

**Searching for meaning: reflections on the process of creating a
"Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin.**

Two years ago I began writing an article for the Vienna Jewish Museum about the proposed Holocaust memorial in Berlin- which is to be the largest Holocaust memorial in the world. I started the article with a quotation by Berthold Brecht: "The curtain falls; the questions remain open." And although in the meantime enough newspaper articles have been published to fill two big folders, three big colloquia have taken place in 1997 alone, and a new competition to select a memorial is almost decided upon -now, as I write this at the end of 1997, I could begin with the same quotation.

What has happened?

The plan to create a central Holocaust memorial in Berlin began in 1988. It was inspired by the grass-roots organisation 'Perspektive Berlin e.V.' which solicited support from the Federal Government and the senate of Berlin. The first draft appeal supporting the idea reads as follows:

"A half century has passed since the accession to power of the Nazis and the murder of Europe's Jews. However, to this date no central memorial has been constructed on German soil, in the land of the perpetrators, to recall the unparalleled genocide and no memorial dedicated to the victims." (First appeal Jan. 1.1989)

The appeal was supported by a number of prominent people including Willy Brandt. Critical voices pointed out that the whole of Germany is at least a topography of terror if not a Holocaust memorial. To argue as the head of 'Perspektive Berlin' did, that we need a central focus, such as the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum or Yad Vashem, was rejected by saying that Germany has a lot of historical locations, such as former concentration camps, the House of the Wannsee Conference etc. The other basic criticism was that we do not need memorials, but educational work and places where this work can be done.

But the 'Perspektive Berlin' insisted on such a central memorial under the headline "Confessing Deeds". Although I essentially share the view of the critics, I have to say that the attempt to create a memorial which reflects the feelings and thoughts of the descendants of the perpetrators and tries to establish a form of commemorating the victims without forgetting that there were perpetrators (who normally vanish in the process of commemorating), seems to me to be an important challenge. Unfortunately however, this focus was lost in favour of this central memorial.

After unification, Chancellor Kohl dedicated the official former East German memorial for the victims of fascism called the "Neue Wache" as the official state place of remembrance to all "victims" of World War II. This particular site includes perpetrators who died during the war and the victims. As this subsequently created an uproar inside and outside Germany, the German government offered a huge piece of land south of the Brandenburg gate for the Holocaust Memorial (and another one for a memorial for Sinti and Roma).

Now three groups - Perspektive Berlin, the German government and the senate of Berlin - announced that a competition would take place to design this central memorial. Altogether, 523 artists and architects submitted plans. The competition outline stated:

"The proximity of the Chancellery of the Reich, Hitler's administrative seat, alludes to the perpetrators but also to their subjugation and disarmament. This venue marks the dividing line between the two Germanies, divided for nearly forty years. The memorial for Europe's murdered Jews is to be constructed close to the former ruins of these events. Contemporary artistic energy is to connect symbolically the approach (to the past) in mourning, shock and respect with contemplation in shame and guilt."

In my opinion, the allusion to the perpetrators, their surrender and the division of Germany should remain completely separate from the mourning, the shock and the guilt of my country. In fact, none of these concepts have any relationship with one another. Is there a magic energy coming from this place because Hitler's "Reichskanzlei" was not far away? Would it not be more appropriate to reflect the fact that for 50 years there was no outcry for a central memorial in the "perpetrator's society" instead of seeking "mystical locations"? What is the relevance of the division of Germany in the commemoration of the German murder of European Jewry? Besides, extending beyond the question of whether we Germans have really accepted the burden of our history - surely commemoration is an inappropriate tool to demonstrate "we are good again".

The results of the competition were decided in 1995. Immediately, the winning received a lot of criticism. It was a 10,000 square meters wide and up to 11 meters high, engraved with the names of all known murdered Jews, together with 12 stones from Massada.

The last idea was withdrawn very quickly as the protest against it was immense: the symbolism of a heroic suicidal event in the history of Israel could not be connected with the racist murder of European Jews. Besides, Israel declared very quickly that they never would agree to donate these stones, for this purpose. Further, the artists Hella Rolfes and Christian Jakob-Marcks, suggested that money for engraving the names in this huge block could be raised by Germans "buying" a name. This idea was also strictly rejected.

To cut a long story short: the public discussion which was missed in the years before and during the competition, now started vehemently and in earnest. Chancellor Kohl didn't like the monumentality of the favoured first prize and rejected it. Others asked about the purpose of a memorial after 50 years and some suggested changing the location. Generally, experts, politicians and "ordinary" people agreed that monumentality does not guarantee a good memorial. On the contrary, there is no link between monumentality to the monstrosity of the Holocaust.

As almost no one in the public agreed with the decision of the jury, and even some of the jury began to distance themselves from what they just had decided, the whole process became stuck. Finally, in the summer of 1996, the three main organisers (Government, Senate and Perspektive), declared that a public discussion needed to take place. They announced that at the beginning of 1997 there will be three colloquiums with 70 experts to discuss the basic questions involved:

1. Why do we need a Holocaust Memorial?
2. Where should it be located?
3. What are the aesthetic criteria?

The discussion was poorly led, no results were summarized and then discussed, and statement followed statement.

Most participants, for example, wanted to change the location and put it in front of the Reichstag. This was not only because they thought the proximity to the former "Reichskanzlei" an inappropriate place for such a memorial, but also because they want to put the memorial into a contemporary political context. They want it to be seen that the memorial is a disturbing part of present-day reflection, indicating that this past is not yet over.

The result of these colloquiums formed part of the second step in the competition. It was decided that the nine first artists of the old competition and 15 new invited artists should deliver a proposal.

Unfortunately, in the description of this second step, there was no mention of a possible change of location. Indeed, the results of the colloquium were hardly mentioned, only that the text concerning what the memorial is about became a little more understandable and it left out the German unification 'connection'.

The outcome of the latest competition was publicly announced on November 16 1997. The commission has chosen 4 proposals which are as monumental as the ones from the old competition and there is no change to the location.

The curtain falls, the question remains open.

Christian Staffa is a German non-Jew, living and working in Berlin. He is the co-founder of the Institute for Comparative History and has pioneered exchange and study programmes between third generation Jews and Germans. Since April 1999 he is executive director of Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste in Berlin.