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### Findings trapped in a state of in-betweenness

van der Laarse, R.

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Winter 2017

# ACCESSING CAMPSCAPES: INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR USING EUROPEAN CONFLICTED HERITAGE

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# FINDINGS TRAPPED IN A STATE OF IN-BETWEENNESS

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In June 2013, during their excavations at the Sobibór extermination camp, the Israeli and Polish archaeologists Yoram Haimi and Wojciech Mazurek found two meters below the ground a tiny nametag bearing the name of David Jacob Zak – an eight-year-old Dutch boy who must have been carrying it when being gassed and cremated there exactly seventy years before. David, or ‘Deddie’ as his nickname was, was born in the Jewish neighbourhood of Amsterdam and taken away on 3 April 1943 with his parents to the Jewish deportation site Hollandsche Schouwburg. From there they were deported to the SS concentration camp Vught. Yet on 6/7 June, all 1,300 children below the age of sixteen were separated from their parents and transported in two trains to the Jewish transit camp Westerbork. From there, 3,017 people, including 1,147 children, were transported on 8 June 1943 to the camp at Sobibór.

Sobibór functioned as one of three Nazi-German Aktion Reinhardt extermination camps, where from spring 1942 until the revolt of October 1943 around 250,000 people were murdered in its gas chambers. After the escape of 365 prisoners, the Germans decided to demolish the camp and wipe-out any traces of it by planting trees, thereby changing the extermination site into peaceful forest that still exists today. Except for a long series of war crime trials, testimonies and oral history, no historical records of the camp exist. Yet, during the past decade, forensic archaeology, employing digital and non-invasive techniques to identify hidden material remains within former campsites, has become an important source of knowledge about the structure of the former camp. In addition to this emergent role of truth-finding and crime scene investigation as pertaining to the camps, however, Holocaust archaeology has also become a tool for representation and memorialization.<sup>1</sup> Facing a future without survivors, it offers a new bridge to the past, fostering a transnational identification with victims and a sense of belonging far beyond one’s direct relatives.

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies: Approaches and Future Directions*, New York 2015.

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David Zak and his family. Copyright: NRC Handelsblad.

David Zak's name tag. Courtesy of the Joods Digitaal Monument.



In this sense David Zak's name tag might be regarded as a material manifestation of what Marianne Hirsch with regard to the Holocaust has labelled postmemory, and which she described as a transitory stage between personal, lived memory and mediated, cultural memory.<sup>2</sup> Although Hirsch relates postmemory in her work mainly to family photographs and stories of a second generation of children of Holocaust survivors, I would like to use it in a broader sense. Postmemory, for me, refers to a transitory stage of memory works, mnemonic artefacts and cultural representations signifying the rediscovery of 'forgotten' memories in a postconflict society – a public musealisation and mediatization of personal memories and family archives providing access to the past for those who did not have direct experience of the events.

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Needless to say, already in 1944-1945 for the Allied 'liberations' of Nazi concentration camps, testimonies, photography, film and exhibitions became crucial media in communicating the magnitude of the 'hidden' Nazi war crimes to the those 'who did not know'. According to this postwar genocide narrative, war crimes were visualized through the lens of war photographers and filmmakers with the piles of dead bodies used for forced confrontations in US denazification campaigns, such as in Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen<sup>3</sup>, and staged by exhibitions of human belongings and remains, like the hundreds of shoes and glasses, and the heaps of human hair in the barracks of Majdanek and the large vitrines of the 1955 permanent exhibition of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. If these early visualisations and materializations of mass murder were closely related to Raphael Lemkin's notion of genocide (1944) as applied to the Nuremberg tribunals on Nazi war crimes (1945-1946),

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Cora Sol Goldstein, *Capturing the German Eye: American Visual Propaganda in Occupied Germany*, Chicago/ London 2009.

today's dominant, individualized postmemorial gaze might be traced back to the media coverage of the Israeli Eichmann trial (1960-1962). This was the first trial where victims were admitted to testify in court against a perpetrator whom they had actually never met. This new agency attributed to formerly anonymous Holocaust victims – sharing their personal, traumatic camp experiences in a global, mediatized court case – attracted huge attention among public intellectuals and a younger protest generation. The Eichmann trial marked the emergence of "the era of the witness" during which increasingly more personal testimonies would travel from the court room to libraries, cinemas and TV screens as part of a worldwide Holocaust memory boom.<sup>4</sup>

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In contrast to the earlier narrative of magnitude, this victimhood-centred narrative has become dominant among postwar generations with only indirect memories of mass violence and Nazi war crimes. Starting with mediatized testimonies like Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1948) and the Auschwitz memoirs of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel (1956/1958), personal stories have become key to this emotional turn. Originally published in small languages like Dutch, Italian and Yiddish, after being repackaged as Holocaust bestsellers, they paved the way for Hollywood movies like the American 1980s mini-series *Holocaust*, *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). In correspondence with the global human rights discourse, this "selling of the Holocaust"<sup>5</sup> also determined to a large extent the representation of victims of mass violence in a new kind of memorial museum.<sup>6</sup> Just like Holocaust fiction, Holocaust museums mediatize victimhood by creating performative spaces for consuming the lessons of a painful past. Combining museum, educational and memorial functions mostly for diasporic communities and touristic visitors far removed

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<sup>4</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, Ithaca/ London 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler. How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold*, New York 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Oxford 2007.

from the European terrorscape, they have developed a strong narrative for offering visitors an off-site Holocaust experience, using universal icons of victimhood to connect the contradictory tendencies of individualization and globalisation. By means of postmemory tools like family photos and portraits, letters and diaries, Holocaust museums create emotional bonds between victims and visitors. Such personal objects help visitors experience the magnitude of mass killings and at the same time identify with the dehumanized victims by giving them a name and a face when confronted with the intimacy of their earlier, prewar family life.

When visiting extermination camps like Auschwitz or Treblinka such discursive-material scripts signify for visitors an even more incomprehensible cruelty than the off-site constellations of urban memorial museums. Actually, because of the emotional interaction of visitors' spatial-historical experiences, these "trauma site museums" profit from their indexical relation to the crime scene, as visitors literally walk in the footsteps of the victims – and/or the perpetrators.<sup>7</sup> This also applies to archaeological findings, like earrings, necklaces, bracelets, drinking cups, worn-out shoes with steel laces or hidden coins, hairpins, combs, homemade toys and spoons, or house keys, which are found in still-traceable garbage dumps, cemeteries and crematoria, or in mass grave pits. After being changed from waste into artefacts, such in situ displays of personal objects in museums make visitors figuratively 'touch' the violently killed persons who wore them. Tracing these belongings back to the original owners actually transforms them into the last signs of those who died anonymously thousands kilometres from home at the unknown killing sites – and, in more general terms, this turns archaeology itself into a performative act of cultural, if not political, signification.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Patrizia Violi, *Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 29 (2012) 1, 36–75.

<sup>8</sup> Rob van der Laarse, Francesco Mazzucchelli and Carlos Reijnen (eds.) *Traces of Terror, Signs of Trauma, Versus* 119 (2014).



Archaeological finding exhibited in the Warsaw Katyń Museum.  
Photo: R. van der Laarse.

Because of this, findings like David Zak's name tag, or that of the six-year-old Lea de la Penha (another finding of Haimi's team at Sobibór from 2011), function for survivor communities and postmemory visitors as a contact point with a terrible and silenced past. Haimi therefore called Lea's identification tag his most touching finding at Sobibór and framed her in the Anne Frank tradition as "the girl of Sobibór".<sup>9</sup> Yet the finding of a third plate, in late 2013, of the twelve-year-old Amsterdam Jewish girl Annie Kapper did not attract much fresh publicity in the Dutch press. The reason might be that in the meantime a remarkable heritage conflict had arisen over the ownership of David Zak's identification tag: it was reclaimed by his eighty-year-old niece Lies Caransa-de Hond, who recalled on Dutch television how Deddie protected her as a four-year old child while waiting in April 1943 at the Amsterdam Hollandsche Schouwburg for their deportation to Westerbork. Lies Caransa-de Hond survived the war because she was together with hundreds of other children smuggled out of the theatre and kept in safety. David's name tag appeared to her as an "angel from heaven", because after her return from hiding she "didn't have anything from him, just some photos". Yet, according to Polish law, archaeological findings, including the excavated belongings of Dutch victims of former Nazi German extermination camps, are regarded as national property and not allowed to leave the country. Notwithstanding governmental support for the David's family's moral claim that "it belongs not to Poland, but to us",<sup>10</sup> the Polish State Museum Majdanek, which supervises the Sobibór excavations, offered David's niece – to her astonishment – only a replica of the tag. The original, of which a photo is printed in Majdanek's latest museum guide, will become part of the permanent exhibition of the new museum planned at Sobibór.

<sup>9</sup> Aron Heller, Israeli Archaeologist, Seeking Truth About his Family, Digs into Nazi Death Camp, in: The Times of Israel, 22 August 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-archaeologist-digs-into-nazi-death-camp/> (26 November 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Liesje de Hond, interviewed at the Dutch website from the NPO History Broadcast Andere Tijden, Liesje en Deddie. Anderen tijden. Alle kinderen op transport, in: NPO Geschiedenis, 2 May 2016, <http://www.npogeschiedenis.nl/nieuws/2016/april/Liesje-en-Deddie.html> (9 November 2016).

Thus archaeological findings in a museum context may offer visitors both genocide-centred 'evidence' of war crimes and victimhood-centred post-memory 'experiences'. Yet outside the museum context, the same object may return to its origin as a personal or family property and change into a highly contested 'semiophore', a thing with multiple meanings for different 'owners' as a finding, an artefact, and a memorial. In other words, Deddie Zak's name tag might be considered from a curator's point of view a postmemory tool for visitor's identification, while from a survivor's perspective this might be regarded a disgraceful act of disowning, if not looting. Most important though, this cultural property conflict over Sobibór name tag makes clear that the current transnational Holocaust paradigm is not as hegemonic and universal as often thought. For although Holocaust narratives tend to become strongly globalized, the original crime scenes are still very much localized. To put it differently, personal memories might easily 'travel', but the sites themselves are mostly fixed into local and national canons of memory. Many material remnants and findings of conflicts are trapped in this binary state of in-betweenness.

*Rob van der Laarse (University of Amsterdam)*

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