

Exkursion im Rahmen der LV „The Shadows of Past“

Lern- und Gedenkort Schloss Hartheim:

Für die Incoming Student:innen wurde dieses Studienjahr erstmals die Lehrveranstaltung „The Shadows of Past. Linz and Upper Austria in the Nazi-Period“ angeboten. Der von Prof.ⁱⁿ Birgit Kirchmayr und Dr. Andreas Schmoller geleitete Kurs umfasste die Kapitel Führerstadt Linz, jüdisches Linz, das System der NS-Zwangsarbeit und Konzentrationslager sowie Formen des Widerstands gegen den Nationalsozialismus. Die Inhalte wurden in drei Exkursionen vertieft. Zu diesen gehörte neben einem Besuch des Zeitgeschichte Museums in der VÖST, eine Fahrt nach St. Radegund auf den Spuren von Franz Jägerstätters auch eine Führung im Lern- und Gedenkort Schloss Hartheim.

Der folgende Bericht umfasst eine Zusammenschau aus Reflexionen, welche die Student:innen im Anschluss an die Exkursion verfasst haben.

Arriving in Hartheim

What is happening behind the walls of Hartheim Castle? On the surface, a beautiful castle, which looks inviting from afar, without suspecting what kind of story is hidden behind the castle walls. Entering the castle itself, that grayness and the remains of gas smoke on the facades of the castle struck me even more.

In the center of the castle, I came across memorial plaques, which intrigued me and made me very sad (one of them I came across was dedicated to the martyred people from Yugoslavia, where I come from), they were placed by relatives or associations.

Guided tour and Introduction to the subject

The very start of our tour and the way our guide made an introduction to the whole story behind the Schloss had a huge impression on me. It was very original, creative, and even mentally engaging. That way, by trying to put the photos in relation to the Castle and its history in chronological order, I did not feel like a pure observer, but as an active participant in the tour. By entering the room, I noticed colorful drawings on the walls. Our guide told us that they are drawn by people with disabilities. Honestly, before our tour, I was not aware that Hartheim was also a place where the people from mental institutions and residents of homes for the disabled were euthanized (I thought that it referred exclusively to the concentration camps prisoners or the people who were considered ethnically inferior). That information was even more shocking and provoked even deeper emotions. The fact that the castle is again used for cooperation with and inclusion of people with disabilities is, in my opinion, a very beautiful and touching example of significant, positive turnovers over history.

History of the Castle

Schloss Hartheim is a Renaissance castle that was built at the end of the 16th century by Jakob von Aspen but it seems that there was originally another construction dating from the 9th century. Hartheim Castle is located in Alkoven which is a town 14 kilometers from Linz. At the end of the 18th century, more precisely in 1793, Hartheim Castle became the residence of the Princes of Starhemberg, an important and

politically powerful Austrian noble family that played an important role in the Holy Roman Empire and later in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Hartheim remained the residence for the House of Starhemberg for more than 100 years and later in 1898 it was donated by Camillo Henry, Prince of Starhemberg to the Upper Austrian State Welfare Society (Oberösterreichischer Landeswohltätigkeitsverein). The idea of this donation was that the castle would become a home for the handicapped or institute for "idiots" as it was described at the time. To this purpose between 1900 and 1910 the building was rehabilitated so that it could meet the needs of the disabled. One of the major improvements made to the castle for this aim was in 1926 and consisted in the introduction of a bed lift.

"Euthanasia": The Action T4

However, things took a tragic turn when in 1939 the castle was confiscated by the Nazis and what was supposed to be a humanitarian place with a clear purpose, namely to help the disabled, was transformed into a monstrous institute of terror that also had a clear purpose, the extermination of the disabled. In the program called action T4 six such euthanasia centers were opened and one of them was Hartheim Castle. For this purpose of killing disabled people the Nazis completed the castle with two crematoria and a gas chamber.

As at the other T4 murder sites, a doctor was tasked with overseeing the killings. The physician at Hartheim was Rudolf Lonauer, from Linz. Georg Renno functioned as his deputy. To ensure the smooth running and bureaucratic efficiency of the institution, a police officer was deployed as "office manager". These managerial personnel were in charge of male and female nurses, office workers, drivers and many other staff, who were also significantly responsible for the implementation and cover-up of the killings.

Overall around 30 000 people were murdered in Hartheim Castle between 1940 and 1944. On the one hand, these were people with physical and mental disabilities and mental illnesses who were in psychiatric institutions, were housed in nursing homes or welfare homes. On the other hand, prisoners who were unable to work were also removed from the concentration camp systems Mauthausen-Gusen, Dachau and Ravensbrück, as well as civilian forced laborers from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were brought to Hartheim.

At the turn of the year 1944-1945 dismantling work was carried out in the area of the killing facilities. Nothing should remind of how this place had been used in the years before. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the castle served as accommodation for "displaced persons" and refugees. In 1948 the castle and the farm returned to state charity.

Reflecting on the Ideology of Euthanasia

It is curious to think that the Nazi mass extermination, unlike the other remarkable genocides in History, occurred in an industrial manner. Perhaps this is the only way to fully realize the eugenics ideology. After all, between the ideal of technical improvement and the ideal of genetic "improvement" there is no fundamental ethical distance. One wants to improve, to go beyond the conditions that nature has reserved for us, that is the great goal; and nothing goes more against this goal than a group of "deficient" people, useless for the establishment of any technicist society.

Those individuals weren't executed in the same way people are executed in firing squads. In fact, they were killed in a way similar, though even less humanized, to the cattle industry. We are talking about people lined up, labeled numerically, reduced to their supposed defects, walking in a squeezed corridor, to die in a chamber destined solely for murder, carried out by the simple actuation of a mechanism designed to suffocate the breath of Life, Life that dared to make itself present even in those who were born in an "useless" condition.

The disabled person is fated not to fit into the world and society. And yet, it is we, the so-called "sane" ones, who carry out the unmeasured, coldly calculated murder, based above all on hatred.

Voice of Resistance

Yet, an important figure stood up against Nazi practices. This man is Clemens August Graf von Galen, a cardinal of the Catholic Church who led protests against euthanasia, denounced the Gestapo lawlessness and the Nazi persecution of the Catholic Church.

Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen was an influential personality, he used his social situation as a tool for charitable purposes trying to raise public awareness. He was proclaimed "the Lion of Munster" precisely because of his fearless attitude towards the Nazi regime and the fact that on 3 August 1941 he denounced the euthanasia program. He harshly condemned the ideology that disabled people are a burden on society, that they cannot work, are useless and therefore they are not worthy to live. He appealed to the conscience and morality of the population but to make himself more understandable he raised the question, if soldiers returning from the front wounded and disabled, what will happen to them, will they not suffer the same fate?

It seems the voice of Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen was strong enough to stop the euthanasia program.

The Memorial Site today – Conceptual Framework

The memorial's physical space is built so that the visitor can walk the path of the victim through the former reception room, technical room, gas chamber, morgue, and crematorium room. Thanks to the minimalist design and play with emptiness and light, the artist of this project managed to achieve an essential distance between visitors and the past. This place does not impose a particular narrative or try to imitate the scenes from those days. There is room for visitors' reflection, emotions, and meaning-creating process. Herbert Friedl, the artist of memorial, success the task about which Aleida Assmann writes in *Spaces of Memory: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory*, "The gap, the abyss between the place of victims and visitors, must be made tangible so that the affective potential that mobilizes the place of memories does not lead to a "fusion of horizons" and illusory identification."¹ One can feel this sacred distance especially in the former gas chambers, where bridges are installed, so visitors do not walk directly on the tiles. Herbert Friedl says, "From this distance, every visitor

¹ Assmann A. *Spaces of Memory: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory*. Kyiv: Nika - Center, 2012, p. 352.

must decide for themselves how close to get to the historical events."² The artificial and sharp light in the form of a large rectangle projected on the floor of the former crematorium makes a strong impression. It is a physical and symbolic attempt to cast light on a history that should never happen again. The physical space and exposition, which directs the visitor to the room of silence through all of the victim's steps, enables him to qualitatively live the experience of interaction with this place, to experience a kind of catharsis.

If one deconstructs this space into separate elements, one can highlight textual and material aspects, a long list of all the victims' names and personal belongings. For me, it became a meeting point of history and memory. The former usually tries to be objective, and operates with "dry" facts, numbers, and names, while the latter is about something intimate, sometimes romanticized, but real. As for the room with endless text, there is an effort to give meaning to everyone to avoid missing a single name, but they all, at some point, get lost and merge into one.

It demonstrates the smallness of life in the face of history. Only for the victim's relatives, their life is remarkable. For others, it is a drop in the ocean of 30,000 innocent dead. These mugs, combs, icons, glasses, and cigarette cases are brutal reminders that these victims are ordinary people like you and me. Those people just found themselves at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Anyone could have ended up being there in Schloss Hartheim. These dusty and broken personal things have now found themselves in a new semiotic system, they were trash, but now they are the bearer of the "aura," the stories of those people. Things of daily use, which people used in the last days of their lives, probably created for them a feeling of home, security, and everyday life. Some of them, especially crosses and icons, served as talismans. Because of such intimacy, these (in)significant things make such a strong impression on us.

History of the Memorial

In 1995, the Hartheim Castle As Since 2003 Hartheim Castle is a memorial site dedicated to the ten thousand of physically and mentally handicapped persons, concentration camp prisoners and forced laborers who were murdered there by the Nazis. Also, in 2003 the exhibition "Value of Life" was opened. An association was founded. Its goal was the sole use of the castle as a memorial and exhibition site. In 1997, the province of Upper Austria decided to financially support this goal and the implementation of a learning and memorial site.

Final Reflection

I'm a museologist and I can confidently say that Hartheim Castle as museum is absolutely amazing. First of all it's accessible to everyone, they have special programs for the people with disabilities. That's very important for each museum and especially for place with such past. Also with help of exhibitions we can follow history step by step and almost feel all the desperate, hopeless agony that victims felt themselves. I believe that visiting this kind of places is good opportunity to honor all of these brave people who was sacrificed by the regime.

² <https://www.schloss-hartheim.at/en/memorial-exhibition/memorial/concept/artistic-concept>
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Personally, I think that at this point, the only thing we can do for their memory is keep this past alive as much as we can! These memorial venues, chambers, the things and photos, these are the most valuable things which remain and it is our responsibility and duty to memorialize them!

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