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HOLOCAUST HERITAGE AND ITS PROBLEMS WITH INAUTHENTICITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers authenticity at sites of Holocaust heritage through the eyes of the IHRA Charter for Safeguarding Sites, exploring the importance of authenticity for providing proof of the past and avoiding Holocaust denial and distortion. Taking a variety of case studies from across Europe, it explores authenticity in both the physical reconstructions and restorations, and in the atmosphere at sites. It concludes by asking whether to argue about the acceptability of inauthenticity, and its limits, is ultimately a distraction. The real problem today is Holocaust distortion, and elements at sites which contribute to that, and tell false narratives of past, are where heritage professionals at such sites should place their energies.

KEY WORDS: Authenticity, Holocaust heritage, restoration, reconstruction, Holocaust distortion

Introduction

This paper starts with two statements which, on the face of it, appear uncontentious. First: Holocaust heritage acts as proof of the past. Second: the authenticity of this heritage is vital to avoid Holocaust denial and distortion[1]. Such statements reflect the two strategic priorities and key thematic areas which the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has identified as most pressing issues in the field, namely: safeguarding the record of the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma; and countering distortion[2]. This paper asks how important authenticity is at Holocaust sites and how exercised visitors and heritage professionals alike should be about examples of 'inauthenticity'.

Authenticity at Holocaust-related sites is complex. Given the eight decades of post-war changes at such sites, claims of 'authenticity' in the sense of 'untouched' and 'original' appear naïve. Where does leave IHRA's aspirations to safeguard the record and protect the authenticity of sites? It all depends on what is meant by authenticity, why this matters, and whether the ultimate purpose of retaining sites – so that we can remember and honour the victims – is impacted by inauthenticity.

The IHRA Charter

IHRA's strategic priorities are reflected in the new IHRA Charter for Safeguarding Sites, which lists, in Article 2, sixteen different threats, risk and challenges to the significance of sites, including neglect and decay, climate change, vandalism, and destruction due to warfare. Article 4 advises on good practice in addressing the risks. These include mutual help between countries to help preserve records and sites, allowing access to sites on privately owned land, the prohibition of looting, minimizing wear and tear caused by visitors, and the avoidance of disturbing historic material remains where possible[3]. These have a clear focus on materiality and physicality.

The IHRA Charter also acknowledges and stresses the threats to the 'cultural significance' of sites, something which is defined in the 2013 Burra Charter, Article 1.2, as:

> *aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. Cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects. Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups*[4].

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1 The IHRA working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion can be found here: https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-holocaust-denial-distortion, accessed 1 March 2025.

2 https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Grant-Guidelines-2023-25-1-1.pdf, accessed 9 February 2025.

3 *IHRA Charter for Safeguarding Sites*: https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/IHRA-Charter-for-Safeguarding-Sites.pdf, accessed 16 January 2025.

4 *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (2013). https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf, accessed 9 February 2025.

While cultural significance is embodied in fabric (its physicality), it is also embodied in a place, its meaning and its values, which are more intangible. Sites of Holocaust heritage are defined as the tangible and intangible traces of the murder of European Jewry by the Nazis and their collaborators from 1933 to 1945. They include the material places and spaces through which the Holocaust happened, such as concentration camps, extermination centres, killing sites, mass graves, prisons, ghettos, forced labour camps and the like. We can readily appreciate the importance for today's audiences of both the physical places and the surviving fabric, and what those sites stand for: their meaning and values for audiences today. Such heterogeneous audiences comprise survivors and their families, victims' relatives, pilgrims, educational groups, researchers, and tourists. While we cannot know why each and every person visits (what meaning and values these sites hold for them today), Hodgkinson's research[5] indicates that visitors tend to fall into three broad and overlapping groups: those who visit for reasons of remembrance, those who travel to sites for educational purposes, and the casual tourist or sightseer. Each will have a different concept of 'authenticity', and each will want to see or be exposed to different things. A survivor, returning for a memorial ceremony, might fight hard not to feel the spirit of place and may wish to keep the memories and trauma at arms' length. They may also want to see wheelchair ramps, railings by stairs and elevators added, such as can be seen today at Mauthausen Memorial, but which have caused an uproar because of 'insensitive' impact on the authentic fabric of the site[6]. Their families might want to see the buildings where their loved one's experiences took place and may be very disappointed if they are no longer there. Those wanting an educational experience and even the casual tourist will no doubt want to see *something* if they are not to be disappointed.

Visitor expectations

However, quite what they want and expect to see at such sites is unclear because of the ethical issues and perceived lack of sensitivity of researchers with clipboards approaching visitors at such sites; the challenge and difficulty of visitor surveys has also been noted by Beech[7]. Yet what Hodgkinson[8] describes as a 'voyeuristic demand to witness the actual sites of the Holocaust' is likely to include a desire to see original features, perhaps to an unrealistic level of survival and visibility. However, Dalton[9] suggests that current theorising has failed to 'highlight the vital role of the imagination in animating the artefacts and geography of a place and investing them with

5 Hodgkinson, S. (2013). The concentration camp as a site of 'dark tourism'. *Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire*, 116. pp. 27-28.

6 'New concrete tower in the middle of the historic structure of the Mauthausen CC Memorial', statement made by the Mauthausen Komitee Österreich, https://www.mkoe.at/en/new-concrete-tower-in-the-middle-of-the-historic-structure-of-the-mauthausen-cc-memorial, accessed 1 March 2025.

7 Beech, J. (2009). Genocide tourism. In: Sharpley, R. & Stone, P.R. (eds), *The Darker Side of Travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism*. pp. 207-223: Bristol: Channel View Publications.

8 Hodgkinson, S. (2013). The concentration camp as a site of 'dark tourism'. *Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire*, 116. p. 22.

9 Dalton, D. (2009). Encountering Auschwitz: A personal rumination on the possibilities and limitations of witnessing / remembering trauma in memorial space. *Law Text Culture,* 13. p. 189.

meaning.' This builds on Tyndall[10], who argued that people who visit Holocaust sites 'bring to such sites mental images from books, education, movies, television, personal memories, and fantasies', a list to which can also be added the internet and computer games. However, it is unclear whether this means that reconstructions are necessary in order to meet tourist expectations, or whether they are unnecessary because people can imagine or visualise what was once there. One might question whether today's younger generation are so used to online gaming and digital reconstructions that this is what they expect and want at sites of the Holocaust too.

Digital solutions are now employed at some sites, ranging from online tours (which were especially popular during the Pandemic), smart phone apps (which allow you to stand in a certain place and see the site as it was in the past and today, such as that in use at Mauthausen Memorial and the nearby former sub-camp at Gusen), interactive digital reconstructions (such as can be seen today at Jasenovac Memorial, Fig. 1), and augmented reality of a digitally reconstructed set of buildings viewed through iPads[11].

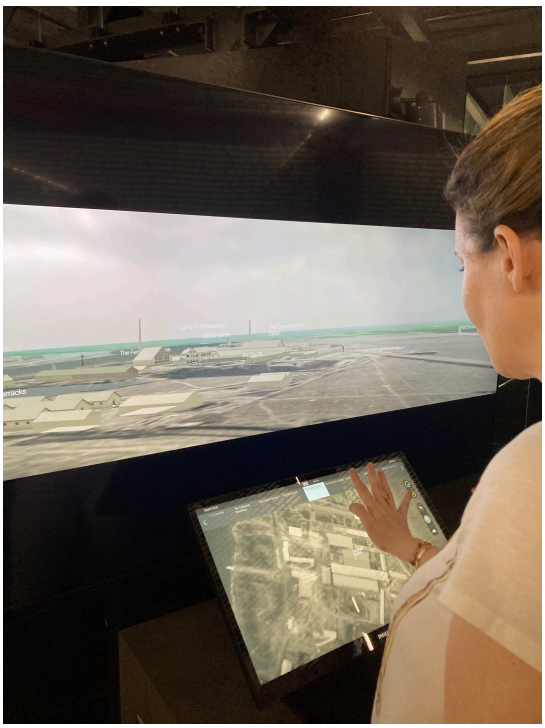

Fig. 1. Demonstration of the digital reconstruction of Jasenovac. Copyright Gilly Carr 2023

[10] Tyndall, A. (2004). Memory, authenticity and replication of the Shoah in museums. In: R. Lentin (ed.), *Re-presenting the Shoah for the 21st Century*. p. 114: New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[11] see: Verschure, P., & Wierenga, S. (2022). Future memory: a digital humanities approach for the preservation and presentation of the history of the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. *Holocaust Studies,* 28(3), pp. 331-357; Waagen, J., Lanjouw, T., & de Kleijn, M. (2023). A virtual place of memory: Virtual reality as a method for communicating conflicted heritage at Camp Westerbork. *Heritage, Memory and Conflict Journal*, 3, pp. 87-93.

Authenticity and the physical

Regardless of whether people need or want physical reconstructions at sites, they exist and, arguably, are useful for meeting visitor expectations and for educational purposes. But how does this impact our demand for authenticity at sites of Holocaust heritage in order to avoid Holocaust denial and distortion? It depends, as stated at the start, on what is meant by authenticity, and here we should turn to the definition used in Article 13 of the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity:

> *Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design,* ***materials and substance, use and function,*** *traditions and techniques,* ***location and setting,*** *and* ***spirit and feeling,*** *and other internal and external factors. The use of these sources permits elaboration of the specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of the cultural heritage being examined*[12]*. [author's emphasis]*

As far as this paper on Holocaust heritage is concerned, the key aspects of authenticity which concern us include materials (such as the fabric of wooden huts or brick buildings, or the soil of mass graves), use and function (including for the internment and killing of Jews and other victims of Nazi persecution), location and setting (the 'authentic' ground on which these sites were built can be highly significant, as is the landscape within which certain events took place, such as killings in forests and ravines), and spirit and feeling (most people who visit Holocaust sites recognise or feel a certain 'atmosphere', as will be discussed later).

Let us take each of these in turn. When we talk about the 'authenticity' of the material or fabric of a site, perhaps a barrack block or triple-tiered bunk bed (to take an example of what Charlesworth & Addis[13] term 'archetypal camp 'furniture"), we mean the original or historical wooden hut or barrack block that was used by prisoners at this very spot during the Second World War. To what extent are visitors disturbed, if at all, by bunk beds which are original and survive at one site being placed in another site where they have not survived? Are visitors more troubled by reproduction bunk beds? Do they care if a wooden hut is wholly reconstructed yet built according to the wartime plans or photos? These are not hypothetical situations. At Auschwitz-II Birkenau, for example, several barrack blocks have been restored – or perhaps even reconstructed (the visitor is not told) in order to help visitors understand what such buildings were like. We might well argue that such reconstructions for heritage presentation are educational and a good thing. One of those barracks huts is filled with triple-tiered bunk beds, one of which carries a small and easily missed sign which says 'replicas of bunk beds' (Fig. 2). It is unclear how many people notice this sign and how many are either fooled by, feel cheated, or feel uneasy about it, as Derek Dalton did on being told by a tour guide that the death / execution wall at Auschwitz-I was

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[12] *Nara document on Authenticity*, https://www.icomos.org/en/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/386-the-nara-document-on-authenticity-1994, accessed 5 January 2025.

[13] Charlesworth, A., & Addis, M. (2002). Memorialisation and the ecological landscapes of Holocaust sites: the cases of Plaszow and Auschwitz-Birkenau. *Landscape Research*, 27. p. 231.

a replica[14]. Perhaps it is commonly understood that such beds and barracks are unlikely to have survived after 80 years, and this sort of reconstruction is only helpful to help visitors visualise a past that they did not personally experience.

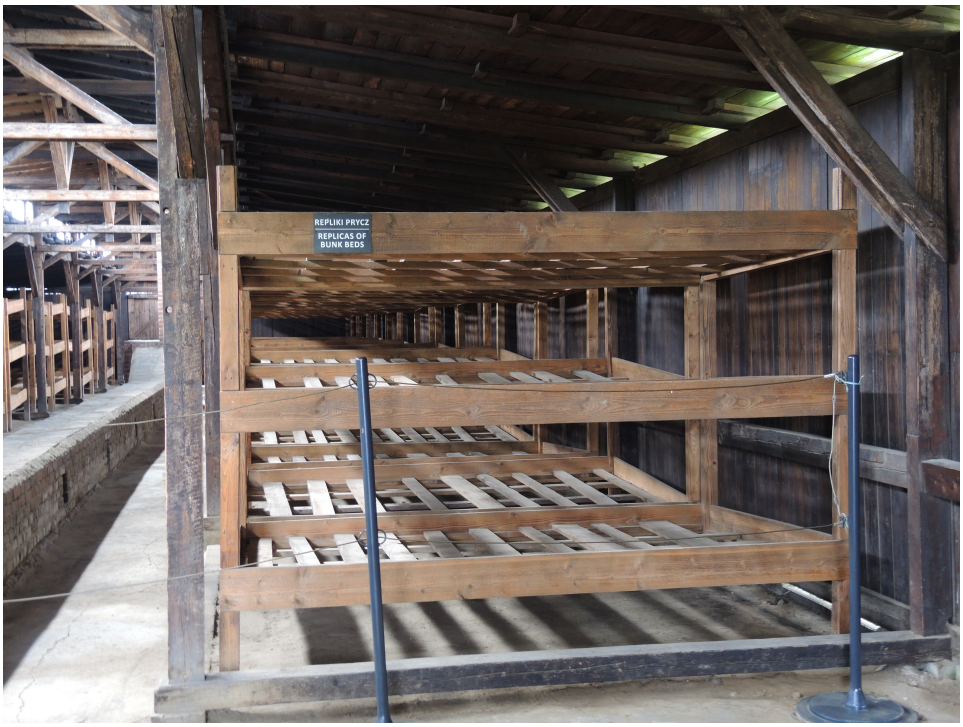

Fig. 2. Replica of bunk bed at Memorial Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Copyright Gilly Carr 2022

Such use of reconstructions, replicas and non-original camp furniture is not just reserved for Birkenau. In the museum at Ravensbrück memorial, for example, a bunk bed on show in the former camp's administration block, now a museum, is not original to that former camp. In the small fortress in Terezín, the bunk beds are not original, despite – like those at Birkenau –looking old.

Are reconstructions necessarily disturbing for visitors? They seem common at some Holocaust sites. The post-war reconstruction of the gas chamber and crematorium-I at Auschwitz-I, for example, which Tim Cole refers to as 'shoddy' and 'embarrassingly problematic', has been used as evidence by Holocaust deniers that the mass gassings of Jews did not take place at this site[15]. However, even this structure was originally built in 1941 as an experimental gas chamber, then converted into an air raid shelter in 1943, then destroyed by the Soviet army after liberation before being reconstructed by the Polish authorities as a gas chamber and crematorium in 1948,

[14] Dalton, D. (2009). Encountering Auschwitz: A personal rumination on the possibilities and limitations of witnessing / remembering trauma in memorial space. *Law Text Culture,* 13. p. 197.

[15] Cole, T. (2020). *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler. How history is bought, packaged and sold*. New York and London: Routledge. p. 109.

with two of the three furnaces being rebuilt using original parts[16]. This makes it an inauthentic structure built using authentic building materials, which complicates our understanding of the authentic.

Tim Cole draws a distinction between the historical Auschwitz and the mythical 'Auschwitz-land' (the version presented to the public, complete with reconstructions) which 'distorts the horrific reality of Auschwitz' and, in its place, creates an "Auschwitz' which is open to the attack of those who would deny that the Holocaust ever took place. Representing the complexities of the past in a ghoulish theme park for the present has consequences. The 'tourist Auschwitz' threatens to trivialise the past, domesticate the past, and ultimately jettison the past altogether'[17].

We might ask whether there is a difference between reconstructions in Auschwitz and, say, a reproduction of a watch tower at the former camp of Westerbork in the Netherlands as part of their memorial presentation to the public. The difference between a reconstruction and a reproduction seems slim, but only if the former is accurate in its design and placing, unlike the gas chamber and crematorium at Auschwitz-I. Because Auschwitz originally had gas chambers and crematoria, just as Westerbork had watch towers, is their inclusion necessarily always 'wrong'? Or is it only poor or shoddy reconstructions that are problematic? And how problematic are restorations?

At Mauthausen Memorial in Austria, for example, there is a museum inside a restored former barrack block. Such restoration allows climate-controlled conditions, heating and electricity; such things are necessary to preserve and display collections. The visitor understands that they are standing in the same space that former prisoners once inhabited. The barrack stands on the same footprint and the windows look out over the same landscape, although the view has changed somewhat with the passing of time, and the barbed wire seen through the window has replaced that which was present 80 years ago. During a visit to the former camp of Fossoli in Italy in 2018, one former brick barrack, used as a small museum / interpretation centre, looked brand new and over-restored (Fig. 3). Hut 14, once used by Jewish prisoners, was 'rebuilt and restored to its original appearance'[18]. In any case, it sat awkwardly among the other buildings, which were mostly in ruins, a state of collapse exacerbated by the earthquake and heavy snowfall in the region in 2012[19] (ibid). Since then, there has been further restoration of other buildings at the site.

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16 Ibidem. pp. 109-110.

17 Ibidem. p. 110.

18 Luppi, M., & Schintu, F. (2020). Difficult heritage: The experience of the Fossoli Camp Foundation. *EX NOVO Journal of Archaeology,* 5, p. 57.

19 Ibidem.

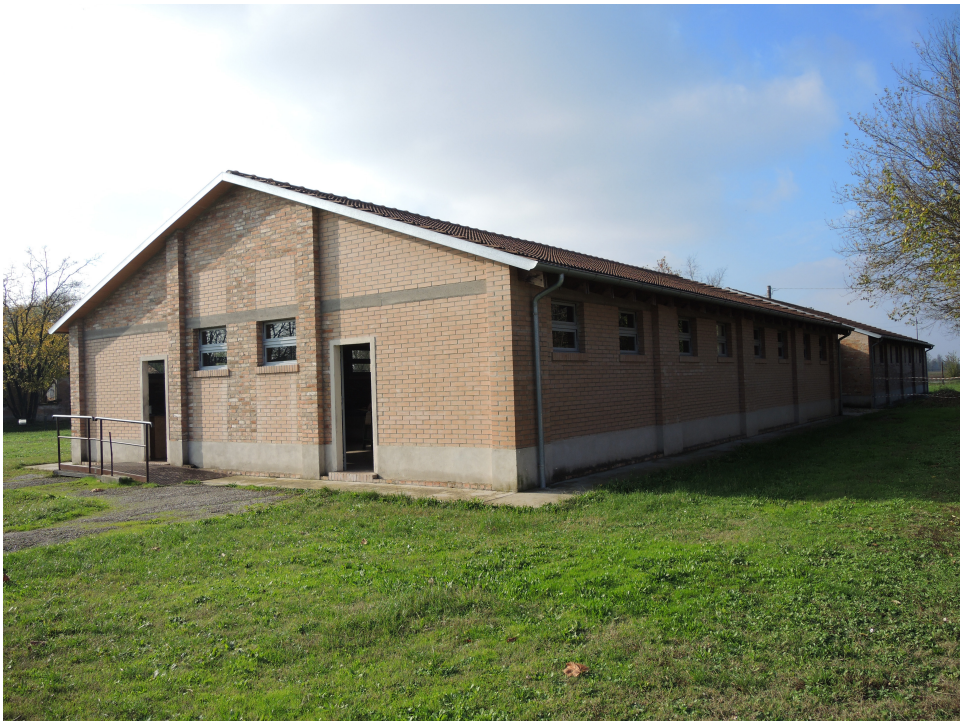

Fig. 3. Hut 14 at Fossoli Memorial. Copyright Gilly Carr 2018

Authenticity of ruins

Perhaps there is an honesty and an 'authenticity' in ruins. Ruins are or would be the 'natural' state of the fabric of many sites after 80 years. Indeed, at the former ghetto in Terezín in the Czech Republic, the Dresden Barracks have been in a state of decline since the Czech army departed the site at the end of the Cold War. After storms in 2021[20] and more since, triggered and exacerbated by climate breakdown, the Barracks have collapsed in stages. The wooden beams of the attic in which Jews were packed during the war are now strewn over the inner courtyard along with the roof trusses. The building itself is now structurally unsound and unstable, seemingly one small storm away from complete collapse (Fig. 4). Although the Czech government has committed funds to restore the building[21], once rebuilt it needs tenants if it is to be maintained. It is not proposed to turn this part of the former ghetto into a museum or memorial centre because Terezín Memorial already has enough staff and an established museum and has no funds and no need to expand. This authentic site seems likely to be reused for something other than a memorial function. Perhaps this would take away from its authenticity, but we must be pragmatic in accepting that not every former Holocaust-related site in Europe can be preserved and compromises are necessary[22].

[20] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-56596351

[21] https://holocaustremembrance.com/news/saving-dresden-barracks

[22] Carr, G., & Cooke, S. (2024). The pragmatics of Holocaust heritage in the 21st century: exploring the concept using the case studies of Terezín and Staro Sajmište. *Heritage and Society*. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2024.2423319

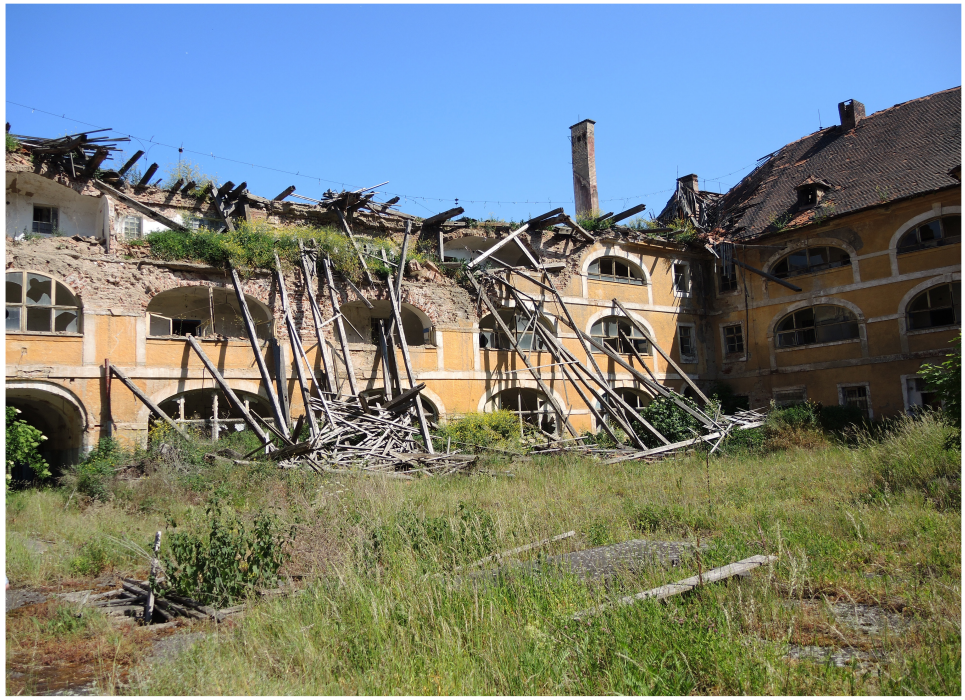

Fig. 4. The Dresden Barracks, Terezin Memorial. Copyright Gilly Carr 2023

Let us return to the concept of the authenticity of ruins. We might consider the site of Oradour sur Glane in the Limousin region of France, where the burning of a village and massacre of its inhabitants by the Nazis in 1944 was commemorated by preserving the village as a burnt shell of a ruin. Those ruins seem 'manicured' today. The grass is mown in the village. Surviving 'innocent' domestic artefacts, such as Singer sewing machines, pram frames and bicycle frames, appear to be strategically placed where they will be noticed by visitors, perhaps to underline the similar innocence of the villagers. The burnt and ruined walls of houses are visibly cemented to structurally stabilise them so that the ruin is arrested[23].

The display of ruins is a recognised phenomenon in Europe as a way of proclaiming victimhood by showing off the scars of suffering. Examples range from the ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, to those of the national library in Belgrade, which was bombed in 1941, to the careful curation of ruins of demolished houses in villages in the former Yugoslavia by those who had been 'ethnically cleansed' by their neighbours and returned to keep the ruins looking fresh, 'as if the genocidal process of demolition had occurred in recent days or weeks'[24]. It could be argued that some Holocaust sites fulfil a similar function in Europe today. Oradour, Dresden and the former Yugoslavia show us that even ruins (if curated) can have their artificial or inauthentic elements; they also have cultural and political capital.

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[23] Farmer, S. (1999). *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

[24] Moshenska, G. (2015). Curated ruins and the endurance of conflict heritage. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites,* 17(1). p. 77.

And yet, being left in a state of ruin is not satisfactory for Holocaust heritage. The prospect of this kind of heritage site left neglected, covered in weeds and abandoned, causes disquiet and unease. It implies a lack of respect and concern for the victims; it signifies the visitor as a non-interventionist bystander to the memory of the Holocaust. There is something about not paying for the upkeep of such an important site type that brings shame upon the site owner, even if that owner is the nation state. The IHRA Charter lists a lack of financial support among the identification of risks to the significance of such sites[25]. A good example of a site at risk because of lack of financial support is Stara Gradiška, a sub-camp of Jasenovac, situated in a small village in Croatia. The centuries-old former fort had multiple periods of use during the 20th century (a concentration camp from 1941, a POW camp from 1945, a penitentiary from 1948, a prison from 1971 for intellectuals following the Croatian Spring, a POW camp again in 1991) but was bombed in 1991 during the Croatian War of Independence[26]. Today it stands as a dangerous ruin, surrounded by hazard warning tape and signs warning visitors to keep out (Fig. 5). While the tiny village of Stara (or old) Gradiška sits on the left bank of the Sava river, the modern town of Gradiška is across the river and situated in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Financial responsibility for the former camp sits on Croatia's shoulders, but there are no facilities for tourists, and even the main camp of Jasenovac does not get the number of tourists it wants, mainly because it is distant from major cities. There seems little prospect of the village getting the funds it needs for its own purposes, let alone restoring a sub-camp that few would come to see. This multi-phase site also tests the concept of authenticity further: which past would restoration showcase? How would it tell multiple competing narratives at once? After restoration, which phase would be the most 'authentic' in the sense of retaining the most original architecture? In any case, questions which focus on fabric ignore the more important questions relating to value and meanings of the site, and whether these can only be told after restoration or reconstruction. There is currently no consideration about how heritage professionals might tell this story at or alongside ruins which visitors cannot explore.

[25] *IHRA Charter for Safeguarding Sites,* Article 2: Identification of Risks to Significance, 2.1.2. and 2.1.6., https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/IHRA-Charter-for-Safeguarding-Sites.pdf, accessed 5 January 2025.

[26] Jasenovac memorial site website, https://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6751, accessed 1 March 2025.

Fig. 5. The ruins of Stara Gradiška. Copyright Gilly Carr 2023

Authentic atmosphere

And yet, perhaps ruins only serve to enhance spirit and feeling. We have already noted how some reconstructions (such as Hut 14 at Fossoli) can leave the visitor unmoved if perceived as 'over-reconstructed'. Does the act of reconstruction or over-restoration necessarily kill the atmosphere? This is certainly a danger. But we must ask where the atmosphere at some sites of Holocaust heritage comes from. It can be remarkably tangible or able to be felt, as any visitor to such a site can attest, even at the version of 'Auschwitz-land' presented by the Holocaust heritage industry at the site of the original Auschwitz, even if the site is a 'Holocaust theme park' rather than a 'Holocaust concentration camp' and a 'mediated past which has been carefully created for our viewing'[27].

The subject of the intangible aura, atmosphere or spirit at sites has been discussed by a number of scholars, including Walter Benjamin, who thought that an object was 'auratic' if it had the capacity to convey its historical authenticity, imbued with the magic of having 'been there'[28]. One might question how much of that magic is still conveyed when aspects of a site are relocated to museums far from the original site. The frontage of barrack 6 from the camp of Beaune-La-Rolande is now at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris (Fig. 6), and any magic or aura it may once have had seems hard to detect today now that it has been removed from its authentic context.

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[27] Cole, T. (2020). *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler. How history is bought, packaged and sold*. New York and London: Routledge. pp. 110-111.

[28] Benjamin, W. (1985). *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. p. 215.

Fig. 6. Barrack 6 from Beaune-la-Rolande, Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris. Copyright Gilly Carr 2025

Tony Seaton has observed that sacred spaces, like objects, have a 'numinous quality', and 'auratic power, related not only to people with whom they are associated but also to location and setting, architecture and design, furnishings and presentation' [29]. Seaton argues that tourism development and commodification at these sites can act to reduce and erode their auratic power[30]. Chris Keil, on the other hand, has argued that the atmosphere at Birkenau is 'to a significant extent an artifice created by Museum management policies, the result of many decisions about conservation, interpretation and presentation'[31]; the same is true of the 'manicured' ecological landscape of the camp[32]. Keil echoes Holtorf and Schadla-Hall, who argued that the aura and authenticity of heritage sites is highly dependent on the context of their presentation. Heritage sites are regularly modified and re-invented and, as heritage managers and practitioners, we 'must not be blind to our own impact. Aura and authenticity are not neutral "natural" properties of artefacts or sites but signs for the most successful of these modifications and reinventions'[33].

This is perhaps why sites where there is nothing at all left to see arguably do not seem to hold the same atmosphere as sites with ruins, extant buildings, mounds covering mass graves, or some other feature to indicate what was once there. Each of these features provide their own cues as to what happened at such places, indicating that the intangible spirit and feeling can also rely upon the more tangible physical aspects of a site – its buildings and physicality. Exceptions exist at sites in striking natural locations and settings, such as mass graves in forests, for example, those in the Panerai forest outside Vilnius, Lithuania, where 33,500 Jews were killed by the end of 1941. Even here there are very visible burial pits and memorials, which contribute to the feeling evoked by the natural setting of the forest (Fig. 7). Many former camps are also in striking natural settings in the landscape, but we must be aware that the landscape presented to the public as the Holocaust heritage site is not always the full extent of the original historical site and all of its associated features[34].

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[29] Seaton, T. (2009). Purposeful otherness: Approaches to the management of thanatourism. In: Sharpley, R., & Stone, P. (eds.), *The Darker Side of Travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism.* (p. 85). Bristol: Channel View Publications.

[30] Ibidem. p. 88.

[31] Keil, C. (2005). Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6(4), p. 490.

[32] Charlesworth, A., & Addis, M. (2002). Memorialisation and the ecological landscapes of Holocaust sites: the cases of Plaszow and Auschwitz-Birkenau. *Landscape Research*, 27, p. 245.

[33] Holtorf, C., & Schadla-Hall (1999). Age as Artefact: On Archaeological Authenticity. *European Journal of Archaeology,* 2(2), p. 243.

[34] Keil, C. (2005). Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead. *Social and Cultural Geography,* 6(4). p. 486.

Fig. 7. The mass graves in Panerai, Lithuania. Copyright Gilly Carr 2022

Reconstruction and restoration

Although we might dispute whether an aura or 'spirit and feeling' emanates from features of the site itself, this would appear to be something that at least some survivors can detect. Relating this to the question of the authenticity of restoration, let us pause to consider first the story of the restoration of the ship of Theseus, which has been used as a thought experiment to discuss the question of the identity of objects undergoing continuous change. If all of its original timbers were replaced, would it still be the same ship? Does the identity of the object (whether ship or wooden hut in a former concentration camp) reside in continuity of form or in its material?[35]. Slovenian author and survivor of Natzweiler-Struthof, Boris Pahor, wrote in his 1967 book *Necropolis* about a return visit to the site of his incarceration:

> *When I was here two years ago … a carpenter who was replacing rotting boards complained what awkward work it was [and] I had a different reaction. Of course I felt gratified that the French were taking such pains to maintain the wooden monument, but at the same time I didn't like the presence of new white wood among the dark, weathered boards. Not so much because of the colour, but because I knew that another worker would come later to paint and make the new boards indistinguishable from the old. These pieces of raw, freshly*

[35] Martínez de Arbulo, A. (2023). The Ship of Theseus: a misleading paradox? The authenticity of wooden built heritage in Japanese conservation practice. *Journal of Architectural Conservation,* 29(2), pp. 151-167.

> *planed wood were an intolerable intrusion. As though one were trying to graft living cells onto dead, decayed flesh, or to fit a round white leg onto a flat, blackened mummy. I didn't want the destruction to be altered. But now I can't tell the new boards from the old. The evil has absorbed the new tissue and saturated it with its rotten essence*[36].

Pahor gives us a different perception of the power of restoration, but both views – of continuity of form or in materials – reside in materiality, and the 'rotten essence' of the 'authentic' weathered boards saturated or infected the inauthentic new ones. Whether or not we see restored sites today through the eyes of survivors, and feel that the rotten essence of the authentic seeps into the inauthentic, does it really matter? If the barbed wire in place at Memorial Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau has been replaced since the war, should we be concerned? Clearly there is a line that can be crossed if too much of a site is inauthentic; the problem is the lack of clarity over where that line should be drawn. No research has established how much of the original fabric of a site can be replaced before it becomes a Holocaust theme park. While Tim Cole may feel that 'Auschwitz-land' at the current site of Auschwitz-Birkenau has crossed that line and risks becoming a voyeuristic 'chamber of horrors'[37], hundreds of thousands of tourists annually continue to have meaningful and emotional experiences at the site.

Perhaps a greater problem with reconstruction comes when visitors are not informed that what they are witnessing is not 'authentic' beyond the historical location and the historical accuracy of the reconstruction – and perhaps location and accuracy provide enough 'authenticity' to satisfy visitors? Of course, such structures may be educational, but their 'fake', non-original status only encourages Holocaust deniers.

If this is that danger, perhaps it should all be stripped away to seek authenticity in those sites which, today, are empty or largely so: many sites of former concentration camps have large areas where the above-ground remains do not survive. Sometimes this is because they were deliberately burned down after liberation because of disease and filth (as took place at the barracks of Bergen-Belsen), and sometimes little survives because of general decay or because local people have taken away structures to reuse as building material. In some locations, the land was returned to the original owners after the war, who removed the wartime structures in order to reuse the land for its original purpose, perhaps for agriculture. Among such (nearly) 'empty' sites we might include Bergen-Belsen in Germany, Westerbork in the Netherlands, and Jasenovac in Croatia, as well as the mass grave at Jajinci memorial park in Belgade, Serbia. Today, such sites have been re-landscaped, studded with memorials and turned into heritage sites for the public. Empty sites may be more 'authentic' from the point of view of largely omitting reconstructions and restorations, but the landscaping is rarely authentic. The creation of memorial parks or landscapes with memorial features and new trees can also act to disturb or even destroy the archaeological record. While archaeology might be viewed as the last untouched and genuinely authentic trace from the past, even this can be impacted by looters and metal detectorists searching for 'Jewish

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36 Pahor, B. (2020)[1967]. *Necropolis*. Edinburgh: Canongate. pp. 32-33.

37 Cole, T. (2020). *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler. How history is bought, packaged and sold*. New York and London: Routledge.p. 112.

gold' or items to sell on Ebay. Some sites were also deliberately destroyed by the Nazis at the end of the war to hide evidence of genocide, leaving a badly impacted archaeological record. Climate change in the form of flooding, which has taken place at sites ranging from the memorials of Jasenovac in Croatia to Westerbork in the Netherlands and Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, can also wash away topsoil and contaminate the archaeological record with non-local redepositions. Where does this leave us in our need for proof of the past and the necessity of authenticity?

Concluding thoughts

In our demands for authenticity at sites of Holocaust heritage, we seem to have lost sight of the balance between what visitors want at a site and what is realistically possible. Eighty years since the war, the expectation of wholly original fabric at a site is unrealistic unless serious decay is acceptable. Curated decay and ruins can be criticised for making a political point, yet abandoned ruins bring only condemnation and demands for restoration. Restoration is problematic because it introduces inauthentic elements, and reconstruction can lead to Holocaust denial; both bring charges of creating 'Holocaust theme parks.' Empty space – if landscaped and studded with memorials – also lacks authenticity, and empty space with no visual cues lacks spirit and feeling, and may find itself a target for being turned into real estate. There appears to be no satisfactory solution until we accept the inevitability of inauthentic elements and find peace with it.

Scholars such as Araoz[38] have identified the emergence of a 'new heritage paradigm' which challenges the old conservation approach, whereby, for example, facsimile reconstructions are increasingly accepted as valid equivalents of originals long gone. Does this (and can this) hold for Holocaust heritage? Where does the Holocaust remembrance sector as a whole stand on restoration and reconstruction? A tacit acceptance clearly exists at sites across Europe or else we would not have so many examples of it as standard practice. The stated belief in the importance of authenticity in Holocaust heritage to avoid Holocaust denial and distortion does not fully play out in the heritage presentation of such sites today – at least, not in the buildings and landscape. The limits of authenticity and inauthenticity (with regard to reconstruction, reproduction and restoration) at Holocaust sites have yet to be fully established; we can only observe what has already been carried out and the resulting reactions from the varied audiences. Perhaps we should be content with perceiving Holocaust heritage sites in the same way as 'ordinary' heritage sites that Araoz[39] calls 'vessels of value and significance', whereby the value and significance lie not in the materiality, but in memories of people and events. Araoz complained that heritage professionals have 'never really protected or preserved values; the task has always been protecting and preserving the material vessels where the values have been determined to reside'[40], i.e. the physical structures themselves. The new paradigm he identifies includes:

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38 Araoz, G.F. (2011). Preserving heritage places under a new paradigm. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development,* 1(1), p. 55.

39 Ibidem. p. 59.

40 Ibidem.

> *places of memory, where associations with historic events or individuals took place but left no specific or distinctive physical marks, and where the value resides in keeping the memory of the person or event … with nothing tangible to conserve, the task of the preservation professional becomes one of ensuring that the memory is transmitted to all society. It is about preserving a message, and not a place*[41].

We might indeed accept Araoz's position and declare that it matters not if Holocaust sites are destroyed, removed or fall down with time, as long as we remember the events and people at the place. Yet this would not sit easily with those working in the Holocaust remembrance sector, where authentic physical remains, according to the IHRA Charter, must be safeguarded because they embody the truth of the past, and provide evidence of persecution and genocide to those who would deny or distort the Holocaust. The passing of the survivor generation has meant that sites of Holocaust heritage have taken on additional responsibilities as witnesses to the past, and cannot be easily let go[42], even if letting go is sooner or later inevitable because of climate breakdown and unavoidable change over time.

On the other hand, we can accept that most sites of Holocaust heritage across Europe today, where presented to the public as heritage sites, already contain inauthentic features. Restoration and reconstructions are the norm, and it must be recognised that this is inevitable and has been for decades already. Such heritage interventions have provided us with many benefits on which we must focus, not least of which is education, the survival of the sites themselves into the present, and all that this means in terms of providing a place to remember and honour the dead and passing their memory on to the next generation. With the passing of time, further restoration – and inauthenticity - is inevitable. It seems that visitors either do not mind, do not question or do not notice inauthentic, reconstructed parts of sites today. These are beneficial to learning and the visualisation of a past they did not experience, but perhaps their family members did.

There are limits to the extent of reconstruction and restoration, but it is not yet clear where this lies. At some sites, the limits were passed long ago; at others, the line lies in the future and is surely different for every site and every visitor. This paper calls for more transparency and honesty at sites about what is restored or reconstructed, and what is not, as well as a clear statement about the site's post-war history during which decisions and changes were made to the memorial vision. It can be easily agreed by all that site managers should stick to the evidence and refrain from building or inserting anything that did not exist historically, unless that inserted element is clearly a memorial feature. Where non-historically accurate post-war insertions were added at earlier phases of the current memorial vision, these should be marked as such.

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41 Ibidem.

42 contra DeSilvey, C. (2012). Making sense of transience: an anticipatory history. *Cultural Geographies,* 19(1), 31-54; Holtorf, C. (2015). Averting loss aversion in cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies,* 21(4), 405-421; DeSilvey, C., Fredheim, H., Fluck, H., Hails, R., Harrison, R., Samuel, I., & Blundell, A. (2021). When loss is more: from managed decline to adaptive release. *The Historic Environment: Policy and Practice,* 12(3-4), 418-433 for discussions of how to rethink this for other kinds of heritage sites.

Perhaps our problem has never really been the 'inauthenticity' of restoration and reconstruction (except where misleading inaccuracies were knowingly introduced). This argument was merely a distraction. Rather, the risk lies in an inauthenticity of the story told at sites, or in other words, Holocaust distortion. The IHRA Charter warns against the 'danger of misinformation and disinformation, deliberate distortion, falsification, silencing, and misappropriation of narratives'[43]. With the passing of the survivor generation and our greater reliance on sites of Holocaust heritage to narrate the past, it is this narrative that must remain authentic. This is where the line should be drawn.

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[43] *IHRA Charter for Safeguarding Sites,* Article 3.1, https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/IHRA-Charter-for-Safeguarding-Sites.pdf, accessed 1 March 2025.

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