

‘Starting from zero’ - newness from the ruins of Schindler’s Ark

by Daniel Low-Beer

“At least once in life, it is good to start from zero” said Anni Albers, the bauhaus weaver. She had escaped Nazi Germany to USA in the 1930s. Her visa was granted due to the innovation of one of her textiles. It was a two-sided textile, absorbing sound on one side and reflecting the light of the room on the other side. The textile changed the sound and light of a room, almost magically. She lived to 94, and shaped modern weaving, an example of how survivors shape our world (Anni Albers 1961).

What is meant by starting from zero? How does the ruined Low-Beer textile factory which is Schindler’s Ark in the Czech Republic start from zero? How do we bring a sense of newness to the past and to the restoration of heritage sites?

‘Starting from zero’ was the theme of the event in the ruined Schindler’s Ark on 30th July 2022 – ‘creating newness out of ruins – new stories, new textiles, new film, new music, new theatre’. There was a launch of an iWalk of the stories so you can visit the site virtually (in the iWalk app from the Shoah Foundation). New testimonies of second-generation survivors were released, including of the daughters of Joseph Bau, their parents married in the camp in Schindler’s List. The first Low-Beer textiles since 1938 were released, the Brno-Mendel and textiles by Otti Berger. The new film *Absence*, two songs based on the poems written by Joseph Bau in the camp, and the premier of the play *Last Day of the Fire* by Arnost Lustig, directed by his daughter Eva Lustigová.



The iWalk was released which allows you to visit Schindler’s Ark virtually (left) and the collection of Anni Albers and Lucie Rie which illustrate how survivors shape our world (right)

Over 300 people attended from the local villages, from Brno, Norway, Germany, India, Switzerland, and Austria. The Friends of Czech heritage were present and offered the support of a working party in 2023. For a day they shared the newness, the challenges and possibilities of restoring ruins. They felt and discussed how the bricks can be rebuilt, and how newness can be brought into the stories to connect to the present.

The ruins then settled back to their haunting quietness and possibilities. A few weeks later the European Commission provided its first modest funding to make the small part of the site where the July events occurred into a permanent exhibition by 2025. The proposal had been infused with the spirit of “Starting from Zero”, bringing newness to a heritage site. It gained a technical score of 98/100 (the passing threshold is 70). We are grateful to get an opportunity to “Start from Zero”.



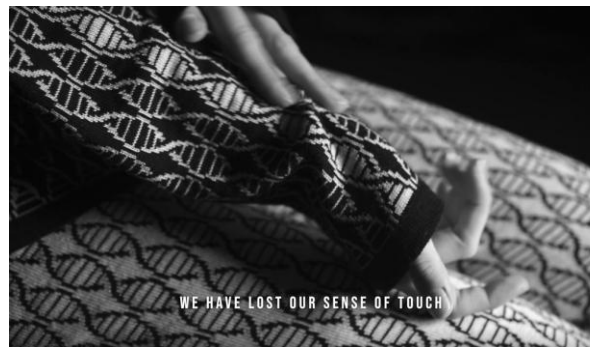
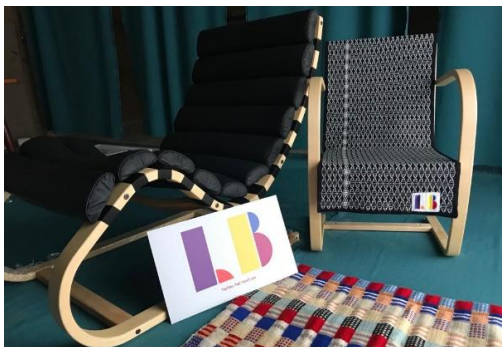
“Starting from Zero” event, Schindler’s Ark, July 2022 (left), weaving Otti Berger textile (right)

Otti Berger was an equally talented bauhaus weaver of Jewish descent from Central Europe. She was close to Anni Albers, and they are the two decisive figures in modern weaving. Otti Berger could weave anything, snow or zebras. She described weaving winter “To experience winter in a textile, it is not necessary to weave a bare tree with a raven on it. With only the expression of the material, we can feel winter. We can weave a white fabric, with the glitter and shimmer of snow and the hard shine of porcelain and a soft transparency. Through the materials we can weave immateriality, the textile can be music itself” (Otti Berger 1930).

She could also cover the modern world with textiles, investing time to design textiles for trains and public transport. She rose to the challenge of the modern world. I recently travelled to Zurich by train to find the small, textile squares of her work that remain in the Design Museum. I travelled back still marveling at how much more beautiful her train textiles were than what I was sitting on. Otti Berger could not escape in the 1930s and was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. She did not get the opportunity to start from zero.

That is why we released a textile of Otti Berger in July, as well as a Brno-Mendel textile to commemorate 200 years of the discovery of genetics in Brno, Czech Republic. The Otti Berger textile is a rhythmic, mesmerizing burst of colourful music. It takes a day, and a mix of discipline and improvisation to hand weave a meter. We use wool rather than her mix of materials, as we want her to address the newness of the modern environmental challenge. Sixty percent of the clothes we wear are made from plastic and petrol. They shed 200,000 micro plastics into the water, each time we wash them. We want to see if Otti Berger can still help us face the challenges of the modern world.

The work of Otti Berger and that of Anni Albers will be built into the museum, into the textile walls, the dividers, the curtains, the materiality of the place. They illustrate the theme of survivors and how they shape our world. We will also show the art of Lucie Rie who started from zero making buttons in England during the war and Joseph Bau, using testimonies and art to communicate the spirit of a new museum of survivors.



The first Low-Beer textiles and chairs released since 1938 in July, 2022 (left). Textiles that touch you with their material, design and story, reversible design in 100% merino wool (right).

The second textile we released was in black and white. The first part of the museum covering the events, 1939-45 will be in black and white, focused on saving a life. The second part which follows the life of survivors and how they shape our world, in their words and art, will be in colour. The Brno-Mendel textile is 100% merino wool. It is in the form of 23 helix pairs and can be worn two sided, black on white or white on black. Its length of two meters is the length of the genetic strings we have in each of our cells. You regain a sense of touch in its material, and with its story. Low-Beer textiles touch you with their material, their design and their story.

“Starting from zero” also reflects on the past and what heritage can achieve now. “The past is never dead, it’s not even past.”, William Faulkner reminds us (William Faulkner 1951). If we think one hundred years from today, it will not be the Holocaust that is forgotten, nor how we respond now. What disappears is the present which does not find a sense of newness. Heritage at its best reminds us of the creative presence of the past in the present.

The Czechs have often risen to the challenge of starting from zero, in 1919 and in 1989. Vaclav Havel, while in prison, had an essay smuggled to him in the family letter. The essay was by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas translated by his brother Ivan. Havel had never read Levinas but “was dogged by the feeling he had read it all somewhere before”. Czech thought is built on layers of Jewish, Protestant and Catholic humanism since at least Komenský.

Havel commented “In the four walls of my cell, I came back again and again to this idea, if I understand Levinas correctly, that what has happened is written down somewhere and cannot be effaced” (Vaclav Havel 2006). He realised the challenge was whether newness was possible after 40 years of Czech communism. At times he did not think it was possible.

Heritage can play a role in helping us find newness in the material of the past. Heritage gives us a chink of perspective, an angle of otherness and newness in the present. The ephemeral events of July 2022, the testimonies, the buildings filled with people, the dance, music and theatre, provided a sense of newness in the ruins of Schindler’s Ark. Now follows the work of ‘Starting from Zero’ of creating a place where the past survives to continue to shape our world.

Daniel Low-Beer is the grandson of the owner of the Schindler's Ark factory and founder of the Arks Foundation (www.arksfoundation.net). He works for the WHO in Geneva.

iwalk (download IWalk - USC Shoah Foundation from iPhone or Android App Store. Select 'Czech Republic' and 'Schindler's Ark'.

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