

Workshop: Rescue of Jews during the Second World War in contemporary museums
Berlin, October 5th-6th, 2017

In the last decades, the Holocaust has become the centre of attention within the European memory of the Second World War. At its centre, there are the Jewish victims, but recently, the focus has shifted towards the contexts of the genocide, too. The Stockholm Declaration (2000) stressed the importance of preserving the memory of those “who defied the Nazis, and sometimes gave their own lives to protect or rescue the victims of the Holocaust”.

From the beginning of the 21st century, a whole series of museums dedicated to those who saved Jews during the Second World War has been created in Europe. Among these are the Dimiter Peshev Museum in Kyustendil/Bulgaria (2002), the Villa Emma Nonantola Foundation/Italy (exhibition "Jewish Children of Villa Emma", 2001/2014), the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind (2006) and the Silent Heroes Memorial Centre in Berlin (2008), Žaņis Lipke Memorial in Riga (2012), Lieu de Mémoire au Chambon-sur-Lignon/France (2013), Tadeusz Pankiewicz's Pharmacy in Kraków (1983/2013), Żabiński's Villa in Warsaw (2015) and the Ulma Museum in Markowa/Poland (2016). Next to these, there are other museums too, such as the Jewish museums in Copenhagen (2004), Hohenems/Austria (2007), Vilnius (exhibition "Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah", 2009), London (2010) and Warsaw (2014) or the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk (2017), which in their permanent exhibitions also deal with this issue.

The topic is not only of historical importance, but also of high relevance in the area of civic education. Amongst others, it can help to convey the difficult questions of indifference or collaboration during the Holocaust in an adequate manner. At the same time however, “the Righteous” can easily be misused for political purposes. Such commemorative initiatives can sometimes be interpreted as attempts to neutralize uncomfortable debates about the participation of “regular” society members in the murder of Jews. How, then, should the subject be treated appropriately in museums? How can we use the educational potential of these narratives to convey not only a better understanding of history in its complexity, but also possibly to promote tolerance, human solidarity and civic engagement?

The Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin (CHR), the German Resistance Memorial Centre and the Europäisches Kolleg Jena - Representing the 20th Century organise an international workshop for October 5th -6th, 2017 to discuss these difficult questions with selected museum practitioners, curators and educators, as well as historians and social scientists. The workshop will be held in Berlin at the CHR as an opportunity for exchange of experiences and networking.

We will invite representatives of some of the above-mentioned museums (exhibition curators and museum educators) as well as external experts on the subject (historians, social scientists and museum researchers). Travel and accommodation costs will be covered for speakers. The conference language is English.

WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

The workshop is divided into four sections. Within each discussion round we will ask representatives of three museums to present their institution focusing on the topic of the panel. Each discussion round will be introduced and commented by an external expert, historian, social scientist or museum researcher. As part of the workshop, we are also planning a joint visit to the Silent Heroes Memorial Centre and the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind in Berlin.

We plan the following panels:

I. Protagonists

The purpose of this panel is to examine who the protagonists of the various museums and exhibitions are.

In some museums, there is explicit mention of "the Righteous Among the Nations", making a clear reference to the honorific title given by Yad Vashem; in others, the term "silent heroes" is used or the texts simply speak of people who saved Jews during the Second World War. There are also exhibitions in which not only saviors but also survivors and Holocaust victims are presented as actors. At the same time, the narrative about the rescue efforts is sometimes put into a broader context of resistance against the German occupiers or the local collaborationist regime.

How are the protagonists of the various museums defined, what were the reasons for this narrative direction, and how does this affect the museum's general narrative and its forms of display?

II. Mission

This panel will discuss how the museums define their mission and how it is being realized throughout the permanent exhibition.

For some of the museums mentioned, honoring the "Righteous" seems to be their main concern, whilst others treat the history of the saviors as a point of departure to speak about the Holocaust in a broader context. Still others focus on local history and underline the singularity of the history presented. Many treat history as a tool to shape their audience's attitudes.

What role do the museums play in the public discussions of their respective countries? What context is needed to properly classify the narrated story? Does the topic provide a good starting point for talking about the Holocaust as well as about difficult questions of collaboration and the participation of one's own society in the murder of Jews? To what extent can these stories be used as a tool for civic education?

III. Architecture and Exhibition Design

This discussion round will be devoted to the question of what role architecture and exhibition design play in the mediation of historical content. How can the design of museum buildings and exhibitions shape their message, and what museological means did the authors of the exhibition use to strengthen it?

The museums discussed here differ greatly in their architecture. While some of them were created at historical sites, others received new, sometimes rather simplistic and functional, but often very symbolic buildings. The exhibitions vary greatly in their design, too. The spectrum ranges from purely documentary to highly scenographic presentations. Original artefacts, personal stories, films, stage design and interactives as well as artistic installations are used to different extent.

What were the circumstances and considerations that led to the selection of a particular building or exhibition design? What does their symbolism signify? Where are the boundaries between the museum's function as a monument and as an educational institution being set up? How do the exhibitions work in practice? Based on experience, which types of exhibition do not only encourage interest and commitment, but also a reflective approach to the topic?

IV. Museum Education

Often, it is not just the permanent displays, but also the accompanying educational program, the websites as well as the temporary exhibitions that make up the museum as a cultural and educational institution. They can either deepen a topic, which has already been addressed in the exhibition, or offer new perspectives.

Many of the museums discussed see their role mainly in the mediation of historical knowledge. Others consider themselves as institutions of civic education and try – if not in their exhibitions, then at least in their educational program – to draw parallels between history and the present, and thereby promote tolerance, solidarity and commitment to human rights. It appears to be a new trend to make memory itself a subject of museum education.

Who are the target groups of the museums and their educational offer? What is their educational mission? What are the links between the permanent exhibition and the learning program and how is the display being used in education? And: Is it appropriate and meaningful to universalize the Holocaust and draw parallels between history and the present?

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