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## Projected memory: reflections on one year's work at a memorial museum in Germany, and an initiative that aims to remind us how we remembered

By GIDEON UNKELESS 03/17/14, 8:44 AM

In the summer of 2011, I made a day trip to the Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen memorial museum on the grounds of a former Nazi concentration camp and later Soviet detention center. Like many others, I think, I had wanted to see a former concentration camp for some time for vague, hard-to-articulate feelings. What would I feel while on site? What of the physical grounds remained in place? Which narratives were emphasized and which relegated to the periphery? When I got there, I was struck not only by the space itself—the barbed wire, crumbling parts of an old wall, the stone fields marking out where each of the 68 barracks once stood, and the grey overcast sky that seemed a permanent museum fixture—but by the way different visitors apparently interacted with the memorial. A couple of students joked around in between updating their Facebook pages with pictures taken in front of the “Arbeit macht Frei” gate leading into the main prisoner section at Sachsenhausen. I noticed some Jewish visitors placing stones atop bench-like granite slabs (poorly marked as mass graves), and overheard others fervently asking about every detail of the Nazi mass-shooting campaign that occurred in 1941. At some point, I was overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all: the tourists ambling around like sleepwalkers with audio-guides attached to their ears, a tour guide gesticulating wildly, the stagey re-creation of parts of former barracks, and the stillness of the grounds themselves, the dumb walls, stones, doors, and earth, each neutral and utterly unknowing. I broke for the museum archive and library building to sit down and read a book. During the short hour that passed, I became increasingly conscious that language also has an architecture, and that words arranged can be as valid and lasting a monument as statues and graves. I wrote about language as a monument, and other thoughts on Sachsenhausen, [here previously](#).

One summer later, after an intervening year at home in New York, I found myself on a local S-Bahn from my Berlin apartment to Oranienburg, the last stop on the line and a small town with a Nazi-era reputation of being “the town of the SS.” I had signed up for a year-long internship at Sachsenhausen. I didn't know much German, knew still less about exactly what kind of work I'd be engaged in, but the gig came with a small monthly check and an apartment in the city, and the placement offered the bizarre opportunity to spend time where so much havoc was wrought. During the course of the year I learned a bit of German and delved into books, photos, and artifacts. I guided numerous tour groups and perfected my “two-hour *Spiel*,” which always felt simultaneously like too much information and never enough. Even on “good” tours I never quite felt comfortable with the performative aspect of



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being a tour guide and recounting the horrible history of the place. How does one articulate “starvation?” What gestures would one use to demonstrate a shot to the nape of the neck?

One day a week, I visited a 93-year-old man, Jack Plapler, who survived Sachsenhausen (and numerous other camps) through his involvement in a top-secret counterfeiters' unit that the Nazis organized at Sachsenhausen in an attempt to destabilize England's wartime economy by flooding it with false bank notes. Our weekly meetings consisted of tea and stale cookies, impromptu singing performances (him), gardening (me), and sometimes recorded interviews. I learned that a life can be utterly ruined but still resilient, and I sensed how extreme one's circumstances would have to be for someone to feel *distinguished*, in a perverted sense of the word, by the particulars of one's tragedy. A man's imprisonment in the twentieth century's most notorious prison system had become a kind of calling card to the outside world. I also discovered how memory—even (and possibly especially) the memories of an elderly gentleman, a “primary source,” as it's described to history students with all its connotations of heft and incontrovertibility—can become fragmentary and distorted, as if grafted together by the mind's untraceable intertwining of fact, fiction, and projection.

It was my weekly tea-time meetings with Herr Plapler and my thoughts thereafter, combined with my everyday work with diverse visitors to the memorial—different in topical knowledge, geography, personal connection—that provided the intellectual substance to offset the daily exposure to a wrenchingly sad topic. Creating the blithely recommended “professional distance” from genocide was not something acceptable to me. I acknowledge that a year's time is nothing compared to that of colleagues who were in their forty-first year at the memorial, but we each have our own limits and depths of involvement, and I probably overextended mine. I worked with a group of American medical professionals, who were interested in the pseudo-scientific experiments carried out at Sachsenhausen. A leader of a Chabad group from Connecticut was something of an emotional bully, aggressively airing his political views and emotional reactions, while leaving little space for his group to find their individual points of access. But perhaps most poignant were my common interactions with groups of Dutch and Scandinavian students whose English language skills were good enough to listen, but who often reverted to their native tongues when asking and answering questions. It was these 17- to 19-year-olds who, responding to a question about the prisoner population breakdown at Sachsenhausen with a confidence that German students often lacked, reminded me that one of the most pernicious legacies of the Nazis was to couple the word “Jew” and “camp” together in languages the world over, and that part of what goes on at sites like Sachsenhausen is a non-Jewish European community learning about “Jews,” almost exclusively in the context of the Nazi persecution. Although Sachsenhausen's first and largest prisoner group were not Jews, in fact, it is hard to deny the influence that language plays on the way we learn about and engage with these places. The nearly half-million visitors who come each year to Sachsenhausen come, in my opinion, because of the site's proximity to Berlin (a dynamic European capital city), and because of the notoriety of the word “Auschwitz.” This is despite the museum's fevered attempts to impress upon visitors the distinction between “work camps” like Sachsenhausen and “death camps” like Auschwitz and Sobibor. Perhaps it is not so different from American school children learning about Native Americans in the context of Thanksgiving and bow-and-arrow hunting techniques. Both groups—Jews and Native Americans—are confined, through lack of language, to one dimension in a historical context.

From fragments of my post-tour conversations with individuals, I noticed that people were of course thinking and feeling, but that they needed a private space away from others to

grapple with their partially formed and sensitive reactions. In other words, I noticed a need to discuss not only *what happened here*, but also *what happens to me when I'm here*.

And so it was language and our tinkering with words to get closer to an incomprehensible event that drove me to conceive of a project that would enable us to put words back into the void that trauma leaves behind, back into that “calamitous depth,” as Jean Améry, Auschwitz survivor and uncompromising writer of searing brilliance, called it. **Projected Memory**—first installed at Sachsenhausen in 2013—is an initiative meant to enable and encourage visitors to reflect on the meaning of their visits to memorials and museums by recording their thoughts and feelings in a semi-private, interactive audio/video booth. Such a booth may have helped, for example, an Argentinian school teacher working in Amsterdam who burst into tears during the tour and afterward told me that while none of her relatives had died at Sachsenhausen, her time on the grounds had overwhelmed her in a way she had not anticipated, and further that she had not yet revealed to any of her students the fact that she is Jewish. Had the Projected Memory feedback booth been available then, and had she felt comfortable enough to share her thoughts with others besides me, she might have been able to gather herself before returning to her students, and many would have appreciated her comments. Aside from contributing a message for research or sharing it with others, the booth is also an option for one who simply wants to articulate thoughts exclusively for personal relief, which might have been the case with my own mother, who visited me a couple months into my year in Berlin, but, being the daughter of German Jews who were bullied out of their home country in the mid-1930s, she was not able to stay on site long enough for me to show and tell her all the things I had hoped to. Had she had a space in which to sit and reflect a bit—or even to ramble on incoherently venting sadness, resentment, and continued incomprehension—perhaps we would have been able to spend more time together there.

The booth is now an official and ongoing part of the Sachsenhausen memorial. Projected Memory feedback installations offer each visitor two saving settings: Public and Research Only. Visitors who simply want to vent their feelings can record a message and elect not to save it. During the three-month pilot phase, visitors left over 500 messages, and addressed a range of topics, including the physical impressiveness of the site, and the ambiguity of being both tied by religion to a part of the history the memorial represents and removed from the experience due to the lengthy passage of time. At a later stage, a selection of visitor messages saved under the “Public” setting will be returned to the booth so that visitors can watch and listen to messages left by others, either before or after leaving new ones of their own. And the messages, left by visitors themselves in real-time response to an experience and perhaps in response to other visitor messages, will become a kind of organic and collaborative “exhibit” where the collected impressions of visitors themselves become an ongoing part of the museum or exhibition space, and in that sense a collective memorial. Particular museums may want built into the user interface targeted questions that will enable the institution itself to get a better grasp of the impact it is (or is not) making on its visitors.

### **A “future history” archive**

The Projected Memory project will also include an online archive of visitor impressions which, over time, should enhance our understanding of the various ways successive generations connect to historically traumatic sites and events. According to the visitor's choice (Public or Research Only), each message will be archived in Projected Memory's

central library of visitor impressions from around the world. The aim is to organize, tag, and make available for research visitor messages that might help us consider the way we think, speak, feel about, and otherwise respond to catastrophe. Like other archives, the Projected Memory archive will become a platform for future study, not an ideology pushing a particular perspective. A researcher will be able to compare reactions of self-identified American Jews who visit memorials with the experiences of young German students. And what about those groups of students I often heard complaining of a perceived drop in temperature once on the other side of the prisoner gates? Did they really feel colder, or was it tied up in the gravitas of the place? How many others feel the same thing; how many times and in how many languages do visitors leave a message to the effect of "Never Again," and what does that really mean?

During my year at Sachsenhausen, I thought a lot about the future of memorials such as the one I had come to know intimately. Which way will the funding of these sites trend when the events themselves recede deeper into history? As Holocaust survivors and witnesses die, we will become directly reliant on secondary witnesses and sources, such as passed-down family histories, museum exhibits, and art and literature. Our own interpretation of these sources will come to shape the ways in which we remember these events, and, at the same time, should reveal much about their emotional, intellectual, and educational impact on us. What do we want from these places? How do we grieve and how do memorials facilitate this species-wide ritual? In the future, we will be able to look back on *how* we remembered and what we took away from our experiences on site. Will memorial exhibits continue to resemble someone's Ph.D. simplified and plastered on the walls, overwhelming visitors with dates, numbers, and "hard facts"? Will new avenues of interpretation open up, making use of literature and art on site or nearby to effect intuitive responses from visitors without disrespecting the history of the grounds? And how will the experiences and reactions of visitors to places like Sachsenhausen and other memorials influence memory culture, government policy, and architects charged with forming a national narrative out of concrete and rebar? Would anyone think of building a memorial in the Darfur desert? By creating a platform for people to think deeply and share their words with others, we will learn more about the ways we contemplate violence. It's the pursuit of thinking that we are after, for with words and thought, we might make a different kind of memorial to human rights—empathy and active citizenship. Society as a collective—and not drones or isolated covert missions—holds the real power to make conditions for violence on the scale of the twentieth century unacceptable for future generations, and Projected Memory's aim is to challenge ourselves to make more meaning of our visits to memorial sites. After all, it was another Jewish Austrian writer, Karl Kraus, who described the rise of the Nazis and the fragile relationship between language, thought, and humanity when he wrote that "the word fell into a sleep when that world awoke."

*Gideon Unkeless founded Projected Memory after his year-long internship at the Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen. He is also working on a collection of essays recounting his time in Berlin, his work at the memorial, and his time spent with a 93-year-old camp survivor and friend. For more about Projected Memory, visit [www.projectedmemory.org](http://www.projectedmemory.org).*

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