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The Pragmatics of Holocaust Heritage in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Concept Using the Case Studies of Terezín and Staro Sajmište

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust heritage across Europe is held to high standards of conservation, management, interpretation, and use, due to the belief that all such sites should be retained as or turned into places of memorialization as their primary function. This paper proposes that a pragmatic approach instead be taken towards Holocaust heritage in the twenty-first century and beyond. In acknowledgement that heritage practitioners today are not safeguarding this as a "found" heritage resource in 1945, but in the present day, it is argued that it is inevitable and perhaps unavoidable to make pragmatic decisions which take into account changes to such sites over the last 80 years. Site managers and other stakeholders are not in a position to make decisions based on a clean slate, devoid of post-war events and uses. Drawing on case studies from Serbia and Czechia, and adopting a three-pronged model of "heritage pragmatics," this paper argues that our choices today should reflect and acknowledge past uses and aim towards more pragmatic solutions, letting go of idealistic aspirations more suitable for sites without a long history of reuse.

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Introduction

Holocaust heritage is a precious resource. As the remaining sites of persecution, murder, execution, crimes against humanity, and genocide by the Nazis and their allies on European soil, it is uncontroversial to state that those who work in the sector agree that such sites should be protected, safeguarded from risks and threats (IHRA Charter, e.n.11), and kept as places of memorialization, education, and research (IHRA Ministerial Declaration 2020, Article 10); places to remember the victims and make pledges to guard democracy and our freedoms. These are commendable aspirations, actively supported by the authors in their roles as delegates to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

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And yet, Holocaust sites are not what Charlesworth (2016) has referred to as a "place apart"; while viewed as "sacred" and places of quasi-religious pilgrimage by families of survivors and many tourists (Cole 1999), one can and must bring academic rigor to the management of and decision-making processes at Holocaust heritage sites. Janet Jacobs has observed that Holocaust sites throughout Europe "offer some of the most startling examples" of a trend towards "sacred memorialisation" where "former death camps and massacre sites have increasingly become sacred ground where the performance of rituals and death rites mark and reclaim these surviving landscapes of violence and genocide" (2004, 311). The perceived "sacred" nature of the sites is matched by debates surrounding similar perceptions of sacredness of and in Holocaust museums (Alba 2007; Tollerton 2017), Holocaust objects (Levitt 2020), and Holocaust texts (Waxman 2010). And yet, such perceptions of sacredness have not stopped many sites from disappearing from the landscape, underlying both the lack of universality of this perception, and the size of some of the challenges of the twenty-first century. And yet archaeologists have developed the sub-field of Holocaust archaeology to reveal Holocaust sites (making Holocaust archaeology a form of Holocaust heritage), with methods for investigating "disappeared" sites, generating knowledge about the daily life and death of prisoners at such places (e.g., Carr, Jasinski, and Theune 2018; Karski and Kobiałka 2023; Kersting 2023; Sturdy Colls 2015; Sturdy Colls, Kerti, and Colls 2020). Archaeologists are also activists in calling for the protection, remembrance and memorialization of Holocaust heritage; the disappearance of sites from the landscape faces stiff opposition in Europe today.

When it comes to some of the challenges of the twenty-first century, the authors' fieldwork at Holocaust sites across Europe has revealed that the aim of protecting Holocaust memorials, is now, in many places, not just impractical or impossible, but has been so for decades. This paper argues that there is a need instead to adopt a pragmatic approach to Holocaust heritage as one seeks to safeguard it in the twenty-first century. Rather than a cynical outlook characterized by giving up what seems to be a difficult job, the authors argue instead that – in the face of eighty years of post-war changes, coupled with the climate emergency and the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by the return of war to Europe – it is time to embrace a pragmatic approach. We deliberately characterize such an approach as a common-sense one that works with the reality of the situation on the ground rather than one rooted only in ideals, because working with the variety of international stakeholders at sites today needs clarity of purpose, vision and approach, unencumbered by philosophical debates.

This paper explores the many obstacles to safeguarding, through case studies in Europe today. Beginning with an overview of the IHRA Charter (a project which both the authors are leading) and exploring the range of other threats and risks which challenge sites today, the case studies are then discussed. The problems created by climate change in the former ghetto of Terezín in Czechia are examined, where the case is made for the inevitability of a pragmatic approach, before cementing this through a consideration of the former concentration camp of Staro Stajmište in Belgrade, Serbia. Rather than a call to let go of the memory and dignity of victims by abandoning sites to their fate, this paper argues that, given that very few Holocaust sites were safeguarded from their point of liberation onwards at the end of the war, it has been increasingly too late for nearly eighty years to enforce or encourage the highest standards of conservation, preservation (as defined in the Burra Charter), and safeguarding at all but a relatively small

handful of the most well-known sites today. While the authors continue to aspire towards the highest standards, seeking them wherever possible, a new pragmatism in Holocaust heritage safeguarding is called for, in order to deal with this precious resource. As part of this, the authors propose a "three-pronged model of heritage pragmatics" in order to guide work, which considers not only the feasibility and ethics of the relevant types of safeguarding of each site considered (i.e., preservation or restoration as discussed here), but also the problems caused by the current use or reuse of the site. One of the biggest threats Holocaust heritage faces today is the simple passage of time: it must be acknowledged that 80 years have passed since the end of the war and multiple changes have taken place at sites. There has also been decay, destruction, fragmentation and crumbling of building materials not designed to last forever, as well as changes in approaches to interpretation under different political regimes. Yet with Holocaust heritage there is a tension caused by the necessity and esthetic desirability of keeping the original or historic fabric, wherever possible, to guard against Holocaust denial, which means that sites face an ever-growing challenge to their survival. This is not the only threat to sites today.

IHRA and Safeguarding Sites: Defining the Problem

The authors are national delegates of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA 2023) and chair and deputy chair, respectively, of IHRA's *Safeguarding Sites* project, which has produced a heritage charter to ensure the safeguarding of sites relating to the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma (IHRA Charter 2024), as part of IHRA's remit and one of its strategic aims (IHRA Ministerial Declaration 2020). The term "Holocaust heritage" is used as an umbrella to include (but is not limited to) concentration camps, labor camps, internment camps, prisons, ghettos, extermination centers, killing sites, mass graves, and other such places which played a part in the persecution, suffering, and murder of Jews and the Roma. The Charter is also more widely applicable to all places of Nazi persecution, and trauma more generally, and not just sites of the Holocaust alone.

The methodology of the *Safeguarding Sites* project, which began in 2019, was adopted by IHRA's 35 member states in November 2023, and was launched in January 2024, rests on three pillars: comparison with other charters; advice from practitioners, academics, and heritage experts; and field work at sites. It is a strongly practice-based and- informed project. Here an approach is used that foregrounds the active involvement of practitioners and site managers, bringing them together with researchers. Each year the project "adopted" a site to work with, learning aspects of good practice in Holocaust heritage and giving recommendations, where appropriate, on dealing with specific challenges. The IHRA has a wealth of expertise and previous experience of working with other such sites before the project began. Years of working with and monitoring the sites of the former concentration camp of Jasenovac (Croatia), the former Roma camp of Lety (Czechia), the former ghetto library site in Vilnius (Lithuania), the former Roma camp at Komárom (Hungary) and the former concentration camp of Staro Sajmište (Serbia) has given the IHRA an institutional memory and expertise among those who have worked with sites since the IHRA was founded in 1998. Some of these experts have become advisors to the current project, joined by others from external heritage organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICMEMOHRI and International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, acting in an advisory capacity.

During the length of the project, with a break for the first year of the pandemic, the project has been working with a different site each year to sit alongside those already monitored by the IHRA. These have included the camps and likely mass grave in Alderney (see Sturdy Colls and Colls 2022) (Channel Islands, 2019), the former concentration camp at Mauthausen (Austria, 2021), the killing site at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas (Lithuania, 2022), the ghetto in Terezín (Czechia, 2023), and the excavations at the Warsaw Ghetto (Poland 2024). The project team has also visited and had seminars and workshops on a range of other places of Holocaust heritage during the lifetime of the project, widening their knowledge and deepening their understandings of the particularities of this form of heritage. Sharing aspects in common with other types of dark heritage, Holocaust heritage has the distinction of bearing witness to and evidence of genocide on European soil, which claimed the lives of over six million Jews. Many such sites still carry archaeological evidence of these crimes, even where nothing exists above the surface of the soil (e.g., Sturdy Colls 2015; Theune 2018).

The IHRA Charter has identified sixteen different types of threats and risks that such types of heritage face today (noting that the threats are not unique to this kind of heritage) and have come to the realization that every single site in Europe faces such challenges. There is not a single Holocaust site or site of the genocide of the Roma which is properly and entirely safeguarded. While one of the most pressing challenges today is financial, triggered by the pandemic and a loss of physical audiences for an extended period, followed by a cost-of-living crisis caused by war in Ukraine, a multitude of other problems plague these sites. Before the pandemic, many sites had the opposite problem: wear and tear caused by too many visitors was a real concern for site managers (Dalton 2020; Podoshen 2017; Reynolds 2018). All historical sites of this type still standing are now around 80 years old. As already highlighted, this alone means that problems of natural decay caused by damp, insects and vermin are evident, including at sites such as Auschwitz. Most of the structures at camp sites were made predominantly of wood and were not constructed to last for decades. Other sites face deliberate destruction or damage through vandalism, the rise of extreme political parties who don't support adequate funding for these sites (Wagner 2019), or even – as seen in Ukraine today – destruction in warfare (e.g., Times of Israel 2022). These are not the only issues on the table. Others include vandalism, such as the arson which resulted in severe damage to a barrack at Sachsenhausen in 1992; and political misappropriation or distortion of narratives and numbers such as at Jasenovac in Croatia or Staro Sajmište in Serbia (fieldwork observations, 2013, 2022 and 2023). It has been calculated by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that the Nazis and their allies ran "more than 44,000 camps, ghettos, and other sites of detention, persecution, forced labour and murder during the Holocaust" (USHMM, n.d. a). It is not known how many survive today, nor how many are currently museums or memorials, or heritage sites open to the public.

Some Holocaust sites are not protected by heritage legislation. This can leave them vulnerable to demolition or reuse. If they are situated on private (or even common) land, the remains of unprotected sites can, in some countries, be dug up, removed, and the land reused for other purposes. Landowners may also have the power to prevent access. Even where sites are not destroyed, insensitive or "modern-looking" restoration, additions or reuse can impact the perceived "authenticity" (Nara Document) of the site. Some sites with a history of Holocaust or genocide have been threatened with inappropriate (or

contested) reuse as a shopping center (Dhumieres 2013), a sausage museum (Shelton and Knight 2019) or turned into a pig farm (IHRA 2016; see also Charlesworth 2016 for a discussion on appropriateness of activities at such sites), to give three notable examples. Although reuse which prioritizes remembrance or education is ideal, it is imperative that sites of the Holocaust acknowledge their previous post-war history to help visitor understanding, and that reuse prioritizes remembrance and education where possible and practical as part of respecting the victims.

Terezín and Staro Sajmište: The Need for a Pragmatic Response

Perhaps one of the most pressing threats to Holocaust heritage today is climate change. Desiring to witness this in action, in August 2022 (with a follow-up in June 2023) the authors were invited to the former ghetto of Terezín in Czechia to see such problems for themselves. The part of the ghetto known as the Dresden Barracks has been standing empty since the end of the Cold War, during which time they were used by Czechoslovak soldiers. Today, access is strictly limited. The tour around the barracks with members of the team of the Terezín Memorial and the mayor's office was a particular privilege because, in the last few years, the site has been in a state of ever-worsening and dangerous collapse and disrepair. An increase in storms, their unpredictability and severity, coupled with flooding at Terezín in 2002 and 2013 and a hurricane in 2017, is sadly symptomatic and part of wider trend of climate instability across Europe. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has published annual assessment reports. Its chapter on Europe in its sixth assessment report highlights the variations in the impact of climate change across the continent, with more severe consequences predicted in the south than the north, and with changes in precipitation and sea-level rise causing risks to people and infrastructure from increasing coastal, riverine and pluvial flooding across the continent (Bednar-Friedl et al. 2022).

As the authors entered the corridors of Dresden Barracks, delicately stepping on broken glass from blown-in windows, and hearing it grind and crunch underfoot, they involuntarily contributed to the ultimate decline of this site of Holocaust heritage. Entering the first corridor, the damage was abundantly clear all around. As they peered into the rooms of the barracks, they witnessed collapsed ceilings, allowing them to see into the dark attics above. These attics contained traces of its wartime Jewish prisoners in the form of graffiti and left behind possessions, artifacts that are now beyond reach because of the imminent danger of further collapse of the building (fieldwork observation 2023; 3D sketchfab model by Ivan Němec n.d.). It cannot now be known what stories and new information is contained within the unstable piles of broken wooden beams and crumbled plaster on the floor.

Looking out of the windows and into the heavily overgrown courtyard, the state of the roof collapse is shocking. A BBC news report of April 2021 had alerted many beyond Czechia to the damage to the barracks (Cameron 2021); since then, a further three phases of collapse have taken place due to summer storms (Blodig 2022). Another such storm was due that very afternoon and so it was with some trepidation that they walked carefully along corridors propped up with wooden struts and past doorways blocked with hazard tape. Our eyes moved anxiously between the shards of broken glass in our path, the piles of roof beams in the courtyard, and the glimpses available through each broken window into the gaping attic space, now open to the elements, on the other side of the courtyard (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The destruction of the Dresden Barracks today, caused by climate change. Photo taken August 2022. Copyright Gilly Carr.

More than 140,000 Jews passed through the ghetto in Terezín before being transported to extermination camps further east. It is known that the ghetto became massively overcrowded, with people squeezed into attics and cellars, leading to the death of 35,000 prisoners from the terrible conditions. Although not part of Terezín Memorial today, the Dresden barracks were an iconic part of the ghetto, known from an infamous propaganda film made by the Nazis in 1944, *The Führer gives a city to the Jews* (see USHMM n.d. b, *Theresienstadt: a documentary film*). Before the film was made, the ghetto was "beautified" in order to convince visiting Red Cross officials into thinking that the Jews were being well looked after. The film included a scene of the inhabitants of the ghetto pouring into and filling the Dresden Barracks to watch a football match taking place in the courtyard. Thanks to this film, the barracks are one of the most iconic and recognizable parts of the former ghetto today, increasing the importance and necessity of their preservation.

A number of questions emerge for the Holocaust heritage pragmatist to ponder and resolve: how could such calamitous building collapse be restored? How could anyone justify spending millions of Euros on such a project when those who live in Terezín – as elsewhere in Europe – face a cost-of-living crisis and spiraling energy bills, not to mention a desire to house displaced Ukrainian refugees (fieldwork observation 2022)? It was clear that decisions had to be taken. But is it acceptable to let the building fall down on the grounds that other parts of the ghetto are still intact, including the nearby Magdeburg Barracks which today house the Terezín Memorial offices? Or should the money be found to restore the barracks and turn the site into a museum and part of Terezín Memorial, even though they do not have the capacity nor staff to add it to the group of buildings they already safeguard? Conversely, should one criticize the municipality of Terezín if the building is handed over to, say, development companies

to restore and turn into housing or commercial businesses? In short, is all and any reuse of such Holocaust heritage acceptable, so long as a memorial plaque is added somewhere prominent? Should one accept a pragmatic approach to Holocaust heritage, or should one always perceive it as a "sacred" resource and fight for restoration as a museum, memorial, or place of education as its only function? Given the implications for heritage conservation under the increased threat of climate change, should we accept that the climate emergency has overcome our resources and we need to recognize when to relax our idealism?

This belief in ethical and appropriate reuse was on our minds when the authors discussed the future of the Dresden Barracks with the team from Terezín Memorial. Holocaust heritage sites are places of pilgrimage for many and a place to mourn victims. They are also places of education and remembrance which can, it is claimed, teach us about inhumanity (Bussu, Leadbetter, and Richards 2023). They are crime scenes: places where archaeologists are today able to reveal evidence of genocide, crimes against humanity, or new evidence of the everyday lives of former perpetrators and victims (e.g., Carr, Jasinski, and Theune 2018; Kersting 2023; Sturdy Colls 2015; Sturdy Colls and Colls 2020; Sturdy Colls, Kerti, and Colls 2020; Theune 2018). What form the adaptive reuse of these sites might take is a question of ongoing debate. For many, to allow them to be turned into mundane places of everyday use, such as shopping centers, restaurants, schools, or places of domestic housing, seems incompatible with the imperative to keep them as places of remembrance and education. And yet, as Andrew Charlesworth (2004) reminds us, the Holocaust happened in very "ordinary" or mundane landscapes. Throughout this project, the project team has been reminded time and again as they visited sites that it is not 1945 and the heritage professional is not engaging with perfectly preserved sites, frozen in time at the moment of their construction or liberation; they are neither untouched nor – to use archaeological parlance for a well-preserved site – pristine (in the sense of unchanged). "Pristine" is also an inappropriate choice of word to convey the filth, squalor, death, and horror of many of these sites at the time of their liberation or liquidation (Lang 2000, Cole and Hahmann 2019; Rowland 2023). When one recognizes that most sites were not static and underwent changes and growth with the addition of buildings or changes of function throughout their wartime lives, coupled with varying degrees of destruction at liberation, one recognizes that "untouched" also becomes an inappropriate way of perceiving such sites immediately after the war. By 1945, many sites were in a poor state of repair and were crowded with dead bodies. Sites are not presented to the public as they were at liberation, complete with corpses and emaciated bodies, mud and filth, and riddled with typhus, such as at Bergen-Belsen. Neither is there an aspiration to present sites in the function they held after liberation, where some were reused as displaced persons camps or refugee camps, and others held collaborators or Nazis.

All sites of Holocaust heritage which survive today as memorials and heritage sites have been "sanitised," restored and / or interpreted for the public; in short, re-landscaped, often with visitor services added. They have also undergone 80 years of reuse, destruction, decay, rebuilding, and renovation decisions. Sites presented today do not resemble how they ever would have looked given that they are devoid of prisoners or guards. Many have also had substantial memorial additions, such as can be seen at the entrance of Mauthausen Memorial, where memorial stones, plaques and sculptures have been added by many

different groups and nations over the years. In short, every Holocaust site surviving to the present day has had 80 years of changes and a wide variety of different museological approaches, including different conservational and heritage legislation approaches, not to mention different political contexts and phases of interpretation, reinterpretation and memorial "vision." These sites have had an afterlife (and often, a pre-war before-life) of their own before the present day. It is often neither feasible nor practical to ask for such changes to be undone or removed. A pragmatic response is needed. This recognition was uppermost in the authors' minds as they met with the team from Terezin Memorial.

Although the barracks are not part of the Memorial's site, nor their financial responsibility, they work with the municipal authorities in Terezín today as "good neighbours" (IHRA 2023). At the time of the authors' first visit, the municipality was struggling with finding and funding a long-term solution to the Dresden Barracks. A year later, in August 2023, they were still waiting for a decision from the Czech government about funding restoration (IHRA 2023). Happily, that funding was pledged in September 2023 (Willoughby 2023). Yet, for the authors, this raised a series of questions about the long-term sustainability of Holocaust heritage sites, appropriate reuse, and how communities are engaged with their own difficult histories (e.g., Macdonald 2009), as well as the accelerated degradation of heritage because of the climate emergency. Should we do our best to keep Holocaust heritage exempt from the transience which Caitlin DeSilvey (2012) argues is the natural order of cultural heritage?

Terezín is not the only site in Europe facing questions about ethical and pragmatic reuse. The buildings of only a small class of Holocaust heritage were saved or restored and presented to the public as heritage in the early years or decades after the war. Auschwitz-Birkenau, for example, became a state memorial and museum in 1947, although this did not necessarily guarantee a problem-free future of heritage presentation (Charlesworth 1994; Zubrzycki 2019). Many more, including many sub-camps, or traces of major sites in countries such as (but not only) Serbia, were abandoned or only belatedly claimed, restored, and presented to the public. Other camps, such as Buchenwald in Germany, purchased or were given only a selection of camp buildings to use as their memorial site, meaning that a number of the original buildings have had mundane uses for the last eighty years. The former camp of Gusen in Austria, near Mauthausen, was knocked down after the war and a large village was built on its footprint. Just a few former buildings of the camp survive today, now reused for domestic purposes, but the Austrian government is engaged in purchasing them so that they can be given a memorial function (Gusen Memorial Committee 2023). It would be utterly unthinkable for the post-war village to be bulldozed and cleared to reveal the archaeological traces of the former camp. These observations have been critical in persuading us not just of the need for a pragmatic approach, but the unavoidability of it. Letting go of idealistic perceptions of "sacred ground" and aspirations towards a function of memorialization alone is sometimes not just pragmatic, but the only available option. The difficulty comes in recognizing when one has to be pragmatic and seek realistic compromises, and when one should be a single-minded activist who can accept only an outcome of museumification, education and memorialization. Before a way forward can be proposed, let us consider a second case study: that of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade, Serbia.

The city of Belgrade in Serbia is home to a number of sites which played a role in the Holocaust. The best known, Staro Sajmište (Old Fairground), is situated in Zemun, in New Belgrade, where there had previously been undeveloped land. In 1937, a series of trade fair pavilions were built by different countries, such as Turkey, Italy, and Czechoslovakia; companies such as Philips; and wealthy industrialists and merchants such as Nikola Spasić, who gifted their pavilion to the city. The aim was to promote the economy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, to show off wares, products and technical innovations, and for Belgrade to show how "European" and "modern" it was. It followed international exhibitions held in other European capital cities periodically since the 1851 Great Exhibition in London's Crystal Palace.

In April 1941, Germany and its allies attacked the kingdom of Yugoslavia and bombed Belgrade. While the Nazis occupied Belgrade, the other side of the River Sava, where Zemun was situated, was declared part of the Independent State of Croatia. In December 1941, 6,400 Jewish and 600 Roma women, children and the elderly were taken to the Gestapo-controlled *Judenlager* Semlin (the German name for Zemun) and placed in the now empty pavilions of the fairground. The men had already been taken to the camp of Topovske Šupe elsewhere in Belgrade (a site currently in a poor state of repair; fieldwork observation 2022); they were subsequently murdered. From mid-March to the beginning of May 1942, mobile gas vans were employed to kill almost all the Jews and some of the Roma at Sajmište.

Afterwards, the camp was turned into *Anhaltelager* Semlin, a detention camp for around 32,000 mostly-Serbian captured partisans, Chetniks, and forced laborers, of whom around one-third died. The camp was eventually closed in late July 1944; Belgrade was liberated in October 1944. The camp grounds – the pavilions of the old fairground – were abandoned. After the war, the site became the headquarters for the youth work brigades tasked with building New Belgrade. From the 1950s onwards, some of the buildings were used to house those on low incomes, while others were inhabited by artists from the Association of Fine Arts of Serbia. Additionally, Roma communities settled within shacks and some of the remaining buildings (Forensic Architecture 2013). The presence of people at this site contributed to the preservation and maintanence of the buildings and hindered redevelopment plans after the war.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a detailed site biography, nor to explain and rationalize the situation of the site today through recourse to Yugoslavian or Serbian history and politics; the reader is referred elsewhere for such analysis (Byford 2011; Syrri 2012). Rather, the intention of this paper is to discuss the pragmatics related to the current and future use of the buildings as Holocaust heritage. Today, many (but not all) of the old pavilions of Staro Sajmište still stand; many of these (but not all) are in a poor state of repair, and all still standing have been reused. A visit to the site in 2013 and project-related fieldtrips in July and November 2022 and April 2023 showed a range of uses and reuses of the old pavilions and other buildings of the camp which still exist on the site. The whole area is run down and economically disadvantaged today.

The former commandant's office and camp administration building is today a bookshop, which often functions as a meeting point for those being taken on a tour of the former camp by Novi Sad-based NGO, *Terraforming*. The former Italian pavilion is in a poor state of repair, yet squatters and refugees live here. Inhabitation is signaled by a

rose bush and old bench outside, a name written on an internal door in marker pen, and letter boxes for post inside the front entrance. Those marginalized by society have made a home here. The central tower at the site, once also used for camp administration, was in poor repair and used by artists during a site visit made in 2013. It was demolished and rebuilt during 2022–2023 as part of a future memorial museum building (Figure 2).

The Czechoslovakian pavilion is used as an artist's workshop, and today sculptures of body parts have flowed out of the building to take over the front yard. Yet some of the most important artists of the former Yugoslavia worked here in the 1950s; avant-garde ideas were born here, and important works of contemporary art were created (Daković, Rogač Mijatović, and Nikolić 2015; Miško Stanišić pers. comm. 2022). This place of death became a place of life.

Figure 2. The central tower at Staro Sajmište, photographed in July 2022. Copyright: Gilly Carr.

Such layering of histories is evident at other parts of the site too. During its period as a concentration camp, the former Turkish pavilion was the location for a morgue. For the last thirty years, local customers have flocked to eat at *Salt and Pepper* restaurant and the owners of the building have kept it clean and in good repair. Our tour guide, the director of Terraforming, Miško Stanišić, was critical of the lack of proper memorialization across the site at Staro Sajmište. The approach of his tour was designed to provoke reflection and debate. He asked us what the owners of *Salt and Pepper* were supposed to do with a building with this history. "Are the clients of the restaurant antisemites for eating here? Are they ignorant? Are they doing something wrong?" Many hundreds of sites in Belgrade had wartime dark histories, Stanišić informed us; at least the owners of this building were preserving its existence by investing in it and heating it, unlike with some of the other former pavilions. And yet, the site is not a place of memory, which, Stanišić argued, should be its only function. Interestingly, while other sites of death and suffering in the city have been either properly memorialized or entirely demolished, Sajmište has remained in limbo since the war. "From decade to decade and from one generation of decision makers to the next," as Stanišić put it, "somehow no one dared to demolish the site and build something else instead … [which] says something both about the lack of courage but also about the sense of awareness of the importance of its history."

The Nikola Spacić pavilion today houses the Poseydon restaurant and has also functioned in the past as a gym, a nightclub, a kindergarten, an exhibition center and a sports center. This was also the site of the controversy surrounding the use of the space for pop concerts in 2007 (Syrri 2012). During the war, this pavilion was the camp hospital, although the lack of medicine meant that most patients died. While it might seem unusual to some that this space could have been reused for children's play or for dancing, this is an example of local enterprise, where space was needed by the local community and was available, and so was used. Life, as Stanišić reminded us, goes on; there is little choice. Belgrade is full of places of death: there were several concentration camps and killing sites in the city, and Belgrade was badly bombed. Local people have not chosen to live in a perpetual memorial site. Further discussion with Stanišić prompted further questions for the group: what kind of businesses would be better for these former pavilions and sites of suffering? What would be "less inappropriate" – a florist? A funeral parlour? Would these be somehow "better"? "Of course not," argued Stanišić, "because these places should only be a place of memory."

The Hungarian pavilion at Sajmište, too, is reused, and turned into private apartments. Today, washing hangs outside and cats lie in the sun. Stanišić asked us what the local people who live at the site should do. Should their behavior be constrained? Should events of eighty years ago dictate the way they live their lives today? His questions were ones that would be understood well by those who live in the village of Gusen in Austria, who have to put up with similar questions from tourists, asking how they can live in such a place. They have grown their hedges tall and put up high fences to avoid having to face tourists. Today, a new app is in use showing parts of the camp as they once were and – with a swipe – how they look today (mm-tours.org, also available as an app). A historical facts-based approach is employed to counter the problems with the older audio-guide, where tourists heard the voices of actors speaking the words of locals, victims and perpetrators (Figure 3). This tour was unpopular with local people as

Figure 3. The Gusen audio-guide in use, 2021; note the tall hedge. Copyright: Gilly Carr.

it led to too much confrontation with visitors. Whether or not an app could contribute to finding a solution for Staro Sajmište is unclear; it would still leave the discussion open about whether it is better to restore the site or leave the local community alone. Are the lives and stories of the people of Staro Sajmište or Gusen, or other such places, now engraved onto the site after many years, less worthy? Should today's local communities move out, abandoning everything, so that the decaying shells of buildings be preserved in memoriam and perpetuity? But who will preserve them – who will pay? Who will demand eviction followed by preservation and museumification?

Indeed, such evictions began at Staro Sajmište in 2013, when artists were evicted from the studio in the central tower on the site to make way for part of what was planned as a commemorative Holocaust museum. Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths University in London, referred to Staro Sajmište as a "living death camp" because of its reuse by the living. They called the evictions an "unacceptable contradiction. A museum commemorating genocide cannot be built on a site forcefully cleared without compromising its purpose" (Forensic Architecture 2013). Forensic Architecture made the film *Living Death Camp* on behalf of a local citizens' tribunal, to help them fight eviction.

New legislation was eventually passed in Serbia in February 2020 to establish a memorial center at the site (Balkan Transitional Justice 2020). The central tower was blocked off with orange plastic mesh nets when one of the authors viewed the site in July 2022. By November of that year, work was already well underway, with part of the central tower demolished because of its poor condition, and a reconstruction put up in its place. The Italian Pavilion and the Nikola Spasić Pavilion are reported to be the next to be renovated; one assumes that further evictions are forthcoming. Although the law allows for expropriation of property, it is not yet known whether this will be used. According to the

Serbian news outlet *Politika*, since families still live at the site "both legally and illegally," the city "cannot provide [alternative] housing for those who live there illegally" (Aranđelović 2022). It is unclear whether the current Serbian government can be relied upon to espouse an accurate narrative at the site. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's Progressive Party deemed it appropriate to open a party office in 2018 at the site of Staro Stajmište, to much public criticism (Rudic 2018). The text of two of the memorials erected at the site in 1995 and 2022, the latter at Vucic's instigation, do not instill full confidence in this regard.

And yet, changes are afoot at the site, thanks at least in part to pressure from the international community in IHRA. The precise extent and shape of the plans for the site remain largely unknown to those outside the inner circle of the new memorial director of the site; at present, one building at a time is being renovated or rebuilt as part of memorial plans as money is made available for such work and associated essential services. The worry of observers is that original features of the site will be demolished and the memorial narrative may introduce distortions. Such concerns were borne out in the summer of 2023, when the German pavilion was demolished amid (contested) claims that it was not part of the former camp (Nikolic 2023). For several weeks this demolition was largely kept out of the national and international news. Interested parties overseas could only watch and wait, relying from updates from those on the ground in Belgrade.

Discussion: A Methodology of Pragmatics

Although the way forward at the sites discussed in this paper are far from obvious, when one comes to consider the pragmatics of Holocaust heritage in difficult places like Staro Sajmište or Terezín, one might consider three key questions which can be visualized as prongs of a fork. These are each linked together at the bowl of the fork representing the inter-connectedness of the questions as the "core of the pragmatic approach." This "bowl" or "core" also carries within it the history of the reuse of the site since the war (or site biography, Sorensen and Viejo-Rose 2015), which will be unique for every site. It is this uniqueness that means that pragmatic responses need to be tailor-made for each site rather than relying on a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all response. This is why a sensitivity and creativity of approach, which considers the biography of the site, is necessary. In brief, before this concept is unpacked, the three questions asked by the pragmatic heritage practitioner (in regard to safeguarding a site, which for the sites presented here means restoration and presentation of the site to the public as a memorial) can be summarized as: to what extent is it physically *feasible*, to what extent is it *ethical*, and to what extent are the local challenges *surmountable* or able to be overcome (such as through creative responses which do not necessarily include restoration)? These should guide the work.

Let us unpack this in further detail using the case studies at hand. The first "prong" or line of questioning is the degree to which one *could* restore or preserve the sites (noting that other outcomes might be more appropriate for sites in different states of current existence). This relates to its feasibility: could it be done or is it too late? If any surviving buildings still standing today are – for the most part and despite the flaking plaster on the outside of buildings at Staro Sajmište – habitable and have been maintained to varying degrees, can the site be restored? Although it would be expensive, restoration would appear to be possible; the same could be said for the Dresden Barracks in Terezín but,

at the time of writing, the site is on the edge of collapse. For sites which exist only beneath the soil, one might ask here whether the remains can be revealed and preserved in situ, or whether a memorial could be erected instead.

The second question one must ask – the second "prong" – is the degree to which one *should* restore or preserve the site. This refers to the wisdom and ethics of the endeavor, an ethical approach being defined here as one that minimizes harms to the living while acknowledging and honoring the victims. Ideally, one would want it to be both feasible and ethical for work to go ahead, but when one turns to Staro Sajmište, one can see that any memorial function for the site will be ethically compromised if its creation involves eviction of vulnerable groups – an action that would also require considerable resources to be feasible. The question is less problematic for the Dresden Barracks, as they are currently empty. The third "prong" or question evaluates the "surmountability" of existing local challenges, perhaps through using creative modes of memorialization, and this is often where pragmatism comes into play. An ability to overcome local challenges, whatever they may be, involves careful thought about whether it is possible to work around the status quo yet still honor victims of the Holocaust. For a site beneath the soil, one might observe whether anything inappropriate or disrespectful has been unwittingly or knowingly built on top. Can this be reversed and is it necessary to do so? One is reminded here that Rodney Harrison (2013) has argued that the specter of the absence of a site can successfully behave as a mnemonic. And yet, a site can be excavated as part of revealing a past to confront the present in a temporary "performance." "Third prong" creative solutions need not be permanent.

Can the significance of the site be successfully safeguarded knowing the challenges on the ground? Can alternative modes of commemoration or remembrance of the victims (such as through the public spectacle of an excavation) be (easily) proposed or enacted? Cornelius Holtorf encourages us to see heritage as a process, constantly changing rather than a fixed thing. For him, there is no such thing as maintenance of the status quo; a fixation on saving everything for the future is akin to a "Noah complex." He argues that one should question whether the value of cultural heritage is "really inherent in a given object so that it might be damaged with the object" rather than instead being "dependent on a particular social and cultural context" (Holtorf 2012; 2015). Such arguments have yet to be thought through for Holocaust heritage given the importance of historical traces as proof that the Holocaust took place. And yet, one does not need the physical fabric of a site to remember the dead, as places such as Bergen-Belsen illustrate.

This three-pronged model of Holocaust heritage pragmatics demands that one questions what constitutes the ethical or appropriate reuse of the site. The Dresden Barracks currently lie empty. But at Staro Sajmište, is a restaurant, a domestic home or an artists' studio "wrong" or an "unethical" use of former concentration camp buildings? In the eyes of which stakeholder(s)? There are many different stakeholder groups at Staro Sajmište, ranging from the Serbian government, NGOs such as *Terraforming*, organizations such as the new Memorial Centre Staro Sajmište, created as a result of the new legislation to preserve the site, as well as the Jewish and Roma community, and the families of survivor and victim groups, and not least the local community who today live and work in and around the former camp itself. Each one of these groups is likely to have very different ideas about the wisdom and ethics of safeguarding the site, what that might

entail, and whether there is anything "wrong" with the current format. This means that each stakeholder might have different views on what constitutes ethical Holocaust heritage pragmatics, meaning that not only would pragmatism, negotiation and compromise be necessary to reach agreement, but a greater attention would be needed for the creative solutions indicated by the third prong.

Identifying Staro Sajmište's response to the three-pronged model is clearly problematic given the subjective nature of ethical issues: the heritage professional is likely to have a very different view compared to someone currently living in a former pavilion. Consensus among all parties is therefore desirable but hard to achieve, as the slow progress at the site attests. This is why it is important to accept pragmatic solutions rather than aiming for a purist or idealist solution which is likely to consider only the first two prongs. A purist will always aim for restoration, preservation or safeguarding with a primarily memorial function, but a pragmatist will accept that this is not always possible. The advocate of pragmatic Holocaust heritage – potentially a stakeholder, if invited to become one – might focus on issues of surmountability and work with and around the current situation at the site with some minor changes (such as memorials and information boards, digital heritage solutions, or an excavation which can heighten awareness of what happened at the site), knowing that maintenance of the significance of the site need not involve restoration of physical fabric.

A pragmatic approach to Holocaust heritage accepts alternative uses (third prong creative solutions), as long as there are adequate and accurate memorials, information boards or signage (perhaps with QR codes that link to digital heritage solutions) attached to the buildings or placed next to them or in a prominent location rather than hidden away. Given the number of buildings at Staro Sajmište built since the war, many of which are – like the original buildings – not in a good condition, it is not immediately obvious to visitors which are an original part of the site. Signage and memorials should be coupled with the potential for commemorative and memorial activities at the site, such as the tours currently conducted by *Terraforming* at the site today. While there are memorials close by at Staro Sajmište, the memorial texts are misleading and / or inaccurate, which leads to the problem of Holocaust distortion. This is listed as a threat to Holocaust heritage in the IHRA Charter.

Memorial activities within the site itself rely on the goodwill and support of local communities, and here one encounters problems that are all too frequent at Holocaust sites across Europe: few communities are comfortable with having their neighborhoods overrun by tourists who come and stare at them and wonder how they can live in such a place. There is the potential to learn from sites with similar issues, such as Gusen, and to employ apps or audio guides so that tourists can guide themselves around the site (a good example of third-prong pragmatism). There is also a potential for the local community businesses to benefit financially from an increase in tourists; local people might also find employment opportunities here.

There are few Holocaust sites which have problem-free reuse in an alternative function, yet which *can* and *should* be restored and have yet to receive such work. We wait to see what might happen at the Dresden Barracks at the former ghetto at Terezín. While the site is currently empty and is not reused for anything, at the site visit in August 2022 casual discussions about site reuse included potential conversion into domestic accommodation and businesses. The Dresden Barracks have a memorial plaque at the front and the

context of the site next to the Terezín memorial means that it is clear how the site was once used. At one stage quite recently, there was only a financial impediment to the site being restored. Today, the entire structure seems likely to collapse in the next storm and it is far from clear whether the building can be saved from demolition. Restoration or reconstruction with a domestic or commercial function could bring benefit to the living; the pragmatist should advocate acceptance of this proposed reuse. The third prong, which represents the (pragmatic) surmountability of the challenges presented by the site *in its current state* is only likely to quickly become more difficult as the impact of climate change on this site overwhelms it. Accepting a pragmatic reuse of this site, if still possible and if done sympathetically and in a way that maintains historic features as far as possible, is – the authors argue – a pragmatic and acceptable response.

Conclusion

As the last witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust pass away, sites of the Holocaust are becoming critical to ensuring that people can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect on its consequences (Charlesworth 2004). An increasingly greater weight is now placed upon the sites of Holocaust heritage as crime scenes, as places of education and memorialization, as learning spaces for democracy and citizenship, and as places for archaeological excavation as an alternative source of knowledge. Inevitably, there is a growing anxiety about the surviving fabric of such sites and the importance of safeguarding them, even if there is a concomitant belief that the significance of the site does not reside wholly in the fabric itself, but in the commemorations and ceremonies that take place there, as well as the memories and feelings associated with the place, experienced by survivors and their families.

An intention to safeguard the physical record of the sites of the Holocaust is unarguably highly desirable and commendable; one acknowledges that the very soil of such sites is often seen as "sacred" by many, even if this is contestable. And yet, when it comes to properly safeguarding them, one must question whether Holocaust heritage is qualitatively different to other sorts of heritage sites; they should be treated just as other sites are, albeit noting the many difficulties that practitioners have experienced in caring for sites of difficult heritage (e.g., Carr 2014; Macdonald 2009).

To help us focus on the decisions that should be made in a pragmatic approach to Holocaust heritage, this paper proposed a three-pronged approach, where the heritage practitioner considers not only the feasibility and the wisdom and ethics of restoration and safeguarding, but also the surmountability of problems posed by the site and their pragmatic solution(s). Admittedly all three prongs of pragmatical considerations will not apply to all sites, but asking these questions of all stakeholders is important.

This paper has argued, however, that in order to make good decisions about the surviving fabric, threatened as it is by so many threats and challenges in the twenty-first century, one needs to adopt a pragmatism in approaching Holocaust heritage. It is simply too late, sometimes by decades for many sites, to come to any other conclusion. Rather than aspiring to preserve all sites in aspic and return them to their 1945 state as soon as possible, the authors support the adaptive reuse and safeguarding of the *significance* of sites, appropriately marking them in ways that remind us why they are significant. Any such changes to a site must involve and engage the local community in

looking after their heritage, otherwise new projects will fail, or at least will fail to survive for long.

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