

ABANDONING THE MONOLITHIC VICTIM: CHANGES IN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MEMORY OF RAVENSBRÜCK CONCENTRATION CAMP

Šárka Kadlecová

*Katedra antropologie, Fakulta filozofická, Západočeská univerzita v Plzni
sarkak@ksa.ff.zcu*

THIS article deals with representations of collective memory of the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück. Memorials established at the sites of former Nazi concentration camps are referred to as European symbolic realms of memory. Cultural memory is materialized in exhibits and transmitted through expositions. However, since collective memory is closely connected with the constituting and constituted group and reflects its requirements, the themes and meanings selected for the audience vary in different political and temporal conditions. Employing the methods of discourse analysis of two exhibitions in the Ravensbrück Memorial, participant and non-participant observation, interviewing, and content analysis of official publications, the changes in approaches to the representation of collective memory are examined. The shift from depicting a monolithic national victim to personalisation and diversity is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

According to Pierre Nora's (1996) typology, Nazi concentration camp sites can be categorized as European symbolic realms of memory. A "memory mania" has occurred in Europe (Lenz and Welzer 2009), especially since the start of the millennium, drawing the rapt attention of scholars as well as the general public to heritage and memorialisation. On a political level, the special significance of Holocaust

remembrance was agreed on at the international Stockholm conference held on January 27, 2000. The "universal meaning" of the Holocaust as a consequence of its "unprecedented character" was recognized. In the declaration adopted at the gathering, the members of twenty-six European countries, the USA, Israel and Argentina who participated in the event referred to "the horrors that engulfed the Jewish people" and "the terrible suffering of the many millions of other victims of the Nazis" which "has left an indelible scar across Europe", as of August 8, 2017, the homepage of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance stated.

However, the permanent wound of Europe had not always been perceived as traumatic, present and, above all, commonly shared. The official declaration that the Holocaust and the damage done by the Nazis represents universal evil is a result of a five-decade-long process of "meaning struggle" (Alexander in Eyerman 2004), "trauma drama" (Eyerman 2004), negotiations, meaning making, and making a bridge between the actual event and its representation. As Aleida Assmann (2011, 27) writes, "It took twenty years for the Holocaust to resurface from behind the cover of the Second World War and another twenty years until the historic crime of the Holocaust took the shape of a transnational culture of commemoration." This is not a natural development. Constructing a social trauma is rather

“the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification [...] deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents” (Alexander 2012, 15). The trauma unfolds in various institutional arenas, such as religious, aesthetic, legal and scientific, of mass media and state bureaucracy. In the symbolic-cum-emotional representation of social suffering, collective identity is the agent defining collective suffering, usually drawing on individual experiences of pain and suffering. Intellectuals, political leaders and symbol creators of all kinds create narratives through speeches, rituals, meetings, movies and storytelling which are projected to the audience and third parties. Emotional experience is thus critical but not primordial in this process (Alexander 2012).

Monuments, museums and memorials play a significant role in constructing social memory and negotiating the meaning of trauma. Jelin and Kaufman (in Alexander 2012, 13) perceive them as “attempts to make statements and affirmations [to create] a materiality with a political, collective, public meaning [and] a physical reminder of a conflictive political past”. According to Carol Kidron (2015, 50), “The construction of national memory and the public sites in which it is housed and performed play an essential role in the maintenance of collective cohesion and cultural continuity.” They “encapsulate the cultural meanings attributed to events evoking re-enactment of the past and consensual remembering” (ibid.). War memories play a fundamental role in the construction of master narratives of victory and defeat in distinguishing heroic (victor) and vulnerable (victim) categories. The question is then how transnational memory is fabricated in realms of memory recognised as such.

This article discusses the content of two exhibitions in Ravensbrück Memorial in order to identify the changes in representations of the memory of a Nazi women’s concentration camp through time. They are marked by the alteration of political regimes; one exhibition being compounded in the era of East Germany, the other opened after the turn of the century under democratic rule. It appears that political ideological variables influence the

approaches to meaningful themes selected for remembrance.

RAVENSBRÜCK MEMORIAL AS A SUBJECT OF INVESTIGATION

The realm of collective cultural memory examined in this article is the memorial located directly on the site of the former Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück. Originally a labour camp intended especially for women, Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück was opened in 1939 and liberated in April 1945, having changed into an extermination camp. According to the information published by the memorial, approximately 132,000 women, 20,000 men and 1,000 adolescent or young women were registered there.

The site is located eighty kilometres to the north of Berlin, and during the period of a divided Germany it was situated in the eastern part of the country. A national memorial was established in 1959, first as a museum displaying artefacts donated by former prisoners. It was one of three national memorials established at that time in the German Democratic Republic. Simultaneous to its role as a memorial, the former camp was put to practical use. Its facilities were used by the Soviet army between 1945 and 1999. The official name in German, Mahn- und Gedankstätte Ravensbrück, clearly illustrates the intended function of the institution. There is the word *mahn-*, meaning reminder or warning, added to the German word for memorial. Only memorials in East Germany were so named. The name encourages activity in the audience. Visitors are reminded or even urged not to forget, in order to recognize that the current times under a different political regime are better, and behave in compliance with the “nie wieder”, “never again” slogan. Nowadays, the title is perceived as an example of the application of the ideology of East Germany – too commanding, representing a lifted index finger of the non-democratic socialist regime. The Memorial is currently administered by the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation under the German Ministry of Culture.

Despite its unique features, like its status as a labour camp exclusively for women,

Ravensbrück has not drawn much scholarly attention. The current director of the Memorial, Insa Eschebach, referred to the first scholarly research, conducted in the 1980s by students from Berlin as part of a diploma thesis on Jewish women in Ravensbrück. She claims that the uniqueness of the site lies in its being a place for women:

“Normally, concentration camps are for men. One speaks of concentration camps. Ravensbrück is called WCL – women’s concentration camp (FKL, Frauenkonzentrationslager). When people speak about concentration camps, they always see men. We must remember that there were also many women. The popular memory sees a concentration camp prisoner as a male. We must correct that.”

Additionally, Janet Jacobs (2010, 51), who chose the site for her fieldwork, notes that “German collective memory is impressive and offers insight into the complex nature of public forms of commemoration; a review of the research reveals the extent to which questions of gender have remained somewhat obscured in this broad field of memory studies. Perhaps the most glaring omission is the absence of an extensive body of scholarship on Ravensbrück”.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The extent of social influence on memory has been a matter of interest for various scholars in the social sciences. Maurice Halbwachs (2009) introduced the so-called social frameworks of memory that are constructed in the process of socialization. They shape individuals’ memories based on a selection of what is communicated, perceived as important and reflected upon. An individual thus arranges his or her individual memories accordingly. In Halbwachs’ view, history, memory and identity are connected and under the influence of one another. Thus identity requirements have an impact on the selection of what aspects of the past will be remembered and, reciprocally, common remembering constitutes common identity.

This article is concerned with the type of social memory identified as cultural memory, which is designated as “memory whose primary form of transmission is through cultural

media, such as texts, film and television, and museums and exhibitions” (Macdonald 2013, 15). It is a notion of memory introduced by Jan Assmann and is often put in opposition to the communicative memory constructed in everyday lively personal interactions. Cultural memory is objectified, fabricated, and ceremonial. It is bound to fixed points in time, to past events. In order to be interpreted, it requires previous understanding and even special education. It is connected with constructing and transmitting collective identity (Erlil 2005).

Although cultural memory is clearly linked to particular events in the past whose representation or explanation it provides, there appears to be a clear distinction between memory and history. Pavel Barša (2011) writes that collective memory is bound to group identity. It reflects the practical demands of the present rather than the criteria of the truth about the past. It serves the self-identification or self-assertion of a particular group, whereas history is in the service of universal knowledge. According to Pierre Nora (in Barša 2011), memory is dynamic, carried by groups that are alive and therefore in permanent evolution. It creates a problematic, incomplete reconstruction of something that is no longer there.

Ravensbrück Memorial as an institution can be perceived as a bearer and creator of cultural memory. The questions that may occur concern the way meanings are constructed, as well as by whom, and how memory is transmitted to visitors. Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper (2011, 143) identifies the key element of memory transmission as the “memorable moment” of one’s learning experience when in contact with the content of someone else’s story or opinion. It needs to be told, listened to and learned. Subsequently, it will be remembered, embedded into the receiver’s learning experience and coloured by personal recollections and innermost emotions. The memorable moment marks the starting point of another person’s future memory. Thus, people who have not experienced the event can become the witnesses of their own learning experience. Memory is transmitted through time and space. The subjective and objective temporalities as well as the country, town or room of occurrence will be attached to the recollections of

the new person. However, “although memorable moments may be planned and prepared, no one can be sure of the outcome” (ibid.).

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question about how the official representations of the memory of Ravensbrück have changed over time – in the eras of the divided and united republics of Germany – a variety of methods were deployed. Field work at the memorial site and observations of both exhibitions were conducted. While in the field, the method that Gillian Rose (2016) terms discourse analysis II was employed. It is a tool to examine the ways in which various dominant institutions have put images to work. This method is concerned with technologies of display, textual and visual technologies of interpretation, technologies of layout, the architectural structure of the museum itself, and visitor routing, among other things. Moreover, participant observation in an international group of survivors and their descendants when viewing the museum was carried out.

Additionally, the content of official materials on the exhibitions was analysed. These were published by the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation, the umbrella organisation that also administers Ravensbrück Memorial. One of the resources was a volume consisting of essays on the national memorials in the so-called cell building, along with brief descriptions and visual documentation of the individual rooms. The other was the official catalogue accompanying the newly opened main exhibition. It provides information about the intention of the curator and is rich in visual reproductions of the photographs, documents and artefacts displayed in the exposition. Both volumes were edited by the current director of the Memorial, who was also personally interviewed.

THE SHIFT FROM NATIONALISM TO PLURALISM: THE MONOLITHIC VICTIM BECOMES DIVERSIFIED

National Memorials in the Cell Building

The first exhibition in the Memorial was opened in 1959 in the basement of the former

camp prison, the cell building. Individual cells were later used as spaces for national installations. There was no unifying foundation of the expositions, and the national approaches varied considerably. Nevertheless, their layout was assigned. Their order in the cell building illustrates the chronological spread of fascism across European countries. Drawing on this perspective, the Spanish national exhibition is situated in the first room, the Austrian in the second, and the Czechoslovak in the third from the entrance. Eschebach (2008, 83) points out the didactic principle of the museum, namely to guide visitors “through the chronological aspects of National Socialism’s practice of conquest”. She also shares a remarkable observation about the irony of such a decision, noting “that the visitor following the guided tour involuntarily slips into the role of German Wehrmacht by entering each national space” (ibid.).

Associations of former prisoners were primarily engaged in designing the content of the cells. Some of them commissioned professional artists. In 1984, a “functional diagram” was formulated to provide guidelines for designing the rooms. The main motifs institutionally selected for the memorials were national flags and plinths at the rear wall; the main focus of the museum is women’s resistance, as well as artistic interpretations of this struggle (Eschebach 2008). Typically, the national memorial rooms contain authentic visual and textual materials explaining the political context of the subsequent imprisonment of their citizens, such as documentation of repressive measures taken by the Nazis after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in the Czechoslovak memorial room, or photographic illustrations of the Spanish Civil War in the Spanish memorial room. Often an artefact (a sculpture or painting) depicting the suffering was installed, such as the sculpture of a kneeling woman positioned in front of prison bars in the Romanian memorial room. Personification of the women incarcerated in Ravensbrück is accomplished through photographs or lists of names on the walls of individual cell rooms, and also through the display of keepsakes – small personal handicraft objects which often served as gifts among prisoners.

In the curating approach to the design of the cell-building memorials, the national aspect prevails over the individual or personal. Consequently, the victims are the whole nations themselves affected by evil fascism. The impression of a seamless national victim is created by having the main focus on the country's anti-fascist resistance, leading to the citizens merging "with the women deported to Ravensbrück to form the monolithic figure of a single victim" (Eschebach 2008, 85). Suffering seems to be the salient theme of all the national memorial rooms. This impression is reinforced by the architectural elements of concrete walls and metal staircases, a lack of daylight, and the knowledge that the original function of the space was to serve as a place of severe punishment in the concentration camp.

The administering organization, the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation, decided in the early 1990s that the national memorials should be conserved as they were. Therefore, they nowadays provide an opportunity for visitors as well as scholars to examine the construction of the collective cultural memory of Ravensbrück.

THE NEW EXHIBITION

In the preface to a volume published in 2008 on the memorials established in the cell building in Ravensbrück, the current director of the Memorial, Insa Eschebach (2008, 15), expresses the need for a more contemporary approach to the museum, as she writes that "a new place of commemoration should be created outside of the cell building which meets the demands of a pluralistically oriented culture of commemoration". In April 2013 a new main exhibition was opened. It is located in a separate building in front of the walls of the actual camp, the former commandants' headquarters. The exhibition rooms spread over two floors and, unlike the national memorials in the cell building, they evince a linking curators' idea. Obviously, this is a complex exhibition designed by the Memorial, and it contains textual and visual media, photographs, documents, biographies and material objects employed to provide an insight into the topography, history and function of

the concentration camp, life inside of it, and practices of commemoration. According to the official catalogue of the exhibition, three methodological approaches were deployed in the concept: contextualizing, historicizing and multiperspectivity (Beßmann and Eschebach 2013). By contextualizing, the authors mean taking the approach "not to state a date or a thing alone" (ibid., 16) and explaining why a women's concentration camp was established in 1938. Historicizing allows the understanding of the past as a story. Concerning the new exhibition, multiperspectivity relates to the differences among the groups of prisoners, their experiences and remembrances. In this regard, memories of Ravensbrück are not coherent and therefore will not be deliberately presented as such.

The exhibition begins on the first floor of a spacious house reachable by a wooden staircase that the Nazi commandants once walked. It might be the space itself, with wide corridors and staircases, ample rooms with wooden floors, enough daylight and the neat layout of individual expositions, artefacts placed in glass cases and labels in German and English, which contribute to the educational focus experienced in the exhibition. In addition, the only art works on display are those created by the prisoners themselves as illustrations of events in the camp or personal handicraft objects. Unlike in the cell building, there are no expressive art works commissioned from professional artists.

The visitor is guided through thirteen rooms in chronological order, from an early history of the location and its transformation into a Nazi concentration camp, through World War II and into the post-war era. General information about the Nazi genocidal system, life in the camp, forced labour and the liberation of the camp are represented. Additional psychological topics are also presented, such as solidarity and self-preservation on the one hand and conflicts among prisoners on the other. The occurrence of rivalrous relationships in the camp is represented by a drawing by a Czech prisoner called Nina Jirsíková.

"There are two women in the centre of the picture seated at a long table. They are dressed in striped prisoner shirts, depicted during eating time. There

is a part of the body of another woman on the right side indicating a row of eaters. One of the women in the foreground is bending over towards the other one, staring into her pot. The eater is covering her ration with one hand and grasping it with the other. The title of the coloured drawing inscribed below is 'You've got a potato there girl' "

The selection of the drawing for the main exhibition contradicts the historically more common narrative of mere solidarity and comradeship among incarcerated women.

The section of the exhibition entitled "Prisoners" deploys a national perspective, as the prisoners are grouped according to their nationalities. However, there is a clear shift to individualization and personalisation of the suffering. The victim is no longer the whole nation fighting against Nazism. It is rather a particular woman with her own life story before, during and after the incarceration. More precisely, various women from different countries and with different stories.

"There is a binder with photographs and brief information about the lives of three prisoners from Czechoslovakia on display. One of them is a survivor from Lidice. The selection of personal photographs depicts her with her family before the war, a group of Czechoslovak prisoners settling in a forest during the so-called death march after the liberation of the camp, Czechoslovak prisoners lined up in a group photo in Neu Brandenburg where they gathered after the death march and before the transportation to their home country, her with her sister in Prague after the war, and finally her surrounded by young Japanese singers during a commemoration ceremony in Lidice."

The series intends to create a complex image of the life of an individual survivor, including her engagement in public memory transmission after the war.

The continuation of memory work and, in general, life after imprisonment, is represented and encouraged here by drawing attention to the family members of the women-prisoners, the second and third generations.

"Two portraits of German prisoners accompanied by brief information about their lives hang on the wall of the exposition room labelled 'Prisoners'. On top of the frames there are snapshots of their descendants posing in front of these portraits while visiting the exhibition.

They are small photographs loosely placed above the exhibits. Both women in the pictures are smiling. One of them shows the gesture of a thumbs-up, expressing her joy at reuniting."

These extra elements became part of the installation. This indicates that the exhibition triggers personalisation in visitors as well. It provides an avenue for family members to connect with their ancestors. Alexander (2012) identifies personalizing trauma as one of the phases in the process of meaning making, in the struggle for its recognition as a socially shared phenomenon. Subsequently to personalizing, everyone can identify with the victims. In the case of Ravensbrück Memorial, the intention of the designers of the exhibition seems to be a shift in the construction of cultural memory from the national, unified and therefore limited, through the personal and diversified, to the universal, and therefore democratic and accessible to the wider public.

CONCLUSION

Changes in the representations of cultural memory of the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück were discussed in this article. With a focus on the contents and properties of two different exhibitions established at the Memorial, the attempt was to identify differences in representations selected for display. During field work at the site, various methods were employed, such as discourse analysis of spatial, technological and visitor-oriented aspects of the exhibitions, participant and non-participant observation, and interviewing, with additional content analysis of published materials accompanying the expositions. Although the first exhibitions were compounded by different European states, with associations of former prisoners involved in the process, they showed similar visual representations ranging from expressive art works, personal photographs and lists of names to national flags. The national focus was prevalent until the early 1990s, causing a certain invisibility of the victims, who merged into a mass of representatives of a nation. Moreover, social memory was constructed with regard to politics, responding to the needs of a certain group. Innocent victims of a nation expressing

solidarity and comradeship with one another and collectively opposing Nazism were the focal point.

At the beginning of the millennium, a new exposition was opened in front of the wall of the former camp. Apparently, the democratic society of the twenty-first century requested different motifs in the representation of the collective memory of Ravensbrück. There is an observable shift to personification and psychologisation, as well as an ideological tendency toward multiple perspectives of shared experience. Ostensibly, the new exhibition constructs a social memory of the concentration camp Ravensbrück in accordance with the notion of memory as collected (Young 1993) rather than collective (Halbwachs 2009). It is approached as a set of various processes of remembering individuals and groups, with a focus on the pluralistic characteristic of memory. Finally, memory work seems to be realized here from an ethical perspective, as opposed to a political one (Barša 2011), as attention is directed to the shared identity of human beings, highlighting the aspects of the experience of Ravensbrück which may be perceived as universal. However, such pursuit of universalism and appeal to humanity may be significant for the imminent shift in the role of Holocaust memorials, from places of memory to places of history.

POUŽITÉ ZDROJE

- Alexander, Jeffrey. 2012. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. London: Polity Press.
- Assmann, Aleida. 2013. "Europe's divided memory." In *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, eds. Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind and Julie Fedor, 25–41. London: Pelgrave Macmillan.
- Barša, Pavel. 2011. *Paměť a genocida: Úvahy o politice holocaustu*. Prague: Argo.
- Beßmann, Alyn, and Insa Eschebach, eds. 2013. *Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück: Geschichte und Erinnerung*. Berlin: Metropol.
- Dolff-Bonekämper, Gabi. 2011. "Memorable moments – chosen cultural affiliations." In *Clashes in European memory: The case of communist repression and the holocaust*, eds. Muriel Blaive, Christian Lindenberger and Thomas Gerbel, 143–153. Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag.
- Erll, Astrid. 2005. *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung*. Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler.
- Eschebach, Insa, ed. 2008. *Ravensbrück. Der Zellenbau: Geschichte und Gedenken*. Berlin: Metropol.
- Eyerman, Ron. 2004. "The past in the present: Culture and the transmission of memory." *Acta Sociologica* 47: 159–169.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 2009. *Kolektivní paměť*. Prague: Slon.
- Jacobs, Janet. 2010. *Memorializing the Holocaust: Gender, Genocide and Collective Memory*. New York, NY: I. B. Tauris & Co.
- Kidron, Carol. 2015. "Survivor family memory work at sites of holocaust remembrance." *History and Memory* 27: 45–73.
- Macdonald, Sharon. 2013. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. New York: Routledge.
- Nora, Pierre. 1996. *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rose, Gillian. 2016. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. Routledge: London.
- Welzer, Harald, and Claudia Lenz. 2011. "Is there a European memory? First results of comparative research on historical consciousness and family memories." In *Clashes in European memory: The case of communist repression and the Holocaust*, eds. Muriel Blaive, Christian Lindenberger and Thomas Gerbel, 199–211. Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag.
- Young, James E. 1993. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale University Press.