

The following article appeared in the New Zealand Listener in May 2004

NEVER ENDING STORIES?

Philip Temple was in Berlin when Don Brash gave his notorious Orewa speech. Debates in Germany around the same time seemed uncomfortably close to home.

Near the Brandenburg Gate a 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' is being constructed. It covers what were once the gardens of Reich ministries and Hitler's Chancellery and, later, the no-man's land of the Berlin Wall. Across two hectares, 2700 concrete stellae are being erected, each a metre thick and 2.4 metres wide but varying greatly in height. The memorial is due to be completed next year, 60 years after the end of the Second World War, but the impression already is of a gigantic graveyard. Financed by the German government, the memorial's 'prominent location at the heart of Berlin ... signifies an official recognition of historical responsibility'.

Knowing that 2700 stellae would be a challenge to the city's demon graffiti artists, each slab is being coated with a graffiti-proof lacquer. Then it was discovered that the company making it, Degussa, had once manufactured Zyklon B gas for the murder camps.

Work stopped. Some Jewish leaders said it would be an outrage to continue with Degussa's involvement. The memorial's architect, Jewish New Yorker Peter Eisenman, flew in saying it was 'the worst case of political correctness' he had come across. The director of the memorial said that the participation of Degussa would cause some people pain but others would accept their contribution as a gesture of reconciliation.

The decision to continue with Degussa seemed connected to the €2.34 million extra it would cost to replace them. The chair of the Jewish Community of Berlin protested, but Jewish journalist Lea Rosh, one of the instigators of the project, said it was 'absurd that the building of the memorial depended on what Degussa had done'. After all, you can trip on Holocaust irony all over Berlin. If Degussa lacquer were disallowed then maybe all Volkswagen and Mercedes vehicles should be banned from passing the site.

The Degussa case could be seen as just another of the politically correct bubbles that regularly rise to the surface from the long-sunk wreck of the Third Reich. But then a bigger bubble burst and gave off a much more poisonous odour. In a Unity Day speech, the right-wing Christian Democrat MP Martin Hohmann bemoaned the constant belabouring of Germans for their Nazi past while Jews were always seen as inoffensive victims. It was time to give modern Germans a break. He produced figures which showed that Jews were disproportionately represented as activists in the Bolshevik revolution and its atrocities. The trouble with both the Nazis and the Jewish Bolsheviks, he said, was that both had stopped believing in God.

The consequent uproar was compounded when a Bundeswehr general said Hohmann had shown courage in speaking the truth. He was immediately fired by the Minister of Defence. But Hohmann fought on for another two months, refusing to retract despite relentless political and media pressure. He had support from fellow right-wing MPs and a storm of e-mail and talkback reaction. The football crowd chant 'Jetzt geht's los!' was frequently heard - 'Now let's get into them!' - referring to the state's 'Meinungsdiktatur' (dictatorship of opinion). When would Germans be free of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust? Hohmann had let a big genie out of the bottle. Christian Democrat leader Angela Merkel had no options. She demanded that Hohmann retract and apologise. He wouldn't. So, for the first time ever, a Christian Democrat MP was expelled from the parliamentary party.

For me, the cry, 'Now let's get into them!' and the idea of a government dictatorship of what people should think seemed uncomfortably close to home. In Germany, Jews are the victims of a crime so horrendous that they are virtually beyond reproach or criticism. Although Germans directly guilty of the Holocaust are fast disappearing, guilt and shame linger and are increasingly replaced by the sense of 'historical responsibility'.

In New Zealand, Maori are victims of crimes that some Maori leaders have compared to the Holocaust, and there is a climate of official opinion that regards Maori, in Treaty matters, as beyond reproach or criticism. Those non-Maori directly guilty of wrongdoing have long disappeared, but shame and even guilt linger, as well as the active expression of 'historical responsibility' in the reparations process of Treaty settlements. If past events in New Zealand are compared to the Holocaust and pakeha ancestors are depicted as the perpetrators of crimes, then it seems unsurprising that many of them have reacted to Don Brash's Orewa speech in a similar way that Germans reacted to Hohmann's.

To explore the question of 'historical responsibility' further, I asked people about the Holocaust memorial. I went to Berlin's Jewish Museum and spoke to Cilly Kugelmann, the programme director. She is the daughter of Holocaust survivors. I asked her if the memorial was both too big and too late.

She told me that its size was accidental. Originally a private initiative in the 1980s, it was supported from both sides of the Berlin Wall by such luminaries as writer Günter Grass. It gained official support and a site was agreed upon - in the wasteland behind the Wall. But no-one thought the Wall would come down so quickly.

Over the years that followed there were fierce debates in the Bundestag before a resolution of government support was passed in 1999. Kugelmann did not think it was too late: 'You have to go very far away from the original deed to be able to create an ... aesthetic memorial'. Created by people on both sides who were not involved in the original event. I pointed out that no other capital had such a memorial to the guilt of their ancestors. There is no memorial in the middle of London or Washington to the victims of slavery, for example. The difference, Kugelmann said, was that there was nothing elsewhere to compare to the organised mass murder of the Holocaust. And yet ... 'No other country has a monument to a criminal part of their own history ... This is very new ... unique ... a model for other countries' in shouldering historical responsibility.

Prompted, perhaps, by the information placards, her view was generally supported by people I spoke to at the memorial site, although older visitors seemed doubtful about its scale. I had suggested to Cilly Kugelmann that the memorial might prove a future catalyst for resentment. 'We cannot tell how it will be regarded in 50 years' time,' she said. 'Monuments are an expression of the time they are created'. Many other monuments around Berlin were now ignored or had no meaning. But more than one person at the site pointed out how good it was to have it within sight of the Brandenburg Gate and only five minutes' walk from the futuristic towers of Potsdamer Platz. The huge Holocaust memorial will never be overlooked. And while visitors agreed with the concept of 'historical responsibility', of never forgetting, the half-finished memorial is already seen as forbidding, even threatening.

One letter to the editor about the Degussa dispute likened the constant reference to German guilt to a never-ending moral mortgage. Would it ever be paid off? Former Social Democrat minister Egon Bahr replied that, while the pursuit of individual Holocaust criminals must continue, the nation must 'amnesty' itself to recover. Bahr played a major Cold War role in pursuit of disarmament and better relations between the two Germanies and with the Soviet Union. He was a soldier in the Second World War but earlier was not allowed to study music because he had a Jewish grandmother.

Bahr wrote that the past should not be forgotten: so we would always remember that present actions have future consequences. 'But we should resist everybody who tries to seduce us through moral argument, or with appeals to one's conscience, that the future should be determined by the past.' Bahr considered that after reunification, Germany had won a 'new continuity ... We should not allow this continuity to be always measured by the 12 years' of the Hitler period.

Bahr's observations seem relevant to all nations grappling with problems of 'historical responsibility'. Is New Zealand being 'seduced' into allowing the future to be determined by the past? We should never forget. But should we allow the 'continuity' of our state to be always measured by what happened in the 19th century? When will the moral (and material) mortgage be paid off?

Even Cilly Kugelmann said that, while debates - 'moral, ethical, theoretical, theological' - may continue between perpetrators and victims, 'If you accept, if you take, compensation you accept that it is over'.