AEJM Conference: “Where We Are: Site, Space and Context” (16.11.2013, Munich)

Dr. Jörg Skriebeleit

What Remains: A Concentration Camp, a Synagogue and Their Surroundings

Diagnosis 1: The Theatre of Memory

More than 15 years ago, a short book by the American sociologist Michal Bodemann was published under what was then the decidedly provocative title “Gedächtnistheater” – or “Theatre of Memory.”*(In Bodemann’s words,)* “When I speak of a culture, or more precisely an epidemic of commemoration in Germany, I am referring particularly to the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, which took place in November 1988.” [1]

Several days ago, we marked the 75th anniversary of Reichskristallnacht – the pogrom initiated and directed by the National Socialist regime against the Jewish population of Germany. The anniversary was observed with tens of thousands of memorial events, readings, and political and historical commemorations across Germany – with notably fewer events taking place in Austria. In terms of the sheer number of commemorations, the “theatre of memory” – to echo Bodemann’s phrasing – surrounding the November pogroms continues unabated.

Diagnosis II: “Topolatry”

Now to turn to a second diagnostic intervention, also dating from the previous century. In 1987, the writer Karl Markus Michel published a widely read polemic in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper in which he criticized the veritable yearning for material sites of memories, authentic memorials, and ruins. *(In Michel’s words,)* “A wave of commemoration is overtaking our country. Nearly everything is liable to become a memorial, especially if it

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1 Michal Bodemann, Gedächtnistheater. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung, Berlin 1996, S.82.

2 Karl Markus Michel, Die Magie des Ortes. Über den Wunsch nach authentischen Gedenkstätten und die

has been largely ignored until now, or if it is a *Schandfleck* – a site tainted by history. The only criterion is that the site must be a place that can be toured.”[2] Writing what is now already 25 years ago, Michel cited the example of Frankfurt’s Börne square to criticize the trend toward material transfiguration and preservation of the past, which he derided as a form of topolatry, or the cult and worship of places. “It is true that we should not preserve only the sentimental relics of progress. There is, of course, also good reason to recover the more disreputable sites of barbarism from the rubble of memory. But what is less reasonable is the reduction of our awareness to places in which meaning is presumed to reside – a meaning that is served up to us by evangelical itinerants as an ersatz-religion, or as a form of myth by the anointed arbiters of our age. Should this reductionism succeed, we will have achieved the end of history – the very history in whose name these memorial tours are held.”[3]

I have chosen these two quotes and the critiques which they pose in order demonstrate that critical assessments of our practices of memory – which are also contemporary practices – are anything but new.

I will draw on two examples – first a concentration camp and second a Jewish rural community – to accompany you on cultural, historical and memorial *tour d’horizon* of the topic “Site and Space in the Context of National Socialist Crimes.” Or, in another formulation: “*What remains of the concentration camp in Flossenbürg and the Jewish community in Floss?”* And – where do we stand today?

Two Sites: Floss and Flossenbürg

Stefan Schwarz was for many years the liaison for cemeteries of the Bavarian Association of Jewish Communities. Like the rest of the staff at the Bavarian Landesverband, Schwarz was a survivor of the Shoah. In the early 1970s, he wrote a book about Jewish life in Bavaria, in

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2 Karl Markus Michel, Die Magie des Ortes. Über den Wunsch nach authentischen Gedenkstätten und die Liebe zu Ruinen, in: Zeit vom 11.9.1987.

3 Ebenda.

which both the town of Floss, and the Flossenbürg Concentration camp, receive prominent mention:

> This peculiar place, Floss, not far from the former Flossenbürg Concentration Camp … the peculiar history of the former Jewish community at Markt Floss, and the cemetery, more than 350 years old, situated on the road to Flossenbürg – back in 1945, the victims of that regime of terror were herded along this road toward the lions’ den that was Flossenbürg, among them another starving and skeletal victim, the author of this book.[4]

Driving toward Flossenbürg from the west we arrive at the last exit before we reach our goal. Here we see a cemetery, difficult to overlook – the old Jewish cemetery of Floss.

Jewish Cemetery Floss, 2013

[4] Stefan Schwarz: Die Synagoge in Floss (Oberpfalz), in: Hugo Gold (Hrsg.), Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden, Jg. 1973, S.113.

Many who drive along this street pause to wonder about the history of this Jewish cemetery and how it could still exist today, situated not far from what was once a concentration camp. During their visit to the Flossenbürg Memorial, many visitors learn – in passing – that the neighbouring municipality was home to a Jewish community, which existed there from the Middle Ages until the mid-twentieth century.[5] The Nazi pogroms and the deportation of the final Jewish families to the Theresienstadt ghetto in September 1942 spelled the brutal end to Jewish life in Floss. Today, only the cemetery and the buildings at the so-called *Judenberg* – which include some residential buildings and a former synagogue, testify to the Jewish heritage of this small market town.[6]

Judenberg Floss, 2013

5 Zur jüdischen Gemeinde in Floß vgl. Renate Höpfinger, Die Judengemeinde von Floß 1684 - 1942, Kallmünz 1993.

6 Zur grundsätzlichen Frage des Erhalts zahlreicher jüdischer Friedhöfe während der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft vgl. Andreas Wirsching, Jüdische Friedhöfe in Deutschland 1933-1957, in: Vierteljahrsheft für Zeitgeschichte, 50 (2002), Heft 1, S.1-40.

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In accompaniment to the exodus of the Jewish community of Floss, in 1938 the SS began construction on their fourth concentration camp, in the neighbouring municipality of Flossenbürg. However, until summer 1944, Jews constituted only a very small percentage of the prisoners held at Flossenbürg. This situation changed drastically in August 1944, when thousands of Jewish men and women, some still in their teens, were deported from across Europe to the main camp at Flossenbürg, or to one of its sub camps. By the time Flossenbürg was liberated in April 1945, a total of 22,000 Jewish inmates were detained in the camp complex. During the final year of the war, the Jewish inmates formed the largest group of prisoners detained at Flossenbürg.

Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, March 23, 1945

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Despite the spatial proximity of the exodus of the Jewish community of Floss and the crimes committed at the Flossenbürg concentration camp, these two historical events operated largely independently of one another. Nonetheless, in terms of their historical reception and commemoration, the former Flossenbürg concentration camp and the former Jewish community of Floss display remarkable parallels, which also correspond perfectly to the topic of this conference – namely *site, space and context*.

1. The Crime Scene – Crimes Committed and Honouring the Dead

When troops from the Third US Army discovered the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 23, 1945, they had few examples for how the crimes committed there could be represented or remembered. Providing the dead with a respectful burial was an initial, spontaneous response meant to honour and pay tribute to the concentration camp inmates, who had been stripped of their individuality, their names, their basic human dignity and their lives. In essence, the first form of memorialization at the Flossenbürg concentration camp was the commemoration of the dead – such as at other campsites.

The liberated concentration camp inmates had very similar impulses. For example, in August 1946 the Jewish community of Tirschenreuth organized a honourable reburial of the bodies of 39 Jewish victims of a death march from Buchenwald to Flossenbürg, which had been discovered in a mass grave located in a small village north of Flossenbürg. As you are all aware, many Jewish survivors of the concentration camps joined together to create new Jewish communities in locations across Bavaria. These new post-war Jewish communities were generally of short duration, and were dissolved when their members emigrated to Palestine, the United States, or other countries. In the region surrounding Flossenbürg and Floss, such communities were created in Weiden, Tirschenreuth, and elsewhere. This short-lived Jewish community in Tirschenreuth carried out a burial ceremony for the concentration camp victims at the Jewish cemetery in Floss. These were the final burials carried out on the site.

Memorial for death march victims at the Jewish Cemetery Floss, 2013

Nonetheless, the differences between Floss and Flossenbürg are clearly apparent. The burial of the bodies found at the concentration camp was not only a pious restoration of honour, but also punitive and pedagogical measure. The American authorities ordered the honourable burial of the concentration camp victims to take place in the middle of the town of Flossenbürg – and not on campgrounds. The local population was required to observe and participate as a way of confronting them with the horrors, which had taken place.

Burial of concentration camp victims in Flossenbürg, May 3, 1945

The burial of the victims of the death march in the Jewish cemetery in Floss, by contrast, was carried out by members of their religious community who had also suffered as inmates of the concentration camps. This burial ceremony thus had an entirely different purpose. It was a “Halachic reclamation” carried out by the survivors of the Shoah, who had been temporarily stranded in the area. It also marks the transition to a new phase, which I will designate as follows:

2. Site and Symbol – (Later Use and Memory)

At this point in time, the liberators and former inmates did not ascribe a particular commemorative value to the campgrounds. One exception was the crematorium, which served as a burial monument. Camp barracks were ubiquitous structures during the war and were thus seen from a purely pragmatic perspective. In spring 1946, a camp used to house DPs was established on the former concentration camp grounds. These were mainly **non-Jewish Poles**, who had no personal connection to the fate of the former inmates of Flossenbürg.

Polish DP-Camp Flossenbürg, 1946

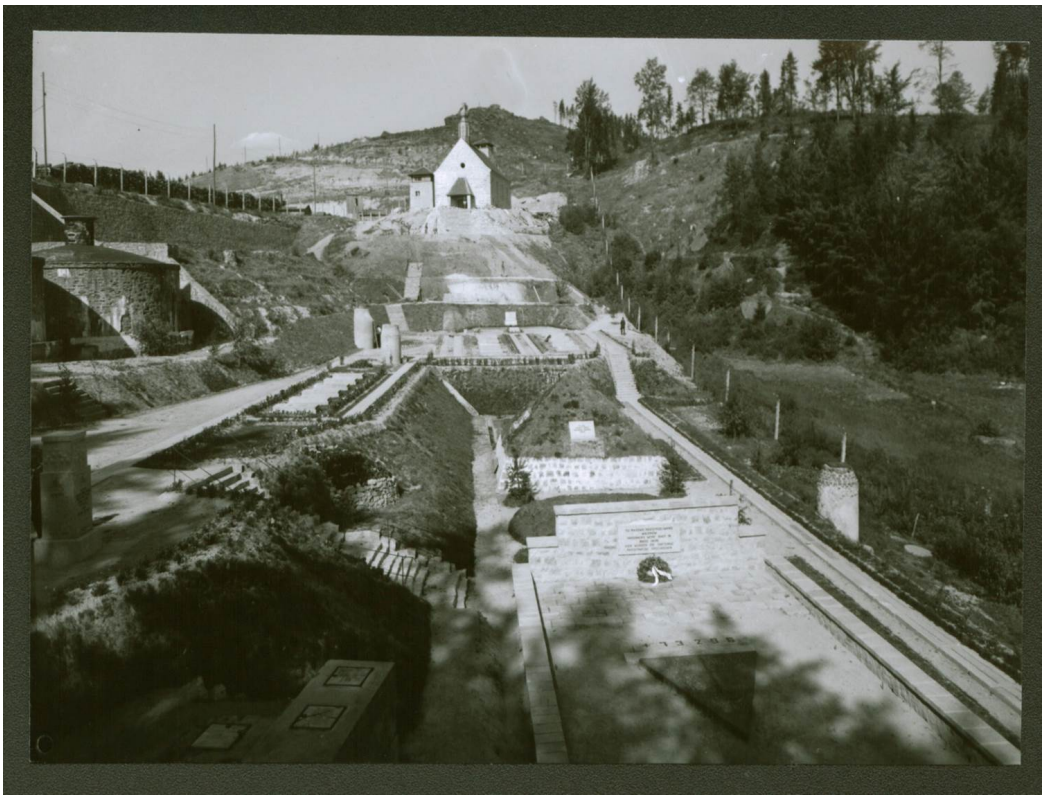
Why do I emphasize this point?

As soon as the residents of the DP camp realized they were living in the barracks of a former concentration camp, they established an initiative to build a memorial chapel on the site, and founded a memorial committee. During 1946 and 1947, the committee established a memorial landscape in a hollow area of land outside the actual campgrounds. This memorial landscape consisted of three separate parts:

1. The crematorium, which served as a historical reference point and a “sacred” site of burial
2. The area in which the SS carried out shootings, which was configured as zone of honour and remembrance of the dead
3. The newly constructed chapel, which linked both elements with one another in a meaningful way.

Structurally, the memorial landscape was conceived along the lines of the Stations of the Cross.

Memorial landscape Flossenbürg, view from the chapel to the crematorium, 1947



Memorial landscape Flossenbürg, view from the crematorium to the chapel, 1947

With the dedication of the chapel and the memorial complex on Whit Sunday in 1947, Flossenbürg became one of the first European memorials to be established on the site of a former concentration camp – although the actual campgrounds were not a part of the memorial conception.

Even though many Jewish survivors were living in the area around Flossenbürg during the immediate post-war years, they were not asked to join the Polish memorial committee. It was not until the intervention by US military rabbis that the committee also agreed to establish a memorial marker to the Jewish victims of Flossenbürg.

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Jewish memorial marker at the Memorial landscape Flossenbürg, 2013

For Jewish concentration camp survivors, the memorial at Flossenbürg was not a site of mourning and self-representation; rather, they created their own site of memory at the cemetery in Floss.

3. Site and Absence

When the DP camp was closed in October 1947, the memorial committee dissolved. By that time, the Jewish DPs active in Floss had also left the region. The only communities of remembrance working to memorialize the Flossenbürg concentration camp which had existed until that point were dissolved, disappearing in the maelstrom of repatriation.

After the dissolution of the Flossenbürg DP camp, and the handover of the former concentration camp grounds to the Bavarian agency in charge of administering property and assets, a number of different parties registered their interest in the former campgrounds. The ruins and remains of the concentration camp became assets available for disposal – much like the abandoned homes of the former Jewish residents of Floss.

Former concentration camp grounds, around 1955 (left side the memorial with the chapel)

The **absence of people directly affected and with a personal stake in the sites** – meaning former inmates of the Flossenbürg concentration camp and Jewish residents in the community of Floss – led to an entirely different attributions of meaning to the site, and to

different forms of “topolatry”, to return to the phrase employed by Karl Markus Gauss. The concentration camp grounds were gradually reclaimed as an infrastructural resource for the post-war economic development of the town of Flossenbürg. In the process the campgrounds were re-occupied. The camp’s old roll call grounds and the surrounding buildings were put to industrial use.

Private homes on the former concentration camp grounds, 1961

A similar process of repurposing and reoccupying sites and buildings also took place in Floss. Beginning in 1938, the town’s Christian residents had systematically assumed ownership of the residential buildings where Jews had lived. Like much of the Flossenbürg camp, after 1945 the synagogue in Floss was put to industrial use. In Floss, a shoemaker took over the site, while in Flossenbürg it was a Sudeten German wooden toy manufacturer.

However, even in those locations where the state actively carried out (or had to be carried out) a program of “memory and commemoration” – this resulted in a deliberate **absence of history**, or at least in the deliberate illegibility of that history. In the late 1950s, for example, the existing Flossenbürg memorial was granted a commission to expand the site with a new cemetery. However, the programmatic goal of the design concept read as follows:

> To create a dignified and peaceful complex, we intend to develop an area that … will be incorporated directly into the landscape. … Survivors, bereaved families and visitors should find a peaceful and nonviolent place, which has been planned with attention and discretion and maintained with great care that will help ease the memories of the past.[7]

In order to ease the memories of the past, the remaining buildings of the concentration camp were demolished, and a memorial grove containing iron crosses as grave markers, similar to a war cemetery, was established at the site. This design mirrored what was the prevailing impulse in West Germany at the time – when victims of the concentration camps were remembered within universal memorials to the victims of war – or not remembered at all.

The de-emphasis of the remains of the camp and the park-like design of the Concentration Camp Cemetery and Memorial served to mitigate the events of the past. The dead were honoured with a cemetery, but the historical circumstances of their violent death were almost literally silenced and erased.

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7 Erläuterung des Gartendirektors Bauer zum Ehrenfriedhof Flossenbürg vom 28. August 1956, Archiv der Gedenkstätte Flossenbürg, Schlösserverwaltung Nymphenburg, Flossenbürg 6/1, Neugestaltung 1953-55.

New cemetery of honour in Flossenbürg, 1958

4. Rediscovering the Sites

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the historical remains began to assume new importance at Flossenbürg. This shift was due to the government’s plan to demolish the former camp jail – the site where Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Wilhelm Canaris had been killed. As a result, the site witnessed the first public criticism of the use to which it was being put – in this instance, criticisms by the Protestant Church.

Demolition of the former camp prison, 1964

During that same period in Floss, Stefan Schwarz, and the liaison for cemeteries of the Bavarian Association of Jewish Communities, arranged for the association to purchase the former synagogue building, which was to be renovated and converted into a memorial.

The rediscovery of the two sites – the sites of terror and loss – thus took place at a similar time and on the basis of similar motivations, and were carried out by similar actors – meaning private, non-governmental actors who were either personally affected or socially and politically engaged with the sites and their past. Both initiatives met with a mixed response from the state and the local community. In the end, however, both initiatives succeeded, marking an important step toward what Karl Markus Michel would, two decades later, describe as the topolatry of the sites.

Though much of the Flossenburg prison building was demolished, the wall at which executions were carried out was restored, and a memorial plaque to the men of the “July 20th” plot against Hitler was established at the site. In Floss, plans to renovate the synagogue continued apace.

Memorial plaque for the murdered men of the “July 20th” plot, 2013

One aspect is worth particular emphasis in this respect: the growing interest in the sites as such was directed at very specific objects – a former concentration camp prison, and a former sacral space. Both of these spaces embody a powerful symbolism of criminal wrongdoing and loss. To draw upon the analysis of the sociologist Rolf Lindner, they are at once a **defined** and a **definitional** space.[8] They are symbols, which both **form** and **deform** our images of history. For example, the camp jail represents the commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Wilhelm Canaris – and not of the 1,500 Soviet prisoners of war who were also killed there. The synagogue defines the commemoration of the Jews of Floss in religious terms, instead of by way of their contact and their conflicts with the local community.

5. Sites: From Stigma to Standard (Vom Stigma zum Standortfaktor)

The rediscovery of the sites marked the beginning of what would become a decades-long obsession with history and the locations at which that history took place – an obsession, which evidently continues to this day. Following the political and generational upheavals in western Germany, the 1970s saw a renewed emphasis on the former concentration camp sites and the sites of the former Jewish communities in Germany.

These memorial initiatives were characterized by a pedagogical bent, while the activism, which surrounded them called into question the resistance of broader society and official policy to the issues, which they raised. Taken together, this served to nurture the sense that education and learning at these historical sites had an emancipatory effect as such. The confrontation with the sites of criminality – or the sites of loss – was believed to offer a nearly cathartic or inoculatory effect. The “authentic site” – a problematic concept that did exist present but was not yet in vogue at the time – was believed to have pedagogical value as such. This pedagogical value was generated through the political sensitization achieved via an emotional engagement with the site.

At this point, we have arrived at the moment when critics began referring to *topolatry* and

[8] Rolf Lindner, Vom Wesen der Kulturanalyse, in: Zeitschrift für Volkskunde, 99 (II), 2003, S. 182.

the *theatre of memory*.

An increasing number of public and religious initiatives began to engage with Flossenbürg. Their criticisms were directed at the park-like nature of the memorial, the selective preservation of memory, and the lack of adequate historical information regarding the site.

Together with Bavarian Association of Jewish Communities, Stefan Schwarz continued to work for the establishment of a new more visible Jewish monument at Flossenbürg. This was finally erected in 1985, at the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the camp.

New Jewish monument, 2013

Ten years later, the Memorial received another Jewish monument. In spring 1994, the president of the Bavarian Association, Simon Snopkowski, approached the ministry of culture with the request that at Jewish place of prayer be established alongside the Christian chapel. The new construction was to be built in close proximity to the memorial chapel, and resemble a synagogue. Together, the two structures would form a “Path of Prayer.”

Jewish site of prayer and memory 2013

During those same years, the synagogue in Floss was renovated twice. The first was a makeshift renovation in 1980; the second was a through renovation in 2005, which restored the synagogue as a memorial and a site of commemoration. As a guest at the opening ceremony, who had travelled from abroad to attend the event, remarked, “it was never this lovely before!” Indeed, during the process of renovation, all signs of the destruction had

been erased. The synagogue has been restored in all its glory – but it has no actual function. The museum planned for the site has been notably slow in coming. In any case, visitors can enjoy an occasional Klezmer performance or two…

By contrast, since 1995 Flossenbürg has been transformed into a public “construction site against the process of forgetting”[9].

Construction at the Flossenbürg memorial site

And this brings me to my closing point and the third diagnosis:

9 Utz Jeggle: Judendörfer in Württemberg, Tübingen 1999, S. 330.

Diagnosis III: Where We Are: Site Space and Context: The Current State of Memorial Culture

Today the project of confrontation with the legacy of National Socialism has undergone a fundamental and irreversible transformation.

During the recent process of “nation building” which followed the events of 1989, historical and political initiatives and cultural and commemorative practices were debated with particular vehemence and intensity.[10] You will all remember the debates elicited by Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s support for the establishment of a memorial to the victims of tyranny and war at the Neue Wache on Unter den Linden in Berlin. Likewise the years of debate regarding a central memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe. Or the controversy surrounding the former concentration camps and the evaluation and significance of National Socialist crimes of humanity and the dictatorship of the former East Germany.

There has been at least one outcome of these debates, and the political decisions which were made as a result: the commemoration of the victims of National Socialism is now cultural cornerstone of reunified Germany. Remembrance, defined as the on-going preservation of the crimes of National Socialism in Germany’s collective memory, is seen as a national duty. In the words of Detlef Garbe: “There can be no such thing as a forgotten concentration camp nowadays.”[11]

The establishment of these sites of memory and this culture of memory, however, appears to have quelled the longstanding public debates about Germany’s politics and culture of history. The memorial culture recalling the victims of National Socialism is firmly established and institutionalized. Meanwhile, it must compete for funding and attention within the larger cultural and memorial landscape in Germany.

However, even today the current culture of remembrance in Germany is still the target of criticisms as biting as any offered by Michal Bodemann or Karl Markus Michel more than 20

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10 Vgl. Benedict Anderson: Die Erfindung der Nation. Frankfurt a.M. 1988.

11 Detlef Garbe, Von den “vergessen KZs” zu den “staatstragenden Gedenkstätten”?, GedenkstättenRundbrief 100, 4/2001, S.82.

years ago. For example, the conservative scholar Christian Meier has directed polemical attacks against the Gedenkwesen – the “edifice of remembrance”. Timothy Garton Ash has identified with typical British irony what he terms a “DIN standard” for past beating. Likewise the literary scholar Aleida Assmann has articulated what she describes as a “new discomfort regarding the culture of commemoration.” So too Volkhard Knigge, the director of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, speaks of contemporary practices of memorialization as “habitualised redundancies and displays of concern.” Yet new memorials continue to be built. The “theatre of memory” – as we saw just last week – is alive and well.

The project of confrontation with National Socialism, and with it the generation that made this project its own, have been extraordinarily successful. At the same time, however, we risk overlooking a fundamental break. Volkhard Knigge, who works with both the theory and the practice of commemoration, has outlined the possibility of a “reflective historical consciousness”: “The future will obtain memory not just through the transmission of memory, but through its understanding as a historical source and as an object for learning. Within reflective historical consciousness, memory and commemoration will itself require historical practices of understanding and interpretation.”

Conclusion: Sites and Presence

The topography of former concentration camps is spaces that have undergone substantial modifications over time. The same applies to the public spaces which once belonged to Jewish rural communities. At both sites, we encounter material relics **of the time**, but also symbols and memorials intended to remind us **of that time**. In addition, we find various traces of the many different uses to which these sites and buildings were put in the decades since the war.

For this reason, one of the central issues of our work should entail an engagement with what we call the “memory of objects”. We are called upon to empirically deconstruct the concept of authenticity and decipher the “memory of things” as an expression of our cultural

memory.

Perhaps another question is also worthy of greater attention. How was it that these architectural and spatial remains we have considered here could be put to so many different uses over the decades in such a pragmatic and unproblematic fashion? At the Flossenbürg Memorial, we have dedicated a permanent exhibition to the topic of “what remains of a former concentration camp.” Rather than focusing merely on the site, the exhibition also addresses questions of context. For example: “What remains of the perpetrators?” And “What remains of the prisoners?” And finally “What remains of memory?

Perhaps space must always undergo transformation and recreation. Or, drawing upon a fascinating suggestion by the director of the Jewish Museum of Munich, Bernhard Purin, perhaps we should not venture new memorializations before examining the purpose and value of existing ones. What if we carry out a thought experiment? What if every memorial plaque we have today would have to find one hundred people willing to speak out in its favour? Those plaques, which fail the test, would be dismantled – but not abandoned. Instead, they would form the exhibits in a new museum of abandoned memories. This thought experiment, itself, might indeed have a greater educational value than any new memorial plaque could have.

And what should be done with the former rural synagogue? Why was the neighbouring building, which was once a kosher slaughterhouse, not renovated and turned into a museum? This points to an important issue: our commemorations are promoting certain memories, certain concepts of history, and even certain concepts of ethnicity. Perhaps it would be both a more honest and more sustainable to utilize a former rural synagogue as a community college, local library, or community association building, rather than yet one more centre for German-Jewish encounters. However it is repurposed, the building should not hide its former function – instead, it should present its own history, in legible form. Perhaps wounds should not be healed, but be discursively inscribed as lacunae – or empty spaces – within their communities, and integrated into other daily practices. Such projects may well offer greater possibilities for capturing public attention than do our carefully groomed, tended and curated sites of commemoration.