



Research article

The facts on the ground: why we should be talking about Austria's *Stolpersteine*

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Abstract

Holocaust commemoration is a diverse cultural practice that comes in the form of ceremonies, textbooks and various kinds of art. There are films, novels, memorials and so-called 'counter memorials'. Presumably, *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) is the largest project of counter memorials worldwide. These are brass plates inserted into the ground, commemorating individual victims of Nazi violence. The project originated in Germany in the 1990s and quickly spread to numerous other countries. But why should special attention be paid to Austrian stumbling stones? My interest in this question was sparked by the realisation that some Austrian stones differed significantly from their German counterparts. Their designs are different; they are partially based on diverging concepts and the organisations responsible have atypical structures compared to the status quo in other countries. In this article, I first show that activists as well as commentators in Austria are hesitant to identify memorial stones with national concepts. I then examine a curious schism that has occurred between memorial organisations in the Austrian capital of Vienna

and the rest of the world. I propose that the tendency to confine memorial work to local contexts is symptomatic of a larger, specifically Austrian, resistance to accepting moral responsibility for the National Socialists' crimes. Most importantly, I call upon scholars to acknowledge and study the so-far overlooked idiosyncrasies of organisations that install stumbling stones in Austria.

Keywords memorial culture; *Stolpersteine*; stumbling stones; Holocaust commemoration; national identity; Austrian identity

What is a *Stolperstein*?

In 1992, German artist Gunter Demnig laid the foundation of his art project by installing minimalist memorials called *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones), which are brass plates inserted at flush level into the ground, intending to draw attention to sites of National Socialist violence (see Figures 1 and 2).¹ The first stumbling stones were installed in German cities on the doorsteps of the homes of those who were torn away from their lives, families and friends to be murdered in concentration camps: factories designed to perfect annihilation. Today, there are stones commemorating a variety of National Socialist victims, many of whom were killed or driven to commit suicide; others were humiliated, robbed or forced into exile. Each stone commemorates an individual at the very place where they lived, were taken or forced into exile. Three simple facts are recorded: their name, date of birth and how they were abused and/or murdered. This fixed design is a prerequisite for the artist. Recently, Demnig has also begun installing so-called 'stumbling thresholds' (*Stolperschwellen*) in places like schools where the number of victims was so large that there would have been too many single stones per person and which would have defeated the intended purpose of the project.²

Figure 1. Memorial stones by *Erinnern für die Zukunft* (Remembering for the future), Otto-Bauer-Gasse, Vienna

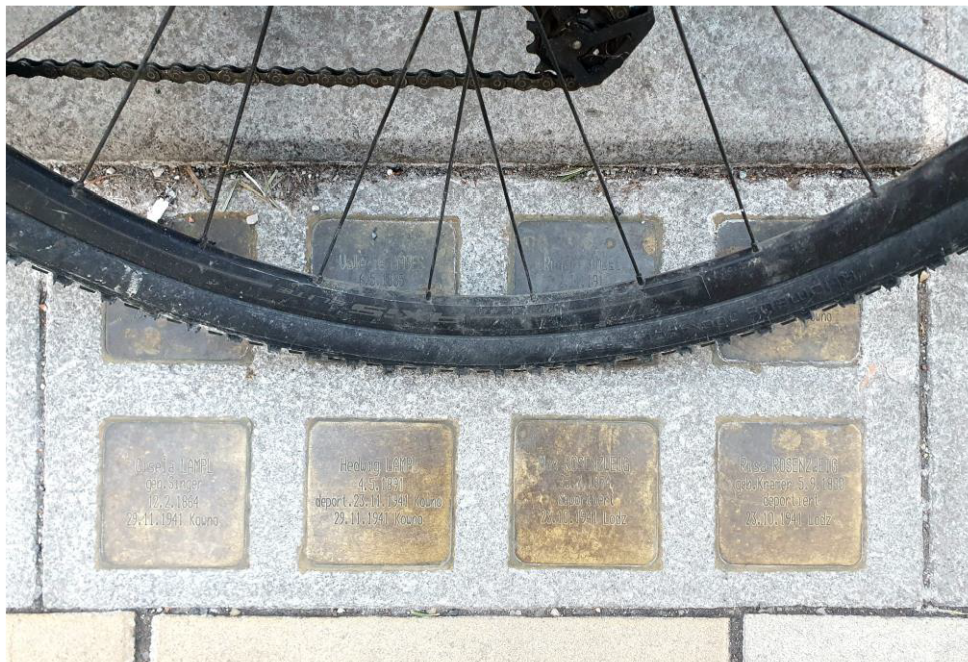


Figure 2. *Stolperstein* in front of a door, Judengasse (Source: 1971markus, Wikimedia Commons, 2016)



By inscribing the victims' names into the urban landscape,³ the stones are intended to make passers-by stumble, not in a literal way but with their 'minds and hearts'.⁴ This marking of 'trauma sites'⁵ jolts us out of our daily routine and confronts us with a moral choice⁶: to either acknowledge the crime that happened right where we are standing and thereby acknowledge the person to whom it was done, or to avert our gaze and walk on. However, to stop, look and take time in our daily commutes around the city is not an exclusively individual experience. In a busy street, stopping may result in others having to redirect their steps and perhaps intuitively follow the gaze of the person standing. Some may be irritated, others curious. The simple act of standing still and looking down makes a person an extension of the memorial stone itself: they become what has been described as a 'person pillar'.⁷ As the project got more attention in the media, the types of performative remembrance built around *Stolpersteine* have evolved. In several cities, it is possible to book *Stolpersteine* guided tours, which lead the participants from one stone to another, recounting stories about the victims commemorated and the *Stolpersteine* project itself. Some also include a visit to sites such as Jewish cemeteries.⁸ Moreover, there are several initiatives providing audio guides that direct listeners and give information about victims as well as historical contexts.⁹

Stolpersteine are a decentralised form of commemoration inseparable from their local context, which is why they have been defined as 'counter monuments'.¹⁰ Demnig's initiative began within the context of a larger movement of German 'counter' or 'negative-form' memorials which began in the 1970s.¹¹ By inverting monuments in their form and meaning, they represent criticism of a more traditional commemoration and what German speakers tend to call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (dealing with the past). In the case of *Stolpersteine*, it is their small and inconspicuous quality that challenges the concept of conventional war memorials, monuments that tower over the public in central squares.¹² Demnig's stones have also been ascribed the attribute of being 'unassuming'¹³ given that they present minimal and plain facts without any pathos.

Stolpersteine and activism

The first stones were installed on Demnig's own initiative but, within a short period of time, others joined the project. The ideal typical procedure of installing a stumbling stone, as it was initially conceived, plans for individuals to commission handcrafted stones that bear the names of victims who were relatives or who had lived in their neighbourhoods or apartment buildings. This entails researching the respective victims' lives and the circumstances of their deaths as well as appealing to municipal authorities for permission to install memorial stones in the public sphere. In some places, the process of acquiring permits has proven to be difficult.¹⁴ Private individuals feared that their property would be devalued or simply did not want to be confronted with the violent history surrounding their homes.¹⁵ In other cases, authorities have themselves become initiators¹⁶ of the installing of *Stolpersteine*, which is indicative of a general shift in the *Stolpersteine* dynamic. As the project has become increasingly visible to the public, different groups of people have begun to get involved.

Today, individuals can and do commission stones, yet the more prominent part of the work is carried out by organisations, such as victim or activist associations, religious communities, museums, local councils and schools. This has also enhanced the impact of the stone installation ceremonies. Hanauer identifies four components of such ceremonies in Germany: the stones themselves, official posters and banners, unofficial handmade posters and banners and speeches delivered.¹⁷ The sum of these performances and inscriptions in urban landscapes procures a 'repository for multiple voices, memories, and histories'.¹⁸

Figure 3. *Stolpersteine*, Cologne, Sülzgürtel 43 (Source: Geolina163, Wikimedia Commons, 2019)



Hanauer is one of the scholars who prominently disclose their personal affiliation with, and activism in, the context of *Stolpersteine* in that he also reflects on the overlapping spheres of participation of and meaning to families as well as the wider public.¹⁹ This points to one of the reasons why the inconspicuous memorial stones are so popular; they attract different groups of people in different contexts and they speak to multiple audiences, perhaps because of their minimalistic, unassuming design. Various forms of remembrance and mourning²⁰ are combined in their interactions with stumbling stones (see Figure 3). As I contemplate below, the various commemorative performances and meanings, despite their oftentimes similar forms, do not necessarily align or symbiotically work together. Indeed, there are instances of conflict, notwithstanding that all actors have the best intentions.

Criticism and attacks

As expected, *Stolpersteine* have been subjected to criticism beyond the discomfort of people who are directly confronted with them on their doorsteps. In Spain, for instance, Demnig's form of Holocaust commemoration has been interpreted as problematic as it overlaps with the 'trauma sites' of Francoism.²¹ Others object to the inconspicuous quality and insertion into the ground as it entails people stepping on the names of victims.²² Regarding the academic commentary on the *Stolpersteine* project, it has also been pointed out that many scholars are activists.²³

More distressingly, criticism of stumbling stones has originated from the demand for the end of what has been called a 'German guilt cult'.²⁴ These voices challenge those who are convinced that the histories, memories and culpability regarding the National Socialists' crimes must not be forgotten. Scholars have argued that this push and pull of activism and resistance has been one of the factors that makes Demnig's project so relevant. After all, if one considers urban landscapes to be 'repositories of multiple voices, memories, and histories',²⁵ oppositional statements are a component of the debate which cannot be dismissed in the analysis.

Moreover, the public sphere is open to everyone by definition; for instance, there is less curation and surveillance than in museums. This leads to ambiguity, as represented in Figure 4. Stickers, graffiti and memorial stones share a space and thereby do not simply exist within their own meaning but as components of a combined meaning whose interpretation is up to the individual spectator.

Figure 4. Memorial stones by *Erinnern für die Zukunft*, Stumpergasse, Vienna



How (trans)national are *Stolpersteine*?

Gunter Demnig's dedication to honouring victims of the National Socialists was sparked by discovering that his father had served in the *Wehrmacht*. First and foremost, Demnig is an artist, yet he also discloses himself as a descendant of a German perpetrator. His initial installation of stones was illegal as official permits were withheld. But today, the project is a tremendous transnational success, with stumbling stones represented in 31 European countries.²⁶ In Argentina, a stumbling threshold was installed in front of a school building.²⁷ Nonetheless, most German activists as well as the international press and the academic community seem to be in agreement about classifying stumbling stones in national terms; that is, 'German'. Demnig's work is frequently associated with concepts such as the 'German conscience',²⁸ 'German guilt'²⁹ or Holocaust commemoration as a 'specifically German crisis'.³⁰ There

is, indeed, a pragmatic explanation for this. Demnig was born in Berlin and created his first memorials in Cologne where he had been residing since 1985.³¹ Hence, Germany is home to the largest number of memorial stones. The project's official definition is free of national terminology, however; according to the website, stumbling stones can be installed 'wherever National Socialists committed crimes and persecuted, humiliated or murdered people between 1933 and 1945'.³²

This definition unmistakably includes places outside the borders of today's German Federal Republic. It is also by no means an innovative position to argue that Austria in particular shares moral responsibility for the atrocities committed by National Socialists and their many helpers. Even so, historians' deconstruction of the claim that Austria was 'the first free country to fall victim to Nazi aggression'³³ has not led to a large-scale meditation upon and appreciation of the degree to which the undeniable culpability is specifically Austrian and in which ways this culpability should be reflected in the context of Holocaust commemoration. In the following, I use stumbling stones as an example to show that, eighty years after the supposed 'liberation' of Austria, even those with noble intentions act within a system that helps to obscure uncomfortable truths.

Stolpersteine in Austria

Today, official 'Demnig stones' have been installed in all nine Austrian federal states.³⁴ Some cities were quick to join the memorial project; others took a while to come around to the idea.³⁵ In the city of Linz, a jury decreed that there would be no *Stolpersteine*. Instead, there were to be stelae designed by the architect Andreas Strauss.³⁶ The opposition to the original stones waned eventually: in November 2023, the local activist group reported that 276 *Stolpersteine* had been installed.³⁷ The capital has a unique position within this national and transnational framework. There are more than 1,000 memorial stones and plaques on house façades in Vienna; however, only a fraction of them belong to the original *Stolpersteine* project. The majority of Viennese stones were installed by five different organisations, none of which cooperated with Demnig.

In 2021, when I was a postgraduate student in history, I discovered this unusual configuration by chance – one could say I stumbled upon it with my 'mind and heart'. It became a side project to read about *Stolpersteine* and Holocaust memorials in general while also investigating what made my hometown different from other places in Austria and elsewhere. What keeps me captivated is that there are no academic or journalistic texts to be found to explain why: why is it that, in Vienna, activists choose to stay separate from the transnationally successful project run by Demnig? Why do other cities and countries seamlessly become part of the initial project? Why do their specific considerations and necessities not pose a threat to the existing organisational structures? Why are there five different organisations within one city, Vienna, although they seem to share not only a mission but also a method? And, lastly, why is it that no one has asked these questions before?

My investigation into the matter has by no means been exhaustive. I have read texts by German-speaking as well as non-German-speaking experts from different fields. I have read press releases, mission statements, interviews, brochures and encyclopaedic entries. I walked through the city of Vienna and reached out to activists. In one case, a representative kindly agreed to be interviewed. Nonetheless, rather than finding answers, I continue to come across more mysteries. Above all, I have been intrigued to discover that, whereas national labels are virtually ubiquitous in academic, political and journalistic discussions about German stumbling stones, there are hardly any references to a national context in Austrian publications.³⁸

In the following, I summarise my findings and present my hypotheses. My intention is not to cast blame on any party. What I aim to do is to heedfully elaborate on why these questions matter and sketch which steps, in my view, might be taken to find answers. For the readers who are non-German speakers and unfamiliar with the workings of Austrian memorial culture, I briefly expand on the overall institutional structure before I begin going into the details. As has been pointed out, there is no one model of how local or regional groups of activists are set up. It is important to distinguish types of activism in two regards: (1) whether an initiative is officially part of the Demnig project; and (2) whether an initiative is run by private associations or official institutions. In Austria, there is often a private *Verein* at the centre of local memorial activism. *Vereine* are founded by private individuals but they are state-registered associations legally bound to one purpose and regulated by a specific set of legal norms. There are also

more ambiguous forms of coalitions such as Salzburg's non-partisan 'people committee'³⁹ or the Tyrolean activist 'initiative' named 'Stolpersteine für Tirol'.⁴⁰

According to the two Wikipedia entries on Austrian *Stolpersteine*, all stones belong to Demnig's project, with the exception of five organisations in Vienna and one in Lower Austria.⁴¹ This claim is impossible to verify given that there is no central registry or umbrella organisation for such diverse groups. Yet it seems plausible for three reasons: (1) those who have websites present themselves as part of the *Stolpersteine* project, using the exact term; (2) Wiki pages have had multiple editors adding information about their respective initiatives and none of them have taken exception to the claim; and (3) Demnig has only objected to the Viennese using the name *Stolpersteine*.

The Viennese *Sonderweg*

The five Viennese organisations installing Demnig-like memorial stones and plaques are all *Vereine*:

- (1) *Steine der Erinnerung*⁴² (stones of memory) was founded in 2005 by Elisabeth Ben David-Hindler and her partner Karl Jindrich who, as an engineer, took it upon himself to inscribe the first stones. Their work started in two of the city's 23 districts and has since spread to 13 others. Their mission was to 'commemorate the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and preserve the memory of Jewish life and culture before the Nazis seized power'.⁴³ Memorial stones from this project can carry the names of up to four victims or contextual information about Jewish 'life and culture'.⁴⁴
- (2) *Steine der Erinnerung in der Josefstadt* (8th district) was founded in 2007 and has had close ties to *Steine der Erinnerung* from the beginning. In a contribution published in the *Steine der Erinnerung's* anniversary volume,⁴⁵ co-founder Irmtraut Karlsson highlights the help she received from Ben David-Hindler and Jindrich. However, the smaller partner organisation differs from its 'role model'⁴⁶ *Steine der Erinnerung*, in one significant way: its memorial work is not limited to Jewish victims of National Socialism.
- (3) *Steine der Erinnerung in Liesing* was founded in 2013 and limits its work to the 23rd district. Whereas it uses the same name as the original *Steine der Erinnerung* organisation, its purpose is to keep alive the memory not just of Jews but of all Holocaust victims, such as the previously mentioned *Steine der Erinnerung in der Josefstadt*.⁴⁷ The project's representative, Eva Schmidt, stated that she received advice from Ben David-Hindler regarding interaction with authorities and sponsoring institutions.⁴⁸
- (4) *Steine des Gedenkens* (stones of remembrance⁴⁹) was founded in 2007 and works in the 3rd city district. Its work concerns the extensive research on Shoah victims by Karl Hauer,⁵⁰ which is why the biographical research is usually not carried out by relatives or tenants. To fulfil the goal of commemorating 'the homes of Jewish victims and their institutions',⁵¹ the stones are inscribed with heterogeneous information. Some point out practices of discrimination and humiliation, while others commemorate single or multiple victims, recording either their surnames or full names, as well as the date and circumstances of their death, or give extra information about their occupations or personal qualities.⁵²
- (5) *Erinnern für die Zukunft* (remembering for the future) was also founded in 2007 and limits its activities to Vienna's 6th district. The founders were not private individuals; it was the district council, most prominently Councillor Kilian Franer. The 6th district is the only Viennese district that has a complete record of victims deported by the National Socialists. Consequently, it was possible to develop a concerted design to commemorate the totality of victims, which includes stones in the ground as well as plaques on house façades.⁵³

The five *Vereine* have established collaborative relations with each other, as the contributions in the aforementioned anniversary volume demonstrate. Nonetheless, it remains unclear why they choose to keep their organisational structures, legal affairs, public relations and sponsorships separate. There are five key ways in which their methods differ:

- (1) the districts that make up their areas of work
- (2) the group of victims commemorated: two of the five *Vereine* dedicate themselves exclusively to the memory of Jewish victims
- (3) the forms and contents of memorial objects: there are stones and plaques – some carry one name each; some carry several names; others do not carry names at all but provide contextual information about Jewish life and culture, antisemitic violence or organisations' names

- (4) one of the five organisations is not run by private individuals but by the district administration
- (5) the research is distributed differently between organisation representatives and private individuals who wish to commemorate family members or people who used to live in their houses.

I cannot determine whether these differences are the, or even a, reason why the organisations remain separate, given that it is a matter that none of the representatives have publicly commented on. In addition to the volume published by Ben David-Hindler herself, there is only one text that sheds some light on the matter: an unpublished diploma thesis by Astrid Michlmayer about *Stolpersteine* from 2013 which is archived at Vienna University. Part of her study was based on conversations the author had with several members of the aforementioned organisations. Although the thesis is not an entirely reliable source, mostly because the interviews were not properly transcribed, there are two pieces of information relevant to my inquiry. On the one hand, the 3rd district team is reported to have stated that they first intended to join the existing *Steine der Erinnerung* organisation run by Ben David-Hindler, yet the proposal was rejected because of 'an at least small personal falling-out [due to] unidentifiable reasons'.⁵⁴ Consequently, Karl Hauer and Gerhard Burda founded their own *Verein* using a synonymous name, *Steine des Gedenkens*.⁵⁵ What must be added, nevertheless, is that the current website of the 3rd district, *Steine des Gedenkens*, features a link to *Steine der Erinnerung's* database, which certainly indicates that relations are now repaired.⁵⁶

On the other hand, the summarised interview with Ulli Fuchs of the 6th district's organisation *Erinnern für die Zukunft* records that – unlike Ben David-Hindler – they had never been accused of plagiarism by Demnig.⁵⁷ The reason might be that the group never intended to use the name 'Stolpersteine'. *Erinnern für die Zukunft* occupies a unique position in the framework given that representatives have publicly taken exception to Demnig's ways – most notably, they explicitly reject the term 'stumbling stones'. Franer, as the main representative, has been outspoken in his criticism, taking the metaphor quite literally: 'We do not have "stumbling stones" in our district. We do not want anyone to stumble, rather we care about our district being accessible to everyone.'⁵⁸ This stance might be reflected in the accumulation of several stones in more inconspicuous places (see Figure 1).

The story of what really transpired between Demnig and the pioneer of Viennese not-quite *Stolpersteine*, which led to the eventual accusation of plagiarism, is likely to remain a mystery. Demnig has not commented on the issue since 2012⁵⁹ and Ben David-Hindler sadly passed away in 2016. The aforementioned diploma thesis' comment on Demnig's role is that interviewees suggested that Ben David-Hindler had reached out to Demnig for a collaborative agreement and had granted him only three weeks to state his position. Being away on summer holiday, Demnig did not respond within the given period.⁶⁰ Ben David-Hindler and her partners therefore went ahead and launched their project. Demnig has not commented on any deadlines but he did voice several points of criticism. His main concerns are how Viennese memorial stones differ from – and contradict – his concept. First, Demnig's stones are handmade to avoid any likeness to the factory-like concentration camps – Viennese stones, he claims, are factory-made.⁶¹ He further takes issue with activists negotiating with reluctant house owners to compromise on stones being installed not at the victims' doorsteps but in central squares where it was less likely anyone would feel personally accused by them.⁶² One consequence is that individual stones are pooled together in one place, which may or may not reduce their visibility.

One observation of my own, as I was on one of my research walking tours through Vienna, was that the compiled stones, which seem to represent a small memorial carpet, could be mistaken for typical Viennese cellar windows that are part of the pavement, as Figure 5 shows. I could only find one other example of criticism of the Austrian derivatives: art historian Galit Noga-Banai of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem even called the Viennese *Steine der Erinnerung* 'fake memorials', which undermined the unifying nature of Demnig's project.⁶³

With regard to Austria, Demnig and his partners appear to take into account a wide spectrum of nuances. Austria was the first country, aside from Germany, to commission *Stolpersteine*. Still, compared to other countries, the density of stones in Austria is below average. In an interview published in 2012, Demnig mentioned that he had previously received requests to place stones next to war monuments that unite two groups of Austrian (supposed) victims: those murdered in the Holocaust and *Wehrmacht* soldiers.⁶⁴ This is indeed a widespread phenomenon in Austria: war memorials for soldiers killed in the First World War are amended by plaques or inscriptions bearing the names of the men killed in the Second World War. One of the many examples is the First World War monument at the military cemetery in Lower Austrian Sigmundsherberg (Figure 6). This type of memorial is indicative of Austrians'

reluctance to acknowledge their country's role in the war as well as in the Holocaust. On the one hand, it is understandable for those who lost their loved ones in the war, many of whom did not choose to become part of the *Wehrmacht*, some of whom were drafted in the final stage of the war – teenagers and old men – even though the Third Reich had undeniably lost the conflict. On the other hand, these monuments still exist without any amendment; for instance, plaques explaining why the myth of Austria's victimhood (*Opfer-Mythos*) is dangerous and unacceptable.

Figure 5. Cellar windows, Mollardgasse, Vienna



Conflicting stories

Daliah Hindler of *Steine der Erinnerung* kindly agreed to answer some of my questions. Several answers were illuminating, others were confusing and slightly evasive.⁶⁵ One of the interesting clarifications was that the decisions to aggregate stones were often made by victims' family members who commissioned them and that, in other cases, the restyling of public squares offered opportunities to add to the commemorative cityscape without the stones being placed directly in front of doorsteps. Moreover, Hindler explained that stones giving additional information about the historical context were also used to 'fill in the blanks' of nameless victims who could not be commemorated with individual stones.

Even more fascinating, albeit confusing, was her account of the relations with Demnig. According to Hindler, it was Demnig's decision not to install *Stolpersteine* in Vienna because the legal requirements dictated that he would not be permitted to install stones personally in the presence of relatives other than via the city council. The municipal administration informed me, however, that there was no record of any communication with Demnig in their archives, nor did they mention that the installation of stones had to be carried out by a city official.⁶⁶ They added that Viennese authorities have individual contracts with organisations like *Steine der Erinnerung* by which they are responsible for maintaining the stones – this is also the case in other cities, however. On the official *Stolpersteine* website, it is also specified that Demnig insists on personally installing the first stone in a new municipality.⁶⁷

In her reply to my questions, Hindler also expressed disappointment that Demnig refused to share his knowledge. She emphasised that her organisation stepped in because their goal was not to be 'the centre of attention [unlike Demnig] but to realise relatives' wishes to commemorate the dead', which is why they were willing to obtain official approval from the city. This is curious given that the city councils' approval is also a requirement in German cities. I could not find any legal specifications about who carries

out the installation of memorials of any kind. Furthermore, Demnig by no means installs all the stones himself and, today, there are indeed official Demnig stones in Vienna, which means that he might have changed his mind – or perhaps he would tell a different story.

Figure 6. War memorial at the military cemetery, Sigmundsherberg



The main part of the interview, however, focused on the separation of Viennese *Vereine*. Surprisingly, Hindler altogether rejected that there was any actual separation. She referred to the other four organisations as ‘sister projects’ whose ‘mission and philosophy [was] closely related’. Later, she stated that the ‘mission and technique [were] identical’ and added that their cooperation made it possible to do work in ‘their own’ and other districts. Moreover, she claimed that the organisations had been founded to strengthen collaboration and efficacy. Lastly, she stressed that none of the Viennese *Vereine* wanted to make commemorative work about themselves; instead, they cared deeply about the victims and their relatives.

To be fully transparent, I want to emphasise that I find it very difficult to scrutinise the hard work of such dedicated activists. Yet, as a scholar, I am convinced that these inconsistencies should not be ignored. It is evident that the organisations share a lot of their mission, design and best intentions. At the same time, it is indisputable that they are separate legally, financially and personally, that they have their own specific methods and that they were founded at different points in time by different people and in different contexts. Furthermore, the interviews from 2013 and Demnig’s account tell diverging stories.

Curiously, the Viennese activists did not find a solution to their disagreements and conflict with Demnig (and with each other) given that the adaptability of the project has been identified as one of the main factors contributing to the success of the *Stolpersteine* project.⁶⁸ Recent additions like *Stolperschwellen*, inscriptions in Braille script for deaf-mute victims (Figure 7)⁶⁹ and so-called 'remembrance stones' in Spain substantiate that claim. The Spanish remembrance stones initiative was officially launched in 2018. It is part of Demnig's foundation *STIFTUNG – SPUREN – GUNTER DEMNIG*. In a press release, Demnig called it a 'logical continuation' of his project. Its goal is to commemorate people who were not direct victims of the National Socialist regime but people who were 'arrested, imprisoned, tortured and murdered by Nationalist opponents of the [Spanish] Republic, supporters of General Francisco Franco'.⁷⁰ This pilot project was set up 13 years after Ben David-Hindler contacted Demnig. Since the beginning, the *Stolpersteine* movement has been evolving; it has been modified and enhanced. Demnig's view of adaptations of the original stones might have changed and, possibly, the lack of Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (struggle of overcoming the past) as well as human interaction between him and his Viennese counterparts also played a role in the decision-making.

Figure 7. Braille Stolperstein for Irene Ransburg, Graz (Source: J.J. Kucek, 2016)



The coexistence of original *Stolpersteine* and their Viennese derivatives has had an evident impact: for instance, Austrian newspapers wrote articles about *Stolpersteine* (using the original name), although the organisations behind the said stones do not belong to Demnig's project but to the Viennese separative *Vereine*.⁷¹ Moreover, the results of a simple Google search for 'Stolpersteine Vienna' prominently lists *Steine der Erinnerung* and *Steine des Gedenkens*; Demnig's project is listed as the 31st result (in January 2024). I would argue that this confusion is amplified by publications such as an online article by Irmtraut Karlsson, which features a photo montage in which a picture of Demnig is placed next to a picture of one of the memorial stones installed by *Steine der Erinnerung in der Josefstadt* (see Figure 8) – not an original *Stolperstein* by Demnig's project.⁷² Curiously, the stones are referred to as '*Steine des Anstoßes*' (stones of impulse/impact/impetus), which is a fairly common figure of speech in the German language. Nonetheless, the mix of images, terminology and organisational structures complicates questions of credit and perceptions and principles of memorial work.

Austrian identity: an 'anti-German' identity?

I point this out not to criticise or favour any project or group as compared to another. Rather, I want to argue that the history of memorial stones in Austria is symptomatic of a more general and problematic tendency in the country's dealing with its past. As I have laid out, neither one of the five Viennese organisations nor any comparable organisation in another Austrian federal state uses national terms to describe their mission. In this regard, stumbling stones (and derivatives) within the Austrian territory differ significantly from their German counterparts. In the case of Germany, scholars have pointed to

the focus on local contexts and communities as an advantageous aspect,⁷³ but taking into account the context of Austrians' particularly tenacious reluctance to accept historical responsibility, I suggest that we adopt a more critical perspective on the matter.

Figure 8. Photo montage featured in the article by Imtraut Karlsson (Source: No photo credits given, <https://www.derachte.at/steine-des-anstosses/>)



Aside from Austria's reluctance to accept their National Socialist past, there is another factor that might have an impact on this dynamic; a deeply felt sense of undeserved inferiority compared to the larger, more powerful Germany. This narrative is expressed in the popular trope of sibling relations; that is, Germany being the big brother and Austria being the little brother.⁷⁴ After the First World War ended, the national borders of Austria and Germany were dictated by the Allied Forces. In the 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain, territories that had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were given to other European states or founded as new ones: Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and, of course, Hungary. Naturally, the German Empire also lost territories, for instance to France. Defying the Allies' conditions, Austrian and German representatives still pursued the idea of a unified state, *Deutschösterreich* (German Austria).⁷⁵ The name reflects the importance of the shared official language. During the negotiations, it also became clear that the Austrians were adamant that both sides needed to be treated as equal partners.⁷⁶ Due to the Allies' insistence on the Accords of 1919, however, the project failed.

In 1938, Austria became part of the National Socialist state – not as an equal partner, however, but as the *Ostmark* (Eastern March). After the end of the Second World War, the German Empire was even more ravaged and at the mercy of the Allies, who again had to negotiate new borders in Europe. The agreement resulted in the Austrian territory being restored to the state of 1919, yet for 10 more years it was an occupied state. In the Moscow Declaration of 1943, the foreign ministers of the US, the UK and the Soviet Union agreed that Austria was to be considered 'the first free country to fall victim to Nazi aggression'⁷⁷ – a claim that has long been deconstructed by historians but continues to be evoked.⁷⁸ Its consequences are, above all, that the German Federal Republic is the sole legal successor state of the National Socialist regime, but it also manifests in the continued commemoration of *Wehrmacht* soldiers as war victims, as demonstrated above. Compared to Germany, Austria took much longer to carry out 'Denazification', to take action against people who were publicly trivialising National Socialist crimes and to acknowledge the violent plundering and expropriation and the need for restitution. In 1986, the conservative politician Kurt Waldheim was elected President despite substantial evidence that he had been a member of the National Socialist Party, that he had very likely served in the 'Storm Division' and that his actions had at least facilitated war crimes.⁷⁹ His party, the Austrian People's Party, defended Waldheim by using the slogan: 'Now more than ever!'⁸⁰

I recount this very brief history of Austrian politics since 1918 to demonstrate that the sense of inferiority concerning Germany is a key factor in questions of Austrian identity: a sense of having lost

large territories undeservedly and being a small, relatively unimportant European country compared to Germany, which has become the most powerful state in the European Union. This is manifested in the methods used to commemorate Holocaust victims. It manifests in Austrian *Stolpersteine* activists refraining from explicitly identifying their work as 'Austrian'. I would also argue that it manifests in the fact that I could not find any Austrian activist representative who disclosed family relations as perpetrators, as Gunter Demnig did from the very beginning. Prominent figures such as Elisabeth Ben David-Hindler represent the opposite side: they are descendants of victims who dedicate themselves to honouring their ancestors' memory.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that Austrian activists in Holocaust-related memorial culture reference the 'German' artist Demnig as the creator of the concept, but none identify themselves as 'Austrian'. Activists in the limelight are identified as representing groups of victims rather than perpetrators and local initiatives remain separate and do not end up joining forces, whereby they end up missing out on opportunities for increased visibility, scope and, consequently, efficacy.

I hypothesise that the fragmentation of structures and the avoidance of cooperation beyond the local level are part of a general pattern of avoiding confrontation with questions of Austrian 'national' identity within the context of historical responsibility. It is remarkable that, even among scholars, there is no public or critical debate about these issues. After all, memorial culture, especially within the context of the history of the Holocaust, is one of the most prominent historical topics of our time. It has inspired abundant scholarly literature as well as non-academic interest. Understandably, the pandemic drew attention away from memorial work. Since then, however, other countries have done work in the spheres of activism and academic analysis. I argue that it would be a shame if the potential for further development of existing structures of memorial work in Austria and for investigating the complex system of actors as part of a study in public history were never realised. One possible risk, which should not be taken lightly, is that research might reflect badly on activist groups. This is by no means a consequence intended by my propositions. I am not pointing out a deficit *within* the existing organisations but a deficit of *additional* memorial work and analysis thereof.

Twenty-first-century Vienna is a city whose politicians object to naming streets after Anne Frank because of her supposed lack of connection to Austrian history – only to then choose the name 'Janis Joplin-Esplanade'.⁸¹ This city is home to many activists dedicated to commemorating victims of the Holocaust but it is the capital of a country that urgently needs to engage in an open, transparent and fact-based discussion about Austrian moral responsibility and memorial culture within the context of National Socialists' crimes and their victims. To further such a public debate, scholars should investigate questions like the ones I raise in this article. We cannot afford to shy away from the facts on the ground – in the most literal sense. Our mission must be to look for answers by reaching out to the people doing the work and asking uncomfortable questions – even if it entails the risk of stumbling every so often.

Notes

- ¹ Official website: <https://www.stolpersteine.eu>. Accessed 31 July 2024.
- ² Berkessel, 'Stolpersteine', 46–7.
- ³ Carrier, 'Stumbling stones', 64.
- ⁴ Conrad, 'Stolpersteine'.
- ⁵ Violi, 'Trauma site museums'.
- ⁶ Carrier, 'Stumbling stones', 67.
- ⁷ Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history', 7.
- ⁸ For instance, in Carinthian Klagenfurt: *Erinnern.at*, 'Stolpersteinführung in Klagenfurt'.
- ⁹ A description in the case of Manresa memorial stones is given by Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history'.
- ¹⁰ Harjes, 'Stumbling stones', 143; Gould and Silverman, 'Stumbling upon history', 792.
- ¹¹ Heyden, 'Humanizing remembrance'.

- ¹² 'Ich hatte gegenüber großen Monumenten immer großes Unbehagen. Die sind anonym – und einmal im Jahr werden davor Kränze abgeworfen' [I always felt uneasy about large monuments. They are anonymous and once a year wreaths dropped in front of them], Demnig is quoted in: Standard.at, 'Ein kleiner Stein vor der eigenen Tür'.
- ¹³ Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history', 6.
- ¹⁴ For instance, for Munich, see Hengst, 'München verbietet Stolpersteine'; for Innsbruck/Tyrol, see 'Debatte um Stolpersteinverlegungen in Innsbruck'. *Erinnern.at*: 'Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust'; or more recently, for Rosenheim, see Köpf, 'Rosenheim verzichtet auf Stolpersteine'.
- ¹⁵ Heyden, 'Humanizing remembrance', 345.
- ¹⁶ For instance, for Hamburg, see the official website: <https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de>. Accessed 31 July 2024; and for Wattens/Tyrol, see Tirol.ORF.at: 'Wattens'.
- ¹⁷ Hanauer, 'Discursive construction', 267–70.
- ¹⁸ Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history', 17.
- ¹⁹ Hanauer, 'Discursive construction', 276. This aspect is also considered in Heyden, 'Humanizing remembrance', 335.
- ²⁰ Suganda, 'Death', 719–20.
- ²¹ Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history', 13.
- ²² Kaiser, 'Streit Über Stolpersteine'.
- ²³ Schaarschmidt, 'Ein Kunstprojekt Macht Geschichte'.
- ²⁴ Heyden, 'Discursive construction', 346.
- ²⁵ Hernández-Grande, 'Stumbling over history', 17.
- ²⁶ Endlich, 'Porträt'.
- ²⁷ Christoph, 'Argentinien'.
- ²⁸ Apel, 'Stumbling blocks', 191.
- ²⁹ Deutschlandfunk.de, 'Erinnerungskultur'.
- ³⁰ Gould and Silverman, 'Stumbling upon history', 792.
- ³¹ Cook and van Riemsdijk, 'Agents of memorialization', 139.
- ³² Stolpersteine.eu, 'FAQ'.
- ³³ As stated in the Moscow conference's declaration on Austria (1943). See Avalon Project, 'Moscow conference'.
- ³⁴ There are different estimates of the total number of *Stolpersteine* in Austria installed by Demnig and others. Having reviewed several registers, I consider it plausible that Demnig himself has installed at least 900 stones on Austrian territory, most of them in Salzburg, Graz and Wiener Neustadt. The organisations installing similar memorial stones have installed a minimum of 1,238 stones and plaques (1,206 installed by a total of five organisations in Vienna and 32 installed by one organisation in St Pölten). See Wikipedia, 'Liste der Orte mit Stolpersteinen'; also Institut für Jüdische Geschichte, 'Steine Der Erinnerung'.
- ³⁵ The very first were installed in Salzburg in 1997. The federal state of Burgenland had its first stones installed in November 2021 according to: Güssing.net, 'Güssing – Stolpersteine'.
- ³⁶ ooe.ORF.at. 'Gedenksäulen als Erinnerung an NS-Opfer'. In Munich, there are similar stelae designed by the artist Kilian Stauss; see Wetzlar, 'Gedenken auf Augenhöhe'.
- ³⁷ Stolpersteine München, 'Stolpersteine'.
- ³⁸ The rare ones I did come across tended to be in inconspicuous positions. I base this claim on my analysis of the websites and press statements of *Stolpersteine*-like activist groups in the nine Austrian federal states – in the case of Vienna, see Franer and Fuchs, *Erinnern für die Zukunft*. The Salzburg group refers to the national context once in their 'FAQ' when pointing out that Salzburg was the only Austrian city where National Socialists undertook a public burning of books; see Stolpersteine-salzburg.at, 'FAQs'. In the introduction to Franer's and Fuchs' volume, there is a reference to the Austrian 'victim myth'; Franer and Fuchs, *Erinnern für die Zukunft*, 18. However, it is mentioned as a point of criticism which had previously been voiced by the Jewish community and is then countered by Franer within the next two paragraphs.
- ³⁹ For example, for Salzburg, see Stolpersteine-salzburg.at, <https://www.stolpersteine-salzburg.at/>. Accessed 30 July 2024.
- ⁴⁰ Domanig, 'Stolpersteine für Tirol'; Wikipedia, 'Stolpersteine in Österreich'; Domanig, 'Initiative'.
- ⁴¹ Wikipedia, 'Stolpersteine in Österreich'.
- ⁴² In addition to the website, the organisation also discloses its goals and self-conception in a book published to celebrate the 10-year anniversary: Ben David-Hindler and Verein Steine der Erinnerung, *10 Jahre Steine*; Röhrer, 'Stadt soll Zeichen'.
- ⁴³ Steine der Erinnerung, 'Über uns'.

- ⁴⁴ DemokratieWEBstatt, 'Interview mit Daliah Hindler'.
- ⁴⁵ Ben David-Hindler and Verein Steine der Erinnerung, *10 Jahre Steine*.
- ⁴⁶ Steine der Erinnerung in der Josefstadt, 'Über uns'.
- ⁴⁷ Steine23, 'Steine23'.
- ⁴⁸ Schmidt, 'Steine der Erinnerung in Liesing', 197–9.
- ⁴⁹ I asked Daliah Hindler of *Steine der Erinnerung* whether she agreed with my translation of the organisations' names. I respect her position which is why I make this transparent, still I chose to stick with the differentiation of 'stones of memory' and 'stones of remembrance' since her suggestion to call both 'stones of remembrance' and just add '(in the 3rd district)' seemed to conceal the fact that the founders chose to use a different name.
- ⁵⁰ Vienna.at, '81-Jähriger Museumsleiter Karl Hauer Blickt Zurück'.
- ⁵¹ Steine des Gedenkens, 'Zweck des Vereins'.
- ⁵² Steine des Gedenkens, 'Ich möchte einen Stein'.
- ⁵³ According to a 'synoptic protocol' of an interview with Franer's partner Ulli Fuchs, conducted by Michlmayer, Demnig's stones were too expensive and not approved by the construction company, see Michlmayer, *Eine Erinnerungskultur*, 186.
- ⁵⁴ Michlmayer, *Eine Erinnerungskultur*, 81.
- ⁵⁵ Michlmayer, *Eine Erinnerungskultur*, 81.
- ⁵⁶ Steine des Gedenkens. 'Steine des Gedenkens für die Opfer der Shoah...'
- ⁵⁷ Michlmayer, *Eine Erinnerungskultur*, 114–15.
- ⁵⁸ Hörtnner, 'Erinnern für die Zukunft'.
- ⁵⁹ Conrad, *Stolpersteine*.
- ⁶⁰ According to the official central registry, the organisation was founded on 27 July 2005.
- ⁶¹ Daliah Hindler confirmed this in January 2024.
- ⁶² This was not confirmed by Daliah Hindler since she claimed that they exclusively worked with the city council.
- ⁶³ Sattlecker, 'Steine des Anstoßes'.
- ⁶⁴ See Conrad, 'Stolperstein'. I must note, however, that it seems highly unlikely that the person making that proposition was Ben David-Hindler.
- ⁶⁵ For instance, she chose not to respond to my question about their decision to commemorate Jewish victims exclusively.
- ⁶⁶ I received a written reply to my inquiry on 12 February 2024 from *Stadt Wien – Straßenverwaltung und Straßenbau (MA 28)*.
- ⁶⁷ Stolpersteine.eu, 'Schritte'. Accessed 13 February 2024, <https://www.stolpersteine.eu/schritte#c327>.
- ⁶⁸ Schaarschmidt, *Ein Kunstprojekt*, 289.
- ⁶⁹ In the Austrian city of Graz, a 'stumbling stone' with Braille inscription was installed to commemorate Irene Ransburg who was murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- ⁷⁰ Stiftung–Spuren–Gunter Demnig, 'Remembrance stones in Mallorca'.
- ⁷¹ Tasic, 'Philharmoniker'.
- ⁷² Sochor, 'Steine des Anstoßes'.
- ⁷³ Harjes, *Stumbling Stones*, 147–8.
- ⁷⁴ Reisinger, 'Piefke und Ösis'; Sprenger, 'Österreich und Deutschland'.
- ⁷⁵ Staatsgesetzblatt für den Staat Deutschösterreich, 484 (1919), 1253. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, published online. Accessed 26 January 2024. <https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?aid=sgb&datum=1919&page=1229>.
- ⁷⁶ Stourzh, *Vom Reich Zur Republik*, 32.
- ⁷⁷ Avalon Project, 'Moscow conference'.
- ⁷⁸ Die Presse, '1938 am eigenen Leib erlebt'.
- ⁷⁹ Originally published in 1988, the English translation followed in 1993: Kurz et al., *The Waldheim Report*.
- ⁸⁰ Wodak, 'Waldheim affair'; Pink, 'Janis-Joplin-Promenade'.
- ⁸¹ Pink, Oliver. 'Janis-Joplin-Promenade.' *Die Presse*, 21 November 2013, accessed 28 January 2024. <https://www.diepresse.com/1485201/janis-joplin-promenade>.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics

I confirm that my article, presented at the Heritages conference in Prague, has met the ethical standards required by the AMPS Research Center. The research was reviewed and approved by the ethical committee of the selection board composed of permanent members of AMPS and CTU Prague researchers. This board ensured that the study adhered to the recommendations of COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics).

Consent for publication

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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