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Museum of Recent History Celje, Slovenia

COLLECTIONS IN (R)EVOLUTION

In my short presentation I would like to present the specific content and meaning of collections of a special type of museum – Museum of revolution, which was known mainly in Eastern Europe, and the changes of these collections which happened together with museum transformation in more recent time.

The article wishes to present the issue of museum which was founded by authorities in the former socialist and communist country with the view to establish and legitimise the status, the power and the politics of the regime and at the same time to form, control and re-shape the collective historical memory of a certain community. Primary activity – collecting objects, maintaining, preserving and presenting the cultural heritage, education and scientific research – was largely ideologically biased. The consequences of broader political and social changes in the last sixty years in Europe were indirectly also reflected in collections and activity of the museums. Museums responded to the transformations in different ways, with different powers of comprehension and different dynamics. They did not only lose numerous visitors, but also their mission and the essence of their existence. That is why such museums were closed down, renamed and re-formed after 1990. But what happened with their collections? What's the role and mission of these collections and museum objects in modern society?

The key questions asked are thus: What collections or which museum objects were suitable for the mission of museums of revolution? In what way did they reconstruct the ideology, how were museum objects presented at exhibitions? How did the transformation of these museums in the last two decades reflect in the collecting policy? And last but not least, what is the role of collections today? How are they revived?

The Museum of Revolution Celje – Slovenia

As an example I mention the Museum of Revolution Celje – Slovenia, now renamed Museum of Recent History, where I am employed.

The Celje Museum of Recent History was founded in 1963 as the Celje Museum of Revolution. Its main purpose was to present regional and national history between 1918 and 1945, with special emphasis on the history of the labour movement, antifascist struggle and socialist revolution. In 1991 it was formally renamed the Celje Museum of Recent History, and successfully concluded the demanding path of restructuring and transformation.

At the time of its establishment in 1963, the Museum of Revolution Celje stored extensive and various kinds of museum material, which can be divided into four thematic sets:

1. museum objects representing violence – these are different means of violence – weapons, guns, rifles, machine guns, cannons, military devices and military equipment.

Exhibition language of this group of objects emphasised technical perfection of objects, their good condition, diversity, rarity, while the fact that these objects are nonetheless means of violence and killing is left overlooked. Looking at such museum objects created feelings of magnificence and sublime enthusiasm, and not, paradoxically, feelings of anxiety and horror.

2. The second group comprises museum objects which symbolise heroism and which work on the level of memorialness. These objects formed an extensive collection which included different decorations and medals, personal objects of national heroes, flags, statues, models and monuments. The museum took in its care entire legacies of individuals and, in doing so, made sure to preserve the memory and glorification of personalities with the status of national heroes.
3. The third thematic group consists of museum objects such as witnesses, evidence and accounts of the war period and preservation of historical memory. The collected objects show the way of life and ways of surviving war. Work in this field was concentrated on cooperation with victims of violence or their relatives and witnesses, members of resistance movements, war veterans and other survivors. Exhibitions based on these objects present events and certain rounded historical periods. These presentations or exhibitions can be independent and speak about the time of violence and its forms for themselves, or they can be presented within the context of exhibitions showing a certain longer historical period. A collection of farewell letters written by those sentenced to death a day before conviction is shocking, then hand-made objects by people kept in camps, their equipment, and also various kinds of documentary material.
4. Documentary and propaganda paper material was extensive: these are documents, photographs, books, slogans, postcards, memorial letters, a partisan newspaper, and recordings of speeches. These museum objects were used to create simple, so-called “paper exhibitions”, where mainly media of words and pictures are used, with very few objects.

Therefore we can say that objects of the Museum of revolution Celje were active in the exhibition language of the museum

- between science and propaganda,
- between education and indoctrination,
- they built iconography,
- left white patches and tabooed certain topics,
- were between individual and collective memory.

Museum objects were actually the exhibition of power, with the aim of affirmations, especially those the regime was particularly proud of. Content-wise – regardless of the various types of exhibitions or precisely because of that – they remained with the black-and-white portrayal of political history. Collections were a tool for presenting ideology and for building collective historical memory on the one side, and at the same time a tool for controlling the society.

And what is the role of these collections and objects on the threshold of the 50th anniversary of the museum, when the parade horse was replaced by the yellow stars of united Europe?

Today the Museum of Recent History Celje is a contemporary museum, which follows modern trends in museology in all segments of museum work – in forming the collecting policy as well as in the ways of interpreting museum material.

Despite the changes in collecting, research and exhibition policies, there was not an object at the museum which would be redundant or in any way disregarded. Most of them lost their function of an exhibit or exhibition object. Objects were removed from exhibitions, not discarded. I would like to stress that these are carefully managed and documented “movements”, carried out in accordance with all principles of museum and library work. Certain collections are still being supplemented, e.g. the collection of farewell letters, and topics dealt with in the past are now part of broader research; historical contextualization and revival of material are stressed.

Among different interpretations of collections there are also new and trendy forms of interpretation with an interpretative form such as for example the form of artistic installations, which are an effective exhibition form which was not present in the past in historical museums. Installation is a strong form of interpretation when heritage and museum objects address visitors and spectators through the language of art. The project of “Artistic interpretation of collections and supplementation”, which started in 2009 at the Museum of Recent History Celje, uses artistic potential for broader recognisability and accessibility of a collection, its revival and systematic supplementation. In this way we draw attention to material which is kept in storage and is not on display, bring it closer to society and revive it. In such a way we will interpret the collection of weapons and the collection of farewell letters, which thus not only preserve the memory but also stimulate critical social reflection. In this way the collection is engaged and turns its mission towards the future.

At the beginning of the 21st century the time is obviously ripe for themes with topical and engaged accent and the necessary contextualization of what is exhibited. Exhibition topics talking about the dark sides of the past and “difficult heritage” are even more subjected to such an approach. “Museum’s unveiling” of the suppressed views and themes from the period of recent history is a new challenge in museum practice and a demanding task of overcoming different obstacles. “While the heritage of material and spiritual progress and development, which brings pride to an individual as well as broader community already at the time of its “life”, practically offers itself to one day become a museum exhibit, it is different with the legacy of evil. It usually remains where it was created. In the dusk, dark and silence” (Tone Kregar: 2008).

The use of contemporary information technologies is necessary. Modern information technologies offer also to museums numerous communication tools for their updated two-way communication and at the same time trigger completely new forms of museum work. The use of new technologies is indispensable in research work, communication and interpretation of exhibition themes and in all-round communication of a museum with society and its users. Accessibility / representativeness / participation are notions which denote activities of museums in their imaginary forms or digitalized museums. At the museum we formed the NOB Portal (national liberation struggle portal) this year. The aim of the integrated portal Ce-NOB is to gather in one place an exceptional stock of different sources relating to the period of the Second World War in the territory of Celje and Slovenia. The content of the portal is intended for study and research purposes as well as individual use. By increasing accessibility of museum material online – which has the ambition or will offer the possibility to be developed into a national portal for the period of the Second World War – we will also increase recognisability of the material itself, and also of the period from which this material originates and which it refers to, and in this way an opportunity will be given to the expert and lay public to get more comprehensive information about the heritage of this period and also create a clearer picture about the period.

The first and still fresh responses to the Ce-NOB portal from experts as well as interested publics fill everybody who took part in the project with satisfaction and optimism. The portal became known as transparent, handy and useful, and as such entirely reaches its goals and its purpose, but we will of course, if possible, take into account potential suggestions, opinions and comments of users. At the same time we are well aware that we took an important, but only a minor step towards enabling the widest accessibility of our museum material. It needs to be continued, upgraded and expanded.

Conclusion

Especially the museums that dealt with recent history, among them especially the former red museums, therefore faced new challenges and questions. As active participants or initiators of social and cultural processes in the field of (re)interpretation of the past, the museums deal with the characteristics of a particular historical period, to which their scientific and professional interest is devoted. But if they want to carry out this mission in a credible and competent way, they first have to critically confront the difficult heritage of their country, nation or community, as well as their own role in it. In order to be able to (re)define their mission, the museums must objectively interpret their former status and critically assess their own past.

In any case, our basic guide is demystification of museum objects and collections and demystification of the collecting process. This opens entirely new dimensions in modern museum practices. Approaches which allow people to choose/collect material themselves and consequently document memories at their discretion, establish new concepts of musealization, which can be used by individuals or groups to choose “cultural heritage” themselves, or make decisions about what will be musealized and institutionalized as cultural heritage.