

## Chapter 6

# **The Individual's Interaction with Memorial Sites**



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## Introduction

This reflection piece focuses on human interaction with memorial sites. It explores the possibility of the memorial as a testimony of the wounds of the past, or perhaps a warning for the future: a product of human madness or a product of human resilience. Places of grief and restriction or places of freedom and expression, the question of one's interaction with the memorial site is tied to the question of its purpose. This chapter draws on my personal reflections from the *Narratives of Memory* field school, and in particular how my interactions with a particular memorial site stimulated specific reactions as well as self-reflection.

A memorial site represents the real paradox between the goal of remembrance and the ugliness of some past human actions. Therefore, the meaning of the memorial site embraces both beauty and ugliness; there is hope and there is guilt embedded into this meaning (Duhamel

2016). The dimensions of this paradox often depend on the site itself as well as the ways in which individuals interact and engage with the site. Is there perhaps a universal conception of the behaviour that we should adopt when we are in these places of remembrance?

I must clarify that I am struck by the contrast between the potential beauty of our world and the latent ugliness of some human actions. However, the concept of beauty does not depend on aesthetic aspects of the memorial site. In this chapter, the concept of beauty is derived from a meaning that is built on hope, while, ugliness relies on guilt. This might be perceived as a controversial hypothesis. Nonetheless, this assumption is based on my own experience of the field school, which inspired these reflections. I tie shame to ugliness because I believe that shame does not offer enough perspective; it does not allow us to take a step back and apply our knowledge to other particular situations. For example, some people might criticize the Holocaust but make racist or heinous comments against Roma or Muslims. In contrast, hope allows us to apply our values and principles of open-mindedness and tolerance to other people and other situations.

One of my premises is that art is a powerful memory tool to discuss meaning, beauty, and freedom. Indeed, I have the deep-seated feeling that art should be about hope, not about guilt. When art is used to make you feel ashamed and guilty, we may wonder if this was its original intent. To blame — isn't that the burden of history? And yet, art is often used to express a "never again" statement. This attribute allows art to express guilt just as it expresses hope, even if this conclusion goes against my personal vision of art.

My other premise is that the interaction with memory, knowledge, or art depends on our choices to endorse or to refuse the emotions the site or monument sends to us. These emotions are framed by a historical, educational, and societal context, but they are at first a reflection of one's own personal experiences and empathetic capacity. Consequently, one's interaction with a memorial is individual, depends on one's choices, and reflects one's own perception of society.

All these assumptions are the result of the experiences I had this summer during the field school in which I participated. Indeed, one of the real challenges I faced during the field school, when we visited memorial sites, was to determine the appropriate way to behave. For example, I did not come across any particular rules of behaviour at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe [Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas] during our 2017 visit, although I have been told that these

do exist and can now be found on plaques along the edges of the site. My experience at this site generated thoughts about “memory reverence” compared to “memory reference,” as described by Alain Chouraki (2015, 14), director of the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp. These thoughts can be summed up in these questions: Is the duty of memory to generate emotions of guilt and reverence or to call for hope and reference? Should beauty triumph over ugliness, or should we carve the ugly in the present and the future in an attempt to prevent new tragedies?

In order to address this issue, I provide a brief summary of the destinations of the field school in Europe, before detailing my experience in Berlin. Then I question the transformation of memory, before addressing the best way to remember, if there is one. I would like to clarify that I focus on my own *experience* in order to discuss these questions because it was my personal adventure that created these thoughts that is the source of this chapter.

## A Brief Summary of Our Destinations in Europe

You must be the change you wish to see in the world...  
 We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the  
 outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we  
 could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would  
 also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the  
 attitude of the world change towards him.... We need not  
 wait to see what others do. (Mahatma Gandhi 1999, 214)

In the summer of 2017, some Hungarian, Canadian, and French students in Social Sciences, Music Studies, and Law had the opportunity to meet in the context of a field school about *Narratives of Memory, Migration, and Xenophobia*, organized by the University of Victoria. On our journey, we had the opportunity to visit not only memorials but also different sites that engendered memories.

Budapest was our first destination. The Hungarian capital is in itself a testimony of the wounds of the past and the social breaks and tensions of the present. Squeezed between the previous collaboration of the government with the Nazi regime (which preceded the German Occupation) and the present instrumentalization of the refugee issues,

the country is prisoner of a torn identity (to explore this issue further, see Barna and Petó, 2015).

However, the population has not given up yet. An amazing example of the strength of the Hungarian people may be found in the creation of a counter-memorial in Budapest, in front of a memorial erected by the government. Specifically, the government-endorsed memorial only remembers the victims of the German occupation, glossing over the period of collaboration that happened before, and thus erasing the history of all the individuals and families who were killed during this time. In response, there was a grass-roots movement to create a living memorial with pictures, documents, and mementos symbolizing the persons who were killed or who disappeared prior to the occupation.

Then, in Ravensbrück, Germany, we spent a few days at the memorial site of a former women's concentration camp. I will not go into detail with regard to the challenges I experienced. I just want to express how disturbing it was to feel the emptiness of an incomprehensible past, in the full light of the gorgeous natural landscape of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site. How do I reconcile the vision of the crematorium and the silence of the mass grave with the sunset on the lake and the songs of the birds? This experience led me to separate the experience of history and the experience of the present. It was important for me to be able to appreciate every feeling of sadness or fear or joy or emptiness at any time it came. It was primordial for me to be able to feel free and alive. I underline this because it constitutes my premise about an individual's interaction with memorial sites, especially regarding these places of trauma and suffering. I think we need to be aware of the historical context, so we can understand the importance of the site. But I also think that our emotional response to the place has to play its own part, detached from any form of external moralization. Otherwise, how could we know if the reaction is due to an understanding that society is trying to impose on us according to its own standards; or if it is the product of our own empathy regarding the history of the place and the suffering of the people at that time?

We spent some time in Berlin before departing to our last destination, the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp, a French former detention camp that emphasizes the properties of art, resistance, and prevention. In the German capital, I had an experience that became the source for this paper. This experience led me to think more deeply about what the real point of memorials is — the true aim of remembrance, between perpetuation of pain and reconciliation. Facing the abstract structure of the

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, I got lost in the freedom of interpretation offered by the place. I would like to share my memories and the thoughts that this memorial site generated for me.

## The Holocaust Memorial

Nonetheless, because the consequences of the affective force of an image are indeterminate, there are pedagogical (and political) risks associated with the practice of exhibition. (Simon 2011, 447)

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is a 4.7-acre space covered with 2,711 concrete slabs. It might look like a graveyard, but the designers say it is an abstract memorial that is open to interpretation. I did not notice any signs or indications about how to act in the memorial, which is kind of a labyrinth inciting the public to get lost in it. The blocks start small and then they grow bigger and bigger; at the centre of the labyrinth they are so big and so high that it is very impressive, and almost oppressive. The blocks are not far from each other; you can easily walk on the top of one of them and then walk from one to the other. These characteristics give this memorial site almost a sense of playfulness.

Holocaust memorials are typically austere places designed to honour the memories of the millions who lost their lives in the Nazi genocide. In our society of flux and pictures and social networks, the “selfie” has taken the place of the stories and testimonies, and therefore tourists can often be seen posing for photos in front of the memorial sites. The artist Shahak Shapira has created a project called *Yolocaust* to speak out against this. In order to demonstrate a different perspective of what tourists are doing in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews, Shapira gathered some of their photos and photoshopped them into actual historical photos from Nazi extermination camps (Zhang 2017; Shapira 2017).

The photograph of me that a friend of mine took at the top of one of the memorial blocks was not altered by Shapira, but my experience at the site was. I experienced the memorial as a place of freedom, of discovery, a place to take precedence over history, to get an overview of the place — of Berlin, of the people playing in the “labyrinth.” And this

reaction to the site was reflected in the photograph that I shared on social media, and specifically on Facebook. The post received a lot of comments, mostly negative. My friends posted that my behaviour was not appreciated, particularly by Germans, who considered it an affront.

At first, this did not disturb me because I understood that for Germans who live near the Memorial, their relationship with it is unique (Houziaux 2005, 40). Houziaux discusses trans-generational memory and states that culpability may exist, even if there is no conscious memory. The “ghost” of the memory of a committed fault remains in the spirit of the people as the trauma suffered by past generations. I cannot speak for a German person, but I can picture the ghost of their history and the subsequent necessity to look for resilience, to not get trapped by the past.

Furthermore, my previous experience at Ravensbrück had made me think that I should pay attention to how I felt at this memorial – as I explained in my introduction. Indeed, I experienced the need to seize the beauty of the moment, especially when I was confronted with terrible historical realities. This led me to cultivate a feeling of hope during the summer school, because, even if the wounds of the past are deep, the possibilities of the present are richer. This allows me, today, to make a critical appraisal of the reflected guilt that we feel. I think we should validate our own moral feelings outside of society’s wounds. If, during past tragedies, everyone had lived in accordance with his or her own individual values, i.e., not following a collective movement, who knows how it could have changed the course of history?

So, at first, I accepted the responsibility for my behaviour. However, this initial assessment of my reaction and how to contextualize it was altered once my friends showed me the work of Shahak Shapira. His work deeply moved me, not because his art woke up something in my soul, but because I pictured my photo as if it had been altered, as if the bodies of the murdered Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexual persons, resistance fighters, and many others who died in the atrocities of the Nazi regime were all exposed behind my happy face. And I felt betrayed, ashamed, rejected. The experience of freedom I felt was suddenly inappropriate, and mostly undesirable.

Later, however, I began to reflect on the idea that perhaps Shapira’s critique of the site might, in fact, run counter to the spirit of the place. This led me to reflect more on this strange memorial and its ability to create such conflicting emotions. It led me to question the will of the designers, the meaning of an abstract design, the perceptions of the



German citizens, the public's duty to behave, and its right to behave. It also led me to ask myself if the answers to these questions mattered.

## The Transformation of Memory

To claim that we owe the dead our witness simply avoids the question as to what would constitute an adequate practice of witnessing. Contemporary ethics would have us attempt to guard against reducing another's suffering to imaginative or quite real versions of our own, by critically attending to the inescapable failure of comprehension that is always a component of ethical witness. (Simon 2011, 446)

I want to address the transformation of memory that is inherent to the transformation of our society, mostly in terms of communication technologies. We are a society in flux, dominated by *selfies* and self-absorbed communicational mediums like Facebook and Instagram (Goodnow 2016). This form of communication is probably superficial and depends more on a narcissistic perception of ourselves than a desire to share. However, selfies maintain a testimony that is diffused through boundaries, cultures, and experiences. Consequently, we can wonder if they might constitute an adequate practice of witness. It is important here to note that the transformation of society and of our ways of communicating are accompanied by a transformation of memory. This evolution in our globalized society of flux can also be noted through social networks, mostly Facebook. For instance, personal "walls" of people who have passed away still remain. They are not physical graves, but they persist as an electronic testimony of an individual's existence, and they probably receive more visits than cemeteries do nowadays.

As a result, open access to information has consequences when it comes to our attempts to connect, exchange, and remember. But it also has impacted our attempts to learn and to receive knowledge. Consequently, the different forms of knowledge and memory have had to adapt to the public's expectations; they have had to become flexible and interpretive.

Thereby, the evolution of knowledge and memory's diffusion can be observed through the evolution of museums. At first built as places of pure exposition, the museum was essentially a collection of various

objects that served as testimonies of the past or of the existence of other actual civilizations or species. Today, museums — and we had an amazing example when the Narratives of Memory School visited the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg — have evolved to Ideas museums. The Ideas museum not only collects objects but also stories; it creates spaces for dialogue and reciprocal learning, and it is mostly ruled by a shared authority (Czajkowski and Hill 2008; Rader and Cain 2008). Generally, the museum tends to become a site of conscience that turns memory into action, moving along the path from memory-*reverence* to memory-*reference*.

But if memory is transformed, if we go from reverence to reference, we are adding the factor of choice in the interaction of the individual with memory. Reference means we *might* refer; reverence means we *should* refer. Therefore, we can identify the issue as the eventual duty to remember. The inclusion of the possibility to *choose* is a result of the transformation of our societies. The choice is inherent to our freedom, inherent to the human rights that were guaranteed for every human being after WWII. However, this ability to *choose* whether or not to refer to the past mistakes and traumas also creates a risk that we might then forget, and then repeat the mistakes. The problem of memory is narrowly tied to responsibility and learning from our mistakes. This responsibility may be looked at as the result of self-identification with the victims, or through the feeling of culpability, or as an ethical responsibility — the product of our natural tendency to understand the suffering of others (Simon 2011, 435). The question would be: Is the exposition of structures or images of suffering and death sufficient to create an ethic of witness and historical repair? And will culpability result in further thoughts and actions (Reinhardt and Edwards 2006, 8)? What about the Memorial of the Murdered Jews in Europe in Berlin, which is so abstract and open to interpretation?

One premise we can probably agree on is that we *have to remember events*. It could be through an ethical path of understanding the reasons of a possible pre-figuration of the risks of the future, or a demonstration of humans' capacity to hurt themselves (Houziaux 2005, 52). The potential of memorial sites, not only as a respectful testimony for the victims but also as an acknowledgment of the past and a warning for the future, leads to the question of the adequate way to transmit memory. I often have the feeling that our duty toward the past is exaggerated compared to our duty toward the present and the future. We might interrogate ourselves regarding the dangers of a shameful memory that will not

offer actual and appropriate keys to fight against new challenges we face. In this sense, the duty of memory could be either well-used or abused. As Paul Ricoeur said, a “work of memory” might be a more appropriate burden than a duty of memory (Ricoeur 2000, 105).

This work of memory or the duty to remember seems to be a political duty at first, and so a duty that could differ for the Germans or the French, or for North Americans or Africans (Bienenstock 2010, 103-15). The ethical dimension of the political duty of memory and of the memorial site should, therefore, be questioned regarding the potential universal message they could send, if that is possible. Consequently, I would ask: Was the Berlin Holocaust Memorial built for the German people? For me? For our children? Was it for the past victims? For the next generation? Is it all of these? Can the memorial site be both beautiful and ugly, and about both hope and shame, at the same time?

The memorial site tends to commemorate the traumas and the victims, as well as to remember in order to prevent new crises and atrocities. However, the political duty to remember cannot, in itself, be enough to carry on this legacy, and the passage from reverence to reference has to be analyzed deeply.

Our societies understood the necessity of adopting measures of prevention and the repression of atrocities at the international, regional, national, and local levels. But the evolution of the museums’ expositions of knowledge, the conception of a work of memory and of political duty, and the links between memory and responsibility lead me to think that our tendency today is to provide a base for reflection. Each of us has to think about his or her own duty to understand and to integrate our knowledge. This assumption leads me to the conclusion that the research regarding appropriate behaviour, or the interaction between a memorial site and the public, might be meaningless — because the process of reflection is engaged thanks to the site, and the public policies or civil actions surrounding the site are by themselves an intrinsic and individual process (although this individual process is conditioned by cultural, political, and social parameters). Even the path from memory reverence to memory reference, if it can be a macro-choice operated by society, can also be a micro-choice, as it was for me in the Ravensbrück Memorial Site.

Therefore, I would like to underline two elements: the reflection undertaken as a result of the interaction with the memorial site or monument is at first an *individual act*; secondly, the reflective potential of the memorial site or monument leads the individual to question the

appropriate behaviour to honour the memory of the past and the freedom of the present. The memorial arouses and engages with one's own emotional needs: perpetuation of pain or resilience, grief or relief, ugliness or beauty — just like in a *game of mirrors*.

## Is There a Good Way to Remember?

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law [...] (Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, Preamble)

A tragedy as a victory may become a sacralized moment of history. The “archive,” far from being a reference anymore, then becomes a relic, dispensing its teaching from being re-actualized and implemented in the present in a new way (Houziaux 2005, 51). In consequence, the work of memory has to be seen in the context of the lessons we can learn, which would become scientific tools to fight against the future. Should these tools rely on hope or on guilt? Is memory subjectively shameful or should it make us aware of our responsibilities? I would argue that the danger with subjectivity is the inability to translate our feelings into a concrete and well-prepared action. Therefore, the objective interpretation of the purpose of the memorial should not put aside the emotional aspect of our interaction with the memorial and how reactions might vary from person to person. Guilt, like hope, must

make its way to our brains. But both guilt and hope are not ours as French, Hungarian, German, or Canadian individuals; they are ours as human beings.

Consequently, to find your humanity, you must look inside yourself, so as to see the special reflection the memorial site sends back to you. It is not the memorial that should be analyzed; it is your own reactions and feelings reflected by this special place. This is, in my opinion, the only way to interact with the memorial site in accordance with its purpose and with the universal conception of it.

I lived an example of sacralization in Berlin, through the shame of my attempt to capture what Shapira esteems to be the spirit of the site, and I confess that this experience marked me, probably forever. By taking this picture on top of the Memorial, I intended to carve my presence into that place; but then the place was carved into *me* in a deeper way than I expected. I do not know if I will behave the same way at the future sites I visit.

One thing I know and would like to share is that this human instinct to want to be engraved in the traumatic sites is more current than we would think. In Ravensbrück, we saw on the walls of the crematory ovens, inside the crematorium, the names of the Soviets soldiers who had freed the camp. Why did they write their name on these specific walls? Why not somewhere else in the camp? I assume maybe it is a way to be remembered; to say I was there; to say I saw what happened here. Maybe it was a *selfie* in those times, as suggested by our tour guide, Matthias Heyl.

## Conclusion

The established memorial sites encourage reflection regarding past traumas and regarding our current relationship with society — so different elements come under consideration.

First, the *voluntary factor* persists, as it should, because it is a part of our freedom to learn, to question, and to understand, or to refuse to do so. The ability to choose freely is inherent to the respect of human dignity and human rights, and also to the legacy of the Holocaust. It is inherent to every site that perpetuates the memory of the people who were deprived of their fundamental rights and their liberties.

Second, our interaction with the memorial depends on *our interaction with society*, our individual way of perceiving its legacy and knowledge. Consequently, to create an adequate practice regarding the interaction with memorial sites, society has to be able to pass on the knowledge, but also to accept that knowledge is always continuing to expand. Social media and selfies are tools of diffusion. In order to frame this diffusion in an adequate and ethical way, society has to respect the critical and the empathetic spirit of individuals, and to help them to develop their personal morality rather than imposing an external and disconnected morality onto them.

Third, and the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp insists on this point in its expositions, we have an individual burden to wonder: *what if it was me?* Everyone is a potential author or victim of violent actions. Once you know this, you never forget it: this is the path from memory reverence to memory reference, from guilt and passivity to hope and action. The consecration of human rights, the existence of memorial sites, the involvement of civil society, and initiatives such as the Narratives of Memory Field School give us the opportunity to live our part of this legacy and to become part of the solution. These actions, such as visiting memorial sites, are a matter of justice for the past *and* for future generations. Moreover, the matter of justice relates to present generations — because we know that atrocities still exist. Despite the progress the international community may have made, we are far from the eradication of human violence. Therefore, our reflection on our liberties, our potential for reflection, and our possibilities for action, as experienced in Budapest, Ravensbrück, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp, and in other memorials, structures, sites, and monuments, shall be carried on and expanded throughout the world.

In conclusion, I wish for everyone a deep and meaningful encounter with a memorial site that engenders both guilt and hope, reverence and reference, ugliness and beauty.

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