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Out of the Comfort Zone

Abstract This article explores the issues and dilemmas which resulted from the development of a museum on European history, focussing on the twentieth century, called the House of European History. The House opened in 2017 in Brussels, featuring multiple perspectives on the main processes and events which have shaped Europe in last century. Through the ten-year process of building the new museum, the team of curators, educators, conservators, communicators, etc, encountered and debated many emerging questions in connection with the role of museums in today's quickly-developing society. The House of European History team chose to bring critical voices forward and open a debate on the recent European past. It acknowledges different situations of museums, their collections and their position in society throughout the continent.

Keywords Europe, museums, memory, politics, responsibility, criticism

The conference *Museums, Borders and European Responsibility* – organised in November 2018 by ICOM Europe and ICOM Germany – gathered museum professionals from museums in Europe, USA and Australia to reflect on different perspectives and developments in museums during the last century from the end of the First World War.

The last session of the conference featured a speech entitled “Out of the Comfort Zone” and was dedicated to museums in the 21st century, focusing on the challenges, responsibilities and perspectives facing museums and curators.

The memory and commemorations of the First World War Centenary coincided with other anniversaries such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943), the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia and student movements (both 1968), and many more which have impacted Europe and the world. As usual, many discussions, evaluations and museum exhibitions were organised, touching different aspects of these historical events along with the tradition of regular commemorations. The memory of the First World War was, in different parts of Europe, for a long time in the shadow of the Second World War. The Centenary gave an opportunity to evaluate it again from different perspectives. In other words, the remembrance of the First World War in 1918 struck with great intensity.

Considering a density of events which happened a century ago and which permanently reshaped our continent, and the strong stream of emotions which has been still running through collective national memories, we should not be surprised that the First World War and its political, economic and social consequences seem much more current than maybe a decade or two ago.

The commemoration of the first mass war in human history came during rather turbulent (and not only) political changes in Europe, when yesterday’s assumptions – which Europe had agreed upon – have been strongly challenged. European values, politically-correct rhetoric and agreements found new voice in a way unthinkable and inappropriate even a decade ago. The core elements of the European Union seemed to be fragile. Worries and warnings about the dark shadows emerging from the past have been heard from the highest political representatives.

The political, economic and social tensions were visible also in the methods of commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War in European countries: a rainbow of different sentiments and expressions of collective remembrance in juxtaposition with current political “big” themes. The sense of “victors” and “defeated” were visibly present in some rhetoric,

especially amongst more recently-formed countries or those regaining their independence. Drastic changes of political geography and changing borders on the ashes of fallen empires after 1918 were echoed in politically-organised commemorations.

One did not need to be an attentive observer to confirm how much history, remembrance and current political processes have been intertwined. Sentiments which have survived, sometimes with a deep feeling of injustice, can be kept as a part of national remembrance and maintained through different channels. They become useful when appropriate, and instigate emotional responses among different generations.

For decades the focus of commemoration for many European countries was the Second World War. The phenomenon of presentations of the First World War in museums only became more numerous in recent decades in many parts of Europe. New museums and new exhibitions contributed to the bigger significance of the First World War, leading to greater recognition of that conflict among citizens.

There are excellent museums which have been dedicated to this event and have been recognised by museum experts for their courage to open up discussions about contested chapters of the history of the twentieth century.

The conference organised by ICOM Europe and ICOM Germany in Koblenz in November 2018 has rightly recognised the “historic consequences” of this first mass war as well as the importance of “social responsibility and awareness of democracy” for “establishing museums and their contexts”.¹

From this perspective, a relationship between museums and politics has been identified. Different examples from museums in Europe as well as around the globe show that museums, in their role of opening difficult and sensitive questions of the past, or reinterpreting them anew, could be challenged by politicians and interest groups. This could be as a direct intervention or an indirect one, visible even through museums’ self-censorship.

The House of European History in Brussels, which was opened in May 2017, was clearly a political project. The idea was presented in the inaugural speech of former President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, in February 2007. The museum was a project of the European Parliament and developed as a part of, and within, its administration.

1 ICOM Europe, ICOM Germany, Programme, *European Conference 2018: Museums, Borders and European, Responsibility – 100 Years after WWI*.

In creating the House of European History, it was clear from the beginning that making this museum would be a very sensitive as well as difficult process in many ways. The book *Creating the House of European History* features contributions from 40 authors, all involved in one or another way in the project.² Being a project of a political institution also means that the academic independence for the Academic Project Team responsible for the content was paramount. From the beginning, it was secured by an international Academic Committee and its Board of Trustees.

With the Conceptual Basis, a document that was prepared by an international group of experts (historians and museum professionals) and accepted by the Bureau of the European Parliament in 2008, the Academic Project Team had a solid foundation on which to create a “modern exhibition, documentation and information centre.”³

Becoming a connector of different interpretations, our main goal was thus to create a place for academic debate and interdisciplinary interactions on European history. The permanent exhibition should serve as the first of its type, as an attempt to start a discussion to find answers for the most sensitive questions and dilemmas of our common past. Among other things, the Conceptual Basis clearly stipulated that a teleological approach should be avoided. Since the House of European History should become a “bridge between an academic world and the general public”⁴ and attract visitors from all over Europe (and the world), the Academic Project Team decided in the conceptual phase of the narrative that the permanent exhibition should be multi-layered. That means that there is a first, general chronological narrative, which provides visitors an overview in 90 minutes, as well as different specific themes, presented as the second and third layers for visitors with more specific interests. Different surveys were made during the process, and they confirmed an expected low level of general knowledge about processes, phenomena and historical events of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which had been a focus for the House’s permanent exhibition. The permanent exhibition is therefore not a sum of different national histories, nor been limited to the member states of European Union. Indeed, a rather new approach has been taken. To become the only museum dealing with processes

2 Mork, A. and Christodoulou, P. (2018) *Creating the House of European History*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

3 Committee of Experts (2008) *Conceptual Basis*. Brussels, p. 7.

4 Ibid.

and phenomena, which have shaped the continent in the last two centuries, the team decided to deconstruct these phenomena and processes, and to build on their fundamental principles a narrative of diverse examples from across Europe. With this approach, a visitor – be they young or old, from East, North, South or West Europe – can get a wider context with concrete, compared examples.

The museum exhibition should be an experience for all senses, but should also challenge the visitor to confront their knowledge and experiences with different views and with the experiences of the others. The structure of the permanent exhibition is therefore rather complex: it gives a lot of food for thought and is emotionally intensive. It enables different views and interpretations; yet it also stands clearly for democracy, human rights, rule of law, social inclusions and solidarity.

A museum for the 21st century can hardly be apolitical. It cannot and should not avoid researching and presenting contested chapters in history – however painful and divisive they might be. The twentieth century, with many upheavals, revolutions, two World Wars, with all the terrible consequences, have marked Europe and Europeans for good. In the last decades – with democratization processes in former dictatorships, with accessible archives and numerous historiographical researches – many chapters of history have been rewritten and new perspectives presented. In making the House of European History, we acknowledged them and presented them with the remaining dilemmas and controversies. We did not shy away from sensitive events in a clear attempt to enable our visitors to compare, to get to know different views and interpretations, and to talk about them.

From the very beginning we were aware that in spite of how much we tried, would be impossible to satisfy everybody. With the broad theme of European history, we had to make drastic choices. For example: in June 2011 the team prepared a list of 330 proposed topics which were later transformed and distilled down to six themes with 24 topics.

The permanent exhibition was intended to serve as the first of its type, an attempt to start a discussion to find answers for the most sensitive and complex questions and dilemmas of our common past. Becoming a connector of different interpretations, and thus a place for debate and interdisciplinary interactions on European history, was among our goals. Thus we expected the criticism and welcomed it as an opener for debate.

A year and a half after its opening, the House of European History has welcomed tens of thousands of visitors. Through visitors surveys we have

heard that a large majority of our visitors have been “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the quality of their visit.

Critical remarks have been taken seriously and since the opening there has been an ongoing process to improve the exhibition. However, there has also been a campaign of criticism which partially surprised us, not only with the manner in which the criticism was made, but because political stakeholders were called to make reactions.

Some months after the opening of the House of European History, the President of the European Parliament received a critical letter from the Minister of Culture of Poland which, among other points, accuses the authors of the permanent exhibition of the House of European History of violating historical truth. A long report from the “Platform of European Memory and Conscience” followed in October 2017 with accusations – among others – that the exhibition had been “influenced by an ideological Hegelian or neo-Marxist interpretation of European history”.⁵ According to the authors of the report,

a panel of experts should be nominated by different political groups and MEPs from different regions of the EU to evaluate and consequently propose changes. In the opinion of the members of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience the best solution would be work out a new concept of the exhibition properly defining its goals. The new concept of the exhibition should be worked out and consulted with broader circles of scholars, museum professionals and experts from institutions of remembrance and history education from all EU member states.⁶

We took the criticism very seriously, checked all comments accordingly and informed the Academic Committee and the Board of Trustees, as well as the European Parliament hierarchy.

In the end what was interesting is the fact that the criticism was expressed not toward the House as an academically-independent body, but as a political review, which is not a usual practice for a professional academic debate on critical issues. We were surprised that the academics and museum professionals who wrote the report were actually calling for politicians to select the

5 Platform of European Memory and Conscience, P. Ukielski ed. (2017) *The House of European History. Report on the Permanent Exhibition*, p. 3.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

experts who should prepare a new concept for the permanent exhibition of the House of European History. The members of the Academic Project Team for the House of European History had been selected through an international open call in 2010.

Museums, if they are aware of their role in society, cannot be passive observers in a fast-changing political reality. They have to take a position, in spite of the fact that – or especially because – it has become obvious that history as always can be hijacked for political goals.

Therefore it might be good to remember a discussion at the ICOM Committee for Management in 2011 which called “for museums to have fundamental responsibility to confront political issues, and to inspire and provoke public debate in the quest for freedom of speech, rather than attempt to maintain a safe and spurious neutrality.”⁷ Following this advice, the House of European History has been a museum which stepped out of the comfort zone, and tries to raise interdisciplinary debates on sensitive and debatable questions from the recent European past.

In doing so, we sincerely believe that with interdisciplinary academic discussions supported by arguments, and in good faith, we can contribute to maintaining and strengthening the values on which Europe has been based.

7 ICOM INTERCOM, Annual meeting, Copenhagen, Denmark 2011, Announcement of the Conference