



International Committee for Memorial Museums for the Remembrance of Victims of Public Crimes
le Comité international pour les musées à la mémoire des victimes de crimes publics
Comité Internacional de los Museos Conmemorativos de las Víctimas de Crímenes Públicos

Wulff E. Brebeck

Report by the chairperson

for the term July 2001 till April 2005

The beginning

IC Memo was founded during ICOM's General Conference in Barcelona (Spain) on 3. July 2001. At that time we had 10 members. The committee was aproved by the

leading bodies of ICOM on a provisional basis. The interim period lasted about one year.

The following members were elected to the board:

Wulff E. Brebeck (Director of Wewelsburg District Museum, Chairman), Jan Munk (Director of the Terezin Memorial) and Thomas Lutz (Memorial Museum Co-ordinator at the Topography of Terror, Berlin) as deputy, Jan Erik Schulte (Wewelsburg District Museum) as secretary and treasurer, as well as Bettina Bouresh and Klaus Müller (U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington) as board members.

The programme

We started off with visions which, for all the differences in emphasis, nonetheless had so much in common. It is the task of memorial museums, as we conceive them, to identify and document exhaustively public crimes mainly committed in the 20th century by showing solidarity - as a public and cultural duty - with the victims of such crimes. And our memorial museums should still perform this task even in such cases where the perpetrators are not being pursued politically and legally at a national or international level. Memorial museums remembering the victims of public crimes, i.e. „historical museums of a new types“, have made the public aware of the significance of negative remembrance. Negative remembrance involves our remembering the guilt of members of societal majorities responsible for such crimes. If we succeed in reclaiming this kind of remembrance as a part of our historical heritage, our discourse will help to redefine the space and influence of inferior victim groups on the collective memory at both the national and international levels.

The new committee therefore set itself the following goals:

To organise a long-term communication among the members using the framework of ICOM and taking in stimulating issues from this worldwide organisation; to co-operate on developing the theoretical conception of negative remembrance and this new type of museum through organising conferences and promoting pertinent publications; to take first attempts at lobbying at public debates – wherever possible – to promote the interests of these museums; to organise an international exchange of young colleagues between the institutions; and – to achieve these goals – to enlist as many members as possible and to procure funds.

Steps towards implementing the programme

Improving communication

A number of measures have been introduced to improve communication between members and to better publicise memorial museums as historical museums of a new type in the “museum world.” Hence, for example, “The Villa Grimaldi Memorial Museum” in Santiago de Chile and “The State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau” in Oswiecim, Poland were presented in IC MEMO’s Newsletter 1. Newsletter 2 presents “The Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum” in Galilee (Israel)” and the “Gernika Peace Museum”.

In this context I want to thank our secretary Jan Erik Schulte, who is the editor of the “Newsletter”. Grants to publish the periodical are given by the District of Paderborn.

“ICOM News” has published short reports on the Villa Grimaldi on the Terezin Memorial Museum and Wewelsburg District Museum.

IC MEMO was introduced at a number of conferences. One of these was the first conference of European memorial museums held in Berlin from 14th to 17th November 2001 entitled: “On the Way towards Europe? – Memorial Museums Facing New Challenges”. Another opportunity to draw attention to IC MEMO presented itself during ICOM Germany’s annual conference in Warsaw from 17th to 20th October 2002, where a large part of the programme was devoted to the occupation and destruction of Warsaw by the German troops during the Second World War and to Poland’s experiences with the state socialist dictatorship. Some committee members were able to spread the word thanks to their contacts with other colleagues. Jan Munk’s double membership in both associations, for example, has firmly established him as a mediator between IC MEMO and the Coalition of Historic Sites Museums of Conscience. Thanks to him and to our member Wojtech Blodig, who fully supports the work of our board. Our member Julie Higashi organised an informative trip to Japan for the members of the board last September. Then we came in contact respectively renewed old contacts with Japanese memorial institutions. Our member Pnina Rosenberg is prepared to organise a membership meeting in Israel in the near future.

The committee owes its invitation to Guernica, Spain to another double membership: to that of Ms. Iratxe Momoitio, the director of the Guernica Peace Museum, who is a member of both IC MEMO and the Worldwide Network of Peace Museums. I want to express our warm hearted thanks to her! We are glad to come into fruitful contacts with a group of museums whose areas of activity are very similar to those of memorial museums in many ways. In Guernica, the board will be elected for the second term of office since IC MEMO was founded. For the second time in its history, the committee will be taking an important decision on Spanish soil – thanks to the only Spanish member and her good contacts.

Developing a theoretical conception

The committee has adopted a variety of approaches for developing the theoretical conception of memorial museums as a new type of historical museum. One way is to issue publications. Its main approach, however, involves co-organising meetings. A modest contribution towards a theoretical basis for our work appeared in the new committee newsletter under the heading “Reflections”. Attempts to define positions also appeared in other ICOM publications.

International meetings provide an important forum. The first in which IC MEMO played an important role as co-organiser took place from 12th – 15th March 2003 in Berlin. It was entitled “Learning and Remembering: The Holocaust, Genocide and State Organized Crime in the Twentieth Century”. IC MEMO’s ideas on the subject largely coincided with those of the “Georg-Eckert-Institut für Schulbuchforschung” in Brunswick (Germany). Through contacts maintained by Thomas Lutz and the Topography of Terror in Berlin with the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, we were able to secure funds to cover the greater part of the substantial costs. Grants were also given by ICOM Germany. The large number of speakers (33 in all), who were all experts in their fields, and the approximately 150 participants from Europe, Asia, Africa as well as North and South America, and – last but not least – the wide range of topics opened up truly international perspectives. With speakers presenting new, comparative views on genocide and violent crimes, the great diversity of fields in which the participants are involved (as scholars, teachers, journalists, museum and memorial museum staff, and human rights activists), as well as the presentation of a wide variety of scenes of terror, the meeting was “a breakthrough” (Erick Weitz, Minnesota, USA).

The discussions not only produced many interesting results, but also clearly showed the social function of genocide. For all the structural similarities that appear – especially in comparative approaches – the specific role played by genocide in a given society seems to be of particular significance. What needs to be clarified is the nature of this “social project genocide” (Eric Weitz) in which large sections of society are involved in a variety of functions. And this evidently leaves its mark on the next generation too. As Mihran Dabag (Bochum, Germany) demonstrated, genocide is always carried out “for the future” in the name of the next generation. It is therefore of crucial importance whether the next generation denies genocide in order to benefit from its consequences, and thus continues to commit genocide; or whether it refuses to deny genocide and succeeds in acknowledging the guilt of individual representatives of the parents’ generation and thereby manages to come to terms with the historical past. Work at memorial museums with both the surviving victims – which can also mean working with their descendants – and the culprits can probably only be done following a generation conflict in those societies that have experienced genocide.

A publication of the conference contributions is available, but it is only in German.

A conference held by IC MEMO in conjunction with the International Committee of Museums of Arms and Military History (ICOMAM) within the framework of the General Assembly of ICOM in Seoul (Korea) from 4th to 6th October 2004 opened up new perspectives, albeit within a smaller geographical and time frame. The focus there was on Nazi and war crimes and their reception in Europe and East Asia since the Second World War.

The first day-and-a-half of the conference, in the preparation of which Thomas Lutz showed complete commitment, was devoted to examining cultures of remembrance in both Germany and – to a certain extent – the European countries occupied by the German armed forces on the one hand, and similar cultures in Japan and Korea on the other.

On the second day of the conference, the participants turned to the question of “intangible heritage”, the overriding theme of the ICOM General Conference.

On the third day of the conference, participants went on an excursion together. We first visited a cemetery and memorial museum to the student uprising of 19 April 1960 which, thanks to popular support, resulted in the resignation of the country’s corrupt

first post-war president. The centre, which could only be established after a successful struggle for democracy in the early 1990s, shows, in all its monumentality, the belated reinterpretation of this historical event as being of great significance for South Korea's transition from an underdeveloped country to a western-style democracy with a flourishing economy. The next step in our journey was Sodaemun Prison, which is now a memorial museum. The prison was erected by the Japanese (then occupying Korea as a colonial power) in 1908 on the model of German prisons. There the Japanese mainly imprisoned political opponents of both sexes, many of whom were tortured and executed. The last item on the agenda was a visit to the Korea War Memorial. In addition to commemorating fallen US, other allied and South Korean soldiers during the Korean War, this building also presents the glorious role played by the Korean armed forces from the early middle ages to South Korea's intervention in the Vietnam War, when its soldiers fought on the side of the USA.

Generally speaking, any attempts to draw comparisons also reveals some essential differences: whereas East Asia is primarily concerned with coming to terms with war crimes, Europe is having to deal with a situation in which a war was inextricably linked with genocide.

For "negative memories" to be accepted by society, it is not only important that a criminal dictatorship be brought down and discredited, but also that an open society can evolve that examines its taboos. These conditions have been gradually established in the Federal Republic of Germany after decades of heated public debate on questions of contemporary history. Memorial cultures in Europe's state socialist dictatorships, however, were defined by the state, and specific areas deliberately excluded from debate (e.g. the genocide perpetrated on the European Jews, the fact that there were groups of "undesirable victims"). In Japan, the USA's decision not to prosecute the Emperor after the war meant that the "Showa" period (Japanese historiography is periodised according to periods of imperial rule) lasted until Hirohito's death in 1989. In the peaceful decades following the war, in which Japan developed into a leading economic power and the majority of its inhabitants experienced growing prosperity, people cultivated an increasingly positive picture of this era. Critical perspectives were not very welcome. Korea, by contrast, was forced into a war shortly after the first republic was founded. Then it was divided. Until the early 1990s, one dictatorship replaced another. A number of uprisings were bloodily suppressed. The fact that the dictatorships strove for and maintained a close

relationship with Japan is evidently expressed in a – partly – unreflected or unilateral critique of the role played by Japan.

In this respect, then, the “learning goals” that different memorial museums strive for also differ. The need to actively support the goal of a democratic, free and open society is now undoubtedly part of Europe’s shared heritage. In Japan, the emphasis is far more on preserving peace, whereas in Korea the military struggle for national independence and dispatching soldiers to fight on the side of the USA are accepted as a matter of course. In discussions, human rights’ activists were astonished to learn that memorial museums in Europe tend – in their contribution to the establishment of moral values – to emphasise different aspects owing to the divergences in historical experiences at different locations. Most centres and institutions regard themselves neither as human rights’ nor as peace museums. Instead they tend to view these tasks on an equal footing with, for instance, educating people to be tolerant and able to formulate criticisms as well as attempting to strengthen their powers of judgement.

Alongside organising conferences, IC MEMO also participated in individual events. Hence, the committee co-organised a conference of German associations instructing teachers in the teaching of history at the District Museum in Wewelsburg. Under the title “Of the ‘centre of the world’ in Wewelsburg”, historians and educators met on 17 July 2004 and discussed the problems arising at a memorial museum for the inmates of Niederhagen concentration camp: for SS symbolism at Wewelsburg Castle, which was to have been extended to create an ideological centre for the SS during the Third Reich, has made it a site of pilgrimage for young Nazis from all over the world.

First attempts at lobbying

Probably the most important event in this connection is the position adopted by the board of the committee with regard to a parliamentary initiative by the Christlich Demokratische Union and the Christlich Soziale Union (CDU/CSU) parties in the German Bundestag, the parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany, in January and again in May 2004. Their motion aimed to change the existing practice in Germany, whereby memorial museums are supported by the central government. The main criticism expressed in their draft was that the memorial museums dealing with the injustices and persecution perpetrated by the organs of the Soviet occupying forces from 1945-1949 and the Socialist Unity Party dictatorship from 1949-1989

were – ostensibly – receiving too little support. As things stand, every memorial museum of national importance is, in principle, entitled to funds if it fulfils certain objective criteria, and provided the funds are guaranteed to an amount covering 50 per cent of the costs by the German Land where it is located. The CDU/CSU draft argues that funds ought to be granted to fewer museums, which are to be listed in a catalogue containing a disproportionately high number of memorial centres concentrating on the “Communist Dictatorship”. Virtually no distinction is made between the dictatorships.

The counter argument put forward by IC MEMO was as follows: “Against this background, IC MEMO views the CDU/CSU’s motion critically. The planned canonization that would make some of the numerous memorial museums into national memorials suffers from two main drawbacks. It evidently fails to take into account the dynamic civil movement behind the development of memorial museums, which prohibits a closed-shop policy. Furthermore, quite a lot of the memorial museums, which have not been nominated, are of great national – or even greater international – importance.

The policy demanded by the motion seems to be an attempt at putting public memory under the control of the central government. This practice is reminiscent of the policy towards public memory which the GDR and other Eastern European countries adopted during the State Socialist period. Its failure is widely known. It resulted in a division into the type of memory forced upon people by the state and the personal experience of history”.

This protest, which was one of many in addition to the vehement objection expressed by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der KZ-Gedenkstätten Deutschlands (association of concentration camp memorial museums in Germany), and by Avner Shalev, Jan Munk, Sigurd Syversen (The Norwegian Association of Political Prisoners 1940/45) and others did at least result in the first draft being withdrawn. Furthermore, the second version was not adopted on 2 May. It was merely passed on to a parliamentary committee for further deliberation.

The committee’s other activities involved discreet attempts to mediate and offer advice in disputes between institutions working in our field.

International Exchange Programme

We had initially intended to launch an international exchange programme primarily for young academic staff at memorial museums. In order to translate this idea into practice, we first had to find some way of financing this scheme. The response to a number of applications to ICOM showed that no money was available for such schemes. The only funds available, if any, consisted of modest support to fund the announcement of a programme. As we had no funds of our own for this purpose, the committee endeavoured to obtain funds for short monitored stays by staff at German memorial museums. Few of these attempts were fruitful.

There was one case in which we were successful, however. After we had been in contact with Oribe Cures, the director of Montevideo's city museum in Uruguay via the Internet for some time, we finally had an opportunity (in March 2003) to invite him to Germany. He visited several of our German memorial museums together with our board member Bettina Bouresh. His visit was the highlight of a long and fruitful discussion on the problem of coming to terms with the past dictatorships in both Germany and Latin America. We discovered many common interests, based on the similar experiences of a specific generation in both countries. This generation was faced with the problem of working through its experiences and presenting its theses in the face of opposition from a reluctant majority.

Oribe Cures was already seriously ill when we met him in person. In October we received a letter from his wife informing us that he had passed away. In the short time we worked together at ICOM, we had the privilege of learning and appreciating just how valuable international encounters and exchanges charged with curiosity can be. We learned to see the world from a different perspective and to understand it better. The memory of Oribe Cures will always accompany IC MEMO in its work. We posthumously made him an honorary member.

It was ultimately intense experiences such as these which strengthened our resolve to find sponsors. As we were well informed about foundations and other donors in Germany, we approached a number of them. We finally received a positive response from the German foundation "Erinnerung – Verantwortung und Zukunft" ("Remembrance – Responsibility and Future").

With these funds in hand, IC MEMO can now (2005) offer young professional staff members working at memorial museums in Central and Eastern Europe as well as

Israel an opportunity to perfect their occupational skills through participation in the exchange programme. IC MEMO plans to fund study stays at German memorial museums for a period of up to two months. IC MEMO will take care of the accommodation, living expenses, and organize the work at the host institution. Participants need only pay their travel expenses. We hope this initial step will allow us to make the international exchange a lively feature of IC MEMO's work and to extend the programme in three years' time.

At the moment we have 6 host institutions in Germany. Recently we have sent the advertising documents to about 25 memorial institutions in Eastern Europe and Israel. The time schedule for first exchange is the following:

- People who are interested in taking part in program have sent their application documents to me till 15 June 2005.
- The selection of the scholarship holder will take place at the beginning of July. The jury will consist of one representative of the host institution, and - in case that we will be reelected – Bettina Bouresh, our board member in charge for the exchange program and me.
- The scholarship holder will come to Germany on 15 October 2005 for two months.

Each year we'll have two exchange periods, one in spring and one in autumn.

On the development of membership and the positive results of this efforts for enlisting new members we will be informed by our treasurer and secretary Jan Erik Schulte in a few minutes.

Before ending any report I want to thank all the mentioned active members of the board and all other members of our committee who have been in contact with me for their dedicated efforts. Thank you!