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MEMORY AS A MUSEUM PRACTICE

Tone Kregar

Museum of Recent History Celje, Slovenia

Abstract: In the current public discourse memory is among the most common words, concepts, and contents of a multiplicity of meanings, connotations and contexts. Besides personal memory, the interpretations of our past and consequently our present often include references of collective and historical memory. This terminology is particularly popular with politicians and publicists striving for a more colourful vocabulary, who often use the fore mentioned terms as synonyms. Scientific and professional circles are more conscientious at differentiating these terms, as their research focuses on studying the past and, consequently, on the role of memory or on the very process of remembering. However, within this corpus certain differences in the terminology and different views on the types and forms of memory do exist. In this paper, rather than psychological and sociological theories (by Maurice Halbwachs and others) we focus on how we, historians, look on the various forms of memory, especially those historians who study (still "alive") 20th century. And who in their work, let it be research, teaching, or, like in my case - work in a museum, rely on both, individual memories and collective memory to shape the historical memory of a community or society. Although greater terminological clarity in this regard would be more than welcome, it is most important that we correctly identify the different forms and types of memory and its components and that we use them appropriately in our work - that is in research, understanding and interpreting our past or our history. Even more so because they often intertwine with each

other, overlap, complement, and transform from one to another, or, sometimes even exclude each other. Therefore it is often difficult to clearly distinguish one from another and to deal with them separately. Historians working in the Museum of Recent History Celje are faced with these issues and problems on a daily basis; many specific examples of our work further demonstrate the moulding complexity of memory and its forms and go beyond the theoretical classifications and division.

Keywords: Museum of Recent History Celje, Museum of Revolution Celje, individual memory, collective memory, historical consciousness, difficult heritage, Life in Celje, Diary of Three Generations

I. INTRODUCION

Since the theme of the conference is cultural memory, please allow me to begin my paper in a very personal way. Almost 23 years have passed since my last stay in Skopje in September 1990. Like thousands of young men from all parts of former Yugoslavia, I served a one year military service here. Therefore, I was flooded by personal memories when I came here again. Such a trip down memory lane offers a wide range of grateful topics for male companies who love to recall countless more or less plausible micro-stories

to urban legends and myths. Military service remains part of the collective memory of many generations, and this collective memory is much more colourful and varied than the historical memory of this region in which I and my buddies are probably recorded as the last generation that served its military service in relatively normal and peaceful conditions. Namely, less than a year later the irreversible disintegration of our common state and its army began. All this is history nowadays, and as such it paved its way to museums.

II. MUSEUM AS A PLACE AND REFLECTION OF MEMORY

In essence, a museum is a place of memory and the reason why museums and other such institutions exist is to preserve that memory and convey it in different forms and ways. We consider museum materials and collections to be a materialized foundation or linking elements of memory. Contemporary museums do not merely collect objects, they focus on their interactions. Therefore, we can truly get to know a museum object or truly understand it and respect it only when we associate it with our memory. At the same time, museums are also a reflection of the actual social and political environment and its relationship to memory. The museum, which I come from, is a good example of the latter. It came into being in 1963 as the Celje Museum of Revolution. Already its name reveals that, it belonged to the so-called "red museums", which emerged throughout the former Yugoslavia in that period and which had a very clear purpose and role or as one would say, a mission. They showcased the history of labour movement, the anti-fascist struggle and the socialist revolution, and at the same time they also

legitimized and consolidated the system and promoted the ideology of the ruling communist regime and the personality cult of Josip Broz Tito. The museum preserved the memory of an important historical period, which was, of course, selected, (self-)censored and tailored.

It originated from a one-sided interpretation of historic sources, was based on autobiographical records and testimonies of selected individuals, and drew mostly from the collective memory of WW II participants and supporters of the revolution and the victims of occupying forces. Any other contingent of memory, which differed from it in one way or another, was not welcome or had no place in the museum. The purpose of the museum was basically to create and promote the official and the only legitimate historical memory, therefore to strengthen not only historical, but also political and ideological consciousness of visitors to the museum. Or by words of the one of museum's directors: »Methodical and systematic search for museum material and its collection, arranging and research; organization of museum exhibits; spreading the traditions of the National Liberation War; formation of a moral, freedom-loving, patriotic, humane and revolutionary awareness.« (Marolt, 1974: 533.)

In the mid 1980's the conceptual transformation of the museum began in the context of broader socio-political changes. New collections were added to the old ones, which spoke of the history and tradition of the Celje region throughout the 20th century. Accordingly, the expert team changed and expanded, as well. The museum was joined by ideologically unburdened young historians and an ethnologist who introduced urban ethnology as one of the areas of museum work.

As a conclusion of sorts, the Museum of Revolution Celje also officially changed its name to the Museum of

Recent History Celje in 1991. The new name had therefore not been the cause of the above-mentioned changes, but rather the result of these changes. It was the result of having expanded the temporal frame of research to include the entire 20th century, of having introduced new topics that were no longer ideologically conditioned (political history had to step aside to make room for everyday life), and of introducing professional and methodological novelties (ethnology has joined history). The new name therefore extended the framework of museum research work and exhibits in a formal manner as well. Among other things also changed the look and attitude of the memory in all its appearing forms. Unlike the selective and politically tailored collective memory, which once dwelled in the museum, our door is now open to the widest range of memories. For years we have systematically collected, stored and processed a wide range of life stories and individual memories. Unlike the former practice (and it also applies to published autobiographic and other memoires) these materials do not merely represent (ancillary) historical sources, but they also speak their own, showroom language directly. This is especially welcome and valuable when it comes to confronting the past, which still burdens the current social reality and of which, both, in professional circles and in public discourse, there exist different, often diametrically opposite views and interpretations. It is so-called "difficult heritage" the content of which is described by Sharon Macdonald, Professor of Social Anthropology at Manchester University, as the »past, that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity.«(Macdonalds, 2009 : 1.) Difficult heritage in our case has its roots in multi-ethnic and worldview conflicts that took place in

Slovenia or in this entire region during World War II and immediately after it, and this heritage is still strongly present in people's minds and is actually quite aggravating. Museum professionals are therefore often faced with the challenge of placing all these manifold memories, both individual and collective, correctly in the historical and museological context in such a manner that we avoid conveying contradicting messages or any relativist approach to objective historical facts.

III. KNEADABLE COMPLEXITY OF MEMORY

It applies likewise to other content, which in a less painful, but still indicative way portrays the dynamics of political, socio-economic and cultural changes of the 20th century, as the heritage and legacy of this content is still reflected both in situ and in the structure and in the way of life of the population. The collective memory, which has formed within middle-class families in the traditional urban core of Celje is probably not fully comparable with the collective memory of blue-collar residents of -industrial suburbs that started to emerge at the end of the 19th century and existed as a specific socio-cultural entity for over a century. We could list a number of similar examples, but this does not mean that the environment from which I come, does not have a common collective memory, or at least some fundamental points, on which we can rely on in our specific museological work, regardless of individual destinies, world-ideological orientation, or other characteristics of individuals and groups in this particular environment.

The most obvious example of this is the Second World War as an important milestone in the life of a

generation that is today already in the late autumn of its life. We could hardly find anyone who lived in Celje at that particular time and who would not still remember vividly certain events from the town's history. Among them, the arrival of German Army and the first major ceremony held by the occupying forces in front of the Town Hall, the mandatory membership in the organization "Deutsche Jugend", as well as scenes from the darkest period of the occupation. For example, the large red posters with lists of prisoners, who were shot in the prison yard in the city centre; the shots that echoed from there, the disrespectful handling of their dead bodies or the humiliation that captured partisans had to endure. Most of the testimonies, including written and published sources on this subject are very similar. The reasons can be found in the fact that many young people often witnessed those sad events directly. The participation in the germanizing organizations and in their events was obligatory, and pupils had to attend them, same as the previously mentioned ridiculing parade. In addition, Celje was a small town, where people knew each other personally and their destinies were strong interwoven, therefore in those peer and family circles any news travelled fast. In addition, those events became part of the official, codified historical memory in public life immediately after the war; they were included in educational programmes, and soon also paved their way to the Museum of the Revolution. Thanks to the Museum and its collections of documentary photographs, the memory was preserved in a clearer form than it would be otherwise, and it was easier to pass it on to further generations. (Kregar, Žižek, 2006) Unlike so, when it comes to events that were deliberately marginalized or erased from historical records, there is an evident and quite large gap in our collective memory. Therefore we can talk

about memory, which is the result of, either people's individual memory and personal experience, or the result of interaction of various individual memories that were socially recognized and cultivated over the years. The above mentioned example of collective memory of war times is not the only one, but I pointed it out just to illustrate the interrelations or blend of individual and collective memory, and the hard to determine boundaries between personal and social, or autobiographical and historical memory.

IV. THE DIARY OF THREE GENERATIONS AT THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION "LIFE IN CELJE" – AN PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF MUSEUM PRACTICE

I want to illustrate the kneadable complexity of memory and its forms by the following example from practice.

In 2000 the museum opened a new permanent exhibition entitled "Life in Celje", in which we wanted to present the history of the city and its inhabitants in the 20th century in a clear and modern way. At this point, we are primarily interested in the first part of the exhibition, which brings a chronological overview of the history of Celje and its inhabitants throughout the 20th century. At the exhibition there are no explanatory historical interpretations, but the showcased exhibits, which are, accompanied and interpreted by so called "Diary of Three Generations". Namely, a visitor can see the exhibition through the eyes of three individuals, belonging to three different generations of one family. He learns about the history of Celje through their thoughts and observations, expressed and written down at a particular moment in history, which from today's perspective functions as a kind of frozen memory. (Living in Celje, 2000: 10 – 19.)

A. Examples of diary entries

The first diary was written by Marija, who was born into a Slovene middle-class family in the early 20th century. At that time Celje was not just a nice peripheral town of the Habsburg Monarchy, but was marked by fierce ethnic disputes. This diary entry talks about that.

Marija's Diary, April 1913

Our little city is very nice. The German call it Perle an der Sahn and the holidaymakers from Vienna say that it looks like Heidelberg and Ischel. Mamma says that this is true, even though the Germans are not to be believed otherwise. As for my papa: the Germans stick in his craw even more and he often gets angry at them, saying that they should go if they do not like it here. We are Slovenes and we keep to our own, and so should they.

The next author of the diary is her son Marko, who belongs to the generation that grew up before and during the Second World War, and which was actively involved in the post-war economic and social transformation.

Marko's Diary, 27st Oktober 1965

I have two children now, Janez and Andreja. My father and mother are in poor health, but they are quite satisfied and happy. I am very busy, the job has its own demands as well as the numerous social and political functions I am involved in. We, the members of the Communist Party, are trying hard to raise the standard of living in Yugoslavia and I think we have succeeded. We already have a refrigerator, a washing machine and even a television set at home.

The last diarist is Janez, Marko's son and Marija's grandson. He is a "child of socialism" who witnesses the gradual disintegration of the Yugoslav state and its political system. His record of the birth of his daughter rounds up the story of three generations of the 20th century. The passage that I chose to present kind of illustrates my personal introduction to this lecture.

Janez's Diary, 2nd August 1988

Well, they've finally caught up with me and here I am in the Army! No sooner did I finish my degree, when I got drafted. And now I've just been transferred to Sarajevo. Fuck! I tried to get out of my compulsory stint in the army by feigning illness, but it was impossible. I was almost gaoled in the army hospital in Ljubljana for my efforts. Fuck, fuck, fuck! Is there really nothing better to do in the world than crawling around on your belly in the dust, polishing shoes or listening to political lectures? I really couldn't care less about anything. I'm just trying to take short-cuts and get out of as much work as possible. "From the Vardar river to the peak of Triglav, from the Djerdap river to the Adriatic" goes the current hit, but personally, I don't give a hang about the soppy patriotic song. The people here are nuts over that Serbian singer Beautiful Brena. Well, she's nice chick, but the music is not for Slovenes. Just as Milošević is not, along with his idea of Yugoslavia.

At first glance, this is not unusual, since diaries and autobiographical notes are common and grateful threads of various historical displays also in museums. However, in our case the three diarists are fictional characters and consequently also their logs are constructs or fiction. It is therefore a forged historical source in the role of a narrator that guides visitor

through exhibition. And yet we, its creators, do not find this fake diary controversial or unbecoming.

On the contrary, we believe that in this way we approached the objective historical truth, whatever that is, much more than we could have by using any real diaries from the time. In that case we could speak of only one of countless personal memories. Our "Diary of Three Generations" reconstructs the social memory of a certain period through the eyes of three generations represented by 3 members of a single family, who pass the diary on like a baton in a long race, which according to Maurice Halbwachs, "stretches out as far out and as long as it can". Therefore as far and as long as the memories of individuals that form the group can reach. (Halbwachs, 2001: 90.)

And after we opened the exhibition in 2000, the oldest population of visitors still harboured their memories of the beginning of the 20th century – maybe not so much based on personal experience but rather on stories and memories of their parents. Nevertheless, in this way, we covered the whole century with our collective memory.

Our diary records are based on numerous individual testimonies of memory and are consistent with the existing memory records and memoirs. They are written in the language of the time and thoroughly reviewed and contextualized with historical sources. The deliberately demystified relationship between the "little" man and the "great history" also contains some literary elements. After all, isn't literature often the most effective form of understanding the spirit of the past?

Therefore, there is nothing wrong if we use similar approaches in museums. Except for one thing - unlike other artistic interpretations of the past, we have a far

more limited manoeuvre space, but our responsibility is much bigger. If we may be allowed to (re-)construct the past, this by all means does not mean that we should be allowed to romanticize or mythologize it.

Because the moment we placed that kneaded historical mass on display, together with all other elements; exhibits, inscriptions, subtitles, music, ambience, etc., we formed a final product intended for general public, and we can no longer refer to it as collective memory. According to Halbwachs, our intervention presenting collective memory as a view from the inside and the image of similarity became the historical memory as a view from the outside and the image of changes. Which means that we do not only influence the historical consciousness of visitors, but also directly intervene in their collective memory.

As a rule the very same collective memory, from which we, ourselves, will continue to draw.

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