

# FAKE AND FALSE HISTORIES - ICMEMOHRI SYMPOSIUM, DAY 1

2 June 2025, Mémorial de la Shoah

## Welcome and opening remarks

### (Points briefly summed up)

**Jane Klinger, ICMEMOHRI Chair:** When talking about fake, false, and authenticity we have not yet agreed to the exact terminology. It becomes a complex issue when we want to communicate it across cultures, religion, etc. We see it being used now in politics and in the media, and so, it is an important topic to discuss.

**Bruno Boyer (Jacques Fredj, director Memorial de la Shoah could not join us):** The Mémorial de la Shoah is a very strong institution in Europe when it comes to information on the prevention of mass atrocity. Right now, we are all facing a massive attack on history: we see history distortion and history rewriting. Outdoor exhibitions have been vandalised. When someone attacks the institution, it is 1) antisemitic, and 2) an attack on a historical and scientific institution therefore it targets academic research, with the goal of presenting a political narrative. The invasion of Ukraine was the final step; Putin wants to present his own history and eradicate the other and we should see what is happening in Ukraine as a warning sign

**Juliette Raoul-Duval, VP ICOM Europe:** ICOM Europe is one of the alliances within ICOM, of which there are eight in the world (Europe, Africa, etc.). ICOM Europe is large with 37 country members, and the topic of fake and false histories is of vital importance – cultural sites and actors have never been so contested and threatened. We need to look at the responsibility of museums in the fight against falsifications of history; museums need to fulfil their goal of educating the public. This is done by curating with expertise. And that task today is a heavy one, and your work will guide us; all the memorials and museums will open their doors to you. Keep courage, my colleagues. It takes courage to work according to our Code of Ethics.

## SESSION 1 – Terminology: Authenticity and the Visitor’s Experience

### “Terminology: what constitutes “Authenticity” – Zahava Doering

- Does authenticity matter? Are we indifferent to the term authenticity or is it something we think about?
- It is important to remember that museums are trusted
- Survey done on the reasons that contribute to trust
  - Notice that 50% of the participants says they trust museums because they are fact based
  - 46% says they trust museums because they present real/authentic objects
  - 36% says they trust museums because they offer independent and objective information
  - 35% says they trust museums because they are non-partisan/neutral
- But do museums present authenticity? We have a long – and distinguished – history of “faking it”
  - The Apollo of Piombino for example: Found in 1832, purchased for Musée du Louvre in 1834. It was dated in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, however it was later found to be an archaizing pastiche, made for a Roman client in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE
  - Another example is Edgar Degas’ *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, a figurine that exists in [at least] two versions. One is dated between 1878 and 1881, made from pigmented bees wax,

clay, metal armature, rope, paintbrushes, human hair, silk and linen ribbon, cotton and silk tutu, with linen slippers on a wooden base (National Gallery of Art Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon). The other is a cast done by A. A. Hubbard in 1922, the original highly damaged and fragile tutu having been replaced in 2018 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.). Which one is authentic?

- Auguste Rodin's statue *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (modelled in 1884-95) can be seen in at least six different museums. *Which one is authentic?*
- Museums use a variety of different words to describe their objects: Conjectural restoration, copy, engineering test model, facsimile, model, proof test article, prop, reconstruction, representation, replica, reproduction, scale model, etc.
- Can people who visit museums identify what they are looking at? Do my kids and your family know the difference between these words? Do they know that they are looking at a replica? And does it matter?
- Another example are plantations which are often viewed as romantic and nostalgic, rather than sites of violence and trauma for enslaved Black people by white enslavers – 375 plantation museums across the US, where the atrocities of slavery compete with the grandeur of plantation living – BUT today, there are 4000 places with slavery histories that are museums, historic sites, B&B's, event spaces, vacation homes, etc.
- Examples from the Stalinist period:
  - Constructive authenticity: Gulag History Museum in Moscow where doors taken off of prison cells are exhibited
  - Objective authenticity: Tomsk Prison Museum in Siberia where the exhibition is in the actual prison cells
  - Study shows that visitors are moved by both
- Chroma (ancient sculpture in colour): When the past does not look like we want it to be – visitors did not want to see the painted versions of marble statuary, because it does not correspond with the way they see the past. Even though the marbles were probably painted originally!
- Survey by Stephan Schwan and Silke Dutz: How DO visitors perceive the role of authentic objects in museums? Results: To me, an object is authentic if it... 1) truly shows how it was, 2) tells stories, 3) is of historical importance and 4) shows many details
- The public is forgiving when they are not kept in the dark about the exhibited objects: it should be indicated if it's not an original; tell us, trust us (the visitors) – knowledge gives appreciation
- Simply tell the visitors what it is, in words they understand: *"What I want as a person that comes to your house is that you tell me what I am looking at, tell me what I am seeing, hearing, experiencing... let me be the judge of the authenticity"*
- Four components worth considering (from Stephan Schwans research: Schwan, Stephan and Silke Dutz, "How do Visitors Perceive the Role of Authentic Objects in Museums?" May 20, 2020; <https://oi.org/10.1111/cura.12365>): Authenticity
  - ... is not confined to objects, but also refers to persons, places, phenomena, and activities.
  - ... may be ascribed to entities that are not necessarily "original" but also entities that "feel to be true"
  - ... is not dichotomous but is scaled

- ... is not determined by characteristics of the object at hand but is strongly influenced by its context of presentation, the specific forms of staging, and the personal context of the visitor, including prior knowledge, experience, attentiveness, and engagement
- **Conclusion:** Authenticity does not – and cannot – have a single definition. Rather, it is defined by context, culture, history, technology, and purpose. *“It is a symphony that can be experienced”*.

## **SESSION 2 – Misrepresentation of history: From distorted or tendentious presentation and falsification of history to deliberate manipulation in museums and exhibitions**

(Unfortunately, Aya Ben Naftaly could not be present)

### **“Erasing the past, distorting the present: Tools of Power” – María Gaitán Valencia**

- In Columbia in our stately institutions, fakes are being spread and misinformation about our history is being told
- Erasing history: A narrative that has been deliberately promoted in Columbia to suppress the critical thinking of younger generations - Since 1984 we are not taught about history in school. If you as a teacher want to teach history, you teach what you think is important. Children do not know what “the conflict” (since 1944) is about.
- An overview of the conflict: Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, killed in April 1948. Luis Carlos Retrepo (fugitive from justice) started going against Gaitán. Retrepo is saying that Columbia can only move forward if we kill the memory of Gaitán – he is fighting for inequality, we need to forgive the fight, otherwise we cannot move forward as a country
- The Gaitán House Museum is closed: after Gaitán was assassinated, his widow took the body from the clinic and brought it home as an act of protest to the government. The State’s response was to declare the house a national monument, bury Gaitán’s body in the living room, and expropriate the property in order to evict his widow and daughter. Gaitán’s daughter was removed from the directorship of the museum.
- The state does not see itself as guilty of anything
- Between 2002 and 2008, 6402 individuals were murdered and falsely reported as combat casualties by members of Columbia’s security forces, with their bodies subsequently disappeared. This phenomenon is known as “False Positives”. Despite extensive documentation of these summary executions, some political sectors have sought to deny that they ever took place
- The victims of the so-called “False Positives” were often forced to wear military boots at the time of their execution. In response, the organisation Mothers of False Positives (“Mafapo”) has used these boots in artistic interventions to demand justice, creating a memorial full of boots with paintings on them.
- Years later, Congressmen Miguel Polo Polo publicly threw Mafapos boots into a trash bin while they were on display in Bogotá’s Plaza de Bolívar. A way of saying, “we are not going to talk about this”.
- The words “Las cucas tienen razón” – an expression in Colombian Spanish meaning, “the moms know best” – has appeared across the streets in major cities in recognition of the women who have led the search for their loved ones – victims of extrajudicial executions. These people are looking for their husbands and kids and moms, the state is simply saying “this is not true, you just want money

from the government”. The graffiti words are being painted over all the time, then written again, then painted over, back and forth

- Memory is complicated and very symbolic; we are working with the past and the present, looking for a different future. “All memories all” – the museum will open in 2027, hopefully
- People think that Columbia is at peace, but we are not, we are in conflict. This is why I am here today, to tell you that I live in a country that needs to find peace.

**“Between memory and rewriting: museums as spaces of conflict and reflection on history” – Giorgia Ciolli:**

- Museums have become cultural negotiators of the past; no longer a passive observer but play an active part; the museum is no longer just a holder of objects
- This presentation considers two antithetical case studies:
  - Museum for the Memory of Ustica: Recuperates individual voices through an empathetic exhibition design
    - Each lamp represents one of the 81 citizens that was killed by an action that was effectively an act of war – an undeclared war, an international police operation conducted against our own country, whose borders and rights were violated; *no one has provided the slightest explanation for what happened*
    - The museum leaves place for questions – represents the reflective value of memory
    - The Museum would have never been built if not for the families of the victims
    - They offer programme for schools
  - House of Terror Museum Budapest: Advances a state-sanctioned narrative aligned with dominant power structures
    - Presents itself as a place of the victims (“de-Jewish”) – the museum values the “national” victims (anti-fascists and anti-communists) and neglects the Jewish and collaborationist component of the past
    - The museum aims to show that the perpetrators are also coming from the outside (Nazism from Germany, and Communism from the Soviet) ridding the state of guilt
    - Selective lighting, sounds and digital tools to present the narrative and provoke affection
    - A one-sided view if not challenged
- The aim is not to compare them directly, but to demonstrate their opposite modalities in the interplay between memory and power
- In 2018, the Living Memorial group organised a series of protests against the removal of the statue of Imre Nagy from Kossuth Square in Budapest. The protest highlighted the tensions between official and civil memory, underlining the importance of preserving public spaces of confrontation and historical pluralism- the aim of the group is to listen to victims and avoid that the dominant power tells the story

*Questions and comments from the panel:*

*If your museums/institutions are funded by the state, how can you go against the state?*

**María:** Even the media is now talking about the origins of the conflict. They are not just talking “50 years

ago”, but further back. Which is very exciting, that we are talking about the conflict now. So, our chance is now, and we are not afraid of talking.

*How can you do things with education and schools if history is not taught in schools?*

**María:** We are creating a masters and diploma in “Historical justice” with the ministry of education – “it’s difficult for the minister to talk about history, I don’t know why”

### **SESSION 3 – Constructing, questioning and deconstructing historical narratives**

#### **“Public memory and the heritage agenda”- Muthoni Thang’wa**

- Constructing public memory in Kenya is shaped by:
  - Political and religious narratives, not so much nationalistic narratives
  - Choice of what to include and what to leave out does not include wahudhuriwa (the affected & afflicted)
  - Reliance on written record and archives which were created by the colonial governments, the perpetrators of massacres and the elite – meaning that it is from a colonial perspective, and often does not include those who are most affected
- Conspiracies of silence support false histories:
  - A conspiracy of silence in terror for the survivors of the attacks ensured
  - The colonial government also followed with its own massacre of the ‘perpetrators’
  - The false narrative of collaborators was made a national mantra that still haunts independent Kenya to date
  - The colonial government destroyed many documents that they held in archives
- Kwa-Luka:
  - Is a dream of reconstructing public memory in Kenya through the eyes of the affected and afflicted
  - It will be an effort to reconstruct and present the events that happened during the massacres from oral histories collected from the afflicted and affected
  - Secret archives that have been opened to the public in Britain will help in construct the true narratives
  - Initiate real effort to tackle these deeply contested and ambiguously presented narratives
  - There are several projects in Kenya that aim to give back the power of heritage and memory to the communities that created them
  - There is little effort to work on contested histories, especially those that detail the abuse of human rights and would therefore celebrate reconciliation and the quest for transformational justice
  - Kwa-Luka will address the 1953 massacres: that of Luka Kahangara and his family and those who were consequently hanged for it
- Numerous books including the histories of the hanged document the Kahangara family as completely wiped out – yet some of us would not be here if that was true. The colonial government coerced the families to stay silent. Locals have the perception that they were privileged, while the colonial government ensure that their stories were never told.

- It is time for the true stories on the massacres to see the light of day and it is time to address the false narratives that are associated with the massacres.
- The stories must include those of the alleged perpetrators of the massacres and 'legally' sanctioned massacres that were conducted in retaliation. Hopefully we will witness a genuine change in practice rather than a rebranding exercise
- It will be a painful journey, but it is time we retrace our steps. We must be willing to retrace our steps no matter how far back we need to go to initiate reconciliation and forgiveness. We have a memorial for the attack on the American embassy in Kenya 1998, but not for our own people who were killed.

### **“Geschichte statt Mythen: Combatting historical denialism through research” - Jakob Schergaut**

- “Geschichte statt Mythen” (“History instead of myths”) is a project which is situated in the University of Jena, and is founded by the EVZ (“Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft” - “Remembrance, responsibility, future”), in cooperation with the Buchenwald Memorial Site
- Aims to monitor, analyse and debunk historical revisionism, denialism and negationism
- We try to monitor websites, social media, public relations, and journalism
- An example of the work we do is the Gispersleben Affair:
  - Context: Debate in the state parliament of Thuringia on November 14, 2024
  - Topic: Proposal to declare May 8, 2025 a public holiday for the liberation from Nazism
  - Sascha Schlösser (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) speech: A case of historical revisionism (practically everyone except for AfD talked about responsibility and the past)
- The key points of Schlössers speech were:
  - A focus on German suffering (displacement, Allied crimes)
  - In response to another speaker, who remembered the liberation of Buchenwald on April 11, 1945: *“Go to Gispersleben! There is a small gravestone. 50 young German soldiers were murdered there on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 1945!”* meaning that instead of remembering the liberation of Buchenwald, we should remember the 50 German soldiers “murdered in cold blood”
- The gravestone in question has 38 names written – one of them Franz (SS leader) – and is put on the site where they were shot
- What really happened in Gispersleben:
  - April 10-11, 1945: Heavy fighting between German (SS, Wehrmacht, Volkssturm) and American troops
  - SS executed American prisoners, and the US troops retaliated and executed 12 members of the SS (Also, American troops had a few days before liberated Ohrdruf KZ camp – they said, “no more prisoners for today” and executed them)
- Schlösser mixes and exaggerates the numbers: he distorts numbers by mixing those who were executed and those who were killed in battle – and then we compare Buchenwald victims with the 12 SS soldiers. In other words, he compares civil victims of Nazi Germany with allied war crimes
- Historical revisionism explained:
  - Definition: Distortion or falsification of historical facts
  - Techniques:

- Emphasizing German suffering while ignoring Nazi crimes
    - Using misleading comparisons (Allied crimes vs. Nazi crimes)
  - Purpose: Rehabilitate far-right politics and narratives. If we decriminalise Nazi crimes, it is easier to legitimately talk about right wing politics again
- The aim of the AfD is to shift focus from Nazi victims to German suffering. It is a manipulation and misuse of history for political goals
- Why this matters...
  - It undermines historical truth and democratic values
  - A victim-perpetrator reversal distorts the understanding of World War 2
  - It reinforces right-wing narratives in German politics
- In January, Elon Musk and Alice Weidel (AfD) had a conversation about how Hitler was a communist. The purpose: if Hitler was a communist, the only right answer is right wing policy
- Conclusion:
  - Historical revisionism is a tool for political manipulation, and understanding and exposing these strategies is crucial.
  - Historians need to find new paths to communicate their findings to the public. The problem is that history does not happen on Instagram; we need to find new ways of communicating to the public, otherwise we are just talking to ourselves and among ourselves

### “Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Generative AI” - Nils Roemer

- Technology is not just a tool; it changes according to where we are
- We are required to use technology for accessing archives, simply because of the extent of the archives
- How can we preserve Holocaust memories and lessons for future generations?
  - In recent years, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as both a promising solution and a potential risk in this endeavor.
  - On the one hand, AI-driven projects enable interactive dialogues with survivors’ testimonies and immersive reconstructions of historical sites, **offering powerful new ways to engage with history.**
  - On the other hand, experts warn that without **ethical safeguards**, these **same technologies** could distort the historical record and even fuel Holocaust denial and antisemitism
- Various generative AI projects have emerged, focusing on preserving and sharing Holocaust memories through new technology
- Collaborations among institutions have fostered innovative approaches to enhance Holocaust education and remembrance using generative AI
- Technological advancements, including AI, play a significant role in developing interactive experiences related to Holocaust memory
- Interactive installation with holographic representations (Dallas):
  - The installation employs advanced holographic technology, allowing for immersive interactions with 3D representations of survivors.
  - Using natural language processing and voice recognition, the installation facilitates real-time Q&A sessions with holographic figures.

- Showcased in museums worldwide, this installation promotes awareness and education about the Holocaust and other genocides
- “I witness”:
- Launched in 2023, this project enables interaction with ten survivors from the museum’s community, enhancing audience engagement.
- The system is available online, ensuring accessibility for a global audience, transcending geographical boundaries.
- The project emphasizes non-generative AI retrieval to guarantee the authenticity of responses, enhancing trust and credibility.
- Bringing together a Holocaust Museum, university library, and the Shoah Foundation exemplifies a successful collaborative effort.
- “Tell me, Inge...”:
- This VR experience utilizes AI technology to deliver powerful testimonies from Holocaust survivors, enhancing historical education.
- The project is a collaboration between tech startups, UNESCO, and other organizations, highlighting global teamwork in education.
- The VR experience is freely available on multiple platforms and in various languages, ensuring wide accessibility
- Supported by a U.N. agency, the experience serves as an educational tool against Holocaust distortion and misinformation
- Presenting a VR experience created by students from the Ackerman Center
- Arolsen Archives AI Indexing:
  - Partnering with Microsoft's AI for Good initiative, Arolsen Archives utilizes machine learning for efficient document processing and data extraction.
  - An online platform allows volunteers worldwide to validate AI-extracted data, combining crowd-sourcing efforts with AI technology.
  - The Arolsen Archives project serves as a successful model for the digital transformation of archives, inspiring other institutions globally
- The Roma Genocide Map: A project of Yahad-In Unum in Romania
- An issue with using AI is that it relies on the fact that memory stays the same, but memory changes and is a more dynamic process
- **Moving forward:**
  - Projects in Holocaust studies ought to connect these to discussions about memory, trauma and representation
  - AI could lead us from a process of recovery and access to creating counterfactuals to explore silences possibilities (e.g., the lives that could have been)
  - AI as a partner, could be trained to ask questions, to “listen”, and to engage in dialogue, enacting a non-human witness that reflects, interrupts, or re-contextualises human memory (at the moment, it is the computer sciences who are interested in this, and who can be compelled into working with this, not so much historians)
- I would not use words such as “denial” or “distortion”, because distortion comes with a clear political agenda, and AI does not

- AI generates information that is out there, therefore it is “authentic”
- Can AI do something for us that we would not be able to do without it?
- Memory of the Holocaust is not only about authenticity, but also about creativity

*Questions and comments from the panel:*

**Jane:** At our museum we have been uncomfortable with the “Ask a survivor” AI, because many of us have known the survivors – however, the new generation of museum workers are not as uncomfortable. Perhaps this opens up new opportunities.

***(After tour of the Mémorial de la Shoah)***

**“How can museums navigate the complexity of the provenance and authenticity history of their collections?” – Judith Eisenhut Bejerano**

- Who owns the “heirlooms” that are left of now destroyed Jewish communities?
- Parochet from Würzburg – destroyed during Kristallnacht
- The synagogue included sacred textile that was destroyed or stolen – forced to open safes; in 1943 the community was destroyed
- Stolen Jewish items were stored at different locations in Germany
- In 1947 a relative of the family that originally owned this particular Parochet, survived the Holocaust and went to Offenbach and searched for objects – by then the parochet was probably already shipped to Israel; there was no request or claim for this item
- Next object: The parochet from Bergheim (*just the beginning of the research, so we don’t know what happened to this family yet*) – the synagogue was never a synagogue again, but turned into a public space
- The objects have no owners, because there is no community left
- *Who has the rights? Who owns these objects?*

## FAKE AND FALSE HISTORIES - ICMEMOHRI SYMPOSIUM, DAY 2

3 June 2025, Mémorial de la Shoah

### **SESSION 5 – Motives and backgrounds of forgeries: Commercial interests. Political or ideological manipulation. Scientific deception.**

#### **“Judaica collectors in search of identity and authenticity” – Felicitas Heiman-Jelinek:**

- Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Judaica began being collected. With the foundation of Jewish Museums, the demand for items grew
- With nationalist movements these items began symbolising identity and were labelled as antique
- Economic forces – the object looking like a human foot coming into the collection of the Jewish Museum in London 1920s
- The Italian Jewish wedding rings are popular collectors’ items, but cannot be traced in documents, but this has not been regarded as a sign of forgery – one of the examples dated to 1600s, on museum’s site today it says “uncertain” [provenance]
- Many objects are being misinterpreted (willingly or not): for example, anything with the hexagon is seen as Jewish (mistaken as the Star of David)
- Label: “Iron from Jewish ownership” (because of the hexagon); however, the hexagon was considered to protect from fire outbreaks, which is why it would be found on an iron – and has nothing to do with Judaism
- The same goes for fish shaped containers which were interpreted as eastern European and became popular as collectors’ items
- Post-Holocaust: the demand became high. Especially with the rise of Jewish museums.
- It mattered to the collector “what Jewish art should look like”; the example here, is a Russian object with a figurine of a bearded man, mistaken to be depicting a Jewish man
- Forgeries of art and cultural object, expression of historical, economic and political influence: it is about what we want to be, more than actual history
- In general:
  - Studying forgeries is not just about exposing fakes – it is about uncovering the deeper structures that shape our collective understanding of the past and of our interpretations of that past
  - Forgeries are not merely objects of deception but documents of their time. They reflect a cultural longing for history just as much as an economic will to translate that history into commodities. Their existence tells the story of a market more invested in value than in truth and of a time that constructs “authenticity” and consumes that very construction.
- Specific considerations:
  - The search for reconstructions and even forgeries can serve as a form of identity affirmation for Jewish collectors as well as for visitors to Jewish museums. In a history shaped by repeated ruptures, expulsions, and losses, there arose a profound need for material continuity which supported and supports self-assertion.

- Reconstructed or allegedly authentic objects offer a sense of historical and cultural continuity – they create a connection to a past that has been silenced or destroyed, a need that became even more acute after 1945

### **“The role of forgeries in political storytelling” – Cordélia de Brosses**

- Tales of forgery are often presented from an economic and psychological point of view. The purpose of this talk is to challenge the rather simplistic view of fakes and explore the role of forgery in the political rewriting of history
- Revenge of society for not recognising their value (examples – the forger becoming the victim in the “The Forger”)
- Three case studies of forgeries and political retelling:
  - The Donation of Constantine – a forged document used to spread disinformation and justify territorial claims during the Carolingian period
    - A forged text produced during the Carolingian period. Emperor Constantine handing over. Describes Emperor Constantine handing over Rome and the western part of his empire to Pope Sylvester I and his successors back in 315
    - Its authenticity was seriously questioned in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla in an essay published in 1442
  - Hans van Meegeren – a painter who manipulated history through forged artworks, and later manipulated the justice system during his trial in the XXth century
    - Hans van Meegerens fake Vermeer: A puzzle for art historians! Van Meegerens painting supported Bredius’ theory that Vermeer had gone through a religious phase. He went from being to outcast to become a hero.
    - How could this picture be mistaken for being a “Vermeer masterpiece”? At the end the expert saw what he deeply wanted to see
  - Photography as a Propaganda Tool – how photography has been used to alter or distort historical facts for political purposes
    - Once hailed as a mirror of reality – photos were seen as being the truth – photography quickly became a medium of manipulation
    - Authoritarian regimes used retouching to reshape collective memory and historical narratives
    - Manipulation of photographs used as political erasure: Disgraced figures were removed from official images –
      - In example:
        - The picture of the Soviet soldiers putting their flag on Reichstag in Berlin 1945, where the picture has been altered to hide that there were two watches on the soldier’s wrists seen as he had been looting the falling city; they didn’t want this to be seen
        - The picture of Lenin giving a speech during the Russian Revolution 1920. Kamenev and Trotsky were later erased from the same picture. Now, they are just “ghost figures”
        - The picture of Stalin walking besides Nikolai Iejov. Iejov was later removed. The USSR transforms former allies into ghosts

- AI as one of the greatest threats to the integrity of historical truth today. It is an accessible tool for everyone and therefore a perfect tool for anyone to create misinformation
  - AI-generated deepfakes blur the line between fact and fiction in public memory
  - There is a decline of fact-checking on major platforms and accessible AI tools
  - Case Study: New Zealand’s National Party used AI images in 2023 campaign — this was later admitted
  - New tools to detect AI-generated content such as AI Art Detector, Winston AI, and Illuminarty.
- TRANSPARENCY is important with the use of AI
- Conclusions:
  - Forgeries can reshape history. It can reshape a map of territories through disinformation, manipulate our vision of art history and even used as a propaganda tool, where inconvenient truths are erased
  - From propaganda to art historical distortion, falsification has deep cultural and political stakes.
  - Two interesting initiatives:
    - The Registrar of Fakes: A proposed legal framework in France to formally track and classify fakes — already passed by the Senate.
    - A Museum of Fakes: A space for critical engagement with forgeries, fostering public awareness and interdisciplinary dialogue.
    - Some initiatives have been taken on by British Museum and V&A

**“Of flying discs, wonder weapons and the Black Sun – conspiracy narratives around the Wevelsburg” – Kirsten John-Stücke**

- Wevelsburg is associated the nationalist ideology and criminal acts – through the last 80 years these turned into numerous legends and myths, and right-wing conspiracy theories
- The real history of this historical place: In 1933, Heinrich Himmler (SS) was searching for a place in Westphalia to be a special meeting place for the highest SS generals – for him, Westphalia was the home of the Aryan Nordic race
- Himmler became aware of Wevelsburg castle, rented it, and established a scientific research centre (full of nationalist ideology)
- Starting in 1939, Himmler deployed concentration camp visitors from a nearby camp, to further expand Wevelsburg into a gigantic fortress. The whole village would have been destroyed had the original plan for the expanding of the fortress been realised
- On the April 2, 1945, Americans liberated the prisoner commando. By this time Himmler had already had the castle blown up and it burned to the ground, except for the north tower
- As early as the 1950s, the narratives of the former SS members began to give rise to crypto-historical legends surrounding Wevelsburg castle; these legends claimed that there was a previously true hidden history of the national socialists, in which secret societies operated behind the scenes of world politics, to promote the Nazi movement
- Various publications have described the SS as a secret order, for example a report by Karl Wolff (Himmler’s personal adjutant) – they described Wevelsburg Castle as an isolated SS Monastery,

where the SS met as a secret consistory. Wolff claimed that Himmler and the SS came together at Wevelsburg Castle like King Arthur and his twelve knights of the roundtable. They specifically mention the two rooms in the (surviving north tower) as secret SS meeting rooms, but provide no evidence

- Fantasy literature from the 1960s and onwards, also brought up these crypto-historical motives – primarily with the SS being superhuman in a form of demonic order secretly striving for world domination, with Wevelsburg being the magical centre of the order, so to speak
- Wevelsburg Castle takes on a similar role in numerous thrillers and comics, whose plots centre on the SS as a secret order
- In 1992, the name Black Sun was first released. Since then, the sun wheel has developed into a symbol of the political right-wing scene, and is now also used by violent right-wing extremists
- For them, it is irrelevant that the sun wheel symbol had no meaning for the SS and that the SS did not use the term “Black Sun” themselves
- Some of the conspiracy narratives surrounding Wevelsburg Castle is based on esoteric themes, such as the so-called Vril Society of Cosmic Forces. Vril refers to a supposed elementary power that governs the earth through cosmic influences and extraterrestrial lifeforms. Here too, there is supposedly secret knowledge of forces passed on through the ranks of secret organisations, including residents from the Atlantis.
- The Vril Society is set to have contributed to the rise of national socialism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the help of their secret knowledge and cosmic forces.
- What these right-wing esoteric conspiracy theories have in common is that they often trivialised national socialism and its crimes, by spreading even more antisemitic propaganda. The fact that the content of these conspiracy narratives is also combined with the role of Wevelsburg Castle can be traced back to the so-called Vienna Circle
- Former SS member wrote a book about the so-called Vril project, and a book called *The Thule Novel*, which also gave further life to the myths and legends of Black Sun and flying discs – myths and legends about inhabitants from Atlantis and Thule existed even before the common era, and still radiates energy today
- In these novels there is also mentioned a rocket base in the South Pole, where SS members who survived the war were stationed. So, you might imagine that there is the South Pole, there are flying discs, and there is the north tower of Wevelsburg Castle where the flying discs would fly over. From the South Pole the SS men launched supposed Reich flying forces to fight for world domination and start a new Reich.
- According to conspiracy theories of esoteric Hitlerism, Hitler did not die but fled to the Earth's interior, to the South Pole. There he is protected by SS men with special abilities, and he will return to the Earth for the final battle. According to this theory there was an inner circle of the SS that wanted to fight a mythical battle and use Wevelsburg Castle as its centre.
- For several years, the motifs of Nazis surviving the war, have been taken up in pop culture in movies, games, comics, etc. Stories with Nazis living in space, for example. Wevelsburg Castle and the Black Sun symbol are often used as a code for national socialism and the SS, like with the movie *Iron Sky* from 2012.

- These conspiracy theories are extremely powerful in today's esotericism. Many followers of both right-wing esotericism and conspiracies, and right-wing extremism are attracted to Wevelsburg Castle as a supposed place of consecration and a place of worship, and want to experience Wevelsburg Castle as an authentic place
- To Wevelsburg District Museum – where I come from – it is a constant challenge when trying to respond to this particular group of visitors and maintaining the image of Wevelsburg Castle as a historical, political learning centre committed to educate and strengthen the fundamental story of the Reich as well as a memorial site to the victims of SS violence
- As a consequence, we have put orange beanbag chairs into our northern tower, to prevent this atmosphere of it being a secret society, or something like that, and visitors can sit here without being overwhelmed by the architecture

*Questions and comments from the panel:*

**Felicitas:** It is hard for museums to admit when they have fakes; it is hard to overcome. Many museums do not see the potential of the interpretation of these objects – we get a different authenticity out of this interpretation and puts the object to its right

**Kirsten:** Cordelia's idea of a fake museum is interesting. You cannot see the difference between the real SS skull-rings and the fake ones, but you can tell the story and tell the story of the fakes, and why people create fakes. It is interesting to talk to the visitors about this, and it is the duty of the museum to talk about this – even if the visitors do not like this

**Jane:** The emotional aspect is missing from this discussion. We have been given several collections directly from survivors and in those collections are inauthentic objects. In one case, I would definitely call it a fake and a forgery; there was a man named Arnold Shay, who became fairly well-known within the United States, for going around and talking about his experiences as a Holocaust survivor. When he died we got his almost his entire – I wouldn't say, "collection", but stuff. Including half-full liquor bottles. In that, there was direct evidence that he was manufacturing objects to bring to his events, to demonstrate the horrors of the Holocaust. The main example, that comes to my mind, is, that he would purchase Torah-scroll fragments, and himself, make inserts for shoes, for insulation, and wallets. Unfortunately, when I have visited other Jewish museums that have Holocaust exhibitions, I have been able to spot some of those objects on display, as examples of what the Nazis did, and the disrespect that they had for the Torah. It was a shock to me, but I, in a sense, - that someone would do this, particularly a Jewish man cutting up the Torah. In a sense, I came to peace with it, because he was a very, very embittered man, who never really fully got over the trauma, and it was his way of struggling with the past and history. So, there is this emotional aspect to the creation of inauthentic or fake objects. At the other end of the spectrum, I have a good friend who is not a survivor, but is a first generation. Her older brother was born in a DP-camp, so she has a very direct link to the Holocaust. She collects antique dolls. On some of these dolls there is the six-pointed star emblem, and she is convinced that that is a symbol that the doll-manufacturer was owned by Jews, that it was a Jewish enterprise. And nothing I can say, no publication I can point to will shift her off that idea. And that again, is an example of the emotional ties to this.

**Felicitas:** We see the assertion of identity again in Jane's example, where authenticity is understood as an emotional and cultural resonance.

## **SESSION 6 – To what extent do curators and exhibition concepts influence the perception of authenticity and historical veracity?**

### **“The Underground Camera” – Erik Somers**

- From May 1940 to May 1945 the Netherlands was under Nazi occupation. Repression was harsh and freedom was severely limited. The persecution of the Jews and the deportation to concentration camps had been taking place at full-force, and by the final year of the war nearly all the Jews had been deported. Only a few thousand remained in hiding. Life became increasingly difficult for the general population. In the South, liberation had begun in September 1944, but the West and North of the Netherlands remained occupied.
- The resistance grew more active, and the occupiers responded mercilessly. Reprisals, arrests, and even executions became part of daily life.
- In the summer of 1944, two young men were in hiding in Amsterdam: Tony van Renterghem, a Dutch soldier and resistance fighter, and Fritz Kahlenberg, a Jewish filmmaker who had fled Germany in 1933. Kahlenberg had work in the film industry before the war. They went out into the streets with false papers.
- After the allied landings in Normandy in June 1944, it seemed that the end of the war was near. And van Renterghem and Kahlenberg got the idea of getting together a group of trusted Dutch photographers, to make sure that the liberation would be completely documented.
- But the liberation came much later than hoped, and van Renterghem and Kahlenberg adjusted their plans. They built a network of photographers in Amsterdam and gave them the mission to document the occupation of the city, as a testimony for the future – not the images that the German occupiers wanted to show, but the harsh reality, the real effects of occupation on everyday life. These photographs served as a counterbalance to the dominant and controlled and propagandistic images of the German occupiers, which showed a false version of reality.
- In that sense, photography played a powerful role in combatting disinformation and preserving the truth, whichever that may be. Taking photographs carried serious risks. From November 1944 and onwards, it was strictly forbidden to photograph in public. Throughout the occupation it had already been prohibited to photograph military objects.
- First, Fritz Kahlenberg maintained the contact with the photographers, but it was not an organised resistance group, more of an informal network. To reduce the risk, most of the photographers did not know who else were involved. He gave the photographers assignments of who to photograph, and sometimes, why.
- Dark rooms were secretly put up across the city, for developing and printing.
- Sometimes the cameras were concealed in a bag, and distraction tactics were used when a photographer was about to take a photo. For example, someone dressed as a nurse would not raise suspicion and drew attention away from the photographer “rummaging in her bag” next to her.
- One important subject for the photographers was the physical presence of the German occupation forces. Another subject, which was the riskiest assignment, was to photograph strategic Nazi locations. The films were smuggled to the liberated South, often on microfilm hidden in for example the battery compartment of a flashlight.

- The photographers documented daily life in the city on their own initiative. And from October 1944, daily life changed drastically. Since the South had been liberated, the North was cut off from food and fuel, gas and electricity were shut off, schools closed, people were queueing up at soup kitchens, and houses were torn down for firewood.
- Photographing resistance activities was extremely dangerous and the photos are therefore rare. Photographs of people in hiding, and where there were hiding. Today, it seems extremely irresponsible, because if these photos were to get into the wrong hands the results could be fatal. But today they offer a unique look into the functioning of the resistance. The photographers would take pictures with themselves in it; therefore, the photographers were not outsiders, they were an active part of the story.
- In January 1945, the situation for the people of the city became terrible. It was a harsh winter and no longer hunger, but an actual famine. Photographers captured these inhumane conditions. Some of the photos are posed but not staged. An important point.
- My colleague and I interviewed a few of the photographers in the 1990s and our Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, possess the main part of these photos in their collection, and I have grown up in my career with these photos.
- The situation became so desperate that a cry for help was sent to London
- The photos hold a great artistic value despite, or perhaps, because of the difficult circumstances they were made under. They are technically strong and visually powerful.
- After the war, these men went their separate ways, and for many, this was in fact the start of their career. But not everyone wanted to be reminded of these dark times and what had happened, so for some of them it was a kind of a burden.
- For the current research project and book publication, we made an exhibition, and it can be seen as a tribute to these photographers who showed the world what had happened.
- This message and the intention of the hidden camera is timeless. International tensions are once again dominating the world, and the war and tyranny that the underground camera documented once seemed far behind us but are, as you all know, moving ever closer again. The essential question today is, can we protect the hard-won freedom and democratic values that we often take for granted?
- This question was asked by the mayor of Amsterdam, who opened this exhibition three weeks ago, and during that, he said, “even today, there are people who risk their lives to be a witness for injustice” and she referred to Fatma Hassona a 25 year old Palestinian photographer, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike this year, just a couple weeks ago. Day after day, she photographed destroyed buildings, bleeding and dying civilians, and starving children. And as a counterbalance, she also showed the continuation of daily life. Her camera was a weapon against forgetting.
- Remembering also Maksym Levin a Ukrainian photographer who was killed while documenting Russian attacks on Kyiv. He photographed the destruction of cities, the people who were killed, and the bravery of the Ukrainian forces. During the invasion, the photographer wrote, “every Ukrainian photographer dream of taking a photo that will stop the war”.
- So, the camera is a weapon; not to kill but to record, and to bear witness, to offer hope and that is what the photographs of the underground camera did as well.

- Their work urges us to cherish democracy and the freedom that we won, especially now. War and tyranny are once again entering our world, and it transcends a historical context and a message of courage, resistance, and the power of truth.

### **“The War Heritage Institute and the Department of Remembrance” – Ilse Bogaerts**

- The War Heritage Institute is under the direction Ministry of Defence
- The institute oversees five locations, and each of these historical sites adds to the collective memory of the numerous conflicts, big and small, that has occurred in Belgium or elsewhere, as well as the men and women who died during those conflicts
- The Institute seeks to uphold the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for human rights and democracy and freedom and peace
- It is a museum within a museum; it dates from 1923 – historians are working to contextualise the objects, and it is a work in progress
- Recontextualising and framing the older exhibitions, helps us to understand how over one hundred years ago, how colonies were seen: We can understand the framing and understanding of Belgium’s colonisation and the paternalizing thoughts of the colonies
- A new permanent World War 2 exhibition (3200m<sup>2</sup>) opened in 2018. It tells of the suffering of the Belgium population during the German occupation, and it received major attention. It was a move away from national heroic battlefield stories toward broader narratives based on scientific research:
  - The Nazi-occupation of Belgium in a European context; daily life of civilians during occupation; the collaboration, the resistance, and the repression; the armies in Eastern Europe, the race and battle for Berlin; the Asia-Pacific War; the concentration camps and the Holocaust; the liberation of Belgium and the use of V-bombs on Belgium; and the liberation of Europe, VE-day explained.
- Not about proving authenticity, but about how statues are interpreted in an exhibition – Hitler, Stalin and (?) were placed as equals, but moved because they didn’t want Stalin next to the two others (ideological sensitivity) – placement of statues influence individuals and how they view history – diplomats felt it was historically incorrect
- Roles of military museums – renewed storylines in a modern scenography
  - Uniforms of prominent figures are still on show in modern exhibitions, therefore honouring the collection (there was at one point some talking about Herman Fegeleins uniform not being authentic; a rumour started by two dismissed employees who had started this rumour to diminish the institution)
  - Illuminated train tracks are used to introduce the deportation of Jews, Roma and Sinti from Belgium
- One of the initiatives that has been rather successful is *“History Comes to You”* which visits schools unable to visit the museum itself. Aimed at historical as well as social awareness, this low-threshold educational offer is connected to workshops of identity
- *“The Train of 1000”* is another esteemed project that annually lets hundreds of students participate in a five-day journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Krakow. These field trips are well-prepared in the classroom before departure, because one of the pillars of remembrance is knowledge and understanding

- The War Heritage Institute gives memory education especially great weight.
  - “If we do not know our own history, we are doomed to live it as if it were our private destiny,” Hannah Arendt said.
- Belgium has long lacked public recognition of resistance fighters (as opposed to their neighbouring countries France and Netherlands) – we are giving place to a more complicated history
- What a country decides to remember says as much about what they are deciding to overlook and forget
- We may conclude that public memory is not fixed; it is a dynamic and continuous process that calls for vigilance, balance, and critical thought.

### “The Photomontage Works of Foto Ada” – Sonja Palade

- In 2024, four photomontages attributed to the Hungarian photographer Elemérné Marsovszky, also known as ‘Foto Ada’, were proposed as a donation to the Department of Photography at Centre Pompidou. They were dated to the 1930s.
- The works themselves were untitled, and they had no significant inscriptions of any kinds, no signatures, no data, no stamps, nothing
- They had previously been bought at an auction and there was no further provenance
- Furthermore, none of my colleagues had ever seen these works or heard about the artist, who is unfortunately not very known. Together with my colleague, I started researching them and their provenance before being able to accept the donation proposal, and secondly, in light of recent cases of suspected forgery of avant garde works in other museums, especially collages, we were also a little more cautious regarding their authenticity
- The research is still ongoing, but I would like to give you a short overview of the different approaches that we used to try and find out more about these objects
- Our first question was, what could be a plausible context in which these works could have been created, and how to they connect to other artworks that we know
  - Many avant garde collage creators in the interwar period. In Hungary specifically, collages were especially popular among the left and activists, and a network of avant garde collage artists were established, however, Foto Ada was not a part of any of these networks and there is nothing that suggests she was in contact with them. Furthermore, there are no traces of any of her collage works in any of their publications, therefore it is unlikely that the collages were made in this context
  - But collages were also used for other purposes, for example in design and advertising. More on that later
- Next, we were trying to see how many other similar works that had been attributed to the same artist – Marsovszky – and I was surprised to find that there were a lot more. Since the mid-1990s, following the discovery of an anonymous notebook containing similar collage works in Budapest, around 100 collages have been attributed to Marsovszky and have since been circulating on the market
- These works have gained popularity in the anglophone world over the last five to ten years, with 42 collages held in museums or public collections: 39 in the US, two in the UK and one in Australia
- Interestingly none of them are held in Hungarian collections and none of the Hungarian colleagues that we spoke to had ever heard about them or seen them before.

- Through these institutional collections we were able to gain a little more information about the provenance, for example which gallery they were donated through – one in San Francisco and one in London, who had bought them from a Hungarian collector. When we reached out to him, we confirmed that there was a total of 100, maybe more, collages that appeared from the same source, namely the former employee of Foto Ada, who sold the book of collages in the 80s in a flea market in Budapest
- We looked further into the materials of the artworks: how were they made and what do they consist of? Most of them are made from newspaper prints collaged onto off-white background paper, which corresponds with the other works that are in circulation. In general, they are in very good condition, with almost no visible defects. Through comparison with archival materials, I was able to identify the publication sources of the newspaper clippings on the collages. All of them do in fact come from Hungarian newspapers and magazines published between the 1920s and early 1940s. However, this is not necessarily indicative of the period of which they were created.
- What we know about Foto Ada; her name was Adrienn “Ada” Eleménné Marsovszky, born Ackermann and she was born in 1895. Unfortunately, very little information on the artist is publicly available and even in Hungary she is not very well known. However, colleagues have worked to find out more about her. She was born in Zsombolya in Hungary (today, Romania); she studied painting in Budapest and then did a photography apprenticeship with József Pécsi. In the 1930s she worked as a commercial photographer in Budapest, and she opened her own studio. Then suddenly she disappears and there are no traces of her after 1944, and until recently it was not known what had happened to her afterwards, and the exact day of her death in 1949 was not known. This gap was speculated on by the galleries that sold her works, and they suspected her to be Jewish and a victim of the Holocaust.
- Looking at the biographies of Marsovszky’s contemporaries, it is not unlikely that this might have been the case. The collection at Pompidu has a large collection of Jewish Hungarian photographers, but the collection overwhelmingly represents those that had left the country already much earlier and lived in exile. The biographies of many other Hungarian Jewish photographers are often hard to reconstruct because there are few available resources. And for Marsovszky and others, it is important to remember that women still to this day have been underrepresented in modernist photography. They have been disregarded by the art historical canon for a long time, and this is reflected in the gap in the archives.
- Fortunately, we have been able to find the missing piece to the gap in the story of Marsovszky. In 1944, as the Red Army enters Budapest, Marsovszky flees to Sopron and from there to Germany. For the next year, she lives in Munich as a DP. In 1948 she fills out a form for financial aid for emigration to Paris, New York, or Caracas with the IRO, and this request was accepted. However, she never got to emigrate, since she died in Germany in 1949, and this last information was given to us by a distant member of her family. Her belongings were sent back to Budapest – she had brought with her camera equipment, perhaps in the hope of setting up a new studio.
- Her later works included dance photos, portrait photos, and advertising photos – later architecture photos, however, not under the name *Foto Ada*
- A thought from yesterday: It is important that we address the gaps and the voids. Do not fill it with some immediate interpretation; our interpretation says a lot about our assumptions.

*Questions and comments from the panel:*

**Jill Vexler:** A comment on institutional memory (in the Belgium example): It is important to preserve the museum within the museum – it reinforces your message that a change has happened – it's important to see because *this is the way things were!*

*Why are the underground pictures only being shown now?*

**Erik:** The history had never been researched, they needed the context and that is what we have given them now; we have made some critical remarks on how the photos have been used, but the photos were already quite known

## **SESSION 7 – Fakes and forged histories: The role of museum educators**

### **“Desire in stone: Sufi love, Nationalist Erasure, and the Politics of Memory” - Shataxi Chauhan**

- My personal encounter with the tombs of Jamali Kamali: I was introduced to the site on a queer heritage walk. It was hidden in plain sight, yet so intermate, so charged. “Why hadn't I heard this story before?” This walk became the beginning of my inquiry into memory, love, and erasure
- Sufi love and queer intimacy:
  - Jamali: Persian Sufi poet in early Mughal Delhi – buried 1535
  - Kamali: Companion, lover, disciple? His identity remains undefined
  - They share a tomb, which is in masculine forms under a feminised dome
  - Sufi idea of “ishq”: Love as a divine dissolution of binaries
  - Ambiguity = resistance
- Heritage as erasure: Sanitising the Sacred
  - State narratives flatten the past for tourism
  - “Incredible India” excludes Islamic and queer pasts
  - No mention of Jamali-Kamali's queer resonance in official records
  - The monuments are treated more as artefacts, and not as affective sites
- Memory and the nation:
  - Heritage policy is shaped by Hindutva and neoliberal agendas
  - Curriculum “rationalisation” erases the history of Mughals, caste, queerness, etc.
  - Misinformation on WhatsApp, Instagram drives moral panic
  - Comedy (Vir Das, for example) becomes dissent; made a song called “Two Indias” that went viral
- The caste of queerness: Whose queerness is archived?
  - Pride and queer joy = upper-caste visibility
  - Dalit, Muslim, and trans bodies are erased or aestheticized
  - According to PhD Akhil Kang are the archives dominated by gay men from the Brahmin caste (the highest-ranking caste)
  - Queerness is only acceptable when it is sanitised and de-politicised
- How can reclaiming queer past restore the memory in India?
  - Jamali-Kamali is not just a tomb – it is a text
    - The public calls it the gay Taj Mahal – a centre of non-normative intimacy; a site of resistant memory

- Remembering queer pasts = reclaiming plural futures
  - The notion of queer theory as a way to analyse how humans experience the same thing – looking at things through queer theory, shows things (like art) in a different perspective. Basically, showing things, that cis-gendered people may not see
- History is not neutral; it is a political act!
- *“Let’s love dangerously. Let’s remember fiercely.”*
- The unexpressed leads to depression which often leads to suicide – talking to a woman with a Psychology Major who works as a suicide counsellor: “I just don’t know if I can live in a world with so much suppression” how old are you? “I’m 20.”
- We need awareness, we need to know what is happening; there are things that are not published most of the time – we must try to remember in these times of political unrest; discuss queer history!

**“The Spanish Civil War has already jumped on the Fake News bandwagon” - Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia (and Idoia Orbe Narbaiza)**

- Gernika Peace Museum and Fake News: A concern for the educational department:
  - We noticed that when young people come to our museum, they know very little about the historical context of the Spanish Civil War. What you must keep in mind, is that they only start knowing something about the Civil War from the age of 14.
  - Disinformation: There is a growth of extremism everywhere and revisionism of the Franco movement, and this has an impact on young people and the information that they receive.
    - An example would also be the political extreme right, who use TikTok to approach young people. For us in the museum, this is a new method of communication, and we cannot control this, so many things can happen...
  - Among colleagues in ours and in other memory museums that we work with, for example Argentina, Chile, Mexico there is a concern about the sources used by students
    - We sometimes asked them, “do you believe everything you read? Do you believe everything you receive? How do you know if what you receive via facebook, via Instagram is right or wrong? Do you know how to look critically at the information presented to you?” And when we asked them these questions, they look at us as if they do not know what we are talking about
  - Another concern for us is the use of artificial intelligence and its use to create fake news
    - All the pupils use AI, all the teachers use AI, but how and for what?
    - We are thinking about having an exhibition next year, of photos made by AI depicting the Spanish Civil War. These pictures are not going to be real, and we would talk about the ethical issues in fake photos like these spreading
- ... and because of all the abovementioned concerns, we created our educational workshop about fake news
- This workshop is designed for secondary school students, 12 to 17 years old. It is a workshop that I think should take longer, but an issue at hand is that if the classes come, they only have 50 minutes, one hour maximum to do this. Therefore, we cannot do everything we would like to do.

- During the workshop, the students become historians who want to know the facts, and they have to talk to the others about issues – but with *real* facts. They have to use materials from archives, for example newspapers
  - Parts of the workshop:
    - 1. What is fake news? Have you seen, read, or listened to any? Where? When?
    - 2. Running a test through a museum programme called “Genially” to see if they are in fact fake or not
    - 3. Explanation of the context of the Spanish Civil War and the bombing of Gernika. It is important that we do not assume that they know the historical context, when they come to our museum
    - 4. Students are divided into six small groups where they will do research on newspapers from the period; two groups will work on republican newspapers; two groups will work on a rebel newspaper and two groups will work on the testimonies
    - 5. The students are given a worksheet to help analyse the material (asks them to pay attention to what newspaper it is, the date, journalist, language, country, etc.)
    - 6. They will know look for keywords and seeing if they can find any forms of manipulation
    - 7. Here we have our conclusion, where we tell the students that as they have just witnessed the same story can be taught/explained in different ways
    - 8. Lastly, we give the students tips and tools to recognise Fake News when it is presented to them

### “Addressing historical misinformation in the classroom” – Athanasios Vitas

- **Memory Museums as Pedagogical Tools:**
  - In an era where the past is not merely studied but contested, we face a critical challenge. Misinformation spreads across digital platforms while historical denialism undermines the foundations of informed democracy. As custodians of memory, we must equip future generations with both facts and the tools to discern truth from fabrication.
  - Today, I invite you to reimagine the classroom as a dynamic space where the past is interrogated, felt, and ethically engaged with. At the heart of this vision lies the transformative potential of memory museums – institutions that merge critical inquiry with emotional resonance.
  - In this presentation we will explore memory museums as sites of truth-telling, through a case-study from a Greek Gymnasium, and discuss the broader implications for global education in an age of digital disinformation.
- **Theoretical Framework: Memory Museums as Sites of Truth-telling**
  - (*visually, from the top of the triangle and down*) Pedagogy of witnessing – transcends mere facts to confront ethical dimensions
  - Active negotiation – history as ongoing dialogue between past and present
  - Multisensory engagement – dismantling falsehoods through immersive experiences
  - Virtual accessibility – democratising access through digital platforms
- Memory museums occupy a unique space in the cultural landscape. Unlike conventional museums, they confront unresolved legacies of collective trauma

- As Sharon Macdonald notes in “Memorylands”, these spaces frame history as an active dialogue demanding participation, not passive observation
- The “Pedagogy of witnessing” (seen above) coined by Roger I. Simon transforms abstract statistics into visceral reality. When students stand before children’s shoes from Auschwitz or hear a survivor’s testimony, they bear witness to human cost, fostering empathy that challenges digital desensitisation
- **The Power of Multisensory Engagement:**
  - Exposing propaganda mechanics: Museums juxtapose antisemitic caricatures with photographs of Jewish families, revealing the incremental erosion of empathy that enabled genocide
  - Democratising access: Virtual tours allow students from remote regions to “walk” through Auschwitz barracks or explore the Jewish Museum of Athens from their classrooms
  - Interactive learning: Digital platforms integrate timelines, survivor testimonies, and guided reflections to deepen engagement beyond physical limitations
- Memory museums dismantle historical falsehoods through multisensory engagement. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s exhibit on Nazi propaganda exposes dehumanisation tactics by contrasting propaganda with real Jewish lives. Visitors understand not only what happened but how it happened – the gradual erosion of empathy that enabled atrocities
- Virtual tours have revolutionised accessibility. These digital platforms allow learners worldwide to experience these powerful spaces, creating tailored pedagogical interventions that enhance rather than merely substitute physical visits
- **Case study: Bridging Kalymnos, Auschwitz, and Athens**
  - Phase 1: Contextualising denial: Students analysed Nazi propaganda alongside Holocaust survivors’ diaries, identifying rhetorical tactics of scapegoating and dehumanisation
  - Phase 2: Virtual immersion: Virtual journeys to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Jewish Museum of Athens, followed by guided discussions on how physical spaces shape understanding
  - Phase 3: Creative synthesis: Students created digital storytelling projects weaving historical facts with personal reflections and survivor testimonies
- In 2004, I conducted an educational experiment with students from a Greek gymnasium on Kalymnos, an island distant from Holocaust memory sites. Initial surveys revealed concerning trends. 20% questioned the Holocaust’s scale, influenced by social media rhetoric. My goal was to dismantle misconceptions and cultivate historical empathy through virtual museum experiences.
- The project unfolded in three carefully designed phases (seen above), each building on critical thinking and emotional engagement. Without VR headsets due to financial constraints, we relied on conventional projectors to create meaningful connections to these distant historical sites
- **Virtual immersion experience:**
  - Auschwitz-Birkenau virtual tour: Students navigated the camp’s architecture: railroad tracks leading to gas chambers, stark barracks, and haunting personal belongings, transforming abstract knowledge into spatial understanding
  - Jewish Museum of Athens: With a museum educator’s guidance, students explored artifacts including Torah scrolls from destroyed synagogues and resistance fighters’ letters, connecting to Greece’s Jewish heritage

- Guided discussions: Post-tour conversations explored how physical spaces shape our understanding of suffering and which stories are preserved or silenced in museum archives
- **Transformative outcomes:**
  - 40% increased detection: Improvement in students' ability to identify denialist rhetoric after completing the project
  - 20% initial scepticism: Percentage of students who questioned Holocaust scale before the project
  - Three project phases: Structured approach to building critical thinking and emotional engagement
- The results were transformative. Pre- and post-project surveys revealed a 40% increase in students' ability to identify denialist rhetoric. Qualitative interviews showed profound shifts in empathy, with one student noting: "I used to think numbers were just numbers. But seeing the names and faces in the museums – it made me realise each number was a person who laughed, loved, and dreamed."
- Educators across disciplines observed increased student engagement. Learners demonstrated greater scepticism toward reductive narratives and actively sought primary sources. Rather than merely transmitting information, the virtual tours provided frameworks for critical inquiry, equipping students with transferable skills in source evaluation and contextual reasoning
- **Memory Museums in the Post-Truth Era:**
  - Historical literacy as civic armor: Framing history as a complex, multivocal process that inoculates against monolithic narratives
  - Ethics of representation: Centring survivor voices while acknowledging archival silences and avoiding sensationalism
  - Technology – promise and peril: Balancing democratised access with risks of commodifying trauma through thoughtful design
- The Kalymnos initiative illuminates broader imperatives for global education in an age where misinformation proliferates at algorithmic speed, historical literacy becomes a civic necessity. Memory museums exemplify this by teaching students to question whose stories are centred and whose are omitted.
- **Toward a global pedagogy of remembrance:**
  - Global network: Interconnected memory museums united by commitment to truth
  - Cross-border collaboration: Students worldwide analysing shared historical archives
  - Global solidarity: Fostering historical literacy and human connection
  - Spaces of hope: Transforming classrooms into sites of witness and critique
- We stand at a crossroads. The digital age has given denialism a megaphone but also provided tools to amplify truth. Memory museums are not passive monuments but battlegrounds for the soul of history. They teach that the past is a living tapestry of human choices, consequences, and ethical reckonings.
- We envision a global network of memory museums interlinked by virtual platforms. Imagine students in Kalymnos collaborating with peers in Warsaw and Johannesburg to analyse apartheid archives or Cambodian genocide testimony – transcending borders to foster global solidarity.
- As Elie Wiesel said, "To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time."

- Let us honour the dead by equipping the living, transforming classrooms into spaces of witness, critique, and hope. Together, we ensure history remains not a weapon of division, but a teacher of humanity.

## **SESSION 8 – The object as witness or Countering fakes: Challenging stereotypes and distorted history through objects**

### **“Objects after terror” – Anne Lene Andersen (and Lena Fahre)**

- On July 22 2011, Anders Breivik started a mass-shooting on the island of Utøya. In total, 77 people were killed, and many more live with injuries from the attack. Most of them were young people at a political summer camp. The perpetrator was inspired by the Eurabia conspiracy theory.
- The 22 July-centre is a commemoration and learning centre with a mandate to educate and document the events that took place on Utøya; why and how it could happen, human consequences after a terrorist attack, and further related themes in the light of historical and contemporary, national and global questions
- The 22 July centre has been open since 2015, four years after the attack. And in 2026, we will be reopening in rooms where the first attack took place, and where you can still see traces of the attack, and where the bomb exploded.
- Even though we have been a centre for almost ten years, we have only been able to collect objects for the last year.
- In contrast to many of the perpetrators after the Holocaust, who sought to erase the evidence of their crimes, the society today we are facing perpetrators that seek attention and who want to be remembered for their actions, and keep inspiring others to carry out new attacks.
  - After his trial, Anders Bering Breivik contacted the Norwegian Museum of Resistance with a request of them lending his personal objects from the attack.
- I see this shift as very interesting and it raises important ethical questions in our collection work. With this knowledge, why is it still important for the 22 July-centre to collect his personal objects? And in a broader context, what is it in our society that allows a terrorist to believe that his thoughts and actions, would find a certain resonance amongst people in general? So much so, that he wants to donate his artefacts to our Museum of Resistance?
- It is important to address one distinction: In contrast to the proposal Breivik made for the Museum of Resistance in 2012, Breivik himself has not contacted our centre. We have collected objects in our own process, and Breivik’s idea of what is important has never been a part of our decisions of what we find important for the future
- Even though we are focused on collecting objects from many different perspectives, we face a well-known issue for memorial museums:
  - the collection is defined by the perpetrator and the desire for destruction
  - Even though we seek to broaden the perspectives and give the victims’ families, survivors, first-responders, and others affected by the attack, the possibility to donate objects and to document their story, the collection is still being defined by the perpetrator, since there would not be a collection if there had not been an attack.
- In our collection work we had to find some principles for collecting artefacts, because we realised very quickly that the regular principles of collecting for a museum, cannot necessarily be followed in

our work. Because how can we say to the families who want to donate something important for them, and how can we decide which personal artefacts are more important than others. Well, we cannot. And still, we know that we cannot collect everything. We had to find a balance.

- Since we started this work, I have reflected on how the mandate of the institution matters, and how we frame our mandate into our pedagogical philosophy of how we talk about July 22
  - Our mandate helps us contextualise how we receive Breivik's artefacts. Let me give you an example: We have, since we first opened, worked closely with the complexity of portraying Breivik. Our philosophy has always been to talk about Breivik as a person, as one man who was willing to act like he did, and it is important for us to emphasise that this is not something that happened out of the blue. Considering our pedagogical approach to how we talk about and display the perpetrator, it is natural for us that we collect personal objects from him, and displaying it in a sense that highlight our goal to talk about the causes of the attack and the ideology behind it
- Objects alone cannot prove a lot, and if people want to misuse the history or deny that the attack happened, they can and they will – as we all know. But objects play an important role in how we are displaying the history of July 22 and how our society talks about the attack.
- It is important for us to display the object in a context, and to be open with our visitors about what they are looking at.
- In the new exhibition that we are currently working on, we will display Breivik's artefacts in the context of his ideology and his thoughts behind his actions. As some of you might know, Breivik was dressed as a policeman, and his fake ID card, which was a part of his fake uniform, is part of our collection. As time goes on and when people do not remember the attack, it is important for us to show that we was dressed as a police officer – as a person, that the majority of the Norwegian society trust – to give people an understanding of how this could happen, and how he was able to come so close to the island.
- We try to balance our collection, and I do think it is important to let people participate and be a part of the memorialisation process and let people contribute. So, this year, we opened our museum storage in the heart of our new centre, and the victims' families and the survivors are able to come into our centre and document their story at the same place as the first attack happened. We find this very symbolic, and it is important for the families.
- Just a final comment to Jane, and what you said earlier about remembering the aspect of emotion: We feel this every day at the July 22-centre. It is so hard to balance our work and all the emotions. And now that we invite the families in and it is almost like they are co-deciding the collection. I would love to talk more about this subject and that difficult balance.

### **“Challenging stereotypes and distorted narratives in modern history exhibitions” – Eliška Pekárková and Michaela Smidová**

- Focus on LGBTQIA+ community – the other groups are minorities
- “History of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” is a permanent exhibition in the new building of the museum:
  - The most innovative exhibition in the museum
  - It presents Czech Republic history from end of World War 1 to 2004 when we joined EU
  - It is chronological with the centre part being 1945-1968 (Prague spring)

- The conceptual theme is the category of SPACE:
  - Three parts: public, private and semi-public space – meant to highlight the connection between everyday lives and major historical events, with the authors trying to incorporate new aspects; however, these authors consisted of three white, cis-gendered men, who did not discuss this with any marginalised groups, which was criticized
- The exhibition was also criticized for the lack of big parts of conflict and the omission of certain subjects, a lack of national minorities, non-linear narrative, and the handling of controversial or sensitive topics:
  - Criticized for its assumed ethnic homogeneity within the Czech historical narrative,
  - The support for heteronormative and cis-normative historical narrative,
  - The lack of conflict in the historical narrative,
  - And the self-victimization of the Czechs
- Solutions and strategies:
  - Collaboration with institutions that are dealing with marginalised groups (The Museum of Romani Culture, The Society for Queer Memory)
  - Programmes of museum education
  - Focus on especially vulnerable groups of citizens – people with communication barriers or sensory disabilities, people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (refugees, single-parent families, etc.)
- History of diversity: LGBTQIA+ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Czech - Objects were installed into the already existing exhibition!
  - The museum only had a limited collection of these objects, since we only began collecting these in the last 15 years. Before that very little tradition for the collection of LGBTQIA+ in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – began working together with personal collections instead
  - A lot of the collection is of books released in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is being put into the existing exhibition: they are placed into the private space, on a bookshelf or on a table, to show that LGBTQIA+ could be a part of someone's everyday life
- Reflection on identity and the act of self-identifying
  - Aim to stop the spreading of homophobia and queerphobia
  - We started a museum programme to show that queer people have always been a part of Czech society and “not something that was invented in 2016”
  - Answering questions anonymously
- Drew inspiration from the multicultural museum in Oslo:
  - Students were given a label: Ukrainian, highschooler, nerd, TikToker, etc. (Purposefully omitted religious and sexual identity to show a safe space)
  - Discussing and reflecting on the fact that sometimes you have an identity that you don't have a label for; something that queer people have felt for a great part of history
- Challenges:
  - Society's approach to national and other minorities
  - Level of prior knowledge of students and teachers – students and teachers come with preconceived stereotypes
  - Review and adjustment of the inquiry-based tasks based on the feedback

- Effective approaches:
  - Authentic objects: Authenticity is important in this instance, so that we can show that queer people did exist in the Czech public spaces
  - Including fictional media
  - Respectful and respecting discussion because these things can be a cultural taboo and most of the time because of a severe lack of information about things that *we deem* very easy and view as “something they should already know”
    - For example: Some of the teenagers believed society should not give more political, journalistic and marital power to queer people, and that queer people should not go down in history and so on. Much is because of the homophobic tendencies in popular culture

### “Trauma collections: from Forensic Items to Objects” – Nirit Shalev-Khalifa (and Dina Grossman)

- Who we are and what we do:
  - Yad Ben Zvi is a prestigious educational, cultural, and academic institution dedicated to researching and preserving the history of Jewish communities in the East, Jerusalem, and the Land of Israel. Established by legislative order of the Knesset in 1969 and named after Israel’s second president, Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi. We are committed to advancing scholarship and sharing its findings with researchers and with the public
  - Eretz Hefetz: Heritage Collections in Israel
    - Launched in 2018, Eretz Hefetz focuses on documenting cultural and historical heritage artifacts which can be found in small and unrecognized museums and private collections all over Israel. An essential part of this initiative was the development of an academic and practical methodology for documenting and studying imagery, objects, and collections. These collections are managed with software developed especially for this purpose – the Eshmor, thus laying the foundations for research into heritage objects and their preservation
- **Documenting a Trauma Zone: a Timeline**
  - The gathered artifacts serve as an essential foundation for understanding the historical and cultural impact of the events and preserving the legacy of the victims, families and communities, society at large
    - October 7, 2023: Hamas attacks communities in the western Negev
    - November 19, 2023: The Ministry of Heritage sends teams to the region, at the time a war zone, requesting assistance in documentation initiatives
    - November 2023: Delegations are organised, including curators, registrars, and conservators from Israeli museums
    - November 26, 2023: Eretz Hefetz begins daily work in Kibbutz Be’eri, focusing on the dental clinic and two burned homes in the Kerem neighbourhood as a pilot
- **Eshmor – A collection management system developed by Yad Ben-Zvi**
  - Collection management systems are critical for managing heritage collections, especially those consisting of trauma-related objects
  - There is a mobile interface suitable for creating new items and entering data
  - And a desktop interface for updating and managing the collection

- **Documenting trauma objects: Step-by-step**
  - A preliminary meeting with the community's representatives, and a survey of the grounds
  - Obtaining consent and selecting areas to be documented
  - Marking and selecting objects in situ
  - Creating a georeference for the items in our documentation and registration system (the Eshmor)
  - Removing the items from their locations by professional restorers
  - Photographing and documenting the items
  - Packing the items and storing them in a dedicated storeroom
- **Issues for thought and discussion**
  - The object as an expression of a daily life, in contrast with a disrupted routine and a distorted purpose
  - Changes in material, form, or location
  - Ownership: the proprietary history of the object and its genealogy up to and following the moment of rupture
  - The principle of origin: its direct connection to the traumatic event, location, and time
  - Subjectivity and interpretation at the time of collection: symbolism, contrast, iconicity
  - Technological aspects representative of the era (a washing machine, ie.)
  - Significant cultural values representing the victims and communities