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Or-Sarua Synagogue, Vienna

Not the Holocaust Memorial

Pam Maclean

Photographed here are the excavated foundations of the Or-Sarua synagogue in Vienna. The synagogue had been one of the largest in medieval Europe and the center of a thriving Jewish community, until its destruction during the intense persecution of Jews in 1420–21. Returning from an abortive attempt to suppress a Hussite rebellion in Moravia, Duke Albrecht V took out his frustration by arresting and torturing “wealthy” Jews whom he alleged financed the Hussites. Jewish property was confiscated, and poorer Jews were placed on a rudderless boat on the Danube and left to drown en route to Hungary. Other Jews who refused to convert were burnt alive in a field outside of Vienna.

At the height of the persecution, eighty Jews, including women and children, are said to have taken refuge in the synagogue under the leadership of Rabbi Jona. After several days under siege by the local population, the rabbi set the synagogue alight, consummating a Masadaesque act of mass suicide. The ruined synagogue was demolished and its stones used to build an annex to the University of Vienna. In 1451, just thirty years after their catastrophic expulsion, Jews returned to Vienna under Habsburg protection.

I accessed the archaeological site via the basement of the “Mizrachi” house, located on the north-eastern corner of the historic Judenplatz in Vienna, where a secondary campus of the Jewish Museum of Vienna was established in 2000. Models of the synagogue and other medieval Jewish buildings are displayed in the museum, as are artifacts from the period. A video describes the main features of medieval Jewish life, but does not detail the specific circumstances of the synagogue’s destruction.

My 2005 encounter with these ruins occurred a week after I had attended a conference in Berlin on genocide, so it is hardly surprising that my subterranean viewing of its skeletal remains affected me so strongly. In the semi-darkness, the subtle lighting used to delineate the main areas of the synagogue, including the pulpit (bima), evoked a sense of loss and emptiness far more profound than I have felt in the “purpose-built” Holocaust memorials I visited previously or subsequently—hence my decision to discuss this image.
here. Initially, I expected the emotional impact of my visit would be at the forefront of this essay. However, as I started some background reading (see the bibliographic note), I found myself propelled on an unanticipated journey of reflection on the memory politics of a site whose history, spanning over six centuries, I had not understood when I was there. Hence, the following comments unpack broader issues surrounding a site where the semiotics of genocide appears overdetermined.

As already indicated, and somewhat perversely, the historical context of the synagogue’s destruction is marginal to the museum display. Although the genocidal narrative can be accessed via an interactive computer terminal (which I did not find at the time), the museum’s exhibition is primarily engaged with Jewish life in medieval Vienna, not its annihilation. Regardless, the ruins themselves spoke to me of genocide.

The archaeological excavation of the synagogue was a direct result of the project Simon Wiesenthal initiated in late 1994, with the cooperation of the Vienna city council, to construct a memorial to Austrian Jews murdered in the Holocaust. The Judenplatz was acknowledged to be the logical place for such a monument, and in summer 1995 archaeological investigations
were launched to locate the remains of the synagogue, in preparation for the memorial's installation. The site, including the *bima* still covered in ash, was far more extensive than anticipated, with implications for the location of the Holocaust memorial.

A jury of eminent architects organized an international competition to select a memorial design, and in January 1996 British sculptor Rachel Whiteread's vision of an enclosed, inaccessible, and "nameless" library, constructed out of concrete and consisting of inverted books, proved successful. The plan was to open the memorial later that year, on November 9 (the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* in 1938). Then the controversy began in earnest. The radical design itself proved polarizing on both aesthetic and political grounds. Local residents challenged the scale of the monument in the historic square, and raised other trivial objections that smacked of anti-semitism. Divisions emerged within the Jewish community itself, with some arguing that the synagogue ruins constituted a sufficient memorial to the Holocaust.

The project became so politicized that the Viennese council called for its suspension to enable a "pause for reflection." This lasted over a year, until in 1998 a compromise was finally reached among the various interest groups. The proposed site of the Holocaust monument was slightly shifted so that it would not stand above the *bima*. Approval was given to open a museum focusing on medieval Jewish life and providing access to the synagogue foundations. The Vienna city council guaranteed financial support for both projects. Six years after Wiesenthal's original proposal, the memorial and museum opened in October 2000.

Despite this compromise, Whiteread's monument is not immediately recognizable as a Holocaust memorial. Yes, the inscriptions at its base pay homage to murdered Austrian Jews and the sites of their extermination. On an intellectual level, the eternal exclusion of Jews from "the book" acts as a powerful metaphor for both their physical and cultural annihilation. The dimensions of the enclosed structure, the doors of which are permanently "locked," may be reminiscent of crematoria—but in contrast to the site of the Or-Sarua synagogue, the memorial lacks an intrinsic symbolic relationship to genocide, and this arguably undermines its commemorative function.

Whiteread's monument provoked extensive academic discussion of the issue of Holocaust memorialization. In January 1997, during the "pause," the Jewish Museum of Vienna, together with the Institute for Social Sciences, organized a symposium titled "The Stumbling Block—Monuments, Memorials, Shoah Memory." Its objective was to address issues relating to Holocaust
remembrance and the problem of post-Nazi states’ engagement with Holocaust memory. In its permanent exhibition, the Jewish Museum of Vienna had itself attempted to deal in a novel way with the problem of representing the void created by the physical destruction of the prewar world of Austrian Jewry. Forsaking the display of material objects, it mounted a series of holographs that captured a \textit{bricolage} of spectral and fleeting images from an elusive past. The efficacy of this and other memorial strategies was vigorously debated.

My personal experience of visiting the Or-Sarua synagogue suggested to me that no matter how well-intentioned, self-conscious attempts to memorialize genocide—as with the Whiteread monument or the museum’s holographs—may be destined to fail under the weight of unrealizable expectations and reliance on a metaphoric artifice that imposes memory from without. Although the ruins of the Or-Sarua synagogue might be considered an “accidental” or even “incidental” monument to the Holocaust, the synagogue’s intrinsic and multiple entanglements with Jewish catastrophe render it a paradigmatic memorial to genocide.

\textbf{Bibliographic Note}