

## **Rethinking the Remembrance of the Holocaust in German National Museums and Memorials as Agents for Positive Social Change?**

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By taking Berlin as an example, this paper will focus on questions of commemorating and representing history of the Holocaust as a constructive process that is strongly connected to the circumstances of the present. It will question the social role of National Museums in Germany by presenting different examples, which respond directly to the German Government's ambition of encouraging civil courage and democracy.

By presenting examples of smaller, more biographical National Museums like the Museum Workshop for the Blind that focus on the resistance to National Socialism by using authentic places and telling one individual story, the paper will question and re-think the role of National Museums and their possible impact on positive social and global changes with respect specifically to the German identity-finding process.

Due to the fact that the Holocaust is not the focus of my PhD research, I will draw upon my experiences in working in the Jewish Museum Berlin for four years. Then, rather than presenting results, the paper will conclude with open questions for further discussion.

## National Consciousness in Germany

The word "national" in a German context today is still associated for many, but especially for the German themselves, with images of the darkest side of recent German history- the Holocaust. A feeling of guilt towards the Second World War has, in a sense, repressed the official development of a National Identity in Germany. As it is a very sensitive part of German history it is strongly connected to the self-consciousness of the Germans as a nation. It is remarkable that the World Cup in 2006 was the first time since the end of the Second World War that German national consciousness could be seen with people waving German flags, wearing shirts and painting their faces in German colours. In former times presenting German national symbols in this way was always connected to Neo-Nationalism. The absence of public national consciousness in an understanding of pride and national belonging is also mirrored in the development of National Museums and Memorials and their representation of the Holocaust in Germany.

## Commemoration of the Holocaust in German

### *Museums and Memorials*

The first years after the End of the Second World War can be thought of as a period of "concealment". The era of the National Socialistic Regime was neither addressed within schools nor was it an issue within public discourse. (Bar-On 2005)

Since then, the official way of addressing the era of National Socialism and dealing with the guilt of the Second World War has dramatically changed. The last two decades have seen an ever-growing number of memorials dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. Huge national projects funded by the German government like the Topography of Terror, the Jewish Museum Berlin and just recently the building and opening of the Holocaust Memorial as Germany's central memorial in 2005 are just a few examples that reflect the explosion of memorial sites in Berlin and all over the country.

Although these government driven projects are of national importance, each of them focuses on different issues and therefore tells particular stories. The mission of the Topography of Terror for example is

...) to provide historical information about National Socialism and its crimes as well as to stimulate active confrontation with this history and its impact since 1945. Moreover, the Foundation serves as an advisor to the State of Berlin in all matters relating to these issues. (Topographie of Terror 2007)

Just a few miles away, the Jewish Museum Berlin with its permanent exhibition

offers visitors a journey through German-Jewish history and culture, from its earliest testimonies, through the Middle Ages and up to the present.

Apart from that it

offers guided tours, temporary exhibitions, and a diverse calendar of events including scientific symposia, concerts, talks, workshops for kids and teens to name but a few, the museum is a lively center for Jewish history and culture. (Jewish Museum Berlin 2007)

A few miles further away is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe:

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the centre of Berlin is Germany's

central Holocaust memorial site, a place for remembrance and commemoration of six million victims. (Stiftung Denkmal fuer die ermordeten Juden 2007)

Within the near future there will be two other memorials in Berlin funded by the government, which will undoubtedly attract national interest. There will be a memorial for the gypsies murdered in the Holocaust as well as one to the homosexuals that suffered under the Nazi Regime. (German Government Bund 2006) These recent and future developments show the extent to which commemoration has become an important means of expression for modern-day Germany.

## Missions and Aims

When looking at the missions and aims of these memorials as a way of defining their roles it is surprising to see that they are, in fact, very similar:

The Topographie of Terror will

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The Jewish Museum Berlin sees itself as a

learning space for young and old for Jews and Non-Jews, for people of different origins and cultural backgrounds. (Michael Blumenthal 2006)

And the central Holocaust Memorial formulises its ambitions in this way:

As a result of the process through which it emerged, this Memorial is closely tied to a commitment to democracy and civil courage. Its open form facilitates personal remembrance, commemoration and mourning. (Central Holocaust Memorial 2006)

The main focus of all these institutions is to strengthen democracy and encourage civil courage. It is strongly connected to the circumstance of the present as it tries to tackle current issues like racism and multicultural understanding.□□ In light of this understanding that their aim is to force positive social change, these institutions correspond to recent ideas of Museums as agents for social change contributing towards a more just and equitable society (Sandell 2006). But how are these national memorial sites reflecting the attitude of their nation? Do the Germans identify themselves with the history that is represented within those memorials? How are they connected to them as individuals and the histories that are told within families?

## Official Versus Individual Commemoration

Results of a survey of German students in the early 90s showed that only 11% knew or acknowledged that their grandparents were members of the NSDAP, 16% believed that they were active in resistance and 49% didn't know anything about their relatives during this period.<sup>1</sup>

These results can be seen as evidence of a separation of the commemoration into two distinct areas, the official site and the individual site, which tend to be quite different from each other. (Bar-On 2005) Although the official and outgoing means of dealing with the

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1 P. Hare/M. Brusten/F. Beiner, "Working through" the Holocaust? Comparing questionnaire results of German and Israeli students, in: *Holocaust & Genocide Studies*, 7(2) (1993), pp. 230–246.

Holocaust might be exemplary, it does not necessarily correlate with the individual views of the Germans. Bar-On, a psychologist and peace researcher from Israel even argues that the individual site is more relevant to understand a nation's attitude, but much harder to influence. (Bar-On 2005) At the same time, he argues that too much official memorising might lead to less personal memorising processes. (Bar-On 2005)

A survey which was carried out recently among the residents of Magdeburg revealed that when asked whether they wanted to live next to a Jew, more than half of respondents said no. When asked whether they knew a Jewish person, 90 per cent again replied in the negative. Where does this attitude come from? Prejudices on this scale are shocking. Around 15 to 20 per cent of the grassroots population are anti-Semitic. (Paul Spiegel 2003)

How to tackle the complexity of this issue in times of internationally rising Anti-Semitism, Neo-National Socialism in Germany (the right-wing party NPD have gained 7.3 % of the votes in elections in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in 2006) and growing racism (over 11.000 right-wing crimes have been recorded in 2006) is probably the most important question, that has to be faced.

### Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind

Beside government driven memorials is a parallel movement of citizen driven projects that have emerged from the engagement of different groups of interest or individuals, artists, students, etc. One example of a museum that has emerged from a student's project and belongs to the German Resistance Memorial Center (Die Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand) is Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind, which will be presented briefly.



Exhibition rooms of the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind.

Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind opened on December 5, 2006. It tells the story of a brush manufacturer, Otto Weidt, who during the Second World War employed mainly blind and deaf Jews to produce brooms and brushes in his workshop. Various life stories testify to Otto Weidt's efforts to protect his Jewish employees from persecution and deportation. As danger grew, he searched for hiding-places for many of them. One of these hideouts was in the rooms that are now part of the museum. (Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind 2006)

In 1999 a group of Museum Studies students in Berlin discovered the workshop, and remarkably found that it had remained virtually untouched for over 50 years. They investigated the tales of the place mainly by referring to the memories of the writer Inge Deutschkron who had worked in the workshop from 1941–1943. The students wanted to tell

the story of the workshop and open it to the public. From 2001 the museum was a dependant of the Jewish Museum before becoming part of the Memorial Centre in 2005.

Through telling this simple, individual story and connecting present and future issues by showing ways of behaviour and ways of resistance even under enormous pressure – the museum aims to nurture civil courage, to tackle racism and allow visitors to reflect on their own attitudes towards the past. The hideout itself is tucked away in one of the courtyards in the completely refurbished part of former East-Berlin and is the only courtyard that has remained in its original state and able to give an authentic impression of its own history. It is, as the Museum Director Kai Gruzdz says, a window into history.

## Differences vs. Integration

Recently, the way in which memorizing the Holocaust has become a part of “mass culture” has been discussed (Bar-On 2005) within academia, politicians and the Jewish community itself. (Bodemann 1996) Bodemann, for instance, questions the monumental way Germany is memorizing the Holocaust by naming it “Gedächtnstheater” (“commemoration theatre”). He argues that, despite being a small ethnic group in Germany, the Jews are getting too much media and public attention compared to other ethnic minorities. In accordance to that Michael Brenner from the Department for Jewish History and Culture at Munich University argued in 2003 “On the one hand, the holocaust still casts its almighty shadow over all areas of Judaism. On the other, it should increasingly be pointed out that Jewish history and culture may not be reduced to its darkest chapter in the 20th century. The efforts of the wider public to deal with the issue of Judaism in universities, schools, churches and museums is virtually suffocating the small Jewish community, which has grown from around 30,000 to just under 100,000, or from 0.05% of the population to a good 0.1%.”<sup>2</sup>

In this understanding the Jewish topos still has a very special role within the narrative of the nation. However, this is not necessarily connected to individual attitudes of the Germans itself, because people rarely know Jews personally and have little idea of the current lives of Jews in Germany. Furthermore, Bodemann questions the Jewish suffix itself. He states that the Jewish community in Germany is too diverse to be pigeonholed by one term. How integrative are these national sites telling the History of the Holocaust? Isn't it German History in all its facets that has to be told? Weren't almost 200.000 of the Jewish victims Germans after all? Paul Spiegel who was the President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany from January 2000-2006 said in an interview with *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2003:

When I talk to secondary school students about the Jews it doesn't bother me that they don't know much about them. But they talk about Auschwitz and Hitler, not about the fact that they were Germans, and not about what these Jews did for Germany.<sup>3</sup>

While young students from the Jewish Secondary School have been asked about their identities within an interview in 2005 a young female student said:

In a sense I belong to Germany – but I am Jewish as well. But I never say about me, that I am just a Jew – you can't separate it that easily.<sup>4</sup>

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2 M. Brenner, Dossier Jewish Life in Germany 2003, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/rel/prt/en66114.htm>, viewed January 2007.

3 Paul Spiegel (2003), *Anti-Semitism is a Problem for all Democrats*, <http://www.goethe.de/ges/rel/prt/en66739.htm> (viewed January 2007)

4 Jüdisches Leben in Berlin, 2005, <http://www.3sat.de/3sat.php?http://www.3sat.de/delta/78764/index.html>, viewed January 2007.

Accordingly it has to be realized that the current way of memorizing is predominantly based on an understanding of Jews, Gypsies and others being different. The controversy, which has run for almost ten years, about the place and the aim of the central Holocaust Memorial in Berlin exemplifies the complexity of the debate regarding integration and separation:

“Should only the offending nation commemorate the Jewish victims? And how should a place compete with other authentic places which show the terror of National Socialism?”

Furthermore, integration can also be reflected in terms of questioning the meaning of “national” within a multicultural society.

- To whom belongs the history that has to be told, when “national” has become “multicultural”?
- Are the multicultural minorities in Germany excluded from the memorizing process because they have no German origins and are therefore not connected to the Nazi Era?
- How do multicultural societies influence and transform the interpretation of history?

## Facing the Future

One of the greatest challenges for museums at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the turn to the visitor (Hooper-Greenhill 2006).

The way of remembering the Holocaust has changed and will change in the future. This is especially true at this time as the generation of witnesses to the Holocaust is gradually disappearing. The museums' success in keeping its memory strong will depend on their ability to remain relevant to their German, Jewish and multicultural public.

Today it is not so much important anymore what has happened, rather than how the tales will be told and contextualized to the present. (Michael Jeissman 2001)

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### ***Images***

Exhibition rooms of the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop, with kind permission of the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind, Berlin 2007.