

The Stolpersteine Project

Guest post by Jon Meier



I never thought I would be saying Kaddish in public, standing at a podium with a microphone in a town square in a small picturesque town in Northern Bavaria.

The occasion was the installation of Stolpersteine for my grandparents and uncle. Stolpersteine (literally 'stumble stones') are small brass plaques set in the pavement in front of the houses of Holocaust victims. It was the end of May and the town of Miltenberg had finally agreed to the installation of these commemorative stones.

It was, appropriately, a Saturday morning. A large crowd had gathered in the square, in front of a house which had belonged to my maternal grandparents. This was the house where my mother had spent the first fourteen years of her life. The house had been a shop which sold leather and leather goods. It still looks like a shop with a residence attached. In the pavement outside the house, three small square holes had been hollowed out the day before, ready to receive the plaques. One was for Rosa Moritz, my grandmother, one for Oskar, my grandfather, and one for my mother's brother Manfred. Manfred Moritz was deported from an agricultural school in north Germany where he was preparing for life in Israel. He was twenty.

Even those three hollowed out gaps were a potent symbol of loss, of the absence of a family that was once happily together, thriving in the midst of a community.

There had been a Jewish community here since the 13th century. The town, nestling on a bend on the river Main, was home to about 100 Jewish people in 1933 (out of a total population of just under 4,000). By 1938 this number was halved and by 1942 all the Jewish inhabitants had fled or been deported. My mother and her sister left separately, in 1938 and 1939. When they came to England, my mother 'Trudie' Moritz was fourteen, her sister Ilse was sixteen. They never saw their parents or brother again. The stone-laying ceremony itself was solemn and simple. There were a few speeches interspersed with music played by local schoolchildren. Other pupils from local schools read biographies of the victims which they had researched themselves. My cousin Rosemarie read Psalm 121. I said Kaddish. By now the stones were in place, cemented in by Gunter Demnig, the craftsman who has made it his mission to make the plaques and to travel round Europe six days a week installing them. Local residents who had sponsored the stones placed white roses on the new shiny brass squares. I was struck by the symbolism of mortar, reminiscent of the Pesach story and here used to cement the memories of the victims of genocide.

In a speech at a formal reception the night before, I spoke of our gratitude to the people of the town, especially to the dedicated group of individuals who had worked so

hard over the past four years to bring about this moment. The project had adopted the motto 'Against Forgetting' ('Gegen das Vergessen'). I picked up on this theme and reiterated that the event was not just a commemoration but a symbol of tolerance and mutual understanding, a lesson in friendship and peaceful co-existence. I spoke of the importance of young people in carrying forward this message.

The organisers read out a letter of support from Dr Josef Schuster, head of the Jewish cultural council in Germany. He describes the stones as small, modest mementos which have a huge impact. According to Josef Schuster, the stones help people in the painful task of confronting their past. They remind us that the victims were their neighbours who led normal lives. The brass plaques give the victims back their names, helping to counteract anonymity and to personalise tragedy. He goes on to say: 'In order to be able to see the names on the stones, we have to bend down. In the process, we bow down to these victims. We move towards them and in doing so, we pay them our respects. That is a wonderful gesture.'

My mother's cousin, Ernest Moritz, who lived in Munich, used to visit my family as a teenager in the holidays. In his memoirs, he writes movingly:

It is a melancholy thought, but really true: it has taken me a generation before I could visit Miltenberg again, without feeling deep in my heart the excruciating weight of loss for all those simple, hard-working and friendly Jewish people who were no longer there. The city was still unchanged; it remained exactly as it had been for centuries, barely touched by time: there were the red sandstone buildings, the half-timbered houses, the castle on the hill, the city walls and the towers — all this had survived the years. Only the Jews who had been there from the beginning were gone: dragged away, murdered or scattered to the four corners of the earth.

Visitors to the town will now see the three Stolpersteine commemorating my family outside the house on the south side of the square, a permanent and poignant reminder of once happy lives brutally curtailed.

