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# Museums as Spaces for Exhibiting and Dealing with the Difficult Past. Curatorial and Educational Choices and Challenges

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## Abstract

Museums as Spaces for Exhibiting and Dealing with the Difficult Past. Curatorial and Educational Choices and Challenges The paper argues how museums and sites of memory can be an important field for Restorative Justice: the place for the restoration and reconstruction of memory and identity. Museums can become interactive spaces to help visitors to confront difficult, violent past. They can contribute to knowledge and understanding of past violence and their primary educational task becomes to prevent human rights abuses and atrocities as well as cultivate historical awareness about distortion of such crimes and their misinterpretation. In this context, the paper presents and explores several examples from Europe and Asia, including such museums, sites and exhibitions as the Topf & Sons – Builders of the Auschwitz Ovens Place of Remembrance in Erfurt, Germany; the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw; and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The paper critically assesses the choices made by curators and educators of aforementioned museums and sites and addresses the following questions: How to start discussing violent past and one's own complicity in atrocities? How to avoid presentation of

hegemonic, heroic or selective version of the difficult past and create tensions in society? How to use appropriately material objects and photographs as a testimony, with respect to victims? How to use appropriately texts; and prevent denial, distortion, manipulation and banalisation of past atrocities? How to avoid the trap of sensationalism by showing atrocities and violence? How to keep neutrality and independence in exhibiting difficult knowledge when museums are often political and not neutral? How to include minority narratives and give visitors the space for reintegration and change? Can museums bring both the offenders and victims (and sometimes the competing victims) together to reconcile? How to present the experience of victims, how to show the story of the rescuers and avoid their instrumentalisation and banalisation? How to cultivate empathy amongst visitors and utilise authenticity? Some memory studies scholars such as Jeffrey Olick and Michael Rothberg have argued that *'the Holocaust has set the ethical and legal precedent for atrocities around the world dealing with past violence'*. The paper refers to the experience of Holocaust memorial sites and exhibitions in Europe, including through author's personal work as a museum curator and educator, but discusses other examples of other genocides' representation in this context. The paper also addresses the challenge and potential for museums and memorial organisations to work with ongoing human rights abuses and violence (e.g. genocide of Yazidis as presented by Yahad in-Unum and anti-Rohingya violence in various exhibition displays observed by the author) vis-

à-vis memorial museums working with past atrocities and historical examples of violence. How does it influence the mission and work of museums? To what extent the experience of past atrocities can be applied to understanding of contemporary instances of violence, genocide and suffering of victims? How it can be reflected through the museum representation?

### **Keywords**

*Violence, Genocide, Holocaust, Museums and Sites of Memory, Exhibitions, Countering Genocide Denial and Distortion, Yazidis, Rohingya genocide*

### **Author's Bio**

Natalia Sineaeva studied Sociology at the Center for Social Studies and the Graduate School for Social Research in Warsaw and Museum Studies at Jagiellonian University. She is a PhD candidate in Sociology. Her PhD dissertation deals with Holocaust denial and nationalist identity in Moldova and Eastern Europe. Natalia has worked as an education specialist at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. She also cooperates with the 'NEVER AGAIN' Association, which deals with the commemoration of the Holocaust and other genocides as well as contemporary issues of diversity and tolerance, Warsaw, Poland, and with the ToulSleng Genocide Museum on the UNESCO nomination process, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In 2019-2020, she serves as a Europe coordinator for the Rotary Peace Fellow Alumni Association. She is a member of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS). Currently, she works on the project of the exhibition on genocide of Jews and Roma during WWII, the first of its kind in Moldova, as a curator and coordinator.