



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

Bundestag President Wolfgang Thierse Opens the Holocaust Memorial (May 10, 2005)

In May 2005, the Bundestag President Wolfgang Thierse (SPD) opened the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in central Berlin. He welcomed the field of concrete stelae not as a collective alibi, but rather as a persistent challenge to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

Speech by Bundestag President Wolfgang Thierse at the Dedication of the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” on May 10, 2005, in Berlin

Two days ago, on May 8th, the Federal Republic of Germany commemorated, we commemorated, the end of the war and the liberation of our country and our continent from Hitler’s barbarism.

Today, we are opening a memorial that commemorates the worst, the most heinous crime of Nazi Germany, the attempt to annihilate an entire people. This memorial is dedicated to the murdered Jews of Europe.

This is a memorial at the limits, a memorial in transition – in several respects.

This memorial came about through the highest possible decision that can be made in this republic: a decision of the German Bundestag. The decision, made by parliament with a large, cross-party majority on June 25, 1999, was preceded by an intensive, ten-year-long debate prompted by a group of citizens from within society and carried forth by their unwavering commitment to this day.

The decision to build the memorial in Berlin was one of the last resolutions passed by the Bundestag in Bonn before its move. It was the decision to build the first joint commemorative project of reunited Germany, and an avowal that this united Germany acknowledges its history, namely by remembering the greatest crime of its history in its capital city, at its very center. In the center of the very city which, if not the site of the mass murder itself, was the place where the systematic murder of millions of human beings was conceived, planned, organized, administrated.

No other nation, wrote the American Judaic scholar James E. Young, has ever undertaken to “reunite itself on the bedrock memory of its crimes” or to “place the remembrance of these crimes at the geographical center of its capital city.” – A task, therefore, at the very limits of what is possible for a social community. That might explain and justify the intensity of the debate over the memorial, even some of the resistance. Opposition and debate will no doubt continue to accompany the memorial, which surely is not the worst thing that could happen.

The Holocaust touches “the limits of our comprehension,” it has been aptly said. This memorial operates at those limits. It expresses the difficulty of finding an artistic form that could be in any way adequate to the incomprehensible, to the monstrosity of the National Socialist crime, to the genocide of the European Jews. It does not blur the boundary between a memory that cannot in any way be “coped with” and that memory which must have meaning for the present and the future.

This should be a place of commemoration, it should, therefore, transcend the boundary between cognitive information, historical knowledge, on the one hand, and empathy with the victims, mourning for the dead, on the other – however much the two surely belong together. This memorial – together with the information center – can make it possible for us today and for coming generations to confront the incomprehensible with both head and heart.

What contemporary witnesses can still recount so forcefully today must be conveyed in the future by museums, by art. We are currently in the midst of a generational change, an epochal change, as some are saying: National Socialism, war, and organized genocide are becoming less and less the lived experience of contemporary witnesses and more and more the events of history; they are changing from personal, individually authenticated memories into collective memory conveyed thorough knowledge. The memorial is an expression of this transition.

This is not, as some fear, the end, the lapidary endpoint of our public engagement with our Nazi history. Rather, it transmits this unsettling memory into the cultural memory of the Germans without diminishing its power to unsettle. The memorial will remain a bone of contention; the quarrel over it will continue, of that I am certain. After all, it does not refute all the arguments that have been leveled against it. It does not assert a monopolistic claim to commemoration; the information center makes reference to the actual sites where the murderous events took place and to other commemorative sites. Its dedication remains controversial.

The dedication of such a memorial is surely no occasion for festive celebration. But for me, as the person who commissioned this memorial, it is an occasion to thank all those involved – for the fact that the Bundestag resolution has now been realized.

- The impetus for this memorial came from a civic initiative. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the *Förderkreis* [group of sponsors], represented by Lea Rosh and Eberhard Jäckel – for their patient impatience, for the unswerving, stubborn commitment with which they have shepherded the project to this day.

- My thanks go to the architect Peter Eisenman for his brilliant design and, yes – also for his patience.
- My thanks go to Dagmar von Wilcken, the quiet, sensitive, meticulous designer of the information center.
- My thanks go to the Yad Vashem Remembrance Authority and to all of the other kindred memorial sites that have supported us in so many ways. That Yad Vashem should work with us is surely not a given, it humbles us, it honors us, it sets a challenge for the future.
- My thanks go to the Jewish families, to the Holocaust survivors who opened their personal archives for us and made the testimonies of their lives and suffering available to us.
- My thanks go to the Board of Trustees, the Advisory Council, and the Office of the Foundation for their diligent participation in discussion and hard work.
- And, not least, my thanks go to all those who were involved in the practical realization of the structure: the supervising construction companies, the craftsmen, the construction workers.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is a sculpture that can be entered and walked through, a sculpture that – in my experience – radiates great emotional power; it is an architectural symbol of the incomprehensibility of the crime it commemorates.

It is – in the true sense of the word – an open work of art. Open to the city, to surrounding area into which it flows. Open to its manifold individual uses: this memorial cannot be accessed “collectively,” it individualizes. It generates a sensory/emotional sense of isolation, distress, threat. It forces nothing.

It is my hope that people, also and especially young people of normal sensitivity, will sense this, will feel the memorial’s indefinable expressive power, will be touched by it, and will seek out the information center, moved and questioning. Here, the victims are given names and faces and fates – who can remain unmoved by this! And then people will walk through the field of stelae again and remember the victims.

This is what can be, this is what is intended: not a kind of negative nostalgia, but a commemoration of the victims that obligates us now and in the future: to a culture of humanity, of recognition, of tolerance in a society, in a country, in which we as people can be different without fear.

Source: Wolfgang Thierse, "Rede zur Eröffnung des 'Denkmals für die ermordeten Juden Europas, 10. Mai 2005'" ["Speech at the Dedication of the 'Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, May 10, 2005"] http://www.bundestag.de/aktuell/presse/2005/pz_0505101.html.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap