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Exhibiting Violence or Teaching Values? Historical Exhibitions at a Modern Museum of Martyrdom

In memory of my wife, Magdalena,
who died during the writing of this article

Museums of martyrdom, also known as memorial museums, sites of memory or museums of remembrance, were and continue to be established in Poland and in the rest of Europe on the sites of former Nazi death camps, concentration camps, prisoner-of-war camps, labour camps, police prisons and other historical sites associated with the Nazi terror, persecution and extermination. The unique character of these places, which sets them apart from other museums, is mainly related to the fact that they are authentic historical sites (*in situ* museums) as well as cemeteries in both the real and symbolic sense. They are usually treated as institutions that combine many different historical, socio-political and cultural functions.¹ Museums of martyrdom are in essence history museums that focus on the theme of the traumatic events of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Europe, and this is how they are classified.

The State Museum at Majdanek (SMM) is the oldest such institution; it was established in November 1944, i.e. even before hostilities had ended. In pursuing its mission, the Museum has explored and described the operation of the Nazi concentration camp at Majdanek and the death camps at Bełżec and Sobibór;² since

¹ For more on the function and meaning of museums of martyrdom, see: T. Kranz, *Muzea martyrologiczne jako przestrzenie pamięci i edukacji*, [in:] *Obóz–Muzeum. Trauma we współczesnym wystawiennictwie*, ed. by M. Fabiszak, M. Owsiński, Kraków 2013, pp. 53–55; V. Knigge, *Teren byłego obozu a wystawa historyczna*, [in:] *Chronić dla przyszłości*, ed. by K. Marszałek, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz–Birkenau 2003, p. 115.

² The Museum–Memorial Site in Bełżec became a branch of the SMM in 2005, and the Museum of the Former Death Camp in Sobibór became part of the SMM in 2011. Owing to the particular themes on which these two institutions focus, and their relatively short existence as branches of the SMM, in this article I limit myself to describing the exhibitions at the parent branch of the Museum.

its inception, it has held exhibitions that allow visitors to access the sites of these former camps, and has organised various themed exhibitions.

For the seventy or so years it has been in operation, the SMM has produced four permanent exhibitions devoted to the history of the camp as well as dozens of smaller historical exhibitions. The exhibits, archive materials and photographs displayed there have unique documentary value. The items found on the site of the former camp, the preserved elements of infrastructure and archive materials as well as the accounts of former inmates all provide evidence of a totalitarian regime that functioned on the basis of mass physical and psychological violence.³ This violence was ever-present on the site of the Nazi concentration camp that operated in Lublin between October 1941 and July 1944.

In this article, I attempt to present the conceptual framework and methodology applied nowadays at the SMM with respect to the open-air exhibition and the monographic historical exhibitions. To illustrate the changes in exhibition methodology that have taken place at the SMM over the decades, I compare contemporary productions with the methods of constructing open-air narratives in the past, and with examples of historical exhibitions from the Museum's early years (primarily the permanent historical exhibitions from 1945–1996 whose circumstances, underlying assumptions and message were usually reflected in the smaller exhibitions held at the same time). In the case of both modern and defunct exhibitions, I try to take into account the context in which they were created (ideological assumptions, social conditions, etc.). Both the educational goals that the Museum has pursued through its exhibitions, and the external factors that influenced how those goals were formulated, are of interest to me.

The nomenclature used by museums of martyrdom to describe different types of historical exhibitions is often inconsistent and imprecise, both in the literature and in museum practice. In the context of the SMM, Tomasz Kranz attempted to systematise the nomenclature in 2011: 'On large-scale sites of memory, the State Museum at Majdanek being one example, there are usually two types of permanent exhibition: open-air exhibitions and main exhibitions inside museum buildings. The term 'open-air exhibition' usually denotes a narrative constructed using various means in order to commemorate, explain and contextualise the historical site in question. Therefore, at museums such as Majdanek, this includes all the ways of presenting and describing the preserved space and the historical buildings,

³ One of the leading theorists of sites of memory, Volkhard Knigge, wrote about the role of relics and remnants of the former camp: 'I believe that relics, even in an exhibition, are real evidence, especially when they are the last sign of existence of the tormented and murdered, the last trace left by them before their death and annihilation. Objects become relics when they point to mass death. The kind of death that renders us speechless and prevents any comment. And this is precisely what we want to achieve by displaying them. However, their display, especially at sites of mass murder, must not only serve to communicate cognitive content — it must also include elements of judgement', V. Knigge, *Teren bylego obozu*, p. 117.

including the site of the former camp as well as the structures, ruins, fences, paved roads, ditches and other material traces of the past within its borders'.⁴ When juxtaposed with the 'open-air exhibition', the term 'main exhibition' used by Kranz appears to suggest a hierarchy of values. As noted in the work quoted here, the two types of exhibitions Kranz describes are complementary but in principle different components of the museum exhibition (understood as an entity of a higher order). It appears that if one is to pass judgement here, primacy ought to be given to that part of the exhibition which is most unique, original, and which forms the core of the museum's activity, i.e. the entire historical substance of the former camp.⁵

Furthermore, the definition of an 'open-air exhibition' must be supplemented in this case, since the content of the exhibition is not just the narrative understood as presentation and description; the content includes this descriptive portion of the exhibition as well as the site of the former camp that is being described.⁶ Taking into account the foregoing as well as my experience of daily work with the exhibition, in this paper I construe the open-air exhibition as the entire area of the former camp accessible to visitors and the historical commentary that accompanies it, including the extant camp infrastructure, together with the examples of post-war commemoration and the additional exhibition elements (explanations, plaques and

⁴ See T. Kranz, *O koncepcji modernizacji ekspozycji Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XXV, 2011, p. 9. For comparison: as recently as in the 1990s, the permanent historical exhibition was referred to as the 'historical exhibition' in texts on the history and methodology of exhibitions published by the Museum staff, while temporary monographic historical exhibitions were referred to as 'documentary exhibitions'. At that time, the open-air exhibition was treated as part of the 'historical exhibition'. T. Kranz, M. Wiśniewicz, *Działalność oświatowa Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XVI, 1994, pp. 45–47.

⁵ V. Knigge, among others, uses precisely this argument: 'Against the background of what remains, the explanation and reconstruction of the historical context of events on the basis of our knowledge must not be imposed from the outside or be forcibly incorporated into the exhibition. It should rather provide a complement, a link, an aid for visitors to understand and experience the exhibition... The main value of an exhibition created on the basis of physical remnants is the site of the former camp, which evokes certain emotions and encourages visitors to awaken their own historical imagination and form their own ideas about the former camp that are based on the knowledge and impressions they gathered'. V. Knigge, *Teren byłego obozu*, pp. 116–117.

⁶ The relationship between types of historical narrative and remnants of the camp is similar to that in which an exhibit is displayed in a 'classic' manner in a museum room: it is the relationship between the exhibit (museum object) and its description (in the form of a plate, printout, light projection, etc. containing a verbal message formulated by the curator of the exhibition). Clearly, the forms and techniques of describing exhibits in the case of open-air objects within the historical space of a museum of martyrdom will have particular characteristics resulting from the nature of the site itself. In both cases, the description of the museum object should, firstly, be distinguishable from the object itself and, secondly, only play a supporting role in the process of sensory perception. When choosing typographic techniques (or perhaps visual or audio techniques), designers should exercise particular caution and restraint.

permanent thematic exhibitions consisting of display boards located in selected historical buildings).⁷ In its substance, the open-air exhibition is obviously a type of historical exhibition too. However, I use the latter term exclusively to denote permanent and temporary monographic exhibitions created according to a certain script and constituting self-contained narratives on certain themes; together with the relevant commentary, these display in a material form, or as digital or analogue reproductions, that part of the Museum collection that does not include buildings, topographic features or monuments. This nomenclature concerning various aspects of the SMM's activities obviously suffers from a degree of semantic inconsistency, since terms belonging to different categories are used to describe elements of the Museum's exhibitions ('open air' exhibition — a description of the exhibition space, 'historical' exhibition — a description of the exhibition theme; likewise 'open air' exhibition — a spatial description, 'main' exhibition — a qualitative one). Having outlined the problems related to nomenclature, however, I will continue to use these inaccurate terms, bearing in mind the need to distinguish between the different exhibitions.

In this article, I deliberately avoid describing the long-standing tradition of art exhibitions at the SMM (which were held from the 1960s until the middle of the last decade, initially as Anti-War National Fine Arts Exhibitions and later as International Art Triennials). Despite the obvious connection between the anti-war theme and issues concerning the representation of violence, and also the unquestionable value of the Museum's art collections assembled as a result of organising these events, art exhibitions at Majdanek did not make use of the SMM's historical collections and generally did not refer to the history of the camp. In addition, the methodology of organising such exhibitions is different, as is their educational purpose. Therefore, for both formal and substantive reasons, they should be the subject of a separate study.⁸

⁷ In everyday practice, and in the reports produced by the SMM, minor exhibitions that do not constitute separate narratives and which provide additional content that is not related to the camp itself but instead facilitates an understanding of its history (e.g. display boards with photographs or narratives about the occupation of Lublin, which are found in the barrack where prisoners' property was stored) are also considered parts of the permanent exhibition.

⁸ An extensive article on the history of the International Art Triennial exhibitions was published by D. O l e s i u k, see *Międzynarodowe Triennale Sztuki na Majdanku*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XXIII, 2005, pp. 249–266. I also describe the political circumstances and historical background of the 'Anti-War' and 'Triennial' exhibitions in my article, *Działalność wystawiennicza PMM w latach 1944–2014*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XXVI, 2014, pp. 273–310.

THE OPEN–AIR–EXHIBITION — PAST AND PRESENT

Most of the area of the former concentration camp at Majdanek was opened to visitors shortly after the arrival of the Red Army and the Polish Army on 22 July 1944. The retreating Germans had no time to destroy much of the camp. Thus, initially, most of the camp structures were preserved: the prisoners' section consisting of six prisoner fields, the utility section with warehouses, workshops, gas chambers and baths, and the SS section with guard barracks and the camp headquarters.⁹ The fact that the German troops withdrew from Lublin as a result of a Soviet offensive was of considerable propaganda value to the state apparatus being established in the Lublin region at the time. This apparatus would in future provide the foundation of the Polish state resurrected within new borders and with a new communist political system. From the outset, the communist authorities that installed themselves in Lublin were involved in the activities of the Museum established in November 1944 on the site of the former camp. Their involvement resulted in, among other things, a narrative in which Majdanek had been 'liberated' by the Red Army (despite the fact that there had been no real struggle for the KL Lublin site since the army arrived after most of the prisoners had been evacuated and the camp had been liquidated) and in the creation of a certain canonical interpretation of how the camp operated, its various groups of inmates, and the number and nationality of its victims.¹⁰ This version of the camp's history was maintained with certain modifications until the demise of the People's Republic of Poland in 1989.

The presence of the army on the site of the former camp had a major influence on the permanent open–air exhibition. In particular, it determined which elements of the camp's infrastructure were preserved in a condition that enabled them to be included in the exhibition. This is because the soldiers destroyed much of the camp's buildings and facilities. The greatest interest among visitors to Majdanek was aroused by the gas chambers, the piles of shoes and ashes, and the crematorium building behind prisoner field, which had been set on fire just before the Germans fled in order to obliterate all trace of the last execution of political prisoners from the prison at the Lublin Castle; this crematorium was of particular interest to locals.

⁹ The construction of field VI was not completed until July 1944 and its barracks were used mainly as warehouses. It was there that much of the prisoners' footwear was discovered. This footwear, displayed in adapted barracks from the late 1940s onwards, was to become one of the most powerful elements of the open–air exhibition. An account of the discovery of the footwear stored in field VI is quoted by D. Olesiuć in her article *Obuwie więźniarskie w zbiorach Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XXIV, 2008, pp. 145–147.

¹⁰ I describe this process in more detail in the article cited previously. K. Banach, *Działalność wystawiennicza PMM*, pp. 274–282. See also, J. Kiełboń, E. Balawejder, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944–1947*, Lublin 2004, pp. 6–13.

As early as in 1944, the history of the camp at Majdanek was used to persuade the Polish population that the communists and the Red Army were liberators and guarantors of peace. For Soviet soldiers too, stationed in Lublin on their way to the front, the narrative about the camp was intended to boost morale and encourage them to fight the occupiers. From August 1944, both soldiers and civilians who visited the former camp were offered a booklet containing a brief description of the history and operation of KL Lublin together with a (considerably inflated) victim count and many unconfirmed statements that made the narrative even more dramatic and stressed the depravity of the German torturers.¹¹ Recounted in this manner, the story of the camp was to provide an impetus for the revival of Polish patriotism in the new post-war environment. Indeed, the suffering and extermination of Poles and Slavs were put at the forefront of this narrative. In this way, the organisers of the first exhibitions became involved in the propaganda activities of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PCNL), which was not overly popular at the time. The PCNL's main goal was to win over the local population; in the new Poland, this consisted mostly of Christian Poles.

After a difficult period when the new museum had to be organised with the army still present on the site, the open-air exhibition at the SMM finally took shape in 1946 and 1947. The part of the camp made accessible to the public included most of the utility section (including the gas chambers and baths), part of the prisoners' section, the crematorium and the grounds where mass graves had been dug. At the same time it was decided to demolish the structures within the German sector, liquidate field VI and dismantle the barracks in fields I, II, IV and V.¹² The main reasons for the liquidation of the SS section were its poor technical condition and the difficulty of conserving the wooden structures.¹³ Only the

¹¹ The first attempts to establish the number of victims of the camp were made in late July and early August by the Polish-Soviet Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes Committed at Majdanek chaired by Andrzej Witos, a representative of the new authorities who was at once Deputy Chairman of the Polish Committee of National Liberation. The Commission found that 1.5 million people had perished at the camp. According to the latest studies, the number of victims was around 80,000.

¹² Some of the barracks in the SS section were used by the Museum until the 1960s when they were finally demolished.

¹³ The number of preserved barracks also gave rise to an idea, implemented between 1946 and 1949, to hold national exhibitions at Majdanek. At the time, 22 exhibitions were planned — each created by a different country from which prisoners had originated. In the end, only an exhibition on Jewish martyrdom, created by the Central Committee of Polish Jews, came into being. It too closed, however, mostly due to the diminishing role of the local Jewish community in remembrance initiatives and to the ever-stronger isolationist tendencies imposed on Polish cultural institutions by the Polish United Workers' Party in the late 1940s. The authors of the 'Jewish' exhibition included Zofia Rozenstrauch, a former inmate of Majdanek and Auschwitz, who was responsible for its visual design. Rozenstrauch later emigrated to Israel where she changed her name to Noemi Judkowsk i and worked as an architect at the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz. Her album of drawings depicting the reality

architecture of field III was preserved but its appearance had been transformed to some degree, since already in 1944 when the troops had been stationed there, most of the sculptures and decorations created by inmates as part of the ‘beautification’ campaign initiated by the SS were removed or destroyed.¹⁴ This made the prisoner fields look even more stark and contributed to the impression visitors had of the historic site.

The approach to exhibiting the infrastructure of prisoner fields in the early years of communist Poland was far removed from the guidelines currently followed by the Museum, which involve preserving the original significance and realism of the site. In 1948 and 1949, four prisoner fields without barracks were planted with trees in order to create a cemetery and commemorative park. However, this concept, which harked back to the Slavic idea of a sacred grove, was abandoned and the trees were cleared in the early 1960s. It was then that a new plan for the site was developed by Romuald Gutt and Alina Scholtzówna, in accordance with the authorities’ guidelines; this focused on preserving the site with maximum authenticity.¹⁵

Despite the implementation of the aforementioned plan to develop the Museum, the open-air exhibition narrative created at the end of the 1940s took on certain characteristics that were maintained until the end of the communist era in Poland.¹⁶ The most important of these were the instrumental treatment of issues related to the operation of the camp, the universalisation of the identities of victims (primarily Jews) and the emphasis on the mass and total nature of the crimes committed at the camp at the expense of personal narratives.

Until the 1990s, the information boards placed in the gas chambers, by the mass graves beyond field V and in the barrack containing the shoes of murdered prisoners stated that ‘prisoners’, ‘people’ or ‘victims’ had perished — there was no mention of their nationalities or the reasons for their imprisonment and death. Already in the Museum’s early period enough was known about the history of the

of Auschwitz was used as evidence in the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1962. Rozenstrauch was probably also the author of an album containing photographic documentation of the Jewish exhibition at Majdanek, which is now included in the collections of the Jewish Historical Institute. See Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, Alb, XLIII; see also, Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku, VII/M510, Relacja obozowa Noemi Judkowski.

¹⁴ The ‘*Schmücke dein Heim*’ campaign saw the establishment of work commandos whose task it was to make Majdanek look less menacing. As a result, a number of camp sculptures were created that have been preserved and are now used for exhibition purposes; some of them had hidden anti-fascist meanings. These included the ‘Tortoise’, ‘Lizard’, ‘Castle’ and ‘Column of Three Eagles’.

¹⁵ D. O l e s i u k, *Urządzenie przestrzenne Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku 1944–2010. Plany i realizacja*, “Zeszyty Majdanka”, vol. XXV, 2011, pp. 238–239.

¹⁶ The general assumptions behind the open-air exhibition were first formulated by A. W i t o s from the PCNL and by A. F e r s k i, the first director of the SMM. J. K i e ł b o Ń, E. B a l a w e j d e r, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*, pp. 6–13.



1. An aerial photograph of the SMM site made in 1964. In the foreground: part of the former prisoner section of the camp with the foundations of non-existent barracks visible. In the top right corner: the remains of structures in the SS section, which were demolished in the late 1960s.

Photo: SMM

camp to determine that most victims of the gas chambers and of the executions carried out in the trenches beyond field V on 3 November 1943 were Jews and that most of the footwear discovered in Majdanek had been looted from them.¹⁷ Despite this, the descriptions on the information boards had a deliberately vague wording so that the mass extermination of anonymous prisoners became the essence of the message.¹⁸ The combination of this message with information displayed in subsequent historical exhibitions on the Nazis' designs to eradicate various nationalities from Europe (Jews, Poles and other Slavic nations), a plan thwarted by the communist states' war effort, was meant to uphold the myth of Soviet communism as a liberating idea that had saved entire nations from physical annihilation. Taken together, this and other examples of the camp's history being harnessed to construct an ideological message reflect the instrumental use of

¹⁷ This execution, codenamed 'Erntefest', was the final act of 'Aktion Reinhardt' — the extermination of Jews in the General Government supervised by the head of the SS and the Police in the Lublin district, Odilo Globocnik.

¹⁸ I describe the phenomenon of universalisation in more detail in my article *Zagłada Żydów w świetle ekspozycji stałych Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku*, "Studia Judaica", 2013, no. 2 (32), p. 131.

historical narratives. For many years, an important factor that perpetuated confusion and deception in the open-air exhibition was the authorities' unwillingness to revise official estimates concerning the number of victims or even to reveal the purpose of individual camp facilities. One example was the room for disinfecting clothes situated in the men's baths, which for many years continued to be described as one of the gas chambers where prisoners had been exterminated. Owing to insufficient reflection on the need to introduce changes, the exhibition included imprecise statements to varying degrees until the early 2000s.

Currently, the open-air exhibition consists of around 80 historic buildings and almost 100 remains located on 90 hectares. Although the Museum holds documents that would enable it to reconstruct the appearance of a large number of structures, conservation work in this regard is limited to essential repairs of damage caused by environmental factors (e.g. structural damage to the wooden barracks). The only purpose of these interventions is to preserve the existing state of the former camp infrastructure, which is considered to be material evidence of the crimes committed at KL Lublin. The preserved structures convey a strong enough message and to reinforce it through the reconstruction of completely destroyed parts would not achieve the intended additional educational purpose.¹⁹

Significant changes in the form and content of the open-air exhibition at the SMM have taken place under the modernisation project developed by Tomasz Kranz and implemented since 2008.²⁰ As part of the upgrade, new information boards and plinths have been installed at the Museum with explanations that offer a two-level narrative. The first of these (the memory of the place) includes information about the history of Majdanek. To this end, a historical route has been arranged, featuring glass plates with text in three languages and archive photographs of the relevant locations, other glass plates situated inside the buildings, information plinths located near selected structures, a model of the camp and a display of archive photographs of the site. The information plates are made of translucent glass so that they do not obscure the relevant structures and places. Where it was not possible to use transparent elements (the plinths supporting the heavy steamrollers, the outdoor display case protecting a section of the camp road, the barrier supporting the curtains protecting the crematorium ovens), black metal sheets covered with structural paint were used, clearly indicating that these

¹⁹ J. Nowakowski describes this approach from the conservator's point of view in his article, *Granice ingerencji konserwatorskiej w procesie zachowania pozostałości obozowych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem ruin komór gazowych i krematoriów*, [in:] *Chronić dla przyszłości. Międzynarodowa konferencja konserwatorska, Oświęcim 23–25 czerwca 2003 rok*, ed. by K. Marszałek, Oświęcim 2003, pp. 97–103. Nowadays, some museums of martyrdom have adopted a different approach. At the Gross-Rosen Museum in Rogoźnica, one of the prisoner barracks and a watchtower were reconstructed in 2010, based solely on the surviving foundations. The reconstructed watchtower is to be used as an observation point.

²⁰ I describe this project primarily on the basis of T. Kranz, *O koncepcji modernizacji*, pp. 13–21.

are not original objects but rather structural parts of the exhibition.²¹ The second narrative consists of boards containing accounts by former prisoners and camp personnel (the memory of witnesses) illustrating the most important events and periods in the camp's history with reference to specific historical sites. Displayed in this manner, open-air objects become contextualised as the background for the factual narrative. Emotional language or ideological judgements about the events described are deliberately avoided (beyond the obvious emotional attitudes of the witnesses to history). The purpose of the open-air exhibition as a whole is to make available, both to groups and to individual visitors, information that has been verified by experts, and also to place the structures within a broader context, clarify their purpose and systematise and unify the knowledge that has been acquired.



2. Part of the open-air exhibition, 2014 (road rollers used to compact roads in the camp).

Photo: SMM

When developing the content of the narrative boards that now accompany the open-air exhibition, maximum precision with respect to both substance and language was the goal. In order to avoid universalising the victims' identities, particular attention was paid to their origins and to how the camp's extermination infrastructure was used. Thus, in the vicinity of the gas chambers, there is information

²¹ The signage also has a similar, easily recognisable form: composite plates finished in the colour of brushed aluminium or glass plates with text and pictograms.

that mainly large groups of Jewish prisoners perished there and that the executions of prisoners of other nationalities following selections in the prisoner fields were sporadic. These executions ended altogether after the last Jews remaining in the camp were murdered in November 1943. The boards situated by the execution ditches where action *Erntefest* was carried out mention the identity of the Jewish victims while pointing out that the ditches were subsequently used to bury Polish political prisoners — victims of the executions carried out in 1944. Other areas less directly related to extermination, e.g. the history of the so-called Column of Three Eagles, are described in a similar manner.²² The open-air narrative constructed in this way is not just a collection of information monoliths supplying superficial and formulaic knowledge about the camp, but rather takes into account the specificity of the site and facts directly associated with the victims' history.

HISTORICAL EXHIBITIONS — FROM VULGARITY FOR THE MASSES TO AN INDIVIDUAL MESSAGE

The SMM's activities have so far resulted in the creation of four permanent exhibitions intended to summarise existing knowledge about the camp. The first permanent exhibition, based on an idea developed by Antoni F e r s k i, opened on 2 September 1945. It consisted of photographs by war correspondents, drawings of scenes from the camp, archive documents and maps. These were supplemented by waxworks depicting exhausted prisoners and exhibits illustrating the massive scale of the crimes committed. The purpose of the exhibition was to evoke strong emotions, and it used extremely direct, even vulgar visualization techniques — this was the first attempt to impart a message about how a Nazi concentration camp operated. Just as the open-air exhibition described above, the first historical exhibition at the Museum was largely influenced by the emerging propaganda narrative aimed at creating a new national martyrology and supporting the objectives of the nascent state apparatus.

The next permanent historical exhibition was opened in 1954 (on the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland); it was created by a team headed by Henryk P o z n a ń s k i from the Ministry of Art and Culture. This was the most ideological project in the entire history of the SMM. It would not be an exaggeration

²² The column was erected by the aforementioned work commando of Polish political prisoners as part of the *Schmücke dein Heim* campaign. The inscription on the board placed next to the Column, most probably in the 1960s, read: 'Column of Three Eagles. Erected by prisoners in May 1943. Its base incorporates the ashes of prisoners burned in the crematorium.' The current board from 2013 reads as follows: 'Column of Three Eagles. Designed by Albin Maria Boniecki. It was erected by Polish political prisoners on the orders of the camp authorities. The Germans intended it as a decoration for field III. Ashes from the crematorium were secretly placed inside, and it thus became the first monument honouring the victims of Majdanek'.

to say that the concentration camp served only as an excuse to vilify the capitalist states and glorify the Soviet Union. Monographic historical exhibitions were organised in parallel and featured content similar to the permanent exhibition.

In 1962, another permanent exhibition opened at the SMM; its authors were Stanisław Brodzia k, Zofia Mura wska, Edward Dzia dosz and Edward Gryń. Divided into eight blocks, its purpose was to present various topics related to Majdanek whilst incorporating the latest academic research. Due to the interesting exhibition techniques used and the diversity of materials presented, the exhibition ran for over 30 years. It was also significantly less politicised, although ideological themes and the influence of the materialist interpretation of history were still in evidence.²³ The project inspired the Museum to put on smaller historical exhibitions about the camp and, more generally, about the Second World War and the occupation. These were displayed at the Museum itself and in the form of touring exhibitions.

The last permanent historical exhibition, by Anna Wiśniewska and Czesław Rajca, opened in 1996 and was entitled 'Majdanek as part of the concentration camp system'. It occupied two barracks in the utility section of the camp and mostly used photographic materials, copies of documents and just a few exhibits. Both the means of expression and the presented content were quite frugal. Nevertheless, the undoubted merits of this exhibition included the introduction of hitherto neglected topics in the history of Majdanek, e.g. its role in the persecution of anti-communists immediately after the war, and also the use of materials (photographs, documents) relating to individual prisoners from different groups of inmates. However, the presented materials were not combined in a manner that would enable the public to fully comprehend the complexity of the issues in the absence of a broader historical commentary. As new forms of cultural and social life emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and faced with declining interest in concentration camps among the museum-going public in Poland, the SMM's focus shifted towards holding a large number of artistic events.

Today, the historical exhibition centre is located in a single barrack (No. 62), which has been adapted to use modern display methods as a result of the modernisation carried out in 2012 and 2013. As standards for the protection

²³ For a Western observer who visited the Majdanek exhibition in the 1980s, these aspects were particularly noticeable: 'At Majdanek, such [former camp — K.B.] objects thus "tell" the story of the camp's Soviet liberators, configured [by the accompanying texts — K.B.] in a reflexively Marxist interpretation of the war and its victims' (J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory, the Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven–London, 2003, p. 121). The presence of politicised elements is confirmed by the script for the exhibition kept in the SMM Archive and by the documents relating to the modernisation of the Museum. Compared to the 1954–1959 exhibition, the manner of presentation undoubtedly evolved; however, from today's point of view, the 1960s exhibition cannot really be regarded as a form of politically neutral historical communication. See T. Kranz, M. Wiśnioch, *Działalność oświatowa*, p. 53.

and conservation of museum objects have increased, future plans include major renovation work to prepare more barracks to house additional exhibition pavilions. The space dedicated to historical exhibitions is now relatively smaller, therefore, than in 1954 and 1962 (when the exhibitions were housed in around a dozen barracks). Some blocks, however, have acquired new display boards to supplement the open-air exhibition, e.g. the aforementioned boards on the German occupation of Lublin or contemporary photographs of the Museum site juxtaposed with archive photographs.

Since its inception, the SMM has been a large-scale museum in which the display of small objects in the original historical buildings has been made much more difficult by atmospheric conditions. Currently, most of the exhibits that must be exposed to harmful environmental impacts are displayed in the modern, air-conditioned exhibition room in Barrack 62 (the former shoemakers' workshop and the first Museum headquarters) where temperature and humidity are constantly monitored. For decades, however, the approach to displaying the collections had been much less restrictive. Most small exhibits, including textiles and items made of leather, wood and metals susceptible to corrosion, were displayed in the former camp barracks where they were exposed to fluctuations in temperature and humidity. This state of affairs was largely caused by insufficient financial resources and technical capabilities, but the overarching ideological tone of the communist period, which determined the methodology for designing exhibitions, also played an important role. The two successive permanent historical exhibitions of that period, which opened in 1954 and 1962, stressed the mass scale of the crimes committed at the camp. It was therefore particularly important to display large volumes of exhibits such as shoes or prisoner uniforms.²⁴ At the 1996 exhibition mass exhibits were not dominant, and selected exhibits were displayed seasonally in two barracks in the utility section of the camp until the exhibition was closed in 2013. For technical reasons, the temporary exhibitions organised by the Museum in the first decade of the 21st century (with two exceptions where archive materials were displayed for a few days after the opening of the 'Letters from Majdanek. KL Lublin in the light of secret messages' exhibition by Danuta Olesiuk and Krzysztof Kokowicz and also during the 'Remember Majdanek — the activity of the SMM in the light of posters and placards from 1944–1948' by the same authors) used boards with computer collages of digitised archive photographs and digital reproductions of museum objects accompanied by the authors' narratives.

²⁴ Barrack 52, in which prisoners' footwear can be seen, is currently the only example of this style of presentation. In this case, too, the Museum attempted to supplement the message conveyed by a large group of exhibits by personalising them. This was done by projecting onto the barrack walls photographs of death camp victims whose shoes were sent to Majdanek in order to be processed and subsequently returned to Germany. This presentation is currently unavailable for technical reasons, but in future it is likely to be restored in an updated form.



3. Photo of striped prisoner uniforms displayed at the 1950s exhibition.

Photo: SMM

Currently, preparations are under way for a new permanent exhibition that will present the most important aspects of the camp's history. Until it opens, this function will be performed by the 'Prisoners of Majdanek' monographic exhibition set up in 2014 and based on a script by Marta Grudzińska, Wojciech Lenarczyk and the present author, who is also the curator of the exhibition. Izabela Tomasiwicz was responsible for the visual design. The main goal of the project is to present the Majdanek inmates as a community shaped by the conditions prevailing in the camp. The history of the camp, which provides the backdrop for the exhibition, is shown through the prism of the prisoners' experiences and observations and their fate. As the narrative was constructed from the perspective of social history, the phenomena described are not strictly chronological or factual. The authors sought to portray the camp from the point of view of individual prisoners and reveal the multitude of possible perspectives.

The exhibition is divided into eight thematic panels. These present selected aspects of the prisoners' life in the camp: their experience of deportation, the relationships between them, the experience of work, survival strategies, responses to living conditions, the violence of the camp regime, death and death-related experiences, and finally the possibilities for getting out of KL Lublin. In order to provide a representative view of the groups of inmates that formed the Majdanek prisoner community, several dozen characters were selected whose fate served

as the framework for the narrative. It was important to stress the particular characteristics of the different groups, whose members perceived and experienced the camp in different ways.

For obvious reasons, the choice of the exhibition's protagonists could not reflect, in perfect proportion, all the groups of inmates; however, the authors tried to avoid a bias that would artificially narrow this group and thus relativize the narrative. Deliberate interventions by the authors of the 1954 exhibition are a notorious example of such relativization. Certain groups of inmates were excluded from the narrative about the Majdanek prisoner community and therefore omitted from official commemoration. The exhibition mentioned only those inmates whose biographies were acceptable to the communist authorities. Thus members of the underground resistance in the camp were exclusively proletarian anti-fascists (and certainly not representatives of the 'treacherous' Home Army). Similarly, when mentioning Polish soldiers of Jewish origin who were incarcerated in the labour camp at ul. Lipowa 7 in Lublin in 1940, their ethnicity was deliberately ignored — they were simply referred to as 'Polish POWs'.²⁵ This situation was only partially remedied in 1962. The fact that only the accounts of Polish prisoners were used in the 1962 exhibition exacerbated the disingenuous representation of individual ethnic groups.

Owing to the new technical possibilities afforded by the renovation of Barrack 62, around 150 exhibits could be included in the "Prisoners of Majdanek" exhibition, among them many that had never been displayed before. Most of these have been placed in certified showcases; only large metal or wooden objects are displayed on dedicated open plinths. Some of the exhibits, particularly those related to direct physical violence and extermination at the camp, e.g. whips, gallows, armbands worn by prisoner functionaries or canisters of Zyklon B gas, carry universally recognisable symbolic meanings and are highly emotionally charged.

The starting point of the exhibition is the fate of inmates from different social, national and religious groups who occupied different positions within the camp hierarchy. It was possible to show the diversity of the prisoner population thanks to the use of a large number of personalised museum objects associated with the protagonists of the exhibition. These objects tell individual stories as well as conveying a universal meaning. One example are striped prisoner uniforms, which have hitherto been included in exhibitions only as large groups of objects. In the case of 'Prisoners of Majdanek', an individual uniform was used that had been worn by Helena Kurcysz, an architect and member of the underground resistance during the war; in the camp, she looked after a commando of Belarusian children.

²⁵ These soldiers were held in the camp as Jews. See W. Lenarczyk, *Obóz pracy przymusowej dla Żydów przy ul. Lipowej w Lublinie (1939–1943)*, [in:] *Erntefest 3–4 listopada 1943 — zapomniany epizod Zagłady*, ed. by W. Lenarczyk, D. Libionka, Lublin 2009, p. 37; K. Banach, *Działalność wystawiennicza PMM*, p. 286.

Just as in most historical museums, in preparing ‘Prisoners of Majdanek’ the key criteria for selecting exhibits and archive materials were their factual value and authenticity.²⁶ This is because their content supplements the most important characteristic of a museum of martyrdom such as the SMM — the authenticity of the site. Just as the site of the former camp itself, they have a multidimensional importance since they serve as testimony and evidence of the crimes committed and as mementos of the murdered; once properly contextualised, they also commemorate the victims.



4. The ‘Prisoners of Majdanek’ exhibition, 2014.

Photo: SMM

An important consideration underlying the way in which this very special set of exhibits would be displayed was the wish to avoid any excessive, deliberate styling of the environment in which the objects were placed. Previous projects at the SMM provided negative examples of such arrangements and a case in point was the permanent exhibition opened on 3 September 1945. In addition to works of art, photographs and exhibits it also featured wax figures dressed in striped uniforms that were supposed to represent prisoners dying of exhaustion. When combined with the recurring motif of Zyklon B canisters and barbed wire, this was intended to evoke terror, horror and revulsion towards the torturers who had run the camp.

²⁶ The exhibition is overwhelmingly composed of original exhibits. Copies of exhibits, of which there are very few, are presented in a separate display case that is clearly distinguished from the others.

This backdrop and the context imposed on the exhibition's content was criticised in the Lublin press — even shortly after the exhibition had opened.²⁷

The contextualisation of the collection is conditioned not just by the aforementioned relationship between the environment and the exhibits. The relationship between the objects themselves is important as well. In the 1954 permanent exhibition, devices such as the juxtaposition of exhibits or photo collages were used in order to modify the ideological message. Photographs of Nazi crimes were displayed alongside photographs of U.S. soldiers during the war in Korea in 1953 under the caption 'the origins of genocide'; in contrast, Red Army soldiers were shown next to them as heroes who had liberated Majdanek, the Lublin region and the entire country from 'the fascist yoke'. The exhibitions of 1945, 1954 and 1962 also featured intimate photographs, e.g. the naked bodies of emaciated prisoners, including victims of execution. Nowadays, images of identifiable persons, of naked prisoners or of people being treated like objects are considered a very delicate matter at the SMM. The principal goal is to avoid the secondary objectification and stigmatisation of prisoners in the name of the images' documentary or informational value.²⁸

WORDS AND IMAGES — THE ROLE OF MICROHISTORY AND PERSONALIZED NARRATIVES

Verbal and textual elements form an integral part of most historical exhibitions. In recent years, the SMM has paid considerable attention to editing the texts that appear in its exhibitions. Recent display-board exhibitions (without any original exhibits) such as 'They arrived at the ghetto... and went into the unknown...' (Robert Kuwałek, Dariusz Libionka, Izabela Tomaszewicz, 2012), 'Blessed priests from Majdanek' (Anna Wójtowicz, Krzysztof Kokowicz, 2013) and 'Letters from Majdanek: KL Lublin in the light of secret messages' (Danuta Olesiuk, Krzysztof Kokowicz, 2007) have featured extensive texts — original descriptions with historical narratives, captions beneath reproductions of museum objects, photographs and archive documents, transcripts of documents and excerpts from written accounts. In the 'Prisoners of Majdanek' exhibition, the authors have used a similar set of textual elements, but the relationship between these elements and other components of the content is different. Efforts have been made to minimise the captions accompanying museum objects and iconography so they do not detract

²⁷ See J. Kiełboń, E. Bala wej der, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*, p. 23.

²⁸ A casual approach to displaying such controversial photographs was typical of martyrdom-themed exhibitions of the communist era. A prominent example is the 1955 permanent exhibition at the State Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is running to this day with certain modifications. It contains, among other things, photos of executed prisoners and medical experiments.

from the items themselves and do not restrict the opportunity for interpretation. The exhibition also includes historical texts placed on the partition walls that delineate individual exhibition zones. However, the authors' commentaries play a secondary role and are not crucial to grasping the meaning of the narrative. Their primary function is to systematise and organise the message of the exhibition. Furthermore, they allow additional meanings to be discovered, highlighting interesting relationships between the materials and broadening the scope of the narrative. However, efforts have been made to prevent the commentaries from ruling out independent interpretation of the presented content. This is because the photographs, documents, accounts, biographies and exhibits, are of which are directly related to one another, are intended to help the public discover and interpret the various themes of the exhibition. Additionally, there are excerpts from prisoners' accounts — in written form and also transcribed from audio and video recordings — most of which are accessible at a level different to that of the museum objects and iconography, and access to them requires the physical interaction of the visitor. The understated visual design of the environment in which the materials are displayed is a clear departure from archaic stylisation (which appeals to some authors of Second World War exhibitions), but still uses the motif of prisoners' writings from documents stored in the SMM Archive. This allows the exhibition to avoid pathos and narrative fiction stylised to resemble historical reality.²⁹

While the first SMM exhibition had only concise captions under prints and exhibits (a broader historical text was available in the form of a booklet for visitors), the 1954 and 1962 exhibitions contained extensive textual content. In addition to the often lengthy captions that accompanied the iconography, the former exhibition included many propaganda slogans that subsumed entire thematic blocks within the strictly defined 'anti-imperialist' interpretation that glorified the communist order ('The Hitlerite political and party apparatus was an instrument of German monopolies. The American rulers of today express the will of large corporations' or 'If you do not want Majdanek to be repeated, stand with us for a happy fatherland and a peaceful world'; the latter slogan was set against the background of a drawing depicting a bricklayer and photographs from socialist construction sites).³⁰ Apart from the linguistic devices used to present the prisoners' origins in

²⁹ This formula is close to 'participating laconism' (*anteilnehmende Lakonie*) as described by Volkhard Knigge. It puts historical evidence rather than its staging in the spotlight, while not pretending that it is the past itself or a direct reflection of the past. Historical evidence does not merely serve to illustrate preconceived narratives and interpretations. The point is rather to help visitors to use their imagination, to enter into a dialogue with historical evidence and to form an independent assessment of the past. See Z. Wóycicka's conversation with V. Knigge in connection with the opening of an exhibition on forced labourers (scheduled for January 2013) in Warsaw, "Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały", no. 8, 2012, p. 491.

³⁰ The quotations originate from the exhibition script, which is available on hard copy in the APMM [SMM Archive], Archiwum Zakładowe III/33, Scenariusz wystawy 'Walka o pokój'.

a manner that had a propagandist purpose, the main texts included in the exhibition were often entirely devoted to political topics (e.g. the peaceful use of nuclear energy by the Soviet Union). While the amount of ideological content in the 1960s exhibition was reduced, propaganda was not entirely absent either. The big slogans were gone but the message still included distortions and inaccuracies (e.g. ‘Aktion Reinhard’, which consisted in the extermination of the Jewish population in the General Government, was described as ‘a campaign of extermination and plunder of prisoners’ property’).³¹ The technique used in those exhibitions was to construct closed and fully interpreted narratives that left no doubt as to the significance of the materials on display and thus did not allow for any deeper reflection on the part of visitors.



5. Propaganda content in the 1954 exhibition.

Photo: SMM

If we perceive a museum exhibition as a kind of educational tool, then the relationship between the teaching concept adopted by the institution in question and the way in which the exhibition’s narrative is constructed become important. The narrative framework described in the preceding paragraph, which was typical

³¹ APMM, AZ III/71, Scenariusz ekspozycji ‘Majdanek w systemie obozów’, p. 89. Emphasis — K.B.

of exhibitions before the 1990s, stands in sharp contrast to the assumptions of the participatory teaching model put forward by proponents of the pedagogy of remembrance concept, which originated in Germany and is now being applied to various areas of the SMM's activities.³² The pedagogy of remembrance is understood primarily as a 'form of socio-political education that emphasises the need for a critical approach to history, combines remembering the victims of the Nazi dictatorship with fostering democratic behaviours and values and demands that the learning process initiated in places of remembrance be oriented towards activating visitors, involving the intellectual, practical, affective and reflective at the same time'.³³ In historical education, 'the focus should be shifted from teaching to learning. Self-education can be defined as a process of deliberate acquisition of certain knowledge, skills and habits that takes place in the course of direct and indirect cognition of reality. This leads to the pedagogical postulate that students should be in the centre of attention. A necessary condition for that is the individualisation of the learning process understood as the personal "reliving" and "experiencing" of history, devising new ways of reaching the past and forming one's own judgement about it'.³⁴

In the case of 'Prisoners of Majdanek', visitor engagement that is considered desirable by the proponents of this concept is stimulated largely by the fact that the exhibition is interactive. The creation of interactive exhibitions is no longer a novelty in Poland or elsewhere, but museum exhibitions are increasingly falling into the interactivity trap, which is usually manifested by an over-reliance on multimedia that dominates the presented content and often hinders

³² See, for instance, T. K r a n z, *Pedagogika pamięci jako forma edukacji muzealnej*, [in:] idem, *Wizyty edukacyjne w Państwowym Muzeum na Majdanku. Poradnik dla nauczycieli*, Lublin 2012, pp. 11–25; W. W y s o k, *Edukacja w muzeach upamiętnienia 'in situ'. Postulaty, możliwości i granice oddziaływania dydaktycznego*, [in:] W. W y s o k, A. S t ę p n i k, *Edukacja muzealna w Polsce. Aspekty, konteksty, ujęcia*, Lublin 2013, pp. 40–68.

³³ W. W y s o k, *Edukacja w muzeach*, p. 40. Visitor engagement, which is a characteristic assumption underlying the pedagogy of remembrance, is also an element of the constructivist approach endorsed by George Hein and still considered innovative in Polish museum education. Hein states that 'the educational intention of museum exhibitions is to facilitate visitor meaning-making', because it is only then that learning occurs, and the meanings themselves arise not just from the objects and the manner in which they are displayed, but also from the visitors' cultures. See G. H e i n, *Museum Education*, [in:] *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by S. M a c D o n a l d, Oxford 2006, p. 347. Therefore, an important component of the constructivist teaching and exhibition methodology is the organisation of cognitive experience in a way that enables reference to be made to the experiences we already have (easily recognizable themes, objects and iconography) and the disruption of linear and chronological narratives within the exhibition. Defining education as 'experiencing meanings' and not as 'specific predefined content' is an important general assumption underlying the constructivist approach.

³⁴ W. W y s o k, *Wokół problematyki, uwarunkowań i efektów edukacji w Muzeach*, "Zeszyty Majdanek", vol. XXVI, 2014, pp. 321–322.

its understanding. In the 2015 exhibition, interactive elements are used where the conceptual framework requires the visitor to become involved in the narrative, and this is achieved by tailoring the range of content to his or her needs. Multimedia is only used where it is necessary to extend the narrative space in a virtual manner, which would be impossible using 'traditional' methods. Visitors are not presented with all the materials (written accounts and documents relating to the exhibition's protagonists) that are available. Instead, they select the characters who will be their 'guides' to the exhibition. They elect to see certain photographs and read the biographies or accounts of certain prisoners, thereby opening new possibilities to interpret the objects or iconography included in the exhibition. The large number of hidden connections between the materials is designed to arouse the visitors' curiosity, encouraging them to examine the content more closely and explore its meaning on their own.

Post-war recordings of prisoners' accounts of their life in the camp also encourage visitors to provide their own interpretations of the message of the exhibition. Excerpts from such accounts in text form appeared already in the 1954 exhibition.³⁵ However, their use at the time was subordinated to the general political aims of the exhibition and the accounts themselves were not accompanied by any information about the prisoners' identities. The exhibition prepared a decade later also included a number of accounts. However, the selection was limited to Polish prisoners only. The 1996 exhibition did not feature any written accounts, but there were plans to use the video recordings made by the Museum since 1987. The main obstacles at the time were probably the poor technical quality of the prisoner interviews and the technical limitations related to preparing and displaying these materials. Initially, however, it was assumed that the 'Majdanek as part of the camp system' exhibition would include a computer through which excerpts from eyewitness accounts could be accessed. Were this implemented at the time, it would have been a pioneering solution in Polish museums of martyrdom. In the end, this idea was not implemented. On the other hand, the exhibition was eventually supplemented with two multimedia art installations produced by external curators: the 1999 project entitled 'Shrine — a memorial to an unknown victim' by Tadeusz Mysłowski and the 2003 'Primer' based on an idea by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz. The former installation combined sculptural elements with audio-visual accounts of the camp and prayers read in several languages, while the latter was devoted to the children imprisoned at Majdanek. Using excerpts from audio accounts, it related the biographies and fate of Polish, Belarusian and Jewish children who had been inmates of KL Lublin.

³⁵ The documentation of the 1945 exhibition is too sparse to claim with any certainty that such materials were not used in its preparation. However, the preserved photographs and documents suggest that they were not.

Primary sources, and especially audio–visual accounts, are special types of exhibition materials. They often contain factual errors, subjective opinions and incorrect interpretations of the facts due to the respondents' incomplete knowledge or distorted memories. For this reason, they should not be presented without proper contextualisation provided by the remaining layers of the exhibition's message. In terms of their content, audio–visual accounts usually convey much more information than other types of source material. Judgements, feelings, opinions, behaviour during interviews and the entire range of non–verbal messages (if properly interpreted) can be treated as evidence of motivations and views and a reflection of the times being described.³⁶ Audio–visual messages based on prisoners' memories also provide the conditions required to feel empathy towards the victims of violence at the camp. This is essential for an active, individual experience of a museum visit and is considered necessary by the pedagogy of remembrance.

TEACHING VALUES

The activity of the State Museum at Majdanek has undergone several periods marked by different paradigms, conditions and different ways of interpreting the Museum's mission, which has influenced both the form and content of the exhibitions. Since we are aware of the methodological assumptions, circumstances and factors that influenced the design of SMM historical exhibitions in the past, we can now take into account this part experience in both its positive and negative aspects (e.g. the forms and conditions under which exhibits were displayed and the way in which verbal and textual elements were incorporated, but also the arrangement of space and typography). Many of the assumptions underlying current SMM exhibitions build on the achievements of researchers working at other institutions of martyrdom, and in particular relate to the pedagogy of remembrance. A key element of the latter is visitor engagement in the museum education process, in which learning occurs primarily through the creation and construction of knowledge. In his description of educational work with groups of schoolchildren, who make up the majority of visitors participating in extended tours (meetings and study visits, workshops, etc.), Wiesław Wysok writes: 'in practice, it is not just about pupils being engaged, but also about them creating something meaningful and subjecting their activities to critical analysis, discussion and self–reflection... Therefore, in the context of visits to sites of memory, the emphasis should be on self–reliance and creativity'.³⁷ Tomasz Kranz adds that 'the

³⁶ See M. Grudzińska, *Zbiór 'Nagrania audio' w zasobie archiwalnym PMM*, "Zeszyty Majdanka", vol. XXV, 2011, p. 279.

³⁷ W. Wysok, *Wokół problematyki*, p. 322.

learning process within the framework of extracurricular historical education is based on strong motivations. It not only enhances the learner's knowledge but also equips the learner with skills that impact on his or her individual attitudes, beliefs, conduct and general development'.³⁸

The pedagogy of remembrance assumes that the goal of institutions such as museums of martyrdom should be, on the one hand, to keep alive the memory of the victims of Nazism and, on the other, to forge attitudes and social behaviours characteristic of open democratic societies, such as tolerance, respect for diversity and civic responsibility. The prevention of war has always been the overarching aim of exhibitions at the SMM, which have presented elements of concentration camp infrastructure, museum objects, archive materials and other evidence. Depending on the period, however, working methods, the scope of the presented content and the range of values promoted in the positive part of the museum's message have differed. The first exhibitions involved a strictly-defined narrative and a desire to impart 'ready-made knowledge' — formalised information that was entirely determined by the exhibition's authors. In this process, there was little room for visitors to draw their own conclusions. Today, the task of museum staff who design exhibitions at the SMM is increasingly to create the conditions for independent reflection. This consists in visitors actively confronting their own experiences, views and beliefs with history. In the case of the museum established on the site of the former Nazi concentration camp at Majdanek, this is often a history of various forms of violence that humiliated and destroyed human beings. Accordingly, the creators of exhibitions should remember that a historical exhibition which concerns human suffering and death should not satisfy a public need for voyeuristic or aesthetic experience or entertainment. The only justification for showing the genocide and terror that took place at the camp is to enable visitors to acquire the ability to form their own assessment of modern reality from the perspective of humanitarian values. For this and other reasons, an especially important issue for museums of martyrdom such as the SMM is to incorporate into their exhibition activities participatory teaching models such as the pedagogy of remembrance and the constructivist education model.³⁹

In addition to holding exhibitions, the new exhibition strategy of many modern museums also involves activities centred on information, education and animation. George Hein points out that 'an exhibition that does not rely solely on the authority of the curator engages a great many people its creation. Among them are not only

³⁸ T. Kranz, *Edukacja historyczna w miejscach pamięci*, Lublin 2009, p. 74.

³⁹ Already in the 1990s it was observed that the SMM must develop new forms of educational work aimed at 'a humanistic and anthropological education in which visitors play a more active role than before...'. 'Its primary objective should be to sensitise the audience to evil and to initiate, on the basis of knowledge about the past, thought processes that enable one to look critically at the events taking place in the modern world'. T. Kranz, M. Wiśniewicz, *Działalność oświatowa*, p. 53.

museum educators but also people who conduct visitor research and frontend assessments (i.e. while the exhibition is ongoing) in an effort to involve the defined groups of visitors'.⁴⁰ Even the best exhibition will not achieve complete success if its impact is limited to people who regularly attend the institution's events and if the form of this impact is limited to passive participation by the visitor who is present in the exhibition space at a given time; this also applies to sites of memory / museums of remembrance. It is very important to combine the exhibition's impact with other ways of involving different groups in society and encouraging museum visitors to participate in a variety of educational and popularising activities that utilise the exhibition, such as workshops, meetings, study visits, projects using modern media as well as other forms of engagement. Hein, among others, posits that before educational programmes to accompany exhibitions are developed, the museum-going public should be properly studied, its composition examined and the right methods and measures chosen. This is because active involvement in an exhibition, and preparation of an exhibition according to the assumptions that make such involvement possible, appear to be very important factors if a museum of martyrdom is to fulfil its mission successfully.

⁴⁰ G. Hein, *Museum Education*.