

Let's Talk about History! Public History through Face-to-face Communication

Veranstalter: German Historical Institute Warsaw; Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam

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Much of public history (history directed to a broad, non-academic public) is conducted through face-to-face oral communication. A prime objective of this workshop, co-organized by SABINE STACH (German Historical Institute Warsaw) and IRMGARD ZÜNDORF (Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam), was to begin to redress the lack of focus on the work of tour guides at museums, memorials, and other sites. For two days, museum educators and scholars of history, anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, and history didactics discussed questions of how we talk about history in public educational and commercial settings.

The workshop started with a public lecture by PETRA TJITSKE KALSHOVEN (Manchester). Kalshoven drew from her book on communities of „Indianists“ who reenact 18th and 19th century Native American lives with a strong emphasis on the replication of artefacts. Taking up the workshop topic, she focused on discursive practices among the movement. One of her main arguments was that when „Indianists“ talk about history they are talking about „the way we could best re-experience history.“

By way of introduction to the workshop, SABINE STACH (Warsaw) argued that far from understanding written culture to have replaced oral culture, we need to be thinking about the constant „re-oralization of history“ in public, a process that far exceeds the sharing of memories and oral history as method. Scholars focused on the mediation of public narratives about the past almost exclusively orient themselves in the opposite direction: from the oral to its textual representation. This workshop was a first major step in flipping our focus the other way and addressing the significant research gap.

The first session of the workshop presented the main topic from three different disciplinary angles: history didactics, linguistics, and oral history. GEORG MARSCHNIG (Graz) cited teachers' complaints that their students don't understand what's written in their textbooks. Marschnig attributes this to students' lack of sufficient „language scaffolding“ to process historical knowledge and generate historical meaning. Language scaffolding is not historical facts and figures but the narration, terms, procedures, and genres used to position them. MORITZ LAUTENBACH-VON OSTROWSKI (Hamburg) then offered a pragmatic linguistic analysis of a transcribed speech of a tour guide at the Bergen-Belsen Memorial, demarcating portions of the speech by their function, such as narration, reporting, or describing. Lautenbach-von Ostrowski's work shows how education, remembrance, commemoration, and the creation of knowledge all happens at the level of speech action. PIOTR FILIPKOWSKI (Warsaw) compared the didactic framing offered by heavily memorialized sites to oral history narration of survivors of concentration camps and war in relation to unmarked historical sites. While the role of survivors is sometimes reduced to provide personal evidence by their mere presence in staged rituals, Filipkowski pleaded for tours that disrupt everyday reality, subvert the more ritualistic frame of the official memorial ceremony, and open a space for a more analytical view of the past.

The afternoon session turned its focus to guided city tours. KAROLINA DUDEK and SŁAWOMIR SIKORA (Warsaw) summarized their three years of ethnographic fieldwork studying a series of walking tours, not for tourists but for the current residents of an area of Warsaw. The purpose of the tours is to instill a sense of community by building knowledge of past communities, such as a Jewish Kibbutz, once located in the area. The guides not only distribute knowledge. They also gather information and corrections from the tour group. The tours produce a collectively-written history that continues to unfold on Facebook. ALENA PFOSER (Loughborough) stressed the need to study historical memory as both an international and economic affair. Her study of historical tours of Tallinn

shows how international relations unfold at a vernacular level and negotiate conflicting national narratives. Pfoser suggested that simply seeing the many sites and sounds of other people and places helped to reconstruct identities and relations between Russia and Estonia by working against a simple view of friend and enemy. MAGDALENA BANASZKIEWICZ (Cracow) contended that the rise of tourism to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in recent years is part of the increasing desire to craft personalized „experiences“ in the worlds of commerce and entertainment. Chernobyl is well suited for such experiences because it evokes dissonant heritages and interpretative ambiguities. Interpretations, meanings, and relationships shift most centrally around the biography of the guide. The position of the guide becomes the central access point to the site itself, suggesting that the role of the guide is close to an heir (of memory), an animator (bringing the site to life in different mediated forms), and even a kind of priest.

The next day of the workshop focused on museums. In the morning session on exhibitions about the GDR and its end, PHILIPPE CARASCO (Berlin) compared publicly- and privately-financed museums and one memorial dedicated to GDR history in regards to their adoption of the 1976 Beutelsbach Consensus of standards for political education. Carasco stressed how the millions of living witnesses to the GDR have made the adoption of the protocol a delicate task. While the publicly-financed sites present a balance of perspectives on the GDR as part of their larger goal of defending democracy, they also actively downplay personal experiences of the past for how they are easily glorified or misremembered. This is not a concern of the private DDR Museum because their goal is to entertain rather than expressly educate the visitor. MARIE MÜLLER-ZETZSCHE (Leipzig) gave a behind-the-scenes take on the job of a tour guide at the permanent exhibition of Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig. Her main objective as a tour guide is to present a coherent narrative with a beginning and end. Nonetheless, the makeup of the different groups that she leads, and their specific assumptions and questions, dictate a different overall frame.

The path and pauses she takes along the way is largely configured by the design of the museum, but this spatial dimension allows for her to carve different historical narratives that jump across time to better fit a group's needs. CHRISTIANE SCHRÜBBERS (Berlin) then offered a recap and assessment of her work as a trainer of the „moderators“ on the 2009 exhibition „Peaceful Revolution: 1989/1990“ at Alexanderplatz in Berlin. The ten moderators sought out contact with visitors for 3-10 minutes and acted as conversation partners. They proved to be the most successful part of the exhibition for Schrübbers. There was a great need to speak and exchange views, and emotional reactions were frequent and strong (especially around memories of the Stasi).

The last session was opened by PATRICK HELBER (Berlin) who recounted his experience designing one element in and giving tours through the exhibition „Europe and the Sea“ at the Deutsches Historisches Museum. He and his team placed inclusive communication stations throughout the exhibition to increase accessibility. Helber highlighted the placement of a bottle of rum in a station about „Slave Trade.“ He bought the object, labeled „a sip of cultural history,“ in a supermarket in Flensburg, and showed how it acted as a bridge with the colonial past. Among young people, the bottle yielded jokes and strange associations with Flensburg sex shops and traffic offenders. The humor allowed for freer and more critical thought about the connections and overlaps between the past and present. ANDY SIMANOWITZ (Berlin) gave an assessment of a program of co-led tours that he helped develop for the exhibition „Welcome to Jerusalem“ at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The guides were activists, artists, academics, and previous tour guides. They were Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Muslims, or Christians. Based on the museological paradigm of agora (the museum as a forum for social discourse), the idea was for two guides to remain in dialogue during a tour to offer different perspectives to the tour group. Simanowitz critically discussed the problem of adding an additional layer of dialogic communication on top of the rich exhibition itself and stressed the irreconcilable tension of an individuality of opinion produced

institutionally. ALEKSANDR AFANASJEV (Moscow) presented an inside view into the education department of the Archaeological Museum of Moscow by focusing on tours for children. The most important components of these tours are dialogue, a logical story, and a sense of scale that brings the past into the dimensions of a child's life. It turned out that, in many ways, the goals and strategies of tours with children and adults are the same.

Philippe Carasco concluded the presentations with a short talk about Plain Language. The purpose of plain language is to explain complex concepts using a set of tools such as easy words, short sentences, active tense, no conditionals, and no synonyms. Carasco pointed to the problems when the phrase 'plain language' is associated with people with disabilities. Considering other language as being at a 'high level' also reinforces discrimination. Carasco stressed that guides have long been employing plain language no matter the audience. Indeed, people tend to be primarily interested in plain language-like explanations on guided tours. Adults often seek out audio guides made for children.

The workshop offered ample time for spirited and challenging discussion, which ranged over four central topics: the nature of the authority of the guide, the mode and frame of communication, the composition and motivations of the group, and the reference to concrete historical sites and objects. These components became the means by which participants understood how the guide and group „experience“ history together, negotiate societal morality, and create a sense of agency and responsibility in the present.

Attention returned mostly to the role of the guide and the creation of a testimonial space for both past and current witnessing. Indeed, the feeling of participating in discovery, or of partaking in an extra-ordinary encounter with an environment, emerged as the underlying theme of the workshop. At moments, this feeling of belonging and connection can take priority over knowledge of specific historical content. This proved an ongoing tension in discussions at the workshop. It became clear that much public history education and interpretation (even when it is a touristic commodity) are inseparable from the experiential as-

pects of face-to-face engagement. It is possible that public history education and interpretation prove more successful when that engagement conjures place-specific, emotional scenes. The dynamic relationship between knowledge creation and emotional experience needs further investigation, not least of all within groups.

Konferenzübersicht:

Karel Šima, Miloš Řezník, Sabine Stach: Welcome

Keynote:

Petra Tjitske Kalshoven

The Role of Discourse in a Mimetic Practice: Performing History in European 'Indianism'

Sabine Stach, Irmgard Zündorf: Introduction

Panel 1: Language & History: Different Approaches to Public Oral History and History Didactics

Chair: Irmgard Zündorf

Georg Marschnig: Language Awareness and Historical Thinking: A New Challenge for History Didactics

Moritz Lautenbach-von Ostrowski: Approaches to Memory: Linguistic Action in Concentration Camp Memorials

Piotr Filipkowski: Eye-witnesses as Guides in Historical Spaces: An Oral Historian's Impressions

Panel 2: Talking while Walking: History in Guided Tours

Chair: Sabine Stach

Karolina Dudek / Sławomir Sikora: Storied City: Local Urban Histories as a Product of Collective Work of Many Actors

Alena Pfoser: Contested Heritage and the Work of Mnemonic Intermediation: Guiding Russians through Tallinn

Magdalena Banaszekiewicz: Personal Encounters in the Interpretation of the Past. Reflections on Guides' Narrations in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

Panel 3: Talking about History in Museums: Exhibitions about the GDR and its End

Chair: Zdeněk Nebřenský

Philippe Carasco: Re-oralisation of GDR History: A Comparison of Publicly and Privately Financed Museums in Berlin

Marie Müller-Zetzsche: How to Make a Historical Exhibition Talk: The Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig's Permanent Exhibition

Christiane Schrübbers: Why Didn't Anyone Tell me That? Reactions to an Exhibition

Panel 4: Talking about History in Museums: Inclusion & Dialogue

Chair: Jakub Jareš

Patrick Helber: Colonialism and Enslavement in a Bottle

Andy Simanowitz: Jerusalem in Dialogue – Personal Contributions vs. Institutional Determinants

Aleksandr Afanasjev: A Conversation with Children about History: Experiences from the „Museum of Moscow“

Philippe Carasco: Talking Simply about History? A Short Input about „Plain Language“

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