

More than Life Stories - Fates

The Janus Pannonius Museum (Baranya County Museums, Pécs) embraces all domains of museology (natural history, archaeology, fine and applied art, ethnography, history) within the county. With approximately two million objects and fourteen permanent exhibitions it is one of the biggest museum organisations in Hungary. The Janus Pannonius Museum is also one of Hungary's most visited museums, having around 200,000 visitors annually. It has received the Excellent Museum Education Award from the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Background and objectives

Baranya County Museums often take part in intercultural projects. In 2006, the Year of Hungarian culture in Germany, the museum co-organised a travelling exhibition based on joint research with museums from Ulm, Berlin and Hungary. The title of this exhibition was 'Germans in Hungary, Hungarians in Germany,' and was accompanied by a bilingual exhibition guide and website. The project described here is a follow-up to the 2006 project, as it broadened its dimensions with a new focus group and life stories.

The biggest ethnic minority in Hungary is the German. In 2001, 63,000 people declared themselves German, 35% of which live in Baranya. According to a survey in 1980, German population in this area is more than 90% in ten villages, and more than 50% in 27 villages.

The most obscure and hidden period of this group occurred after World War Two. The *Schwabians*, as ethnic Germans are called in Hungary, were put through relocations, confiscations, *malenkij robot* (a Russian term for compulsory labour service) and other humiliations due to their ethnic origins. Only a few witnesses and subjects of these events are still alive. It is one of the last opportunities to record their memories and to get an authentic picture of that era.

The project collected and revealed memories of and objects belonging to people of German origin who had been collectively punished after WW2. The project also involved a survey of knowledge of current youth on the topic. The final exhibition targeted all population of the country, since the collective punishment after WW2 constitutes a chapter in Hungary's national history that should always be remembered.

Process

The preparation of this new project involved identifying people who had suffered collective punishment. This was not at all easy as most of them had not dared to speak for a long time about what had happened to them.

Students from the German Language Department of the University of Pécs and two ethnic German schools, as well as participants of international conferences, filled in a bilingual questionnaire to reveal how much is known today about the collective punishment of the German minority in post-war Hungary. Two university students helped to prepare the questionnaire and three students cooperated in their evaluation. Andrea Pásztor, curator at the History Department of the museum, assisted in the preparation of the exhibition and the guide. The Lenau Association helped with PR and the local German Government of Baranya County had a role in the exhibition opening.

The project leader conducted interviews with ten survivors. It was initially planned to

have the university students act as interviewers, however it became clear that the interviewees would not speak about their past unless they knew that their conversation partner or her relatives had been involved in the same experience. The project coordinator's family background helped to create the necessary connections for the interviews, although the long process of establishing trust reduced the number of interviews it was possible to conduct within the time available.

Outcomes

- Stories were collected and recorded of people who had been forced to do labour service in the USSR, had been relocated to Germany, or had their possessions confiscated after the WW2 because of their German origin;
- After fifty years of silence people started to talk about what they had been through; they made available their photos and objects for the exhibition, and donated some of them to the museum;
- An exhibition with all the interviews and original objects donated was viewed by 50,000 people;
- A printed exhibition guide accompanied the exhibition, which presents excerpts from interviews with photos shared by the interviewees;
- Other ethnic groups (e.g. Serbians, Hungarians) were involved, and their opinion incorporated in the project (exhibition and exhibition guide), which may provoke further discussions and rethinking;
- The recorded life stories will be available for further research within the museum collections.

Institution

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Project coordinator

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Target groups

People of German origin who had been collectively punished after WW2; young people (through an awareness survey); general Hungarian publics (through the final exhibition)