



# Counting to Six Million: Collecting Projects and Holocaust Memorialization

Daniel H. Magilow

## ABSTRACT

*This essay concerns memorial collecting, a new trend in Holocaust education and memorialization whereby groups, often student groups, accumulate six million of a particular object (such as paper clips, buttons, or shoes) to symbolize the murdered. Rather than “work” through the past, memorial collecting encourages one to “play” through it, and thereby redirects attention away from finished memorials toward the processes of memorialization themselves. Nevertheless, official institutions of Holocaust memory often refuse to support memorial collections and accuse them of trivializing the Holocaust. Using the example of the “Paper Clip Project” (the Children’s Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell, Tennessee), I examine some of these controversies and what they imply for Holocaust memory.*

*Key words: American Holocaust memorials, Holocaust pedagogy, collecting, Tennessee*

**T**o speak of Whitwell, Tennessee, and the Holocaust in the same sentence might sound at first like a deeply counterintuitive proposition. Whitwell is a rural community of 1,600 near Chattanooga. Most of its residents are white, evangelical Christians. No Jews live there, nor are any of its residents Holocaust survivors or camp liberators. Unlike, for instance, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which was one of the secret sites for nuclear research and the Manhattan Project, Whitwell played no such significant role in the American war

---

Daniel H. Magilow, “Counting to Six Million: Collecting Projects and Holocaust Memorialization,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 23–39

---

effort during World War II. Yet one can speak of Whitwell and the Holocaust together because this small Tennessee town is the home of the Children's Holocaust Memorial. Since 2001, a boxcar like those that once transported Jews to their annihilation in Poland has stood in front of Whitwell Middle School. Today it is filled not with prisoners but with 11 million paper clips that Whitwell students collected to honor Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other victims of the Nazi genocide. Since this collecting project began in 1998, it has received numerous awards and accolades from the Anti-Defamation League, the Anne Frank Center, and other official institutions of Holocaust memory.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it inspired the documentary *Paper Clips* and two children's books.<sup>2</sup>

The project started when the parent of a student at Whitwell Middle School urged school officials to address more actively issues of multiculturalism and prejudice in the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> The school decided to offer a voluntary, after-school class about intolerance and its roots. But the class did not study the American Civil Rights Movement, even though many of that movement's key events occurred within easy driving distance of Whitwell. Instead, the class studied the genocide of European Jewry. The school's logic, correct or not, was that the Holocaust's root causes are evident in different historical situations. The Holocaust represents a kind of "worst case scenario" whose lessons apply not only to German-Jewish relations in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s but also to intercultural encounters in America today.

For the children at Whitwell Middle School, grasping the Holocaust's enormity took the form of a bluntly concrete question: "How many is six million?" To answer it, one student proposed that the class collect six million of something. The idea was well received. At first, the students considered buttons and pennies. But they eventually settled on paper clips. They reasoned, based on Internet research, that paper clips were appropriate because they had symbolized resistance in Norway during World War II. The students learned from the Internet—inaccurately—that non-Jewish Norwegians subtly protested the rounding up and deportation of their Jewish neighbors by wearing paper clips, which Norwegians mythologize—also inaccurately—as their own invention.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the Whitwell middle-schoolers began to collect paper clips by the thousands. They set up a website to solicit paper clips and to publicize the project. They wrote to celebrities, including Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, Bill Cosby, Tom Hanks, Tom Bosley, Stephen Spielberg, Henry Winkler, and even Elie Wiesel, all of whom responded with letters and paper clips. Then Washington, D.C.-based journalists Peter and Dagmar

Schroeder became involved. They helped publicize the project in the American and German media and later assisted in locating a Nazi-era boxcar and arranging for its transportation to Whitwell. By the time the Children's Holocaust Memorial was dedicated on November 9, 2001, three years after it started, close to 30 thousand letters and over 25 million paper clips had arrived in Whitwell.<sup>5</sup>

The memorial in Whitwell is not an isolated phenomenon. Similar projects have proliferated across the United States and, in at least one case, in England. All of them follow the same basic format of amassing millions of inanimate objects for use in either a one-time memorializing event, such as a charitable donation, or a permanent memorial sculpture or installation. For example:

- The Holocaust Museum in Houston is currently sponsoring the "I Never Saw Another Butterfly Project," an undertaking inspired by the poem "The Butterfly" by Theresienstadt prisoner Pavel Friedman. According to the museum website, "1,500,000 innocent children perished in the Holocaust. In an effort to remember them, the Holocaust Museum Houston is collecting 1.5 million handmade paper butterflies. The butterflies will eventually comprise a breath-taking exhibition for all to remember."<sup>6</sup>
- The Jewish Federation of Peoria, Illinois, collected six million buttons because "[Their] circular shape represents the cycle of life. Once clothes were unbuttoned at the gates of the concentration camps, people were left vulnerable. As the fabric unraveled and became a pile of threads, the buttons endured."<sup>7</sup> The buttons are now displayed in a permanent installation at a Peoria shopping mall.
- To mark Holocaust Memorial Day in Kirklees, England, on January 25, 2006, the Kirklees Community History Service, West Yorkshire artist Antonia Stowe, and local students collaborated to collect buttons in the "Six Million Plus Project." The installation and accompanying testimonies are intended to "illustrate the sheer industrial scale of the murder of millions and the continued oppression of minority groups around the world." The buttons themselves symbolize diversity because "They come in all shapes, sizes, and colours just like people, and they remind us of the clothes forcibly removed from victims as they entered the death camps."<sup>8</sup>
- Jessica Feuerstein, a teenager in Rockland County, New York, spearheaded a drive to collect six million pennies for charity as a mitzvah (good deed) project. She reasoned that "a penny these days has very little value—there isn't anything you can buy with one. Until now. A penny saved can represent a human soul that perished in the Holocaust. Each penny can help the memory of that soul live on forever and help us all keep the memory of the Holocaust alive."<sup>9</sup>

[25]

*Counting to  
Six Million*

•  
Daniel H.  
Magilow



- Synagogue congregations in Pennsylvania and Costa Rica are collaborating on the “Shoes for Shoah” project. Its goal is “to collect six million shoes for redistribution at minimal or no cost to those who are in need in Central America. A tag is attached to each pair of shoes, explaining to the wearer that each shoe has been donated in honor of one man, woman, or child who perished in the Holocaust.”<sup>10</sup>

These examples—and by my count there are at least a dozen such projects—suggest that memorial collecting has emerged in recent years as a distinct new form of Holocaust memory. In this new mode of memorialization, two obsessions have converged. The obsessive childhood tendency to gather, arrange, and play with stamps, coins, rocks, or other objects has been redirected to the Holocaust, an event whose grip on the American public imagination has itself become obsessive.

Memorial collections have, however, sparked enormous controversy. Even critics who appreciate their good intentions deride them as childish, trivializing, historically inaccurate kitsch that they tolerate only because it is well intended and because “after all, they’re only kids.”<sup>11</sup> Such critics indignantly point out that people are not paper clips, buttons, or shoes. Although some official institutions of Holocaust memory have praised the Whitwell project, others, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Tennessee Commission on Holocaust Education, refuse to endorse such projects or do so only with reservations. Meanwhile, the collectors stress just how positively their projects have affected their own lives and communities. Linda Hooper, the principal of Whitwell Middle School, stresses that “the Paper Clip project has allowed our students, staff, and community to forcefully confront our own prejudices” and that it has “been wonderful in terms of broadening our experiences and knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

In this article, I examine this controversial trend through the case study of the Children’s Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell. In the first part, I consider collecting as a unique form of consumption. I then discuss critiques of memorial collecting through the example of the Whitwell Paper Clip Project. I propose how we might reinterpret memorial collecting not as something that trivializes the Holocaust but as an expression of how a new generation is relating to an increasingly distant event. Although memorial collecting projects incorporate boxcars, stars of David, and other familiar Holocaust tropes, they use these well-known icons differently. The Holocaust becomes a collective community-building exercise in which the act of memorializing itself becomes more important than any finished memorial. Critics may attack memorial collecting projects because they engage genocide in a childish way,

but, as I hope to show, the value of these projects lies precisely in the juvenile mode in which they approach a profoundly adult subject.

[27]

### Collecting as a Form of Consumption

*Counting to  
Six Million*

●  
Daniel H.  
Magilow

To understand better the novel and progressive dimensions of this new memorial form, it is first necessary to define and specify the concept of “collecting.” What counts as a collection? And what separates collecting from hoarding or warehousing? Russell Belk, a scholar of marketing at the University of Utah, has synthesized a rich critical literature on collecting in his definition of it as “the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences.”<sup>13</sup> Collecting is a form of commodity fetishism, whereby people attribute human, symbolic, and even magical properties to inanimate objects.<sup>14</sup> The objects lose their use as commodities (that is, their use value) and concurrently gain exchange value as symbols, at least in the eyes of a certain community of collectors. A collection, in other words, consists not only of a set of objects but also of the collector’s intense affective investment in them. A collection comes into existence when the collector says it does.

Memorial collections unify the collected objects in a special memorial context. In Whitwell, for instance, millions of paper clips are now together in a boxcar. It has thereby figuratively reunited the murdered in a consecrated space. The memorial collector treats the collected object as though it were a relic, even though it lacks any direct, organic connection to the murdered along the lines of a saint’s bone, a piece of wood from the cross, or, more appropriate to the Holocaust, a leather shoe, a lock of hair, or a pair of eyeglasses. On its own, the amassing of large numbers of everyday objects might be considered quaint or idiosyncratic. Yet the treatment of everyday objects as though they were relics has led critics and other outsiders to deem memorial collecting obsessive, blasphemous, or even pathological.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we must remember that any relationship exists not between the coins, buttons, or paper clips themselves but in the minds of collectors.

It follows that, if we are to go beyond dismissive normative judgments about memorial collections and yet still engage them critically as something other than just piles of shoes, coins, or paper clips, we must examine them on their own terms, from the collector’s standpoint. In this connection, the concept of the archive provides a useful analytical tool. As historian Peter Fritzsche has argued about the ar-

chive, when we call a particular set of things “a collection,” we posit a whole and interpret its parts as meaningful within a certain history:

[28]

Jewish  
Social  
Studies



Vol. 14  
No. 1

Archives are not comprehensive collections of things, the effects left behind by the dead, nor are they arbitrary accumulations of remnants and leftovers. The archive is the production of the heirs, who must work to find connections from one generation to the next and thereby acknowledge the ongoing disintegration of the past.<sup>16</sup>

A collection is not just a set of random objects; it consists of fragments of a posited whole. Like a time capsule that tries to represent an entire year with artifacts tied to certain events and fashions, every collection implies myriad social, economic, and political relationships between things and the people who collect them. Yet as the mere pieces of an unrecoverable whole, the collection necessarily implies the gaps. Thus, when memorial collections represent the Holocaust as a set of everyday things, they seem to imply that state-planned, factory-style mass murder is itself everyday and that its victims are disposable. Yet, to the collectors, each button or paper clip resembles the surrealist’s found object, at once totally trivial and yet concurrently a portal to the infinitely significant. The discomfort with memorial projects arises from an inability to reconcile the radical incongruity between a profane signifier (a button, a penny, or a paper clip) and a sacred signified (the victims of genocide).<sup>17</sup> Whereas from the collector’s standpoint, the relationship honors victims, to the outsider it can appear arbitrary, improper, and even blasphemous.

### **Critiques of Collections**

Anxiety about the perceived inappropriateness of using ordinary things to symbolize extraordinary events underpins objections to memorial collecting. When critics attack specific projects, they generally object for historical, philosophical, or aesthetic reasons. The criticisms of the Children’s Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell offer a case in point. I must stress that I do not necessarily share these opinions. Nevertheless, they are part of the public discourse on memorial collecting, and as such they deserve to be heard—even if, in my opinion, they miss the point.

The first type of criticism of these projects is the claim that they are based on historically inaccurate information. The Whitwell students collected paper clips because they believed that Norwegians wore them during the Holocaust to show solidarity with their persecuted Jewish countrymen. Yet even Norway’s official Hjemmefront-

museum (Resistance Museum) draws no such connection between Jews and paper clips. The museum's website instead states that, "To demonstrate their loyalty to King and Government, people wore paper clips (symbol of unity) on cuffs and collars."<sup>18</sup> It was not the desire to show solidarity with the Jewish population (which before the war numbered only 1,700) that motivated Norwegians to wear paper clips but, rather, opposition to Vidkun Quisling's Nazi puppet state and allegiance to the exiled King Haakon VII.<sup>19</sup> Norwegians wore paper clips because they were proud to be Norwegians, not because they harbored any particular fondness for their Jewish countrymen. Furthermore, critics note, "Project Paper Clip" was the name of a top-secret Pentagon program to keep Nazi scientists, including some convicted of war crimes, from falling into Soviet hands by whitewashing their tainted records and allowing them to immigrate to the United States after the war.<sup>20</sup> Such historical inaccuracies, detractors argue, show that the Whitwell memorial interprets the Holocaust not as the leveling cataclysm it was but selectively, as an event that can be mined for its redemptive moments and turned into a feel-good story.

Historical issues aside, memorial collecting has been attacked for subscribing to the philosophical fallacy of reification—that is, for treating people like things. Marc Gellman, a rabbi and columnist for *Newsweek*, summarized this sentiment:

I try and fail every year to teach the kids in my synagogue what it meant that 6 million Jews were murdered in four years in the Holocaust of European Jewry. I have put up pictures of more than a hundred Yankee Stadiums filled to capacity. I have filled up a box with 6 million grains of rice. Now I show them the movie about how the kids at the Whitwell Middle School in Tennessee collected 6 million paper clips. All of these audio-visual aids fail utterly, not because of any lack of love, dedication or teaching ability but simply because people are not paper clips, or grains of rice.<sup>21</sup>

Gellman criticizes memorial collections because they assign the properties of concrete objects to abstractions. They treat people not as the complex, contradictory, and inscrutable beings they are but as household objects. To equate people even metaphorically with disposable objects implies that people, like paper clips, can be thrown out after use. Critics like Gellman imply that, by reifying victims, collecting projects do just what the Nazis did: they dehumanize people and treat them as objects. Or as a polemical article in the conservative Jewish online newspaper cynically put it, "a scenario comes to mind wherein someone in need of a paper clip and wanting to save himself two syllables simply asks for a Jew."<sup>22</sup>

[29]

*Counting to  
Six Million*



Daniel H.  
Magilow

The third and most familiar type of critique is based on aesthetics. Memorial collections are regularly disparaged as kitsch—that is, as a kind of representation that panders to common tastes and that, rather than demanding critical reflection or examining virtue, instead praises viewers for already having reflected critically and for already having examined virtue.<sup>23</sup> The category of kitsch implies that art worthy of the name must be difficult to produce and consume. If it is somehow “too easy,” it cedes its aesthetic legitimacy. In his review of *Paper Clips*, the documentary film about the Whitwell project, the film critic for *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott, stresses his annoyance with what he sees as the Whitwell students’ self-satisfied tone: “I found myself bothered by the sense of self-congratulation that radiated through the film, and that seemed to tug against the gravity of the historical cataclysm that the students were meant to be studying.”<sup>24</sup> This self-congratulation materializes as kitsch when the students mount a plaque on the train car that reads: “Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed students can change the world—one class at a time.” Paper clips sent to Whitwell in the form of a paper clip fence surrounding a drawing of the Star of David, a Star of David made of paper clips, and a paper clip menorah exemplify what critics find tasteless about memorial collecting projects. They see them not just as kitsch but as Holocaust kitsch that trivializes genocide and exploits the pain of others for unrelated agendas.

### **The Juvenile Character of Collecting Projects**

I must again stress that I do not entirely agree with these historical, philosophical, and aesthetic criticisms of memorial collections in general and of Whitwell’s Children’s Holocaust Memorial in particular. They overlook the most important aspect of this novel memorial form. Memorial collecting projects are, I submit, not particularly significant for the physical monuments they create. Rather, their importance lies in the community building, critical reflection, and public debate they trigger among literally thousands of participants, both in the United States and abroad. Memorial collecting values the processes of memorialization over memorials themselves, and it does so in a profoundly social and public way. Memory becomes a collective process. In educational theorist Roger I. Simon’s words, “[I]t build[s] a social consensus by invoking iconic memories that mobilize affective structures of identification.”<sup>25</sup> Remembering becomes the occasion for community building and identity formation.

The German-Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin’s writings about



toys, playing, and pedagogy provide a useful interpretive lens through which to better understand memorial collecting's progressive implications. In his 1928 essay "The Cultural History of Toys," Benjamin discusses children's tendency to play with non-playthings—their tendency to find the wrapping paper more appealing than the toy inside. He criticizes the belief that "the imaginative content of a child's toys is what determines his playing." He suggests instead that the opposite is true:

The more authentic [the toys], the less they mean . . . to adults. Because the more appealing toys are, in the ordinary sense of the term, the further they are from genuine playthings; the more they are based on imitation, the further away they lead us from real, living play.<sup>26</sup>

Here and elsewhere, Benjamin suggests that the less toys appear to correspond to something in the "real world," the more children value them as toys. The objects that children gather for memorial collections were never produced as toys but rather as currency, office supplies, clothing, or other literal or symbolic commodities.<sup>27</sup>

Memorial collections do not seek to represent the Holocaust mimetically, in a manner "true to nature." Rather, the individual objects become the medium for an exercise of childhood fantasy through play. In play, children use objects to create a rich network of meanings between what they collect and what they imagine these objects symbolize. The toy, here the paper clip or penny, is merely a means to the end of a different kind of relationship with history. Consequently, unlike memorials that grow old and illegible, collecting projects do not treat trauma as something entirely separate, distanced, and relevant only as an object of reflection. To the contrary—the collecting of material objects connects the past with the present.

Collecting is thus literally a learning experience. Indeed, Benjamin's ideas about the pedagogic value of this kind of play find implicit support in the writings of the Swiss philosopher of education Jean Piaget and his students. To quote Margaret Donaldson, one of Piaget's interpreters, experience to Piaget involves "the acquiring of new knowledge through acting upon objects."<sup>28</sup> Because memorial collections involve discrete, tangible, material objects in the here and now, they emphasize the past's literal presence as an active partner in the construction of historical experience. Removed from everyday use, the collected object takes on added value as a teaching tool—a kind of educational toy.

Specifically juvenile qualities of memorial collections reveal them as precisely a form of childhood play. These projects are at once highly tactile, highly symbolic, and highly obsessive in nature. They allow chil-

[31]

*Counting to  
Six Million*



Daniel H.  
Magilow

dren who have not fully developed their powers of reasoning and abstraction to learn through their sense of touch. Rather than simply look and listen, children manipulate and play with objects to literally and figuratively “grasp” trauma through its symbols. Aside from this material basis in things, the juvenile character of collecting projects also extends to their motivations. Children transform everyday objects into symbols. They invest them with metaphysical significance, even if it is based on an immature, oversimplified, and highly imaginative understanding of the world.<sup>29</sup> As an exercise of childhood fantasy, this form of play appears entirely reasonable to the child. To the adult, however, it seems irrational and historically inaccurate, but it is tolerated because the gesture appears authentic.<sup>30</sup>

Memorial collecting projects are, moreover, juvenile in a psychoanalytic sense. Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud’s disciple and biographer, interpreted childhood collecting as a pathological symptom of his mentor’s theory of anal-eroticism. Jones saw collecting as a form of perverse sexuality. Collectors, he claimed, are anal retentive, and collecting is a narcissistic attempt to fashion the external world in one’s own image. Collectors obsess over objects and how best to collect, clean, organize, store, and display them. For all of its problematic assumptions, Jones’s Freudian model opens the possibility that collecting memorials are a form of collective neurosis. Perhaps children seek through their collecting to eradicate symbolically the belligerent ways of the adult world and to heal the wounds the grown-up world has produced. Collecting becomes the vehicle to work through a received trauma—or, rather, to play through it—and clean up its figurative messiness. Yet there will always be one more coin, one more stamp, or one more paper clip to collect.

These characteristics of memorial collecting projects—their interactivity, their basis in childhood fantasy, and their obsessive-compulsiveness—suggest that, according to Benjamin’s category of play, “juvenile” need not be understood pejoratively. Rather, it suggests a broad network of meanings, some quite contradictory, including youthful, child-oriented, curious, playful, rebellious, authentic, false, and tending towards fantasy. Memorial collections merit our attention precisely because such projects are not yet assimilated into the adult world’s ideological, behavioral, and aesthetic norms. To adults, the relationship between the collected object and fantasy is arbitrary and irrational. What is important is what one does with them. To the child, however, such concerns are not necessarily relevant—the collecting itself is the point. In Whitwell, for instance, the idea to store the paper clips in a boxcar was not originally a part of the project. It

came about almost as an afterthought when the students and their teachers realized they needed to store their paper clips somewhere.

[33]

### Memorial Collecting as a Site for Historical Reflection

*Counting to  
Six Million*

●  
Daniel H.  
Magilow

The many letters that accompanied paper clips to Whitwell from around the world, but in particular from Germany, dramatically illustrate how this kind of project provides a space for different kinds of associations with the past. The Paper Clip Project's essence lies in the way it recovers diverse flashes of experience, which might otherwise have been lost forever, and unites them in a collective. Although some letters criticize the project, point out Americans' own racially motivated injustices, or, in a few cases, deny that the Holocaust took place, such missives represent only a tiny fraction of the letters. Most of the letters fulfill one or more of several different functions: they praise the Whitwell students for their undertaking and encourage them to continue; recount personal histories related to the Holocaust; describe how donated paper clips commemorate specific individuals; connect the Holocaust to contemporary politics; or reflect on the processes of memorialization. In some cases, paper clips become part of works of art, many of which depict Stars of David, or the inspiration for drawings or poems.

Although it is impossible to survey the range of letters without reproducing the entire archive, several examples from Germany reproduced in the book *Das Büroklammer Projekt: Schüler schaffen ein Holocaust Mahnmahl* graphically illustrate that each recounted experience links the past and present, often in a unique and deeply personal manner. In one letter, for instance, a 74-year-old German woman from Grimma, southeast of Leipzig, revisits the ways her life intersected with Germany's fascist past. She recounts the fate of her father's Jewish business associate whom her own family sometimes invited to dinner before the war. On these occasions, the letter writer recalls, her mother cooked kosher food, and she was surprised that the Jewish guests were allowed to keep their "little caps" on during the meal. The Nazis tormented this family on Kristallnacht and eventually forced them to immigrate to France, from which they were later probably deported to death camps. The letter writer laments that, in the minds of many, little has changed. She recounts a conversation at a birthday party in 1999 that occurred just after the death of Ignaz Bubis, the former chairman of the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland (Central Council of Jews in Germany). When she mentioned that Bubis died, the host responded "Six million weren't enough" but

[34]

Jewish  
Social  
Studies



Vol. 14  
No. 1

added that he would “only talk like that among friends.” The letter writer then comments on her shame at not having left the party immediately and asks that her paper clips be thought of as commemorating the Jewish family from her childhood.<sup>31</sup>

Another paper clip donor, this one from Leipzig, used the paper clips he enclosed not as an occasion to explain his own history but as the opportunity to meditate on the persistence of the past:

These paper clips are definitely paper clips from the Nazi period. They were in official files that I found ten years ago in an abandoned building in the north German city of Greifswald. These paper clips belonged to the National Socialist system. They simply did their duty. They held together pieces of writing that were stamped with swastikas and that concluded not with the civilized salutation “with friendly greetings” [*mit freundlichen Grüßen*] but rather with “Heil Hitler.”<sup>32</sup>

Other letters articulate similar sentiments about how the past has left its mark on the present not only through material objects but on language as well. One paper clip donor noted that German retains idiomatic phrases such as “bis zur Vergasung,” literally “until gassing” but figuratively used to mean “sick and tired of.”<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, a letter from Velden in Bavaria uses paper clips to make a very different association. It mentions that the Whitwell project’s focus on an object of the modern office sparked the letter writer to reflect not on the past but on Germany’s present political asylum process, which bureaucratically reduces immigrants to mere stacks of legal documents and photographs. All of these letter writers stress that every clip implies a history in its very materiality as a physical object.

Still other letters reflect on the complexities of creating memorials. A 16-year-old from Jesewitz wrote to the Whitwell students in November 1999, immediately after she had visited Auschwitz with a school group. “The most gruesome thing was the room in which all of the prisoners’ shoes or hair were stored,” she wrote, presumably realizing that her paper clips would, when collected en masse, both echo and symbolically reconstruct Auschwitz’s piles of looted objects.<sup>34</sup> Another letter writer said that rules concerning international postage and tariffs prevented him from sending as many paper clips as he would have liked, and thus “Both of the enclosed clips should symbolize the thousands of paper clips that I would have liked to have sent.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the paper clips, already arbitrary signifiers, become themselves symbols of other symbols.

In short, each paper clip represents a highly personal engagement

with history that then disappears into an anonymous pile. Because the Holocaust is spatially, geographically, and emotionally distant from the collectors' own lives, it is not a trauma that children born long after the Holocaust can work through in the same ways that those who lived through it can. Children cannot work through the past, but they can—and do—play through it. As the Leipzig letter shows, far from mere kitsch, the paper clips condense complex layers of history, each paper clip sparking a different narrative. Some paper clips were accompanied by remorseful letters from former soldiers who apologized for not being heroes. Other letters are rife with historical errors, contradictions, and blurred memories. Yet together they map a rich network of historical experiences of the Holocaust and its aftermath, in Europe and elsewhere. Paper clips are merely the medium of this exploration.

On the other side of the ocean, among the Whitwell students themselves, the project's effects on historical and political sensibilities remain to be seen. Although the film *Paper Clips* teems with students, parents, and other members of the Whitwell community who stress just how much the project affected how they understand ethnic and religious differences, such excitement might simply have been a function of the publicity the project received. At least so far, this enthusiasm has not translated into any radical changes in voting patterns or increased local activism. Ultimately, we will probably not know until years down the road whether memorial collecting produces meaningful changes in its participants' political sensitivities or is simply a novel form of folk art.

### **Memorialization or Memorials**

By way of conclusion, it is useful to compare the Children's Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell to a memorial much more in the public eye, the Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas (Monument for the Murdered Jews of Europe). This monument, which letters to Whitwell reference both explicitly and implicitly, now stands in Berlin's center amid cultural and political icons such as the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and the reemergent Potsdamer Platz. Designed by architect Peter Eisenmann, it consists of 2,711 concrete blocks of different heights organized on a skewed grid pattern. From the air, it looks like a graveyard. At ground level, it feels like a labyrinth that intends to disorient those who wander through it.

The Monument for the Murdered Jews of Europe opened in May 2005, after many years of parliamentary debate, design competitions,

[35]

*Counting to  
Six Million*

●  
Daniel H.  
Magilow

and countless arguments about how best to remember the central event of twentieth-century German history. It sparked an enormous amount of public and private discourse, which Germans now call the *Mahnmaldebatte*, or the Monument Debate. When Eisenmann's memorial finally opened to the public, the result was somewhat anticlimactic. Some commentators even longed nostalgically for the past—that is, for the time before the finished memorial effectively rendered moot any national debate about how best to engage the Holocaust. Writing in *Berliner Morgenpost*, journalist Rolf Schneider pointed out that “the discussion up to now concerning the monument was the most important intellectual engagement that we Germans have had in the past decade. It touched on history and the present, art and reality, morality and conscience.” He added, “Many thought that the debate and it alone was the real monument.”<sup>36</sup>

The Eisenmann memorial casts a long shadow over the Children's Holocaust Memorial. Letters sent to Whitwell, especially those from Germany, frequently compare the two projects. The German language book about the Whitwell Paper Clip Project even goes so far as to state:

With their Holocaust Project, a group of 13- to 15-year-old students has embarrassed politicians and “normal people” in many countries around the world. Whereas in Germany, the land of the perpetrators and the victims, people have for more than a decade wrestled with and debated the sense, design, and costs of a heretofore unbuilt “national monument,” these students create completed facts.<sup>37</sup>

To collect millions of inanimate objects in rural Tennessee will surely always strike some as a tacky and trivializing approach to memorializing the Holocaust. Some will never think of it as more than a waste of time and resources and a symptom of a culture obsessed with the Holocaust. But, as I have tried to show, the mode of memorialization that we encounter in the Children's Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell and other memorial collecting projects may in fact suggest a new way to approach issues that will only grow in importance as the Holocaust recedes into history. Memorial collecting focuses not on finished memorials but on the difficult processes of memory itself. It reminds us that a memorial's value is not a trait of the finished building, sculpture, or artwork but of the debate, discussion, and reflection that accompany its creation.

## Notes

I wish to thank my many colleagues at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for their input and comments on this article, especially Judith Gerson and Simone Schweber.

- 1 Anti-Defamation League, "Paper Clips and the ADL," <http://www.adl.org/paperclips>; Anne Frank Center, "Winners for the 2003 Spirit of Anne Frank Awards," [http://www.annefrank.com/download/spirit\\_winners\\_2003.doc](http://www.annefrank.com/download/spirit_winners_2003.doc).
- 2 Peter W. Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Das Büroklammer Projekt: Schüler schaffen ein Holocaust Mahnmal* (Munich, 2000); Peter W. Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips: The Making of a Children's Holocaust Memorial* (Minneapolis, 2004); *Paper Clips*, film directed by Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab, with performances by Tom Bosley, Linda Hooper, David Smith, Sandra Roberts, and Peter Schroeder (Miramax, 2004).
- 3 Schroeder and Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips*, 8–9.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 12–14. See also Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things: How Everyday Artifacts—From Forks and Pins to Paper Clips and Zippers—Came to Be As They Are* (New York, 1992). Johann Vaaler patented his paper clip design in 1899 in Germany and in 1901 in the United States. By 1899, however, the familiar double-oval paperclip design of Gem Manufacturing Ltd. in England was already in wide use.
- 5 Eighty-five notebooks contain the letters and related documents. One contains negative letters.
- 6 Holocaust Museum Houston, "The Butterfly Project," <http://www.hmh.org/minisite/butterfly/index.html>.
- 7 Jewish Federation of Peoria, "The Button Project," <http://www.buttonproject.com>.
- 8 British Broadcasting Corporation, "Six Million Buttons!," [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bradford/content/articles/2005/11/11/buttons\\_holocaust\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bradford/content/articles/2005/11/11/buttons_holocaust_feature.shtml).
- 9 "Letters to the Editor," *The Jewish Press* (online edition), Mar. 11, 2004, [http://www.jewishpress.com/news\\_article.asp?article=4333](http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=4333).
- 10 "Shoes for Shoah," <http://www.bnei-israel.org/BULLseptember2001.html#SHOES%20FOR>.
- 11 In his review of the documentary *Paper Clips*, for instance, *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic and television personality Roger Ebert wrote: "[T]here is something innocently naive about the paper clip project, which transforms a silly mountain of paper clips into a small town's touching gesture." Roger Ebert, "Paper Clips" (Review), *Chicago Sun-Times*, Feb. 25, 2005.
- 12 Personal correspondence with Linda Hooper, Oct. 5, 2005.
- 13 Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London, 1995), 67.
- 14 Karl Marx famously defined this term in the first volume of *Capital*: "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the

[37]

*Counting to Six Million*

●  
Daniel H. Magilow

- social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1978), 319.
- 15 Another oft-cited definition of collecting is "an obsession organized." Aristides [Joseph Epstein], "Calm and Uncollected," *American Scholar* 57 (1988): 327.
- 16 Peter Fritzsche, "The Archive," *History & Memory* 17, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 16.
- 17 Compare Simone A. Schweber's discussion of genre mismatch in her article "Simulating Survival," *Curriculum Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 139–88.
- 18 *Norway's Resistance Museum*, ed. Norges Hjemmefrontmuseum (Oslo, 1982), section 11 ("Resistance Grows"); Norges Hjemmefrontmuseum, "The Exhibition," <http://www.mil.no/felles/nhm/start/eng/exhibition>.
- 19 Gerd Stray Gordon discusses how Norwegians, particularly young Norwegians, wore paper clips and matches as symbolic acts of nonviolent resistance. The umbrella term for such actions is *Holdningskampen*, literally "struggle of attitude." Gerd Stray Gordon, "The Norwegian Resistance During the German Occupation, 1940–1945. Repression, Terror, and Resistance: The West Country of Norway" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1978), esp. 38–63, here 173. Of Norway's pre-war Jewish population, 736 died in the gas chambers. See *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Judith Taylor Baumel and Walter Laqueur (New Haven, Conn., 2001), 446.
- 20 See Clarence G. Lasby, *Project Paperclip: German Scientists and the Cold War* (New York, 1971), and Linda Hunt, *Secret Agenda: The United States Government, Nazi Scientists, and Project Paperclip, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991).
- 21 Marc Gellman, "Paper Boats," *Newsweek* (online edition), Aug. 10, 2005, reprinted at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8900133/site/newsweek>.
- 22 Julia Gorin and Heather Robinson, "The Holocaust Without Jews," *FrontPage Magazine*, Oct. 7, 2005, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=19762>.
- 23 See Denis Dutton, "Kitsch," *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 18 (London, 1998), 100–101. This article nicely summarizes several definitions of "kitsch." See also Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pa., 1996); Clive Bell, *Art* (London, 1914); and Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1994).
- 24 A. O. Scott, "Grasping Extraordinary Evil Through the Very Ordinary," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2004.
- 25 Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York, 2005), 3–4.
- 26 Walter Benjamin, "The Cultural History of Toys," in his *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 115–16.
- 27 Miriam Hansen has proposed that the concept of *Spiel*, meaning play but also game, performance, and gamble, occupies a central position in Benjamin's thinking. Hansen argues that *Spiel* is best understood



- vis-à-vis *Schein*, or semblance, the term with which it exists in a polarity. According to Hansen, play as a theoretical category “provides Benjamin with a term, and concept, that allows him to imagine an alternative mode of aesthetics on a par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed—that is, capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive-reception of technology.” Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2004).
- 28 Margaret Donaldson, *Children’s Minds* (London, 1978), 142.
- 29 One of the earliest collecting memorials, the Children’s Peace Monument in Hiroshima, also known as “Tower of a Thousand Cranes,” grew out of childhood fantasy as a form of play. The premature death of Sadako Sasaki inspired this project. Sadako was only two when the atom bomb fell on Hiroshima, and, though healthy while young, she developed leukemia by age 11. A school friend told the ailing Sadako of a Japanese folk belief that cranes can live for 1,000 years. According to tradition, an offering of a thousand origami cranes will protect one against grave illness. Sadako began to fold cranes, but by the time she died, she had not yet reached a thousand. Her classmates finished the folding and raised funds for the memorial statue, unveiled in 1958, that stands today in Hiroshima’s peace park. See Betty Jean Lifton, “Let a Thousand Paper Cranes Fly,” *New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1977, SM8.
- 30 Bjarne Kildegaard writes that “Children’s collections tend to be looked at with more tolerance, however strange or fantastical they may seem to the adult world. They form a space where childhood fantasy and imagination can be indulged.” Bjarne Kildegaard, “Collections and Hobbies,” in *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, 3 vols. (New York, 2004), 1: 215.
- 31 Schroeder and Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Das Büroklammer Projekt*, 155–56. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from foreign-language sources are mine.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 36 Rolf Schneider, “Die Debatte als Denkmal: Halten wir ihre Weiterführung aus?” *Berliner Morgenpost*, Oct. 24, 1998. Reprinted in *Der Denkmalstreit—das Denkmal? Die Debatte um das “Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas.” Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Ute Heimrod, Günter Schlusche, and Horst Seferens (Berlin, 1999), 1148–49.
- 37 Schroeder and Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Das Büroklammer Projekt*, 7.

[39]

*Counting to  
Six Million*



Daniel H.  
Magilow

Copyright of *Jewish Social Studies* is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.