



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (source: Wikimedia Commons_Jonay CP_CC BY 2.0)

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Auschwitz? Never heard of it... The reasons behind the poor knowledge of German youth on concentration camps

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To this day, the Germans and Austrians are not certain how to deal with the grim legacy of concentration camps. The trivialisation of memory adds to the lack of knowledge about the camps among the younger generations.

Winston Churchill once said: "History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it". States and nations fight for the chance to enforce the "monopoly on interpretation" on the world, ergo for "history to be kind to them". For this reason, they attempt to popularise their own version of memory and historical narrative. Of course,

this is largely due to the historical policies and expectations of societies to paint their countries in the best possible light at the international scene.

The Polish, German and Austrian experiences of the Second World War are so drastically different that to find a unified interpretation of some events seems almost impossible, while the clash of some historical narratives is sometimes painful. However, we could assume that the concentration and death camps in the Third Reich and in the territories it occupied should never be an element of political games and manipulations. Independently of their location, they should remain as proof of the crime and, at the same time, a kind of memento for humanity. It is worth taking a closer look at how the “policy” of commemorating these places is carried out and, first and foremost, what is the general knowledge and memory of the younger generations on concentration camps.



Occupation of the territories of the Republic of Poland between 1939-1941. Photo from the book by M. Korcuć *The Fighting Republic of Poland 1939-1945*, illustration by Tomasz Ginter



Occupation of the territories of the Republic of Poland between 1941-1944. Photo from the book by M. Korkuć *The Fighting Republic of Poland 1939-1945*, illustration by Tomasz Ginter

Places of truth

The attitude of individual countries towards former concentration camps was mostly dictated by the relation perpetrator - victim. Naturally, the areas of former camps in the territory of Poland became protected; it was an entirely different situation in Germany and Austria where the camps were the proof of these nations' crimes, so an undesired element of history.

“In the world of information overload from the media with which we need to cope every day, with which young people need to cope - in the era of the Internet and television, where fiction is being presented as the past, it is extremely important to have sources showing the truth.”

This is what prof. Günter Morsch, the director of the Foundation *Brandenburg Places of Memory* and an expert on the history of concentration camps said about the role of the places of memory in former camps.

Even though, most of the concentration camps in Poland had been taken over by the Soviet army after the

war, part of their areas were usually given to Poles for management and were made into the places of memory. Thanks to that some camp buildings remained as well as objects left by prisoners, sometimes even documentation which the Germans were unable to destroy (although it needs to be mentioned that often the camps' infrastructure was taken away by the Soviets). Part of the territory of the Majdanek camp was put under special protection already in November 1944 as a place of memory, which was made official in 1947. The Auschwitz memorial was created the same year. In Treblinka, such a place was created much later - as far as in 1964, since the Germans eradicated and destroyed the camps themselves in 1943, following the uprising of the prisoners.



**Women and children upon
arriving at the KL Auschwitz-
Birkenau camp, May 1944
(Institute of National
Remembrance)**

The places of memory in Poland usually cover the substantial areas of the former camps. They are characteristic for their large numbers of artifacts, as well as the partially intact former structures of the camps. Interferences in the shape of the areas are typically limited to renovations and the necessary adjustments to the needs of the visitors. It is worth remembering that even in Poland, where the "sacredness" of the former camps seems to be so obvious, it is characteristic for these places to have tensions between the dynamically developing, nearby cities, their citizens and the trauma of the past which requires appropriate respect to the victims. This poses many questions: "Can you live in the shadow of Auschwitz?"; "How can one live there?"; "Is it ok to laugh in Oświęcim?"¹ Such doubts are perfectly understandable, they are the proof that the memory of these events and the meaning of these places are vivid. An opposite situation, when the area of a former camp becomes a place of ordinary use or is forgotten, can be very troubling. There are such cases in Poland as well. For example, museums built at the areas of former death camps in Kulmhof (Chełmno, near the Ner river), where between 160-200 thousand people died, or in Treblinka (around 800-900 thousand victims). These are only divisions of regional museums, funded mainly by local governments, which drastically limits their budget. There aren't even any roadsigns with information on how to reach these museums, for which the directors of these facilities have asked for quite some time.

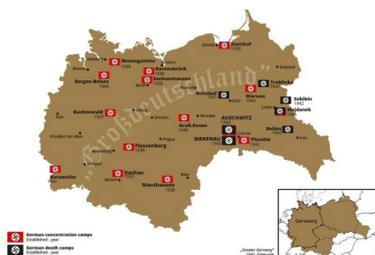
Even more disturbing situations took place in Austria, which, with the Allies blessing, declared itself as “Hitler’s first victim”². In Austria, after it had been joined to the Reich, there was formally only one concentration camp - the Mauthausen, however, it had several dozen subcamps in the eastern part of the country (including Gusen). In the western part of Austria, there were thirteen subcamps of the Dachau camp, located in the nearby Bavaria. The Mauthausen-Gusen complex was actually a single, big camp on the Austrian land. After the war, these facilities were taken over by the Soviets occupying part of the country, who transformed them into, among other things, military barracks and devastated most of them by taking away many elements of the camp infrastructure.

A visit to the former camp can still be very shocking as regular households and living blocs stand only several dozen metres away from the crematory, while the former roll-call square has only recently been taken under the protection of the conservator of monuments. The house which held the headquarters of the camp’s gestapo is now a private villa.

In 1947, the territory of the main Mauthausen camp was handed over to the Austrian authorities, under the condition of creating a memorial site there. It was constructed two years later. Since that moment, the Mauthausen camp was to be the single and model example of honouring the memory of the victims of the Austrian camps. Unfortunately, during the adaptive works many of the prisoners’ living barracks were deconstructed, while only some of the living quarters of the SS and industrial buildings of the quarries were left untouched. The building of the camp hospital was renovated for the purpose of holding the main exhibitions there. Today, the entirety of the Mauthausen Memorial Site is more like a sterile, modern museum with mostly new buildings. For certain, this type of area management was dictated by the damages of the original buildings, but also by the museum’s functionality. Sadly, it does not convey the grim atmosphere of the former camp, which was considered one of the harshest in the Third Reich.

The fate of the Gusen subcamp, where almost 45 thousand prisoners lost their lives, including 27-35 thousand Poles, was completely different. In 1955, when the Soviets were leaving Austria, they handed the rights to the camp’s territory to the Langenstein municipality, which decided to sell it to private owners. Thanks to the determination of the former prisoners, who bought some of the land, it was possible to save the area of the

former crematory. Moreover, thanks to the efforts of former prisoners from various countries, a small memorial site was created in 1965 - the Gusen Memorial. A visit to the former camp can still be very shocking as regular households and living blocs stand only several dozen metres away from the crematory, while the former roll-call square has only recently been taken under the protection of the conservator of monuments. The house which held the headquarters of the camp's gestapo is now a private villa. The Austrian authorities showed little interest in protecting the camp's remains and creating a memorial site which the Gusen camp deserves.³



**A map of the German camps
between 1941-1945**

In Germany, the areas of former concentration camps, almost immediately after liberation, were taken over by either the Soviets, the British or the Americans. The Soviets often established new camps in their place for the NKVD (among others in Sachsenhausen); in the western occupation zones the camps also served as intern camps and prisons for Germans suspected of committing crimes.

The biggest one out of all of them was KL Dachau, once a model German camp, also used for training. After it had been liberated, the Americans turned it into a prison and organised trials for the crews of the KL Dachau, Mauthausen and Buchenwald. Then, the camps' infrastructures served as temporary facilities for German refugees from Sudetenland (Sudety Land). At the time, only the crematory was put under special protection.

It was a different case with the Bergen-Belsen camp, liberated by the British. On April 16th, the day after the liberation, a Holy Mass was held for the saved prisoners and a birch tree cross for the victims was put up. In November, it was replaced with a large, wooden cross funded by the former Polish prisoners. This cross stands to this day. Due to the typhus epidemic in the middle of May 1945, the British decided to burn the prisoner barracks. A hospital for the saved Polish and Jewish prisoners and DPs⁴ was set up at the former Wehrmacht barracks. In 1952, the president of West Germany Theodor Heuss solemnly unveiled the monument for the murdered victims thus inaugurating the museum's activity - the Bergen-Belsen Memorial Site.



A group of small, Jewish children walking in pairs at one of Łódź's streets during a deportation to a death camp in Chełmno by the Ner river in the summer of 1942 (Institute of National Remembrance)

The situation was slightly different at the territory of the German Democratic Republic, where there had previously been several, large concentration camps. When the camps were liberated by the Soviet troops, they unfortunately retained their functions, although under the NKVD's management. The Germans suspected of crimes, but mostly "the enemies of the people", were kept in Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück and Buchenwald between 1945-1950. Only when East Germany was founded, some of the camp areas were given to the German authorities. Sadly, the former buildings were often very damaged and the local population used the post-camp infrastructure as a source of building materials. In Sachsenhausen, between 1952-1953, the Barracked People's Police (Kasernierte Volkspolizei - KVP) blew up the remains of the crematory, and built a shooting ground on part of the area.

Only in the second half of the 1950s, on the initiative of the former prisoners, the modest memorials for the victims began appearing in the shape of commemorative plaques or statues. In 1959, the East Germany's authorities changed their policy towards the former camps. The Ravensbrück Memorial Site was established, covering only a small part of the former camp, since the rest was still in use by the Soviet military. Following the fall of the USSR, until 1994, it was used by the army of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The concept of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site, as well as the two other national places of memory of East Germany (Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen), was created by the group of architects called *Buchenwald-Kollektiv*, which took inspiration from, among others, the Polish museums on former German camps.



**The KL Auschwitz gate, January
1945 (Institute of National
Remembrance)**

In all the cases of the German memorial sites, both in the Federal Republic of Germany and in the German Democratic Republic, the associations and committees of former prisoners played a crucial, often initiating role as they relentlessly demanded the commemoration of the former camps. It is also worth stressing that the German memorial sites had a specific function in the internal historical policy of the two German states. In East Germany, where obligatory trips to the former camps were organised for students and workers, the propaganda strengthened the picture of the east-German elites as members of the anti-fascist opposition, at the same time stressing the Nazi provenance of the western-German elites. On the other hand, in West Germany until the 1960s it was the rule of thumb for politicians to avoid visits to the former camps as much as possible. Only in 1965 did the prime minister of Bavaria, Alois Hundhammer (who himself was a prisoner of KL Dachau for a short time) open up a modest memorial. Later, on the initiative of the associations of former prisoners and religious communities, more places of memory and prayer for various religions were created. The second time the prime minister of Bavaria (Edmund Stoiber) visited Dachau was no sooner than on the 50th anniversary of the camp's liberation, so in 1995, and the first visit of the president of the Federal Republic of Germany (Horst Köhler) took place only in 2010. A positive element of the German memorial sites are the youth and documentation centres located near them, which serve as educational facilities.

Knowledge and memory

If the memorial sites in former camps are to actually serve as a warning, as is often declared by politicians, then the societies need to have at least the most basic knowledge on the system which created them and on the mechanisms of extermination. In the year 2000, Alphons Silbermann and Manfred Staffers published - under the telling title *Auschwitz: Never Heard of It* - the results of their research on the Germans' knowledge on concentration camps.⁵ Despite the fact that Auschwitz was the largest "death factory" for Jews, and despite the emphasis of the German state on education on the Holocaust, when asked if they knew what Auschwitz was, as much as 23% of correspondents aged 14-17 responded with "I don't know" (aged 50 or more - it was

only 3.6%).⁶ In 2012, the Forsa Institute conducted a survey with shocking results: it turned out that 21% of Germans between the ages of 18 to 30 could not find any associations with the word Auschwitz.⁷ Other research show that even when Germans know the general numbers concerning the Holocaust, they do not know the “technical” details of the Final Solution. Most Germans cannot describe what transpired in death camps and do not know the names of other camps, like Treblinka or Majdanek.⁸ The 2017 research conducted for the Körber Foundation only confirmed the dramatic state of Germans’ knowledge. Only 59% of students under the age of fourteen know that Auschwitz was a concentration and death camp.⁹ The feeling of moral responsibility for the genocide of Jews by the Germans is indisputable; however, the crimes committed on Poles and other Slavic nations are often not remembered at all. It is the result of the lack of proper education and the rather convenient alibi for the Germans - the number of Jewish victims in a way justifies their sole focus on the Holocaust. Concentration camps are also mainly associated with the Holocaust; the other eventual victims which are sometimes mentioned are Romani or homosexuals. The subject of the extermination of Slovenians and other nations under the German occupation is practically non-existent. “It is almost like a black hole” - comments prof. Benjamin Ortmeyer, who conducts research on these matters.¹⁰

“In the German culture, it is believed that the Second World War became a total, destructive war only since the Barbarossa Plan, the attack of the USSR in 1941. The memory of the Holocaust is prevalent, which is undeniably right, but we should also remember about the other groups of victims.”

- says the aforementioned prof. Morsch, the co-author of the exhibition *Forgotten genocide? Polish and Czech intelligentsia in the Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück concentration camps*, which was visited by more than 200 thousand Germans.¹¹



Ruins of the Łódź ghetto after the war had ended, 1945 (Institute of National Remembrance)

The situation is even worse in Austria, where the myth of “Hitler’s first victim” made it practically impossible to not only research the Austrian Nazism but also the participation of Austrians in the crimes of national socialism. The result of such historical construct was not only the lack of Austrians’ knowledge on the crimes committed by their compatriots, but also the cultivation of the memory of the soldiers and officers serving in the structures of the Third Reich.¹³

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Research shows that the participation of Austrians in the crimes against humanity was larger than the ratio of Austrian to German population.¹⁴ Eight of the seventy five commandants of concentration camps were Austrians; 40% of jailers and female overseers in the camps came from Austria, and 14% were members of the SS, while 70-80% of officers in Adolf Eichmann’s staff (the man called the “architect of the Holocaust”) were of Austrian origin too.¹⁵

The Austrian author and columnist Martin Pollack wrote this about the memory of his compatriots:

“The definite majority of Austrians welcomed the Anschluss with joy. Part of the Austrian society chose the road of oblivion. They prefer to think that Austria never had much to do with Nazism. In Austria, many people treat the subject of the Second World War that way: we don’t talk about it out loud or better yet - we don’t talk about it at all.”¹⁶

The memory about the crimes takes shape in the correlation with the role the state played during the Second World War. In a natural way, these events are being erased from the memory of Germans and Austrians, while they are cultivated in Poland. The policies of the authorities are usually tied to the moods of the society, which is clearly visible on the example of Germany and Austria in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was practically no mention of the subject of war, and it wasn't even taught in schools.

Currently, the knowledge on the subjects of the Second World War, its crimes, especially the Holocaust, is much larger in Germany than in Austria. However, it is largely selective, which is proved i.e. by the almost total omission of the Slavic victims. The difference in cultivating the memory of victims can also be observed in the approach towards the memorial sites like the former concentration and death camps.



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (source: Wikimedia Commons_Jonay CP_CC BY 2.0)



View through the wall of the Gusen camp (photo: Joanna Lubecka, Institute of National

Ritualisation of memory

The narration on crime, built up over the years, was based on something which the German historian Norbert Frei described as “the discretion of the non-specific” (*die Discretion des Unkonkreten*).¹⁷ The renowned researcher of the Holocaust Saul Friedländer called Auschwitz the universal “metaphor for evil”¹⁸. It is troubling to see that it is nothing but a metaphor in many countries. A metaphor without any specific knowledge behind it but rather a general idea, often repeated without reflection. Austrian historian and journalist Martin Haidinger warns against such approach to cultivating memory:

“Young people cannot have their attitude towards the Third Reich shaped by pop culture, because this is a superficial knowledge on symbols and gestures rather than content.”¹⁹

As much as we see the dangers of forgetting about the crimes of the Second World War, we often fail to notice the second dangerous aspect of collective memory which is the trivialisation and ritualisation of commemoration. It is the sin of many governments and educational systems. Contemporary societies allowed for ritualisation to take place; they left commemoration to the state structures which made it political. It has become an element of political plays for party gains, and the selective knowledge - an element of manipulation. The key role in preventing such processes plays wise, historical education.

Nothing protects nations from oblivion better than reliable knowledge, guarded by more than the structures of the state. Nothing will ever replace grass-root initiatives, often of regional character, but also individuals who are able to, even in opposition of “official memory”, bring back the authentic memory of the victims. Places such as Krzyżowa, Oświęcim or Sachsenhausen need to be teeming with life and debate on what the totalitarianisms were. Especially young people should not only learn about the dry facts, but also understand the processes which led to these crimes.

¹ All these titles come from various publications and blogs.

² Such point was included in the Moscow Declaration already signed by the Allies on October 30th 1943

³ It is worth reminding that the current shape of the Gusen Memorial is mostly due to the efforts of a group of Austrian citizens who, often in opposition of their compatriots, fought to commemorate the victims. In 2017, three activists - Martha Gammer, Rudolf Haunschmied and mayor of St. Georgren an der Gusen, Erich Wahl - received the Decoration of Honour Meritorious for Polish Culture from the hands of the Polish deputy minister of culture Magdalena Gawin (who along with the ministry of foreign affairs and Polish facilities in Austria is advocating for the proper commemoration of the victims of the KL Gusen camp).

⁴ "DPS" is an abbreviation from the term *displaced persons*. It was a term used by the allies to describe people who "found themselves outside their own country due to the war and wish to either return to their homeland or find a new home, but are unable to do so without help".

⁵ A. Silbermann, M. Stoffers, Auschwitz: Nie davon gehört. Erinnern und Vergessen in Deutschland, Berlin 2000.

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Jeder fünfte jüngere Deutsche kennt Auschwitz nicht, „Stern25“,
I 2012 r., <https://www.stern.de/politik/geschichte/befragung-von-18--bis-30-jaehrigen-jeder-fuenfte-juengere-deutsche-kennt-auschwitz-nicht-3523458.html> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.].

⁸ Interview with prof. B. Ortmejerem for „Die Zeit“ z 27 II 2012 r., Nahezu ein schwarzes Loch, <https://www.zeit.de/2012/09/C-Interview-Lehrer-NS-Zeit> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.].

⁹ Deutsche wollen aus Geschichte lernen, <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/presse-meldungen-fotos-journalistenservice/deutsche-wollen-aus-geschichte-lernen-1143.html> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.].

¹⁰ Interview with prof. B. Ortmejerem for „Die Zeit“ z 27 II 2012 r., Nahezu...

¹¹ E. Stasik, Sonderaktion Krakau – zapomniana zagłada?, <http://www.dw.com/pl/sonderaktion-krakau-zapomniana-zag%C5%82ada/a-4909976> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.].

¹² H. Uhl, Das „erste Opfer“. Der österreichische Opfermythos und seine Transformationen in der Zweiten Republik, „Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft“ (ÖZP) 2001, nr 1, s. 93-108.

¹³ It is worth mentioning that the taboo regarding the Wehrmacht soldiers has also recently been broken in Germany. Alexander Gauland, the leader of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany, stated that Germany has the right to be proud of their Wehrmacht soldiers, Gauland fordert „Stolz“ auf deutsche Soldaten, „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung“, 14 IX 2017 r., <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/bundestagswahl/afd-alexander-gauland-relativiert-verbrehen-der-wehrmacht-15199412.html> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.].

¹⁴ The ratio of the Austrian population in the Third Reich was at 8%.

¹⁵ B. Perz, Der österreichische Anteil an den NS-Verbrechen. Anmerkungen zur Debatte, [w:] Österreichische Nation, Kultur, Exil und Widerstand. In memoriam Felix Kreissler, red. H. Kramer, K. Liebhart, F. Stadler, Wien 2006, s. 223-234; J. Weiss, Der lange Weg zum Holocaust. Die Geschichte der Judenfeindschaft in Deutschland und Österreich, Berlin 1998, s. 241-242; R. Steininger, Austria,

Germany, and the Cold War. From the Anschluss to the State Treaty 1933-1955, New York 2008, s. 14-15.

¹⁶ II Wojna w oczach Austriaków. Interview with M. Pollack and M. Haidinger, <http://www.polonika.at/index.php/miesiecznik/historia/1254-ii-wojna-w-oczach-austriakow> [dostęp: 07 I 2020 r.]. Martin Pollack is the son of an officer of the SS, a member of the Gestapo and of the *Einsatzgruppe*.

¹⁷ N. Frei, Auschwitz und Holocaust. Begriff und Historiographie, [w:] Holocaust: Die Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte, red. H. Loewy, Reinbek 1992, s. 104.

¹⁸ S. Friedländer, Die Metapher des Bösen. Über Martin Walsers Friedenspreis-Rede und die Aufgabe der Erinnerung, „Die Zeit“, 26 XI 1998 r., http://www.zeit.de/1998/49/199849.friedlaender_xml [dostęp: 7 I 2020 r.].

¹⁹ II Wojna w oczach Austriaków. Interview with M. Pollack i M. Haidinger, <http://www.polonika.at/index.php/miesiecznik/historia/1254-ii-wojna-w-oczach-austriakow> [dostęp: 7 I 2020 r.].

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