

The  
Texture  
of  
Memory

Holocaust

Memorials

and Meaning

James E. Young  
17

Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

## Introduction

## The Texture

### of Memory

Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.

—Jean Baudrillard

No one can become what he cannot find in his memories.

—Jean Améry

So this story will not finish with some tomb to be visited in pious memory. For the smoke that rises from crematoria obeys physical laws like any other: the particles come together and disperse according to the wind, which propels them. The only pilgrimage, dear reader, would be to look sadly at a stormy sky now and then.

—André Schwarz-Bart

The further events of World War II recede into time, the more prominent its memorials become. As the period of Holocaust is shaped in the survivors' diaries and memoirs, in their children's films and novels, public memory of this time is being molded in a proliferating number of memorial images and spaces. Depending on where and by whom these memorials are constructed, these sites remember the past according to a variety of national myths, ideals, and political needs. Some recall war dead, others resistance, and still others mass murder. All

reflect both the past experiences and current lives of their communities, as well as the state's memory of itself. At a more specific level, these memorials also reflect the temper of the memory-artists' time, their place in aesthetic discourse, their media and materials.

Memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure. Both the reasons given for Holocaust memorials and the kinds of memory they generate are as various as the sites themselves. Some are built in response to traditional Jewish injunctions to remember, others according to a government's need to explain a nation's past to itself. Where the aim of some memorials is to educate the next generation and to inculcate in it a sense of shared experience and destiny, other memorials are conceived as expiations of guilt or as self-aggrandizement. Still others are intended to attract tourists. In addition to traditional Jewish memorial iconography, every state has its own institutional forms of remembrance. As a result, Holocaust memorials inevitably mix national and Jewish figures, political and religious imagery.

In Germany, for example, memorials to this time recall Jews by their absence, German victims by their political resistance. In Poland, countless memorials in former death camps and across the countryside commemorate the whole of Polish destruction through the figure of its murdered Jewish part. In Israel, martyrs and heroes are remembered side by side, both redeemed by the birth of the state. As the shape Holocaust memory takes in Europe and Israel is determined by political, aesthetic, and religious coordinates, that in America is guided no less by distinctly American ideals and experiences—such as liberty, pluralism, and immigration.

By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation's rites or the objects of a people's national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory. For traditionally, the state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election. The matrix of a nation's monuments emplots the story of ennobling events, of triumphs over barbarism, and recalls the martyrdom of those who gave their lives in the struggle for national existence—who, in the martyrological refrain, died so that a country might live. In assuming the idealized forms and meanings assigned this era by the state, memorials tend to concretize particular historical interpretations. They suggest themselves as indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape; in time, such idealized memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands. Indeed, for memorials to do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, of the state's seemingly natural right to exist.

The relationship between a state and its memorials is not one-sided, however. On the one hand, official agencies are in position to shape memory explicitly as they see fit, memory that best serves a national interest. On the other hand, once created, memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state's original intentions. In some cases, memorials created in the image of a state's ideals actually turn around to recast these ideals in the memorial's own image. New generations visit memorials under new circumstances and invest them with new meanings. The result is an evolution in the memorial's significance, generated in the new times and company in which it finds itself.

The capacity for change in memorials has not always been so apparent, however. For, traditionally, the monument has been defined as that which by its seemingly land-anchored permanence could also guarantee the permanence of a particular idea or memory attached to it. In this conception, the monument would remain essentially impervious to time and change, a perpetual witness-relic to a person, event, or epoch. Hence, the first monuments mentioned in the Bible: a small pillar and a witness heap of stones (*gal-ed*) gathered to mark the agreement between Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:45–48); the matzevah (tombstone) Jacob erected on Rachel's grave (Gen. 35:20). In both cases, the monuments would suggest themselves as everlasting remnant-witnesses by which subsequent generations would remember past events and people.

At this point, a clarification of terms may be in order. Many presume that "memorials" recall only past deaths or tragic events and provide places to mourn, while "monuments" remain essentially celebratory markers of triumphs and heroic individuals. In this vein, Arthur Danto has written that "we erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus, we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends. . . . Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments, we honor ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

But in fact, the traditional monument (the tombstone) can also be used as a mourning site for lost loved ones, just as memorials have marked past victories. A statue can be a monument to heroism and a memorial to tragic loss; an obelisk can memorialize a nation's birth and monumentalize leaders fallen before their prime. Insofar as the same object can perform both functions, there may be nothing intrinsic to historical markers that makes them either a monument or a memorial.

In this study, therefore, I prefer to distinguish a memorial from a monument only in a broader, more generic sense: there are memorial books, memorial activities, memorial days, memorial festivals, and memorial sculptures. Some of these are mournful, some celebratory: but all are memorials in a larger sense. Monuments, on the other hand, will refer here to a subset of memorials: the material objects, sculptures, and installations used to memorialize a person or thing. For the purposes of this book, I treat all memory-sites as memorials, the plastic objects within these sites as monuments. A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. A monument, on the other hand, is always a kind of memorial.

In the last century, the very idea of the memorial-monument and its place in modern culture has grown no less contentious than its definition. Indeed, the traditional assumption of the monument's timelessness has nearly relegated it as a form to the margins of modern discourse. For once it was recognized that monuments necessarily mediate memory, even as they seek to inspire it, they came to be regarded as displacements of the memory they were supposed to embody. Even worse, by insisting that its memory was as fixed as its place in the landscape, the monument seemed to ignore the essential mutability in all cultural artifacts.

"What is the use to the modern man of this 'monumental' contemplation of the past?" Nietzsche asked. "Monumental" was, after all, Nietzsche's disdainful epithet for any version of history calling itself permanent and ever-lasting, a petrified history that buried the living.<sup>2</sup>

A few years later, Lewis Mumford echoed Nietzsche's scorn for the monumental when he pronounced the death of the monument insofar as it seemed hopelessly incompatible with his sense of modern architectural forms. "The notion of a modern monument is veritably a contradiction in terms," he wrote. "If it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument."<sup>3</sup> In Mumford's view, the monument defied the very essence of modern urban civilization: the capacity for renewal and rejuvenation. Where modern architecture invites the perpetuation of life itself, encourages renewal and change, and scorns the illusion of permanence, Mumford wrote, "Stone gives a false sense of continuity, and a deceptive assurance of life" (p. 434).

Instead of changing and adapting to its environment, the monument remained static, a mummification of ancient, probably forgotten ideals. Instead of placing their faith in the powers of biological regeneration, fixing their images in their children, the eminent and powerful had traditionally sought in their vanity a petrified immortality. In Mumford's words, "They write their boasts upon tombstones; they incorporate their deeds in obelisks; they place their hopes of remem-

brance in solid stones joined to other solid stones, dedicated to their subjects or their heirs forever, forgetful of the fact that stones that are deserted by the living are even more helpless than life that remains unprotected and preserved by stones" (p. 434). Indeed, after his mentor Patrick Geddes, Mumford suggests that it was usually the shakiest of regimes that installed the least movable monuments, a compensation for having accomplished nothing worthier by which to be remembered.

More recently, the late German historian Martin Broszat has suggested that in their references to the fascist era, monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations.<sup>4</sup> As cultural reifications, in this view, monuments reduce or, in Broszat's words, "coarsen" historical understanding as much as they generate it. In another vein, art historian Rosalind Krauss finds that the modernist period produces monuments unable to refer to anything beyond themselves as pure marker or base.<sup>5</sup> After Krauss, we might ask, in fact, whether an abstract, self-referential monument can ever commemorate events outside of itself. Or must it motion endlessly to its own gesture to the past, a commemoration of its essence as dislocated sign, forever trying to remember events it never actually saw?

Still others have argued that rather than embodying memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community's memory-work with its own material form. "The less memory is experienced from the inside," Pierre Nora warns, "the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs."<sup>6</sup> If the obverse of this is true as well, then perhaps the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally. In this age of mass memory production and consumption, in fact, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden.

As Nora concludes, "Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstruction. Its new vocation is to record: delegating to the *lieu de mémoire* the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin" (p. 13). As a result, the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives. Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.

Added to this is a contemporary skepticism of the supposedly common values all bring to public spaces, one of the reasons for the uprising against so much public art. "In the absence of shared belief and even common interests," John Hallmark Neff writes, "it should not be surprising that so much of the well-intentioned art acquired for public spaces has failed—failed as art and as art for a civic site."<sup>7</sup> That is, Neff suggests, without a set of shared expectations, beliefs, or interests, artists and their prospective public audience have no grounds for engagement, no common cultural language in which they might even argue their respective views.

But this formulation may overlook one of the basic functions of all "public art": to create shared spaces that lend a common spatial frame to otherwise disparate experiences and understanding. Rather than presuming a common set of ideals, the public monument attempts to create an architectonic ideal by which even competing memories may be figured. In this light, Neff's observation might be modified: in the absence of shared beliefs or common interests, art in public spaces may force an otherwise fragmented populace to frame diverse values and ideals in common spaces. By creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory.

As in any state's official use of commemorative spaces, this function of monuments is clear most of all to the governments themselves. Though the utopian vision may hold that monuments are unnecessary as reminders when all can remember for themselves, Maurice Halbwachs has argued persuasively that it is primarily through membership in religious, national, or class groups that people are able to acquire and then recall their memories at all.<sup>8</sup> That is, both the reasons for memory and the forms memory takes are always socially mandated, part of a socializing system whereby fellow citizens gain common history through the vicarious memory of their forbears' experiences. If part of the state's aim, therefore, is to create a sense of shared values and ideals, then it will also be the state's aim to create the sense of common memory, as foundation for a unified polis. Public memorials, national days of commemoration, and shared calendars thus all work to create common loci around which national identity is forged.

To the extent that all societies depend on the assumption of shared experience and memory for the very basis of their common relations, a society's institutions are automatically geared toward creating a shared memory—or at least the illusion of it. By creating the sense of a shared past, such institutions as national memorial days, for example, foster the sense of a common present and future, even a sense of shared national destiny. In this way, memorials provide the sites where groups of people gather to create a common past for themselves, places

where they tell the constitutive narratives, their "shared" stories of the past. They become communities precisely by having shared (if only vicariously) the experiences of their neighbors. At some point, it may even be the activity of remembering together that becomes the shared memory; once ritualized, remembering together becomes an event in itself that is to be shared and remembered.

### The Site of Memory

In keeping with the bookish, iconoclastic side of Jewish tradition, the first "memorials" to the Holocaust period came not in stone, glass, or steel—but in narrative. The Yizkor Bikher—memorial books—remembered both the lives and destruction of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media: words on paper. For a murdered people without graves, without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as symbolic tombstones: "The memorial book which will immortalize the memories of our relatives and friends, the Jews of Pshaytsk, will also serve as a substitute grave. Whenever we pick up the book we will feel we are standing next to their grave, because even that the murderers denied them."<sup>9</sup>

The scribes hoped that, when read, the Yizkor Bikher would turn the site of reading into memorial space. In need of cathartic ceremony, in response to what has been called "the missing gravestone syndrome," survivors thus created interior spaces, imagined grave sites, as the first sites for memory.<sup>10</sup> Only later were physical spaces created. While the function of place in mnemonic memory has been well examined, starting with Cicero, and re-examined through the brilliant studies of Yates and others, the reciprocal exchange between a monument and its space is still too little studied. For a monument necessarily transforms an otherwise benign site into part of its content, even as it is absorbed into the site and made part of a larger locale. This tension between site and memorial can be relieved by a seemingly natural extension of site by monument, or it can be aggravated by a perceived incongruity between site and monument. It is better in the view of many contemporary monument makers, in fact, to provoke the landscape with an obtrusive monument than to create a form so pleasingly balanced that it—and memory—recede into the landscape (and oblivion) altogether.

Taken further, a monument becomes a point of reference amid other parts of the landscape, one node among others in a topographical matrix that orients the rememberer and creates meaning in both the land and our recollections. For like narrative, which automatically locates events in linear sequence, the memorial also brings events into some cognitive order. In this sense, any memorial marker in the landscape, no matter how alien to its surroundings, is still perceived in the midst of its geography, in some relation to the other landmarks nearby.

A stainless steel obelisk situated in an empty field, for example, generates different meanings from that situated in a neighborhood shopping mall. Instead of being the only thing standing, it is one of several towers, barely noticed, surrounded by large buildings. American monuments, in particular, are placed often to maximize opportunities for symbolic meaning: the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C., necessarily resonates to other nearby national monuments. The Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, planned for the Battery in New York, will form part of an immigrant triad, with Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty in sight. Likewise, the Liberation monument in Liberty Park in Jersey City, New Jersey, echoes the ideals and theme of the Statue of Liberty on the skyline in the background. A new Holocaust memorial in Boston, whatever shape it finally takes, will derive further American meaning from its place on the "Freedom Trail."

### The Art of the Monument

In every case, Holocaust memorials reflect not only national and communal remembrance, or their geographical locations, but also the memorial designer's own time and place. For, like their generational counterparts in literature and music, most of the contemporary artists commissioned to design memorials remain answerable to both art and memory. In a hypothetical marker they designed for the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, for example, the Starn twins have overlaid sepia-tinted automat photographs of Anne onto an enlarged page of her diary. Instead of segmenting these photographs, they have left them intact in two series of three, placed side by side, almost twinlike. The diary page, Frank's last, is dated and so recalls the dates of a tombstone, her epitaph self-inscribed.

Hans Haacke, as he has done so effectively with the icons of big business, resurrected a Nazi memorial in Graz, Austria, in order to remind all of the site's complicitous past. In *Bezugspunkte 38/88*, a city-wide installation, the artist duplicated the Nazis' draping of the town's patron saint in swastika-emblazoned banners in order to turn the image of Nazism against itself.<sup>11</sup> Haacke's "point of reference" was itself turned inside-out when neo-Nazis torched the monument, an act which the artist then incorporated into the text of the memorial by adding the inscription: "On the night of 9 November 1938, all synagogues in Austria were looted, destroyed, and set on fire. And during the night of 2 November 1988, this memorial was destroyed by a fire bomb."<sup>12</sup>

In an installation entitled *Memorial*, Christian Boltanski has likewise extended his earlier work, mixing fuzzy photographs, light bulbs, and wires to recall a Jewish day school, the instruments of memory, and the resulting difficulty of

memory. Sol Lewitt's black cube set in the square of a former palace in Münster recalled both the absent Jews of the city and his own geometrical forms—before the monument itself was dismantled by town authorities. When commissioned to create a monument for San Francisco, George Segal turned reflexively to his white plaster figures, using an Israeli survivor as his primary model. In fact, as Albert Elsen reminds us, for many contemporary artists, the needs of art, not the public or memory, come first.<sup>13</sup> For artists working in an era of abstract expressionism, earthworks, and conceptual art, and for architects answerable to postmodern and deconstructivist design, the perceived public audience is often none other than themselves.

While contemporary designs are welcomed by the artists and architects, critics and curators, however, they often run up against a wall not only of public bewilderment but also of survivor outrage. For many survivors believe that the searing reality of their experiences demands as literal a memorial expression as possible. "We weren't tortured and our families weren't murdered in the abstract," the survivors complain, "it was real." In reference to his Warsaw Ghetto Monument, for example, the sculptor Nathan Rapoport once asked plaintively, "Could I have made a rock with a hole in it and said, 'Voilà! The heroism of the Jewish people?'" Probably not. All of which raises the question of the dual roles of public and memory in public art: for, as becomes clear, not every work of public art is a monument, not every memorial a work of public art.

Though not a historical monument, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* and its removal from the government plaza in New York exemplify the dilemma. On the one hand, *Tilted Arc* was scrupulously true to its maker's vision, his material, his time and place. At the same time, however, it was precisely the work's integrity and brilliance that alienated the very public it was intended for. *Tilted Arc* could not have it both ways: it could not please a community of artists who almost unanimously supported it and lay viewers disturbed by what they perceived as a violation of their public space. The conundrum remains: how is the artist going to be answerable both to his discourse and to public taste at the same time? How is she to balance the needs of a lay public against the occasionally obscure sensibilities of contemporary art—all of which depend on civic administrative approval?

Nor is this dilemma particularly new. For, as Elsen has also noted, modern and avant-garde sculptors between the wars in Europe were rarely invited to commemorate either the victories or losses, battles or war-dead of World War I.<sup>14</sup> The reluctance on the part of donors and government sponsors to commission abstract memorials, in particular, seems to have stemmed from two parallel impulses in the public and state. War-related memorials were perceived generally

as intended to valorize the suffering in such a way as to justify it historically. This aim was best accomplished by recalling traditional heroic icons in order to invest memory of a recent war with past pride and loyalties, which would also explain the recent war in ways visible and seemingly self-evident to the public. In both cases, figurative imagery seemed best to naturalize the state's memorial messages. It was clear to those in position to memorialize World War I that the primary aim of modern sculptors after the war was to repudiate and lament—not to affirm—both the historical realities and the archaic values seeming to have spawned them.

Not that many of the modern sculptors would have shown much interest in such projects to begin with. At what was regarded as the nadir of European civilization, artists and monument makers vociferously resisted traditional mimetic and heroic evocations of events, contending that any such remembrance would elevate and mythologize events. In their view, yet another classically proportioned Prometheus would have falsely glorified and thereby affirmed the horrible suffering they were called upon to commemorate. In the minds of many graphic and literary artists of the time, this would have been tantamount to betraying not only their experience of the Great War, but also the new reasons for art's existence after the war: to challenge the world's realities and the conventions encouraging them. If figurative statuary were demanded of them, then only antiheroic figures would do, as exemplified in the pathetic heroes of Wilhelm Lehmbrück's *Fallen Man* and *Seated Youth* (1917). As true to the artists' interwar vision as these works may have been, however, neither public nor state seemed ready to abide memorial edifices built on foundations of doubt instead of valor. The pathetic hero was thus condemned by emerging totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia as defeatist for seeming to embody all that was worth forgetting—not remembering—in the war.

In addition to the ways abstraction was thought to ameliorate a work's sense of mimetic witness, it also seemed to frustrate the memorial's capacity as locus for shared self-image and commonly held ideals. In its hermetic and personal vision, abstraction encourages private visions in viewers, which would defeat the communal and collective aims of public memorials. On the one hand, the specificity of realistic figuration would seem to thwart multiple messages, while abstract sculpture could accommodate as many meanings as could be projected onto it. But in fact, it is almost always a figurative monument like the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial that serves as point of departure for political performances. It is as if figurative sculpture were needed to engage viewers with likenesses of people, to evoke an empathic link between viewer and monument that might then be marshaled into particular meaning.

The fundamental dilemma facing contemporary monument makers is thus two-sided and recalls that facing prospective witnesses in any medium: first, how does one refer to events in a medium doomed to refer only to itself? And second, if the aim is to remember—that is, to refer to—a specific person, defeat, or victory, how can it be done abstractly? For many who survived solely to testify to the Holocaust, memory and testimony are one: witness for these survivors entails the most literal transmission possible of what they saw and experienced. Since few survivors would regard themselves as witness to form alone, as became clear in the art recovered from the ghettos and camps, even artists of the avant-garde redefined their aesthetic task as testimonial realists.<sup>15</sup> What has come to be regarded as “documentary” art and literature seemed to them the only mode in which evidence or witness could be delivered. But as historians and literary critics have come to accept the impulse in writers to testify in narrative, even as they look beyond witness to the kinds of knowledge created in such writing, so might critical viewers of Holocaust memorials accept the parallel impulse in Holocaust memorial makers to testify through literal figuration—before turning to the ways that public memory is organized in such figures.<sup>16</sup>

In referring to the general condition of the world, an inner state of mind, broken trust in humankind, or even art's inability to represent the real, abstract forms still offer artists the widest possible variety of expression. Maya Lin's succinctly abstract Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, commemorates the nation's ambivalence toward the Vietnam War and its veterans in ways altogether unavailable in figuration.<sup>17</sup> Instead of merely condemning the figurative mode as archaic and out of touch, however, we might acknowledge the need in public audiences for figuration, even as we recall the constructed nature of figurative iconography. In this way, we can keep monumental figuration from naturalizing itself, from putting a finish on its significance.

### The Consequences of Memory: An Alternative Critique

Public art in general, and Holocaust memorials in particular, tend to beg traditional art historical inquiry. Most discussions of Holocaust memorial spaces ignore the essentially public dimension of their performance, remaining either formally aestheticist or almost piously historical. So while it is true that a sculptor like Nathan Rapoport will never be regarded by art historians as highly as his contemporaries Jacques Lipchitz and Henry Moore, neither can his work be dismissed solely on the basis of its popular appeal. Unabashedly figurative, heroic, and referential, his work seems to be doomed critically by precisely those qualities—public accessibility and historical referentiality—that make it monu-

mental. But in fact, it may be just this public appeal that finally constitutes the monument's aesthetic performance—and that leads such memorials to demand public and historical disclosure, even as they condemn themselves to critical obscurity. Instead of stopping at formal questions, or at issues of historical referentiality, we must go on to ask how memorial representations of history may finally weave themselves into the course of ongoing events.

While questions of high and low art may well continue to inform the discussion surrounding Holocaust monuments, they must not dictate the critical discussion any longer. Instead, we might keep in mind the reductive—occasionally vulgar—excesses in popular memorial representations, even as we qualify our definitions of kitsch and challenge its usefulness as a critical category for the discussion of public monuments. Rather than patronizing mass tastes, we must recognize that public taste carries weight and that certain conventional forms in avowedly public art may eventually have consequences for public memory—whether or not we think they should. This is to acknowledge the unfashionable, often archaic aspects of so many Holocaust memorials, even as we look beyond them. It is also to recognize that public art like this demands additional critical criteria if the lives and meanings of such works are to be sustained—and not oppressed—by art historical discourse.

For there is a difference between avowedly public art—exemplified by public monuments like these—and art produced almost exclusively for the art world, its critics, other artists, and galleries, which has yet to be properly recognized. People do not come to Holocaust memorials because they are new, cutting-edge, or fashionable; as the critics are quick to note, most of these memorials are none of these. Where contemporary art is produced as self- or medium-reflexive, public Holocaust monuments are produced specifically to be historically referential, to lead viewers beyond themselves to an understanding or evocation of events. As *public* monuments, these memorials generally avoid referring hermetically to the processes that brought them into being. Where contemporary art invites viewers and critics to contemplate its own materiality, or its relationship to other works before and after itself, the aim of memorials is not to call attention to their own presence so much as to past events *because* they are no longer present. In this sense, Holocaust memorials attempt to point immediately beyond themselves.

In their fusion of public art and popular culture, historical memory and political consequences, therefore, these monuments demand an alternative critique that goes beyond questions of high and low art, tastefulness and vulgarity. Rather than merely identifying the movements and forms on which public memory is borne, or asking whether or not these monuments reflect past history accurately or fash-

ionably, we turn to the many ways this art suggests itself as a basis for political and social action. That is, we might ask not only how the monument maker's era and training shaped memory at the time, and how the monument reflects past history, but, most important, what role the monument plays in current history.

We might now concern ourselves less with whether this is good or bad art, and more with what the consequences of public memorial art are for the people. This is to propose that, like any public art space, Holocaust memorials are neither benign nor irrelevant, but suggest themselves as the basis for political and communal action. With apologies to Peter Bürger, I would like to propose a reworking of what he has called the "functional analysis of art," adapted to examine the social effects of public memorial spaces.<sup>18</sup> My aim is to explore not just the relations between people and their monuments, but the consequences of these relations in historical time.

Whereas some art historians have traditionally dismissed such approaches to art as anthropological, social, or psychological, others have opened their inquiry to include larger issues of the sociology of art: public memorials in this case are exemplary of an artwork's social life, its life in society's mind. As Marianne Doezema has suggested, there is much more to the monument's performance than its mere style or school of design. "The public monument," she writes, "has a responsibility apart from its qualities as a work of art. It is not only the private expression of an individual artist; it is also a work of art created for the public, and therefore can and should be evaluated in terms of its capacity to generate human reactions."<sup>19</sup> To my mind, such reaction refers not just to an emotional affect, but to the actual consequences for people in their monuments. The question is not, How are people moved by these memorials? but rather, To what end have they been moved, to what historical conclusions, to what understanding and actions in their own lives? This is to suggest that we cannot separate the monument from its public life, that the social function of such art is its aesthetic performance.

"There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument," Robert Musil once wrote. "They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention."<sup>20</sup> This "something" is the essential stiffness monuments share with all other images: as a likeness necessarily vitrifies its otherwise dynamic referent, a monument turns pliant memory to stone. And it is this "finish" that repels our attention, that makes a monument invisible. It is as if a monument's life in the communal mind grows as hard and polished as its exterior form, its significance as fixed as its place in the landscape. For monuments at rest like this—in stasis—seem

to present themselves as eternal parts of the landscape, as naturally arranged as nearby trees or rock formations.

As an inert piece of stone, the monument keeps its own past a tightly held secret, gesturing away from its own history to the events and meanings we bring to it in our visits. Precisely because monuments seem to remember everything but their own past, their own creation, my critical aim will be to reinvest the monument with our memory of its coming into being. None of this is intended to fix the monument's meaning in time, which would effectively embalm it. Instead, I hope to reinvigorate this monument with the memory of its acquired past, to vivify memory of events by writing into it our memory of the monument's origins.

By returning to the memorial some memory of its own genesis, we remind ourselves of the memorial's essential fragility, its dependence on others for its life; that it was made by human hands in human times and places, that it is no more a natural piece of the landscape than we are. For, unlike words on a page, memorial icons seem literally to embody ideas, to invite viewers to mistake material presence and weight for immutable permanence. If, in its glazed exteriority, we never really see the monument, I shall attempt to crack its eidetic veneer, to loosen meaning, to make visible the activity of memory in monuments. It is my hope that such a critique may save our icons of remembrance from hardening into idols of remembrance.<sup>21</sup>

For too often a community's monuments assume the polished, finished veneer of a death mask, unreflective of current memory, unresponsive to contemporary issues. Instead of enshrining an already enshrined memory, the present study might provide a uniquely instructive glimpse of the monument's inner life—the tempestuous social, political, and aesthetic forces—normally hidden by a monument's taciturn exterior. By drawing back into view the memorial-making process, we invigorate the very idea of the monument, thereby reminding all such cultural artifacts of their coming into being, their essential constructedness.

To this end, I enlarge the life and texture of Holocaust memorials to include: the times and places in which they were conceived; their literal construction amid historical and political realities; their finished forms in public spaces; their places in the constellation of national memory; and their ever-evolving lives in the minds of their communities and of the Jewish people over time. With these dimensions in mind, we look not only at the ways individual monuments create and reinforce particular memory of the Holocaust period, but also at the ways events re-enter political life shaped by monuments. Taken together, these stages comprise a genuine activity of memory, by which artifacts of ages past are invigo-

rated by the present moment, even as they condition our understanding of the world around us.

On a more general level, we might ask of all memorials what meanings are generated when the temporal realm is converted to material form, when time collapses into space, a trope by which it is then measured and grasped. How do memorials emplot time and memory? How do they impose borders on time, a facade on memory? What is the relationship of time to place, place to memory, memory to time? Finally, two fundamentally interrelated questions: How does a particular place shape our memory of a particular time? And how does this memory of a past time shape our understanding of the present moment?

Through this attention to the activity of memorialization, we might also remind ourselves that public memory is constructed, that understanding of events depends on memory's construction, and that there are worldly consequences in the kinds of historical understanding generated by monuments. Instead of allowing the past to rigidify in its monumental forms, we would vivify memory through the memory-work itself—whereby events, their recollection, and the role monuments play in our lives remain animate, never completed. In this light, we find that the performance of Holocaust memorials depends not on some measured distance between history and its monumental representations, but on the conflation of private and public memory, in the memorial activity by which minds reflecting on the past inevitably precipitate in the present historical moment.

It is not enough to ask whether or not our memorials remember the Holocaust, or even how they remember it. We should also ask to what ends we have remembered. That is, how do we respond to the current moment in light of our remembered past? This is to recognize that the shape of memory cannot be divorced from the actions taken in its behalf, and that memory without consequences contains the seeds of its own destruction. For were we passively to remark only the contours of these memorials, were we to leave unexplored their genesis and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all.

## Part IV

America:

Memory and the

Politics of Identity

Memory is important, letting that memory be sufficiently ambiguous and open-ended so that others can inhabit the space, can imbue the forms with their own memory.

—James Ingo Freed

### **Introduction**

As the shape Holocaust memory takes in Europe and Israel is constrained by political, aesthetic, and religious coordinates, that in America is no less guided by both American ideals and experiences of this time. Unlike European memorials, however, often anchored in the very sites of destruction, those in America are necessarily removed from the "topography of terror." Where European memorials located in situ often suggest themselves rhetorically as the extension of events they would commemorate, those in America must gesture abstractly to a past removed in both

time and space. If memorials in Germany and Poland composed of camp ruins invite visitors to mistake themselves for the events they represent, those in America inevitably call attention to the great distance between themselves and the destruction. The meaning in American memorials is not always as "self-evident" as that suggested at the camps, places of deportation, or destroyed synagogues. In this sense, American memorials seem not to be anchored in history so much as in the ideals that generated them in the first place.

In America, the motives for memory of the Holocaust are as mixed as the population at large, the reasons variously lofty and cynical, practical and aesthetic. Some communities build memorials to remember lost brethren, others to remember themselves. Some build memorials as community centers, others as tourist attractions. Some survivors remember strictly according to religious tradition, while others recall the political roots of their resistance. Landsmanschaften organizations continue to erect hundreds of inscribed markers to lost teachers, communities, and families in the Jewish cemeteries in and around New York City.<sup>1</sup> Veterans' organizations sponsor memorials to recall their role as camp liberators. Congressmen support local monuments to secure votes among their Jewish constituency. Even the national memorial to the Holocaust now

under way in Washington, D.C., was proposed by then-President Jimmy Carter to placate Jewish supporters angered by his sale of F-15 fighter planes to Saudi Arabia. All such memorial decisions are made in political time, contingent on political realities.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for memory change with every new generation, as well. While the survivors remember themselves and loved ones lost, their children build memorials to remember a world they never knew, an act of recovery whereby they locate themselves in a continuous past. In the words of Alex Krieger, a child of survivors and professor of architecture active in Boston's proposed memorial, "It's not for my parents that I pursue this endeavor. . . . This memorial will be for me. Because I was not there, and did not suffer, I cannot remember. Therefore, I very much need to be reminded. This memorial will be for my six-month-old daughter, who will need to be reminded even more. It will be for her children who will need to be reminded still more. We must build such a memorial for all of the generations to come who, by distance from the actual events and people, will depend on it to activate [memory]."<sup>3</sup> That is, the memorial will become for post-Holocaust generations a surrogate experience, something other than the survivors' recollections to inspire their own memory.

In the pages that follow, I trace the generational change in American public memorialization of the Holocaust, from its early place along the margins of historical consciousness to its more recent overshadowing of nearly all other Jewish past and present. Like the preceding sections, this one on American memorials does not attempt a comprehensive survey of American memorials and museums, of which there are now hundreds. For want of space, this means that many celebrated memorials in Miami, Atlanta, Baltimore, Toledo, Philadelphia, Long Island, and New Haven, among dozens of other communities, have not been addressed here. The memorials I do examine were chosen as illustrations of the critical themes I have pursued until now: their embodiment of national ideals, difficult aesthetic debates, and political contingencies. I hope that this inquiry will inspire others to critical tellings of the dozens of memorials that have been undeservingly passed over here.

## Chapter 11

## The Plural Faces

### of Holocaust Memory

### in America

American public memory of the Shoah began with the first newspaper reports of mass murder early in 1943. Though often buried beneath accounts of military battles, these stories haunted both the Jewish refugees who had arrived in the mid-1930s and second-generation Jewish Americans with family still in Europe. To this vicarious memory of events, newly liberated survivors arriving after the war added their personal experiences. At first, Jews in America enacted such memory in traditional, ritual forms: remembering the dead in Yizkor services during the high holidays, lamenting the catastrophe on the Ninth of Av, or even leaving place-settings empty at home festivals in honor of those recently lost. Relatives who knew the exact dates of their loved ones' deaths lighted *Jahrzeit* candles, while those who did not know where or when their family was killed waited for the rabbinical ruling that deemed the Tenth of Teveth such a day of mourning and remembrance.

The first public Holocaust commemoration in America took place at the very height of the killing, on 2 December 1942. On this day, according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, some five hundred thousand Jews in New York City stopped work for ten minutes, both to mourn those already killed and to call attention to the ongoing massacre. In a gesture of sympathy, several radio stations observed a two-minute silence before broadcasting memorial services at 4:30 that afternoon.<sup>1</sup> Similar commemorations followed the next spring, culminating in several mass public memorial ceremonies, including a pageant held at Madison Square Garden in March 1943, called "We Will Never Die" and dedicated to the two million Jews who perished at the hands of the Germans that year.<sup>2</sup> Other public

memorials included mass rallies called by the Jewish Labor Committee to mourn the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. The largest single Holocaust memorial event during the war took place on 19 April 1944, the first anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. On the steps of New York City Hall, over thirty thousand Jews gathered to hear Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and prominent Jewish leaders honor the memory of fighters and martyrs who had died in the uprising.

Much of the horrifying information that moved these groups to memorialize Europe's dying Jews had been distributed by the man at the Polish News Agency who later proposed the nation's first Holocaust monument. After fleeing to France from Vienna in 1938 during the Anschluss, A. R. Lerner came to New York, where he edited bulletins for the Polish News Agency describing the plight of Polish Jews under Nazi occupation. His parents had died in France after following him there, and the rest of his family—Polish Jews—had perished in the death camps. In 1944, using photographs and documents supplied by the Polish underground, Lerner published a pictorial history of the Nazis' annihilation of European Jewry. Later, he organized an exhibition of these same materials at the Vanderbilt Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in New York, sponsored by the Jewish Labor Committee. In January 1946, as vice president of the National Organization of Polish Jews (NOPJ), he proposed that the group establish an eternal flame in tribute to the "Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Six Million Jews Slain by the Nazis," to be situated somewhere in New York City.<sup>3</sup>

Within days, according to Lerner, the NOPJ had petitioned the new mayor of New York, William O'Dwyer, for a place to build their "Eternal Light." The mayor endorsed the project, as did Robert Moses, commissioner of the Parks Department, who enlisted the aid of Stuart Constable, the department's chief designer. Moses wrote to the NOPJ that he preferred a monument to an eternal flame and would proceed when they found a suitable site in the city. At Lerner's suggestion, Constable and Jo Davidson, a well-known sculptor and friend of Constable, drove to Riverside Drive to look for an appropriate site. Constable reported back to Lerner that on approaching Riverside Drive between Eighty-third and Eighty-fourth streets, he and Davidson watched as an old, bearded Jew stood quietly in the park as if in deep contemplation. Apparently struck by the apparition, they stopped the car and decided that the spot on which the Jew stood, monumentlike, would be the future site of the memorial.

The date for the dedication was chosen less arbitrarily. "My decision to hold the dedication ceremony in September or October," Lerner said, "was chiefly influenced by the acute situation in Palestine where a bitter fight raged between the Jews and the English which caused the United Nations to put the Palestine question on the agenda before the Assembly in October, 1947."<sup>4</sup> Between May and

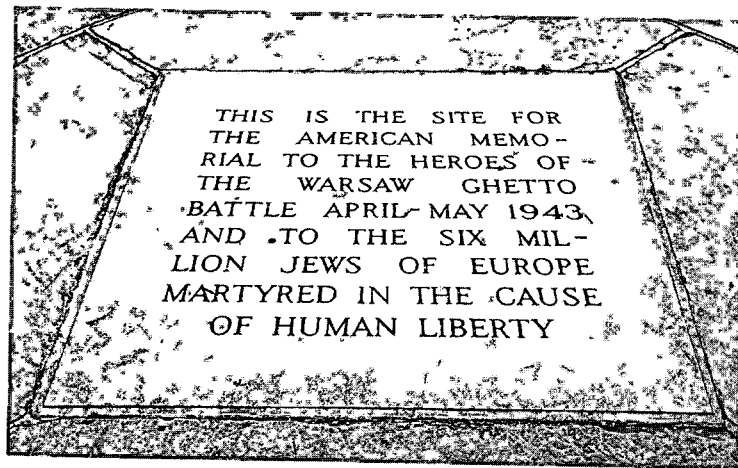


A mass rally on the steps of New York City Hall commemorates the first anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, 19 April 1944. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia listens as Sen. Isaac Rubinstein, former chief rabbi of Vilna, reads. Among those standing in the second row are writer Sholom Asch, poet Julian Tuwim, and, on the far right, miniaturist Arthur Szyk. Photo: Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

October, Lerner mounted a furious public relations and fundraising campaign. Before long, letters from all the European ambassadors began to pour in, each requesting some role in the ceremonies. Hundreds of civic and religious leaders from all sectors pledged their support, as well, also expecting to take part in a public way. Arrangements were made for television, newsreels, and the Voice of America to cover the dedication ceremonies. Hundreds of thousands of admission tickets were sent to civic organizations for distribution and mailed to all delegates at the United Nations.

At 12:30 on a rainy Sunday afternoon, 19 October 1947, tens of thousands of people jammed the Riverside Park mall from Eighty-third to Ninety-fifth streets. With people crowded onto rooftops above and blocking the streets below, Mayor O'Dwyer dedicated the site of the future monument and marked it with a cornerstone slab inscribed with the words: "This is the site for the American memorial to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Battle, April–May 1943 and to the six million Jews of Europe martyred in the cause of human liberty." Descriptions of the ceremony and excerpts from speeches filled the next day's newspapers. In its editorial two days later, the *New York Times* declared, "It is fitting that that a memorial to six million victims of the most tragic mass crime in history, the Nazi genocide of Jews, should rise in this land of liberty." The stone slab remains to this day, but the memorial itself was never built.

The first New York City memorial, dedicated to the site of the still unbuilt memorial in Riverside Park. Photo: Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

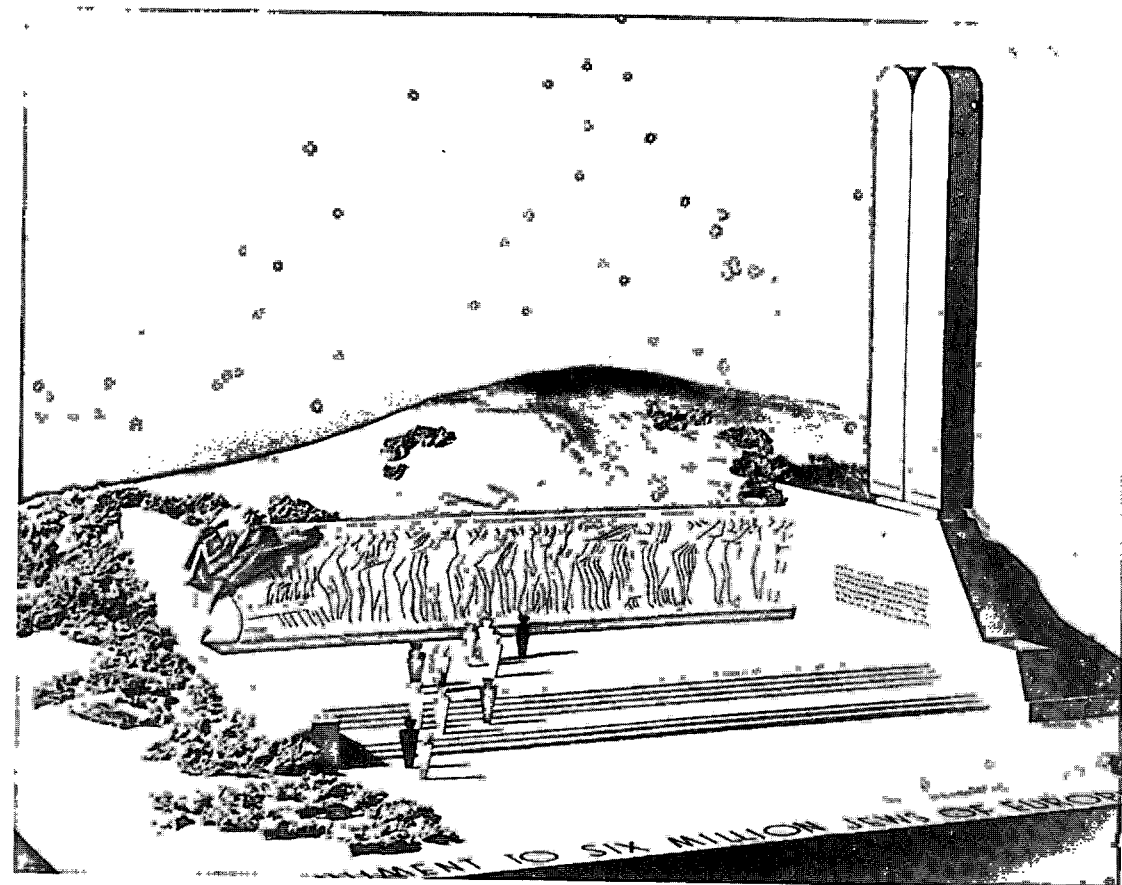


### The First American Monument: Forever Unbuilt

As is often the case, the subsequent story surrounding the unbuilt memorial can be more instructive than a finished memorial could ever have been. The first proposed monument, designed by Davidson and architect Ely Jacques Kahn in 1948, consisted of a series of steplike blocks forming a pedestal, atop which stood a muscular, heroic figure. With his arms swept back, his chest thrust forth defiantly, and sleeves rolled up, the bare-handed fighter towered over a rabbinical figure below, hands up as if beseeching the Almighty; another figure aided a fallen comrade, and yet another slumped dead against the front of the pedestal. Within months, however, and without much commentary, the New York City Arts Commission rejected the model and began a search for another.

A year later, another model was submitted by the Memorial Committee for the Six Million Jews of Europe. Designed by a Columbia University architecture professor, Percival Goodman, it had a 25-foot-high wall stretching 120 feet long, crowned by a 45-foot pedestal and menorah. It was rejected on two counts, according to Arthur Hodgkiss, executive secretary of the Parks Department. Not only would the memorial take up an inordinate amount of space, but in its sheer visibility, it could well cause automobile accidents by startling motorists on the Henry Hudson Parkway.<sup>5</sup>

Two years later, ground was actually broken for an 80-foot-high black granite pylon of two tablets, on which the Ten Commandments were to be inscribed. In this design by architect Erich Mendelsohn and sculptor Ivan Mestrovic, the tablets would rise at one end of a long plaza, bordered on one side by a 100-foot-long wall of bas-relief figures depicting the struggle of humankind to fulfill the Commandments—all urged on by a giant carving of Moses. Though the design was accepted by the Arts Commission, Mendelsohn's death in 1953 discouraged



potential donors, and fundraising efforts eventually broke down altogether.

Nearly twelve years passed before two memorials by Nathan Rapoport were submitted for consideration in 1964. One, the *Scroll of Fire*, was proposed by the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization (WAGRO). The other, submitted by the Artur Zygelboim Memorial Committee, was a sculpture of the committee's namesake, engulfed by flames, about to pitch forward—a reference to Zygelboim's 1943 suicide in London to protest the world's indifference to the plight of Jews in Poland. After rejecting the Zygelboim sculpture on behalf of the commission as too tragic for recreational park land, too distressing for children, Eleanor Platt, a sculptor and Arts Commission member turned to the *Scroll of Fire*. "This proposed work seems to be excessively and unnecessarily large," she wrote. "Even if it were to be smaller and in better taste, artistically, I believe that by approving it or the Zygelboim sculpture, we would set a highly regrettable precedent."<sup>6</sup>

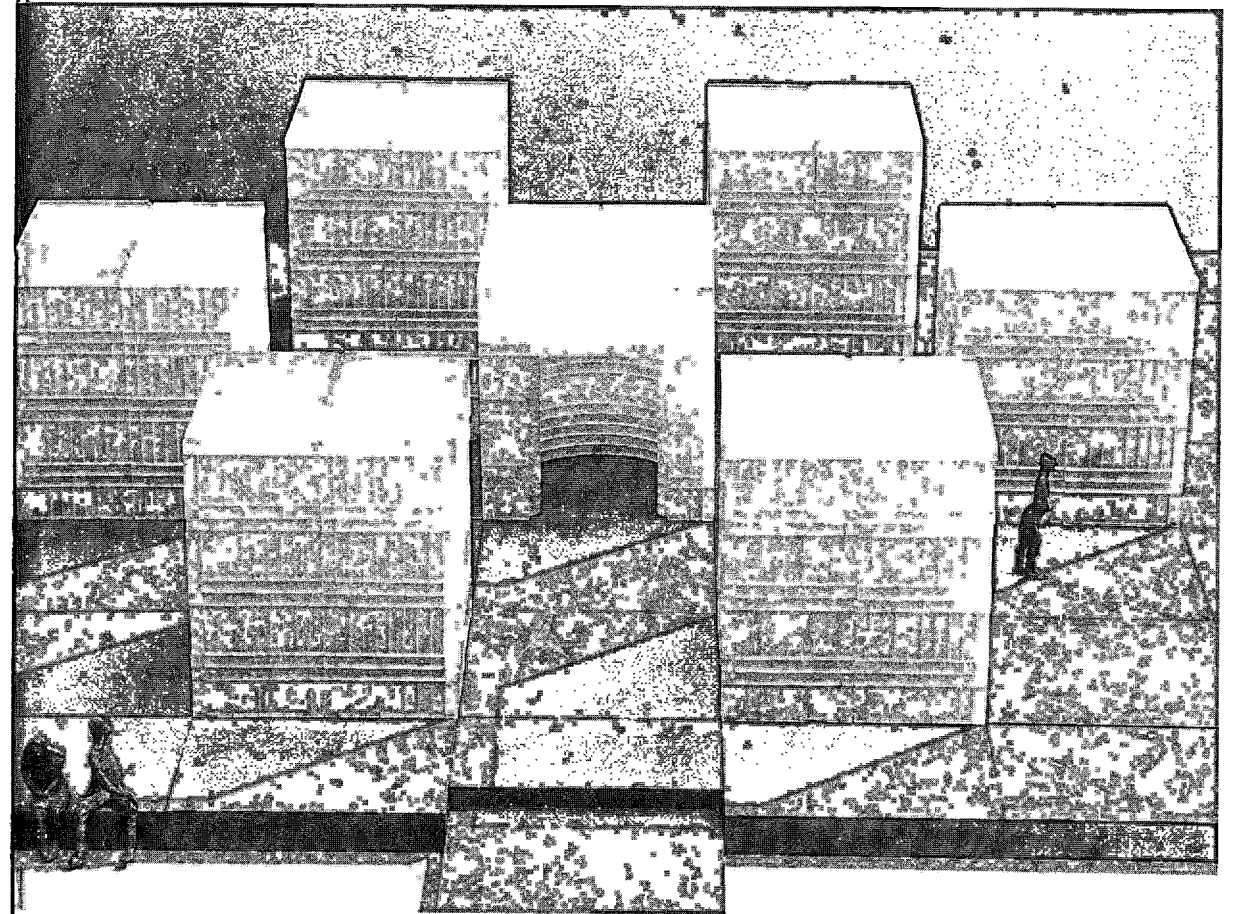
In the eyes of Rapoport and his sponsors, however, the crux of Platt's response came in her concluding remarks, which incensed the Jewish community. "How would we answer other special groups who want to be similarly represented on

Model of memorial designed for Riverside Park site in New York City, designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Ivan Mestrovic but never built. Photo: Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

public land?" she asked. Stunned by her reference to "special groups," the sponsors were further bewildered by Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris's opinion that "monuments in the parks should be limited to events of American history." They saw numerous examples of other immigrant groups' national heroes immortalized in stone and bronze, from Central Park to Washington Square. Eventually, Rapoport's *Scroll of Fire* was erected in Israel, where national memory had always been defined by that of Jews everywhere, a continuum of generational memory transcending borders.

But these American survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto may have continued to wonder what the difference was between "events of American history" and those of "Americans' history." For, like many American immigrants, they included both old and new worlds in their historical memory. In a culture composed of immigrants, they assumed that their "foreign" experiences would come to be regarded also as American, that as part of their European past, the Holocaust would become part of America's past. As a land of immigrants, the survivors had hoped, America would also be a land of immigrant memories, of pasts that were "foreign" only insofar as they transpired in other lands, but American in that they explained why immigrants had come to America in the first place. If the survivors' history was not a part of the public memory, could they still regard themselves as part of the public?

The New York Holocaust memorial was never built at its assigned place in Riverside Park. The square stone remains, however, protected by a short cast-iron fence, largely unknown to most New Yorkers. Once a year, around 19 April, wreaths of flowers appear inside the enclosure. Undeterred, WAGRO continued its search for funds and an acceptable design. In the mid-1960s, with the city's blessing, a new site on the lower tip of Manhattan across from Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty was chosen as more suitable for a truly civic monument. An umbrella committee calling itself Memorial to the Six Million Jewish Martyrs, Inc. and comprising some twenty major Jewish organizations commissioned a model from the celebrated architect Louis Kahn. In October 1968, Kahn's model of six great glass blocks was exhibited to wide acclaim at the Museum of Modern Art. A season of fundraising dinners was kicked off to raise the 1.5 million dollars necessary to install the monument. Five years later, the committee had raised \$17,000, barely enough to pay the architect for his model. Kahn died in March 1974, and the following May, the executive committee announced that fundraising efforts had been stymied by a worsening economic recession, Israel's recent wars, and the crisis of Soviet Jewry. Fearful that a drive to fund memory of the past could be at the expense of endangered Jews in the present, the memorial committee suspended further work on the New York monument.<sup>7</sup>



Louis Kahn's model for a Holocaust memorial in New York City, designed in 1967 for Battery Park but never built. Photo: Courtesy of Vladka Meed.

Which is not to say that New York was left without its share of Holocaust monuments and memorial centers. Most synagogues in New York continue to reserve some space for a small memorial: a bas relief of Janusz Korczak and his children frames the doorway of the Park Avenue Synagogue; a miniature memorial garden invites quiet meditation at the Brotherhood Synagogue on Gramercy Park. In other places, Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument has been divided thematically and reproduced: the exilic bas relief has a home at the Jewish Theological Seminary, while a version of the fighters occupies the lobby of the Workmen's Circle Building.

Other memorial motifs depend similarly on their sites and sponsoring institutions. Sculptor Harriet Feigenbaum's marble bas relief is set vertically along the corner edge of the Appellate Division Courthouse of the State Supreme Court on Madison Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street. Carved swirls of flame and smoke climb gracefully from an etched plan of Auschwitz, up along the corner, cut off bluntly at the top. This memorial "to Victims of the Injustice of the Holocaust" is inscribed with words that echo its placement as a kind of cornerstone for the courthouse, the reason for its commission: "Indifference to Injustice Is the Gate to Hell."

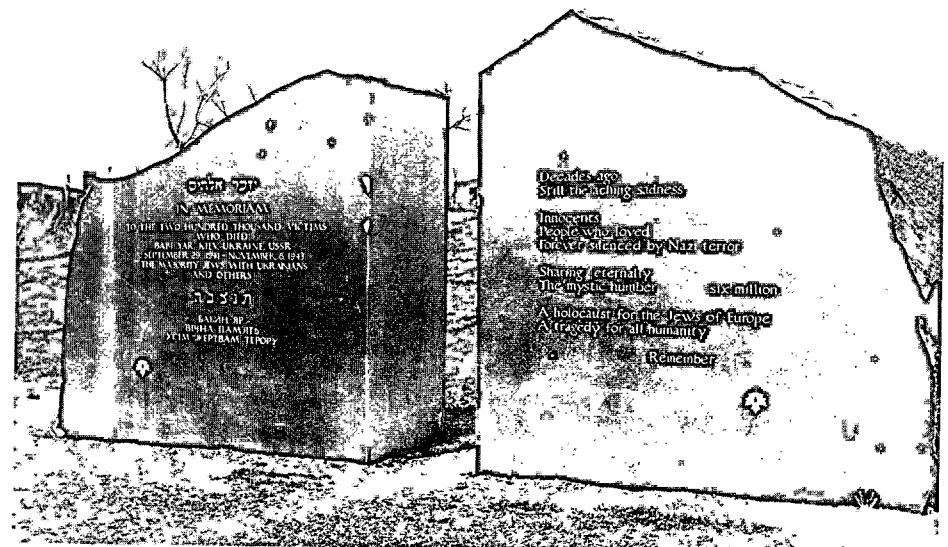
### The American Memorial Terrain: Denver

With little national coordination, other memorials did begin to appear across the country, quietly as plaques on synagogue walls, or as small memorial gardens in the courtyards of suburban synagogues. Occasionally, the rabbi would read from a pulpit salvaged from a destroyed synagogue in Germany, Poland, or Czechoslovakia. Eventually, as a community's confidence grew, small memorials were dedicated publicly in civic spaces usually reserved for state and national monuments. Open competitions were occasionally held, though more often it was the donor him- or herself who conceived of the monument's form and commissioned it. Typically, a Holocaust memorial committee would invite a local artist to submit proposals until they could agree on one they liked. Even as community projects, these memorials rarely achieved popular consensus: if they were too figurative, religious leaders balked at their not being Jewish enough. If they were too abstract, survivors protested that their all-too-literal experiences were betrayed.

Today, nearly every major American city is home to at least one, and often several, memorials commemorating aspects of the Holocaust. What each remembers depends on who commissioned the monument, under what financial conditions, and in what context. For example, not long after Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" came to the attention of Americans, the city council in Denver passed

a motion "to recall the past tragedy of Babi Yar, as well as the necessity to speak out against anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union today."<sup>8</sup> As the plight of Soviet Jewry had paralyzed one memorial in New York, it would now inspire a new one in Denver. Accordingly, the city council designated a twenty-seven-acre parcel of undeveloped city land for a Babi Yar Memorial, chosen for its apparent topographical resemblance to the site of the infamous massacre at Babi Yar: a ten-meter-deep drainage culvert recalled to their minds the ravine at Babi Yar. After several years of fundraising, a dedication ceremony addressed by Elie Wiesel, and a Congressional motion commending the committee for its work, plans for the memorial were nearly completed.

But when the model and inscriptions were publicly announced, representatives from the local Ukrainian community rose in protest. There was no mention of the massacre of Ukrainians that took place at Babi Yar in 1942, they argued, which included the martyrdom of the nationalist poet Olena Teliha, among others. After several rounds of negotiations between the Babi Yar Foundation and a newly formed committee of Ukrainian Americans, the foundation agreed to change the monument's inscriptions to reflect the Ukrainian dimension of the killings at Babi Yar between 1941 and 1943. In return, the Ukrainian group would contribute \$25,000 to finish the memorial. Two massive, polished chunks of charcoal granite at the entrance to the Babi Yar Memorial in Denver now commemorate the "Two Hundred Thousand Victims Who Died [at] Babi Yar, Kieve, Ukraine, U.S.S.R.,



September 29, 1941–November 6, 1943. The Majority Jews with Ukrainians and Others.”

Beyond the portal stones, a number of other, mixed symbolic markers dot the great expanse of green, rolling park land. One hundred crabapple trees were planted to represent Jews killed at Babi Yar. A narrow, high-sided wooden bridge spans the culvert, an oblique reference to boxcars that once carried Jews to their deaths (though not at Babi Yar). Across the park, a round granite slab in the shape of a tree trunk sheared near the ground signifies a people cut off, mid-growth. Near the entrance, a large round marble stone is inscribed with the names of the park’s founders, its chief donors, and the politicians who participated in its establishment.

Today, Denver’s Babi Yar Memorial Park lies quietly unvisited by much of the community. The city’s park service continues to maintain the grounds, and neighborhood children on bicycles still careen down the park’s grassy slopes. But the voice box that once narrated Babi Yar’s history to visitors has long been broken, its tape lost. Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies have been moved to other sites throughout the city. For, as was the case in many American communities, the building process itself was occasionally so bruising and contentious, that much of Denver’s Jewish community grew alienated from the very site that was meant to unify them. In time, wounds may heal and the community may yet return to their Babi Yar Park, but as of this writing, the memorial seems all but forgotten by its community.

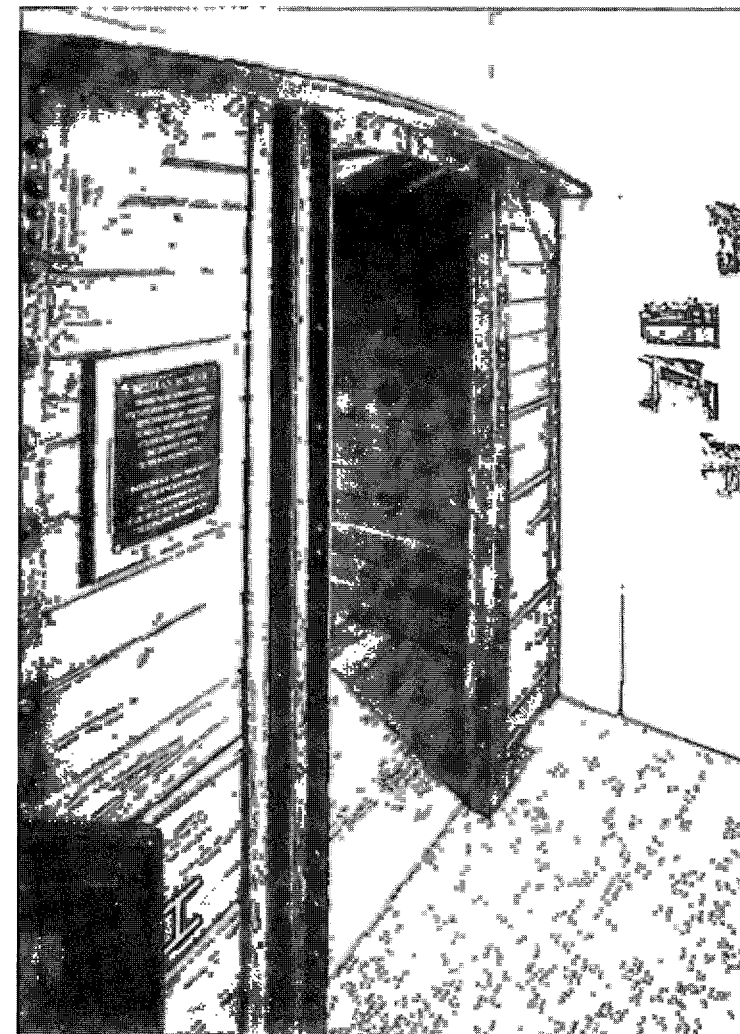
### Dallas

As terrain and fundraising combined in Denver to shape the Babi Yar Memorial’s message, the artists’ and primary sponsors’ visions dominate in other American memorials. Though survivor Michael Jacobs says he had wanted an outdoor site for the memorial he had long planned for his Dallas community, he gratefully accepted the downstairs space donated to him by the local Jewish Community Center in 1980. This would be the future home of the Dallas Memorial Center for Holocaust Studies, a professionally run museum and study center for Holocaust education and research. As the chief donor and fundraiser, Jacobs wanted the center to bear some mark of his personal experiences during the Holocaust, some trace of the survivor’s vision.

This vision was defined for him when he was led downstairs to see the space for the first time. As he descended, Jacobs has said, the stairs appeared to be so many railroad ties, the handrails seeming to lead him into the boxcar he’d been forced into as a young Jewish child in Poland.<sup>9</sup> Committed to presenting a rhetorically authentic reconstruction of events, the survivor-sponsor traveled to Europe in

1983 expressly to find one of the boxcars that once transported Jews to the East. He first tried the Dutch national railway, but they had disposed of all the now ancient boxcars. He then called the Belgian railway, who believed they had one car left, which they were about to destroy. Assured by authorities that its murderous credentials were beyond reproach, Jacobs arranged to have the car shipped intact to Galveston, whence it would be trucked overland to Dallas. At first, the railway tried to sell the boxcar to the survivor, but when told of its purpose and Jacobs’s own past, they agreed to donate it, as shippers did their services over the entire length of the boxcar’s journey to America.

On its arrival in Dallas, the boxcar was shortened by one third of its length to fit into the building. It was then placed at the bottom of the center’s stairs as an entry hall to the museum, a kind of antechamber, just to give visitors the sense



Boxcar entryway to the Holocaust memorial museum and study center in Dallas. Photo: Courtesy of the Dallas Memorial Center for Holocaust Studies.

of "having been there." As the survivor's memory had been dominated by his experiences in boxcars, so too would the visitor's museum experience be framed. But here a minor memorial crisis ensued. During the museum's dedication, a few of those who really "had been there"—the survivors—refused to enter the boxcar at all: once had been enough. When they complained that they were, in effect, barred from visiting a museum devoted to their experiences, a solution followed immediately. The boxcar remained, but survivors were given their own, hidden entrance, a secret door for survivors only. To this day, the boxcar entryway is the only one of its kind.

### Tucson

In Tucson, local topography and landforms combined with the Jewish Community Center's design to influence the shape of Holocaust memory in still other ways. Unveiled on 22 April 1990, the coincidental convergence of Earth Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Holocaust memorial at the center seemed to embody the simultaneous gesture every monument makes to both landscape and memory. As the "Grand Canyon State," Arizona had long linked its identity to its monumental natural setting. Artist Ami Shamir thus conceived and built Tucson's Holocaust memorial in direct proportion to the wide-open landscape it would inhabit. With its 43-foot-high, broken-topped column, a reflecting pool, and 150-foot-long bas-relief wall, it would be the largest Holocaust monument in America.

For its size would correspond to that of Tucson's landscape, not to that of its small but vibrant Jewish community of some twenty thousand. In this sense, Tucson confirmed the general wisdom that the smaller the community, the more manageable and streamlined the memorial building process will be. In a community of relatively uniform aesthetic tastes and historical concerns, the Holocaust memorial committee found little disagreement in evaluating some eighty submissions and proposals from artists around the world. When the local Jewish federation decided to build an expansive new recreational and educational community center, one open to the entire non-Jewish Tucson community, they voted to commission the memorial as part of the complex, thus avoiding the usually fractious fundraising chores. Costs of the memorial would be built into the center's ten-million-dollar budget.

Though the building's architect had not designed a specific space for the monument, he had planned for a long, free-standing wall to extend outward from the main structure by some 150 feet to define and enclose the surrounding open desert. Instead of sitting isolated and exposed, the center would seem linked both to nearby roads and to the landscape; such a structural arm would also create a

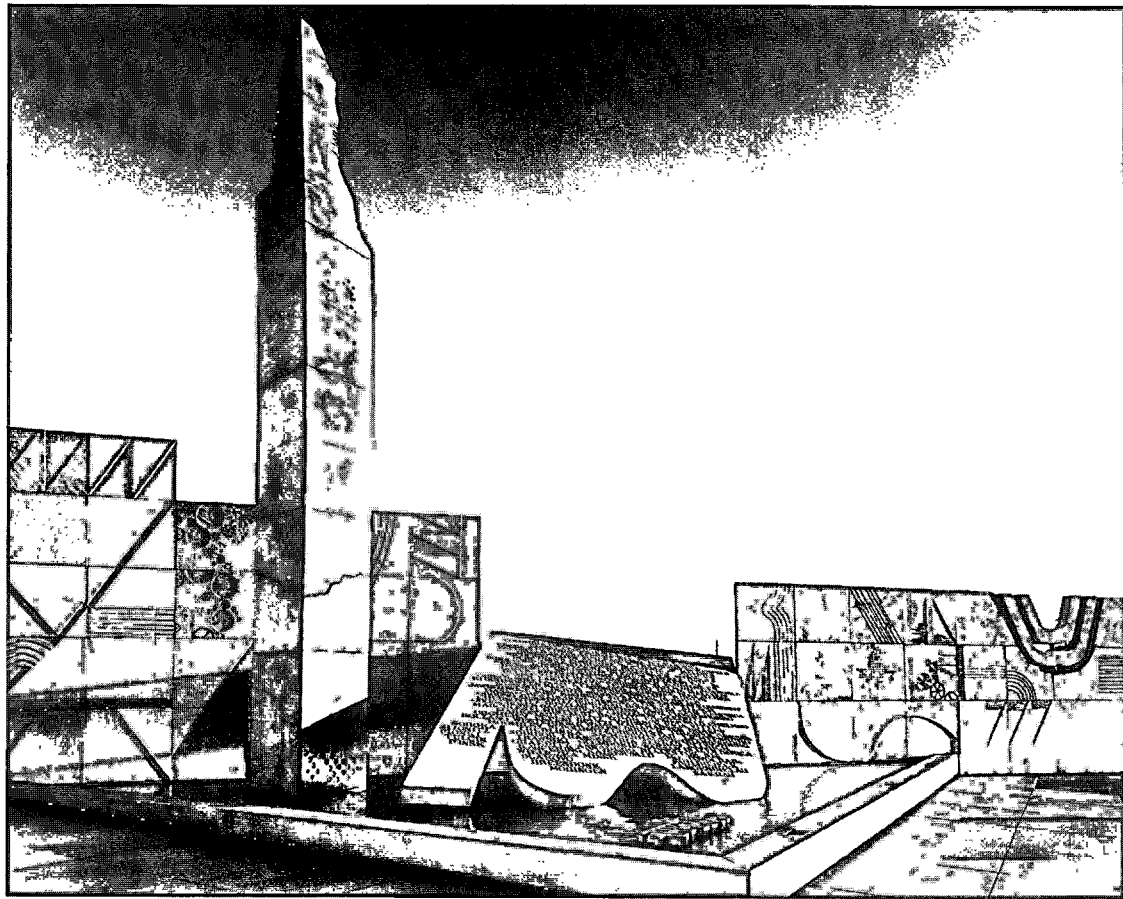
large, inviting plaza and parking lot in front, breaking the landscape into manageable parts. As it turned out, the wall and the plaza it created also provided an ideal space for the monument; indeed, by building the monument into the free-standing wall, Shamir has made it seem part of the center's original structure. As a result, the monument now functions as the architectural entryway visitors pass through on their way into a stunning complex of auditoriums, cavernous gymnasiums, weight rooms, swimming pools, and tennis courts. Built as it is into the wall and plaza, the memorial houses and thus lends a certain cast to all the activities that take place in the center.

From a distance, only the three-sided concrete column and long white wall are visible. The open country around it is dotted with postcard-perfect, three-armed saguaro cactus trees, sandy dry gulches, and low-slung Santa Fe-style homes—all dwarfed by the craggy Santa Catalina mountain range looming eight thousand feet high a couple of miles to the west. As we approach, we see that the column and walls are poured in white concrete sections. Like many of the monument's other elements, the broken top of the column resonates in several ways at once: some iconographic, some symbolic. By itself, the column suggests an architectural remnant from a shattered civilization, or, in the tradition of Jewish funerary motifs, a broken tree, or a broken candlestick recalling a life interrupted by death. Survivors, as well as those who have only visited the camps since the war, say they see in the lone column a crematorium chimney.

Both tower and wall seem to take on the color and cast of the natural earth forms nearby. The tower's broken top, for example, recalls the craggy peaks of the nearby mountains. At sunset, the entire wall complex radiates the warm pink glow of evening. The pastel hues of the desert—reds, yellows, and browns—are picked up, seemingly cast into the raw white concrete of the wall and monument, while the sky's sunset gold is reflected in the pool of water at its base.

Other elements simultaneously reinforce and undercut the tranquility of the setting, which takes on the taut stillness of ruins. A section of the wall appears to have toppled forward into the reflecting pool, leaving a wide gap in the wall's length. With its round-topped edges, the section leaning into the pool recalls the tablets of the law, broken and reinscribed with the names of some 147 concentration, death, and labor camps. According to the project's director, Fred Steinger, the artist made sure every local survivor's former camp was listed here, a place where individual stories might be recalled together. A piece of stone from Dachau was also embedded in the slab of concrete bearing the camp's name, linking the removed memorial sign to its place on earth.

Rivulets of water run down from cracks in the column to feed the pool, on which seems to float a stylized Hebrew quotation from Jeremiah 31: 15–17:



The Holocaust memorial at the Jewish Community Center in Tucson, Arizona, designed by Ami Shamir, 1990. Photo: Courtesy of the Jewish Community Center of Tucson.

"There is hope for thy future." The aim, according to the artist, was "to conjure up the essences of complementary archetypes such as destruction and rejuvenation, hopelessness and hopefulness . . . death and life with the emphasis on the power and vitality of life forces to overcome unspeakable difficulties."<sup>10</sup> Together, images and words suggest that from brokenness, life still flows. Shamir, an Israeli living in New York, seems to combine Israel's sense of continuing Jewish life after the Holocaust with America's ever-sanguine view of the future.

In addition to resonating the nearby "lay of the land," Shamir's design seems to have incorporated some of its local lore as well. For as stark and raw as the wall looks from a distance, on closer inspection we find that its entire length is covered with a bas relief of what appear to be etched hieroglyphs: geometric lines and squiggles, randomly drawn arrows and a star of David, Hebrew lettering (*Zachor*, or remember), and round intermeshing gears. According to the artist, these abstract signs gesture to the identity of the memorial maker, on the one hand, and to the railroad tracks and machinery of death, on the other. Further

down the wall to the right, a stylized menorah cut out of the top of the wall serves as both part of the monument and the only icon marking the site as specifically Jewish.

Whether intentionally or not, Shamir's wall signs also recall yet another kind of local iconography, known primarily to the inhabitants of Tucson familiar with the history of their environs. For wherever someone digs in Tucson—for a new sidewalk, swimming pool, or even a monument—handfuls of red-clay pottery shards are churned up, remnants of a now extinct tribe of Native Americans, retrospectively named "Hohokam"—loosely translated as "the Disappeared Ones." The Hohokam tribe left more than broken vessels: they also left what has been called a "legacy on stone," thousands of petroglyphs carved into nearby stone faces, caves, and cliff sides. Various abstract and anthropomorphic in design, the petroglyphs now function in the popular imagination as indecipherable epiphanies for an extinct people. The visual resonance between Shamir's wall etchings and the petroglyphs of the Hohokam tribe may be apparent only to those who have seen both, yet it still links the memory of one genocide to another and in so doing ties the monument that much more closely to its surroundings.<sup>11</sup> The result is a Holocaust monument whose elements speak directly to its habitat, even as it commemorates events so distant in time and space that they may seem more mythical than real to much of Tucson's non-Jewish community.

It also becomes clear that in its many elements, the monument draws on much more than local landscape and lore. For, like any artist, the monument maker has drawn from his own particular repertoire of memorial figures and materials, forms and motifs. With several memorial commissions to Shamir's credit, it is not difficult to trace the recirculation of elements from memorial to memorial, each recalling some aspect of its predecessors. In fact, it seems likely that the Tucson memorial, with its seemingly unlimited space, invited just such a compilation of previous Holocaust memorials designed and built by the artist in New Jersey and Los Angeles. The forms of a memorial Shamir built in 1983 for Temple B'nai Abraham in Livingston, New Jersey, for example, are repeated here: a broken-topped column, cut-out menorah, and leaning tablets are slightly rearranged and enlarged in scale to the monumental surroundings of their new home in Tucson. To them, Shamir has added the long wall that will be part of his new design for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. Even the broken column in Livingston appeared in Shamir's earlier commission for the Wiesenthal Center's first memorial courtyard, built in 1977. By rearranging a number of repeating elements from his previous work, the artist might even be said to have created a kind of modular monument, eminently adaptable to its surroundings.

### Los Angeles: Three Memorials

In general, the larger a particular Jewish American community and the greater its diversity, the more difficult it will be to reach agreement on a unified memory of the Holocaust, much less a single memorial space. Conversely, the more compact and homogeneous the community, the easier and more single-minded the memorial-building process usually is. This is why Tuscon has a memorial and New York does not, why San Francisco finally agreed to build its controversial monument while Boston is still raising funds for its memorial. This may also be why Los Angeles has ended up with two major Holocaust museums, plus a large public monument.

In Los Angeles, with a Jewish population second only to New York's in size, public memory of the Holocaust has been riven into three unequal shares: the Jewish Federation's Martyrs' Memorial and Holocaust Museum, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Beit Hashoah—Museum of Tolerance, and a striking monument of black granite columns set in Pan Pacific Park. In a Jewish community of six hundred thousand, including some thirty thousand Holocaust survivors and refugees, rival memories and competing interests were inevitable. Practically the only common trait uniting an otherwise diverse weave of pious and secular, left- and right-wing, European and Mediterranean Jews has been the desire to remember. But questions of how, what, whom, and where to remember have divided the community no less than in other cities. While the Jews of Los Angeles have not decided on the single best way to commemorate the Holocaust, all agree that there is, for better or worse, more than enough memory to go around.

Indeed, even the desire to remember was born in conflicting needs. "At first, we wanted to forget," local survivor Otto Schirn has said. "But when we realized that our forgetting might lead to others never knowing about the Holocaust, we began to work on remembering—both for ourselves and so that others would know what happened. That's when the idea of a monument was born."<sup>12</sup> Each side of this twin memorial impulse would eventually demand its own corresponding space: one would be a substitute gravesite where survivors could mourn their lost families, the other a public exposition of Holocaust history. From its inception in the 1960s, the Los Angeles memorial was thus to plod painstakingly along two parallel tracks—one monumental, one museological—until it was joined—some say challenged—later by an energetic newcomer, Rabbi Marvin Hier.

By 1973, Schirn and his committee of fellow survivors had found what they believed to be a friendly neighborhood park for their projected memorial, the Pan Pacific Park in the traditionally Jewish Fairfax district of Los Angeles. That the neighborhood was not quite as Jewish as it had been in the past, but had become a more representative mix of African Americans and new immigrants from Mexico

and Asia, made the space even more appealing in the "new Americans'" eyes. An open competition for a memorial design was called in 1977, and ten artists submitted drawings. Within weeks, a jury of survivors, local academic art historians, and Jewish community leaders had chosen Joseph Young's proposal for six triangular columns of black granite, each twenty four feet high, equipped with gas flames to be kindled on commemorative days.

But when the survivors' group turned to the county for use of the public park, the Board of Supervisors balked. According to the Los Angeles County Parks code, a public park was a civic, and therefore nonsectarian, space. This was, after all, Pan Pacific Park and so could not display the religious symbols or forms of any single group. The Holocaust, in the board's view, would have to be broadly defined to include all of its victims, Jews and non-Jews. The monument would have to invite the entire community into its space, without the implicit boundaries suggested by stars of David, crosses, or moons and crescents. As good "new Americans," the survivors agreed to omit all religious iconography. While the original design had included a hexagonal arrangement of columns inside a larger star of David, the final version would be the granite columns only—arranged in the outline of the now missing star.

Likewise, other specific references to Jewish victims would come only in oblique symbolism, according to the artist, forms that allowed the memorial projections of both Jews and non-Jews. The six columns, for example, would be open to many interpretations: their number would suggest in Jewish eyes the approximate number of Jewish dead, six million; others might count each as signifying one of the six death camps in Poland. Some would see the black columns as commemorative candles or torches, others as crematoria chimneys belching flames. In their vertical reach, they could be regarded as soaring emblems of heroism, while their triangular shape could recall the patches worn by all concentration camp inmates. Young has also suggested that the space between between columns could recall the absence of victims, the missing generation of children.

In fact, rather than conveying a sense of comfort or reassurance, the artist has attempted to suggest some of the pain that comes with mourning and remembrance. "I did not want to make something beautiful," he said, "but something to evoke the experience itself, which was not pretty."<sup>13</sup> The 75-by-100-foot space includes both the black granite columns set in a floor of black and red granite and a wall of broken-topped, unfinished granite chunks. A low black granite bench is meant to evoke the uncomfortably short bench traditionally used when Jewish mourners sit Shiva. And rather than inspirational memorial inscriptions, two sides of each of the three-sided columns will be incised with a historical text, each one of twelve panels describing a year of the Nazi rule. On the third side of

each column, a bronze bas relief will illustrate images from the period, with a special text set at child's eye level.

Though conceived in 1973, the monument at Pan Pacific Park was dedicated eighteen years later, in the fall of 1991. Meanwhile, the other half of the city's memorial project, its expository part, was also under way. What had begun as a small, traveling exhibition of photographs in 1976, organized by a group of survivors, finally found a home on the twelfth floor of the Jewish Federation office building on Wilshire Boulevard in 1978. In both conception and style, the exhibition reflected its modest origins—a meeting over coffee between an American-born businessman, Morton Silverman, and survivors from the area. We did not want a “pigeon-roost” in a park, said Silverman, but “something to teach, to document.”<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, Silverman and his group gathered photographic documents, labeled them, and solicited space from local universities and community centers. The exhibition's designers forswore a slick, high-tech appearance for a more understated, books-on-walls approach, one that would fit in flexibly with whatever space it occupied. Eventually, the local Jewish Federation found space to mount the exhibition permanently at its offices.

For a while, this room was the first and only Holocaust museum in America, a small sister to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which had sent consultants to advise the Jewish Federation. Working closely with Los Angeles County schools, the federation's small staff of survivors brought thousands of students from neighborhoods throughout the city to tour the museum. In fact, as instructive and powerful as the photographic panels were, students and teachers agreed that the exhibition's principal resource was the survivors who led them through the museum. In their presence, the photo montages came alive. The survivor-docents' living commentary seemed to invigorate the “book on walls,” filling in the gap between a grainy black-and-white past and the present moment. The director, Michael Nutkiewicz, recalls that after visiting the museum in 1982, Elie Wiesel told him, “You have a little jewel up here.”

Over the years, the center amassed a huge archive of photographs and artifacts—everything from uniforms to badges, letters to train schedules. For twelve years, visitors found their way up to the little jewel on the twelfth floor, but when the Bank Hapoalim vacated the space next door, the federation mounted a million-dollar campaign to endow a much larger, more accessible museum on the ground floor. In 1991, the new Martyrs' Memorial and Holocaust took its place on Wilshire Boulevard's museum row, just down from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Page Museum, and the Craft and Folk Museum.

Survivors still lead tours, but rather than focusing only on a long road to death, the redesigned exhibition begins with descriptions of Jewish culture and life in



Survivor Marc Salberg leads students on a tour of the Martyrs' Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust in Los Angeles. Photo: Courtesy of the Martyrs' Memorial and Museum.

nineteenth-century Europe—showing what was lost. And instead of emphasizing the end of Eastern European Jewry only, the new space will include elaborate displays of French and Greek Jewish communities whose destruction is often overlooked. According to Nutkiewicz, the exhibition story line does not end in 1945 with the liberation of the camps, but also covers the ensuing three years to suggest the continuation of Jewish life in Israel and America. “The content committee doesn't want to give the impression of Jews as [just] victims,” Nutkiewicz has said, “but [also] to demonstrate that they had a rich life before 1933.”<sup>15</sup>

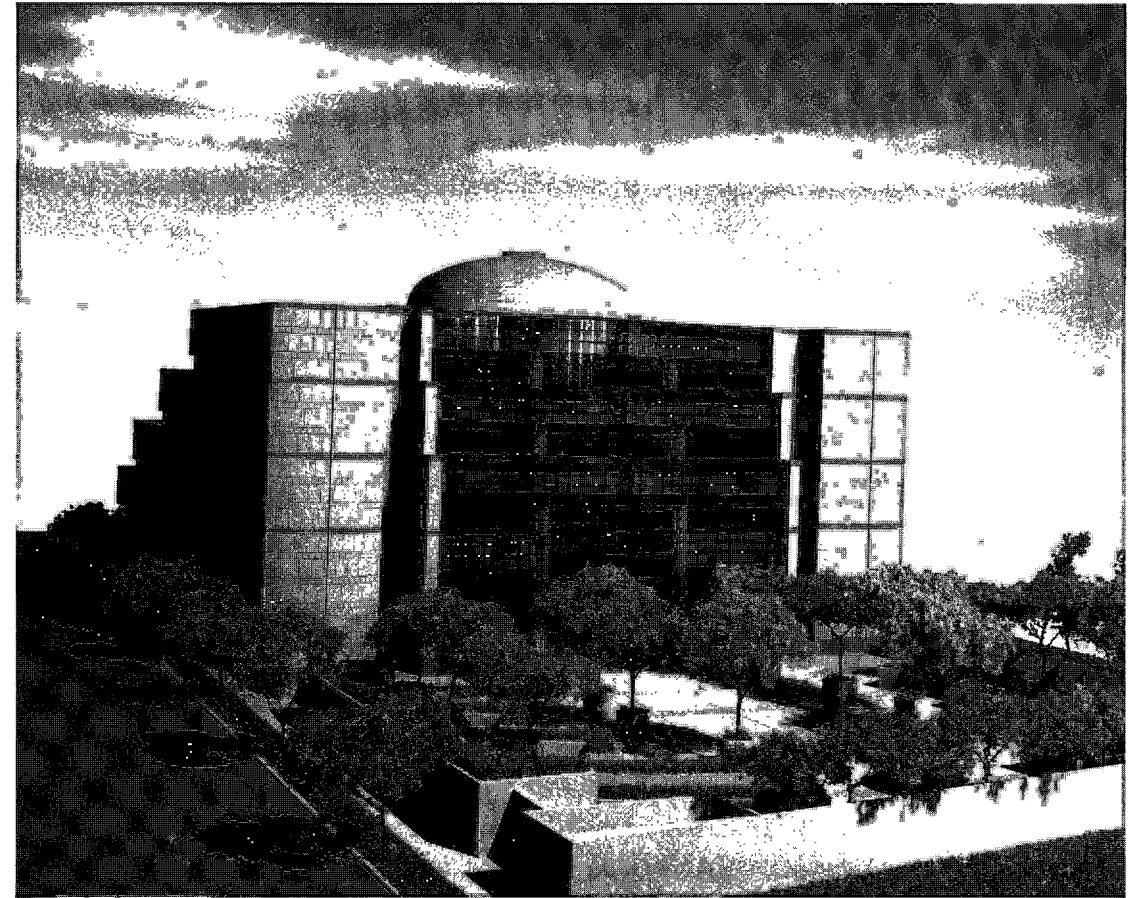
About the time in 1977 when the Jewish Federation decided to open the Holocaust museum, a young orthodox rabbi was on his way to Los Angeles to found the city's first orthodox Yeshiva. New York-born and -trained, Rabbi Marvin Hier had taken a sabbatical from his congregation in Vancouver to spend the year before in Israel. He had been much impressed by two institutions there: a small yeshiva called Or Sameach for young Ba'alei Tshuva (secular Jews who “return” to the orthodox fold) and the Yad Vashem memorial and museum. On his return

to Vancouver, Hier decided to found his own yeshiva in Los Angeles, after Or Sameach's example. With encouragement and financial backing from philanthropist Samuel Belzberg, whose children Rabbi Hier had shepherded back into the Jewish flock, the young rabbi moved to Los Angeles in 1977 to open a West Coast branch of Or Sameach. Within months, not only had Hier opened a Yeshiva (later affiliated with Yeshiva University) but, to the consternation and amazement of his newly adopted community, he had appended to it a Holocaust memorial and museum, the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

To this day, the motivation and timing underlying Hier's yoking of the yeshiva and Holocaust remain a festering sore point in the Jewish community. In the eyes of his well-to-do supporters, Hier's timing and vision were propitious: his Wiesenthal Center was to be the advanced edge of the Holocaust museums boom. But to his many detractors, including much of the academic and religious community, the rabbi was an interloper and opportunist, a self-promoting media hound who beat Angelenos at their own game. Many believe that while his original plans to open a Yeshiva were sincere, once he tapped the immense potential in the Holocaust as a fundraising theme, he allowed the means to become synonymous with the ends: Holocaust and Jewish education would become one. Critics charged that in this city of illusions, Hier had cleverly mixed Holocaust fundraising with Holocaust consciousness raising; even worse, in their minds, the public—especially the wealthiest sector—had bought it.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Hier was accused of dividing the area's financial resources, having jumped into the pool of potential donors precisely at the point when the Jewish Federation began raising funds for its long-planned museum.<sup>17</sup>

With its 380,000 contributing members, the Simon Wiesenthal Center is now the largest Jewish organization in the world and home to a sparkling new, five-story, fifty-million-dollar Holocaust museum and memorial complex. For better or worse, it has in fact borne out the words of the center's principal financial backer, Samuel Belzberg, who once told a reporter, "It's a sad fact that Israel and Jewish education and all the other familiar buzzwords no longer seem to rally Jews behind the community. The Holocaust, though, works every time."<sup>18</sup>

Ever mindful of both the differences between civic and Jewish constituencies and how they overlap, the Wiesenthal Center has constantly refined its mission to reflect the contingencies of audience and funding. As the recipient of state funds, the center was forced, in a lawsuit brought by local Jewish groups anxious to preserve the separation of church and state, to divorce itself completely from the yeshiva it once supported. Both the mission of the new museum and its name have been refined accordingly: it will now be a nonsectarian, public museum whose stated aim will be to confront bigotry and racism. Its new name,



Beit Hashoah—Museum of Tolerance, suggests that tolerance can be propagated precisely through the study of its greatest antithesis, the Holocaust, and other examples of racial and religious persecution.

In keeping with its new civic mandate to be answerable to Los Angeles' large black, Hispanic, and Asian communities, Beit Hashoah—Museum of Tolerance plans to examine the history of all social and ethnic prejudice and its consequences in America. In the words of a promotional brochure, "The museum's main exhibit area is organized in two sections: the history of racism and prejudice within the American experience . . . and then the story of the most quintessential example of man's inhumanity to man—the Holocaust." The exhibition hall on the ground level will include multimedia presentations of the civil rights movement in America, with a biographical section on Martin Luther King, Jr. After examining American forms of racism and bigotry, visitors will meet the Holocaust—now part of a distinctly American continuum. In this way, European and Christian anti-Semitism will be thematically subsumed to a more universal propensity in humankind toward prejudice and race hatred.

Model of Beit Hashoah—Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles. Photo: Courtesy of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

According to the exhibition model, the second main exhibition hall is devoted to "the Shoah—the Destruction of European Jewry." As at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., visitors entering the Holocaust section of the Museum of Tolerance will receive a passport bearing the photo of a child "enmeshed by events of the Holocaust." At every station, visitors insert their cards into machines to learn further details of their adopted child's life. In anticipation perhaps of a near future without survivors to lead us through such exhibits, technology makes former victims themselves our new guides. The first tableau in a succession of installations—"Berlin 1932: A Streetscape in Pre-Nazi Germany"—features a Jewish woman and child dining amicably at Café Kranzler with a German businessman, doctor, and military officer. On a screen above, according to the plan, visitors "see these same people ten years later as they are transformed into the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust." From here, we will be led through a series of dioramas and multimedia presentations presenting the subsequent twelve years—Kristallnacht, the invasion of Poland, the Wannsee Conference, ghetto uprisings, and finally the entry gates to Auschwitz. Only at the last station will visitors learn the fate of their child-guides.

At the end, visitors return to the present day in the form of a "situation room," complete with wire-service monitors relaying minute-by-minute instances of anti-Semitism and other human rights violations. Whether this will bring the past forward or make the present moment seem already historical and archaic in its museum setting remains to be seen.

Holocaust memorials not only reflect the aesthetic tastes of their communities, the topographies of their landscapes; in both process and execution, they tend also to embody the community's broader ethos. What happens when, in the words of Judith Miller, Hollywood meets the Holocaust? The results may have been all too predictable. Early conjecture surrounding the initial design of the Wiesenthal Center was not always without basis: in the land of Disney and entertainment theme parks, a Holocaust chamber of horrors, replete with piped-in smoke and screams, did indeed make its way onto the drawing board—only to be rejected by the project's organizers.

The ultimate design of the center showed both taste and Hollywood flash, even if the slickness of the promotional campaigns left many in the community uneasy. In media-saturated Los Angeles, where the strength of an idea or depth of talent is often measured in decibels and talk-show visibility, even the public institutions have had to rely on show-business techniques to draw some of the region's great wealth into its cultural and performing arts centers, its museums, and universities. Given the ethos of a region dominated by the "entertainment industry," the Beverly Hills Holocaust banquets featuring everyone from George

Bush to Arnold Schwarzenegger should not be surprising, no matter how surreal they seem at first blush. Because Los Angeles is a big city, where all kinds of people give all kinds of money for all kinds of causes, all kinds of memory are going to exist side by side: both the glitzy, entertaining productions of the Wiesenthal Center and the more measured, lower-key exhibitions at the Martyrs' Museum.

None of which is to ignore the serious consequences for Holocaust memory and understanding that also take root in this media wonderland. In the Wiesenthal Center's case, it becomes clear that those who live by the media sword may also be wounded by it. On the one hand, the center has succeeded masterfully in converting media attention into museum-building capital. At the same time, because discord and controversy elicit more media attention than anything else, the power plays, media coups, and bitter rivalries between Holocaust organizations in Los Angeles have generated far more publicity than any actual memorial-work yet accomplished. To a great extent, in fact, "public memory" of the Holocaust has been defined in Los Angeles explicitly by that which plays on the media waves.

As a result, publicity of the internecine wars between competing museums in Los Angeles, between national and state museums in Washington and New York, has become a kind of mutant variation of "public memory." Precisely because of the prurient attention these controversies attract, and because no community likes washing its dirty laundry in public, the entire process—necessarily a public one—grows ever more distasteful and painful. For those survivors whose dignity was already shattered by the Nazis, the unseemly charges and countercharges, the indignities of fundraising and political maneuvering, become almost too much to bear. For many survivors and others who always wanted their community's resources directed toward education and social services, such memorial scenarios grow ever more egregious and unpalatable. Few could have predicted that so much dinunity would arise in the name of memory, the only activity that has traditionally unified the Jewish people over time.

#### San Francisco: George Segal's Holocaust

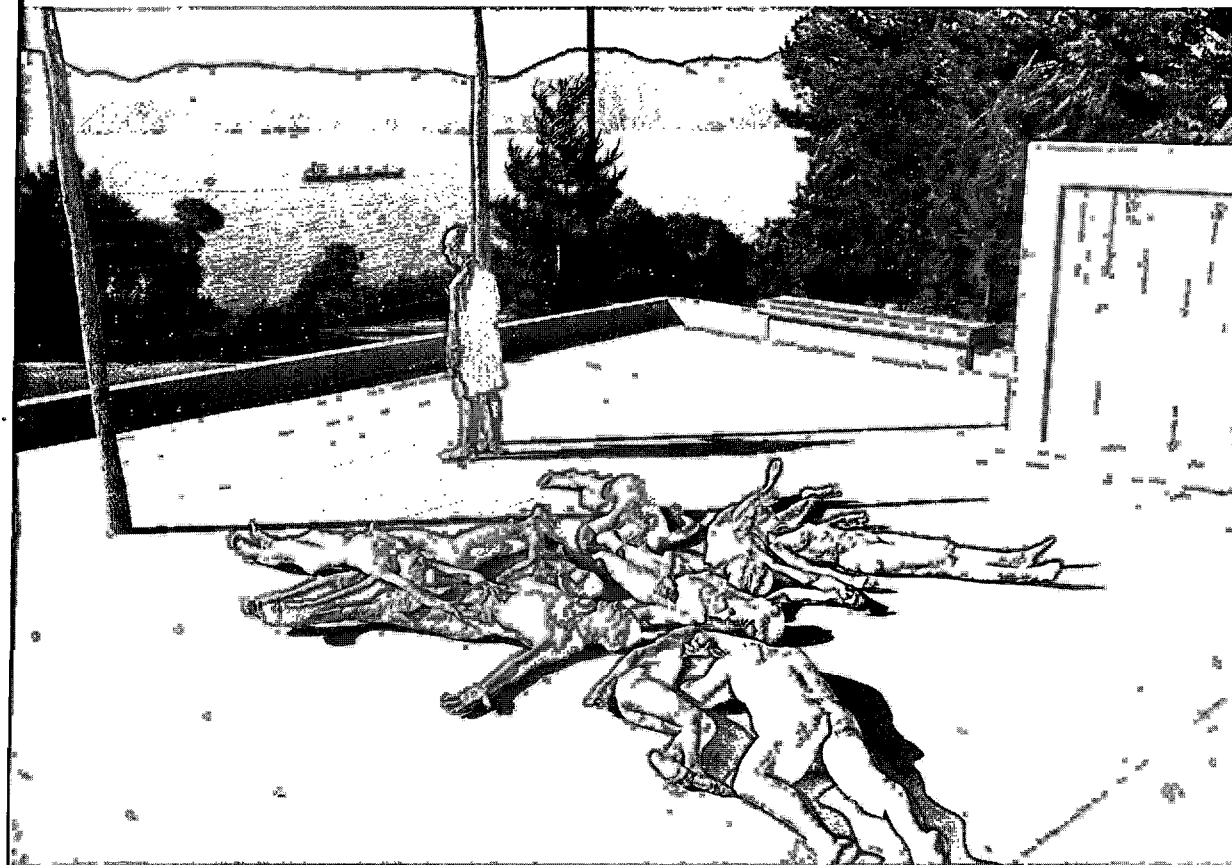
San Francisco has long prided itself on the often spectacular blend of its architectural and natural landscapes. So when Mayor Dianne Feinstein's Holocaust memorial committee conceived of its project in 1981, members set their sights high: theirs would be both a memorial and a work of public art great enough to stand on its own. The aim would not be to acquire merely a flame or a stone, "but a major work of art for the city."<sup>19</sup> In the words of Henry Hopkins, then representing the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and a committee mem-

ber, "the memorial should serve a dual audience: those who would go to see it because of the subject, i.e., a memorial, and those who would go to see it because it would be a great work of art and thus would learn about the Holocaust and its implications for mankind."<sup>20</sup> The committee could not have foreseen how a monument might succeed valiantly in its constituent parts—as memorial and as art—and yet divide the community and generate nearly as much controversy as memory.

With its lofty goals in mind, the committee acquired a prime site from the city Parks Commission at Lincoln Park's Palace of the Legion of Honor—a shoulder of land set amid pine and cypress trees overlooking the Pacific Ocean just west of the Golden Gate. An equally promising list of prospective artists was compiled, including some of the most distinguished sculptors of the century: Henry Moore, Joan Miró, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Nevelson, Max Lieberman, Menashe Kadishman, Robert Graham, Ya'akov Agam, and George Segal. Of those invited to participate, however, only Agam, Kadishman, Graham (together with Lawrence Halperin), and Segal submitted designs. The rest either declined (some respectfully, others dismissively) or ignored the invitations altogether.

Deliberations began with Agam's proposal, which was rejected out of hand for being, in the words of one committee member, "too Agam-ish, too kitschy and light-weight." And while the committee admired Kadishman's forty-foot memorial column, they balked at its cost and were sure that the Parks Commission would never allow such a tower to dominate the Legion of Honor. The short list came down to a conceptually innovative memorial tunnel proposed by Graham and the landscape architect Lawrence Halperin, and an installation by George Segal, who had turned reflexively to his hallmark white plaster figures. Though at first intrigued by Halperin's and Graham's negative-space concept, committee members feared that in its secluded location, the "black hole" could prove dangerous, inviting both crime and physical accidents.

Segal's design had almost never been conceived. The artist had long mulled over possible aesthetic responses to the Holocaust, but the loss of nearly all his parents' European family during the war and the prospect of immersing himself in such memory led him to resist the committee's repeated overtures. Nevertheless, on his way home from mounting an exhibition in Tokyo, Segal agreed to stop over in San Francisco to tour the proposed memorial site. It was early June 1982, and Israel had just invaded Lebanon. Shaken and anxious to hear more details, the politically dovish artist recoiled at the tone and language that American newscasters used in describing the war. "I was horrified for the first time in my life to hear anti-Semitic words coming out of American mouths," he related afterward. "In that instant, I decided to do the [Holocaust] piece. . . . It seemed precisely



George Segal's *Holocaust* at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, with a view toward the Pacific Ocean. Photo: Ira Nowinski.

the wrong moment for me to abandon my support for the state of Israel and my fellow Jews, despite my objections to Begin and Sharon."<sup>21</sup>

Barely three months later, the committee received photographs of Segal's memorial: a tableau of eleven cast-white figures behind a barbed wire fence. One tattered, plaster-white figure (modeled on an Israeli survivor) stands looking out from behind the fence, his left hand resting on the wire. Behind him, ten bodies lie splayed in a pile, rife with both biblical and formal allusions: a woman with her head against a man's rib, a partly eaten apple in her hand; a father fallen near his son, both sacrificed; a man with outstretched arms, seemingly crucified. Radiating outward, the pile of corpses forms a rough star from one angle, a cross from another. On visiting the artist's New Jersey studio, committee members found that the work seemed to fit in with their original conception: it would be both high, cutting-edge art and an explicitly defined space for Holocaust memory. The committee agreed unanimously that it had found its design and returned to San Francisco to raise funds for its installation.

By this time in Segal's career, his plaster forms had long been celebrated as pop-cultural heirs to Duchamps' ready-mades, Warhol's soup cans, and Hopper's mundane slices of life. Widely acclaimed and exhibited in New York and European galleries, they were collected and shown in dozens of major museum installations. Before long, Segal's human-sized forms also began to find homes in public outdoor spaces, commissioned as commemorative bronze statuary to honor bus riders at New York's Port Authority, steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio. For an artist who had turned away from the two-dimensional flatness of canvas to sculpture precisely for its material volume and three-dimensional space, this seemed to be the most natural memorial medium.

As a young painter during the 1950s, Segal had wrestled with the legacies of German expressionism and fauvism in the context of contemporary abstract expressionism. Still influenced by the broad brushstrokes and primary colors of these schools, he was also indebted to contemporaries like Jan Muller, Wolf Kahn, and Felix Pasis. Segal thus worked hard to reconcile abstraction with his powerful desire to depict the human figure. This led him to explore the materiality of both his medium and his subject, the human form. Allan Kaprow's seemingly three-dimensional canvases and tar-babies moved Segal toward his own experiments with human volume and space. But, dissatisfied with his paintings, he turned to space itself (not its illusion on the two-dimensional canvas) for the third dimension: the material volume of human forms would follow the canvas's illusion of volume. In the late fifties, Segal began placing free-standing, roughly hewn human forms, made of chicken wire and burlap dipped in plaster, in front of large canvases painted with brightly colored, life-sized figures.

In the sixties, Segal won renown by casting first himself, seated at a table, and then others in plaster-dipped, cotton-gauze strips. Initially, both critics and, according to Phyllis Tuchman, the artist himself were unsure about these casts: they were disturbing, even morbid somehow in their echoes of the figures caught in the lava and ashes of Mount Vesuvius's eruption.<sup>22</sup> But it was precisely this capacity to formalize the pedestrian moment, captured in *media res*, that set Segal's medium apart. His figures clustered at street corners, arrested in midstep, or sat at tables; they stood in front of pinball machines or lay in bed. In its sudden stillness, its shocking whiteness, the human form was both affirmed in his plaster casts and abstracted as a formal object of study.

Long regarded merely as the step between a sculptor's clay maquette and the final bronze piece, the plaster model was preserved in its own right by Segal. Even after casting his plaster figures in bronze—his concession to the monumental—Segal began to return them to their penultimate stage of creation by covering the bronze in a permanent, plaster-white patina. As a result, both his sculpture and monuments suggest themselves as works still in process, provisional and unfinished.

By the time of his San Francisco commission, two other public memorial experiences had left Segal wary of, if inured to, the political and emotional agendas underlying all such public commissions: one at Kent State University in honor of the students killed there by the National Guard in 1971, and another in Tel Aviv in honor of the state of Israel. In both cases, he had submitted variations on Abraham's binding of Isaac, neither of which suited his sponsors. While Kent State had hoped for something like a soldier's gun being brushed aside by a young nude woman, his sponsors in Tel Aviv had inferred an unfavorable political comparison between the aborted biblical sacrifice and that made by young Israeli soldiers for the policies of the older generation.

Like that of most Americans, Segal's "Holocaust experience" was necessarily vicarious, limited to the photographs and newsreel footage taken at liberation. When asked to remember the Holocaust, therefore, it was the piles of corpses and barbed wire, the shock and revulsion that came back to him. To refresh his memory before starting work on the San Francisco memorial, Segal returned to the site of his memory: archival photographs of liberation. One in particular, by Margaret Bourke-White, stuck with him and became the image he decided to replicate in his tableau of plaster casts. Segal adds another reason for using the corpses as his motif: strewn as they were, the bodies seemed to exemplify the violation and degradation prisoners underwent at the hands of the Nazis. "I determined that I would have to make a heap of bodies that was expressive of this arrogance and disorder."<sup>23</sup>

Once his theme was decided, Segal told a reporter, he "had two options in dealing with that heap of corpses." One would have been to use bodies borrowed from a morgue, a prospect he rejected. The other was to ask his friends "to play dead," so that, in his words, he "could bury images of sensuality and myth in their gestures."<sup>24</sup> In fact, when several critics remarked not only the apparent robustness of the bodies but their teeming sensuality, Segal responded, "That was also put there purposefully, so there would be overtones of the life force amid all the tragic and carnage."<sup>25</sup> He had become, he said later, as interested in Eve's sensuality as anything else, adding, "It has to do with survival."<sup>26</sup> For Segal, questions of historical veracity were less important than the sense of recently passed life still emanating from his forms.

Back at his New Jersey studio, Segal gathered a number of his friends, young and old, and briefed them on their duties as models. They undressed, and then he asked his friends "to fall down, to collapse and imagine they were dead," after which the artist began the arduous process of wrapping bodies in plaster-soaked cotton-gauze strips. In the next hours, there was plenty of time for the models to meditate on their roles as victims. In fact, Segal had hoped from the outset to capture some expression of his models' responses to their task, some trace of their own memory. In the forms their bodies took, Segal hoped that their thoughts, too, would somehow become part of the cast: reflected in a frozen grimace, a contorted limb. In Segal's words, this piece would thus be "a summation of gestures and movements, of piling and heaving. It becomes a collection of each individual's ideas about death. Some were relaxed, some were rigid, some were drooped. It's a collection of a series of movements that are all ruminations on death."<sup>27</sup> In fact, the figures in the memorial seem only temporarily stilled, ready to rise and brush themselves off after a brief rest. By reminding us that the dead were once whole, living humans, the artist hoped to rehumanize all the victims, to undo some of the degradation that moved his conception in the first place.

Once the design became known, civic response was swift and predictably fractious. As new committees formed to raise funds, others were called to stop the monument's installation. Whereas survivors had hoped for a place to mourn lost loved ones, a substitute gravesite, other groups bewailed the want of similar monuments to mark their losses. Some art historians scorned what Peter Selz called the monument's "wax-work representation," while others, like Selz's colleague Brian Wall, applauded both the artist and his aesthetic conception.<sup>28</sup> Because part of the brilliance in Segal's earlier cast-white sculpture had been its formalization of the banal moments in life, other critics felt that his medium was at direct cross-purposes with his Holocaust theme, the least banal of subjects. Did it trivialize memory, they wondered, or expand the sculptor's medium? For



George Segal installs one of his plaster-white figures for San Francisco's Holocaust memorial, dedicated in 1983. Photo: Ira Nowinski.

dissenting critics, the particularization of Segal's life-sized figures reduced both the scale of meaning and possibilities for memory in ways that abstraction would not have done.<sup>29</sup>

On arrival today at the turnaround at the Legion of Honor, the visitor is struck by a seeming dissonance between the Holocaust theme and its beautiful setting. But within a few minutes, this incongruity becomes less problematic. We see, for example, that Segal's white forms echo the tormented figures in Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, long installed nearby at the Legion of Honor, itself a memorial to the fallen of World War I. As we look around, we may be reminded, as well, that the concentration camps were often placed in stunningly beautiful, secluded countryside in Germany and Poland—an ironic perversion of pastoral oft noted by survivors.<sup>30</sup> During the dedication of the original plaster model at the Jewish Museum in New York, more than a year before the memorial was installed in San Francisco, Segal addressed this question directly. "That contrast may in itself speak volumes—about the beauty of the world and the dark underside of human nature," he said, adding later that "I intend this work in part as a memorial to all people who have been victims of that dark underside of human nature."<sup>31</sup> The issue may be less one of "agony in paradise" than the particular effect of the setting on the piece itself, which turns out to be considerable.

In fact, Segal has made two memorials, one an indoor sculpture, the other an outdoor monument. The plaster model of *The Holocaust* was unveiled to the public on 10 April 1983 at the Jewish Museum, as a part its Yom Hashoah commemorations. The museum has since acquired the original plaster models for its permanent display. In their interior setting at the museum, the white plaster casts invite us to contemplate their forms as objets d'art, part of the artist's larger corpus. The survivor stands alone, estranged from the heap of corpses lying behind him and separated from us by the fence. Stooped slightly forward, he stares straight ahead at no one, at nothing. Enclosed by a ceiling overhead and spotlighted, he remains still and mute, encumbered by an interior memory too recent, too painful to articulate. At the memorial's Jewish Museum dedication in 1986, Segal reiterated this point. "It is fitting," he said, "that silent art represent the muted voices that were forever stilled in the Holocaust."<sup>32</sup>

The deathly stillness is now made palpable, affirmed and highlighted, in the indoor installation. On the other hand, it concentrates our attention on the forms themselves, made ghostly and strange by the white plaster. Without color, only line and shadow, these forms in their whiteness become emblematic and mythical. Surrounded by nothing but its dark borders, the installation remains all-absorbing: memory is defined as an interior, symbolic process.

But in the glory of the sculpture's California environment, with sunshine and spectacular view, memory is externalized, swallowed up by the vastness of its setting. The human forms in particular are miniaturized in such landscape, reduced and made less striking. Indeed, it could be said that we often seek out such beautiful surroundings precisely to lose ourselves in them, places where our thoughts and preoccupations are made to look small and inconsequential by comparison.

In such a context, these figures seem to refer neither to their material, nor to themselves, nor to the ghastly moment of liberation; instead, they are drawn outside themselves by the landscape, become less about themselves than part of their surroundings. While in the museum, they inspire quietude, stillness, and contemplation, at the Legion of Honor, they merge with the great outdoors—the song of birds, rustle of trees, thwack of golfers, roar of cars make them too much a part of the present moment. The white plaster forms lose the context of their material and the artist's corpus and acquire new, California-esque significance. Visitors remark that, at a glance, the sprawling bodies appear to become sun-bathers, the barbed wire fence a volleyball net. From their elevated perspective in front of the monument's inscription, visitors look down at the scene, as from a cliff over a beach. Rather than lingering on the installation, the eyes of visitors are apt to join the survivor's own gaze over a spectacular landscape of sloping green grass, a golf course, the ocean, and sailboats—framed by trees on one side and the Golden Gate on the other. Whereas, indoors, the survivor seemed to be looking inward and asking us to do likewise, by his position in the park, he looks out—and invites us to join him, yet another tourist transfixed by the view.

On the memorial's unveiling on 8 November 1984, the eve of Kristallnacht, a steady rain dampened spirits and seemed to lend the setting an enclosed, interior feel; in the summer fog, visitors are also contained by the space, less apt to lose themselves in a landscape shrouded from view. Dazzling sunlight, on the other hand, can be almost blinding when reflected off the white bodies: our gaze over the space is quite literally repelled and seeks refuge in the green shade of golf course and trees, the cool blue of the ocean. In this respect, the fine black-and-white photographs by Ira Nowinski can assist memory here. For in his control of light and tone, his depiction of low-hanging, smoke-colored clouds, the photographer is able to cultivate a brooding, ominous setting. His cool, dark frames recenter the white forms in our consciousness, fence us back into the memorial space.

Despite, perhaps even because of, its transformation from museum sculpture to public monument, Segal's memorial continues to lead a vibrant life in San Francisco's civic mind. Ceremonies for Yom Hashoah are conducted here, as well as Kristallnacht commemorations. When former President Ronald Reagan went to



Segal's  
*Holocaust* after  
being defaced  
by vandals.  
Photo: Ira  
Nowinski.

Bitburg, the memorial served as gathering space for a spontaneous countervigil. Four days after its installation and dedication, vandals spray-painted the faces of the figures black and added their own counterinscription to the wall behind it: "Is this necessary?" The monument has since been sprayed with Nazi swastikas and cleaned a number of times. When detractors suggested that its whiteness may well have invited its desecration, supporters responded that this sounded a lot like blaming the victim: were the Jews, by extension, responsible for their own murder? In a show of support, an anonymous donor has sent flowers to be laid weekly at the site ever since. Survivors still come daily to tend the memorial, as if it were a surrogate gravesite for lost loved ones.

In San Francisco, with its large population of Japanese Americans, aspects of the monument necessarily evoke other memories, as well. In fact, the project's landscape designer, Asa Hanamoto, could not help but recall his own experience in an American internment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II. "It's been a long time," he said, "but I still remember those barbed-wire fences and those guard towers with machine guns in them. It stays with you."<sup>33</sup> The designer reflects as much his experience as the artist's, making it a joint memorial, embodying plural kinds of memory. Knowing this, the busloads of Japanese tourists at the Legion of Honor may not recall the Jewish Holocaust so much

as their own experiences, or perhaps those of their American cousins during the war. Like all memorials, this one depends on those who visit it, those who resist it, those who embrace it for its life in the mind, its many lives in many minds.

And like many communities before and after it, San Francisco has found that its effort to build a site for shared memory could not help but expose the many conflicting and contested assumptions underlying "public memory." Few communities are prepared for this kind of controversy, and most are embarrassed by it, ashamed that such a seemingly unifying cause like public memory should betray so much real disunity. In the heat of argument, bruised friendships and fractured political alliances, most communities are ill-prepared to acknowledge the value of the process itself. Largely unfazed by the argument, possibly even invigorated by it, Segal was able to take the long view of this process when he inspected the site a year before the monument's dedication. "What's at stake," he commented, "is the quality of the response, in the area of public education. Sculpture functions as a community memory. It's a civilized root to educate young people, to reinforce freedom and tolerance and respect for individuals. I don't mind all the discussion."<sup>34</sup> As Segal seemed to recognize early on, debate is also a form of memory.

#### Liberty State Park, New Jersey

Though his medium is not typical of other Holocaust memorials in America, the liberation motif in Segal's monument is. This is the one experience shared by both survivors and American soldiers during the war: one that conforms conveniently to America's most powerful self-idealization. For the young American GIs who liberated Dachau and Buchenwald, memory of the Holocaust necessarily excludes the conditions in Europe before the war, the wrenching break-up of families, deportations to ghettos and camps—even the killing process itself. American soldiers were not witnesses to the process of destruction, only to its effects.

Even the first national days of Holocaust remembrance in America were called for explicitly in light of the American liberators' experiences, independently of either the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Commission or Yom Hashoah. In 1979, Sen. John Danforth proposed that 28–29 April of that year, the days corresponding to the thirty-fourth anniversary of Dachau's liberation by American troops, be designated as national days of remembrance. The senator was unaware of Yom Hashoah and its proximity to these days, which have since been moved to coincide more closely with the Twenty-seventh of Nissan. Though they now seem to coincide with the Jewish calendar's day of remembrance, America's national

Nathan Rapoport's *Liberation*, erected within sight of of America's greatest ideological icon, the Statue of Liberty (right), and Ellis Island (out of photo on left). Photo: James E. Young.



days of remembrance necessarily recall both America's experience as liberator and the Jewish catastrophe—each in the figure of the other.

Because the "American experience" of the Holocaust in 1945 was limited to the grisly moments of liberation, it may not be surprising that one of the most widely visited monuments to this era in America, entitled *Liberation*, is located in Liberty State Park, New Jersey, within sight of America's greatest ideological icon, the Statue of Liberty—all part of a topographical triad including Ellis Island. In this work by Nathan Rapoport (sculptor of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument), a young, solemn-looking GI walks forward, his eyes on the ground, cradling—almost pietà-like—a concentration camp victim. With skeletal chest showing through shredded prison garb, his arms spread, and his eyes staring vacantly into the sky, the victim exemplifies helplessness.

Commissioned by the State of New Jersey and sponsored by a coalition of American Legion and other veterans' organizations, the monument is consonant with both the specific experiences of Americans in the war and with traditional self-perceptions of the nation's role as rescuer in war and as sanctuary for the world's "huddled masses." Indeed, the official state resolution dedicating the monument on 30 May 1985 defined explicitly its place in American history:

Whereas the Liberty Park Monument Committee was formed by Governor Thomas H. Kean to raise funds for, and commission the construction of, a monument to honor American Servicemen of World War II as liberators of oppressed people, and

Whereas the theme of the monument was to recognize that our servicemen fought, not to conquer nor to be aggressors, but rather to rescue and restore freedom to those persecuted and oppressed by the fascist powers . . . .<sup>35</sup>

According to the program notes from the dedication, though other monuments have honored American victory in World War II, this is the first one to show us the purpose of the fight. In *Liberation*, America's reasons for fighting World War II would thus reiterate America's memory of its origins.

The governor's remarks at the dedication emphasize the monument's American pedigree even more strongly. "To me," he said, "this monument is an affirmation of my American heritage. It causes me to feel deep pride in my American values . . . . This monument says that we, as a collective people, stand for freedom. We, as Americans, are not oppressors, and we, as Americans, do not engage in military conflict for the purpose of conquest. Our role in the world is to preserve and promote that precious, precious thing that we consider to be a free democracy. . . . Today, we will remember those who gave their lives for freedom."<sup>36</sup> As such,

*Liberation* has become an obligatory photographic stop on the campaign trail for national candidates, including George Bush, Dan Quayle, and Jesse Jackson in 1988.

Liberty and pluralism thus comprise the central memorial motifs in both current and proposed museums to the Holocaust in America. The museum at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles is being reconceptualized, moved next door into an expansive new complex, and renamed Beit Hashoah—Museum of Tolerance, both to reflect its pedagogical mission (tolerance) and to attract as wide an audience as possible. In New York, the new Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust is being planned for Battery Park City in lower Manhattan, within sight of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, thus situating the Holocaust somewhere between American shrines to immigration and liberty. The twin names of these two museums illustrate both the dilemma each faces in professing civic values in a sectarian space and the attempt to overcome this dilemma by balancing Jewish and American memory in one line.

## Chapter 12

## Memory and the

### Politics of Identity:

### Boston and

### Washington, D.C.

All those who walk this Freedom Trail pause here to contemplate the consequences of an absence of freedom.

—Alex Krieger

#### **Boston: An American Process**

Not long after the unveiling of *Liberation*, a Boston survivor decided to initiate a similar memorial in his city to thank the American soldiers who had liberated him at Buchenwald. The survivor organized a small memorial committee and approached sculptor Nathan Rapoport, who agreed to design a version of *Liberation* for Boston. But when the committee turned to other survivors for support, they found unexpected resistance instead. "Maybe some were liberated by Americans," a fellow survivor complained, "but my family and I were never liberated at all. They were killed at Auschwitz while American bombers flew overhead, and I barely survived the death marches to Germany." While other survivors sympathized with their friend's motive, they also feared that in *Liberation*, a millennium of Jewish civilization in Europe and all the lives lost would be reduced to the one degrading moment they shared with American liberators. Bitter arguments ensued, community support withered, and the project was put on hold.

Yet Boston will soon have its Holocaust memorial. Moreover, the chain of events that followed even suggests itself as an object lesson in American memorial building. For what began as one survivor's thwarted memorial mission eventually grew into a sophisticated and self-reflexive public art project. Still in