



Linda Norris

## Looking Backwards to Move Forward

Many museums in Central and Eastern Europe have made substantial commitments to a deep presentation and interpretation of the region's complex 20th century history. The most thoughtful of these museums explore not just the question of whom the victims were but they help us understand the why, and most importantly, encourage all of us to face the question, "How can we make sure this never happens again?" Ukrainian history museums are encouraged to embrace – now – new approaches including community consultation, innovative exhibition techniques, a willingness to surrender sole curatorial voice, and the development of dialogue-based programs – in the service of understanding the complex 20th century history of the Ukrainian nation. Such interpretive museums are vital to democratic societies, to visitors who are longing for deeper understandings, understandings that we, as museum professionals, have the obligation to help create.

*Keywords: museum, history, Central and Eastern Europe, narrative, interpretation, 20th century history.*

Багато музеїв Центральної та Східної Європи доклали значних зусиль для ширшої презентації та інтерпретації складної історії регіону впродовж ХХ сторіччя. Через вдумливий підхід до представлення своєї експозиції музеї не лише ставлять питання ким були жертви, але й чому та що найважливіше; вони примушують замислитися над питанням «що маємо зробити, аби ті лихоліття не повторилися знову?» Історичні музеї України заохочуються якнайшвидше прийняти цей новий підхід та шляхом проведення консультацій з публікою (місцевими громадами) й використання інноваційних технологій відійти від звичного підходу залучення до розробки музейної експозиції лише вузького кола фахівців. Нові музейні програми мають бути розроблені на основі діалогу з публікою, лише він допоможе зрозуміти складну історію народу України, пережиту ним впродовж ХХ століття. Музеї, в яких заохочується інтерпретація й дискусія щодо минулого, є важливою частиною демократичних суспільств. Ці заклади відіграють значну роль в житті відвідувачів, які прагнуть поглибити своє розуміння минулого. Як музейні професіонали, ми зобов'язані допомогти створити це багатогранне та повне розуміння минулого.

*Ключові слова: музей, історія, Центральна та Східна Європа, наратив, інтерпретація, історія ХХ століття.*

**A**s a museum professional that works primarily with the intersection of subject matter and audience, I'm deeply interested in how museums convey stories and how they assist visitors of widely differing experiences to make meaning of complicated events. In the United States, my work has ranged from exhibits about relationships between Europeans and Native Americans to designing dialogue that facilitates

conversation about enslaved people at the memorial home of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin. One of my deepest professional beliefs is that we need to look backwards – to understand the past – in order to move forward, to create a more just, more compassionate world.

Over the last eighteen months I have found myself visiting museums and memorials in Central

and Eastern Europe that address two great issues of the 20th century: Nazism and Socialism. From Riga, Latvia, to Moscow, Russia, to Berlin, Prague, and of course, throughout Ukraine as my work here, which began in 2009 as a Fulbright Scholar. I've continued to return every year for projects and continually work to deepen my own understandings of Ukraine and its complex history. I am not a scholar of the time period or the region, and in most cases, I did not meet with staff at the museums mentioned below. I came as a visitor, ready to receive whatever message was imparted to visitors. These visits, and the questions they raised, continue to occupy my thoughts and conversations with my museum colleagues.

As I reflected on these experiences, I came to see four key questions that are addressed in these exhibitions and historic sites.

### How did it happen?

Perhaps this is the simplest of exhibition topics, most often addressed in a time line. At the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a chronological timeline in a long hallway sets the stage for the personal stories that follow. It strikes me that clear, well-designed timelines of this sort may be increasingly useful as new generations know the 20th century only as history, not as lived experience. Although limited labels were available in English, I found the Museum of Political History in St. Petersburg to be a revealing overview at the how of the entire Soviet Union's history. Formerly the Museum of the Revolution, the museum's unparalleled collection of documents and objects – everything from tiny film cans used in smuggling out Alexander

Solzhenitsyn's manuscripts to enormous propaganda banners, allowed me, an American, to gain a broader scope of history. I've visited numerous Ukrainian history museums and often wish for a clearer presentation like this, going beyond exhibition platitudes in cases, many still remaining from the Soviet era.

### Who did it happen to?

One half of this, in a way, is the simplest story to tell. The victims of 20th century totalitarianism are millions strong. But I have found in my museum visits that three specific installations stand out for me – not because they are about millions, but more precisely, because they are about individual people and families. At the **Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe** in Berlin, the exhibition under the memorial begins with six striking images, representing the 6 million. At the little-visited (and so perhaps, thankfully

ignored) **House on the Embankment Museum** in Moscow, notebooks full of Xeroxed pages told the stories of those who were once Communism's elite, living in this building, but eventually, for any and all reason, fell afoul of Stalin and disappeared. The scratchy copy of an official photo and an unknown death date made those people real to me. And just this month, in L'viv, a colleague took me to see the small exhibition, **Personality vs. Totalitarianism** at Media Tek, developed by a team for the new, not yet open Museum of Totalitarianism. The exhibit took the life stories of 8 people, still living, and showed us, on simple panels, the entire scope of their lives: growing up, student activism, resistance, imprisonment by the Soviets or Nazis, release, family life, and now life in independent Ukraine.

In each of these exhibitions, the curators or exhibit developers understood that stories are what make us deeply human, best demonstrated at the **Žanis Lipke Memorial**, Riga, Latvia where Lipke himself, a Latvian who sheltered Jews, is shown warts and all – an “eternal dissident.” We are left a bit unsure of his motivation – and that's okay. Few, if any of us could be wholly heroic when we are called upon. We are all a mixed bag of motivations, of ideas, and of actions. (For more about my visits to these museums, please see my blog, The Uncataloged Museum, <http://uncatalogedmuseum.blogspot.com>)

But in most museums, only one half of the story is told. Rarely are we given the opportunity to hear the stories of perpetrators. And after all, they are human too. They have motivations, agency, families... they are not so different from you and me. Why did they participate? How did it affect their personalities during and after? Is change and remorse possible? I have never seen a history museum in Ukraine that addresses any of those issues of the 20th century but exhibitions in both Berlin and Riga helped me look deeper. A fascinating exhibit in Riga, opened last year at the former KGB House, and organized by the **Museum of History and Navigation**, “Stories of People and Power in Ten Objects”, included the suit of the Latvian intellectual, Augustus Kirchenstein) who to the surprise of many, willingly became first prime minister after the Soviet occupation. We are asked to consider his motivation and I left the gallery with more questions than concrete answers, a result which I always hope for in museum exhibitions.

And of course, here in Ukraine, like everywhere, one group's villains may be another group's heroes. I find it fascinating that the museum most willing to approach the trickiness of our collective ideals is not a history museum, but **the National Art Museum**

**of Ukraine** whose recent exhibit on heroes provides visitors with the opportunity to consider and reflect on the meaning of the term hero and the changing nature of that definition.

Although the details and implementation are unclear (and a caveat, my readings on this have been in English translation) the recent adoption of the new laws passed by the Rada seem to suggest the changing nature of historical interpretation and the importance of ongoing scholarship may be at risk as legislation defines how the country should think about some parts of history.

Americans are no strangers to those same thorny issues of ongoing historical interpretation. For example, should we deny that Thomas Jefferson fathered six children with his own slave, Sally Hemings? Despite resistance on many fronts, historians persevered and now, even the website of Monticello, Jefferson's home, says, "Ten years later, Thomas Jefferson Foundation and most historians believe that, years after his wife's death, Thomas Jefferson was the father of the six children of Sally Hemings children mentioned in Jefferson's records, including Beverly, Harriet, Madison, and Eston Hemings." (<http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-brief-account>. Retrieved April 17, 2015) Does that make Jefferson less of an American hero? Perhaps. But I think what it does is illuminate the complex human nature of an individual at a particular historical time. Ukrainian history museums could take up the initiative of the Art Museum and begin to address the complex nature of many of history's actors.

### **Why did it happen?**

At the "Museums and Politics" tri-national ICOM conference in St. Petersburg in 2014, Dr. Jörg Skriebeleit, Director, KZ-Gedenkstätte Flossenbürg/Flossenbürg Memorial, Germany and researcher Ulrike Fritz addressed the shift in narrative for concentration camps as both memorials and museums. They wrote,

Concentration camp memorial sites are multiple sites. They are modern Golgothas, cemeteries, sites of family histories, open-air museums, places of learning, and historical sources – both for the period of the concentration camps themselves and for the following decades of dealing with their historical existence. However, concentration camps have a further and increasingly important function: they are also museums.

Defining them in this way presents the conceptualization of exhibitions with particular challenges. The issue today is not so much one

of providing authentic proof of the horrors that occurred there as of generating a reflexive and discursive presentation of as well as commentary on these horrors. *The great task facing exhibitions at concentration camp memorial sites consists in making history and historical processes decipherable in all their complexity, in naming actors, providing changes in perspective, and facilitating empathy with the victims without superficial moralization.* [Italics added] (Dr. Jörg Skriebeleit and Ulrike Fritz, "Exhibiting Memory Former concentration camps as modern Museums of recent history" Museums and Politics abstract, 2014).

Understanding the why of these events means understanding on so many different levels. To create such an understanding, museums need to exhibit the political, the personal, the large and the small, the real and the unimaginable. Just this month, the United States director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, James B Comey, spoke about why he requires every new FBI agent to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. He said, in part of the reasons for such visits,

Naturally, I want them to learn about abuse of authority on a breathtaking scale. But I want them to confront something more painful and more dangerous: I want them to see humanity and what we are capable of.

I want them to see that, although this slaughter was led by sick and evil people, those sick and evil leaders were joined by, and followed by, people who loved their families, took soup to a sick neighbor, went to church and gave to charity.

Good people helped murder millions. And that's the most frightening lesson of all – that our very humanity made us capable of, even susceptible to, surrendering our individual moral authority to the group, where it can be hijacked by evil. Of being so cowed by those in power. Of convincing ourselves of nearly anything. ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-scariest-lesson-of-the-holocaust/2015/04/16/ffa8e23c-e468-11e4-905f-cc896d379a32\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-scariest-lesson-of-the-holocaust/2015/04/16/ffa8e23c-e468-11e4-905f-cc896d379a32_story.html) Retrieved, April 19, 2014).

Telling the why is not easy. It will never be easy because it seems unimaginable to us. But that difficulty is exactly why museums must try to explain, to help us understand.

### **How can we make sure it never happens again?**

One way we make sure it never happens again is that we ensure that we try to understand all of the above, the how, the why, the who; that we understand that

heroes and villains are human and that it takes human effort to ensure that totalitarianism does not take root, no matter where we live. This requires not merely the display of sad images and the placing of blame, but real civic education – for all generations, for all of us, from politicians to schoolchildren. Around the world, museums have taken leadership roles in this capacity and history museums have the opportunity to do the same in Ukraine. Two international organizations provide multiple tools for such work that can be useful to Ukrainian museums: The International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience [www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org) and the Social Justice Alliance of Museums [www.sjam.org](http://www.sjam.org).

Scholars, scientists, museum directors, and political figures, need to view the past as something that is not fixed – and also not a political tool – but rather history is something that requires ongoing and intensive thinking, in partnership with communities. Such understanding requires the development of real interpretation, exhibition design, and public and school programs focused on dialogue. It requires innovative interpretation that may not be the precise story that a single scientist wishes to tell. It involves talking with our communities about their questions, their fears, their interests, the places they want to

know more. It means really listening to what those communities have to say, coming out of our offices and archives. New temporary labels in permanent exhibitions re-contextualizing objects or creating simple pop-up exhibits that encourage reaction and response are both ways it can happen. Exhibits addressing these issues need skilled facilitators in the galleries, not merely guards who turn on the lights and point you to the next room. It calls for the development of thoughtful school programs that teach a next generation to think critically and to ask tough questions. All of this involves museum workers learning new skills and looking for models and advice from around the world. It also surely involves not waiting until there is funding to do something perfectly. That day is a long way away.

Sometimes I have felt overwhelmed with sadness during these museum visits. There are not places of joy or of beauty, like art museums. But to me, they are vital to democratic societies and so bring a different kind of joy. In the faces of their visitors, I see people longing for deeper understandings, understandings that we, as museum professionals, have the obligation to help create. As Martin Luther King wrote, “We are not makers of history. We are made by history.” We must look backwards to move forward.