Treblinka: Death Camp to Commemoration Site

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Preface:
The history of Treblinka is one that I was not familiar with before May 2019. I was fortunate enough to travel to Poland as part of a study abroad program where I was able to visit the site of the death camp, Treblinka. After visiting and learning more about its history, I knew that it was a subject I needed to study further. My visit was truly life-changing. The Treblinka memorial is successful and thought-provoking. For me personally, the lack of material at the Treblinka memorial caused my visit to be much more meaningful. I was forced to imagine where the buildings were based on the model in the education center/museum. After I imagined where the buildings were, my mind took me to a dark place of imagining what the people deported to Treblinka were going through. How did they feel in the transport trains? What were they thinking when they arrived? Did they know what their fate would be? Those are only a few of the questions that came to mind as I walked through the field of stones that comprise the memorial field. The strangest thing during my visit was the birds singing, sun shining, and the overall beautiful environment I was standing in, despite knowing the atrocities that were committed there. It is my hope that through my research, I may gain some clarity on the topic of commemoration as a whole and why Treblinka was commemorated in this specific way.
The Holocaust has long been a prolific topic of research because of the complex intertwinement of politics, society, and social opinion. The questions of “why” and “how” drive this continuing research because it is not known if society will ever fully understand the true answers to those questions. After the Holocaust ended in 1945, the question of commemoration arose. Memorials today exist not only throughout Europe, but also throughout the world. One specific type of memorial comes to mind: memorials at the death camps in Poland; specifically, Treblinka. The topic of this research is exploring the history of Treblinka; not only during the Holocaust, but also afterwards and how that site transformed from a site of mass murder to the memorial it is today. The persons responsible for commemorating the lives lost at the Treblinka death camp were tasked with an almost impossible duty: commemorate the victims in a way that is respectful, yet provocative. This helps to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust does not fade with time and continues to be discussed by society. The resulting memorial and museum leaves it to each visitor to interpret in a way they see fit; each section of the land used for the Treblinka memorial is dedicated to a specific purpose that can cause a variety of reactions from the people who travel there to remember those whose lives were cut short by the Nazis. These sections include: an education building designed to be visited prior to the memorial, large cement stones signifying the borders of the camp, cement blocks identifying the former railroad ties that led trains to Treblinka, and the large memorial itself, surrounded by thousands of shards of stones in an open field. In their utilization abstract design, the creators of the memorial at Treblinka have constructed a provocative and evocative space in which to keep the memory of the site and its victims alive. This was researched through examination of visitors’ responses, the overall history of the site, and the development and construction of the monument itself.
While the idea of a successful memorial is altogether a subjective idea, it is possible to set some guidelines by which to measure success. Success is, at its core, the idea that something was done well; a favorable or desired outcome. One way to measure success is analyzing how something is received by people. If a majority of people have a positive reaction to something being presented, it can be concluded that it is successful. For this particular research project, TripAdvisor has become a valuable source for measuring the success of the Treblinka Memorial in terms of commemoration.

Out of the over one hundred reviews left by visitors, only five people indicated that they felt it was not worth their time to visit or lacking in some way. These five people indicated that the reason they were not satisfied with their visit was due to the lack of information about the site.\textsuperscript{23} One aspect of these reviews is the dates of visiting. The five negative reviews were from visits prior to the construction and official inauguration of the Treblinka Museum and Education Center on July 1, 2018.\textsuperscript{24} The limitation of researching through these important personal accounts does prevent these five reviews from providing in-depth information. For example, would these visitors’ opinions change if they visited after the completion of the education center?

Every other review listed on the TripAdvisor page is positive. The people making the reviews have many different interpretations and thoughts after their visit. Based on the reviews, it is possible to ascertain the visitor’s level of knowledge regarding the Holocaust. One particular reviewer stated that they have been researching Treblinka for years. While this user visited prior to the construction of the education center, it is implied through the rest of their review that they

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23}“Treblinka Memorial,” TripAdvisor, accessed July 10, 2019, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g946539-d284154-Reviews-Treblinka_Memorial-Treblinka_Mazovia_Province_Central_Poland.html.
  \item \textsuperscript{24}“Upamiętnienie (Commemoration),” Muzeum Treblinka, accessed July 10, 2019, https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/informacje/upamietnienie/.
\end{itemize}
found value and had an appreciation for the site as a whole. Another reviewer noted at “Crying tears just isn't enough .... My SOUL shook and I remembered them....” Several other reviews echoed these sentiments. Part of the intention in the design of the memorial was to create a “symbolic tomb for all those who” perished in Treblinka. The fact that many reviews pointed to the act of remembering those lost indicate that the intended function of the memorial was achieved. This is a place where many go to not only learn about Treblinka, but also to pay their respects to the victims.

One other interesting aspect regarding the data on the Trip Advisor site is the different languages in which the reviews have been submitted. The politics before, during, and after the war were fraught with conflict between the Jews, Poles, and Germans. There were very few reviews in the German and Polish languages (nine reviews), accounting for only 8.4% of the total reviews on Trip Advisor. Those reviews, however, were overwhelmingly positive. One specific review stated: “Here you have to stop for a moment.” This was a common theme among reviews as well: The idea that one must stop and reflect on what happened at this site affirms the concept of connecting history with the present through commemoration.

Another site researched for reviews was Viator. Viator is a tour group connected to Trip Advisor with offerings around the world. The reviews on the Viator website were a little more difficult to sift through as they were not only reviews of the memorial itself, but also the tour guide/company itself. Even so, the reviews regarding the actual memorial were predominantly

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positive; similar to Trip Advisor. Kenny E’s review from February 2017 states “It is a very somber experience walking the grounds. Watching the video at the museum, and seeing the pictures/items there as well.” The only reviews that were negative pointed to issues with the tour pointed to the tour guide specifically rather than the memorial itself. Only one reviewer stated they did not feel that the tour was worth their time due to the lack of buildings remaining. This could certainly indicate a lack of knowledge of the site history overall and how important it is to ensure that whatever message is intended at a memorial is carried out.

In order to have a better understanding of the individual reactions these visitors experienced, it is important to have an idea of the history of that site in question. It is the hope of this researcher that it inspires others to learn more about a topic that is very quickly fading from memory. Most likely in less than 20 years, the world will only be able to learn about the Holocaust from books, as those that survived will no longer be alive to tell their stories. A multitude of events occurred leading up to the Holocaust. Along with pogroms (violent attacks generally aimed towards one demographic or ethnic group) against Jews, orders from the Nazis completely disrupted Jewish businesses and everyday life in Germany and German territories, along with other discriminatory and violent acts culminated in the murders of millions of Jews across Europe. Commemoration plays a part in keeping that history alive; not only to bring awareness to that type of societal decline, but also to pay tribute to the victims and survivors and to show how life continued after the Holocaust. To maintain focus on the objective of commemoration research: what happened at Treblinka during World War II? Having a basic

knowledge of the Treblinka death camp helps to contextualize the connection between history and commemoration that this research is in search of.

Before the horrors of the death camp Treblinka began, the penal labor camp, Treblinka I, was established. This camp was set up to house workers for a nearby quarry.\(^{31}\) The persons imprisoned in this camp included those who were, for one reason or another, deemed to be a threat to the Nazi agenda. They were farmers unwilling or unable to meet the demand for agricultural supplies and those who participated in anti-German activities; Jews and non-Jews alike. Although the final number of prisoners sent through Treblinka I was exponentially smaller than the number sent directly to their deaths in Treblinka II, the mortality rate at the labor camp still amounted to over 50%. Many prisoners were also forced to help in the construction of Treblinka II.\(^{32}\)

The construction of Treblinka II was secretive at first. According to historians Chris Webb and Michal Chocholatý, there were several theories about what the land was going to be used for, including another labor camp. Eventually, German railway workers told some of the townspeople of nearby Wółka Okrąglik that it was to be established as an extermination camp. This information was not necessarily passed along freely. It was more so due to continual probing by townspeople. Even once this information was released, a majority of people who learned that information did not believe what they had heard.\(^{33}\) The prisoners built the railway that led from Treblinka I to Treblinka II. Then, they were forced to dig pits for what would eventually become mass graves and they were forced to construct the gas chambers, which they were told would be bath houses. The only reason the workers (Jews and other Penal Camp


\(^{32}\) Webb and Chocholatý

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
prisoners) ever found out what they were constructing was from listening to what the German soldiers were saying.  

Treblinka II was opened on July 22, 1942, with the first transport arriving the following morning. In order to try to retain a sense of calm during the transport, the Nazis told the Jews they were simply being “resettled” in the east. Victims of Treblinka came from across the region: the ghettos of Łódź, Lublin, and Warsaw were some of the main departure points. When the train cars arrived at the platform, the door was thrown open, and the Jews inside were forced out as quickly as possible with the use of rifles and whips. Chil Rajchman, one of the few survivors of Treblinka, recalls the moment he knew where he had ended up: “Through a small opening (in the train car) I see great piles of clothes. I realize that we are lost. Alas, it is hopeless.”

Rajchman’s memoir *The Last Jew of Treblinka* proves to be an invaluable resource to anyone studying Treblinka. He survived one year in Treblinka and escaped during the camp uprising on August 2, 1943.

Throughout the operation of Treblinka, the method of extermination and disposal of bodies constantly expanded and evolved. Originally, the camp was built with a small building comprised of three gas chambers. Because the camp was relatively efficient according to the Nazis’ intended purpose, the number of people sent there increased dramatically and another larger building with ten to twelve chambers was built to accommodate the increase. These gas chambers were supplied with exhaust from a diesel engine housed in a separate chamber within the building. This newly constructed building, built by prisoners within the camp, was capable of exterminating twice as many people in one day as the smaller gas chamber building.

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34 Webb and Chocholaty.
37 Webb and Chocholaty
38 Webb and Chocholaty.
Once the train cars were emptied, women and children were sent to the left and men to the right. Women were sent into one of the barracks where they were made to undress and have their heads shaved. The men had to undress outside. The Nazis, set up a tunnel of sorts in which people were funneled through to the gas chamber after they were initially processed (stripped and shaved) and hung a sign above it, giving it the ironic name: “Himmelstraße” – Street to Heaven. They were told that this was the way to the shower. In less than an hour, every person who walked or ran through the Himmelstraße died.

Those who arrived to the camp sick and/or injured would be led to “Lazaret” under the guise that they would be given medical treatment. The Lazaret was a separate area of the camp, designed to have the appearance of a medical facility. A large fence was built to hide the reality of what was in that area. The people brought to Lazaret would be led through a gate where they would see a large open pit of bodies, the last thing they saw before they were given the same fate. They were made to stand or kneel on the edge of the pit and were shot.\(^{39}\)

Eventually, word got back to Warsaw of the terror and death at Treblinka. The news was so atrocious, not to mention the conflicting reports, that many did not believe it, similar to when the townspeople close to Treblinka did not believe what they were told about the function of the camp under construction. The few inhabitants who did believe the news then knew that if they were forced onto the “resettlement” transport, they were on their way to death. On August 2, 1943, a camp uprising occurred. Camp workers (known as Sonderkommandos) were able to make a copy of the key to the munitions building and obtained a small number of firearms. With the help of other prisoners, they attacked any camp guards they could get their hands on. Many of the rebels were killed shortly after they escaped. Rajchman was one of the few that was

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
successful in his escape. His survival after leaving the camp was an incredibly difficult journey. He describes this journey in *The Last Jew of Treblinka*: “After the revolt, I wandered for two months, lived for a year as a Pole with false papers, then after the Warsaw Uprising, I hid in a bunker for three and a half months until I was liberated on 17 January 1945.”

After the war, Rajchman married and relocated to France. He and his wife eventually moved to Uruguay, where he had three sons and lived until his death in 2004. From July 1942 to August 1943, it is estimated that over 900,000 people lost their lives at Treblinka.

The idea of commemoration, especially in the case of violent historical acts, is extremely difficult. It requires compassionate consideration in the design and implementation process. A few questions posed by this project include: Who/what should a memorial be commemorating? Who is consulted in the design of a memorial? Who makes the final decision? In researching the Treblinka memorial, it has proven to be a difficult task to determine answers to some of these questions. In order to find a commemoration design fitting of the space, a competition was announced in the mid-to-late 1950s. Conflicting dates have been found in different sources making it tough to pinpoint the date the competition began. This difference in information can possibly be attributed to the political dynamic of postwar Poland - which was under the control of the Soviet Union. Possibly the most useful resource regarding the memorial thus far has been James E. Young’s book, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Released in 1993, Young offers his own perspective on why memorials are installed in a precise way across Europe. He notes in his book, that the competition was initiated in 1958 by the Warsaw

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40 Rajchman., p. 138
42 Rajchman., p. xix
43 Ibid.
Regional Council while the official website for the museum and memorial states that it was started in 1955 and was spearheaded by the Central Board of Museums and Monuments of the Ministry of Culture and Art. Other than the difference in that particular date and who was in charge of the contest, the remainder of the history is the same.

The other difficulty encountered in researching the memorial is the attempt to locate a list of any other submissions/artists. The “winning” submission was a concept to commemorate both Treblinka I and II. The designers were Polish Architect Adam Haupt and Polish Sculptors Franciszek Duszenko and Franciszek Strynkiewicz. Unfortunately, almost no information can be found regarding the backgrounds or life after the memorial for any of these men. Their design was accepted in 1960 and unveiled in 1964. Each section of the memorial has its own reasoning behind the aesthetics and placement of the specific design elements. Young describes the memorial as “perhaps the most magnificent of all Holocaust memorials, seventeen thousand granite shards are set in concrete to resemble a great, craggy graveyard.” The shards are placed in three separate designated areas and signify the seventeen thousand lives that, on average, perished each day that Treblinka operated. Two of the areas indicate possible locations of mass graves based on survivor testimony.

In the middle of the third area of granite shards lies an enormous monument in the spot which is thought to have been where the gas chamber stood during the camp’s operation. Leading up to the monument are eleven larger stones with the names of the nations from which victims were deported. This specific element, designed by Duszenko, was intended to represent

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45 "Commemoration," Muzeum Treblinka
46 Young, p. 188
48 Young, p. 186
49 Webb and Chocholaty
the Western Wall in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{50} The Western Wall is (a.k.a. Wailing Wall) is a place of pilgrimage in Judaism. It is a wall that was left standing after the Romans destroyed a temple at Temple Mount centuries ago and is now (within the last two centuries) considered one of the holiest places in Judaism.\textsuperscript{51} It is common to see small pieces of paper inserted into the cracks of the Western Wall with the prayers of its visitors along with prayer candles. The monument at Treblinka was built out of large stone slabs with a wide fissure down the middle in which visitors often leave prayers and candles. On the front, at the top of the memorial is a stone mural depicting crying faces reaching out to the sky. On the back side of the memorial is a menorah – a symbol of Jewish culture representing the call to bringing “a light unto the nations.”\textsuperscript{52} Behind this large monument is a shallow pit filled with black rock that is sometimes lit up to represent the fire pits on which the bodies of the dead were burned. Leading up to this field is a line of concrete slabs resembling the railroad ties that would bring trains of deportees to the camp. Large vertical stones surround the border of the camp to give visitors spatial identity.

When understanding the layout of the memorial, it is important to have a very general understanding of Jewish culture when it comes to cemeteries; especially with regards to Young’s description of it being a “great, craggy graveyard”\textsuperscript{53} as previously noted. Cemeteries in Jewish culture are considered sacred and, once buried, the graves of those who have passed should remain undisturbed. The Nazis desecrated this belief during World War II in more than one way. The mass graves at Treblinka were eventually disturbed when Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler visited the camp during the first couple months of 1943. In The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance, Tanhum Grinberg describes what he experienced on the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}

\bibitem{50} "Commemoration," Muzeum Treblinka
\bibitem{53} Young, p. 186
\end{thebibliography}
day of Himmler’s visit: “One day, we received orders that someone extremely important was about to arrive for a visit… They ran us and beat us to make us clean quickly.”54 After his visit, Himmler was concerned about any evidence of the crimes committed at Treblinka; especially the remains of the people murdered by the Nazis. Shortly thereafter, the bodies were exhumed and burned.55 The idea of cremation in Jewish culture was regarded as an unacceptable process except for those who follow reform Judaism which began in the 19th century,56 although it is still an uncommon practice.57

Another way that the Nazis violated the Jewish burial customs was by destroying existing Jewish cemeteries in the areas they occupied; the grave markers (Matzevot in Hebrew) were broken into pieces and used to pave roads, among other uses.58 These tombstones were meaningful to Jews as they usually signified who a person was during their life. Many were designed with artwork depicting a person’s profession.59 As previously stated, each matzeva in a cemetery is for one specific person and will always honor that person in its design. After the war ended, a small number of Jews returned to a few of these cemeteries in an attempt to put together what the Nazis destroyed. One such example is in Kazimierz, a former Jewish neighborhood in Krakow, Poland. A wall surrounding a cemetery was built using fragments of tombstones that could not be identified and returned to their original place of installment. To bring light to the victims of Treblinka, Samuel Willenberg made it his mission, prior to his passing in 2016, to continue the legacy of those who perished during the Holocaust. Willenberg wanted to give those

54 Webb and Chocholaty
55 Ibid.
56 Rabbi David Steinberg, “Jewish History in One Easy Lesson” (lecture, University of Minnesota Duluth, Duluth, MN, May 14, 2019).
58 Young, 189
victims their identity back, creating a cemetery of sorts at the site of Treblinka. He wanted to ensure that the memory of Treblinka was not only sustained, but also understood.

Samuel Willenberg was, like Chil Rajchman, a survivor of Treblinka. According to a letter obtained by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland, Willenberg writes: “Knowing that I will not always be able to personally share my experiences, I would like to provide a place for those who will continue this important mission.” In his letter, Willenberg passes down the burden of memory to historians worldwide. Willenberg’s daughter, Orit Willenberg-Giladi was tasked with designing the education center that now operates at Treblinka in order to help visitors contextualize what they will see after their brief walk through the woods to see the memorial. Even though the education center was not opened until 2018, plans were unveiled on the 70th anniversary of the Treblinka Uprising – August 2nd, 2013. Paweł Śpiewak, director of the Jewish Heritage Institute, said at the ceremony: “We meet at one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the world.” Śpiewak’s is an interesting interpretation of how the site can be viewed. He was not incorrect in his description of Treblinka as one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the world, but that statement does require some clarification. “Part of our plan is having the names of the camp’s victims engraved on the walls of the building.” Willenberg and his wife, Ada, decided on this one specific design element of the education center to give those known victims an official resting place.

The design of the memorial at Treblinka leans on that idea of honoring those who died. The most glaring difference however, is that, apart from one stone with a name (Janusz Korczak

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62 Ibid.
63 “Samuel Willenberg,” The Memory of Treblinka Foundation
and the children.\textsuperscript{64}, the rest are blank or have names of cities which people were deported from, pointing to the idea of a cemetery incomplete. It is a cemetery that is not quite a cemetery. Even so, this idea still connects to the history of the site. James E. Young points out in his article, “Memory and Counter-Memory”, “It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.”\textsuperscript{65} When examined in this way, the fact that the shards represent and incomplete cemetery make sense; it requires our “obligation to remember” to continue and not be forgotten. The other issue with labeling the site as a cemetery is that the names of a majority of the victims is not known. Because it was strictly an extermination camp, records were not kept regarding the people sent through the Treblinka gas chambers.\textsuperscript{66}

The research completed in this project shows that the designers used purposeful consideration in their execution of designing a memorial for an historic tragedy. They were able to turn a place of death and destruction into a place of remembrance by calling attention to how the camp was organized during its operation. They took specific locations of some of the buildings and burial areas (based on survivor testimony) and commemorated them in a way that provokes thought and discussion. Perhaps the greatest thing (for those who try to find a positive aspect to everything) to come out of the Holocaust is that the goal of the Nazis was never realized. That goal was “simple”: to erase Jewish people, culture, identity, and history from the face of the planet. The memorials that have been established since the end of one of the darkest times in human history are a testament to the fact that they were not successful. Even though he

\textsuperscript{64} Janusz Korczak,” YadVashem.org, , accessed July 23, 2019, https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/learning-environment/janusz-korczak/korczak-bio.html. Note: Korczak was in charge of 200 children at a Warsaw Orphanage and refused to leave them. Korczak went to the gas chamber at Treblinka with the Radren he cared for.

\textsuperscript{65} James E. Young, “Memory and Counter-Memory,” Harvard Design Magazine, Fall 1999.

\textsuperscript{66} Webb and Chocholaty
is no longer alive, hopefully historians have made, and will continue to make Samuel Willenberg proud with the attempt in keeping that memory alive. He was proud of the “magnificent memorial in Treblinka,” but recognized the short-comings prior to the construction and dedication of the education center that guests can now visit in order to connect that history with its commemoration.67

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