

How Germany Remembers the Holocaust

*And what America can
learn about atonement*

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THE FIRST MEMORIALS TO THE HOLOCAUST WERE THE BODIES IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS.

In January 1945, Soviet forces liberated Auschwitz, in southern Poland. As the German forces retreated, officers at Buchenwald, a camp in central Germany, crammed 4,480 prisoners into some 40 railcars in an effort to hide them from the Allies. They sent the train south to yet another camp: Dachau. Only a fifth of the prisoners survived the three-week journey.

When Dachau was liberated in April and American forces came upon the railcars near the camp, they found corpses packed on top of one another. Soldiers turned their heads and covered their noses as the sight and smell of the bodies washed over them. They vomited; they cried.

Dachau was about 10 miles northwest of Munich, and was the first concentration camp built by the Nazi regime. It had operated as a training center for SS guards and served as the prototype for other camps. Its prisoners were subjected to hard labor, corporal punishment, and torturous medical experiments. They were given barely any food; they died from disease and malnutrition, or they were executed. In Dachau's 12 years of existence, approximately 41,500 people had been killed there and in its subcamps. Many were burned in the crematorium or buried, but thousands of corpses remained aboveground.

The American soldiers wondered how this could have happened. How thousands of people could have been held captive, tortured, and killed at the camp, while just outside its walls was a small town where people were going about their lives as if impervious to the depravity taking place inside. Buying groceries, playing soccer with their children, drinking coffee with their neighbors. German people, the Americans reasoned, should have to see what had been done in their name.

And so the soldiers brought a group of about 30 local officials to the camp. When they arrived on that spring day, they saw piles of bodies, mountains of rotting flesh. They also saw thousands of emaciated survivors emerging from the barracks—"walking skeletons," as many soldiers described them, barely holding on to life. Later, American soldiers ordered farmers and local residents who were members of the Nazi party to bury some 5,000 corpses. This is how they were made to bear witness. This is how they were made to remember.

The mass burial was one of the first acts of constructing public memory in a country that has been navigating questions of how to properly remember the Holocaust ever since.

Today, Dachau is a memorial to the evil that once transpired there. Before the pandemic, almost 900,000 people visited every year from all over the world, including many German students. Visitors see the crematorium where bodies were burned, where the smell of smoldering flesh filled the air, where smoke rose through the chimney and lost itself in the sky. They are made to confront what happened, and they realize that it happened not so long ago.

Questions of public memory—specifically how people, communities, and nations should account for the crimes of their past—are deeply interesting to me. Last year I wrote a book, *How the Word Is Passed*, about how different historical sites across the United States reckon with or fail to reckon with their relationship to slavery. As I traveled across the country visiting these places, I found lapses and distortions that would have been shocking if they weren't so depressingly familiar:

a cemetery where the Confederate dead are revered as heroes; a maximum-security prison built on top of a former plantation, where prisoners were once tasked with building the deathbed upon which executions would take place; a former plantation where Black employees were once made to dress as enslaved people and give tours to white visitors.

During my travels I often thought of Germany, which is frequently held up as an exemplar of responsible public memory. From afar, it seemed that the Germans were doing a much better job than we were at confronting the past. But the more I invoked Germany, the less comfortable I felt drawing comparisons between America and a place I barely knew. So over the past year I made two trips to Germany, traveling to Berlin and to Dachau, visiting sites that only eight decades ago were instrumental to an industrialized slaughter of human beings unlike any the world had ever seen. I learned that the way the country remembers this genocide is the subject of ongoing debate—a debate that is highly relevant to fights about public memory taking place in the U.S.

In recent years, Americans have seen a shift in our understanding of the country's history; many now acknowledge the shameful episodes of our past alongside all that there is to be proud of. But reactionary forces today are working with ever-greater fervor to prevent such an honest accounting from taking place. State legislatures across the country are attempting to prevent schools from teaching the very history that explains why our country looks the way it does. School boards are banning books that provide historical perspectives students might not otherwise encounter.

Many of these efforts are carried out in the name of "protecting" children, of preventing white people from feeling a sense of guilt. But America will never be the country it wants to be until it properly remembers what it did (and does) to Black people. This is why I went looking for lessons in Germany. Sometimes, I found, these lessons are elusive. Sometimes they're not.

I saw that Germany's effort to memorialize its past is not a project with a specific end point. Some people I spoke with believe the country has done enough; others

believe it never can. Comparisons to the United States are helpful, but also limited.

Soon, those who survived the Holocaust will no longer be with us. How will their stories be told once they are gone? Germans are still trying to figure out how to tell the story of what their country did, and simultaneously trying to figure out who should tell it.

ON A COOL OCTOBER MORNING, I walked with Frédéric Brenner to Gleis 17, or track 17, of Berlin's Grunewald station, the primary train platform from which Jews in Berlin were sent to the camps in Eastern Europe.

Brenner, a photographer known for his portraits of Jewish communities, has spent more than 40 years traveling the world to document the Jewish diaspora, and a few years ago settled in Berlin with his wife, Hetty, a Dutch woman who now serves as the director of the city's Jewish museum.

Originally, Brenner told me, he had not wanted to come to Germany at all. Many of his relatives had been killed by the Nazis. Brenner grew up in France in the years after the Holocaust. "I was raised that we don't go to Germany, we don't buy German, and we don't speak German," he said.

Yet he was also intrigued by the idea of returning to a country his family had been forced to flee, of not allowing that trauma to exert control over him. It had not been easy. "My father will not come and see me here," he said. His father's father had been one of six siblings, and only three survived the Holocaust. Brenner placed his hands in his pockets and shook his head, almost in disbelief at himself. "I never thought I would come back." In a 2021 exhibition and accompanying book called *Zerheilt: Healed to Pieces*, Brenner used Berlin as a setting to explore Jewish life.

The houses in Grunewald, the neighborhood where we were walking, were large and elegant, with enormous windows that invited in the sun. "These are the homes the Jews were taken from," Brenner told me. Men, women, and children had been forced to march down these streets to the train platform and sent to their death. Most of them were made to pay for their own "tickets."

As we approached the station, we saw a concrete wall etched with silhouettes—a monument to the people who had been deported, designed by the Polish artist Karol Broniatowski and unveiled in 1991.

I walked past the monument and up onto the Gleis 17 platform. I looked down. Lining the tracks were steel plates. Each one had the date of a train's departure, the number of Jewish people on board, and the camp they were sent to. I walked up to the edge of one section and read the date: 1.3.1943.



The Polish artist Karol Broniatowski's monument to the people who were deported from the Grunewald train station

Next to the date I saw 36 JUDEN, meaning that 36 Jews had been deported on that day. Next to the number, the steel plate read BERLIN - AUSCHWITZ. I tried to imagine those people—maybe eight or nine families—handing over their tickets, being shuffled into the cars, and listening as the heavy doors shut behind them.

I looked down again and used my foot to sweep aside a leaf; I realized that I hadn't seen the full number. It wasn't 36 Jews. It was 1,736 Jews.

I stood there and looked at the numbers carved into the plates on either side of me. 1758 JUDEN were deported the next day. 1000 JUDEN had been deported just a few days prior.

I tried to do the math in my head as my feet followed the chronology beneath them. But there were 186 steel plates, and as the numbers reflecting each day's human cargo rose and fell—ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred to more than 1,000—it became impossible.

The platform stretched off into the distance in both directions. I craned my neck over the edge and looked down at the train tracks, their weathered steel stained with spots of brown rust. To the right, the tracks were visible until the rail line curved and disappeared into the forest. To the left, the tracks were partially buried beneath a cluster of trees whose thin trunks arched upward into an orange-and-yellow canopy. The trees' presence was intentional. The trunks growing between the tracks were there to say: No more trains will ever pass here.

This memorial, designed by the architects Nikolaus Hirsch, Wolfgang Lorch, and Andrea Wandel, opened to the public on January 27, 1998: Holocaust Remembrance Day.

I asked Brenner what he felt when standing on this platform and seeing these dates, these numbers, these words. He paused and looked around at the trees above us, his eyes moving slowly back and forth, as if he were searching for the answer in the leaves. "I cannot process it. My mind cannot process it. And obviously"—he wiped at his eyes—"my body *can* process it."

Unfortunately, Brenner said, his experience at Holocaust-memorial sites wasn't

always like this. He asked me if I had been to Auschwitz, in Poland. I hadn't. "Don't go there," he said, shaking his head. "People are all with their phones. It should be prevented. And they go"—he raised his hand a few feet from his face and looked at his palm, emulating someone taking a selfie—"Me in front of the crematorium.' 'Me in front of the ramp.' I mean, it's so obscene."

I walked to the end of the platform to read the final plate. The last train on record left Berlin on March 27, 1945. Eighteen Jewish passengers were sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. Auschwitz had already been liberated by the Soviets by then; a week later, Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald, became the first camp liberated by U.S. soldiers. The Germans were in retreat. Dachau would be liberated within weeks. The war in Europe was nearly over. Those 18 people had been so close to avoiding deportation. I wondered whether they had survived.

After Brenner left, I sat down on the platform and let my legs dangle over its edge. Small blue wildflowers sprouted from the cracks in the wooden railroad ties below. From 1941 to 1945, 50,000 people were sent on these tracks to death camps and ghettos farther east. I closed my eyes and pictured soldiers yelling. Children crying. Bodies tussling. Suitcases rattling. I wondered how much the deportees knew about where they were headed when they got on those trains. I wondered how many days they spent inside those railcars. I wondered if they were able to sleep. I thought of my own children. What would I have told them about where we were going? How would I have assuaged their fear? How would I have assuaged my own?

THE FIRST TIME I saw a Stolperstein, I almost walked past without noticing. I was heading back to my hotel after getting some tea at a café, and there they were, two of them. Small, golden cubes laid into a cobblestone sidewalk. They sat adjacent to each other outside what looked like an office building, or maybe a bank. I stepped closer to read what was written on each of them:

HIER WOHNTE
HELMUT HIMPEL
JG. 1907
IM WIDERSTAND
VERHAFTET 17.9.42
HINGERICHTET 13.5.1943
BERLIN-PLÖTZENSEE

HIER WOHNTE
MARIA TERWIEL
JG. 1910
IM WIDERSTAND
VERHAFTET 17.9.42
HINGERICHTET 5.8.1943
BERLIN-PLÖTZENSEE

Hier wohnte ... Here lived ...

The English translation for *Stolperstein* is "stumbling stone." Each 10-by-10-centimeter concrete block is covered in a brass plate, with engravings that memorialize someone who was a victim of the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. The name, birthdate, and fate of each person are inscribed, and the stones are typically placed in front of their final residence. Most of the Stolpersteine commemorate the lives of Jewish people, but some are dedicated to Sinti and Roma, disabled people, gay people, and other victims of the Holocaust.

In 1996, the German artist Gunter Demnig, whose father fought for Nazi Germany in the war, began illegally placing these stones into the sidewalk of a neighborhood in Berlin. Initially, Demnig's installations received little attention. But after a few months, when authorities discovered the small memorials, they deemed them an obstacle to construction work and attempted to get them removed. The workers tasked with pulling them out refused.

In 2000, Demnig's Stolperstein installations began to be officially sanctioned by local governments. Today, more than 90,000 stumbling stones have been set into the streets and sidewalks of 30 European countries. Together, they make up the largest decentralized memorial in the world.

Demnig, now 75, spends much of his time on the road, personally installing most of the stones. Since 2005, the sculptor Michael Friedrichs-Friedländer has made the stones. Mass-manufacturing them would feel akin to the mechanized way that



Steel plates line the tracks of the Gleis 17 platform. Each plate has the date of a train's departure, the number of Jewish people on board, and the camp they were sent to.

the Nazis killed so many millions of people, Demnig and Friedrichs-Friedländer say, so each one is engraved by hand.

I felt drawn to the Stolpersteine, compelled by the work Demnig was trying to do with them, and overwhelmed by how much they captured in such a small space.

The next day I met Barbara Steiner in the city's Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district. The neighborhood's narrow streets were lined with five- and six-story buildings whose balconies stretched out over the cobblestone sidewalks. People bundled in coats whizzed past us on bicycles.

Steiner, a convert to Judaism, is a historian and therapist. She has short, jet-black hair. She wore a sky-blue coat and small gold earrings that gleamed when they caught the sun.

"I have a 12-year-old daughter," Steiner told me as we walked toward a Stolperstein a few meters away, "and whenever we walk

in the streets, we stop." She looked down at the engraved brass in front of us. "She really wants to read every stone."

"They mean more than those huge things," Steiner said, stretching her arms wide above her head. "I think the huge monuments are always about performing memory, when this is really connected to a person." Steiner likes that you see the names of specific people. She likes that the stones are installed directly in front of the place these individuals once called home. "You can start to think, *How would it have looked for them to live here?*"

Stolpersteine are largely local initiatives, laid because a family, or residents of an apartment complex or neighborhood, got together and decided they wanted to commemorate the people who had once lived there. Steiner said that students at her daughter's school had begun researching the building across the street from the

school, and discovered that a number of Jewish families had lived there. Then they applied to have Stolpersteine installed.

Demnig has said that this is the most meaningful aspect of the project for him. He believes that for children and adults alike, 6 million is too abstract a number, and individual stories are more powerful tools than statistics for coming to terms with this history. "Sometimes you need just one fate," he has said, to start thinking about how someone's life relates to your own: Maybe they lived on your street, or were the same age you are now when they were murdered. "Those are the moments I know they will go home as different people." Each stone creates its own unofficial ambassadors of memory.

Steiner and I walked a bit farther down the street. She stopped in front of a beige building with a large white archway above a brown door. "I lived here," she said. I



Left: Barbara Steiner in Berlin. *Right:* The German artist Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine memorialize victims of the Nazis.

looked at the door, then looked down. Five stumbling stones lay together among the cobblestones, their brass faces shimmering. Steiner translated them into English for me:

MAX ZUTTERMANN. BORN 1868.
DEPORTED OCTOBER 18, 1941.
MURDERED JANUARY 15, 1942.

GERTRUD ZUTTERMANN. BORN 1876.
DEPORTED OCTOBER 18, 1941.
MURDERED DECEMBER 20, 1941.

FRITZ HIRSCHFELDT. BORN 1902.
DEPORTED OCTOBER 18, 1941.
MURDERED MAY 8, 1942.

ELSE NOAH. BORN 1873.
DEPORTED JULY 17, 1942.
MURDERED MARCH 14, 1944.

FRIEDA LOEWY. BORN 1889.
HUMILIATED/DISENFRANCHISED.
DIED BY SUICIDE JUNE 2, 1942.

I did the math to estimate how old they might have been when they died: Max Zuttermann, 74. Gertrud Zuttermann, 65. Fritz Hirschfeldt, 40. Else Noah, 71. Frieda Loewy, 53.

I glanced at Steiner; she was still looking down at the stones, her hands in her coat pockets, her legs crossed at her ankles.

I thought about what it must be like to live in a home where you walk past these stones, and these names, every day. I imagined what it might be like if we had something commensurate in the United States. If, in front of homes, restaurants, office buildings, churches, and schools there were stones to mark where and when enslaved people had been held, sold, killed. I shared this thought with Steiner. "The streets would be packed," she said.

She was right. I imagined New Orleans, my hometown, once the busiest slave market in the country, and how entire streets would be covered in brass stones—whole neighborhoods paved with

reminders of what had happened. New Orleans is, today, at a very different place in its reckoning with the past; it has only recently been focused on removing its homages to enslavers. Over the past few years, the statues of Confederate leaders I grew up seeing have been removed from their pedestals, and streets named after slaveholders have been renamed for local Black artists and intellectuals. My own middle school has a new name as well. As I looked at the stumbling stones beneath me in Berlin, I wondered if there might be a future for them on the streets I rode my bike on growing up.

I asked Steiner how it felt to have these stones here, in front of what was once her home. "My daughter now reads these names and asks herself, *Could this be me?*," she said. "But what I like is to stand here and think about them, how they might have lived here."

As I looked at the house, I began to imagine who these people could have



been. Perhaps Max and Gertrud were married; I pictured them making Shabbat dinner for their adult children on Friday evenings. Perhaps Fritz helped them with their groceries as they made their way up the stairs. Maybe they spoke about what the Zuttermanns planned on cooking, whether they would see one another at synagogue on Saturday. Perhaps Max and Gertrud invited Fritz to join them for their meal. Perhaps they invited Else and Frieda too. Maybe they all sat around the table. Perhaps they laughed. Perhaps they sang. Perhaps they played a game of cards to end the evening. Perhaps, as wax began to collect at the bottom of the small plates that held the candles, they discussed the new laws that were restricting their lives, the rumors of war. Perhaps they asked one another whether they still had time to leave. (I later learned that Max and Gertrud were in fact married, and that Fritz was their subtenant. The Zuttermanns' two adult daughters, I found, had been able to escape Germany.)

My eyes moved from the building we stood in front of to the buildings adjacent

to it. When German Jews were led to the trains for deportation, the block would have been lined with other Germans who watched from their windows, their storefronts, the sidewalk. Maybe some cheered. Most probably said nothing.

Steiner saw me looking at these other buildings and must have realized what I was thinking about. "There's the relational aspect," she said. "It was their neighbors that had been murdered. It was their neighbors that had been deported. It was their neighbors that had been thrown out to Auschwitz. It was their neighbors who lost their lives. And we need to understand this. It was not an abstract group."

SO MANY OF Germany's monuments, I was learning, were not built until long after the war. The first Stolperstein was laid in 1996. The Gleis 17 memorial opened in 1998. The Jewish Museum Berlin opened in 2001. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin, opened in 2005.

When Steiner was a child, the country's major sites of memory about the Holocaust were the concentration camps. Her parents had taken her to Dachau when she was very young. She was left haunted and terrified by the experience.

I asked if she had taken her daughter to any camps. She shook her head and told me she thought that, at 12, she was still too young. They had considered going to Auschwitz in the summer, but Steiner had changed her mind, ultimately deciding it wasn't yet time. Her daughter had read about the Holocaust, and it seemed to have overwhelmed her. She struggled to sleep. "She was worried that if she fell asleep, she might not wake up," Steiner told me.

Anti-Semitism and racism have been on the rise in Germany in recent years as the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has gained political power; the German government recently reported a 29 percent increase in anti-Semitic crimes. Steiner shared a story about how, on one recent Holocaust Memorial Day, two boys at her daughter's school had pretended to "hunt" her daughter as they chased her through the hallways.

"She was ... hunted by them?" I asked, wanting to make sure I had heard correctly.

MORE JEWISH PEOPLE LIVE IN BOSTON THAN IN ALL OF GERMANY.

"Yes, she was hunted by them." Then, in a singsongy voice meant to emulate the melody of a nursery rhyme, she said what the boys had said to her daughter: "My grandfather was Adolf Hitler and he killed your grandfather."

I put my hands in my pockets and took a deep breath.

"This is everyday Jewish life for children," she said. "If you raise a Jewish child, how can you avoid this topic?"

Steiner's question echoed the question that Black parents in the U.S. wrestle with every day. How can we protect our children from the stories of violence that they might find deeply upsetting while also giving them the history to understand who they are in relation to the world that surrounds them? My son is 5 years old; my daughter is 3. I think about what it means to strike that balance all the time.

I mentioned this to Steiner and she nodded, then looked back down at the stones in front of us. "I wonder what it's like, because when you're Black in America, at least there are more of you who could connect and support each other. There are so few Jews."

This point—this difference—had become clear to me in my first few days in Germany. In the United States there

are 41 million Black people; we make up 12.5 percent of the population. In Germany, there are approximately 120,000 Jewish people, out of a population of more than 80 million. They represent less than a quarter of 1 percent of the population. More Jewish people live in Boston than in all of Germany. (Today, many Jews in Germany are immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their descendants.) Lots of Germans do not personally know a Jewish person.

This is part of the reason, Steiner believes, that Germany is able to make

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Holocaust remembrance a prominent part of national life; Jewish people are a historical abstraction more than they are actual people. In the United States, there are still millions of Black people. You cannot simply build some monuments, lay down some wreaths each year, and apologize for what happened without seeing the manifestation of those past actions in the inequality between Black and white people all around you.

Steiner also believes that the small number of Jewish people who do reside in Germany exist in the collective imagination less as people, and more as empty canvases

upon which Germans can paint their repentance. As the scholar James E. Young, the author of *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, writes, "The initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them." The American Jewish writer Dara Horn puts it more bluntly in her book *People Love Dead Jews*, writing that in our contemporary world, most people

only encountered dead Jews: people whose sole attribute was that they had been murdered, and whose murders served a clear purpose, which was *to teach us something*. Jews were people who, for moral and educational purposes, were supposed to be dead.

Steiner and I continued walking. Before, I had seen stumbling stones only intermittently; now I saw them in front of almost every building. Three here. Six there. Eight here. Twelve there. When we encountered a group of a dozen or more stones, we would stop, look down, and read the names as we had done in front of her old home. I saw dates of birth that read *1938, 1940, 1941*. These were children—a 5-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 2-year-old.

A blackbird landed near the brass plates, jabbing its beak into the spaces between the cobblestones with quick, jerking movements. A little girl walked by and pointed in its direction, turning and saying something to her mother as she held her hand.

THE MEMORIAL TO the Murdered Jews of Europe, recognized as the official Holocaust memorial of Germany, sits in the center of downtown Berlin, just south of the famous Brandenburg Gate and a block away from the site of the bunker where Hitler died by suicide. Designed by the American Jewish architect Peter Eisenman and spanning 200,000 square feet, it consists of rows of 2,711 concrete blocks that range in height from eight inches to more than 15 feet tall. The space resembles a graveyard, a vast cascade of stone markers with no names or engravings on their facade. The ground beneath them dips and rises like waves.

The memorial is significant not only for its size and location—the equivalent, in

the United States, would be the placement of thousands of stone blocks in Lower Manhattan to honor those subjected to chattel slavery, or on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., to remember the victims of Indigenous genocide—but also because it was constructed with the political support and full financial backing of the German government.

Steiner told me that, in her opinion, the stumbling stones are a much better means of memorialization than something like the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. "This has more to do with the German society and the expectation of having something big," she said, stretching her hands out again. "We did a big Holocaust, we have a big monument."

Steiner said that whenever she went down to the memorial, she saw people smoking while standing on top of the columns, or jumping back and forth from one to another. "It's lost its purpose and meaning," she said. "Maybe it never got it."

When I visited the memorial, the sky was overcast, its long sweep of endless gray matching the color of the stone columns beneath it. A group of young people took selfies in front of the columns, some throwing up peace signs or puckering their lips as they sat cross-legged on top of a stone. Two women stood in between the shadows, their faces covered in tears, and held each other's hands. A class of students looked up at their teacher as he explained what lay behind him, their eyes moving from him to the columns to one another with a silent solemnity. Three small children played hide-and-seek among the columns, shrieking in delight when they discovered one another. The memorial had become a part of the city's landscape; different people engaged with the space in different ways.

I wondered, as I toured the monument, how much of the motivation to create memorials to the Holocaust reflected a desire for Germany to—internally—reckon with its heinous state-sanctioned crimes, and how much of it stemmed from a hope that putting memorials up would demonstrate to the rest of the world that Germany had accounted for its past? Put more directly, were monuments like this one for Germans to collectively

remember what had been done? Were they a performance of contrition for the rest of the world? Were they both?

James E. Young writes that “memory is never shaped in a vacuum,” and that the reasons for the existence of Holocaust museums and monuments in Germany, and across the world, “are as various as the sites themselves.” Some, he argues, were built in response to efforts of Jewish communities to remember, and others were built because of “a government’s need to explain a nation’s past to itself.” The aim of some is to educate the next generation and forge a sense of collective experience, while others are born of guilt. “Still others are intended to attract tourists.” The messy truth is that all of these ostensibly disparate motives can find a home in the same project.

AT THE EDGE of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, I met up with Deidre Berger, the chair of the executive board of the Jewish Digital Cultural Recovery Project Foundation and the former director of the American Jewish Committee’s Berlin office. She was bundled in an all-black ensemble—jacket, shoes, scarf, and gloves—that matched her short black hair. Berger is American, and Jewish. She has lived in Berlin since 1998.

We discussed the differences in the ways the Holocaust is memorialized in the United States versus in Germany, which she called “enormous.” In the United States, she said, the push for Holocaust remembrance has come largely from Holocaust survivors themselves, as well as their descendants.

In Germany, after the war hardly any Jews were left—only 37,000 in the entire country in 1950—and the push to create a national Holocaust memorial came largely from non-Jewish communities, many years later.

The idea “came from within German society,” Berger said, but there had been, in previous decades, “perhaps some gentle pushing from other countries that felt that it was important for Germany to have a visible symbol of marking the Holocaust.” Notably, the German word for guilt, *schuld*, is the same as the word for debt.

It wasn’t always obvious that Germany would build memorials to the Nazis’ victims; for decades there was mostly silence. In her book *Learning From the Germans*, the philosopher Susan Neiman writes that families in Germany simply did not discuss the war in the years immediately following it. “Neither side could bear to talk about it,” she writes, “one side afraid of facing its own guilt, the other afraid of succumbing to pain and rage.”

When 22 of the Third Reich’s leaders stood trial in Nuremberg, from November 1945 to October 1946, the four major Allied powers vowed to publicize the proceedings. Officials in the American zone put up billboards and posters with photographs depicting Nazi crimes, had films made that documented the gruesomeness of the concentration camps, and ensured that German newspapers and radio stations reported on the trial. The Allies hoped that the public nature of the trials, and the extensive documentation presented, would help educate Germans about the true scope and horror of what the Nazis had done. According to the military historian Tyler Bamford, in the final month of the tribunal, 71 percent of Germans surveyed by American authorities said that they had learned something new from it.

But awareness did not necessarily translate into reckoning. For some, even those who had supported Hitler, Nuremberg provided the opportunity to wash their hands of culpability, and pin responsibility only on the Nazi leaders on trial. When confronted with the Nazis’ atrocities, many Germans repeated the phrase “*Wir konnten nichts tun*”—“We could do nothing.” In the years after the trial, former Nazi officials rejoined mainstream society, and many took on positions similar to those they’d held before the war.

Neiman writes that in those postwar years, many Germans saw themselves not as perpetrators, but as victims—as people who had experienced enormous suffering that wasn’t being acknowledged by the rest of the world. Husbands, sons, and brothers had died in battle; women and children had spent long, freezing nights in cellars as bombs dropped overhead; civilians survived on scraps of potato peels. Not only were they being asked to accept having lost

the war, but they were being told, amid all their hardship, that they were responsible for evil. The German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich write in their book, *The Inability to Mourn*, that the nation experienced a sort of paralysis, in which people couldn’t countenance their soldiers moving so quickly from heroes to victims to perpetrators. If they couldn’t even mourn their sons and brothers because the world was telling them they were monsters, how could they bring themselves to mourn the people those soldiers had killed?

“There wasn’t really a confrontation until the ’60s, when the young generation started asking their parents what they did during the war,” Berger told me. They wanted to know what had happened in their community—and their country—and why there was so much silence. Germans, Berger said, many of them the children of those who had witnessed or participated in the Holocaust, began tracing Jewish histories, inviting Jewish families who had fled to come back to visit their towns.

As Berger and I spoke, I wondered about the people leading the various museums, memorials, and other cultural institutions that had resulted from this push in the decades since the ’60s. How many of them were Jewish? Did it matter?

I had heard that Germans would sometimes create events, commissions, and institutions centered on commemorating Jewish life without meaningfully consulting any Jewish people. Berger closed her eyes and nodded when I mentioned this, and said that it had been a major issue for years. She told me about how, in 2009 and 2015, the German Parliament had created independent commissions on fighting anti-Semitism. The 2009 commission included only a single Jewish person. The 2015 commission, at first, had no Jewish members at all. Berger found this unacceptable, so she approached officials in the Interior Ministry. She was appalled by the response she got. “They said, ‘Well, Jews are not impartial enough, because they’re part of the story.’” (Two Jewish members were eventually added to the eight-person committee, bringing its total to 10.) She tucked her lips inside her mouth as if she was preventing herself from saying something she would regret.



Lea Rosh, who helped push Germany to build a national memorial to the Holocaust. In 2021, a portrait of Rosh by Frédéric Brenner was featured in an exhibition of the photographer's work at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

I was struck by how much this idea echoed what Black scholars in the United States have navigated for generations. The preeminent early-20th-century Black American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois faced questions from white scholars and funders who doubted his ability to do his work objectively and with the appropriate level of scientific rigor, because they thought he was too invested in the issues he was studying. He was often encouraged to partner with white scholars, who could balance out his ostensible biases.

When I asked Berger what she thought of the Stolpersteine, she told me she feels ambivalent. On the one hand, she said, the project has brought communities together to research their history. But on the other hand, she finds the idea that people are stepping on the names of Jewish people deeply unsettling. "Every time, I cringe," she said. "They should be plaques on the wall. And why aren't they? Because most of the owners of buildings wouldn't accept, even to this day, a plaque saying, 'Here is where a Jewish family lived.'"

Berger is not alone in this sentiment. In Munich, Charlotte Knobloch, a Holocaust survivor who is the former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, persuaded the city to ban Stolpersteine in 2004. The city eventually created plaques at eye level. "It is my firm belief that we need to do everything we can in order to make sure that remembrance preserves the dignity of the victims," Knobloch has said. "People murdered in the Holocaust deserve better than a plaque in the dust, street dirt and even worse filth."

Berger also believes that sometimes the laying of the stones can serve as a sort of penance: After a Stolperstein has been placed, people wipe their hands and believe that they have done all there is to do.

Even though Berger and the American Jewish Committee had, for years, been some of the most prominent advocates for the memorial where we now stood, she also has mixed feelings about how the space turned out. "It's overwhelming. And the symbolism isn't entirely clear to me. I

mean, we don't need to have a cemetery," she said, looking around at the stones. "The whole country is a cemetery."

But Berger says she is grateful—and relieved—that the space exists.

Eisenman, the architect who designed the memorial, was cognizant of how difficult—perhaps impossible—it would be to create a Holocaust memorial commensurate with the history it carries. "The enormity and horror of the Holocaust are such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate," he wrote in 2005.

Criticism of the monument has come in many forms. In 2017, a leader of the far-right AfD party said that the monument was a "symbol of national shame"; he didn't think that shame was a good thing. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, some critics have charged that the memorial isn't inclusive enough. Demnig, the originator of the Stolperstein project, supports the memorial as a whole, but has been critical of its exclusive focus on Jewish victims. "There were other drafts

that would have included all groups of victims that, in my opinion, would have been more effective,” he said in 2013.

The *New Yorker* writer Richard Brody visited the monument in 2012, and took issue with the very framing of the memorial: “The title doesn’t say ‘Holocaust’ or ‘Shoah’; in other words, it doesn’t say anything about who did the murdering or why—there’s nothing along the lines of ‘by Germany under Hitler’s regime,’ and the vagueness is disturbing,” he wrote. “The passive voice of the title—‘murdered Jews’—elides the question that wafts through the exhibit like an odor: murdered by whom?”

I understand some of these criticisms, and still, I couldn’t help but appreciate the scale and scope of the space. I couldn’t help but admire how centrally located it was in the city. There was no missing it. There was no avoiding it. No other nation on Earth has done anything quite like it. Not the United States for its genocide of Indigenous peoples or centuries of enslavement; not France or Britain for their histories of colonial violence; not Japan for its imperial projects across eastern Asia.

Walking through the monument’s columns amid the cacophony of the city all around me felt haunting, but appropriately so. It is a space meant to haunt, meant to overwhelm. But beneath the stones, in the memorial’s underground museum, there was only silence.

I stepped into one of the subterranean exhibits. The room was dark but for illuminated glass panels underfoot. Other visitors moved through the space like shadows, each of us silent, looking down at the glowing glass beneath us. Below each pane were letters, diary entries, and accounts written by people who had been murdered in the Holocaust. I leaned in closer to the panel I was looking at.

There was a note written by a 12-year-old girl named Judith Wishnyatskaya, included as a postscript to a letter her mother had written to her father on July 31, 1942:

Dear father! I am saying goodbye to you before I die. We would so love to live, but they won’t let us and we will die. I am so scared of this death, because the

small children are thrown alive into the pit. Goodbye forever. I kiss you tenderly.

Yours J.

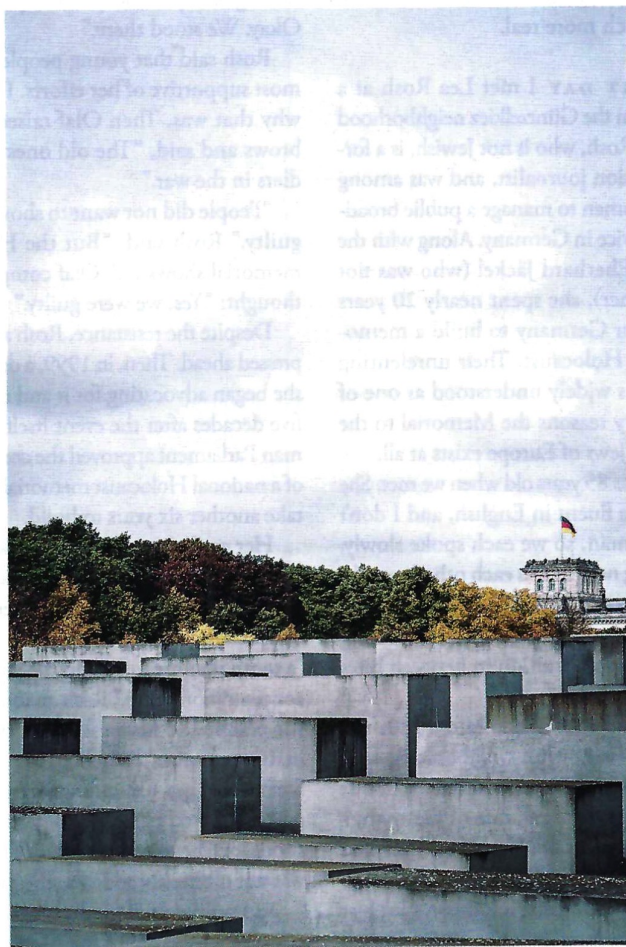
Judith and her mother were killed shortly afterward. Their letter was found by a Soviet soldier near the eastern-Polish town of Baranowicze (in what is now Belarus).

Each panel told the story of another victim, the floor glowing with accounts of murder and terror, a fluorescent extension of the work the stumbling stones were doing throughout the city. There was something about the physical act of looking down, of having your body pause and hover over the names, that made the experience feel somehow intimate.

After reading all of the panels, I took a seat on a bench toward the back of the room. In front of me, and to my left and right, and then behind me, I saw numbers with the names of different European countries alongside them. I quickly realized that these numbers reflected estimates of how many Jews from each nation had been killed in the Holocaust.

BELGIUM	25,000–25,700
HUNGARY	270,000–300,000
GREECE	58,900–59,200
LATVIA	65,000–70,000
ITALY	7,600–8,500
LITHUANIA	140,000–150,000
GERMANY	160,000–165,000
POLAND	2,900,000–3,100,000

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is in the center of Berlin, near the Reichstag.



I stopped at this last number and caught my breath. I hadn't known that half of the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were Polish. (Ninety percent of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland were murdered, I would later learn.) By the end of the war, only 380,000 Polish Jews survived.

In school, I read more books about the Holocaust than perhaps any other atrocity in human history, including those that took place on American soil. I have watched countless films and documentaries on World War II and the Holocaust. But it wasn't until this moment, surrounded by these numbers that stretched around the room and the stories that glowed underfoot, that I began to fully feel the scale of this atrocity.

Approximately two-thirds of all the Jews in Europe were killed in the span of just a few years, a level of slaughter that is overwhelming to consider. Something about being there—in Berlin, in this museum, in this room—made it all feel so much more real.

THE NEXT DAY I met Lea Rosh at a small café in the Güntzelkiez neighborhood of Berlin. Rosh, who is not Jewish, is a former television journalist, and was among the first women to manage a public broadcasting service in Germany. Along with the historian Eberhard Jäckel (who was not Jewish either), she spent nearly 20 years pushing for Germany to build a memorial to the Holocaust. Their unrelenting advocacy is widely understood as one of the primary reasons the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe exists at all.

Rosh was 85 years old when we met. She is not quite fluent in English, and I don't speak German, so we each spoke slowly, attempting not to miss each other's words. She was accompanied by a man named Olaf, and we discussed her work to bring the memorial to fruition in between bites of cake and fruit.

Rosh said that in the mid-1980s she and Jäckel had begun collaborating on a four-part television documentary about the Holocaust. Jäckel, one of Germany's leading historians of Nazism, told her that Germany needed to build a monument to the Jews killed in the Holocaust. Not just the German Jews, but the Jews from all

across Europe. "The German victims were 2 percent of the whole," she told me. Her conversations with Jäckel, and the experience of working on the series, were transformative for Rosh.

In 1989, Rosh and Jäckel published a formal call to organize German citizens to help erect a memorial. "I was sure we'd have it in three years, because it's so clear to do it," she said as she set her fork down. "It was not clear for this country."

So this became her mission, to make the moral imperative for building a memorial undeniably, inescapably clear. She began a public crusade to pressure the German government, she told me, speaking about the need for a memorial on her television show, and her group took out ads in newspapers and met with political and civic leaders. She said that every Saturday for about eight years, she stood on the street with other advocates, collecting signatures in support of a museum. "If it's raining? Okay. It snowed? Okay. Sunshine? Okay. We stood there."

Rosh said that young people were the most supportive of her efforts. I asked her why that was. Then Olaf raised his eyebrows and said, "The old ones were soldiers in the war."

"People did not want to show we were guilty," Rosh said. "But the Holocaust memorial shows..." Olaf completed her thought: "Yes, we were guilty."

Despite the resistance, Rosh and others pressed ahead. Then, in 1999, a decade after she began advocating for it and more than five decades after the event itself, the German Parliament approved the construction of a national Holocaust memorial. It would take another six years to build.

Her work, however, has not been without controversy. Barbara Steiner had told me about how, when Rosh gave a speech at the memorial's opening, she held up a tooth—"a tooth that she found on the ground of a concentration camp." Rosh announced that she planned to have the tooth embedded in the memorial. "Everybody was shocked," Steiner told me. "You don't take something of a murdered person with you." Steiner shook her head, exasperated. (The tooth was not ultimately added to the memorial.)

As I walked through the streets of Berlin, past the Memorial to the Murdered Jews

of Europe, past the Jewish Museum, past Gleis 17, past Hitler's bunker, and past the Stolpersteine that are scattered across the streets of the city like stars, I had the feeling of being confronted with the past at every moment. I wondered if I would feel different if I encountered these every day. Would the gleam of the stumbling stones eventually dim and fade into the rest of the pavement? Would the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe become a silhouette in the corner of my eye as I sped by in a taxi?

"I think there's a real risk of all these manifestations becoming either senseless or unreadable, or just part of the city landscape at some point," the German historian Daniel Schönplüg told me. "It creates the feeling that we're doing so well at this, we're world champion of Holocaust memory, and this gives us also legitimacy," he said. "This memory loses its pain, once it's put into an almost positive, proud context."

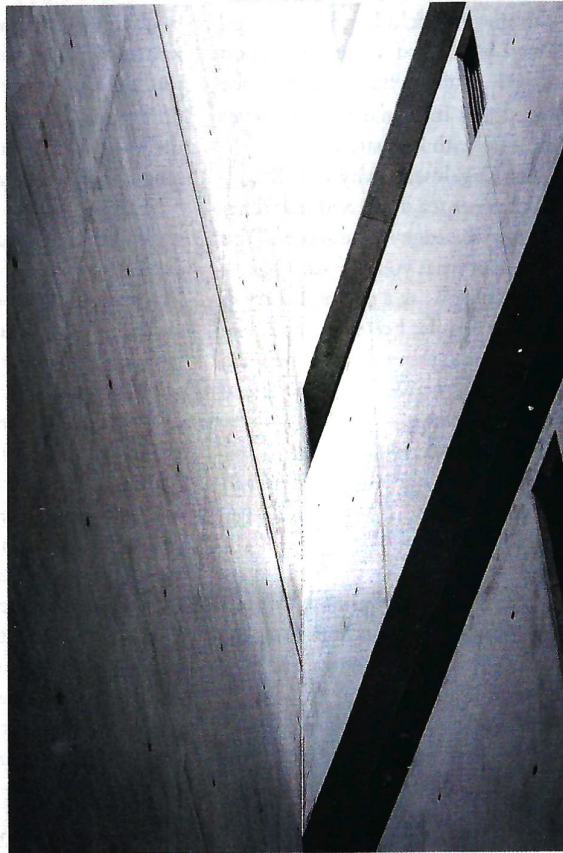
Was Rosh happy with how the memorial and the museum had turned out? I asked. Did she think that it did justice to the victims?

"It's 6 million murdered people. You cannot be happy," she said, her voice becoming low. "You can [only] be satisfied that it was possible to build them a memorial."

I asked Rosh if she thinks that Germany has done enough to account for its past, or if she thinks there is still more to do. She paused and looked up, her eyes searching the ceiling. "Difficult to say, because our memorial is a big memorial. It's the biggest. There's no example in the world for such a thing," she said. She told me that memorials and monuments had been constructed to essentially every group of victims, and that Germany had come a long way since she first began her advocacy, almost 35 years ago.

"I think you cannot do more. What else?"

THE MEMORY OF Jewish life in Berlin is not singularly tied to the spectacle of mass death. There is a museum that attempts to ensure that German Jews are remembered as a people with a rich culture, and not only remembered for what was done to them. At a café in Berlin's Schöneberg neighborhood, I met with Cilly Kugelman, who was a co-founder



Cilly Kugelman, who retired in 2020 as the program director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, in the museum's "Memory Void," which includes an installation called *Shalekhet (Fallen Leaves)*, by the Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman. Visitors are allowed to walk on the more than 10,000 open-mouthed iron faces that cover the floor.

and, until her retirement in 2020, the program director of the Jewish Museum Berlin.

Kugelman compared that institution to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in the sense that both attempt to tell the story of an oppressed group, without the entirety of their cultural identities being linked to that oppression. Jewish history, Kugelman said, does not begin and end with the Holocaust.

I was curious what she made of the other memorials and museums across Berlin. "Well, I think one has to ask yourself, what would Germany be without these memorials? You can criticize every single memorial. It's an aesthetic expression and

it never comes close to what really happened, so it's always ambiguous. But on the other hand, what would we say if it wouldn't be there at all? It's a dilemma. It's an unsolvable dilemma."

Both of Kugelman's parents were Jews from Poland. They were married before the war and had two children. In 1943 they were all sent to Auschwitz. Her parents survived, but their first set of children—siblings Kugelman never knew—were killed.

Her parents didn't talk much, or really at all, about their time in the concentration camps. But Kugelman told me that once, she was watching a film about the liberation of the camps, and as the camera was scanning across survivors, she saw her father's face.

After the war ended and her parents were liberated, they moved to Frankfurt am Main, where they started a new family. As a child, Kugelman was aware that she had a pair of siblings who "were no longer there," but she did not have a full sense of what that meant. Had they died? Were they living somewhere else? Would she ever meet them? Her mother wore a silver medallion around her neck with photos of the two children, but she never spoke of them.

It was only many years later that Kugelman was able to put the pieces together. From the work of the Polish Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski and others, she learned about the ghetto from which her family had been deported. She learned

that all the infants and smaller children from this ghetto, including her siblings, would have been killed immediately upon their arrival at Auschwitz. Even when she discovered this information, she never brought it up with her parents.

I asked Kugelmann why not. Kugelmann placed her tea down and traced her fingers along the edge of the saucer. "You have a sense of what you can ask a parent and what you can't ask a parent. If I try to explain it to people, I refer to rape. The most humiliating thing that can happen. And the question is: Would you be able to question your mother about details of the rape? Of course you would not."

"And for you that feels analogous?" I asked.

"Yes, absolutely."

THE HOUSE OF the Wannsee Conference is a villa about half an hour from the center of Berlin, on a narrow, one-way street just off Wannsee Lake.

Everything about the villa is idyllic. Behind the mansion, a small band of

brown ducks dipped their heads into the lake and then returned to the surface, their wet feathers gleaming under the midday sun. Sailboats swept across the water while gentle waves lapped against a stone wall on the shore. Wind chimes on a nearby tree sang a chorus in the light breeze.

This was where, on January 20, 1942, the leaders of the Nazi regime discussed and drafted their ideas about how to implement "the final solution of the Jewish question."

Exactly 50 years later, the villa was reopened as a museum. But unlike most of the other sites I visited in Berlin, it was not created to remember the victims of the Holocaust so much as the perpetrators.

Because it's outside the city center, the museum is not the sort of place people just happen to stumble upon. If you end up there, you intended to. As I walked through one of the museum's long hallways, I saw a row of 15 yellowed pages in a glass case: a copy of the Wannsee Conference's minutes, which in thinly veiled language laid out the plan for the mass murder of European Jews.

As the legal scholar James Q. Whitman has documented, when Nazi officials first formulated their Nuremberg race laws, in 1934, they drew inspiration from the U.S., modeling them in part on the Jim Crow laws. The Nazis looked to America's history of oppression in other ways, too. As Susan Neiman writes, "Hitler took American westward expansion, with its destruction of Native peoples, as the template for the eastward expansion he said was needed to provide Germans with *Lebensraum*—room to live."

Toward the top of the Wannsee meeting notes, the leaders outlined how, in the preceding years, the policy had been to facilitate the emigration of Jews from Germany. After emigration was deemed infeasible because of the war, the Nazis changed course and began forcibly expelling Jews from Germany, to the east. "This operation should be regarded only as a provisional option," they wrote, "but it is already supplying practical experience of great significance in view of the coming final solution of the Jewish question."

The House of the Wannsee Conference, where in 1942 Nazi leaders planned the annihilation of European Jews



"The Jewish question" needed to be resolved not only in Germany, but throughout all of Europe. The "evacuated" Jews, the Nazis decided, should be put to work, "during which a large proportion will no doubt drop out through natural reduction."

Upstairs, I met with Deborah Hartmann, the museum's director. She sat across from me in her office, her brown hair falling over one shoulder. Behind her, through floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto a veranda, the lake glimmered. Born in Austria, Hartmann had worked earlier in her career as a guide at the Jewish Museum Vienna, and then at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial. After nearly 15 years there, she'd applied for the opening at Wannsee.

Walking around the museum, I had felt the presence of the men who had choreographed a genocide, and sometimes wondered whether lifting up the names and ideas of people who had engaged in mass murder could have unintended consequences. Might someone come to a museum like this and be inspired by what they saw? Was there a risk in providing these men with a posthumous platform? I asked Hartmann why she felt it was so important to have a museum that included the thoughts and stories of the perpetrators.

"We cannot only focus on the Jewish perspective and on the perspective of those who perished. We have to learn something about anti-Semitism, about the views of national socialism," she said. "Also, about the bystanders ... This could be the neighbor who was not a member of the Nazi Party but was just hanging around, had a nice view out of the window seeing the neighbors being deported." A bird flew by the window, rested on the veranda, looked around, then took off again over the lake. "We need to focus on all of them to be able to understand the picture of what was going on."

Part of what Hartmann wants visitors to understand is that the people who committed these atrocities were, in many ways, just like anyone else. It can be easy, she said, to turn them into two-dimensional caricatures of evil—and in some ways they were. But they also had wives, children, parents, friends. As Hartmann put it, "People who

participated in the mass shootings in the morning wrote nice letters to their families back home in the afternoon."

The museum has hosted visitors from all over the world, some of whom are descendants of the perpetrators. Just a few months earlier, Hartmann told me, she'd been flipping through the museum's guest book and saw that one of the visitors who'd left a note was the granddaughter of Martin Luther, one of the 15 Nazi officials present at the Wannsee Conference. It was Luther's copy of the minutes that American troops discovered in 1945. "She wrote down in the guest book, 'I'm very much ashamed of what my grandfather was doing.'"

I was floored by this revelation. I tried to imagine what it must have been like for this woman to walk through the hallways of the place where her own grandfather had helped orchestrate the slaughter of millions of people. What emotions could she possibly have felt? Beyond the shame she said she experienced, I wonder, too, if

there was a sense of culpability. Certainly, she is not responsible for what her grandfather did. But what must it feel like to be part of such a lineage? How does one extract oneself from that legacy?

Hartmann has a master's degree in political science; she titled her thesis "Europe and the Shoah: Universal Remembrance and Particular Memories." But her proximity to this subject matter is not just academic. Hartmann is Jewish, and her great-grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. When she first started working at the museum, she didn't like to be alone in the building.

The previous director of the museum was not Jewish, and Hartmann wonders whether it would have been possible 20 years ago for a Jewish person to be the head of such a museum in Germany—or whether they would have even wanted to. Now, though, she said that Jewish people are much more a part of the public conversation about the institutions of memory that depict their experience.



The author and journalist Jennifer Neal says Germany has made some admirable efforts to reckon with its Holocaust history, but has been less willing to account for other crimes.

**NEAL IS
FLUMMOXED
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BE “ERASING
HISTORY.”**

They are stepping into leadership positions that they previously would not have been considered for.

Hartmann makes a point of emphasizing that she doesn't think non-Jews should be prevented from leading these museums. On the contrary, she believes that Jews and non-Jews should always be working in collaboration. Still, she can't help but think about those who, for generations, were kept from being part of the project of Holocaust memorialization because they were deemed too close to the subject matter.

Hartmann told me about a Jewish historian named Joseph Wulf, a survivor of Auschwitz who wrote books on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. For years, beginning in 1965, Wulf advocated for the West German government to make the Wannsee house into a Holocaust research center, but his proposal was ignored. On October 10, 1974, Wulf died by suicide after jumping from the window of his Berlin apartment. In a letter to his son a few months before his death he wrote, "I have published 18 books about the Third Reich and they have had no effect. You can document everything to death for the Germans ... Yet the mass murderers walk around free, live in their little houses, and grow flowers."

"He was never accepted by German historians, because they had the feeling that he cannot be objective as a Jewish survivor," Hartmann said, echoing a point that Deidre Berger had made. Hartmann always found the idea that Jewish scholars couldn't be "objective" because of their "proximity" to the Holocaust ironic, given that many non-Jewish scholars who ended up writing the history of the Holocaust had their own proximity to the event. "On the German side, those historians? We know who they were," she said. "The Hitler Youth."

IN CENTRAL BERLIN stands another museum dedicated to telling the story of the Holocaust's perpetrators. At the Topography of Terror museum, people can learn about the history of the Nazi regime, the way Hitler and his followers gained power, and the way they exerted that power to devastating effect. It is located on the former grounds of the headquarters of the Gestapo, the high command and security service of the SS, and the Reich Security Main Office.

I met Jennifer Neal, a journalist and an author, on the museum's steps. Neal is Black, and originally from Chicago. She has lived in Berlin since 2016.

Neal told me that, in some ways, Germany has done an admirable job of reckoning with its history. For example, the government has paid reparations through a program called *Wiedergutmachung*, which translates roughly to "making good again." In 1952, West Germany agreed to pay Israel 3 billion German marks over time, which played a crucial role in ensuring the young nation's economic stability. It also

provided funds for individual payments, which continue to this day. As of 2020, Germany had paid out more than \$90 billion. (The process of applying for individual reparations, however, was difficult and traumatic for many survivors, Neiman writes in *Learning From the Germans*. Those who survived Auschwitz, for example, had to outline how and when they'd arrived at the camp; obtain two sworn statements from witnesses who could confirm that they'd really been there; submit the number that had been tattooed on their skin; provide evidence of any injuries they'd suffered at the camp; and also prove that they had a low income.)

Neal said that Germans haven't always been as willing to account for the country's other crimes. From 1904 to 1908, the German military committed genocide against Indigenous communities in present-day Namibia, which at the time was a colony known as German South West Africa. An estimated 80,000 people

MARC WILSON FOR THE ATLANTIC



were exterminated through forced labor, starvation, and disease in concentration camps there. Eighty percent of the Herero people and 50 percent of the Nama people are thought to have been killed.

The Namibian genocide is considered the first genocide of the 20th century. Many historians contend that the racialized hierarchy used to justify killing Namibians and conducting phrenological studies on them—noting the shape and size of their skulls—was a direct prelude to the Holocaust. Dr. Eugen Fischer, who conducted eugenics experiments on living Namibian people, went on to teach his racial theories to doctors in the Nazi regime. One of the students influenced by Fischer's work was Josef Mengele, who led heinous experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz.

The Namibian government spent years demanding that Germany both apologize and pay reparations for what happened, and after years of resistance to the idea, in

May 2021 the German government officially recognized the killings as genocide and issued an apology. Germany offered to fund \$1.3 billion worth of projects in Namibia over 30 years, an amount many Namibians felt was far too low. Herero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro said the deal was “an insult” because it did not include the payment of individual reparations.

Neal told me that watching the conversation in the U.S. about whether Confederate statues should come down seems especially ludicrous from her vantage point in Europe. She's flummoxed by the notion that taking down the statues would somehow be “erasing history.”

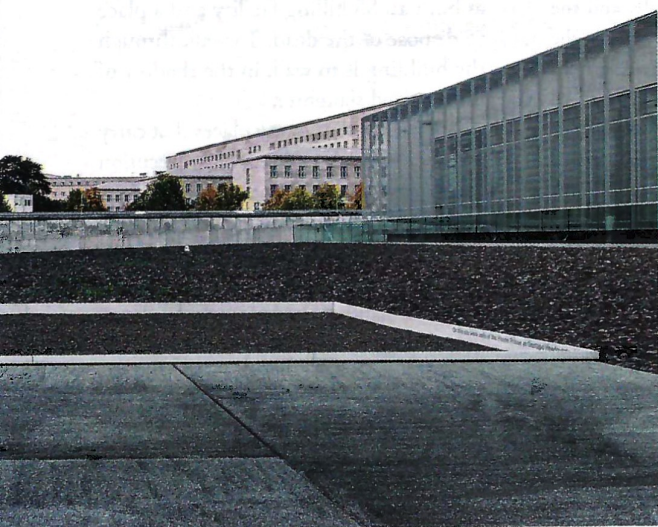
“What Germany does well in regards to the Holocaust is show that when you honor the victims instead of the perpetrators, you're still remembering history,” she said. “But

you're making it clear who the aggressors were, who the victims were, and who we honored. I think this is important in terms of how the country heals.” She shook her head. “That is why I think the United States is very far from healing.”

IN EARLY OCTOBER of this year, I visited Dachau. To enter the concentration camp—now a memorial site—visitors must walk across a small concrete bridge and through the gates of the *Jourhaus*, a cream-colored building topped with a watchtower that juts up from the roof like a steeple.

Inscribed on the black iron gates is the phrase *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*, “Work Sets You Free.” The slogan, Nazi propaganda meant to present the camps as innocuous places of “work” or “reeducation,” appeared at the gates of concentration camps across Europe.

**The Topography of
Terror museum
stands on the former
grounds of the
Gestapo headquarters
and tells the story
of the Holocaust's
perpetrators.**



Gravel crunched beneath the feet of visitors walking between exhibitions; the sea of small gray pebbles was interrupted only by the brown and yellow leaves that had been scattered by the wind.

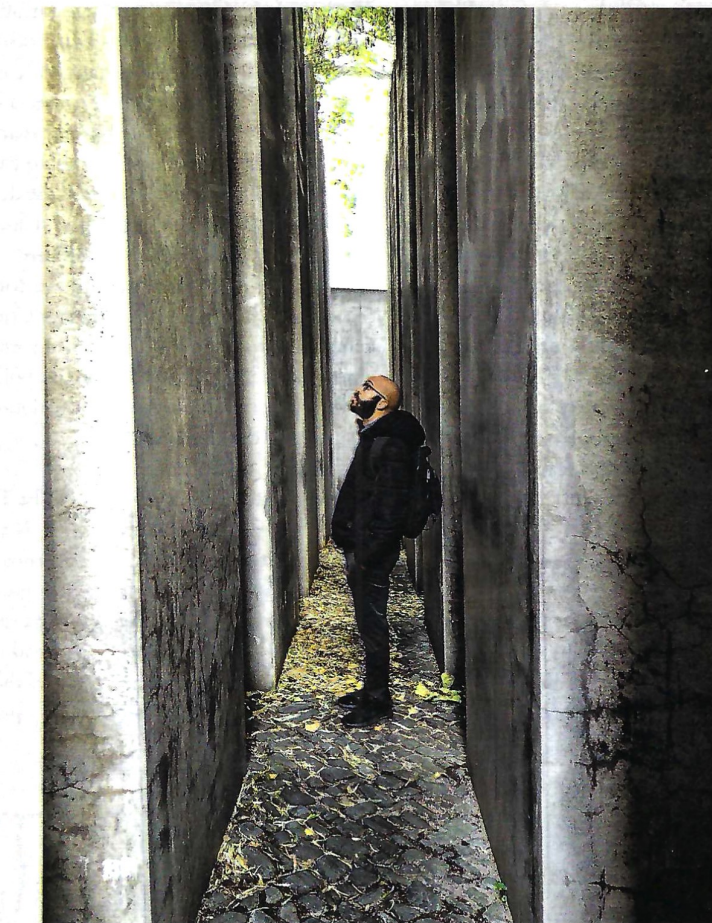
Dachau's history, in part, reflects the different ways that East and West Germany remembered the Holocaust in the post-war years. Former concentration camps in Soviet-controlled territory in the east—such as Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, and Sachsenhausen—were turned into memorials soon after the war, with restoration funds coming from both the state and individual donations. Dachau, located in the Allied-controlled western territory, did not receive any public funding until 1965, when a group of former prisoners persuaded the state of Bavaria to help finance a memorial there. Not until after the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990 did any memorial sites at West German camps receive federal funding.

When Dachau was built, in 1938, it was designed to hold 6,000 prisoners. But by April 29, 1945, when American forces liberated the camp, it held about 32,000. Barracks built to house 200 people held as many as 2,000. The originals were demolished in the 1960s, but as I walked through the reconstructed barracks I tried to imagine so many people living in them at once: The women pushed against one another between the splintered, wooden bed frames. The diseases that swept over men's bodies and turned them into silence. My breathing quickened. My stomach churned.

Visiting the memorial site, I was struck by how close it was to the homes, restaurants, and cafés around it. This was not a concentration camp in the middle of nowhere. *Surely*, I thought, *those who lived nearby during the war knew what was happening there.*

George Tievsky, an American medic who helped liberate Dachau, had a similar reaction. "I could smell the stench from the camp," he said of walking through the town on a Sunday in May 1945.

And I said to myself how can this be? How can this be? How could this exist here? These people. This town. Beside this death camp? These people knew what was in the camp. They heard the



The author in the "Garden of Exile"
at the Jewish Museum Berlin

trains coming with people, and the trains go out empty. They smelled the smell of death. They saw the smoke from the chimneys ... and yet when I asked them ... did you know about this? ... They all denied it. They all denied knowledge of it. There was no guilt. There was no remorse.

I wondered if this was before or after the American soldiers brought Germans to see the camp, before they entered the gates and saw the emaciated bodies, smelled the rotting flesh. Before local Germans were made to bury the bodies. Did they still deny it then?

At the far end of the camp stands "Barrack X," a crematorium that served

as both an SS killing facility and a place to dispose of the dead. To walk through the building is to walk in the shadow of mechanized slaughter.

I have stood in many places that carry a history of death—plantations, execution chambers—but I have never felt my chest get tight the way it did when I stood inside the building's gas chamber. The ceiling was so low, you could reach up and touch it with your hands. It had more than a dozen holes designed to release poison gas.

There were four other visitors in the chamber with me. Our hands were in our pockets; we were silent. Occasionally, we would catch eyes, affirming, if only for a moment, that we each understood the solemnity of the space we were in.

FREDÉRIC BRENNER

I imagined the people who once stood in rooms like this one in death camps across Europe, the moment they realized what the holes in the ceiling were for. It is a fear I cannot fathom. It is a type of torture I cannot fully grasp.

Historians do not believe that the gas chamber in Dachau, which was fully operational, was ever used for mass killings, though it is unclear why not (one witness account claims that some people were killed by poison gas there in 1944). Still, the building was a site of murders by other means—primarily shootings and hangings.

In the room at the center of the building were four red-brick ovens, each equipped with a slab used to insert bodies into the furnace. Wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling; a panel explained that most of the hangings done in the camp were done from these beams. After having been suffocated, the bodies were cut down and placed directly into the ovens.

Outside, I looked at the building's chimney and imagined the sight of smoke rising from it—smoke filled with stories, smoke filled with families, smoke filled with futures that had been erased.

I turned to my right and walked down a path that led me through a canopy of trees. I arrived at a square patch of land with a stone cross at its center. *FOSSE COMMUNE GRAB VIELER TAUSEND UNBEKANNTER*. "Grave of Many Thousands Unknown." This was a grave where the ashes of bodies burned in the crematorium had been buried. This was an effort to remember.

I left the camp and stepped out onto the street. A woman was pushing a baby in a stroller, a man rode his bicycle and rang its bell as he passed neighbors on the street, two friends held hands as they laughed and chatted underneath the afternoon sun.

IN 1949, W. E. B. DU BOIS visited Warsaw, where he witnessed firsthand the aftermath of Nazi destruction. "I have seen something of human upheaval in this world," he said. "The scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw."

Du Bois said that the experience "helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination, and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world."

As Du Bois stood amid the rubble of what was once the Warsaw Ghetto, he

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looked around. "There was complete and total waste, and a monument," he said. He was referring to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, which commemorates those who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943. It was the largest uprising of Jewish people during World War II; approximately 7,000 Jews were killed. That monument helped him see the Jews not simply as victims, but as people who rebelled, much like Black people in the United States had rebelled against slavery and Jim Crow.

After spending time in Germany, I, too, gained a sense of clarity about the interconnectedness of racial oppression and state violence. I left with a clearer understanding of the implications of how those periods of history are remembered, or not.

I was reminded, too, that many of Germany's most powerful memorials did not begin as state-sanctioned projects, but emerged—and are still emerging—from ordinary people outside the government who pushed the country to be honest about its past. Sometimes that means putting down Stolpersteine. Sometimes that means standing on the street for years collecting signatures for the massive memorial to murdered Jews that you believe the country needs. Americans do not have to, and should not, wait for the government to find its conscience. Ordinary people are the conscience.

Some in the U.S. have undertaken efforts reminiscent of those in Germany. In Connecticut, a group of educators started the Witness Stones Project, modeled after the Stolpersteine in Germany. The group works with schoolchildren in five Northeast states to help them more intimately understand the history of slavery in their town. In Camden, New Jersey, a local historical society has erected markers in places where enslaved people were sold, echoing the memorials to deported Jews at train stations in Germany. In Montgomery, Alabama, the civil-rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, who often cites Germany in his work, has built the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which commemorates the history of slavery and the oppression of Black Americans. The space has a similar physical and emotional texture to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

None of these projects, whether in the U.S. or Germany, can ever be commensurate with the history they are tasked with remembering. It is impossible for any memorial to slavery to capture its full horror, or for any memorial to the Holocaust to express the full humanity of the victims. No stone in the ground can make up for a life. No museum can bring back millions of people. It cannot be done, and yet we must try to honor those lives, and to account for this history, as best we can. It is the very act of attempting to remember that becomes the most powerful memorial of all. *A*

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