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Shaping Memory with Monuments:
Diverging Representations of Holocaust Commemoration

By Sarah Trager
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HIST 302 Final Paper
Question

How did the construction of Holocaust memorial and collective memory in Germany and Israel reflect and shape the national identity of each country?

Introduction

This essay examines Holocaust commemoration in contemporary Germany and Israel (1990s-present) by analyzing the correlation between each country’s public memory of the Holocaust and its structural manifestations. In particular, their memorials and museums came to represent each country’s view of the Holocaust. Because both countries have promoted several versions of their national Holocaust narrative since 1945, Yad Vashem and the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” are emblematic of these shifting phases of national memory.

An unimaginable tragedy, the Holocaust left deep imprints on German and Israeli societies. While both countries recognized that a Holocaust memorial would be unable to fully embody the horror victims had experienced, their decision to commemorate victims and survivors, was significant in shaping and reflecting their country’s collective memory of the Holocaust. Sixty years after the war, the two nations experienced significant shifts in this public memory. With the 2005 installation of Berlin’s “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,” Germany reaffirmed its responsibility for Nazi atrocities and declared the memorial to serve as a lasting, overt reminder to Germans to never forget this portion of their national history. That same year, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem re-opened after a ten-year expansion. What once had largely been a tribute to the Jewish heroes and martyrs of the Holocaust, now included exhibits that highlighted victimhood and personal testimonies. The architecture and interior design throughout the museum were carefully crafted to simulate aspects of Jewish suffering as well as convey feelings of isolation, fear, and emptiness—
emotions thought to have been commonly felt by victims\(^1\). Although German-Israeli relations have strengthened considerably in the decades since the Holocaust, it is important for both countries to remember their commitment to victims directly. As Germany and Israel continue to stress the importance of highlighting the Holocaust in their historical narratives, each country’s political leadership hopes that the personal hardships their citizens have endured in struggling to memorialize their involvement in the Holocaust will be a warning to other nations to ‘never forget.’ In doing so, they hope the Holocaust will continue to serve as a deterrent and a universal example of how emotionally, politically, economically, and mentally destructive mass murder can be for generations.

**Memorialization of the Holocaust in Germany**

When World War II ended in 1945, a divided Germany emerged. Thus, memorialization of the Holocaust also became fragmented. Controlled by the USSR in the east and Western allies in the west, Germany developed multiple war narratives. From the 1950s until 1989 when the Berlin wall fell, the communist GDR focused on commemorating German victimhood and fascist persecution of the Communists while West German memory shifted from repression to acknowledgement. The Soviet political leadership convinced East Germans that they had been “victims of the capitalist fascist regime” and were not responsible for the Holocaust.\(^2\) As a result, many individuals denied any personal responsibility for the German crimes because they saw themselves—Communists and workers—as having been the primary victims of Hitler’s regime.\(^3\)

Additionally, this particular narrative led residents to diminish the suffering Jews and other

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this paper, unless otherwise specified, the term, ‘victim,’ will refer to Jewish individuals who perished in the Holocaust.


persecuted groups had experienced in the 1940s. In the 1950s, East Germans were eager to memorialize their victimhood in monuments and memorial plaques identifying sites of fascist persecution. According to German historian Jürgen Kocka, the memorials erected in East Germany during the 1950s “commemorated opponents and victims of fascist rule.” His colleague, Thomas Di Napoli, further argues that these memorials were meant to serve as “a constant reminder and warning to future generations of man’s capacity for evil.” Therefore, while under Communist rule, East Germans framed their historical narrative of World War II and the Holocaust as one of fascist abuse and oppression.

West Germans, however, adopted a contrasting approach to shaping their collective memory of the Holocaust. Residents of the Federal Republic of Germany largely chose to put the past behind them and focus their attention towards rebuilding the state’s infrastructure and developing a thriving economy. This recovery mentality therefore distracted them from confronting their involvement in the war and the atrocities many of them had likely committed as members or supporters of the Nazi party. By concentrating on the present and not the past, Wulf Kansteiner suggests, West Germans were able to distance themselves from the Holocaust. It became easier to continue this public silence throughout the 1950s as several West Germans began to embrace the western influences of an allied occupation, mainly capitalism and the free market. Overwhelmed by their experiences in the war, West Germans were desperate to “lead a normal life” and many of them, albeit to their detriment, believed that repressing their

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4 Wüstenberg and Art, 75.
7 Di Napoli, 255.
8 Kansteiner, 111.
traumatized past might ensure the material stability of their burgeoning state’s future.⁹ This repression created a generation haunted by their crimes and traumatized by the burden of concealing their memories of the war.

Although the 1950s was an era in which West Germans maintained silence about their possible involvement in Nazi crimes, it was not a silent time. Like their eastern neighbors, West Germans too believed they had been victims of the war. West Germans often portrayed themselves as victims of Nazi manipulation, claiming that they had been seduced by National Socialism.¹⁰

Throughout the 1960s-1980s, collective memory of the Holocaust in West and East Germany had diverging trajectories. East Germans continued to denounce Nazi fascism and framed their narrative of the war as an ideological and class conflict between National Socialists and those opposed to the Regime. It was not until the late 1980s that East Germans publicly acknowledged their Nazi past, specifically in the context of committing crimes against the Jews.¹¹ On the other side of the wall, West Germans had experienced several phases of public memory. During the 1960s and more so in the 1970s, the West German government and university students publicly exposed Nazi crimes. With the FRG’s broadcast of the Eichmann trial in 1961 and the student movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, Nazis became the main culprits for the War’s atrocities.¹² Students argued that the Nazis were the main perpetrators and not the general German population. Additionally, West Germans believed Eichmann was guilty and as a Nazi, should be exposed for his crimes. In this way, they had begun to publicly acknowledge that crimes had been committed, yet they were still hesitant to assume personal

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¹⁰ Wüstenberg and Art, 76; Kocka, 74.
¹¹ Kocka, 81.
responsibility. It was not until the 1979 broadcast of the American mini-series, *Holocaust*, that West Germans admitted collective guilt in mistreating Jews during the War.\(^\text{13}\) The 1980s thus became a decade where German civilians acknowledged personal guilt for the Holocaust.

During Germany’s transition to reunification in the late 1980s-early 1990s, public discussion of the Holocaust and German guilt became a prominent topic in national politics and the media. In 1988, German journalist Lea Rosh, speaking on behalf of her social movement, *Perspektive Berlin*, advocated for a national memorial to commemorate the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The organization’s members felt that the Jews deserved their own monument because “no other victim group had been persecuted as massively or as fervently as the Jews, and that anti-Semitism had been Hitler’s central and indeed programmatic mode.”\(^\text{14}\) Although other persecuted groups like the Roma and Sinti were angry that their victimization had been overlooked, *Perspektive Berlin* feared that if the monument were to include all victims of the Holocaust, it would diminish the memorial’s significance.\(^\text{15}\) In 1999, the Bundestag decided to build a memorial in the center of Berlin to commemorate the Holocaust’s Jewish victims. This political choice demonstrated a significant shift in Germany’s public memory.\(^\text{16}\) Their “willingness to look the awful truth of the past straight in the eye” indicated sincere progress that could not be understated.\(^\text{17}\) Historians and academics alike attribute this shift in collective memory in the 1990s to the chronological distance from the Holocaust the majority of Germans were afforded. Having the Holocaust be a part of their national history and not their personal

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\(^{13}\) Wüstenberg and Art, 77.


\(^{15}\) Ibid.


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
history made it easier for postwar generations to examine and debate when they did not have to claim personal guilt. Within the past ten years, Germans have openly shifted their perspective from guilt to responsibility\textsuperscript{18} since the majority of citizens were not alive or too young during the war to claim individual responsibility for Nazi behaviors; therefore, they can only reflect on how memory of the Holocaust was handled after the war.\textsuperscript{19} Because these recent generations had not been directly involved in committing Nazi crimes, they were inclined to learn more about their country’s history and understand why it had been buried initially.

While some twenty-first century Germans are acknowledging national responsibility, others are characterizing themselves as ‘non-German Germans’ to seek distance from their nation’s stigmatized identity as Holocaust perpetrators. With this new identity, these individuals are able to argue that as Germans who had no involvement in the war (too young) they should not be stigmatized for their country’s past transgressions.\textsuperscript{20}

This reversion to 1970s West German sentiments is common among individual citizens, but it is not indicative of Germany’s national Holocaust narrative. In January 1996, Bundespräsident Herzog delivered a speech commemorating victims of National Socialism. In his address, he spoke strongly about the benefit of memory. He said, “Remembrance gives us strength, since it helps to keep us from going astray…It is our collective responsibility to keep the memory alive in order to overcome evil and to understand the precious nature of democracy

\textsuperscript{18} Guilt: Acknowledgement of one’s personal involvement in committing (Nazi) crimes; Responsibility: acknowledgement that the Holocaust was initiated and implemented by Germans. Control over one’s actions. Not forced by any other nation or group to implement the ‘Final Solution.’


and human rights.”

Herzog also recognized that Jews had suffered persecution in Germany well before the death camps and that it was because of German policies that other countries had been influenced to mistreat the Jews too. While he was not the first German politician to publicly decry Germany’s Nazi past, this moment was significant because it reaffirmed Germany’s commitment to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and admitting guilt for their unnecessary deaths.

“Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe”

After a twelve year planning process, construction began on the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in 2000. While it would not be the first Holocaust memorial in Germany, it would be the first one fully funded and supported by the Federal Government. The Bundestag reportedly spent over fifty-three million Euros on the installation. The memorial was designed by American architect, Peter Eisenmann, and it opened on May 10, 2005 with a dedication ceremony that was broadcasted on national German television and invited over 1,000 guests.

Initial praise for the Berlin Memorial commended its “use of abstract space to symbolize tragedy without prodding or preening.” One journalist described it as “the most extraordinarily informative and affecting display about its subject I have seen.” Additional praise came from Holocaust survivor, Sabina van der Linden, during the memorial’s dedication ceremony, when

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25 Ibid.
she stated that “the monument doesn’t mean today’s Germans are guilty of the deeds of their parents and grandparents, but that they have taken responsibility for the memory of their elders’ crimes.”

Comprised of 2,711 rectangular stelae of different lengths, the memorial’s concrete columns range from fifty centimeters to five meters in height. Arranged in straight rows and tilting at irregular angles, the installation was intended to be interactive. It was designed for visitors to become disoriented as they walk amongst the off-kilter stelae. The uneven pillars and slanted pavement have created a setting in which it is impossible to know what comes next. Eisenmann once explained how this artistic choice aimed to evoke “the fear that Jews felt as they were caught up in the Nazis’ killing machine.” However, he clarified, “the enormity and scale of the horror of the Holocaust is such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate...Our memorial attempts to present a new idea of memory as distinct from nostalgia...We can only know the past today through a manifestation in the present.” In accordance with this abstract theme, one brochure credits the “lack of inscriptions on the slabs to be a reference to the vast numbers of nameless victims.”

While it is true that it is impossible to fully encapsulate the horror of the Holocaust in one image, the structure should be able to convey a clear message; however, many believe it does not. Shortly after the Memorial’s opening, members of the Jewish community publicly criticized the memorial’s failure to properly promote the design’s message. These individuals were...

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26 James, 2.
27 Carrier, 102.
outraged that the “memorial bears no signs; there is no marker indicating the title or even the purpose of this massive memorial...an approaching visitor, unaware of the existence of such a monument, could remain bewildered about its purpose, meaning, and intended commemoration of the victims.”31 They were afraid that the educational site would only attract an informed, self-selecting group of historians, academics, and Jewish tourists and thus never reach the remaining majority demographic to its elusiveness. Without prior knowledge of the structure, they argued, the underground information centre—which is the central commemorative piece—is overlooked and the concrete slabs become open to interpretation.32

Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Berlin Memorial, Ulrich Baumann, agrees that the information center is a critical companion to the Memorial’s artistic representation. While he understands that Eisenmann was confronted with a difficult project, he believes this inability to represent all aspects of the Holocaust should not excuse the Foundation from educating its visitors. In a telephone interview, Dr. Baumann repeatedly stated the significance of the monument’s complementary underground information center. Only four small rooms, the information center is meant to contextualize Eisenmann’s visual representation.33 Baumann explained that this exhibition chronicles German Jewry before the war, its destruction during the Nazi regime, and victims’ stories. He clarified that although the center was not a museum, it served to educate and inform visitors with varying levels of Holocaust knowledge. The purpose of the center was “not to simulate historical events as theater, but rather concentrate on individuals’ experiences” in order for visitors to truly understand, through these personal

32 Ibid.
33 Dr. Ulrich Baumann. Interview by author. Phone interview. Wellesley, Mass./Berlin, Germany, December 6, 2012.
accounts, the impact of persecution and loss. Baumann’s colleague, Research Associate Adam Kerpel-Fronius, also emphasized the center’s significance. He argued, “the information center is a strong addition because it enables visitors to remember that the Holocaust occurred all across Europe and that those Jews who were victimized by it had families, occupations, homes, and hobbies. The exhibition humanizes them. It moves away from statistics and confronts visitors with the reality that there were people behind these numbers.”

Since the Memorial’s opening in 2005, the international community has offered its own interpretations about Germany’s Jewish memorial. In particular, many scholars have been intrigued by its location. Originally planned to be built at the former Gestapo headquarters, the monument rests on a less controversial space, the Ministerial Gardens, out of respect for the other victims of Nazi persecution who would not be represented in this memorial. What once was ‘no-man’s land’ between East and West Berlin has now become a landmark of unified remembrance. By selecting this neutral territory, the two states have converged to create a communal public memory representative of their national identity as a unified country.

More superficially, commentators like Joachim Schlör opine that the memorial’s centrality in Berlin serves as a reminder to Germans on a daily basis that the Holocaust is

34 Ibid.
36 Wiedemer, 144-46. Roma & Sintis were afraid that if the Jewish memorial were to be erected at Gestapo HQ, those Roma & Sintis who were murdered there would be neglected and forgotten. Note: Advocates for Roma, Sintis, & homosexuals were outraged that their suffering had not been recognized in the monument. Due to their discontent, the Fed. Govt. constructed Holocaust memorials commemorating each persecuted community (Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted Under Nazism—May 2008; Memorial for the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered in National Socialism—October 2012).
prominent in their history and should never be forgotten nor buried in their national narrative.\[^{38}\] Conversely and perhaps unintentionally, the memorial’s central location has also become an overt allusion to the tragic reality that many German citizens were aware of Hitler’s plan to exterminate the Jews, yet remained idle bystanders throughout the war. Just as civilians overlooked the blatant Nazi crimes, so too is it common for current Germans to pass by the monument without proper notice.\[^{39}\]

Academic Brigitte Sion would agree. In her review of the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” in 2010, Dr. Sion is heavily critical of the recent installation. She argues that the “memorial fails to perform remembrance but succeeds as a public artwork—the Information Centre involuntarily becomes the site of remembrance.”\[^{40}\] She continues to lambaste the monument’s architectural design by asserting, “because the memorial does not overtly commemorate the Jewish victims, many tourists also overlook the purpose of the installation and visit it to witness architectural art, thus detracting from Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.”\[^{41}\]

Sion’s observations are certainly accurate. When I visited the memorial in 2009, people were using the space as if it held no significance. Couples were picnicking on the lower stelae, children were running through the memorial playing tag, and many others leaned against the columns listening to music or reading. To the German public, this memorial was a place to relax and for recreation. Besides for those who visit the memorial to learn about the Holocaust, Germans misuse the installation. In doing so, it is as if Berliners are trivializing Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. Although Germans know that it is a memorial which commemorates these Jewish victims, and they recognize its importance, many Berliners have failed to use the

\[^{39}\] Baumann, December 6, 2012.
\[^{40}\] Sion, 243.
\[^{41}\] Ibid., 250.
installation appropriately. One could argue that their mistreatment of the space is a direct affront to the Jewish community. This memorial should not be used as a place of leisure, but rather a space the public engages with to further their understanding of the genocide and to honor those who have been murdered.

Similar frustrations have been expressed in discussions of the memorial’s title. Journalists like Richard Brody would agree that the structure and its title fail to present a clear message. Frustrated by its elusive generality, Brody wonders which Jews they are referring to. Clearly mocking, he asks, “which murdered Jews? When? Where? Does the list include Rosa Luxemburg, who was killed in Berlin by rightist thugs in 1919, or the foreign minister Walther Rathenau, also killed here by rightist thugs, in 1922?” He goes on to clarify that “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.”

While Brody’s contention is valid, the memorial’s employees provided an alternate explanation that is also reasonable. When asked why the word, Holocaust, was not included in the title, Kerpel-Fronius replied, “I hate that word. Holocaust. It makes the act sound mythical or biblical, like it didn’t happen in our lifetime. It really happened and not far away from here. By using the word ‘murdered’, the title clearly states what occurred. Jews from all over Europe were murdered and this is a memorial to them.” Baumann added to this explanation by highlighting the title’s directness. He said, “the naming was part of the citizens’ movement. Lea Rosh and her

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
supporters felt it was important to name the crime so that Germans would remember what happened. You can’t hide behind the term, ‘murdered’, it’s too overt. Too direct.”

Although Baumann and Kerpel-Fronius were convincing, ultimately, the Memorial has failed to present an unabridged version of the truth. While it is commendable that the memorial was funded by German money and conceived by German intellectuals, it should not be enough that it exists. Considering the nation’s turbulent history and recent reunification, it is understandable and significant that the monument was actualized so soon thereafter; yet it is not enough to have a memorial. Constructing this site was a symbol of Germans taking responsibility for the Holocaust, but this sentiment should have also been reflected in its title. For those unfamiliar with the events of the crime, Germany and Nazism is not exposed. With a vague title, the memorial’s location holds no significance. It thus becomes a memorial to commemorate all Jews ever murdered in Europe. It requires prior context and hides behind the assumption that knowledge of the Holocaust is universal; and as Brody suggests, this dangerous assumption can lead to forgetting the past. Yes, it is true that this is not a Holocaust site, but rather a memorial solely for Jewish victims of the Holocaust, yet the title should still have some reference to the genocide. While it is admirable that the Germans themselves chose to erect this memorial and attempted to avoid a euphemistic title, the planning committee should have been more thoughtful about calling attention to the monument’s relevance and emphasize why it was being built in Germany.

Despite the memorial’s initial conflicts, Baumann and Kerpel-Fronius reported that it is now well received amongst Germans. While the majority of visitors are school groups and

45 Baumann, December 6, 2012.
tourists, both employees asserted that the exhibition is receiving record-high crowds. “It is becoming more accepted by visitors than ever before,” Kerpel-Fronius remarked, “People leave feeling impressed. They see the sense behind it and know building it was the right thing to do.” These observations suggest that Germany is facing its ugly past, albeit gradually, in a self-initiated attempt to reconcile with its Nazi history while simultaneously working to honor their victims. Hopefully, they will continue to prioritize this theme of educating succeeding generations about the nation’s tainted heritage so that future Germans will contextualize their country’s political, economic, and social motives and further comprehend how their national identity has been shaped by this colossal crime.

Memorialization of the Holocaust in Israel

On the other side of the spectrum, the victim nation was determined to build its own Jewish state soon after the war. Eager to prevent future Jewish persecution in exile, Zionists strongly advocated for a return to the biblical homeland. With an ever-increasing influx of immigrants and a yearning to establish itself, Israel recognized its necessity to frame the country’s Holocaust narrative as one of courage and perseverance. In an effort to encourage pioneers to cultivate the land and its infrastructure, 1950s Israeli political discourse concerning the Holocaust focused on myths of heroism and martyrdom. “The perception of the Holocaust commonly held at the time by the media, in political rhetoric, and even in educational messages was one-sided, simplistic, and self-righteous: active resistance, in the form of revolt or guerilla fighting, was considered the only kind worthy of commendation.”

46 Baumann estimates 50% are German and 50% are international tourists.
47 Kerpel-Fronius, December 6, 2012.
49 Ibid., 40.
50 Ibid., 45.
Jews were persecuted as a result of living in exile, Israel framed its public Holocaust memory in opposition to the perceivably weak, defenseless Diaspora. Zionists strongly believed that no Jew should live in exile and be subjected to atrocities such as the ones Holocaust victims had experienced.\(^{51}\) By promoting this argument as a justification for the Jewish state, Zionists dictated the initial framework for the country’s national identity.

In the 1950s, not all Holocaust survivors were viewed as passive and willing participants in their own persecution. Particularly, the rebel fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were lauded for their courage and bravery in the face of adversity. The leader of the movement, Mordechai Anielewicz was canonized as a martyr. Israel’s ruling socialist labor party, MAPAI, in fact used Anielewicz to memorialize Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.\(^{52}\)

There was a clear distinction between public and private memory in Israel in the 1950s. As has been mentioned, public memory strove to shape Israeli identity in opposition to the largely passive, weak Jews of the Holocaust. The Zionists framed this rhetoric to legitimize Israel’s existence as a safe haven for the Jewish nation.\(^{53}\) They highlighted stories of heroism and armed resistance, like Anielewicz’s, hoping that Israel’s pioneers would relate to these experiences.\(^{54}\) And publicly, society did. Recent immigrants focused on assimilating into their new homes and vowed to protect the holy land.

Privately, however, Holocaust survivors were inevitably struggling. Their trauma and psychological terrors were saved for intimate, personal conversations. Grief and mourning were

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\(^{53}\) Shapira, 47.

kept private because as new members of the Jewish state, Holocaust survivors, along with all other Israeli citizens, were expected to focus on cultivation and assimilation.\textsuperscript{55} To clarify, while survivors were obviously grappling with their grief internally and perhaps amongst friends and family, bereavement and mourning rarely arose as themes in early versions of Israel’s public, political memory of the Holocaust.

**Yad Vashem**

Conceived in 1953, Israel’s national Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, became a physical representation of the country’s collective memory that political rhetoric had been working tirelessly to shape. With the passage of the “Martyrs’ and Heroes Remembrance (Yad Vashem) Law” in 1953, Israel recognized the importance of chronicling the Holocaust. The law stipulated that the memorial would commemorate “the six million members of the Jewish people who died a martyr’s death at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators.”\textsuperscript{56} Additional language in the statute cited words like “fortitude”, “rebelled”, and “heroism.” Religious leaders and politicians like Rabbi Mordechai Nurock were interviewed at the Knesset to respond to the law’s enactment. Rabbi Nurock praised the law saying, this new decree is significant because Yad Vashem will enable future generations to draw strength from the Jewish martyrs of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{57}

The memorial was chosen to sit west of the national military cemetery at Har Herzl as an extension of the site where Israel’s fallen heroes and leaders have been buried.\textsuperscript{58} The original complex, which opened in 1957, included archives of recorded victim testimonies, a scholarly

\textsuperscript{55} Shapira, 50-1, 53. This author argues that “One’s personal, private bereavement was considered something that had to be hidden—pull yourself together and get on with your life.” (50)


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 9.

library, and administrative buildings. At that time, the museum displayed exhibits on Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto, the uprisings in Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps, and the struggle of the survivors to get to Palestine. These exhibitions were meant to demonstrate that Israel must exist to prevent future persecution in exile; and more so, to distinguish modern Jews from those who had succumbed to the gas chambers.\(^{59}\) Five years later in 1962, the ‘Avenue of the Righteous’ was dedicated. This section of the complex honored gentiles who had courageously aided their Jewish neighbors. In 1973, a more complete historical exhibition opened. The museum featured heroes of the Holocaust with Nathan Rapoport’s sculpture, ‘Warsaw Ghetto Uprising’, in the ‘Wall of Remembrance.’\(^{60}\) The institution expanded again in 1981 when it opened an art gallery displaying Holocaust artwork produced by Jewish victims and survivors.\(^{61}\)

Within the museum’s first thirty-five years, it was very much a work in progress. Originally serving as a symbol of heroism and an educational resource, Yad Vashem would go onto revise its message at the turn of the twenty-first century.\(^{62}\)

**“Yad Vashem Expansion” (1995-2005)**

By the time Yad Vashem announced plans to renovate in the early 1990s, Holocaust survivors had become more willing to “expose their private memory” and insisted that Israeli society was now capable of sharing their burden.\(^{63}\) Since the museum’s inauguration in 1957, victims had been sharing their stories with relatives, school groups, and media outlets for some time. They believed it was important to chronicle the atrocities of the Holocaust so that future

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\(^{60}\) *Yad Vashem Magazine*, 24-5.

\(^{61}\) Young, 250.


\(^{63}\) Shapira, 54.
Jews would be conscious of their history. Past treatment of Holocaust survivors in Israel had been impatient, rejecting, and insensitive. In an attempt to somehow atone for this and to further recognize their trauma, Israeli society encouraged survivors to document their pain and struggles in a permanent exhibit in the museum. The museum’s board recognized that many survivors were dying and thus, their stories would be lost. Therefore, it was crucial that these testimonies be recorded as soon as possible. Despite a conscious effort to document survivors’ stories, Museum Chairman and Chief Curator, Avner Shalev, admitted that some accounts would inevitably get buried with their storytellers. “With the number of survivors dwindling,” he opines, “a 21st-century museum would ultimately "have to talk about the Holocaust without [their voices].”

After a ten-year renovation that began in 1995, the new Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum opened on March 15, 2005. What would eventually cost $100 million—with the main building itself costing $56 million—this project was a massive undertaking. Designed by Canadian-Israeli Moshe Safdie and Israeli artist, Dorit Harel, the refurbished museum shifted its focus from heroism to victimhood. As someone who had contributed designs to the memorial since the late 1980s, Safdie was an obvious choice. His most recent installation at the museum, would be conscious of their history. Past treatment of Holocaust survivors in Israel had been impatient, rejecting, and insensitive. In an attempt to somehow atone for this and to further recognize their trauma, Israeli society encouraged survivors to document their pain and struggles in a permanent exhibit in the museum. The museum’s board recognized that many survivors were dying and thus, their stories would be lost. Therefore, it was crucial that these testimonies be recorded as soon as possible. Despite a conscious effort to document survivors’ stories, Museum Chairman and Chief Curator, Avner Shalev, admitted that some accounts would inevitably get buried with their storytellers. “With the number of survivors dwindling,” he opines, “a 21st-century museum would ultimately "have to talk about the Holocaust without [their voices].”

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the Children’s Holocaust Memorial (1987), had focused on personal suffering the museum intended to highlight in the new wing of the building.\textsuperscript{70} Soon after the museum commissioned Safdie for the project, Avner Shalev endorsed the architect, saying, we hope Safdie will “breathe life into the horrific events by presenting them through the individual experiences of some 90 survivors because there were not just six million victims, there were six million individual murders.”\textsuperscript{71}

The new museum building is a triangular-like prism which was largely constructed underground to preserve the pastoral landscape of the Jerusalem hillside.\textsuperscript{72} Visitors begin on the southern end of the mountain where Safdie has created a sealed enclosure, symbolizing the terrors of the Holocaust. On the northern end, the structure extends over the landscape, inviting natural light into the building, and symbolizing rebirth.\textsuperscript{73} Visitors travel through the museum chronologically beginning with “The Doomed Jewish World: 1900-1939” and ending with the “Hall of Names.”\textsuperscript{74} Throughout the museum, there are trenches filled with historical artifacts or interactive technology that make it impossible for visitors to skip over any section of the exhibit. In addition to controlling the pace of the museum, the trenches’ placement signifies the course of history as Jews were unable to avoid these phases of anti-Semitism, the Nazi regime, the Final Solution, Refugee status and so on.\textsuperscript{75}

The new installation also features authentic artifacts to reconstruct and replicate certain historical moments. Dorit Harel sought to provide visitors with a more honest, albeit uncomfortable, experience in order to educate, inform, remember, grieve, and honor the victims.

\textsuperscript{70} Goldman, 112.
\textsuperscript{71} Dean, 112.
\textsuperscript{73} Esther Zandberg. “Stealing the Shoah [Yad Vashem, Jerusalem].” \textit{Blueprint}, 230 (May 2005), 44.
\textsuperscript{74} Harel, 17.
\textsuperscript{75} Zandberg, 44.
The exhibit’s largest installation is a piece of the brick road with rail tracks and lampposts running through the Ghetto section of the museum. Harel wanted to place visitors on the main street of the Warsaw Ghetto while learning about its history so that visitors could better empathize with the Ghetto’s inmates.\textsuperscript{76} She also installed original bunk beds from the Majdanek extermination camp; and on the grounds outside, a train car, that had once transported Jews to the camps, was added.\textsuperscript{77}

Although Harel sought to use original material objects, she was not interested in traumatizing the museum’s patrons. Aware that the building’s fire sprinklers might evoke visions of the gas chambers, the designers concealed the sprinklers behind windowsills and in crevices.\textsuperscript{78}

In addition to these artifacts, artwork by victims has been placed throughout the main exhibit to expose their struggle and hardship throughout the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{79} These creative touches, especially, focus on the personal. For example, confiscated belongings such as silver, Judaica, books, and shoes are displayed throughout the museum; and photographs found in Jewish homes and video clips of survivor interviews haunt the walls.

The last room and probably most poignant, the Hall of Names, instantly overwhelms the senses. Designed to place value on the individuality of each victim, the room’s walls are covered with photographs of Holocaust victims. With a ceiling ten meters high, the extensive collection of images exposes the magnitude of destruction. Visitors are confronted by the sheer immensity of the Holocaust and the personal faces of the victims. By humanizing the six million, the museum imparts to viewers a deeper understanding of the genocide. Intended to be a multi-purpose space—art installation, historical exhibit, archive, and memorial—the hall contains 600

\textsuperscript{76} Harel, 42.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Dean, 112.
\textsuperscript{79} Shalev, 58.
photographs, ‘Pages of Testimony’ (documented biographical information on lives and deaths of Holocaust victims), and a pool of water located in the center of the room which reflects the victim’s photographs covering the walls.\footnote{Ibid., 60.} Because only about three million names are chronicled in the project, the reflecting pool commemorates the unknown victims not pictured and not recorded in the archive.\footnote{Michele Costanzo. “Testimonianza Intensa: Holocaust History Museum, Jerusalem.” \textit{L’Arca}, 208 (November 2005), 28.}

Avner Shalev explains the design’s significance saying, “If the Washington museum serves as the Holocaust's Thucydides, its historian, then the new Yad Vashem is its Homer, its poet and storyteller, enlivening the defining moments of a culture through the trials of individuals.”\footnote{Dean, 112.} Evidenced by the symbolism infused in the architecture and the breadth of information presented, the new museum thoughtfully commemorates European Jewry. At a time when many young Jews perhaps had no familial connection to the Holocaust, the renovation gave voice to the victims. Visitors are now exposed to the human element through testimonies, photographs, shoes, and books once owned by Holocaust victims in hope that they might become future preservers of Jewish memory. By filling the museum with everyday objects left behind, visitors are instantly discomfited by their familiarity. Viewing the hair piled high or the letters written to loved ones, the Holocaust becomes tangible. To be sure, visitors arrive at the museum acknowledging that the Holocaust happened, but there is something harrowing about standing in a room filled with shoes of people knowing that they had been gassed to death. In this way, Yad Vashem presents unaltered relics that speak for themselves.

As a visitor to the new exhibition, I was personally struck by these historical objects. Much like a time capsule holds relics of the past, so too is Yad Vashem a Jewish time capsule of
the Holocaust. Its immense collection of confiscated belongings, shoes collected at the Concentration Camps, and letters written to loved ones has enabled the exhibition to become a genuine and thoughtful tribute to European Jewry and to the victims of the Holocaust. During my visit, perhaps the reality of the Holocaust was most evident to me upon seeing these objects. Of course, I believe the Holocaust occurred and in doing so, I have sought to educate myself about this historical period; yet for me, history has always been an intangible, factual narrative of the past until I am visually confronted by it. I do not truly process that it has happened until I see a visual marker of it. This is why the Yad Vashem renovation was particularly impressive. The artwork by Holocaust victims and survivors, the mangled chassis displayed in one of the trenches, and the Concentration Camp striped prisoner uniforms were a few examples of historical objects that made the Holocaust that much more tangible for me. As remnants left behind, they will shortly become some of the only markers of the Holocaust. With the number of living survivors decreasing each year, there will soon be no witnesses to share their stories. In thirty years, historical objects like the chassis or the train car will become part of the only existing proof that the Holocaust occurred. It is critical that institutions like Yad Vashem continue to preserve and display these artifacts in order to reiterate that the Holocaust really happened. In doing so, they will be able to confront future generations with the past and continue to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

**Comparative Analysis**

Berlin’s “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” and Israel’s recent Yad Vashem expansion share several similarities despite their contrasting perspectives. Physically, they are both constructed from concrete to emphasize the cold and isolating mistreatment of the Jews. The structural choice to use concrete might also allude to each memorial’s permanence as well as
the permanence of the Holocaust in each country’s collective memory. Additionally, both memorials focus on portraying the victims’ experiences through personal accounts and dramatic imagery. This inclination to highlight individual victims has become a popular approach to representing memories of the Holocaust in the past twenty years. Before the Berlin Memorial, the new Yad Vashem, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, commemorative sites such as concentrations camps were largely inaccessible to a majority of the public. These innovative memorials, therefore, brought Holocaust commemoration and education to wider audiences less interested in making an effort to visit original sites. Berlin’s information center and Israel’s new exhibition have created environments where visitors can connect and sympathize with the Jewish victims in an intimate setting. Germany’s downfall in doing so, however, is that it has avoided including itself more prominently in the narrative because its monument commemorates the victims, yet artistically demonstrates no allusion to who killed them. Conversely, Yad Vashem devotes several rooms to the history of Nazism and relevant propaganda, even though its main focus is on Jewish suffering. From the uneven paths in Berlin to the reflecting pool in Israel, both sites are infused with purpose. The architecture creates a communicative space emblematic of suffering, isolation, and personal experience. Both designs have created powerful spaces, yet their supplemental exhibitions provide context and intensifies one’s experience.

Germany and Israel, in some ways, underwent similar phases of collective memory. In the 1950s, both countries were outwardly silent about Jewish suffering. Whether they perpetuated myths of heroism or omitted key details from their narratives, Germany and Israel both framed their initial Holocaust memory so as to protect their reputation and defend their character. Over time, discussions of the Holocaust gained prevalence in national discourse and
the focus shifted to mourning Jewish victims and in Germany’s case, also accepting responsibility. However, unlike Yad Vashem, the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” is not entirely representative of Germany’s current collective memory. On all accounts, Germany has voiced culpability for the Nazi genocide and has rightfully paid its reparations. Why then does the Berlin memorial not display this more fully? Germany’s Holocaust memorial in the center of its capital city is a monumental act of progress, but the memorial has yet to be entirely representative of the significant progress Germany has made in reshaping its Holocaust narrative.

**Conclusion**

Constructing a national Holocaust memorial proved to be therapeutic for both Germany and Israel. Through this process, both nations were able to come to terms with the past. Specifically, Germany demonstrated its desire to make peace with the Jewish community and Israel allowed its people to mourn publicly. Their respective memorials enabled both countries to shape thoughtful and accurate Holocaust narratives. Although both countries have made considerable progress, collective memories are always vulnerable to shifting social attitudes. Were Germany or Israel ever to revert to past national narratives of the Holocaust, namely silence and repression, their country’s national identity would once again be manipulated in order to deal with the past. In doing so, all of the genuine efforts both countries have made to honor the memories of the victims would be futile. Hopefully, Germany and Israel will continue to handle this aspect of their respective national identities cautiously and with respect for the Jewish victims.
Appendix

“Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe”

aboveground monument

underground information center
Yad Vashem Expansion

Main corridor with trench displaying chassis of a truck from the Majdanek Concentration Camp

Hall of Names
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