

Making Meaning at Holocaust Sites

New Approaches in
Participant-Centered Learning



Photo: Darrell Owens

A Claims Conference Publication by
Paul Salmons and Wolfgang Schmutz



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Participant-Centered Learning: A Strategic Initiative of the Claims Conference

Nearly every educational project the Claims Conference funds raises fundamental questions about how to be most effective. How should docents, teachers, and guides at authentic Holocaust sites be trained to achieve the greatest impact? How can activities be designed so that learners discard myths and misconceptions, opening their minds to new ideas and their hearts to new understanding? And how can we best ensure that the educational outcomes we seek are truly realized?

For decades, the Claims Conference has supported hundreds of projects worldwide to advance Holocaust research, education, and documentation. As we witness the passing of the survivor generation, this mission has grown more urgent. In 2020, the Claims Conference took a bold new direction, launching its own strategic initiatives designed to strengthen and elevate the field as a whole.

One of the first of these initiatives focused on the critical role that visits to Holocaust sites play in both education and remembrance. Recognizing the profound influence these experiences have on learners, the Claims Conference convened educators from across Europe, Israel, and the United States for a multi-year symposium. The goal was to introduce and explore a methodology that could deepen learning, intensify dialogue, and enrich the meaning-making that takes place during educational visits.

This project was built around participant-centered learning—a pedagogical model developed by Yariv Lapid, Paul Salmons, and Wolfgang Schmutz. In this approach, learners are not passive recipients of information but active investigators. Working collaboratively, they analyze the landscape of Holocaust sites, examine evidence, engage in moral and historical inquiry, and reconstruct meaning for themselves. This process often generates productive dissonance between what participants believed and what they discover—fostering reflection, responsibility, and personal connection.

Participant-centered learning can transform both guides and learners. It redefines the educational encounter as one of shared inquiry and exploration, empowering participants to think independently about the difficult and unresolved questions the Holocaust raises. It moves beyond the simple transmission of facts toward a model that challenges assumptions and inspires deeper engagement.

This Handbook, *Making Meaning at Holocaust Sites: New Approaches in Participant-Centered Learning*, is a major outcome of this initiative. The Handbook introduces the rationale, core principles, and practical methods of this approach, and highlights how educators from leading institutions have begun integrating the approach into their work. As one Symposium participant asked, "How can Holocaust education improve for the 21st century? This methodology may be the answer."

The Claims Conference is proud to share this publication with the field—both as a resource and as an invitation to join in shaping the next chapter of Holocaust education.

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Authors' Preface

The past is not simply "received" by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present.

Jan Assmann

Traditional guided tours to historical sites are heavily narrative based, and guide-centered. The guide takes up most of the talking time, imparting knowledge, expertise, and wisdom. Visitors are mostly passive. They are expected to receive this knowledge of the past, and often—in the case of visits to authentic sites of the Holocaust—to receive and absorb its moral lessons.

A problem with this approach is that belief in the truth of the story relies upon the group accepting the authority of the expert guide. But we know that they come with many rival sources of information—fictional films and novels, popular myths and misconceptions, and what they encounter on social media. The passivity of a group should not necessarily be taken as agreement with the narrative and lessons that the guide is offering.

In what some describe as a "post-truth" age, we should not only provide knowledge of the past but also strengthen people's capacity to understand how we know what we know. We need to create a space for visitors to share their perspectives and thinking, to surface their gaps in knowledge and misconceptions, and to test these against the historical evidence—the historical site itself, and archival photographs, documents, and witness testimonies.

The approach offered in this Handbook is a radical departure from the traditional model of guided tours. The focus is on the visitors. They take a greater share of the talking. Critically, they are active participants in the process of meaning-making, how people construe, understand and make sense of this difficult past, and its resonance and relevance in the present. Instead of moral lessons to be imparted, we are concerned with the deeply troubling moral, ethical, social and political questions that an encounter with the Holocaust holds for us today. And our interest is in what the participants of our tours make of these questions, what conversations emerge, what meanings might be discovered.

Paul Salmons and Wolfgang Schmutz

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A First Glimpse on Practice



Photo: Darrell Owens

[This initiative] ventures beyond traditional pedagogy, aiming to transform Holocaust educators into facilitators who inspire curiosity, critical reflection, and a visceral connection to the Holocaust's narratives... Incorporating constructivist participatory learning principles... [it] paves the way for uncovering obscured stories and facilitating transformative dialogues.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

Meaning-Making at Mauthausen

In discussing what this Handbook should look like, participants from the Claims Conference Symposium stressed the need to start with an example of participant-centered learning, just as we had done with them in our early online sessions. Taking their lead (which is a core pillar of the approach) we begin here with a dive into an activity that we led for them in a field trip to the memorial site of the former concentration camp of Mauthausen, in Upper Austria.

A starting point—common knowledge and assumptions

If you were to ask the average person, “Why didn’t ordinary people living in Nazi Germany protest about the concentration camps?” how are they likely to answer? What is the common knowledge—what have they absorbed from popular films and novels, or from conversations with family and friends? What do they think people at the time knew about the camps, how did those people feel about what was happening, and what - if anything - could they have done?

It is likely that in your brief (unscientific) survey, you will be told that most people at the time didn’t know very much. That the Nazis’ crimes were a closely kept secret. That some people would have heard about the camps, but that they would be too afraid to speak out—that

they themselves would be killed or sent to a concentration camp if they protested. And perhaps that others went along because they were brainwashed by the Nazi propaganda.

We ask our group of colleagues—Holocaust educators from Europe, Israel, the United States—to bear this common knowledge in mind as we approach the former Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen, not far from the Austrian city of Linz.

It is the first time any member of the group has visited the former Mauthausen concentration camp, a place that together with its satellite camps held some 200,000 prisoners from 1938-1945, about half of whom were murdered there. And it can be incongruous to be in view of these imposing granite walls today, standing as they do above rolling green hills, under a beautiful blue sky.



Photo: Wolfgang Schmutz

A simple activity connects where we are in the present, to the place as it was back then. The participants are asked to get into small groups of three, and we hand each group the archival photograph shown below, taken on May 10, 1945. It is size A5 and laminated, so that each small group gathers around the image and discusses it together. We ask them to use the photograph and their surroundings to discover where the photographer was standing, a prompt to relate any details they can see in the photograph to the topography of the space they are in today.



Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Ray Bach

This small group task serves to focus each individual; everyone looks more closely both at the scene in the photograph and the landscape around them. They discuss together any clues to the photographer's position and point of view. It serves to create a connection between the place as it is now and as it was approximately 80 years ago, to see this landscape through the lens of the person taking the photograph.

Although the large walls of the camp are not visible in the photograph, some people do spot a detail that orients them—a part of the grass embankment and a stone wall that remains to this day.

Now that they have an idea of the viewpoint of the photographer, we ask why did he take the picture? What might be happening in this photographic image—what was he trying to capture? Participants respond by describing the scene they see in the photo: more than 20 men dressed in civilian clothing are digging a large trench, or pit.

We now hand them some key historical information, again on an A5 laminated card:

On May 3, 1945, the last members of the SS staff fled the Mauthausen concentration camp and its neighboring camp, Gusen. On May 5, a reconnaissance unit of the US Army arrived in Mauthausen and Gusen. On the following day, units of the 3rd US Army finally liberated around 40,000 prisoners in these camps. In both camps they found the bodies of hundreds of concentration camp prisoners who had died in the days before liberation.

Thousands more were so weak and their health so frail that they died in the weeks and months following liberation, despite the medical care provided by the US Army medical units. Over 3,000 were buried in mass graves.

With our prompting and support, participants begin to make their own deductions and inferences about the photographic source. An American photographer has captured a scene of local people, many of them Nazi Party members, who were forced to dig mass graves for the hundreds of unburied corpses discovered on liberation, and the thousands who continued to die in the following days, weeks, and months.

Having established the historical context, we ask whether there is anything else that catches your eye in this scene, anything that does not seem to fit, that you would like to know more about?

A participant spots the white frame in the background and asks what it can be, suggesting quizzically that they look like goalposts. So we share a second photograph, an aerial photo taken by an Allied

reconnaissance plane, on March 15, 1945, seven weeks before liberation.



Photo: Luftbilddatenbank Dr. Carls, Vienna

The goalposts are confirmed—a soccer field is clearly visible. So, we ask the group, what can this be doing next to a concentration camp?

Participants are animated, and they discuss together and begin to make suggestions—a little incredulously. Perhaps this was a site of recreation for the SS guards? Did they play soccer together in the shadow of the camp?



Photo: Estate of Anna Pointner, private property of Sandra Hymas

As the participants begin to uncover these unexpected details about Mauthausen, we hand out a further archival photograph among

the small groups: evidence to corroborate the deductions they have made so far, a source that reveals more historical information—also still drawing on the aerial photo—and a stimulus to further group discussion.

A short text is also handed out, again on an A5 laminated card, for the small groups to share and read together:

From the autumn of 1943 onwards, a team called SS Mauthausen played league games on this soccer pitch. The team played in the highest division in Upper Austria, and only lost one match in the period from 1943 to 1945.

The second player standing on the left is Franz Doppelreiter, a midfielder and goal scorer. He was also in the SS “Political Department” of the concentration camp, where prisoners were interrogated and tortured. Doppelreiter regularly beat prisoners there with a bullwhip, and he also murdered prisoners, especially in the Mauthausen quarry.

A further round of discussion ensues. The participants understand that the SS were not only playing games against each other, but

also competing with teams across the region—home and away. They hosted other teams here, on the concentration camp grounds, just outside its granite walls.

And so, we ask, as the games were public and part of the official soccer league, who else would also be present at the match?

The realization dawns that the team’s own, and the visiting supporters, would have gathered here, where we are standing, to watch the match, the locals from the town of Mauthausen cheering on their SS team.

Returning to the aerial photograph, it is evident that the soccer field overlooks another part of the camp, that is outside of the stone walls—the roofs of wooden barracks are visible just a short distance away. We tell the group that this was the site of the camp infirmary. It was only some 15 meters away from the edge of the soccer field, and so it was clearly visible to the crowd of soccer fans who saw it through a barbed wire fence.

We walk together across the grassy field and discover the foundations of the former wooden barracks. A new photograph is handed out, and the discussion continues.

As educators delved into this method as students, they not only observed but deeply felt the dissolution of the traditional knowledge hierarchy... they experienced that learning was co-created. This shift brought to life the concept of the ‘invisible guide’—educators realized they needn’t always be the dominant voice in the room but could subtly steer learners using effective materials and open-ended questions. By stepping back and allowing students to take the lead with the carefully curated materials, educators experienced the joy of exploratory learning first hand.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator



Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park

As they watched the soccer matches, spectators overlooked one of the most murderous parts of the camp, where sick and exhausted prisoners were left to die. At times, the dead would be carried out of the camp, up the small hill to the crematoria inside the walls, past the spectators watching the game. People living in the camp's vicinity later testified to the smell of the constant burning of human flesh. Spectators of the matches not only saw and heard the suffering of the prisoners, they could not have escaped this smell. But could they have become accustomed to it? Would their experience of the camp and the prisoners have changed after seeing, hearing and smelling it day after day for several years?

What does this mean for our picture of crimes supposedly "hidden from view", atrocities that many people today believe were carried out in secret, and to our assumption that the general population were ignorant of what was happening? What did it mean for the local people that these crimes were carried out in plain sight, and that some of them cheered on a team of murderers?

Or for the SS players, if they relaxed afterwards in the nearby pub, and were patted on the back by locals for a game well played, offering to buy them a drink for the goals that they scored? And what did it mean for those prisoners who managed to climb onto the roofs of the infirmary barracks to watch the games - how would they perceive the locals cheering "their" team?

A new question emerges from the discussion, one that will be the focus of the visit to the former concentration camp: "How was it possible that some 100,000 people were murdered in the middle of civil society?"

The group has begun to explore the site and history of Mauthausen, but there has been relatively little spoken by us, their guides. Instead, the participants have observed the topography of the site as it is today; they have used archival photographs to investigate how the concentration camp was seen by the local people; and through group discussions they have begun to unearth what questions this difficult past raises for us today.

The participants, then, are at the center. They drive the inquiry and engage in meaning-making. In this approach, the guide is a facilitator and enabler: we provide the setting, the essential information, and share our knowledge and expertise not through our own narrative exposition, but rather through carefully chosen materials. It matters that participants hold these materials in their hands - in an embodied way they take ownership of the sources of knowledge of the past. This direct engagement with the place and the historical source materials (e.g., photographs, documents, testimonies) enables participants to understand and interpret the past for themselves. The facilitator remains *one source* of knowledge, but not *the source* of sense and meaning-making.

Crucially, this means that the usual hierarchy between guide and group is dissolved, and we instead join the participants in the negotiation of meaning, rather than imposing our own predetermined “lessons of the Holocaust.”

With the modeling of the methodology at the former soccer field and infirmary, our new approach to participant-centered learning has been shared. A radical new departure now takes place. The responsibility for the rest of the tour of the memorial and former concentration camp is handed to the participants.¹ Breaking into smaller groups of three to four people, we lead each team of participants to different locations, share out materials that relate to each

Participatory learning is an immersive dance into education. Rather than traditional methods that often involve absorbing vast amounts of information passively, this approach encourages learners to jump into the driver’s seat and navigate through the experience. It draws inspiration from educational visionaries like Freire, who saw learning as a dynamic dialogue through problem posing for consciousness raising in praxis, and Vygotsky, who stressed the significance of social interactions in learning.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

¹ The participants in this case were Holocaust educators, in an activity designed for professional development in this methodology and approach.

place—photographs, testimonies, archival documents, brief historical background and context—and ask each small group to develop a 10-15 minute guided stop, in the mode of participant-centered learning.

For the rest of the morning each small group designs its own site-specific activity. They decide upon a key inquiry question that they will pose for the wider group, and the task/activity they will ask them to complete in order to explore that question. Groups select one or two items from the historical materials for use in their activity, and they plan for the

discussion that they anticipate will unfold, thinking about the steps of the activity, when to introduce the materials, what questions to ask at each point to generate discussion and to move the conversation on, what discoveries they wish the participants to make.

In the afternoon, the full group reconvenes, and takes part in a participant-led and participant-centered exploration of Mauthausen, a tour facilitated by us but created by each group and their colleagues, none of whom have ever visited the site before.



Photo: Darrell Owens

Our Participant-Centered Approach



Photo: Darrell Owens

A key brilliance of this methodology lies in its challenge to traditional pedagogical hierarchies. In the world of participatory education, the lines between “educator” and “learner” are intentionally blurred, fostering a shared ecosystem of knowledge-construction and dissemination.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

On the Methodology¹

Our approach to participant-centered learning allows and enables learners to discover their own meanings from an encounter with the Holocaust, “owning” those meanings, rather than “borrowing” them from the guide.² It also intensifies meaning-making within groups, creating a space for open discussion and negotiation about the significance of the past, the ethical questions it raises, and what it means for us today. It changes the role of the educator from a narrating-guide to a skilled conversation facilitator, using the topography of the site, its history, and well-chosen historical sources to generate group discussions about the past and its relevance for us today. The facilitator refrains from imposing their own interpretation on the group and rather structures the discussion through open questions. Conversations are focused on ethical questions related to the site and its history, but the mode of teaching and learning is fundamentally empowering and democratic.³

Methodological building blocks

A key principle of the approach is to dissolve the hierarchy between guide and group, to open a space for genuine conversations.

However, while the facilitator ceases to be a narrator-guide, their role is still crucial. The narrative of the tour is no longer relayed directly, but instead is unfolded by the

facilitator through the places they choose for the group to visit; the brief, essential historical information they give as context; and the historical sources they provide.

The pedagogical challenge is to create an environment that allows visitors to discuss the history of the site and its significance.⁴

The facilitator gives up their authority as the

¹ This text is based on an article by Schmutz, W., Lapid, Y., and Salmons, P., (2024) *In Search of Meaning and Relevance: Applying Participant-Centered Learning at Holocaust Sites*, Journal of Museum Education, Volume 49, No.1

² On the pedagogy of meaning-making, see for example, the video of Salmons, P. *Pedagogical Approaches to Holocaust Education* at <https://bit.ly/4nL3Ydz>. For a discussion of meaning-making as a practice see: Popa, N. (2021). Operationalizing Historical Consciousness: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature on Meaning Making in Historical Learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(2), 171-208.

³ Vygotsky, L.S. (1978), *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Harvard University Press.

⁴ Understanding these challenges better was the purpose of the project *Developing Education at Memorial Sites*, funded by the Europe for Citizens Program of the European Union, see <http://www.edums.eu>, its findings being presented in Brachmann, Lapid, and Schmutz, *The Challenges of Interaction*.

narrating-expert, and instead shares out their expertise through the structure of the activity—the building blocks of the methodology.⁵ These building blocks can be summarized as narration, material, observation, questions, and imagination.

Narration

Narration is the story of the site and its history that is shared with the group. In traditional tours, the guide's spoken narration might take up 80% or more of the time on the tour, dominating the visitors' experiences. However, this tendency militates against the participant-centered approach, as the time used by the guide to relate the history of the place is time taken away from the participants to discover it for themselves; time used by the guide to explain and to interpret events is time taken away from the participants to discuss meaning and relevance.

To actualize the participant-centered approach, we have established a rather radical framework: a strict limitation of time, no more than two minutes, to be spent on the facilitator's introduction to each place (or stop) on the tour, each part of the site that is visited.

In such a strictly limited amount of time, it is a challenge—but also a necessity—to narrate only the essential, most relevant, clearly structured, and well-articulated historical information, and no more than is needed to enable a meaningful discussion of a question, issue, or ethical dilemma that can be raised at that place.

This does not mean that groups are deprived of historical content. Rather we choose to share this knowledge and information in ways other than traditional, spoken narration. All the other building blocks that go into creating a participant-centered activity—observation tasks, the material handed out, the questions raised, what we offer for the imagination—also support and add to the narration. These, too, all function as narrative elements.



Photo: Darrell Owens

Narration transcends the mere dissemination of facts; it emotionally engages participants, allowing them to forge intimate connections with the past, contextualizing their understanding in a deeply personal way.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

⁵ For a detailed explanation of how the methodology was initially built from the specifics of the Mauthausen memorial site and its perception in Austrian society, see Lapid, Y. (2013) *Combining Education at Memorial Sites and Civic Education Experiences from the Mauthausen Memorial*, a paper presented at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University.

To be clear, participants should always be offered whatever historical and contextual information they need to discuss a topic. And if they feel they are missing some information or need clarification, they should always be able to ask for it. But crucially, when information is provided in such a way, the addition of more factual knowledge is intrinsically more meaningful to the recipient. The mere fact that it was shared on request makes it inherently useful to the person who asked for it to better understand and reflect. In this sense, the knowledge shared is responsive to the needs of different kinds of groups, to a range of prior knowledge, and can address different patterns of thinking, and can be directed by the participants. Applying these self-limitations, the facilitator ensures that information provided becomes a common knowledge base for all, revolving around the place chosen, the topic raised, the material shared, and the questions asked.

The limitation on spoken narration at each individual stop also raises the issue of emplotment. To build the “big picture,” the educator needs to consider how the stops relate to each other, their order, ensuring that each stop on the tour forms part of a cohesive whole. In this way, small narrative interventions at each stop can together build a good picture of the place and its history throughout the tour.

Observation

Exploring an authentic historical site, understanding its spatial nature and conditions, is strongly linked to being an active participant, to connecting with a specific space in an embodied way, to being present in that place. Allowing for spatial exploration is particularly meaningful at memorial sites, where participants are visiting for the first and, in most cases, only time.



Photo: Darrell Owens

They feel the need to understand the space, to orient themselves, and to discover what lies behind the visible and less visible remains. First and foremost, they come to see the place.

Observation, however, needs to be structured, embedded in the narration, and aligned with the additional materials handed out by the facilitator, to help the participant fathom what happened and how it happened on that very ground. Observation tasks can help visitors realize something that is there, but not yet seen or connected to one's historical understanding. It therefore invites a deeper exploration of a historical reality. Through a task, the participants are not only invited to connect to the place, but also to question it.

In the example offered at the beginning of this publication, the group were not told but rather they discovered that they were on the site of the former soccer field at Mauthausen concentration camp. The observation of the present-day topography was deepened by archival photographs and written histories handed to them by the facilitator. This revealed core aspects of the site previously unknown to the visitor, enabling a closer reading of the space and its history: that there was an audience, that local villagers came to watch the SS play soccer on the campgrounds and with a view of atrocities

that were committed there. The traditional guide-led narration, focused as it is on imparting detailed historical information, too often comes at the expense of observing and understanding the space of the historical site. The observation method offered here brings the site itself to the fore to allow for individual investigation and collective discussion by the participants. The facilitator moves to the side—their historical knowledge and expertise remains key to the structure and process of the activity but what they personally make of this difficult and contentious past becomes less significant. Personal discovery, interpretation, and meaning-making are handed over to the participants.

Material

In our terms, "material" here means archival sources: photographs, drawings, documents, and personal accounts that describe a scene or situation that the author has witnessed or directly experienced. Material shared with the group contributes to the unfolding of the historical narrative. But it is carefully chosen, and ideally connects to the master narrative of a tour and contributes to a larger inquiry question being asked, such as that raised at the beginning of the tour of Mauthausen, at the former site of the soccer field and infirmary, "How was it possible to murder

Participants are... connecting intimately with the place and contemplating its historical significance. Such observations immerse participants in the very fabric of history, allowing them to interact with and understand spaces in a profoundly experiential manner.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator



Photo: Darrell Owens

almost one hundred thousand people in the midst and in sight of civil society?"

Well-chosen material ensures that the ensuing conversation is grounded in an evidential base, keeps the discussion within the bounds of historical accuracy, and feels meaningful as it carries the authority of an authentic historical source.

When introduced with a key question or ethical dilemma, the material source becomes evidence for the inquiry at hand, a means to challenge, surprise, even to confound prior thinking and expectations. It also allows for a concision that is difficult to achieve in a freely spoken account, crucial given the time limitations we have with a group. A well-chosen and edited quotation does not use unnecessary words; a well-chosen image does not introduce more information than is needed. But it does raise questions, and these stimulate and push on the discussions.

The material—whether a photograph, testimony or document—also adds perspectives that the narrating guide cannot fully reproduce, introducing a plurality of voices and multiple entry points into the tour experience. In selecting the material, the facilitator chooses sources that illuminate

key aspects of the past, but also for their potential to arouse interest and stimulate engagement. Ideally, the source will also create dissonance, perhaps contrasting with popular received wisdom, images, and narratives; or it will point to the complexity of events and undermine common misconceptions; or present dilemmas faced by people at the time, alluding to their agency, their scope of action, or perhaps the ambivalence of decisions made. For the material to be powerful, it must function more as a provocation than as an illustration, generating interest and arousing curiosity.

On a methodological level, having the historical source in one's hand reduces participants' dependence on the facilitator as the sole source of knowledge and understanding. As such, it creates a more democratic space for conversation, discussion, and debate, where no single individual has authority and control over meaning-making. Participants experience that in holding historical sources in their hand they own both the substance of the conversation and the challenge of the inquiry. Historical material can and should be interpreted. The participant's direct and personal encounter with a historical source puts them in a better position to think independently and negotiate

its interpretation and meaning. Ownership of the meaning-making supports individual engagement with and interrogation of source material, and thus the interpretation of history, which in turn fosters individual responsibility and empowerment.

However, a key principle of the approach is that it is one of joint meaning-making, so this ownership of the material is a shared ownership among the participants, also in an embodied way. To stimulate conversation and to create curiosity, material is shared out not to each individual but to small groups of participants. Two or three people share one copy, and they tend to start to discuss what they have just received, even before a question is raised by the facilitator.

Laminated copies, size A5 (approximately half Letter format, in the USA) has shown to be ideal for photos and quotations. It renders photos large enough to capture details and yet small enough to feel intimate and to allow

people to physically come close to the image, especially when in groups of two or three. For quotations, the same A5/ half Letter size has proven to be ideal, imposing an important constraint on length and word limit that makes editing necessary, once again forcing the facilitator to decide what is most relevant about the testimony they wish to share.

Questions

In contrast to the constellation of building blocks discussed so far, questions tend to function as the gravitational force holding the overall process together. They are the driving force of observations and are framed to decipher historical material and to discuss its meaning. Questions provide a structure for shared inquiry. A conversation, along the line of questions posed by the facilitator, both triggers and guides the participants' thinking process, challenging them, and in turn encouraging them to ask their own questions of the facilitator and the group.



Photo: Darrell Owens

It is in the form of questions that facilitators can create a culture of critical thinking, engaging participants in a struggle to understand what happened and how, and what that means for us today. Whereas statements often come with a sense of solidity, questions offer a space for uncertainty, for wondering, for probing. Statements can therefore tend to be a more passive mode, where visitors are simply receiving information; questions, on the other hand, demand more active engagement - they require visitors to participate, to process what they have discovered, and to respond. By opening the space for meaning-making, questions can also make both the facilitator and the participants more vulnerable, and thus open to things not yet thought of, or at the edge of what we imagine to be thinkable.

In line with our desire to create democratic spaces, to dissolve the hierarchy of the guide and the group, and to foster genuine conversations and joint meaning-making, one of the main—if not the guiding—criteria for a good question posed by the facilitator has become that it should be a question which they are genuinely struggling with themselves: an open question to the extent

that the facilitator does not have a definitive answer. When we ask how those who watched the soccer games in the camp might have perceived what they saw—with their view of the infirmary just beyond the edge of the soccer field, with thousands of prisoners starving to death, with the dead being carried out during the games, with the stench in the air—we as facilitators of that conversation struggle with and alongside our group.⁶

This is crucial to the process, as when we as facilitators have no clear answer ourselves, then the participants understand the question as authentic rather than manipulative, not one that is rhetorical or closed, or aimed at leading them to a predetermined answer. Because the facilitator lowers their status by asking a question they themselves cannot fully answer, it becomes much more legitimate and meaningful for participants to think about the issue together. They feel the call to participate.

On the level of group dynamics—but also in terms of the experience we wish to create, and in line with the goal of empowering the learner—participants realize that they depend on each other to wrestle with such difficult questions. This is rewarding in itself, and even more so when dealing with complex issues

The methodology places emphasis on open-ended questions that lack clear answers, encouraging participants to collectively grapple with complex issues... Crafting open-ended yet focused questions can be a challenging endeavor, demanding facilitators strike a balance that fosters meaningful dialogue.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

⁶ On how such inquiries draw on past-present relationships in historical thinking, especially “historical perspective-taking” and the “ethical dimension” see: Seixas, P. (2015). A Model of Historical Thinking. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(6), 593–605.

such as those raised by the Holocaust. The hermetic “lesson to be learned” is replaced by the open-ended questions we must ask and discuss, seeking and negotiating meaning together. Furthermore, such a process explicitly values the presence of the participants - they are essential for the meaning-making to unfold in this way: they are seen, they are heard, their ideas and opinions are acknowledged, challenged, probed and debated. *They matter.*

Imagination

The questions, issues, and dilemmas that the facilitator offers for exploration very often contain perspectives that are challenging for participants, because they go against much common knowledge and collective memory. These popular narratives are often the product

of what societies choose to remember and what they choose to forget. They are the stories we like to tell ourselves about ourselves and tend to be representations of the past that we would prefer to believe, a more comforting story, less troubling for our self-identity. Few think of the perpetrators as warm family men, or of the locals—who saw them on a daily basis—having good reports of the SS who staffed the camps. Few imagine them socializing together and enjoying each other’s company. Rather, students, and especially adults, believe that almost half of the German (and Austrian) population at least privately opposed the Nazis and their policies, even if they were not all engaged in active forms of resistance.⁷

Confronting the participants with the historical reality of very widespread approval for the Nazis and of the extent of the wider public’s

⁷ See the results of the German Memo studies done by the University of Bielefeld and the EVZ foundation ever since 2018: Papendick et al., *MEMO Germany* <https://bit.ly/3LtoDFF>.



Photo: Darrell Owens

complicity in these crimes does not necessarily lead visitors to give up their prejudices. Indeed, such confrontations can so deeply challenge one's sense of national and self-identity as to lead to rejection.⁸ And this can easily lead to an overly emotional argument between the educator and the learner who resists such difficult knowledge. In response to these tensions, a fifth element has emerged over the past decade that allows for, even opens up to, emotion but which transforms it into a positive dimension of the conversation: imagination. While informed by a solid body of historical evidence—more than enough to reasonably assess what was most likely the case—imagination explores the things that aren't documented in the archive, in part because they couldn't be documented.

One such activity utilizing the imagination was introduced in the village street next to Hartheim Castle, a killing site of Nazi "euthanasia", where in a specially constructed gas chamber at least 30,000 mentally ill or physically disabled people, along with concentration camp prisoners and forced laborers deemed no longer fit to work, were murdered. This beautiful renaissance castle is located on a village street where all the main civilian businesses of the town were housed: a grocery store, a bakery, and a village inn. In the testimonies of post-war interrogations, it becomes evident that local villagers fraternized with the killing center's staff on a daily basis, supplying them with bread, cigarettes, alcohol, and other goods and services, despite having a clear understanding that the castle had become a site of mass murder.

Some of these testimonies vividly recall the arrival of buses with blacked out windows

continually bringing people to the castle, smoke and ashes from the crematoria chimney blowing across the village, and the stench of the burning bodies. Clearly, knowledge of the mass killings was inescapable, yet other post-war testimonies show that some villagers tried to keep up the pretense that they knew nothing of what was happening.

Even though in these testimonies the villagers themselves do not claim that they were terrorized into silence by the Nazis, many visitors today tend to fall back on fear and ignorance as explanations for the villagers' compliance with the regime's policies of mass murder. The belief in this explanation is held so strongly that it proves resilient against an educator's attempt to counter the misconception, however much evidence is provided. So, rather than countering it with additional testimony, an alternative approach has proven effective. We instead invite participants to imagine the interactions and conversations between the local villagers and the killing center staff as they drank their beer together in the village inn in the evenings (a regular occurrence that we do know took place). Explaining that there is no archival document that tells us just how such social interactions went, what the atmosphere was like, whether they talked about what was going on in the castle, or the "working day" of the staff, we ask participants to share how they *imagine* the scene and whether the conversations would *most likely* have turned to such topics. Doing so quickly reveals the commonly held beliefs that the killers kept silent about such "work" and that the villagers were too terrified to ask. And yet the simple prompt, "And what

⁸ Wertsch, J. V. (2008). Collective Memory and Narrative Templates. *Social Research*, 75(1), 133-156.

might it have been like after three beers?” quickly undermines that consoling narrative of silence and fear. How significantly prior assumptions collapse in this very moment, something that could hardly be achieved through the presentation of facts alone.

We move far beyond the more comforting and simple narratives of “they didn’t know” or “they were brainwashed” or “they had no choice”, or even the invocations of “this is where hatred leads” and “never again.” In short, it becomes clear why it is relevant to acknowledge what

Imagination... encourages critical thinking, exposes gaps and assumptions, and integrates emotions into discussions. Through imagination, participants gain insight into how they frame and explain the past to themselves, a process that E.H. Carr noted is fundamental to the interpretive nature of history.

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Once imagination has helped to dismantle some significant psychological and emotional barriers, new pathways of thinking become possible. The facilitator can move to a discussion about why we had perceived things differently initially, what made us believe post-war testimonies where some villagers try to distance themselves from their proximity to mass murder, and why we tend to neglect the possibility that ordinary people’s behavior could have been less informed by fear than we first thought (and perhaps had wished for). The conversation turns from what happened to why and how we choose to believe certain things about the past, about what is at stake for us, to reflect more fully on how the past haunts the present.

Participants become more ready to confront how easily ordinary people became complicit in the Nazi crimes and how through their actions, such as socializing with the killers, they helped to create an atmosphere of “normalcy” around a place of mass murder. This then raises troubling questions and issues for our societies and economic and political relations today.

we refused to believe initially, to allow for a less convenient and far more troubling perspective on the past. We do not call upon the imagination in order to identify with actors in the past, or to pretend that we were there, or to ask what we would have done, but rather imagination in this mode offers us a way to undermine common tropes of our collective memory, to think with and even beyond the historical documents, and to overcome our resistance to some of the most difficult and troubling aspects of the past. Structurally, the kind of time-travel mode in which we use



Photo: Darrell Owens

imagination suggests a distance and exposes our obstacles to understanding; we do not seek to overcome that distance in a simple manner, but rather to negotiate how this past is meaningful from today's perspective.⁹

Hosting the conversation

Deciphering and unpacking the underlying assumptions of a statement can be of great value if they are related to a concrete challenge or a common misconception. Switching modes to correct or exclude statements, either in the moment they are made or even in advance through the setting of rules and boundaries, creates a problematic dissonance with the democratic core of the approach. But in its process design, by holding participants accountable for what they say (by taking their comments, answers and questions seriously), by facilitating a question-

based conversation, and by the evidentiary-focus created through the historical material, we constantly mitigate the potential risk of losing ethical ground.

Establishing a group of learners also means establishing the dignity of its members, which we then must take care of together. It is the facilitator's responsibility to set the stage for such an environment through their own behavior. Thus, the actual limits of this process are profoundly human. We advocate for our ability to facilitate difficult conversations, not to shy away from disagreement, and to take care of ourselves when we feel emotionally and ethically charged. We still need to understand much better what helps us to respond in a positive, growth-oriented way, even or especially when we feel stuck or attacked, pushed out of our comfort zones.

Guided by constructivist theories, such as those posited by Piaget, this learning approach posits that individuals integrate new knowledge by fitting it into pre-existing cognitive structures. Consequently, educators transition into facilitators, assisting learners as they explore complex subjects and seek understanding. This pedagogy recognizes the individuality of each learner's path, endorsing a personalized mode of engagement.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

⁹ Grever, M. (2017). Teaching the War. Reflections on Popular Uses of Difficult Heritage. In T. Epstein, & C. L. Peck (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories. Global Concepts and Contexts. A Critical Sociocultural Approach* (pp. 30-44). Routledge.

Recommendations for Engaging Participants

- 1. Make sure that your participants have a greater share of the time** in speaking and conversation than you do as the guide. Aim at 20% for you and 80% of "air time" for the group. This can include small group conversations that you are not necessarily witnessing or moderating.
- 2. Keep historical narrations concise and short** - only give the essential information needed to begin a discussion or activity at each stop. Give most of the time to the group to discuss the ethical implications of the history.
- 3. Leave the meaning-making to the group.** Do not tell the group what the history means - rather afford them opportunities for individual and joint meaning-making, creating space and encouraging differences in opinion and pressing participants to explain and elaborate on their ideas.
- 4. Ask helpful and meaningful questions.** Don't base your questions on prior knowledge or make them a test. Your questions should be thought provoking and help participants to reflect upon their own perspectives and preconceptions, and test them against what they meet, learn and discuss on site and through the historical materials you provide.
- 5. Value the ideas and contributions of the group,** listen to what participants are saying, acknowledge them, show interest and be curious to know more - ask good follow up questions to take the conversation further. It matters that participants feel seen and heard.
- 6. Do include thorough observations of the location.** Visitors to historical sites come to see the place and want to explore and experience the history spatially. Don't deprive them of this need by an over use of narration or historical material, rather strive to combine and connect explorations to these elements.
- 7. Use powerful historical materials** to share historical information, engage participants in discussion, and to stimulate conversation. Make sure you have enough copies to share the material with small groups of (ideally) three participants.
- 8. Listen closely to the implications of the conversation.** Much of what participants wonder or think will not necessarily be expressed directly and openly, but indirectly. If you stumble across something or see a contradiction, use follow-up questions to have participants explain how they know what they believe to know.

How to Develop a Participant-Centered Tour

In the course of the symposium we realized that colleagues were eager to receive a paper that would help them transfer the theoretical underpinnings of the approach (as outlined in the earlier chapter on methodology and its building blocks) and the development of isolated activities into a full tour, one that was coherent and cohesive, that had a unifying theme, that took account of participants' prior knowledge and allowed them to construct a more full picture of the site, its history and its meaning.

We developed for them the following protocol, with a worked example for each step that draws on an activity initially created at the former Nazi "euthanasia" site in Hartheim, a killing center established in a beautiful renaissance castle, set in the midst of a small Austrian village. (See also chapter 5, on how we shared the approach).



Photo: Darrell Owens

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
1. Problem statement The specific challenge or problem that needs to be solved in each tour stop, or a topic that should be dealt with. What do you anticipate about the group's notions? Which gaps and/or misconceptions do you want to address? What do you want to bring forward in your tour and why?	<i>How could 30,000 disabled people, concentration camp prisoners and forced laborers have been killed in the environs of a small village?</i> <i>Most of the visitors to Hartheim Castle don't think of the historical site as being embedded in society, they rather perceive former killing sites as isolated and disconnected from their civilian surroundings and everyday life in the Nazi period.</i> <i>As the interconnectivity remains underestimated, it allows for the visitors to stick to their perception that civilians either knew nothing, or if they did know about the mass murder then they themselves were passive, inactive, and frightened.</i> <i>Relevant questions regarding civic responsibility, participation and complicity are not raised, the historical reality is distorted. This may be an example of what we have termed a "consoling narrative", a picture of the past that by locating responsibility on "Hitler and the Nazis" alone avoids confrontation with some of the most troubling questions raised by this history.</i>

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
2. Goals What should be the result of the tour stop, the aspect you want to achieve/change? What should be different afterwards? The intended outcome is derived from the problem statement. What we want to achieve on the level of the process itself is our notion of progression in learning, not only more information, but how this leads to new concepts and a shift in the framework of understanding.	<i>Through incorporating the immediate village surroundings in the standard tour of Hartheim Castle, spending at least half of the time outside the castle, visitors should learn about different aspects of this neighborhood, and its historic connections to the killing center in its midst.</i> <i>Visitors should become aware of the interdependencies between the perpetrators and the civilians surrounding them, and should start to decipher the complexity of complicity which was a key factor in making mass murder amidst a civilian society possible.</i> <i>Through questioning the assumption that atrocities happened in a hidden way and ordinary people had nothing to do with it, the stop challenges the general perspective on what constituted the Nazi state and how it carried out its aims. Rather than understanding the regime as ruling only through terror, visitors will come to recognize that the Nazi state drew in wide sectors of society to be complicit in their crimes, and counted on the interdependencies of a modern society. Economic opportunities allowed civilians to accommodate themselves even to the worst atrocities committed by the perpetrators in their midst. In this way, living alongside mass murder could become part of what they perceived as “normal” daily life.</i>

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
3. Framework & scaffolding for each stop	
a. Inquiry question Think about what is intriguing to you about this particular place or area. Can you frame an inquiry question for this place that will help explore the problem statement? A good inquiry question should intrigue and engage visitors, help give purpose to their visit, and coherence to the tour.	<i>The village road is one stop in a longer sequence that forms the full tour of Hartheim. The question here is:</i> <i>How and why did local people become involved in what was going on in the castle?</i> <i>The stop in the village road reveals the topographical proximity of castle and village center, addresses this shared public space and the daily contact between villagers and employees of the killing center, and uncovers the economic relations between local businesses and the castle.</i>



Photo: Darrell Owens

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
b. Emplotment Consider how this stop fits within your overall tour. How does each stop relate to your problem statement, and how do the stops fit together? What can be done better here, at this place, than somewhere else on the tour? What is it that the very place and the inquiry question you choose at this point, contribute to exploring the overall problem statement? What knowledge and concepts are needed earlier on in order to access ideas explored later in the tour? How do later stops build upon, deepen, and thicken what has gone before?	<i>The village road is the second stop of the on-site tour, which ends with a visit to the exhibit "The Value of Life."</i> <i>At the first stop, the group has already seen the area of the former bus garage and has unpacked the logistics and organizational design of the "euthanasia" program, Action T4. They discussed the buses that brought victims to Hartheim Castle, the time frame between arrival and the cremation of the people who were murdered, and realized that villagers living in the locality could easily piece together what was going on.</i> <i>After the village road stop, the tour focuses on the farmers (another neighborhood) and the range of responses open to the local people: from willing collaboration and economic opportunism, through living alongside the killing center while trying to keep a distance from its activities, to securing evidence of its crimes or even promoting resistance. This both extends and thickens the panorama of connectedness.</i> <i>The last stop outside the castle addresses the cemetery, where the killing site's employees dumped both personal belongings of the victims, and their ashes, in large pits. Thus, the four stops outside build into a panorama of intersections, business and social relations, and options that help to establish the idea of a neighborhood in which killing took place alongside daily life.</i> <i>The second part of the on-site tour then reconvenes at the side door of the bus garage where the victims entered the castle, so outside and inside are already connected, and the castle walls become a more permeable barrier than was assumed before the visit.</i>

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
c. Materials Choose the materials that will help achieve your aim at this particular stop. Start with what you personally find powerful, intriguing, surprising or disturbing about a photograph, document, testimony, or object connected to this spot. What do these sources make you think about, what do they point to? How do they address the inquiry question? What is the potential here for deeper knowledge and understanding and for group discussion and shared meaning-making?	<i>The photo materials chosen for this spot depict ordinary life around the castle. They convey a certain normality. The quotes chosen talk about the perception of what was going on in the castle—filtered through the circumstances of the testimonies, which were given to the local police during post-war investigations into the perpetrators and their crimes.</i> <i>The combination of photos and quotes help to establish a disequilibrium on two levels: historically, between daily life and killing, and in terms of the audience: their pre-assumption that village and castle were disconnected, and that villagers might not have noticed anything (or that they were terrorized into silence) is profoundly shaken.</i> <i>The testimonies and interrogations help to address that there is always something told and something left out, which is also the case in very general terms. We talk a lot about victims, less about perpetrators and hardly ever about the society they were all a part of, a society in which the killing program took place, and by which it was enabled.</i>

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
4. Strategies/concepts/ solutions Draw upon a range of strategies/ concepts/ solutions to achieve the goal for each stop through each of the building blocks (narrative, materials, observations, questions, imagination) and their intention and effect, i.e. how they are related to the inquiry question/ problem statement and how they can advance the process of critical thinking, deepen understanding and shift perspectives. Use questioning to hold all the building blocks together in a rich and meaningful conversation. Consider what role the imagination might play to help participants think with, through, and beyond what we find in the archive.	<i>The stop builds on the obvious: the castle sits on the village road. This can be easily observed by the group. An observation task could be to identify the character of the buildings. The bakery remains largely unchanged to this day and continues to provide bread to the community; the grocery store has bigger windows towards the side of the street; the former village inn still has a big entrance stairway, though today the premises is a wedding gown boutique.</i> <i>Upon the realization that the street is made up of some small businesses, the material is introduced. By sharing these historic sources, each small group is able to look into different aspects and stories (grocery store, bakery, village inn). They piece the puzzle together once they present their findings in plenary. Altogether, we learn about daily routines and affiliations of the businesses with the killing site, and the ensuing personal interactions and relations.</i> <i>Through a set of questions posed by the facilitator, the group shares their insights (What have you found out? What stood out to you?) and qualifies their thinking (What got stuck with you/ troubled your thinking?).</i> <i>Eventually, the group discusses how far and in what ways the continuation of daily routines led to complicity in the mass murders, how far the local villagers enabled or contributed to the killing process, and what role “normalcy” of everyday life can play to distance ordinary people from their involvement in extraordinary crimes.</i>

Steps of the protocol	Example: A village street
5. Hypothesis When common misconceptions (and distortions) about this past are corrected through more accurate knowledge and deeper understandings, what new unresolved questions does this trigger? How do the dissonances introduced challenge the more consoling narratives about the past and its meaning with which visitors typically arrive?	<i>Understanding how easily ordinary people became complicit in the Nazi crimes and created an atmosphere of normalcy around them raises troubling questions and issues for our societies, economic and political relations today.</i> <i>These go far beyond the more consoling narratives “this is where hatred leads” or “they didn’t know”, “they were brainwashed” or “they had no choice.”</i>



The protocol stands out primarily due to its systematic design. It provides a structured blueprint that aids educators in weaving together a cohesive narrative from the vast tapestry of historical events and emotions. Many participants recognized the value this brought to their practice.

Prior to engaging with the protocol, while they incorporated elements of the methodology, there wasn't a guiding framework in place. The introduction of the protocol offered a defined, sequential process, enhancing their approach and ensuring that each tour became a more comprehensive, impactful, and emotionally poignant experience.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

Joint Practice Development



Photo: Darrell Owens

It was during their experiences in Linz that participants reached a pivotal juncture. Here, they began to grasp the vast potential of participatory learning beyond their initial perceptions. This moment of realization catalyzed a paradigmatic shift, opening their eyes to the broader canvas of participatory engagement.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

Sharing the Approach

Creating genuine change in educational thinking and practice is challenging, and new pedagogical theories and methodologies will not be effectively communicated, absorbed and adopted through a single workshop or conference. As such we are most grateful to the Claims Conference for investing in a two year, three phase program of sustained professional development, and for the investment of time and energy by colleagues from Europe, Israel and the United States who were open to engage with these ideas and who shared their own knowledge and expertise to further develop the approach.

Our dissemination of the approach is informed by the ideas of joint practice development, a process of learning new ways of working through mutual engagement, opening up and sharing practices with others.¹ This allows participants to play a key role in the continual development of the process; and the design of programs and symposia are responsive to what we observe to be relevant to the participants' needs, the issues and questions they raise, what they are struggling with, or what they want to understand at a deeper level. It is a principle of our dissemination process that we want colleagues to experience the very mode of learning that we are encouraging them to practice. Dissemination of the participant-

centered methodology is then itself in the participant-centered mode, and modeling is thus at the heart of the design of the process.

In the case of the Claims Conference Participant-Centered Learning Symposium, the program unfolded over the course of nearly two years and consisted of three phases. These phases reflect a specific idea of progression, which we will illustrate through the following depiction of the process.

Beginning with an initial phase of 11 online sessions, symposium participants were introduced to the participant-centered approach and engaged in discussion and reflection on how they experienced it

¹ Fielding, M., et al. (2005). *Factors influencing the transfer of good practice*. University of Sussex and Demos.

from a learner's perspective. The second phase consisted of a three-day field trip to Austria, a learning laboratory to experience and experiment with the methodology elaborated in the online course, and to apply their learning at key historical sites such as Mauthausen, urban Linz, and Hartheim Castle. In this second phase, participants were encouraged not only to experiment and interact with the materials provided, but also to create their own site-based activities, and together to critically reflect on these,

further deepening their understanding of the approach. In the third phase, participants were asked to adapt the approach and apply the methodology, implementing changes in their own program development, while in continuing online sessions they presented their ideas by conducting exemplary activities for each other. This allowed the symposium group to mutually experience and discuss the impact of applying participant-centered learning in their own settings and to distill what they found most relevant for this transfer.



Photo: Darrell Owens

Phase One: Introductory online symposium

At the heart of phase one was the immersion of participants in the very methodology they were invited to adopt. By assuming the role of students, these educators had the opportunity to experience firsthand the dynamics of participant-centered learning, which Claims Conference external evaluator Sabrina Isić deemed to be “an essential step towards developing a profound understanding of the potential this approach holds for Holocaust education.”

Throughout the online workshops, participants explored a range of topics, beginning with a reflection on what participation means to each of them, their own experience of being in a group activity or tour, and how (or how little) participation was involved, what did it look like, what was the role of the guide and what space were members of the group given for their own contributions and meaning-making?

In subsequent sessions, they experienced strategies for engaging audiences in meaningful conversation, introducing concepts and methodologies such as “Five kinds of questions” and “Catch & Pass.”² They discussed the value of site-specific learning experiences, analyzed the dynamics of interactive methodologies, and, throughout, were introduced to the underlying building blocks of the methodology.

Finally, the symposium group was invited to discuss the shared responsibility of both participants and facilitators for this type of learning process. Based on a collective evaluation of the learning process, revisiting the core principles discussed, participants were given the opportunity to take their own first steps by trying out the approach. Several participants facilitated self-developed activities in online presentations. This set the tone for what we were moving to next in the process, having them experiment with their online learnings in person, on site, in historical places of the Holocaust.

The prioritization of inquiry-based questions; show don't tell as much; engage learners at each site in ways that simulate questioning and reflection; consider the purpose for each site—why are we stopping here and what do we hope people might learn/consider.... Those are some of the highlights, but not all.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

² See Project Zero's *Typology of Classroom Questions* <https://bit.ly/43gixxy> and Steven Brooks' *Catch and Pass* <https://bit.ly/47veeSw>

Phase Two: Field trip to Austria

In the second phase, participants continued their journey with an immersive exploration of authentic historical sites in Upper Austria, in the city of Linz, and at two memorial sites, Mauthausen and Hartheim. Building upon the foundations established during the Introductory Online Symposium, this phase introduced a new dimension—the historical site itself. At the same time, we regarded these spaces as a working laboratory, the environment in which we could have participants move to a hands-on approach, testing the approach in situ, under conditions that they or their partners would be in with visitor groups.

To demonstrate and model the practice-orientated nature of the trip, day one was dedicated to exploring Mauthausen Memorial, the site of a former Nazi concentration camp. Instead of touring the participants on site, we had them create their own tour of the memorial, making this “workshopping the site” their first encounter with Mauthausen. To set the tone and to remind participants of the practical aspects of the methodology, in the first stop we (the facilitators of this Symposium) modeled how to base a stop on the methodological building blocks, and at

the same time introduced them to a specific gaze on Mauthausen: reading the place and its past from the perspective of the camp being embedded and strongly connected to its civilian environment (see chapter one).

Proceeding from this modeled stop, participants were split in small teams of two to three people, taken to different places around the site, and handed envelopes with pre-curated material, photographs and quotes, and brief historical information on these specific places and events that unfolded there. With a variety of resources at their disposal, each group had the freedom to create their individual narratives, tailoring questions to align with the selected materials for their designated sites, and to highlight aspects that they regard highly relevant.

After lunch, the group reconvened to investigate the full site, each team leading the activities and discussion that they had devised at their particular stops. During the tour that unfolded along these designed stops, pauses were taken for reflection, to take stock of how the methodology was working on the ground, what participants experienced in developing and facilitating their tour stops, and participating in the activities designed by colleagues.

The direct engagement with historically authentic sites... provided a pivotal moment for educators. It allowed them to transition from abstract understanding to tangible, hands-on experiential learning. This revelation accentuates the indispensable value of the field trip in facilitating this crucial leap.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

What got stuck with me from the day at Mauthausen? It's mainly how amazed I was that we can create the stops and be creative about how to use the sources. The Mauthausen complex in itself was something unimaginable to me and the fact that the surrounding villages and people were involved extensively (soccer pitch, farmhouses, etc.). I'm still telling people about our visit and all that we learned there.

Symposium participant

The second day followed a similar structure, but was more open-ended, taking participants on a walking tour through Linz that was not fully developed, but which rather allowed them opportunities to research and uncover hidden narratives, and whether and how the city commemorated its Nazi past in its public spaces, within the urban landscape. The group explored lesser known and even unmarked historical sites, discussing potential educational activities that could be run there, as we introduced additional material such as historical photographs or quotes that related to these places. Stops included the main town square; the old marketplace with brick stones in the floor marking the location of the medieval synagogue; and the school that Adolf Hitler attended as a child. Each site was chosen to highlight different aspects of history, often overlooked, and included rarely seen materials, such as a photograph of Hitler on a balcony which still exists in the main square, from where he addressed the cheering crowds of locals welcoming him "back home" during the Anschluss of Austria, and its incorporation into the German Reich.

The day also featured a visit to the local synagogue, a Museum of Forced Labor in the Linz steel factories that had initially started off as "Hermann Göring Werke" in the Nazi period, a visit to the Lentos Museum housing artworks either stolen from Jewish owners or created

by National Socialist painters themselves, and with a collection that is significantly built on what art collector and post-war director of the town's art gallery, Wolfgang Gurlitt, had acquired during the Nazi period.

The group concluded with a tourist road train ride through the city, offering a very different perspective of the city and its history, an activity that juxtaposed the historical narrative from the previous days with a touristic marketing viewpoint that mostly omitted the Nazi past from its narrative and so avoided its implications for the Linz of today.

The third day led the group to Hartheim Castle, and to a twofold activity. The first half of the visit consisted of a tour circling around the castle, exploring how local business owners and villagers had both economic and socio-personal links to the killing site, sitting at the central village road, neighboring the bakery, the grocery store and the village inn. This was a fully modeled tour to again demonstrate how to put the approach into practice (see also the protocol, chapter 3). The second half of the day was designed differently, as a forensic research of a crime scene, approaching the operations inside the castle through perpetrator testimony, piecing together the killing procedures and how this place was operated in terms of mass murder.

It was at this juncture that some participants found themselves grappling with a tumult of thoughts and emotions, a moment that poignantly underscored the emotional weight of the history they were confronting.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

With no survivor testimony available, due to the fact that hardly anyone arriving at this place survived, the stark contrast of a beautiful renaissance castle, the cold-minded design of the killing procedures, and the matter of fact tone of the perpetrator testimonies focusing on technicalities, hit the participants heavily. Several of them found the experience overwhelming and began to disengage either physically or emotionally. As the participants explored the inner parts of the castle, especially the rooms directly related to the killing, they became acutely aware of the meticulous nature of the operations that took place here. This confrontation deeply affected the psyche and emotions of several participants to an extent that we, as facilitators, hadn't anticipated and to which we had to respond by opening the

space for an extended period of reflection and decompression.

While participants perceived it as helpful to reflect on their experience, the Consulting Report suggests that for several participants this emotional weight prevented them from absorbing any further learning, let alone identifying the objectives of this particular approach and how it was informed by the specifics of the site. Continuing to work in this way at Hartheim Castle with other visitor groups, changing the framing of the visit, being more explicit about what to expect, planning a longer break between the two parts, and allowing participants to move more freely and independently through the inner parts, has shown very positive effects that have not yet been documented or analyzed through evaluation.



Photo: Darrell Owens

Phase Three: Creating case studies and guidelines for the field

A fundamental aim of the Claims Conference project was to transform practice in visits to Holocaust sites. As such, the embrace of the approach by institutions who take groups to these sites was critical to its success. After a summer break of several months, the participant group reconvened. The goal was to take stock, to understand how comfortable and confident the group had become to apply their learnings, what it was they would still need to implement changes in their own

institutional programs, and whether they felt ready to convey this approach to others. In order to allow participants to further consolidate their facility with the approach and to apply it in practice, they had the opportunity to develop activities that were related to their own programs. These were presented in a further series of online sessions, the outcomes of which are the examples presented in Part IV of this publication, a series of case studies of work developed by the participants and which we present to offer further inspiration for the field.



Photo: Darrell Owens

Case Studies - Take Up and Impact



Photo: Darrell Owens

Participants made significant strides in honing their skills, yet they also voiced a continued desire for guidance... [they] eagerly turned to the facilitators for advice... The fruits of this mentorship were clear in every activity developed.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

To the Nazis, the most important sites of what we now call the Holocaust were not the killing sites of Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka, the places where Jews were murdered. Rather they were the places across the continent where Jews lived, loved and labored, within their own centuries-old communities and alongside their non-Jewish neighbors. The genocide was intended to empty Europe of its Jews, to erase them completely, to murder every last Jewish woman, man and child wherever the Nazis could find them, to destroy them as a people, and to erase them from history. In many places, the Nazis and their collaborators were terribly successful. An essential component in understanding the totality of the genocide is to see what was lost, but it is incredibly challenging for visitors to perceive this absence. Here, Anna Wencel takes her participants on a search for that void.

Paul Salmons

In Search of the Void

Anna Wencel, Galicia Jewish Museum, Poland



Bus station on the site of the Jewish cemetery in Przeworsk, Poland, 2015

Photo: Jason Francisco

Collection of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków: exhibition "Traces of Memory: A Contemporary Look at the Jewish Past in Poland"

The idea behind this activity stems from a reflection on learning about Jewish history in Poland through study visits in Jewish heritage sites and Holocaust sites: in most cases the participants can see a preserved synagogue, a Jewish cemetery, some traces of historical Jewish quarters, Holocaust memorials etc. But there are thousands of Jewish-related sites in Poland where no visible, tangible traces were preserved, and such sites are equally important for our understanding of the dramatic and complicated Polish-Jewish history. In this context an educational visit in the town of Przeworsk in Southeastern Poland,

where there are no traces left of its Jewish community, can become an eye-opening, powerful experience.

The site visited during this activity is the bus station in Przeworsk. The **observation** of the site from different angles doesn't really bring any additional information, it only causes certain disorientation and frustration that lead to a series of **questions** from the participants, the first perhaps an internal monologue, but with some prompting from the guide it can become our joint inquiry. What is the purpose of visiting this place? Why are we in this old,

ugly, neglected bus station in some small town? How is this place related to Jewish history? What had been here before this bus station was built?

The next step is to try to discover if there are any markers that might help, and as the group fans out, before long, someone will find a monument located on the edge of the bus station, a small memorial stone: "In memory of Jews murdered in 1939-1944 by the Nazis." Now the connection of the site with Jewish history begins to emerge, although it still remains somewhat vague.

Rather than the guide narrating the history, the process of self-discovery can continue through the sharing of materials to help participants to answer their own questions. The **materials** include information about the history of the Jewish community in Przeworsk, an archival photo of the synagogue, and an old picture of the Jewish cemetery. With the use of materials and **narration** more details are revealed: the bus station was built in 1969 on top of the Jewish cemetery in Przeworsk, where approximately 240 Jews from the area were killed by the Nazis in a mass shooting. The cemetery was partially destroyed by the Nazis. Later the traces of the cemetery were completely obliterated, but the burials are still there. The dead lie under the asphalt road and concrete sidewalks.

Giving a tour in a traditional way, a guide would probably convey the information that the current bus station in Przeworsk was built on a Jewish cemetery quite early. This would result in the loss of a very valuable element of the activity—an initial disappointment which is overcome by careful observation, an attempt to orient oneself in this space, and discover anything related to the topic of the visit. Also,

the impact of the information is lessened if the group is simply told it. The meaning is far more profound if understanding emerges from their own process of self-discovery, and here feelings of disorientation and frustration become productive elements in that process.

Participants' reactions may vary depending on their individual traits, their backgrounds, cultural traditions etc. The realization that they are standing in a Jewish cemetery can have a strong emotional impact for all, but each person will respond differently. The questions and discussions resulting from this realization will go in different directions in a very diverse group than in a group that is rather homogenous.

While conducting this activity online with an international group of experienced educators and guides, Jews and non-Jews (who already had extensive knowledge of the Jewish history and heritage in Poland) there were a wide range of reactions. Some perhaps guessed immediately that it could be an uncommemorated site of the Holocaust, or the site of a destroyed monument of Jewish culture. However, there was also tangible surprise, despite the knowledge that such places exist all over Central and Eastern Europe; and there was also anger and outrage about how the former cemetery and the site of mass executions was treated; there was strong discomfort, too, but also a need to know more. As the historical and social context was being explained, more questions continued to arise.

The same activity was conducted with a rather homogeneous group of Polish teachers (mainly teaching humanities and experienced in educating about the Holocaust). This took place in a slightly different atmosphere.

Discomfort and indignation were among their reactions, too, but there were also defensive attitudes. Some participants felt uneasy discussing something that felt difficult, even shameful, in Polish history. The conversation moved from the history of the Holocaust and the question of cemeteries in the Jewish tradition (not all participants were aware of the difference in approaches to burial grounds between Christian and Jewish traditions) to the issues of responsibility for commemorating the site properly (who should do it, how and why?) and the future of this place.

In this context, the key element of the entire activity seems to be **questions**, both those introductory and opening the discussion, those that arise for the participants in the course of the activity, depending on their background and knowledge, as well as those that the participants are left with after the session; questions of a general nature (how do we, people, treat burial places?), as well as very specific ones (who and when placed the small monument on this site?); questions asked out of a feeling of discomfort and indignation, as well as those arising from a cold look at the place we visit; questions to which we have a ready answer and those for which we are looking for answers, sometimes unsuccessfully.

The purpose of the visit to Przeworsk is to point out the absence, the lack of what the participants are looking for or what they

expected to see. In the process of learning, remembering and reflecting on what we learn, the element of mystery and the need to unravel it cannot be overestimated. The moment of surprise is very important. The participant-centered approach gives group members the necessary space for a gradual joint search for knowledge about the place and for its various contexts, and encourages attempts to understand what this particular place actually is. In this way, it is possible to convey knowledge that is very important in the Polish-Jewish context: often the only trace we come across will be emptiness, void, “nothing.”

The goals of the activity are clear, however, there is always a temptation to say and show more, to convey all the knowledge about the place. With such an accumulation of contexts and meanings, it is very difficult to limit yourself and apply the principle of “less is more” in practice. Moreover, there is a risk of losing the main subject: particularly when we feel somewhat uncomfortable with “nothing to see there” and hide this discomfort in the flow of words. Providing too much information and bringing up all the historical, social, and cultural contexts possible could cover up the reality of this site and blur the purpose of visiting it. This activity is all about “nothing.” The void is at the center, it is the main reality of this place, and the participants need to experience it, reflect on it, and come up with their own questions and meanings to make sense of it.

Traditional guiding tends not only to narrate the past but also to present the visitor with the meanings, “lessons”, ideas, values and dispositions that the guide wishes the visitor to take from the encounter with this difficult past. Holocaust memorials can present opportunities to explain the significance of the past as the guide interprets the monument for the audience. Julian Tsapir offers another approach, applying the methodology of participant-centered learning to embrace the ambiguity of a monument, engaging visitors in conversation about the struggles inherent in commemorating traumatic pasts beyond the limits of representation.

Wolfgang Schmutz

In the Face of the Abyss: the Potential of Silence

Julian Tsapir, Yad Vashem, Israel



Photo: Judith Klubmann

When we stand at a site with a group, it is likely that the place itself does not necessarily convey everything that we want to explore - important elements are missing. We have our educational goals, our points of discussion that we want to raise there, a narrative that we wish to convey but the place won't do it all for us. What does that mean for our work - what do we do with these *gaps*? One monument on the Yad Vashem campus in particular

presented me with these challenges—the *Memorial to the Deportees*, established at Yad Vashem in 1995 and designed by Moshe Safdie as a monument to the millions of Jews herded onto freight cars and transported from all over Europe to the killing centers.

An authentic German freight car from the time, given to Yad Vashem by the Polish authorities, stands at the center of the

memorial site. The wooden box car is perched on abruptly ending train tracks, leaving it suspended on the edge of an abyss over a forested valley. On the adjacent wall, underneath the level of the train tracks, the following text, an excerpt from a report by an escapee from the killing center of Treblinka, inscribed in English and Hebrew:

Over 100 people were packed into our cattle car... It is impossible to describe the tragic situation in our airless, closed car. Everyone tried to push his way to a small air opening. I found a crack in one of the floorboards into which I pushed my nose to get a little air. The stench in the cattle car was unbearable. People were defecating in all four corners of the car... After some time, the train suddenly stopped. A guard entered the car. He had come to rob us. He took everything that had not been well hidden: money, watches, valuables... Water! We pleaded with the railroad workers. We would pay them well. I paid 500 zlotys and received a cup of water—about half a liter. As I began to drink, a woman, whose child had fainted, attacked me. She was determined to make me leave her a little water. I did leave a bit of water at the bottom of the cup, and watched the child drink. The situation in the cattle car was deteriorating. The car was sweltering in the sun. The men lay half naked. Some of the women lay in their undergarments. People struggled to get some air, and

some no longer moved... The train reached the camp. Many lay inert on the cattle car floor. Some were no longer alive.

In a cattle car to the death camp -
Testimony of a survivor¹

On the street level above, when looking into the direction of the freight car, one can read on the parapet a poem written in 1970 by Romanian-Israeli Holocaust survivor, poet and scholar Dan Pagis, *Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car*, a poem deliberately cut short:²

HERE IN THIS CARLOAD
I AM EVE
WITH ABEL MY SON
IF YOU SEE MY OTHER SON
CAIN SON OF MAN
TELL HIM I

In a traditional narrative approach to guiding this memorial, guides explain the origin of the freight car, the symbolism of the cut off railroad tracks and sometimes tell an anecdote about a Holocaust survivor living on the opposite hillside who had complained to Yad Vashem that seeing the freight car from her window every day caused her distress—which eventually led to the planting of trees in front of the memorial, to block the sight. Sometimes the poem is brought up as well, and interpretations such as the questions it raises about the

¹ The testimony is from Jakub Krzepicki, born in 1915 in Praszka. He did not survive the Holocaust. During the Great Deportation in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, he was arrested and deported to the Treblinka death camp, where he worked as a slave laborer in the Sonderkommando until he managed to escape after 18 days. He returned to the Warsaw ghetto and gave testimony to the ghetto's underground archive. Krzepicki died, most likely on April 22nd 1943, during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In its original form the monument did not provide his story or name, only the quote. Recently, however, a plaque was added with information on Krzepicki.

² The title and the author of the poem are mentioned on the engraving on the parapet, but not the year it was written (1970) nor that the author was a Holocaust survivor. This can cause confusion, with some visitors misconstruing that the words were actually written and found inside a sealed railway car.



Photo: Judith Klubmann

universal meaning of the Holocaust are being addressed. The testimony, though, is rarely mentioned, in part because it requires an extra walk down to the base of the monument below street level.³

I have found that this traditional way of guiding very much depends on the facilitator and what they find interesting and worth mentioning, often leaving aside many questions that participants might have about the site, and with little insights other than explanations of symbolism.

Such a classic narrative approach which does try (usually unsuccessfully) to convey everything one thinks could and should be said about the monument, poses the problem of too much information for the

visitor, overwhelming them, and going against the time available for their own meaning-making. In such an approach, what usually stays with the listener, if anything, are just the most peculiar parts of the stories told, like the story of the survivor's complaint about the memorial—while the potential for further meaning-making is not facilitated.

Faced with a monument that does not easily reveal its meanings, guides tend to add more and more information. However, what is seen as a “problem”—that the elements of the monument do not provide a clear-cut answer—actually holds a potential. Having the group wrestle with this openness is key to allowing the monument to speak and to echo the gaps, omissions, absence and loss that it potentially conveys.

³ If one were to walk down to the base of the monument, one might also notice that visitors have laid stones on a beam of the railroad bridge, as an act of commemoration, like the Jewish custom of placing tiny stones on tombstones. Commemorative stones can sometimes also be found on the parapet above.

This case study's genius lay not just in the recounting of facts but in its layered approach, inviting participants to understand the Holocaust from a factual, emotional, and deeply philosophical standpoint.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

By joining various fragmentary elements together, a poem with an utterance cut short in mid-sentence; a part of the testimony of someone who did not survive; a single freight car on cut off tracks, it seems as though the monument itself is struggling to find the right words to speak about the horrors and meanings of deportations and the Holocaust. Hence, in the participant-centered mode, by discussing the fragmentary and unresolved nature of the monument, by keeping it open-ended and allowing the group to struggle with its meaning, we may stay truer to the monument itself than we do when we provide a closed narrative and fixed set of meanings.

By not explaining the memorial, not narrating the history, and not making the points we as guides want to make, but instead allowing the participants to explore the site for themselves, asking open questions, such as "what does this monument tell us?" or "what thoughts went through your head when you explored the monument?" or "how does the memorial resonate with you?" we dissolve the hierarchy between the guide and the group and invite them into the process of meaning-making. Then, the participants, through the memorial and the questions, provide each other with a plethora of topics, ideas and questions that can be touched upon, debated and explored through their engagement with each other and the facilitator. In this case they touch upon topics that are meaningful to them and also engage with the ideas of

others, whether they agree with them or not. Topics such as the representation of experiences of deportations, universality and particularity of the Holocaust, questions of commemoration, of emotions, of making sense of atrocities may arise in various ways and can be discussed.

The initial free exploration and observation of the monument gives participants time to absorb the atmosphere and consider the emotional impact of the memorial. This way each individual participant is able to engage with those elements of the monument that interest and resonate with them the most. The open-ended questions encourage participants to share a wide range of feelings and interpretations that can lead to topics and discussions which a closed narrative might not cover. If the facilitator conveys that the monument is open to interpretation, that anything can be addressed in this place, then participants are more able to raise the questions they are struggling with, and which otherwise might not get discussed.

One participant might share a personal reflection on the intense emotions evoked by the conditions described in the testimony, while another might point out the fact that we are physically unable to reach the cattle car, just as we will never fully understand what it was like for those locked inside. Another person might connect the cut off train tracks to the violent end to so many

lives, while another sees its placement in the beautiful landscape as a symbol of resilience in the face of tragedy. The facilitator still has a vital role, but folds additional information into the discussion to move it on, rather than leading it entirely - for example, adding another perspective to this discussion by telling the story of the survivor's complaint and the traumatic memories that the memorial triggered, or pointing out the stones placed by visitors on the railroad bridge, to reflect on the complexity and diversity of Holocaust commemoration.

The poem might lead participants to try to complete the sentence to "Cain", and to wonder whether the poem is referring to the Biblical first murderer, the perpetrator society of the time, or us, the later generations? Others might conclude that we can only be speechless, or struggle to find words, like Eve in the poem. At the same time, the poem might lead participants to think about the pain of families that were torn apart, and last goodbyes.

The paths of discussions can be as diverse as the individual participants, yet they all hold a truth about what monuments and post-Holocaust societies are dealing with.

Even seemingly improper questions that might be brought up by participants, such as "what did the monument cost?" can lead to interesting discussions about the costs of deportations on Jewish communities, the loss of life and culture that the Holocaust has inflicted on the Jewish people and the world, or whether there can ever be something like adequate commemoration for such an atrocity.

In my experience of guiding the monument in this way, the discussion often leads to questions of representation. For example, participants refer to the testimony by Krzepicki and realize that we cannot fully comprehend the conditions of the deportations, the smells and sounds inside a freight car like the one we see on the bridge. Krzepicki's testimony and—to a lesser extent—Pagis' poem sometimes inspire discussions on the topic of survivor testimonies, the ones we hear about and the ones we don't, about the silence in families of survivors and the families of perpetrators. The fact that the monument usually is the last stop of a tour of the monuments on the Yad Vashem campus means that participants often connect the meaning of the monument with knowledge that they have gained during a visit to the museum and the campus, and now bring up questions and ideas that have not been addressed elsewhere on the tour.

The open-ended nature of the approach encourages participants to grapple with the complexities and unanswered questions left by the memorial, mirroring the struggles inherent in commemorating such profound events as the Holocaust. A clear answer to our questions cannot always be given in light of the complexity and immensity of the crime whose victims are being commemorated here. Perhaps this is what the memorial wants to point us to, with the open ending of Pagis' poem and the testimony of Krzepicki, a testimony that actually begins with words not featured on the monument:

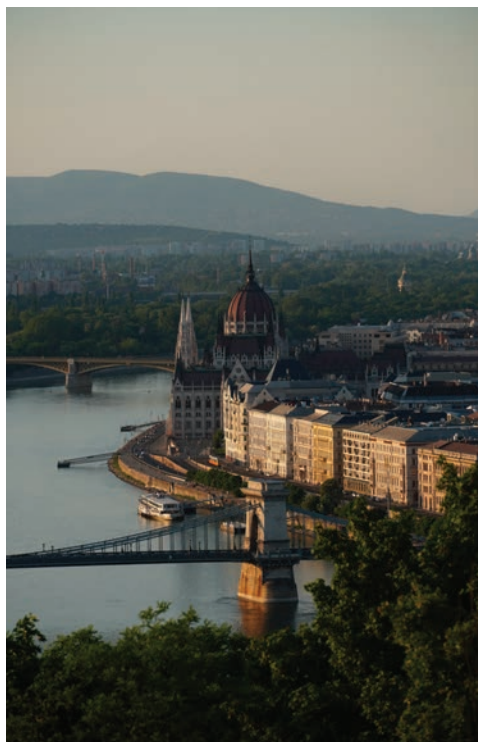
The phenomenon of Treblinka is difficult to describe, but also even to understand. It's hard even to begin. I feel a lump in my throat...

The Holocaust is a trauma, first and foremost for its victims, the survivors, and their descendants, but second also for the societies that perpetrated and were complicit in the genocide. How do such societies confront and avoid, remember and forget, difficult, deeply troubling pasts? Gabriella Komoly explores such issues with groups on the banks of the Danube, in the heart of Budapest, and uses testimony from eyewitnesses to add new dimensions in participant-centered learning.

Paul Salmons

Recovering Memory— the Power of Testimony

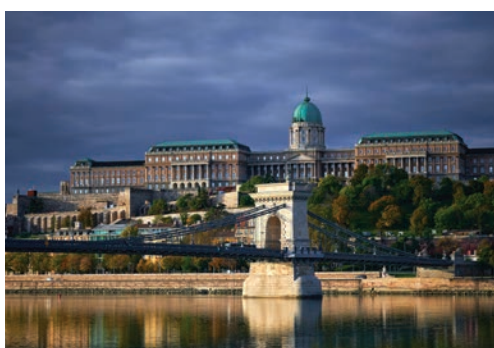
Gabriella Komoly, Zachor Foundation, Hungary



Chain Bridge today - Photo: Miklós Gábor, Unsplash



Chain Bridge in 1939 - Photo: Friss Ildikó, FORTEPAN



Chain Bridge and Parliament
Photo: Ákos Szócska, Unsplash

The Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial in Budapest is a unique site that is often visited by tourists on their own, sometimes led by guides.¹ Since the history behind this place is very complex, the site holds a lot of potential to be discovered in different ways. Applying the participatory learning methodology gives a new perspective for visitors to encounter the area. In this participatory mode, at the beginning of the walk visitors stop by the

Chain Bridge, one of the major attractions in the city, and are given some time to take in what they see. They are then asked to discuss in pairs what comes to mind when thinking about a Holocaust site, and the group reflects on their answers. Typically, they speak about images of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, or other death camps. The goal is to create a stark contrast between such images and the place they now find themselves in.

¹ In 2018 the Zachor Foundation created a self-guided, testimony based, local historical pedagogical program (IWalk) at the memorial, then, in 2023 a virtual IWalk, titled: *The Role of Professionals during the Holocaust in Budapest* included the same location.

The facilitator provides archival photos of the area around the Chain Bridge, and participants are asked to look around, to draw comparisons between these historical images and the present-day scene, and absorb the beautiful surroundings.

After locating themselves, the facilitator asks the group to move slowly along the bank of the river, in the direction of the Parliament building.

When the group reaches the memorial itself, the facilitator asks participants once again to look around and tell each other what they see, where they think they are. The memorial is not explained right away, rather participants encounter it much as any passerby might do, on their way to the Parliament or the inner city. They are encouraged to explore the area and try to make sense of it themselves, using only what is there: the different sizes of iron shoes that line the edge of the riverbank, and a small memorial plaque in three languages. This plaque bears very limited information about the historical events and reads: *"To the memory of victims shot into the Danube by Arrow Cross militiamen in 1944-45. Erected 16th April, 2005."*

Once the group gets back together, the facilitator asks them to share what they discovered and try to name what information they gathered from the plaque, surfacing gaps in the memorial by using the classic "5W questions": Who, What, Where, When and Why? Faced with an inability to answer these simple questions, members of the group quickly understand that much is missing from the plaque. A thought-provoking question about the consequences of not naming who the victims were, why they were killed, and who by, provides a platform for open discussions and deeper consideration about the purpose of the memorial. Following this, the facilitator gives

details about the information that is missing from the plaques: the memorial commemorates thousands of Jewish victims shot into the Danube River during the winter of 1944 by Hungarian right-wing militia, members of the fascist, deeply antisemitic, Arrow Cross party.

To bring the events even closer, participants first watch a testimony clip of an eyewitness, Leslie Banos, and then they are asked:

- *What new information could you gather from the clip?*
- *Where was Leslie standing?*
- *Whose perspective is this, and why is it important?*
- *How does this affect your own understanding of the events?*

The testimony and questions help to highlight the significant perspective of the witnesses who saw what happened to the Jewish people, murders committed in the open, in broad daylight, in the midst of the city. Then, Leslie's short biography is read aloud by the facilitator and participants learn that he was half Jewish but was able to conceal his identity and participated in the resistance to try to save Jews.

Following the eyewitness testimony, further historical information is provided by the facilitator about how the roundups took place and how Jews were herded to

the riverbank to be shot. Then, participants watch the clip of Eva Foti, a Jewish survivor of these mass shootings. Similar questions are asked as in the case of Leslie's testimony, to reveal more different experiences of and perspectives on the events. The testimonies and associated questions may be new or uncomfortable for participants, since



Leslie Banos
Testimony



Eva Foti
Testimony

traditional guided tours typically inform about events, and do not delve so deeply into such discussions or seek visitors' opinions. Because of the difficulty of the topic and the emotional impact of the testimonies, as well as the location, the facilitator needs to be patient and give time and space for participants to process the experience.

The final testimony they watch from Ágnes Heller focuses on the enduring impact of the events. With this, the walk aims to bring participants back to the present day, prompting reflection on the layers of meaning and how they have unpacked the significance behind this memorial, considering its relevance to them today. After watching the last testimony clip, the facilitator revisits the question about the significance of not naming the victims on the monument and invites participants to think about their earlier responses. Participants grasp that trauma extends beyond the wartime period and has a long-lasting impact on the survivors, but also on the society. Failing to name the victims and the perpetrators inhibits us from facing their trauma because the crime, its victims, and who was responsible goes unrecognized and unacknowledged.

The added value of the participatory experience was firstly the approach to the site that encouraged participants to discover not only the memorial and its history, but also its context and surroundings. This approach heightened the participants' understanding of the memorial's significance, fostering a deeper connection by emphasizing its location and embeddedness in the city, than is generally the case with a more traditional, guide-led narration. By moving out of the way, the facilitator ceases to be the main focus - now the participants' attention is far more directed at



Ágnes Heller
Testimony

the site itself, that these events really happened here, on these streets, in this city; on how the memorial speaks, what the testimonies add, and what meanings the participants themselves make out of all of this.

The participatory approach to this walk was piloted both virtually and on-site. In each case the most impactful part of the visit was the self-exploration of the area and the provided materials, the video testimonies. Even when the groups included a few local people or came with certain background knowledge of the history, the discovery of the whole story was new and meaningful to them.

However, as mentioned earlier in this case study, not only the topic is very sensitive but the testimonies and associated questions may be new or uncomfortable to visitors, especially because they are not used to being asked their opinion. When participants feel uncomfortable or uncertain, there are ways they try to avoid this feeling: for example, they might ask irrelevant questions or would challenge the whole methodology. In such cases, the facilitator needs to be aware and observe the group dynamics. Sometimes other group members balance out these concerns but other times the facilitator needs to smoothly guide and support the discussion in a way that is beneficial for the whole group.

By navigating through discomfort and uncertainty with sensitivity and guidance, the facilitator cultivates an environment where participants can engage meaningfully and learn from each other's perspectives. This not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters a sense of openness and participants leave with curiosity and a deeper understanding of the history and its relevance today.

The Holocaust took place amid European society, and so many of the former sites of persecution and killing have today been subsumed into the routines and practices of normal life. How far then, and in which ways, should the past haunt the present? How to mark and commemorate these spaces of genocide, and how should people behave when their everyday lives intersect with parts of their towns and cities that saw such suffering? What do the living owe to the dead, and how far should we attend to the spaces of our everyday lives to make room for those who were murdered? Bartosz Duszyński considers how to surface these issues with visitors to Krakow's Ghetto Heroes Square.

Wolfgang Schmutz

Tracing the Past in the Present: Exploring Urban Landscapes

Bartosz Duszyński, Forum for Dialogue, Poland



Ghetto Heroes Square, Krakow – Photo: Bartosz Duszyński

Ghetto Heroes Square in Krakow's Old Podgórze district is undoubtedly one of the most important symbols associated with the Krakow Ghetto. From this place hundreds of Krakow's Jews were deported to Nazi killing centers, and it is also a site of mass murder within the city itself, with dozens beaten and shot because they were unable to walk any further.

What makes Ghetto Heroes Square special today is that it is not only a place of remembrance, but also a permanent part

of the cityscape. It is not a museum nor the enclosed site of a former concentration camp. Normal life still goes on, the memorial plaques placed between the windows of the restaurants. We see people heading to tram stops, couriers on bicycles, and taxis coming and going. Around the square we have hairdressers, a Ukrainian food shop, and small bistros and cafes. At first, visitors aware of its Holocaust past may feel uneasy—a feeling that normal life should not continue so freely in such a place. On the other hand,

consciously or not, all the people present in the square in some sense participate in the ongoing commemoration of this place: the very name of the square makes its connection to the past visible. The layout of the memorial, occupying much of the public space with its many rows of metal chairs, provokes questions about what the memorial means, perhaps even about who these empty chairs are waiting for.

Rationale

The “participatory observation” exercise proposed here has the participant group explore the entire surroundings of Ghetto Heroes Square, a place that has only become an official commemoration of Krakow’s Jews since the early 2000s. The first thing that the participants notice are the rows of metal chairs. As the activity unfolds, they discover more information in and about the square to not only discover its historical significance, but also to reflect on the many aspects of memory and commemoration in a contemporary urban space.

The activity addresses several questions and problems:

1. How to read contemporary memorials dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust?
2. Is contemporary urban space conducive to an investigation of the past?
3. Is a memorial alone, without historical information, a good or sufficient way of commemorating?
4. Without historical knowledge of Ghetto Heroes Square, can we properly understand its significance?
5. How should collective memory of the past be shaped?

Responses to these overarching questions are to be found in an exercise that encourages participants to search for details that provide information about the history of the site, amidst the present-day environment. In this way, historical facts are gradually revealed, making participants curious about the history of the Krakow Ghetto and the history of the Holocaust in Krakow. It is a process of discovering the space, with historical materials such as photographs, maps, and quotations. Critically, the participants form their own initial conclusions from the site itself and the historical evidence provided, rather than being given a closed narrative by the guide. They then share their thoughts, opinions, and judgements with the rest of the group, leading to an in-depth discussion on the historical significance of the place and the form of its commemoration.

Exploring the square—an outline of the stages and steps of the activity

1. Observation prompt: “What do we see at present? What is the current purpose of this space?”

On one hand we see the square filled with metal chairs arranged in even rows. On the other hand, the square is a very busy public transport transfer point. We see trams and buses: the square is a place you pass through, just thinking about everyday things.

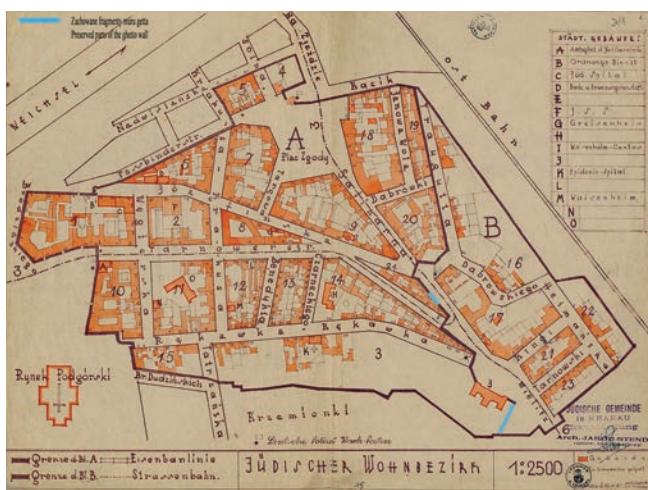
Inquiry questions:

- What do we see around us?
- What could this place be?
- What could the chairs be addressing?

2. Searching for traces of the history of the place.

Without introducing the history and without presenting the meaning of the place, the facilitator asks the participants to find information about its past in the space around the square. Within a quarter of an hour, they can walk around the whole space and find, among other things, commemorative plaques, information boards and visual material. Material is shared out that indicates the historical implications of the area and points at concrete places:

- a. An old plan of Old Podgórze. The small group getting this material is asked to locate the Plac Zgody (Agreement Square)—this is the place where we are standing today.¹



Plan of the Krakow ghetto, published in the German daily newspaper, *Goniec Krakowski* on 7 March 1941 – Image: Creative Commons

- b. A small building on the square still bears the dates 1941-1943 (which correspond with the establishment and liquidation of the Krakow ghetto). The building in question is indicated on the archival photograph below - at that

time it was the guardhouse, though this is not evident today, as there is no information on the building about what it was. Today it houses an art gallery and a cake shop.



One of the places of deportation of Jews from the Krakow ghetto – Plac Zgody (now Plac Bohaterów Getta) Photo: IPN Kr-2-14-3-13, AIPN

- c. Another material shared is the English translation of a Polish language memorial plaque, placed between the windows of a restaurant:

In memory of the heroes and martyrs of the Krakow Ghetto murdered by the German barbarians. The house was the headquarters of the Jewish Fighting Organization. The plaque was erected on the fifth anniversary of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto by the Civic Committee. 13 March 1948

3. Analysis of clues and traces in the square.

As the small groups lead each other to the places and traces they found, presenting their material and how it links to the actual location, the participants start to learn about the historical background of Ghetto Heroes

¹ At this point in the activity, participants do not yet know that they are already looking at a plan showing the ghetto with its division into part A and part B. The German language labelling such as Weichsel and Ost-Bahn might raise questions, though.

Square and the purpose of the place at that time. They are asked, how easy did they find it to trace historical information about the square? Is the historical background of the site sufficiently explained on its plaques, is it sufficiently commemorated? At this point, the facilitator also distributes a historical photograph showing Jews gathered in the square before the deportation.



Deportation of Jews from the Krakow Ghetto, March 1943
Photo: IPNKr-2-14-3-15, AIPN, Creative Commons

The following excerpts from the memoir of Tadeusz Pankiewicz (a Polish Roman Catholic pharmacist who continued to operate within the ghetto) and stills from a 1940 film begin to clarify the meaning of the metal chairs that today occupy in the square.

The deportation has begun. The square is slowly emptying. Some are leaving in cars, others are leaving on foot, hurried by screaming Germans. Pushed, kicked and beaten, they run along Lwowska and Wielicka Streets - in the direction of Płaszów. During this journey, the Sonderdienst guards escorting them shoot at those unable to keep up. Corpses mark the way of the displaced persons, blood pours down the cobblestones.

Empty tenement houses are shining with emptiness, in the squares, in the dead-end streets and in the spacious courtyards old furniture that is of no use for anything sometimes rises to the height of a storey, piles of old iron grows. On the Plac Zgody (Agreement Square) an innumerable number of cupboards, tables, sideboards and other furniture, moved from place to place for the umpteenth time, is falling apart.

Tadeusz Pankiewicz,
The Krakow Ghetto Pharmacy



The moment of resettlement to the Krakow ghetto.
Photo: taken on behalf of the German Nazi occupation authority - National Archives in Krakow, Files of the City of Krakow, ref. no. 29/33/SMKr. 211.

Final discussion: The implications of representation

Based on their prior findings and the exploration of remains and commemorative signs on and around the square, the group is invited to discuss the implications of the main monument on Ghetto Heroes Square, the chairs. What does it mean that in this way the memorial addresses the moving into the ghetto, and not the deportations? Is it appropriate to put the emphasis on one and not the other? How do the participants feel about the choice made? Also, what would potentially be different, if the monument would be disorganized piles of luggage, instead of neatly lined up chairs?

From discussing the choice of the chairs, the design of the monument and its implications, the group can consider how people move

and interact with the space, as can be seen in the photograph below, seeking to answer the questions: Does the behavior of these visitors somehow echo what might be missing in the design and emphasis of the monument? Do participants feel that what the monument addresses (and even more so, what it doesn't address) is somewhat linked to people using them as the scenery for social media pics? And more generally: Do such types of commemorations in urban spaces, devoid of visible boards with historical information in multiple languages, fulfill their primary role and function? Are they a permanent monument to history and represent the memory of the victims with dignity? Or do they also become a photogenic tourist attraction? Nowadays, in the age of social media, such situations occur more and more frequently. Not only in Krakow, but also in Berlin, for example.



Photo: Bartosz Duszyński

The participant-centered approach allows for another move, a further way to engage with the memorial, to enter into conversation with it, even to “rescue” it from the triviality of the social media portraits... If a group simply visits the square and has the memorial pointed to by the guide, who explains what it means and a little about the history of the place, then perhaps some are touched by the story, others might feel it lacks power and resonance because of the setting, still others might be offended by the lack of consideration to the memorial they observe in tourists and passersby.

However, if through an activity the group have uncovered the history for themselves, if they discover not only what is present (the metal chairs) but what is absent (a fuller narration of the destruction, a more vivid

picture as provided by the archival photos and eyewitness testimony) then they begin to own that narrative and may be moved to a deeper sense of feeling about the inadequacy of the commemoration. Now, as they see the ambivalence of many of those around them, perhaps the memorial begins to speak to the depth of what has been lost, that the genocide was so complete that people pose for smiling portraits alongside these chairs, climb upon them, ignore them. The memorial’s purpose was never to draw such explicit attention to the act of forgetting, but through the behavior of those in the square, and in the mode of the participatory activity which makes such issues visible, perhaps it is possible to make this tendency to forget into its strongest message. In such a way, as argued above, all who visit the space become active in the commemorative process, wittingly or not.

The exploration hinged on participants grappling with abstract symbols that might not immediately convey their profound meanings. The presenter further introduced a dimension of respect, noting instances of tourists casually taking selfies or sitting on the chairs, perhaps oblivious to or overlooking their deeper significance... The key was to foster a dialogue ignited by genuine curiosity rather than judgment. It was proposed that historical context be seamlessly integrated, accentuating art's unique capacity to elicit introspection and enrich discussions with depth and nuance.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

One of the potentially controversial elements of the participant-centered approach is the role of the imagination as one of the building blocks of the methodology. How legitimate is it to use fictional texts or imagined scenarios, outside and beyond the documentary archive to encourage inquiry into this past? Not in the sense of “imagine you were there” or “what would you have done?” but activities that allow for more open conversations about the implications of this history. Oren Lew introduces a fictionalized letter from the 1920s to reveal to participants just how secure and settled many Jews felt in their homes, how much a part they were of their wider community, and as a means to overcome our tendency to read the past backwards, to assume that people should have seen what was coming, to more fully recognize the rupture of the Holocaust and the discontinuity between past and present.

Paul Salmons

The Role of the Imagination

Oren Lew, Moreshet, Israel



Bielefeld Town Hall – Photo: Anna-Lena Friebe

There has been a tradition for Holocaust guides and educators not only to preserve and pass on the memory of the victims, but also to impart the “lessons” the guide deems important for their group to learn. The participant-centered approach, however, recognizes that learners are active agents, that they do not simply absorb the narratives and “lessons” as given, that the processes of teaching and learning are far more dynamic. As such, in this activity, I sought to take account of how entwined memory and meaning-making can be—how the victims

are represented affects the meanings our participants make from the past, and their own worldviews and meaning-making will also affect how they perceive its victims. It felt important to me to integrate into the activity a chance for participants to put into question how they view the victims, and by doing so, to open a window for them to express their own lessons and worldviews.

In March 2023, I had the chance to visit Bielefeld, a city in the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. My impression

The session's narrative arc was crafted masterfully, beginning with a historical photograph of the synagogue in its glory days. But it was the subsequent fictional letter, a poignant piece penned as though from the past to the future, that added depth to the experience. This letter, filled with yearning and hope, expressed a desire to showcase the splendid architecture of the synagogue to future generations.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

from visiting the place and learning about its history, people, and discovering its fascinating history with connection to the Holocaust, changed how I personally view the victims, and subsequently made me rethink the meanings I take from the Holocaust. I wanted in some sense to recreate this experience for my colleagues on the Claims Conference symposium and chose Bielefeld as the location for my participatory activity.

My main goal for the activity was to start off a discussion about the identity of the Jewish community in pre-war Germany. Considering the places I visited and the materials I encountered, the impression I received was of a Jewish community that was optimistic about their future in Germany, and one that was also considered an integral part of the city by their non-Jewish compatriots. I wanted my participants to ask themselves, "Knowing that the Holocaust destroyed Jewish communities across Europe, what do they think relations were like on the eve of that genocide? How did Jews and their neighbors see themselves and each other? What were relations like between them?" The idea would be to explore their preconceptions (and possible misconceptions) and then to test these against the place itself and evidence of the time. And by doing so, to create a meaningful discussion about the identity of the victims and to ask ourselves: How can learning more about them

contribute to us today? And how does our present outlook on life reflect in how we view the past?

The challenges in any activity I do is first to help participants find the subject at hand interesting and relevant. And second, to structure the activity in a way where the meaning is derived from their thoughts and actions. In these two key aspects, the participatory method has helped me tremendously in the methodology I use and refining my thoughts when coming up with this activity.

While searching for materials to use in the activity, I was excited to come across three stamps that were part of a series published during the early 20th century, before the Nazis came to power. Despite Bielefeld having more "traditional" landmarks such as cathedrals and a medieval castle, these stamps instead showcase three modern city landmarks from that time: the theater, the city hall and, most notably, the Great Synagogue.

That the same series included both Jewish and non-Jewish buildings alongside each other, as representatives of the town community was very intriguing, and I decided to use them as original materials showcasing Jewish life not as separate, but as a natural and native part of German life before the rise of Nazism.



Great Synagogue at Turnerstraße - Photo: Leo Baeck Institute

Once I had decided on the stamps, the next thing was to figure out the most interesting way to present them to the participants and how to make the best use of the material. The natural match for a stamp is a letter, so I decided to create a fictionalized letter to accompany them, one that could also serve as an anonymous narrator driving the activity. It would provide further context and connect the material to the historical sites of the town and synagogue, guiding the participants through the historical sites.

Here the element of imagination came into play. I wondered what kind of letter participants would find interesting. Wouldn't it be engaging to be guided by a local from that time, a letter to my participants from an imagined person in the past? In my earlier search for material, I had come across a

photo of the Great Synagogue from 1924, from one hundred years ago. So, I decided that the person would be from around that time period, someone who had cherished the synagogue and the city, and had left a letter in a time capsule, fully expecting that in another one hundred years those sites depicted on the stamps in his letter will stand the test of time:

From: Bielefeld, 1924.

To: Bielefeld, 2024.

Dear friends from 100 years into the future, I write to you today in the hope that you may all get a glimpse of my wonderful city! I write this letter in the year 1924, and I am confident that you are impressed by the sights my city has to offer.

The City Hall and the theater are proof that the city is booming into a proper German industrial city, and I myself am doing my part as I own a weaving factory. Just a minute away from City Hall is my synagogue. I invite you all to visit and am sure you will be impressed!

The postage stamp on this letter is a bit small, so I added a picture on the other side of the letter, along with a map containing directions. When you arrive at my synagogue, perhaps you might hear the choir singing or the organ playing (as they should in any proper modern synagogue!)

While you certainly cannot miss it, perhaps some things have changed in 100 years, so I think it won't be cheating to use a modern map?

We would not have the opportunity to visit Bielefeld in person, and so the activity involved a virtual “scavenger hunt” using Google street view and a satellite image of an area next to the old city center, which holds the historical sites relevant to the activity and would serve as a map to guide their exploration on Google Street View.



Google Map

The participants were divided into smaller groups. Each group was given the satellite map with three sites marked upon it, the fictionalized letter, and images of the three postage stamps.

Using the map and the letter, the participants used Google Street View to navigate along the historical sites, at each stop along the way



Bielefeld Theater – Photo: Anna-Lena Friebe

comparing what they see in the present with the images on the stamps—first the theater, then the City Hall, and finally the Great Synagogue.

In the case of the theater and the City Hall, they discovered the surviving buildings much as they were depicted a century ago. The past and the present were linked. However, when arriving at the location of the final mark on the map, they could not recognize the building depicted on the stamp. In its place is a more modern building, bearing only a modest memorial plaque. Out of the three sites depicted in the stamps, the only one of these structures that today no longer exists is the Great Synagogue. As is revealed to the participants, it was destroyed during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938. And it is at that location that the scavenger hunt ends, and the concluding discussion begins.

At the activity's conclusion, I was looking forward to the discussion with my fellow

symposium colleagues and to hearing their thoughts on the activity. What was their impression from visiting the sites? Has the accompanying letter managed to provoke thought and discussion within the group participants? And did this experience manage to tackle the main goal of the identity of the victims?

The first thing that came up was the question of authenticity regarding the letter, and a feeling of unease that one colleague experienced in using it. In that regard, it is important to keep in mind that the use of imagination can sometimes require ensuring participants understand right at the beginning the fictional nature and the factual material it is based upon. However, the overall reaction of the group to the activity showed both emotional and thoughtful discussion. As the landmarks shown on each of the first two stamps do still exist, an expectation naturally developed that they would also find the third landmark, the Great Synagogue, just as it was depicted on the stamp and described in the letter. Thus, the use of imagination managed not only to enhance the aspect of narration and the materials, but also played a key role in how the activity was emplotted.

As participants located and recognized the images on the stamps in their immediate surroundings, this made a clear connection between the material and the site as it is today.

It gave them a better understanding and enabled them to feel confident during the scavenger hunt to ask questions and engage with their surroundings more freely. Some participants raised questions about other locations that could be seen en route and shared their insights on the sites and the pre-war Jewish community.

After arriving at the final location and learning about the destruction of the synagogue, new and interesting questions arose regarding the site and the victims, focusing on how we got from a city celebrating the existence of its Great Synagogue, to burning it down little more than a decade later. The activity ended with participants feeling that they had learned more not just about the story of the site, but about the story and identity of the people who cherished it and wanting to learn more.

In conclusion, I believe that the participatory approach to learning is doubly valuable because it not only enriches the participants' experience by putting their needs, thoughts and learning process at the center, it also helps us grow as guides, as we put the participatory protocol into practice (see chapter 4). When using the building blocks to connect the site, the history and the participants, we ourselves come to a higher level of understanding about the site, its meaning to us and its history, and are therefore able to produce better, more engaging activities.

Since it is not possible to bring all students to sites of the Holocaust in Europe, what are the possibilities for replicating the participatory learning experience in the school classroom? How far can virtual visits to Holocaust sites enable and facilitate the activities, conversations and meaning-making that prove so powerful when exploring these places in person? Here, experienced classroom teachers and Holocaust educators Lauren Granite and Paul Regelbrugge wrestle with the opportunities and challenges of translating participant-centered methodologies into classroom settings, and consider the importance (stressed in chapter 4's protocol for developing tours) of the emplotment of "stops" in facilitating progression in learning.

Wolfgang Schmutz

Applying the Participatory Learning Model (Virtually) to Classrooms

**Lauren B. Granite, PhD, Centropa, and
Paul Regelbrugge, Holocaust Center for Humanity,
United States**

Why transfer the participant-centered approach to the classroom?

As previous classroom educators, we were immediately enthralled with participatory learning at authentic sites of the Holocaust because we know—and have witnessed firsthand—the power of well-conceived inquiry and discovery-model lessons on student learning. Chiefly, these are ideal means by which to cultivate critical thinking skills and learning that endures. Participatory learning is, after all, a fusion of these two approaches, striking a balance between pure inquiry and carefully curated historical context and

materials necessary to scaffold historical learning that is the hallmark of discovery-based learning.

What intrigued us even more about participatory learning is that it invites the participant to a historically significant geographical location where something—or perhaps several things—occurred some time ago. But it becomes so much more than that through the lens of participatory learning, in contrast to a visit to such a site with a more traditional guide who “talks at” the group. The visitor is agitated by contemplation and consideration not merely of what once

happened, but what does this place mean to us today? How does our knowledge of what once occurred here inform our thinking of what was, and is humanly possible? What responsibility do we have in the light of this realization?

And so, of course we were excited about the prospect of applying this model to a classroom setting and, more particularly, to American classrooms since American students are geographically far removed from what occurred during the Holocaust. For Americans, the Holocaust is not only temporally distant but geographically far away, as well. If or when it is considered at all, it is most often seen (and imagined) in typically gruesome images that are in black and white, or else they are fictionalized approximations or worse, distortions. Only privileged Americans have opportunities to travel to Europe to visit monuments and plaques marking events that occurred during the Holocaust, including stumbling over the elevated stones in parts of Germany and Austria designed to inform passersby of lives senselessly taken. In fact, there are too few such markers on American soil to remind or inform Americans of its own dark history. Therefore, out of sight and out of mind. In short, with few first-hand experiences of historic sites of the Holocaust, students experience history too often from a distance, with typically little, if anything, asked of the visitor and/or learner. So how, then, to make visitor and learner one and the same?

Of site(s) and lesson: considerations

We selected Vienna as our virtual “site” because Centropa (www.centropa.org) conducted interviews with elderly Jews in Vienna, and although some Americans may

be familiar with the Anschluss most know little of Jewish life in Vienna before, during, or after the Holocaust. Most American students who learn about the Holocaust usually consider only Germany, Poland, and possibly—courtesy of the relative popularity of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Our lesson takes students on a tour of 20th century Jewish Vienna to delve into two questions:

- During the Holocaust, how did the Nazis transform public places in Vienna and what did that transformation mean for the Jews who lived there?
- How do personal stories add to or affect your understanding of what occurred in Vienna?

Our virtual tour of Vienna consists of four “stops”:

- Stop 1: Heldenplatz/Hofburg Palace (Google Earth), video: Austrians welcome Nazis.
- Stop 2: Gaußplatz, Augarten Park: a Jewish neighborhood, firsthand accounts of growing up Jewish before the Anschluss.
- Stop 3: Vienna streets, parks, Jewish homes—experiences of persecution/violence post-Anschluss.
- Stop 4: Postwar: Why did some Jews return to Vienna? City Hall: 2011 Maccabi Games.

At each stop, through a combination of virtual site visits (Google Earth Street View) and primary source readings, video clips, discussion questions (with the entire class, or in small groups), and journal prompts (analytical, reflective) students “meet” the Jews who grew up in Vienna in the early 20th century and experience the city through their

eyes. Here is the most recent version of this lesson: <http://bit.ly/4npq0T7>.

Choosing a city (Vienna), or several parts therein, created some logistical and even philosophical challenges for us. First, no one site in Vienna could fulfill our objectives because there was not one place where all of the individual stories from Centropa intersected. One survivor (Lucia Heilman) did specifically mention Heldenplatz, our first stop, and her testimony afforded us a wonderful opportunity to show an alternate perspective juxtaposed against the film reel and other images of ostensibly enthusiastic Hitler supporters. But for the rest, we realized we could only hope to arrive at our objectives to connect the vibrancy of Jewish life—and ensuing terror, by taking participants out into the Jewish neighborhoods and public parks in Vienna.

Second, once we knew we would need to “bring” participants to more than one place, our primary model for an experience with more than one stop was when we visited Mauthausen in person. There, we visited six different sites, with separate activities and inquiries for each. It was fascinating, but there was a noticeable exhaustion—intellectual, emotional, and even for some, physical—from the repetition that set upon the group by the time we reached even the fourth “stop.” We faced the same problem when we decided to include more than one stop on our “tour.” We addressed this by recommending this lesson occur over two, even three, classes, but still wondered: would students remain engaged with this lesson over more than one day? Third, another challenge we faced was how could we meaningfully engage American students with the selected site/s from thousands of miles away? We addressed this

by varying our activities: Showing students what the sites look like today via Google Earth. In this way, students (and/or the teacher) could get a sense of distance, space and two- and three-dimensional present-day; using interview excerpts from and video clips, personal stories of people born and raised in Vienna about their experiences there, pre- and post-Anschluss.

In these three ways we approximated the type of multilayered, sensory experience of the public spaces of Vienna that students might experience if they were there. Especially in the virtual setting, we hoped that by fusing the remote site visits with personal stories we could not only create a connection between past and present, but a complicated, frustrated one in which participants would be compelled to consider, to question, to wonder ... all in relation, ultimately, to themselves. In this way, the combination of site and history to self, the model for participatory learning is enlivened.

The lesson in practice

As of this writing, we have presented this lesson three times: twice for American classroom educators, and once with our symposium colleagues. Here is the most recent version of our presentation of this lesson: <http://bit.ly/3JsDDmH>. We have tweaked a few things along the way, a couple of which we explain below, but we’re happy to report and share the following. Good educators know that one of the best measures of the success (or failure) of a lesson lies in data to demonstrate the level to which the learning objectives (here, in the form of our two principal questions regarding site/s and personal stories) have been met. In this case, our data is both anecdotal and numeric.

Here are three representative comments (anecdotal):

The Vienna-based lesson did an incredible job of linking the past and the present in a visceral way. Our students are incredibly visual so seeing, firsthand, the same neighborhoods, stores, community buildings 80 years apart, deepens the connection and the empathy.

This lesson centered the stories of real people. Students may find the stories relatable as common places such as the playground, school, and candy shop are explored. As well, students can make connections by seeing images of people and viewing the actual places on Google Earth.

Framing the context of this lesson with a macro view (google maps) and details of pre-war Vienna was excellent - the idea that this was an example of just one city, one place, one community. I often feel that my students get easily overwhelmed so starting this way leads them safely into the material as well as setting an educational boundary for this deeper type of learning. Additionally, this particular lesson really gives a sense of the community and the city. There is a connecting thread between the different children and adults even as we learn about their individual experiences. You chose fantastic testimonies - they are so "ordinary" (I say that with the utmost respect) - and knowing the horror that was to come - makes the comparison that much more chilling and heartbreaking.

Our numeric data is likewise as compelling. Of the 25 respondents in our post-session

surveys, every one of them told us they would "definitely" use this lesson with their students. 24 of them rated it a 5/5 (the other gave it 4), and they offered numerous reasons why this type of lesson would uniquely resonate with students.

One challenge we confronted when doing this virtually, which might not occur in an actual classroom, was our need to use breakout rooms. Namely, what seemed self-explanatory to us in terms of what we were asking individuals to do—first alone and then in conversation with their breakout room peers—seemed to elude some. As a result, we really became even more deliberate in our instructions, simplifying and checking for understanding before releasing them into breakouts. Note, however, that in a classroom setting, unless the class itself is online (remote) this would be less of a problem because the students would be assigned into groups to consider and compare their assigned pieces—but have the relative luxury of raising their hands for clarification, as warranted. Nevertheless, we do believe the procedures to engage with the materials are as clear as we can make them. Indeed, the next time we presented this lesson for teachers, we received no complaints or questions whatsoever.

Another challenge we had the very first time we demonstrated the lesson for our symposium colleagues was that, for reasons we weren't sure of, some seemed unsure of how to dive into their conversations after having read/viewed their respective testimony excerpts. So, we created a scaffold from engagement with the materials into the aspired group discussion by creating a Padlet onto which participants, after reading or viewing their assigned testimonies, would

post the places they read about/saw in their testimonies along with a quote or piece that stood out to them. In this way, we emphasized the importance of the respective sites and related personal stories/materials, thereby augmenting the connection to self. Here is the link to the Padlet from our most recent presentation: <http://bit.ly/4oJiBzd>. Although a Padlet might not be necessary in an actual classroom, the concept underlying the Padlet—offering specific question prompts—could be implemented in various ways: placing Post-It notes under the respective categories, for example. In any case, the Padlets afforded

rich, profound, and emotional discussions in our presentations—and could have gone on far longer than the time we had allotted.

In conclusion, while it is not possible to fully replicate the power of historical site visits in the classroom, participant learning affords teachers opportunities to explore the impact of geography and place on those who lived through the events of the Holocaust. By bringing “visitor” and “learner,” we can deepen students’ reflections about what humans lived through, and what that means for us today.

Recommendations for Institutions

Educators, museum docents, and guides at authentic sites often wish to move beyond telling the history of the Holocaust and engage in deeper conversations and meaning-making with their groups. But sometimes they feel unable to do so in the limited time they have, or they are unsure about how to host such conversations, particularly if this raises difficult or controversial issues, questions and themes. Such work is challenging. The environment in which educators apply educational principles and new approaches, and deepen and further their pedagogical practice is key.

Holocaust memorials and museums that wish to establish spaces for conversations with visitors as a key element of their educational offers can support the work of their facilitators in several ways:

- New facilitators should receive extensive and ongoing professional development on the rationale, key concepts, pedagogy and methodology of participant-centered learning, to develop their capacity and become more confident in hosting open conversations.
- Facilitators should be regularly allocated paid time (at least monthly, at a ratio of no less than 15% of the time they spend working with groups) to deepen their knowledge of and capabilities in facilitating participant-centered education. This time should be thoroughly planned and structured by the educational department.
- Holocaust memorials and museums should have full-time education staff whose sole responsibility is the support and education of facilitators in the approach of the participant-centered methodology and practice, including their initial training and the facilitation of continued joint practice development.
- Staff should be responsible for the research and preparation of materials for use by the facilitators in the participant-centered methods (historical sources such as text documents, testimonies and photographs).

Wider Impact and Continuation

One measure of the success of the Claims Conference Symposium on Participant-Centered Learning lies in the very high rate of participants either adopting the approach already, or planning to do so in the near future. Participants of the organizations who took part in the program have already created participant-centered learning activities, and some partners have already started to share it within their networks.

Working together with Mémorial de la Shoah, network coordinators of its “Holocaust as a Starting Point (HSP)” program had the opportunity to learn about and try the approach on the grounds of the former Warsaw ghetto. The methodology was introduced in a similar way as at the former soccer field at the Mauthausen Memorial, described earlier in this Handbook. Participants in Warsaw first took part in a stop modeled by the facilitators at Nathan Rapoport’s *Memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. They were then led in a guided discussion on how potentially to apply this approach to the memorial landscape at Miła 18, the former bunker sheltering resistance fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt. Afterwards, the group moved to the area of the former Umschlagplatz, and in small teams they were provided with a range of primary materials - photographs, testimonies, documents from the Ringelblum Archive -

with which to develop their own participatory stops. These focused on authentic sites and monuments in that vicinity, and explored themes such as the deportations, the former ghetto hospitals, the role of the Jewish ghetto police, and with the non-heroic aspects of survival, ethical dilemmas, and personal loss.

Mémorial de la Shoah intends to offer an additional workshop for guides of site visits who their partners work with in the frame of HSP, adapting the scheme initially established for the Claims Conference Symposium at Mauthausen and in Linz.

We as facilitators have also benefitted from working closely with and learning from the participants of the Claims Conference Symposium. The opportunity to jointly develop the theory and practice of our approach has borne fruit outside and beyond the parameters of the project itself,



Photo: Darrell Owens

for example, in introducing these concepts within the European Union sponsored project MemAct, where we partnered with Galicia Jewish Museum, and in facilitating visits to Linz, Hartheim and Mauthausen for American educators in the *Power of Place* program, created by Humanus Network and co-led with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Furthermore, in our role as consultants to the United States Holocaust Memorial

Museum (USHMM) we partnered with Zachor to develop a participant-centered tour of Budapest for criminal justice and law enforcement professionals from countries across the African continent. Many of the concepts, strategies and methods refined in the process of the Claims Conference Symposium informed this project, and Zachor and USHMM later used it to create a powerful and engaging new IWalk of Budapest for the USC Shoah Foundation. Here is a link to the IWalk: <https://bit.ly/4qHzdJn>.

Afterword

When we launched our approach to participant-centered learning at the Mauthausen Memorial site some fifteen years ago, it felt like we had created a new house, an educational space we wanted to inhabit and grow. It constituted the basic model, containing the relational triangle of site, history and the visitor, and we knew much work was needed to furnish it with internal structures and methodologies. In the next couple of years, we added rooms to the house, which in the current project are named building blocks: the narrative, the observation, the material and the questions.

Since then, development and experimentation continued at different scales and with different institutional collaborators. An incredibly innovative new room, or building block, was added to the house, that of imagination. We also realized that the process of professional development for educators and guides must follow the same concept of equity and empowerment. This meant that all training sessions must be participatory, with the participants owning the time, and doing away with lectures and speaker-centered presentations.

An additional important broadening of the development of participant-centered learning achieved in this initiative of the Claims Conference is the involvement of education practitioners representing a wide range of international Holocaust institutions. Building on earlier development projects (which all had practical experimentation with and among guides at their core), the very broad range of museum, memorial sites and educational institutions participating in this project—with their different histories, different locations and countries, national status, backgrounds, languages, cultures, structures, sizes and development—is a novelty. The initiative has both tested the compatibility of participant-centered learning to new and different settings, and greatly broadened its exposure to the memorial sites and educational professional community. The enthusiastic response from these colleagues clearly shows its potential for the field and has created a nascent network of colleagues committed to developing it further.

Educators at memorial sites often lack opportunities for regular and sustained professional development. Their employment consists largely of touring groups, and generally does not include time allotted for perpetual learning and reflection on their own work. The Claims Conference continued investment in the field can help to change this, and sustaining the development of the Symposium participants will further enable them to share their experience and expertise in participant-centered learning with others.

However, the challenges facing the educator in creating an educational setting that truly shares ownership, establishes relevance, and empowers participants are not easily overcome.

To address them we need to know more about the human dynamics of exchange within the guided groups visiting Holocaust sites, to better understand what settings optimize learning, and which inhibit it. The participation of Sabrina Išić, a professional external evaluator embedded in both academic and practice communities, takes the development of participant-centered learning beyond the memorial sites' community of practice and discourse and exposes it to empirical categories. Enhancing academic collaboration could be of great value for the further development of the approach. The core questions driving Holocaust education, such as the function and dynamics of critical thinking and self-reflection within group activity, necessitate knowledge and expertise from the social sciences. An approach that exposes visitors to information that undermines what they believed to be true should also be responsible for the reactions it can unleash, such as resistance, disbelief and anger. By its very nature, the experience of cognitive dissonance can be disruptive and emotionally charged, and navigating a group of people through such an experience successfully is no simple matter.

The cry of "Never Again!" from the survivors rising from the ashes of the Holocaust was a desperate emotional call for humanity to commit itself to ensure we learn from their experience. This cry is as relevant today as it was all those years ago, but our understanding of how to go about it still leaves much to be desired. Visits to Holocaust memorial sites confront people with some of the most difficult questions about human nature, and the educators at these sites have an enormous responsibility to help visitors through this challenging encounter. To do so, these facilitators need much more support, to enable them to understand the socio-psychological dynamics triggered during the visit, develop the appropriate educational settings, and put effective methodologies into practice.

This strategic initiative has placed the Claims Conference at the forefront of addressing these issues. Not only has the Claims Conference enabled the continued development of the architecture and interior design of our "house" of participant-centered learning, it has also opened the door to new colleagues from many institutions. The "house" is becoming a living space for deeper conversations within the field, amongst facilitators and educators, for how to advance Holocaust education at historical sites. For the institutions responsible for visits to Holocaust sites, this raises the question of how best to create a fruitful environment and an effective infrastructure in which participant-centered learning can flourish.

Yariv Lapid

Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our participants for devoting their precious time to this process, for sharing their experience and expertise, and to helping us further develop this participatory approach. We find the development of their own activities and the case studies they have written for this Handbook deeply inspiring and are grateful for all we have learned with and from them.

Yariv Lapid, our inspiration, friend and colleague for many years, stood at the cradle of this approach and continues to work with us in the further development and dissemination of participant-centered learning.

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As such, we would like to thank all involved not only for their contributions but also for their friendship and companionship as we travelled this road together.

Paul Salmons and Wolfgang Schmutz

A key brilliance of this methodology lies in its challenge to traditional pedagogical hierarchies. In the world of participatory education, the lines between “educator” and “learner” are intentionally blurred, fostering a shared ecosystem of knowledge construction and dissemination.

Sabrina Isić, Report of the External Evaluator

This strategic initiative of the Claims Conference is based on the model of participant-centered learning, a pedagogic approach developed by Yariv Lapid, Paul Salmons, and Wolfgang Schmutz.

It is a methodology where learners are no longer viewed as passive recipients of lectures, stories, or moral lessons delivered by a guide. The focus instead is on the visitors. They take a greater share of the talking. Critically, they are active participants in the process of meaning-making, how people construe, understand and make sense of this difficult past, and its resonance and relevance in the present.

Instead of moral lessons to be imparted, this approach engages with the deeply troubling moral, ethical, social and political questions that an encounter with the Holocaust holds for us today. The key interest is in what the participants of tours make of these questions, what conversations emerge, what meanings might be discovered.

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