
Where Words Fail

We dodged a papal bullet, missing Benedict's pilgrimage to Krakow by just two days. Yet other than some scattered posters and window displays in Catholic gift shops, there was little sign that he'd been there. Certainly not in the long central market, where stall after stall showcased amber jewelry, the chief object of tourist desire. The rare papal souvenirs typically presented the smiling Polish face of Benedict's predecessor. Even the official poster for the open-air mass that drew nearly a million people assigned the current pope to a secondary role, exhibiting a less-than-beatific Benedict striding across a beach, stepping into footprints noticeably larger than his own.

Like many Americans who journey to Krakow, though, our group was not in search of Karol Wojtyła's city, but of a vanished world whose odd traces are also for sale in the teeming market—as bearded dolls dressed in black-and-white Hassidic costumes and silver pendants whose amber is framed by six-pointed stars.

Our trip to Poland, framed by stays in Berlin, was part of a summer course on Holocaust sites, museums, and memorials, giving Grand Valley students a chance to engage first-hand the historical and commemorative geography of Holocaust memory: the plaza in Berlin where university students burned piles of “dangerous” books; the villa in the Wansee suburb where Nazi officials crafted a plan implementing the Final Solution; the ramp at Birkenau where SS doctors enacted it; the vast stone field in central Berlin where 2711 concrete stelae memorialize its victims.

Krakow was for us more than just a way station to the killing fields of Auschwitz-Birkenau, offering as it does an introduction to the world Hitler destroyed but did not entirely erase. Kazimierz, its old Jewish quarter, is familiar from *Schindler's List* and is now an important tourist site. We explored the district's central square, wandered what remains of the old cemetery, ate in a “Jewish-style” restaurant, and browsed through books, cds, maps, and postcards. But most of our time was spent exploring the synagogues that survived Nazi vandalizing and looting. The solid buildings, though not their congregants, had somehow outlasted the war. Today, only the tiny Remu Synagogue remains an active place of worship, while the rest serve cultural rather than sacred functions.

Housed in the restored Old Synagogue, the Krakow Museum of Jewish History is a far cry from Berlin's architecturally daring institution, the zinc-clad Daniel Libeskind building whose high-tech wizardry we'd visited a week before. The Old Synagogue's glass cases display a host of stunning religious artifacts, yet few are original to the site or are even from Krakow

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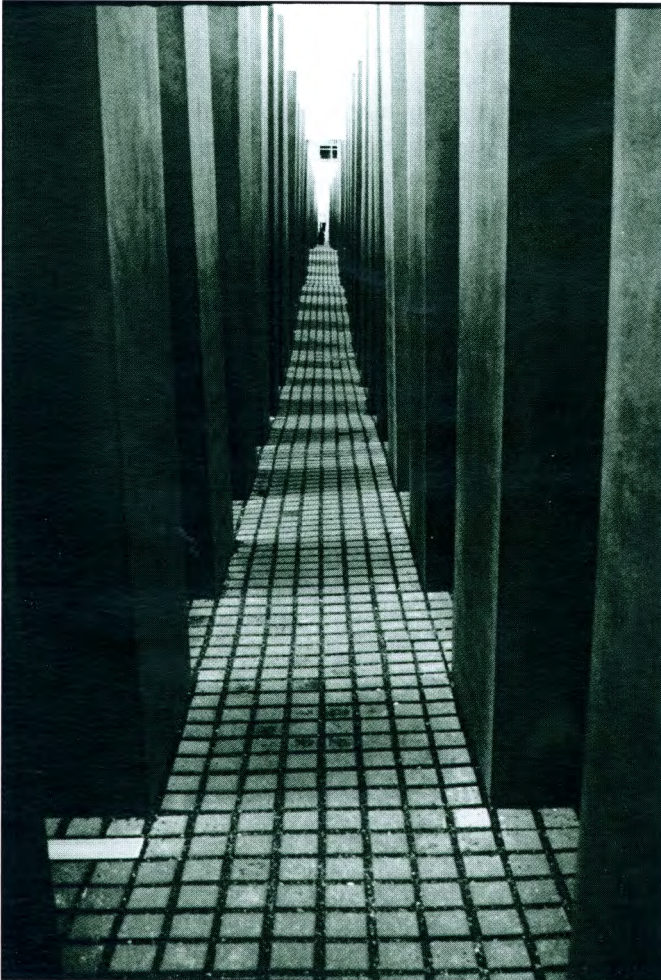
itself. And not even their beauty could lessen a sense of absence, the silence in the place. These objects of faith have outlived their faithful. Being there, I told my students when we were again out on the square, reminded me of childhood visits to the Egyptian rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when I viewed with awe the exotic remains of a lost civilization.

Later in the hard-to-find Kupa Synagogue, though, my wonder gave way to perplexity. Here was a religious building whose central hall, though meticulously restored, was filled not with religious objects but with art depicting shtetl life—paintings, drawings, sculptures, ark curtains, even an illuminated Torah scroll on handmade paper. The last was obviously not the work of a religious scribe: next to its excellent Hebrew calligraphy the artist had penned a similarly stylish Polish translation. Like all the other art exhibits, the scroll was a winning entry in a national contest for Polish youth ranging from grammar school children to art college students.

As a gesture toward the Jewish culture that had flourished for so long in Poland, the collection of art was impressive testament of efforts among

post-communist Polish educators to acknowledge that past. Yet the Kupa itself was offered without explanation, a cipher attended only by a bored young man at a desk off the main hall text-messaging on his cell phone. No signs or brochures were in evidence; certainly nothing recounted how in August 1945, three months after Germany's defeat, the Kupa was again ransacked during an anti-Semitic riot. The furniture was destroyed, the Torah scrolls trampled. Apparently the few returned Jews were once again murdering Polish Christian children for their blood. Even the excellent guidebook to Jewish Krakow omits any mention of this act or the other post-war pogroms that forced the bare remnant of Polish Jewry at last to abandon the land millions had called home for six hundred years.

Nowhere is this still-conflicted relationship between Krakow and its absent Jews more evident than



on the site of the ghetto established by Nazis just across the Vistula River from Kazimierz. After much searching we found a few fragments of the ghetto wall, as well as the remains of Schindler's factory; but



the class was most drawn to a curious memorial space in what had been the ghetto square. On this site where Krakow's Jews had been assembled time and again in 1942-43 for deportation to slave labor or death camps, an open plaza abuts a busy tram stop. Scattered across *Plac Bohaterow Getta* (the communist-named "Ghetto Heroes' Square") are thirty-seven bronze chairs and benches. A small stone building, whose interior resembles the inside of a boxcar, is on one end of the plaza. Like the blank slate of the Kupa Synagogue, though, there are no plaques, no words explaining the origin or significance of this memorial largely ignored by the tram riders.

The former ghetto's plaza of empty chairs resonated particularly with my students, though. Before traveling to Europe we had studied the memorial to the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. There, a similar field of 168 empty bronze chairs honors each life lost. My students found the similarity between the designs remarkable, even plagiaristic; but they also noted a crucial difference. Where one set of chairs names each victim, the other is curiously silent about exactly who is being remembered. In an internet café after our visit I learned that the Krakow memorial had been dedicated in December 2005. "New Concordia Square" it is now called, *Nowy Plac Zgody*, a gesture recovering the site's former name (*Plac Zgody*) erased under communist control. The communist-imposed idealization of a handful of heroic ghetto fighters has now yielded to an expression of harmony restored among Poles, with a name now erasing acknowledgment of the ghetto site. Do average citizens waiting for the next tram or buying

flowers in the boxcar-like shop ever think of their long-dead neighbors, I wondered, neighbors who also stood here and waited?

Reconciliation between Christians and Jews, as John Paul II understood, is crucial to the conscience of Catholic Poland, and early in his papacy he made a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. Benedict XVI, as the first German pope in five hundred years, faced a far more difficult journey to Poland. From our Berlin hotel rooms some of us had watched him speak at Birkenau, just yards from the crematoria ruins. A few days later we found no sign of his visit there, except at the Catholic center just across the road from the vast camp's northeast corner. A twenty-foot banner of Benedict's image gazed out over empty barracks rows.

Leaving my students to continue along the camp's unending paths, I crossed to the Birkenau Parish Church and Retreat Center. A display board in Polish and English explains that the building, originally intended as the massive camp's administrative headquarters, had in 1982 been given to the local parish which then added an enormous rooftop cross. Although the sign asks readers to "recall the Jewish nation," whose fate had been determined just across the road, its audience is clearly the people of the cross: "This building which was to serve those who tortured and scorned and hated, those who trampled crucifixes and burned holy books of both Christian and Jews," it says, "now serves those who pray and learn to imitate Him who went to the cross out of love." Just a few days earlier Pope Benedict had similarly blurred Christian and Jewish experience. By murdering Europe's Jews, he said, the "ring of criminals" who "used and abused" their German countrymen, had "ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention."

Sometimes I must remind my Christian students, in a university where Jews number less than one per cent, that Judaism is more than an opening act. Benedict's words reminded me just how much work remains to achieve a genuine bridge between the two faiths. "The past is never simply the past," he had declared from the Birkenau ramp. "It always has something to say to us; it tells us the paths to take and the paths not to take." But where the pope wanted to lead in his reading of the Final Solution, I would never follow.

Back in Berlin our path across the landscape of Holocaust memory ended, quite deliberately, at the massive Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. My teaching colleague, Dan Balfour, and I had wanted students to take the full measure of this site erected by Benedict's countrymen just a short distance from the Reichstag, and we had avoided it during our earlier explorations of Berlin's memorial spaces.

A Sunday morning flight from Krakow to a seedy airport southeast of Berlin left us again hauling our bags onto the S-Bahn to travel across fields of oppressive apartment-blocks that remain fitting monuments to East German socialism. After a rest in our hotel—or, for some students, another visit to the kabob stands in its Turkish neighborhood—we set out to culminate our memorial journeys. Thirty minutes later standing near the Brandenburg Gate on Unter den Linden, Dan and I took a few minutes to remind the class how unique is the memorial we were about to encounter, dedicated as it is to a nation's own crimes. We even asked them initially to resist the lure of their digital cameras, to experience the site simply and directly.

As we approached the undulating five acres of concrete blocks, the students seemed lost. No main entrance guided them into it. No sign stated the purpose of this memorial often described as like a field of waving corn. When we aligned ourselves with the narrow rows between the 2711 smooth, gray blocks, the long walkways seemed almost inviting. But from an oblique angle, the stelae of varying heights took on the provocative and disjointed face of a massive cemetery. Our students were disconcerted by the challenging memorial as it is. How much more imposing, even terrifying, might have been the space originally planned—narrower rows between some 4000 stelae, with those in the center towering up to twenty-five feet.

My highly anticipated “teachable moment” dissolved once we rounded a corner of the perimeter and faced a series of incongruous sights along the memorial's eastern boundary—sidewalk restaurants, souvenir stands selling World Cup 2006 items, even a bagel cafe. The bagel shop's ironic proximity to a memorial for Europe's murdered Jews did not register for my young Midwestern students; but having walked the empty fields at Birkenau just a day before, they could not help but note the plaza's jarring festive atmosphere. Children with electric blue balloons darted



down the rows of concrete blocks, chased by parents in games of hide-and-seek. Young couples sat on the lower stelae, doing what young couples do on sunny Sunday afternoons. Discreet signs warning against smoking and eating were regularly ignored, especially along the edges, where the concrete stelae functioned inadvertently as benches.

To engage this memorial space, then, we needed to venture deep within its center, where the blocks, short around the perimeter, soared up to fifteen feet. We first had to negotiate the sinuous and uneven surface, deliberately evocative of life for Berlin's Jews during the Nazi era, when the ground shifted beneath their feet. Among the innermost stelae we finally attained solitude, the contemplative silence appropriate to a memorial site. As the tall gray blocks shielded us from ordinary life in Berlin, their smooth heights pulled our eyes to the early June sky.

After the memorial's quiet core, the park-like mood of the periphery revived our sense of frustration. One group of students, I later learned, decided right then to return at night, when the Berliners spending a pleasant Sunday afternoon in the heart of their reunited capital were all in bed. They told me that the dimly lit memorial had a more haunted air then—almost, though not quite, what they had felt on the windswept fields of Birkenau.

The next day, flying over the Atlantic and thinking about our engagements with a host of haunted sites in Germany and Poland, I reread the speech Pope Benedict delivered at Birkenau. "In a place like this," he had said on the ramp, "words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence." Wise words, I thought, from a self-described "son of the German people." I eased the cramped coach seat back, closed my eyes, and imagined him uttering them alone at night before a crowd of 2711 silent witnesses.