

► 07.06.2005: Theoretical Perspectives and Evolving Practice – IC Memo 2003/2004

Wulff E. Brebeck

Chairperson IC Memo / Director Wewelsburg District Museum

Ten years have now passed since the genocide in Rwanda. In 1994, as many as 800,000 people were killed in only three months. Seventy-five per cent of the Rwandan Tutsis and many moderate Hutus were slaughtered. Official documents served as the basis for defining the victims; broadcasting stations and the press stirred up hatred; the UN withdrew its forces... These were the conditions under which “public anger” vented itself in allegedly spontaneous massacres. The killers massacred their victims even in churches, where many had sought refuge.

We were painfully reminded of these events and confronted with their consequences when we gathered at the conference Learning and Remembering: Holocaust, Genocide and Violent State Crimes during the 20th Century, which was held in Berlin from 12 to 15 March 2003. IC Memo organised the conference in co-operation with the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (Brunswick) and the Topography of Terror Foundation (Berlin). The Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany made a significant financial contribution to the conference.

A remarkable number of speakers (thirty-three), all experts in their fields, and approximately one-hundred-and-fifty participants from Europe, Asia, Africa as well as North and South America attended. A broad spectrum of issues, concerning various times and places, were examined: inter alia from Armenia to Cambodia, to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya. Hence, the conference had a truly global perspective. With its new, comparative views on genocide and violent crimes, participants involved in a great diversity of fields (as scientists, teachers, journalists, staff from historical and memorial museums, human rights’ activists, etc.) and the presentation of so many different scenes of terror it was, according to Eric Weitz of Minnesota, a breakthrough.

Those of us working in memorial museums found certain parts of the programme particularly interesting. Scenes of atrocities and the way they occur were presented in a very powerful film, introduced by Suzanne Bardgett, from the Imperial War Museum in London. Suzanne Bardgett is the project director of the museum’s Holocaust Exhibition, which was opened in the year 2000, and of the permanent exhibition “Crimes against Humanity”, which opened recently. The film Crimes against humanity: an exploration of genocide and ethnic violence was an exemplary demonstration of the museum’s approach to the subject. The museum shows the film as an introduction to the permanent exhibition.

Jonathan Webber (Birmingham) gave a talk on holocaust memorials. He noted that conflicts often arose over their various functions. As a result, their function as places of remembrance - including their religious dimension and their function as cemeteries - clashes with the educational goals so vital to museums and

museum-like establishments, the various media, and explanations, and with the mission of conserving relicts, which can, however, result in museumised fetishes (women's hair, for example).

Pedro Alejandro Matta, who was invited to the conference by IC Memo, told the conference about a memorial and a scene of atrocities barely known outside his own country: the Villa Grimaldi in Santiago de Chile, where he was incarcerated under the Pinochet dictatorship (see Newsletter No. 1). He described the social climate in which the surviving victims of torture remember their sufferings. According to Matta, the way people now come to terms with the history of the dictatorship is conditioned by the fact that former perpetrators and victims live "in the same street". There has been no criminal prosecution nor has there been any political dialogue about the past. Until 1998, there was an Amnesty Law. It is completely up to the victims to keep memories of this time awake. Matta has devoted himself to this task.

Two workshops were held in memorial museums. Wolf Kaiser presented the House of the Wannsee Conference and its educational work. (Wolf Kaiser is deputy director and head of the educational department of the House as well as being a member of IC Memo.) Work at memorial museums in Germany was discussed at great length. The workshop in Sachsenhausen museum and memorial examined the historical site's repeated history: as a concentration camp from 1936-1945 and as a special Soviet camp from 1945-50 (The latter was kept secret until the East German state collapsed.). It also looked at its integration into a new memorial museum conception that clearly demonstrates the East German conception of memorials (Günter Morsch, Director of the Foundation of Brandenburg Memorial Museums and IC Memo member). It also examined the lesser-known concentration camps: Trostenec in White Russia, presented by Leonid Levin (Minsk) and Jasenovac in Croatia, which was presented by Ivo Goldstein (Zagreb).

A third workshop, which focused on the holocaust and genocide in teaching and teaching materials, was held in a school named after German resistance fighter Sophie Scholl. In the schoolyard there is a bunker, that was built using Soviet forced labour from 1943 on. The workers were interned in the school. Now, the school pupils have established a memorial and maintain contact with the former internees and their families.

It is impossible, here, to summarise the results of the conference in relation to even one of the areas covered by memorial museums. I shall therefore restrict myself to a few subjective remarks: for all their structural similarities, which become particularly apparent in a comparative perspective, the specific role which genocide and mass crimes play in a given society seems to be extremely important for the effect it has on people and society later. What we need to clarify is the nature of "genocide as a social project" (Eric Weitz) in which large sections of society participate in this project in a variety of functions. Dan Diner (Leipzig) advanced the hypothesis that it is not so much genocide as the way a society subsequently comes to terms with genocide that distinguishes a post-genocidal society. As Mihran Dabag (Bochum) showed, genocide is carried out "for the future" — in the name of the next generation. It is therefore of crucial importance whether the next generation denies that genocide has occurred so that it can benefit from the consequences and thus go on perpetrating genocide, or whether it rejects all denial of its existence and moves on to acknowledging the guilt of individual members of the parental generation and manages to come to terms with the genocide historically. Work at memorial museums - as a continuation of the efforts

of surviving victims by the offspring of perpetrators - is probably only possible once this type of generation conflict has taken place in the society effected.

IC Memo's annual general meeting took place after the conference had come to a close. We were pleased to welcome eighteen members and six guests from eight different countries and three continents, including Hans-Martin Hinz (Berlin), the president of ICOM Germany and Europe. Two days earlier, in his speech welcoming conference participants, Hinz paid tribute to the selection of conference subjects and the choice of venue as an outstanding reflection of ICOM's basic principles. Pnina Rosenberg (Haifa) invited the committee to come to Israel for an annual general meeting and to take the opportunity to gather information there. This gesture made by the Israeli national committee was welcomed. We welcome the opportunity to take up the offer in the future. Oribe Cures (Montevideo), our first exchange guest, subsequently set off from Berlin on an information journey round German memorial museums. Oribe Cures has sadly passed away. He remains with us in our thoughts.

Our IC Memo exchange programme stands on a financially sound footing in the initial phase of our activities. The Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft (Berlin) has granted us 17,000 euro for a period of three years. (This sum will cover up to six exchange partners.)

ICOM's next annual meeting of members will be held in Seoul in October 2004. There, we shall be occupying ourselves with Korean and Japanese memorial culture. We shall consider the period of occupation and investigate the meaning of "intangible heritage", the general theme of the conference. Our colleague Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia has invited us to Guernica (Spain) in 2005. The International Conference of Peace Museums is taking place there during the first week in May. IC Memo's members have accepted the invitation and thank the Gernika Peace Museum for giving us this opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the activities of the internationally networked peace museums, whose work is very closely related to our own.

I am glad that we can draw such a positive balance of the eighteen months that have passed since our first report in the light of the above. I would like to thank all our board members and other members for their dedicated efforts.