

Rescue of Jews during the Second World War in Contemporary Museums

Veranstalter: Daniel Logemann, Europäisches Kolleg Jena; Barbara Schieb, Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, Berlin; Zofia Wóycicka, Zentrum für historische Forschung Berlin der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften / Centrum Badań Historycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Berlinie

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Bericht von: Anna Georgiev / Markus Wege-
witz, Europäisches Kolleg Jena

As quotidian life in wartime Berlin became subject to a series of ever tightening controls, the Jewish couple Elsbeth and Erich Frey found it increasingly difficult to avoid the danger of deportation. They turned to Erich Frey's employer, the brush-maker Otto Weidt, for help. Weidt and his network of helpers provided the Freys and several others with food, employment and later a hide-away beneath Weidt's factory at the Rosenthaler Straße in Berlin. Against all odds, the Frey family survived until April 1944, when the Gestapo arrested them in a different hide-out. Elsbeth and Erich Frey were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. For his exceptional efforts to save them, Otto Weidt was named a „Righteous among the Nations“ in 1971. His former workshop is now home to a museum which presents this particular story as a „failed rescue attempt“.¹ The history of Weidt and the Freys may serve as an example for more recent discussions about how to represent and remember the topic of rescue. In this workshop which was organized in cooperation between historians and museological practitioners, the participants sought to establish an overview of the treatment of rescue in museums and memorials in Europe and Israel. In her introductory remarks ZOFIA WÓYCICKA (Berlin) pointed to the emergence over the last 15 years of institutions solely dedicated to the topic of rescue. The question of why and how museums have dealt with the topic is thus an urgent one.

GYÖRGY PÉTER (Budapest) dedicated his keynote lecture to the politics of memory in contemporary Hungary, where the remembrance of rescue is largely reduced to the his-

tory of the Hungarian rescuers. In this narrative, the Jewish population is subsumed under the ever-broader category of the „victims of occupation“, as Péter demonstrated in his analysis of the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation and the House of Terror in Budapest. Far beyond Hungary, the memorialization of rescue corresponds with the „wish of a society to be innocent“, as Beate Kosmala remarked in the ensuing discussion.

Stories of rescue are told in large part as individual narratives. The first panel sought to establish who the protagonists of these stories are and how they are integrated in the broader contexts of exhibitions and memorials. The title „Righteous among the Nations“ still proves to be of great importance, as IRENA STEINFELDT (Jerusalem) confirmed. Steinfeldt remarked that in popular understanding as well as in many exhibitions the term „Righteous“ is synonymous with „rescuer“. Yet the granting of such a moral reward to individual gentiles is ill suited to reflect the complexity of survival in occupied Europe. Tadeusz Pankiewicz's Pharmacy in the Kraków Ghetto, presented by KATARZYNA KOICK (Kraków), is one of the institutions which revolves around a single Righteous. The memorial is housed within the historical pharmacy, where the sole permanent non-Jewish resident of the Kraków Ghetto lived and worked. The story of Tadeusz Pankiewicz also serves as a portrayal of life in the Ghetto and of Jewish „self-help“, as well as the broader context of German occupation and the Holocaust. The Lieu de Memoire in the French village of Chambon-sur-Lignon, which was presented by ELAINE WAUQUIEZ-MOTTE (Chambon-sur-Lignon), took a different approach by memorializing the rescue of Jewish refugees in the surrounding region. Here, rescue is displayed as an effort of a network of helpers and integrated in the history of French resistance. While Chambon-sur-Lignon and the Pharmacy feature the Jewish side of the story as well, the Villa Emma memorial will offer a more specific focus on Jewish agency and the interaction between rescuers and the

¹ Stiftung Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand (Hrsg.), Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind. Katalog zur Dauerausstellung, 2nd ed., Berlin 2016, p. 143.

rescued. MARIA LAURA MARESCALCHI (Nonantola) gave a preview on how to exhibit the history of a Youth Aliyah group and a number of Jewish orphans, who hid within the villa and the village of Nonantola.

The handling of rescue as a theme needs to be understood mainly in light of a museum's mission, which is shaped by specific national approaches to remembrance. Given the ongoing debate on Polish memorial culture, the presentation of ANNA STRÓŻ (Markowa) from the Ulma Family Museum was much anticipated. The difficulty of communicating the museum's message in a manner free of ideology became a side-note in the talk, as Stróż asked that the documents should be allowed to speak for themselves. BARBARA SCHIEB (Berlin) of the Gedenkstätte Stille Helden pointed out that her institution is the only one of its kind in Germany that is devoted to the remembrance of all those who helped Jews during the Nazi-period. The institution's approach is to present stories that combine both the perspective of rescuers and those rescued, thereby stressing the agency also of the latter group. Schieb is well aware that rescuers can serve as role-models for the present day, but the institution refrains from emphasizing this view. The focus of the Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum is much broader than the theme of rescue alone, as IHOR SHCHUPAK (Dnipro) noted: only a small section of the museum's permanent exhibition is devoted to rescue. In the „Ukrainian Righteous among the Nation Hall“, rescues in different countries are presented, taking Yad Vashem's honorific title as a point of reference. The Endowment Fund for the Memorial of the Shoah and Oskar Schindler in the Czech Republic plans to open a museum in Schindler's former factory. Their project also exceeds a merely national frame. ALEXANDRA MOYSTÝN (Brněnec) reported on the difficulties faced by the Fund while trying to acquire support. Beyond a general lack of interest from the Czech side, the project is further confronted with a negative perception of Schindler – often referred to as „Schindler-Gauner“ – and the fact that there were no Czech Jews among those rescued. From the vantage point of social-psychology, MICHAŁ BILEWICZ (Warsaw)

summarized his research on narratives about rescuers as giving a chance for reconciliation. Offering a rather optimistic outlook, he concluded that a reflection on rescuers in a workshop-setting tends to foster reconciliation in a post-genocide setting – a hypothesis that is yet to be confirmed with long-term data.

The third panel was devoted to the interplay between architecture and exhibition design. The dual function of memorial-museums shapes many institutions and often creates places of high symbolic significance. With the Żaņa Lipkes Memorial, LOLITA TOMSONE (Riga) showcased a museum on the site of a former Jewish hiding place. Through the abstract architecture, as well as the use of dim light and sound, the visitors can experience the atmosphere of the Lipkes family's woodshed. Somewhat uncommon, the „cinematic“ narrative of the exhibition was influenced by a team of filmmakers. The notion of authenticity is also prominent at the Villa Emma. The architectural features of the memorial were explained by ELEONORA CUSSINI (Nonantola). Its permanent exhibition will stay in two adjoining buildings of the villa which were frequented by the rescued Jewish children. The future museum will rely heavily on documents, photographs and audio-visual testimony. SARA F. STADAGER (Copenhagen) presented the Danish Jewish Museum which incorporates the story of rescue during the Second World War into the broader history of Jewish life in Denmark. Still, the topic of rescue features prominently in the exhibition because of the interior design by architect Daniel Libeskind. Both the planked floor and the highly irregular walls hint at the swell of the Baltic, which the Danish Jews had to cross on rafts and fishing boats in 1943. Thus, the architecture imposes its very own influence upon the museum. In his commentary to the panel, exhibition designer PAUL WILLIAMS (New York) outlined the international developments in the architecture and design of museums concerned with rescue and the Holocaust. He offered some insights on the projects his agency was involved in, like the Canadian Museum of Human Rights and the Lost Shtetl project in Lithuania. Williams elaborated on the use of

audio and temperature manipulation in different exhibitions.

GRANT SIMON ROGERS (London/Berlin) noted that educational concerns are – as was the case for this workshop – always discussed last. He argued that education might not be more important than other museological concerns, but its relevance should not be denied. He emphasized the need to evaluate the use of particular concepts in the depiction of rescue. Terms such as „evil“, „martyrs“ or „heroes“ need to be avoided in order to grasp the grey shades of history. The participants of the fourth panel expressed their views on the universal nature of rescue stories and whether moral aspects should resonate in museums as educational institutions. FRANZISKA DRECHSLER (Berlin) explained that while the Museum Blindenwerkstatt Otto Weidt focuses on Weidt as a person, it is important to provide the audience with the context that informed his commitment. The museum strives to offer information that encourages learning from the past by means of empathy. IRINA POCIENĖ (Vilna) of Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum emphasized that in their educational programmes, she and her colleagues encountered a poor understanding of history, and especially Jewish history. Given the time constraints of such programmes, it turned out to be challenging to integrate additional topics on more fundamental matters. But drawing a parallel between rescuers and the present proved to be a successful approach in their workshops. The broadest treatment of the Righteous topic was offered by KLARA JACKL (Warsaw) of Polin-Museum. The museum's recently launched online exhibition „Righteous without Borders“ portrays people honoured by Yad Vashem, as well as icons such as Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, or contemporary people and organisations supporting, for example, refugees in Lampedusa. The online exhibition aims at promoting values and encouraging civic engagement. At the same time, Polin contextualises rescues in Poland during the Second World War by linking the country's Righteous to Polish behaviour in general.

In his final remarks, JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMMER (Jena) dealt with narrative strate-

gies of presenting rescue. He argued for the acknowledgment that rescue was usually made possible by a group of people instead of an individual rescuer. Also, rescue cannot be understood as a solitary act, but refers to a continuous engagement. There are, he said, still several open questions: How to deal with different forms of agency of rescuers and rescued? How to account for the complex realities, morals and motivations of everyday life in wartime Europe which facilitated the decision to rescue? And why is there a move to turn the focus on the rescuer at a time when fewer and fewer survivors remain alive?

The workshop made clear that the representation of rescue remains a challenging task. While many of the participants went beyond the narrative of individual deeds, the landscape of memory is still dominated by heroic rescuers. Yet those figures seem to foster many problems, like a clear-cut distinction between Jews and Gentiles, the myth of Jewish passivity, or a simplified view of the motivations of the rescuers. In this regard, the workshop delivered a number of promising strategies for a more nuanced approach to the history of rescue. Groups and networks of helpers should be explored, coercion and leeway should be taken into account. As an antidote to the ever-present danger of political instrumentalization, the exceptionality of rescue-attempts should be stressed. Only a tiny fraction of the overall population, after all, could be counted among the rescuers. This suggestion of a greater complexity in the handling of rescue would also allow the formulation of cognitive learning targets for the intended audiences of the museums – a topic largely absent from the discussion. It remains to be seen whether a story such as the tale of Otto Weidt and the Frey couple can be framed within such prerequisites, doing justice to both the individuals concerned and the broader history of the Holocaust.

Conference Overview:

Welcome Address

Zofia Wóycicka (Zentrum für historische Forschung Berlin der polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften / Centrum Badań Historycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Berlinie)

Keynote

György Péter (ELTE Institute for Art Theory and Media Studies, Budapest, Hungary): „Mémoire de l'escalier – Contradictions in contemporary Hungarian memory politics“

Panel one: Protagonists

Chair: Barbara Schieb (Silent Heroes Memorial Site, Berlin, Germany)

Katarzyna Kocik (Tadeusz Pankiewicz Pharmacy, Kraków, Poland)

Eliane Wauquiez-Motte (Lieu de Mémoire au Chambon-sur-Lignon/France)

Maria Laura Marescalchi (Villa Emma Nonantola Foundation, Italy)

Commentary: Irena Steinfeldt (Yad Vashem, Israel)

Panel two: Mission

Chair: Zofia Wóycicka

Anna Stróż (The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II, Markowa/Poland)

Barbara Schieb

Ihor Shchupak (Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum/TKUMA, Dnipro, Ukraine)

Alexandra Mostýn (Endowment Fund for the Memorial of the Shoah and Oskar Schindler), Brněnec, Czech Republic)

Commentary: Michał Bilewicz (University of Warsaw, Poland)

Visit to the Silent Heroes Memorial Site and the Museum Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind

Panel three: Architecture and Exhibition Design

Chair: Daniel Logemann (Europäisches Kolleg Jena, Germany)

Lolita Tomsone (Žaņis Lipkes Memorial, Riga, Latvia)

Sara F. Stadager (The Danish Jewish Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark)

Eleonora Cussini: (Villa Emma Nonantola Memorial)

Commentary: Paul Williams (Ralph Appelbaum Associates, New York, USA)

Panel four: Museum Education

Chair: Eva-Clarita Pettai (Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, Germany)

Franziska Drechsler (Museum Otto Weidt's

Workshop for the Blind)

Irina Pocienė (Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilna, Lithuania)

Klara Jackl (Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw, Poland)

Commentary: Grant Simon Rogers (London / Berlin)

Final remarks

Joachim von Puttkamer (Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany)

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