

Creating an Exhibition, a Political Narrative, or Both?

Reflections on the Redesign of a Museum and Memorial Space at the Nazi Execution Site in Pardubice

From 1998 to 2009, the Czech Republic implemented the programme *Rehabilitation of Memorials of the Struggle for Freedom, Independence and Democracy*. The financial expenditure was intended for the rehabilitation and historical-political reorientation of memorials that, until 1989, had been appropriated to promote the communist regime. The programme included seven major memorials (including the Nazi ghetto and Gestapo detention centre Theresienstadt, and the village of Lidice, which was destroyed in 1942 and its inhabitants murdered as a ‘reprisal’ for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich). While the pre-1989 memory politics of the war had provided a black-and-white representation of the morally victorious Russians and the defeated Germans and Western Allies as part of the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, this was now omitted. Yet the new narratives were again hardly in accordance with historical research, especially when it came to acknowledging Czech complicity in the wartime Nazi crimes.

A telling case is the “forgotten” denunciation of a Jewish woman from Lidice, whose name was added to the list of victims at Lidice Memorial in 2020 only after a political scandal. This case reveals an obvious contradiction between academic research and its application in memorials. The story of Štěpánka Löwinger(ová), which I also discussed in my 2016 monograph *Lidice: The Birth of a Symbol*, centres around her Jewish identity being disclosed to the police, according to surviving documents by her landlady shortly before the Lidice atrocities. This story was one of many unknown chapters in the history of the destruction of the village and the creation of the Lidice symbol in the post-war period. Coincidentally, the last Lidice survivor, Jaroslava Skleničková (then 96 years old), wrote about the denunciation in her book, also published in 2016.¹ In 2019, the Czech public television broadcas-

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1 Jaroslava Skleničková, *Vzpomínky mě stále tíží* (Memories still weigh me down), Lidice 2016, 22.

ted a report on Löwingerová, the forgotten Jewish victim from Lidice,² which led to an unprecedented political trial involving the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Culture (all former members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party). Arguably, this controversy rendered visible how political narratives of victimhood rely on its oversimplified understandings. Meaning-making in collective memory is troubled by narratives that do not adhere to the understanding of the victim as ‘pure’. The director of the Lidice Memorial, Martina Lehmannová (also the chair of the Czech section of ICOM), was in favour of adding the missing name of the Jewish woman, but her decision was overturned under public pressure.

Although the laws of 1946, 1948, and 1957³ as well as the founding charter of the Lidice Memorial from 2000 require the listing of all victims, Löwingerová was to remain erased from the history of the village. Her landlady turned her in to the police on 2 June 1942 – an act unrelated to the ‘reprisal’ action on the village, which started the next day with the investigation of the inhabitants. According to the surviving documents, the reason for the denunciation was a personal dispute over the payment of the rent. The dispute apparently involved several neighbours who did not mention the missing Jewish victim anywhere after the war. The reason for this was that the family with which the Jewish victim had found shelter was one of the leading post-war communist families in the village. At the same time, one of the 17 surviving children of Lidice was the landlady’s daughter, who played an important cultural and political role during Czechoslovakian “normalization”, especially in the 1970s. The communist government’s close ties with Eastern European countries, especially the Soviet Union, as well as Czechoslovakia’s political orientation towards the revival of post-war myths as the cornerstone of a modern Czech nation oriented towards the East, led to selective respect for the results of historical research and, above all, to efforts to come to terms with the problematic past. While the historical narrative changed after 1989, it has remained equally reluctant to address the topic of Czech complicity in the Nazi crimes.

The same scandal almost led to the dismissal of the director of Czech Television a few weeks before the parliamentary elections in October 2021. It was trigge-

2 V předvečer tragédie (10 June 2019), <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/1142743803-reporterict/219452801240021/0/66320-v-predvecer-tragedie/> (30 March 2023).

3 According to Act No. 187/1946 Coll. and 188/1946 Coll. on the Statute of the Society for the Restoration of Lidice, as well as by Act No. 208/1948 on certain measures for the restoration of Lidice and by the government resolution on the dissolution of the Society for the Restoration of Lidice, which in 1959 transferred the competences and duties of the Society for the Restoration of Lidice to the Lidice Municipal Council, that is, not only the care of the immovable property and the exhibition in the museum but also publication and educational activities were the duties of the Lidice inhabitants in order to preserve the memory of all victims of the Nazi persecution in Lidice, Ležáky, and other villages destroyed by the Nazis.

red by twelve opinion pieces commissioned from several organizations by the new director of the Lidice Memorial, Eduard Stehlík, claiming that contemporary documents about Löwingerová were unreliable. This was despite the fact that he, as co-author of the Lidice exhibition since 2001, allegedly knew about the Jewish victim, although he did not mention Löwingerová in the exhibition. None of the authors of the twelve statements had visited the archives for research and none had contacted the last living witness in Lidice. The director of the Lidice Memorial refused to accept me as a contributor of another opinion piece. On 1 July 2021, the international journal *Malice Moravská* published my study *Forgotten is He Whose Name is Forgotten*,⁴ in which I present the concrete historical context and documents describing the ‘unpleasant’ fact, hidden for decades, that Czechs were also involved in the persecution of specific population groups under Nazi occupation. The whole matter was widely covered in the international media, including *The Guardian* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. A hearing in the Chamber of Deputies, which was to lead to a motion to dismiss the director of Czech Television, was cancelled after the publication of my study.

At the same time, I was part of the reconstruction process of a memorial museum connected to the Lidice atrocities, in which it was possible to mention aspects of Czech complicity in the Nazi crimes. They were presented in the exhibition, their reconstruction based on historical research – interestingly enough without causing a political scandal. In 2016, the young deputy mayor of the eastern Czech city of Pardubice approached me with the question of how to adapt the memorial space of the former Nazi execution site in Pardubice. This is the site where members of the resistance involved in the assassination of Reich Security Main Office chief and Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich (the pretext for the Lidice atrocities) were executed in 1942. After the war, the memorial was used twice a year for wreath-laying ceremonies, and its architecture, which dates back to 1949, was renovated in 1972. Based on my experience of preparing permanent exhibitions in other museums, I proposed a concept of building a new facility for the original objects that had been preserved. The central idea was to show that, despite the enormous civilian casualties, a successful attack had hit the top leadership of the Nazi state. This was to refute the view held for decades that the attack had had no effect on the war situation and had only led to the liquidation of any internal resistance.

One advantage in creating the concept for the new memorial was the fact that several artefacts (stakes, several pieces of clothing worn by the executed, tin-lined coffins) from the time of the executions are preserved at the local execution site. For-

4 Vojtěch Kyncl, Zapomenut je ten, jehož jméno je zapomenuto. Židovská oběť z Lidic Štěpánka Mikešová, *Časopis Matice Moravské*, in: Brno roč. 140/1 (2021), 123–192.

unately, the execution site was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1972 and has not fallen victim to the insensitive industrial development of the surrounding area. The design of the exhibition included several sections, which we have labelled with the working titles “Cinema Hall”, “Gestapo Office”, “Memorial Room”, “Geneva Conventions”, “Memories”, and “Memorial Courtyard”. Since the building was to be constructed on the site where the original memorial had been erected in 1949, it was necessary, according to the National Heritage Institute, to preserve this original arrangement. However, it was also possible to remove additionally built parts of the no longer existing exhibition, which were inadequate in terms of structural dimensions and spatial arrangement. The architectural competition proposed interesting solutions (a spiral double wall with partial overlapping as an interior exhibition; a dune divided into two parts as an interior exhibition; three buildings with an irregular ground plan arranged like a labyrinth), with the winning design proposing an underground museum building of 25 x 25 m².

The new concept clearly separates the memorial space from the museum and historicizes some of the elements originally housed in the memorial space by transferring them from there to the museum. The original memorial is dominated by a granite monument from 1949, with a relief of three columns symbolically representing the execution piles. Their foundation stone contains urns with the ashes of the victims, which were transferred to the new building in 2021. Two stelae with ceramic mosaics depicting the fallen and surviving fighters were added to the memorial in 1972. While the monument was retained as a landmark in the current revision and its significance was highlighted by the redesign of the memorial, the mosaics were removed and installed as part of the exhibition in the new underground building.

The exhibition is located underground, with only low structures on the surface between the trees. It does not compete with the granite monument, but disappears under a green roof that blends seamlessly into the surrounding meadow. It is more land art than an actual building. It is accessible via a ramp that takes up the theme of the walls, using them as a symbol of the notch – the scar that the place will forever bear.

The house is designed as a concrete cast. Concrete was chosen both for its rawness and for its structural properties, which allow for spatial diversity. The shape of the structure has been designed to match the surviving elements – the width of the crown of the attic of the new building, the adjoining foundation walls, and the stand therefore match the width of the crown of the wall of the existing monument, creating a unified boundary between old and new. The dominant concrete is complemented by steel or metal elements (doors, railings, ceilings, etc.), clay floors, granite blocks, and robust wooden benches in the cinema hall. The pathways are made of clay.

The exhibition itself is designed in a circular shape and is characterized by a variety of content-related themes as well as the impressions to be conveyed through the different designs of the individual exhibition rooms – in particular proportions, height level, light intensity/light and shadow design/lighting composition, and the selection of the different types of exhibition objects (digital displays of documents, artefacts of the executed, reproductions of photographs, sound and video recordings) play a decisive role. Corridors (mostly ramps) were then inserted between the different parts of the exhibition. The aim was to achieve a maximum visitor experience with a minimum of resources while avoiding pathos.

The uncovered stories of the victims show that most of them were handed over to the occupation authorities due to denunciations by Czech or German residents of the protectorate. For example, a trivial poem discovered by the Gestapo in a suitcase buried in the garden as a result of a denunciation led to an execution for “condoning an assassination”. The story of a high school student who denounced his professors for slandering the Führer, but was executed as a “false informer” for making up the story, directs the visitor’s gaze from the hitherto uncritical evaluation of the heroes to the everyday reality of protectorate society. The effect of the indirect depiction of violence in large-format pictures illustrating the crimes against humanity is concluded in the next room with the statement of a Holocaust survivor: “We Jews did not win the war, we did not.” The war is thus presented not as a glorified battle of heroes, but as a space of suffering passed down through four generations. The guilt of the perpetrators is not wiped away, but the exhibition foregrounds the burden of the surviving victims, who have had to carry their memories through the long twentieth century.

The underground exhibition is accessible via a curved ramp. After entering through a large door, the visitors find themselves in a bright foyer, which serves as a central communication hub and connects visitor facilities (reception, cloakroom, toilets, etc.). The tour begins with a short introductory film showing Czechoslovakia’s transition to Nazi dictatorship. The film ends with the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, setting the scene for the following parts of the exhibition. The wooden benches made of beams are deliberately not very comfortable.

In the next room, visitors find themselves in a sky-lit ‘Gestapo office’. On a desk, which refers to the category of so-called desk perpetrators, there are digital and printed documents on the functioning of the resistance, the assassination of Heydrich, Czech informers in Nazi terror organizations, programmatic cooperation, the persecution of Jews, Sinti and Roma, people with mental or physical disabilities, etc., and the preparation of the structures for the mass murder, which was to take place partly in the Pardubice and Kolín districts. The design of this room makes extensive use of digital displays, which allows the documents to be presented as historical

objects and offers the visitor several in-depth excursions, for example, the story of a Jewish family from Pardubice. For example, digital copies of Joseph Goebbels' diaries, Heinrich Himmler's notes and transcripts of conversations with Adolf Hitler, which are directly related to the events in Eastern Bohemia in June 1942, are on display for the first time. Seven tablets offer 650 documents (with short descriptions in Czech and English), while the room focuses on the representation of the almost 200 murdered victims in the form of medallion portraits. During my research, I found that half of these victims died in connection with the Resistance, while the other half were shot "for agreeing to the assassination", a phrase used by the Nazi authorities as a cover for killing politically inconvenient people. A tray panel is dedicated to contemporary radio broadcasts, from both the Protectorate and abroad. The sound is deliberately muffled to recall the clandestine eavesdropping on London broadcasts, which was punishable by death. The large-format pictures on the opposite walls evoke the uncomfortable feeling of surveillance by the ubiquitous Gestapo, whose agents, incidentally, often lived with impunity well into the 1990s. Tracing the personal details of the three dozen Gestapo members depicted, the last of whom died in the mid-1990s, effectively establishes a link between the war period and the generation of today's visitors. The third wall shows the world of Nazi ideas in concentrated form. Chronologically arranged excerpts from texts and speeches from the second half of the nineteenth century to the trials in the second half of the twentieth century show the gradual radicalization of hatred, culminating in the consequences of justifying mass murder.

The visitor is then plunged back into darkness and descends a ramp into a dark, empty room with two illuminated lines on either side. An oblong display case on the right shows objects and memorabilia from the execution site. On the opposite wall are copies of the uniquely preserved execution protocols, with the names of all victims. The uneasy atmosphere is enhanced by the sloping clay floor and high ceiling, giving the impression of a dungeon.

The room slopes down towards the front, from where a small dark dungeon is accessible, symbolically located at the lowest point of the exhibition. The coffins used to transport the executed are stored in an enclosed space, visually separated from the hall, to preserve the reverence of the objects on display. Photos and the names of the victims are projected onto the wall. The atmosphere is enhanced by an audio recording of the spoken diary of Jaroslav Charypar, a witness to the last moments of the executed victims. As we leave the hall, we pass a small niche set in the wall containing the preserved part of one of the executioner's stakes.

Then the slope of the ramps reverses and the visitor begins to climb upwards. The next room is dedicated to the Geneva Conventions, which were adopted in response to the Nazi crimes that no legal system had anticipated. Since then, the pro-

tection of victims has been an internationally guaranteed principle of humanity to which 196 countries in the world, including the Czech Republic, have subscribed. The Czechoslovak General of the Judicial Service, Bohuslav Ečer, was the author of the new definition of “crimes against humanity”, which became part of the international legal order. Part of the exhibition space is dedicated to his biography, his historical experiences, and the responsibility that arises from them for today’s society.

The topicality of the exhibition’s ideas became clear early on. When the exhibition opened in October 2021, ninety states of the world were at war. The war in Ukraine and the related crimes of the Russian occupation forces have shown how important it is to educate the Czech public about war crimes, human aggression, criminal settlements with perpetrators, and the extremely long-lasting impact of violence on surviving victims and family members. The theme is presented with illuminated photographs of war crimes from the Second World War and texts that place the scenes in the context of international law.

On the opposite side of the room, the transitional justice and the prosecution of Nazi crimes are documented. The criminal justice reckoning with National Socialism is presented using the example of Pardubice and covers the period from 1945 to 2007, when the last convicted member of the firing squad died. Information about the fate of the murderers from the execution site is supplemented by a projection of the Nuremberg Trial and the trial of Karl Hermann Frank, a key Nazi functionary in the Protectorate, in Prague in 1945-46.

Another part of the exhibition consists of testimonies from surviving contemporary witnesses. Seven screens project the same loop. Visitors can stand face to face with the witnesses and get a sense of personal contact. The memories focus on the people of Pardubice who were affected by Nazi persecution – by being imprisoned in a concentration camp or by participating in the Resistance organizations. The projection is accompanied by a montage of unique testimonies of Holocaust survivors from the area of Eastern Bohemia. Members of the Resistance risked their lives to save them, but at the same time their “deportation to the East”, as the extermination was euphemistically called, was supported by local collaborators. Providing the Czech people with a view of history that not only offers a broad spectrum of “perpetrators, victims, and spectators”⁵ but also adds the perspective of Czech complicity, was the basic motive of the educational concept of this area.

Just before returning to the foyer, visitors pass through the final part of the exhibition, an open memorial courtyard at the heart of the building. A plaque commemorates the names of all 194 murdered victims. The design is as minimalist as possible: there are only four walls, a tree, and the sky above.

5 Raul Hilberg, *Pachatelé, oběti, diváci. Židovská katastrofa 1933–1945*, Prague 2002.

Museum exhibitions that deal with such serious topics as the oppression of human rights, human suffering, and death should, above all, be ethical and defend the position of the victims. The death of the innocent obliges us to act, regardless of the political imperatives of the moment, nationality, and time. This is where museums can be the institutions of the future, because they can prepare society for the expected behaviour of groups of people in times of great social crisis, and connect with experiences that have already been lived.

The newly opened museum received two awards in October 2022: the Award for Outstanding Public Contribution of the Year 2022 and the Award of the President of the Senate of the Czech Republic. The professional and political recognition of our team's work shows that, despite all difficulties, the presentation of twentieth century history is on its way to describing the full range of positive patterns and aspects difficult to confront. It is a path that leads society to preparedness and resilience in times of instability.