

# Jasenovac Memorial Site and “difficult heritage”

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Jasenovac Memorial site

**W**hen we use the term “difficult heritage”, we refer to the events in the history of a people or a nation that are perceived as unpleasant and shameful, and are therefore in opposition to the positive and affirmative identity of a community. A society can deal with such a heritage in different ways: it can forget, ignore, falsify historical facts, or it can confront such a legacy regardless of the difficulties. In the past sixty-seven years, the remembrance of Jasenovac concentration camp has gone through the majority of these phases. Throughout these years, transformations and amplitudes were linked with political regimes run by states in whose territories the camp was located.

When referring to the Memorial Site Jasenovac Memorial Museum as “difficult heritage” from the Croatian perspective, the reason lies in the fact that the majority of guards and perpetrators at the concentration camp were Croats, whereas the victims were mainly members of other ethnic groups – Serbs, Jews and Roma. What makes the area of the former camp specific and different from other Second World War memorials in other European countries is the fact that in the territory of Croatia, during the 1990s there was yet another war whose destruction directly influenced not only Jasenovac Memorial Site, but also the consciousness of the people and their way of thinking.

## **USTASHAS AND JASENOVAC CONCENTRATION CAMP**

The Jasenovac concentration camp was founded as the central camp of extermination. It existed in the period of the Second World War (from 1941 to 1945)

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[1] The term was taken over from the book by Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Dealing with the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

when Ustashas ran the Independent State of Croatia. They were blackshirt-military formations that were founded at the beginning of the 1930s<sup>2</sup>.

After the First World War, in the territory of the South East Europe, a new multi-ethnic state was formed and its first name was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Complex relations created tensions especially in the relations between the two largest ethnic groups – Serbs and Croats. The state was ruled by the Serbian royal dynasty called the Karadjordjevic. In 1929, after the establishment of King Aleksandar’s dictatorship, the state’s name was changed to The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (engl. Kingdom of South Slavs<sup>3</sup>).

From 1927 till 1929, Ante Pavelić, a lawyer from Zagreb was a representative in the parliament in Belgrade. He was the president of the nationalistic Croatian Party of Rights. After the dictatorship was proclaimed in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Pavelić emigrated and founded “Ustasha-Croatian Revolutionary Organization” (Croatian acronym UHRO for Ustaša-Hrvatska revolucionarna organizacija). The aim of that organization was the separation of Croatia from Yugoslavia. They tried to achieve it with violent means and an armed struggle. Their most sinister action before the Second World War was the assassination of Aleksandar, the King of Yugoslavia in Marseilles in 1934. They organized it in collaboration with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO).

After the Kingdom of Yugoslavia joined the Tripartite Pact on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 1941, a group of officers from the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia committed a *coup d’État* and took over power. These events led to the attack of Germany and the Axis powers against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1941. After the war that lasted 11 days, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia signed the capitulation. In the meantime, the Nazi plan on the division of the territory of Yugoslavia was implemented, and the Independent State of Croatia (Croatian acronym NDH – Nezavisna Država Hrvatska) was proclaimed on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1941<sup>4</sup>.

Racial laws against the Jews and Roms were proclaimed in the state<sup>5</sup>. Ethnically pure territory was supposed to be created according to the ideology of the Ustasha movement; therefore they proclaimed discriminatory provisions against the Serbs who at the time made up almost one third of the population.

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[2] Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska: 1941.-1945.*, Zagreb, Liber, 1977, p. 21.

[3] Dušan Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, Zagreb, Golden marketing, 1999.

[4] Jozo Tomasevich, *War and revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: occupation and collaboration*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001.

[5] Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska: 1941.-1945.*, Zagreb, Liber, 1977, p. 158.

The Jasenovac concentration camp, which was founded in August 1941, was an extremely brutal place. There were no gas chambers and industrial ways of murdering detainees within the camp as there were in Nazi extermination camps. Detainee executions were carried out with hand weapons, knives and mallets<sup>6</sup>. There was direct physical contact between the perpetrator and the victim.

### **FOUNDING OF THE JASENOVAC MEMORIAL SITE**

Before I move on to the evolution of the remembrance related to Jasenovac concentration camp, I need to say a couple of things about the remembrance policy in the period of socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1990). It can be divided into two parts. The first period would be from the end of the Second World War till the time when the idea of founding a public institution called Jasenovac Memorial Site was conceived in the early 1960s. The second period is the one during which the public institution was found with the Memorial Museum as its integral part.

When discussing the first period, it is marked by the neglect of the area where the Jasenovac concentration camp was located. The authorities were also not coping well with the way they should have approached the topic of remembering the victims who were killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp. There are no documents that could confirm why it had happened, therefore the majority of explanations are reduced to suppositions and speculations. In any case, practically nothing was saved from the original camp premises and from the wall that was surrounding the camp. Before Ustashes retreated, they mined the buildings within the camp, so when the resistance units (Yugoslav Partisans) entered the camp area, the majority of buildings were demolished. In a couple of years that followed the end of the War, the authorities allowed the local population whose houses had been demolished to use the materials



from the camp buildings to reconstruct their houses with them. Bogdan Bogdanović, the author of the monument in Jasenovac, visited the camp area in the early 1960s and noted down; “Moreover, the traces were almost completely destroyed since the camp was thoroughly demolished and

Flower monument at Jasenovac Memorial Site.

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(6) Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941.-1945. Logor smrti i radni logor*, Jasenovac-Zagreb, Javna ustanova Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2003, p. 171-172.

dug over. Ustashes mined it for understandable reasons, but partisans did it for incomprehensible ones. There was overgrowth in the premises of the former camp, so it was slowly turning into some kind of rainforest on the underwater soil?”

We could look for reasons why the camp was forgotten in domestic and foreign affairs in socialist Yugoslavia. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the Communist Party attempted to strengthen its power in the country. Dramatic events that lead to the breakup of the alliance with the Soviet Union in 1948 left Yugoslavia in the position where it needed to look for its own path towards socialism, somewhere between East and West. Yugoslavia found its place in the cold war environment through the Non-Aligned Movement. Only when the new regime felt safe, was it in a position to turn towards the past and start dealing with the topic of “difficult heritage”.

Such circumstances were reflected in the area of the former Jasenovac concentration camp in 1960 when architect Bogdan Bogdanović’s idea about a monument in the shape of a flower was accepted, and when it was decided that locations of former camp buildings would be marked with mounds and depressions. The monument was ceremonially revealed in 1966. Two years later Public Institution Jasenovac Memorial Site was founded.

In the following two years, the administration building was constructed as well as the Memorial Museum building. The first permanent exhibition was set up in 1970.

In the period from 1970 to 1990 the Memorial Museum in Jasenovac was one of the most visited memorial sites in socialist Yugoslavia. Annually it had more than 250, 000 visitors. Most frequently they were groups from schools that visited the museum during the school year. The visit to the Memorial Site consisted of seeing the permanent exhibition, whereas within the museum there was a cinema hall where visitors would watch a documentary. It was a compilation of shots recorded in different concentration camps after they were liberated. Such a way of presenting was not adequate for all groupage, because it was shown both to the youngest students who were seven, and to those who were older. The presentation at the museum showed the victims without an individual approach, as if they were a nameless mass, and only in the way they were seen by the eyes of the perpetrator.

## **THE PERIOD OF THE CROATIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE RECONSTRUCTION**

At the beginning of the 1990s there were many changes in Eastern Europe. As far as Yugoslavia was concerned, these changes did not manifest themselves in the change

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[7] Bogdan Bogdanović, *Ukleti neimar*, Split, Feral Tribune, 2001, p. 154.

of a political system only. There was a breakup of the state, and consequently a war. Jasenovac Memorial Site was also in the area where there were war activities. At the beginning it contributed to the fact that visitors stopped coming to the Memorial Site, and in the later phase an armed struggle took place right around Jasenovac village, and around the Memorial Site. In October 1991, fighting was such that the Croatian Army units had to withdraw from Jasenovac during the attack by the Yugoslav People's Army forces and insurgent Serbs. That means that in the period from October 1991 till May 1995 the Republic of Croatia did not control the area where Jasenovac Memorial Area is. It was in the territory of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Krajina.

Jasenovac concentration camp, and later Jasenovac Memorial Site, was located in the area around the River Sava that was, during Socialist Yugoslavia, a border between two federate republics – Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. After Yugoslavia broke up, the borders between the republics became state borders. That meant that the area of Jasenovac Memorial Site was divided between two states. In the territory of Croatia, the Memorial Site continued working under the same name, whereas in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina they established a separate Donja Gradina Memorial Site. It was named after the village of the same name that is located on the southern bank of the River Sava, across from the village of Jasenovac. In that area, there is the largest number of mass graves with the remains of victims killed in Jasenovac concentration camp.

Due to these circumstances the entire collection of the Memorial Museum (documents, objects, photographs) was taken to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina as early as 1991. At the time Serb military forces controlled that area as well. In May 1995, after military action by the Croatian Army, the authorities of the Republic of Croatia once again controlled the area of Jasenovac Memorial Site. The buildings in the Memorial Site were abandoned and devastated. The Public Institution Jasenovac Memorial Site was reopened in 1997. Its first task then was to retrieve the collection that had belonged to the Memorial Museum up until the beginning of the last war. The procedure was slow and complicated. The collection was finally returned in November 2001, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum from Washington was the mediator in that process. The collection was listed and photographed in Washington, and it was established that a significant portion of it was missing. From the total of 14 237 objects from the museum that were under the ownership of the Memorial Museum, the total of 6 531<sup>8</sup> was returned, and the others are still considered missing.

In 1995, after the Republic of Croatia gained control over Jasenovac Memorial Site area, there were procedures introduced for the reopening of the institution. Before that, it was necessary to determine the new concept for the functioning of the Memorial Site. Franjo Tuđman, the then president of Croatia also stated his idea about the new

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[8] Revizija muzejske grade i dokumentacije Spomen područja Jasenovac, 2003.

concept. He saw Jasenovac Memorial Site as a place of remembrance for all victims of the Second World War, a place of reconciliation of all Croats, and a common grave for all Croats who were at odds with each other during the Second World War. Such a vision caused anger among many associations and individuals both in Croatia, and in the international community<sup>9</sup>. Therefore this suggestion remained just a suggestion, and it never took off. Anyway, President Tuđman’s idea about turning Jasenovac Memorial Site into a place of reconciliation of Croats carried a dangerous idea of revisionism. Mentioning Croats as the only ethnic community that would, according to this suggestion, adopt Jasenovac as a location of suffering, means forgetting that the largest number of victims at the camp were actually Serbs, Jews and Romanians. Such unacceptable ideas were rejected, and Jasenovac Memorial Site staff needed to find a new way of functioning.

After the elections and the change of authorities in Croatia in the year 2000, Jasenovac Memorial Site staff made a step forward in (making a closer) presentation of the Holocaust and genocide victims’ remembrance following other modern movements in the museological profession. In 2002, the Republic of Croatia submitted a request to become a member of the Task Force for international cooperation on Holocaust education, remembrance and research (ITF). It was explained in the application that the situation in Croatia under the Ustasha rule was specific; that the victims of genocide were also Serbs and Romanians besides Jews. Croatia became a full ITF member in 2005. The Memorial Museum staff then cooperated and communicated with renowned institutions that deal with the holocaust topic<sup>10</sup>. Significant progress was made which, in the end, led to the opening of the new permanent exhibition at the Museum.

## PERMANENT EXHIBITION AT THE MEMORIAL MUSEUM

When planning the permanent exhibition, the institution staff established contact with the most renowned European and global institutions that deal with the Holocaust. Using their experience and advice, the staff tried to create the concept of the permanent exhibition that would satisfy all contemporary criteria of the presentation of Holocaust and genocide victims’ remembrance. The names of the victims killed in the Jasenovac concentration camp are the most important part of the permanent exhibition. They are written on glass plates that are positioned on the ceiling of the museum. Testimonies of the camp survivors are another important part. They are displayed on four screens at the Museum.

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[9] Nataša Mataušić, *Jasenovac 1941.-1945. Logor smrti i radni logor*, Jasenovac-Zagreb, Javna ustanova Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2003, p. 161.

[10] There was cooperation with Yad Vashem, The United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum, Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and others.

The concept of the new permanent exhibition is based on the meaning of the term “memorial museum” exhibitions up until 1990, had focused on crime and perpetrators. The victims were presented from the perspective of perpetrators; the way the villains wanted to see them. The crime that was committed in the Jasenovac camp was a planned mass crime against members of the Serbian, Jewish and Romanian people. But, among the victims, there were also Croats, Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenians as well as members of other ethnic communities who did not accept the terror of the Ustasha regime. In order to understand the whole, it is necessary to tell individual stories of the people who were detained at the camp. All persons detained at the camp had their individual stories. These stories were at times very similar, and sometimes they were completely different. Therefore it is wrong to view victims as statistical data. For that very reason, the permanent exhibition at Jasenovac Memorial Museum, tries to tell as many as possible personal stories, and through them it attempts to bring back dignity for people whose dignity was taken away from them the moment they entered the camp.

The new permanent exhibition at Jasenovac Memorial Site Memorial Museum was opened in November 2006. It is a combination of classic and multimedia museological presentation. With this kind of exhibition we are trying to pay respect and return honor to each and every victim, so that all of them have their first and last names. The exhibition also emphasises the celebration of life, spiritual resistance of detainees and their amazing courage. With stories of this nature, we heighten the conscience of visitors, and we draw their attention to how easily human life can be left unprotected, especially during the times of totalitarian fascist regimes.

There are three-dimensional exhibits at the Memorial Museum that were gathered over the years from survivors, or from family members of detainees who were killed in the camp. Documents, photographs and letters are also exhibited. Within the museum there are three computers that contain a database on events in the territory of Croatia and Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

Permanent exhibition  
at Memorial museum.



The opening of the Educational center was a new element in the work of Jasenovac Memorial Site. This is where lectures, workshops and discussions with students of all ages are held. Visitors receive additional information on the Holocaust and genocide committed in the Jasenovac camp. But what is also important is, they actively participate in the educational program; they are not merely passive observers. It is important that visitors learn about crimes committed in the Jasenovac camp, but it is also important that they take with them the foundations for studying human rights, non-violence, cultural and ethnic differences. Only in this manner can a visit to Jasenovac Memorial Site be complete.

Nataša Jovičić, the head of Jasenovac Memorial Site, explained in the following way what kind of message we want to send out with this type of exhibition at the Memorial Museum:

I will continue defending our new permanent exhibition and the new educational concept because I believe that we do not instigate hatred, and that crimes committed by Ustashes are presented unambiguously. The truth was told and nothing has been concealed. I am convinced that Jasenovac is becoming a place where we promote humanist and ethic ideals of humanity, combined with the education on genocide and Holocaust on one side, and teaching of human rights, democracy and non-violence on the other<sup>11</sup>.

The number of people visiting the Memorial Museum is pretty modest if we compare it to the period up to the year 1990, although the number is gradually growing each year (7 999 visitors in 2008, 10 234 visitors in 2011). School groups are targeted in particular, therefore, every year at the time of marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day (the 27<sup>th</sup> January), a seminar is held for school teachers in collaboration with the Agency for Upbringing and Education.

### **LIST OF NAMES OF THE VICTIMS OF JASENOVAC CONCENTRATION CAMP 1941-1945**

Authors dealing with this topic have often misrepresented the number of victims killed at the Jasenovac camp. Depending from which side the authors have approached this topic, the number varies from 40, 000 to over a million victims. Most frequently they were arbitrarily estimated and were not based on scientific research. Such underestimation (on the Croatian side) or overestimation (on the Serbian side) of the number of victims were mainly used for daily political needs<sup>12</sup>. Until 1990, the official number most frequently stated was 700 000 victims killed in the Jasenovac concentration camp.

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[11] Nataša Jovičić, “Jasenovac Memorial Museum’s permanent exhibition – The victim as an individual”, *Review of Croatian History*, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2nd year, no.1, 2006., p. 295-299.

[12] Vladimir Žerjavić, *Population losses in Yugoslavia: 1941-1945*, Zagreb, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 1997.



It is known for a fact that Ustahas listed camp detainees, but that documentation was destroyed on two occasions: for the first time in 1943, and the second time in 1945. Therefore the original documentation was preserved in fragments only. There was research done on the mass grave sites as well. Right after the Second World War, there was an exhumation of victims at a few camp execution sites from a few mass graves (Uskočke šume, Međustrugovi). Until now, in the area of Jasenovac camp there were some anthropological-archaeological research done. However, they only went as far as probing the soil, as well as determining the existence of grave fields, meaning mass graves.

In 1964, the Institute for Statistics from Belgrade initiated a project called “The Victims of War”. They attempted to name and list Second World War victims. Due to their methodological weaknesses, and due to the fact that the institute in question could not “reach” official numbers of victims, the list of names was not available to the wider public until 1992. For the first time then, the Bosniak Institute<sup>13</sup> issued a list, but on each page there was a notification “the list is not complete”. The Jasenovac Camp was listed as the location where 59 461 victims were killed.

In order to stop these assumptions about the number of victims, Jelka Smreka and Đorđe Mihovilović, the museum curators launched a *List of names of the victims of Jasenovac concentration camp 1941-1945* project. Their source was the list of names from 1964. The list was completed with data gathered while working in the archives, in the field and through cooperation with local Second World War veterans’ organizations from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There was also cooperation with people whose family members were killed at the Jasenovac camp. The book was published in 2007<sup>14</sup>.

At present, the database contains 82 129 names of victims. If we look at it from ethnic basis, the majority of victims were Serbs (46 771), then Romanians (16 131), then Jews (13 019), 4 210 Croats and 1 117 Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Regardless of the large number of various available sources, we must stress the fact that it will never be possible to determine the exact number and the personal data of victims and missing persons in the system of the Jasenovac Ustasha camp. However, the researchers working on the list explained their motivation and the reason why this project is extremely important:

**By listing the victims with their first and last names, we will avoid manipulations with the number of victims, and each victim receives her/his identity, dignity and full respect.**

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[13] *Jasenovac, Žrtve rata prema podacima Statistickog zavoda Jugoslavije*, Žurich-Sarajevo, Bošnjacki institut, 1992.

[14] Jelka Smreka, Đorđe Mihovilović, *Poimenicni popis žrtava Koncentracijskog logora Jasenovac 1941-1945*, Jasenovac, Spomen područje Jasenovac, 2007.

Victims stop being numbers; just one in a row. Every child, woman and man are withdrawn from eternal oblivion, and from crimes committed by Ustashas who intended to obliterate them totally so that no one would ever know that they even existed<sup>15</sup>.

The list is also available on official websites of the institution<sup>16</sup>. The list is actually work in progress, and it is constantly being updated. What needs to be stressed, is the fact that next to the name of every victim there is a reference with the listed source or sources where the data on a particular victim was found.

## CONCLUSION

In the period of socialist Yugoslavia remembrance within Jasenovac Memorial Site Memorial Museum was presented with scenes of explicit violence, with photographs and a documentary film that was shown in the Museum. Such an approach incited hate in the visitors and they called for revenge. With time, that hate was not directed only towards the Ustasha movement, but towards the whole Croatian people, and led to the feeling of collective responsibility. This is the reason why the permanent exhibition became a political instrument, especially in the period after 1988 when the exhibition was designed by members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Serb acronym SANU for Srpska akademija znanosti i umetnosti). Such a presentation led to manipulation of the Jasenovac camp remembrance, and it became a justification for aggressive Serb nationalistic policies from the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

On the other hand, in Croatia during the 1990s there was a period of conflicted memory, especially after there was more discussion in the public about crimes committed by members of the Yugoslav Partisans towards the end and after the Second World War. These crimes are the ones that were not talked about during socialist Yugoslavia. On the one hand there were people who were advocating a radical turn in the remembrance policy that had significant elements of revisionism, and on the other side there were those who still firmly believed in condemning the Ustasha movement and preserving the remembrance of camp victims that would be modernized in accordance with new social-political circumstances. Such conflicted memory led to the situation that Jasenovac Memorial Museum became even more the museum of “difficult heritage” of the newly established Republic of Croatia than it had been in the period when Croatia was just one of the federal units of socialist Yugoslavia. This was reflected in the ideas that the museum should be converted into the place of reconciliation of all Croats. Under various pressures from within and from abroad, they gave up on such tendencies and Jasenovac Memorial Site today became a place that enables the Republic of Croatia to follow the example of modern remembrance of the Holocaust and genocide victims.

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(15) *Ibid.*, p. 7.

(16) <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=7620>.

The messages that Jasenovac Memorial Site visitors should take with them after they visit the Memorial Museum are the following:

1/ The knowledge of historical circumstances that led to the establishment of the Jasenovac concentration camp, and the genocide policy conducted by the Ustasha movement.

2/ Individual stories should instill empathy for the victims who were killed at the camp.

3/ A message should be sent out that concerns both the present and the future, and it is a message of respect towards those groups that society labels as “different”. It is a challenge that has been set before Jasenovac Memorial Site and before the Croatian society as a whole.

Translated by Irina Krlic