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From national to transnational and back: Memorial sites in transition

When Tony Judt noted in his essay “From the House of the Dead”, published in 2005 in *Postwar*, that “Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket,”¹ he was describing an important and by now well-known shift in the political mobilization of Holocaust memory. Initiated by the Stockholm Holocaust Conference of January 2000, the formulation of the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, and the creation in 1998 of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research,² this shift consisted primarily of providing a common European transnational framework for cultural remembrance. It was to be based on the consensual recognition of shared humanitarian values and the promotion of ‘universal’ human rights. Only afterwards did accession to the European Union start to depend greatly on the ability and willingness of a government of a given country to commemorate the Holocaust and, in this way, to fulfill the postulates of the Stockholm Declaration. Mobilized in order to legitimize the normative and political project of European unification, the transnationalization of Holocaust memory has subsequently brought about both a profound transformation of the practices of memory in many European countries, and a critical reconfiguration of the ‘politics of theory’ dealing with national and transnational memory formation.³

¹ T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, London 2005, p. 803.

² See: J. Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung. Der Holocaust im Focus geschichtspolitischer Initiativen*, Frankfurt/Main 2006.

³ See for instance: D. Levy, N. Sznajder, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust*, Frankfurt/Main 2007; A. Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention*, München 2013; K.R. Phillips (ed.), *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*, Tuscaloosa 2011; J. Kroh, op. cit.; M. Pakier, B. Strath (eds.), *A European Memory: Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, New York-Oxford 2010; L. Bond, J. Rapson, *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, Berlin 2014.

Yet neither the shift from the methodological nationalism to methodological transnationalism⁴ in the context of cultural memory studies, nor the potentially productive transborder movement of 'Europeanized' memory practices and contents⁵ seems to be free from inner tensions. After all, the political and cultural transnationalization of Holocaust memory underlying the 'European project' is not only advocated for, but also severely criticized for being a "universalizing, imperialistic Western [...] paradigm"⁶ and contested in various local and national contexts. Thus both the deconstruction of national myths and the strengthening of national sentiments can be seen as a byproduct of European memory policies.⁷ Likewise, the assumption shared by many memory researchers that the nation still functions as a primary 'provider' of mnemonic hegemony⁸ — which one could certainly not consider to be simply essentialistic — further complicates the picture. Consequently, it is not always easy to draw a clear distinction between what John-Paul Himka and Joanna Michlic describe in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light* as 'remembering to remember' and 'remembering to benefit'.⁹ All of this points to the necessity of movement between different scales and layers of analysis while interpreting the 'outcomes' of the political transnationalization of Holocaust memory and, at the same time, as Susannah Radstone points out, very emphatically reminds us of "the significance of memory's locatedness."¹⁰ Hence the analytical movement from national to transnational and back (both on a diachronic and a synchronic axis) suggested in the title of my paper.

Nevertheless, the proposed interpretation of the forms of political mobilization of Holocaust memory — as exercised at the sites where it is commemorated — is not intended to bluntly reproduce the national-transnational opposition or to focus on the infamous Eastern-Western memory divide. On the contrary, the move beyond the constraints and limitations of both national and transnational (European) memory perspectives, the understanding of the implied communities

⁴ I am referring here to the distinction introduced by Sanjeev Khagram and Peggy Levitt in *The Transnational Studies Reader*. S. Khagram, P. Levitt, "Constructing Transnational Studies", in: *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*, New York 2008, p. 1–7.

⁵ J. Werner-Mueller, "On 'European Memory': Some Conceptual and Normative Remarks", in: M. Pakier, B. Strath (eds.), *A European Memory...*, p. 27.

⁶ R. van der Laarse, "Europe's Terrormaps in the Age of Postmemory", [in:] M. Silberman, F. Vatan, *Memory and Postwar Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past*, New York 2013, p. 87.

⁷ See: M. Malksoo, "The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 15(4), 2009.

⁸ See for instance: C. Fogu, W. Kansteiner, "The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History", in: R.N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, Durham-London 2006.

⁹ J.-P. Himka, J.B. Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, Lincoln-London 2013, pp. 10–11.

¹⁰ S. Radstone, "What Place is This? Transcultural Memory and the Locations of Memory Studies", *Parallax*, 17:4, 2011, p. 117.

of memory, their hegemonic travels, and the often close-circuit character of their encounters will be my main objective in this paper. Thus the proposed investigation “of the roles of recollection, forgetting, rituals of remembrance, [...] the silences that populate the complex terrain of [national] and transnational memory”¹¹ is undertaken first and foremost in search of alternative, more critical forms of site-specific political engagement with Holocaust memory. Those, which — in short — rather than operating on behalf of presupposed communities and pre-established values, allow new ones to emerge. That is: from national to transnational and beyond.

Therefore, after spending a significant amount of time struggling with the task of getting them to speak in the way that would suit my purposes, I decided not to focus on the memorial sites created at the former National Socialist extermination camps in Poland — Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka — to which my current research is devoted. All three memorial landscapes — first erected in the 1960s, subsequently long forgotten and neglected — are currently being transformed into fully-fledged Holocaust memorials. The new commemorative idioms developed at and for the sites of the former extermination camps (for Belżec in 2004, for Sobibór and Treblinka in 2013), all three cases being a result of international (at least financial) cooperation, definitely reflect important transformations in the “geopolitics of Holocaust commemoration.”¹² Yet, although they mirror far-reaching changes in the approach to the Holocaust in post-1989 Poland and demonstrate clearly the local applicability of transnationalized aesthetic and architectural solutions, they still lack, in my opinion, the potential to reach ‘beyond’. For this reason, instead of simply ranting and propounding, I decided to venture onto a potentially rather shaky ground and devote my paper to a different place marked by a difficult history and artistic and political activities undertaken at the site in recent years: a Nazi concentration camp established in 1941 on the outskirts of Belgrade.

The prism through which I would like to look at it is a transspatial artistic research project “Living Death Camps”, conducted by the Forensic Architecture group from the Goldsmiths University of London. This project is led by Eyal Weizman, in cooperation with the Holocaust archeologist Caroline Strudy Colls, famous for her research at Treblinka, and Grupa Spomenik (Monument Group) — an art/theory group which for years has been actively participating in the production of public forums and discussion platforms for aesthetically and politically charged debates on the uses and abuses of public spaces of memory in former Yugoslavia. The documentation of the project was presented in the spring of 2014 in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin within the framework of *Forensis*, an exhibition and transnational research forum curated by Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman.¹³ Resuming

¹¹ K.R. Phillips, G.M. Reyes, “Introduction”, in: K.R. Phillips, G.M. Reyes (eds.), *Global Memoryscapes...*, p. 19.

¹² This is a phrase coined by Robert Jan van Pelt and Eyal Weizmann.

¹³ *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Berlin 2014.

and expanding on the etymological meaning of forensis — as “pertaining to the forum”¹⁴ — and, in this way, moving beyond contemporary technical or scientific connotations, the exhibition explored its potential as a political, counter-hegemonic practice. That is, as a practice aimed at critical reconfiguration of hegemonically defined and stabilized relations between material objects, natural and social spaces, subjects, populations and broader political forces. The exhibition gathered projects proposing critical, transdisciplinary forms of knowledge production (merging scholarly research, art, and human rights activism) resolving around issues of spatially mediated state and corporate violence, oppressive legal frameworks and dominant narratives, in which “aesthetic means [were employed] as investigative tools.”¹⁵ The resulting double obligation of forensis as an activity of relating to and (aesthetically) producing forums¹⁶ or, to borrow a concept from Jacques Rancière’s discourse, ‘communities of sense’,¹⁷ was crucial also for the “Living Death Camps”: a case study dedicated to the Nazi camp Staro Sajmište (Semlin) and the neglected concentration camp in Omarska, operational during the Bosnian war in 1992. For the purposes of this paper I will concentrate exclusively on the section of the project related to the Staro Sajmište. Yet, before dwelling on the project itself, I would like to briefly present the mnemohistory of the former camp.

Located at the site of the prewar Belgrade’s Fairground, built in 1937 in modernist, panoptic style, the Staro Sajmište (Old Fairground) functioned between 1941 and 1942 as Judenlager Semlin, a detention center and extermination site for Serbian Jews, Sinti and Roma, and from 1942 to 1944 as Anhaltenlager Semlin, a concentration and transfer camp for civilians and political opponents of the National Socialist regime.¹⁸ It was located on the left bank of the river Sava, which served during World War II as a border between Serbia and the Independent State of Croatia. It is estimated that around 6,500 Jewish women and children were killed in the camp or the gas van and buried in the mass graves outside the city. After the war, like many other former Nazi concentration and extermination camps, it was not dismantled but reused, according to the social and political needs of the time.¹⁹ Consequently, the remaining structures — the former exhibition buildings converted by the Nazis into barracks for the camp’s inmates and warehouses

¹⁴ E. Weizman, “Introduction: Forensis”, in: *Forensis...*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁶ S. Sheikh, “Forensic Theater: Grupa Spomenik’s Pythagorean Lecture: *Mathems of Re-association*”, in: *Forensis...*, Berlin 2014, p. 167.

¹⁷ B. Hinderliter et al., “Introduction”, in: B. Hinderliter et al. (eds.), *The Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Durham-London 2009.

¹⁸ See for instance: Ch.R. Browning, “The Final Solution in Serbia. The Semlin Judenlager”, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 15, 1983; “Sajmiste”, in: I. Gutman (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Holocausts. Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, Band 3, München-Zürich 1998.

¹⁹ For an overview of the postwar fate of the majority of National Socialist concentration and extermination camps see: H. Marcuse, “The Afterlife of the Camps”, in: J. Caplan, N. Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, New York 2010.

— were never transformed into memorial sites, but instead made available for artists' ateliers and used as state-provided emergency residences for the poorest and socially most vulnerable groups: Sinti and Roma, the unemployed, the homeless. Many of them (around 2,500 people) inhabit the site of the former camp to the present day. Nowadays, as a result of rapid postwar urbanization, Staro Sajmište is located in the immediate vicinity of the city center, but it still functions as a spatially and socially marginalized urban enclave consisting of deteriorating inhabited edifices, illegally built barracks without sanitation, small workshops and a privately owned restaurant located in the former camp's mortuary.²⁰

This does not mean, of course, that no attempt was made to acknowledge and reinscribe the memory of past crimes into the cultural landscape of Staro Sajmište. On the contrary, the site functioned as a multilayered field of various hegemonic articulations reflecting changing approaches to both the Holocaust and World War II in socialist Yugoslavia and post-communist Serbia — the early postwar neglect being an expression of the resistance-and-struggle-oriented official culture of remembrance. Moreover, the fact that the Holocaust was not perceived as unique and specific, but rather subsumed under the broader category of the 'crimes of fascism', further contributed to the marginalization of Staro Sajmište on the Yugoslav commemorative map. The fact that the first memorial erected at the site in 1974 (and later renewed in 1984) was dedicated to the "forty thousand people from all parts of the country",²¹ clearly testifies to this. The postcommunist transition and resulting rise of nationalism in Yugoslav republics during dissolution wars brought about an important transformation of the prism through which the camp was viewed, since, according to Jovan Byford, "the newly embraced emphasis on the history of Serbian martyrdom played a key role in shaping the public reception of the Holocaust."²² It was reappropriated and instrumentalized as a symbol of common Jewish and Serbian suffering (caused by the Nazis and Croats) — an interesting, if not paradoxical, response to the transnationally recognized cultural shift from the 'memory of triumph' to the 'memory of trauma', described by Bernhardt Giesen.²³ A new memorial, this time dedicated to "Serbs, Jews, and Roma"²⁴ and the victims of Ustasha

²⁰ S. Radovic, "Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall", http://www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/radovic_essay_sajmiste.pdf; idem, "Memory Culture and Urban Reconstruction: The Case of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade", in: C. Brants, A. Hol, D. Siegel, *Transitional Justice: Images and Memories*, Farnham 2013.

²¹ J. Byford, "Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory, 2009", www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin.

²² J. Byford, "Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization: Holocaust Memory in Serbia since the Late 1980s", in: J.-P. Himka, J.B. Michlic (eds.), *Bringing the Dark Past to Light...*, p. 530.

²³ B. Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*, Boulder 2004.

²⁴ J. Byford, "Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization...", p. 535.

camp Jasenovac, was unveiled near Staro Sajmište in 1995. After that, the site once again fell into oblivion.²⁵

In 2007, the international scandal surrounding the organization of a concert by a British music group Kosheen, which was to take place in the former camp's hospital, drummed up renewed interest in Staro Sajmište both locally and internationally and directed attention to the progressing privatization and commercialization of the historical site²⁶ — a situation quite typical for a post-transformation city under capitalist urbanization. Nevertheless, the following bottom-up initiatives, fostered by various interest groups and organizations lobbying for Holocaust commemoration — such as the Memorial Sajmište Organization, the Initiative for Memorial Education Center, and the internet-based research project *A Visit to Staro Sajmište*,²⁷ conducted since 2010 by artist Rena Rädle and journalist Dirk Auer — transformed the former camp into a discursive event, without actually affecting the living conditions of its present inhabitants.

Yet, as the Serbian government proceeds in its efforts to become a member state of the EU, the situation of Staro Sajmište is to change radically.²⁸ The plan to erect a state-sponsored Holocaust memorial and museum at the site, conceived as an attempt to fulfill the requirements of official European memory politics, would require that its tenants be evicted. The first round of forceful removals of the Staro Sajmište residents took place in the summer of 2013. It was exactly this problematic, if not paradoxical, aspect of the interaction between the requirements of transnationalized memory politics and the socially damaging outcomes of its implementation that was taken on by Forensic Architecture. In the case of Staro Sajmište, the group focused on the obvious contradiction between the assumed moral appeal of the Holocaust memorial, objectifying after all a set of 'universalized' humanitarian values, and the politically legitimized harm inflicted on already vulnerable inhabitants of the former camp. Let us remember that among these are the representatives of Sinti and Roma, who were also victims of Staro Sajmište. To recapitulate: according to the group, "a Holocaust memorial cannot be built on a forcefully cleared ground without immediately compromising its purpose."²⁹

Far from being against honoring the Holocaust victims at the site, the group developed a set of 'memory' activities and actions proposed as an alternative to the planned official commemoration and as a form of protest against the imminent evictions. Based on an extensive archeological survey of the site and the creation

²⁵ See for instance: R. Rädle, "Der Lager Sajmište in Belgrad — ein vergessenes KZ?", <http://www.igbildendekunst.at/bildpunkt/2011/smrt-postnazismus/raedle.htm>.

²⁶ M.a Ivankovic, "The 'Sajmište' (Exhibition Grounds) in Semlin, Serbia: The Changing of Memory", *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 22: 3–4 (Fall) 2010, <http://jcpa.org/article/the-sajmiste-exhibition-grounds-in-semalin-serbia-the-changing-of-memory/#sthash.3A6sxBCE.dpuf>.

²⁷ <http://www.starosajmiste.info>.

²⁸ See for instance: J. Byford, "Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization...", p. 517.

²⁹ "Living Death Camps — Forensic Architecture and Grupa Spomenik", in: *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Berlin 2014, p. 194.

of an on-site public forum at which its outcomes could be presented and discussed with all those interested in the future of the camp, the project aimed to expose both the importance — if not indispensability — of the place to its present inhabitants and the profound role of their daily routines and spatial practices in preserving the remains of the former camp. According to the forensic archeologist, “Staro Sajmište stands today thanks to its ongoing inhabitation, which has sustained it for the past sixty years.”³⁰ Unoccupied and uncommemorated, the material structures of the former camp would almost certainly have deteriorated. Moreover, the presence of Sajmište residents at the site prevented further privatization of the centrally located and potentially profitable urban area. The main practical conclusion of the research was therefore a proposal that the role and needs of the Staro Sajmište residents be acknowledged and included in the planned project — thus achieving, instead of their eviction, a “commemoration that would remain responsive to the demands of ongoing life.”³¹ At the same time, the project provocatively exposed an important and fascinating tension between two different and essentially opposing approaches to the afterlife of the landscapes of violence: sanctification and ‘profanation’, conceptualized through the prism of Giorgio Agamben’s *In the Praise of Profanation*.³²

While the former describes the act of enclosing and dividing — a gesture of separating that which belongs to the sacred from that which belongs to the profane or humane, which sanctions the unavailability of the separated for a daily use — ‘profanation’ names the variety of practices that put those divisions in question by returning the sanctified to the common use. It is a playful or critical intervention contesting, reversing and creatively exploring the partitions, cuts and segmentations of reality imposed in order to stabilize an uneven distribution of power (both ‘divine’ and secular) and the demarcation lines, hierarchies, and exclusions on which it rests. Conceived as a politically charged practice of re-appropriating and opening up of the separated, bounded and excluded realms “for a new use”,³³ profanation is thus radically opposed to the exclusive mechanism of power, first and foremost those which are the condition of possibility of the existence of a concentration camp itself. In this sense, the postwar inhabitation of the former camp could be interpreted as the reclamation of a once separated realm, revoking the very logic that brought it into being.

Interestingly, as the project suggests, the same applies to the cultural practices of commemoration, which either profane by searching for new critical uses of the past, or separate and divide (sanctify) and render the past politically inoperative. That is, according to Agamben, essentially the meaning of museification:

³⁰ Living Death Camps — Forensic Architecture and Grupa Spomenik, p. 195.

³¹ Ibid., p. 193.

³² G. Agamben, *Profanations*, New York 2007. See especially the text “In Praise of Profanation”.

³³ Ibid., p. 86.

a contemporary form of secularized sanctification, which, by transforming lived spaces into exhibition spaces (the use-value into exhibition-value), “designates the impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.”³⁴ Hence, the possibility of ‘re-sanctification’³⁵ — of turning the former camp into a Holocaust museum and, in this way, of separating it from the necessities of daily life — is contrasted in the case of Staro Sajmište with the need to commemorate it in a way that would reverse the mechanisms of social and economic exclusion that presently determine its form and “include a plan to rehabilitate its homes and modernize its infrastructure, in order to support its potential as a common space.”³⁶ Thus, by “disputing the inscription of [in-]equality within the space that is defined as common,”³⁷ that is the planned state-sponsored memorial site, the project questions the logic behind the depoliticizing politics of sacralization — an endeavor that can itself be interpreted as a profanation of a sanctified space.

As a result, the “Living Death Camps” project not only destabilizes the commonplace trajectories of the debates on the politics exercised at the memorial sites, but also enables a more critical rethinking of the politics that they put in practice. Firstly, by pointing out the equivalence between the problem of Staro Sajmište and the broader, doubtless transnational, issues of social exclusion and social distribution of the common space — be it a poor urban neighborhood or the site of memory, or both — the project relocates the question of commemoration and entangles it within the context of broader contemporary discussions on the spatial politics, gentrification and democratization of the public space.³⁸ In this way, it re-politicizes the problem of Holocaust remembrance — designating it as a place for critical engagement with the present injustices beyond and below national and transnational integration agendas and the tensions that their encounters produce. Secondly, by introducing into this debate around the fate of the memorial site a reflection on social actors and subjects, who have no part in it or are not typically invited to participate, the project puts forward an understanding of the commons, which disrupts (profanes) the existing coordinates of commonality. Instead, it proposes new, more democratic ones in which those deeply marginalized and ignored gain visibility and become not only audible participants, but also active carriers of Holocaust remembrance.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁵ „Living Death Camps — Forensic Architecture and Grupa Spomenik”, p. 195.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ B. Hinderliter et al., op. cit., p. 7.

³⁸ See for instance: R. Deutsche, *Evictions: Art And Spatial Politics*, Cambridge-London 1998.

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FROM NATIONAL TO TRANSNATIONAL AND BACK: MEMORIAL SITES IN TRANSITION

Summary

This paper discusses the consequences of the political transnationalization of Holocaust memory, as initiated by the Stockholm Holocaust Conference (2000) and the creation of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (1998), for the shaping of, and research on, the memorial sites commemorating the Holocaust. The article focuses on the consequences of the implementation of the project of common European Holocaust memory — its practical outcomes, but also on the resulting political tensions (especially in the context of EU eastern expansion), and poses questions about the various forms of political mobilization of Holocaust memory. At the same time, it demonstrates the necessity to problematize those research paradigms which focus exclusively on (and reproduce) the symbolic conflict between 'East' and 'West', and the antagonisms between national and 'European' agendas, when framing the post-Holocaust landscapes. Taking as a venture point the analysis of a specific memorial site — the former Nazi concentration camp Staro Sajmište in Belgrade — as well as artistic and research projects constructed around it, the article discusses the potential for alternative, local forms of site-specific engagement with Holocaust memory, critical towards and operating below or beyond national and transnational (EU) agendas.

Keywords: memorial sites, transnationalization of memory, Holocaust.

OD NARODOWEGO DO MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO I Z POWROTEM — MIEJSKA PAMIĘCI W PROCESIE PRZEJŚCIA

Streszczenie

Artykuł stawia pytanie o konsekwencje politycznej transnacionalizacji pamięci Holocaustu, zainicjowanej przez Konferencję Sztokholmską (2000) oraz stworzenie Grupy Roboczej do Międzynarodowej Współpracy w Dziedzinie Edukacji, Pamięci i Badań nad Holocaustem (1998),

dla kształtowania i badania miejsc pamięci upamiętniających Zagładę. Wskazując na praktyczne rezultaty, ale także napięcia związane z realizacją postulatu wspólnej Europejskiej pamięci Holokaustu (przede wszystkim w kontekście wschodniego rozszerzania UE), autorka zastanawia się nad formami politycznej mobilizacji pamięci o Zagładzie. Równocześnie zwraca uwagę na konieczność problematyzacji tych paradygmatów badawczych, które przy badaniu miejsc pamięci stawiają w centrum zainteresowania (i reprodukuja) jedynie symboliczny konflikt pomiędzy ‘Wschodem’ i ‘Zachodem’ czy antagonizm pomiędzy wymiarem Europejskim i narodowym. Wychodząc od analizy konkretnego miejsca pamięci — byłego nazistowskiego obozu koncentracyjnego Staro Sajmište w Belgradzie — oraz realizowanych wokół niego projektów artystycznych i badawczych, artykuł pyta o możliwość budowania alternatywnych, lokalnych prób upolityczniania Holokaustu, krytycznych wobec projektów narodowych i transnarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: miejsca pamięci, transnacionalizacja pamięci, Holokaust.

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