

## Encounter with Holocaust Memory

A Reply to the Article 'Holocaust History' by Adina Langer by students of the research seminars 'German Remembrance: National Socialism' (Summer Semester 2019) and 'German Remembrance: GDR Dictatorship and Colonial Times' (Winter Semester 2019/2020)

Task: Write a short paragraph about an encounter with Holocaust memory you have had that either aligns or contrasts with how the author suggests we remember.

Due: November 10 2019

Mira Boler: My most important encounters with Holocaust Memory was when I visited the Dachau KZ during a class trip in Munich in 10. grade and the museum in the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where I have been a few years later. Seeing the KZ area and especially the incinerator was very impressive and touching for most of my classmates and me. From the Anne Frank House I mostly remember the reports and letters of eyewitnesses and victims. These personal stories illustrated the range of individual misery. I felt deep condolences for the victims of the Nazi regime. I guess the biggest part of Holocaust memory outside of museums takes place during the political education in schools. Holocaust education often lacks comprehensive coverage. I mostly encountered Holocaust Memory focused on Jews, which are of course numerically the biggest group of victims. Genozid on Sinti and Roma and persecution, deportation and killing of Polish people, homosexuals and oppositional political activists were not covered in school. Furthermore euthanasia programs were only specified on "disabled" people. In my experience juxtaposition is very uncommon in the German Memory of Holocaust, because comparing or connecting Holocaust to other events may relativize it. Happenings in other parts of the world around that time weren't presented to us or are unbound to the proceedings in the "third Reich" in my memory. While the Holocaust is clearly the most relevant cruelty in the German collective memory, the connection to the present time often doesn't go beyond the "Never Again"-Slogan. The long and unfortunately ongoing history of antisemitism is both in school education and remembrance museums reduced to the Shoah. Looking back, in school we never talked about what concretely happened in our region concerning Holocaust or about the current situation of Jews or other groups in Germany. Neither was talked openly in my family. I don't know what my ancestors knew, what they thought about the proceedings or in what way they were affected. If the goal is accounting for the past and preventing revitalization of radical nationalism and fascism, educators have to emphasize the personal affection of every citizen of that time – because they were affected regardless of whether as NSDAP members, followers, victims, anti-regime activists or as "apolitical" citizens, who claim to didn't know anything.

Stefanie Storch: The arguments I can relate the most to are the "Importance of Individuality" and "Relatability". To me the Holocaust got another dimension when I was introduced to a film about my hometown Göttingen during the Nazi period. The image with sticks with me the most was of a photo from a street where huge Nazi flags were hanging from buildings from both sides of the street. That felt very surreal because I walked these streets and knew the places so it was alarming to see how visible the Nazi ideology used to be even in this small town. This was one example of how Holocaust memory affected me on a more personal level. I think it is very important to use different approaches to the Holocaust other than working with a history book. In my school the teachers dedicated a whole school day to teach about different groups of victims of the Nazi regime on the Holocaust Remembrance Day. We watched "Schindler's List", read documents and had a theater group come to our classroom. I think that the input that we got from the film and through the play made it easier to

analyze and discuss our past because we had the possibility to emphasize with the victims. Of course when it comes to individual stories the gathering of information and its display must be done in a respectful manner but if done right I think it can help enormously in approaching and remembering the Holocaust.

Jonas Lohstroh: During my school time, we visited the memorial of the former “KZ Esterwegen”. Since it was not far away from the town, which I went to school in and due to the fact that the memory of the National Socialism plays a big role in teaching history in schools in Germany, this was something every class in our school did. As far as I can remember, the memorial focused on the lives of the victims in the concentration camp and not so much on the role of other people like bystanders or resisters. But I do not think this would have been necessary because the whole story of the concentration camp was put into the greater context of National Socialism, so that we could get an understanding of all the other roles we talked about in the lessons before and after the visit. For me, the purpose of the visit was mainly that of learning that the National Socialism was not something that happened far away, but rather something that affected everyone, even in the small villages and rural areas where I grew up. Furthermore, the memorial showed us the individual lives of the victims by showing passports, letters, clothing, pictures and so on. I remember the breathtaking feeling I got during the visit. So, despite, or because of, the focus on the victims we learned far more than we could have learned in any lesson. Nevertheless, of course, one has to see the visit in a greater context in so far as we already had prepared it in class. We talked quite a lot about different roles in National Socialism, about bystanders, survivors, and resisters. We discussed society in general, the political circumstances and the laws. I can remember that we even watched the movie “Schindlers List” with other classes and that some of my friends were crying. Later, we talked about the difficult ways to handle this part of our country’s past. I cannot remember that my teacher ever spoke about the Holocaust as an “ultimate crime”, he just let the facts and stories of that time speak for themselves. If one keeps in mind all the aforementioned facts, one can say our school did it exactly like the author of the given text suggests. For me, this was by far the best way.

David Schreiner: Since the early beginning of secondary school, at a time of an appropriate maturity the Holocaust history had been permanent attendee in our education. The inerascible history of the Holocaust had been installed as a basic educational cornerstone while investing days, month, years to achieve increased awareness of the tragic and cruel foretime. The encounter of place-based sites of remembrance, the stable and steady Holocaust education, the cultural and societal contention ached, shocked, stunned, regretful swayed our minds and existence while our consciousness and perception had been shaped while raising up on the grounds of these inhuman outrages. The rigorous elaborateness in combining any kind of element of yesteryear aligned us in being critical, honest, insightful, understandable regarding our present responsibility in the time of the resurgence of fascism, antisemitism and racism. We had been taught to remember and preserve all of their stories, through their testimony’s, their pictures, their deprivations, their resistance and their heritage given to us, so that the history never repeats itself. Therefore, any attempt of public historians off storytelling, in gathering, sharing, telling and retelling is an attempt of understanding the prior and avoiding the repetition of itself. Lest we forget “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards” – to narrate is forward, understanding will be the backwards<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard in: Collins, J. (1953). *The mind of Kierkegaard*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Anna Böhtel: The article "Holocaust History" by Adina Langer published in "The inclusive Historian's handbook" in November of 2019 is about different monuments over the world. I only visited monuments in Germany and most of them were museums. I am remembering the „Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe “. At my first trip to Berlin I did not realize the monument. I read and learned a lot about it afterwards. A popular critic about the structure of the memorial is that children play games inside it; young adults shoot pictures of themselves and ignore the meaning of this monument. I do support the memorial in a way that it encourages a discussion and an exchange of feelings of the visitors. The public talked about the context and discussed important factors how to remember the Holocaust. To put it in a nutshell the most important part of the article is that it underlines the fact that the monument needs to be put in a context and that the public should talk about it. Another significant comment of the author is the responsibility of every individual. He criticizes the question: "What would you have done, had you been there?", because people have to think about their actions today and "what ifs?" are not necessary. I agree, especially with a focus on the current arising of right populism. We need to reflect our actions and revue the growth of the national socialism in the last century.

Manuel Comes: Recently I have visited the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial. Although Buchenwald was not a death camp like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka or Sobibor, a lot of the detainees died from the bad supply conditions or simply from exhaustion of forced labor. Also the poor health care in the camp entailed diseases and epidemics, weakening the prisoners even more if not killing them right away. One thing I remember in particular is that although there were doctors and an infirmary in the camp, the doctors usually were not interested in the inmates' health. Instead they performed medical tests on the prisoners in order to find an antidote for spotted fever (typhus) which was needed for Wehrmacht soldiers. Some doctors even killed inmates 'just for fun'. Even though Jews were a minority amongst the prisoners in this camp, Buchenwald also played a part in the Holocaust. Although the author says that 'claiming that everyone bears some responsibility for evil' can be problematical, I think the juxtaposition of prisoners seeking help on the one hand and doctors which did not help to cure diseases but instead purposely infected people with spotted fever on the other hand is a good way of showing people that in fact almost everyone *does* bear responsibility (for doing evil). Doctors – who had sworn the Hippocratic oath – became criminals and murderers. But of course things are often more complex in reality. However, I absolutely agree with the author that 'learning from the past is important, [but] problems occur when people perceive the agenda as supplanting the intrinsic importance of the story'. As the author already put it 'triggers are going to be different for different students'. For me it was the story about those doctors but someone else might find other things more interesting. I also agree with the authors point that we have to be careful not to hurt the feelings of people who actually experienced the horrors of the Holocaust (or their relatives) but that it can be necessary to write or talk about such (sometimes really cruel) things in order to make it comprehensible for younger people what Holocaust means.

Tammo Mannott: In the following I will write about three encounters with the Holocaust in my life. I don't know if the chronological order is right. My first personal encounter with the Holocaust was, when my mother convinced me to go to a lecture from a contemporary witness. The contemporary witness was a jewish survivor of the Holocaust. Before the lecture I was really annoyed that I my mother convinced me to go there, I was eleven or twelve years old and didn't want to hear a lecture. But hearing to the stories the woman told really impressed and also shocked me. The only thing I remember of the lecture was how she told, how they were brought to the concentration camps. It was during the winter and the Nazis used a train which was made for animals, so the train had no windows

only fences. Because of the head wind the people were freezing a lot. Furthermore there was no space so everyone had to stand the whole time. She told us that during the ride people died because of exhaustion and the coldness. So I think this was the first encounter with the Holocaust besides documentaries or movies. Now that I am older I understand, why my mother made me go to the lecture. Another encounter with the Holocaust was in Amsterdam with my parents. We visited the Anne-Frank House. Again it was a long time ago since I visited the place. I was around the same age like I was at the lecture of the contemporary witness. I remember how small the place were, in which two families with in total eight persons lived. The last but probably the most important encounter in my life with the Holocaust was the visit to a concentration camp. I think I was around fourteen years. The concentration camp we visited, was Dachau which is nearby Munich in the south of Germany. This is the encounter I remember the most. It was really shocking to be in a Death Chamber, where so many people died. Furthermore it was hard to imagine how the prisoners slept in the small beds with so many people. I remember that one guide told us, that the person couldn't change their sleeping position, because when they did all the persons in the bed had to move. Another shocking thing were all the pictures hanging around with the heap of dead bodies or how thin the people were. So that were my three encounters with the Holocaust I remember the most.

Imke Dreyer: Most of the encounters I have with Holocaust memories are place-based sites of remembrance. My hometown is about an hour away from the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen thereby I visited it twice with my school and once with my family. The area of the concentration camp was mostly destroyed and neglected after the camp was freed, but a documentation centre with many exhibitions and information was built. The exhibitions are very educational and at the same time very shocking. Alongside museums the school is playing an important part in encountering Holocaust memories. In the last two school years I had advanced history where we not only talked about Jews, as other schools and classes did, but also about other victim groups such as Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and oppositional political activists. Furthermore we watched many movies and documentaries, e.g. "Schindler's List". As the Holocaust was so terrible a juxtaposition is very uncommon, because comparing or connecting Holocaust to other events may relativize it. Other events which occurred in other parts of the world around this time are only secondary and therewith not really present to us. Altogether World War II and the Holocaust were the main topics in history class, at least in my school, since grade 9. In my experience the result was that many students were so tired of listening to the same topic for two years that they dropped history classes as soon as possible. Another encounter with Holocaust memories are personal stories. In my family we never really talked about the "Third Reich" and our own family history. I only know fragments and even my parents don't know much more than I do. Not knowing the own family history is quite common, as no one wants to know exactly what the own family did in this time. I think that's because we don't want to realize and even refuse to accept that the own parents or grandparents may have been perpetrators and therewith part of the atrocities. In cases where the family history is known almost always the system is blamed and not the person and their actions. In my opinion it's important to deal with the own family past and to question the role of family members in the "Third Reich" in order to prevent the revitalization of radical nationalism and fascism and furthermore not to understate the atrocities with our silence and unknowingness.

Zhe Du: For me, a person who was born in the late 1990s, I know the history of the Holocaust more through the history books of schools, various TV series and movies, or museums, because the family and friends around me also know nothing about that history. The photo and description of the Holocaust in the history book is my first impression of the Holocaust. Although photo and description

in the book have given me a very painful and serious feeling, I still feel this history is too far away from me. What impressed me most is the visit to the Holocaust Museum. I once went to the Nanjing Holocaust Museum. At that time, the temperature was probably above 40 degrees, but after coming back, I felt that the cold was emanating from the bones, and the bones were cold. That museum is a black building, but it does not far from the urban area, instead it is surrounded by a wide road. After walking into the yard, the whole world seemed to be quiet, I could not hear the noise of the car, but only the voice of visitors. After entering the museum, it was cold, just like we could not see the sun all the year round. It was also a kind of oppressive darkness. No one went out or made noise, no one went chasing the fight. This place is suitable for a person to contemplate. I visited the various items displayed in the glass, such as newspapers and weapons. I believe that most of the junior high school history books have written this history. In this pavilion, their knives were displayed there, waiting quietly. You couldn't even imagine that these two knives had killed hundreds of people. The second point was the wax image, which was different from the glamorous wax image we saw in the wax museum. The images of these wax figures were some civilians. Some of them tried to protect their children, some were women who were crying, some were fleeing, screaming, but all the wax statues had a same feature, that was, they were panic. There was also a TV, where survivors who suffered from the disaster at that time told us their memory, their expressions are either numb or sorrowful. Everyone's memories are different, but that history brings them only hurts, that cannot be erased.

Judith Pantenburg: I don't remember the first time I was confronted with the German past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I remember it being dealt in school very intensively. My parents and I attended an interview with contemporary witness twice which I'll never forget, but as the text says, won't be possible anymore in a couple of years. I have also listened to my relatives telling their stories but most of them just wanted to forget, because they hadn't been resistant but apathetic or even supportive of the regime during the third Reich. I think there is a big responsibility to never forget about the cruelty and the extreme horror and especially school classes should visit museums and the named sites of remembrance if possible. Last year I had been to Paris where I visited an exhibition of a Roma artist, Ceija Stojka who survived the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück. She assimilated her trauma in paintings and attending this exhibition made me able to relate to her grief and pain. Of course, I will never understand what it's like to be persecuted and almost killed by fascists, but this exhibition was better than watching a Holocaust movie and even better than visiting sites of remembrance. I have not been to Auschwitz so far but to Theresienstadt and some other little concentration camps, but nothing was as powerful for me as looking at those pictures. Probably, for others it's more intense to read, e.g., the diary of Anne Frank or watch a movie like Schindler's List, but I was touched most by visiting the exhibition. At the same time, I would not want to participate in any experiment or simulation exercise, because that would probably be too heavy for me. I agree with the author that only statistics don't stick in people's memories and that individual fates are more touching, but I wouldn't go so far to simulate being in the situation of a victim of the Nazi regime. I also agree with the author that we shouldn't characterize the Holocaust as "the ultimate", because that could easily relativize individual fates of people, because there is always a worse situation. Nevertheless, the Holocaust should be treated intensively. Particularly in times of many insane persons governing countries and new social movements leaning to the right, it is very important to not forget about the danger of populism and fascism and the horror of the Holocaust.

Niklas Klauner: The article "Holocaust history" by Adina Langer sums up several types of how the Holocaust history is remembered and what strategies they utilized. While the article just refers to location-based remembrance and education, I experienced Holocaust remembrance on a firsthand and

interactive basis. During my year abroad in Israel I attended a ceremony on the national Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day (“Yom HaShoah”) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It began with a nationwide minute of silence in which a siren sounded in the whole country. During this minute, the life in Israel came to a standstill. This set the tone for the rest of the ceremony. In the ceremony itself music was played and stories were told by several students from different countries. An interesting factor to the ceremony was this year’s theme of the “righteous gentiles” who helped Jews to survive during the Holocaust. While the overall structure of Holocaust commemoration differentiates from the frameworks outlined in the article, the strategies employed within the ceremony are nonetheless examples of how comprehensive coverage and individuality is included while the stories of the “righteous gentiles” were told. Contrasting to the article, Holocaust remembrance is not just happening in exhibits and education but also in an interactive way in that people come together to reflect in a commemorative way. Israel might be a special case, because it is founded as a Jewish state and therefore looks back on the history of the Holocaust in an institutional way. However, the United Nations also has a day founded for Holocaust commemoration; the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, the day Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated. The way in which memorial days like this reflect on the history is another example of how the public commemorates the Holocaust.

Ruben-Werner Bartling: I can agree with the Author in several aspects of its Essay. First of all I consider that seeing the Holocaust in its historical context may help people with no certain knowledge of the topic to understand the scale of the injustice done. Furthermore I am convinced that it is absolutely essential to remind coming generations of the horrendous actions of the past and which circumstances have made them happen or even possible. In my opinion the coming generations are not really aware of what happened back then. I wish that the errors of the past won’t repeat itself. Therefore we need to keep in mind what happened, especially those who have no grandparents who witnessed the events are much likely to forget. I personally was shocked when my Grandparents finally talked about their experiences and what it took to finally speak about it even when they don’t had much to do with the things they talked about. The guilt of being more or less a part of it was embarrassing for them and for me it was eye-opening.

Melina Schmidt: The first big encounter I had with Holocaust memory was in middle school when I was approximately fourteen years old. In our history class we learned about the Holocaust and we also talked about the different groups that were targeted by the Nazis. Before this class I hadn’t really been aware of other victims of the Nazi regime other than the Jews. Other victims had basically been invisible to me. So in a sense this class opened my eyes to whole extend of the horrific crimes that the Nazi regime committed, it gave me a complete picture. Therefore I agree with the author of the article when he says that we need to include all victims/targets of the Nazis when we talk about the Holocaust. In my opinion it does not diminish or take the focus away from the horrendous genocide of the Jews but honors all victims and gives them a voice. I also agree with the author that learning about the individual stories of people helps (as far as that is possible from our perspective) to get an idea of what these people had to go through. When I was doing my internship at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in DC, they handed out an „ID card“ to each visitor. These ID cards provided the story of an individual that lived during the Holocaust, was persecuted by the Nazis or even murdered by them (the ID cards include people from various target groups of the Nazis from all over Europe). The ID card was connected with the different floors of the museum so the visitors could follow the person’s story as they walked through the exhibition and learned about the facts of the national socialism and the Holocaust. When you hear „millions were murdered“ it’s just a mass, an incredibly high number. But focusing on individuals and their story makes this number humane/manlike again- and learning about an individual

story can teach people more about the magnitude and brutality of the NS regime than a faceless number.

Jana Marie Kozubski: Last year I traveled to Ukraine. During my visit to Kiev I decided to visit Babyn Jar, a place where many Jews and other groups have been murdered. Nowadays it's a park. It was created during the Sowjet era and only commemorates „victims of the Nazis“. They added a panel in Hebrew later, but it's still very unspecific. However, there is another park next to it that has many different memorials, basically one for each group (I'm not sure if there has been any memorial for groups such as homosexuals or „asocials“, though). I remember one for children, one for Roma and Sinti, and one for Jews. The memorials itself were well made and interesting, but I felt there was a lack of information. It's also a normal park for the locals, so there were lots of children and people just taking a rest. It did not have this serious atmosphere that many holocaust memorials have. On one side I guess it's good that it's included into the daily life. Remembering shouldn't be something that is only done in hidden places. But I also didn't feel like I had the space to remember. It was not a good place to inform yourself because of the lack of explanations. Moreover, the memorials did not really fit together. It looked like they had been scattered all over the place with no concept behind it. I have been thinking a lot about how it could have been made better, but I honestly don't know. I just didn't have any connection. It showed you many aspects, but did not combine them into a comprehensible picture. I actually cannot remember visiting any memorial site that pays tribute to different groups of victims and does it well. I guess it's just really difficult to find a balance without being overwhelming or diminishing one aspect. From my experience, museums are much better at doing this job.

Christoph Jarchow: The way how remember is, in my opinion, very much in line with the relationship we have to this issue. A contemporary witness has a different view on past issues than a person who has not experienced it. But even if the relationship dwindles, because you no longer feel part of it, it is important to keep memories. That's why I want to refer to the point of "relevance" of Adina Langer. The need to remember what was happening is not only an important contribution of sympathy. By remembering the Holocaust and its victims, we can hopefully prevent something like this happening again. All the mistakes that have been committed and the resulting atrocities bring us to the point of realization. This realization enables us to recognize such ideologies early on and to prevent them. So we should not just ask ourselves how we acted at the time, but how we should act to never make that possible again. Thus, the nature of the "relevance" to this topic is essential and lays an important foundation for the possible prevention of new ideologies.