

Gusen: Oblivion, Memory and the Future

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Abstract

The text is an abridged and edited version of a paper which was presented together with photographic materials at the international scientific conference entitled "Killing Intellectuals. European Intellectual Elites under German Occupation, 1939-1945", held on 8-9 May 2017 in Vienna and accompanied by commemorative events organized in Gusen on 7 May 2017. It presents issues concerning the commemoration of the victims of the concentration camp of Mauthausen-Gusen - a location infamous even by the standards of the Second World War - and the proposal to establish a Henryk Sławik European Center of Education in Gusen.

In the autumn of 2016 Professor Magdalena Gawin, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, turned to the International Auschwitz Council at the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland with a request for expert support in matters concerning the former concentration camp of Gusen. The International Auschwitz Council is an independent body comprising more than 20 persons from all over the world, who represent the most important institutions and circles engaged in perpetuating Holocaust memory and commemorating the victims of other major atrocities committed during the Second World War. Its members come from various nations and include former prisoners of the camp, scholars, museologists, social activists, as well as officials of Jewish communes and Christian Churches. In the discharge of its duties, the Council is guided by the need to protect its independence and credibility, and has thereby gained and consolidated the international prestige and authority required to settle many difficult problems concerning not only the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, but also other former German Nazi concentration and extermination camps located within the present-day borders of Poland.

The initiative authored by Minister Gawin allowed us to familiarize ourselves in detail with issues pertaining to the present condition of the Gusen camp complex, and we soon decided to enter into cooperation with the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, at the time headed by Dariusz Pawłoś. This body, which enjoys considerable standing both in Poland and abroad, was piloting a project – in many ways groundbreaking – for a new memorial on the grounds of the former German extermination camp in Sobibór. Following introductory discussions, we elected to pool our experience and draw up a proposal for what could be established in Gusen in the future in order to provide the site with a worthy form of commemoration and ensure that it played a proper role in shaping memory.

For after all, if we take into consideration the number of victims, this is the largest crime scene in contemporary Austria. Further, it was the sole category three – that is, the most severe – concentration camp in the whole Third Reich. By way of comparison, even KL Auschwitz, as regards its concentrative function, was only a category two camp. In turn, in the postwar era a great many groups and communities – by no means only in Poland – came to view Gusen as a symbol of the destruction and obliteration of memory. If you enter the name of this former camp in Google, you will be immediately directed to photographs showing how – for example – the old camp gateway, where the ss administrative echelon was located and in the cellars of which prisoners were tortured, has been turned into an exclusive private villa. Whether we like it or not, we should all be aware of this sorry development. And we must confront the issue.

Gusen presents a challenge for both Austrians and Poles, and indeed for European society as a whole, since it is the place of death and suffering of nearly 30 nationalities. It is not by chance that I mentioned Poles, who accounted for the majority of victims; indeed, even the ss men called Gusen

“the extermination camp for the Polish intelligentsia”. In consequence, Poland feels particularly obligated to care for the cultivation of memory at this site – just as our Jewish friends care for Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Chełmno on the River Ner. And just as the Romani and the Sinti, with whom the International Auschwitz Council has been cooperating closely for a great many years, perpetuate the memory of their kinfolk in Auschwitz-Birkenau – the largest cemetery in their history. But the attention shown by Poland to preserving the present material condition and securing the future of Gusen – and this fact I would like to emphasize – is in no way an attempt at the Polonization or nationalization of this place of memory, although unfortunately such opinions, unfair and completely unjustified, have reached us.

Each project implemented at this location must treat all the victims with the utmost respect, irrespective of their nationality or religion. And indeed, the integrity of Polish intentions is best proved by the abovementioned initiative of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which calls for inviting the International Auschwitz Council – a body that invariably acts in the name of truth to perpetuate the memory of all victims, without consideration of any political interests – to participate in numerous expert tasks.

When thinking about the future of the place of memory in Gusen, we should take one other aspect into consideration: namely, that during the War the camp functioned as a gigantic quasi-industrial concern, with scores of businesses making use of the slave labor of inmates. Many of these companies exist to the present day, although some under different names. That would be all as regards the conclusions which may be drawn from the wartime and postwar history of Gusen.

The second important reference point for those who want to create a worthy memorial in Gusen is the testament of former prisoners. I think that at this point we should cite a short, shocking and very to-the-point story.

In May 1945, Stanisław Nogaj, a Polish inmate of Gusen, a writer and journalist, decided to return home. On foot. No more than 11 kilometers from the camp, he stopped at the house of a blacksmith, who received him warmly and gave him food and drink. The man admitted that he knew full well what went on in that terrible place... Mauthausen. But he had never heard of the camp in Gusen. Not once.

In his memoirs, which he proceeded to write down soon after the end of hostilities, Nogaj observed that he found it nearly impossible to believe the man’s words. During the long years spent in incarceration he had come to be convinced that the whole world knew about Gusen. That this was a place as well-known as Dachau. And yet so near the camp he met a local resident who had never heard of Gusen.

While considering the event as symbolic, we should note that its meaning remains current. For decades, the most significant efforts at saving the memory of Gusen were undertaken by former prisoners themselves. But while a museum and a place of memory were established in Mauthausen,

the former Gusen complex became the location for an estate of single-family houses; incidentally, the layout of its streets is modeled after that of the camp. Acting on their own initiative, former inmates collected funds and purchased three allotments so as to save the crematorium, itself left standing by a miracle. And it was the ex-prisoners who funded the first Memorial, located amongst the detached houses, in the 1960s. The Austrian Ministry of Internal Affairs took custody of the site only in 1997.

Inmates of the facility, whose numbers dwindle by the day, view two issues as being of fundamental importance. Firstly: to preserve every possible trace of the suffering of thousands of people, to save their history from oblivion. Because for former inmates oblivion is like a second death, or even a death worse than the one they would have suffered in the camp. And secondly: it is the dream of ex-prisoners that, when they are no more, and most unfortunately this moment is inescapable, Gusen becomes a focal point for the shaping of the young generations, so that similar tragedies are never repeated.

The third point of reference in our deliberations on the future of the place of memory in Gusen, additional to the historical dimension and the testament of former inmates, are the guidelines of international experts. Namely, in April 2017 leading specialists from UNESCO, the International Auschwitz Council, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and other institutions of international stature held a meeting in Wannsee, a location of equally symbolic importance. The conference was organized with the support of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and also with the significant participation of the Witold Pilecki Center for Totalitarian Studies (currently the Pilecki Institute). Its most important result was the unanimous adoption of recommendations for all places of memory in Europe.

These guidelines have come to be known as the three golden rules of UNESCO. The first is that of authenticity. We must save the ruins, the former camp buildings, the artifacts, archives – all things materially tangible – at any cost. The importance of these physical remains grows with the passage of time, as following the demise of the last eye-witnesses objects alone will remain as the direct point of connection with historical events. The second rule of UNESCO concerns retaining the integrity of archives, artifacts and locations, while the third calls for the development of international cooperation at places of memory. Obviously, the states within the borders of which these places of memory lie are first obligated to ensure their maintenance, because without them we would cease to be able to comprehend contemporary Europe. They remain as a sign of the suffering and death of representatives of many nations, and for this reason international dialog must be viewed as a *sine qua non* – particularly as regards such delicate matters as, for example, conducting archaeological research.

Now let us move on to the reality of Gusen. It is possible to purchase three historical allotments from private owners – provided that we want to

protect the authenticity of this location in accordance with UNESCO principles. The first of the sites contains a priceless relic: the *Schottersilo*, the stone crushing mill, which was operated by slave labor. Prisoners worked without facemasks, and soon the dust would clog their lungs. Many died after no more than a few weeks. Presently the mill is a ruin, but it continues to be a moving testament to the tragedy of decades past. During our discussions with the local community someone broached the idea that the tower of the *Schottersilo* could be used as an observation point for visitors. Looking from above, they would see the former camp's grounds in all their magnitude. Today, however, it is of greatest urgency to save the mill from collapsing.

The second allotment has even more importance, for we have found out that the original retaining wall of the camp, a few meters high, which was made from granite blocks by the prisoners themselves, has survived there more or less intact, buried under the ground. There is no doubt that this is an object of exceptional historical import. In Gusen, we do not need to announce any international competitions for an "artistic" monument. This original wall – a veritable wailing wall – is shocking enough in itself. And if it is uncovered in its entirety, we will come face to face with one of the most touching memorials to the martyrdom of humankind in Europe. But this is not all, for everything seems to indicate that the roll-call square, paved with granite flagstones by the prisoners, has also survived deep under the earth. This would be the only roll-call square of any former concentration camp surviving with its original surface intact. The stones are soaked, literally, with the sweat and blood of the inmates. Let me repeat: what other memorial do we require in Gusen? None, for authentic relics speak for themselves with a power far greater than any works of art or words uttered by man.

The third allotment contains two historical SS barracks. But if no concerted plan of conservation is implemented in the near future, then in the next few or dozen or so years these structures will fall to pieces and cease to exist. In any case, the allotment is of a sizable area and will be suitable for future reuse.

The immediate purchase of these three sites and saving the relics of the camp is the absolute minimum. If we do not do this, then we shall be guilty of disrespect to the testament of former prisoners.

It is also worth noting in the present context – and this constitutes yet another important point of reference – that our great ally in the struggle for the worthy commemoration of Gusen is the local community. Without the support of local residents, the creation of any memorial or educational center would be pointless. We would travel there two or at most three times a year. But the local community lives there 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We are fortunate in that the citizens of Gusen and neighboring communes want to cooperate, and readily come forward with their own initiatives and novel, inspiring ideas. Significantly, the Gusen Memorial Committee (a public body) has been functioning for over 30 years. It groups people deserving of the most prestigious awards, who work on a voluntary basis

– frequently facing hindrances and unwillingness – to protect the memory of Gusen without expecting any remuneration or reward for their efforts. We give them our thanks, because without such people nothing would have ever been possible. Further, the neighboring communes have established a so-called Region of Awareness in order to provide fitting care for local places of memory. Together with Dariusz Pawłoś, I listened to their representatives for more than three hours, and we were both delighted with their sensitivity, knowledge and ideas. Opinions gathered among residents give us a very clear hint as to what should be the focus of the Gusen Memorial: education, the young generations, the future, tolerance, the role of a location inextricably linked with the local community.

During our visit to Austria we had yet another important discussion, this time at the Mauthausen Memorial. For there is no possibility of any initiative undertaken in Gusen competing with or duplicating the tasks that are carried out so successfully at Mauthausen. I would like to stress this with the utmost firmness and conviction: such rivalry would have no sense whatsoever. Both sites must cooperate closely and supplement each other, never compete, particularly as the educators at Mauthausen perform their work with a high level of professionalism. However, they face a problem typical for many places of memory in Europe, namely that the majority of visitors are school children on short trips lasting no more than a few hours. But the future belongs primarily to so-called study groups, which are made up of young people who are prepared to stay over for even a few days in order to explore the subject in greater depth. And it is for such groups that we must develop a special offering.

For this reason, we would like to put forward a proposal for the establishment of the Henryk Sławik International Center of Education in Gusen. We are not concerned here with the erection of a new building, for it will be absolutely sufficient if we properly utilize the existing infrastructure. Our initiative has both a special symbolic and practical dimension.

In Gusen, the Nazis wanted to obliterate the European – not only the Polish – elites. Whereas we would like this place of memory to function as a location for shaping contemporary and future generations European intelligentsia. We want to endow Gusen with a new meaning, completely opposite to the designs of the perpetrators. The person of the intended patron – a social activist who was murdered in the camp and became a hero of the Polish, Jewish and Hungarian nations, years later recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations – clearly indicates that our efforts have an international reach. Apart from the typical school exchange programs involving different countries, we have planned regular courses for European university students from specific fields of study, the points of departure for which would be selected aspects of the history of Gusen. Initial financing could be obtained under the Erasmus+ program for the so-called networking of educational facilities, while at a later date we could apply for coverage under a special long-term program approved directly

by the European Commission. The following are but two examples of classes: a Simon Wiesenthal study course for students of law, which would be devoted to issues concerning the formulation and practice of human rights, and one named after Aldo Carpi, the Italian painter and author of the famous *Diario di Gusen*, which would be addressed to students of painting and sculpture. It is worth reiterating that the Center would not require building investments or the establishment of an administrative institutional structure, for its focus would be on educational work carried on utilizing the facilities already in place in the township of Gusen. But the first task – of overriding urgency and paramount importance – remains unaltered: to purchase the three allotments and save the priceless relics of the former camp.