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Natasha Goldman’s *Memory Passages* is a fascinating study of Holocaust memorial art in Germany (East, West, and united Germany) and the United States. Its fascination lies, first, in the sheer range of memorials covered, from the earliest—what became Nathan Rapoport's Memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, installed in 1976 but its development dating back to 1948, according to Goldman—to some of the most recent ones, notably the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, dedicated in 2005. Among the other Holocaust memorials Goldman discusses are Will Lammert's *Die Tragende* (Burdened Woman) at Ravensbrück Memorial Site in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) from 1959; Rapoport’s unjustly neglected 1964 memorial in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the United States; Margrit Kahl's 1988 Synagogue Memorial at the Bornplatz in Hamburg, in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany); Alfred Hrdlicka's 1986 Countermemorial at Hamburg-Dammtor in the FRG; and memorials inside the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) created by Joel Shapiro, Sol LeWitt, Ellsworth Kelly, and Richard Serra, all dating from 1993.

Second, Goldman’s study is fascinating because it focuses on the broader visual and textual fields of Holocaust memorials, as well as their particular aesthetics, and thus situates them within art-historical developments, the biographies of the sculptors, and the shifting political perceptions of what was deemed desirable or not desirable to write on the plaques. As Goldman rightly observes, too often memorials are ignored or even dismissed in the assessment of artists' oeuvres, as if they are somehow of less artistic value. Memorials often do not name their creators. Once standing, a memorial focuses on something the public is encouraged to remember, so much so that mentioning who actually designed and made the memorial might seem to risk compromising that focus. Add to this the constantly voiced concern that the Holocaust is “unrepresentable” and one has a further reason for the neglect of Holocaust memorials in art-historical research.
As an example of her approach, Goldman explores the history of Lammert’s sculpture Die Tragende (unfortunately misspelled as “Der Tragende” in the image caption on page 17) in the context of Lammert’s own personal and artistic biography, enabling her to reveal expressionist features in this sculpture and thus show that socialist realism was not always the discourse of GDR public art, not even in the 1950s. She then reveals that, in Lammert’s original draft and maquette for Die Tragende, a group of standing figures was included at the base of the statue that did not feature in the final sculpture as it was erected in 1959, presumably because this huddled group was seen by officiarm as too hopeless—in contrast to the woman bearing another prisoner in her arms in an apparent act of defiance and solidarity. Lammert was married to a Jewish Communist. Thus, Die Tragende probably represents the courage of the Jewish Communist Olga Benario, a prisoner at Ravensbrück. Lammert created this memorial at a time when explicitly referring Jewish suffering and resistance was uncommon in the GDR. Goldman implies that Benario was not acknowledged in the GDR but she was regularly commemorated at Ravensbrück and even had streets and schools named after her. Goldman’s further exploration of the history of Lammert’s original design illustrates that the group of figures he omitted from the Ravensbrück statue became, in the mid-1980s, a post-expressionist memorial to the Berlin Jews deported from a Jewish old people’s home in Große Hamburger Straße. Shortly before the end of the GDR, it became possible to represent Jewish suffering more openly, with the emaciated figures now signifying the ultimate fate of the deportees.

In her analysis of the texts of West German Holocaust memorials dedicated to the memory of the Night of Broken Glass or Reichskristallnacht, Goldman points to a certain reluctance of creators of memorial plaques to use these terms to describe the events of November 9, 1938, and to the creators’ tendency to use passive language in order to avoid references to the perpetrators. Yet, over time, things have changed. She demonstrates these changes through her discussion of the history of specific memorials, such as the memorial by Gerson Fehrenbach at the site of the former Münchner Straße synagogue in Berlin, erected in early 1963. Initially, the Construction Committee that oversaw the placing of the memorial decided on vague text—“Here stood the synagogue built by the Jewish community in 1909”—which says nothing about the history of the building under Nazism (p. 44). Not until 1988 was further text added specifying that the synagogue was not destroyed during the Night of Broken Glass because of its location in a residential building and that, following the expulsion and annihilation of Jewish citizens, it lost its function and was torn down in 1956.

Over time, memorial texts in the FRG told more and more of the truth, though, as Goldman rightly observes, the 1988 plaque on the Münchner Straße memorial still avoids stating who did the murdering or the tearing down. Goldman’s portrayal of a shamefully belated evolution in East and even West German memorials toward openly commemorating the deportation and murder of Jews (rather than only the destruction of November 9, 1938) is striking. There are also other examples one could point to, such as the memorial at the site of the former Levetzowstraße synagogue in Berlin, from where Jews were deported during the Second World War. The first iteration of this memorial from 1960 states that, from the synagogue during National Socialism, many “of our Jewish citizens had to begin their last journey,” which is as vague as it could get.[1] Only in 1988 was a new memorial complex added that listed the actual transports and the ghettos and annihilation camps to which the Jews were deported.

There are some occasional imprecisions in Goldman’s account. While making a valuable distinction between the German words for “monument” (Denkmal) and “memorial” (Mahnmal), she suggests that the component Mal refers to the
number of times something happens, but, in this context, Mal means “mark” or “sign,” not “times” (p. 5). At the start of chapter 3, a slip of the pen leads to a mix-up between the GDR and FRG, with the GDR being credited with the “Wirtschaftswunder” (economic miracle) and the FRG accused of placing blame for Nazism on capitalism (p. 80). There are some misspellings of names here and there, and Goldman claims that the Night of Broken Glass was also known as the Night of the Long Knives, which actually refers to the 1934 Röhm putsch (p. 46). Mistakes happen, of course, and I point these out in the hope that they can be corrected in a new edition of this excellent book. I especially recommend the concluding chapter, in which Goldman provides a fascinating overview of the oeuvre of Serra, who planned the Berlin Holocaust memorial along with Peter Eisenman, before Serra withdrew, and created a number of important memorials in the United States, Canada, and Germany, all of which Goldman analyzes. She succeeds in reinscribing Serra’s contribution into our understanding of the Berlin memorial by outlining the importance of movement by walking in his conceptualization of memorial art. Goldman provides the most insightful and original analysis of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial I have read in many years.

Note


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