

Emergence, Power Relations, and Proponents:

A New Display of War and Nazi Crimes at the House of History at the Museum Niederösterreich

The House of History opened in September 2017 as a new part of the Museum Niederösterreich, the state-run museum in St. Pölten, capital of Austria's largest province of Lower Austria. 2021 saw a major redesign of exhibition parts addressing European history between 1914 and 1945 and its close connection to historical events on a local and regional level at the same period of time. We, the curating team of the museum, were responsible for this revision.¹ Our aim was to refocus the exhibition's content and achieve further evolution of its display and mediation concept. The new presentation takes a longer perspective on social and political developments and highlights continuities and processes. Nazi atrocities are shown in their historical context and conveyed through individual victim biographies. Violent images are employed consciously and in a manner that encourages viewer empathy without precluding their ability to reflect rationally on the subject. The guiding considerations of our revision will be sketched in this article.

Following the ideas of Saul Friedländer, our ambition was to show an “integrated history” of the Holocaust, the multi-perspectival presentation of which would not only encompass the fates of individual victims but also include perpetrators of different social and hierarchical positions as well as the complex historical context.² National Socialism and its measures of persecution, the war of extermination, and the “Final Solution” are embedded in longer-term lines of development within a relatively long period of consideration, beginning with the First World War – something Peter Longerich, for example, has also requested of research to acknowledge.³ We refer in this context to an emergent perspective that examines the development of referential frameworks for a “society of perpetrators” extending as far back as the

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- 1 We want to thank Maren Sacherer for her support and input in revising this article.
- 2 See Saul Friedländer, *Nachdenken über den Holocaust*, Munich 2007, 154–167.
- 3 See Peter Longerich, *Tendenzen und Perspektiven der Täterforschung*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 14/15 (2007), 3–6.

nineteenth century. The use of the term “emergence” by no means implies that developments were irreversible. What the term emphasizes instead – in line with recent social psychological studies⁴ – is that National Socialism, lacking the time it would need to establish a new normative model, managed to “build” on an already existing basis in society. It also speaks to the persistence of this normative model, which, as we know, did not simply disappear after 1945.

Another major aim of our redesign was the shift from a system perspective to an actor perspective. The previous exhibition foregrounded the “system”, emphasizing the totalitarian envelopment of the individual and the formation of a people’s community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), which was portrayed in a way that made it appear both all-encompassing and self-contained. By contrast, the current presentation aims to make clear that the Nazi regime never managed to exercise the kind of complete control implied in the original exhibition, just as its reactionist ideology deeply contradicted its modernist practice. Individuals certainly had some latitude for decision-making and the image of a “perpetrator society” must be viewed in a differentiated manner, which raises new questions about individual responsibility. Implementing multi-perspectival representation requires a focused look at perpetrators and their respective roles and relationships with the regime at several points in the presentation.⁵

A separate room is devoted to victims of the National Socialist system in the form of individual biographies. Preserving the integrity of portrayed victims was a key consideration. Unlike the previous presentation, the remodelled display intentionally avoids imagery created from the perspective of perpetrators so as not to reproduce hierarchies of power and belatedly humiliate the victims once again.⁶ Other factors included the danger of trivializing war and mass crimes and the dedication to prevent “decontextualization and dehistoricization”⁷ – issues we aimed to

4 Harald Welzer, Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden, Frankfurt am Main 2007, 69.

5 See e.g.: Michael Wildt, Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes, Hamburg 2002; Klaus-Michael Mallmann/Gerhard Paul (eds.), Karrieren der Gewalt. Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien, Darmstadt 2004.

6 See Stefan Benedik/Monika Sommer, Ein neues Zeugeschichte-Museum: Bedingungen und Chancen einer transmedialen Vermittlung von NS-Geschichte, in: Markus Stumpf/Hans Petschar/Oliver Rathkolb (eds.), Nationalsozialismus digital. Die Verantwortung von Bibliotheken, Archiven und Museen sowie Forschungseinrichtungen und Medien im Umgang mit der NS-Zeit im Netz, open access publication 2021, 35–46, 40; with regard to footage from the Theresienstadt Ghetto: Dirk Rupnow, Unser Umgang mit den Bildern der Täter, Federal Agency for Civic Education (08 May 2013), <https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/nationalsozialismus/geheimsache-ghettofilm/154336/dirk-rupnow-zu-geheimsache-ghettofilm?p=all> (9 September 2022).

7 Ljiljana Radonić/Heidemarie Uhl, Das zeithistorische Museum und seine theoretische Verortung, in: Ljiljana Radonić/Heidemarie Uhl (eds.), Das umkämpfte Museum. Zeitgeschichte ausstellen zwischen Dekonstruktion und Sinnstiftung, Bielefeld 2020, 7–25, 16.

resolve by focusing on instruments of power, both administrative and technical, in the presentation.

Reasons for the reconfiguration

The decision to redesign the presentation was based on a number of aspects and desiderata:

The interwar period was underrepresented in the previous permanent exhibition, as the museum opening in 2017 also featured a comprehensive temporary exhibition on the topic. After its runtime rooms in the permanent exhibition area had to be rearranged to integrate the period between 1918 and 1938. Our main lender, the State Collections of Lower Austria⁸, has received important bequests from Holocaust survivors since 2017. For example that of Walter Fantl-Brumlik: a Lower Austrian who survived Theresienstadt/Therezin Ghetto, the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a “death march”. It was very important to us to present photographs and documents of his family members who were killed in the Shoah. Besides that, his talisman is now on display: a broad leather belt that Fantl-Brumlik wore during his internment. The holes he added document his physical emaciation and suffering. The previous perspective was too limited to the institutional level – an aspect that also showed in the selection of exhibited objects. Exhibits on display were mainly documents of the power apparatus, including maps, panels, plans, and photographs created by perpetrators. Totalitarian elements of the Nazi regime were addressed in a separate area of the exhibition (“From the Cradle to the Grave”). It contained objects like toys, didactic material from schools, Hitler Youth training weapons, and propaganda material – and thus gave the impression that no one could escape the grip of such a system. While there was an emphasis on the supposed inevitability of indoctrination, the decision-making of individuals – and the leeway afforded to them – receded into the background.

The presentation had also specific weaknesses concerning the usage of pictures of violence that needed to be eliminated. Actions taken by the *Einsatzgruppen* of the Security Police and the *SD* (Security Service of the *SS*), for example, were depicted with a greatly enlarged photograph of a shooting execution scene. The image was displayed in a narrow space and in such a way that the viewer was literally drawn into the motif without being made conscious of the victim’s suffering. Though the

8 The Landessammlungen Niederösterreich holds state-owned museum objects. The museum cooperates closely with this state-run institution and a major part of the objects on display in the permanent exhibition are part of the collections of the Landessammlungen Niederösterreich.

photograph was disturbing as a “typical” visual document of an act of murderous violence, it inhibited questions about the context and actors involved.

We felt it was important to focus more on temporal processes and developments. Whereas the aspect of time played a relatively minor role in the old exhibition, the new one sought to show long-term developments in their processuality, highlighting their mutual influences and interdependencies. The radicalization of the Holocaust, for instance, is conveyed in the context of, and in interaction with, the course of the war.

A new presentation also needed to take museum education work more into account. The architectural concept of the permanent exhibition provides for separate areas of education work within exhibition rooms as opposed to relegating it to more peripheral areas of the museum.⁹ These “forums” are considered integral to the themed areas. Spaces are made available for group work and are intended to facilitate thoughtful engagement with the content and objects on view. Like most other areas of the exhibition, the reconfigured space now has a “forum” as well. A large table in the centre of the room invites groups and individual visitors to stop and take a closer look at the surrounding content.

In our daily work and intense exchange with our visitors and communication with partner institutions we came to the conclusion that selected objects and content needed a stronger focus on local examples and actors. Rather than belabour case studies from far-away places, the reconfigured display conveys “major” Second World War events and Nazi persecution through their connections to Lower Austria. A reference to familiar places and circumstances helps museum visitors connect presented content to their own, lived experience.

Approach and principles

At the beginning of the redesign process, we faced the question of what exactly we wished to convey when recounting this history of violence leading up to 1945. As German writer Thomas Thiemeyer pointed out, museums must take into account a number of contradictions when dealing with war and violence. On the one hand, a museum seeks to denigrate violence and war from a moral perspective, yet, on the other hand, it avails itself of “enhancing” elements such as architectural and graphic design features, clean glass display cases, and sophisticated lighting effects. Whereas

⁹ See Christian Rapp, *Hausbau und Ausbau. Stichworte zu Entstehung und Programm des Hauses der Geschichte im Museum Niederösterreich*, in: *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur (mit Geographie)* 64/3 (2020), 252–268, 261.

war and violence are *destructive* in nature, aesthetic and design components are *constructive*. When viewed at the safe distance, which separates the museum visitor from the exhibit, war and violence become an aesthetic experience that can be observed without risk.¹⁰ And while violence is often amorphous and chaotic, the museum itself is an institution that provides order, arrangement, and structure. Because of the formalized organization of its material, the museum always offers us a “frozen” image of violent processes and conflicts. It allows us to experience these events simultaneously, even though they originally occurred sequentially.

We set out to counteract these specific disadvantages of the museum experience in the course of our reconceptualization process. From the start, we reminded ourselves that the redesign of the exhibition serves a clear socio-political objective. We reflected critically on social and political developments that can lead to violence. We use historical processes to promote the critical analysis of present-day power structures. The exhibit is also a response to our social obligation to protect vulnerable and/or disadvantaged individuals – both past and present. And not least, we wished to memorialize the victims of systemic violence. If only for this reason alone, the shift in perspective from system to individual was crucially important. We also needed to address the fact that, owing to their “departure from contemporaneity” (Norbert Frei), the two world wars now fall within the direct lived experience of only a small number of visitors.¹¹ Because of this, “the narratives of the generations who personally experienced these times are disappearing from the communicative memory of societies, and new ways must be sought to transfer these memories to the collective consciousness of subsequent generations.”¹² This problem is addressed by choosing a biographical approach which is especially important because school classes and other youth groups are a major part of our visitors. Many of these young persons are not descendants of the *Tätergesellschaft* (perpetrator society) and thus do not share its historical background. By telling stories of individual victims it is possible to establish a link between historical events and the visitors’ lived experience.

Later in the process we used those basic principles to develop the following guidelines:

Focus on the long-term ideological perspective. We decided to present the long-term ideological trends emanating from the turn of the century, such as

10 Thomas Thiemeyer, Fortsetzung des Krieges mit anderen Mitteln. Die beiden Weltkriege im Museum, Paderborn 2010, 209–211.

11 See Norbert Frei, Abschied von der Zeitgenossenschaft. Der Nationalsozialismus und seine Erforschung auf dem Weg in die Geschichte, in: WerkstattGeschichte 20 (1998), 69–83.

12 Katja Köhr, Flucht in die Moral? Museale Darstellungen des Holocaust zwischen nationalen Fragen und universellen Zugängen, in: Medaon 1 (2007), 1–13, 2, <https://www.medaon.de/de/artikel/flucht-in-die-moral-museale-darstellungen-des-holocaust-zwischen-nationalen-fragen-und-universellen-zugaengen/> (20 November 2021). Translation by the authors.

nationalism, antisemitism, racism, imperialism, and militarism, which were there even before 1914.

Perspective shift from systems to actors. Systems are abstract and have no personal instigators or participants. As sociologist Niklas Luhmann pointed out, the individual is merely part of the system's environment.¹³ If the exhibition only discusses the techniques, locations, and practices of Nazi terror, it merely shows an unaccountable system in isolation without explaining how it came to pass that so many individuals took part in these crimes. By looking at individuals, however, we can explore the decisions they made from within the system, as well as those they made from outside, or even against it. Our focus on the actor's perspective, thus, allows us to ask ourselves how we would have responded in such situations. Was there any leeway for us to have made our own choices, and if so, would we have used it?

Far more space is dedicated to the interwar period. In the redesigned exhibition space we highlight how there were indeed periods of tentative upswing in the First Republic, and how, primarily during its early phases, the two major parties, the Social Democratic Workers Party of Austria (SDAP) and the Christian Social Party (CS), were able to reach key decisions together. But there were also conflicting political worldviews which stood irreconcilably at odds with one another. This dilemma is the subject of the interactive "conflict generator" at the heart of the exhibition space. Here visitors can see how these two major parties and the third influential political factor, the German nationalist faction, were positioned on socio-political "battleground issues" such as religion, economy, culture, and foreign affairs shortly after 1918. The columns display red, yellow, or green indicators depending on the extent to which these positions are in conflict or agreement with one another. In nearly all cases, these "traffic lights" will be either red or yellow, demonstrating how there was virtually no common ground, particularly among the radical factions of the respective political camps. The only issue on which these were somewhat unified was foreign policy, in particular regarding their desire to unify with Germany. The consequences of these ideological antagonisms made clear in the "conflict generator" are reflected in the surrounding of the installation.

In the exhibition space dedicated to the First Republic, we also explore the topic of violence through the incendiary visual language of political posters. To this end, we assembled a "pandemonium" of themes commonly seen in campaign posters of the time (Fig. 1).

These include visual elements such as men threatening their political opponents with sledgehammers, revolutionaries trampling on parliament or marching through

13 Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, 244.



Figure 1: “Conflict generator” and violence in political imagery in a room addressing the inter-war period, ©Museum Niederösterreich, photo by Franz Gleiss.

the streets with flaming torches, antisemitic depictions of greedy “capitalists”, or political rivals shown as fire-breathing dragons to be vanquished in armed combat. The captions allow visitors to associate the posters with their respective parties, yet the primary objective of the collage is to highlight the extremely violent visual language shared by all the political groupings in their election propaganda.

From gradual deprivation of rights to systematic extermination. We firmly believe that shedding light on the history of the Holocaust’s origins and radicalization, its multifaceted nature and development, is vital to conveying it adequately to the public. Such a presentation is of particular interest to Eastern Austria, where the Adolf Eichmann-led *Central Agency for Jewish Emigration* in Vienna prototyped procedures used in the systematic deprivation and deportation of the Jewish population – procedures implemented in similar ways in other parts of the German Reich.¹⁴ Objects, documents, and photographs structured along a timeline trace how Jews in the “Ostmark” (post-*Anschluss* name for Austria) were gradually stripped of their rights, dispossessed, and ultimately deported (Fig. 2).

Drawing on specific examples from Lower Austria, the installation points to the most important measures and events in that process. Visitors encounter documents and objects belonging to Jews whose property was “Aryanized” – the euphemistic

14 Gabriele Anderl/Dirk Rupnow, Die Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung als Beraubungsinstitution, Vienna 2004. From October to December 2021, the House of Austrian History dedicated an open-air exhibition to the “Vienna model” on Vienna’s Heldenplatz square: “The Vienna Model of Radicalisation. Austria and the Shoah”.



Figure 2: History shown in its processuality: systematic deprivation of rights and dispossession of the Jewish population 1938–1941 (from right to left), © Museum Niederösterreich, photo by Franz Gleiss.

term for the seizure of their possessions and its transfer to non-Jews – or who attempted to organize emigration for themselves and their families. The presentation shows bureaucratic measures taken in the period between the annexation of Austria by the German Reich in 1938 and the autumn of 1941, but also their impact on the lived realities of those individuals.

Contextualizing propaganda. We took a cautious approach to materials meant to promote National Socialism, including adding explanations and undermining their initial aim by embedding them in a larger ensemble of exhibits. Propaganda – when properly contextualized – loses its beguiling effect. Read in a manner that contradicts its intended purpose, it can testify to the inherent injustice of the Nazi system.¹⁵ A Wehrmacht propaganda troop photographed a burning homestead in Belarus and a German soldier kneeling in front of it, capturing an image meant to highlight the supposed heroism of German troops in battle. Viewed in the context of other exhibits from the war of annihilation, it exposes the criminal nature of the war on the “Eastern Front”. The photograph loses its nimbus as a document glorifying the German war of conquest and takes on new meaning, offering a revealing glimpse at a war on the Soviet population that was animated by racist prejudices.

However, one should also bear in mind that not all popular approval of the Nazi regime can be attributed to propaganda alone. Private accounts – a number of which

15 See e.g., Hans-Ulrich Thamer, Hitler im Museum? Ein Erfahrungsbericht zur Ausstellung “Hitler und die Deutschen”, in: *Studies in Contemporary History* 8 (2011), 88–101, 90–97.

can be seen in the exhibition – also point to eagerness to comply, to voluntary cooperation with the regime, and an internalization of National Socialist goals as key factors, a circumstance Ian Kershaw aptly described as “working towards the Führer”.¹⁶

Some objects produced for propaganda purposes can add valuable context to an exhibition. Take, for instance, two fragments of printing plates recently discovered by chance.¹⁷ Likely used in the production of a magazine or pamphlet, they feature exaggerated, comic-strip style images of atrocities against figures antisemitically identified and stereotyped as Jews, along with derisive image captions: “Jews are made to stand as Watschenmann in the Prater for popular amusement” (referring to a stuffed, life-size dummy that registered the force of a blow when punched); youths play football with “the heads of Jews brutally slaughtered by the SA”; and finally “Jews are minced and processed to sausages”.¹⁸ The propaganda was likely created in response to foreign press reports decrying anti-Jewish riots after the *Anschluss*; the exaggeration was meant to downplay National Socialist crimes and portray the reports as overblown. That the industrial-scale killing of Jews would soon become reality was probably beyond what a majority of the population could have imagined in 1938, even most National Socialists.¹⁹ Being aware that the content is highly problematic, we decided to show these objects nevertheless because the depiction is abstracted and obviously exaggerated. The printing plates are part of the timeline mentioned above and correlate with the nearby documents of the beginning persecution of Jewish citizens. They add another layer of documenting the propaganda of this specific moment in time. To avoid the danger of fixation on the perpetrators’ perspective we centred this exhibition section on personal objects and experiences of those effected by the seemingly legal discrimination.

Embedding the Shoah in the Second World War. We are operating on the assumption that the Holocaust cannot be understood as a primarily bureaucratically organized extermination project that was independent of the war – that is, as an event that would have come about even without the Wehrmacht’s warfaring. On the contrary, the war was an essential precondition for the Holocaust. War and genocide are inextricable from one another. The regime waged war to achieve its criminal aims, and without the war the mass crimes would not have been possible.

16 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936*, Stuttgart 1998, 663.

17 The objects were discovered near Brunn am Gebirge, a small town at the southern outskirts of Vienna in 2019. They were found by chance in a hedge by a walker who gave them on loan to the House of History. For further details on the finding and analysis of the objects see: Nikolaus Hofer/Martina Hinterwallner/Martin Krenn, Ein archäologisches Dokument nationalsozialistischer Propaganda aus Brunn am Gebirge, Niederösterreich, in: Bundesdenkmalamt/Bernhard Herbert (eds.), *Fundberichte aus Österreich* 58 (2019), 131–135.

18 Original commentary in German language; translation by the authors.

19 Hofer/Hinterwallner/Krenn, *Dokument*, 135.

The regime saw its military occupation of Eastern and Southeastern Europe as an opportunity to establish remote concentration and extermination camps outside the Reich. The war also lent further legitimacy to violence within the Reich. War ultimately became an “intrinsic element”²⁰ of National Socialism, the system environment that facilitated a headless unleashing of its brutality. A new, interlinked exhibition presentation shows the mutual dependency of the two phenomena: the Shoah can only be coherently described in correlation with the course of the war. This is reflected by the exhibition’s architecture and on the text level. In addition to that we focus on the participation and active role of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust. Thus, it is possible to illustrate the influence of the war on the radicalization of the Shoah.

The importance of biographical narrative. Victims of Nazi persecution are central to the (spatial) narrative. Lining the walls of the aforementioned “forum”, which was specifically designed for museum education work, are 15 short biographies, each consisting of a text panel with a portrait photograph of the individual along with an associated exhibit: personal possessions and correspondence, or an archival document (Fig. 3).

In this regard, we employ a concept of individualization now commonly used to represent the Shoah in a museum context.²¹ We also expand its scope of application,



Figure 3: Biographies of selected victims of the Nazi regime: personal items; portraits taken before the persecution. Walter Fantl-Brumlik (left) and Lilly Tauber (right), © Museum Niederösterreich, photo by Franz Gleiss.

20 Ulrich Herbert, *Das Dritte Reich. Geschichte einer Diktatur*, Munich 2016, 68.

21 For a detailed analysis of the concept, see e.g. Katja Köhr, *Die vielen Gesichter des Holocaust. Museale Repräsentation zwischen Individualisierung, Universalisierung und Nationalisierung*, Göttingen 2021, especially 110–134.

adopting it to convey the persecution and murder of other victim groups and individuals involved in the resistance. References to individual lives and experiences appear frequently in the overall exhibition.

This practice of representation puts the focus on individuals and sets them apart from the anonymous millions of persecuted and murdered people. But it also makes them represent those inexplicable masses as consisting of single people, who are as individual as those visible. This focus on victims of National Socialism as individuals – as human beings with individual histories and worlds of experience – aims to affect viewers at an emotional level. We regard the potential of exhibitions to trigger emotions through their aesthetic character and their ability to stir the senses as a strength. Though viewers spend a relatively brief period in an exhibition – its “exposure time” is short compared to that of other media – its confluence of texts, objects, and images can trigger emotions and encourage empathetic engagement with the topic. The fact that the narrative begins at a point when the victims were not yet directly victims of a crime but “regular” people makes it easier to relate and draw connections with one’s own lived experience. This room, therefore, revolves around the question: How would I have felt if it had happened to me?²²

The challenge of this approach is not to stop at the level of empathy. We must also strike a balance between emotionalization and knowledge transfer, thereby providing room for rational contemplation. Here, too, it should be emphasized that, although the exhibition highlights individual fates, it never does so at the expense of the quantitative, social, and political dimension. Biographical sketches are consistently interwoven with historical context, both spatially and in terms of content.

Victim groups. To us, it was an essential concern that the presentation on National Socialist persecution incorporates as many different victim groups as possible. Featured biographies include those of Jewish victims along with stories of individuals subjected to Nazi medical atrocities, but also the fates of those persecuted on account of their sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, or as a result of being labelled *asozial* (derogatory term for those who did not conform to Nazi social norms) or *Berufsverbrecher* (“career criminals”), victims of military justice, deserters and resistance fighters, as well as political prisoners. Representing as broad a spectrum of victim groups as possible, the exhibition establishes points of reference to current socio-political debates surrounding the culture of remembrance and commemoration. As mentioned, the focus is on biographies connected to (Lower) Austria – a limiting factor on the selection, particularly in terms of geography. Finding the names of individuals persecuted was often difficult in the case of victim groups whose political, legal, and social recognition has been so long refused that it ulti-

22 Ibid., 120–125.

mately came too late for most survivors. Indeed, the absence of testimonies provides a rather obvious proof of the continued social stigmatization and/or criminalization. In such cases, individual biographies could only be reconstructed using corresponding archival records documenting the respective history of persecution. However, we were also able to draw on some fundamental studies from recent years, along with support and input from scholars associated with various research institutions. Consequently, the exhibition does reflect the current state of research.²³

Involving descendants. We established contact with the descendants of eleven individuals whose biographical narratives are woven into the exhibition and present photographs or exhibits they have made available to us. Personal contact with the children, grandchildren, or close relatives of victims of Nazism and their involvement in the process of creating the exhibition was certainly an enriching experience for all involved, and we do not take their trust for granted. Interaction with the descendants also provided valuable food for thought when it came to creating the exhibition concept. One example was the need to do away with the exhibition's exclusive consideration of the period up to 1945, a scope prescribed by the presentation's previous chronological layout. The suffering endured by survivors and their descendants did not end with the fall of the Nazi regime but continued after 1945: this was a consequence of low solidarity among the social majority and their continued marginalization, evidenced by the long struggle to see their suffering acknowledged and further manifested in contemporary debates surrounding the Austrian "culture of remembrance". For this reason, and at the suggestion of a descendant, the room devoted to victims' biographies now features a centrally-placed monitor showing the legal path to recognition for various victim groups in the form of important milestones and landmark cases. It also addresses their continued social discrimination.

Against the anonymization of victims. A victim biography-based presentation of the history of National Socialism naturally broaches the subject of data protection. The question as to whether or not the names of Nazism's victims should be published or anonymized from an ethical and legal point of view is a matter of ongoing debate revolving around academic freedom, the right to commemorate, and protecting the privacy of victims and their families. It arises exclusively with respect to certain groups of victims – victims of the Nazi "Euthanasia Programme", for example²⁴ – and decidedly not with others. Jewish victims, for instance, are often named

23 Special thanks to Brigitte Entner from the Slovene Scientific Institute in Klagenfurt (Slovenski znanstveni inštitut v Celovcu), Brigitte Halbmayr from the Institute of Conflict Research, Hannes Sulzbacher from the Zentrum für queere Geschichte (QWIEN), and Philipp Mettauer from the Institute for Jewish History in Austria.

24 See Andreas Nachama/Uwe Neumärker (eds.), *Gedenken und Datenschutz. Die öffentliche Nennung der Namen von NS-Opfern in Ausstellungen, Gedenkbüchern und Datenbanken*, Berlin 2017.

as openly and publicly as possible, an act intended to – at least symbolically – restore their identity and dignity.²⁵

We decided to show full names for all exhibited biographies of victims – along with the person's date of birth, and (if known and relevant) the date and circumstances of their death. This was, of course, only possible insofar as it complied with relevant data privacy laws, though regulations only prevented us from showing the full name in one victim biography.²⁶ In this case we were not able to determine that the person is deceased. Our aim was to tell an individual life story and give an account of the suffering borne; we view this not as a violation of privacy protections, but as a contribution meant to restore some of the persecuted individual's dignity. Excluding certain groups of victims from these efforts runs the risk of continued discrimination, as the non-publication of names can also be interpreted as hiding or tabooing. A democratic society strives for inclusion, and that same goal should apply to the commemoration of victims of National Socialism. Their individual fates must also be acknowledged.²⁷

Why and how we display the “instruments” of war. Exhibiting arms is rightly controversial and requires a solid justification. However, weapons are characterized by the fact that they are above the “semiotic threshold”, which is to say that every visitor is aware of their primary purpose.²⁸ This allows them to be placed in a variety of contexts and associative frameworks. Our intention here is not to understand weapons per se, but to better understand human beings through weapons and their relationship to them. It was Bruno Latour, who pointed out that firearms are not only instruments of death, they also change the person who carries them. User and weapon enter into a mutually altering relationship; together they constitute a new unity of action.²⁹ Thus, when we show weapons in the exhibition, we do so in the context of political processes. They are embedded in contexts, new layers of meaning are highlighted, and the space and display case are considered in the construction

25 Contemporary examples include the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial in Vienna's Ostarrichi Park, which opened in November 2021.

26 According to the Austrian Federal Act on the Safekeeping, Storage and Use of Archival Holdings of the Federal Government, archival material is accessible to the public after a protection period of 30 years if this does not affect third parties or their personal rights. Personal records may be used ten years after death. If the year of death cannot be determined, the protection period ends 110 years after the birth of the person concerned. This also applies to the publication of personal data (§ 11, par. 1), but not to data from the “most personal sphere of life” (§11, par. 2).

27 See e.g., Andreas Hechler, *Diagnosen von Gewicht. Innerfamiliäre Folgen der Ermordung meiner als “lebensunwert” diagnostizierten Großmutter*, in: Cora Schmechel/Fabian Dion/Kevin Dudek/Mäks* Roßmüller (eds.), *Gegendiagnose. Beiträge zur radikalen Kritik an Psychologie und Psychiatrie*, Münster 2015, 143–193; Michael von Cranach, *Ein Plädoyer für die Namensnennung*, in: Nachama/Neumärker (eds.), *Gedenken und Datenschutz*, 2017, 77–81.

28 Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik*, Munich 1972, 28–38.

29 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge/Mass. 1999, 193.

of meaning. Straight away at the start of the exhibition space is a bunker-like vitrine containing a machine gun from the First World War. Though the viewers find themselves in a place of “harmless encounter with objects” (Gottfried Korff)³⁰, this particular exhibit means to evoke a sense of vulnerability and helplessness as a person engaged in modern material warfare might experience it. Or a *Panzerfaust* (rocket-powered grenade) as typically wielded by *Volkssturm* units: the material superiority of the Allies in the final phase of the war was to be compensated by the ‘heroic’ deeds of individuals defending the German Reich. The intimation that the – mostly teenaged or elderly – shooter was to approach an enemy tank and fire the weapon at close range, and at considerable risk to themselves, speaks volumes to the regime’s disposition towards the end of the war.

Conscious approach to images of violence. We tried, as best we could, to work only with photographs of victims that were taken voluntarily and prior to their persecution. Our intention in doing so was to take the integrity and sovereignty of these individuals into account. Such photographs, by their very nature, show no use of force. In an effort to avoid trivialization, we related images, texts, and documents to one another in such a way that the image level conveys an integrated personality before its entry into the Nazi system, while text and exhibits portray its violation. This precludes the need for “illustration” with perpetrator-made images and photographic depictions of violence. At the same time, how else could such events be adequately conveyed in their unimaginable dimension if not with a look at the experiences of individual people? How can the atrocities of the Holocaust be communicated in pictures, yet in a way that is appropriate for the target audience and does not shock visitors, thereby opening an emotional dimension that hinders rather than promotes knowledge acquisition?³¹ Sidestepping this dilemma, we chose to include a series of pencil drawings in their first-ever presentation as part of an Austrian permanent exhibition: detailed and realistic depictions find Vladimir Gubenko processing his childhood experiences in the Belorussian city of Brest, which was German controlled from 1941 to 1944 (Fig. 4).

The pictures show unvarnished impressions of the German occupation practices and demonstrate what an approach in line with the *Generalplan Ost* (“Master Plan for the East”) meant for the local population. They portray specific events and atrocities and evoke feelings of sympathy with the victims without trivializing them. With a low degree of abstraction, they illuminate the nature of Nazi crimes without adopting the perpetrators’ perspective or accommodating voyeurism.

30 Thiemeyer, Fortsetzung, 2010, 167.

31 The recommended minimum age for visiting the exhibition is twelve. On the effect of graphic photos in museums, see Thiemeyer, Fortsetzung, 2010, 299–301.



Figure 4: Images of violence: drawings by contemporary witness V. Gubenko depicting German occupation practices in Eastern Europe. The picture shows the deportation of young Jewish men from Brest (detail), private collection.

Conclusions

Four years after its opening, the House of History at Museum Niederösterreich in St. Pölten (Austria) saw the reconfiguration of parts of the permanent exhibition depicting Austrian and European History of the twentieth century. The overall conception process revealed a need to rethink the museological approach to the exhibited material. This revision meets the museum's didactic and educational aims, but also takes the ambiguity of objects derived from violent contexts into account. The aforementioned conflicting objectives arising between historiographic and ethical principles – between the danger of trivializing violence, on the one hand, and that of further humiliating victims on the other – called for new thinking in terms of finding case-by-case solutions, options, and sometimes compromises. New objects and the various content-side aspects they evoke showed the importance of taking a reciprocal approach to developing a detailed curatorial concept, necessitating everything from simply adding more information on a topic to context shifts and far-reaching reorganization of content. This is not to suggest that this process ends after the exhibition opens. True to its mission, the House of History remains a “museum in progress”³²; its content and presentation methods continue to evolve and develop in dialogue with visitors and in light of recent historical research.

³² Scholarly Advisory Board concept for the House of History (HGNÖ) at Museum Niederösterreich, St. Pölten 2015, 5.