

Chilling beauty

A visit to picturesque Wannsee, on the outskirts of Berlin, reveals a magnificent villa, a testimony to the turning point of the 'Final Solution'

• LAURA KELLY

About 25 kilometers from central Berlin lies the picturesque lakeside village of Wannsee. Today, the lake is surrounded by fish restaurants, country clubs and opportunities for sunbathing. Yet one villa stands out among the manicured gardens, offering a pilgrimage for those wanting to witness the location that housed one of the most infamous meetings in history, the Wannsee Conference. This high-level meeting of Nazi officials is considered the turning point in World War II in carrying out the "Final Solution" of the Jewish problem.

I visited the museum as part of my participation in the Muslim Jewish Conference, an annual meeting of young professionals interested in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. With me that day was Amiira, a master's candidate at a European university, who is originally from Singapore. While I reflected on my own family's history – my great-grandmother Sarah left Germany in the early 1900s – Amiira focused on something more current.

"This kind of institutionalized racism is happening in Singapore. On my ID it says my race is 'Malay.' While the Malay people are indigenous to the area, I am seen as one of the lower classes."

Singapore, with a majority of Chinese Buddhists, is a small country of 5.5 million people, surrounded by far bigger neighbors with Muslim majorities. Its economy benefits from the country's reputation as an attractive base of international business. To protect its interests, it boasts a strong army, in part set up and supported by Israel. According to Amiira, who wanted to use only her first name because political topics are sensitive and considered taboo, Malay citizens, the majority of whom are Muslims, can't advance in government and military positions in Singapore, and on a personal level have their loyalty to the state questioned.

"It's the same thing," Amiira remarked sadly while looking at the exhibit.

The story of the Wannsee Conference provides a powerful historical lesson whose meaning and implications are

analyzed in academia, law and popular culture. But the decision to turn the villa into an exhibition was not without controversy; many feared it would become a pilgrimage site for neo-Nazis. When it first opened in 1992, it was criticized for being too graphic. It reopened in 2006 with its present-day exhibition.

After walking up the pebbled drive toward the entrance, one enters the first room of the exhibition, which would have been a welcoming salon. A map of Europe, Russia and North Africa dominates the side wall, displaying Jewish population numbers in 1933. Germany had around 500,000 Jews, which was less than 1 percent of the total German population. Poland, with around three million Jews, had the largest concentration of Jews in Europe.



VISITORS TO the Wannsee House look at copies of the meeting's minutes in the conference room. (Wikimedia Commons)

The first few of the eight rooms on the ground floor follow the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe in general, and in Germany in particular. Photos and newspaper clippings show that between 1933 and 1938, public humiliation of Jews was commonplace, accepted, and in some instances assisted by law enforcement. Some of the shocking photographs show romantically linked Jews and non-Jews being paraded down the main streets of their villages and cities, wearing signs attesting to their so-called blasphemy as a warning to anyone daring to enter into a relationship with a Jew.

The later Nuremberg laws institutionalized this racism, further brainwashing the public, licensing bigotry, punishing Jews and taking away their livelihoods.

After portraying how racism and

violence toward Jews accelerated in neighboring countries, the exhibit culminates in the conference room, where government ministry officials coordinated their efforts. On January 20, 1942, high-ranking representatives from the Nazi Party, several government ministries, the SS and the police gathered here at the invitation of Reinhard Heydrich, at that time the protector of Bohemia and Moravia, also splitting his time as director of the Reich's main security office.

The villa was built in 1914 by Ernst Marlier, a successful drug manufacturer. After Marlier went bankrupt in 1921, German industrialist Friedrich Minoux acquired the Wannsee villa. Myths surrounding the house say it was at one point owned by a Jew, but this is not true. After Minoux went to jail for

piped and they could easily and cheaply be transported by trains.

In their minutes, with certain parts of the text enlarged and highlighted on the walls of the exhibit, the men present were careful to avoid language that explicitly called for murder, but their intention was clear nonetheless. Not covered in the minutes was how best to carry out murder, asphyxiation by Zyklon-B or carbon monoxide.

"This is the moment in time that the entire German government signs off and becomes accomplices to murder," noted one of the tour guides.

Museum tour guides explained that at the end of World War II, in preparation for putting these men on trial for war crimes, few if any precedents existed for the breadth of the crimes committed. To prosecute someone for actually committing first-degree murder – yes, laws and punishments existed and were clearly understood. But for a civil servant desk worker who signed his name and gave a stamp of approval, to what degree could this man or woman be held accountable for murder?

"It's a place people find a bit chilling," says Dr. Hans-Christian Jasch, the director of the Wannsee house. "It has this beautiful salon, but it stands for this incredible Wannsee Conference, where they talked about millions of European Jews as numbers to be evacuated and murdered."

Jasch says the importance of the house is its authenticity. "The particular place, where the perpetrators met, we demonize these perpetrators [in the exhibition] but show how they worked and functioned and how dangerous they were, how dangerous this system of modern administration was."

Jasch says that Jewish and Israeli visitors find it a triumph to stand in the house where top Nazi officials met to decide on the logistics and legal framework for the deportation and mass extermination of the Jews. He continues that the museum is working on creating an audio guide in Hebrew for the increasing number of Israeli visitors.

The house is also preparing a garden exhibition that will look into the history of the entire area of Wannsee, which was a popular vacation spot for some of Berlin's upper class in the 1930s. For example, German-Jewish painter Max Liebermann owned a home in Wannsee. Also in the area is a mixed Jewish and Christian cemetery, where stars of David share space with crosses on headstones. "It's important for us to get an idea that Wannsee is not an isolated place," Jasch says of the learning possibilities.

While Jasch acknowledges that many people go to Wannsee with apprehension, "it's very important to show this government crime was organized and agreed upon here." ■