

Commemorating from a distance: the digital transformation of Holocaust memory in times of COVID-19

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Abstract

The severe restrictions on public life in many countries following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically affected Holocaust memorials and museums in all parts of the world, especially in Europe and in Israel. These measures posed a significant challenge, because contemporary forms of Holocaust commemoration are particularly based on the personal experience of presence at museums and historical sites. In contrast to the experience of distancing in face of the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing the presence of the past is thus a crucial element of contemporary Holocaust commemoration. This article explores the relationship between presence and absence, proximity and distance, guided commemoration and online engagement by critically analyzing digital activities of Holocaust memorials and museums in response to the pandemic. It argues that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Holocaust memorials began experimenting with the potential of social media for Holocaust memory. These experiments finally accepted the ongoing generational change and reacted to significant previous shifts in media consumption that were already affecting Holocaust commemoration.

Keywords

COVID-19, digital culture, memorials, memory, Holocaust, social media

The severe restrictions on public life in many countries following the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically affected cultural institutions such as theaters, cinemas, and museums. Physical sites had to close their doors to visitors and cancel public events,

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and travel restrictions made it impossible to visit tourist attractions. All these measures also caused significant challenges for Holocaust memorials and museums in all parts of the world, especially in Europe and in Israel. As one of the first to shut to the public, the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial closed on 12 March 2020. On 14 March, former concentration camp sites in Germany were forced to conduct the same action. On 15 March, Yad Vashem in Israel closed its museum to visitors.

Even more challenging was the fact that 2020 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the discovery of various concentration camps and atrocity sites. For that reason, many memorials had planned large-scale commemoration events on-site. For these occasions they had especially invited survivors and their families, which for many was perhaps their last chance to visit the sites of traumatic suffering and articulate their living memories. In addition, the peak of the shutdown also coincided with the *Yom HaShoah*, Israel's "Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day," or in short Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Due to the closure of the sites and severe travel restrictions, the events had to be canceled on short notice. The cancellations left several institutions with the difficult decision of how to deal with public ceremonies usually physically performed at their sites. Yad Vashem prerecorded the annual *Yom HaShoah* ceremony and broadcasted it on national television, YouTube, and on Facebook. Memorial sites such as Flossenbürg in Bavaria uploaded video speeches from survivors, politicians, and others to their website.

These measures posed a significant challenge, especially because contemporary forms of Holocaust commemoration are particularly based on the personal experience of presence at museums and historical sites. The visit to memorial sites and historical exhibitions in combination with educational activities and the personal encounter with survivors are assumed to offer unique access to the history of the Holocaust and result in enduring experiences.

Establishing the presence of the past is thus a crucial element of contemporary Holocaust commemoration, and encounters with the physical sites of atrocity and with survivor testimonies seem to produce such "presence effects" (Pinchevski, 2019: 101). In contrast, the current situation in face of the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by the experience of distancing. In the context of Holocaust commemoration, this experience correlates with the increasingly growing temporal distance between present generations and the past events. While the tension between immediacy and distance is characteristic of mediated memories from the Holocaust, it seems to be constitutive for commemorating the Holocaust in times of COVID-19. This is even more true considering the situation of Holocaust survivors. Social distancing regulations particularly affect their ability to speak to audiences and their function as witnesses of the past events. The COVID-19 disease specifically harmed this generation as it disproportionately affects older people. In fact, the very first COVID-19 victim in Israel was Aryeh Even, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary.

Already since several decades commemorative culture of the Holocaust anticipates the prospective absence of the survivors' presence. Researchers and educators tested a variety of media formats that preserve survivor testimonies for the future. Due to the particular situation of aged the witnesses in the pandemic, however, Holocaust commemoration in the wake of COVID-19 proves the absence of the survivors while they are still with us.

In the following, I explore the relationship between distance and presence by critically analyzing the digital activities of Holocaust memorials and museums in response to the pandemic. Social media played a crucial role in this process. Many Holocaust memorials developed and uploaded digital formats in response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that specifically addressed social media users. In my analysis, I am interested in how those social media initiatives explicitly or implicitly reflect the tension between proximity and distance, and with it the mediated character of Holocaust memory oscillating between presence and absence. A crucial element in this context, which is in the focus of this discussion, is the translation of preexisting modes of commemoration into digital formats. I argue that such translation from analogue into digital modes of remembrance strives for establishing presence effects through experiential modes that spark engagements in a situation of commemorating from a distance.

Engaging with the past from a distance

According to Landsberg (2015: 10), distance is an important precondition for engaging with the past through media: “affective engagement” correlates with realizing the “fundamental distance” between the past and the users’ own presence. This recognition process depends on formal and stylistic elements and implies reflexive thinking about media (p. 16). In the wake of COVID-19, this “sense of distance” (p. 153) has various implications.

The temporal (and emotional) distance from the past events conjoin with the physical distance from commemorative activities. Therein, digital media gain a prosthetic function to reduce (and at the same time maintain) distance. Writing about films, Walden (2019: 49) accentuates that visual media “can emphasise the distance between past and present, whilst simultaneously trying to bring the spectator close to the Holocaust.” Through media we “negotiate between past and present,” a process for which distance is a precondition, because we “cannot fully access the actual moment of the past” (Walden, 2019: 78). This negotiation, however, “helps us to begin to create our own (partial) memory of the real that once was, and contribute to a collaborative memory of it” (Walden, 2019: 78).

Holocaust museums and memorials play a crucial role in this negotiation process. Social distancing regulations however, which forced Holocaust memorials and museums to facilitate access to their sites and collections from a distance, change the status of negotiating presence in Holocaust commemoration. This implies a loss of control over preferred (and therefore regulated) ways of engaging with the historical sites. Digital media offer modes of experiencing the sites from afar, thus enabling the users “to grasp some knowledge from the past, whilst retaining their temporal [and in times of COVID-19 also physical] distance from it” (Walden, 2019: 32). However, in particular with the shift of digital memory culture toward social media, Holocaust memory merges with other forms of social media engagement: Presence connects to the dominant social media mode of self-witnessing (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020). Thus, in the absence of collective forms of on-site commemoration, users themselves become agents of (social media) memory. Still embedded in a social framework, that of social media, this engagement, however, enables new forms of collaborative remembering, resembling Hoskins’

(2017b: 85) notion of the “memory of the multitude,” which he describes as “the defining digital organizational form of memory beyond but also incorporating the self.”

Digitization is not new to Holocaust memorials and museums. To the contrary, many innovative digital commemoration projects were developed in recent years. In contrast to the current situation, these digital projects mainly focused on using advanced digital technologies for preservation and education purposes. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic however, Holocaust memorials did not only foreground preexisting, often prestigious, digital initiatives and content, but spontaneously began experimenting with the potential of social media for Holocaust memory. These innovative experiments finally accepted the ongoing generational change and reacted to significant previous shifts in media consumption that were already affecting Holocaust commemoration. Kansteiner (2017a: 316) described this changing situation as follows:

Digital memory no longer evolves along the individual-collective axis. In the post-broadcast era there is no collective to speak of, at least not in the way in which television used to aggregate consumers into audiences through narratives and media events. [. . .] Participatory digital culture features active individuals constantly posting, editing, liking and linking in pursuit of fluid ‘we’s’ and for the purpose of crafting and exhibiting an attractive self.

The pandemic seems to have a transformative effect on global Holocaust memory, at least concerning its mediation. COVID-19 affected the parameters of, concerning the use of social media, still limited digital Holocaust commemoration. The challenge to involve the public in restricted and often isolated forms of commemoration from their distant homes reconfigured the relationship between individual commemoration and collective commemorative culture. #RememberingFromHome was a popular hashtag during the peak of the shutdown that coincided with *YomHaShoah* in Israel. Memorials transformed into #DigitalMemorials, as another popular hashtag suggested. This not only involved uploading digital content and advertising public activities on social media platforms, but museums and memorial sites also tried to offer engaging formats that provided access to the restricted landscapes of memories: #ClosedButOpen.

This also implied user engagement in the sense of Landsberg’s (2015: 3) “experiential mode of engagement,” which on the one hand results from the desire to feel connected to the past, but depends, on the other, on asserting its “alien nature” (p. 10). Users could engage with the online activities through participating in virtual tours or Zoom conversations; by posting questions, comments, or emojis; and through interacting with different formats (videos, educational tasks, documents). These formats translated existing modes of Holocaust commemoration into social media memory, adopted user-friendly technology such as mobile phone cameras, asked for contributions from the users, and handed over editorial power and creative freedom to freelancers and volunteers. Thus, Holocaust commemoration in the wake of COVID-19 moved beyond what Kansteiner (2017a: 318) previously criticized as “teaching resources that are conservative, predictable and uninspiring in content and form.”

Before analyzing this translation process in relation to the notion of distance and distancing, I briefly delineate the evolution of digital Holocaust memory and review previous attempts to integrate Holocaust commemoration into social media.

The evolution of digital Holocaust memory

The Holocaust has become one of the best documented but still remarkably fragmented memories of the twentieth century (Blanke et al., 2014). In the 21st century, digitization offers new forms for engaging with these fragmented memories. However, the promises of participating in creating and mediating memory confront crucial concerns regarding how to commemorate and educate about the Holocaust in appropriate ways.

Digitization changed existing concepts of memory and the mediation of the past in a fundamental way (Hoskins, 2017a). For institutional commemoration, digitization offered new opportunities as well as challenges with regards to archiving, collecting, and distributing historical objects (Ernst, 2013). Most importantly, it could assist in – at least virtually – slowing down the process of decay that objects naturally undergo or reconstructing in three-dimensional images what has been lost. This corresponds to Pinchevski's (2019: 87) observation that recording and preserving were basic intentions that also motivated the collection of survivor testimonies about the Holocaust (Bothe, 2019; De Jong, 2018; Zalewska, 2017). Those collections became the most important basis for the newly emerging digital Holocaust memory. The USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) especially marks the watershed from analogue to digital memory. Its founding coincided with "the advent of the Internet" that "marked the start of a new era in media practices, transforming the ways in which information could be stored, inventoried, disseminated, and engaged" (Shandler, 2017: 3). Though still recorded with analogue video technology, the videotaped survivor testimonies were from the beginning intended for online dissemination. Thus, for Shandler (2017: 4) "the VHA also bestrides the transition from the 'video age' to the 'digital age'."

The transition into digital culture made the video testimonies accessible online and added to the authorial position of the survivors the potential to address distant listeners. Hence, Pinchevski (2019: 88) emphasizes that "testimonies are now expected to reach out and address – to have an interpellating power on audiences. Testimony extends beyond documentation and preservations; it is now increasingly about connection and dialogue." Furthermore, the transition to online media turned the analogue linear source through transcription, indexing, and annotation into a segmented dataset. This offered additional possibilities for actively engaging with the audiovisual sources and virtually reediting them according to specific narratives (Shandler, 2017: 14). For Hogervorst (2020: 11), online testimony archives therefore indicate a new "era of the user" that allows new forms of interactions with testimonies through "elaborate search instructions and a more user-oriented design." Kansteiner (2017b: 121) specifically mentions the USC Shoah Foundation's *IWitness* platform as an outstanding example of handing "over editorial power over cultural memory to teachers and high school students." The platform allows not only advanced search in the VHA by means of transcripts and keywords, but also provides basic film editing tools in order to use clips from the testimonies and integrate them into new audio-visual narratives.

The most advanced and best-known project in this context is USC's *Dimensions in Testimony*. This human-computer interface produces three-dimensional projections of Holocaust survivors interacting with future generations of listeners. Adjusting the logics of databases, this technique combines human-computer speech interaction capabilities

with three-dimensional holographic imaging in order to simulate an immersive experience of live interaction (Pinchevski, 2019: 90). Based on a statistical algorithm that performs the ranking and selection of proper answers and visual morphing that helps interconnecting different conversational sequences, the system simulates a conversational setting (Pinchevski, 2019: 93).

Paradoxically, as Kansteiner (2017b: 117) emphasizes, these professional memory projects “make ample use of digital technology to maintain their sizable cultural footprints both on- and offline, all the while seeking to keep historical cultures within appropriate limits.” Although striving for immersion into distant places or accessing virtual reconstructions of past and vanished landscapes, this technology is still institutionally bound and located at specific sites. As a consequence, the current hardships posed by COVID-19 also affected these flagships of digital Holocaust memory.

The rise of social media memory

In spite of the intensification of Holocaust memory on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram had already become popular media of (virtual) Holocaust commemoration beforehand (Bothe, 2014; Menyhért, 2017; Pfanzelter, 2015; Walden, 2015). Facebook was one of the first platforms to serve as a “virtual memory place for Holocaust remembrance” (Pentzold and Sommer, 2011: 83), in some extreme cases by hosting social media profiles of virtual “users” who were murdered in the Holocaust. In recent years, the image-sharing platform Instagram became an important forum for visual memories of the Holocaust as well as for documenting visits at former sites of atrocities. Holocaust memorials and museums began sharing their visual collections through Instagram and other social media platforms, and private Instagram users post photographs taken during visits at concentration camp memorials. In 2015, the USHMM asked visitors to “Instameet” by encouraging them to post pictures during their museum visit on Instagram (Pfanzelter, 2015: 265). Thereby, these social media platforms “open space for debates, discussions, and remembrance” (Commane and Potton, 2019: 159), thus offering possibilities for actively engaging in and contributing to social media memory.

With this, commemorative agency changed. In social media environments it increasingly “oscillates between individual online engagements and institutionally curated projects” (Zalewska, 2017: 98). Digital networks “allow for multiple ways of remembering in different social constellations, with different publics and among different communities” (Pentzold and Sommer, 2011: 80). In doing so, social media contribute to a “layered process of collective memory building” and “new types of decentralized archival regimes of memory” (Zalewska, 2017: 100), which pose a challenge to institutionalized Holocaust commemoration. As Kansteiner (2017a: 323–324) emphasizes, memorials and museums “prefer one-directional communication ‘broadcasting’ a carefully shaped, widely acceptable message via social media,” which created cautiousness concerning the interactive and participatory potentials of social media use.

The most controversially discussed topic in this context were selfies taken at memorial sites and posted on social media. But at closer look, selfies and other photographic self-representations at Holocaust memorials express individual forms of engaging with

memory culture. According to a study by Bareither (2020: 11), such “digital self-representations” indicate ways of exploring emotional connections to heritage sites and thus express “engagement in cultures of remembrance” rather than ignorance. In doing so, selfies prove the emergence of “new modes of dealing and interacting with historic sites” (Samida, 2019). Part of this is to document oneself at a memorial, share this experience with others through social media platforms, and connect it through the use of hashtags and geo-tagging to similar posts and related experiences at these sites. Nunes (2017: 108–109) describes this as an “act of ‘self-witnessing’,” which is expressed in “an increasingly complex networked social space.” Connected through hashtags with other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, or hosted on platforms such as Instagram, these visual acts of self-witnessing are replicated and amplified in the new virtual commemorative space of social media memory.

Until the pandemic, many commemorative institutions were nevertheless skeptical of utilizing social media for Holocaust commemoration. Kansteiner (2017b: 125) suggests that the potential of social media to allow engaging forms of self-narration runs contrary to the institutional interest to navigate the ways visitors/users encounter and engage with history. Mainly being afraid of denial, distortion, misuse, and superficial representations, many institutions have tried to control the digitally distributed memory of the Holocaust. Digitization, however, led to a “paradigm shift” (Zalewska, 2017: 98) toward interactive modes of engagement: “whereas the first generation of media of testimony was strictly about preservation, and while the second was a combination of preservation and reception, the third is concerned primarily with reception – more precisely, with interaction as a means for memorialization” (Pinchevski, 2019: 89).

In the context of social media this paradigm shift led to distinct forms of social media memory. A recent example for this phenomenon is the Instagram Stories project *Eva Stories* that was globally shared online during *Yom HaShoah* in 2019 (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020). This digital commemorative project was initiated and produced by Mati and Maya Kochavi, Israeli high-tech entrepreneurs with no connection to any memorial or other official commemorative agent. Split into seventy segments spread over 24 hours, *Eva Stories* is based on the diary of a Jewish girl from Hungary shortly before her deportation to Auschwitz, and attracted more than one million followers. It depicts the experiences of the historical Eva Heyman through filmic reenactments recorded with a mobile phone camera, thus mainly adopting selfie aesthetics and the subjective point-of-view perspective of video diaries. In addition, *Eva Stories* utilizes typical social media tools such as hashtags and geo-tagging as aesthetic and narrative elements, and adds various after-effects, textual layers, and emojis to the individual stories.

Eva Stories translates previous forms of mediating Holocaust memory into social media patterns in a unique manner. It does so in three distinct ways: (1) it *transfers* existing modes and approaches, for instance by adopting a personalized or autobiographical account, which is characteristic of modern Holocaust education as well as most video testimony projects. It also, however, (2) *transitions* existing modes that it adjusts to the specific environment of social media memory. The format of Instagram stories, for instance, corresponds with the narrative structure of a diary, the medium in which Eva Heyman’s story was preserved. Finally, *Eva Stories* (3) *transforms* analogue into digital

forms of commemoration. By adopting the multi-layered visual and textual structure of Instagram, using hashtags and geo-tagging, *Eva Stories* offers new ways of engaging with Eva's memory through responding to, sharing, and integrating the stories into their own social media feeds (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020).

Other projects followed the path of *Eva Stories*, which illustrates its lasting impact. The *Anne Frank Video Diary*, for instance, a project launched in April 2020 by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, similarly utilizes the notion of self-witnessing. The video diary that was aired on YouTube in fifteen episodes depicts Anne's story from a selfie perspective and extensively uses a subjective point of view. Unlike *Eva Stories*, however, the *Anne Frank Video Diary* does not perform a full transition into the digital. Although shared on various platforms, social media was mainly used as just another form for disseminating Anne's story.

Although produced before the outbreak of the pandemic, the *Anne Frank Video Diary* resonated strongly with the lockdown that many governments implemented in response to COVID-19, a fact the producers of the YouTube series openly addressed. Being confronted with public comparisons between the lockdown experience and Anne Frank's story, the Anne Frank House focused on this issue in the context of framing its project, emphasizing, of course, the differences between Anne's situation and the current one, while nevertheless reacting to the fact that the present state of the users would influence how they look at the video diary, which might also give them "a better understanding of certain extracts from her diary" (Anne Frank House, 2020).

Some episodes of the video diary indeed enabled implicit retroactive references to the COVID-19 restrictions. After learning about the allied landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944, Anne elaborates on her isolated situation and longs to go outside and experience the wind. In another episode she reflects on freedom, emphasizing the contrast between inside and outside. Here, a selfie shot of Anne's face strongly interconnects with the view of a window from below. Hence, the current situation affected the users' perceptions of digital commemoration projects on social media even though they were produced before the pandemic had started.

Commemorating the Holocaust in the wake of a global pandemic

The transformative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Holocaust memory was especially strong because it touched on two basic principles of Holocaust commemoration: The first is the authority of the (historical) site. Holocaust memorial museums seem to establish a specific experiential connection to the past (Assmann and Brauer, 2011). The second is the authority of the surviving witnesses. In current forms of Holocaust commemoration and education the survivors serve as mediators of memories from the Holocaust to contemporary audiences. They offer access to the emotional complexity of the historical catastrophe as a human experience.

Forced to close, and with the survivors kept home, the COVID-19-related restrictions in effect directly challenged the exclusive position of Holocaust memorials, especially those located at former concentration camps and atrocity sites, as well as the speaking

position of Holocaust survivors. Digital communication technology served as a prosthesis for commemorating from a distance. This technology offered survivors another option to share and at the same time preserve their messages for the contemporary generation, and they enabled memorials and museums to keep their sites and collections, at least virtually, open to the public. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis indicates like no other event the long-lasting shift from personally encountered living memory to (social) media memory experienced from a distance. As a global challenge, it not only catalyzed the digital transformation of Holocaust memory, but also symbolizes, and even actually reinforces, the transition from what Annette Wieviorka (2006) described as the era of the witness.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on cultural institutions and heritage sites induced a significant shift from on-site activities and online resources to social media commemoration. COVID-19 challenged the traditional forms of commemorating and mediating the Holocaust through museums, historical sites, and personal encounters with witnesses, as well as earlier transitions toward complex site-based digital technology such as survivor holograms. Thus, most memorials responded to the current restrictions with initiatives that moved from complex digital technology and online resources to social media platforms as preferred commemorative spaces that foster engagement and active response through sharing, posting, and commenting.

In order to describe virtual historical environments, Landsberg (2015: 150) introduces the concept of translation that “foreground[s] the inevitable partiality, incompleteness, imperfection of the transmission.” Therefore, she considers historical engagement “a translation of the past into the present” (Landsberg, 2015: 151). In our context of Holocaust memory in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this translation process is twofold: it refers to the translation of the past into the present through mediated forms of commemoration that compensate the experience of distance, and it implies the translation of analogue formats and on-site approaches into digital modes. When exploring those digital modes, I identified three expressions of such translation processes: (1) simply transferring existing analogue modes of remembrance into the digital world, (2) transitioning previous commemorative forms by adjusting them to social media logics, and (3) transforming modes of commemoration into the digital narratives of those platforms with which they are engaged. In the following, I explore such forms of *transferring*, *transitioning*, and *transforming* Holocaust memory in social media environments after the outbreak of COVID-19 that were already apparent in the *Eva Stories* project.

Transferring Holocaust memory

Especially in the context of *Yom HaShoah* in April 2020, many museums and memorials as well as other memory agents in Israel, Germany, and the United States utilized the online communication platform Zoom as an instrument for remote discussions. Already popular due to a general shift toward online activities and distance learning, Zoom became an important commemorative tool for online conversations with survivors. Transferring the model of the initiative *Zikaron BaSalon / Memories in the Livingroom*, a recent attempt to establish new interactive ways of listening to survivor stories while facing the increasing immobility of the ageing witnesses, into the digital world, such

remote meetings became increasingly popular. According to *Zikaron BaSalon*, approximately one million participants registered for such online conversations in the context of this year's *Yom HaShoah* (Springer, 2020). Zoom webinars with survivors offered a forum for listening to testimonies from a distance, while also engaging with them through moderated online discussions or chats. For the survivors, this format offered the possibility of breaking out of the isolation imposed on them by the pandemic restrictions. Many, however, also struggle with the technological challenge of using the technology. Some prefer speaking with their audience in person and reject Zoom as a tool for sharing their memories. While the audience increased this year due to the use of digital video communication, the number of survivors bearing witness through *Zikaron BaSalon* activities dropped from 3000 to fewer than 300 (Schwartz, 2020).

In the context of virtual commemoration, memorials at former concentration camps and other atrocity sites in Germany used a variety of platforms to establish virtual conversations with survivors and their families through the use of hashtags. The Sachsenhausen Memorial interconnected video messages from survivors with political and other representatives on Vimeo, thus creating a virtual commemoration event (Gedenkstätte und Museum Sachsenhausen, 2020). Other survivors, such as Anita Lasker-Walfisch, who experienced the Auschwitz and the Bergen-Belsen concentration camps, videotaped their speeches and messages and posted them online on YouTube and other digital video platforms (Szymanowski, 2020). Thus, digital platforms made it possible to preserve, access, and even interact with survivor testimonies in times of the pandemic.

Similar to transferring existing commemorative practices, many memorials shifted from the prototypical way of encountering a physical site through a guided tour to virtual tours offered in social media environments. The Dachau Memorial invited the public to attend 45 minutes long online live visits of specific locations at the memorial compound that often focused on marginalized experiences or usually overlooked aspects of the concentration camp's history. In order to emphasize the significance of the places, the tours were transmitted in landscape format. They were streamed on the memorial's Facebook page with an average of 150 users participating live and a total of 200,000 clicks. Transferring the mode of guided tours into a digital environment, the online visits offer the opportunity to interact with the guide through posting questions and comments. This also led to new forms of online commemoration. When a guide placed a rose at the memorial for the Old Gallows Stand close to the crematorium, the online participants responded by posting rose emojis in the comments (Jost, 2020).

Another particularly popular platform for such virtual tours is Instagram. Starting on 27 May, the Bergen-Belsen Memorial offered Instagram live streams introducing specific aspects of the camp's history through virtual tours at the memorial compound. Filming the guide live with a mobile phone camera while instantly streaming the tour on Instagram, the mobile phone operator also communicates comments and questions from the chat to the guide, who can respond in real time. The tours focus either on topics that adjust to the multi-layered logics of Instagram in a specifically resonating way, such as two tours that focused on time layers at the site and utilized printed photographs and the virtual reconstruction of the former camp's architecture with the help of the memorial's augmented reality app, or they focus on specific anniversaries, such as the birthday of Anne Frank, who died in Bergen-Belsen, and the German attack on the

Soviet Union in June 1941, which was commemorated through a virtual tour at the Soviet POW cemetery there.

Augmenting the video of the tour, users who are participating live can recognize the user names of other participants appearing on the screen as well as a number of emojis and other icons, which might have a disturbing effect (Walden, 2020). Besides that, the tours themselves utilize analogue techniques such as printed photographs or laminated maps to provide orientation. As Walden (2020) emphasizes, this “practice plays a particularly important role online when we are not in the site and our view of it is restricted by the frame of the mobile device filming the tour.” Nevertheless, the virtual tour broadcasted live on Instagram mainly transfers the typical modes of guided tours from the on-site to the online environment. Walden (2020) explains accordingly that it “encapsulates much of the performativity, interaction and liveness of a typical in-person group tour. It has the same ephemeral quality – a one off, collective experience. One might call this a remediation of a guided tour, if indeed we can think of guided tours as mediation themselves.”

Transitioning Holocaust memory

While these projects can be analyzed as transfer of existing modes of commemoration from analogue to digital, others indicate a transition from analogue models to the specific requirements of social media. Accordingly, memorials adjusted the “medium” of the guided tour to the particular logics of Instagram. Only days after the restrictions were implemented and the memorial site had to close, the Neuengamme Memorial posted a series of short clips on Instagram that offered social media users a virtual experience at particular spots in and around the site. Edited as loops, the clips performed visual discoveries, often starting with obscure, irritating details and then revealing the context with the help of expressive camera movements. The first clip contains a panning shot gradually revealing a barbed wire fence, thus exhibiting an iconic visual object that one would expect at a concentration camp site (neuengamme.memorial, 2020a). As a virtual establishing shot of the tour, the technique resembles the first shots of Alain Resnais’ famous short-documentary *Night and Fog* (France 1955) about the concentration camp system, in which he utilizes panning shots to visualize the sudden encounter with the camps’ structures among beautiful landscapes. Similarly, the second clip opens by focusing on an unidentifiable object. Only the following panning shot reveals that this object is in fact a lorry placed in the camp’s compound (neuengamme.memorial, 2020b). Using the visual narrative of discovery, contextualization becomes possible with the help of the accompanying textual explanation that puts the visible object in relation to #forcedlabour. A third clip, which introduces the prison, starts with panning along a glass display with a real-size photograph of the historical building. Slowly moving behind the glass, the camera reveals the building’s ruined remains and stops at the display’s flipside (neuengamme.memorial, 2020c). Metaphorically, the users are invited to look behind the displayed items and connect different temporal layers and states of representation. Through the joint hashtag #digitalmemorials, these clips were interconnected with each other and also related to similar content uploaded by other memorials, thereby establishing a solely virtual commemorative site on social media.

Another Instagram project by the Neuengamme Memorial illustrates the transition of a guided tour at the site into social media practices typical to Instagram even clearer. Stating that “history lays in the detail [sic],” the memorial’s social media team posted photographs with details of objects or documents that can be discovered at the site (neuengamme.memorial, 2020d). When first encountering these details in their feeds, Instagram users would most likely be irritated by these obscure objects such as a door handle, a steel wheel, part of a fence, straw, files, and a metal replica of a gate that recalls the famous entry to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. By touching the display and swiping over the photographs, the users can actively reveal a related second picture that will offer them the broader context of the detail. The accompanying text explains the historical background and meaning of the visual objects and documents. The idea of this project is to reveal history related to specific objects through the use of close-up shots. Thereby, it adjusts the visual logics of Instagram in combination with interactive swiping techniques typical to the use of mobile touch screens.

Also participatory modes of commemoration transitioned into social media contexts. Compensating canceled commemoration ceremonies at many places worldwide, which often also affected the public reading of the names of those who were murdered in the Holocaust, Yad Vashem offered a *Virtual Name Reading Campaign* on the occasion of the annual *Yom Hashoah* as a social media-based form of digitally commemorating together from a distance. The memorial addressed social media users through a short advertising film and asked them to read names of Holocaust victims and post them on Facebook or Instagram. By using the hashtags #RememberingFromHome and #ShoahNames, these posts interconnected. The effect was a virtual space for publicly commemorating the names of Holocaust victims. Yad Vashem later edited the short clips together in two digital films that interconnected remote acts of commemoration and thus established a collaborative expression made from individual and isolated acts of digital social media communication (Yad Vashem, 2020).

In a similar way, the Mauthausen Memorial in Austria asked social media users on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to share pictures and video clips using the #Liberation1945 hashtag. Based on a visual template of the camp’s iconic gate, users could create their own paintings, collages, or films recalling as well as imagining the moment of liberation, and post them on Facebook or Instagram. Connected through the shared hashtag, these individual segments merged into a commemorative event that was later edited into a #Liberation1945 video that was again shared on social media platforms (Mauthausen Memorial, 2020c). Both these social media campaigns utilized social media’s affinity for practices of co-creation (Burgess and Banks, 2010).

Transforming Holocaust memory

Next to such transfer and transformation of established analogue commemorative modes, some projects transform pre-digital modes into the digital, for instance the *Digital Education* project launched by the Mauthausen Memorial immediately after its closure. In short video clips, the memorial’s educators adopt various digital genres – selfie videos, influencer videos, video lectures, virtual tours, video diary, audiovisual essay – for

communicating the history and presence of the memorial site across various digital media platforms (website, YouTube, GoogleDocs).

The first digital video, made by the memorial's educational director Gudrun Blohberger and posted online on 23 March, introduces the main elements of the project: the use of historical photographs in relation to the site in order to connect and compare past and present, the selfie perspective, and the subjective point-of-view shot. In a clearly symbolical way, Blohberger films her hand opening a door at the main gate and steps inside while shifting the camera toward her face (Mauthausen Memorial, 2020a). This shot illustrates how the digital videos intend to gain access to the closed site, and that the guides and educators see themselves in the position of mediators between the contemporary situation of users and past memories and experiences.

At the same time, many of the films document the current situation affected by the pandemic. A shot of the deserted site in the first video or symbolic views through windows in the third episode interrelate COVID-19 with reflections on distance viewing while looking closely at the traces of the past, modes that clearly structure the *Digital Education* project (Mauthausen Memorial, 2020b). Correlating with the characteristics of the digital video format, the short films accentuate audiovisual elements such as visual documents, testimonies, and the encounter with the site with the help of mobile phone cameras. Annotated maps; comparison of the present topography with historical photographs, quotes, or virtual tours; together with simple interactive elements such as the invitation to stop the video with the pause button in order to closely inspect a photograph or an inscription, or to change to an online document with additional information and questions, turn these videos into a digital tool for engaging with the history of the Holocaust and its sources which, as the memorial's director emphasizes, cannot replace the physical visit of the site (Kroisleitner and Rohrhofer, 2020), but nevertheless establishes an engaging commemorative space online.

A similar transformation became apparent in projects that explored digital equivalents for the cancelled anniversary ceremonies. An example is the initiative #75Befreiung by the Sachsenhausen memorial. The hashtag interconnects various segmented videos (speeches, video messages, greetings, music, etc.), which the users can access independently from a formal schedule according to their own interests.

The hashtag #75Liberation however, originated from a digital commemoration initiative that was already established before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. Since January 20, 2020 this hashtag was used by memorials to commemorate the 75th anniversary of liberation, first on occasion of the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Supported by the Digital Humanities institute at the University of Cologne the initiators, among them the Neuengamme Memorial, developed two internet bots on Twitter, which retweeted short messages in German and English that contained the hashtag (Groschek, 2020).

With the intensification of social media activities during the pandemic, the use of the hashtag #75Liberation further increased and was applied also to posts on other platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. In doing so, the hashtag turned into a highly visible and recognizable label for social media memory related to the anniversary. Thereby, it transformed into a digital commemorative sphere that interconnected digital projects, distant

historical sites and social media users. In doing so, it established virtual forms of collaborative commemoration that minimized the distance between the isolated memorials and their distant audience.

Conclusion

The transfer, transformation, and transition of analogue forms of Holocaust memory into social media environments have established new ephemeral and often experimental forms of digital commemoration. The restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on institutionalized Holocaust commemoration thereby intensified the development of distinct modes of social media memory. These modes imposed by digital projects made it possible to replace “social distance” with mediated proximity.

While before the pandemic technologically advanced projects such as three-dimensional survivor holograms dominated the emerging field of digital Holocaust memory, in the wake of COVID-19 social networks have gained significant importance. Experimental approaches adopted the culture of commenting, sharing, and creatively remixing content on social media for commemorating the Holocaust from a distance. Utilizing user-friendly technology, such as mobile phones and social media applications, many innovative projects experimented with digital aesthetics and formats such as the selfie perspective, video diaries, and influencer videos, and combined them with established approaches to teaching and learning about the Holocaust. Virtual tours, digital videos, interactive photo series, and virtual memorials refined Holocaust memory in the digital sphere, even though they will replace neither the personal encounter with the historical sites nor with Holocaust survivors nor, after they will be unable to transmit their memories live (or with the help of Zoom or other digital communication platforms), with their digitized testimonie.

These formats of social media memory, however, establish a commemorative sphere that integrates a variety of digital media modes, with all cases discussed in this paper especially proving the central role audiovisual media play for digital commemoration in times of COVID-19, as well as the privileged position of image- and moving-image-based social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and to a certain extent Facebook as well, which became virtual commemorative spaces for hashtagged social media memory. This use of particular hashtags interrelates digital commemoration projects and active forms of user engagement so they function as links between memorials and users. Furthermore, the hashtags provide an organizing principle that allows the mapping of a clearly virtual commemorative space composed of posts and contributions from a variety of institutionalized and private social media users.

This development in the area of Holocaust memory has also implications for media memory in a broader sense and other memories affected by the pandemic. Its transforming power in the field of digital communication is not exclusive to Holocaust commemoration. Other museums and memorials had to cope with the same challenges and developed similar digital solutions like Holocaust memorials in response to the restrictions that followed COVID-19. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic reevoked forgotten memories like that of the Spanish Flu (Erl, 2020). Finally, commemoration of COVID-19 as a significant event in human history already started during the spread of the

pandemic. Virtual “Corona Archives” as well as collections of testimonies related to the experience of COVID-19 were established in real time. Many of the social media initiatives commemorating the Holocaust in times of the pandemic however, do not only refer to the past or the particular memory of the Holocaust but also to their formative presence. Hence, to a certain degree they are also part of a future memory of the pandemic.

Most significantly for the development of Holocaust memory the digital activities of museums and memorials moved beyond the established use of social media platforms for their commemorative purposes. While before the pandemic, memorials mostly used social media as a forum for disseminating digitized documents and visual content from their collections, they now experimented with new forms of transferring, transitioning, and transforming established commemorative forms and media formats into social media environments. Such translation of analogue modes into digital environments reduces distance and strives for a sense of presence at the sites of Holocaust commemoration in times of social distancing. This development will certainly have an impact on the “new normal” after the pandemic. The successful format of virtual tours will most likely remain part of several memorials’ programs, especially as they offer the opportunity to focus on special-interest topics and help to engage distant audiences. Zoom and other digital video communication tools might continue to serve as platforms for meeting survivors even after a successful cure for COVID-19, especially because they provide a solution to the limited mobility of the aging witnesses. Interactive educational videos offer new possibilities for reaching out to new generations of users and help them prepare themselves online for their visits to the actual sites. Hashtags will also be used in the future to connect social media users to commemorative events and memorial sites. However, these formats also set new standards for engaging with the history of the Holocaust in the digital age. They offer models for creative engagement with historical sites and sources in times of increasing distance from the past events. In combination with new on-site formats, such as augmented reality applications or self-guided tours based on geo-tagging, social media in the wake of COVID-19 has become a connective commemorative space for Holocaust memory.

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