

ART, CHANGE, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN GERMANY: ETHNOGRAPHIC REFERENCE TO INDONESIA?

Vissia Ita Yulianto

Religious and Cultural Studies
Graduate School of Sanata Dharma University

Email: vissia_ita@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This project engages with the power of art in transforming historical into social memories. Specifically it examines the strengths of the installment of the Stolpersteine, the work of artist Gunter Demnig, in evoking public awareness and maintaining collective memories of the Holocaust in Germany as part of Germany's indelible past. In drawing parallels with Indonesia, this anthropological investigation in the field of social memory and history is reported for its relevance for Indonesia in coping with the ugly truth of October '65 that lie at the root of 21st century Indonesia.

Keywords: Art, Change, Collective memory, Historical memory, Holocaust, Ethnography,
Freiburg, Indonesia, Germany.

INTRODUCTION

My professor asked me to read a manuscript from an Indonesian student for correction. It discussed the Stolpersteine, an art project memorial to the individual victims of the Holocaust in Germany. I read the paper with little more than a sense of obligation to my professor and regarded the manuscript, actually, as simply another research report. When I read it my focus was completely on the quality of the writing and its ethics rather than on the content of the paper as such. In short, the 16 pages report did not move me to further explore the historiography of the Holocaust. However, this changed 3 years later in the beginning of 2012 when a German friend took me on a visit to Gengenbach, a suburb in Baden-Württemberg, a state government in the southern part of Germany. As we were strolling through the village my attention was directed to an object similar to one I had often seen in the city of Freiburg where I lived and in other places I had visited elsewhere in Germany. At that moment, it occurred to me to ask my German friend: "What is that yellow block? I often see such things elsewhere here". She replied "It is a memorial for Nazi's victims. It is called Stolpersteine¹...." My interest was now aroused and became stronger as she continued to explain further in response to my questions.

The above short story is my lived experience on my road of discovery about Stolpersteine. As a foreign visitor of Germany, it has powerfully moved me, and convinced me finally get interested to know more about the historical past of Germany and specifically about the Holocaust, matters that originally

¹ *Stolpersteine* is the plural forms of *Stolperstein*.

were hardly of any interest for me. It should make clear that this paper is my perspective as a socio-cultural anthropologist and is based on my personal observations and the interviews I conducted between 2011 to 2013 in Germany, and supplemented by further online interviews in early 2016. Using ethnographic methods, this paper aims to focus attention on the significance of the power of art and the artist in encapsulating historical memories of the mass murder of Nazi Germans in Europe for its relevance for Indonesia. Specifically, it considers the strengths of the installment of the Stolperstine, the work of an artist Gunter Demnig, in evoking public awareness and collective memories of the Holocaust, and its relevance to Indonesia's own violent past. The paper considers whether and how the concerns today's and future generations regarding the experience of mass killings or other moments in Indonesia's inglorious past, could be accommodated by adopting Germany's strategies in using art to gain knowledge of the past in order to maintain collective memory of the Holocaust.

The History of Nazi and the Holocaust

Today, Germany is a federal Republic with 16 constituent states locally known as Bundesländer. With a population of around 81 million, the country has become the economic locomotive in the European euro-zone and one of the world's strongest economies. It is a global leader in technology and many industrial sectors. The country is deeply concerned with the welfare of its citizens, maintaining a high standard of living, keenly aware of the importance of a green and friendly environment, and providing high quality social security, health care and education systems. Germany maintains an education system, which, unlike most countries, continues to be relatively free of charge. These conditions make Germany the most wanted human migration destination after the United States. However, today's glorious Germany has an inglorious moment².

This inglorious past clearly refers to the administration of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) or known as the Nazi regime which ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945. It is telling that Germany – under the National Socialist regime – filled the world with fear and horror. Espousing an ideology of extreme racism and cultural superiority, it was responsible for an era of oppression and genocide, which has become the darkest and most painful chapter in German history (Maier 1997:11)³ as well as the most atrocious genocides in our globe.

There is a big disparity between estimates of the number of the victims of this regime, but it is generally estimated that approximately 11 million people were systematically killed by the Nazis, not only those who were lived in Germany but across German-occupied land in Europe. The most brutal element of this well organized, intentional and lethal mass killing was that directed at the Jewish population of Europe, and is known die Endlösung or 'the final solution', and more commonly as the holocaust. Although perhaps less well-known in Indonesia, it should be noted that the Nazi regime murdered

² Here I am aware that before WWI, German culture was regarded as the heart of Western civilization.

³ The history of Jewish persecution goes back centuries across Europe. It should be noted that most of European countries expressed deep racism socially as well as intellectually as seen in colonialism and the intellectual justification for racial superiority.

not only the Jews (orang Yahudi), but also Romani, Gypsies, Jehova witnesses, homosexuals, handicapped, aged, sick, prisoners of war, forced laborers, camp inmates, critics, Czech, Italian, Polish, French, Ukrainian as well as Germans citizens, those regarded as hostile to the regime. This mass killing was highly organized and victims were systematically gathered from their neighborhood, deported by train to the killing centers or extermination camps. Many death camps were established, the biggest is in Nazi-occupied Poland, where 1.1 million people were gassed, shot, beaten, or died from disease and hunger (Snyder 2016).

Art works, and the Stolpersteine in response to the Holocaust

There are thousands of responses in the aftermath of the unimagined horror of the Holocaust, including from artists. It is well known that there are countless works of art created in response to the holocaust ranging from monuments, museums and sculptures to novels, paintings, films, comics, posters, , and many other forms of art works. Amongst the most well-known in Germany are Spigelmen's Maus⁴, the Berlin Holocaust Museum, and Yad Vasem – the world Holocaust remembrance --, while holocaust museums now exist in many cities around the world. Memory of this horrific period in Germany's history has given rise to so-many expressions of public remembrance that it is sometimes referred as Holocaust industry (Finkelstein 2000). Notwithstanding, they have all been are created as attempts to make sense of the senseless Holocaust tragedy. Here, I specifically discuss the work of Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine, forms part of this process within German society.

Literally meaning the 'Stumbling stones' *Demnig's Stolpersteine* were first installed in 1992 in the city of Cologne. They are brass plaques of 10-by-10 centimeters, stamped with the details of an individual victim such as their name, year of birth, and the date of deportation when victims were gathered on their way to execution. These *Stolpersteine* are placed in front of the houses where victims used to live or on the pavement in front of victims' last address of choice. In Freiburg im Breisgau, the city where I lived, I found many Stolpersteine placed in the city center, specifically in front of the Salamander and at the Bertholds Brunnen area close to the Schwabentorbrücke. I also found many of them installed at the back of the Kaufhauf shopping center around the city hall (Rathaus). A typical Stolperstein reads: Here lived, Born, Deported, Murdered. Below are visuals of Stolpersteine found in Freiburg:



Figure. 1

⁴ For further info see Doherty, Thomas. "Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust." *American Literature* 68.1 (1996): 69-84.

A Stolperstein for Else Weil located in corner of Salzstreet in Freiburg



Figure 2.

A Stolperstein for Jessy Mayer, located in Haus Salz street no.24 in Freiburg



Figure 3.

A stone for Max Liebers, located in Slaz street no.7.

The word geb or geboren (born), hier wohnte (here lived), deportiert (deported) or ermordet (murdered) or sometimes flucht in den tod (killed while trying to escape) are written on the brass stones. From the first visual above, we learn that Else Veil lived in that area where this memorial is installed and that she was born in the city of Stern in 1909, deported in 1940 to Gurs concentration camp and murdered in 1942 in Auschwitz. The second Stolpersteine informs us about Jessy Mayer who was born in 1894, escaped to Belgium in 1938, and killed in the same year while escaping.

Freiburg is in fact the first city which took the initiative to install this art work by Gunter Demnig. The idea of these installments encourages today and future Freiburgers to consciously remember each individual victim of the massacres and to remind them of the great danger of Nazi's racist and horrible nationalism⁵. Many Germans have told me: 'We feel embarrassed [...] very, very embarrassed about our dark past. ...although sometimes it is overwhelming, we continue to discuss it; we hope that present and future generations never forget this past horror so that such crimes will not happen again.'€ Such statements were uttered by many younger and older German in Freiburg and it is argued that many Germans continue to be burdened and deeply sorrowful about and remain haunted by this Nazi past. However, rather than burying the indelible shadow (Insdorf 2003), they have opted to accept

⁵ As my informants explained, today Germans are hardly confident and convenient talking about nationalism as it reminds them with Nazi's senseless nationalism.

responsibility and try to remember and teach this bitter truth of history to younger generations in an attempt to prevent similar events to occur now and at the future.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The Power of Art: transforming historical to social memory

In Germany today, citizens and visitors are constantly made aware of this German past in a variety of ways. Besides the many books written about past events⁶ there are varieties of memorials, exhibitions, TV documentaries and school textbooks, while the topic is discussed again and again in the media and public institutions, such as in Parliament. It is clear that the awareness today on the part of Germans of the dark chapter of their history is extensive.

Compared to Indonesians' awareness of past events such as the Peristiwa Madiun of 1948 or of October '65, the history of Nazi genocide is still a present concern in contemporary Germany, and in fact in all over Europe. For me, from the most, the continuous installment of Stolpersteine all over Germany is one of the most effective means of keeping that memory alive. The idea is not to overload society with gloomy shadows of a haunting past, but rather to remind them that it happened and should be accepted. The way my German friend was willing to openly answer my questions about matters I had previously thought sensitive to them, described at the opening of this paper, is but one example of how contemporary Germans cope with this today.

One most important element in the installment of Stolpersteine is that each stone stands as a memorial to the individual victim of Nazi persecution. Demnig maintains that each individual stone must be dedicated to one single victim: anonymity must be avoided. Although one may suggest a mere inscription is not sufficient, the idea of erecting these 'stumbling stones' is that every contemporary German would stumble over them and then read them – confronting in this way one individual – , and ask why, when and who, and in so doing be forced to remember what happened. Stolperstein stands alone as a well installed monument, clearly detailed and intriguing assessment of historical events in and around Germany.

The installment of Stolpersteine, then, has many strengths. It helps maintain a collective memory⁷ by successfully transmitting knowledge of the past to today's society. But not least, the presence of Stolpersteine also has the ability to powerfully trigger the curiosity of the foreigner to be further informed about an unfamiliar history of the 'Other'. It is also art, and through art historical memories of the Holocaust are transformed into contemporary social memories.

⁶ Hannah Arendt's book entitled *The Human condition* (1958) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) are just two examples of academic books discussing this topic. I read the two books in 2002 and in fact use the concepts of totalitarianism in framing my postcolonial perspective in understanding and explaining the logic of Indonesian whitening skin TV advertisement product in controlling viewers' world view of whiteness (Yulianto 2007 a). Having lack and even no background knowledge about Germany, I missed any interest about the historiography of the holocaust but mainly looking for the concept of totalitarianism.

⁷ Referring to the idea of Kansteiner Wulf, collective memory refers to the representation of the past shared by a group or community (2002:180).

What relevance has this for our own need to cope with our own dark past related to moments of human tragedy that have occurred in Indonesia? Should we seek to remember those who were victims and remember those whom the nation has tried to forget?

Since the end of the authoritarian era in 1998, Indonesia has moved to a state of relative freedom. However it has also remains in a state of some confusion with regard to the related to the events of 1965.⁸ Today we are increasingly reminded of that horror of that period with many new and striking testimonies, stories, films, facts, movements and analyses of the mass killings that have emerged from many voices, including those who were silenced and victimized. Those who were victimized face large challenges in attempting to overturn the ongoing discrimination that they and their families continue to face.

Generally, many believe that the mass killings were the result of a domestic conflict in the form of an anti-Left pogrom while, some academics see this as a planned mass murder contingent and entangled within a broader international context. Greg Poulgrain, for example, argued in 2014 that the Freeport deposit in Papua was a relevant factor, and, in reference to the Blitz telegrams of 1957, that this pogrom was backed by the CIA as part of an American plot to overthrow Sukarno (Yulianto 2015).

The various challenges to official history may come to nothing if our understanding of September 1965 and the way it is represented in the filmic propaganda 'G30-S/PKI' is maintained. In point of fact, it has become increasingly questioned. But how should we cope with new facts? Which version is the most reliable? Are we prepared to accept these new accounts and interpretations or should we bury these narratives and events and consign them to the ugly past? Or should we just move on?

Tentative ideas

In this context, the strategy of the Stolpersteine – regardless of its name or form – has great relevance for Indonesia. While different from the Holocaust, Indonesian Stolpersteine could be installed in places where mass killing and deportations occurred in relation to events of 1965. While unlike the case of the Holocaust, the perpetrator in Indonesia is far from clear, as with the Stolpersteine the emphasis is to mark the location where crimes against humanity - mass murder, enforced disappearance and deportation - occurred. This project, then, can act as the basis for a call for Indonesian artists to take this German's strategy as a reference in transforming historical events into social memories of individual victims of human rights abuse in Indonesia. In the process, they – both artist and this Stolpersteine concept— can play an important role for contemporary Indonesian society in bringing clarity to the events following the night of September 30 1965. In this way, such simple art objects could be employed as markers for stimulating and awakening a collective consciousness, for informing a new generation a historical inquiry, as in the German case, which calls for another kind of history telling.

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⁸ See Wardaya, FX Baskara Tulus 2006.

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