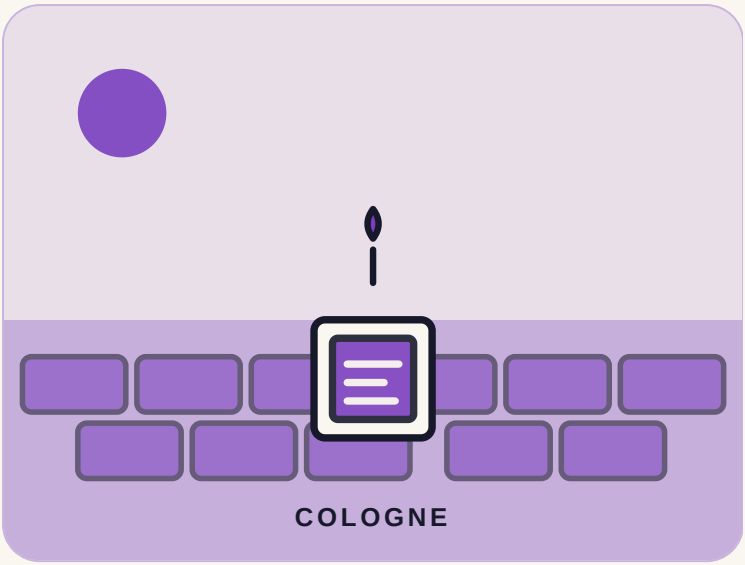

GERMANY

The stones that make you stop

Artist Gunter Demnig set small brass stones in pavements to name Nazi victims. Over 100,000 now exist.

WHERE	Cologne
WHO	Gunter Demnig, a German artist, and the many people who help him name victims of the Nazis
WHEN	1990 to 2023

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In 1990, the German artist Gunter Demnig walked through Cologne with a paint wheel. He was marking the route along which the Nazis had taken 1,000 Sinti and Roma away in May 1940. The paint faded. So he began to replace it with brass letters set into the ground.

While he worked, an older woman praised the project. But she doubted that any Sinti or Roma had ever lived in her neighbourhood. Demnig saw how many stories had been forgotten. He wanted to bring them back to the streets where people had lived.

> **A person is only forgotten when their name is no longer remembered.**
>
> A PASSAGE FROM THE TALMUD, WHICH GUNTER DEMNIG LIKES TO QUOTE

A stone in the pavement

His idea was small. It was a brass plate, ten centimetres wide, on a concrete cube set into the pavement. It is placed outside the last home a person chose freely, before the Nazis persecuted them. It shows the name and dates, and usually the words “Here lived”. He called it a “Stolperstein”, which means stumbling block.

The first one was laid on 16 December 1992, in front of Cologne's City Hall. It was engraved with the first line of the order to deport Sinti and Roma. In January 1995, the first stones for named people were laid.

13,000

stones laid by October 2007, in more than 280 cities

26

countries with stones by 2021, Romea reports

100,000

stones laid by May 2023, Wikipedia says

A project for many hands

Anyone can ask for a stone. The request comes from local groups, families, historians or schools. Students and teachers often find out who lived where. Donations pay for each stone, and each one is made by hand.

Demnig has laid most of the stones himself. He wants to be there. He speaks with the people who come, and places each one with care. To read a name, you must bow your head.

On 26 May 2023, the 100,000th stone was laid in Nuremberg, for a firefighter named Johann Wild. Not every city agrees. Munich, for example, does not accept the stones. It looks for other ways to remember.

How it unfolded

- **1990** Demnig paints the route of the 1940 deportation of Sinti and Roma in Cologne.
- **1992** The first Stolperstein is laid in front of Cologne's City Hall.
- **1995** The first stones for named people are laid in Cologne.
- **2007** More than 13,000 stones have been laid, in more than 280 cities.
- **2023** The 100,000th stone is laid, in Nuremberg.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

The memorial is not in a museum. You find it by chance, at your own feet.

It began with one doubtful sentence from a neighbour, and a decision not to let it stand.

OUR TAKE

Demnig turned forgetting into a small, daily reminder, one name at a time.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 **Listen to what surprises you**

An older woman's doubt showed him how much had been forgotten.

Try this: Notice one comment that surprises you this week. Ask what lies behind it.

2 Make memory personal

Each stone names one person and the place they lived.

Try this: Learn one person's name and story, not only a number.

3 Let others own the work

Anyone can ask for a stone, and schools and families often do the research.

Try this: Plan your project so other people can join in and lead parts of it.

4 Keep the idea small and clear

A plate ten centimetres wide became a worldwide memorial.

Try this: Boil your idea down to one simple thing people can see or touch.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A name placed where someone once lived can stop a stranger in the street.

Sources

Stolpersteine in Berlin
Art Project Stolpersteine

Stolpersteine (official project site)
Frequently asked questions

Romea.cz
Gunter Demnig marked the Nazi deportation route of thousands of Roma and Sinti from Cologne, Germany, then invented the Stolpersteine (2021)

Wikipedia
Stolperstein

Fact-check note: The four sources agree on the main story and differ on a few details. The first paint trail in Cologne: Stolpersteine in Berlin says Demnig used white house paint in 1990 to mark the deportation of 1,000 Sinti and Roma in May 1940; Romea.cz says he used a custom-built wheel on 6 May 1990 and gives the words “Eine Spur durchs Vergessen”; the official FAQ says he laid a colour trail in 1991; the story says 1990 and “a paint wheel”. The older woman who doubted that Sinti or Roma had lived in her neighbourhood is in the official FAQ, Stolpersteine in Berlin and Romea.cz; the official FAQ and Romea.cz say she praised the project. The first stone: 16 December 1992 in front of Cologne’s City Hall, engraved with the first line of Heinrich Himmler’s order, is in Stolpersteine in Berlin, Romea.cz and Wikipedia. The first stones for named individuals: Stolpersteine in Berlin says January 1995 in Cologne, Wikipedia says January 1995, and Romea.cz says 4 January 1995 and adds that it was done without asking for official permission; the story says “January 1995”. Numbers of stones: 13,000 by October 2007 in more than 280 cities and the 100,000th stone on 26 May 2023 in Nuremberg for Johann Wild are from Wikipedia; Romea.cz in 2021 says almost 90,000 stones in 26 countries; the story attributes the 26 countries to Romea.cz and the 100,000 to Wikipedia, and we could not open a second source for the 100,000 figure. The size (ten centimetres), the last freely chosen home, the words “Here lived” and the name “stumbling block” are in Wikipedia and the official sources. That anyone can ask for a stone, and that the request comes from outside, are in the official FAQ; students and teachers doing research and donations paying for the stones are in Wikipedia; hand-made stones are in Wikipedia and the official FAQ. That Demnig lays most stones himself and wants to be there is in Romea.cz and the official FAQ; that people bow their heads to read the stones is in Romea.cz. The Talmud passage, as quoted by Demnig, is in the official FAQ and Romea.cz. Munich not accepting the stones is in Wikipedia. The stones are for all kinds of victims of the Nazis, mostly Jewish, which the short story does not list; Wikipedia gives the full range. We could not open the DW, Guardian or the Stolpersteine home page (404 or no content). The pin shows Cologne. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.