

## **SOLVEIGA KRUMINA-KONKOVA**

*Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia, Latvia*

UDC 130.2

### **DARK TOURISM AND SITES OF SELECTIVE SILENCE – COMMUNICATION ON HOLOCAUST AND ITS MEMORIAL PLACES IN LATVIA<sup>1</sup>**

By highlighting the essential features of dark tourism and its development trends, the author focuses on Holocaust memorial sites in Latvia as possible destinations for dark tourism routes. The article points to the ambiguous and often contrastive attitude of the local community towards the use of these places for dark tourism purposes, which is related to the way how and whether local communities and different social groups preserve Holocaust events in their living memories. According to the author, Holocaust memorial sites can be described as the sites of selected silence, and this designation quite accurately describes how society in Latvia remembers and preserves memories of its tragic historical heritage.

**Keywords:** dark tourism, Holocaust, Holocaust memorial places, cultural memory.

Many places of dark heritage, historically associated with Death, tragedy and destruction, such as the places of natural disasters, mass massacres, wars, and terror, have become popular among tourists. The popularity of dark tourism is growing into Latvia as well. Let us begin by briefly outlining the characteristics of dark tourism that could be considered relevant to the issue of this article.

From a philosophical point of view, the most exciting discussions seem those, in which several different ideas have emerged in an attempt to explain the reasons for the popularity of dark tourism. The keyword for the explanation of the essence of dark tourism which unites the seemingly opposite views is the word ‘death’, more precisely, *thanatopsis*, that is, reflection on Death, or perhaps, a meditation on Death.

“Death sheds light on our lives ...”, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz wrote thinking about the reasons for the exceptional attitude of his compatriots towards Death. “Death cannot be passed on, just like life. If we do not die the way we

---

<sup>1</sup> “This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, project “ Difficult Heritage: Between the Memorisation and Contemporary Tourism Production and Consumption. The Case of Holocaust Sites In Latvia” (MemoTours), project No. lzp-2019/1-0241”

live, it is because the life we lived was not ours: it did not belong to us, because the misfortune that kills us does not belong to us. Tell me how you die, and I will tell you who you are” [10; P. 21]. The theme of Death has always existed in Western culture, but little has been said about it, perhaps because it has always been one of the thinking man’s most significant concerns. We fear to die, and at the same time, Death tempts us with its mystery and marginality. Perhaps it is because in Christianity Life and Death, as Paz emphasises, lack autonomy; they are two faces of the same being. All their significance is created and managed by other values with reference to invisible reality [10; P. 23].

Religion and religiosity are mechanisms that reduce the trauma of inevitability of Death by heralding the continuation of life in another, better world. Such mechanisms no longer exist in a secular society, so there is no hope of after-life [10; P. 22]. Secularisation has also removed the veil of mystery from the face of Death. There are no more secrets and no more hope, and Death terrifies most people today more than ever. That is why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century so much is thought and written about Death, so many people travel to ‘places of death’ and new tourist routes are developed to such sites. Therefore, it can be said that dark tourism is a natural making of the secularisation of Western society. Some researchers even see the resemblance of dark tourism to pilgrimage [4], and this is possible for one main reason: we can see the sacralisation of Death in it.

The primary goal of a medieval and, presumably, modern Christian pilgrim most often is repentance, the hope of spiritual and physical healing, and this goal has little to do with the fear of Death. As sacralisation is based on the logic of secularism, it may initially seem that it has nothing in common with the Christian pilgrimage. However, it is different if we look at dark tourism as the presence of thanatopsis: an opportunity to understand our Death through the deaths of other people. From this point of view, dark tourism can be considered an anthropological attempt of secular society to tame Death. In other words, dark tourists try to subject Death to themselves by ritualising the deaths of others, and thus symbolically prolonging their own lives [1; P. 55-108]. This view allows to portray dark tourism as a ritual or set of rituals, a spiritual practice not yet fully understood, and thus at least partially justifies its comparison with the pilgrimage.

Well-known researcher of dark tourism Philip Stone points out that dark tourism has varying degrees of saturation, as does darkness: from dimmer to lighter manifestations of Death. Therefore, the sightseeing sites range from areas of extreme suffering (genocide, massacres, natural disasters) to places of “cultural entertainment” such as the Dracula Museums [13].

Stone distinguishes supporters of dark tourism from visitors to cemeteries who, for example, look for the resting place of a famous poet or actor. The first reason why dark tourists visit ‘places of death’ is not curiosity or the desire to

honour the memory of the dead: their motivation is different. For those who are attracted to this type of tourism, these sites are essential primarily because they allow them to think about their own Death through the deaths of many others. According to Stone, dark tourism is essentially a mediator between Death and dying and Life and living, formulating the personal “mortality capital” of the visitor of one or another place. The mortality capital, which at the same time, is common to all [12; P. 72].

In the earlier works, Argentinian philosopher Maximilian Korstanje described dark tourism as a healer of social trauma and a creator of psychological resilience. He emphasised that dark tourism is one of the social mechanisms by which society can recover from a disaster and make the world safer for life [8; P. 59]. For this reason, it is not surprising, for example, to see well-maintained memorials in the places of massacre and festivals or other events in areas devastated by natural disasters.

However, a few years later Korstanje writes that “death appears to be commoditised to be sold to an international audience, with the end of reinforcing how special they are” [6; P. 179]. Since Death is considered a sign of weakness in secularised capitalist societies, the needs of consuming Others’ Death wake up in audience “a sentiment of happiness that delineates the borders between sadism and narcissism” [7; P. 1-19]. It is a popular opinion among researchers that when visiting, for example, a mass murder site, tourists do not aim to understand the causes of the tragedies that took place there, or what happened in the particular place, and what are the life stories of the victims. In these sites, they can think about their own deaths and feel happy that they have not been affected by events associated with these sites, that they have been allowed ‘to be winners in the game of life and death’. In Korstanje’s works, we can also find confirmation for the assumption that dark tourism is a ritual based on experiencing unique feelings.

So far about the dark tourism in general. In the following, the author of this article focuses on some of the Holocaust sites in Latvia, which could be interesting for dark tourism. For information: there are a total of 265 Holocaust memorial sites all around Latvia [3].

The largest and, therefore, also the most famous Holocaust memorials are in and near Riga. The Memorial in the Bikernieki forest is in the area where about 35 000 people were killed during the Nazi occupation, 20 000 of them were Jews, among them – about 12 000 were Jews from other European countries. About 15 000 were Soviet prisoners of war [9]. A memorial to the victims of Nazism of all nationalities was unveiled in 2001.



PHOTO 1. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN THE BIKERNIEKI FOREST.  
PHOTO BY DIANA POPOVA.

About 25 000 prisoners of the Riga ghetto and almost 1000 foreign Jews brought from Berlin, as well as Soviet prisoners of war, were killed in the Rumbula forest. In 1964, a monument to the victims of fascism was erected there, but in 2002, a memorial was unveiled.



PHOTO 2. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN THE RUMBULA FOREST.  
PHOTO BY DIANA POPOVA.

The Holocaust Memorial in the form of a big menorah was established in 2005 by the sea in Shkede near Liepaja. In December 1941, 2754 persons including 2731 Jews were shot in this place. In 1942, another 150 Jews were killed.



PHOTO 3. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL IN LIEPAJA. PHOTO BY DIANA POPOVA.

Several memorials to Jews killed during World War II are located in Daugavpils. The largest of them - Memorial of the Genocide against Jews and Daugavpils Ghetto victims – in Mezheciems (historical name Pagul'anka) marks the place in the forest where from July 1941 up to the end of 1943 Jews deported from the Daugavpils ghetto at various times were shot. There are data about more than 10 000 victims.

Three more places which are emotionally very impressive, but little visited by tourists should be mentioned. In 1971, the Memorial in the Likverteni forest near Bauska was created. A monument in dolomite "Human Figures" was erected on the site of the massacre in summer 1941 when at least 900 Jews were killed.



PHOTO 4. MEMORIAL STONE IN MEZHCIEMS. PHOTO BY KASPARS STRODS.

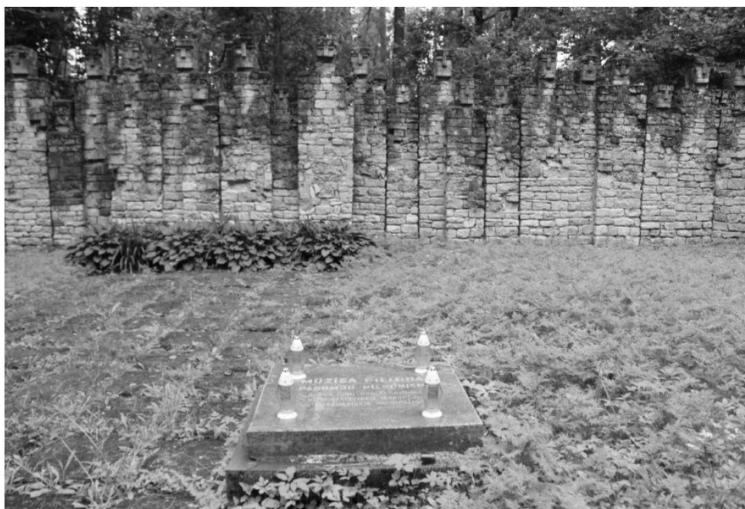


PHOTO 5. MEMORIAL IN THE LIKVERTENI FOREST NEAR BAUSKA.  
PHOTO BY DIANA POPOVA.

In 1993, a monument in the shape of a human skull was erected in the Smecere Pine Forest near Madona. About 700 residents of Madona and its vicinity were killed in this place in one day, on August 8, 1941. Among victims, 250 were Jews.



PHOTO 6. MEMORIAL IN THE SMECERE PINE FOREST NEAR MADONA.

PHOTO BY GEORGIJS KONKOVŠ.

One more forest became the site of a massacre in Valmiera. The Jews of this city and its vicinity were murdered in several actions in July and August 1941 in the former shooting range in K'elderleja. The course of the Holocaust in K'elderleja and its victims are not clearly known. There is a reference to more than 3000 residents of Valmiera. A monument on the site of the murder, dedicated to all victims killed in this place was unveiled in 1948.



PHOTO 7. MEMORIAL IN K'ELDERLEJA NEAR VALMIERA.  
PHOTO BY GEORGIJS KONKOVŠ.

If the named and dozens of other memorial places to the victims of the Holocaust are available to tourists, then there are just as many that have once been marked based on eyewitness stories but are practically very hard to find today. The question is whether the attraction of dark tourism to these places can strengthen the importance of them in the eyes of the local community, or, on the contrary, too much attention of tourists can have the opposite effect, and these

places become the places of unsounded selective silence. The probability cannot be ruled out that if the interest of dark tourism in Holocaust sites in Latvia will increase, the contradiction between the requirements of the tourism industry and the needs of local municipalities in making Holocaust sites more accessible to tourists, on the one hand, and the sustainable reluctance of local people to talk about events related with these places, on the other hand, could become strained. Perhaps, in the case of Latvia, what Korstanje had warned about could be referred: by making tragedy places a commodity, they can become a tool of political manipulation in the hands of certain groups, as these places, as spaces of memory, have no unified boundaries, so this problematic heritage of society is actually made up of political interests, and sometimes political discourse about dark memorial sites does not receive the unanimous support of the whole of society [8; P. 66].

In Latvia, the Holocaust is officially commemorated on July 4, the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Jewish Genocide. The main commemoration ceremony of the day takes place in Riga at the Memorial to the victims of the Jewish genocide in the place where in 1941 the Great Choral Synagogue of Riga was burned down. Commemorative events and flower-laying also take place at other Holocaust memorial sites in Riga and beyond, attended by a few hundred people.



PHOTO 8. THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENT ON NOVEMBER 30 IN RUMBULA.  
PHOTO BY DIDZIS BERZINS.

Since 2010, community *Shamir* has been organising a “Living March” in the former Riga Ghetto. Around 150 people regularly take part in it. Holocaust



victims are also remembered every year on days which are not included in the official calendar of public holidays or other commemoration days. Among them is an event commemorating the Jews killed in the Rumbula campaign of November 30 and December 8, 1941. However, these events are also not widely attended.

The official commemoration of the Holocaust quite accurately describes the attitude that prevails in Latvian society. In 2016, in the survey conducted as part of the SUSTINNO project, when asked, which, in the respondents' opinion was the worst event in Latvia's history, of the thirteen events offered in the questionnaire, the Holocaust was chosen by ten per cent of all respondents [14]. For comparison, Latvians gave first place to events related to the occupation of the USSR, but non-Latvians – to World War II. Without going deeper into the reasons why Holocaust memories are not particularly important to the public, it could be said that this indifference is primarily reflected also in the public's attitude towards Holocaust memorial sites. However, analysing the situation in more detail, we will see that the reasons for this attitude are various.

Moreover, often it is not indifference, but silence, a desire not to talk and not to think about the Holocaust, because these events are still painful for a part of society. For this reason, the position of different groups in society on the inclusion of Holocaust sites in dark tourism routes can be markedly different. Similarly, attitudes towards the Holocaust, its remembrance and the preservation of memories vary from community to community. Let us highlight some of the most relevant aspects.

First, it should be noted that almost all of the pre-war Jewish community (about 93000 Jews lived in Latvia in 1940) was killed. A new Jewish community emerged after the war, with the coming of Jews from various republics of the USSR, had no connection with the events of the Holocaust, as well as a particular interest about them. Most of the Holocaust sites were identified by local and foreign Jews who survived the Holocaust, as well as by other local people who witnessed the events. The Soviet regime's attitude towards the activities of these enthusiasts was relatively negative. As the years go by and the generations change, there are fewer and fewer eyewitnesses to the events. Thus, only eighteen Holocaust survivors now live in Latvia. The number of eyewitnesses is also declining rapidly, and many of them still do not want to talk about the events of the Nazi period. As a result, these memories are almost lost.

Richard Lowell Rubinstein, a well-known American Holocaust theologian, emphasises in his works that more than any other 20th-century disaster, the Holocaust resonates with the religio-mythic traditions of biblical religion, the dominant religious inheritance of the Western civilisation. That is, the response to the Holocaust reflects the pervasiveness in the Judaeo-Christian West of the

‘witness people myth’ [5; P. 8], the belief that whatever happens to the Jews, for good or evil, it is an expression of God’s providential justice and, as such, is a sign ‘for God’s church’. Among other things, Rubenstein is convinced that the answer to the popularity of Holocaust sites among Westerners can be found in this resonance [11; P. 937].

Latvia has a multi-confessional, mostly Christian society, with an influent Judaism (Hasidic) tradition in pre-war Latvia. However, Rubenstein’s assumption is not confirmed here because the theme of the Holocaust is very rare in the discourse of the Latvian Christian Church. Besides, these some references also are not related to the myth mentioned by Rubenstein, but to the pieces of information about the Church’s attitude towards the genocide of the Jews, Romani people and mentally ill persons during the Nazi regime, as well as about clergy and laity who tried to stop this genocide and were among the Jewish rescuers.

When talking about Holocaust memorials as sites of selected silence, another aspect should be mentioned. By creating places of Death as memorials during the Soviet era, they were created as memorials to all victims of fascism, without highlighting the Jews. Jews, as well as Romani people, Soviet activists and prisoners of war, were killed and buried together, mostly in the summer of 1941. Therefore, from time to time, the question arises in society as to whether the Holocaust was the Holocaust only for Jews? Was the suffering of other victims less? Furthermore, how to measure suffering in general?

Selected attitude to the common places of remembrance is directly connected also with the attitude towards the Soviet occupation and the collaborationism of the part of the Latvian population with the Soviet regime, especially in 1940–41. This attitude is reflected in the care of memorials and, ultimately, in the different interests of local authorities in maintaining these sites. However, even more painful is the question of collaborations in the situation of Nazi occupation. This mood is sharpened further by the fact that the adherers of different versions of history sometimes accuse all Latvians in general of collaboration with Nazi and participation in the Holocaust. As a result, the events of the Holocaust are not passed over in silence or denied, but, at the same time, they have not become a topic to be discussed openly. However, it should be noted that the younger generation has a different, more inclusive attitude towards the past. For example, a new tradition emerged on the evening of November 30, 2016, at the initiative of the director of the Zhanis Lipke Memorial Lolita Tomsonē, and the historian Kaspars Zellis. Since then, candles are placed and lit at the Monument of Freedom on this day in honour of victims of the Holocaust.



PHOTO 9. AT THE MEMORIAL OF FREEDOM ON NOVEMBER 30.  
PHOTO BY RAIVIS SIMANSONS.

This tradition is unique for several reasons: it is the civic initiative, it is the initiative of representatives of the younger generation, and it is the application of a new ritual of remembrance. Moreover, it is the expansion of the Holocaust memorial space to the nationally most important symbolic site, the Monument of Freedom, and the inclusion of new participants, unrelated to the Jewish community [16; P. 109-110]. Future will tell whether the younger generation will have the strength to dispel the silence about the darkest heritage in Latvia. For this to be possible, they must still be able to address the last eyewitnesses to the events of the Holocaust, as their stories must become that part of the collective and cultural memory that prevent such events from happening again.

The specifics of dark tourism determine that the sightseeing places included in its routes at the same time are the tragic historical heritage of one or another ethnic group or nation. Because of this reason, there is an inevitable contradiction between the desire of the tourism industry to attract large numbers of tourists to these places and the local community's lack of interest in the offering of such tourism products or even resistance to make these 'dark places' too pub-

lic. The way how the Holocaust heritage is memorialised and communicated by local communities in Latvia is one of the many examples of such contradiction.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ariès P. (1975) *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Vol. 3). Maryland, John Hopkins University Press. 128 p.
2. Bardis P. D. (1981) *History of Thanatology: Philosophical, Religious, Psychological, and Sociological Ideas Concerning Death, from Primitive Times to the Present*. Washington DC, University Press of America. 92 p.
3. Berzins D., Simansons R. (2020) Holokausta piemiņas vietas PSRS radīja Rietumu spiediena dēļ. Saruna par ebreju memoriāliem [The USSR created Holocaust memorials due to Western pressure. A conversation about Jewish memorials]. *Re! Zinātnes vārdā [See! In the name of science]*. LSM, November 1. Available at: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/vesture/holokausta-pieminas-vietas-psrs-radija-rietumu-spiediena-del-saruna-par-ebreju-memorialiem.a379965/> (access date: 7.12.2020)
4. Collins-Kreiner, N. (2016) Dark tourism as/is pilgrimage. *Current Issues in Tourism*. Vol. 19, No. 12. P. 1185–1189. DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2015.1078299
5. Haynes S. R. (1995) *Jews and the Christian Imagination: Reluctant Witness*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 240 p.
6. Korstanje M. E. (2017) The Allegory of Holocaust: The Rise of Thana Capitalism. *Ideological Messaging and the Role of Political Literature*, ed. by O. Çakirtaş. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. 177–199.
7. Korstanje M. E. (2016) El diseño del Capitalismo Mortuorio: De la cultura del desastre al narcisismo [The Design of Mortuary Capitalism: From Disaster Culture to Narcissism]. *Reflexiones Marginales [Marginal Reflections]*. No. 32. P. 1–19.
8. Korstanje M. E., Ivanov S. (2012) Tourism as a Form of New Psychological Resilience. The Inception of Dark Tourism. *Cultur. Revista de Cultura e Turismo [Cultur. Culture and Tourism Magazine]*. No. 4. P. 56–71.
9. Melers M. (2013) *Latvijas ebreju kopienas vēsture un holokausta piemiņas vietas [History of the Latvian Jewish community and Holocaust memorial sites]*. Riga: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia. 440 p.
10. Paz O. (1992) *El laberinto de la soledad [The Labyrinth of Solitude]*. Madrid: Fund for Economic Culture. 89 p.
11. Rubenstein R.L. (2001) Religion and the Uniqueness of the Holocaust. *Remembering for the Future. The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*. John K. Roth, Elisabeth Maxwell, Margot Levy, Wendy Whitworth ed. Vol. 2. Palgrave. 937–942.
12. Stone P. (2012) Dark tourism as ‘mortality capital’: The case of Ground Zero and the Significant Other Dead. *Contemporary Tourist Experience: Concepts and Consequences*, ed by Richard Sharpley & Philip R. Stone. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. 71–94.
13. Stone P. (2006) A Dark Tourism Spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attraction and exhibitions. *Tourism*, Vol 54, No. 2. P. 145–160.
14. SUSTINNO (2016). Survey of Latvian residents. Institute of Social and Political Research of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Latvia.
15. Tzanelli R. (2014) Embodied Art and Aesthetic Performativity in the London Olympics Handover to Rio. *The Global Studies Journal*. No.2. P. 13–24.
16. Zelce Vita. (2018) Anomija Latvijas svētku un piemiņas dienu kalendārā un praksē [Anomie in the calendar and practice of Latvian holidays and memorial days]. *Apmaldījušies brīvībā: anomija mūsdienā Latvijā [Lost in Freedom: Anomie in Modern Latvia]*, Aija Zobenā ed. Riga: UL Academic Publishing House, 104–149.