

Speech given by Eftihia Nachmias Nachman on November 7, 2005 at the Community Center of the Jewish Community of Athens.

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A few words of explanation: As one of the editors of Eftihia Nachmias Nachman's English edition of "Yannina-Journey To the Past," I asked Eftihia to add some thoughts on her personal reaction to the events in Berlin in May of 2005, when she was invited to be present at the unveiling of the new Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. Of the fifteen stories chosen to represent the millions who perished at the hands of the Nazis in Europe, one was that of a family from Ioannina, the family of Eftihia Nachmias Nachman. Materials for this story were gathered from her book and from information in the archives of Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum.

**May 10, 2005**

**An Emotional Moment in the History of Mankind**

**I feel fortunate to have been given the opportunity to live to see this.**

Flooded by events which brought me back to the years of the persecution, struggling with feelings that disturbed my soul as I approached the journey to Berlin and so many thoughts that traveled with me to the dedication of the Memorial, looking back, trying to find the words to say to you; everything that I wanted to share with you.

In April of 2003, an e-mail message from Berlin was received by the Yanniote Synagogue in New York [Kehila Kedosha Janina]. The writer was Dr. Ulrich Baumann, a researcher who was busy preparing an exhibit to be displayed in the basement of the planned museum in the center of the city of Berlin near the Brandenburg Gate [where a center for information and a display of stories exemplifying the destruction would be included as part of the Memorial To the Murdered Jews of Europe].

Baumann mentioned that he was working on the area that would include the story of Jewish families. He had the sad obligation to find documents and biographies of those who perished from 15 countries in Europe from where they would chose 15 families as examples of the destruction. One of those families would come from Greece. The question was which Jewish cultural heritage would be included: that of the Sephardim was already known. What interested them [at the Museum] was the Romaniote Community in Ioannina and they were looking to find a family to represent that story. In addition, they were interested in pre-war photos and photos taken during the Holocaust.

The English translation of my book [Yannina] was already being prepared for publication in New York and the message from Berlin was passed on to me. Dr. Ulrich Baumann would become "Dear Ulrich" and I would become "Dear Eftihia" in our correspondences. A marathon of communications began. They would ask the questions and I would give the answers. I also sent them a CD with photographs from my book. A year passed and, in May of 2004, I received a new e-mail from New York.

It said: Greece would be included in the Berlin's new Holocaust monument.

The marathon of messages: answers and questions continued. In the beginning of January 2005, I received an invitation to the inauguration of the Memorial to be held on May 10, 2005 in the afternoon and the Concert of Memory given by the Berlin Philharmonic to be held that evening. Among other things, the invitation said that the main scope of the Memorial was to honor the murdered victims, to keep alive the memory of these inconceivable events of German history, and to admonish future generations to defend human rights, democracy, and justice and to resist dictatorships and tyranny in all forms.

“The fate of your family will be represented in the exhibit of “In Memory of the Murdered Jews of Europe. I want to thank you for your cooperation. Without your help, it would have been impossible to present this story of tragic misfortune.” It was signed by the President of the Bundestag [the German Parliament], Wolfgang Thierse.

The communication continued and the day of departure approached. I would set out in the morning, at dawn. I could not escape the thought that I would be going back 60 years, to Ioannina, to the “molo” [area on the lakeside where the Jews of Ioannina were rounded up] when on another dawn, a tragic dawn, they gathered them together for the first roll-call on their way to hell. At the station in Munich, the first time I passed through, with each person I saw, I would ask myself, ‘what was his role then and if he aided in making their disappearance a reality?’ The airplane continued on to its final destination.

The clouds were dense and stark white, like snow, as I looked at them from the window. They acted as a sacred font for the thoughts that had played around in my brain for days; struggling feelings that slowly settled like sediment. I would want to spread them out to see them next to me, to judge and to choose with unaffected and clear eyes. If only I could erase those scenes of horror from my memory. Maybe, somehow, I could ease the pain those memories caused? Could I be a consolation to our youth who had never known their grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles, aunts and cousins? And who could console us who had the chance to know them, only to lose them while we were still children?

However, perhaps the time had come to change the path of my own thoughts and my life and, what up to now had been my opinion of the Germans? From the time I was a child, I remember them as harsh, heartless soldiers with titles that traumatized: Gestapo, SS, Wehrmacht. . . Without ceasing to know and to remember, I will escape this and change and stop thinking that the Germans of today are identical with those of the past. Here are those who were just children [like I was then]; there were those who had not even been born. There were those who, today, were trying to shake off the too recent shame for which they themselves were not responsible, just as we were also not responsible. In this way, I put aside thoughts of collective responsibility.

## **Berlin**

When I faced the Memorial with successive rows of tomb-like columns, it was as if I was in a cemetery, but I wasn't: there was no human remains to protect. It was an endless labyrinth located close to the Parliament and the new government buildings. There was a park and a Baroque palace and homes where the leaders of Prussia had lived. Hitler's Bunker was close by, as was Goebells' smaller version. In the area was a section of the Berlin Wall. In the southern section were the embassies of German allied states. I thought to myself that no one would be able to ignore this place: it was right in the historical center of the city.

As the President of the German Parliament, Wolfgang Thierse, said: "In the center of the city, in an area that was not an area of mass murder, the means to carry out the systematic mass murder of millions was conceived, organized and put into action. This Memorial, in the center of the German capital recalls what is thought to be the greatest crime committed in its history. In honoring the memory of the victims, we are obligated to the past and the future. We strive for a humane civilization recognized as a community and a country in which one can dare to be different and not be afraid of those differences."

I found myself before the words of the title that accompanied all the exhibits, written in large letters throughout the areas of the memorial and on all printed matter. It referred to those who were unjustly murdered.

## **THE MEMORIAL TO THE MURDERED JEWS OF EUROPE**

This Memorial is to preserve the memory of the unfortunate victims.

Many documents had been written by Jews who were saved from the persecutions and the Holocaust. Spared death, they wanted to give their testimonies; personal eyewitness accounts of the crime. They had historical significance. Many memories were written down, even more than fifty years after the liberation. During the Holocaust, things were written while in the Ghetto, in hiding and inside the camps. Most of those who wrote these last writings did not survive, but pages from their diaries did.

What daring people who, in the midst of danger, often with knowledge of their imminent death, gave testimony of their existence. The idea that they were going to be killed and that, at the same time, they were concerned with history and memory is amazing. Specifically, when we think about traditional Jewish bonds, among them, the religious bond, and its reliance on memory and historical writings. Only accounts and documents can assure that a people will not be erased from history without leaving a trace. Their writings assured them a future, a just world that would give meaning to their lives in spite of their loss. The importance of historical memory is in accordance with Jewish tradition, often referring to the suffering of the Jewish people. Perhaps this is the cultural inheritance for the future generations of humanity. Among those who gave such testimony is a Greek Jew from Thessaloniki, Marsel Natzari.

The Museum in Berlin took evidence from notations such as these, in order to give names to those who were lost and to tell their stories. The most meaningful were those documents created in the midst of the hell, especially the shocking excerpts that relate painful information.

When Lea Rosh, the journalist, proposed a “very visible symbol” to remember the murder of European Jewry, the reactions were intense and diametric, ranging from enthusiasm to intense opposition. According to Lea Rosh, it was the idea of the historian, Eberhard Jäckel. “It was at Yad Vashem in 1988 during the filming of a documentary for television on the murder of European Jewry, that it was said to me: ‘We have the duty to have a memorial in Germany in memory of the events.’ It was then, that the idea for construction of the Memorial To the Murdered Jews of Europe became defined and procedures to make it a reality were put into play.

Finally, the citizens of Berlin were with us. When we began to think of the memorial, we had only an inspiration and we had to persuade the others. We wanted to remember the crime, that many-faceted crime, to honor the memory of the dead and to give names to the faceless victims. We wanted to avert Germany from settling into the routine of work, to go about their daily business as if nothing had ever happened. This would not be easy.”

As the American, James E. Young, a specialist in Judaic Studies, said: “No other nation, no other people, previously in history, have publicly acknowledged their crime and set up a memorial in the geographical center of their capital city acknowledging such a horrible crime.”

Jacob Schulze-Rohr, the husband of Lea Rosh, writing on this phenomenon, said: “Now it is easier to live in this country.....

We searched for allies to give us support. . . Willy Brandt was the first to address it when he put into words what was to become our motto: ‘Honor demands an infinite expression in memory of the murder of the Jews of Europe.’

We agonized over the reports advertising the Memorial: we stood on the road in the wind and the rain, gathering signatures and money. In the meantime, 100,000 German marks were collected and about 10,000 signatures. There were many discussions. Why a memorial only for the murdered Jews? Why not for the other groups that had victims? Why not erect a memorial for all together? We disagreed. The main target of National Socialism, of the genocide, was the destruction of Judaism. That was the most important goal of Hitler, even more important than winning the war. The crime committed against the Jews was so incomparable, so unique, so abominable, so enormous that we would think that the sun would dim forever as a sign of mourning and sorrow. But, the sun shone and continues to shine.”

“The entire 2,000 years of anti-Semitism on this earth and the number of 6,000,000 Jewish victims demands a Memorial dedicated to the Jews,” wrote Lea Rosh.

Gerhard Schroeder, who announced the re-examination of the political policies of Germany in his pre-election strategy, was elected as the head of the government in the parliamentary elections of 1998. The new government decided to give the parliament the final word on the creation of the Memorial.

It was a claim that the experts had proposed for years: only the German Parliament had the power to decide.

After a liberal public dialogue, on June 25, 1999, as one of the last sessions that took place in Bonn, with a plurality of 314 votes to 209, it was decided that the Parliament must give its full attention to the proposal of a memorial. With a decision from the German Parliament, which adopted the initiative of the people, it was decided to erect a Memorial in memory of the “Murdered Jews of Europe,” according to the plan of Peter Eisenman, an architect from New York.

It is a national memorial created in the name of the German public. However, it does not memorialize the work of a people, of a government or a dynasty, but rather the unique crime against humanity committed in the name of Germany. “The history of humanity,” as Eberhard Jäckel said, “is linked with endless brutality, but never before had there been such a persecution of this kind. It was not unusual for anti-Semites down through the ages to expel the Jews from their countries, and even to kill them. The Germans perpetrated mass murder, targeting all the Jews who were in the countries they occupied. Therefore, most of the victims were foreigners. The uniqueness of their act was not applied only to German Jews.”

“The Memorial is built in this place, specifically chosen to stress the centrality of the meaning and its public character,” said the President of the German Parliament. “It’s embodiment in the historical topography of the city of Berlin and in the new governmental district, was a clear choice, so that the Memorial sends its message to the State and to the German public. It is an acceptance of political responsibility and we make this clear: that while it is unfortunate that we were not able to complete this project immediately after the war, it is a blessing to do so now and to finally close the worst chapter of our country’s history. On the other hand, the Memorial informs the public. It is provocative. It will continue to awaken feelings and initiate discussion.

A human life can be immortalized with a stone, a plaque, a cross or a star. The simplicity of that idea ends with the Holocaust, Hiroshima, with mass death. The vastness and the horror of the Holocaust is such where every attempt to incorporate the traditional is terribly inappropriate.”

“First, we have to establish an unique remembrance,” said Peter Eisenman, “to record what happened in that capital. Second, and very important, is to initiate a dialogue with the breadth and the openness proposed by such an operation, one that permits future generations to come to their own conclusion. Not to direct them what to think, but to allow them to think on their own.”

The plan sets out with a solid construction made up of 2,711 columns made of concrete, each of which is between 95 millimeters and 2 meters 38 millimeters wide. The height runs from 0 to 4.7 meters. The vertical form gazes towards the heavens. The columns are set at a distance of 95 millimeters from each other, permitting only one passer-by to pass through at a time. Eisenman's abstract creation is accessible to visitors any hour of the day or night. Whoever passes within the seemingly unending sea of stone masses leaves the sense of a road behind and remains alone with himself. Crossing the footpath, one senses the meaning of being alone, of desperation and of despair. With its honesty, the Memorial offers a space for personal reflection, remembrance and sorrow. It will influence subsequent generations, showing them the power of a message that is permanent. Also, and perhaps more important, the memorial is found close to the building used by the Gestapo, as a reminder of the crimes and executions.

..... As the passing years would show, the actualization of the Memorial was difficult, keeping a balance between memory and respect. So that it would not only be a documentation of memory, it would also contain a 'Information Center,' which would give basic information on the victims of the genocide and their murderers.

With the use of imagery, the exhibit reveals the monstrous number of mass murders committed against the Jews of Europe. It shows the huge number using locations where the mass murders took place, describing the Nazi escalation in tactical extermination and naming the perpetrators. One of the aims of the memorial is to personalize the memory and to combine it with the life of the Jews of Europe who were persecuted and put to death.

A space is devoted to families, presenting their everyday life before the Second World War, their agony and tribulations when the persecutions began, as well as the conditions of their violent death. This presentation will reflect on the varieties of Jewish cultural life in Europe, so that the visitors can actually feel what was lost in the Holocaust."

"Orthodox or Reform, religious or worldly, Ashkenazi or Sephardic, German or Polish, we were all the same in their eyes," said Peter Eisenman. "Perhaps, above all, within this process, I came closer to my Jewishness. In my heart I am a New Yorker, but from today on, a part of my soul will always remain in Berlin."

The institution will keep the memory alive, using programs and lectures with themes of scholarly and artistic interest, always working with representatives of victims. The purpose of all of this activity is to confront Hitlerism in everyday life.

Only then will the Memorial become a living bond including an area of conscious experience with all the extended feelings. Remembrance of the Holocaust would include assumption of life where the future, even today, continues to be a work in progress.

As Reinhard Rurup said: “Memorials have always had a dual purpose, to honor the dead and to insure that history will not be forgotten. This can only be accomplished if society, or at least the greater part of it, gives appropriate attention to that message.”

In the Information Center, the victims have names and faces. Here is housed the fate of the victims and their families. Here their lives, their tribulations and their death are exemplified by representative stories. The personalization of the terror, showing individuals affected by the Holocaust, is the purpose of this part of the exhibit. It is the central thread that runs through the exhibit. Bringing the victims out of anonymity indigenous to the vastness of the number of victims by concentrating on personal memory and stories of their actual lives.

“Practically none of the murdered Jews have their own grave. Following the Holocaust, only a communal grave with the names of the dead engraved on the stone would function for some as a memorial,” said Eberhard Jackel.

Lea Rosh then read a moving letter sent to her by a friend:

“Now, something that no one had dared to hope for has become reality. Now there is a place where all those who were given no grave [except “air” i.e. the gas chambers] have something that binds them with the earth [the columns]. They finally arrived there, where all humanity belongs, on and in the earth.”

I left for last the emotional words of Sabina van der Linden, who, among other things, said:

“Not in my most daring dreams could I have imagined this unbelievable day, the unveiling of this majestic Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Try to envision an eleven-year-old girl from Breslau, Poland, who became a witness to brutality, murder, rape and torture.”

And, thus she described her traumatic experiences, adding to each sentence the words “Why? Why? Why?” She ended her speech by saying:

“I am the voice of 6,000,000 murdered Jews, of whom 1,500,000 were children. I am also the voice of the few lucky ones- the voice of those who were saved. What did I learn from my bitter experiences? I learned that hate brings forth hate. I learned that we must not stay silent and that each of us, as an individual, must battle racism, discrimination, bias and inhumanity. I had said that I did not believe in collective responsibility. If I may quote from an exceptional human being, the great writer, Elie Wiesel:

‘The children of the murderers are not murderers. We can never accuse them of what their grandparents did. But we can hold them responsible for how they handle the crimes of their grandparents.’

“It was the fate of our people,” Sabina continued, “to have been confronted with the worst display of evil in the history of mankind. Our loved ones were exterminated but we survived. From this prospective, we confront the future, with belief in the decisive triumph of the human spirit over the power of violence. A victory, not only for the Jewish people, but a victory of all the good people over the bad.

Above all, whatever was perpetrated during that grievous era, who now could possibly doubt the Holocaust and the 6,000,000 who were lost, in front of this “Memorial” that is the signature and the apology of the German Nation.”

Before I left Berlin, I passed by the Memorial and revisited the area with “the families.” Naturally, I stopped longer at the exhibit of my own family. It was as if I went to say goodbye. I felt that somehow I was actually abandoning them and my eyes began to fill with tears. While I was there, I saw Ulrich Baumann with a group of young people, and as he said to me later, it was disturbing since this was the first time he had acted as a tour guide. I understood that he had been speaking about me to them and my emotions increased and the tears began to flow. It was something that cannot be translated into words; it was something that rarely happens.....