

JASENOVAC MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S PERMANENT EXHIBITION – THE VICTIM AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Nataša JOVIČIĆ*

On 27 November 2006, the new permanent exhibition of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum and Education Center at the Jasenovac Memorial Site was opened to the public. This ceremonial occasion did not pass without praise from some distinguished circles, but also criticism from other corners. Prior to briefly discussing contemporary museum techniques for portraying war crimes, it is necessary to say a few words about the previous permanent exhibitions and the traveling exhibitions of the Jasenovac Memorial Site, because this is the only way to fully comprehend the significance of the new exhibition.

The first permanent exhibition of the Memorial Museum in Jasenovac was opened on 4 July 1968. Based on the photographs displayed in the exhibition hall, it can be concluded that the priority in presentation of the operation of the Ustasha camp was placed on those artifacts that shed light on the lives of camp internees: eating utensils, mail sent from the camp by internees, documents testifying to the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia and the Jasenovac Camp. Thus, there were no photographs of corpses, naked and massacred bodies, the killed and killing, nor were any items used for this killing exhibited. Alongside the exhibition, the film *Gospel of Evil* was screened in the projection room, which every visitor was obligated to see.

After a two-day visit (11-12 October 1985) to the Jasenovac Memorial Site by a delegation from the Serbian Academy of Arts and Science, one delegation member expressed his dissatisfaction, saying, as recorded in the minutes of 13 October 1985, that the exhibition (meaning the then current permanent exhibition) did “not feature some first-class documents”. Alteration of the permanent exhibition commenced immediately, and on 24 April 1988 the second permanent exhibition in the Memorial Museum was opened.

In this second permanent exhibition, a prominent place was accorded to a frieze containing large-format photographs that exclusively depicted torture and details and parts of slaughtered and massacred human bodies. Among the photographs on display, only a small number were actually taken in Jasenovac, while the rest were taken from documentation from other sites of suffering and massacres perpetrated during the Second World War or in other camps. Besides these changes in comparison to the first permanent exhibition, the film *Gospel of Evil* continued to be shown in the Museum's cinema hall. School-

* Nataša Jovičić, Director of the Jasenovac Memorial Site, Jasenovac, Croatia

age children and other visitors were essentially forced to watch it, there was no choice, as all visitors simply had to pass through the projection room.

It is essential to note that in 1986 the traveling Jasenovac exhibition was established under the title "The Dead Open the Eyes of the Living." The exhibition was even set up in the barracks of the Yugoslav People's Army, which articles from the military newspapers of the time (*Front* and *Narodna armija*) confirmed. The traveling exhibition consisted of three hundred photographs from the permanent exhibition's frieze. There was a brief description/caption at the bottom of each photograph. An analysis of the language and style used to write these captions shows that these were texts intended to engender and understanding of the theme of genocide.

From 1986 to 1991, a traveling exhibition from the Jasenovac Museum dealing with war crimes during the Second World War was shown to soldiers in Yugoslav People's Army barracks throughout the former Yugoslavia. The method of presentation and contextualization of the exhibited materials and photographs was arranged according to the standards of a propaganda-based rather than educational exhibition. Numerous articles in the periodicals meant for the Yugoslav People's Army, such as the aforementioned *Front* and *Narodna armija*, testify to this fact. Additionally, a series of features by Col. Antun Miletić from the Military History Institute in Belgrade were also published in both of these publications from 1986 to 1991. He was the co-author in work on the second permanent exhibition in 1998, and also a member of the Serbian Academy delegation that visited Jasenovac in 1985. In texts intended for the Army, the author provided detailed descriptions of the suffering in the Jasenovac camp, and his accounts of how the victims were killed were written in exhaustive detail. These texts were accompanied by illustrations that corresponded to the photographs from the traveling Jasenovac exhibition and the frieze from the second permanent exhibition in the Memorial Museum. These photographs exclusively depicted the dead bodies of the slain. Given that these feature pieces in the military periodicals and the traveling exhibition appeared in the same period, 1986-1991, and the final such exhibition was shown in 1991 in the barracks in Petrinja, one can conclude that this is a unique form of abuse and manipulation of materials from the Jasenovac Museum, which should have had just the opposite purpose: education and prevention of similar crimes.

Based on the aforementioned aspects, it is possible to conclude that in the two former museum presentations of the Jasenovac camp (1968, 1986, 1988), and by means of the traveling exhibition, the victims were marginalized to the point at which they were rendered invisible and effectively non-existent. The victims were given no names, and the manner in which they were portrayed constituted renewed violence against them, while the rhetoric about Ustasha crimes served to justify another ideology that was preparing a war against the Republic of Croatia. In this ideology, the victims of Jasenovac became mere instruments to generate and inspire the crimes that the Yugoslav People's Army committed during Croatia's Homeland War.

An example of the instrumentalization of the Jasenovac Museum and its exponents/photographs, and the later examples of Vukovar, Omarska and dozens of other death camps from the 1991-1998 period, opened a new question of exceptional cultural value: **can the ideological manipulation and misuse of the victims of one war crime be utilized to incite another war crime, and how?**

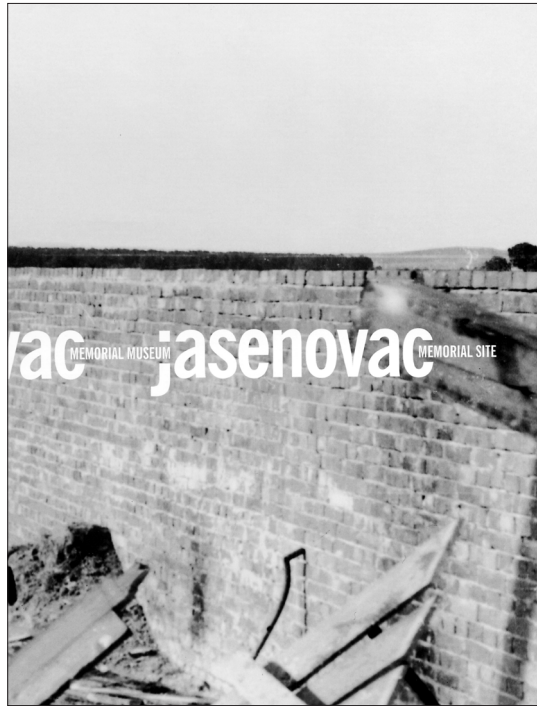
When we conceived of the new permanent exhibition for the Memorial Museum, we were deeply aware that one genocide can foster another, that one instance of hatred can incite another. We knew that the commemoration of such a place, the site of a camp and suffering, the site of death and the most horrid Ustasha crimes, is an extremely complex and sensitive undertaking, not just because of our need and duty to remove the veil of obscurity from the past, but even more due to the need and duty to ensure that our path into the future is the correct one. For Jasenovac recalls a time of horror, and more than anything else, Jasenovac is a symbol of human suffering that loudly proclaims the contemporary admonishment: "Never again!"

To amplify this warning to the greatest possible extent, we took every effort to restore, as much as possible, the identity, personal significance and dignity of each individual victim. The reprisals in the Jasenovac camp were always committed on a mass scale, but the suffering was solely and always individual. Instead of considering the Jasenovac crimes from the perspective of the criminals—a perspective that solely emphasizes the mass of bones and blood—we decided to search for individual human tragedies, and restore the personality of each victim and place this in the context in which, and as a result of which, each individual became a victim of the crimes at Jasenovac.

The new permanent exhibition in the Memorial Museum accords due respect and dignity to each victim by returning their identities. The museum's exhibition has no intention of making the victims invisible (which was the case in the exhibitions of this same museum in the period from 1968 to 1991); just the opposite is the case, for now the intention is to present and portray them, but the method of this presentation and portrayal is to remove the ideological strata that have previously made them such a convenient instrument to generate hatred. We knew that the new museum exhibition in the Jasenovac Memorial Museum and the new Education Center must not serve as a means for potential ideological abuse that could lead to new victims.

Because of this, the spatial concept for the exhibition by Leonida Kovač and the architectural solution by Helena Paver Njirić is rooted in the meaning of the term "memorial site", wherein the emphasis on the crime, which was the conceptual platform for earlier Jasenovac exhibitions, has now been moved to the specific victims of the crimes. Thus, for the public to feel and comprehend the terror of the crimes, it was necessary to set up the exhibition to stress that the Jasenovac crimes were committed against tens of thousands of individuals who have their names and surnames, rather than just an anonymous mass reduced to the group term 'victims.'

The exhibition furthermore concentrates on the affirmation of life and raising the awareness of visitors (particularly school children), on the fragility of



human life and the threats thereto in the face of frenetic and senseless ideologies. The fundamental testimony of the exhibition, i.e. the frailty of human life and the dangers of losing it, is artistically presented with a selection of basic construction material that literally functions as a framework for speaking about crimes. As an appropriate material that unifies all segments of the exhibition, visualizing the discourse on war crimes and stressing the historical and ideological context thereof, is glass. The properties of glass used in the exhibition's structure as a visual portrayal, possesses a dual symbolic connotation. It simultaneously symbolizes fragility (of human life) and a potential danger (we only need recall how perilous shards of shattered glass can be). And it is precisely glass that has been used to illuminate the names of the 69,842 so far verified victims of Jasenovac.

Work on the new permanent exhibition was approached scientifically with no ideological considerations dictating the basic function of the Jasenovac Museum: education and prevention of mass crimes against humanity, and a component of this approach is the Education Center itself, which should become a place of learning about the Jasenovac genocide, the Holocaust and suffering, as the foundation for knowledge on human rights, non-violence, cultural diversity, democracy and the rule of law. In the future, this place should raise the awareness of young people about the causes and consequences of denying human dignity, so that a different world can be built on the basis of this knowledge.

The duty to preserve remembrance of the victims of the Ustasha crimes in the former Jasenovac Concentration Camp has been supplemented with the opening of the new Education Center – a place where visitors of the Memorial Museum and **school-children over 12 years of age** will be able to seek answers to historical, ethical and philosophical questions tied to the Holocaust, genocide, war crimes and human rights through various instructional programs.

Instead of the conventional organized classes, project designer Davor Katušić, with Production 005, has formulated the premises of the Education Center functionally, based on an outline for lecture programs that we devised in cooperation with the Public Education Agency, the Ministry of Science and the Faculty of Arts and Letters, which will be conducted in work with visitors to the Jasenovac Memorial Site.

Lectures, teaching and instruction will be conducted at several levels: in the Education Center, then school children go to the Museum in groups with assignments to learn about themes tied to the Ustasha camp at Jasenovac, the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, deportations, death and resistance and numerous other topics posted on large display panels, and with the help of available computer databases on the exhibition, they can more thoroughly explore the themes assigned to them. After touring the Museum, they return to the Education Center, where they can discuss the individual human fates of slain Serbs, Roma, Jews and Croats, whose testimonies they saw in the form of documented video records in the exhibition itself. The video recordings, i.e. memories of the victims, are presented for the first time in the history of the Jasenovac Memorial Site with all available archival materials and photographs pertaining to the establishment and operation of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp. Additionally, the permanent exhibition also features numerous physical items from the collection of the Jasenovac Commemorative Site. These are items that testify to the manner in which internees were executed in the concentration camp, the manner in which they worked on camp grounds and their everyday lives in the camp. The database, which contains 66 different topics and the list of data on victims (nationality, date of birth, etc.), has been conceived so that it can and must be continually supplemented with data gathered in further research.

Despite all of the obstacles and problems that we encountered during our work on the project, and numerous critiques on the lack of portrayal of the crimes, I continue to defend the new Permanent Exhibition, and the new educational concept, because I believe that we nowhere incite hatred, and that the Ustasha crimes are unambiguously shown, that the truth has been told, that nothing has been concealed, and I am deeply convinced that Jasenovac is becoming a place to promote the humanist and ethical ideals of humanity by combining education about genocide and the Holocaust, on the one hand, and learning about human dignity, democracy and non-violence, on the other.

This project is thus a project of human dignity. It is dedicated to all of those slain, all who survived and all of those who wish to know and who acknowledge of the responsibility of remembering the victims.

Translated by Edward Bosnar