Remembrance in Schöneberg

by Caroline Wiedmer (1995)

On June 4, 1993, the police in the Schöneberg district of Berlin received a number of telephone calls from irate individuals claiming that anti-Semitic signs bearing such provocative inscriptions as "Ban on Jewish musicians. 31.3.1935" and "Jews may no longer keep pets. 15.2.1942" were being bolted to lamp posts around the Bayerischer Platz. The police rushed to investigate; what they found, however, was not a group of neo-Nazis but the artist Renata Stih and the art historian Frieder Schnock in the process of mounting eighty plaques that together were to form a memorial network to the deported Jews of Berlin. "Art or no art," State Secretary Armin Jäger decided, "the limits of good taste have been overstepped." Despite the artists' protest, the police dismantled and confiscated the seventeen signs which had already been put in place.

According to the press, this misunderstanding occurred because the artists had begun to put up the signs a week before the memorial was to be presented to the public in an official ceremony at the Rathaus Schöneberg. They appeared therefore without warning and without any indication that they belonged to a larger memorial ensemble. The outrage on the part of many inhabitants and passers-by in fact was so keen that a smaller sign had subsequently to be added to the bottom of each plaque noting its context. (...) The consciousness that such a memorial was in fact needed grew in discrete stages over the last decade. The first spark came in 1983 when, in the awakening spirit of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (working through the past) in Germany a neighbourhood group began to research the history of Schöneberg and of the neighbouring district of Friedenau before and during the Holocaust. Today's rather charmless and placid middle-class neighborhood around the Bayerischer Platz, largely rebuilt after the war and some five subway stops away from the bustle and commerce of the Zoo and Kurfürstendamm train stations, shows few physical traces of the rich Jewish life once led there. A lone memorial stone marking the spot where a synagogue was torn down in 1956 and a plaque commemorating Einstein's twelve-year stay in the area hardly prepared the researchers for the mass of documents they found. Ranging from real estate deeds to personal letters and diaries from photographs to Gestapo orders and deportation records, these documents attested both to the area's former vibrancy and to its subsequent destruction.

In the twenties, the Bayerisches Viertel was known colloquially as "Jewish Switzerland" since so many well-to-do Jews had settled there after the turn of the century. The neighbourhood's inhabitants of that time, for the most part doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and architects, had done well in Germany and were thoroughly integrated into its social network; they felt themselves to be not German Jews but Jewish Germans. The census count of May 1933 revealed that 7,4% of Berlin's Jewish population, or 16.261 "Germans of the Jewish faith" [Deutsche jüdischen Glaubens], lived in Schöneberg, predominantly in the Bayerisches Viertel. To judge from letters and oral history accounts of the pre-war period, relations among Jews and non-Jews were harmonious. With Hitler's rise to power on January 30, 1933, came the first anti-Semitic laws, and this comfortable world began to crumble. Many of the first laws were Berufsverbote or blacklists of one form or another, and as such quickly undermined the core of bourgeois integration. In March and April of 1933, Jewish shops and businesses were boycotted; Jewish judges, teachers, and lawyers were, with few exceptions, removed from public office; Jewish physicians ceased to be reimbursed by the national health plan; and Jewish enrollment in German high schools was restricted. Further marginalization and isolation of the Jews in the first years of Hitler's reign were assured by ordinances which were, relatively speaking, only a passing humiliation. Described by Goebbels as a "politics of organized chaos," ordinances which, for instance, forbade Jews to swim in the Wannsee or excluded them from the national chess association, detracted from the severity of the others and indeed were received by many as harbingers of possible political improvement. Much more damaging and far-reaching, however, than the actual inconvenience they caused was the message to the German people inherent in the rules: their government sanctioned the isolation of an entire race. By the time of the public pogrom, the Reichskristallnacht, of November 9, 1938, the Jewish population had been so thoroughly marginalized and the image of the Jew as inferior so thoroughly imbibed by much of the German population, that no large-scale protest followed. From then on the laws took on a more menacing tone, as Jews were deprived of their most basic social rights. In 1939

the superintendents of buildings were required to hand in new census questionnaires on which the tenants had to enter proof that they were Aryan; Jewish homeowners lost their property (in the Bayerisches Viertel, twenty-four houses were taken by force, and twenty-one other homeowners were urged to sell); and so-called Judenhäuser were designated in the district, where families from all over Berlin were crammed together into single rooms to await deportation.
Deportation itself had assumed the face of normality. The Jewish Kultusvereinigung, in charge of notifying its members of their date of deportation, included the following instructions: "A list is enclosed in the notice which contains all pertinent orders. We ask you kindly to follow these orders exactingly and to plan for the transport carefully and calmly. Those of our members affected by emigration should realize that their personal behavior and the orderly fulfillment of all instructions will contribute decisively to the trouble-free execution of the transport. It goes without saying that, insofar as we are allowed to do so, we will assist our community members as much as possible and that we will do anything in our power to help them."
Even when the first rumours of mass destruction and gassings began to spread, the forced participation and repression on the part of the Jewish organizations evident in this notice had become so common, and the danger associated with resistance of any kind so great, that there seemed to be no other choice for those who received this harbinger of death than to adopt its matter-of-fact tone and prepare for departure.
Many of their non-Jewish neighbours, in the meantime, looked on with indifference. "They say they didn't see," says Inge Deutschkron, who relates going into hiding in Schöneberg in her book "Ich trug den gelben Stern" (I wore the yellow star). She describes the attitude of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the district in an interview with Claude Lanzmann for his film Shoah: "They say they didn't see. 'Yes there were Jews living in our house, and one day they were no longer there. We didn't know what happened.' They couldn't help seeing it. It wasn't a matter of one action. These were actions that were taking place over almost two years. Every fortnight people were thrown out of the houses. How could they escape it? How could they not see it?" [see Claude Lanzmann, Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 50]
While the memorial installation at the Bayerischer Platz is dedicated to the victims of the quarter, it also asks precisely this question: How could thousands of people ignore the politics of marginalization and destruction? How could they look away while people were gradually dehumanized, until finally they appeared simply as objects to be destroyed?
The materials they unearthed enabled the members of the neighbourhood group to reconstruct the forgotten histories of almost every house in the area: here Jews were hidden during the war; there a family was denounced by the superintendent; in the same house a family committed suicide to avoid deportation; at a church one street over, German Christians faithfully attended Sunday service while in a neighboring Judenhaus seventy-two people awaited deportation the following day. Strung together in vexing narratives, this material testimony of suffering was brought together in an exhibit at the Kunstamt Schöneberg, entitled "Leben in Schöneberg/Friedenau 1933-1945".

Five years later, in 1988, Andreas Wilcke, an inhabitant of the Bayerisches Viertel, decided to find out just how many Jews had fallen prey to the gradual "Aryanization" of the area and began the excruciating work of researching all the names of those deported. Ironically one of his most dependable sources of information was the property files maintained diligently by the Nazis to keep track of their growing wealth as more and more Jewish families were deported. After twelve months of work, Wilcke had recorded more than six thousand names. In response to this overwhelming number, the Schöneberger Bezirksverordnetenversammlung (BW) voted to erect a memorial to the murdered Jews of the district. (...) Three years later, in June 1991, the first phase of a Berlin wide contest to erect the memorial at the Bayerischer Platz was announced. (...) Ninetysix designs were submitted, and the jury selected eight finalists. After a second round of consideration, the proposal of Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock was unanimously chosen on April 1, 1992. Their design, an installation consisting of eighty signs bearing stylized images on one side and the texts of Nazi laws and decrees on the other, incorporates these basic ideas into a memorial which recreates on linguistic and pictorial levels the political violence that had gone on in everyday life. The governing principle of the memorial is, in Stih's words, to "make visible the conditions which led in an insidiously logical way to the destruction of the Jewish inhabitants." The memorial is meant to show, in other words, that the destruction of the German Jews was not a sudden, irreversible occurrence, but rather a slow process consisting of dozens of rules and laws - some quite petty - which culminated, after a number of years, in the deportation and murder of thousands of people. (...) The web of signs moreover does more than reinscribe the neighbourhood with its history. The simple items and pictograms mimic the informational aesthetics of today's advertising, and of public announcements; the sign's neutral images obey, as Stih puts it, an "aesthetics of normality", an aesthetics that allows them to blend into the iconography of today's urban text in the same way that anti-Semitic sentiments and decrees had blended into public consciousness fifty years earlier. The information that accompanies the unremarkable imagery, however, is anything but bland: acting as a disintegrating agent within an otherwise integrated landscape, the semantic recreation of the socio-political circumstances leading up to the deportation of the quarter's Jews unmasks the guilty surroundings of the past, even as it suggests that today's society is vulnerable to similar affront.

Not all of the signs have an equal rapport with the present; the temporal specificity of the information varies from sign to sign. While some of the laws take the form of a simple statement without quotation marks or a date to situate them within a historical context, others are clearly tied to a specific historical time, safely insulated from the present by quotation marks. The strategic placement of the signs in relation to contemporary social structures further underlines the memorial's significance for the present. In front of the post office, for instance, a lamp post holds the stylized picture of a letter bearing the inscription: "The time has come, tomorrow I must leave and that of course is very difficult, (...) I will write to you. Before the deportation, 16.1. 1942." The image of a bench hangs near the green at the Bayerischer Platz and bears the notice: "Jews may only use those benches at the Bayerischer Platz which are marked in yellow. Eyewitness report 1939." A little further down the road, a sign in front of a children's playground says, "Aryan and non-Aryan children are forbidden to play together. 1938."

By this direct association of anti-Semitic rules with today's world, the conditions of fifty years ago are restaged, and beholders are forced to come to terms with their own reactions to violence that is presented in such a matter-of-fact way. The signs in front of the park and the children's playground were originally mounted without any dates at all, thereby not merely contextualizing the past within the present social structure but actually recreating the social conditions of the past. The dates were originally omitted in a search for what Schnock calls "the actual borders of this project," a search that quickly came to an end after immediate and vehement reactions from the public.

To add to the complexity of this "sign language," the relationship between the information given and the image presented varies from sign to sign. One group of signs shows a one-to-one correspondence between picture and information. An empty ashtray, for example, is coupled with the inscription "Jews are allowed no more cigarettes or cigars. 11.6.1942"; a pair of swimming trunks adorns the decree "Berlin public pools may no longer be entered by Jews. 3. 12.1938." Other signs consciously and ironically make clear the discordance between image and inscription: the most poignant of this group is the picture of a door bearing a sign hung slightly askew which reads "Herzlich willkommen" (Heartfelt welcome). The reverse reads "In order to avoid making a bad impression on foreign visitors, signs with extreme content are to be removed; signs like 'Jews are not wanted here' are sufficient. 29.1.1936." Another group of signs consists of symbols for public services which remain the same today. Included in this group are the Berlin subway's white "U" on blue ground, an "H", the symbol for a bus stop, and the letters "DR," for Deutsche Reichsbahn. These signs are particularly impressive, since the restrictions noted on their reverse show the gradual removal of Jews from all public and social life. And, since the symbols are still used today, their status as quotation remains open-ended, suggesting a possible - and actual - rekindling of xenophobia. One of the signs is hardly illustrated at all: the law stated bears implications that go beyond pictorial comment and can only give way to visual silence. A solid black rectangle commemorates the day on which, for many Jews, all hope of escape was lost: "Ban on Jewish emigration. 23. 10. 1941," is the text.

The memorial is not entirely decentralized; the eighty scattered signs are gathered together on three large billboards placed in the memorial area on three sites: the Rathaus Schöneberg, the Bayerischer Platz itself and in front of the Gymnasium Münchener Strasse. Each of the billboards shows pre- and postwar maps of the area, one trom 1933 and the other from 1993; they are superimposed upon each other. Together they produce a topographical palimpsest of the past and present contours of the area which reveals that sixty percent of the neighborhood was totally destroyed as a result of the war, partly by the Nazis themselves during Kristallnacht, partly by the Allied bombing of

Berlin towards the end of the war, and partly by the process of demolition after the war. Green dots mark the signs' locations, inviting an exploration of the Bayerisches Viertel in both its past and present forms. Like a frame narrative, the eighty images serve as a border around the jumbled lines of the two maps as if to form a link between the social and political violence committed by the Nazis against the Jews and the physical destruction of the Bayerisches Viertel by the Allies.

Bearing all of the pertinent material - the signs' images and texts, their location, and the historical information about the quarter - each poster becomes a mini-memorial. There's an instructive difference, however, between reading the poster itself and actively seeking out the signs amid the quotidian sights and sounds of the quarter. Unlike the billboard, the memorial installed throughout the quarter does not provide an even text to be read and understood immediately. Every sign creates its own fields of tension between image and script, between script and content, and between sign and site, to be interpreted each time anew. Moreover, the memorial "works" and literally requires "work" from its observer through a clever mechanical circumstance: to emphasize the signs' doublesidedness, the artists attached them to the lamp posts facing in alternating directions, so that walking along the same street, one is presented once with the text side, once with the image side. The passer-by chooses between a double vision, or a bunch of half-truths depending on the manner in which the offered information is handled, for in order to get the full picture, she must pause and turn around to find either the written complement to an image or the illustration of a text. The effort to see both sides of any given sign represents to the artists the overcoming of a one-sided perception of the area's history, and as such assists in the demystification of both past and present. Experienced together, the three aspects of image, text, and location powerfully restage the persecution of a people within the space of the quarter. Conversely, each of the three billboard maps can turn the quarter into a mnemonic landscape par excellence for those who want to explore the past in the present.

Along with the restaging of past events in the present goes the role assignment to the passerby. This role is not an easy one to play. In contrast to more traditional memorials, for instance the one at the Vélodrome d'Hiver, which ask simply that one be a rememberer, a mourner, or even a survivor, this memorial, by matter-of-factly presenting the anti-Semitic rules and laws from the point of view and within the context of an orderly and safe modern environment, asks its beholder to assume the role of a potential collaborator or Mitläufer. Wandering along the streets collecting one sign after the other, one also comes to know the intertext of the memorial narrative, that is, the sights, sounds, and social structures of the quarter today. And it is in this intertext of normality and security that the insertion of the laws and decrees takes on its most monstrous shape. After the first shock, even the alert stroller begins to assimilate each successive law more easily. The memorial manages in this way to transform a temporal experience into a spatial one, as it reviews synchronically what happened in the Bayerisches Viertel over several years during the Nazi rule. The role of Mitläufer literally unfolds as one walks along the memory lines created by the memorial. The realization of the extent of Mitläufertum among the former inhabitants of the quarter results naturally in the question of what one's own reaction might have been had one lived during that time, and finally what one's reaction is to xenophobia in Germany today. (...)The memoryscape created by Stih and Schnock is complex: it shapes a cultural memory of the past even as it borrows a system of references which tie it to the present. The memorial rewards those who consent to participate in it with a new knowledge of the quarter and its involvement in the years of persecution, as well as with the mnemotechnic to store that new knowledge. (...)

This article appeared in unabridged form in:
Alphabet City No. 4+5, Toronto 1995, p. 6-12
(Caroline Wiedmer, Designing Memories – Three Berlin memorials:
a network of street signs around Schöneberg's Bayerischer Platz,
architect Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, and a Käthe Kollwitz
sculpture installed by Helmut Kohl in the Neue Wache.)
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see also:
Caroline Wiedmer, "The Claims of Memory", Ithaca/NY, 1999