The Holocaust- the greatest systematic termination of human life known to man. 13 million people were slaughtered at the hands of Nazis and their sympathisers, this includes 6 million Jews who had their lives ended simply because of their religion. After World War I ended and Adolf Hitler took control of Germany, he began preaching about the Jews causing all of the hardships that Germany was facing.¹ This started a revolution of anti-Semitism in Germany with Nazi newspapers saying, “The Jews are our misfortune.”² As the anti-Semitism increased, Hitler’s power increased and with it. Jewish freedoms were restricted until Hitler put the Final Solution in place, ordering that Jews be systematically killed. This is where the creation of concentration camps and gas chambers come into play as the Nazis created a way to kill hundreds of thousands of people a day.

How does one create a memorial to such a horrific event? Stanley Saitowitz believes that one way to memorialize the Holocaust is with the New England Holocaust Memorial that he designed near the Freedom Trail in Boston’s West End. Saitowitz designed the memorial with symbolism at the forefront of his mind, even including the start of construction, which began on Yom HaShoah or Holocaust memorial day.³ Saitowitz began by removing all of the trees in the area, leaving the stumps in the ground as scars of the trauma.⁴ Six pits were then dug and lights were put at the bottom to signify a glowing fire, only seen at night. From these six pits, six glass towers are created on top with millions of numbers etched into the glass, all identification numbers that were given to prisoners of concentration camps. The number six has significant meaning to the memorial, representing the six million Jews that were killed.⁵ Inside of the pits, water misters were installed to make it seem like there was gas coming from beneath the towers, incredibly symbolistic of the gas chambers used by Nazis in the Holocaust.

⁵ Ibid.
Each tower has two unique features, the first being a memory of a survivor written on a glass pane, inviting visitors to contemplate the horror and inhumanity that those in concentration camps were subjected to. The second being the name of one of the six death camps– Chelmno, Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibor, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Belzec. At night, the fire from the bottom of the monuments makes the numbers glow, a symbolism to not only the “incinerators” used but to hell and the devil himself. At the entrance of the memorial are two panels, one with the history of the events that led to the Wannsee conference and the creation of the “Final Solution” and the second, on the opposite side, has inscribed the words of Pastor Martin Neimoller who famously wrote:

They came first for the Communists,
And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews,
And I didn’t speak up because I’m not a Jew.

Then then came for the trade unionists,
And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics,
And I didn’t speak up because I’m a Protestant.

Then they came for me,
And by that time no one was left to speak up.⁶

These words bring perspective to the lack of support that the Jewish population faced during the Holocaust– reminding us that we are all responsible and compelled to stand up for injustice whenever and wherever we see it. In a way the design of the memorial plays a role in this. The shape of the towers seem to blend into the skyline if the viewer looks from the bottom up, almost as if Saitowitz was trying to argue that injustice can blend in and seem normal and it’s only when one takes a closer look that we become enlightened to what’s really going on.

⁶ Ibid.
As one walks through the memorial, there is a cold, somber feeling in the air. When I went, I had goosebumps the entire time and looking at the numbers on the glass panes gave a real perspective to the magnitude of the holocaust, knowing that each one of those numbers was a human life that was lost. I found it very interesting how the choice to put the numbers on the glass panes effectively resembled both the individual and the group. Up close, each individual number can be seen, making the magnitude of the loss of life stunning, but back up about twenty feet and the numbers all blend together- symbolizing the group. The memorial also works on almost making the viewer uncomfortable, almost as if the purpose of the memorial is to make the passerby cringe a little when they walk by and glance at the small numbers written on the glass panes. This cringing feeling is one that encourages someone to think deeply about the horrors of the Holocaust and that combined with Pastor Neimoller’s words inspire one to take a look at what they can do to prevent any similar event from happening in the future. This seems to be the message that Saitowitz is trying to make one leave with and the idea that we all have a responsibility to stand up for injustice.

Saitowitz writes that “the six towers are emblems of faith, a covenant of trust that memorializes a collective evil.”7 I think that this purpose is beautifully achieved with the memorial affecting visitors on both a physical and metaphysical level. The reflection that this memorial inspires is the perfect example of a timeless design beckoning visitors in without being extremely obvious. The purpose is clear, with a litany of symbolism that forces the viewer to reflect on not only the meaning of the monument, but their own life with appeals to emotion and logic as well. All of these amazing features make the New England Holocaust Memorial a powerful place for reflection and a must see in the city of Boston.

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7 Ibid.


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