DANIEL LIBESKIND

by DENISE COUTURE

When Daniel Libeskind won an international competition in 1989 for the design of a Jewish museum in Berlin, he was largely unknown outside architectural circles. It was the first commission for the Polish-born professor who had been more interested in exploring architecture theoretically than in practice. When completed a decade later, the museum – a haunting, zigzagging structure that evokes a broken Star of David – was hailed by many as a masterpiece, a work of genius. Libeskind, at fifty-three years of age, suddenly found himself thrust onto the world stage.

The spotlight has shone on Libeskind ever since. In 2003, his design for a master plan to rebuild Ground Zero – the gaping pit where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood – was selected from a crowded group of renowned contenders. In the fall of 2006, the Libeskind-designed Denver Art Museum in Colorado

opened to fanfare and acclaim. His much-anticipated addition to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto opened in the summer of 2007. A fairground redevelopment in Milan and residential skyscrapers in Singapore are among myriad high-profile projects in the works.

Libeskind has come a long way from Lodz, where he entered the world in 1946, the son of Polish Jews who lost most of their extended families in the Holocaust. Today, his architecture firm, Studio Daniel Libeskind, occupies the nineteenth floor of an elegant lower Manhattan office building overlooking Ground Zero. There are satellite offices in Zurich, Bern, San Francisco, Denver, Toronto, Hong Kong and Tel Aviv, employing 150 people.

Now in his early sixties, Libeskind is frequently described as boyish and ebullient. When he talks, his hands often fly up toward his ears as he exuberantly voices his thoughts. He smiles often, a wide toothy grin, and his bright blue eyes are intelligent and friendly. He exudes an infectious, youthful optimism and love for life, qualities he says he owes almost entirely to Judaism and especially to his beloved parents, the late Dora Blaustein and Nachman Libeskind. Even after the horrors they experienced during the war, part of which they spent in Soviet prison camps, "they truly believed the world was worth fighting for," he says.

Libeskind took their life lessons to heart. Generous helpings of optimism and a fighting spirit were required in order to see the Jewish Museum Berlin through to completion. The obstacles were immense – hostile city officials and an undercurrent of anti-Semitism. "At one point in 1990, the city government voted unanimously to scrap the entire project," says Libeskind.

In 1999, when Libeskind accepted the German Architecture Prize for the museum, he told the audience: "The cultivation of naiveté, the feeling that one should remain a beginner worthy of entering the 'cloud of the unknown,' is what motivated me to continue this work across the vicissitudes of the past ten years: six governments, five name changes, four museum directors, three window companies, two sides of a wall, one unification, and zero regret."

From the beginning, Libeskind was determined to design a

structure that would serve as a memorial to victims of the Holocaust. The East German Senate's invitation to enter the competition called for an extension of the Berlin Museum to house a Jewish Department, a *Jüdische Abteilung*. Those two words horrified Libeskind, who recognized them as the very words used by the SS officer Adolf Eichmann, mastermind of the policy of transporting Jews to ghettos and death camps.

"Something rebelled in me against that idea that you could compartmentalize Jewish culture in Berlin rather than see it as part of the everyday life, both its successes prewar and the tragedy of the complete extermination of Jews from Berlin, throughout Europe," says Libeskind, whose slightly accented English retains traces of Polish and Yiddish syntax.

Libeskind felt a sense of darkness, "because I understood who I was dealing with. I was dealing with a generation that was also a perpetrator of those crimes." Sustaining him was "a kind of desperate faith that silence around me would be given a voice and there would be something positive, something that could educate someone about what Berlin was, what Germany was, what the Holocaust was, and what the future was for a democratic new kind of city. But there were bleak days."

What Libeskind designed – and what the Berlin city government finally approved – is virtually a separate museum that incorporates symbolism of both the connection between Jews and Gentiles, as well as the fragmentation of their tortuous history. One axis, a path of continuity, connects the old baroque museum to Libeskind's new building. A second axis leads to the Garden of Exile and Emigration. A third axis dead-ends at the Holocaust Tower, a bare concrete structure, dark, damp and empty to recall the experience of Nazi Germany's Jewish victims. A series of empty rooms, the Voids, run throughout Libeskind's museum, evoking the emptiness in Europe following the mass genocide of World War II.

Among the survivors of that genocide were Libeskind's parents. Not sure what to do after the war, they returned to their Polish homeland. While many members of Poland's small community of

postwar Jews hid their Jewishness and assimilated, Dora and Nachman did not. They were "indefatigably and proudly Jewish," says Libeskind. "They continued to speak Yiddish. They continued to be Jewish in their outward identities, not only inwardly. I always admired them for that. I admired their stance in life." Libeskind considers himself and his older sister, Ania, to be lucky that their parents transmitted to them Jewish values of life and tradition, even though they were not observant, nor is Libeskind himself.

"Our Judaism was an everyday thing," he explains. "It was in the way that you saw the world, and the way you talked about it; it was the way you reacted to other people and the way you embraced realities that are often rejected by others." Of himself, Libeskind says, "I would say what I *do* is Jewish…it's a Jewish approach to reality."

In 1957, the family left Poland for Israel. Libeskind was eleven. Two years later they moved again, this time to the Bronx in New York City. Libeskind often speaks of the visceral feelings he had upon entering New York harbor aboard the S.S. *Constitution* and setting eyes on the Statue of Liberty for the first time. "As we saw it coming out of that mist on that late August day, we stood there with our… jaws dropped, just like all the other immigrants," he recalls. "You could see the beauty and optimism and the power of thought in America in this city."

Nachman Libeskind found work as a printer not far from where the World Trade Center eventually was constructed. Libeskind's mother, Dora, who had run a corset shop in Poland, became a sweatshop seamstress. The family lived in a one-bedroom apartment in garment workers' union housing where nearly everyone spoke Yiddish. Yet in spite of meager circumstances, their daily life was rich with art, culture and learning. "They were very intellectual and scholarly people," says Libeskind of his parents. "They read books. They saved their money to go to the theater. They represented really what Jews in their makeup are."

The arts, especially music, have always been a large part of Libeskind's world. He listens to classical music every morning over coffee and counts the complete works of Bach among his prized

possessions. As a boy in Poland he was a serious accordion player. Not long after moving to Israel, he won an America-Israel Cultural Foundation scholarship, also awarded the same year to Itzhak Perlman. The two pudgy prodigies played alongside each other at a recital in Tel Aviv. But as a young teen in New York, where Libeskind attended the acclaimed Bronx High School of Science, he began to turn to drawing, something he had always loved.

It was his practical mother who first suggested that he try architecture. Worried by her son's obsessive drawing, she urged him to give up any notion of becoming an artist, as Libeskind recounts in his delightful 2004 book, *Breaking Ground: An Immigrant's Journey from Poland to Ground Zero*. When young Libeskind offered up the name Andy Warhol as an example of a successful artist, his mother responded: "Varhole? For every Varhole there's a thousand penniless waiters. Be an architect. Architecture is a trade, and an art form."

The idea stuck. For Libeskind, it was a way to combine all of his passions and interests – the arts, philosophy, mathematics, science.

After high school, Libeskind enrolled in the architecture program at New York's Cooper Union, graduating in 1970. Two years later, he earned a master's degree in the history and theory of architecture from Essex University in England. A short-lived entry-level position at a New York architecture firm left him with a distaste for the actual practice of his chosen profession.

So for the next couple of decades, Libeskind spent his time as a theoretical architect, moving frequently to take various teaching positions, accompanied by his Canadian wife, Nina, whom he had married in 1969. When he was thirty-two, Libeskind accepted an offer to become head of the highly respected architecture department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The couple settled into academic life and started a family.

For a time they were pleased to be there. Gradually, they weren't. Each of them wrongly assumed the other was happy with their Michigan life. Finally, in 1985, Libeskind came clean: He wanted to leave Bloomfield Hills; he was restless and eager for new adventures.

Nina responded by opening a bottle of cognac to celebrate. ("I can still, to this day, remember the taste. I was so happy," says Nina.) The next year they found themselves in Milan, Italy, where Libeskind started Architecture Intermundium, a kind of alternative school that attempted to bring together his disparate ideas about architecture and life. Libeskind, working from his home, was the sole teacher.

When Libeskind learned he had won the competition for the Jewish museum, he, Nina and their children were preparing to leave Italy for a stint in sunny California, where Libeskind had been awarded a prestigious resident scholar position at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. First, however, they made a detour to Berlin to pick up Libeskind's award. Shortly after their arrival, Nina, the worldly daughter of a Canadian politician, told her husband that if he ever wanted to see a Jewish museum actually built in Berlin, they would have to stay. He knew she was right.

Of the many crossroads in Libeskind's life, none would have as dramatic an impact on his career as the path he took toward Berlin.

Recalling that fateful first day in the city, Libeskind says, "We checked into a hotel. Rachel was just an infant and Noam and Lev were six and eight or something. And to this day, I remember the hotel. I remember the man at the desk said, 'How long are going to stay in Berlin?' I said, 'Until the Jewish Museum is built.' And he burst out laughing. He had never heard something so funny in his life. He thought it was kind of a joke.'" For the Libeskinds, of course, it was anything but funny.

Nor did Libeskind's extended family find it humorous. They were horrified to learn he was living in Berlin and swore they would never set foot in the city where the Holocaust had been conceived. Libeskind's father was the exception – he visited, eager to see everything. In one of the most moving passages in *Breaking Ground*, Libeskind writes of his father stopping suddenly on a Berlin street and proclaiming, "'Look at me. Here I am. Hitler is nothing but ashes. But I am here, and I am living, eating, sleeping in this city, and below, Hitler's bones are rotting!' His eyes glistened with tears, but he sounded victorious."

Other family and friends eventually visited as well, in 2001, when Rachel Libeskind had her bat mitzvah, the first such ceremony at Berlin's Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue since 1933.

Berlin was where Nina Libeskind became a full partner in her husband's career, something her husband made a condition if he were to see the Jewish Museum project through. Certainly, she was more than capable. As a girl she worked on the political campaigns of her father, David Lewis, who grew up in a Russian shtetl and went on to become a Rhodes Scholar and the founder of Canada's New Democratic Party. Every ounce of Nina's considerable political savvy would be called upon not only in Berlin but also in the couple's next stop, New York City.

Though construction on the Jewish Museum was completed in 1999, the official opening of the fully installed exhibition space came two years later – on September 11, 2001. When Libeskind heard that the World Trade Center had been struck by terrorists, "I instantly at that point said, 'I'm going to lower Manhattan. I want to be there.'"

The timing was right. His work in Berlin was done. And America, his adopted homeland, beckoned. Almost the first thing he did upon arriving in Manhattan was to visit the slurry wall – the World Trade Center's foundation, which held fast during the inferno. Before leaving Berlin, Libeskind had roughed out a plan for Ground Zero. After visiting the wall, he immediately called his team in Germany and said, "Change everything."

To Libeskind the slurry wall was symbolic of the strength of America's democracy and the value of people as individuals. He wanted to acknowledge the tragedy that had occurred, but he was equally determined to imbue the site with hope. To those ends, he incorporated the exposed slurry wall into his design of two large public spaces: the Park of Heroes to commemorate the fallen and the Wedge of Light to mark the time that each of the Twin Towers was hit by terrorist-flown airplanes. A third major element, dubbed the Freedom Tower, is a skyscraper that soars a symbolic 1,776 feet in the sky.

While the opening of the Jewish Museum in Berlin "instantly made [Libeskind] one of the most sought-after architects in the world," as *Time* magazine critic Richard Lacayo wrote, winning the master plan competition for developing Ground Zero propelled him to near-Hollywood-star status.

Like most celebrity, however, it has come with a price. Libeskind soon found himself embroiled with other architects on the project – and nearly anyone else who had a strong opinion about it – in a battle to retain the integrity of his master plan. As with the Jewish Museum, with its many references to the Holocaust, Libeskind's architecture tends to be deeply, sometimes overtly, symbolic. His harshest critics have called aspects of the Ground Zero master plan corny, kitschy, even ghoulish and ghastly.

"Libeskind's main contribution has always been to integrate history and meaning into design, which was more or less a revolution from modernism, which was much more straightforward," Arjen Oosterman, an editor for the Netherlands architectural magazine *Volume*, recently told the *International Herald Tribune*. "That produces strange, weird and sometimes uncomfortable buildings."

But for Libeskind, true symbols, such as the Jewish flame or the American flag, hold great meaning. "Very often symbols become hollow when they are not really lived, and people take them for granted as if they were just objects," says Libeskind. "Certainly, as an immigrant, one would feel it more profoundly because you would never take for granted what you can find in America," especially, he says, "when you grow up under Communist dictatorship, when you grow up under hardships where you don't have those opportunities."

Libeskind says he was open to making changes on other aspects of the master plan, but he would not compromise on the 1,776-foot height of the Freedom Tower, derided by his harshest critics as empty symbolism. "Definitely not. I fought for it! I had to fight very hard. What's more important than that date?"

In *Breaking Ground*, readers are given a fascinating play-by-play of the World Trade Center battle, complete with insider details (from Libeskind's position, of course), such as the bullying behavior

of the lead architect hired to execute the master plan and ego-driven bickering more befitting little boys on a playground than grown men.

The Ground Zero architectural controversy continues, even as rebuilding has begun. Notes one architect who is acquainted with and likes Libeskind, "There's usually a fair amount of turmoil around him." For many people, Libeskind's appearance on the international stage has been cause for welcome, even celebration. Certainly he has contributed to enlivening the sometimes overly staid architectural scene.

Despite – or perhaps partly because of – the controversy, Studio Daniel Libeskind is flourishing. "We just keep getting project after project in the office," says Nina, who runs the firm's business operations. "The challenge is to remain small."

The eternal optimist isn't complaining. "It's my passion," says Libeskind. "It's not something that you can do between nine and five. It's not something that's even work in any secular sense of the word."

Libeskind, whose grandfather was an itinerant storyteller in Poland, believes memory is the force that drives Jewish life forward and gives it a future. He also believes that every building has a story to tell. "A great building – like great literature or poetry or music – can tell the story of the human soul."