

Dealing with the Past: Aspects of Trauma and Healing

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Panel Discussion on Museums as Spaces for Healing

Challenges for Museums as Spaces for Dealing with the Difficult Past: An Example from Eastern Europe.

The museum can be an important field for Restorative Justice: the place for the restoration and reconstruction of memory and identity. The museum can be a space where visitors confront the (not always convenient) difficult truths and have a possibility to reflect on it. It can integrate society and influence it to be more critical of its own history. At the same time, it can also antagonise society, as memory is always B. How do you make the museum space more inclusive and integrative and avoid antagonization? How do you use the difficult lessons of the Holocaust to teach about other genocides? In this context, how do you encourage visitors to relate their own difficult experience to the Holocaust museums or memorials? For example, those who have experienced discrimination or even war, ethnic tensions, dictatorship, repressions or genocide, in such places as Cambodia and Rwanda. In this context, how do you make the story more universal and at the same time stress the uniqueness of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews and the uniqueness of other genocides? More challenges appear as museums begin to play multiple roles and the visitors become more sophisticated in their expectations.

I have written a paper which teases out these difficult questions based on my first-hand observations made during interactions with visitors in the history museums in Eastern Europe – such as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in the context of their perception of the difficult past. Between 2014 and 2017, I worked with visitors of different backgrounds and from different countries, especially from Poland and other Eastern European countries, and from Israel, and the USA. I mostly focused on the experiences of visiting the Holocaust gallery which covers the Holocaust history of between 1939 and 1944, and the core exhibition, which covers one thousand years of history of the Polish Jews.

In exploring these questions, I referred to the so-called “trusted zone” concept, to use the words of prof. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the museum chief curator. It was elaborated by the museum creators in order to prepare the visitors to be more receptive to the difficult subjects shown at the exhibition, when they learn about the one thousand years of the Jewish-Polish history as “co-existence, competition, conflict, separation and integration”. Thanks to this concept, visitors to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews have become more open and reflective. In the context of the Holocaust gallery, visitors learn about difficult truths such as the different moral dilemmas Poles faced during the war in their attitudes towards Jews, including harm and indifference, the anti-Jewish programs in 1941 and other cases of anti-Jewish violence. The visitors also see the whole complexity, including positive moments, such as solidarity and support given to Jews during the Nazi occupation.

The role of the gallery is important in countering the so-called ‘soft Holocaust denial’, to use the words of Deborah Lipstadt, or selective and deflective denial, as Michael Shafir put it. The former is connected to an unwillingness to discuss the difficult past while the latter refers to when distorters do not deny the technical facts of the Holocaust but rather deny the role of their own nation or seriously minimize or transfer the guilt to others. While the questions I posed earlier are not easy to answer, whether, and how, museum curators reflect upon them in their presentation of museums, shapes the impact museums have on visitors.