

Baby's First Holocaust Memorial: Taking My Daughter to the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

Bringing my daughter to visit the memorial raised a host of issues about Jews, parenting, and memory that I had not expected.

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It's not exactly where one would think of taking his 18-month-old daughter. I'm doing work from Berlin for a week and am here with the whole family, which means that when I'm not working, I am spending time with family seeing the city. My daughter and I had the afternoon to ourselves, and I had wanted to see the relatively new memorial built by the city of Berlin to commemorate the "murdered Jews of Europe," the official group of people being memorialized. So off we went for baby's first visit to a Holocaust memorial.

Now mind you, I do not believe in teaching children about the Holocaust too early, especially Jewish children for whom anti-semitism and the Holocaust form a part of their forming self-identities. I prefer a more life- and culture-affirming Jewish identity than one based on the "they're out to get us" model that puts the Holocaust at the center. However, at eighteen months, my daughter does not have the cognitive ability to understand that she was at a Holocaust memorial. But bringing my daughter to visit the memorial raised a host of issues about Jews, parenting, and memory that I had not expected.

The memorial occupies a huge swath of land right in the center of the city, just south of the Brandenburg Gate, next to the British and Russian embassies, and on the infamous ground of the Hitler's Reich Chancellery. It is also located at the intersection of Hannah Arendt Street and Cora Berliner Street, two female German Jewish intellectuals, whose names subtly stand sentinel over the memorial. When approaching, one sees a vast field of stone pillars that undulate in a wave-like formation. The pillars start at each corner of the square plot of land at about ankle height (8"), and at the center soar over the visitor's head (16'). I was the only person pushing a stroller through the memorial, and the wheels made a rhythmic clicking sound along the stone. Every time I pushed the stroller, the memorial silence was broken. Well, there were also the sounds of visitors' voices that punctuated the silence, but after entering into the memorial, as the pillars grow in height, eventually, the presence of others disappears. If one stands still, one can feel alone.

My daughter was enjoying herself tremendously. Her favorite game was to touch each stone pillar as we passed by. I had to stop and allow her to rub her tiny hand on the perfectly smooth, cool stone. Despite her protestations to the contrary, I decided that we would not touch all 2711 pillars. But there was something moving about an eighteen-

month old's engagement with the memorial. She has no sense of time and space, of history and memory. No ghosts haunt her when she visits Berlin, let alone the Holocaust memorial. For her, the memorial was about perfectly smooth stone that was fun to rub, and it was about recognizing that each stone was special enough to warrant its own personalized touch. Only my rational parenting voice decided that 50 pillars touched was enough. She would have gone on for hours.

The memorial sits on top of a documentation center, a small but hard-working Holocaust museum that gives content and context to the stone pillars above. After making our way through security, my daughter and I went through the exhibit. The rooms are very dimly lit and start off with simple explanatory text panels about the murder of European Jewry. Each panel was accompanied by graphic photographs of the Holocaust, most taken by the Germans themselves. My daughter did not have the smooth stones to entertain her and instead wanted to run around. I let her down until she started going up to visitors and then I picked her up, and we repeated this little routine as we moved from room to room. I probably should have just taken her out and gone home, leaving the others in the museum in silence. The occasional dirty look from a visitor suggested as much, but the periodic smile someone flashed at her made me feel like I had permission to stay.

And as she did with the stone, my daughter showed me a different way of experiencing the memorial. Although she was bored by the overly narrative historical room, another room has a floor covered with about 20 glowing glass panels, each with an original document from a Holocaust victim, a photograph of the person who wrote it, and the text translated into German and English. The glass is illuminated from underneath lending a hallowed glow to the document and the face of the victim. Most visitors moved silently from one face to another and left the room. My daughter was mesmerized by the glowing glass, the faces, and the texts, each of which was in a different language and therefore a different script. She stared at one face for at least four minutes, touching it, touching the letter accompanying the photograph, and occasionally babbling. I worried that she was bothering people, but no one complained (and trust me, German memorial goers would have complained). Instead, people were watching her act out all of our own suppressed desires--to touch, to connect, to feel, in a very tactile way, memory and loss. After leaving the haunting faces, I decided it was time for us to go after she started pounding on a computer terminal used to look up relatives in Yad Vashem's Holocaust victim registry.

I'm constantly figuring out what parenting in public is supposed to look like. It's a challenge trying to meet the needs of your child, yourself, and everyone around you, and rarely do parents get it exactly right. I'm sure there were people in the memorial who thought I was a heathen for allowing her into the memorial and others who thought that every time I picked her up, I was suppressing her creative impulses. I thought I had struck a nice balance between meeting my daughter's desire to experience things in her way and everyone else's need to experience in his.

To be honest, it's a little easier for dads with children than for moms, because, frankly, most people think dads are bumbling fools who have no clue what they're doing. We get more leeway and more help and generally don't hear that voice of judgment that often greets mothers whose children are not "good" (i.e. quiet and under control) in public.

This latitude granted to fathers is generally true, although in Germany, there is more of an emphasis on abiding by rules of public behavior. And it's at moments when I see the enforcement of rules at the expense of reasonable behavior that I hear those voices in my head unfairly condemning Germans. "See, these are people who follow rules instead of honoring people..." I stop myself from going any further, but it's nonetheless something that nags me every time I'm in Germany, and I suspect many Jews raised in post-Holocaust America have a similar voice. As an example, in Germany people don't cross the street against the light, although every time I have done so, I have seen someone who had been waiting at an endless red light with no car in sight follow me into the road. "See, they always follow the leader...doh...must stop that voice."

I got a taste of the importance of rules after leaving the memorial. I decided that we would take the bus home. It was a Sunday afternoon in the heart of the city and the bus was crowded. We boarded and made our way to the middle where there is an area for wheelchairs and strollers, one of those moments when the riddle of the sphinx (what walks on fours in the morning, twos at noon, and threes at night) is most obviously manifested. The specially designated area was packed with people. Instead of pushing them out of the way, which is what I was legally entitled to do, I maneuvered the stroller to leave a path for people to pass and sat down. People exited and boarded without problem...that is, until the dragon lady came down the aisle.

The bus was now only half full and there was plenty of room to move around, but the stroller area was now empty of passengers, and the law says that I should have relocated to that area, a law I of course did not know about, nor frankly cared about. So the dragon lady decided to let me know. She made her way down the aisle and made a grand gesture of having to walk all the way around this HUGE stroller that impeded her direct forward motion. It's a small umbrella stroller but from the look on her face, one would have assumed that I parked a semi in front of her. And then dragon lady laid into me, "How dare you just park your stroller here? It's dangerous, and there is a special place for strollers. Young people these days..." (Well, at least I'm still a 'young person,' I thought. The skin cream must be working.) I explained to her that the area had been packed when I boarded and thought it would be more inconvenient to make people move in order for me to relocate, but she was having none of it. "You rude young people." By this point, I was seething and the "Germans are rule bound at the expense of rationality" voices came back.

And then, like knights in shining armor, an elderly couple sitting behind me started yelling too, but happily, not at me, but at the dragon lady: "How dare you yell at this young man. The bus was full, and the law doesn't stay what you think it says and blah, blah, blah." The three of them went at it for our entire ride home, as I sat there smirking a devil's grin that dragon lady got put in her place. I heard phrases like "Paragraph One of the Civil Code" and "Look how we raise our kids today." (People, I'm a thirty-five year old dad, but never mind.) Finally, as I stood up to take my daughter off the bus after visiting the Holocaust memorial, "you know, dragon lady, when your people killed my people," I wanted to scream at her. Instead, I calmly asked dragon lady if I would be receiving an apology to which she replied with an eye roll and a head turn. I thanked the other couple profusely for defending me and got off the bus.

For me, the adventure was about baby's first visit to a Holocaust memorial, and one in Berlin at that. It was about memory and history and about complicated feelings and emotions about being in this place. It was also about being confused for a young person, which is always fun. For my daughter, it was about smooth stones, pretty lights, and a fun bouncy bus ride with lots of people's legs to stare at, on which she unwittingly caused a near riot to break out between a nasty dragon lady and a sweet elderly German couple.