

ICMEMO 2015 Munich CONFERENCE

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

Guy Stern

In 1962, I became, so to speak, a short-time resident of Munich, while a Fulbright and Bollingen Research Professor at the Ludwig Maximilian University. At that time earnest attempts were being made to chronicle the recent past, but for the most part their appeal was to academicians and researchers. For example there was the tiny Monacensia Library in the Schwanthalerstraße, where Richard Lemp, the director of the Manuscript Division, almost single-handedly acquired key documents – and had to host Putzi Hanfstaengl, at one time a confidante of Hitler, as a steady visitor. There also was the Institute for Contemporary History, charged with exploring and chronicling Nazi history. Last and not least, the Bavarian parliament founded a College for Politics, dedicated to general reeducation towards a democratic order. But there were only a few, corresponding efforts aimed at the public at large.

Had someone predicted at that time that Munich, would one day feature an imposing museum devoted to that ignominious period, I would have laughed and would not have been alone.

So when Mayor Oskar Holl, about a half century later, cleared the way for Dr. Heinz Starkulla (University of Munich), Mr. Stephen Goldman and me to visit the new museum while it was still under construction, we were overwhelmed. To me, a new era of facing the German past had dawned.

It is easy to enumerate the features and the mission of the Museum which I came to admire. The fact that the plethora of information is divided into four time periods via structural levels; that the text is, to be sure, voluminous, but clearly written and understandable; that the crimes of the perpetrators and the passivity of the bystanders have been emphasized; and that the pictures and films do appeal to all age groups and to people from all walks of life. Also

it was strikingly symbolic to build the museum on the grounds once occupied by Nazi Party Headquarters and to have the windows open up to some of the visible vestiges of Nazi rule. Finally, the fine library encourages visitors to undertake their independent research right on the ground floor of the museum.

Of course, an undertaking of that magnitude -- nearly ten years in the making -- can beget controversy. I am aware, for example, that the lack of artifacts and the exclusive use of photographs, paintings and films caused concerns. Also, it was felt by some that the amount of provided information was overwhelming.

In fact, there are immediate, if superficial, rebuttals readily available. As to the last-named criticism: undertaking several visits will ease the absorption of the huge, but pertinent material. And the omission of artifacts is not total; many special exhibits feature them. Also an accumulation of concrete objects or miniatures of structures would likely have led to the showing of artworks and architecture of the Nazi period that were not totally without merit. For example, a replica of the Munich Haus der Kunst (Museum of Art) might superficially pass muster as good architecture or an artifact taken from Hitler's Munich desk might hide his twisted interpretation of art. For neo-Nazis they might even have become a cult object or a fetish.

But I think there is a more profound reason why the designers of the Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism made, to my mind, the right decision. A unique obstacle had to be surmounted. Let me explain. During the whole history of memorials and similar edifices, their purpose was tantamount to reflecting a positive aspect of human achievement. Hundreds of examples come to mind: the memorials established in remembrance of US presidents, for example the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, KS or the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Silver Spring, MD, or the Agricultural Outdoor Museum in Soest, Westphalia, Germany or art museums all over the world: All these focus on

positive and uplifting aspects of our lives. Even Holocaust museums, exhibiting examples of Nazi brutality, commemorate the positive, valiant behavior of the victims and of their occasional altruistic help-meets. Even a war museum, such as the Imperial War Museum one in London, England, displays the courage and devotion and patriotism of an entire people alongside the horror and destruction of war. And we need not add that the representatives of memorial museums and institutions gathered here, will at all times try to credit the efforts of those who have served to validate the memory of commendable human endeavors.

The Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, however, was meant to shock us into remembering a time without any redeeming qualities. The designers and the museum's founding director, Dr. Winfried Nerdinger, who guided us on our first visit to the Munich Museum, were faced with the task of displaying National Socialism, an ideology and practice that was nihilistic and negative in all aspects, even where it tried to spread a patina of deceptive beauty across brutality, or "an assemblage of a beautiful sheen over the Third Reich," to quote the scholar Peter Reichel. Hence I fully understand the decision of the planners to not display artifacts or concrete illustrations of the Nazi period.

In short, my visits to that museum during its genesis and later upon its completion dictated my evaluation. It is a reminder of ill times and a warning against its reoccurrence -- anywhere. It is, simply put, "well done!"

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