

13. Never-Never Land

In 1998, the CEO and Board of the German chemical company Degussa AG began to look into the role its company played during the Nazi years. Neither CEO Utz-Helmuth Felcht, nor any employee of the company had worked for it that long ago, so they hired Peter Hayes, a historian who specialized in WWII German history, to investigate.

Hayes discovered that Degussa had indeed collaborated with the Nazis and had engaged in a number of shameful practices, such as using slave labor, smelting precious metals confiscated from Jews, taking over Jewish businesses, and seizing their real estate. On the other hand, Hayes also found that Degussa had not collaborated as fully as it could have, and may have refrained from taking over Jewish firms until the Nazis compelled them to do so. But the most painful part of its history involved a sister company of which Degussa owned 42.2%. This company had produced Zyklon B, a potent pesticide, which the Nazis had used in their concentration camps to kill millions of prisoners in the closing years of the war. During the Nuremberg Trials, the courts tried some people who worked for distributors of Zyklon B, found them guilty of war crimes, and executed them, but were unable to prove that the leaders of Degussa had known that the Nazis used Zyklon B for anything other than a pesticide.

In 2000, Degussa, along with the German government and sixteen other large corporations, created the Foundation for Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future. This foundation attempted to compensate those who survived Nazi forced labor and their heirs.

Hayes published his most important findings in 2002. In the same year, the Memorial Foundation to the Murdered Jews in Europe opened bidding for construction of a large memorial. After much soul-searching, Felcht decided to bid on supplying a protective coating for the 2,700 pillars that would make up the monument. The coating would shield the pillars from defacement by neo-Nazi groups.

Construction of the memorial began in 2003, but halted after six months when a Swiss newspaper broke the story about Degussa's collaboration with the Nazis. Many people demanded that the builders void the contract with Degussa and redo the work, because no company should profit twice from the Holocaust. But the Memorial Foundation realized that such an action would kill the project, already late and over budget. Defenders of Degussa argued that restricting bidding to companies that had not collaborated with the Nazis would narrow the competition and raise the cost. They also pointed out that no current employee had been with the company during the war, and that Degussa's current management had made sincere efforts to discover and clarify the extent of its past involvement. The Foundation ultimately decided to resume construction, using Degussa product.