

THE IMPLICATIONS OF DECAY OF  
PLACES WHICH RECORD HISTORY

# RUST



## EUROPEAN SOUVENIRS

After taking "The Third Man" tour of Vienna, we venture out to the Zentralfriedhof. I wander away from the group to a run-down area which I soon realize is the Jewish section. Some stones are overturned, the grass is unkempt and there are splodges of graffiti. Later, I tell my roommate Monika about this and she informs me that it has been left in a state of disrepair at the request of the Jewish community of Vienna, who felt it would serve as a reminder. As I try to evaluate this action, she tells me about people who had given refuge to Jews during the war burying them in that section, in secret, after they had committed

suicide. I had never heard this story before and still do not know if it is true.

For the first time, I imagine them giving up. In one of the few stories my grandmother has told about those years they are in a field, at night, lost. They do not know what country they are in. Somebody calls to them, "Juden?" and they are not sure if they should answer. They do, he tells them where they are, gives them directions and disappears. She says he was an angel.

Before we go to Budapest, Doris says that if I am interested in that sort of thing, she heard that the Jewish cemetery there is interesting. I show Jennifer that on the map the Jewish area is symbolized with tombstones, rather than crosses, and we head that way. After walking around the cemetery, making up stories about Hungarian history, we realize that the Jewish cemetery is separated from the cemetery we are in by a stone wall. We debate jumping over, but I am squeamish about crawling over graves. We walk around and are greeted by a white attack dog, rushing the gate, which is fortunately locked. A guard, wearing a cap that says "U.S.A.," appears at the window in the guardhouse above, recognizes us as tourists, brings the dog inside and opens the gate for us. The vegetation in the cemetery is untended, as it was in the older parts of the cemetery we had just come from. I practice my Hebrew on the inscriptions and recognize family names of acquaintances back in Montreal. We get deeper into the cemetery, we see the swastikas, the overturned stones.... Around the walls of the cemetery are family crypts. The stones over them are broken; peering down, I see broken coffins. Jen touches my arm and says, "this must be very hard for you."

In my mind, I see the word "Berlin" in a heavy bold type face. My mother was born there in August of 1947. I visit for the first time in August of 1992. It is sunny and warm: the Wall's collapse is still fresh. I meander across what was formerly a firm dividing line. It already seems the stuff of nostalgia, a trivial pursuit question for the future. A sign on a field marks the former site of the Gestapo headquarters. There's

a hill covered with grass, some foundations at one end....

But I've seen this all before, worse in films, photos, books.... a person would have to be crazed to do this, but it would have been okay if they had stopped at cemeteries, what they did to the living was worse. And why the guard, the dog, the locked gates, what are they to protect against?

I am screening a montage of borrowed images: Kristalnacht, Speer's architecture, Triumph of the Will, people being taken from their beds by men in bulky overcoats, babies being thrown out of windows, one after another.

People were tortured, right here, where I am standing. I am trying to impose something on this place, but the sun is shining, the way it does everywhere else.



## CREATURES WHO SEE IN FOUR DIMENSIONS

In a science fiction story where humans try to explain the world to creatures who live in two dimensions, their world is just slices of ours, that third axis is just outside peripheral vision, they can almost sense it. Consider a more advanced species who see all of time superimposed on the space which we understand: they look at a person and see a fetus, a baby, an old lady, all at once, without confusion. And imagine having those powers, to look at a place, a house or a city, and see every event, every metamorphoses, it had gone/will go through....

see Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *The Sirens of Titan*

and am surprised that he has no moustache, although he shaved it off years ago. My father looks at me and sees a twelve year old. The way a friend moves her hands compresses all the times she has made the same gesture.

These creatures are aware of our limitations; we dismiss our glimpses into their reality as forgetfulness, sentimentality, *déjà-vu*, rather than entertain the possibility that our understanding of time may be a mere convention to

decrease complexity. Of the millions of things that I could describe as "blue," I will call some of them, ice blue, ink blue, light-green/blue. If these things are someone's eyes, a favourite shirt, the ocean under particular conditions, then maybe a filter of emotion makes these details visible.

Still, there are places where we squint to try to see beyond the now and into the infinite. What is it that inspires us to understand more; is it the clues left behind, knowledge of the events which occurred there, a spirit vibrating on a frequency we can just barely receive....?

And what attracts me to damaged buildings, and why did I want to write those stories down?

What to do with these places; why build memorials at the place of the event?

Somewhere, in our minds, history, memory, and imagination combine with place, remnants, and artifacts, to tell us the stories by which we explain ourselves. How does an awareness that a place contains the events it has witnessed influence how we act upon it and if these places are linked to memory, how do the ways in which they transform with time

Rust is fire in slow motion. All our creations are in flames alter memory? and we examine the ashes, inventing stories of who we are, searching for clues of who we will be.



sound to the steps of the living and dead. For the young, endless hours of exploration in time and space can be had in the memory of the house. For the old, only that memory placed far away for private moments of sadness, regret, and nostalgia.

Thanks to: Chana and Idel Topor, Abraham Topor, Marion Druker, Jennifer Beardsley, Julija Ezeragailis, Monika Mittlemayer and Doris Rabel.

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