

# "Why can't we use a flower?"

## An Interview with Dani Karavan about the Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma in Berlin

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Berlin

"The flower-changing ceremony every day at 1 PM is accompanied by the sound of a single violin note, and has been meticulously observed since the unveiling of the memorial site. It's like a prayer, like Mass; there is a scheduled event at a given hour of the day, every day" (Karavan)

"I came to the place. I always do. I always seek the place and contemplate what the place can do and what its function will be," says artist Dani Karavan. This assertion—partly poetic, faith-oriented, partly concrete, engineering-oriented—seems to hold the secret behind the power embodied in his works.

It may sound like a hackneyed cliché, but Karavan, who

currently stays in Tel Aviv (he divides his life between Tel Aviv and Paris), is a young man of 82. On the morning in which we met to discuss the *Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma* which he designed in Berlin, he was highly energetic. The conversation, held in his quiet crowded studio, was interrupted by several phone calls, following each of which he would declare



Dani Karavan, *Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma*, Berlin, 2012  
Photo: Marko Priske, Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe  
דני קרוון, אנדרטה לסינטי ורומא, ברלין, 2012

# Berlin

that we must finish the interview soon because there's a long day ahead of him. Luckily, this restlessness did not prevent him from unfolding the tortuous story behind the memorial site, inaugurated in the German capital last October.

The memorial—a circular pool with a triangular plinth in the middle, surrounded by flat stones inscribed with the names of several concentration camps—was erected in memory of the gypsies (members of the Roma and Sinti people), who were murdered by the Nazis during World War II. A fresh flower is laid every day on the plinth, whose triangular shape symbolizes the patch which the Nazis "gave" the gypsies. An excerpt from *Auschwitz* by young Sinti Italian poet Santino Spinelli is engraved in a channel around the pool. The 2.8 million Euro budget for the site came from the German government, but while the planning and design were already completed in 1992, the actual construction was delayed due to disagreements, political disputes, and technical problems.

It all started more than twenty years ago, when Germany recognized the genocide of the Roma and Sinti, and the Reichstag approved the construction of a site in their memory. In 1992, Romani Rose, leader of the Central Council of Sinti and Roma in Germany, approached Karavan and asked him to design the site. Several years earlier Karavan had completed the design of the *Way of Human Rights* in Nuremberg, a massive monument whose components carry articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a conversation, Karavan admits that his being Jewish and Israeli played a part in his selection, noting that part of his family perished in the Holocaust. "I feel very close to their tragedy," he said in an interview for *Business Week* on the unveiling day.

The chosen site, near the corner of Scheidemannstraße and Ebertstraße, on the north-eastern corner of the vast Tiergarten park in the center of Berlin, is located next to the monument commemorating the gays and lesbians persecuted by the Nazis, only a few hundred meters from Peter Eisenman's renowned *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, and across the street from the parliament buildings: the Bundestag and the Reichstag. With the exception of *Passages: Homage to Walter Benjamin* (1990-94) in the Spanish town of Portbou, where he was invited to choose the exact spot in which the sculpture would be erected, he always works in the area allotted by the commissioners, in this case—a small clearing allotted to the Roma by the German government.

"I realized one thing," Karavan explains. "It's in the Reichstag, which is visited daily by thousands, and many people will come to it due to the location. I want to make something

that people will see." On the other hand, "if 500 people fill this little square, they won't be able to see anything, so I must stop the people at a certain spot. How do I do that? By means of water. The water will protect my idea: one flower which is replaced daily."

**So the pool was intended to make people look at the flower, which is the heart of the matter?**

"Precisely. First, to stop them, to make them stand in a circle, to create a gathering. The heart of the work is the flower."

Karavan, a painter by training, is known as an environmental sculptor who works with eternal and much heavier materials than a single flower. His monuments and sculptures in Israel and the world are characterized by use of marble, concrete, and iron, and usually extend over large areas and reach heights, but the idea of using flowers, which are ostensibly ephemeral and short-lived, has been nestling in his mind for several years. Karavan was the only Israeli artist invited to compete for the Holocaust memorial, ultimately designed by Eisenman in the center of Berlin. His idea was to create a field of yellow flowers imitating the yellow patch worn by the Jews in the Holocaust. For him, the fact that it was a monument that changes with the seasons—covered with snow in winter and with buds in the spring—was the crux of the matter: the eternal nature of memory.

Thus, a central part of the Roma memorial is the permanent daily replacement of the flower: "In order to change the flower, it has to be placed on a dry surface. It cannot float on the water," Karavan explains. "I don't want them to go into the water to change it once a day or twice a week, therefore it has to disappear under ground." A subterranean infrastructure was built for that purpose, including pumps and various installations beneath the pool.

The flower-changing ceremony, he says, has been strictly observed since the unveiling. "I was asked whether I was confident they'd do that, and I said: 'If they do it in the opening ceremony, they won't be able to avoid doing it the next day.' Micha Ullman [who created the sunken *Bibliothek* (1995) in Berlin's Bebelplatz—R.S.] said it was the first sculpture he knew which was also an event."

This was exactly his intention: "I didn't want something that you see and know it's always the same. Here you know there is a change. You know that if you come at a certain hour, something happens. Today, people come at one o'clock to see the replacement of the flower. It's like a prayer, like Mass; there is an event scheduled at a given hour of the day, and



Dani Karavan, *Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma*, Berlin, 2012  
Photo: Fridolin freudenfett (Peter Kuley) [CC-BY-SA-3.0], via Wikimedia Commons  
דני קרובן, אנדרטה לסינטי ורומא, ברלין, 2012

that event works," he explains. To complement the symbolic dimension of this minimalistic ceremony, the flower-changing is accompanied by a single violin note, which Karavan defines as "lamentation."

**My impression is that the gist of your work is absence. Less construction, more reduction. Was that conscious and intentional?**

"That's true. Everything is flat and empty; there's virtually nothing there. I don't know whether it was conscious or intentional, but I do think that the place, primarily, dictates a large part of my work. They were given the place first, and only then did I realize how significant it was, because of the location and its minimalism. It's hard to explain, but I had a feeling it should lie low rather than aim high up."

Nevertheless, he says it was rather the technical and budgetary constraints that "upgraded" the monument. In the original plan, the depth of the pool was supposed to be half a meter, but the people in charge on behalf of the municipality objected for budgetary reasons (the water in the pool is heated and flowing even when everything around is snowy and frozen), therefore the final depth is only 17 cm. Moreover, he wanted the water to be dark and function as a mirror. "Because it's a mirror, it's reflective; all of a sudden, the place reflects the

Reichstag building. The reflection was spawned by the desire to convey the feeling that there was a pit in the ground, and it also reflects the people. Every visitor to the place becomes a part of the memorial, and is in fact buried in it. Things follow from one another in all of my works."

This contingency often surprises Karavan himself. "When I saw the Reichstag triangle reflected in the pool, next to the triangle of the flower, I had shivers down my spine. I should have planned this, but this is exactly the kind of upgrading I was talking about. If the idea you follow is right, the environment will support you."

The willingness to leave room for contingency may be what transforms his works from architecture to poetry. "I do plan some of the things," he hurries to add reservation, "such as the angle at which the sun shines on it. I work a lot with that. Amnon Barzel once said that I 'work with materials of nature and memory.' That's exactly what I do."

"Why do we need iron, bronze, marble, granite, concrete; why can't we use a flower? Why can't a flower be as strong as all these materials? They say 'It's not durable, it's not eternal.' so let's make the flower durable and bring it anew every day. Just like the sun that returns every day to sketch lines on my works, and the wind that blows every day into the pipes, making them play music, and the water that flows every day, as long as it is channeled," he concludes with a smile. ♦