

**PRESENTATION OF THE “SULLE TRACCE DELLA MEMORIA” EXHIBITION, ARTEALTRO #1 AUSTRIAN CULTURE FORUM, ROME, JANUARY 2015**

This unusual exhibit in which I operate, untypically, as a photographer, originates from the fact I unexpectedly “stumbled” upon a small, but very precious art piece which will undoubtedly leave an indelible mark on our Memory. It all happens in Easter of 2012. I am in Berlin, and while I am withdrawing money from a cash machine, my gaze wanders by accident on an odd shiny golden cobblestone near my foot. I decide to look more closely, and see something written on it. I lean down out of curiosity to have a better look, and freeze in horror by what I am reading. A name, some dates, a location: little, but devastating information. That strange cobblestone covered in brass told us in a few lines the beginning and the end of a man’s life. The life of one of those many men, reduced to a mere number, who were first deported to concentration camps, and were then murdered and tortured in unspeakable ways. In the building where the cash machine was placed, lived that poor man seventy years ago, and he had walked on those same cobblestones I was walking upon on the very last day of his life. That unexpected “stumbling” upon that man’s story had profoundly shaken me. I couldn’t think of anything else for the rest of the day, then I forgot about it. But that feeling didn’t last long, it represented only a brief pause, which I perhaps needed to assimilate this traumatic event.

In the summer of that same year, before I returned to the German capital, I came across, through an internet search, the beautiful and engaging project of Gunter Demnig. The Berlin “stolpersteine” in memory of Abraham Fromm had a profound impact on me, and it led me to uncharted grounds, which I would have never thought I’d one day tread. At the same time, that triggered the beginning of a research into the history of the Jewish roots of my maternal family, a search I never considered getting involved in before. Little by little the seed that would bring me to write an exhibition project on the subject was planted. A wider, more complex and ambitious project than the one I am presenting to you today, which, after two years of work, and my finally being able to emotionally distance myself from the subject matter, has now evolved into an instrument of critical thought to be offered to children and teenagers in schools. Thanks to the generosity and enthusiasm of Christoph Meran, director of the Austrian Cultural Forum of Rome, to whom I am forever indebted, my project has landed in the Forum’s foyer, integrating the exhibit into the programme for the commemoration of The Day of Memory, which already included a concert by violinist Gil Morgentern, which was specifically devised for this important occasion.

The thing that particularly struck me about the cobblestones I encountered on the streets of Berlin is the immediacy and sheer force with which their message is delivered. Plaques of commemoration generally have a taste of a distant historical past which seems alien to us; the cobblestones on the other hand, with their few blunt words inscribed on them, penetrate in the passer-by’s soul in a much more immediate and direct way, taking him instantly back to a past that becomes present, bringing back to life men who were reduced to being considered mere numbers. The cobblestones, placed in front of the houses (and in some cases the workplaces) where the deported men and women were abducted from, are produced as ad-hoc works, by applying to their surface a brass plaque with data on it. Being positioned on the ground, they are less visible than a plaque placed on a wall, but they impact our daily life much more profoundly, when we become aware of their existence. The very name the artist chose for his works, to which he is now devoting his whole life, is in itself emblematic of the effect he is trying to create: to “stumble”, symbolically, opening a door to a different, higher thought. My experience is emblematic in this sense, because if my gaze had not accidentally wandered on the Berlin stolpersteine, I would have never become interested in this whole story in the first place. For some, the idea of using a cobblestone which every day is stepped on by many people in order to remember the victims of the Holocaust represents a further insult to their memory. This point of view should be respected. However, I personally found Demnig’s idea very strong, carrying a deep

emotional impact, and I noticed that the more the cobblestones are used, by positioning them in very busy areas, the more they shine and emanate life, while in less frequented areas, they appear dim, and faded.

As far as the actual exhibition is concerned, my objective from the start was to find a way to bring the life stories of the Roman deported Jews back to life, to give them back an identity, and restore their dignity. A precise purpose of mine, executed by starting precisely with the these "stolpersteine" cobblestones from Deming's international project. Behind every stone lie many life stories just like ours, each one with their dreams and their emotions, their joys and their pain... and in order to resuscitate them, one by one, I reckoned the best way was to start by photographing those little works of art, which are priceless for the simple fact that they bear the names and personal information of the Jews deported in World War Two. Using a totally automatic digital Leica, I therefore started to retrace the story of every Roman deported Jew whose name appeared on the cobblestones, photographing the stone, or stones (because they were often laid down by entire family units), which I then assembled together in a unique frame under the doorstep, or the main building entrance, where these people lived and worked, before they were sent to the camps. The stone thus, in place of Man, and the doorstep or building entrance, as a borderline area between life and death. They used to walk into these houses and buildings when they were alive, and also left these buildings forever when they were brutally taken away. These photos are in fact a mere excuse to bring back to light traces of lost lives. A symbolic act to give back dignity and life to those whose existence has been brutally denied. A homage to Life through the memory of life. Beside each photo, seemingly repetitive, because stones, building and houses look all more or less the same, the biographical corresponding stories are introduced. Tough stories carrying a very strong emotional impact which I found on the "Arteinmemoria" ([www. Arteinmemoria.it](http://www.Arteinmemoria.it)) website – who I thank for sponsoring my effort – that handles Deming's project in Italy, and which should be praised for having collected this valuable information. Stories that have sometimes proved difficult to recover, because at the end of the war few were willing to talk or remember, or were lost, because all surviving members of the family had already passed away. Some stories were also re-assembled by uniting various memories or tales heard in the family, or from the survivors themselves, so that the last traces of family life would not be lost forever.

With regards to the technical aspect of the photographs, I consciously took the shots in a quick, and instinctive manner, never using a tripod, making an effort to get the best angle possible for the shot from a usually uncomfortable position. In summer, in winter, with sunshine or rain, that was my personal homage to them. My intent with this exhibition is to invite the public to a personal and intimate journey from Oblivion to Memory, from past to present, to the future. Like slowly reading a book, often pausing to think, to let in, inside your thoughts, to remember, to never forget again... Personally, my only aim is to bring another small grain of sand to Memory, nothing else, and I ask you to do the same, if you feel like it, and to let me know your thoughts.

TO REMEMBER AS A WAY TO NEVER FORGET

Elisabetta Giovagnoni

Rome, 24/01/2015