

The Book Burning Memorial, Berlin, Bebelplatz

Memory Walk, Anne Frank House

'I'm aware that book burning took place on this square. If this is supposed to be an empty bookcase maybe it is related.'

'At midnight on 10 May 1933, German students supportive of Hitler's ideas of purifying the German language and literature, organised a massive book burning on the former Opernplatz in Berlin. Over 20 000 books were burned in the flames, destroying the works of so-called 'un-German' writers, poets and scientists. Among them were works by Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller, Bertolt Brecht and Ernest Hemingway. One author whose writings were engulfed in flames was Heinrich Heine, who wrote the following more than 100 years earlier:

'Wherever they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings.' (Heinrich Heine, 1820)

The book burning in Berlin and other cities in Germany caused outrage in the United States. Thousands protested by marching through the streets of New York. The American author, Helen Keller, wrote an open letter to the German students:

'History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas (...) You can burn my books and the books of the best minds of Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds.' (Helen Keller, 1933)

In 1995, the Israeli artist Micha Ullman created a monument to commemorate this prelude to the Holocaust. The monument is an underground library with enough room to fit 20 000 books. It consists of a 5 by 5 by 5 underground space that can be viewed through a glass cover. It is subtle and easy to miss but the monument asks us to reflect on history and ourselves in order to prevent history from repeating itself.

'What is your opinion about the monument?'

– There is an appropriate kind of memorial for every era. That means also for our time.

– I actually think it is a great way to commemorate it. I think the empty book shelf tells a really cool story. I think it shows a lost place in history, right?

– I think it is really symbolic. I think it actually gets you thinking a little bit more than something that is may be a little more in your face, you know.

– People might see the empty bookshelves, but they do not know the meaning behind it. Therefore I think a description needs to be added. "

'Is a monument the right way to learn from the past?'

– I don't think that young people feel very attracted to memorials.

– I believe that people truly understand something when it is clear to see, to be able to imagine what really happened. That is why I think in school they should try to visit historical places.

– Memorials do have an important place in life, but I think here in Germany and in Berlin we tend to overdo it a little bit. I think that memorials are there to show something of the past which is good and which needs to be taught to the future generation because there is always something to be learned from it. But if you get stuck in the past, then I think something starts to go wrong.

– You know, it is important that history, whether it is good or bad, be documented and remembered either for good or for bad and that it be understood that this is to show what not to do.

Even today books are burned because of extremist religious or political ideological world views. In 2002, books by J.K. Rowling were burned in the US, Moscow and Mexico, because it was claimed for instance that Harry Potter is the Antichrist. In 2006, neo-Nazis in Pretzien, Germany, burned the diary of Anne Frank, which they consider to be a lie. In 2011, Reverend Terry Jones in Florida organised the burning of the Koran causing a riot in Afghanistan that cost the lives of eight foreign UN staff members.

‘How do you feel about these recent book burnings?’

– I think it’s shocking and I think it is terrible that people would do something like this. They are so blind.

– I think it’s just as bad, regardless of whose books are being burned; I think it’s a travesty for anybody to do that sort of thing to any race, religion, creed, whatever...

– Yeah, no government has the right to take away someone’s religion or way of thinking. It is just not right.

– Ignorance is ignorance, you know, it does not really help anyone. Burning books is quite a powerful act, really. You can disagree with something – he didn’t have to agree with the Koran. However you certainly should not burn it. It is not sensible.

– People learn from mistakes. Especially regarding National Socialism. It was taboo for a long time, but today this is no longer the case. You learn from the mistakes of the past – something like book burnings is unimaginable in Germany today.

‘Is it really unimaginable?’

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