

Name: Maria Axinte

Institution: Pitesti Prison Memorial Foundation, Romania

Host Institution: Berlin Wall Memorial Foundation

Project duration: 01.09.2021 - 31.10.2021

## **EDUCATION IN MEMORIALS: FROM FACTS TO KNOWLEDGE**

### *Documentation of educational methods and exhibition programs in memorial museums in Germany*

This research was made in light of the current situation in Romania and Germany, concerning the understanding of the process of memorialising sites related to communist history (and thus igniting a constructive dialogue between Germany and Romania's memorial sites) and the need for different means of expression and efficient methods of education in memorial museums.

The Memory Work program has the great merit of opening a dialogue that would otherwise prove difficult for a number of reasons (logistical, financial, timewise) and of fostering a platform of exchange that will continue to exist and produce results for all parties involved long after the end of the allocated time for the exchange.

Berlin constitutes one of the richest cities for former soviet repression sites; the most recognized being the Berlin Wall Memorial. The Berlin Wall Memorial is a good example of how a site containing memories of trauma may be appropriately developed to tell the personal and collective stories to a wide audience, and thus could serve as a model for societies with a similar national history in managing a violent past, and consequently learning from it. The site has been preserved and recognized as valuable first by the efforts of the local community and civic groups, which is a first step to ensure such sites live on and educate future generations. The unique story of the Berlin Wall becomes even more unique at Bernauer Strasse, which is representative for the overall history of Berlin divided by the wall. As unique is the approach of the outdoor exhibition, the focal point of what we call Berlin Wall Memorial. Whereas, understandably, the whole country wished for the wall to disappear to erase the division that had broken so many lives, sections of the wall (the "death strip", roads blocked by the wall, remains of houses that used to sit on the border) have been preserved to stand as a testimony of the troubled past. All elements part of the site refer specifically to structures of the wall (the use of iron structures, the Church of Reconciliation constructed using the remains of the destroyed parish church on the border, the guards patrol road) and allow visitors to discover the development of the wall in time. The Berlin Wall is mostly

centered on lives. Discreetly but nonetheless heartbreaking, the stories of people who died trying to flee to West Berlin, young militaries' obligation to guard the border or members of the split parish of the enclosed church all mix into matters of daily life under the looming presence of the wall. Two new sites have joined Berlin Wall Memorial Foundation recently, East Side Gallery and Parliament of Trees. Both sites are masterpieces of art, which has preserved two of the longest structures of the Berlin Wall now standing in the middle of the most modern neighborhoods of Berlin. The foundation proposes to keep using art as a mediator to bring together stories of communities and to emphasize on the role of art as a peaceful storyteller of a difficult history.

Visits to many memorial museums in Berlin, Erfurt, Cottbus or Dresden has proved intriguing rather than exhausting of the subject. Though the common theme is communist dictatorship, each site focuses on different particularities. While the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial addresses the complex system of detention of political prisoners in an almost perfectly preserved Stasi prison complex, the Learning Center in Keibelstrasse is opening a conversation about general imprisonment and justice in the GDR. Andreasstrasse Memorial and Education Site in Erfurt uses comic graphics and simple terms to appeal to a young audience, at the same time highlighting the local community's involvement in the peaceful revolution in 1989. The Stasi Documents Archive is keen on proving that files are not as boring as one might think. Their new exhibition on Stasi files is an immersive journey into the peculiar world of control and repression by the GDR state security service.

Educational programs play an important part in memorial museums in Germany, particularly because knowledge of the communist dictatorship can vary from East to West Germany, but also across generations. The educational program at Berlin Wall Memorial is centered mainly on the discovery of the Berlin Wall, particularly by the younger generation. Guided tours and seminars are the core of their educational offer. The Memorial also conducts seminars where contemporary witnesses are present and pilot projects that bring together perspectives from East and West Germany in light of the division brought by the wall. Guided tours are also the core of the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial educational offer. The army of specialised guides is completed by former inmates that share their own experiences to the visitors on their journey inside the complex. On a different note, the staff at the Learning Center in Keibelstrasse is keen on encouraging the visitors to discover the site by themselves through seminars that last between two to six hours which also involve debates on perspectives and the subjectivity of sources. The Andreasstrasse Memorial and Education Site in Erfurt brings the discussion about communist dictatorship in a different direction through graphic novel and music workshops directed specifically at younger generations. They offer workshops that span up to 4 days. Surprisingly, the Stasi Documents Archive has a dedicated educational team and a specialised educational program tailored for

students and teachers alike. Based on the Stasi files of young school groups and people, the team tells the story of repression in GDR. Music, art, rebel youth are the starting point that trigger the discussion on dictatorship and put the students in direct contact with the intricate and difficult to discern information in the files.

The exchange between Berlin Wall Memorial and Pitesti Prison Memorial through Memory Work has resulted in a new collaborative project directed at university students. Through partnerships with universities in Germany and Romania, the two foundations propose a pilot-project dedicated to students in both countries that will consist of guided visits to the two memorial museums, seminars to have an in-depth understanding of the unicity of the two sites in terms of the functioning of the communist dictatorship system in Europe and debates and team projects that will enable the students to create discourse in both memorials and become co-curators of history. The main goal of the project is to bring students closer to memorial sites and spark their interest through methods and materials that are relevant and engaging to them.

Facing an environment of misinformation, information overload and a surge in extremist tendencies, societies and museums alike should focus on preserving proof of past events that have shaped our world as we know it. Communities have the duty of not forgetting, while memorial museums are expected to come closer to the community and act from within. Education can take multiple forms, but its focus should stay on encouraging the public to take a stance and have a personal perspective on history and its value.