



NATIONAL HOLOCAUST NAMES MEMORIAL

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Executive Summary

In 2013, the City of Amsterdam decided to build a memorial to the Dutch Jews, Sinti and Roma, who were murdered during the Holocaust. Circa 102,000 — between 75 and 80 percent of the Netherlands' Jewish population — were killed during World War II, the highest rate in Western Europe. The design by the renowned architect Daniel Libeskind invoked substantial controversy among the city's residents, mainly due to concerns about foot traffic, public safety, and the reduction of green spaces in urban areas. Although the dispute hindered construction for years, the memorial was completed and opened in 2021.

Background

'More than 71 years after the Holocaust, there's no memorial in this city that is significant,' Mr. Libeskind said in a 2016 article for the *New York Times*. 'And if you think that the per capita murder of Jews in Holland was one of the highest in Europe, it's time, it's timely, it's urgent. Especially now when we see the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe, we see the attempt to delegitimize Israel. It's not just about the past, it's about the future and the present.'¹

Plans for the Holocaust Names Memorial started in 2006 by Jacques Grishaver, chairman of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee. In 2013, the decision was made to build a Holocaust monument in Amsterdam with Daniel Libeskind as the architect, who had indicated his interest in designing the memorial two years earlier. Libeskind, a successful Polish-American architect born in 1946, is a son of Holocaust survivors. He designed the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Holocaust Memorial in Columbus, Ohio, among others.² In 2007, fundraising took place, and Libeskind presented his first design for its location in the Wertheimpark in June 2014.³ His design for the location in the Weesperstraat was presented in December 2016. Although the official construction began on June 19, 2020, with the support of Femke Halsema, Mayor of Amsterdam, and Jacques Grishaver, the work on the memorial started in 2017 with the production of the bricks.⁴ Construction was completed in 2021, and the memorial was unveiled on September 19 by King Willem Alexander of the Netherlands and Mr Grishaver.⁵

The memorial is situated along the Weesperstraat, an essential axis within the Jewish Cultural Quarter. Adjacent to the Hermitage Museum, it stands close to important Jewish cultural institutions such as the Jewish Historical Museum and the Portuguese Synagogue. The 1,550 square meter memorial incorporates four volumes that represent the letters in the Hebrew word לזכר ('lizkor') meaning 'In Memory of.' There is a labyrinth of passages articulated by two-meter-high brick walls carrying the message of Remembrance. Each of the four volumes is crafted from mirror-finished stainless steel that hovers above the walls of individually stacked bricks. The use of steel and brick symbolises the link between the Dutch past and present. There are over 102,000 bricks, each inscribed with the name of a Dutch Jewish, Roma, or Sinti person who lost their lives in the Holocaust, as well as 1000 blank bricks that memorialise the unknown victims.⁶ The bricks were provided for free by a company called Rodruza from Nijmegen.⁷

¹ Nina Siegal, "Holocaust Memorial is Closer to Reality in Amsterdam," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2016.

² "Daniel Libeskind ontwerpt Namenmonument," *Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland*, January 19, 2014.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Mijlpaal voor Namenmonument," *Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland*, June 19, 2020 ;

⁵ "Dutch Holocaust Memorial of Names unveiled," *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*, October 4, 2021.

⁶ "Dutch Holocaust Memorial of Names," *Studio Libeskind*.

⁷ "Mijlpaal voor Namenmonument," *Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland*, June 19, 2020.

The official unveiling of the monument was deeply emotional for many. Just before the memorial's opening, Jacques Grishaver expressed the overwhelming initial reactions and emotions that the memorial sparked. 'That endless row of names, you don't get through it easily,' he stated in an article for the *NL Times*. 'One stone bears the name of a six-month-old child, who was gassed in mother's arms. Next to it is the name of a 98-year-old, who could have been the grandfather. You can think of a whole story.'⁸ He also noted that many in the Dutch Jewish community had been anxious for the opening of the memorial, but for some, it came too late; 'Many people who were waiting for it are no longer here.'⁹ Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who also participated in the unveiling ceremony, reiterated the importance of the memorial and how it served as a monument of remembrance; 'This monument says: No, we will not forget you. No, we will not allow your names to be erased. No, evil does not have the last word.'¹⁰ The memorial is the first — and currently only — monument in the Netherlands that includes the names of all Dutch Jews, Roma, and Sinti who were murdered during the Holocaust.

History of the Contestation

In 2015, locals complained about the memorial's construction in Wertheimpark. Seeking to keep their relatively secluded streets off the tourist track, plan opponents hung 'Trees, Not Buses' banners from Wertheimpark's fences, referencing the 200,000 tourists projected to visit the memorial each year. 'The opponents are mostly uninformed and their arguments are based on nothing,' said Naomi Koster, secretary of the Amsterdam-based Dutch Auschwitz Committee. 'It's a small group of highly educated people — lawyers, journalists, etc. — who are not against the memorial itself but would rather not see it in their own backyard.' She noted that the completed memorial will fill just 9% of the existing park, which will be expanded onto an adjacent field to accommodate the memorial. 'The park is now mainly used as a spot to walk dogs, and the opponents of the memorial have said it's not pleasant to be confronted with names of Holocaust victims. It's not a reminder that anyone wants in their backyard.' Wertheimpark is already home to an obscure, almost invisible Auschwitz memorial. Installed in 1993, 'Broken Mirrors' is composed of six cracked mirror panels, under which an urn with the ashes of victims from Auschwitz was buried. 'It is important to have the memorial erected in this particular park, because the ashes of Holocaust victims are already buried beneath the Auschwitz monument,' said Koster. 'The Memorial of Names will function as the tombstone on the grave of all these victims,' she said.¹¹

⁸ "Amsterdam Holocaust memorial to open on Sunday," *NL Times*, September 15, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ohanes, "Dutch Holocaust memorial opens after legal deadlock," *DW*, September 20, 2021.

¹¹ Matt Lebovic, "'Just not in my backyard' for planned Dutch Holocaust memorial," *Times of Israel*, May 3, 2015.

In May 2016, the Weesperstraat was announced as the new location of the memorial.¹² In October 2018, a petition was signed by 54 residents, including some Jewish people, who opposed the plan. They insisted it would mean 'the disappearance of the already scarce greenery' from the street that the city set aside for the monument. The critics said they favour commemorating the Holocaust in principle, but the city has not consulted the community and other citizens on the design. Ronny Naftaniel, the executive vice chair of CEJI, a Brussels-based Jewish organisation promoting tolerance through education, supported the idea of the national monument; he nonetheless said that its critics have a point. 'It's a very prominent monument, and that's appropriate given the magnitude of the crime,' he said. 'But not wanting a colossus like that in your backyard isn't necessarily the result of insensitivity.'¹³ Local residents had objected that the monument was too large for the site in the Weesperplantsoen Gardens, that a large number of visitors would cause a nuisance, and that they were not sufficiently consulted. Their lawyer, Aletta Blomberg said that the group felt it was 'a private initiative for a national Holocaust monument in public space, financed with 90% public money, but where there was no public consultation.'¹⁴

Besides the monument's location, there are also some questions about the names on the memorial. The names of all Dutch victims of the Holocaust without a grave will appear on the memorial, including those who died in or on their way to concentration and extermination camps. This concerns over 102,000 Dutch Jews and 220 Sinti and Roma. However, this does not include groups such as German Jews living in the Netherlands, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals or people who died in Westerbork Concentration Camp. Some people argue that these groups belong on the memorial as well.¹⁵ However, the memorial includes 1000 empty bricks, which can be filled with the names of as-yet unrecognised victims.

There were public safety concerns before the opening of the memorial, and two days before the unveiling, the city of Amsterdam issued an emergency decree in fear of renewed protests.¹⁶ The city's Mayor Femke Halsema more specifically issued a ban on the monument's neighbours from watching the unveiling from their balconies and further ordered that windows and terraces facing the memorial 'remain shuttered for security and "public order" reasons.'¹⁷

¹² Matt Lebovic, "Amsterdam finally to move forward on Holocaust Memorial," *Times of Israel*, May 15, 2016.

¹³ Cnaan Liphshiz, "Why are people protesting Holocaust memorials in Holland and Belgium?," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 23, 2018.

¹⁴ Senzay Boztas, "Go-ahead for Holocaust wall in Amsterdam as court throws out objections," *Dutch News*, July 9, 2019.

¹⁵ Jim Terlingen, "Kanttekeningen bij het Amsterdamse Namenmonument," *Nieuws 30*, September 9, 2019.

¹⁶ Ohanes, "Dutch Holocaust memorial opens after legal deadlock," *DW*, September 20, 2021.

¹⁷ Liphshiz, "Amsterdam's latest Holocaust memorial features the names of 102,000 victims," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 20, 2021.

Decision-Making Processes

After an extensive investigation of possible locations after the protests by locals near Wertheimpark, the Mayor and Municipal Executive of Amsterdam decided in May 2016 that the Weesperstraat would be the new location.¹⁸ The city council approved this in July 2018. Acting Mayor Jozias van Aartsen said that the complaints did not weigh more than the importance of the memorial.¹⁹

On May 28, 2019, the Amsterdam court ruled against the complaint about the memorial construction in the Weesperplantsoen Gardens. According to the judge, the monument's importance outweighs the local residents' objections. The monument's design paid sufficient attention to safety and road safety. The sidewalk along the monument is wide enough, and 'there will be sufficient bicycle racks.' There are enough open spaces, and 'sufficient measures are being taken to guarantee safety,' the court said.²⁰ The locals appealed the case to the Council of State the following year, confirming the earlier court ruling. The Council found no faults in the way the Amsterdam Municipal executive handled the decision-making process and the granting of a construction permit.²¹ In a final statement, a representative of the opposing residents accepts the verdict 'so be it' and summarises their objection to the monument as stemming from an unwillingness of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee to found a national monument 'without any constructive input from others.'²²

Summary and Conclusions

The need for a significant national Holocaust monument was strong, and thus, it was decided in 2013 to build a Holocaust Names Monument in Amsterdam. However, disputes about the location caused years of delay. Moreover, there are questions about which names are to be commemorated on it. After local protests, the first location was rejected. The second and current location was also met with local complaints, but the court ruled that the memorial could be constructed. The history of the Holocaust in the Netherlands is not contested, with all parties involved stressing the need for a Holocaust memorial. However, how the Holocaust is memorialised is contested. Residents' opposition objected to the monument on essentially practical grounds but also revealed many diverging opinions on how to memorialise the Holocaust in the Netherlands.

¹⁸ "College B&W gemeente Amsterdam maakt voorkeurslocatie bekend," *Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland*, May 13, 2016.

¹⁹ Patrick Meershoek, "Raad steunt Namenmonument op Weesperplantsoen," *Het Parool*, July 5, 2018.

²⁰ Janene Pieters, "Holocaust Monument Can Be Built in Amsterdam, Court Rules," *NL Times*, July 9, 2019.

²¹ Council of State, "Uitspraak 201906164/1/R1", October 28 2020

²² Petra Catz, "Reactie op de uitspraak Raad van State inzake het Namenmonument", October 28 2020

Research contributed by Aivin Gast, Maarten Jonker and Miranda Robson.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

Institute for Historical Justice &
Reconciliation
contestedhistories.org

EuroClio - European Association of
History Educators
Bankplein 2, 2585 EV
The Hague, The Netherlands
+31 70 3817836
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

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