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The Memory of Those Lost

The systematic and mechanized murder of over eleven million people during the Nazi’s reign over Europe has certainly left its mark on the world. Sixty-six years has passed since the fall of the Third Reich and the question of how to properly memorialize is still a very relevant and widely discussed question. Memorialization has the ability to both amaze and frustrate individuals and nations alike. For an event such as the Holocaust, those who survived do not have the privilege of looking back at the immeasurable suffering and inconceivable amount of lives lost and feel that somehow through their sacrifice something was gained. This was not a war. There was no fight, no foundation, and no greater cause for losing their lives. As such, the memorialization of the Holocaust is a truly dark experience. The question that is often posed when discussing the memory of those lost due to Nazi genocide is whether or not representation is to be pursued or avoided. One has to wonder when it is that “memory slips into a practice of forgetting.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is a problem posed to numerous European nations that have to deal with a history of both victimhood and perpetration. Austria epitomizes that complexity and has attempted different routes in memorializing such a difficult past. This essay intends to display the convoluted history of Austria’s role as both victim and perpetrator and the ways in which, as a nation, it has chosen to memorialize such a history on the hallowed grounds of the former Mauthausen Concentration Camp. A focus on political influences and education will show that Austria is no exception to the convoluted and often contested practises of Holocaust memorialization.

Austria has an interesting position within the context of the Holocaust. While the Republic of Austria, created in 1918, could boast little more than thirty-two thousand square miles and 6.5 million inhabitants, its Jewish population was proportionately large. Austria was home to 220,000 Jews which represented nearly three and a half times the proportion of the total population that the half million German Jews did.[[2]](#footnote-2) The capital of Vienna had an even more significant percentage. During the inter-war years of the 1920’s over 200,000 Jews lived in Vienna making it the sixth largest Jewish community in the world after New York, Warsaw, Chicago, Philadelphia and Budapest. Well ahead of Berlin’s 173,000. By the time the war ended, Austria’s Jewish population had shrunk to just 11,000. Even today, sixty-six years after the war has ended, the population only nears the 15,000 mark.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the eyes of some Austrians, they were the first occupied nation and should not be held in a position of culpability. This half-truth has become known as *Opferstolz*, or ‘victim pride’.[[4]](#footnote-4) The coup d’état completed by the Austrian Nazi Party on March 11, 1938 negated the potential results of a nationwide plebiscite which was to take place two days later, asking all Austrians over the age of twenty-four to vote ‘in favour of a free and German, an independent and social, a Christian and united Austria.’ This has acted as a smoke screen to cloud the more incriminating actions that Austria as a nation took part in. But appearances do not often give credence to the whole story. The fact remains that a large majority of Austrians desired to be a part of the Reich; to be a part of something strong and united, to be with their German speaking brethren. The 1938 Anschluss when Austria officially became part of Nazi Germany was epitomized by a cheering crowd of an estimated 100,000 people attending Hitler’s speech at the Vienna Heldenplatz.[[5]](#footnote-5) The support did not end there with deadly riots and abuse on Jews and other minorities lasting for days. A description by an eye-witness goes as such:

“That night hell broke loose. The underworld opened its gates and vomited forth the lowest, filthiest, most horrible demons it contained. The city was transformed into a nightmare painting by Hieronymous Bosch: phantoms and devils seemed to have crawled out of sewers and swamps. The air was filled with an incessant screeching, horrible, piercing, hysterical cries from the throats of men and women who continued screaming day and night. People’s faces vanished, were replaced by contorted masks, some of fear, some of cunning, some of wild hate filled triumph.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

And so, Austria is faced with the dilemma of how to properly memorialize the victims of the Holocaust and the part that their specific nation played in it. So as they memorialize the lives that were lost in camps, the potential for guilt undoubtedly comes into play. They must recognize their past and not hide it; for this is the only conceivable way to move forward. And what better place to memorialize the atrocities of the Holocaust than at the Austrian site of the most horrific degradation of human beings, and where an estimated 100,000 lives were lost; at the former Mauthausen Concentration Camp.

The Mauthausen Memorial site near Linz in upper Austria is home to what is known as the Mauthausen Memorial Park. The park is comprised of twenty national monuments, representing the nationalities of victims who perished under Nazi rule within the Mauthausen camp. Nations that erected memorials on site include, Poland, France, the Soviet Union, Albania, Luxemburg, Spain, East Germany, West Germany, Hungary, Italy, Belgium, Slovenia, Bulgaria Greece, Great Britain, Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia. It also features memorials erected for Roma and Sinti, Jewish, Jewish Youth, Homosexual, and simply Youth victims, for it was these characteristics that led to their discrimination and demise and not simply for their nationalities. The sheer magnitude of the monuments appears daunting at first, however once the visual overload settles, the diversity and individuality of each national and ethnic group represented becomes the focus. One example of the uniqueness of the park is the monument devoted to the Roma and Sinti victims. The memorial is built to jut out over the edge of a cliff on a downward angle and contains a glass wall on the downslope which acts as the only separation between the visitor and the ground many meters below.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such creativity and symbolism is not necessarily the product of decades of time to digest situational and current issues surrounding Holocaust memorialization, but it demonstrates the “…complexity and interdependence of war, fascism, and the Holocaust commemoration, particularly the aesthetic representation of victimhood.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In the long run, these monuments stand in an effort to promote thought and awareness to a wide spectrum of observers, comprised of both Austrians and tourists alike. “The memorials seek to challenge the taboo of Austria’s *Opferstolz,* tomake the past palpable in the present and engage Austrians from all walks of life in dealing with their nation’s past.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The former Mauthausen concentration camp was declared an “official memorial” in 1949, with the primary monument being a sarcophagus in the former roll call area. The monument is inscribed with the Latin phrase: “May the living learn from the fate of the dead”. [[10]](#footnote-10) That same autumn the first major national monument from France was unveiled and the memorial park began to take shape. By 1967, several more countries had erected monuments including the Czechoslovakian anti-Fascist resistance fighters memorial which was unveiled in May 1959 and the 1967 construction of the GDR memorial, as it is called, erected by order of the Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters.[[11]](#footnote-11) the 1955 unveiling of the memorial by the Austrian Federal Government to Russian prisoners of war on the site of the ‘Russian camp’, used as a camp for the sick and dying, was erected the same year that the Austrian State Treaty established the country as a sovereign state. Previous to that Austria, as well as Vienna had been divided in four parts representing each of the Allied nations.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As part of the liberation commemoration on 3 May 1970, Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky opened the museum and permanent exhibition at the Mauthausen Memorial. The exhibition is the only permanent exhibition on the history of Nazism in Austria apart from a smaller exhibition in the Documentation Archive of Austrian Resistance.[[13]](#footnote-13) This was a major step for Austria because up until this point the monuments that had been erected had been done so to respect and remember those persecuted under Nazi rule, but in no way were they admissions of guilt by the Austrian nation herself. The exhibition in the new Visitor Centre presents themes of wider significance in the context of a confrontation with the Nazi past and pays particular attention to the receptivity of students and young persons. The site describes a further focus “…on the interaction between the historical facts and research findings and the personal stories of the victims, survivors, perpetrators, liberators and local population.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The focus on educating the youth was a major step in the memorialization process. By incorporating mandatory visits of secondary school children to the site, the agenda shifts from memorializing those lost, survivors and their families, towards a process of education. “Memory as an activity is deeply affected by its medium of transmission. The shift from a predominantly oral to a written to a visual culture has dramatically altered how we remember and represent to the past….In the end, memory is more of a process about how to represent and integrate a shared past in the present than a tangible product or memorial. As contributions to an archaeology of the past, studies of collective memory are not replacements of, but complements to, historical study.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Witnessing firsthand the destruction and horrors that took place at the camp gives the children a tangible example of how dangerous persecution and racism are. It teaches tolerance, something that has not always been a staple in Viennese culture. “Dependent on several collective memories, but masters of none, we are only too aware of the gap between the enormous obligation to remember and the individual’s incapacity to do so without the assistance of mechanical reminders, souvenirs and memory sites.”[[16]](#footnote-16) It also allows educators a new and fresh approach to teaching. As Elsa Pollack, an Auschwitz survivor, was quoted as saying, ``Man created these horrors, but did not invent a language in which to describe them.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Words often lack the necessary impact that visual representations can hold. By witnessing the physical structures erected to represent the thousands of lives lost at this camp alone, children are given the opportunity for experiential learning; an integral part of the memorialization process.

The building of the permanent museum and exhibit in 1970 also changed the political nature of the memorial site. Upon completion of the permanent exhibit, Section IV/4 of the Federal Ministry of the Interior took over the direct administration of the Memorial.[[18]](#footnote-18) Political agendas tend to pop up and surround key issues, and the memorialization of the Holocaust was a prevalent topic in the decades following the camp’s liberation in May 1945. When politics become included in such a convoluted issue such a Holocaust memorialization, it shifts the originating focus from memory to national agenda. In the case of the catastrophe and loss of lives during the Nazi regime, it can be argued that a veritable ‘Holocaust industry’ has erupted like a volcano from the sea of memory. Public memorials to the Nazi persecutions have taken on a more didactic function as the period of time lengthens between the actual events and the commemoration.[[19]](#footnote-19) And when that occurs, the government cannot help but get involved. This is nothing new for the Mauthausen Memorial Park which is home to the numerous national monuments, all of which were discussed and decided upon by the individual nation. This in itself brings many questions to mind. During the sixty-six years since the liberation of the camp, Europe has seen many political platforms and ideological representations fall. The most influential case was the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the Iron Curtain.

The political landscape of Europe is quite prevalent within the context of the Memorial Park. Despite the fall of the Berlin wall twenty-two years ago, the park is still home to monuments from both the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR erected their monument in 1967, right in the midst of building the concrete portion of the Berlin wall. The monument was erected to memorialize the anti-fascist resistance fighters.[[20]](#footnote-20) Clearly this monument has serious Soviet undertones. It was not built to remember Jews who were deported from East Berlin and sent to Mauthausen, nor Roma and Sinti victims, or even for an encompassing German victim, it was for anti-fascist resistance fighters. For those who fought against fascism in the name of Socialism. Clearly this political agenda causes confusion when considering memory. Perception is a necessary evil when discussing memory, but political ideologies should not dictate or degrade the memorialization process. The monument erected by the West German delegation of the FRG on November 16th, 1983 was one of the last monuments erected within the memorial park. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, delegates must proceed with two separate celebrations of the German monuments creating an even more convoluted situation within the park.

In 2001, Federal Minister Ernst Strasser originated an initiative for restructuring the Mauthausen Memorial, which would result in the construction of new visitor centres in Mauthausen and Gusen as well as a number of other projects. In 2008 Federal Minister Günter Platter called for the redesign of the museum area and commissioned Department IV/7 at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs to draft a concept. A working group was created consisting of members of the department along with external experts from various disciplines of history, museum studies and memorial education. The participation of experts in memorials and museums from Germany gave to group a wonderful tool from which the experience gathered in earlier restructuring projects had garnered.[[21]](#footnote-21) Other nations have considered altering the monuments that live within the memorial park. Upon visiting the former camp in May 2011, it just so happened that a group of Polish delegates were measuring and inspecting the monument that had been erected during the time of extreme Soviet influence. It appeared as if they would be redesigning their monument to better represent the Polish people that were sent to the camp. However, these debates are not exclusively centered upon the difficulty of representing a misery that at times seems beyond understanding, but with the interests of who gets to mourn, in what way and with what political motive and outcome.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Austria has had a difficult time dealing with the role it played concerning the Second World War and coinciding attempted genocide of European Jewry along with a multitude of other minority groups. The nation has, at times, collectively hid behind its *Opferstolz* or `victim pride` as the first victim of Nazi occupation in the spring of 1938 and attempted to memorialize in a way that satisfied the victims but in no way took responsibility for the tragic outcome that many of them endured. The battle between victim groups and differing political ideologies and agendas remains a constant in the arena of Holocaust memorialization, and Austria has been no exception. The establishment of the permanent exhibit and museum on the grounds of the former Mauthausen Concentration camp in 1970 provided at the very least a tangible home to experience and educate both Austrians and tourists alike on the horrors that were committed on Austrian soil. It also saw a change in the political nature of the memorial site. Upon completion of the permanent exhibit, Section IV/4 of the Federal Ministry of the Interior took over the direct administration of the Memorial and with it, the politicisation of remembrance began.

The Memorial park that also resides on the former camp`s grounds offers an opportunity for people to see the representations of twenty nations and five groups of people, in one emotional and thought provoking space. The many monuments, which intend to draw remembrance to the personal and collective suffering of the victims of the camp as well as evoke thought and awareness to horrors that hatred can create, is used as a wonderful tool in the education of both Austrians and tourists alike. Austria has taken it one step further by using this site as an opportunity to educate the children of the nation by requiring school children to visit the former camp, and as such, many of the exhibits are geared towards the youth. The opportunity for the youth to experience firsthand the level of degradation and discrimination that Mauthausen was home to, will potentially hold more value than words in a textbook. Its tangibility has the ability to form distinct memories in their minds. The education process is integral to removing the half-truth of *Opferstolz,* and accepting both the role of victim and perpetrator in the attempted eradication of millions of innocent people.

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