

Juli Székely

HEROES AFTER THE END OF THE HEROIC

COMMEMORATING SILENT HEROES IN BERLIN

Living (or) dead heroes?

Although meditations over the influence of key figures on the course of history have already been present since antiquity, the heroic imagination of Europe considerably changed in the nineteenth century when the phenomenon of hero worship got deeply interwoven with a project of nation-states.¹ As historian Maria Todorova describes, ‘the romantic enterprise first recovered a host of “authentic” folk heroes, and encouraged the exalted group identity located in the nation’ and then it ‘underwrote the romantic political vision of the powerful and passionate individual, the voluntaristic leader, the glorious sculptor of human destinies, the Great Man of history.’² Nevertheless, in the period after 1945 these great men – who traditionally functioned as historical, social and cultural models for a particular society – slowly began to appear not that great. In 1943 already Sidney Hook cautioned that ‘a democratic community must be eternally on guard’ against heroic leaders because in such a society political leadership ‘cannot arrogate to itself heroic power’.³ But after World War II the question was not simply about adjusting the accents of heroism, as Hook suggested, but about the future legitimacy of the concept itself. Authors extensively elaborated on the crises of the hero that, from the 1970s, also entailed a



Juli Székely, ‘Heroes after the end of the heroic. Commemorating silent heroes in Berlin’, in: *Studies on National Movements*, 3 (2015).

<http://snm.nise.eu/index.php/studies/article/view/0309a>

shift in scholarly focus towards victims and perpetrators.⁴ The conventional definition of the hero as the main embodiment of the nation was disputed to such an extent that in 2006 the political scientist Herfried Münkler announced that now we live in an era of a 'post-heroic' society.⁵ Echoing various 'endings' in the twentieth century, such as the presumed demise of ideology, philosophy, liberalism, art, history, politics or even the author, everything seemed to indicate that the category of the hero would be done away with too.

Parallel to the discourse of the death of the hero, however, another tendency also emerged. Various analyses appeared that, instead of revitalising the notion of the hero, tried to reinvent it in two senses. On the one hand, conceptually, scholars established a critical understanding of the hero who came to be defined as an end-product of a careful construction.⁶ On the other hand, phenomenologically, 'new heroes' also made their mass appearance.⁷ While the majority of these works discuss the presence of atypical heroes in previous periods, dominantly in the nineteenth century, another trend of the literature focuses on contemporary developments.⁸ These studies analyse the current fashion of 'pop heroes'⁹, such as superheroes, stars or celebrities¹⁰, but representatives of 'civil courage'¹¹, such as peace activists, civil right fighters, whistleblowers, fire fighters, lifesavers or political freedom fighters are also reflected on.¹² Within these frameworks, heroes are not simply reborn: while they are being (re)made in specific historical, social and cultural contexts, they are more and more (re)imagined with a human face, often mediating the message that 'you can be a hero, too'.

Amidst the theoretical positions of heroes dying or reviving, symbolic representations – that typically and customarily played an essential role in the process of inscribing the exemplarity of heroes into collective memory – are also affected. Discussing the position of heroes in the memory politics of particular cities, Berlin certainly emerges as a special case study; there is hardly another place that aimed at putting an end to the celebration of heroes so radically. In the immediate period after 1989 the debate around

the re-functioning of the 'Neue Wache' as a *Central Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny* still signalled the presence of attempts to restore a nineteenth-century nationalist image in Berlin.¹³ But after the historians' quarrel advocates of the image of the German victim – and the German hero too – have been widely accused of trying to relativise the German guilt and the memory of Holocaust. The traumatic memory of the Shoah became the negative founding myth of the new political era emphasising a self-understanding built on the image of the perpetrator. Yet, this shift from 'triumphal' to 'traumatic' remembrances did not mean the solidification of German memory politics, nor a definitive and irreversible farewell to concepts such as Germans as victims or Germans as heroes.¹⁴

As Eric Langenbacher, Bernhard Giesen, Michael Klundt, Andreas Michael, Bill Niven or Aleida Assmann emphasise, after the new millennium the topic of German victims increasingly attracted public attention.¹⁵ Yet, while memories of the carpet bombing of German cities by the Allies, the mass rape of German women by members of the Red Army and the expulsion and forced migration of Germans from Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe are indeed being discussed with a growing emphasis, the gradual reappearance of heroic narratives is largely neglected. In this paper I argue that along with the German victim, a new figure of the German hero – the so-called 'unsung' or 'silent' hero – also returned in the public imagination of Germany.

As with the topic of German victims, the topic of 'unsung' or 'silent' heroism also had its precedents long before the 2000s.¹⁶ The term itself was introduced by journalist Kurt Grossmann who in 1957 published his book *Die unbesungenen Helden (Unsung heroes)*, in which he systematised and collected the stories of everyday men who tried to help people persecuted during WWII. As Dennis Riffel recalls, Grossmann's definite aim was to establish a new concept of the hero:

[He gave] a more humanistic content to the concept of the hero through which he also detached it from the image of the war heroes

that in Germany was established in the nineteenth century and reached its peak during the Nazi period. Grossmann not only cuts off 'his' philanthropic hero from the war hero, but also from the politically motivated resistance fighters [...].¹⁷

In this sense, Grossmann's 'unsung heroes' already reflected a redefined approach of heroic imagination. Yet, while in the 1950s the book brought about various measures that recognised and appreciated unsung heroes, such as the establishment of the Berlin Jewish Community's foundation or West Berlin Senator for Internal Affairs Joachim Lipschitz's initiative honouring unsung heroes, these projects were primarily carried out with the aim of *Wiedergutmachung* (compensation), or, as Lipschitz himself stated, *Wiederherstellung* (restoration).¹⁸ After the end of Lipschitz's program in 1966 the issue of unsung heroes was largely silenced in Berlin and when they found their way back to German memory narratives after the regime change, it was already a different context in which they were approached.

Focusing on various sites of remembrance in the Berlin neighbourhood Spandauer Vorstadt, particularly on the house and courtyard of Rosenthaler Strasse 39, I demonstrate that the two, seemingly contradictory theoretical positions about the death or rebirth of heroes can be joined together, bringing about an interplay of various non-heroic and heroic imaginations in Berlin.

In the absence of heroes

Spandauer Vorstadt is a 'myth', 'a metaphysical place', a 'magic location' 'full of legends'.¹⁹ These attributes used by several authors in various texts refer to the fact that the area is in all probability one of the most multifaceted heritage sites in Berlin. Developed at the end of the seventeenth century, Spandauer Vorstadt belonged to the suburbs surrounding the medieval double-city of Berlin-Cölln, which has gradually transformed into a

fashionable place to live in, in the middle of Berlin. Simultaneously, from the seventeenth century onwards, it also emerged as a centre of Jewish life, later incorporating several representational institutions, most importantly the New Synagogue in Oranienburger Strasse. Therefore, the urban history of Spandauer Vorstadt not only functions as a document of suburban development, but it is also imbued with the traces, as well as the strong absence of the Jewish community in Berlin. These presences and voids constitute the primary material of the various sites of remembrance in the area.

Even though the deportation and mass killing of Jews was sporadically commemorated after the immediate period of WWII, the first significant memorials appeared not before the 1980s. Besides an increasing number of memorial plaques in Spandauer Vorstadt, there were three important developments in the second half of the decade: the 1985 inauguration of Will Lammert's *Memorial of Jewish Victims of Fascism*, the 1988 establishment of the *Foundation New Synagogue – Centrum Judaicum* and the 1988 competition for creating a public statue in remembrance of the *Contributions of Berlin's Jewish citizens*. While the Foundation's object of reconstructing the partly destroyed building of the New Synagogue explicitly sheds light on the connection between urban transformation and changing memory politics, the two public statues – and the differences between them – also illustrate the modification of practices of memorialisation.

The discrepancy between the visual appearances of the two works can first of all be explained by the fact that while Lammert's statue was already finished in 1957, the 1988 winning application, Karl Biedermann's *The Deserted Room* was only erected in 1996. Lammert initially designed his *Memorial of Jewish Victims of Fascism* as a figure ensemble completing the bronze sculpture *Burdened Woman* in Ravensbrück, which unambiguously connected it to the principles of an earlier aesthetic language. The *Ravensbrück National Memorial* – similar to the two other national memorials in the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany),



'Jüdische Opfer des Faschismus' (Will Lammert) | AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen – operated along the lines of a heroic and monumental narrative. Fritz Cremer's *Uprising of Prisoners* (Buchenwald), the *Memorial Obelisk* (Sachsenhausen) as well as Lammert's *Burdened Woman* (also labelled the *Pieta of Ravensbrück*) all fitted in this tradition. Nevertheless, the fact that Lammert's fifteen figures were finally left out from the Ravensbrück composition and that these same (thirteen of fifteen) figures found their place in the 1985 inaugurated public work of art in Berlin also signalled a certain kind of deviation from earlier traditions. The *Memorial of Jewish Victims of Fascism* partly detached itself from a heroic and monumental narrative, not least because of its small scale. Yet, despite its relatively late erection and its rearrangement by Mark Lammert, the classical genre of public statues was not yet questioned.

In contrast to Lammert's rather conventional figure-ensemble, Biedermann's *The Deserted Room* already spoke another language. Being the winner of the first major memorial competition held by the East Berlin municipality, Biedermann's work had a highly unconventional form, especially in comparison to GDR memorials.²⁰ Even though this divergence also resulted in the municipality's backing out of the accomplishment of the project, the united Berlin took up the issue again. Thanks to interventions by local organisations and individuals, the Senate Department for Urban Development realised the public work of art in the framework of its programme *Art in the Urban Space* in 1996. Biedermann's *The Deserted Room* consists of a room without walls and a seemingly leather-covered table with two matching chairs on a coarse parquet floor. Despite this realistic approach, the feeling of alienation is strong, and this not only due the material of bronze; the memorial gets out of balance in various senses.



'Der verlassene Raum' (Karl Biedermann) | AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Both the arrangement (the second chair is set as overturned) and dimension (the size of the furniture is slightly bigger than real life) contribute to the feeling of uneasiness. The discomfort is further strengthened by the absence of any inscriptions: the only hint is offered by Nelly Sachs' poem *O die Schornsteine* (*O the chimneys*) framing the parquet floor. Biedermann's metaphoric representation of violence and loss, therefore, evokes the various innovative methods more commonly utilised after the 1990s.

In the aftermath of the 1989 regime change two installations, Christian Boltanski's *The Missing House* (1990) and Shimon Attie's *Writing on the Wall* (1991-1996), were realised within this renewed aesthetic tradition in the area of Spandauer Vorstadt. Both were part of wider exhibition projects: while Boltanski's project participated in the exhibition *The Finiteness of Freedom*, engaging with the changing political situation in the east and west, Attie's *Writing on the Wall* formed one element in his installation series *Sites Unseen*, conducted between 1991 and 1996 in Berlin, Dresden, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Cologne and Krakow. Reflecting the medium of historical heritage as such, both events were planned as temporary interventions, yet Boltanski's *The Missing House* remained at its place even after the finissage of the exhibition.²¹

Based on the idea of Rebecca Horn, Jannis Kounellis and Heiner Müller, *The Finiteness of Freedom* invited several artists in order to give a unique response to the recent upheavals and to realise two related works in the eastern and western part of Berlin.²² These two locations, in the case of Boltanski, were set at Grosse Hamburger Strasse 15/16 (Mitte, eastern part of Berlin) and at the site of the former Glass Palace (Moabit, western part of Berlin). While the latter functioned as a documentation and research 'centre' that Boltanski called the *Museum*, the building in Mitte, more precisely the empty void of a building that was completely burnt down during WWII, served as his primary object of study. Yet, Boltanski did not only investigate the vanished architectural structure, his main interest lay in its inhabitants. Indicating the names of former tenants, their professions

and the time period of their residency, he placed white boards resembling street-plates on the firewall of the two adjacent houses. These plates explicitly showed that several tenants left the house between 1939 and 1943. Yet, as Assmann argues, 'during this period there were no good reasons to move out from a Berlin tenement. In these days, forced emigration or deportation dissolved many Berlin residential communities'.²³ While the inscriptions only hinted at the relationship between the origin of some of the tenants and the date of their moving out from the house, the Jewish background of inhabitants and their



'The Missing House'
(Christian Boltanski) |
AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

dispossessions became explicitly articulated in the files exhibited in the *Museum*. Therefore, *The Missing House*, together with *Museum* signified a radical shift in memory politics from various perspectives. First, instead of concentrating on the great man, Boltanski pulled the individual out of anonymity and placed the everyday man into the centre of attention. Second, he no longer strived for the re-presentation of a historical event, his main aim was to mark, reveal and document an authentic place of absence. In this sense, Boltanski's work also fitted in the genre of the so-called 'combimemorial' that, by integrating the elements of a memorial, an archive and an exhibition, put the emphasis on the process of research and documentation.²⁴

Similarly to Boltanski's goal, Attie wanted to show and preserve traces. *Writing on the Wall* – just like *The Missing House* – 'focus[ed] on the processes of disintegration, transience and loss'.²⁵ Attie's circa twenty-six temporary interventions consisted of 1920s and 1930s photographs of Berlin's Jewish inhabitants, projected upon the existing architectural structures located in the Scheunenviertel area of Spandauer Vorstadt. As Peter Muir recalls, Attie attempted to utilise the exact locations where the photographs were originally taken.²⁶ *Writing on the Wall* functioned as a projection of ghost images:

Each of his images in the Scheunenviertel is both a tomb (a house of the dead) and a monument; each is a place of exception to remind us of absence, but because of their cognitive capacity relative to their confrontational aspect, they can also be understood as radical negatives – that is, as the non-tomb and the non-monument, they are, in short, active counter-monuments.²⁷

This interpretation of Attie's installation as a 'counter-monument' – which, instead of characteristics as permanence, monologicity, immobility and materiality, can be described through notions such as temporality, dialogue, mobility and immateriality – further sheds light on the paradigm shift in

German memory politics, distancing itself from heroic as well as monumental narratives.²⁸

Parallel to these processes, one witnesses the spreading of stumbling stones in Berlin from 1995 onward.²⁹ According to my research, in Spandauer Vorstadt alone there are more than seventy stumbling stones installed. Gunter Demnig's idea of creating stumbling stones for commemorating individual victims of Nazism, by means of a brass plate with their name and life dates inscribed, very much correlates with the above-mentioned changing traditions. The stones reflect the trend of commemorating single persons within the framework of a renewed aesthetics. At the same time, stumbling stones also indicate how civilians become the main actor in memory politics and how memory politics can be connected to an entrepreneurial spirit: on the basis of their own research, citizens, neighbours, witnesses, school classes or communities can all initiate the installation of a stone with a fixed price of 120 Euros (data from 2012).

What is, then, the position of the house and courtyard at Rosenthaler Strasse 39 within this non-heroic context focusing primarily on the individual victims of Holocaust?

In the presence of non-heroes

The history of the construction and utilisation of the building at Rosenthaler Strasse 39 certainly functions as a mirror of the twentieth-century history of the quarter. Located between the exemplarily renovated Hackeschen Höfe on the right and the Rosenhöfe on the left, the house was originally built in 1769 and, after a series of restructurings, obtained its present structure and form in 1907. While in the 1920s the building was home to a linen factory whose logo is still visible on the façade, in 1927 it was transferred to the ownership of Dr Ernst Wachsner who started to run a canteen for needy Jews. In 1940 the Nazis confiscated the building as an act of 'aryanisation' and the house was sold to Friedrich Christian Prinz zu

Schaumburg-Lippe, former senior civil servant of the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. This was the period during which, from 1940 to 1947/1952, the first floor of the side-wing gave place to Otto Weidt's brush and broom factory classified as 'important for the war effort'.³⁰ Even though after the war there were several apartments available, during the time of socialism the building was primarily utilised for commercial reasons. After 1989, the house, whose condition was already bad enough by that time, was left abandoned, and only in 1995 was it occupied by the artist group *Dead Chickens*. Cultivating and supporting alternative and independent art, the house at Rosenthaler Strasse 39 began to function as *Schwarzenberg House* whose name, referring to Stefan Heym's similarly titled novel, further underlined the aim of creating an autonomous cultural place.³¹

The reutilisation of an abandoned space as a space of artistic production unambiguously reflected the general guidelines of the urban redevelopment plans of Spandauer Vorstadt after the regime change. While the district office of Mitte emphasised that a 'wide cultural offer contributes as a positive factor to the good image and good address of a place', suggesting that its support of cultural projects helped the renewal of the area, Berlin's former cultural senator Thomas Flierl even claimed that 'the discovery, architectural renovation and revaluation of Spandauer Vorstadt in the 1990s was first and foremost mediated through culture'.³² The symbolic importance of culture in urban political economy, outlined most illustratively by Sharon Zukin, leaves no doubt that encouraging artistic production within the area was (hoped to be) a form of urban redevelopment.³³ Thus, the artistic occupation of *Schwarzenberg House* – as the squatting of the house at Oranienburger Strasse 54-56a, later known as *Art House Tacheles*³⁴ – not only signalled the growing presence of an alternative and independent art scene in Spandauer Vorstadt, but the transformation of the neighbourhood as a dynamic and chic place.

At the same time, while *Schwarzenberg House* indeed seems to be very much in line with processes happening in Spandauer Vorstadt, its position in its

larger neighbourhood also appears special. As the fate of the *Art House Tacheles* illustrates, many subcultural projects within the ever more gentrified area of Hackescher Markt have already vanished or are endangered by disappearance. Even though *Schwarzenberg House* also faced several threats of liquidation, the building was not (yet) transmitted to the hands of an investor.³⁵ *Schwarzenberger House* – now incorporating the Eschschloraque Rümschrümp bar, an art house cinema, the Neurotitan Shop and Gallery, various art studios, and also showcasing a flourishing street art scene along with moving metal sculptures in its courtyard – still stands. Nevertheless, the reason behind the steady presence of the house is also connected to a peculiarity of Rosenthaler Strasse 39. The classicist building is not only occupied by alternative and independent art, but also by the memory of the so-called unsung or silent heroes who tried to rescue those persecuted during WWII. There is a strong and visible co-existence between two: the graffiti depicting Anne Frank corresponds exactly with the image on the poster indicating the entrance of the *Anne Frank Centre Berlin* that, along with *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* and the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre*, also operates in the building.



Anne Frank Zentrum entrance, *Rosenthaler Strasse 39* courtyard | AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Although in 1988 there was already a private initiative to erect a memorial plaque commemorating the historical significance of Rosenthaler Strasse 39, this aim got another impetus only in the new political period.³⁶ In March 1999, Museum Studies students from the University of Applied Sciences (Berlin) organised an exhibition in the back part of Otto Weidt's former brush and broom factory where there were around thirty-five people employed – mainly Jews, most of them blind, some even deaf. Elaborating on the developments between 1941 and 1943, the exhibition *Blind Trust* opened up three rooms of Weidt's factory, which remained nearly untouched during the last decades. Based on witnesses' recollections and focusing on the biographies of former employees Inge Deutschkron, Alice Licht, Hans Israelowicz and the Horn Family, students documented the various modes of Weidt's effort to protect his workers and their families from deportation.³⁷

The spatial presence of the three rooms (especially the hiding room at the back of the workshop) and the (hi)story behind them proved to be such a strong experience that the number of visitors exceeded all expectations; the exhibition, originally scheduled to last for four weeks, had to be extended. As with Sharon Macdonald, who in her paper 'Accessing audiences' extensively examined visitor books at the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, comments in the visitor books of the exhibition *Blind Trust* 'provide access to aspects of visitor meaning-construction'.³⁸ Leafing through the visitor book from 1999 suggests that the success was primarily due to the authenticity of the place. Comments like 'Authenticity is impressive' (A. M.), 'I want to praise the organisers who discovered this authentic place' (Unknown), 'The exhibition impressed me a lot in this historically authentic place' (S. E.) are all returning remarks; and in fact authenticity still plays a central role in the enthusiasm around the site.³⁹



Museum Blindenwerkstatt Otto Weidt (under: the cupboard in front of the hiding room) | AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

As attested by the explicit claim that ‘this memorial site absolutely has to be preserved’ (a remark from 2001), visitors clearly expressed their wish to have the temporary exhibition transformed into a memorial. The idea of

extending the run of the exhibition step by step was transformed into an idea of its long-term operation. While the organisers, being short in available resources, entrusted the *Anne Frank Centre Berlin* with the content-, personnel- and finance-wise supervision of the project until the end of 1999, the local government of the district Mitte, as well as the heritage departments of the Berlin Senate articulated their concern about the place with a growing emphasis. While on 5 July 1999 the house was registered as a heritage site, on the initiative of district councillor Thomas Flier, on 19 September 1999 the exhibition became a highlighted spot during the *Day of Contemporary History*, which was organised by the Senate Department of Science, Research and Culture. In the same year Dr Michael Naumann, the German government's Commissioner for Cultural and Media Affairs, suggested the permanent preservation of the memorial place by linking it institutionally to one of Berlin's memorials or museums. At this point, the process was irreversible. In 2000 the organisers of *Blind Trust* founded the *Friend's Association of Blind Trust* with Inge Deutschkron as its chair, and in 2001 *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* became connected to the *Jewish Museum of Berlin*. The memorial place was institutionally established.

Its functioning now ensured, *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* raised several questions. While the attempt of documenting and revealing the history of the workshop at an authentic site through the life story of individual people clearly fitted into the current trends of Holocaust memorials, its focus on a 'hero' who actually tried to rescue those who were persecuted seemed to represent another perspective on the image of Germany as a nation of perpetrators. At the same time, comments from the visitor book of the exhibition not only gave evidence of the demand on this 'other' side of the German history⁴⁰, but also showed a growing interest in the issue of heroism.⁴¹ In this sense, *Blind Trust* can also be understood as being constitutive and representative of the widening of Germany's memory projects.

On the level of politics, however, there was a definite aim to embed this 'other' side of the history into the well-established semantics of trauma narratives. This endeavour clearly manifested itself in the decision of annexing *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* to the *Jewish Museum*. Similarly, the site also got connected to the Jewish history of Spandauer Vorstadt: the museum organises various tours in the area and narrates the story of the workshop through the memorials and historical buildings located in the neighbourhood and connected to the memory of Holocaust. The question of how to position the memory of unsung heroes, especially in relationship to the Holocaust, also appeared in the 2001 speech of Federal President Johannes Rau. After making clear the high importance of remembering the Holocaust and the unacceptable attempts of its relativisation, he argued:

It seems to me that, just like earlier when we were too little occupied with the crimes of the Third Reich, we are still too little occupied with those who positioned themselves in opposition to these crimes. [...] They were heroes, but not in the traditional sense. Maybe, however, we often have a completely false image of heroes. Anyone who is concerned with the heroines and heroes of the Greek and Roman antiquity and early Christianity, whom we are especially familiar with, learns: they were not born for heroism. They had doubts and they also made mistakes. They had fear and sometimes they wanted to run away. [...] But in certain situations, they have overcome all their fears and doubts; they have acted decisively, thereby risking also their own lives. [...] These women and men have behaved heroically. [...] Commemorating 'unsung heroes' [...] shows us that even during the Nazi dictatorship women and men had a room for manoeuvring and had the possibility to make decisions. Their example shows that the excuse that there was nothing one could do, is not an excuse but often just a plea.⁴²

Rau's claim to realise an extended commemorative place for unsung heroes was met with a warm response. Backed up by the aforementioned purchase of the building by the Housing Association Berlin (WBM) in 2004, it was

decided to expand the memorial site. Additional rooms within *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind*, as well as an adjoining institution giving place to the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* were to be opened. Instead of Grossmann's 'unsung heroes', the memorial site utilised the journalist and survivor Deutschkron's notion of 'silent heroes' that further highlighted the change of the interpretative framework of heroism.⁴³

The position of commemorating silent heroes, however, still did not seem to be settled. In 2005, instead of the *Jewish Museum*, it was the *German Resistance Memorial Centre* that was commissioned with the planning procedures. Even if in the background there was some kind of misunderstanding with the *Jewish Museum* (as one of the historians of the



Rosenthaler Strasse 39 courtyard, billboard of Die Gedenkstätte Stille Helden | AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

Silent Heroes Memorial Centre, Dr Beate Kosmala, told me on one occasion), this change in proprietors signified a change in the place of silent heroes within the memorial culture. Instead of being understood as solely a 'Jewish' issue, the notion of silent heroes was incorporated into the wider category of German resistance fighters. This process also crowned Wolfgang Benz's comprehensive research project *Rescuing Jews in Nazi Germany 1933-45* that interpreted solidarity and help as forms of resistance.⁴⁴ This was the framework within which the memorial place of *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* was reopened in 2006 with a revised

and expanded exhibition, and within which two years later the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* was realised, as a central place of resistance.⁴⁵

Compared to the numerous authentic places dedicated to the crimes of Germans, of course, these institutions occupy only a small place within the city. As Kosmala emphasised during our meeting, there was only a limited number of helpers, so 'we have to be modest'. At the same time, funded now by the state of Berlin, by the Federal Government and by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund), *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* and *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* became rooted in German memorial culture as places of resistance to Nazism. Although from a slightly different perspective, this rootedness was reinforced by the 2002 moving in of the *Anne Frank Centre* into the *Schwarzenberg House*. Narrating the far too short life of Anne Frank together with the history of National Socialism not only reflects the issue of going underground, but the *Anne Frank Centre* further exemplifies the process through which memories become more and more focused on individuals. *Schwarzenberg House*, now incorporating *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind*, the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* and the *Anne Frank Centre*, was complete.

Entering again the courtyard of Rosenthaler Strasse 39, within the cacophony of spray messages and posters we will come across glass cases attached to the walls. Elegantly framed, they call our attention to the historical significance of the place and display information on the memorials located here. Farther off, but still in the foreground, we find a door on the left leading up to the first floor to the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* where two levels are dedicated to the rescue attempts in Germany and German-occupied territories. Based on the research findings of the *Centre for Research on Antisemitism*, the exhibition is centred on the various modalities of help, on individual histories of helpers and of those who were rescued, and on an accessible database for research. We pass through a seminar room, jointly utilised by *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind* and *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* for discussions about the notion of heroism, activities like making brushes, or meetings with Holocaust survivors – all

part of the 'educational' programmes. Leaving the seminar room on the other side, we already find ourselves in *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind*. Here, the number of visitors is measurably greater, which is – as suggested by the comments in the visitor book – in all probability due to the fact that original appliances frame the histories of Otto Weidt's successful and failed rescue attempts.⁴⁶ Going back to the courtyard, one continues to stroll between graffitis and explores the Anne Frank Centre. We go upstairs, and while listening to the excerpts from Anne Frank's famous diary, we unintentionally look out of the window facing the rear part of the courtyard. We start to gaze at tourists going in and out from the Neurotitan alternative shop and gallery until we realise with excitement that a monstrous frog sculpture started to flutter its wings.

Conclusion

Processes of memorialisations in Spandauer Vorstadt, as I have argued, simultaneously showed a strong estrangement from heroic narratives, as well as its cautious reintroduction in the form of 'silent heroes'. Even though the two imaginations represented two different theoretical positions of heroes and, ultimately, two different perspectives within German history, this differentiation has been eased by several factors. On the one hand, the current conceptual and aesthetic structure of memorial sites remembering the Jewish victims, as well as silent heroes appeared alike. Highlighting the process of research, emphasising the everyday man, and stressing the attempt of documentation created a link between the two. On the other hand, silent heroes also became incorporated into German memory politics as resistance fighters against National Socialism. In this sense, silent heroes unambiguously overtook the official role of traditional heroes as historical, social and cultural models for German society.

Nevertheless, visitor's comments, such as 'This exhibition is worthier or tells me more than the discussions about a monument' (1999) or 'No

Holocaust Memorial can evoke the horror of the disastrous history of the Nazi era as much as these rooms with their real exhibits' (1999) suggest that the memorial place of *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind*, as well as the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* can still define itself differently from memorials dedicated to the Holocaust. However, the two – on a basic and inescapable level – become bound together through the life of Otto Weidt, who in 1947, probably for the first time in Germany, proposed the construction of a memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. The reaction to the silent heroes' request was – at that time – silence.

Endnotes

¹ L.E. Grinin, 'The role of an individual in history: a reconsideration', in: *Social Evolution & History*, 9/2 (2010) 95-136.

² M. Todorova, *Bones of contention* (Budapest - New York, 1999) 487.

³ S. Hook, *The hero in history: a study in limitation and possibility* (Boston, 1965) 229.

⁴ See for example J.E. Dimsdale, *Survivors, victims, and perpetrators: essays on the Nazi Holocaust* (Washington, 1980); B. Giesen, *Triumph and trauma* (Boulder - London, 2004); B. Giesen & C. Schneider, *Tätertrauma* (Konstanz, 2004); A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München, 2006); G. Rosenthal, *The Holocaust in three generations: families of victims and perpetrators of the Nazi Regime* (Opladen, 2010).

⁵ H. Münkler, *Der Wandel des Krieges. Von der Symmetrie zur Assymetrie* (Göttingen, 2006).

⁶ See for example P. Freedman, 'Cowardice, heroism and the legendary origins of Catalonia', in: *Past & Present*, 121 (1998) 3-28; K. Verdery, *The political lives of dead bodies: reburial and postsocialist change* (New York, 1999); Todorova, *Bones of contention*; G. Šmidchens, 'National heroic narratives in the Baltics as a source for nonviolent political action', in: *Slavic Review* 66 (2007) 484-508; V. Datta, *Heroes and legends of fin-de-siècle France. Gender, politics and national identity* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁷ C. Jones, *New heroes in antiquity: from Achilles to Antinoos* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁸ See for example J. Reiling & C. Rohde, *Das 19. Jahrhundert und seine Helden: Literarische Figurationen des (Post-)Heroischen* (Bielefeld, 2011); C. MacLeod, *Heroes of invention: technology, liberalism and British identity, 1750-1914* (Cambridge - New York, 2007); G. Reichardt, *Heroen der Kunst. Standbilder und Denkmale für bildende Künstler im 19. Jahrhundert* (Köln, 2009).

⁹ R. von den Hoff, R.G. Asch, A. Aurnhammer e.a., 'Das Heroische in der neueren kulturhistorischen Forschung: Ein kritischer Bericht', in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 28/7/2015 <<http://www.hsozkult.de/searching/id/forschungsberichte-2216>> [accessed 7/10/2016].

¹⁰ See for example S. Hopkins, *Girl heroes: the new force in popular culture* (Annandale, 2002); A. Friedrich & A. Rauscher, *Superhelden zwischen Comic und Film* (München, 2007); B. Kainz, *Comic. Film. Helden: Heldenkonzepte und medienwissenschaftliche Analysen* (Vienna, 2009); S. Shimpach, *Television in transition: the life and afterlife of the narrative action hero* (Chichester - Malden, 2010).

¹¹ J. Lau, N. Bolz, H.-T. Lehmann e.a. 'Heldengedenken. Über das heroische Phantasma', in: *Merkur*, 9/10 (2009).

¹² S. Becker & A. Eagle, 'The heroism of women and men', in: *American Psychologist*, 59 (2004) 163–178; E. Goren, 'Society's use of the hero following a national trauma', in: *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 67 (2007) 37-52; S. Neiman, *Moral clarity: a guide for grown-up idealists* (Orlando, 2008); P. Zimbardo, 'Why the world needs heroes', in: *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 7 (2011) 402–407.

¹³ The building of *Neue Wache* was completed in 1818 and served to house the soldiers assigned to guard the king. However, while in 1931 it was re-functioned as a memorial to the dead of WWI, in 1960 it was transformed into a memorial to the victims of fascism and militarism. After the regime change, Chancellor Helmut Kohl's decision to redesign the memorial as a *Central Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny* was met with a loud disagreement as Kohl wanted to create a single category of victims as an expression of national unity. For more details, see B. Ladd, *The ghosts of Berlin: confronting German history in the urban landscape* (Chicago, 1998).

¹⁴ Assmann, *Der lange Schatten*; Giesen *Triumph*; Giesen & Schneider, *Tätertrauma*.

¹⁵ E. Langenbacher, 'Changing memory regimes in contemporary Germany?', in: *German Politics and Society*, 21/2 (2003) 46-68; Giesen & Schneider, *Tätertrauma*; M. Klundt, *Heldenmythos und Opfertauel* (Köln, 2004); A. Michael, 'Heroes and taboos: the expansion of memory in contemporary Germany', in: *War, Literature and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, 17/12 (2005) 58-73; B.

Niven, *Germans as victims. Remembering the past in contemporary Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2006); A. Assmann, 'Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past', in K. Tilmans, F. van Vree & J. Winter (eds.), *Performing the past. Memory, history and identity in modern Europe* (Amsterdam, 2010) 35-50.

¹⁶ As both Langenbacher and Niven argue, the topic of German victims was never completely abandoned. Yet, after the 2000s the nature of these discourses radically changed. On the one hand, instead of promoting an absolute German victimhood, these memory narratives acknowledged German guilt, too. On the other hand, while the subject of German suffering had been largely monopolised by the right wing before, left-wing intellectuals and politicians also embraced the topic now. See Langenbacher, 'Changing memory regimes'; Niven, *Germans as victims*.

¹⁷ D. Riffel, *Unbesungene Helden. Die Ehrungsinitiative des Berliner Senats 1958 bis 1966* (Berlin, 2007) 40.

¹⁸ Riffel, *Unbesungene Helden*, 57.

¹⁹ V. Hübner & C. Oehmig (eds.), *Spandauer Vorstadt in Berlin-Mitte. Ein Kunst- und Denkmalführer* (Petersberg, 2003) 11, 234; Verein Stiftung Scheunenviertel (ed.), *Das Scheunenviertel. Spuren eines verlorenen Berlins* (Berlin, 1994) 7, back cover.

²⁰ S. Endlich, 'Berlin. Einführung', in: S. Endlich, N. Goldenbogen, B. Herlemann e.a. (eds.), *Gedenkstätten für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Bonn, 1999) vol. 2, 28-35 (32).

²¹ T. Flierl, 'Kunstgeschichte im Stadtraum', in: Hübner & Oehmig, *Spandauer Vorstadt* 234-240 (237).

²² W. Herzogenrath, J. Sartorius & C. Tannert, *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* (Berlin, 1990).

²³ A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München, 2010) 377.

²⁴ B. Niven, 'From countermonument to combimemorial: developments in German memorialization', in: *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 6/1 (2013) 75-91.

²⁵ P. Muir, *Shimon Attie's Writing on the wall. History, memory, aesthetics* (Farnham, 2010) 82.

²⁶ Muir, *Shimon Attie*, 9.

²⁷ Muir, *Shimon Attie*, 88.

²⁸ J.E. Young, *At memory's edge: after-images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture* (New Haven, 2000).

²⁹ K. Harjes, 'Stumbling stones: Holocaust memorials, national identity, and democratic inclusion in Berlin', in: *German Politics & Society*, 74 (2005) 138-151; L. Apel, 'Stumbling blocks in Germany', in: *Rethinking History*, 18 (2013) 181-194.

³⁰ After the war, Weidt continued running the firm; his wife Else took over after his death in 1947. In 1952 the Provisioning Office of East Berlin City Council closed down the *Workshop for the Blind*.

³¹ In the 1948 novel, the Free Republic Schwarzenberg functioned as a utopian republic after the German capitulation in 1945, when for unclear reasons neither Americans nor the Soviet troops occupied the district Schwarzenberg in the Ore Mountains for forty-two days.

³² Bezirksamt Mitte von Berlin, *Die Sanierung der Spandauer Vorstadt* (Berlin, 2008) 31; Conrad. Flierl, 'Kunstgeschichte', 234.

³³ S. Zukin, *Loft living: culture and capital in urban change* (New Brunswick, 1989); Idem, *The cultures of cities* (Cambridge, 1995).

³⁴ Art House Tacheles was occupied in 1990 and closed in 2012.

³⁵ While after 1989 *Schwarzenberg Association* rented the building from the WBM (Housing Association Berlin) for symbolic sums, in 1997-2000 the building was transferred back to the Jewish Community who in 2003 requested the vacating of the house. Following a series of campaigns supporting *Schwarzenberg House* and several unsuccessful attempts of auctioning the building, in 2004 WBM decided to purchase the house for an amount of 2,695 million Euros that got financed partly by the federal government and partly by the German Lottery Foundation Berlin. Even though WBM guaranteed to keep the present function and physical

appearance of the building, current conditions were ensured only until 2015, when negotiations started again.

³⁶ Inge Deutschkron initiated the installation of the memorial plaque. It got inaugurated in 1993 and was replaced with a bronze memorial plaque put on the ground in 1990.

³⁷ According to Wolfgang Benz, Weidt altogether helped fifty-six Jews, from whom twenty-seven survived the war. Among these, only seven of his employees (Inge Deutschkron, Erna Haney, Hans Israelowicz, Willy Latter, Alice Licht, Herbert Sommerfeld, Simon Weiss) survived. See W. Benz (ed.), *Überleben im Dritten Reich. Juden im Untergrund und ihre Helfer* (Munich, 2003).

³⁸ S. Macdonald, 'Accessing audiences: visiting visitor books', in: *Museum and Society*, 3/3 (2005) 119-136. Throughout this paper, comments are referred to with only using the visitors' name initials.

³⁹ 'This is an essential exhibition on a historically authentic place. The walls, the floorboards, the furnaces, the court still mediate the feeling of narrowness and threat of that time. I have rarely experienced that the Nazi period [...] becomes as spontaneously present as here' (K. F., 7/3/2001); 'Behind shabby facades noble spirit in this exhibition [...]' (Unknown, 3/4/2002); 'This place with its authenticity in the heart of the new Berlin trying to obliterate the past holds the horrors of old times and makes its happenings come alive. It is very important to keep it as it is so that we can experience and learn how it really was. [...]' (I. P., 12/7/2004); 'The grief, the whispers, the dust. The distant past lies between the bricks, the floorboards, the old walls. You have to touch them to be able to understand. The smell, the old windows. They say, who saves even one life, saves the entire world [...]' (I. F., Israel, 1/1/2005); 'Beyond the great and famous and aesthetically designed museums, which are necessarily dedicated to the memory of a terrible period, these three rooms have the aura of the real and hide the history in the everyday world' (Unknown, 30/6/2005); 'Moving, authentic - there are still good people' (N. H., H. H., Israel, 11/2/2007); 'A Schindler-story. Authentic, stirring, worth of being continuously told' (T., 8/2008); 'The authenticity of this place is mediated with sensitive and vivid means. A very good exhibition. Thank you for this place' (C., Berlin, 9/2011); 'Our present time needs pause, needs memory - to recognise that people always have both: good and evil side by side. But the

exhibition, the preserved rooms, the authenticity reinforces my conviction: the good will prevail' (B. H., 10/3/2012).

⁴⁰ '[...] Very impressive & well done. Also it is important to show that individual Germans (Berliner) had the determination to try and save persecuted Jews' (J. E. D., Anne Frank House, Amsterdam, 9/7/1999); 'It is good to see and realise that it was possible to resist and to provide assistance. I think it's very important to show these examples as a positive signal for civil courage that I also wish for our present times' (Unknown, 9/9/2000); 'It is astonishing that the few non-Jewish people who were willing to risk their own lives to save Jews, have experienced and still experience so little recognition in Germany. All the more remarkable and important the issue seems to me to be' (Unknown, 11/2002); 'It is touching, important and noteworthy to find [...] such an authentic place of the history of German resistance that actually represents the "other Germany". However, as Sigmund Freud said, the voice of reason is quiet, and likewise, the rooms are quiet, the walls only whisper to us. In comparison, the image of Berlin favouring again gigantomania appears as a bugbear. The Righteous among Nations, as Otto Weidt was one of them, really deserve no more publicity? [...]' (S. K., Vienna, 15/12/2002); 'Why in Germany there is still no public or governmental memorial for these brave people? Why only in Israel? Civil courage is still worth nothing?' (Unknown, 13/2/2003); 'For me - as a child of the perpetrator generation - it is very important that there have been people such as Otto Weidt in the Nazi Germany' (D. K., 21/10/2004,).

⁴¹ 'On a barren and inconspicuous place there was a heroic rescue and assistance provided. Had there been only a few more like Weidt, then yes, the world would look different and perhaps also the face of humanity less ugly - just human. [...]' (C. P., Jerusalem, 7/7/2002); 'A wonderful story of a brave pacifists. Weidt is a human hero' (L. and Y. L., Haifa, 8/2005); 'Again and again, we admire the heroism of individuals' (two citizens of Jerusalem, 13/9/2005); 'An incredible place with the heroic story of a dear man [...]' (R. and R. K., M. T., D. and G. B., Jerusalem, 6/4/2007); '[...] Good to know that real saints existed, there is still hope for the mankind!' (Family A., Haifa, Israel, 30/7/2007); 'Otto Weidt, you were a hero!' (L. K., 23/11/2010); 'The helper/rescuer were/are true heroes - models forever!' (R. W., 8/8/2012).

⁴² J. Rau, *Rede zu Inge Deutschkron aus Anlass der Vernastaltung 'Grenzdenker'* <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Johannes-Rau/Reden/2001/03/20010311_Rede.html> [accessed 27/11/2013].

⁴³ I. Deutschkron, *Sie blieben im Schatten. Ein Denkmal für 'stille Helden'* (Berlin, 2003).

⁴⁴ The research project was led by Benz and his team at the *Centre for Research on Antisemitism* (Technical University, Berlin, 1997-2002).

⁴⁵ This point was also underlined by Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit: 'The federal government and Berlin created a central place that remembers this form of resistance against National Socialism.' K. Wowereit, *Rede des Regierenden Bürgermeisters von Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, anlässlich des Festaktes zur Eröffnung der Gedenkstätte 'Stille Helden' am 27. Oktober 2008 im Berliner Rathaus* <http://www.gedenkstaette-stille-helden.de/uploads/media/Rede_RBm_Wowereit_Stille_Helden.pdf> [accessed 30/11/2013].

⁴⁶ The official number of visitors of the *Silent Heroes Memorial Centre* went from 9000 in 2009 to 12400 in 2012. In the case of *Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind*, this number rose from 16045 in 2001 to 66707 in 2012.