# BERLIN, THE HOLOCAUST AND THE CRISIS OF ECOLOGY

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When my wife Elizabeth and I chose Berlin for an autumn city break with our friends David and Barbara, it was in large part out of curiosity. What is this city, which has been at the centre of European history all our lives, really like? All four of us were born during the closing stages of World War II and its aftermath; we all grew up in families whose lives had been deeply impacted by the bombing of London, the loss of relatives, evacuations, stories of refugees and the Holocaust. I remember as a little boy listening to the BBC news of the Berlin blockade, scared stiff that war was about to break out. We are all old enough to remember the brutal division of the city, Kennedy's 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech, and the extraordinary euphoria when the Wall was breached and Berlin reunified. And now, in the middle of the biggest financial crisis since the 1930s, German economic power again dominates European politics. As it turned out, our visit to Berlin was far more challenging and thought-provoking than we could have imagined.

We did the touristy things: took a trip along the river past the gleaming new Federal Government buildings; walked in the Tiergarten; delighted in Chipperfield's radical reconstruction of the bomb-damaged Neues Museum; enjoyed an evening at the Philharmonic, and wondered at the glass dome of the Reichstag. We were impressed by the achievements of reunification and reconstruction – the busy streets and wonderful public transport, the apparent seamlessness with which the two halves of the Berlin have been joined.

The city has been tidied up and, to a great extent, signs of its traumatic past have been cleared away – as a Berliner we spoke to at the Bauhaus Archive complained. He described graphically how the Wall used to run within a metre or so of houses on the western side, so residents were confronted by the division each time they opened their front door. Now, except at places like Checkpoint Charlie, where poignant history seems overwhelmed by tourism, only a line of cobbles along the streets marks the line of the Wall. Some important collective memory had been lost, he told us.

Yet as we explored the city, I was continually aware of

the historic human events that resonate into the present, and was often tripped up by ghosts of the past leaping into present time. When passing the great restored synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse, Elizabeth and I turned to each other in sudden realization. This was the building notoriously burned down on Krystallnacht in 1938. Right here, in this place, is where those beatings and burnings happened. This is the spot where one group of human beings systematically set out to destroy another.

But it is not only other humans we destroy. On the train journey to Berlin, I read disturbing news about the planet's ecology. The International Union for Conservation of Nature's 'Red List' of endangered species now includes one in three of the world's amphibians. Half of all frogs, toads, newts and salamanders are in decline, and one-third threatened with extinction.[1] This reminded me that we are living through the sixth great extinction of species on our planet: animals and plants are disappearing at up to a thousand times faster than the background rate. This is happening not because of a collision with an asteroid or geological changes, but is entirely anthropogenic: we humans, particularly those in industrial societies, are exploiting the earth, destroying habitats and changing global climate to such an extent that there is progressively less space for other beings to flourish.

So the reminders of human tragedies in recent history continually stirred concerns about ecological tragedies in the present. As I walked the streets of Berlin I found myself wondering how, as we learn to be horrified in the face of human suffering and our unrelenting capacity for inhumanity to our fellow humans, we mask our attention to tragedies in the more-than-human world.

This is not to say that I wasn't profoundly moved by reminders of the horrors of the recent past. My emotions were particularly stirred at the Holocaust Memorial in the centre of Berlin, next to the Brandenburg Gate. Taking up a whole city block, sharply edged concrete slabs, or 'stelae', each some eight feet long and three feet wide, are arranged in a grid pattern. There are 2,711 of them, just as there are 2,711 pages in the Talmud. From a distance I saw them as undulating across the space, presenting a uniform and regular pattern. Walking around the edges, where the stelae are low, I could see over their flat tops to the new embassy buildings and apartment blocks beyond. As I moved into the heart of the Memorial, I realized that the ground sank lower so the stelae towered above me. I could only see along the regular lines of the grid, yet these pathways had been set slightly out of true, undulating and tilting, the slabs themselves subtly misaligned from the vertical. So while from the outside the Memorial appeared regular, ordered, even cold, the experience inside was strangely disorienting.

As I walked this way, then that, through the Memorial I found myself more deeply absorbed. Soon out of contact with my companions, I lost a sense of where I was. But along the straight lines of the grid I could spy, as if in the far distance, the everyday life of Berlin carrying on. Out there it appeared to be a sunny day, but where I stood it was cold and dull. Along some sightlines I could see the trees in the Tiergarten, with shiny cars flicking past on the busy Ebertstrasse in front. Looking the other way, I saw dreary apartment blocks, presumably a relic of the Communist regime. At the end of one line, a bright yellow van was parked, a splash of colour surprising the overwhelming sense of grey.

From time to time I saw other people flit across a gap between the slabs, some near and some more distant, I could not always tell which – my sense of depth was disturbed. I could rarely find them again, although I had a sense that I was not alone. Then children passed me overhead, joyfully leaping the gaps between the blocks. At first this upset me, for it seemed disrespectful. Then I realized how they added to my experience, showing how the everyday carries on: cars pass, people go about their business, children play, while the plight of those within this grim matrix is ignored, out of awareness. And the children added a curiously light-hearted perspective, a reminder to attend to, but not revel in, the tragedies of history.

Walking between the cold blocks brought to mind the Jewish people whose stories – very different stories – I have heard, and from whom I have learned something of the Jewish culture, experience and predicament. I remembered my friend Victor Friedman explaining to me how German Jews saw themselves as an integral part of German culture and as patriotic Germans – many fought heroically for the Fatherland in the First World War. Yet the State and its people turned against them.

The Memorial is built on the site of Goebbels' Nazi Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Immediately to the east of the Berlin Wall, the stretch of land was kept vacant during the Cold War as a 'death strip' to prevent access to the Wall. All this, in a strange and unfathomable way, added to the sense of mystery, and to a realization that the Memorial, while dedicated to the Holocaust of the Jewish people in the 1930s and 1940s, nevertheless has wider implications. It shows, as its designer Peter Eisenman intended, how an ordered system can lose touch with human reason, not just in the murder of Jews, but in the persecution and deprivation of all human minorities. In a similar fashion, the system of the industrial consumer economy and globalized finance has lost touch with a wider ecological reason, resulting in the destruction of the ecosystems of which we are a part and without which we cannot survive. We construct systems that lock us into destructive craziness.

Down a flight of steps, underground beneath the stelae, I found what is innocuously called the Information Centre, which displayed the extent and impact of the Holocaust. A timeline on the wall in the Starting Hall shows how the 'final solution' developed; the Room of Dimensions displays last letters and messages; the Room of Families exhibits photographs and narratives of fifteen diverse Jewish families; the Room of Names commemorates the life of each individual murdered Jew; the Room of Sites shows the geographical spread of the Holocaust.

The Room of Dimensions touched me deeply. Here I saw facsimiles of final messages, letters and postcards sending love to dear ones, expressing hope for a better future while staring separation and death in the face. I

felt I could reach back through the decades and meet these people, touch the trauma of parents separated from children, of people experiencing inconceivable loss while knowing that worse would soon come. I encountered the extent of the horror in the Room of Names, a darkened room where I watched the name of one Jewish victim after another, with their birth and death dates, projected onto a wall for a minute or so, while a calm voice spoke a brief biography in German and then in English. I listened to the story of a man from the Ukraine, trained as a glassblower, who built up a business trading metals, and then was shot dead in a pogrom when in his forties. It is intended that every person murdered in the Holocaust will in time be included. Presenting all the victims' names in this way would take over six and a half years.

After listening to the repetition of names of the murdered Jews, I wondered how might we, with equivalent impact, remember the disappearance of species? Just by referring to them as 'species', we distance ourselves with a scientific term. These exhibits bring us so close to ordinary people, with their ordinary lives just like our own. Can we remember just as vividly that all living beings, including ourselves, evolved from single-celled organisms which emerged on Earth some three and a half billion years ago? Can we remember that our hands, capable of expressing both horrific violence and tender love, were once flippers? That we are not ontologically distinct from other creatures, not even the pinnacle of evolution, but part of what Alfred Russel Wallace called the 'grand organic whole', the community of beings on earth?

A poet friend of mine, inspired by the countercultural Feral Theatre company[2], organized a Funeral for Extinct Species as part of the annual festival in the market town where she lives[3]. In a procession through the streets, pall-bearers carried a coffin covered in images of extinct species, while children called out their names – Glaucous Macaw, Pyrenean Ibex, Javanese Lapwing, Ratas Island Lizard, Bush Wren, Downy Hemp Nettle, Moa, Zanzibar Leopard, Vine Raiatea Tree Snail, Bachmann's Warbler, Norfolk Damselfly, Red-bellied Gracile Mouse Opossum, Grand Cayman Thrush, Yangtze River Dolphin… How might we bring such memorial ceremonies more into the mainstream?

Later that day we visited the Jewish Museum, a self-consciously postmodern building by the celebrated architect Daniel Libeskind. The exterior is cold, dull-grey metal, sharply cornered, with openings like random slashes. Seemingly chaotic, it is actually built on the plan of a fragmented Star of David. In the basement, three sloping corridors represent three Paths: of Suffering, of Exile, of the Future. It is intended to be disturbing, although I found its symbolism contrived. It lacks the simple dignity of the Memorial. Nevertheless, some aspects are effective. Along the Path of Suffering, exhibits of jewellery and personal items abandoned by individuals are a startling confrontation with the sudden ways in which lives were snuffed out. This Path ends abruptly in the Holocaust Tower, a claustrophobic triangular space that cuts vertically through the building; cold, bare concrete walls dimly lit by a narrow slit of daylight high above, the sound of traffic outside rumbling weirdly.

The Holocaust Tower is one of several empty spaces Libeskind designed within the museum, intended to embody absence. While the Holocaust Tower rises

vertically, the Holocaust Void slices horizontally through the entire building. Here, in Menashe Kadishman's art installation 'Shalechet' (Fallen Leaves) the floor is piled deep with thousands of masks of human faces, cut with a welding torch from thick metal plate. The masks are assorted sizes and crudely executed, showing just eyes and mouth, yet each has a different expression. They disappear into the void, conveying despair, torment, resignation.

The faces obviously represent Jewish people on their way to gas chambers or piled in slaughter pits. Yet I also saw extinct species and damaged ecosystems, starting way back in the prehistoric past with early systematic hunting and the beginnings of agriculture, then accelerating wildly in present time. Is it illegitimate to draw this parallel? I certainly had some strong discomfort in doing so. But the images arose spontaneously and undeniably at the moment I encountered the installation: bleached coral reefs, bloody whaling, trawlers so large they suck up entire schools of fish, badgers shot and songbirds disappearing.

There were few people in the narrow space in front of the installation, but one woman caught my attention. Short, with light ginger hair, she was silent in the shadows, eyes downcast, listening to the audio tour guide. After a while, she took off the headphones and started to walk over the masks, slowly, as if in deep meditation. They shifted under her feet, clanking slightly. She was unstable, had to tread carefully, from time to time swaying a little and holding arms away from her body to keep her balance. I was shocked: one doesn't walk on art. Then I guessed the audio guide must have prompted her to do so and I watched, fascinated. She walked the length of the space with great dignity, shadowing into the gloom at the far end.

As she started her return, more people arrived, crowding the space in front of the masks. Immediately, they started to take photographs of her. One large young man elbowed his way directly in front of me, blocking my view, contorting his body to frame his pictures. Another crouched to capture images of the masks in the foreground of his shot. They made no noise except for the electronic beep of their cameras, but the quiet drama of the earlier moment was shattered by the busyness of their movements. The woman continued to walk over the masks, head down, apparently totally involved in her experience.

I was at first irritated with these young men, as I had been with the children jumping on the Memorial stelae. Then I realized that the onlookers' response is always part of the installation. How difficult it is to quietly take in this representation of suffering. How easily we humans seek to objectify and capture. How quickly we create drama out of tragedy. Even I discreetly sneaked a couple of photographs before I left.

Leaving the Void, we followed the Path of the Future along a comprehensive display of Jewish culture through the ages: fascinating, important, and at the same time overwhelming – too much for the tired feet of this tourist. My companions and I found our way out of Libeskind's labyrinth to the museum restaurant, where we had a really nice kosher lunch – chicken soup, pastrami on rye, pickled gerkins – all celebrations of traditional Jewish food. We sat in the quiet covered courtyard, resting our legs and sharing our responses to the day. When it was Barbara's turn, she told us how her mother left Berlin for Zurich in the early 1930s to marry a Swiss man – Barbara's father. If she hadn't gone, she probably wouldn't have survived, for she came from a Jewish background. Barbara talked movingly about the complex feelings and attitudes about Jewishness within her family, a muddle of guilt and shame. Berlin was opening new perspectives on her upbringing and ancestry. Once again I am touched by the unexceptional quality of the story: a Jewish woman's life is saved through a marriage that turns out in many ways to be unsatisfactory; her daughter becomes my good friend.

The personal quality of tragedy was emphasised the following day, when Elizabeth and I took the bus westward from the city to the Commonwealth War Cemetery. We were looking for my Uncle Frank's grave – my mother's younger brother – whose Lancaster bomber was shot down in a raid over Berlin in the last months of the war, just before I was born. It wasn't clear where we should get off the bus, but following Elizabeth's intuition we chose the right stop and were able to easily follow the signs – in English – along the road, through a wrought-iron gate, into a tree-lined glade and under a stone arch into the cemetery. It was quiet, the trees blanketing the traffic noise. In front of us were lines and lines of simple white headstones, arranged in groups, each inscribed with name, nationality, rank, and the insignia of their regiment or squadron. Some, surprisingly few, were anonymous, just reading 'a soldier' or 'an airman' of the Second World War.

I was on the edge of tears from the moment we entered the cemetery, a sharp wetness flooding up behind my eyeballs which I knew would soon pour out. We searched for Uncle Frank's grave – we had a sketch map somewhere, but the searching itself seemed important. I examined the headstones, all with English names, and suddenly there was his name, the name of the man I never knew but which is so familiar from Armistice Day services: F. S. Whittlestone, Flight Lieutenant, DFC. I read the inscription carved into the headstone: 'Yours was the courage, laughing soldier; may ours be the fortitude' – chosen, I learned later, by the family, and so appropriate, so in character, with the stories I have heard of my Uncle Frank.

Questions poured through my mind. What was it like to die in this way? And were these his mates, buried alongside him, and also killed on the 29th of January, 1944? Did he have a girlfriend? Or indeed a boyfriend? How different might my life have been without my mother's trauma of losing a dearly loved younger brother, and if I had had another uncle?

I stood by the grave, the tears now pouring out. But why? I had known about his death all my life. My mother told me how he gave her a big hug in the middle of the street when she told him I was on the way. My sister Ann remembers how, aged nine, she opened the door to the delivery boy and took the telegram which told the family he was missing, presumed killed; how my grandmother howled when she read it. I know I carry the middle name Whittlestone because the possibility of a continued male line stopped with his death. I have sometimes resented, and rejected, the idea that I was in some sense a

‘replacement’ for him.

Once my tears had slowed and I felt I could speak, I tried to phone my sister in England, to share the experience with her in some way. She is nine years older than me, and had told me how she remembered watching his long fingers move over the keyboard as he played the piano in our grandmother’s sitting room. But Ann wasn’t at home. I was reluctant to leave a message on her answerphone, but after calling several times I did so, getting choked up with tears again in the middle of speaking.

Elizabeth was weeping too, distressed by the loss of all these young men who could have been our sons – Frank was thirty-four when he was killed, but many were nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. We sat together on a cold stone bench, looking over the graves, talking about it all. These Commonwealth War Cemeteries were established soon after the war. Even though Frank and his colleagues were killed tumbling from the sky, their relations knew they were here and could find the graves if they wished – I know my family were too upset to do so. I too could have come here long ago.

But for many Jewish people, this choice was not available. Their relatives’ graves are pits into which they were piled after shootings, or are completely unknown and unmarked after gassing and burning. So the remembrance of the Holocaust, the recovering of individual names, and acknowledging the way European Jewish culture as a whole was destroyed, is an essential act of confronting the past and marking their humanity, both individually and collectively.

Yet we have not yet found a way to similarly acknowledge and mourn the destruction of other species and whole ecosystems. For the ecological crisis is not simply death: the disappearance of species, the destruction of ecosystems, the disruption of the great cycles of the planet, are disruptions of the process of life itself. They are a permanent loss of evolutionary complexity, permanent endings of patterns of being. Gorilla, gibbon, sand gazelle, swamp deer, musk deer, cheetah, chinchilla, Asian elephant, African elephant …

I vividly remember as a child hearing the cuckoo calling in spring on Wandsworth Common in London. We used to hear them where I live now in Bath. But no longer, not for several years now. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reports that many English people now go for years without hearing a cuckoo call – something inconceivable thirty or forty years ago. Recent research reports that the cuckoo is in decline, on the way to extinction. Somewhere on their migration between England and West Africa they are just disappearing. Yet in some ways their disappearance goes unnoticed: I heard Sarah Walker, presenting ‘Classical Collection’ on BBC Radio 3, cheerfully remark that Delius’ ‘On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring’ is the herald of life bursting forth again in springtime. No longer so, I am afraid.

At the time of my visit to Berlin I was reading reports of the fight by environmentalists to prevent building of the Keystone pipeline which would support exploitation of Canadian tar sands – the second largest pool of carbon in the world. Leading NASA climate scientist James Hansen said that if these tar sands are exploited, the consequent carbon dioxide emissions mean it’s ‘essentially “game over” for the climate.’[4] An International Energy Authority report caught my eye, which argued that if fossil-fuelled power stations, energy-guzzling factories and inefficient buildings continued to be built, emitting carbon dioxide for decades to come, we would within five years be ‘locked in’ to runaway climate change.[5] I saw that a review of all the available evidence at the University of California at Berkeley, drawing on more than a billion temperature records, confirmed that the average global land temperature has risen by around 1 °C since the mid-1950s.[6] In human terms, the destabilization of climate and the degradation of ecosystems has far-reaching consequences through extreme weather, floods, drought, and desertification, causing enormous suffering. And that is setting aside the moral and aesthetic dimensions of the ecological tragedy, the loss of so much beauty, wonder and diversity.

Human actions are destroying the capacity of the biosphere to regulate itself. Yet we refuse, individually and collectively, to accept the consequences of our actions, just as governments during and since the Holocaust have stood by during the genocide of other peoples.

It feels shocking, and yes, illegitimate to write this. The western world has gradually learned to face the horror and tragedy of the Holocaust. The memorials and museums in Berlin and elsewhere are important reminders. So I feel as if I am transgressing a taboo as I contextualize it in this manner. Yet contextualize it we must – without letting go of its unique horror – else we will allow ourselves to be fixated on the historical event, even self-congratulatory that at last we are facing up to it, to the detriment of our recognition of atrocities inflicted in the present.

Maybe we are learning to face up to human horrors. Many of us are troubled by oppression and violence round the world. We are beginning to confront the terrible abuses committed in colonial times. From time to time, appalling violence against women and children in our own country grasps public attention. The conviction of (some of) the murderers of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence suggests that our culture may be a little less institutionally racist

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than it was. And maybe Steven Pinker is correct, that over historical time we humans have learned to live with each other less violently.[7] But what we seem incapable of facing up to is the violence that human civilization is doing to the more-than-human world. We still don't notice. The casual racist language that was commonplace only a few decades ago may no longer acceptable, but people still talk unselfconciousnessly about flying halfway around the world 'because I need some sun'.

The tragedy of the ecological crisis is that, although it effects us intimately and immediately, it seems impossible to fully encompass. How can we begin to fathom the destruction of the world out of which we were born, and which holds the future of the life of our species? Tears come far more easily at my Uncle Frank's grave than for the disappearance of the cuckoo. President Obama can grieve publicly for the loss of children in school shootings, but cannot address the far greater threat to children through climate change and environmental degradation. And we are losing all the children, the children of the more-than-human as well as the human world. The Holocaust Memorial is effective because it offers a symbolic form through which our consciousness can grasp the whole. Maybe this what we need for the ecological crisis.

Some such symbols are being created: the Mass Extinction Memorial Observatory, a monument to all species of animals and plants that have become extinct in modern times, on the Portland Peninsula in Dorset, England, in a symbolic position overlooking the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.[8] Feral Theatre continues to create public performances which draw attention to the loss of species, most recently by designating November 30 as 'Species Remembrance Day'.[9] These are important initiatives, but they are outside the mainstream. Will they ever carry the stark symbolism, the cultural and institutional power of the Holocaust Memorial or the Commonwealth War Cemetery?

What would it take to build a memorial to lost species and destroyed ecosystems in the heart of Berlin, or Paris, or London, or Washington? What images might we draw in the biography of species that are equivalent to the last messages, the personal possessions, the roll call of individuals? What political commitment, artistic and creative skill might it take to evoke a sense of that tragedy in the way the Holocaust Memorial evokes the tragedy of the Jewish people?

[1] *Guardian*, November 17, 2011. 'It's Official: it's not easy being green.' http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/nov/16/amphibians-terrifying-extinction-threat?INTCMP=SRCH
[2] http://feraltheatre.co.uk/
[3] Moore, H. (2013). The Web of Life Community Art Project. In P. Reason & M. Newman (Eds.), *Stories of the Great Turning*. Bristol: Vala Publications.
[4] http://www.thenation.com/article/163020/lessons-central-cell-block
[5] http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/nov/09/fossil-fuel-infrastructure-climate-change?INTCMP=SRCH
[6] http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/oct/20/global-warming-study-climate-sceptics?INTCMP=SRCH
[7] Pinker, S. (2003) *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature.* New York: Penguin Science Press
[8] http://www.memoproject.org/
[9] http://feraltheatre.co.uk/species-remembrance-2013/

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