

Germans and their troubling way of remembering the Shoah – We say No to „Stumbling Stones“/Stolpersteine

Starting in the early 1990s, „artist“/ founder Gunter Demnig has been promoting stumbling stones until today to remember victims of Nazi Germany. On a first view, many people, internationally, like the idea and even praise Germany. On a second view, though, others see the rather undignified way of remembering the victims of the Shoah. In addition, the stumbling stones confuse all kinds of victims of Nazi Germany and deny – in effect, if not intent – the unprecedented character of the Shoah and the specificity of the Holocaust.

Worse, these stones on the sidewalks, are not just a bad way to emphatically remember the victims of Nazi Germany. Many groups and people involved are even known for anti-Israel activities (take some activists the cities of Kassel or Munich as examples). We demand a dignified way of remembering the victims of the Shoah. Therefore we call our groups “Respect & Remember”. We want plates or signs at houses, sidewalks and places in eye height -and virtual prospects also for the young- for to remember the victims of the Shoah. The Stolperstein-Protagonists, those who pretend to remember the Holocaust, are often those who could be rather categorized as “Germans just love dead Jews – they don’t care about the living ones”. There might be people with truly good intentions among those who promote the stumbling stones – still, the result is an insult to the victims.

The stumbling stones camp wants to make allies around the world, including Yad Vashem. This is troubling for Jews and sensitized Non Jews and the remembrance of the Shoah.

Let us explain, why:

1. Those stumbling stones are on the ground, where people walk, drive, dump things, sometimes urinate and spit or crush a cigarette butt. For some, it is where family members were once humiliated, beaten or kicked to death. That is why it is the wrong place to honor memories. Remember Jews who were forced by the Nazis to clean the sidewalk with tooth-brushes? Today, many protagonists of the stumbling stones make events (Nov.9) to clean the stumbling stones – strange déjà-vu, no?

Back then, Jews and other defenseless victims were at the mercy of the brutality of the Nazis. The same defenselessness will even reoccur today – on the ground. Today, names will be at the mercy of others and desecrated. And this will happen to a much greater extent than the supporters of

“Stumbling Stones” admit. Gunter Demnig himself has transformed this desecration into policy. He has said in interviews: “I hope people will step on the stones so they’ll get polished and shine.” So much for honoring memories.

2. The text on the ten by ten centimeter brass plaques contains name, date of birth and date of deportation or murder. This is the language of the perpetrators. The person whose actual fate is the subject is reduced yet again to a minimum in the text. Gunter Demnig has used expressions like “small-time criminals”/Kleinkriminelle or “racial defilement”/ Rassenschande, thus stigmatizing concretely anew.

Whatever their artistic intentions may be, “Stumbling Stones” /Stolpersteine fail as a place of remembrance – which should be their major function. They remain too ambiguous.

3. „Stumbling Stones“/Stolpersteine make for irrational symbolism. One can bow symbolically to the victims, cherish their memories symbolically. One can to clean them symbolically – for example, by mobilizing school children to do so on November 9 as initiatives have done. But cleaning “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine is no way to honor anyone’s memory.

Cleaning “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine is reminiscent of scenes in which Nazis humiliated Jews and other victims by forcing them to scrub the streets or where Jewish gravestones were misused as pavement slabs. Those are but a few examples. In former times people were dishonored, now it’s their names.

In reality, symbolic bowing, cherishing memories and cleaning brass plaques perpetuate an illusion. You can’t shield “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine from the dirt on the street, from footsteps and desecration. They are defenseless on a daily basis and at all times. You cannot soothe some “yearning to find the appropriate place” no matter how much one might try to understand this yearning.

When opponents say no to this form of remembrance they are right. Also the reason “Democratic pluralism“ won’t change anything about it.

4. The supporters of „Stumbling Stones“/Stolpersteine manifest a lack of critical distance to what they propose. They praise these plaques in “Stumbling Stone” Stolperstein petitions as “unobtrusive”, “salutary”, “satisfying”, “elegant”, “subtle” or just plain “ingenious”. This choice of words is completely inappropriate in this context. It is an indication that other

matters beyond questions of form are at the core. Such words are painful for survivors of the Shoah who reject these plaques for the above three reasons. It's especially terrible when supporters of this plaque movement respond to such objections with arguments like: "But WE think it is a good way to honor memory, and that's why WE think it's good." Suddenly survivors are perceived as troublemakers. Eike Geisel, a social critic who sadly died too young, feared this would be coming.

We should be asking other questions. What is at stake here? The memory of a single, lost individual or a variety of sensitivities? Are the plaques a way of selling of indulgences, making any critical distance and any empathy with survivors who oppose them impossible?

Stop the Stumbling Stone /Stolpersteine Movement

Most articles written by supporters of "Stumbling Stoness" reveal elements of conspiracy thinking and indicate vaguely who may be behind the conspiracy. It is very frustrating when Jews, for no reason, are perceived as the "killjoys of democracy".

People who express their opposition are attacked and bullied virulently and blindly.

Moreover, it is shocking that most of the mainstream media, accept the arguments of the "Stumbling Stones" /Stolperstein lobby uncritically.

It is time to stop and consider instead of participating in campaign after campaign. While actionism is being pursued, the people who are supposed to be remembered vanish from view, pushed into the background. That is not an honest form.

It is time to stop and consider, ceasing to burden cities and communities with inflationary placements with amounts of plaques. It would be preferable to create space for more respectfully projects. The vehemence of the "Stumbling Stone"/Stolperstein groups has all but made this impossible. Real estate administrators and home owners by contrast have become more open to memorial plaques on walls. Then Stolperstein groups have reported that they are opposed to this solution. That is not true.

More importantly, placing "Stumbling Stones" /Stolperstein in public space is nothing one can decide privately. To do so ignores democratic process. This is even more valid when the projects have a commercial basis. What you can do within your own four walls is not possible in public space.

It is time to stop and consider. That is more sensible than presenting lists of signatures gathered worldwide to a community like Munich (see the Report

in Bavarian Radio – the „Abendschau“). Many survivors of the Shoah and their descendents, in Munich and throughout Germany, reject these plaques but have not found no voice in local media (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Münchener Merkur, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Deutschlandradio etc.)

It is time to stop and consider in order to find out in all honesty whether the wishes of family members are being respected or not or whether they have even been asked. It's not fair to say that this happens only in a few cases. Plaques have been put in place without the approval of family members. Nevertheless, “Stumbling Stone”/ Stolperstein groups claim in their brochures that they always do ask permission. This is a lie. Sometimes, “Stumbling Blocks”/Stolpersteine have been placed at the wrong locations or inscribed with the wrong names. Sometimes, survivors or occasionally even SA members have been memorialized – usually thanks to the efforts of hobby historians and school classes.

It is time to stop and consider and to admit the extent of the desecration of plaques and their theft by Nazis. Many have been attacked with acid, tar and paint or swastikas or smeared with words like “liar” or “pigs” – more often than one supposes.

It is time to stop and consider that the daily footsteps on the names of the dead are also desecration.

It is time to stop and consider Gunter Demnig's lucrative, commercial business model. According to the lobby, “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine are being financed through sponsorship. They claim that Demnig's income remains modest – especially considering his personal expenses – like traveling costs. In truth, communities have been funneling considerable amounts of money into event management (including travel and lodging), lecture fees, marketing and printing costs. Jobs and coordination offices have being created solely to administer the “Stumbling Blocks”/Stolpersteine. That means: taxpayers are financing a questionable form of memorializing, and this happening without a democratic debate or control. Is that transparency or obfuscation?

It is time to stop and consider comparisons to the “Walk of Fame” or grave slabs in churches. Honoring living actors and memorializing murdered victims of the Shoah is not comparable. Churches and cemeteries are protected areas. Graves in churches have always been reserved for clergymen and the most generous donors. Moreover, walking over graves has always been considered bad manners. One wonders why in the case of

the victims of the Shoah these arguments are reversed.

It is time to stop and consider how critics of Israel from the “Stumbling Stone”/Stolperstein movement in Kassel have misused the poem “Death Fugue” (“Todesfuge”) by Paul Celan, himself a survivor of the Shoah. They scribble on posters “Death is a master from Israel, and we are still waiting to place Stumbling Blocks/Stolpersteine for murdered Palestinians.” (Summer 2014, at an Anti-Israel demonstration). Around this time, Mr. Demnig posed with Mrs. Hecht-Galinski and Mr. Ken Jebsen for a group photo. Both are known for their extreme Anti-Israel and Israel-hating positions. The same thing has happened at other venues, such as Anti-Israel demonstrations or Anti-Israel seminars, where “Stumbling Stone”/Stolperstein supporters have expressed their opinions vociferously. In Munich, for example, Terry Swartzberg, one of the leading forces in the local “Stumbling Stone” initiative and a former chairman of the liberal Munich Beth Shalom community, is in close contact with the Pax Christi. This Catholic movement Pax Christi favors a boycott of Israeli products and engages speakers at seminars like Norman Paech from the “Linke”, the leftist party, who sailed on the Gaza flotilla.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycott,_Divestment_and_Sanctions

It is time to stop and consider and to reflect on this inappropriate means of memorializing the dead. In Hamburg, Peter Hess, a supporter of the “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine, commissioned consulting engineers during the early phase of the project to see to it that the “Stumbling Stones”/Stolpersteine be made of a non-slip material (which, by the way, has not been the case. Newspaper articles have reported accidents). This has resulted in the need to get permission from the Department of Civil Engineering. The question is: Has the democratic process been circumvented? Is this still happening? Has a monopolistic apparatus been established? Has the lobby positioned itself securely by law in case permission be denied ?

It is time to stop and consider the structures that have been set up. Since the beginning of 2015, the “Stiftung Spuren Gunter Demnig” (the Gunter Demnig Foundation for Traces), located in Cologne-Frechen, has been in charge of organization and operation. Moreover, neither the statutes nor the obligatory annual activities report have been made open to the public – not even through the freedom of information laws. The publication of the yearly report is left to the discretion of the foundation. This means that not even representatives of the media find out how finances – beyond the claims of the lobbyists – are really being handled. Demnig is the sole legal

representative of his foundation.

It is time to stop and consider at the end of 2020, the first stumbling stones were relocated in Zurich (Switzerland). The two stumbling stone initiators are known in left circles of criticism of Israel. The decision to move stumbling stones in Zurich was not submitted to the city council for discussion, but simply determined. This undemocratic behavior is known from German municipalities. Shoah survivors in Switzerland were very upset that stumbling stones had been laid. They gave statements against these transfers - only one person with his real name - all others under false names. Because one of four Zurich Jewish communities supported this project with a lot of pressure. In Zurich, in general in Switzerland, a new version of Gunter Demnig is lived. Stumbling stones are laid for former Jews who were not persecuted or murdered but survived. When the stumbling stones were laid in Zurich for the first time in the fall of 2020, a stone was incorrectly described that of Alain Beer (Demnig's mistake, he wrote Berr although his mother bears the same name) who never lived in Zurich and a stumbling stone for him is already in the south of France. This stone has to be changed and has to be paid twice. Again money for Gunter Demnig. His mother only lived a very short time (about 4 weeks) in Zurich, she also got a stumbling stone and also has one in the south of France. Laid by G. Demnig twice and three times, the main thing is that the ruble is rolling. Double laundering is known from earlier times.

"Millions in sales with the victims of the murder of millions" says the journalist Daniel Killy, a Jewish author from Hamburg, about the stumbling stones. Dr. h.c. Charlotte Knobloch, the President of the Jewish Community Munich / Bavaria, feels "unbearable" about the stumbling stones to the crime of the Holocaust and its victims remember it takes a sincere argument that does not hurt. Switzerland has so far almost neglected and now a convenient and highly controversial, hurtful project from Germany is to help?

It is time to stop and consider that this project has been controversial and divisive from the very beginning. Opponents of the "Stumbling Stones"/Stolpersteine are silenced and muzzled, and irregularities have been apparent for years.

The best time to stop all this is now.

Empathy and compassion are the most necessary components for remembering the dead with dignity. Jews and non-Jews who are aware of the situation feel that honoring the Jewish majority of Shoah victims as well

as others cannot be adequately fulfilled in a text that reduces a person's identity to a minimum and is placed in the ground. No, not again. And not in 2023.

The majority in Germany has held the wrong opinion about this subject repeatedly.

We are for a dignified remembrance of the Shoah. Therefore we are opposing the "Stumbling Stone"-movement in Germany and urge our Israeli, American and all other allies, colleagues, friends and the public to share our skepticism and criticism. Too many Germans seem to have a deep need to portray themselves in a nice warm light. This may not happen on the back of the killed Jews of the Shoah.

Respect & Remember e.V. Europe

(We are Jews and Non-Jews with different backgrounds in Germany, nationwide)

www.respect-and-remember.com