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Transformation of Holocaust Memory in Times of COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe in March 2020, and from there spread throughout the world, among several cultural institutions that closed their doors to visitors were also Holocaust memorials. On March 12, the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial closed its site, followed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) the next day. The day after, former concentration camp sites in Germany performed a similar step. The same day, on March 15, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem also closed its museum for visitors. In response to the restrictions, many memorials, museums and other Holocaust-related institutions pushed forward their digital projects and online activities. Leading institutions, such as the USC Shoah Foundation and the USHMM immediately offered links to various online collections, testimony archives and educational activities. On March 27, IHRA, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, presented a list of online resources for remote Holocaust education, stating that "the current COVID-19 pandemic is posing a great challenge for people and institutions across the globe. Museums, educational institutions and civil society organizations focusing on the topic of the Holocaust are also affected." Correspondingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on cultural institutions and heritage sites induced a significant shift from on-site activities to online media. Apparently, the pandemic accelerated a process that had already started decades ago, the increasing shift towards digital Holocaust memory. Interestingly however, COVID-19 did not only challenge traditional forms of

commemorating and mediating the Holocaust through museums, historical sites and personal encounters with witnesses. It also affected current flagships of digital Holocaust memory, foremost innovative projects in the field of virtual and augmented reality. Although virtual reality installations, such as the USC Shoah Foundation's hologrammatic survivor testimony simulations or VR-based visits at historical sites, are significantly based on temporal (in case of survivor testimonies) or physical (in case of virtual visits) remote experiences, they nevertheless require a physical place to use this technology. And these sites had to close as well in response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

As a result, most memorials responded to the current restrictions with initiatives that moved from complex digital technology to social media platforms as preferred commemorative space, which fosters engagement, participation and active response through sharing, posting and commenting. Zoom became an important tool for online conversations with survivors. Transferring the project "Memories in the Living-room" into the digital world, such remote meetings became increasingly popular during Israel's Holocaust Commemoration Day not only in Israel but also in Germany and the United States. In a similar way, many memorials adapted an existing format, in this case the guided tour at the physical site, into social media environments, primarily to Instagram. Using the joint hashtag: "#digitalmemorials" these virtual site experiences interconnected even further.

Others modified established models and adjusted them to the specific requirements of social media. This was the case with Yad Vashem's Virtual Name Reading Campaign, in which social media users read names of Shoah victims and posted them on Facebook or Instagram using the Hashtags "#RememberingFromHome" and "#ShoahNames". A similar transformation of analogue to digital formats took place in case of the Anne Frank Video Diary, which the Amsterdam based Anne Frank House uploaded to YouTube during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown period. In this case, the original format of the diary was translated into the digital format of the video diary disseminating significant episodes from Anne Frank's life in hiding to the present state of self-isolation at home.

Some projects rather perform a full transition into digital formatting, for instance the Digital Education project launched by the Austrian Mauthausen Memorial immediately after its closure. In short video clips the memorial's educators adopt various digital genres – selfie videos, influencer videos, video lectures, virtual tours, video diaries, and audiovisual essays – and conjoin them to a self-reliant, though a bit improvised tool for communicating the history and presence of the memorial site

across various digital media platforms (website, YouTube, Facebook, GoogleDocs). Thus, the restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on Holocaust commemoration intensified the development of distinct modes of social media memory.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic also had a direct impact on two fundamental principles of Holocaust memory, which is on the one hand the authority of the (authentic) site as experiential connecting point with memories from the past in the present, and on the other hand the authority of the witness as mediator of past experiences to contemporary audiences. By forcing to close the physical sites, the pandemic restrictions challenged the privileged position of Holocaust memorials, especially of those located at former concentration camp and atrocity sites. Furthermore, the COVID-19 disease significantly affected the generation of the last remaining Holocaust survivors due to the fact that it specifically targets old people. In fact, the very first COVID-19 victim in Israel was Aryeh Even, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary.

Hence, the question evolves whether the COVID-19 pandemic as a global challenge did not only catalyze the digital transformation of Holocaust memory, but also symbolizes, and even more reinforces, the transition from what Annette Wieviorka had described as the era of the witness to digital commemoration. This notion is even more apparent in light of the fact that the peak of the (first) wave of COVID-19 infections coincided with the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, and with the National Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel. This left several institutions with the difficult decision how to deal with public ceremonies performed at their sites. Yad Vashem prerecorded the annual Yom HaShoah ceremony and broadcasted it on national television, YouTube and on Facebook. Memorial sites such as Flossenbürg in Bavaria uploaded video speeches from survivors, politicians and others to their website. Some survivors, such as Anita Lasker-Walfish who was liberated in Bergen Belsen recorded her prepared speech for the canceled ceremony with the help of her grandson at home, and uploaded it to YouTube.

All cases discussed here prove the central role (audio-) visual media play for digital commemoration in times of COVID-19 as well as the privileged position of image and moving-image based social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and to a certain extend also Facebook that became responsive commemorative spaces for hashtagged memory.

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