



The Sculptural/Architectural Memorial at Belzec, Poland

Belzec is a village in eastern Poland in the Lublin area. During World War II it was the site of the Belzec killing centre where up to 500,000 Jews were murdered. This makes it the third-deadliest Nazi killing centre, exceeded only by Treblinka and Auschwitz. Belzec, along with the other five Nazi killing centres is featured in the permanent exhibition of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre. In 2003, an international competition was held for a new memorial and museum at Belzec and the design of the architects Andrez Solyga, Zdzislaw Pidek, and Martin Roszczyk was chosen. The design and construction was informed and guided by extensive and wide-ranging consultations with strict regard to *Halacha* (Jewish Law). The American Jewish Committee and the Polish Government opened the Belzec Memorial and Museum in June 2004.

To visit the Memorial at Belzec is a harrowing experience. It was built and designed to remember and protect the remains of the Jews murdered there between March and December 1942. To cross the threshold from the ordinariness of the quiet Polish rural environment into the memorial is to separate oneself from everyday life. The memorial's hauntingly restrained qualities lie partly in the vast undulating reconfigured landscape which covers the entire area of the former killing centre. The surface is constructed

from grey-coloured inorganic materials: industrial slag, raw concrete, cast iron and stone.

Speaking at the dedication of the memorial in June 2004, David Harris of the American Jewish Committee, said that Belzec is "a place at once sacred and accursed". He talked of those present at the commemoration as being people "enveloped by haunting memories, excruciating pain and overwhelming loss" yet noted that, like themselves, the memorial itself could play an intercessory role in proving the site for "affirming an unshakable resolve to build and defend a more humane world". By being both it becomes a space for personal witness and exploration of conscience, and in an educative manner, it encourages

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public consciousness to keep alive a particular memory and to remember the horrendous events that took place there during 1942. On one level, the memorial attempts to entrench memory of the past when thousands of lives were so brutally cut short. On other levels, it allows for retrieval of personal and collected memory and provides the space to reflect and it

allows for connections to be made between past and present.

The few symbolically placed pathways which cut through the barren expanse draw one into the wretched space which presents an initial image of unremitting, desolate grey wasteland. Its all-encompassing qualities almost 'demand' the visitor to absorb strong emotional qualities of the art which is charged with traces of the events that took place in 1942.

The memorial is a strongly affective artwork as it compels visitors to get involved with and experience a range of complex feelings and thoughts. Its emotional impact lies in the intricate network of relationships between the actual place of the memorial, its design qualities, its subject matter and the involved viewer. Belzec is striking because visitors are physically always in the space as they move about the memorial. They either absorb the stillness, which

allows one to reflect on the enormity of human absence which so strongly indicates what once was a presence, or become an active participant within the landscape/artwork.

The memorial follows the permanent rights of interment according to Orthodox Judaic law which were stringently adhered to, in both design

and construction. In addition to being a 'final resting place' the memorial performs multiple other roles. For example there is also a place to perform the traditional Jewish command, *zachor* (to remember) which requires ritual activities such as the recitation of memorial prayers, lighting candles and the placing of stones in the designated zone.

The architects deliberately avoided obvious Holocaust representational images throughout the Memorial. Instead meanings are stated and suggested in a combination of clear and unconcealed symbolic, visual and architectural elements and a strong narrative structure, a use of text, subtle manipulation of materials and other ways of presenting ideas, objects and materials which act as a go-between the makers and the viewer. From the street entry most visitors progress straight through and immediately become integrated into the whole landscape as they are drawn into the axial pathway of *The Interstice* which follows the path

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of *der Schlauch* (the tube) in the original camp. To pause at the railway sculpture or visit the museum first would not diminish the impact. Leading from the memorial entrance a large, flat rust-coloured cast iron panel deeply etched with a multi-lined six pointed 'Star of David' is laid at the crossing point of the entry path and perimeter walkways. Part of its impact lies in the fact that it is the only large almost-red coloured element in the entire design. The architects describe the panel and graphic marks over which visitors must walk, as an "emblem", which "... expresses the coldness and ruthless power of this site – the border between life and death" (ROPWiM -AJC, 2003: np).¹

The entire area of Belzec memorial is removed from passing public gaze. Access to the site is gained through a modest opening in a high solid cement wall which visually and physically



The Ramp Monument

separates the street from the memorial. The text "*This is the site of the slaughter of about 500, 000 victims of the Belzec Death Camp for the murder of Jews who were killed between February and December 1942 by Nazi Germany. Earth do not cover my blood: Let there be no resting place for my outcry. Job 16:18*", marks the entrance. The impact of Job's

heart-rending cry is strengthened when the visitor confronts the text again at the *Memorial Wall*.

Inside, on the right and parallel to the road, is the long structure of the museum building which provides the visitor with information and details about the killing centre itself. The building recalls, and thus marks, the place where the railway lines entered the death killing centre. The railway tracks originally culminated left of the entry threshold at the 'loading ramp' where now a large, visually and emotionally striking, sculpture *The Ramp Monument*, stands. Together with a Dan Pagis poem, "written in pencil in the sealed railway car" on the wall behind it, it marks the exact point at which the transport trains finally stopped. Victims were forced off the trains onto a 'loading platform' and then through *der Schlauch* to the gas chambers.

The *Ramp Monument* is constructed from functional steel railway tracks, wooden sleepers and carefully scattered gravel. On close inspection the rough stone littered over the elements gives the impression of railway lines newly ripped from the ground and stacked up together. In addition, in outline and bulk, the sculpture also suggests the cattle cars of the transports. Piled up upon one another, the sleepers could be said to represent the 'end of the line' which was the end of life. Equally they evoke the achingly familiar Holocaust images of rows of emaciated bodies lying in burial pits. The actual material and position of the sculpture points to the importance of trains, railway lines and stations in both the experience and telling of the Holocaust tragedy.

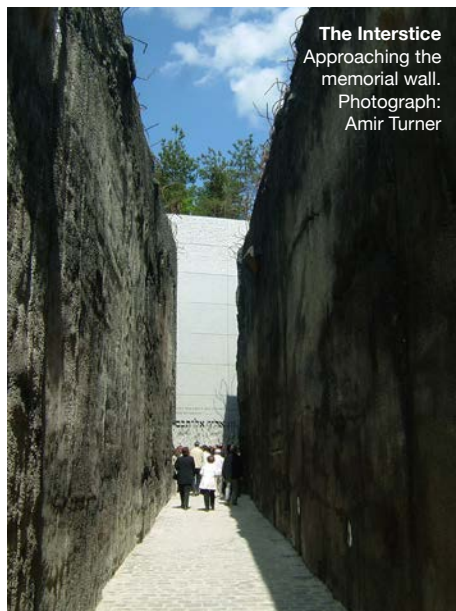
Text, though minimal, is evident throughout the site as it forms part of the memorial narrative, acting as an unfolding and story-telling device. Text as a form of caption is not neutral, and only in part, does it serve as the documented record and historical memory. On the wall behind *The Ramp Monument* is Dan Pagis's poem²: *written in pencil in the sealed railway car*.

**Here in this carload
I, Eve
with my son Abel
If you see my older boy,
Cain, the son of man,
tell him that I**

1. Rada Ochrony Pamieci Walk i Meczestw* and American Jewish Committee, 2003, Belzec Nazi Death Camp 1942: Project Booklet

The truncated poetry which succinctly and eloquently conveys a deep sense of personal loss and life so brutally cut short is indexical of the whole Memorial. In only 23 words the poem allows the reader to identify with the enormity of loss represented here. The imagery of the title refers directly to the very *raison d'être* of Belzec as a killing centre: they remind the reader of the political ideology which allowed 500 000 people to be murdered at Belzec purely on ethnic, religious, national and racial bases. Use of a 'pencil' suggests an impermanent medium and the hurried moments snatched to record the evidence of the last moments of a family torn apart as they move inexorably towards their death. The subtle, layered poem encourages a fundamental human rights interpretation. Its text is 'universalist', encompassing all humankind as Eve is also the mother of humanity, and her family representative of those so cruelly taken. So, in the absence of survivors and those who could not bear testimony, Eve acts as a 'witness not present'. Pagis' poem recounts the pain, suffering and disharmony of Eve and her family who were broken apart in the most unnatural way when Cain's murder of his brother Abel disrupted the natural cycle of family. As Audrey Shore suggests: brutal slaughter during the Holocaust also eliminated this order. The poem mimics these historical anomalies by ceasing to end with definitive words or punctuation; returning to the beginning of the poem immediately after the last word would provide a clearer image of Eve wanting Cain and Adam to know that she and Abel are already headed towards their deaths. (Shore, 2003).³

Eve in the railway truck, who emphasizes the important role of the imagination and allows for personal response, is another trace of the absence and loss so present at multiple levels in this memorial. She signifies the human need to bear witness, as her poignant cry echoes Job's that neither earth nor memorial can cover



the atrocity perpetuated at Belzec. From there one proceeds to square *point of crossing* which is a large flat open area on which deep red cuts, ruts and lines create a bas-relief Star of David which signifies the place "between life and death" and what the architects described

“As people walk between the walls they gradually get higher and seem to enclose one.”

as expressing “the coldness and ruthless power of this site” (ROPWiM -AJC, 2003: np).⁴ Left and right of the crossing and surrounding the actual memorial boundary is a roughly plastered, generally low, black wall punctuated above with roughly bent, rusted cast-iron stakes. Standing at the crossing the viewer is confronted by the vast grey-black barren landscape of slag, where large irregularly shaped dark patches mark the sites of the 33 mass graves.^{5,6}

From the crossing one proceeds to *The Interstice (der Schauch)* which is a pathway bounded by two unique walls. For instance, just past the crossing, the wall on the right disappears as it seems to dip into the earth for a short distance leaving only the twisted, buckled, damaged iron stakes to emerge from the slag. As people walk between the walls they gradually get higher and

seem to enclose one. The dullness of the roughly hand-plastered, naked raw cement on the very carefully hand-crafted walls creates a tense atmosphere which binds one with the physical discomfort of the uneven cobble-stoned floor. The deliberate textures of the irregular surface causes a subtle measure of discomfort beneath the visitors' feet and simultaneously functions as a reminder of victims' journey along the streets of Polish towns.

The visitor's process culminates at the off-white polished granite *Memorial Wall*. Finally the viewers' eyes fall on the deeply carved words of Job at the entrance again repeated in English, Hebrew and Polish. In this case, high above the viewer, the feelings and visual qualities of the bas relief Hebrew lettering have a profound effect. The deeply carved letters become strong irregular vertical lines which are gouged out of the granite's surface right down

to ground level. They are evocative of tears, of weeping, and/or spilling blood. It is in these clefts that small niches are cut. At this point the visitor is forced to stop, finding him/herself in a contained space.[iv]⁷

Opposite this wall there is a roof-like overhang which physically and symbolically serves as the only sheltered area of the memorial. It is as if this architectural device serves to offer, for the only time, protection for the individual visitor which stands in stark contrast to the vast openness and mass anonymity of the rest of the killing centre memorial.

Belzec remains a memorial site of a “collective” loss of life and mass victimhood. To highlight the very nature of the atrocity of the killing centre itself, all individuality is deliberately erased, and direct links to the individual are

2. The celebrated Israeli poet, Dan Pagis (1930-1986), was born in Bukovina, Romania. As an adolescent, he was interned for 3 years in a concentration camp in the Ukraine.

3. Shore, Audrey, 2003, *Connecting to the Holocaust Through Literature*: Dan Pagis, <http://www.koach.org/kocapr03shore.htm>; taken 15-02-2006.

4. Rada Ochrony Pamieci Walk i Meczestw” and American Jewish Committee, 2003, *Belzec Nazi Death Camp 1942: Project Booklet*

5. The current memorial at Belzec appears indirectly to fulfil some of the functions of a Jewish cemetery. Although the architects and many official documents refer to it as a cemetery, halachically, Belzec is not a cemetery. It is, however, a place now designated with permanent burial status for the remains of Belzec's victims who were murdered because they were Jews, and which allows for the performance of associated Judaic mourning rites.

6. These graves were revealed after extensive and thorough archaeological excavations from 1997-1999. Exploration in the 1990s, as well as subsequent design and construction, all followed strict Halacha (Jewish Law) governing cemeteries and burial so the memorial now “provides the most complete and comprehensive protection of victims' mass graves to be found anywhere in Europe (AJC 2004:25)”.

7. Niches in the white vertical wall tear through the granite and allow for the customary act for visitors or mourners to place a small stone as at a grave as a sign of respect.



denied for both the dead and the bereaved. Several devices are employed to communicate that lack.

On the opposite side of the *Memorial Wall*, and on either side of the culmination of the *Interstice*, stretching under the canopy, are two highly polished grey granite walls. Engraved into the stone in a way traditional to *matzevoth* (grave stones) are over twelve hundred first names. A variety of spellings of each name reflects the different areas of Galicia from which Jews were brought to Belzec. Thus these names act as some form of material evidence and as the major strategy to introduce a perspective of individuality.

On a contrary level the notion of anonymity is strong here. There are no single identities, no surnames, so it is as if all family connections have been erased. A generic first name reminds the viewer of the stripping of individual identity as it reinforces the collective loss of generations of an entire region and reinforces the anonymity of mass death and mass graves. These latter notions echo both the landscape above and make visions of huge pits packed with corpses and later, the results of the bone-crushing machines used to conceal the activities of Belzec, real. A generalized list of names demonstrates the individuality denied by the dehumanization of the 'final solution' as the Nazis attempted to destroy an entire people by "solving the Jewish question as quickly as possible."

From this point the visitor can choose

“Memory and knowledge become entwined as the visitor actually participates in the environment.”

how to proceed, or for some 'to escape'. One possibility is to walk back along the *Interstice*. Another is to take one of the two stone stairways at either end of this area which will then lead back up to the framing path. It is from the top of the stairs that the visitor can survey the entire memorial, and even part of the town Belzec, from the upper end of the site's incline. The visitor is no longer embedded in the oppressive space of the memorial, but is physically surveying the entire site below. From here the viewer gazes across the vast desolate expanse.

On the framing, or external path showing the monthly transport chronology, the names of every village, town and city from which Jews were deported to Belzec are recorded in rust-coloured cast iron. They are affixed to the smooth white-grey cement of the perimeter walkway and to read them, the visitor has to make yet another journey, this time along the outline of the memorial. Together with the wall of first names, the place names provide a tangible link to reality and to a sense of lost life and personhood. The visual and tactile qualities of the lettering have a profound effect as they stand proud of the base and act as a point of visual focus and memory.

There are no images of the atrocity here so the viewer is called upon to draw upon his/her prior knowledge of the Holocaust, upon imagination, memory and personal pain. Alternatively, the museum would provide the person with little or no knowledge of the facts of the Shoah and this site particularly with context. Form and content work together to encourage the viewer to experience personal feelings, or attempt an understanding of the events which took place at the killing centre.

Solyga's conceptual work dramatically calls attention to that which is unobservable beneath the surface; to the horror of the experiences of those who lie beneath the ground. The artwork serves to make what is invisible most important and turns silence of the dead into evidence which operates to force us to learn and remember, and thus makes acts of conscience possible. As senses and emotions are stimulated by the experience of being in Belzec, the affective qualities of the work become tangible for the visitor who walks in and through the site along predetermined routes. One feels an overwhelming sense of absence and loss as the viewer moves beyond realistic and naturalist images and instead engages with materials and metaphoric layers encoded into the Memorial. Memory and knowledge become entwined as the visitor actually participates in the environment. Memorialization can be problematic as it can lead to fixity but at Belzec, the layers, traces and strong visual qualities are so powerful so as to make individual memory work possible.

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FURTHER READING:

Buntman, B: 2008: "Tourism and Tragedy: The Memorial at Belzec, Poland.: *The International Journal of Heritage Studies*: Taylor and Francis

Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1352708022848867>