International Workshop "Rethinking Memory Culture", 30 September to 10 October 2018 in Łódź, Poland

Organisation: Volda University College (Norwegen), Hochschule Ostwestfalen-Lippe, Universität Łódź (Polen), Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam (ZZF) and Centrum Dialogu Marek Edelmann in Łódź.

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Workshop participants in front of the Centrum Dialogu in Lodz, October 2018 (Foto: unknown)

Twenty students of graphic design and journalism from Norway, art students from Poland and film studies and public history students from Germany met for ten days in Łódź (Poland) in early October to develop concepts to commemorate and remember the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) ghetto.

As well as exploring the history of the ghetto that existed in German-occupied Poland from 1939 to 1944, the focus was on working at an interdisciplinary and international level. The

students of public history began with a brief introduction to the history of the city, of German occupation policy, of the ghetto and of the Polish culture of remembrance. This was followed by guided historical tours looking at the geography of the city, the remaining traces of the ghetto and the existing memorial sites, signs and inscriptions. These include the "Radegast train station" memorial commemorating the deportations, a monument to the Polish citizens who saved Jews, and various inscriptions on the ground marking the former ghetto boundaries. Holocaust survivor Joanna Berens-Tomczyńska, who lived through the Second World War in Poland as a Polish Jewish child, provided a very personal perspective.

Workshop participants with Holocaust survivor Joanna Berens-Tomczyńska at the Centrum Dialogu in Lodz, October 2017 (Photo: Irmgard Zündorf)

The students were then divided into smaller interdisciplinary and international groups and began reflecting on what they had learned in the form of filmed interviews of each other. The aim was to practise filming and conducting interviews while also allowing thoughts to percolate. This formed the basis for the ensuing conceptual work. The first thing was to decide on the topic and format (e.g. website, exhibition or guided tour). The participants also went on a day trip to the site of the former ghetto in Warsaw to broaden their perspective. A guided tour of the neighbourhood and a visit to the Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, POLIN (Museum of the History of Polish Jews) provided them with input for the rest of their work.

Workshop participants on their tour of Warsaw, October 2018 (Photo: Irmgard Zündorf)

The work in the smaller groups revealed the opportunities as well as the challenges of interdisciplinary and international cooperation, with the group work being strongly influenced by the different approaches and skills brought to the table by the students from the various fields. This gave rise to a wide range of concept ideas from many different perspectives, which were presented to the public at the end of the workshop in the Centrum Dialogu Marek Edelmann lecture theatre and are briefly outlined here.

The "Lodz History Exploration" group aimed to create a long-term communication network between local residents and visitors to Lodz. Following talks with Centrum Dialogu director Joanna Podolska, the students realised that the local population was rarely involved in the centre's work on a regular or repeated basis. A survey of passers-by on the history of the city procured few answers of substance; notably, the Łódź ghetto was barely mentioned. This inspired the group to have interested residents become "ambassadors" of their town. The idea was to offer history workshops where they could discuss the history of the city with historians and develop outreach methods together. Part of the idea for the project was to set up an app or website where residents can connect with interested visitors and organise city tours.

The con-cept revolved around collective interaction and the desire to study and share history where it happened.

Presentation of the first project ideas for the Lodz app (Photo: Irmgard Zündorf)

Another group devised an interactive drama for schoolchildren. It is designed to help young people appreciate the history of the Łódź ghetto on a personal level and get them actively involved in the learning process. The idea of an interactive drama is to tell a story in which the "users" determine the plot. As the story unfolds, presented perhaps in the form of a computer game, the users themselves have to make decisions that influence the course of events. The interactive drama would be based on the experiences of people who lived in the Łódź ghetto. Some of these have been recorded in diaries and interviews. The question of how these real-life stories can be connected with any decisions taken and the extent to which the stories could be altered in this way leads to interesting, but by no means certain, answers. Differing assessments of the use of fiction and facts made the project particularly fascinating.
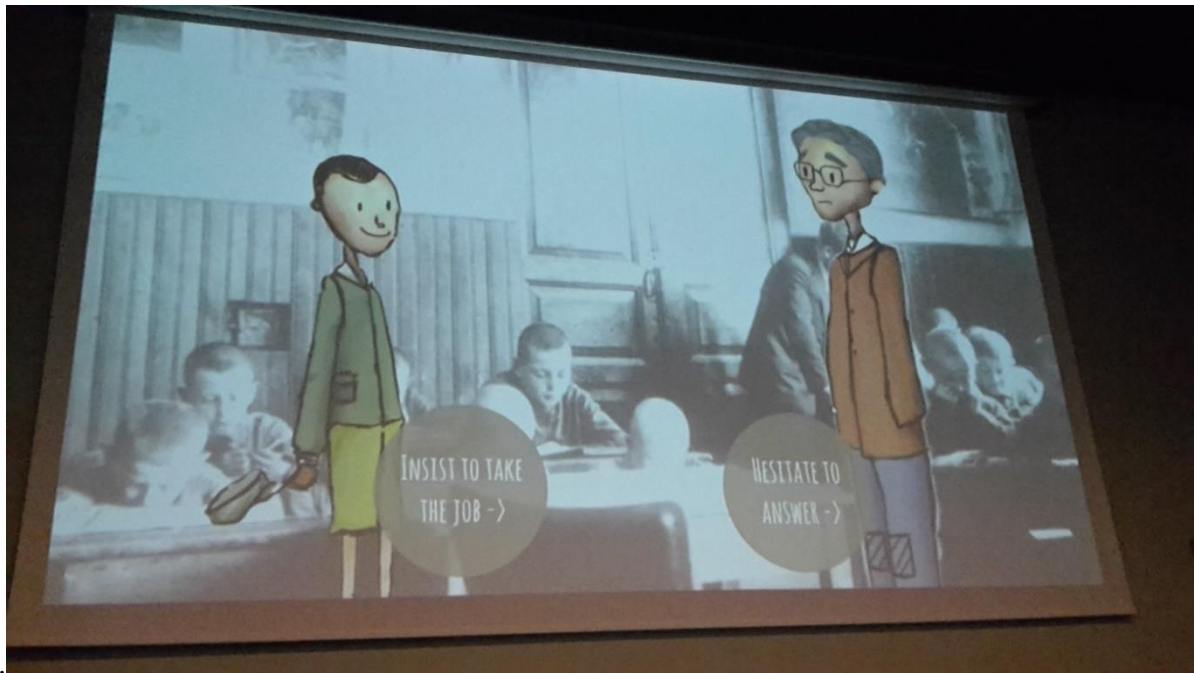
Presentation of an early version of the interactive drama (Photo: Irmgard Zündorf)

The third group designed an exhibition with art installations titled "The Story Behind". The aim was to reveal the stories behind the figures that were once compiled in the statistics division at the Łódź ghetto. Historian Adam Sitarek, who works at the University of Łódź and at the Centrum Dialogu, gave the students access to the digitised statistics. They provide information on a range of aspects of everyday life in the ghetto, such as the average number of calories to be made available to the ghetto inmates each day, the number of children in the homes, and causes of death. Eight topics were chosen on the basis of this data (malnutrition, living situation, diseases, work, culture, religion, separated families, and commemoration), to be presented in seven rooms. Visitors would enter each room of the exhibition through a door with a number on it, the meaning of which is then explained on the inside of the door. Various installations illustrate the topic in the individual rooms. In the room labelled with the number of calories, for example, there is a table with dozens of broken plates and a few breadcrumbs. The walls of another room are covered with the lists of addresses of all the residents of the ghetto, and the names behind the numbers are revealed. This room leads out of the exhibition to a meter that counts the visitors. A sign next to it reads: "We are all part of a statistic. You are visitor No. X". This is to create a connection between the visitors and the residents of the ghetto.
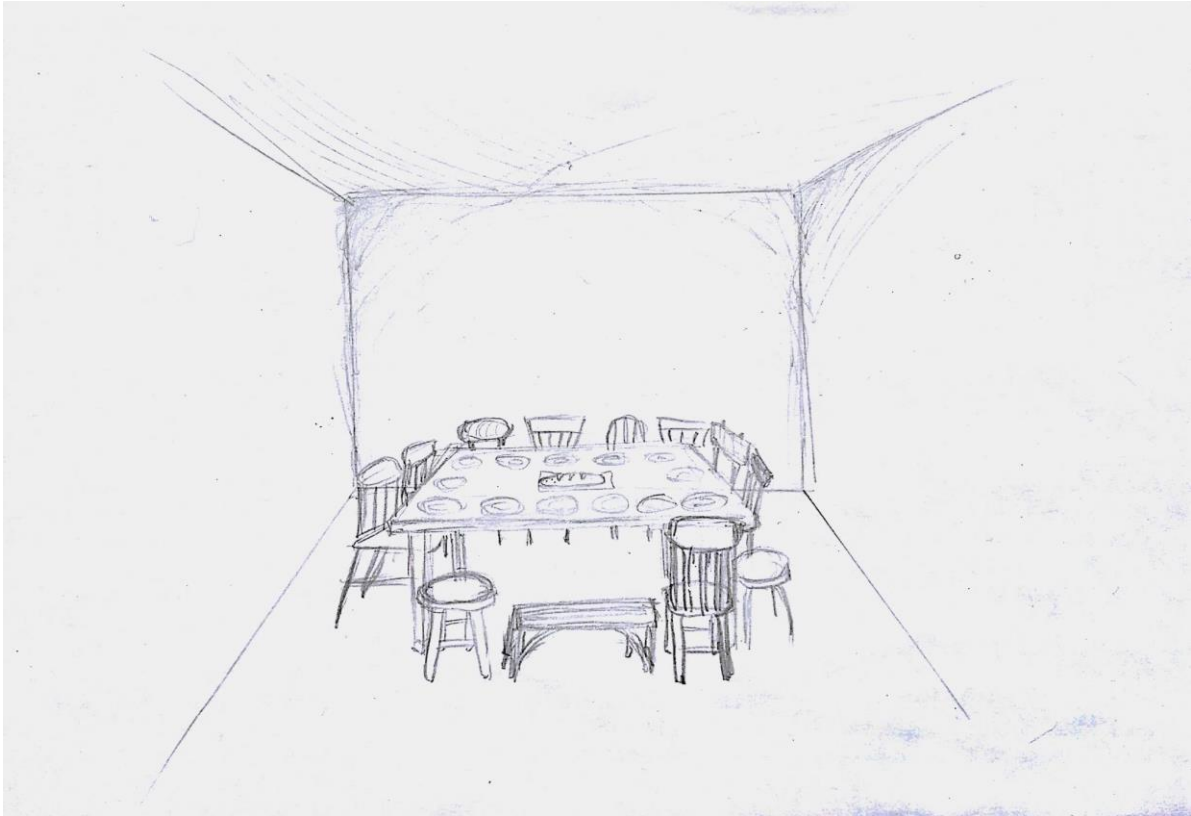
Illustration of the room on the theme of "malnutrition", design by the group "The Story Behind"

The fourth group designed a touring exhibition consisting of interactive screens. A mosaic is depicted on a central monitor. The individual pieces of the mosaic contain information on individuals, living conditions, and other topics relevant to the history of the ghetto. They are just coloured shapes when inactive, but expand when tapped on to display a text and images. Visual links to related topics can be accessed via hyperlinks in the texts, pointing interested visitors to the relevant mosaic pieces on the wall. Display stations are set up around the central monitor where visitors can take a closer look at the elements of the mosaic. The aim of the exhibition concept is to represent the complex information situation resulting from the various fragments of surviving evidence. The interactive concept is also designed to turn learning and experiencing into a process of discovery.

The "Mosaic exhibition" group (group self-portrait) (Photo: Irmgard Zündorf)

In summary, the students' interdisciplinary and international collaboration showed just how much their notions of the project as well as their various working methods and approaches differed. This was apparent in the way in which they dealt with the sources and in the discussions about how much background information should be provided and how much should be left to the imagination, as well as the degree to which the presentations should be entertaining. The debate about whether greater attention should be paid to form or content during the planning phase also revealed the different interests and approaches. Linking up the students' different skills and knowledge bases and negotiating differing priorities made the workshop an important experience for everyone involved.