

Art of Darkness: Berlin's Holocaust Reminder

Exhibit on Nazi Persecution of the Jews Offers a Walking Tour of History

By Rick Atkinson
Washington Post Foreign Service

BERLIN
Subtle as a punch in the face, the sign hangs from a lamppost along a busy street in central Berlin: "Jews are excluded from sports groups."

Around the corner, another lamppost with another sign: "Jews may no longer work as independent craftsmen."

And another: "Jewish authors are forbidden from all literary activities in Germany."

On virtually every block throughout the Schoenberg neighborhood of Berlin, passersby are warned of yet another prohibition imposed on non-Aryans—80 regulations in all that preclude Jewish doctors from practicing medicine, Jewish children from playing with non-Jews, Jewish smokers from buying cigarettes or cigars.

The neatly lettered signs are not evidence of a new wave of antisemitism, but rather are a stark memorial to the systematic oppression of German Jews that began in 1933 and persisted through the deportations and genocide of the 1940s. In Schoenberg, art imitates history.

The unusual project, titled "Places of Remembrance" and sponsored by the Berlin Senate at a cost of 300,000 marks (\$176,000), is intended to remind residents here that evil once was stitched in-

See REMEMBRANCE, D3, Col. 1



BY JOCKEL FINCK—ASSOCIATED PRESS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Sign from the "Places of Remembrance" project in Berlin reads: "Jewish managers can be fired without any compensation," one of the Nazi-era regulations. Says the creator: "It's intended to make people think all the time."

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REMEMBRANCE, From D1

to the daily fabric of German life. First posted on Berlin streets last summer, the controversial signs have been so effective that the artists hope to duplicate them soon—with English translations appended—and ship the replicas to Washington, where they will be displayed next fall as part of an exhibition on Holocaust art organized by the Washington Project for the Arts.

"It's intended to be a psychological work, which means something that makes people think all the time, something that makes them reflect," said artist Renata Stih, who created the Schoeneberg signs with colleague Frieder Schnock. "I wanted to do something that would be so anarchistic that it would look perfectly fine but would guarantee that no one would ever sleep the same way again after seeing it."

Details of the Washington exhibition, which will travel to Boston's Institute for Contemporary Art in early 1995, are still being hammered out, according to curator Karen Holtzman, who's handling the project for WPA. About 30 artists, including Germans, Americans, Canadians and Israelis, are expected to contribute paintings, sculptures, photographs and even videotapes that capture "responses and reflections on the Holocaust by artists who grew up after World War II," Holtzman said in a telephone interview from Washington.

Most entries will be displayed in a warehouse at Seventh and D streets NW, but Holtzman hopes the Schoeneberg street signs can be hung throughout the surrounding neighborhood "to mimic the way they did it in Berlin, in unexpected places that challenge the viewer."

Selected by a jury of Berliners as part of a public competition, the Stih-Schnock project commemorates the oppression of 16,000 Jews who once lived in the so-called Bavarian Quarter in south-central Berlin. Each aluminum sign measures 20 by 28 inches and is bolted to a lamppost 10 feet above the sidewalk. A colorful enamel picture of objects from everyday life adorns one side, and on the flip side is printed the text and date of an antisemitic regulation culled from various Nazi decrees.

Thus, a picture of a chessboard illustrates the sign declaring: "Jewish members of the Greater German Chess Association are expelled. July 9, 1933." A simple razor accompanies the decree: "Jews may no longer purchase soap and shaving cream. June 26, 1941."

The 80 signs document the progressive obliteration of the Jewish community from the spring of 1933, when Jewish judges and civil servants were dismissed from public employment, through February 1945, when Nazi officials ordered the destruction of "all files dealing with antisemitic activities" as Russian troops pressed toward the German capital. Lamppost by lamppost, inhumanity marches down the street:

"Jews in Berlin are allowed to buy food only between 4 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon. July 4, 1940."

"Jews may not use public libraries. Aug. 2, 1941."

"All Jews over the age of six must wear a yel-



BY JOCKEL FINCK—ASSOCIATED PRESS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Sign from the "Places of Remembrance" exhibit says that Jews are only allowed to use benches marked with yellow paint.

low star with the word 'Jew' on it. Sept. 1, 1941."

"Eggs are no longer sold to Jews. June 22, 1942."

"No fresh milk for Jews. July 10, 1942."

After an initial uproar—including denunciations from those who considered the project in bad taste and calls to the police from residents who thought neo-fascists had run amok—the signs have become part of the landscape in Schoeneberg. Schoolchildren on field trips amble from lamppost to lamppost with their cameras and notebooks. None of the signs has been defaced.

"This was an important step to get people to think about what happened, to get them to go back into the past," Schnock said.

Although Berlin's small Jewish community has generally supported the project, few Jews here have any illusions that the evils of a half-century ago have been eradicated. In late March, for example, a synagogue in the north German town of Luebeck was firebombed, the first such attack on a Jewish house of worship in Germany since World War II.

The attack triggered an ugly and unusually public bout of name-calling between the German far right and Jewish leaders. Ignatz Bubis, head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, accused right-wing parties of being the "spiritual arsonists" behind the firebombing. That provoked Franz Schoenhuber, leader of the extremist Republican Party and an SS veteran, to charge that "the real cause of antisemitism in Germany can be found in people like Bubis."

Equally disquieting was a nationwide opinion survey released last month that indicated that more than 20 percent of Germans harbor negative feelings toward Jews and nearly half believe antisemitism in Germany is likely to increase.

A more recent opinion poll by the Allensbach research institute reported that 43 percent of all Germans believe that Jews are now in great danger in Germany. Nearly half also believe that banning far-right political parties will help safeguard the country's Jewish communities.

For Stih and Schnock, the Schoeneberg project was an opportunity to preserve that which will soon pass from living memory. "It's been 60 years since these laws were first passed," Stih said. "That's three generations, and that's the limit of memory. Many of the people who experienced this directly are dead already. . . . But it's something that we just can't forget."