

TRAVEL

All across Europe, ‘stumbling stones’ honor victims of the Nazi regime

By **Ellen Albanese** Globe correspondent, Updated December 7, 2023, 8:00 a.m.



In Amsterdam, stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, with tulips. ELLEN ALBANESE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

AMSTERDAM — On a residential street, just steps from our hotel, four shiny brass plaques embedded in the sidewalk caught our attention. Each one, the size of a

cobblestone, was engraved with the name of someone who had been forcibly taken from their home — the very home we stood in front of — during the Nazi regime. Four people, all with the same surname, but born in two different generations. “Oh,” I breathed, finding it suddenly difficult to speak, “it was a whole family.”

Stolpersteine, or “stumbling stones,” identify European citizens taken from their homes in World War II. Each begins with the phrase “Here lived.” They then document the birth date, date of deportation or escape, and, if known, the date and place of death. Laid into the pavement in front of the last voluntarily chosen residence of these citizens, the plaques are the life’s work of German sculptor Gunter Demnig, whose inspiration comes from a passage in the Talmud: “A person is only forgotten when his name is forgotten.”

Stolpersteine can be found in nearly every country in Europe — Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Croatia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. On May 26 of this year, Demnig laid the 100,000th stolperstein in Nuremberg.

Sue Fuller of Falmouth discovered stolpersteine on a 2022 tour in Italy. On the way to the next stop of a progressive dinner, their guide stopped in front of an apartment building and told the visitors to look down. A single stumbling stone was embedded in the sidewalk. “I had never heard of this before,” Fuller said. “It really hit me. It makes it so real.” On a later visit to Amsterdam, Fuller and her family sought out stolpersteine. “We are so used to looking up,” she said. “And there, we just looked down.”

In Amsterdam some stones stand alone or in pairs, scattered throughout the city. In other places, such as along Nieuwe Amstelstraat, in Amsterdam’s Jewish Cultural Quarter, the sidewalk shimmers with plaques, which weave a sad line through the

neighborhood to the 17th-century Portuguese Synagogue.



Four stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, in front of the Roselaar family's last freely chosen address. ELLEN ALBANESE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“Stolpersteine were not designed just for murdered Jews, but for anyone who was targeted by the Nazis,” says Alexander Stukenberg, executive director of Stichting Stolpersteine, where he oversees the production of stolpersteine for the Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg). Jehovah’s Witnesses were the first religious community to be banned and persecuted by the National Socialists, he said, and politicians were also early targets. “People need not have died to merit a stolperstein,” he added. “People who lived under floorboards for two years also suffered.”

The Netherlands bore a disproportionately large burden of the loss in Europe,

Stukenberg said. Some 75 percent of the Dutch Jewish population was murdered in the Holocaust, second only to Poland.

A native of Germany, Stukenberg believes that many Germans today carry an inescapable sense of guilt. His work with the stolpersteine project helps to assuage that burden. “We are a new generation; we can make things better. I’m trying to do that, and I hope younger generations will pass it on.”



These stolpersteine, or stumbling stones, identify members of the Roselaar family forcibly taken from their home by the Nazis during World War II. ELLEN ALBANESE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At one time, Demnig hand-made every stone. Today, at 76, he primarily travels on behalf of the project and does stolpersteine layings. Stukenberg is one of seven people in four European cities physically making the stones, and Amsterdam is the only

location outside Germany. The waiting list for stones in Amsterdam stands at 1,200, with a backlog of 3,800 for all the Benelux countries.

It's important for children to know about the Holocaust and to understand how such a thing could happen, Stukenberg said. As the liaison to the [Stolpersteine Foundation](#) at Amsterdam's Goethe Institut, he shares information about German culture, society, and politics and teaches schoolchildren about the Holocaust. "We try to relate it to the presence of people from different countries and cultures in Amsterdam today, such as Syrians and Africans," he said. The programs always include a visit to the workshop, where the children can watch Stukenberg engraving stones with a hammer and chisel.

Crafting each stone is a painstaking and emotional experience for Stukenberg. "I try to not think about anything else, but sometimes numbers come by — my sister's birthday or the year my dad was born. Sometimes the names or the constellation of inscriptions makes you stop. Suddenly a dad is missing, so then I start researching the family or ask the requesters what happened."



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The stolpersteine story is powerfully told in a short YouTube movie featuring Stukenberg, “Tracks: Stumbling Stones Amsterdam,” and in a documentary by Emmy Award-nominated filmmaker Jane Wells, “Here Lived,” which will be released by Menemsha Films early next year. “Here Lived” opens as Demnig lays his 100,000th stone in Nuremberg. It retraces his work, journey, and impact, through the stories of families of Dutch victims: Ulrika Citron (daughter of a hidden child), Reini Elkerbout (a hidden child), the sculptor’s Amsterdam apprentice Stukenberg, and local and international politicians and volunteers.

TRACKS: Stumbling Stones Amsterdam (trailer)



Amsterdam is preparing for the March 2024 opening of the [National Holocaust Museum](#) and the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial site, in development since 2016. Located in Amsterdam’s historic Jewish Cultural Quarter, the museum documents how the genocide unfolded and tells the stories of some of its victims. Across the street from the museum, a former theater where the Nazis kept Jews ordered to report for deportation is being turned into the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial. Among the

other historic sites in the Jewish Quarter is the 17th-century Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1639 by Jews who had fled Spain and Portugal to the Netherlands. In keeping with its 17th-century origins, the synagogue is still illuminated by candles. The buildings surrounding the synagogue contain its treasure chambers, which hold objects of great significance and great beauty. Included in the collection of Torah scrolls is one dating from the 14th century. All these sites are within 1 square kilometer, and stolpersteine point the way.

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In Amsterdam, the 17th-century Portuguese Synagogue is still illuminated by candles. ELLEN ALBANESE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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