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Temma F. Berg
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Beginning with Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" and the recent completion of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers on the University of Virginia campus, this essay explores the current monuments controversy by focusing on four Viennese monuments which have much to tell us about how new memorials might contextualize and reframe history. The first Viennese monument, a celebration of a series of fifteenth-century pogroms, was built into the wall of a house opposite the Judenplatz, a square in the center of what was once a thriving Jewish community. Four hundred years later, from 1998 to 2008, three additional memorials were built to emphasize the horror of the Viennese pogrom and others like it. The article ends with a brief mention of a 1955 rememorial in a cathedral in Lincoln, England to address the wrongs perpetrated in 1255 when Jews were accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy named Hugh. New monuments talk back to old and bear witness to people's changing awareness of the significance of past horrors.

Keywords

U. S. Monuments Controversy, Viennese Memorials, Rememory, Transhistorical memorials, Slavery, Anti-Semitism

Disciplines

European History | Jewish Studies | United States History

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Temma Berg
Professor Emerita of English, Judaic Studies, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Gettysburg College

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“ . . . Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 35-36

In 2010, students at University of Virginia organized to protest the absence of any attention to the enslaved people who helped build the university. In 2013, a university commission was formed. A national search ensued to find the best design for a memorial and the Boston-based architectural firm of Höweler and Yoon won. Mabel O. Wilson, a UVA alum and Columbia University professor focused on architecture and race; Frank Dukes, a distinguished fellow at UVA; and Charlottesville landscape architect Gregg Bleam, along with UVA faculty, students, and members of the surrounding community, helped design and build the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers. Now complete, it awaits official dedication which was postponed due to Covid-19. But it has already become an important site for healing. Scores of white-coated health-care workers knelt there in early June to honor George Floyd. And descendants have visited — and touched the names of their ancestors.¹

Many have protested against and advocated for removal of Confederate monuments. Some have been removed but the list of those remaining is very long. According to a Southern Poverty Law Center study “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” which came out in 2019, 780 monuments remain; 103 K-12 schools and three colleges are still named for Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, or other Confederate leaders; 80 counties and cities are named for Confederates; and there are 9 observed state holidays in five states. And this list does not include the thousands of monuments, markers, names or other tributes located on or within battlefields, museums, cemeteries “or other places that are largely historical in nature.”² For example, according to the

statistics on the Gettysburg National Military Park website, there are 1,328 monuments, memorials, markers, and plaques, about a quarter of which honor southern states and men, on the Gettysburg battlefields. It is indeed a daunting task to destroy all the monuments in all the parks and, I begin to suspect, a needless task. Better to surround older monuments with newer, more nuanced ones like the UVA Monument to Enslaved Laborers.

As a citizen of Gettysburg, I enjoy the park. I have always viewed it as a tribute to the Civil War, the war that ended slavery. I know there are other views of what the war was about and I agree that such monuments reinforce systemic racism. But the Civil War was an important watershed in American history and the monuments can also be seen as testament to the importance of that war and to the importance of ending slavery. But I also agree that we need to do more; we need to add more history to the Battle of Gettysburg and to all the other battles and monuments that speak to the lengths some people will go to preserve and control the narrative of a terrible past. One story cannot own history. The Civil War is many stories. And our monuments are part of that story.

Rather than spend money and time destroying old monuments, there are alternative paths we could take. As a result of reading Frank Tallis's novel *Vienna Secrets*, I learned about an atrocious monument in Vienna, which commemorates a devastating series of pogroms and is described as bearing the following words: "By baptism in the River Jordan bodies are cleansed from disease and evil, so all secret sinfulness takes flight. Thus, the flame rising furiously through the whole city in 1421 purged the terrible crime of the Hebrew dogs. As the world was once purged by the flood, so this time it was purged by fire." I was shocked that such a monument once existed in Vienna. I wanted to know more. Thanks to the internet and Professor Karl Vocelka, Retired Professor of History at the University of Vienna, I learned not only that the monument still exists, but I also learned that more recent monuments have been erected. Ultimately my conviction was supported: it is better to surround outrageous memorials with other more complex memorials and plaques. Studying the history of memorials about shameful events ensures that we not only do not forget what happened in the past but we also do not lose

the evidence that such terrible events were supported and glorified by ordinary citizens like us. New memorials can talk back to the old and reframe their stories.

The Viennese monuments provide a valuable lesson for all of us. But first we need to know what happened in fifteenth-century Vienna.

From Fall 1420 to Spring 1421, there was a series of pogroms. Jews were imprisoned, tortured, killed, enslaved, driven out, and baptized against their will. In 1421, a remnant of Jews took refuge in a synagogue located at Vienna's Judenplatz, the heart of a once thriving Jewish community. According to a contemporary chronicle entitled "Wiener Geserah" (or, "Viennese Decree"), after a three-day siege, the remaining Jews chose to die as martyrs, a form of "Kiddush Hashem" (or, "Sanctifying the name of God by being holy"), by burning themselves alive in the synagogue rather than converting.³

The exact phrasing of the memorial glorifying these pogroms is even more appalling than the shorter text cited above: "The bodies of the Jordan were cleansed of dirt and evil by the floods of the Jordan River. Everything that is hidden and sinful gives way. In 1421 the flame of hatred rose, ravaged the whole city and atoned for the terrible crimes of the Hebrew dogs. The world was cleansed by the deluge, all the punishments served by the rage of the fire."⁴ What makes this memorial even more appalling is the placement of the inscription below a relief of the baptism of Jesus.

(Figure 1)



Figure 1

I knew there had been many pogroms throughout medieval Europe but never heard of a monument in praise of such horrors. I wanted to know more. I learned that the fifteenth-century monument is still in its original place, but today, five hundred and fifty years later, three newer, and more complex memorials are nearby to emphasize, contextualize, and confirm the horror of the pogrom.

Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor, led the effort to build the second memorial, which was completed in 1998. Designed by Rachel Whiteread, it was at first untitled but soon named “The Nameless Library.” (Figure 2) At the base of the memorial, two texts centered around a Star of



Figure 2

David point out the crime of the Holocaust and remember the 65,000 Austrian victims of the Nazis. Whiteread requested that the memorial not be given an anti-graffiti coating: “If someone sprays a swastika on it we can try to scrub it off,” she explained, “but a few daubed swastikas would really make people think about what’s happening in their society.”

The third memorial was erected by the Vienna Archdiocese after construction of “The Nameless Library” uncovered under the modern Judenplatz parts of the old synagogue within which the 1421 mass suicide had occurred. To build above these remains seemed sacrilege. After much discussion, the Catholic Church mounted a plaque nearby which bears a very different and detailed account of the Geserah and links it to Nazism and enduring Christian anti-Semitism: ““The Kiddush HaSchem’ means ‘Sanctification of God’. With this awareness, Jews of Vienna in the synagogue here at Judenplatz — the center of a significant Jewish community — chose a voluntary death at the time of the Persecution of 1420/21 in order to escape the



Figure 3

forced baptism they feared. Others, about 200, were burned alive at a stake in Erdberg. Christian preachers of that time spread superstitious anti-Jewish ideas and incited against the Jews and

their faith. Under this influence, Christians in Vienna accepted the crime without resistance, they approved it and became perpetrators. In this way, the destruction of the Viennese ‘Jewish city’ in 1421 was already a threatening omen for the events that took place in all of Europe at the time of the National Socialist [Nazi] tyranny. Medieval popes turned without success against this anti-Jewish superstition, and individual believers fought in vain against the racial hatred of the National Socialists. They were too few. Today, Christianity regrets its share in responsibility for the persecution of Jews and realizes its failure. For Christians today, ‘Sanctification of God’ can only mean asking for forgiveness and hoping in God’s saving action.”⁵ (Figure 3)

This third memorial surprised me. Memorials have seldom expressed guilt so openly or cast it so widely. Although the words “structural anti-Semitism” are not present, they are implied in the linking of a fifteenth-century pogrom to twentieth-century Nazi tyranny and the taking of Christianity to task for sharing in the persecution of the Jews across hundreds of years. The second and third memorials might have been made possible by a 1991 speech in parliament by Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky, who held Austrian citizens (not the state as such) partially responsible for Nazi crimes. His brave speech challenged the prevailing assumption that Austria was the victim of a Nazi invasion.⁶

Chancellor Vranitzky’s speech must have been powerful. It is painful to represent oneself or people like oneself as responsible for a 500-year old crime of such horrific dimensions and to liken it to more recent crimes of even more horrific dimensions. I was surprised but also awed by the memorial’s representation of the Viennese Christian community’s willingness to take responsibility for the dreadful deeds of their ancestors and to apologize. It might not have been enough for Wiesenthal, who once famously insisted that only those you have harmed have the power to forgive you for your crimes against them, but if we cannot forgive one another for even terrible and unforgivable crimes in the past, if we cannot point out the interconnections of complicity between ongoing abominations and past atrocities, how will we ever be able to change people’s understanding of the past and enable them to see what they have striven to overlook? Or willfully repress?

The fourth monument, also nearby, was unveiled relatively recently — in March 2008. Overall, it is a disappointing monument. It retreats from explanations of complicity and interconnection to place the blame squarely on the Austrian Duke Albrecht V and on the theological faculty in Vienna: “On March 12, 1421, about 200 Jews were burned on Gänseweide, now Weißgerberlande. This persecution of the Jews was triggered by Austrian Duke Albrecht V. due



Figure 4

to alleged desecration of hosts in Enns and from the theological faculty in Vienna, which suspected the Jews of working with the Hussites. A then newly built building of the theological faculty in Vienna was built from the stones of the destroyed synagogue.” (Figure 4)

This plaque stresses the guilt of leaders who provoked — and were thus mostly responsible for — the pogrom, which, the inscription claims, was the result of accusations against the Jews (desecrating hosts and aiding the Hussites, Austria’s enemy). There is no sense of atonement and the only historical incident that is recorded on this plaque is the burning of 200 Jews. Forgotten are all the other crimes that were part of the ongoing anti-Semitism of the period, including the destruction of the Synagogue and the Jews who chose a voluntary death rather than succumb to baptism. Nor does it allude to the ordinary priests and Austrians who must have carried out the actual murdering of hundreds of people. And I found the emphasis on the theological faculty’s practical use of the stones from the destroyed synagogue very strange indeed, for it seems to me to imply that the theological faculty did not participate in the murder and mayhem around them, but only picked up the pieces. And gone is any reference to Nazi Germany.

The differences between the four monuments are great. The first emphasizes metaphoric obfuscation and glorification. The Nameless Library poignantly and simply emphasizes those murdered in the Shoah. The third presents the fullest historical account, stressing how the past inflects the present. The fourth retreats from the Catholic Church’s candid emphasis on Christian guilt in general to blame political and theological leaders in particular.

These memorials offer us a valuable lesson. History is told differently from one generation to another. Memorials bear witness to people's changing awareness of the significance of past atrocities. As we grow farther away from the actual event, we are sometimes able to assume more responsibility for what happened rather than see it as God's cleansing or reordering of a sinful world.

And sometimes the sense of guilt can grow so oppressive that we need to shift blame again.

One last example of Christian atonement in a plaque. On August 29, 1255, a Christian boy named Hugh was found dead in a well in Lincoln, England. The rumor quickly spread that his death was a ritual murder by Jews. In retaliation many Jews were murdered. Similar accusations of ritual murder followed by murderous attacks spread throughout England. Thirty-five years later, in 1290, England expelled all Jews.

Hugh of Lincoln was buried in Lincoln Cathedral, venerated as a saint, and incorporated in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale." It was not until seven hundred years later, 1955, ten years after the Holocaust ended, that the blood libel story was repudiated. The plaque which now hangs near the site of Little Hugh's original shrine reads: "Trumped-up stories of 'ritual murders' of Christian boys by Jewish communities were common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and even much later. These fictions cost many innocent Jews their lives. Lincoln had its own legend and the alleged victim was buried in the Cathedral in the year 1255./ Such stories do not redound to the credit of Christendom, and so we pray:/ Lord, forgive what we have been, amend what we are, and direct what we shall be."⁷

It took 700 years to craft a rememory of this terrible series of crimes. It is difficult to face the truths of the past; it is more pleasant to keep our myths and believe we have always been as good as we believe we are now. But that is not true of any nation. And, as Vienna proves, talking about the past can be a healing process if we listen to one another and allow the present to speak to the past and the past to speak to the present. The process was not easy in Vienna. There was much controversy and many interruptions in the work of building the Viennese monuments. It

will not be easy here. But the beauty and power of UVA’s Monument to Enslaved Laborers gives me hope that we, like the Austrians, can face the terrible truths of our past. We not only need monuments to anatomize the actions and consequences of slavery, but we also need monuments to remember the indigenous people who suffered as a consequence of what has been glorified as our Manifest Destiny. We need monuments to remember the Japanese who were interned during World War II and the Japanese citizens killed by American nuclear bombs in their own country. We need monuments to remember the Chinese laborers who built our railroads. We are a country of immigrants. We need to remember all the different peoples who have helped to build this country and make it what it is today. There are many missing pieces in the tangled fabric of our collective memory, many worlds and many histories to re-member.

Bringing back buried memories and re-membering them will free us from the past — frozen in metal and concrete — that haunts us. Hopefully all of us will learn to think differently — those who are descendants of the victims, those who are descendants of the perpetrators, those who are descendants of the “good” people who watched and did nothing, and those who are descendants of those who did something.

On September 30, 2020, the Mellon Foundation announced that it will spend \$250 million dollars over the next five years to help us all reimagine monuments. As Rabbi Hillel might urge, “If not now, when?”

Notes

¹ <https://news.virginia.edu/content/new-app-offers-virtual-tour-enslaved-african-american-history-uva>; “New App Offers Virtual Tour of Enslaved African American History at UVA” by Anne E. Bromley, UVA Today, August 13, 2020.

² “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy” compiled by the Southern Poverty Law Center, second edition © 2019.

³ “Wiener Gesera,” Encyclopaedia Judaica. © 2008 The Gale Group; <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/wiener-gesera>

⁴ I would like to thank Professor Vocolka for sending me this version of the inscription.

⁵ <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=145366>; this entry in The Historical Marker Database was originally submitted and last revised on February 13, 2020 by Andrew Ruppenstein of Sacramento, California.

⁶ Mechtild Wildrich, "The Willed and the Unwilled Monument: Judenplatz Vienna and Riegl's Denkmalpflege," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (September 2013), 395n. Again I would like to thank Professor Vocelka, who also sent me the citation for this article.

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), pp. 240-41. And "Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln." https://wiki2.org/en/Little_Saint_Hugh_of_Lincoln#CITEREFCoakleyPailin1993