

A paradigm change in Holocaust memorialization: lessons to be learned

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Holocaust Remembrance and Representation

Documentation from a Research Conference

*Research anthology of the Inquiry on
a Museum about the Holocaust*

Stockholm 2020



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Preface

This anthology is the documentation from the international research conference on Holocaust remembrance and representation held in Stockholm in February 12–13 2020 arranged by the Inquiry on a Museum about the Holocaust (Ku 2019:01).

It contains the keynotes and papers presented at the conference as well as summaries of the panel discussions. The conference was an important input for the inquiry in putting together its report.

The mission of the inquiry was to propose how a museum to preserve the memory of the Holocaust in Sweden should be established.

The terms of reference for the inquiry points out that stories from survivors with a connection to Sweden should be of central importance. The museum should also be able to describe the Holocaust in a broad historical context as well as Sweden's role during the Second World War. The museum should have a strong foundation in current research on the Second World War and the Holocaust, and establish international networks, both within research and with other museums focused on the Holocaust.

One important part of the task was to gather knowledge and information from scholars, museums, government authorities, civil society and other organizations currently working on issues relating to the Holocaust, in Sweden. This was done in several ways, and one way was to hold a conference.

The creation of a Museum about the Holocaust is of high priority to the Swedish government. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven said in his Statement of Government Policy of January 21st, 2019:

A new museum will be established to preserve and pass on the memory of the Holocaust. Never forget – this was the promise we made to each other. Sweden will never forget.¹

¹ Statement of Government Policy, January 21, 2019.

Prime Minister Löfven will also host the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism on October 26–27, 2020 in Malmö, Sweden.

The Forum will take place 75 years after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. This year also marks 20 years since the first Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust was held, and the establishment of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

As can be noted, Sweden has a long tradition of observing these questions. The former Prime Minister Göran Persson engaged in these issues already in 1998, when he created the Uppsala Programme for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and published the book “... tell ye your children”, written by the scholars Stéphane Bruchfeld and Paul A. Levine, and in 2003 when the government authority The Living History Forum was established.

The conference was characterized by a wish to discuss, reflect and to start the conversation on what a Holocaust Museum in Sweden could be and what it should do. Hopefully, this anthology could contribute to that discussion.

Birgitta Svensson
Inquiry chair

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony by Henry “Hank” Greenspan.....	9
A paradigm change in Holocaust memorialization. Lessons to be learned by Andrea Petö.....	19
Should “the Holocaust” be discarded, or what’s in a name? Historiography(-ies), memory(-ies) and metanarrative(s) by Stéphane Bruchfeld	29
Panel discussion: Sweden’s New Holocaust Museum: A Site of Conversation, as well as Conservation	53
Museums as Sites of Conversation by Henry “Hank” Greenspan.....	59
Memories, testimonies and oral history. On collections and research about and with Holocaust survivors in Sweden by Malin Thor Tureby	67
The Holocaust of the European Roma and the Nordic periphery. Terminology and preliminary state of research by Andrej Kotljarchuk	93

Holocaust in the Periphery. Memory Politics in the Nordic countries by Cecilie Banke.....	109
Exhibiting the Holocaust in countries where it didn't happen by Paul Salmons.....	117
Displaying the narrative of October '43 by Janne Laursen.....	131
Creating the new Jewish Museum in Sweden by Christina Gamstorp.....	137
Refugee Policy in Sweden during the Holocaust. A historiographical overview by Karin Kvist Geverts.....	143
Teaching and learning about the Holocaust in Sweden – some challenges for a new Swedish Holocaust museum by Oscar Österberg	163
Outsider, Bystander, Insider. The Second World War, the Holocaust and Uses of the Past in Sweden by Ulf Zander	179
Panel discussion: A Museum with the Holocaust and Survivors at its Heart.....	189
Author presentations	195
Appendixes	
Appendix 1 Conference Program	201
Appendix 2 List of Participants at the Conference.....	203

A paradigm change in Holocaust memorialization. Lessons to be learned

Andrea Pető

Abstract

In this paper I will argue that there is *a major paradigm shift happening in Holocaust memorialization* and this needs to be addressed in order to avoid sleepwalking when planning a new museum about the Holocaust. The 2008 triple crises migration, financial and security crises neoliberal global order had an impact on museology as well. This, what I would call an “organic crises” to use the concept of Gramsci, is not a backlash, as the world and the world of museology will not go back to the good old business as usual mode, but will change for ever due to the paradigm shift. Not all museums are good as the format is easy to misuse and instrumentalise. First let me list the signs which call for novel approaches and to urge us to think beyond the traditional museum as an educational institution paradigm.

First, a recent study shows that although education about the Holocaust is increasingly institutionalized, and there are more and more relevant study programs, research institutes and museums are set up about the Holocaust, but at the same time ignorance about the Holocaust has never been greater. Holocaust educators and researchers must ask the painful question, what have we done wrong if, in spite of all the funding that was put into Holocaust education and museums, the result is increasing ignorance?

Second, there is also an increasing violence against results of Holocaust research and the researchers themselves which has not been the

case in the past decades. Jan Grabowski was attacked in Paris. When I received online anti-Semitic death threat, the Hungarian police and the attorney's office refused to investigate.

Third the certain states in the EU do not comply with European norms and their governments are secretly setting up monuments and museums that are whitewashing the past,¹ and they pass legislation to include war criminals in the mandatory reading list for secondary schools.

These three factors are alarming for a very important reason. The Holocaust narrative that was conceived during the Cold War elevated the moral command of "Never Again" into a measure of universal integrity. The memory politics of the European Union was built on a positive normative notion, namely: that learning from the past is a process through which a "bitter experience" may become a positive force. International organizations, like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) have been supervising whether individual states are committed to these values. Now this consensus is in danger. Not by Holocaust deniers who are on the margins in most countries. That would have made our work easier: we just have to continue what we have done in the past decade, just better. But the present situation is different: the more we believe that this is business as usual, the more we are losing in the long run, because of the paradigm change in Holocaust memorialisation. Now state actors are trying to challenge the previous consensus.

This challenge is different from revisionism. I analysed in a paper the revisionist museology setting up the Museum of Trianon. However, these museums about the Holocaust are different in two ways. First, as these museums play a key role not revisionising but hollowing or polypore museums which are emptying the meaning while on surface they look like real museums and comply with the Holocaust canon. Second, that the actor is the state, not NGOs or rich individuals. Therefore, in this paper I argue that due to the paradigm change in Holocaust memorialization museums are becoming a site of simulacrum. The new concept of the state requires a new concept of a museum.

¹ Pető Andrea, "Revisionist histories, 'future memories'. Far-right memorialization practices in Hungary" in *European Politics and Society*, 2017:1, 41–51.

New form of states is setting up new types of museums about the Holocaust. How to avoid sleepwalking?

To understand the changing role of the nation state from strong force and supporter of a universal narrative of the Holocaust canon to hollowing the meaning, I would like to bring in a new conceptual framework to understand the change in the state. In the past years, political scientists and analysts scrutinizing the impressive series of electoral victories of illiberal powers were forced to reconsider their conceptual tools when trying to understand the new phenomenon of “democratic authoritarianism”, “hybrid regime”, “state capture”, “illiberal state,” or “mafia state”. Together with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska, we compared Hungary and Poland, and based on our findings we argued that we are facing a new form of governance, which stems from the failures of globalized (neo)liberal democracy. (One of the failures being failing to teach history of the Holocaust in way that it will enable more resistance to the polypore challenge.)

Based on its *modus operandi*, we called this regime an “illiberal polypore state,” because as a mushroom, it does not have existence of its own, and it only produces other mushrooms. It feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system, and at the same time actively contributes to its decay by setting up parallel institutions and redirecting resources into them. The polypore state, by controlling hegemonic forms of remembrance, works within the framework of what is referred to as “mnemonic security”. Illiberal states do not have an ideology but memory politics and the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust are at the center as a foundational event of today’s Europe and global order. Therefore, polypore states set up lavishly funded new historical research institutes and museums which have no quality assurance; and decreased the state funding of pre-existent internationally recognized institutions. Or set up new institutions, NGOs on the first sight but GONGOS after a closer look – to combat antisemitism or to do Holocaust education.

The polypore state agrees with the statement that the Holocaust is an unprecedented tragedy. But the lesson they learned is different as they think of this is only in the context how can use it for maintaining the existence of the polypore itself. They are not interested in values, lives, actions but only in the survival of their structures at

all costs. Therefore, I am arguing that there is a paradigm change in Holocaust remembrance.

The Paradigm change

That paradigm change is related to the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard's category of "simulacrum", which was in turn inspired by a one-paragraph story by Jorge Luis Borges entitled "On Exactitude in Science". In it, Borges describes an empire so attached to the map of its own territory that when the empire collapsed, nothing remained but the map, or the simulation of the land that once was a powerful empire. After the collapse, he writes, the land was "inhabited by animals and beggars".

Similarly, the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary and elsewhere is slowly becoming a simulacrum, owing to a paradigm change in the way it is memorialized. This shift aims fundamentally to alter the current, universally recognized status of the Holocaust as a moral landmark in European history, with major consequences for the continent's values and politics.

The paradigm change in Holocaust memorialization consists of nine elements:²

1. Nationalisation of the transnational Holocaust narrative ignoring the transnational dimension. What scientists call: methodological nationalism is a useful tool in order to argue for exceptionalism. So new museums meet the maximum expected enthusiasm on the side of the national governments shaping a new national narrative redefining the issue of responsibility and compliance.
2. De-Judaization of the Holocaust narrative. This process makes Jewish victims invisible, because their experiences are presented as marginal, while the suffering of the nation as such is being stressed (see point 1). It has been widely discussed how post-1945 antifascist rhetoric in Red Army occupied communist Eastern Europe invisibilized Jewish identity and the Jews as a group. History seems to be repeating itself: according to the illiberal states'

² For more on this see Petó, "Bitter experiences' reconsidered: paradigm change in Holocaust memorialisation", *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 1 July 2019, www.boell.de/en/2019/06/28/bitter-experiences-reconsidered-paradigm-change-holocaust-memorialisation.

memory rhetoric all survivors are victims, while the perpetrators, especially the “local” perpetrators are conveniently forgotten.

3. Establishment and enforcement of the competing victimhood narrative, i.e. the canonization of the narrative of “double occupation” in former communist countries, which relegates all responsibility to the occupying German and Soviet forces. Facilitating this the European Remembrance Network, EU funded network plays a key role which also raises questions about the role of European infrastructure and its role of facilitation a new memory politics.
4. The replacement of the Cold War’s fundamentally secular memory paradigm with a religious framework of remembrance. Here the different Jewish religious groups, especially the fundamentalists play a key role selecting who are the acceptable, desirable Jewish victims according to their standards, and the rest of the victims will be conveniently forgotten again.
5. Considering the Holocaust as an event in the past with no relationship to the present. The debate about historical analogies also touched this point. Holocaust memory is not a constant flux in relation with the different stake holders but something that should be closed down permanently which is the diametric opposite of the memory continuity intrinsic to the “Never Again” model, which was the foundation of the global Holocaust narrative as well as of the European human rights paradigm.
6. Establish its own, new terminology and narrative about the Holocaust, such as introducing the expression “police action against aliens” for a 1941 massacre in Kamenets Podolsk, when thousands of Jews were killed with the active participation of Hungarian authorities.
7. Double speech: state representatives, academics are sending different messages depending on the audience nationally and internationally, i.e. for international organisations or norm owners like Israel or the US. For this conference also be ready for pro-forma compliance and quiet sabotage.
8. Anti-intellectual attacks against the legitimacy of science is undermining the concept of expertise. In the illiberal states government appointments can turn almost anybody into an expert historian, no

previous credentials or training are needed but loyalty to the regime to be appointed in the newly founded historical institutions or GONGOS.

9. Self-censorship of historians as a result of science policy of illiberal states they are not asking critical questions nor giving explanations but find refuge in what they call 'objectivity' and what is in reality an ideologically censored silencing.

An example: the Holocaust simulacrum³

I will not be talking about the House of Terror, the McDonalds of revisionists museums as a lot has been written on this. But I will analyse a seemingly innocent and tiny museum as an example of this museological practice.

The exhibition at the House of Jewish Excellence in Balatonfüred, a small, picturesque town on the northern shore of Hungary's Lake Balaton, features some 130 prominent Jews in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), many of them of Hungarian origin. The museum shop, however, has nothing specifically referring to Jews in the Hungarian context. At best, one can purchase a bottle of kosher wine or a mug with the iconic photo of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue.

Perhaps this is not a problem. Maybe we should just celebrate the opening of another Jewish museum in Hungary, which has the second-largest Jewish community in Europe but very few Holocaust memorial sites. We might even overlook the fact that by identifying excellence only with STEM research, the museum renders invisible several other prominent Jewish scholars whose oeuvre is more closely related to progressive ideas and actions. That skewed view doubtless please the current Hungarian government, which is supporting the museum financially.

Yet it is impossible to ignore the exhibition's painful lack of critical reflection as to why even the talented Jews it did decide to feature were persecuted, and how they survived. The only three-dimensional, material object in the museum is a plaque by the entrance that refers

³ For more on this see Andrea Petó, "Hungary's Holocaust Simulacrum", *Project Syndicate*, 15 August 2019, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hungary-holocaust-museums-simulacrum-by-andrea-peto-2019-08?barrier=accesspaylog.

in general terms to “wickedness” and “a plan to kill.” This vagueness – or rather silence – about the Holocaust, and Hungarian collaboration in it, is part of a wider, disturbing trend in Hungary.

Similarly, the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary and elsewhere is slowly becoming a simulacrum, owing to a paradigm change in the way the event is memorialized, including in museums. This shift aims fundamentally to alter the current, universally recognized status of the Holocaust as a moral landmark in European history, with major consequences for the continent’s values and politics.

Americanisation of the Holocaust Museums

It took a long time for the history of the extermination of European Jewry to achieve its current status. In countries occupied by the Soviet Red Army after World War II, Jewish communities had a corner or a room in their underfinanced and dilapidated synagogues dedicated to documenting the Holocaust. Official war memorials, however, did not mention the Jewish victims.

This Eastern European memory culture was fundamentally transformed after the collapse of communism by the “Americanization” of the Holocaust – meaning, as German cultural studies scholar Winfried Fluck puts it, a democratizing process of stripping away complexity in order to make complicated events accessible to a wider public. After 1989, the Americanized Holocaust narrative also reached Hungary. But not until the 2002 opening of a small memorial center in a former Budapest synagogue did any museum feature the international language of Holocaust exhibitions. At any rate, that language does not correspond with the national Hungarian memorial culture nor with the religious conceptualization of the Shoah.

The Americanization of Holocaust museums also technologized remembrance, resulting in exhibitions without historical objects. Instead, visitors use touchscreens to tailor their museum visit to their own interests – a dangerous educational strategy at a time when ignorance about the Holocaust is growing.

The over-technologized House of Jewish Excellence is an extreme example of this. On entering, visitors first come to a computer terminal on the ground floor. Here, they are expected to choose which scientist’s brief life story they want to read on an interactive board

conspicuously placed on the floor above. The mismatch between international, religious, and national discourse about the Holocaust could not be greater.

The memory of the Holocaust as a moral landmark will become a vanishing simulacrum: the more that museums put it on touchscreens, the emptier it will become. And soon we will all be living in lands “inhabited by animals and beggars,” selling kitschy mugs of Einstein sticking his tongue out at us.

Towards the museum of ‘better stories’

How could a new Holocaust museum attract audience beyond the usual suspects and the captive audience of schoolchildren? Especially now, in this contemporary moment in which we as Europeans find ourselves is shaped by environmental destruction, political polarization, structural and other forms of violence, and the transformation of liberal democracy into autocracies of different forms. This explains the predominance of apocalyptic visions and doomsday scenarios in contemporary political discourse and media. The history of the Holocaust conveniently and uncannily fits here. Unfortunately, this kind of ‘grim storytelling’ is typically utilized in exclusionary, racist, (hetero)sexist ways to instigate fear and insecurity and to propagate increasingly repressive nationalist politics. At the same time, ‘grim storytelling’ plays a major role in the social sciences and humanities where the response to the contemporary state of the world has often been to focus on decline, suffering, collapse, and conflict.

Can we move beyond pessimistic frameworks, while, at the same time, developing new tools to understand and transform the social, political, environmental challenges that we face in Europe and beyond? What are the consequences of ‘grim storytelling’ dominating these realms and, increasingly, the aesthetic realm as well? What possibilities could be opened up by ‘better stories’ of political, academic and aesthetic interventions that offer affective, embodied, and transformative alternatives? By asking such questions, the planned conference might seek to explore, understand, and make visible the liveable – that is, real and acceptable – alternatives to the ‘grim stories’ of the present.

This should be based on two arguments: First, ‘grim storytelling’ only gives access to part of the story and, therefore, needs to be supplemented with ‘better stories’ – stories which generate an understanding of human potentiality, creativity, resilience, interconnectedness and shared ‘vulnerability’. Second, the tendency towards ‘grim storytelling’ in critical social sciences constitutes a major limitation for the possibilities of imagining and enacting the very transformations that Europe most urgently needs in order to enhance the European project. That is why it is important that the alternative tools of knowledge production and practices of political engagement, which are already being put into effect in various activist communities and learned societies throughout Europe and beyond, become more visible. It is equally important to translate these alternative tools of knowledge production and political engagement into a methodology with which they can be made more intelligible in terms of their possibilities for transformative politics on a larger scale. To this end, a re-consideration of the potentials of critical social scientific praxis is urgently required. The planned conference should celebrate what has been achieved, together with providing a model by developing new concepts, methodologies, practices and pedagogies that would enhance critical social science’s capacity to both understand and engage with alternative forms of transformative politics on the ground.

The founders of Holocaust research have been fundamentally concerned with the community of remembrance: with ordinary people. Increasing the outreach of Holocaust research in an understandable and re-enchanting language can be one of the responses to these challenges.

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