

OPINION

## Op-Ed: My father fled Nazi Germany. His homeland remembers him with a marker inscribed 'Here lived'

By Alina Tugend

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There is an importance to remembering.

That is why my father, at 94, returned to Berlin in July after he was forced to flee his homeland 80 years ago. He and his family were about to become part of a unique artistic commemoration.

Since 1996, the artist Gunter Demnig has laid some 70,000 small brass-plated cubes, known as [Stolpersteine](#) or stumbling blocks, around Europe in front of the last-known residences or workplaces of those who were driven out or murdered by the Nazis. They are simply inscribed with “Here lived” and the names, birth year, the year the person fled or was deported and where they went.

It has been called [the world's largest decentralized memorial](#).

My father, Tom Tugend, who remains an active journalist and lives in Los Angeles, did not seek to participate in the Stolpersteine movement. A German public health researcher, [Benjamin Kuntz](#) — who had recently published a book on my grandfather's pioneering work in infant and children's healthcare — asked if he could request the Stolpersteine be placed in front of the home my father left behind.

My father and I had both been to Berlin, but not together. And I had never heard him speak his native language except for an occasional phrase. But as Demnig silently dug

up existing bricks in front of 104 Reichstrasse, my father spoke in fluent German about his parents and his memory of Berlin life as a boy.

Those who gathered on the sidewalk — about 100 in all — had varied connections to us, or none at all. A pediatrician shared how her father, also a doctor, admired the work of my grandfather, a pediatrician named [Gustav Tugendreich](#), so much that he hung a photo of him in his office. Distant relatives my father had met just once years ago traveled from France for the occasion. The taxi driver who had driven us the day before showed up with his wife.

Current residents of the apartment building spoke of how grateful they were to know of the family that had lived there so long ago and eagerly invited us in to my father's old apartment, now remodeled beyond recognition. But the small balcony was still there, the one my father had stood on as he watched Hitler ride by.

After the crowd dispersed, four small squares — all engraved with Tugendreich, the German last name my father shortened when he joined the U.S. Army and became a citizen — lay shining in the sidewalk, surrounded by flowers and a candle.

There is a potency to names. That's why we put them on tombstones. Why almost 3,000 are recited each year at the services for the victims of the 9/11 attacks. In the speech I gave at the event honoring my family, I mentioned the friends of my grandmother, all German refugees I knew during my childhood. Saying their names aloud seemed important. They were not forgotten.

The Stolpersteine project has influenced efforts in the United States to name and memorialize some of the millions who were enslaved and brutalized because of the color of their skin.

In Montgomery, Ala., [the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) opened last year. It is the first memorial to address the lynching of thousands of

African Americans — some 4,400 names are etched on worn steel columns.

The organization's [Community Remembrance Project](#) works to place historical markers and monuments in spaces known to be lynching sites. Bryan Stevenson, the human rights lawyer who founded the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) — the nonprofit behind the Legacy Museum — [told CNN he was inspired by the Stolpersteine](#). Americans “have developed an advanced coping strategy of silence,” he said, on the violence and wrongdoing inflicted for generations on black people.

After people visit the museum, the hope is that they will say “never again,” Stevenson said. That is the rallying cry of Jews about the Holocaust, but Americans “have never been required to say that” about racial injustice, he said.

An American artist, Paul Growald, modeled his [Stopping Stones](#) on the Stolpersteine. His memorials are also small square brass markers that he makes and inscribes with the names of enslaved people and their occupations. They are placed in the area where slaves were forced to work. Nearly 30 markers have been laid in four Northern states. They are also called [Witness Stones](#).

In Germany, my father and I took a day trip to the Jewish boarding school he attended near Potsdam in the mid-1930s; his dormitory was housed in Albert Einstein's summer home after the legendary physicist had left the country. Outside the school is a Stolperstein in remembrance of Gertrud Feiertag, the founder of the school. She was killed in Auschwitz.

While there, we met [Susan Neiman](#), director of the Einstein Forum (which is the caretaker of the house) and a moral philosopher who was born in the U.S. and lives in Berlin. She is the author of “Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil,” set to be published later this month. Neiman said she expects the book to be controversial for suggesting the United States should publicly remember and come to terms with historical wrongdoing in the way the Germans have.

I know that Germany is seeing its own rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic attitudes and incidents. But what my father and I witnessed made us acutely aware of how far behind the U.S. is in recognizing and acknowledging our country's history — especially now, when we are so entangled in a painful national conversation about Civil War statutes, reparations and the continuing impact of the institution of slavery in modern times.

The Stolpersteine are an especially compelling type of memorial — unobtrusive, but scattered everywhere, so even those who don't seek them out are forced to stumble across them.

An American version could address our country's own shameful history. Not to create guilt or to punish, but to do what our family's Stolpersteine ceremony did — to honor, to acknowledge, to name. And then to move forward.

*Alina Tugend is a New York-based journalist.*

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