

Plea for the creation of an *International Committee for Memorial Museums for Public Crimes against Humanity* within the scope of the *International Council of Museums (ICOM)*

1. *Memorial Museums for Public Crimes against Humanity* as a new type of *Historical Museum*

Who thinks of museums when they hear names like Oshwiecim (Auschwitz) in Poland, Terezin (Theresienstadt) in the Czech Republic, or Perm (the site of the biggest camp of Soviet GULAG) in Russia? Unlike the Louvre or the Prado, these centres are not autonomous museums; however, they *also* serve as museums.

During the last few decades of the twentieth century, historical museums came into being at the scenes of state and socially motivated crimes, or at places the victims chose for commemorating such crimes. Hence, by their very nature, these historical museums differ from traditional museums and memorials. Unlike typical historical museums, which "sine ira et studio" display exhibits illustrating historical developments and conditions within their regional spheres of competence, or traditional memorials, which are generally dedicated to outstanding people at places of biographical significance and to events occurring at historical scenes, the new memorial museums commemorate the victims of crimes. This also means their adopting a critical position towards the ideologies and the conceptions of state organisation and practice that led to people being persecuted. State and socially motivated crimes are generally, but not exclusively, connected with ideologies such as fascism, National Socialism, racism, chauvinism and state socialism. All these ideologies involve, without exception, the pursuit of criminal goals, a striving to attain political ends with criminal means and the acceptance of crime as politically expedient. At some places, such as Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, (which were Nazi concentration camps until 1945 and then functioned as special camps under the Soviet NKVD) institutions executing crimes in different social systems succeeded one another on the same site. Museums have also arisen in the houses on the Ile de Gorée (Senegal) where black people were held captive, during the slave era, before being shipped off to America as slaves, as well as in "District Six" in Cape Town (South Africa), one of the scenes of compulsory resettlement under the Apartheid regime in South Africa.

Museums that focus on political crimes can USUALLY only come into being after the

state forms they criticise have ceased to exist. In the countries where they exist, their relevance to the contemporary political situation is GENERALLY not questioned as long as they focus on foreign perpetrators and acts committed by an external colonial power or foreign forces occupying their territory. And where such museums commemorate resistance to occupying forces (as do many of the museums in the countries occupied by Germany during the Second World War) or wars of liberation (such as the memorial centres to the American Revolution in the United States, and the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka - in Bangladesh - which is dedicated to the war of independence against Pakistan), they can generally count on the support of the general public. However, the establishment of museums reminding people of the political crimes committed by their own political leaders or depicting crimes in which members of their own social system were involved (motivated by one of the above-mentioned ideologies) often engenders powerful public resistance. Such museums came into being following an arduous process of learning to confront these crimes as a matter of public conscience. And this process is only possible in countries allowing free public discussion on both these crimes and the socio-political context in which they are perpetrated.

Memorial centres at authentic locations are not autonomous museums, thus distinguishing them from historical – or contemporary history – museums, but serve as genuine places of remembrance for the victims and their relatives, as memorials admonishing the state to safeguard basic human rights, and calling upon all human beings to resist all forms of inhumanity. They also remind each society of its basic humanitarian commitments. Their buildings, premises and facilities document the execution of the crimes. In many cases, graveyards and fields containing corpses and human ashes are situated on the sites or close by. Artistically and architecturally designed memorials are generally as much a part of the place of remembrance as sacred buildings are at others. Social rituals and manifestations are held close to these museums.

Some of these distinguishing features are shared by memorial centres and museums founded by the surviving victims, who wish to commemorate their experiences at places of importance to them, even though the places they choose are not necessarily the actual scenes of the atrocities. Two examples of this are the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The many smaller Holocaust museums in the USA, Canada, Argentina, South Africa, and other countries also deserve

mention in this context.

The subject matter of these memorial centres overlaps in places with that of historical museums and museums of contemporary history situated at 'neutral' places and depicting the Holocaust, the Second World War, resistance, persecution, etc. Often, their work also contains common elements: a clientele with a special relationship to the museum (former resistance fighters and their families, veterans of the world wars, victims of persecution, etc.) and special events (e.g. memorial days at the museum or on the museum premises). The extent to which they can be considered 'historical museums of the new type' depends on their willingness to view themselves as museums commemorating both the victims and the consequences of state violence against human beings, as well as on their efforts to educate the public. 'Historical museums of the new type', devote greater attention to these fields of activity than do traditional museums. Furthermore, their work with survivors has a psychosocial component; educational work is inspired by moral considerations and more closely related to contemporary society than is customary in conventional pedagogical presentations of history.

All of these institutions are working within a field of tension arising from their historical work and the demands placed on them by present-day society. In the declaration signed by nine institutions in 1999, when they joined forces to create the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, their common goals are formulated as follows: "We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications."

To summarise, historic site museums and memorial museums for public crimes against humanity can be defined as follows:

These institutions function as museums with a stock of original historical objects, which generally includes buildings, and work in all the classical fields of museum work (collecting, preserving, exhibiting, doing research, providing education). Their purpose is to commemorate the victims of state and socially determined, ideologically motivated crimes. They are frequently located at the original historical sites, or at places chosen by the victims of such crimes for the purpose of commemoration. They are conceived as memorials admonishing visitors to safeguard basic human rights. As these institutions cooperate with the victims and other contemporary witnesses, their work also takes on a

psycho-social character. Their endeavours to convey information about historical events are morally grounded and aim to establish a definite relationship to the present, without abandoning a historical perspective.

2. The common features and significance of these historical museums of the new type as a basis for new forms of international co-operation

An awareness of the problems relating to the novel character of these *historical museums of the new type*, of which there are many different examples, is perhaps greatest in Germany and related to that country's history. During the 20th century, Germany experienced two dictatorships, National Socialism and state socialism, which had far-reaching consequences, triggering intense public discussion and inducing people to come to terms with this past. In the course of public debate, the scenes of persecution and crimes became memorial centres. Following what were frequently heated local disputes, memorial centres arose where some of the former concentration camps had stood, as well as at former synagogues, 'euthanasia' clinics (where patients were killed), police detention centres, Nazi command headquarters, etc. There now exist approximately 120 memorial centres and museums of varying size dedicated to the victims of National Socialism. Following German reunification in 1990, the areas of interest grew. During the debates on the consequences of the Socialist dictatorship in East Germany, there was an increasing awareness of the contribution this type of museum had made towards kindling democratic spirit. Since then, attention has shifted to include the scenes of persecution by the Soviet secret police (at some of the former concentration camp sites) and the East German state security forces. In addition to the sites already mentioned, there are now others serving as memorials to commemorate the decades-long division of the country, e.g. the old border checkpoints. In the meantime, foundations have been established that operate at the level of the Länder. These foundations are endeavouring to come to terms with the injustices that occurred under the National Socialists, the Soviet Administration and the government of the German Democratic Republic.

The social experience of the historical dimensions of political systems that were deeply involved in crimes on a grand scale (even though the quality and degree differed considerably) and the transformation of places and objects, which - for the victims - incarnate memories of the most horrific experiences, into museums and memorial centres

triggered a debate at a national level about the self-conception and importance of memorial centres. Furthermore, attention quickly shifted to the intercontinental significance of this process of redefinition. This process was triggered by the complex and generally bilateral relations between German memorial centres and foreign institutions, and the international dimension of the work (the present places of residence of the victims of persecution, the archives abroad, exhibition activities, etc.). At the same time, the shortcomings in the organisation of co-operation have become increasingly evident, and a number of new problems have arisen in relation to the field of activity in which we are all involved.

Almost all of the victims of historical crimes against humanity, which constitutes the theme of all memorial museums, come from Europe. Many of the survivors and their descendants also live in Israel, the USA, Latin America, as well as on the other continents. Work with the survivors presents an almost insoluble organisational and financial problem, especially for smaller establishments. This is also true when it comes to analysing and evaluating relevant sources of written material. Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union has made known the existence of many new files in Moscow (in addition to the archives in Germany, England and the USA). However, access to these new files will remain a dream for many establishments. Moreover, many memorial museums will have great problems using research results not published in German. Language problems present quite a serious problem in developing co-operation between institutions in the former "First World" and the former "Second World". Frequently, the results of research work by Eastern Europeans only become known through international publications in English and German. And every day, visitors from all over the world come to our museums with perspectives coloured by their own experiences at home. They raise questions formulated against their divergent historical, political and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, a multi-ethnic sector is growing in all post-industrial societies. In Germany, for example, immigrants from Eastern Europe (so-called "quota refugees") and the children of immigrant Turkish workers approach National Socialism with views differing from the consensus established by the majority in past and present public debate. Strategies for combating continued right-wing extremism are adopted – prematurely and without prior analysis in many cases - from an ostensibly international context. In this field of activity in particular, memorial museums are clearly suffering

from the general absence of an intensive and protracted exchange among experts and educational staff.

For some years now, institutions such as the museums in Oswiecim, Terezin, and Jerusalem, as well as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, have played an important role in cultivating contacts between some of the German memorial centres and institutions abroad. Contacts also exist with other Polish, Israeli, US, Dutch, Italian and French institutions. At present, however, we are only witnessing the rudimentary beginnings of an international debate that not only deals with historical themes, but also takes up pedagogical, social-political, museum-related and other issues, and goes beyond National Socialism. This is especially true of institutions focusing on forms of persecution, discrimination, etc. - by the state or by societal majorities - that are not linked with National Socialism. The GULAG Museum in Perm (Russia), the Maison des Esclaves on the Île de Gorée (Senegal) and the District Six Museum in Cape Town (South Africa) are to be considered in this connection. They commemorate injustices, coercion, oppression and repression from other historical periods and in different political and social systems.

International contacts and co-operation among German memorial centres and the above-mentioned institutions only bring about a bilateral exchange with institutions on specific issues and occasions. This is easiest and fraught with the least difficulties for the large, internationally acknowledged institutions. Even among these, however, co-operation generally only takes place on certain issues. What is needed is an organisational form with an international composition that permits a broad discussion of specific issues related to the public relevance of the institutions within society, and allows for a worldwide exchange touching on all professional questions. This should also include an international exchange of personnel.

3. An international committee within the ICOM to create new forms of national and international co-operation

An international committee for Memorial Museums for Public Crimes against Humanity within the ICOM would seem to provide the most suitable framework for this mode of co-operation. The "Model Rules for International Committees" given by ICOM have served as a basis for the statutes of the new committee. The draft of the rules contained in

the appendix should be seen as a proposal.

This plea was discussed and agreed upon by the members of the working group for the establishment of an International Committee for Memorial Museums for Public Crimes against Humanity.

Wulff E. Brebeck, on behalf of the working group, April 2001