

A hidden shame

A memorial to victims of the Nazis leaves Richard Waters wondering if it was a tragedy Paris would rather forget.



Destination Memorial de la Deportation Paris

■ SETTING THE

The memorial is in the centre of Paris, in the 4th arrondissement, at the Square de l'Île de France at the eastern end of the Île de la Cité.

It is a 10-minute walk and roughly equivalent from the Metro stations at Cité, Pont Marie and Maubert-Mouton.

The memorial is operated by the Ministry of Culture, and is open daily, 10am-noon and 2-5pm (open between October 1 and March 31). Entry is free and no bookings are necessary.

The Île de la Cité is the larger of the two islands that together form an elongated bulge in the river Seine as it flows in an otherwise graceful curve through Paris. At the island's eastern tip the high walls along the water's edge taper to a sharp point, the prow of a huge ship pushing spines. Tacked into this triangular space is a chilling memorial to one of the most tragic and equally shameful episodes in France's recent history.

Sixty years ago, General Charles de Gaulle, a wartime French resistance leader, donned his topi and attended a mass in Notre Dame Cathedral to celebrate the liberation of Paris from German occupation. Eighteen years later, as president, he opened in the shadow of the cathedral a monument to the 100,000 of his fellow citizens who had been deported to Nazi death camps and for slave labour.

Stairways from the Metro station on the Boulevard de la Cité point the way to the site, skirting Notre Dame. Beyond the buskers and the tourist hordes milling in front of the great west entrance, past the flying bulbous propping up the nave like skinny stone legs, to a quiet, green square behind the cathedral.

Benches sit hunched and inert along a low wall bordering a neat lawn, staring out across the cool, grey water to the Île St-Louis and the dying autumn leaves clinging to the quay trees lining the riverfront along the Quai d'Orléans.

The memorial remains hidden until you are close enough to make out the wording on the walls: stonework "Memorial to the French martyrs of the deportation, 1945." Slashes form the letters, imitating the slitting of the numbers seen on the uniforms of concentration camp inmates. The lettering is the colour of dried blood.

From a gap in the wall, a narrow staircase leads down into a concrete courtyard. The walls are the colour of ash. Where the two longer sides meet is a low opening framed by a spiked gateway beyond, all that is visible are the murky waters of the Seine. It is eerily reminiscent of Traitors' Gate, the ancient underpass entrance into the Tower of London from the Thames.

The courtyard walls, four to six metres high, creating a feeling of confinement. Georges-Henri Pingault, the memorial's architect, designed it to evoke the concentration camp environment, with bare concrete, barred openings, narrow passages and no visible horizon. The memorial creates triangular spaces and patterns, reflecting the systemic triangle worn by all deportees and coloured according to the classification of each persecuted group.

The deportations began in spring 1942, when the German-installed Vichy government, perpetrating acting on Nazi orders, dispatched the first of 100,000 French citizens to concentration camps and into slave labour. Jews and gypsies comprised 75,000 of the total, including 8,000

children. Most spent time in the internment and transit camp at Drancy in Paris before being sent to camps in Germany and occupied Europe. Only 2 per cent returned. About 95,000 were victims of crackdowns against resistance to the Nazi occupying forces. Half made it home.

A narrow entrance off the courtyard leads to a dim inner chamber, with walls of the same bare concrete. The air is chilly. Black triangular recesses are in the walls, each inscribed with the name of a concentration camp, and each containing earth and ashes gathered from that camp. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, Buchenwald ... 30 names, 30 triangles.

Inscriptions in the same lettering as on the wall outside line the main chamber. Texts and names - by the likes of Robert Denon, Louis Aragon, Jean-Paul Sartre and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry - recall the deportations. The Sartre quote roughly translates as "And the choices you made for yourself in life were real because they were made in the presence of death." Lacking Sartre's existential eloquence, above the exit is inscribed: "Forgive, but don't forget."

Facing the entrance is a barred opening, beyond which a long narrow wall stretched away to end in a blank black wall. The body of an unknown deportee lies beneath the stone-flagged floor. The walls glow softly with four bands of five yellow lights, representing the deportees who never returned from the east.

Two prison cells lead off the main chamber. Visitors peer in, silenced by the blank exteriority. No one speaks. The only sounds are the echo of footsteps scraping on the concrete and people sniffling, not all of them just from the cold.

On the lawn at the top of the steps the memorial becomes invisible again. The subterranean setting achieves an effect of tomb-like confinement, but could it be that there are other reasons why the memorial is tucked away out of sight at the well-tended residents of the snug apartments across the water?

For France's older generation, the collaboration with the Nazis is an uncomfortable subject. It is therefore easy to speculate that in 1942, when design and location for the memorial were being considered, many Parisians might have been uneasy at the prospect of a visible reminder of such a divisive and shameful event.

Compared to such prominent structures as Singapore's commemoration of the victims of the Japanese occupation, the Paris memorial blends into the landscape, as if disguised.

But down in the grim courtyard, the architect's vision of an unforgettable monument to an event that must never be forgotten is painfully realised. As the inscription above the entrance to the crypt puts it: "So the memory of the 200,000 French who fell into the night and the fog and were exterminated in the Nazi camps will stay alive."