memorial culture 2.0 :
transformation and rewiring of traumatic personal histories

Ildiko Meny _ photographies Ildiko Meny & Rolf Krahl

Overview and reflections about Holocaust memorials in public space. The author is part of an interdisciplinary team of artists and scientists working on The Vienna Project, a public memorial to symbolically represent multiple groups of persecuted victims of National Socialism, which took place in Vienna between 2013 and 2014. After reviewing some literature this article describes some of the monuments and memorials in public space with focus on Austria and Germany and new methods of remembrance brought by web 2.0.

> " …of course he couldn't be alive anymore, said Menasha the physician, opening his medical bag. He removed several pages of death certificates, which were picked up by another breeze and sent into the trees. Some would fall with the leaves this September, some would fall with the trees generations later… " [1]

On collecting bits and pieces and autobiographic writing

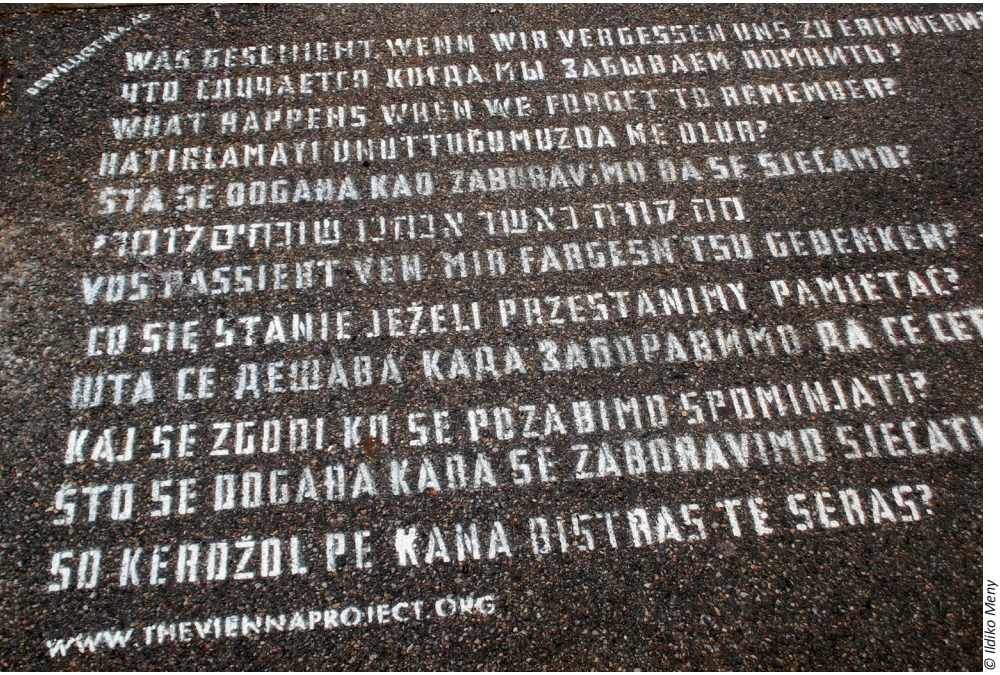
When I think about my deceased Hungarian grandmother, Robert Montgomery's famous public light installation [2] comes to mind: " the people you love become ghosts inside of you, that's how you keep them alive! "

What if our beloved souls left behind lots of letters, pictures and other legacies in old shoe boxes behind, until a point when no one neither read nor cared about them? With web 2.0, this legacy and those historical pieces can be connected to other little shoe boxes, documents and pieces, allowing more fascinating stories, historical events, and personal stories to emerge from these otherwise fragmented pieces of historical knowledge.

It is difficult to find appropriate rituals and ways to cope with and to memorialize the people you love and people who survived or perished because of tragic, incomprehensible and seemingly indescribable antecedents in history. Such antecedents are likely to be followed by new generations often estranged or even traumatized by it, such that they struggle to integrate this legacy into their own history and everyday lives. Some people might not want to dig into their legacy for various reasons, and we need to recognize and respect that some boxes will remain closed forever. But they might be opened much later by someone from following generations, maybe by " chance " or after searching into the biography of their ancestors, which can become an important method for individuation.

My reflection mainly addresses memory culture, especially Holocaust memorials and educational projects in public space and the advantages of our digitalized world. While I am not a historian, I am nonetheless very sensitive to and involved in some research into this subject, it is obvious that this topic must be handled sensitively. Listening to some stories from some of the last survivors of the Holocaust, or reviewing coping mechanisms based on art and literature, is challenging. One can be retraumatized by all the past stories and darkest chapters of our history. Therefore after discussing various examples of authors, sculptors and public memorials I would like to introduce a project I was involved for the last four years. A project that even brought me back to a place where my grandfather studied law and where some of my ancestors worked at the royal court: Vienna, Austria. You can find an overview of the Vienna project in the final part of this article.

There are numerous authors, both contemporary and deceased, who wrote and continue to write about their legacy, including their personal memories. Imre Kertesz (*1929) received the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature for describing his life in concentration camps [3]. Many others, including Primo Levi, Jean Amery and poet Paul Celan [4-6] also left written legacies – painful memories, struggles and victories – to name the unnamable to the readers, but lost the battle and committed suicide. Autobiographic writing seems to be a way of conquering trauma and leaving a legacy of extinguished lives of beloved family and friends, of ruined homes and lost be-



© Ildiko Meny

longings. While it was possible for the authors of Jewish origin mentioned above to publish from one exile to another, a number of authors had their legacies lost among the bookshelves, only to be rediscovered years later – even as late as today. For example Elias Canetti and his wife Veza were forced to emigrate to the United Kingdom and Veza Canetti's work was somehow eclipsed by the success of her husband. In 2012, an artists collective initiated by Gertrude Moser-Wagner in Vienna, Austria revitalized Veza Canetti's unique literary legacy with a series of readings, exhibitions and performances close to the places where the Canettis lived before they had to leave Vienna in 1938 [7].

Other contemporary authors and artists needed to travel across Europe – and even the world – to reconstruct their whole family biographies from objects they had inherited. In "The Hare with Amber Eyes" the author Edmund de Waal (*1964) reconstructed the biography of his family clan Ephrussy [8] from a collection of Japanese miniature sculptures called "Netsukes", which he inherited from an uncle. Other survivors who describe the life of their ancestors in order to bring back information on former Jewish *Shtetl* culture include Edgar Hilsenrath (*1926) [9] and his younger colleague, who could almost be his grandson, Jonathan Safran Foer (*1977). In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel "Everything is Illuminated", he imagines the search for the person who saved his grandfather's life during the Nazi regime in a now renamed town in Ukraine; he begins his journey from the United States with a single picture in his hand [10]. Stories

of the former life in the *Shtetl* are written in a darkly satirical manner: once, he describes a severe accident in a mill, when a saw blade sticks into the miller's head, where it will remain for the rest of his life. This grotesque and painful situation is interpreted as luck by the inhabitants of the *Shtetl*, but could also be seen as a symbol for being stuck in history for both the reader and the author himself:

> "The men in the flour mill, who wanted to do something kind for Brod, something that might make her love them as they loved her, chipped in to have the Kolkers body bronzed, and they petitioned the governing council to stand the statue in the center of the *shtetl* square as a symbol of strength and vigilance, which as of the perfectly perpendicular saw blade, could also be used to tell more or less accurate time by the sun. But rather than of strength and vigilance, he soon became a symbol of luck's power. It was luck that had put that blade in his head, and luck that had kept it there, and luck that had timed his passing to coincide with the birth of his child. Men and women journeyed from distant *shtetl* to rub his nose, which was worn to the flesh in only one month time and had to be rebronzed." [11]

How often do we – either personally or as a society – need to rebronze, rebuild and rewire our memories to the pieces left in our "shoe boxes" filled with legacy from our ancestors? Is it possible to integrate these reconnections with history into our identity within a lifetime? What is the time frame required to acquire a more complex view of history, and why does it take so long to have official memorials erected? Is the erection of bronze plaques an adequate way to pull together individual memory traces in the streets, with dedications to perished and murdered people serving simultaneously as places to mourn, as well as to discuss, and to educate future generations?

For some, these memorials might even be too painful – but without these and history education to constantly remind us of the unimaginable dimensions of horrific wars, such horror might again be overlooked and its gravity diminished or even denied! The erection of Holocaust memorials in public space in Germany and Austria therefore is a long and painful process – with very limited ways in which they are presented – compared to the hordes of equestrian monuments of famous male warriors and wealthy proud emperors or national heroes worldwide.

Bronzed legacies in public space

Another interesting example is comprised of the bronze shoes and plate

at the Danube river bank in Budapest, Hungary to commemorate victims shot into the river by arrow cross militiamen in 1944/45. The bronzed shoes might be an approach to retain the individual within the anonymity in the group. The œuvre was erected in 2005 after being planned by film director Can Togay and the sculptor Gyula Pauer.

Obviously almost all artistic revisualization processes are accompanied by highly antagonistic, heated public discussions. It seems that we have to include these emotions into the process to provide the "public space" for exactly this dialogue. *No Reconciliation without Hatred* is the title of a book written by psychologist David Becker, who has done over 30 years of work and research in the trauma field. In this book, he stresses that the official recognition and visualization of crimes also contribute to the process of integration and healing [12].

As a consequence, most of the official Holocaust memorials are created – intentionally or unintentionally – to be as neutral as possible, providing clear geometrical structures typically illuminated by very sharp lights from all sides – that preclude symbolic interpretation. Every single word to be written on the memorial, and especially what or who is left out, is weighted [13]. Consequently, the time from the proposal to the erection and unveiling of almost all of the official memorials in public space in Germany and Austria have taken decades. While the Israeli Memorial Site *Yad Vashem* [14] was proposed to be built right after WWII, it took another 50 years to propose and select approaches for larger public memorials in Austrian and German cities, except for the reconstruction of concentration camps that were reconstructed immediately as museums and memorials (sometimes by the survivors themselves) and the collections of Jewish museums and rebuilt synagogues.

The erection of official Holocaust Memorials in Austria and Germany

Four more examples of classical static memorials in public space include *the Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna, *the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe*, *the Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma*, and *the Memorial at Bebelplatz* in Berlin to commemorate the burning of the books in 1933.

The Memorial at Bebelplatz consists of glass plates set into cobblestones, revealing a view of empty bookcases, and a plaque bearing a line from Heinrich Heine's play, *Almansor* (1821) set into the square:

> "Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen."
>
> (It was only preliminaries. Where they burn books, they will, in the end, also burn people.)

© Ildiko Meny

The Holocaust Memorial in Vienna [15] was unveiled on 25 October 2000, one day before the Austrian national holiday, another initiative of Simon Wiesenthal, and made by artist Rachel Whiteread. The memorial was created five years before the erection of *the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe* in Berlin.

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe [16], a memorial in Berlin to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, was inaugurated on May 10, 2005. It was designed by architect Peter Eisenman and engineer Buro Happold. It consists of a 19,000 m^2 site covered with 2,711 concrete slabs or "stelae", arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field. An attached underground "Place of Information" holds the names of all known Jewish Holocaust victims, obtained from the *Yad Vashem* Memorial and Museum in Israel.

Already in 1992, the German government decided to erect a national memorial to the murdered European Sinti and Roma [17] who were persecuted as "Gypsies". The memorial by artist Dani Karavan consists of a well with a retractable stone on which a fresh flower is placed daily. Panels present informations on the persecution and mass murder of this minority under the National Socialist regime of terror. It was unveiled in 2012.

© Ildiko Meny

Examples of ongoing initiatives of individual artists that include several victim groups: "Stolpersteine"/cobblestones and "Orte der Erinnerung/The Vienna Project"

A *Stolperstein* (from German, "stumbling block"; plural Stolpersteine) is a monument created by German artist Gunter Demnig, which commemorates a victim of the Holocaust. Stolpersteine are small, cobblestone-sized memorial plaques that commemorate individual victims – both those who died and those who survived – commissioned by their relatives, friends or former neighbors. It is a very personal way for surviving family to have a Stolperstein erected where their relatives used to live. The list of places that have Stolpersteine now extends to several countries and hundreds of cities and towns [18].

The Vienna Project [19] represents an ongoing social action Holocaust memorial project initiated and directed by US artist Karen Frostig, the daughter of Dr. Benjamin Frostig who was forced to leave Vienna in 1938. Slated to begin in 2013, the project is to be situated in the streets of Vienna marking 38 historical sites with the following sentence spray-painted in ten languages:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE FORGET TO REMEMBER?

The Vienna Project is the first public memorial in Europe to symbolically represent multiple groups of persecuted victims of National Socialism, while also naming individual victims and dissidents on record within a given country, murdered between 1938-1945.

Forging a dynamic relationship between different disciplines: art, video, typography, web design, street theater, sound art, history, archival research, and Holocaust education, The Vienna Project is envisioned as a "living" memorial based on a participatory model of engagement, and aims to bring memory and discussions from the different street sites to the people.

The Vienna Project marks the 75th anniversary year of the Anschluss in 1938, and for this reason the 38 historical sites in Vienna were spray-painted. From October 2013 to October 2014, Ildiko Meny, initiated and curated artistic performances in several of these 38 memory sites: silent vigils, "pansy" planting at *Resselpark* in memory of persecuted homosexuals, a "move this world" dance lesson in front of the *Naturhistorisches Museum* (which was involved in researching and curating exhibits on obsolete pseudoscientific antropology until 1990). The interactive "Memory Games" by Nina Prader involved an exchange of stories originating from a set of pictures made by the artist.

© Ildiko Meny

Ossi Yalon's "Well of Remembrance" was inspired by the *Kristallnacht* at Temple *Marpe Lanefesh altes AKH*; and a public reading by students from *Angewandte* at the former *Palais Rothschild* today's Workers Chamber.

Working in public space is very dependent on weather conditions and (pedestrian) traffic. Nevertheless it is clearly another possibility of connecting the historical site with current questions as an ongoing open dialogue between past and present life. Assessing historical informations in an interactive manner through digitalized archives and personal knowledge through social networks can be a new and illuminating way of searching and regaining hidden or seemingly lost information.

The process of creating identity with regard to one's past, including traumatic experiences transmitted from ancestors is as open as every individual's initiative to find time, energy and motivation to conduct the relevant research into his or her story.

References

[1] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is illumintated*, New York, Harper Perennial (Reissue), 2005 (Paperback).
[2] http://www.robertmontgomery.org.
[3] Imre Kertez, *Fateless*, Evanston (Illinois), translated by Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson, Northwestern University Press, 1992 (Hardcover).
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Celan.
[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primo_levi.
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Amery.
[7] http://www.wieninternational.at/en/aktuell/in-the-footsteps-of-veza-canetti-en.
[8] de Waal, Edmund, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, New York, Picador, Reprint, 2011 (Paperback).
[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Hilsenrath.
[10] Jonathan Safran Foer, *op. cit.*
[11] Jonathan Safran Foer, *op. cit.*
[12] David Becker, *Ohne Hass keine Versoehnung. Das Trauma der Verfolgten*, Freiburg, Kore Edition, 1992 (Paperback).
[13] http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2012/07/the-inadequacy-of-berlins-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe.html.
[14] http://www.yadvashem.org.
[15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judenplatz_Holocaust_Memorial.
[16] http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials.html.
[17] http://zentralrat.sintiundroma.de.
[18] http://www.stolpersteine.com/EN/home.html.
[19] http://www.theviennaproject.com.