

REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE

Putting the Holocaust Into Public Museums

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MUSEUMS AND SITES OF MEMORY: How Best to Memorialize the Holocaust?

PETER VERGO

Other contributions to this volume focus mainly on the question: how might one attempt to represent the Holocaust in public museums? This article adds a few brief reflections on how to define a museum and on the challenges that face museums when confronted with the task of representing history – especially a specific episode in history as troubling and as morally disturbing as the Holocaust. Its main focus is on the often far-from-straightforward relationship between Holocaust museums and concentration camp memorial sites.

The majority of such sites, although not all, use the word ‘museum’ in one context or another. In the case of Auschwitz, the official name of the camp is now ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum’, implying that the entire site is considered to be a museum. If one browses through the official Auschwitz web pages and other relevant literature, however, one also frequently encounters the combined phrase ‘museum and memorial’. In other places, a particular building or group of buildings is specifically designated a museum, as happens at Dachau. Here, one part of the former administration block, the so-called *Wirtschaftsgebäude*, displays an extensive photo-documentation and also a small number of original artefacts.

Significantly, sites that do *not* employ the word ‘museum’ are those where the material evidence of the past is, in effect, non-existent. The most vivid instance of this is Treblinka, where the buildings and everything else associated with the camp were deliberately destroyed long before German troops retreated from Poland in the face of the Russian advance during the winter of 1944-45. Not only did the Nazis reduce the buildings to rubble, they ploughed the remains into the ground so that no evidence of their crimes would remain. Thus, if one visits the site today, it is still evocative and indeed moving to be in the real place where these terrible things really happened. But, in the end, all one can see there are fields and trees and an extensive monument consisting of 17,000 standing stones, erected long after the Holocaust, which deliberately evoke the broken and twisted gravestones of the desecrated Jewish cemeteries of Central and Eastern Europe.

So what is it that prevents sites like Treblinka from being considered museums? Here, it is helpful to consider the definition of a museum adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), one of the most important cultural organizations that operate under the umbrella of the United Nations and which represents the international museum community. It reads:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

Although this definition is couched in very general terms, it is none the less helpful inasmuch as it specifies clearly the various activities that must, in a sense, all come together and relate to one another if a museum is really to function as a place of study or education. Certainly, I found it helpful when reflecting on my own visit to Auschwitz in the summer of 2006.

I had fully expected that visit to be both upsetting and disturbing, and so it proved. But it was also in several important respects confusing and disorientating. Numerous historians and philosophers have suggested that one peculiarity of the Holocaust as a subject of investigation is that, the more closely you study it, the more incomprehensible it appears to be. But, even if that is true, my confusion did not arise solely from that. Rather, it had more to do with a kind of tension that exists between the very notion of a museum and that of a memorial, those two terms that are repeatedly conjoined in the literature about Auschwitz.

What does a museum do? According to the ICOM definition, one of the main functions of a museum is to preserve 'the material evidence of people and their environment'. Regarded in that sense, Auschwitz has a good claim to be a museum. Unlike Treblinka, visitors to Auschwitz find themselves confronted on all sides with the material evidence of the past – many different kinds of evidence. Nor is it simply a question of assembling in one place an array of different objects and artefacts. Understanding Auschwitz also involves, at least to some extent, grasping the layout of the site and the relationship between its various elements. Only by visiting the former extermination camp at Birkenau, the second of the three major camps to be built at Auschwitz, can one properly gain a sense of the vast extent of the place: the immense, terrifying scale of the site itself and hence of the horrors that occurred there.

So, there I was in the real place seeing the real things – something that should have been a deeply harrowing experience and in some ways was. But in some ways it wasn't – for two reasons. First, we are mistaken if by any stretch of the imagination we convince ourselves that by going to the place itself, we are going to see it the way it really was. All we can see is the way it really is, which is in many significant respects a very different matter. Thus, alongside original buildings and barbed wire and the dynamited remains of crematoria and gas chambers, what you also see are car parks and visitor centres and toilets. All of these things are, of course, a necessary adjunct to the memorial itself – that is, if people are actually to *visit* the place, if the demands of health and safety are to be met and so on. But the effect is, to say the least, disorientating and to some extent alienating, like a jarring clash of *genres* such as one might encounter in drama or film.

Thinking about this problem afterwards, I was reassured to discover that other writers on the Holocaust have made very similar points. In his fascinating book *The Texture of Memory*, American historian James E. Young has stressed that, in visiting a famous site such as Dachau, we should not kid ourselves that this means an opportunity to see for ourselves what the camp was really like. As he points out, all we can see today is what its memorial is like. At Dachau, this problem is compounded by the fact that a good deal of what we do see is in fact fake. Indeed, Dachau represents perhaps the ultimate irony, since in the 1950s the authorities tore down the remaining barracks, which were actually in tolerable condition and which were used after the war as temporary housing for displaced persons, in order to replace them with carefully crafted reconstructions.

But secondly, of those remains of concentration camps that really are original and unreconstructed – which are by no means all of the buildings and artefacts, either at Auschwitz or at Dachau – many remain curiously mute and unrevealing. In order to grasp the full significance of what one is seeing, one would have needed to study the broader subject of the Holocaust in general, even to have read a good deal about individual sites such as Auschwitz. However, in reality most visitors are unlikely to engage in very much by way of preparatory reading. Instead, Auschwitz itself relies heavily on tour guides, many of them excellent, who perform a crucial explanatory and interpretative function. But for those visitors who chose not to take the tour, the remains, the artefacts and even the site itself would probably transmit only indistinct and confusing messages about the past: messages that are in many ways hard for the modern visitor to hear and even harder to interpret.

It is true that some of the large brick buildings which form a major part of the original camp at Auschwitz (sometimes also referred to as Auschwitz I) do display information panels, historic photographs and other kinds of adjunct material. At Birkenau, by contrast, such aids to interpretation or understanding are few and far between. This, one might argue, is as it should be. The more labels and display captions and other such items that litter the site, the more jarring that clash of genres already alluded to, caused by the obvious and intrusive presence of tour buses and car parks and modern visitor facilities of various kinds. On the other hand, a crucial part of the ICOM definition of the tasks of a museum, that of communicating with the public in meaningful ways, to some extent gets lost to sight: one consequence of the tension that exists not only between original artefacts and modern reconstructions but also between the core functions of a museum and a memorial.

If regarding entire sites like Auschwitz as, in a sense, surrogate museums brings with it problems of a unique kind, what about other kinds of museums and displays that are incorporated into the sites of former concentration camps but which are deliberately intended to form a separate (albeit related) part of one's visit? At Bergen-Belsen, for example, visitors are now confronted with a brand-new, purpose-built exhibition and documentation centre, immediately adjacent to but not actually on the site of the former concentration camp, since the site itself is considered to be a Jewish burial ground and hence cannot be built on. Here, there was no question of re-using or converting an existing building, since the original buildings associated with the camp have not been preserved. This might be considered in some ways a positive advantage, allowing the curators and historians associated with the project for a new exhibition centre to think more clearly and independently about the kinds of messages they wished to convey.

Conveying messages of one kind or another is an essential part of the educative function that is captured by the ICOM definition of the purposes of a museum. But how are such messages conveyed and to what end? It is important for curators to realize that very act of selecting objects and artefacts and putting them on display is by no means neutral. Even their simple juxtaposition may have the effect of coaxing the remains of the past into telling stories; and that kind of story-telling is, of course, reinforced by the activity of explaining and interpreting and educating that is in the end an essential part of what a museum is and what it does.

At Bergen-Belsen, that kind of experience – what some writers have called the ‘museum experience’ – has now been skilfully conjoined with the experience of visiting the site itself. Walking through the grounds, parts of the original topography are still clearly visible in places: some of the paths, the foundations of buildings and especially the mass graves excavated and rapidly filled after the camp was liberated by British troops in the spring of 1945. It is thus immensely evocative: a place of memory, a memorial to the dead and a cemetery, all at the same time. But it does not claim to be a *museum*.

What the new building, the permanent exhibition and displays do is independently to shoulder that crucial *responsibility* of a museum, that of mediating and explaining and interpreting. In other words, the different aims of visiting concentration camp sites and visiting museums are here conjoined. Yet they are clearly distinguished from one another in ways that surely justify the preservation of the horrific evidence of the past and thus of memory itself. Those aims include the act of bearing witness, of grieving and of paying respect – of undertaking, in a sense, a kind of pilgrimage. At the same time, they also embrace the activity of studying and learning about and thus trying to understand and come to terms with the troubling history of the Holocaust. Exhibitions and permanent displays of this kind can, if sensitively and thoughtfully conceived, make a very special and often unique contribution to achieving that aim.

Further reading

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