



“Imagined Communities” in Contemporary Holocaust Exhibitions of the 1990s. A comparison of Berlin und London

Silke Walther (University of Bochum)

Abstract

Remarks on the *crisis of representation* have not adequately tackled the problem of how the genocide of millions of Jews and the ensuing damage for millions of Europeans might be presented within the frame of museum-based exhibitions after the end of the cold war. Since the eighties, the on-going musealization of the history of the Holocaust has merged with a flourishing memory culture. Moreover, postmodern reflections upon the event that used to be called “Holocaust” have already become part of the current museum culture. Memorial sites, Holocaust narratives and iconic images of previous press campaigns get connected in various curatorial efforts to mediate the past within a post-traumatic museum landscape. This paper examines the merging of history and memory of the Shoa within the frame of the new hybrid called “memory museum”. My comparative analysis is focussed on two widely discussed exhibitions that were opened around 2000 to create a (trans-) national collective memory of the Shoa for a contemporary museum audience.

“Imagined Communities” and the Musealization of Holocaust

Remembrance

Museums have always shaped “memories“ for clearly defined communities as their nineteenth century mission included the issue of identity building. According to Benedict Anderson, affiliation to an “imagined community“ used to be interwoven with the agenda of nationalism in the age of Western imperialism. Anderson introduced the term to differentiate between an actual community and an abstract idea of that political community in order to explain why the people in South Asia adopted the Western “ideology“ to think of themselves as being members of a nation (Anderson, 1983: 15; 16; 20).¹ Phenomenologists know about the crucial role of mediated mental activities, commemorabilia, that enable us “to pay homage to people and events“ we have never known face-to-face (Casey, 1987: 218). Based on some ideological framework, symbols, rituals, commemorative acts can bring about the affiliation to a *communitas* of people. Anderson’s constructivist approach explores how imagined communities controlled the affiliation to an abstract nation, but his concept is equally suited to explore other acts of mediation through commemorative acts; in this case the commemoration of the extinction of about six million European Jews called the “*The Holocaust*“ used to be strongly tied to collective acts of remembrance in the public sphere of the post-war era (1945-1989). Within a deeply traumatized post war culture, public acts of commemoration communicated the acceptance of collective guilt the majority of German people had failed to acknowledge for decades. Memorial sites were erected from the 1950s’ onwards either to preserve the original sites of mass murder or to provide an infrastructure for commemorating the victims of the Shoah in public. In Israel, Yad Vashem was opened in 1953 and soon became a hallmark of national Holocaust remembrance and a site for the affirmation of group identity. The “imagined community“ that was commemorated at the nation’s official site of mourning used to be a community of victims. It became a national duty to register lost relatives at the Yad Vashem archive. This register lists two million persons that “have been granted certificates of commemorative citizenship“. (quoted in Stier, 2003: 122)² The affiliation to a community of victims appeared as perfectly natural as long as there was a living active community of Holocaust victims. It ceases to make sense if the infrastructure or the ritual produces a victimized identity for succeeding generations that stroll like any other tourist in the “Valley of Lost Communities“ of the Yad Vashem memorial complex. Mourning site rituals dedicated to the lost people were part of a vivid post-war memory culture before they gradually swept into the international museum-exhibition context that changed previous modes of representation. Although museums are far from being the most important catalyst of a meanwhile post-traumatic, pluralist culture of Holocaust remembrance, their contribution to the problem of Holocaust representation is crucial as they present histories, discourses, images, artefacts to a pluralist “post-Holocaust“ public. This public is well-informed, but more and more unlikely to share a collective memory of the historical event.

Aleida Assmann points out that mainly four post-Holocaust “communities“ might share a “collective memory“ of the historical event and its consequences: (1.) Jewish communities and Israel as a nation, (2.) Germans and Germany, (3.) any other European country affected by Germany’s programme of genocide, and (4.) the allies of the Second World War (Assmann, Conrad, 2010). However, as memories are never disinterested in the Kantian sense, the

“desperate need to freeze time and establish memory of the past“ must appear as a rather problematic desire if it is not embedded in a lively, discursive culture of negotiation and reflection. Assmann argues that the contemporary propaganda of anti-Semitic political leaders makes it necessary for a transnational community to defend a shared “collective“ memory. But should this memory be collected, stabilized and, to a certain degree, become neutralized by museological operations? In 1999, the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research Network (ITF) located at Washington envisioned a supra-national or “global Holocaust memory“ that should be distributed through a worldwide network of cooperating institutions. Museums were recommended to preserve and carry this transient heritage across the threshold of the new millennium. The declared goal is an inclusive “memory community” with a shared political, United Nations agenda around the world (Assmann and Conrad 2010, 113). However, the ITF’s universalist approach underestimates the problem of authorship and context in the museum. The inclusion and mediatization of memory is at odds with the museum’s role in contemporary societies: a social sphere where controversial interpretations of a difficult past can be negotiated for the sake of mutual understanding. Even if a standardized Holocaust memory were possible, it would be a composed compromise *for someone*. In any case the quality of a shared UN memory would depend on how issues of political persecution, genocide, terrorism and displaced minorities were framed. In his discussion of the impact of memory culture on American Memorial Museums, Philip Gourevitch distinguishes between the ITF’s classical agenda of Holocaust education and attempts “to internalize” that lesson in tolerance in order to make it “a form of memory” (Williams 2012, 113).

In contemporary culture, apparently contradictory processes overlap and intersect: an accelerated musealization of the Holocaust since the seventies, the steady growth of the museum-exhibition-complex since postmodernism, and a flourishing, popular memory culture that revolves around “images“ and “narratives“. This contemporary condition locates the museum at the intersection of “the twin dialectical currents of memory“ on the one hand and “forgetting“ on the other hand:

How a museum expresses that tension is consequentially a crucial expression of cultural attitudes toward memory, and an understanding of the ideology behind any museum’s organization and presentation becomes crucial ... How and through what media a particular museum tells its story become essential components of its place (the place it creates for itself) in contemporary culture and community. (Stier, 2003: 114-115)

Musealization and memorialization of the Holocaust continue to be powerful driving forces. Museums have a vague notion of who constitutes their community. Carol Duncan points to the fact that museum representations demonstrate the institutional power to define, control and express shared beliefs of a past or contemporary community (Duncan 1998, 474-475). Assisted by electronic media, installations and exhibition design, museums are today in a better position than ever to create powerful threedimensional “pictures“ or environments. Although the crisis of representation has been discussed at length, analysis of the new kind of permanent Holocaust exhibitions have been largely ignored so far. Curated exhibition design and audio sources influence the visitor’s perception and might even provoke a response to staged pictures or environments demanding empathy and “action“ according to the museum’s narrative. Some critics fear that the new media favour social interaction and weaken reflection and understanding

(Hans Martin Enzenberger quoted in Stier, 2003: 186). Rosen thinks museums should avoid to be identification projects or attempt to re-enact the cultural metaphor of trauma (Rosen 1997). It can be assumed that shared memories encourage affiliation to a community, but what about contradicting memories?

What might be the impact of an identity-focussed memory culture that transforms previous modes of telling and showing in Holocaust exhibitions? How can a museum balance “history“ and “memory“ without losing sight of its obligation to a balanced view? What might the on-going interpretation of the Holocaust as a powerful metaphor mean for a museum that is dedicated to educational duties? What does the sight of mugs, spoons and glasses excavated since the seventies at Polish death camp sites awaken in viewers that were not born in the seventies? How can the museum defend its obligation to transparency when so many contradicting voices and interests are competing to become part of a museum representation?

The contemporary trend to establish permanent thematic Holocaust exhibitions in metropolises occurred after the proliferation of special Holocaust museums and appears dependent of that preceding turn towards “memory museum“ or “monument-as-museum“. The American Holocaust museum belongs to the large group of memorial museums that negotiate identity, war and victimhood. The specialized Holocaust Museum is located “at the twin dialectical currents of memory and forgetting“. Hornstein and Stier read musealization as evidence of “the increasing need to seize memory“ for the sake of generational transmission (Stier, 2003: 114; Hornstein, 2003: 2-6). The irreversible decrease of first or second generation memory of the Shoah has been answered with a range of collecting and recording activities since the seventies. The complex history of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) mirrors these changing strategies to keep a social memory alive because it integrated large amounts of videotaped testimonies of survivors’ fates and presented more than 700 films.

The museum was planned from scratch since the seventies and opened in 1993 as the nation’s first Holocaust memorial museum. The compromise solution was a monumental building and a new type of Holocaust exhibition that demanded identification and participation. It is significant that the representation of the large community of American Jews is presented as a part of the nation’s multitudes. The shared experience of survival and immigration creates the central icon of the storyline, the survivor-immigrant whose retrospective testimony of the crimes against humanity are integrated into a comprehensive survey of the history of the Second World War and America’s fight against European totalitarianism. A vast amount of military archival sources has been plotted for a mediated, dramatic survey in which the visitor finds himself either in the role of the U.S. soldier or in the role of the victim.³ This type of museum offers an instructive, yet oppressive pilgrimage from suffering to salvation. The visitor receives the identity card of a member of the USHMM’s composed Holocaust family and is expected to move from “passive unaware inhabitant of the nation“ to “active vigilant citizen“. Linenthal explains the force of the display should spur empathy with the victims, but also positive action in real communities (Linenthal, 1995: 13). The American-Jewish architect in charge, James Ingo Freed, visited former killing grounds in Poland to get in touch with the authentic sites:

there in Auschwitz on my first night in the camp it all fell apart for me, and I began to cry, and a sort of angry passion shook me, and I knew I had to do this [to design the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at Washington, S.W.] for those who were gone and

who we must remember. (J.I. Freed quoted in Weinberg, Elieli, 1995: 184 introduction without pagination)

Freed's negative revelation and rebirth as member of a transnational Holocaust family fit with the board's intention to build a bulwark against forgetting. The building is a psycho-engineering structure that creates pseudo-sacrality and a monument to the extinguished "Holocaust family" (Stier, 2003: 112).

Saloni Mathur argues that critical museology "must examine the cultural, historical, and political atmosphere of the societies in which museums operate, and that shape their agendas and exhibition practice" (Mathur 2012, 514). This essay is a first sketch that follows a comparative frame. It cannot provide a typology of different exhibition types in European museums of history and museum of Jewish Culture. My intention has been to explore how the large and complex topic of *Holocaust representation* has been treated in new permanent exhibitions that were developed between German unification and the millennium. This decade had to reconcile an enlarged European perspective with a more traditional memorial landscape. I decided to choose museum extension projects that give evidence of the contemporary trend to combine memorial, museum and the mediatisation of memory. The reopened Jewish Museum Berlin is a specialized culture museum that would not have fitted well had not Libeskind added a further connection to memory culture. The Imperial War Museum used to be dedicated to national military history before it interpreted the Holocaust as a paradigmatic memory of war in Europe.

The Jewish Museum Berlin: Reflections on Discontinuity

Quite contrary to the premature diagnosis of a continuing postmodern amnesia, the decade of the nineties was characterized by a continuing obsession with the past and with "making monuments". This was, as my second example shows, not an exclusively German phenomenon. After the end of the cold war the majority of public monuments, especially those dedicated to political leaders or systems, looked tarnished by ideology. In the decade following German reunification, 'history' and 'the museum' continued to be powerful epistemological models to negotiate a self-reflective national consciousness. Berlin already had a remarkable museum landscape, but in the decade after reunification all the mandates for expansion and renewal were open due to the shattered tectonics of two German memory cultures. The question of what should be remembered by whom and to what purpose was central to many debates during the nineties. With the final decision to build a new *Memorial for the Murdered Jews in Europe* the issue of Holocaust commemoration became chained to a further expansion of the reorganized museum landscape.

Jewish museums are suited for any re-evaluation of museum representation as they usually revolve around objects, rituals, and recollection. In comparison with a highly artificial Holocaust Museum, the Jewish Museum Berlin (JM) can refer to its own historical tradition that ended in 1938. The old museum was dedicated to many cultural activities of the community. Due to a politics of total annihilation nothing except a small baroque building remained after 1945.⁴ Plans to found a new Jewish Museum in the old building evolved in a decade that was driven by further museum expansion and a conceptualist turn towards site-specific Holocaust remembrance. The museum should keep the memory of the Jewish pre-war community, approximately 560,000 Jewish-German citizens, alive and visible.⁵ This interest in mapping the traces of a lost Jewish

community was present in several art projects of the decade and oriented the whole museum project in a completely new direction. Moderate plans to add a new wing to the old baroque palace were superseded by Daniel Libeskind's large-dimensioned architectural project (1996-2001) in which the Holocaust became the axis around which all other chains of signification revolve. The American architect explains his personal concept, the translation of Jewish collective trauma into spatial dimensions. The sequence of spaces is intended to offer the experience of absence, difficulty, denied access (to spaces in-between) and arbitrariness. Libeskind feels that the Holocaust has left an enduring emptiness at the core of German culture. He characterizes the building as his subjective reflection of the "void". These extend through all floors as inaccessible blocks that disrupt the visitors' movement - like reminders of the physical, intellectual and social destruction of the Jewish body. For Paul Virilio, any artistic creation that is intended to create "a Holocaust feel", however metaphorically, signifies a thanatopic impulse (Virilio, 2003). But Peter Eisenman (2004: 204) designed his "Topography of Terror" with a similar sensibility for "bodily memory": the experience of 2,711 concrete slabs that are narrativised ("*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*").⁶ Libeskind's 48 pillars in the museum's "Garden of Exile" echo Eisenman's turn to the sublime.



Fig. 1: Perspective view of the jagged main building of the Jewish Museum Berlin with Holocaust Tower and Garden of Exile designed by Daniel Libeskind, Illustration in: Lampugnani, Vittorio/Sachs, Angelis (1999) *Museen für ein neues Jahrtausend. Ideen, Projekte, Bauten*, Prestel, München/London/New York, p. 103.

The new building for the JM has a jagged floor plan that symbolizes the exceptional fate of German-Jewish communities (fig. 1). The lines in the ground plan have ten directional changes. They symbolize "broken life threads" and connect persons and places of pre-war Jewish Berlin that Libeskind found worthy to be remembered: Artists, musicians and intellectuals represent "German culture". For Libeskind, these are the "hundred thousands of Jewish citizens that are no longer there." (Dorner, 2006: 17)⁷ The places where they once had lived helped to shape the form of the building so that "the history of the Jews is living, even in its absence, in its permanent potential." (Libeskind quoted in Hornstein, 2003: 46-47) Christian Boltanski's "*House*

of the Missing“ (1990) is a more playful, conceptual approach to this everyday culture of German-Jewish coexistence in pre-war Berlin (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Christian Boltanski (*1944), Missing House. Grosse Hamburger Strasse 15-16, Illustration in: Schneede, Uwe (1991) Christian Boltanski: Inventar, Exhibition Catalogue Hamburger Kunsthalle (12.4. - 9.6.1991), Hamburg 1991, p. 106, Prometheus Bildarchiv e.V.

This permanent installation in the former Jewish quarter of the city traces the absence of vanished inhabitants of the bombed and destroyed apartment block at Grosse Hamburger Strasse. The wall of the adjacent house is hung with several labels that indicate the names, professions and life data of former residents. The space between the buildings is transformed into a “space of memory”.⁸ Libeskind and Boltanski have a similar interest to give missing people a disturbing presence among the living. The jagged building is Libeskind’s “House of the Missing”: a space that was created to reflect absence, death, is the architect’s response to a traumatized past of his parent’s generation. His own “post-memory” reflection on the exceptional fate of the German-Jewish community of the city adds a dark, elegiac note: “The visitor to this museum has to keep in mind that it is not easy to put continuity together across that which is forever gone” (Hornstein 2003: 57). There is an obvious tension between the architect’s concept of an empty monument and the museum organization’s decision for a multi-media survey exhibition that covers more than two thousand years of Jewish Culture. Many contemporary Jewish museums avoid Libeskind’s prioritization of the Holocaust, but in Berlin the architecture plays the leading role. The museum’s narrative begins with a bow to the Louvre tradition: The visitor steps into the labyrinthine subterranean corridors and must choose between the “Axis of the Holocaust” or the “Axis of Exile” (fig. 3) that lead either into the dead end of the unheated “Holocaust tower” or to the exterior adjacent “Garden of Exile” (Israel). Only the “Axis of Continuity”, illuminated by white strip lighting, leads to a steep staircase that connects a subterranean exhibition of “stranded objects” in minimalist showcases with the main exhibition space on the upper two levels.



Fig. 3: Jewish Museum Berlin, Basement, Axis of the Holocaust, Axis of Continuity, © Jewish Museum Berlin/Press 672/0, Photograph: Jens Ziehe.

The fluorescent ‚Line of Hope’ refers to the recollection of a concentration camp survivor who on being interviewed said a white line in the skies had kept her alive. This story is provided by Libeskind in his ‚Trauma’ essay and is also repeated in the JM museum guides (Libeskind in Hornstein 2003: 43-58). The production of meaning in culture museums usually relies on artefactual representation: objects are being transformed into artefacts. This mode of representation is a difficult task in any museum that deals with the Holocaust, but particularly if there is nothing left to be put on display. The private foundation that runs the museum decided to present “surviving“ objects from Jewish-German everyday life given by donors and other supporters. The objects shall confront the visitor with fragments of a lost “authentic“ individual life.⁹ This paradigmatic shift towards the fate of families of a pre-Holocaust Berlin leads to the fabrication of “micro-narratives“. As very little is known about the original owners of the “objets trouvés“, the history of how they got into the collection is exhibited. Letters give evidence of Frieda Neuber’s deportation, but also of the dancer Steffi Messerschmidt who dreamt of a bright future on Europe’s stages in the late twenties. A sewing machine reminds of the tailor Paul Guteman who was expelled to Poland in 1938, torn apart from wife and child.¹⁰ Director W. Michael Blumenthal thinks that the Holocaust should be reconsidered with regard to the history of German ethno-nationalism and racism, but also from the perspective of individual biographies and popular everyday culture to reach a larger museum public that is neither in touch with Jewish culture nor with the complicated history of German-Jewish relations.¹¹ The JM’s narrative has been developed to inform mainly non-Jewish visitors of the mechanism of socio-political exclusion from a national community. The assemblage of “surviving objects“ in the underground

underscores the catastrophic dimension of this unrepresentable event, but it also leads to a new perception of donated gifts that are transformed into “authentic” sources.

The emptiness of the basement is not continued on the upper floor where Jewish culture in general and German-Jewish life since the Middle Ages are presented on two levels expanding over 3,000 square metres. The curator Kenneth Gorbey, assisted by Würth & Winderoll exhibition design, developed a rich illustrated history book for families and school classes. The aim is to explain how Jewish citizens lost their national identity, their jobs and possessions, and finally their lives. Photographs that were given to the JM are presented in photo-album-style in a section devoted to the role of family life (1850-1933) for a burgeoning middle-class. “Influential citizens” that contributed to innovation in culture, industry, science, and the arts are presented and honoured in a typical bourgeois Biedermeier environment. Lower social classes are strikingly absent from this representation of typical German-Jewish life: the portrait paintings, photographs, teddy bears and other objects given to the institution solely refer to the middle-class. The social norms and preferences of this class are presented as the thriving forces of German industrial progress and innovation in all fields of culture (1870-1933). The representation of the donors’ recollected Berlin childhood has a rather Benjaminesque effect that is reinforced by the many photographs from various family albums: Contrary to Benjamin’s thoughts on the loss of aura in reproduction the aura is produced by the dominant family frame that is built around the photographic image (Walther, 2009: 379). A positive effect is that throughout the exhibition, individually memory appropriated by the institution is included and made visible. The disadvantage is that the concluding section overshadows all of the objects on display.. The guided tour climaxes with a documentation of the killing of European Jews in concentration camps, followed by the post-war Auschwitz Trial.¹² The “present room” makes aware that descendants of this pre-war “imagined community” created through the means of museal representation are living everywhere, except in Germany (fig. 4). In contrast to American-Jewish identity building in the USHMM, the JM presents the history of a growing tension between “being Jewish” and “being from Germany”. The history of the Jews is reflected from politico-historical constellations of the past (ethno-nationalism) and the present (a reunified national community in Europe) in order to reinvest the Holocaust with meaning for a contemporary German public. The perspective of a meanwhile aged community that shares the experience of persecution, flight and exile dominates the storyline and leads to a telling exclusion of Jewish life in Berlin between 1945 and the present.



Fig. 4: Jewish Museum Berlin, Present Room (Jewish Families after 1945), Photo: Silke Walther

The Imperial War Museum London: Spectatorship and Body Horror

Didactic aesthetics of Holocaust memorial museums usually include the “*never forget*” message whereas the reframing of images of atrocity related to the destruction of European Jewry has become part of a changing discourse on voyeurism, spectatorship and the horrific sublime in contemporary art. Gerhard Richter’s montage of pornography and corpses in his *Atlas* project was an early reflection on photographic representation, consumptive spectatorship, and the assumed mass-media commodification of ‘Holocaust imagery’.¹³ Long before the latest spectacularization of Nazi atrocities in contemporary art (and afterwards in museum exhibitions) emerged, Saul Friedlaender wondered whether the obsession with Nazism as well as the discourse that ceaselessly elaborates it is only interested in the past or rather an expression of profound fears projected on the past? (Friedlaender, 1984: 19).

My second case study demonstrates how such fears shape the staged image of the past in museum exhibitions by making more or less obvious reference to a common post war experience that could only be shared retrospectively, i.e. after having been popularized through the media and the museum. A museum team that seeks to reconcile its already national historical narrative with the “collective memory” of, for example, the Second World War or its aftermath, might define problematic ‘chapters’ in this survey as a burden to be mastered or might continue ‘making monuments’ by framing events and heroes worthy to be remembered for the sake of self-assurance in times of crisis. Reflecting on the dynamics of “collective memory works“, Irwin-Zarecka observes that it might not be enough to

restrict our inquiries to tracing the vicissitudes of historical knowledge or narratives. We must also ... attend to the construction of emotional and moral engagement with the past. (Irwin-Zarecka, quoted in Stier, 2003: 150)

The British popular and scientific engagement with the history of German facism has been intense, with the paradoxical effect that most Britains are so well-educated on Germany's Nazi crimes that this difficult past seems more real to them than to their German contemporaries. The Imperial War Museum London (IWM) used to keep exclusively the memory of Britain's military battles alive before it recently turned towards the more complex ‚chapters‘ of the past by choosing the Holocaust, an event that denies complete representation as well as complete musealization. The institutional experience in handling historical documents would have permitted a more profound and self-reflective reassessment of the “attempted annihilation of European Jewry“, but making the Shoa more meaningful in a contemporary multi-ethnic post-Commonwealth British society obviously demanded to find a balance between historical events as “hard facts“ and history, as *we* remember it.¹⁴

A history museum specialized in the art of warfare and renowned for its multi-media surveys of the World Wars seems not the ideal spot to “explain“ and “illustrate“ the history of the Holocaust for a twenty-first century audience, “especially for young people“. (Imperial War Museum, 2000: 1-2) War technology makes up large parts of the artifacts that were usually presented as the result of progress and power (fig.5).



Fig. 5: Imperial War Museum London, Main Gallery, Photograph: Silke Walther, with kind permission of the Imperial War Museum.

The Holocaust exhibition was developed during the nineties (1996-2000) when the museum needed to brush up its programme to attract a larger museum public. A functional five-storey extension wing was erected to have sufficient exhibition space for the new permanent exhibition. The inauguration in June 2000 by Her Majesty the Queen was broadcasted as an event of national

significance. Having seen the museum exhibit, Esther Brunstein, one of the invited survivors whose personal recollection became part of the exhibition narrative, felt “taken back to a time when Evil reigned supreme.”¹⁵ The integration of survivors’ recollections of their suffering, fear and loss has been criticized as a much too strong emphasis on Nazi destruction politics. Although this prioritization of persecution politics and the genocide indicates an awareness of political and intellectual discourses of the decade, the exhibition functions also as a ‘monument’ by honouring very different groups in British and East European history for their resistance against Nazi terror “The murdered European Jews and the allied servicemen“ are happily united as a ‘community of victims’: “they gave their lives to defeat Nazism“.¹⁶ The universalization of victimhood is ahistorical but useful to create an “imagined community“ that shares the same belief in Western liberal democracy at all times and places. In the case of genocide, empathy with individual persons dehumanized by the historical context has often proved to be impossible; on the other hand as empathy easily translates into identification with victors, the Jewish “survivor-as-witness“ plays a crucial role in the IWM’s representation of the Holocaust. An abundant collection of British survivors’ taped testimonies has been used to stabilize the coherence of the museum’s comprehensive institutional narrative on battles against foreign enemies. It is no coincidence that Sir Edmund Burke’s thoughts on the spread of *Evil* are presented together with videotaped reflections on the meaning of *Auschwitz* in the last room of the exhibition. Bearing witness and giving evidence of Nazi crimes in all possible details is one major educational goal of this richly illustrated survey which, due to large amounts of historical sources, particularly films, photographs and posters, also incorporates styles of imagery tied to the symbolic language of Nazism and anti-Semitism.¹⁷

The British team cannot be criticized for having restaged the U.S. Holocaust Memorial’s more dramatic exile-and-salvation-plot. There are some structural similarities between the American and the English exhibition narrative as both are based on the history of the war against totalitarian Germany and Europe. Both plots present the allied forces’ joint efforts to defeat fascism and to end the war. At the IWM, the “American“ mode of display, especially the frequent use of large film screens and the use of simulacra, were rejected in favour of a firm grounding in historical facts and a seemingly documentary chronicling of events. The exhibition team cooperated with many Jewish memorial sites and cultural foundations to present the history of the Holocaust in a European-wide dimension, including the Nazi terror in East Europe’s *Bloodlands*.¹⁸ The result is a historically more accurate “liberator’s plot“ that is mixed up with filmed, photographed and written historical documents and taped ‘testimonies’.¹⁹

The period covered by the new Holocaust exhibition had to bridge the gap between IWM’s famous sections on the two World Wars and the section on post-war conflicts. The exhibition is subdivided into two parts extending on two floors in a dim-lighted gloomy atmosphere that contributes to a discomfiting feeling of Foucauldian control. Part I covers the spread of Nazi ideology in the seedbed of European antisemitism between the wars (1918-38) and Hitler’s successful transformation of the political system according to NS Aryan racial theory. Showcases with china, furniture, personal belongings, suitcases and a map visualizing emigration flows illustrate the disintegration of the (German) Jewish community. Part II downstairs proceeds with the German occupation of Poland, deportation and murder in Eastern Europe by SS execution squads, a detailed portrait of the “*Death camp industry*“ and the liberation of the concentration

camps in the large “*Rescue-and-Survival*”-part which ends with allied jurisdiction and execution of Nazi leaders.²⁰ Patriots might leave with the comforting conclusion that darkness has always been beyond the nation, in remote places.²¹ The IWM’s tradition of the object-driven artefactual representation is continued and leads to sometimes rather surreal encounters between “stranded objects” and “advanced killing technology” in one and the same section (Foucault, 1977).

“*Life before the Nazis*” begins with Jewish Germans’ stories on their childhood and 24 enlarged family portraits juxtaposed with Hitler’s black metaphysics of war.²² Hitler’s and Goebbels’ hate speeches resound in this first part that was intended to sum up all the facts *and* theories that are somehow related to the Nazi’s genocidal programme. The representation of the enemy (Hitler, the SS guards, execution squads, and the whole bureaucratic machinery of destruction) occupies large parts of the tour through the dark and sometimes spins off in the wrong direction. SS uniforms, weapons, “*Mein Kampf*” and the Olympic Games seen through Riefenstahl’s lens are a neo avant-gardist flirt with fetishized icons. Iconic images are used to portray “Nazi Germany” in Part I. This perhaps too strong attention on the “enemy” stimulates empathy with a threatened historical, Jewish minority in Britain and abroad. Like in the JM, the exhibition provides a frame of reference in which the ‘national family’ of the war years and the persecuted Jewish community are reunited as a community of witnesses of the same historical event. The plot is based on a binary structure of competing ‘communities’: victims and their persecutors. There is an almost Barthesian emphasis on the indexical nature of portrait photographs of victims and their relatives in this ambitious reconstruction of a ‘lost community’.

The aim of showing *how* the European Jews were dehumanized and killed is successfully achieved. However, the reliance on an inherited photojournalistic mode of giving evidence for the sake of empathy and information leads to a problematic repetition of the allied forces’ photographic regimes.²³ It would require further information on the provenance of the heterogeneous photographic material that makes up the “documentary mode”. The use of photographic reproductions in larger-than-life scale is a weak point of the theatrical section that shows execution commandos near Vilna in action. Just as the photographer was part of the peeping crowd, the visitor is forced to become a witness and bystander gazing at appalling violence.²⁴ In front of the crime scene, broken glasses and keys excavated at the site of destruction are presented in illuminated showcases. Letters thrown from the train to Auschwitz are part of a presentation of typical individual fates that point towards the millions of untraceable deaths. Throughout the tour it depends on the visitor’s sensibility if he or she follows the explanatory museum texts or listens to the victim’s voice pitched to stir the commemoration of an imagined ‘Holocaust family’. As the storytelling is mainly addressed to a general public, empathy results from the strikingly familiar tone of these last letters: “*promise to be brave*”.²⁵ Both Holocaust exhibitions in Berlin and London contain arranged galleries of portrait photographs, but the London exhibition pushes the identification game further by creating photo galleries of former Ghetto inhabitants and of prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau (The Imperial War Museum, 2011: 32)²⁶. The installation design confronts visitors almost rhythmically with the sight of victims and their enemies. In a sequence of rooms dedicated to the victim’s passage to Auschwitz, the path leads through the reconstructed model of a Belgian railway cattle wagon that resounds with survivors’ voices recollecting their traumatic deportation experience.²⁷ The emphasis on giving evidence has caused a striking cult of relics that has been originally developed

at the Auschwitz memorial museum in the post-war era. The display of traces, like hair, glasses, combs and shoes, creates emblematic exhibition objects that point towards industrialized mass murder at the death camp, the un-representable act of killing (fig. 6-7).



Fig. 6: Imperial War Museum, Holocaust Exhibition, Inside the Camps: Main Showcase with objects found at concentration camp sites, Photograph: Imperial War Museum London 2000, Andrew Putler/James Johnson: *The Holocaust Exhibition at the IWM London*, London 2011, p. 44-45.



Fig. 7: Imperial War Museum, Holocaust Exhibition, Artefacts in Showcase illustrating life in the camps, Photograph: James Johnson, in: *Imperial War Museum (2011) The Holocaust Exhibition at the IWM London*, Belmont Press, London, p. 48-49.

The largest section “Inside the camps” presents a large plaster model of the Auschwitz-Birkenau II complex depicting the selection process of Hungarian Jews in May 1944 in front of a showcase filled with shoes, books, and glasses left by gassed victims (fig. 8). The accurate reconstruction of the Death camp industry gives amassed evidence of the destruction of the Jewish body, but the idea to single out Auschwitz as the Nazi’s “most perfected killing technology” (The Imperial War Museum, 2011, 30) is, although in harmony with the IWM’s war focus, not beyond criticism. Only Auschwitz, not Chelmo or Bergen-Belsen, can be understood

as a powerful emblem of the whole totalitarian system that demands no further comment. But the displayed objects of the artefactual representation have been excavated at different grounds and are presented as authentic objects giving evidence of Auschwitz crimes. These relics will inevitably become less meaningful if the museum visitor meets the same piles of shoes or hair in Holocaust exhibitions around the world. There is an obvious need for authentic objects, but it is debatable if the pile of hair from Madjanek memorial museum must become a commodified exhibition object at London, Berlin, or Washington. The weakness of this exhibition is the uncommented use of photographs and the loyalty to institutional habits of representing history as an illustrated chronicle of events that proceeds in an undisturbed documentary mode.

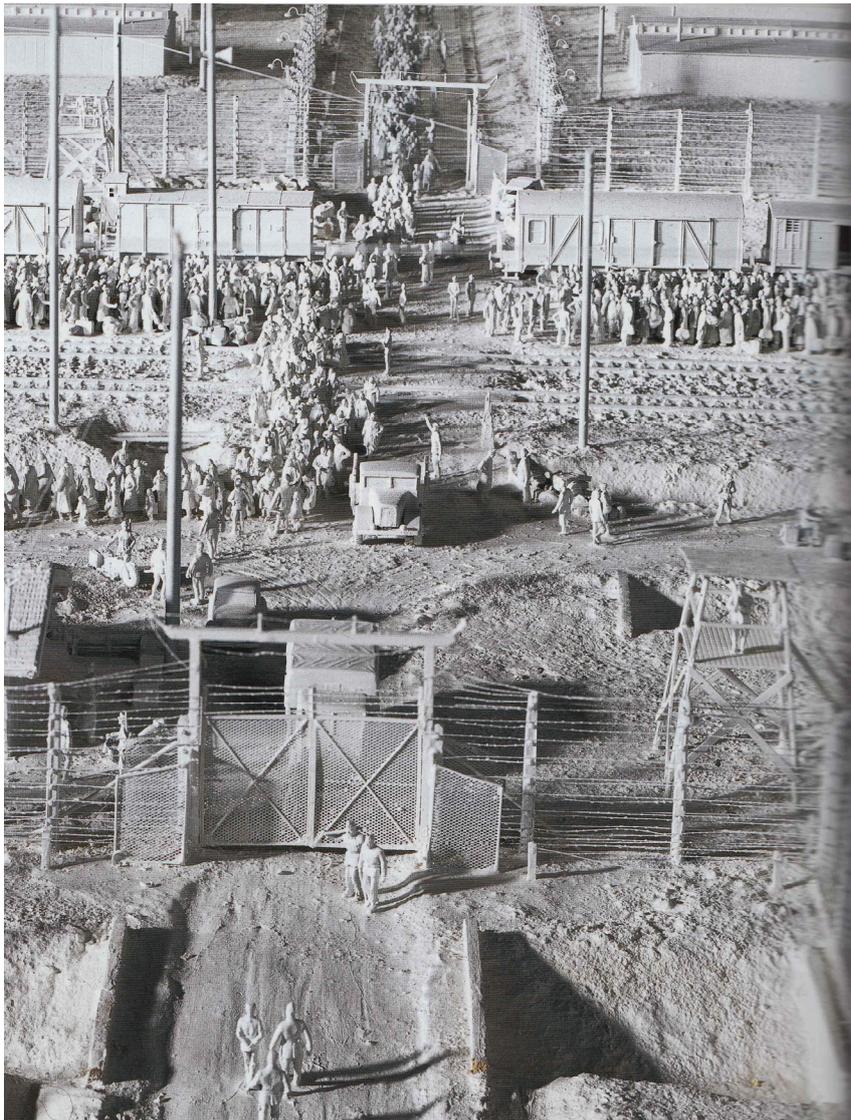


Fig. 8: Imperial War Museum, Holocaust Exhibition, Detail from a plaster model of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp featured in the exhibition showing the selection of Jews from the Berehevo ghetto, May 1944, photograph by Chris King, in: Imperial War Museum (2011) *The Holocaust Exhibition at the IWM London*, Belmont Press, London, p.46.

Conclusion

Both museums have developed exhibition narratives that address and create imagined communities in order to reassess the meaning of the Holocaust for the present. In Berlin, Libeskind's reflection of the void provides a frame of reference that leads to a strong emphasis on recollection and reflection of a lost community at the centre of Germany's capital. Libeskind reconceptualized the American-Jewish Holocaust memorial tradition for Berlin. The trope of 'trauma' to which the architect refers is closely related to specific discourses on Jewish identity that meanwhile have become an integral part of cultural criticism. Historical trauma implies real injury and victimhood with long-term political, psychic and moral consequences whereas metaphorical trauma is a postmodern breed of Holocaust memory culture. The contemporary treatment of the Holocaust as metaphor needs site-specificity, like in Libeskind's approach. Although this building provides an equally supportive environment like the USHMM, the museum's survey exhibition avoids a metaphorical reading of 'trauma' as it could only be read from the perspective of real victims of the Shoah and would be misleading in a chronological survey on the history of the German Jewry for Germans. Education after Auschwitz is geared towards the future avoidance of dysfunctional political and social systems. The narrative framework of the exhibition display mediates between "stranded objects" and a social community that is constructed around these objects. By naming places and persons of a vanished Berlin culture the museum produces a discourse of cultural remembrance.

The Imperial War Museum exhibition creates a witnessing community according to an already mediated experience of previous press campaigns after 1945. It integrates survivors' oral testimony from its own collection to enhance the storytelling of the main plot. The IWM narrative avoids further de-historicising, but it uses the iconic survivor to increase the moral authority of "Britain" fighting against Hitler. The team has sacrificed too much space to mirror evil and to sketch the victim's passage through the hell of war to post-war peace. The imagined community of "British people" bears witness to the crimes that others committed against a Jewish community. In contrast to the Jewish Museum, the IWM pictures the vulnerability of the human body in order to raise empathy, a visual strategy that is similar to the USHMM's more participatory engagement. More information on the reproduced visual resources would improve the exhibition as the narrative remains silent about what we see and why we see it in this arrangement. Although the IWM avoids creating Freed's "Holocaust feel" it has unconsciously created a national community of post-war spectators in order to convey the "highest values and truths" (Duncan 1998, 474-475) of this imagined community to visitors whose identities might span a range of affiliations.

The preliminary result of my comparison leads me to the following conclusion: (1) The ITF's concept of a global Holocaust memory is likely to foster forgetting instead of making the history of the Shoah instructive for a European future. (2) The loss of embodied social memory should not increase the traffic of commodified "Holocaust artifacts" in metropolitan tourist sites. (3) There is no disinterested "collective memory" of the Holocaust, but individual recollections and a globally circulated visual heritage of photographs and films. A global memory unanchored in the social would be meaningless as we cannot but interpret the Holocaust according to the changing "lenses" through which we see the world.

Notes

- ¹ Anderson refers to Ernest Renan's "essence of a nation" (1947): all members share common beliefs and even what they have forgotten holds them together. The nation is a concept that needs acts of imagining a totality of members sharing the same (political) values.
- ² A display reads "Fulfill your obligation by registering your dear ones."
- ³ The concept of bearing witness is explained in my discussion of the IWM exhibition.
- ⁴ The Jewish Museum Vienna shares a similar fate and was reopened in the same decade. Chief curator Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek decided to confront visitors with emptiness as, in her view, a return to the pre-war Jewish Museum Vienna was not possible (Greenberg, 2003: 235-236).
- ⁵ These statistics and a total of ca. six million victims of the Holocaust in Europe are given on the wall in the JM basement. The system of intersecting axes visualizes movements of a fleeing population from Berlin. An electronic map in the exhibition gives more information.
- ⁶ Libeskind and Eisenman are influenced by the discourse of the architectural sublime and are spatializing absence in a site-specific surrounding. They "attempt to embody the ambiguity and difficulty of Holocaust memorialization in Germany" and consider, as Young (Young 2003 in Hornstein 2003: 76) the space between memorial and the viewer who experiences this metaphorical "space of memory"..
- ⁷ "Whatever happens in this city, it will have to do with hundred thousands of Jewish citizens that are no longer there." Daniel Libeskind "Zwischen Geometrie und Sprache", Interview (April 1994)..
- ⁸ Christian Boltanski's project was carried out at Grosse Hamburger Strasse 15-16 in Berlin while Libeskind developed plans for the JM.
- ⁹ This "authenticity effect" results from displacement and recontextualization within the museum's body (Azoulay, 1994: 92).
- ¹⁰ My examples are part of the basement display that I studied in September 2011. The JM homepage offers further information on acquisitions, f.ex. Letters of Frieda Neuber.
- ¹¹ <http://m.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kommentar-das-juedische-museum-ein-begehbare-buch-127376.html> (10.09. 2001)
- ¹² Typewriters, photo-murals and documents picture the infrastructure of a typical concentration camp, (Beeck, Clemens, 2011: 70-81).
- ¹³ The concentration camp photographs are found on panel 17-18 in the Atlas project (begun 1962) and discussed in Buchloh, 1999.
- ¹⁴ Diane Lees in Imperial War Museum (2011) The Holocaust Exhibition London, 3.
- ¹⁵ "Queen opens Holocaust Exhibition", BBC News Online 6 June 2000
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/778774.stm.
- ¹⁶ Quote from a wall text. The exhibition "centres on the murder of Jews, but also shows the suffering of the many others whom the Nazis enslaved and murdered" (Imperial War Museum, 2011: 3). The discourse was fueled by Giorgio Agamben's essay on "Homo Sacer" edited in English translation by Stanford University Press 1998.
- ¹⁷ The discourse on witnessing in the nineties has given up Susan Sontag's famous assumption that the confrontation with violence in photographs causes a new trauma in onlookers, see Meek, 2010: 131.
- ¹⁸ Snyder, T. (2010) Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin, London. Snyder describes the work of killing squad in East Europe. The IWM team worked with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's photo archive, the Yad Vashem Archives, Israel, the KZ Gedenkstätte Dachau, the Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Chelmo concentration camp museum. Seven historians supplied research results for the portrait of East Europe under Nazi terror.
- ¹⁹ The historiography of the Second World War and the Shoa had to rely on the limited military sources collected by the allied U.S. and British army. Storytelling in the USHMM stresses the perspective of the liberator by placing the visitor in the role of soldiers ("retrospective eyewitnessing"). The British variation pays more attention to East Europe, but the liberation-section resembles the American model.
- ²⁰ This moral lesson is also relevant in the JM's aftermath-section to strengthen the trust in jurisdiction. In London, a photo-gallery of executed Nazi 'killers' is juxtaposed with abundant archival material on the liberated camp.
- ²¹ The quotation of the statesman Sir Edmund Burke at the exit reads "For Evil to triumph it is only necessary for good men to do nothing."
- ²² In comparison to Berlin, the names of the persons are missing in the arrangement. A looping videotaped interview with Ruth Forster introduces her as a typical German girl ("I was one of them"). Hitler's "war is the origin of everything" competes with Swing Music.
- ²³ The USHMM Washington supplied archival sources, but the portrayal of Nazi bureaucrats of the genocidal industry, fanatic scientists and industrialists has a specific British flavour.
- ²⁴ This refers to the section "Killing Squads, Poland".

- ²⁵ The deportation section contains letters thrown from a train from Malines to Auschwitz in July 1944. The usual *„Forget me not“* common in soldiers' letters to their families turns into tragedy when placed next to a cattle-waggon. A letter of Oswald Jacobi ends: "promise to be brave."
- ²⁶ These "galleries of faces" are a montage of reproduced Auschwitz registration photographs.
- ²⁷ I was not permitted to take photographs of the display. The use of simulacra, like the cattle truck, has been derived from American Holocaust exhibitions that need to engage their audience by referring to cinematic representations of the Holocaust dramas (Bernstein, 1994: 429).

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