

Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial: Abstraction as a Symbol of Life

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The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial opened in 2014 at Tiergartenstrasse 4, one of the locations where disabled patients were systematically murdered during the Holocaust.¹ The memorial is a 79-foot blue glass wall and includes a cement panel that contains information about the euthanasia program, with stories of victims. The memorial site also includes a bench which allows viewers to look through the blue glass and reflect.² Holocaust memorials in Berlin serve as reminders of those that died, more specifically for this memorial: those who were murdered during the Euthanasia program.³ This memorial was created to provide information about Operation T4, named after the location where 200,000 physically and mentally disabled people were murdered under various Euthanasia programs.⁴ The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is one of now over twenty-five Holocaust memorials scattered throughout the city of Berlin and is used as a form of remembrance of the disabled people targeted by the Nazis.⁵ The creation of memorials around Berlin has led to arguments regarding the most effective method of memorialization. The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial demonstrates the importance of written documentation and photographs, in addition to abstraction, to evoke an emotional experience for

¹ "Germany Unveils Memorial to Nazis' Disabled Victims." *BreakingNews.Ie*, Sep 02, 2014. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1561487899?accountid=10427>.

² Melissa Eddy, "Monument Seeks to End Silence on Killings of the Disabled by the Nazis," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/europe/monument-seeks-to-end-silence-on-killings-of-the-disabled-by-the-nazis.html>.

³ Megan Klarenbach. "Representing a Difficult Past: Examining Contemporary Holocaust Memorials in Berlin." Order No. 1516311, Sotheby's Institute of Art - New York, 2012. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1036706560?accountid=10427>.

⁴ "Germany Unveils Memorial to Nazis' Disabled Victims." Sep 02, 2014. <http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1561487899?accountid=10427>.

⁵ Di Bella, Maria Pia. "Walking Memory: Berlin's "Holocaust Trail." *Journeys* 13, no. 2 (Winter, 2012): 55-70.

viewers without previous knowledge of operation T4 in a revolutionary way. In this case, the term revolutionary meaning something that is not usually seen, in terms of the memorial, this refers to its ability to both evoke emotional expression from those who engage with the memorial while not forcing bypassers to interact with the memorial if it is not their intention.

The creation of Holocaust memorials began in 1945, and by the year 1990, only five street memorial sights were created. This was followed by fifteen more between the years 1990-2005.⁶ There have still been more memorials created after 2005, such as the Nazi Disabled Victims memorial which was opened in 2014. This memorial is one of the most recent memorials built which lead to a burst of discussion focusing on the memorial and operation T4, however, since its opening day, this memorial has received little attention. Scholars tend to focus on the less recent and better known Holocaust memorials that focus on larger groups of people that were targeted by the Nazis. The conversation around memorials in Berlin tend to center around the design and purpose of memorials created before 2005, therefore, lacking in-depth exploration of the modern design used in the Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial in terms of its ability to evoke emotion. The conversation surrounding the Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is limited due to the stigma surrounding disabled people and the recent opening of the memorial.⁷ The memorial is revolutionary because of the lack of attention that disabled people receive in addition to the unique and effective memorial design. Despite the little conversation surrounding

⁶ Di Bella, Maria Pia. "Walking Memory: Berlin's "Holocaust Trail." *Journeys* 13, no. 2 (Winter, 2012): 55-70.

<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1768244188?accountid=10427>.

⁷ Hepburn, Meaghan Ann. "Lives Worthy of Life and Remembrance: Memorialization of the National Socialist Aktion T4 Euthanasia Programme." Master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2014.

https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/72506/1/Hepburn_Meaghan_A_201406_PhD_thesis.pdf.

this memorial, other conversations about the Holocaust memorials in Berlin can be applied for an in-depth understanding of the memorial design.

The purpose of memorials is to serve as a reminder of those who died as the result of a historical event, such as the Holocaust. As acknowledged by Stonecipher, a resident of Berlin, Holocaust memorials remain a topic of discussion because they are still being built in the twenty-first century so they are still of importance to the public and even the identity of the city of Berlin.⁸ Despite the limited articles discussing this memorial, there are many articles discussing the memorials throughout Berlin which apply to the design and purpose of the Nazis Disabled Victims Memorial. The controversy in arguments occurs when scholars begin to think about how an event as major as the Holocaust should be memorialized. The memorials take years to create because these memorials not only commemorate those who were killed but also condemn an entire period of German history and show that it is impossible to erase the mass murders of millions.⁹ One argument that remains is that memorials should be abstract with a combination of video, photography or written documentation.¹⁰ World War II was a horrific war seen by the western world, and one of the first which was well documented, which prompted the building of memorials. The use of abstract memorials allows them to be interacted with but only if the viewer chooses to do so by reading the written documentation and also prevents people

⁸ Donna Stonecipher, "The Moment's Monument: Poetry and Berlin Memorials," *Raritan* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 1-21, 159

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/859016549/abstract/32208B98E2F1456BPQ/1?accountid=10427>.

⁹ Di Bella, Maria Pia. "Walking Memory: Berlin's "Holocaust Trail." *Journeys* 13, no. 2 (Winter, 2012): 67

¹⁰ To read more about this from a tourist view read: Klarenbach, Megan. "Representing a Difficult Past: Examining Contemporary Holocaust Memorials in Berlin." Order No. 1516311, Sotheby's Institute of Art - New York, 2012.

For the opinion of a Berlin local: Donna Stonecipher, "The Moment's Monument: Poetry and Berlin Memorials," 30, no. 3 (2011): 1-21, 159

passing by from feeling pressured to interact with the memorial if it is not their intention. The optional interaction of the memorial is revolutionary because it does not force the public to look at it, unlike many of the other Berlin memorials which some bypassers become desensitized to as they no longer care to interact with the memorial. As mentioned by Young, author and university professor, the emotional response of each memorial will be different based on the viewer, but to represent the group that was murdered during the Holocaust, the memorials should be unique based on the people being represented.¹¹ However, this creates a problem that contemporary monuments face: “if the aim is to remember- that is, to refer to- a specific person, defeat, or victory, how can it be done abstractly?”¹² Some scholars argue that Holocaust memorials should not be abstract because the abstraction encourages viewers to have private visions but this defeats the collective aims of memorials to create a common memory.

Some Holocaust victims argue that memorials should contain the most literal translation of what was seen and experienced by survivors, rather than an abstract interpretation.¹³ As argued by Nina Krieger, Education Director at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, “a challenge for abstract memorials is to provide the viewers with a tangible, specific, and human connection to ground their reflection on the enormity of loss.”¹⁴ Similarly, Young mentions that survivors bring up that their suffering was not abstract so the memorials should express the suffering that the victims and survivors endured.¹⁵ This argument is significant because these

¹¹ James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2000): VIII

¹² Young, 29

¹³ Young, 9

¹⁴ This argument was used first in Klarenbach, Megan. "Representing a Difficult Past: Examining Contemporary Holocaust Memorials in Berlin." Order No. 1516311, Sotheby's Institute of Art (New York, 2012): 29

¹⁵ Young, 9

memorials are built to commemorate those who were murdered, rather than appealing to the public, so should the memorials appeal to the survivors or families of the dead? As mentioned by a survivor, “we weren’t tortured and our families weren’t murdered in the abstract, it was real.”¹⁶ Representing the millions of lives that were taken as a result of a horrific event becomes difficult as mentioned by Ruth Walker. Walker’s argument is in regards to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, where she evaluates the original design of the memorial which was going to have 4 million names carved into a tablet within view of the Reichstag building, used by the government under Adolf Hitler.¹⁷ This design would not be able to include the 6 million names of Jews because not all of these names are available. The design was changed to 2,711 grave-sized concrete blocks in the center of Berlin, which allows the viewer to walk through the blocks and understand the enormity of the Holocaust and the immense tragedy which spreads in all directions. The opinions of survivors overlook abstract forms that include meaning through abstraction. This depiction would allow for the greatest amount of expression. The abstraction can be an arguably more effective design when dealing with the murders of millions of people because it becomes difficult to represent the reality of the Holocaust.¹⁸

Many of the memorials are placed in public places, and this creates the problem of becoming invisible to the public. By creating abstract memorials, the public can interact with the memorial if they choose and does not force them to feel as though one must interact with the memorial even when they are just going to the store.¹⁹ The use of written documentation and

¹⁶ Young, 9

¹⁷ Ruth Walker, Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*. "A Holocaust Memorial in Berlin Seems Stuck on Drawing Board Germany Faces a Difficult Question: What Kind of Memorial is Appropriate in the Land of the Perpetrators?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, Jun 13, 1997.

¹⁸ Young, 11

¹⁹ Stonecipher, 21

photographs incorporated in the memorial design of the Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial allows viewers to understand operation T4, which allows Berlin to remember the disabled victims killed by Nazis.

The significance of the abstraction of the Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial can only be understood once the visitor has read the written documentation, which is placed next to the memorial. The written documentation is on a cement sculpture which is off to the side to prevent a distraction from the blue glass. The cement sculpture allows the viewer to understand operation T4 and it provides stories of some of those who died. Although this is an abstract memorial, the written documentation and photographs allow the viewer to understand the significance of the blue rectangle. This revolutionary design makes the memorial seemingly less abstract once the viewer has interacted with all aspects of the memorial. The design of the memorial and the written stories evoke a sense of emotion from the viewer, which allows for an understanding of operation T4 without any prior knowledge.

The cement sculpture that contains written documentation and photographs serves two purposes which allow for the euthanasia program to be understood. The first purpose of this cement sculpture is it forces people who are walking on the sidewalk to change their path and move around the sculpture. The importance of this was explained by a professor of disabilities studies at Davidson College, Ann Fox mentioned that disabled people, especially those in wheelchairs, must always be conscious of the way that they will get into spaces or get around them.²⁰ The cement intrudes into the sidewalk so it forces visitors and even people walking by to be conscious of the space that they occupy. The cement block forces the viewer to become aware

²⁰ Ann Fox (Professor of Disabilities Studies at Davidson College) in lecture at Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial, March 6, 2019.

of the space they are in, similar to how disabled people must be conscious of how they will enter spaces. The structure of the memorial provides a similar experience to how disabled people must always be aware of how they will enter spaces because of wheelchair access. The second purpose of the concrete sculpture is to provide information about operation T4. The written documentation enables visitors to gain an emotional response about a less known group of victims that were targeted and systematically murdered by Nazis. The written documentation and photographs allow the viewer to learn about children who were murdered or forcibly sterilized because their disabilities made them unworthy of life according to the Nazis, in addition to making the viewer aware of how they move around the memorial.

It is through the written documentation that the significance of the blue glass rectangle can be understood. Viewers are able to learn that when the disabled patients were checking into the hospitals, which were actually killing centers, they would be examined by a doctor. On the medical evaluations, the doctor would either draw a red plus sign, signifying that the patient would be murdered, or a blue minus sign, signifying this victim would be able to live. Once the viewer learns this crucial piece of information, the memorial turns from a blue rectangle into a symbol of life, a fate few of the disabled victims were able to meet. The memorial stands as a symbol that the viewer reading the documentation is alive and they survived the systematic murder, that would have killed many people today for being considered “disabled” and in the eyes of the Nazis “unworthy of life.”²¹ The choice of glass in this memorial allows further

²¹Lutz Kaelber. "Child Murder in Nazi Germany: The Memory of Nazi Medical Crimes and Commemoration of "Children's Euthanasia" Victims at Two Facilities (Eichberg, Kalmenhof)." *Societies* 2, no. 3 (2012): 157-194.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1537386886?accountid=10427>.

analysis of the lives that were taken because when staring into the glass, the viewer can see their own reflection or they can look at the people and cars passing by. This allows the viewer to reflect on the information that was provided about the memorial and allows for emotion and an understanding of the horrific actions of the doctors and Nazis. It is through the written documentation that the viewer can gain an understanding of the location of the memorial, and the at first abstract rectangle which becomes a shape symbolic of life.

This memorial is further understood because of its focus on disabled victims since they are who are being memorialized. The design of this memorial allows it to be accessible to wheelchairs and the texts of information avoid complex, academic words so that those with learning disabilities can understand. There are also videos for the deaf and audio for the blind.²² Although this memorial is abstract, the written documentation and design of the memorial creates a revolutionary way for visitors to understand the significance of this memorial, while also allowing disabled people to interact with the memorial as well. The meaningful abstraction combined with written documentation allows viewers to gain an emotional understanding as to why the disabled victims should be remembered.

The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is worthy of the attention of the public because often times the disabled victims are overlooked because there is a greater focus on the larger groups that the Nazis targeted. This memorial allows the 200,000 disabled people that were murdered to be remembered and claim their place among those who should be known because of the hateful crimes the Nazis imposed on them. The memorialization of disabled victims is an

²² Melissa Eddy, "Monument Seeks to End Silence on Killings of the Disabled by the Nazis," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2014, , accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/europe/monument-seeks-to-end-silence-on-killings-of-the-disabled-by-the-nazis.html>.

underdeveloped topic, especially compared to the other victim groups of the Holocaust, even though the disabled victims were the first group of people that the Nazis began murdering. In Hepburn's Master's thesis, she argues that the limited information on the Nazi Disabled Victims is due to three factors: the negative stigma associated with mental and physical disabilities, legal issues with many doctors and nurses not being prosecuted for their crimes, and the concept of displaying German people as victims, not just perpetrators of these murders.²³ There is a deeply rooted sense of exclusion when it comes to people with disabilities, which may have led to the limited exposure of this memorial.²⁴ One challenge of the memorialization of disabled victims was the lack of initiative to create a memorial by the disabled community.²⁵ Instead, relatives of disabled victims were the voice behind the creation of the memorial, such as Sigrid Falkenstein, who pushed for the creation of a memorial after learning her disabled aunt was killed during operation T4.²⁶

The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is surrounded by silence because often times the disabled victims are overlooked in regards to the other memorials that remember larger and better-known groups that were murdered during the Holocaust. This silence is detrimental because it leads to the forgetting of the victims and the Nazis that participated in operation T4.²⁷ The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial was opened in 2014 because this is the amount of time it took for this topic to be confronted. There is a stigma surrounding this memorial because having a mental or physical disability has a negative connotation. This stigma made it easier to decide to not

²³ Hepburn, 3

²⁴ Hepburn, 6

²⁵ Hepburn, 6

²⁶ Eddy, "Monument Seeks to End Silence on Killings of the Disabled by the Nazis"

²⁷ Hepburn, 21

create a memorial or draw attention to the disabled victims. Many families felt guilt for letting their relatives be a part of the euthanasia program, and there were also legal issues as many of the doctors that carried out this operation were not held accountable for their crimes.²⁸ This guilt prevented relatives from wanting to create a memorial and due to the negative stigma surrounding disabled people, many families wanted to avoid admitting that they had someone with a disability in their family.²⁹

The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is revolutionary both in its design and the people that it is memorializing. Operation T4 has been surrounded by silence but this memorial is working to bring attention to the lives that the Nazis took and showing that disabled victims are worthy of life and remembrance. The memorial addresses the negative stigma surrounding disabled people which still exists and is seen in society and provides information about why these victims should be addressed and remembered. The disabled victims are memorialized in a revolutionary way through evoking a sense of emotion to the viewers who are willing to interact with the memorial and allows bypassers to avoid interaction with the memorial if they choose not to engage with it. The memorial design allows it to be understood by viewers who are willing to take the time to read the written documentation and learn about the euthanasia program initiated by the Nazis. The Nazi Disabled Victims Memorial is first seen as an abstract blue rectangle, but through written documentation and photographs the design of the memorial is understood as a symbol of life for the disabled victims who are worthy of remembrance.

²⁸Hepburn, 3

²⁹Hepburn, 7

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