

THE 'PERFECT' INSTALLATION

For decades I have been thinking – *Perfection is the art of the gods but we are mere humans*. Yet once in an incredibly rare while a work is brought to life making me feel the creator has been touched by – or sleeping with – some god. I am referring to *The Empty Library* by Micha Ullman in Berlin's Opernplatz.

Books present a grand menace to all authoritarian regimes. Tyrannies' leaders view certain, even quite a number of written materials contrary to their objectives as well as an affront to their rights. The problems are as follows: books, through ideas expressed therein, have the power to spur people astray from regimes' dogmas' dictates; they may lead citizens down the incorrect path; those ideas may inspire dissatisfaction, deep discontent, dissent and even insurrection. A charismatic writer may break people's faith in what is holy to the regime's mantra. This is to be avoided at all costs and great measures must be taken to quell all threats to prescribed well-being.

Dangerous writings are terrifying and must be suppressed by all means possible. The ideal solution is to burn them as books are neither phoenixes nor Lazari. Book-torching is censorship by another name. It also degrades authors as well as content – and makes for great publicity (bonfires are exciting and word is sure to spread!). And when large books-numbers disappear forever, we may call this cultural genocide.

Books-destruction has been practised for a long time, in many places around the world. The earliest example I am aware of involves the Qin Dynasty (213 – 210 BC) when books were burnt and scholars buried alive. This makes for a great story but its veracity regarding authors'-immolation is dubious. The Library of Baghdad was pulverized in 1258. Aztec codices were annihilated (1430s) along with the torching of those Mayan (1562). German students held a festival, at a castle in Thuringia, consigning to flames political and literary texts whilst expressing their desire to unite the numerous separate states into one glorious country (1817).

There are more recent examples. In his irrepressibly detailed, thus tedious, biography of James Joyce, Richard Ellmann tells us of *Little Review's* chapter-installments' confiscation of *Ulysses* by the United States Post Office on grounds of obscenity. When the review *Egoist* published, a few years later, the completed *Ulysses*, it was again confiscated in the States. Confiscation resulted in burning – though nowadays I imagine the offending material is shredded. So we have a universal understanding about the need to squash free speech and free thought.

Adolf Hitler was a pyromaniac. During his twelve years in power the Nazis burnt some hundred million books. I thought about putting “million” in italics but then remembered what I had been told as a child upon inquiry – *A million is a number so large it is impossible to imagine it.* The book-burn-binges occurred during more robust years of his despotism as the final ones were more devoted to fire-bombings outside his country – though unsavoury writings were forbidden in all Nazi-occupied countries.

We should all know about his mania for the Aryan stock – people as animals? Thus all Jewish writers' works, no matter what their contents, were automatically consigned to the fire-pyres. Other categories were also found offensive: anarchist screeds; pacifist pussies' scribblings; liberal view-holders' ideologies; socialist and communist doctrines; devotees' waxing on religion – along with sexologists' discoveries and musings. All subversive, anti-Nazi ideology was declared “Action against the un-German Spirit” - the official quote refers to the “true” (Hitler-defined) German values as expressed above. A necessity prevailed to purge the sullied texts in the name of cleansing and purifying the German language.

Some forty thousand writers were thus indicted – among them Hermann Hesse, Alfred Döblin, brothers Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Erich Maria Remarque, Stefan Zweig and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Foreign authors were not omitted - I suppose their language became dirtied in translation: Hemingway, Joyce, Wilde, Dostoyevsky, Nabokov, Tolstoy, Conrad, Huxley, H.G.Wells and Proust.

Authors were deprived of citizenship, jailed, executed – or herded off to concentration camps. Books were banned from libraries, school curricula and personal possession. M. G. Manning, in her fine *When Books Went to War*, writes poignantly of a woman who was tipped off by a friendly Nazi that a raid was imminent. She went home and immediately burned all “Jewish filth” and other books of dubious progeny. The search came the next day and she must have done a good job as her home was declared “clean”. Who wrote that the pen was mightier than the sword? April 17, 1942 was declared Victory Book Day which occasioned Roosevelt to express, with customary eloquence – ... *books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory ... In this war [against tyranny] books are weapons.*

Hitler ascended to the position of Chancellor on January 30, 1933. He certainly did not waste any time putting his credo into action. All that happened on the moist May 10 midnight was a ceremonial celebration. It began with a march through the streets leading to the huge platz, in centre-Berlin – then called Opernplatz (due to the wonderful domed State Opera House) – now named Bebelplatz. The students were bedecked in their university uniforms or insignia and carried tiki torches, shades of Trump-era Charlottesville white supremacists' rancorous full-throated poison. The whole affair was ostensibly organized by the

German Student Union but I highly doubt this. The one doing the orchestrating was undoubtedly Joseph Göbbels, officially the Minister of Public Enlightenment (but known as the Propaganda Minister) who dropped by for a speech, bracketed by students reading out the villainous authors' names and specific reasons why their writings were condemned to literary *auto-da-fé*.

The whole affair was carried out as a ritual. Cars carrying book-stacks were ringed along the square's nearest fringe and students would go and pick up a book and pass it down the line, the one closest to the immolation throwing it in the flames. (Some students, in their excitement, loaded up a hefty pile to consign them directly to the bonfire.) Live music, intoned slogans, singing and "fire-oaths" flavoured the event. These acts were greeted with applause and cheering by the forty thousand gathered onlookers. This spectacle was true entertainment: not only broadcast live over the radio but filmed and shown later in cinemas.

The "perfect" installation is embedded in Bebelplatz, underground, amidst the vast array of cobblestones, close to the former Royal Library, surely by then emptied of its offensive books. It marks the conflagration's location. The perfection lies in its conception, execution, beauty, simplicity and elegance.

Ullman had various options to consider while pondering his commission. What immediately comes to mind: an extinguished pile of burnt volumes (but that would have been too literal); filling all the shelves with copies of one book – *Mein Kampf*, the anti-Jewish, anti-liberal rant so embodying Nazi goals a copy was presented, upon marriage, to each newly wed couple. That solution might have seemed apposite yet would have been perceived by many to be a respectful homage to the Führer. Nonetheless, there would have been sufficient space to accommodate 20 000 books, the low number assigned to the whipfired books-number – but, then, who was counting amidst this controlled free-for-all?

Instead, the (appropriately Israeli) Ullman landed upon a conception much more pure. *The Empty Library* consists of a 22 by 22-foot square room in a library, lined on all sides with equi-coloured pristine-white shelves bordering the same-coloured floors and ceiling. It is inaccessible, hermetically sealed though it has a door within one of the shelves. The room is covered by a thick glass-plate. One must never walk across this glass. What it covers is sacred.

I was once in Berlin for only a couple of days, but had the good sense to take a long guided walking-tour through the city. So I had the great privilege of sitting down and staring at this cubicle of almost-emptiness. I was chilled by its eerie and terrifying profundity. I was awed by its simplicity, its sheer beauty. That was ten years ago – and I have been haunted by it ever since. When a friend went there for an extended stay, I forcefully instructed her, as I exhort you now – *Once there, you must go and see this so-easy-to-miss installation. It is the most*

stunning thing in all Berlin.

Beside this marvel, affixed to cobblestones, is a small bronze plaque with a quote by Heine – *This is just a prelude. When they burn books, they will, in the end, burn people.* You might argue that Heine was not entirely prescient as most Jews met their deaths in gas-chambers – though the argument weakens when you consider holocaust is a word difficult to define, having various, though associated meanings, including 18th Century Oxford English Dictionary's - *violent deaths of large groups of people.* Its origin is apparently *Olah* (Hebrew), later becoming *Holokauston* (Greek), both meaning - *completely burnt offering to God.* And the God of the moment was none other than Adolf Hitler.

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