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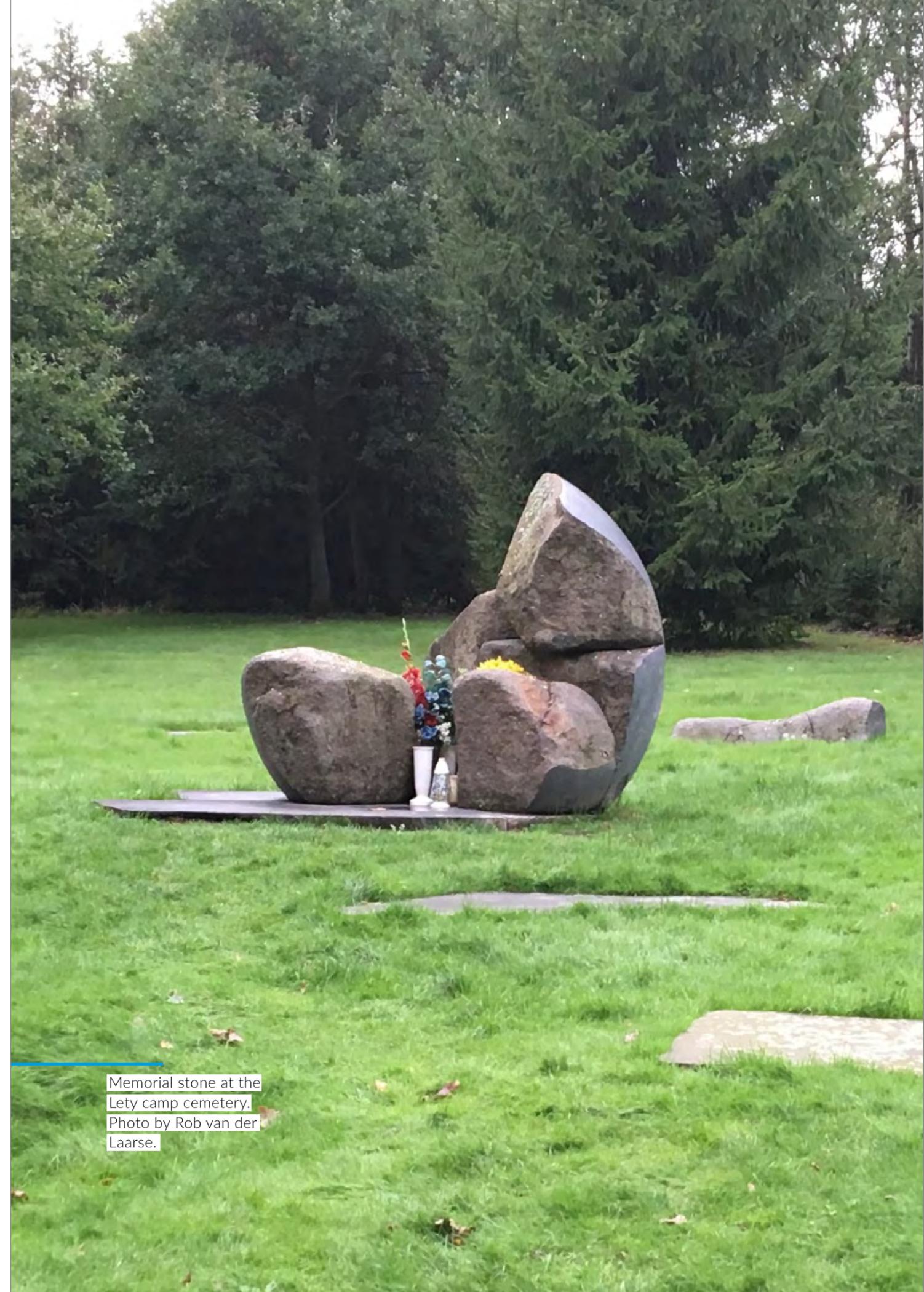
LETY ROMA CAMP: DISCOVERING THE DISSONANT NARRATIVES OF A SILENCED PAST

'Dissonant heritage' has become the shibboleth of critical heritage studies with regard to the enormous heritage of Europe's painful and shameful past. Interestingly, in his 2017 plenary lecture on the social and conceptual challenges for a new multidisciplinary generation of heritage scholars at the fourth Heritage Forum in Krakow, John Tunbridge reminded us that when he and Greg Ashworth coined this term in 1996 they were not referring to a *special kind* of heritage but to something all heritage has *in common*.¹ Taken from musicology, the notion of dissonances was, in other words, not restricted to difficult heritage and competing memories (as addressed in the other plenary lectures by Sharon Macdonald and me). Instead, it pointed to the immanently conflictual nature of cultural heritage, which is almost always used by different interest groups and users for an appropriation of the past by a consumption of places. Precisely *because* of this plurality of interests, cultural heritage scores highly on the European agenda for cultural integration and social cohesion. Maybe this explains why in the absence of political unification, cultural heritage sites and heritage tourism function today as the strongest, perhaps even the *only*, bottom-up engine of Europeanization.² But what heritage managers never forget, is that "you can never sell your heritage to visitors, only their heritage back to them in your locality".³ Thus the commodified touristic past is often brand-new instead of age-old, being experienced by tourists as exciting – or frightening such as in dark tourism experiences – only to become

¹ John Tunbridge, *The Changing of the Guard: A Heritage Perspective Through Time*, plenary lecture, 4th Heritage Forum of Central Europe: Heritage & Society, 1-2 June 2017; Gregory Ashworth and John E. Tunbridge, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past As a Resource in Conflict*, Hoboken 1996.

² David Lowenthal, *Heritage and History: Rivals and Partners in Europe*, in: Rob van der Laarse (ed.), *Bezeten van vroeger: Erfgoed, identiteit en musealisering*, Amsterdam 2005.

³ Gregory Ashworth, *The Conserved European City as Cultural Symbol*, in: Brian Graham (ed.), *Modern Europe: Place, Culture and Identity*, London 1998, 282, and his, *Heritage and the Consumption of Places*, in: Rob van der Laarse (ed.), *Bezeten van vroeger: Erfgoed identiteit en musealisering*, Amsterdam 2005, 193-206



Memorial stone at the
Lety camp cemetery.
Photo by Rob van der
Laarse.

mastered and domesticated by visitors as their own heritage. This “tourist-resident dialectic” affects also the many battles about contested pasts. For what tourists like to visit in a “Europe of the cities” is not the heritage of residents but the treasures of mankind or, by contrast, the biggest atrocities associated with Europe’s shameful past.⁴

That even Auschwitz and other ‘negative’ heritage sites may communicate the inclusive values of a shared European past has since long become axiomatic to European integration policies. Such a packaging of the past, however, also triggers more gloomy, exclusive statements of othering. Heritage sites have many ‘friends’ for whom the notion of hospitality is subordinate to that of identity – because how could ‘their’ national, ethnic and cultural, let alone *painful*, heritage at the same time be that of others? Yet we all use heritage to construct our history, culture and identity. Even though I would not endorse Walter Benjamin’s critical statement that *all* heritage is the sum of past victories and present robberies,⁵ the fabrication of heritage revolves around the decontextualization, reconstruction and (re)appropriation of things and places. The Polish-French historian Krzysztof Pomian used the term *semiophores* for those artifacts that offer their owners (or visitors) tangible links with a past and which open up an invisible, *intangible* realm of an often forgotten or a poorly understood world.⁶ Seemingly fixed in time by the politics of preservation, there is hardly anything more fluid and dynamic than such heritage experiences. And more than anything else, this cultural heritage paradox is reflected in the current role played by memorial sites located at many of Europe’s mid-20th century former killing fields and concentration camps. For what these former terrorscape show to visitors is a domesticated past,

4 See Rob van der Laarse, *Tourism Conflicts and Conflict Tourism: Experiencing Heritage and Identity in Europe’s Age of Crisis*, in: Linde Egberts and Maria D. Alvarez (eds.), *Heritage and Tourism: Places, Imageries, and the Digital Age*, Amsterdam 2017, in print.

5 Walter Benjamin, *Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I: *Abhandlungen*, Teil 2, Frankfurt am Main 1974, 691-707.

6 Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800*, Cambridge 1990, 37.

where atrocities are experienced and lessons learned within the limits of authorized heritage discourses centered around notions of authenticity, preservation and truth-finding.⁷ In almost all European countries one or more iconic camps are today preserved as such semiophores of Europe’s terrible, nationalist past, selling the wish of ‘Never again!’ to tourists, families, and school children. Thus even as a heritage of loss, cultural heritage still acts as a mode of production, changing spaces into places by means of a politics of signification and identification.

Probably no-one would have believed a few decades ago that some of Europe’s most frightening terrorscape would have been turned by the end of the century into memorials to the Holocaust. Yet what happens if sites do not have such an iconic aura of global, national or communal identity that appeals to postwar generations that grew up in a moral climate of historical injustice and the ‘guilt of nations’?⁸ While the traces of the twentieth-century World Wars and mass atrocities might be successfully staged as tourist experiences on a quickly growing scale, visitors are at the same time expected to identify with *universal* victims without being disturbed by the historical complexity of *real* victims, such as communist Jews, or of ‘collaborating’ ethnic minorities, who might also be framed today as perpetrators or ‘terrorists’. What if local people, or hegemonic communities, do not understand their complex and often contested histories, and will not identify with unwanted victims not regarded as their own? Could such camps come to exist as cultural heritage sites without a meaningful context outside the universalizing human rights discourse and the trope of victimhood? And would it be possible for forgotten or contested sites to generate shared meanings and accessibility to *future* inheritors, such as new inhabitants, generations or minorities, without evoking traumatic memories among older memorial communities?

7 See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, London/New York 2006.

8 Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*, New York 2000.



Archaeologist Pavel Vařeka at the entrance to industrial pig farm in Lety, September 2016. Photo by Rob van der Laarse.

This photo of my Czech colleague Pavel Vařeka on a fieldtrip in 2016 with our HERA iC-ACCESS research team to such an unwanted Second World War heritage site shows precisely what heritage managers try to avoid and keep out of site. This fenced off pig farm with the appearance of an industrial plant producing dangerous chemicals, displaying many warning signs against vandals (and memory activists) in a small village in Czech Bohemia, has become the center of one of the most sorrowful conflicts on the legacy of the Holocaust. It concerns the former forced labor and Roma camp (*Zigeunerlager*) Lety, where from August 1942 to May 1943 at least 1,300 Roma were imprisoned, of whom more than 300 died at this site, while many others were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even though some trials against Czech guards took place directly after the War, not one was sentenced. Lety was then soon forgotten.

Whereas Czech Romani were treated relatively well under communism,⁹ since 1989 they have again become subjected to discriminatory legislation and to racism by right-wing skinheads. It was only in 1995, following foreign press attention, that president Vaclav Havel – the poet, writer and Charta 77 dissident, who became a symbol of the global human rights movement in the 1990s – unveiled a remembrance stone near some mass graves outside the fences, promising the immediate closure of the pig farm for which he was internationally praised. For Havel, this *Nazi German* Holocaust site of “forgotten victims” on occupied Czech territory was a national place of shame. After the ‘heritagization’ of the martyred town Lidice (destroyed by the Nazis in revenge for the Czech assassination of Reinhard Heydrich) and the Nazi-German concentration camp Theresienstadt (Terezin), Lety seemed well on the way to becoming the third pillar of the Czech Holocaust paradigm. Welcomed as a contribution to the Roma struggle for human rights, Havel’s shame was, however, deeply rooted in Czech patriotism. This was soon experienced by the American poet, writer and human rights activist Paul Polansky, whose articles on Lety survivors in the early 1990s played an important role in the Czech decision to erect a monument. Yet the president completely ignored Polansky during the memorial ceremony of 1995 to which he was initially not even invited. After Polansky found out that most of the 40,000 files on Lety were no longer accessible in the public archives, he was forced to work as an oral historian and won the trust of the last Lety survivors, who living according to Romani code had never told their stories to *gadjos*. Polansky published his book *Black Silence* (1998) in their name as an indictment of the Czech government, while a year later, when he was already working for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and had become head of the Kosovo Roma

⁹ See for instance Carol Silverman, Persecution and Politicization: Roma (Gypsies) of Eastern Europe, in: Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine 19 (1995) 2, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/persecution-and-politicization-roma-gypsies-eastern-europe> (15 November 2017).

Refugee Foundation, he also challenged the false notion that the Czechs were only a victim nation in his novel *The Storm* (1999).¹⁰

What these dissonances show is that to Havel the case of Lety as a Nazi-German concentration camp, where most prisoners died from typhus, was closely framed in terms of national *victimhood*. Polansky, instead, framed Lety in terms of Czech *perpetration*. According to a Czech law of 1939, Lety was established as a disciplinary working camp for “a-socials”. During the first two years, the internees were tramps and vagabonds, but after the registration and deportation of entire Romani families on the order of the collaborating Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Lety was changed into a “gypsy death camp”. After losing their jobs and being robbed of their properties, Czech Romani were treated much worse than the former non-gypsy inmates by local Bohemian guards, who even surpassed the Nazis in sadism. In contrast to what the official story claims, according to Polansky’s witness testimonies, mass graves were dug not for victims of typhus but of terror. Many Roma slave laborers (together with Jews from Terezin) were forced to work themselves to death in the 10,000 hectares of forests belonging to Count Schwarzenberg. In his 1995 speech, Havel did mention the Czech police guarding the prisoners and their exploitation as a cheap labour force by Czech people living in the neighbourhood, but omitted the Schwarzenberg forest.¹¹ Actually, it was the well-known ex-chairman

¹⁰ Paul Polansky, *Black Silence: The Lety Survivors Speak*, Prague 1998. According to USHMM with 40,000 documents in Trebon and another 90,000 in the state archives in Prague, the Bohemian Roma camp Lety was the best documented in the history of the Holocaust. A Prague assistant was able to make copies in the archives, and regarded the thousands of Roma on the arrival lists of 1942-1943 as more reliable than the (covered-up?) official number of 1100-1300 prisoners in each of Czechoslovakia’s Roma concentration camps. The other camp, Honodin in Moravia, has recently become a part of the Roma Memorial Centre, an institution that is expected in the nearby future to take over the management of Lety from Lidice memorial site.

¹¹ Speech by the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, on the occasion of the opening of the memorial to Roma at the site of the former internment camp and on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe, 13 May 1995, Romea.cz; <http://www.romea.cz/>

of the Helsinki Federation of Human Rights, Havel’s friend, chancellor and foreign minister, prince Karel Schwarzenberg who, in an ironic twist, was appointed by the president to investigate the ‘gypsy’ problem. Still in 2015 Schwarzenberg opposed Polansky’s “conspiracy theory” and claimed that his father had known nothing about Lety. Like Havel twenty years before, he blamed the pig farm for causing all the trouble: “It’s horrible, it stinks there, it’s a real shame”.¹²

Yet why has the farm not been removed in all those years? After Lety had changed from a symbol of Czech victimhood into one of perpetration, the removal of the farming company had been dropped from the political agenda. Having grown from 5,000 pigs in 1989 to around 20,000 in the late 1990s, it was even listed by the European community as a model company and the Czech authorities refused to sanction its closure because of the economic impact on the region. I find it interesting to compare this way of coming to terms with the Nazi past with that of neighboring Poland. Both countries have their betrayal myths: Poland its 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Czech Republic the 1938 ‘Munich Betrayal’, even though the role of betrayer is reserved for Chamberlain instead of Stalin. Poland too had its ‘Lety’ in the case of Jedwabne and a Polish-American muckraker in the role of the historian Jan Tomasz Gross. His provocative publication *Neighbors* (2000; English translation 2001) forced president Aleksander Kwaśniewski to acknowledge Polish responsibility and Cardinal Józef Glemp to issue an apology for the Polish pogrom of 10 July 1941, which was wrongly believed to have been a Nazi atrocity. Just like in Poland, the human rights ‘pedagogy of shame’ is replaced in the Czech Republic today by a ‘pedagogy of pride’. Both

[en/news/czech/vaclav-havel-s-1995-speech-at-the-unveiling-of-the-lety-memorial](http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/vaclav-havel-s-1995-speech-at-the-unveiling-of-the-lety-memorial) (15 November 2017).

¹² Zdeněk Ryšavý, Former Czech Foreign Minister Does not Believe his Father was Involved with the Lety camp, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/former-czech-foreign-minister-does-not-believe-his-father-was-involved-with-the-lety-camp> (15 November 2017).

countries have redefined themselves as *double* victims of Nazism and Communism in accordance with the so-called Prague Declaration of 2008 on the crimes of communism and decades of Soviet occupation. One may understand that under the moral weight of such geopolitical extremes, authorized even by the European Parliament and many other international forums, dark pages in their own histories, such as the 1938 Polish-Czech border conflicts on the Olza River and the behavior of Polish and Czech 'neighbors' against Jews and Roma, lost their former priority. The nationalist current Polish government has been intensely working against the notion of Polish guilt, "as victims are by definitions no perpetrators", Anna Bikont's critical comment put it.¹³

Turning back to the photo of our visit, we may look somewhat more carefully to the historic picture of the Roma camp. It shows a square site with small, linked family barracks which almost look a bit like gypsy wagons, quite different from the standard German model as described in Robert Jan van Pelt in this issue, and completely different from the large stables of the pig farm. The other picture shows a map of this 1970s communist collective farm, which has now been privatized but still occupies the Lety domain behind the fences. Yet one can easily understand how in the 1990s the industrialized farm was believed to be a continuation of the camp. Although barracks from former Nazi concentration camps – such as those in Westerbork in the Netherlands – have been re-used as farm stables, among other things, it might have been the indexical link to the past which under the loaded prisoners/pigs association turned this site of trauma into such a haunted place.¹⁴ For the

¹³ Anna Bikont quoted in Pieter van Os, *Polen die Joden hadden gered, hielden dat geheim*, Interview, in: *NRC-Handelsblad*, 23 September 2016. See also Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001; Anthony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds.), *The Neighbors Respond: The controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton 2009; and Anna Bikont, *Neighbours*, in: *Index on Censorship* (2001) 3, 76-83.

¹⁴ Francesco Mazzucchelli, Rob van der Laarse, and Carlos Reijnen, Introduction: *Traces of Terror, Signs of Trauma*, in: Francesco Mazzucchelli, Rob van der Laarse, and Carlos Reijnen (eds.), *Traces*

entire time, the pig farm was believed to have been built right upon the campscape until an American photographer hired a plane in 2007 to fly over the Lety domain and took a photo with the "Schwarzenberg pond" as a reference point. It was here, according to Polansky, that many Roma children were drowned by the guards. After comparing the aerial photo with a Second World War map of Lety it became clear however that only *one* corner of the farm corresponded with the camp.¹⁵ When 'Lety' was placed under the supervision of Lidice memorial site in 2010, some three barracks were reconstructed near the remembrance site together with a stone modelscape and a walking route around the domain. Lety then started to become a heritage site.

So today the pigs cover a difficult past that might be unearthed by forensic and non-invasive archaeological research, such as our HERA project *Accessing Campscapes* proposes. While research has been hampered by authorized narratives of Czech victimhood and the inaccessibility of the site, such difficulties might also be regarded as an implicit recognition of the mnemonic power of place. For the contestation of difficult heritage actually keeps it alive. It is therefore not unlikely that renewed international pressure, student and Roma activism, and local and national interests, might produce a different outcome than in the past. After years of protest by NGOs like Human Right Watch and Amnesty International (that presented a petition with nearly 100,000 signatures against the ethnic segregation of almost a third of Romani children routinely placed into schools for the mentally disadvantaged), in 2014 the European Commission initiated an unprecedented procedure against the Czech Republic based on EU anti-discrimination legislation, while in September 2017 the government announced serious steps to

of Terror, *Signs of Trauma: Practices of (Re)presentation of Collective Memories in Space in Contemporary Europe*, Milan 2014, 3-19.

¹⁵ Polansky, *Black Silence*, 7.

put an end to the situation.¹⁶ Within two months the Czech government reached an agreement with the owner to buy him out for a price far above the market value.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is also good to distance ourselves from heated debates around the fate of the pig farm. One may read Vařekas' account of their recent mapping of the camp in this journal to find out that the postwar plant actually *spared* the former campscape, whose remains in the ground might be far less disturbed than the peace of the owner. This evokes new questions for future research, of course, including *why* this terracescape has actually been preserved for so many decades as a 'forgotten' terracescape by communist and private stakeholders.

Rob van der Laarse (University of Amsterdam)

¹⁶ European Commission's Action against Czech Republic for Discrimination in Schools is a Victory for Rights, Justice and Roma, Amnesty International Press Release, 25 September 2014; <http://www.amnesty.eu/en/news/press-releases/eu/discrimination/roma/european-commission-s-action-against-czech-republic-for-discrimination-in-schools-is-a-victory--0784/#.WhHdSErIZMA>; Czech Republic: Systematic Discrimination against Romani Children in Schools, Amnesty International, 23 April 2015; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/czech-republic-systematic-discrimination-against-romani-children-in-schools/>; Czech Republic: First Steps Taken on Ending Anti-Roma Discrimination in Schools, CRIN, 13 September 2017, <https://www.crin.org/en/library/publications/czech-republic-first-steps-taken-ending-anti-roma-discrimination-schools> (15 November 2017).

¹⁷ See Vláda odtajnila částku, kterou stát zaplatí za vepřín v Letech: 450 milionů, ČT24 – Česká televize, 23 October 2017, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/2282527-vlada-odtajnila-castku-kerou-stat-zaplati-za-veprin-v-letech>; and Prodej vepřína v Letech dokonán: stát podepsal smlouvu s firmou AGPI, ČT24 – Česká televize, 23 November 2017, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/2311837-prodej-veprina-v-letech-dokonan-stat-podepsal-smlouvu-s-firmou-agpi> (23 November 2017).



Modelscape of the Roma camp in Lety. Photo by Rob van der Laarse.



Unbuilt part of the pig farm where Roma camp was located. Photo by Rob van der Laarse.

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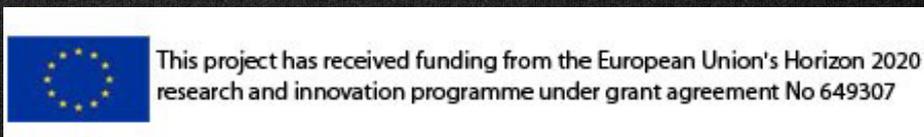
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