

Thomas Lutz

Topography of Terror Foundation, Germany

Lecture

Memorial museums and ITF

Holocaust Era Assets Conference, Prague, June 26 – 30, 2009

*WG Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (Sunday, June 28):
“Remembrance, Memorials and Museums”*

Dear ladies and gentlemen!

In the following brief presentation I will relate some facts about memorial museums in Germany in respect to the depiction of the Nazi-victims. Based on these facts, I will then point out the advantage of working together on the international level through the ITF. After, I will add two chapters about how to deal with actual challenges in the work of memorial museums on authentic sites in Germany and Europe and the importance of “eyewitnesses” in memorial museums and the struggle over the politics of memory regarding victims of “totalitarianism” in Europe.

Special features of memorial museums in Germany

The actual culture of memory differs a lot, if you compare it with the “old, typical” way the First World War was commemorated in Germany and also with the commemoration of state crimes and genocides in many other countries.

Because Germany was divided after the Second World War for 40 years, two different cultures of memories have developed.

In the German Democratic Republic (GDR) we had the traditional model: the culture of memory was invented and organized by the state. The commemoration was focused on our “own” victims. In this case that meant the communist resistance fighters. The aim was to create a tradition celebrating the new state, its government and political system. Because this was based on the communist idea, the resistant fight of communists against fascism was placed in the foreground – and it did not have much to do with the history of the historical sites. Many sites were neglected while the other groups of Nazi victims were never explained or valued in a proper matter.

Because the political and economic system of the GDR was different, so the story went, the roots of the German fascism had been eradicated. In the GDR, it was not considered necessary to deal with the perpetrators. The perpetrators were the “others”: members of capitalist countries - like the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

In the FRG dealing with Nazi crimes and their victims was suppressed for decades. In the wake of the student movement, another movement started to dig-up the history at authentic sites connected with Nazi crimes and where victims suffered and were buried, many of them without dignified by a gravesite.

Such historical sites were important for different reasons: First of all, these sites provided evidence that these crimes indeed had happened and it was no more possible to deny them. Secondly, the realization dawned that different groups of victims had been persecuted at all these sites. It was the task of the newly developed and still small memorial museums to explain the reasons why these groups had been persecuted – with all the complexity that goes with that kind of discussion including the differences in the treatment of the various victim groups by the Nazis and the ways people survived the state's crimes and the genocide. Because 90% of Nazi victims came from foreign countries, and because the German victims of Nazism had been first expelled from main stream German society before they were persecuted and killed, the commemoration of the Nazi victims in post-war FRG was typically a commemoration of the "other" victims. This was a real social advancement. The commemoration of the Nazi victims came to be combined with the civil rights movement in West Germany and the endeavors for reconciliation with the states which had been attacked by the Wehrmacht during the Second World War.

The research conducted into memorial sites, organizations and institutions was so close to the interested young historians, social workers, teachers etc., that they became frightened about how close the murderous Nazi-regime was to a normal society and how many people had supported it in a variety of different ways. Connected with the commemoration of the "other" victims began a self-critical examination of our "own" German perpetrators.

It was crucial that this process was started by civil action groups. They demanded that society and its political decision-makers act. Without the support of the public authorities it would be simply impossible to run a museum in Germany. These social demands were so strong that most responsible governments decided to support the new memorial museums being created across the country.

On one hand, this marked an important development in society and it has become mainstream in German society. On the other hand, the institutions are still small and behind all the nice words and political correctness it is an everyday struggle to generate support for these institutions.

From my point of view, the opening of the debate about the Nazi crimes, the commemoration of the different groups of victims – and especially of the Jews as the group which became the central target of persecution due to the Nazi's racist-biological definition of society – facing the social responsibility that comes with the legacy of the perpetrators became "new" and "unusual". But it also contributed to the democratic development of society and to the self-reflection about the quality of the development of democratic society in Germany -- especially how minorities and weak persons could have a chance to live a normal life in Germany.

The international cooperation in the ITF – especially in the Memorial and Museums Working Group

Speaking generally about the history of Nazi crimes and the affiliated culture of memory, we have two countries on the opposite sides: Germany –the country that killed the Jews in Europe – and Israel –the country where the most survivors live and whose tradition is based on the oath to prevent such a mass murder against Jews from occurring in the future. All other countries fall somewhere in between. Especially the countries which were occupied by Germany and its allies should be considered victims of the Nazi regime. The history of these countries is quite different, nevertheless one can see in all their histories a mixture of opposition, resistance, opportunism, support and cooperation, both on a national and on an individual level, with the Nazi occupier. And without the different levels of collaboration the

deportation of Jews, as well as of forced laborers or political opponents, would have been impossible. Dealing with this history has also been very different from country to country. Quite often one finds specific myths inherent in the national narratives of the World War II era. Quite often only one's "own" victims are commemorated, and in some countries the culture of memory is divided between groups who were treated differently during the war or who have dissimilar political opinions nowadays. Only recently it has become more usual to speak openly about the system behind the persecutions and how one's "own" countrymen acted within that system. The perpetrators are usually considered to be "others".

The cooperation in the ITF, and among its different Working Groups, shows its understanding for the reasons for different approaches to the same historical period in various countries. The view across borders also helps to recognize the strength, weaknesses and myths concerning the interpretation of the World War II— at least in its European dimensions -- in one's own country. This could be a starting point to scrutinize one's own interpretation of events.

From my point of view, a self-critical and pluralistic wrestling with the history of this period represents an important step not only to understand this history (which is important for all of us) but also as a way to develop democratic and open structures for negotiating important topics in a civil society.

The importance of eyewitnesses for Memorial Museums

About 65 years after the liberation from the Nazi regime it has become an international trend to point out that in the near future survivors of Nazi persecution will no longer be around to contribute to the explanation of this history or to tell their own stories. In my eyes this argument is a bit short-circuited. For, it is necessary to see this development in greater perspective:

1. For many people who work in the field of Holocaust education, the encounter and friendship with survivors is a great motivation to do their work. I believe there is no other profession in which professionals have to regularly face the loss of people they work together – and often become friends – with, as professionals in memorial museums often do. The death of an eyewitnesses often represents a distressful personal situation for many of us.
2. Many people were killed during the Nazi-period and thus never had the chance to tell their story. And even if not one survivor had been left among us, it would still be our task to teach about the Nazi's crimes and to commemorate the victims. We have several areas of Nazi crimes where the work of memorial museums had to happen without eyewitnesses from the beginning— for example the 70,000 handicapped persons and institutionalized patients who were killed during the "Aktion T 4" in gas chambers between early 1940 and the autumn of 1941. One might also keep in mind that Primo Levi characterized himself as a "second-hand eyewitness". In his eyes the true eyewitnesses of Auschwitz were the human beings killed in the gas chambers and shot by the SS.
3. During the decades the nature of eyewitness testimony has changed.
 - a. First of all, because of their age, the eye witnesses who are left to speak up now were only teens or children when they were persecuted by the Nazis and their allies. Some decades ago we were able to hear quite different kinds of stories from older survivors. Many of these consciously observed the rise of the Nazi regime and had a different relationship to this history.

- b. Moreover, the personal stories of eyewitnesses are affected by the politics of memory. One important occasion was the end of the communist regimes in Middle and Eastern Europe. I know many survivors whose personal story changed with the political and social changes and the change in the level of attention paid to them and to their stories.
- 4. Germany: Only a very small number of visitors to memorial museums have the chance to encounter survivors of these special historical places. Despite the decreasing possibility of meeting eyewitnesses, interest in learning about the Nazi-era history and the crime sites has in fact increased. Also, if you compare the present-day situation of many memorial museums with the situation two decades ago, one must draw the conclusion that the importance of these institutions, and the conditions of research and learning at them have increased in magnitude – from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum as well as many new or advanced memorial museums in Germany, new Holocaust Museums in France and Hungary as well as the extension of Yad Vashem..
- 5. Even if we sadly lack the possibility of encountering survivors of the Nazi crimes on the professional level, the situation to explain their fates during the Nazi-era persecutions and after their liberation is much better today than it was earlier. We can explain the fates of different groups who were persecuted by the Nazis and their allies much better – on a group as well as on the individual level! The reasons for this are as follows:
 - a. There is much more historical knowledge available regarding this period.
 - b. There is much more material from eyewitnesses (evidence, testimonies, pictures, audio- and video-records, objects used by them during the persecution, etc.) to explain the history from the perspective of the survivors.
 - c. The curators and educators are much more sensitive now in how they explain this history and have much more experience in how to teach the personal stories in the historical context.

To summarize my point of view in a positive way: the memorial museums and other related institutions by now have the expertise and the capacity to explain the history of Nazi persecution from the standpoint of those who suffered under the Nazi regime. This history is so important that it will continue further than the third generation. In Maurice Halbwach's theory about the development of cultural memory this is possible only if on the one hand social interest in the field remains vivid while on the other hand institutions continue to provide information about this history. In recent years one notices an increasing level of interest in dealing with the history of the Holocaust and in the Nazi crimes at an international level.

I am confident that memorial museums for the victims of the Nazi regime will be able to fulfill the task of commemorating the victims and teaching about this history. Without eyewitnesses these "stone witnesses" will become more important. The question is how far governments and societies support them in performing their tasks based on their scientific expertise and in dialogue with civil society as a whole.

The struggle over the politics of memory and the efforts to mix-up different dictatorships in establishing August 23 as a European Commemoration Day

On April 2, 2009, a resolution passed the European Parliament promoting August 23 as a common day of commemoration for "all victims of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes". I assume that if many parliamentarians are unaware of the problems of

commemorating this day, such a commemoration day will inevitably minimize the remembrance of Nazi crimes. I offer the following arguments for my presumption: By employing August 23 as a European-wide day to commemorate every state crime at the same time, totally mixes-up completely disparate phenomena:

- Commemorating this day symbolizes that Germany and the Soviet Union are equally responsible for World War II. This is a political statement, but has nothing to do with the true reasons why the Second World War had begun. New myths will be created!
- It mixes up two totally different aims of the war: The Holocaust, the genocide against Roma and the "Generalplan Ost" as the ideological basis for the German war of extermination against Poland and the Soviet Union are totally different aims compared to the occupation of Europe by the Soviet Union.
- This symbolism presumes that the states which were occupied by Germany and the Soviet Union during the World War II or were satellites of the Soviet Union after the end of the war, were simply innocent victims of two dictatorships and only the foreign powers are to be held responsible for everything bad that went on. (An excellent example for this statement is the "House of Terror" in Budapest.)

The historical situation was quite different in the different states, cities or regions - and it is necessary to look at each situation in detail. Generally speaking, states and their civilians were victims – no doubt about it – and they often offered resistance. But they also at times collaborated, profited or at least looked the other way as the crimes against humanity and genocides happened. Not only is victimhood part of European history, but the perpetrators also came from every European country. It is undoubtedly the case that the starting point of the Second World War was the German occupation. But without the support of local institutions and persons the Holocaust, the deportation of forced laborers or the incarceration of political opponents would have been impossible.

My fear is that these facts could be forgotten by using August 23 as the European commemoration day.

- Another aim of August 23, the mourning and commemoration of all victims of all dictatorships together, may well be impossible. On the contrary, using this day for such a purpose is an affront against Nazi victims. Most Holocaust survivors today would clearly reject being commemorated together with victims of the Soviet regime. The complicated connections between Nazi crimes and the post-war situation makes it possible that people who were perpetrators during the Nazi period could have become victims themselves afterwards. If they are commemorated together you dignify the victims and their murderers at the same time.
- Beyond that it does not make sense to commemorate all victims on the same day. Then you have only rituals without content. Especially with the passage of time it will become more important to combine information about the commemorated groups and the historical context in which they suffered. Otherwise it is impossible to understand why they suffered.
- I am astonished that an old theory which has long been scientifically obsolete is now politically used to equalize the public crimes committed by the Nazis in Germany and in occupied countries during the World War II with the public crimes committed by the Stalinist Soviet Union and in their satellite countries. This leads us back to an equalizing and revanchist political debate which was conducted during the peak of the cold war in the 1950s.

- The promotion of August 23 is also dangerous for the politics of remembrance. Establishing a unique European culture of commemoration will create new myths and taboos. The histories of the various nations are too different. The first step must be to handle the history of different countries in an open and pluralistic way. And this includes commemorating all the victims, but also elaborating about who was responsible for the suffering of each victim group, what the historical situation was and what the attitudes of state agencies and individuals were in relation to the situation.
Secondly one should learn why the cultures of memory in different countries are different, try to reach a mutual understanding and think self-critically about one's own approach to history, what's correct about it and what still needs to be improved.
After taking these two steps it may be possible to think more about a European culture of remembrance. But to me, this would mean bringing together a variety of opinions instead of impose one single point of view.
- If Nazi victims and the victims of Stalinism were to be commemorated separately it would be very difficult to have a similar acknowledgement of the more unique groups of victims on the international level. It would be impossible to commemorate every group of victims for every single dictatorship- – especially for the victims of the Nazi regime and Stalinism.

My conclusion is this: The only result what you can learn from commemorating August 23 as a symbolic day is that dictatorships are evil! But with this date it is impossible to either commemorate the victims of the different historical situations in a proper way or to learn anything from history!

My question is: Why is it that some politicians and governments are so eager to put something together that for personal, historical and scientific reasons makes no sense?