive to the forms of modern art. The "retinal shudder" (Duchamp) produced by the gigantic field is an emotional state that is likely to arise in many visitors in view of the serious playfulness of the stelae. At the same time, the monument is as enigmatic as the numinous Stonehenge. But six million dead is no enigma.

With Peter Eisenman, who, as he put it, flew to Germany each time as an American and returned home as a Jew, I had arranged for an alternative plan for the monument in 1999. A research center on the history of the Shoah with a library, as well as a Genocide Watch Institute, a scientific warning station for the political present, including its genocidal crimes and "ethnic cleansing," and not just in the Third World. Files and other German documents of the Holocaust were to be gathered here. Many of them are still not accessible to historical research. From the original plan, the stelae field, reduced to 600 blocks, would remain.

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It Is Already Clear: The Information Center Will Be Much Too Small

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Six years after the resolution of the Bundestag, the memorial will now be opened to the public. The foundation responsible for the underground "Information Center" expects more than 500,000 visitors per year. It is much too small for this onslaught. The proposal by Lea Rosh's group to commemorate their initiative with their own stelae in the entrance area did not resonate with anyone. That the "Center," as feared in *Die Zeit* at the time, "mocks the memorial" can hardly be believed. On the contrary, there is nothing to laugh about in the four large exhibition rooms. Grief and shame are the feelings that will overwhelm the visitor in the impressively designed basement of the monument. Historically selected and documented stories of Jewish families complement the abstract impression left by the field of stelae with the concrete, representative fates of genocide victims.

In this way, contemplation and historical enlightenment grow from the underground up to the disturbing monument in the center of Berlin like a rediscovered sense, even if they cannot answer one thing: how could it ever have happened? The memorial will commemorate the dead of the greatest mass murder in history. Neither consolation nor salvation arises from this memory, let alone the much cited "reconciliation"—with whom? But perhaps it gives new weight to the commandment of the inviolability of human dignity for every generation to come? The command derives from the historical, religious genius of the Jews, from the biblical principle of the "sanctity of life"—and with it from the law "Thou shalt not kill."

The Berlin police will provide special protection for the field of stelae against neo-Nazis. In the Jewish cemeteries of Germany, more and more graves are being defaced with swastikas.

Source: Michael Naumann, "Ohne Antwort, ohne Trost," *Die Zeit*, no. 19/2005. © Die Zeit. Available online at: http://www.zeit.de/2005/19/Mahnmal/komplettansicht

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