



TE PAPA

TO

BERLIN

THE MAKING OF TWO MUSEUMS

KEN GORBey

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FOREWORD

WHEN, IN 1997, I accepted the German government's invitation to become the chief executive of a planned Jewish museum in Berlin, I had only a hazy idea of what awaited me. I understood that the project was deeply enmeshed in national politics, and for that I came with a certain amount of experience from my days in Washington. I had also just written a book on German-Jewish history. However, I was not fitted for the task of defining a viable concept and actually translating it into the creation of a living museum suitable for viewing by a broad national and international audience.

From the beginning, therefore, I was aware of the critical need to find a partner who would help guide the effort, someone with real museum experience and a proven record of accomplishment in the field. Finding the right one would be the key to the success or failure of the entire project.

To create a Jewish museum in the capital city of the recently reunited Federal Republic of Germany would surely be no ordinary undertaking. Given the terrible twentieth-century history of German-speaking Jewry, there were deep emotions and sensitivities on all sides. So what sort of museum would be appropriate and do justice to the ups and downs of Jewish history in Germany and its disastrous end under German Nazism? Should it deal primarily with the Holocaust? Should it focus on the longer history, on art or on the contributions of prior generations of German-Jewish citizens to national life? The Nazis had destroyed not only Jewish life in Germany, but also its symbols and artefacts, so what was there to exhibit? And how would any of it fit into the dramatic architecture of the building which the government had commissioned Daniel Libeskind to design for the purpose?

To get some clarity about these and related questions, I sought the opinion of a broad cross-section of scholars, historians and museum executives, whose advice proved to be highly diverse and, more often than not, maddeningly contradictory. Some even suggested that the whole idea of a Jewish museum in the land of the Holocaust perpetrators was a profoundly bad idea and should be abandoned.

Eventually one idea evolved that appealed to me. Jews had lived continuously on German soil since the Roman period. There had been good times for them when they lived in relative peace and harmony with their neighbours, and others when they were isolated, persecuted and harassed. Over the centuries, they had become deeply enmeshed in, and made major contributions to, every aspect of German life, eventually as full citizens with equal rights. All this had come to a bloody end under the Nazis. Hence, the idea was to create a storytelling museum – and this 2000-year history of the Jewish presence in Germany with all its ups and downs would be the story that the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) would tell.

But who could help me do it? Ideally it would have to be someone with deep knowledge of German-Jewish history and culture, and probably a Jew. He or she would have broad experience as a proven museum leader and manager able to function effectively in a German environment, preferably a German speaker. (The JMB was to be bilingual in German and English.) Furthermore, it would have to be someone with the imagination and skill to fit all this storytelling into the brilliant, evocative, but complex and intricate architecture Libeskind had designed.

This was a formidable combination of qualifications indeed, and very hard to find. Initially I had despaired of coming up with a suitable candidate. But then, in a near miracle, I got lucky.

When Shaike Weinberg, a brilliant museum expert, creator of the famous Tel Aviv storytelling museum of the Jewish diaspora and a leader of Washington's Holocaust Memorial Museum, agreed to join me, it seemed that my prayers had been answered. Shaike had virtually all of the qualifications needed and as he set about guiding the complicated task of translating our concept into reality, I thought I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. We were on our way, and I could not have been happier. But disaster struck less than a year later when Shaike fell seriously ill and died soon thereafter. We had become good friends and I mourned and missed him greatly. And once again I was confronted with the problem of finding someone with the right qualifications to continue the work he had begun.

Museum-makers experienced in strong storytelling museums are exceedingly rare because very few museums of this type exist. One of the best, I was told, was a wildly successful one in, of all places, faraway New Zealand. Te Papa, the country's national museum in Wellington, was said to be an extraordinary place that had attracted an unheard-of throng of visitors far

beyond anyone's expectation. Its creator, a fellow named Ken Gorbey, was the kind of imaginative museum leader with deeply relevant experience I should be looking for.

I can no longer remember what possessed me to seriously consider actually reaching out to this fabled Kiwi as a possible answer to my increasingly serious dilemma. The Jewish Museum Berlin was under pressure to open within the impossibly short time of two years and I had no one to help make it happen. I therefore decided – in desperation, to be honest – to consider him more closely.

Yet to give serious consideration to someone who did not know Germany, or German-Jewish history, was not Jewish, spoke not a word of German and, as far as anyone knew, had never worked far away from his 'down-under' home seemed more than a little preposterous. And yet he was the creator of a highly successful museum of the type I wanted for Berlin. So without an alternative or a better idea, I decided to give this impossible idea a try.

I had my doubts, but when Ken agreed to come to Berlin for a talk, we clicked almost immediately. Offering him the job was, I realised, one of the riskiest gambles in a lifetime of management assignments with the responsibility to attract top-notch executive personnel. And when Ken actually agreed, I spent more than one sleepless night worrying about what I had done and how it would all work out. In Berlin, the scepticism, if not dismay, among my as yet small cadre of colleagues was also enormous. How could it possibly work, they argued, to bring in this man from faraway New Zealand, and expect that he could successfully work his magic in Germany with a Jewish museum, on a subject matter with which he was totally unfamiliar?

Only in hindsight have I come to understand that the personal and professional risk of coming to Berlin for this assignment was as great for Ken as it was for us. His fascinating, charmingly honest account of what it meant for him and Susan to make the move from Wellington to Berlin, and how he tackled the enormous challenges to create what became Europe's largest and most important Jewish museum, is the central theme of this book. It is, in fact, a unique story of late twentieth-century museum-making which makes compelling reading for museologists and the wider public alike.

Ken's account of his Berlin experience is many-faceted. There are the challenges he and Susan faced in adjusting to the radical change of environment from the modestly sized, culturally familiar environment of their home town, Wellington, to the large and mostly unfamiliar world of a

major European metropolis, culturally and ethnically highly diverse, weighed down by a special history, and politically complex. There is the struggle to gain the confidence and win the hearts and minds of a conservative, cautious and sceptical German staff unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable with the idea of his kind of museum: visitor-friendly, state of the art, and with novel exhibition techniques he taught them to understand and apply. There is the process of creating a great museum when, given German history, so few artefacts were available to show the visitors, and the need to find ingenious alternative ways of making history come to life. Last, but not least, readers will be amused by his description of what it took to handle an unreasonable boss with little museum experience, always in a hurry, frequently impatient, and occasionally ornery and unreasonable. Ken made it all happen. *Te Papa to Berlin* is a story of learning, adaptation, great accomplishment and personal growth. It is, too, a story of leadership, relevant and instructive for anyone called on to help manage an important enterprise in unfamiliar surroundings.

What Ken accomplished speaks for itself. The Jewish Museum Berlin will soon be 20 years old. It has grown and evolved enormously over those years. From the beginning, however, it proved an enormous success. With 750,000 visitors annually, it has exceeded all expectations and it is widely acknowledged as one of Germany's premier cultural institutions. As a national museum telling an important, difficult story, it is the pride of the German government and enjoys the enthusiastic support of business, cultural leaders and the public. Visitors come from all over the world to see it. At a political level, it plays a significant role in Germany's determination to confront a sometimes glorious but ultimately tragic and painful history in an honest and open way. For a country that needs to integrate large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers into its national life, the Jewish Museum Berlin plays an important role in tackling the question of minorities becoming citizens, with all the many problems this raises, in emphasising the need for tolerance and understanding, and in battling prejudice and discrimination.

None of this could have happened without the foundation Ken Gorbey helped to lay, and the enormous contribution he made to the creation of this great museum. In the process, he won the hearts of his colleagues and of all Berliners. He is a Kiwi who also became an enthusiastic Berliner.

Ken and I were an odd couple. Our respective backgrounds and experiences could not have been more different. We had much to learn from each other in building our partnership in what, without a doubt, was the adventure of

our lives. We became not only successful professional partners, but also good friends. Ken, and Susan, made that easy. Berlin owes him much, and so do I.

W. MICHAEL BLUMENTHAL

*Founding Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin,
former United States Secretary of the Treasury,
retired businessman and CEO of Unisys Corp*

PREFACE

THE TWO MUSEUMS COULD NOT BE FURTHER APART. One, Te Papa, is of the Pacific; the other, the Jewish Museum Berlin, is defined by its place in Europe. But search into their reasons for being and they are very similar. Each confronts the dangerous territory that is a nation's dark history while celebrating generations of life lived. They are magical theatres that illuminate and strengthen the fundamental morality which makes us human.

As it comes into being, New Zealand's new national museum, Te Papa, reaches for understandings of a changing society. A team of Māori, Pasifika and European people work together, though sometimes in dispute, to create a joyful celebration and sombre reflection of nationhood. On the opposite side of the world, another diverse community seeks to build a new and inclusive Germany, despite a harsh history that encompasses the Holocaust and a record of chauvinistic militarism. The Jewish Museum Berlin will carry this story.

In 1998 Te Papa opens. The crowds pour in, two million visitors in the first year. They find a place that is anything but a narrow narrative of officially prescribed nationalism. Rather, the museum's marketing slogan, 'Our Place', enters everyday language as a representation of the many cultural streams, here woven together, there diverging, that make up our country. I am well pleased, for at opening I can look back on 13 years of my life engaged in planning and achieving Te Papa.

Meanwhile the Jewish Museum Berlin is not in good heart. Its subject matter, the history of the German Jews, and Daniel Libeskind's lightning bolt of a building focus international attention on the project, but it is going nowhere. National reputation is at stake. In 1997 the German government turns for leadership of the project to former German-Jewish child refugee, now senior American statesman and successful businessman Mike Blumenthal. Not one to countenance failure, he calls for a high-powered review. I have been invited to take part.

The review team confirms everyone's worst fears. Blumenthal acts: at morning coffee on the second day he approaches me. 'Come to Berlin and see this museum through to opening.'

He makes it clear that my mandate will be revolution. I must not only dig this museum out of the quagmire but create a place that does justice to Libeskind's building and that captures the imagination of visitors by provoking profound emotion. It is a daunting prospect and the risks are huge.

I say yes and my life becomes an endless grind of achieving impossible targets. I have done it in New Zealand. But this is Berlin, cultural capital and centre of world history. The work is so very hard but there are moments of elation and deep emotion seared into my consciousness.

Finally, on 11 September 2001, the Jewish Museum Berlin is done. A few hours before the doors will be opened to the general public we meet to assure ourselves that everything is as it should be. Instead, in despair, we see planes slam into two towers a continent away. The army runs razor wire around the building. We know this to be a turning point, but towards what?

*

The liberal democracy is a fragile construct. It requires hard work, constant negotiation and accommodation, to maintain the openness and order that allow people of different cultures and origins to live and thrive together. Over the decades and centuries Enlightenment-based belief systems had grown, supported by functioning political and state institutions. These made sure that each generation would be aware of its obligations, while also doing its best to incarcerate the crooks, curtail the activities of the rapacious autocrats, laugh the petty tyrant off his soapbox, restrain and treat the psychopaths, and pity the sad fools. In their own ways Te Papa and the Jewish Museum Berlin were part of the machinery of two such moral nations.

In the aftermath of 9/11 some of the fragile tenets of that moral order came under pressure. Manipulative leaders rushed to claim the heroic high ground. Scapegoats were required and, as with the Jews in Nazi Germany, were named via a toxic mix of half-truth and lies. A new anti-Semitism was evident. This time, though, not only Jews were under suspicion, but also those defined by their Muslim faith. In so many countries nationalism was narrowed by official decree. Hate was in the air and the principles on which Te Papa and the Jewish Museum Berlin were based, that we might define our nation as a society of moral human individuals living together via complex yet civil negotiation, seemed under threat.

CHAPTER 1

GROWING UP AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

JUST US was a book of poems for young New Zealand kids. I treasured my copy. Though it is now long lost, lines, here and there, come to me still.

‘Don’t give me cake Mum and don’t give me scone;
I only want a piece of bread with Marmite on.’

I liked Marmite, the ultimate acquired taste. It was not for everyone; in later years a visiting American academic sitting at our breakfast table would describe it as ‘unrefined crude oil’.

The cover featured children on a beach. Above, ships, trains and aircraft drove through the clouds, inviting dreams of travel to a world so remote that I sometimes wondered at the reality of countries beyond our coastline. My prized Arthur Mee encyclopaedias told me otherwise, describing exotic places filled with strange peoples and beasts. But the *Just Us* cover was wrong in one important respect. The children playing on the beach wore shoes and that was absurd. Even in midwinter, with snow on Maungatautari, it was a matter of pride to hobble to school down the gravel road, crunching underfoot the chips of stone held aloft by small ice pinnacles.

Dad knew the author, John Brent. I remember a conversation – at least I think I do.

‘Shoes! The publisher commissioned an English artist to do the cover and I got shoes – on a New Zealand beach!’ said John.

This mattered little to me. *Just Us* talked of and to Kiwi kids, used our language and was rooted in our land. There was not a thatched cottage in sight. To read those poems was to confirm that we were of New Zealand and our future rested here. I could become a boat-builder like Uncle Frank. For a time I crafted half-hull models of the ships of my imagination and sanded them to a smooth finish. Dad was inspired to build a model yacht and I followed all the steps closely, including pouring molten lead into a sand mould – the finished item would attach to the keel as ballast to keep the yacht from capsizing. Our

first pour was a disaster. The sand was wet and the lead erupted in a spectacular fountain of dangerously hot material that could have done serious harm.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever possessed, shinily painted and gaff-rigged, complete with a sail between mainsail and topmast. I could not wait to get to our summer cottage. Disappointment. Excessive sail area was but one of its problems; there was too much buoyancy and not enough weight on the keel. Once in the sea, all it could do was to flop on its side. More weight was applied, ugly slabs of lead. But my beautiful boat had lost its charm. It would never skip across the waves as I had hoped. My boat became an early lesson in the misery of failure.

But the dams we made never failed. As another *Just Us* poem implied, every stream awaited a grand construction: 'I must go down to Hukawai to dam the little stream.' And we did. With family or friends we set about stemming the course of every available flow of water. Those at the seaside would be washed away by the tide or the next rain. But one, a major effort over some days, brought together purpose (halt the stream), workforce (I was joined by the farmer's son) and materials (dam-building quality clay) with a flow of just the right capacity and sturdy bank configuration. The completed barrier flooded part of the paddock and the farmer insisted it had to be breached. Perhaps I was destined to be an engineer.

Another early career option was archaeology. Aged nine, I excavated in the back garden of the schoolhouse. My first dig was in the rough area outside the vegetable garden. I had enough knowledge to lay out a measured square, rather than just sink a pit. My parents' benevolent smiles turned to disbelief when I uncovered the first artefact, an old sewing machine. There followed a whole kitchen of pots and pans, and pieces of an old stove. Father asked around. The house had burnt down in the 1930s and I had struck a rubbish pit of charred remains. I reported each find to my class. More was to come of that hole in the peaty soil, for underlying it was a deep layer of most brilliant white, part of a huge valley-choking fan of pumice granules from several cataclysmic eruptions spanning many thousands of years. Dad and I now set to quarrying to create pumice paths and a driveway to the house. Although geology, geomorphology and volcanology remained interests that I would pursue into university, they would never be part of a career. Archaeology was different. It stuck, at least for a while.

After enduring the dreadful embarrassments of delayed maturation, the boy who had built dams and excavated kitchen rubble worked at a degree in

Pacific archaeology, then moved on to a career creating cultural institutions. Place imprinted itself upon me, a mixture of peoples in a unique, isolated landscape at the bottom of the world.

*

But to what extent can I trust my memory? I run a small test. The National Library has *Just Us* and sitting in a quiet room of serious scholarship I reread the poems of my younger days. I have a few words misplaced but the lines I have drawn forth are fundamentally correct. Dams are built at 'Hukuwai', and undoubtedly John Masefield, in another poem studied at my primary school desk, has given me part of what comes to mind 70 years on. All good so far, but there are a couple of slips. No train drives across the sky, only ships and an aircraft, and I have the illustrator incorrectly placed. It seems Stopford G. Wrathall was a Kiwi or at least lived in New Zealand. I was certain, and right, about the shoes, so inappropriate upon a New Zealand beach, but wrong in my assumption that only an Englishman could have fashioned a child's view of our coastline after the North Sea.

The lesson is that while some snippets at the front of my mind are clear and mostly accurate, others are equally clear but incorrect. Sometimes I can draw on papers and files, but memory is malleable, subject to fading, renewal, overlay and even embellishment.

I take comfort and instruction from that masterly exploration of memory, *Peeling the Onion* by Günter Grass. Throughout he pauses to ask: Did this actually happen in those early war-defined years? Was the wheel of the upended bicycle actually turning, turning as the fleeing German boy soldiers lay dying, or was this an after-the-fact piece of theatre overlaid on reality to lend additional drama? Such honesty is hard to replicate but I will try my best.

*

At 26 years of age I had my first real job: I was to traverse the 700 kilometres of a planned gas line checking for archaeological sites.

In some respects, this is my first journey of exploration, the step-by-step trudge of the no-longer-student among people who toil beyond the big smoke. My way is marked by yellow stakes across paddocks and cleared scars through forests. The abandoned village emerges out of the dense fog. But this dead kitten lying in the grass before me, where has it come from? Life in a small caravan parked in an orchard or deserted camping site, waking on frosty

mornings to a star pattern of ice crystals across the metal ceiling. I stand on a narrow spit of land projecting into the sea; each time a wave hits the base of the cliff 30 metres below there is the marked quiver of a piece of ground destined soon to fall. I retreat. This is my Route 66, the precursor of other journeys to come.

The archaeology was easy, application of a training that veered from American to English theory and practice. But I was also able to venture into a society being redefined by assertive Māori leaders. Among them were my teachers: Hirini (Sid) Mead, Ranginui Walker, Pat Hohepa. I knew Sid Mead from his book, *The Art of Maori Carving*. As a high school lad, I had bought a set of chisels and, following Sid's detailed instructions, carved my own tributes to Māori culture, colouring each with shoe polish. Now we rubbed up against each other, and a growing Māori student body, in the clapped-out, weatherboard Victorian villas that housed our department. Despite reactionary voices of complaint, heard to this day, Māori demanded an accounting of rights abrogated and a strong voice in the decision-making that attends nationhood. There was no going back.

Part of my task was to consult with Māori groups in far-flung rural communities to check the proposed gas-line route for places that held spiritual value. Such contact with rural Māori was not entirely new to me. Maungatautari School, part of my early education, had a very large proportion of pupils from Pohara Pā (village) along Oreipunga Road. I mixed with these kids naturally in the classroom, at play and through sport. Māori society was part of my family's life, perhaps in a small way but more than for most Pākehā New Zealanders.

Pākehā is a term that has travelled far in my lifetime. We are the New Zealanders of European origins, the white-faced ones. For many it was, perhaps still is, a pejorative term, a dismissal. But this was not so in my family. I know this because of the political discussions around the dinner table. There was little about art and literature, but those free flows of opinion were so often about our identity as New Zealanders, and that included being Pākehā. The local farmers would talk of their planned trip back to the old country, Britain, as 'going home' but my mother and father dismissed any such idea.

To be Pākehā at that time seemed to include being ambitious for your kids' future. We should aspire to careers. In support the parents would quote a cautionary tale: how unthinking Uncle Bill had shocked his mother and father by announcing that he wanted to be a rubbish collector and further

reinforced his desire by acting out the role around the house. He had grown up to do other adventurous things throughout the world as a marine engineer. On his return he had become a good friend of the people of Tūrangawaewae, a place that would figure in my later history. Apparently, he introduced us to Māori leader Princess Te Puea as she dug potatoes in the communal garden. Margaret, my older sister, was disappointed, expecting gown and glitter, but I have no memory of this meeting. I admired handsome and athletic Uncle Bill greatly; although having none of his physical prowess, I was determined to grow up to be something like him.

That gas-line winter of 1968 is known still for the king of all storms. In April a violent cyclone had blown the inter-island ferry *Wahine* onto a reef at the mouth of Wellington Harbour. Fifty-one people had drowned on the day; two more would die later. As I trundled along the route in my sturdy Land Rover, and walked the inaccessible sections, I negotiated fallen forest and slips. The coast was a tight mat of trees brought down flooded rivers. Dead cows, bloated and with legs askance, protruded from this vast funeral pyre without dignity or grace.

At each marae I met the kaumātua, the elders. They would peruse the plans, and occasionally point to a place where the gas line was uncomfortably close to a sacred site, once where it crossed an ancient fortification.

On the killing floor of the local abattoir, the old chief wiped his hands and took hold of the large bound wodge of strip aerial photos that showed the pipeline route. 'Clever Pākehā.'

There was quiet admiration in his voice at this heavy statement of his land overviewed and captured on paper. This annoyed me for I read his response as acquiescence, almost submission. But who was I to judge a man raised in another world? A few years later I would return to his marae for a commemoration of war 100 years before. The tribe's meeting house was a statement of defiance built over the top of the still visible earthworks of a British redoubt. One of the speakers was a Pākehā historian who persisted in describing each army campaign in terms of 'enemy killed'. We few whities attending were dreadfully embarrassed and knew not what to do. The matter was taken in hand when a man, perhaps sent forth by his elders, wandered up to the podium and laid his considerable bulk down, back to the speaker, looking out at the gathering. It was an act of stern and rightful challenge, also of dismissal.

For so much of my wintry journey the looming symmetrical volcanic cone of still dangerous Taranaki was a solitary companion to thoughts about the

future. Soon I fell into a job with the local regional museum. Naively I read this landscape only for its boundless archaeological promise, but it was not a good choice. The director proved intensely suspicious of book learning; the board met as regional crematorium committee in the morning and museum committee in the afternoon. For both subjects they showed equal enthusiasm. A few months later another job came up, essentially a start-up. The current director would be standing down and I was his designated replacement. It seemed like a good place to secure a career as an archaeologist.