

# Sites of Trauma, Landscapes of Genocide

Avril Alba

**I**NCREASINGLY RARE ARE THE OCCASIONS THAT AN ACADEMIC IS ABLE TO TEACH A COURSE in their specific area of research interest and expertise. The chance to create an intensive core elective unit for the University of Sydney's Master of Museums and Heritage program focusing on Holocaust and genocide museums and memorials was such an opportunity and one that I was privileged to develop and teach over two iterations in 2014 and 2016. While the University of Sydney has a long tradition of undergraduate and graduate offerings in Holocaust history,<sup>1</sup> a course focusing specifically on Holocaust and genocide sites was yet to be attempted.

Internationally, Holocaust and genocide museums and memorials continue to grow in number and appeal. Recognising the growing scope and reach of these sites, my unit, JCTC6100 Sites of Trauma, Landscapes of Genocide, tracks their evolution as a 'genre' as well as outlining the theoretical and political debates that have accompanied their development and their increasingly influential public and political roles. The syllabus covers purpose-built institutions and those developed at former sites of mass murder, reflecting on how these sites both shape our

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<sup>1</sup> These courses were pioneered by Professors Konrad Kwiet and Suzanne Rutland. I now teach the majority of the Holocaust units with my colleague Dr Michael Abrahams-Sprod.

understanding of past events and contribute to contemporary debates concerned with genocide prevention and other related issues.

The Learning Outcomes for the course focused on deepening students' understanding of the history and contemporary relevance of these sites as well as their role as *sites of history*. In other words, the sites were approached as both agents and objects of history. The methodological approach is explicitly interdisciplinary, placing the sites within current debates in Holocaust history, memory and representation. This method was vital in bringing students' attention to the ongoing influence of these enduring scholarly debates, as well as broadening their understanding of these sites as embodied exemplars of these deliberations.

The learning process was consciously shaped to mirror the concerns that practitioners in these sites contend with on historical, theoretical and museological levels. Careful attention was given to the historical development of selected memorials and museums and the role of individuals, communities and states in their creation and maintenance. The emotional, ethical and practical aspects of working in these environments, including pragmatic pressures such as the political environments in which they operate, were also addressed. Finally, students were challenged to devise practical examples of approaches to the memorialisation of genocide and mass trauma based on the knowledge and insights they gained throughout the unit.

The course was taught as a five-week intensive unit from 10am-5pm on Fridays. Each week was themed and local case studies were incorporated. For example, students were given the opportunity for a 'behind the scenes' visit to the Sydney Jewish Museum where they were able to hear from curators, designers and educators not only about the final shape of exhibition content but also the debates and discussions that influenced its development.

Learning activities also included student-led case studies and presentations, guest lecturers and curators where appropriate. The student cohort was heavily weighted toward museum and heritage students (approx. 90 per cent) as the unit counted as a core elective in this program. The remaining students came from MA research degrees in related areas, such as history and education. There was an average enrolment of 30 students per cohort with a wide variation in age, background and knowledge of the historical period(s) concerned. For many, it was the first time they had been exposed to such materials. The exceptions were those who had studied the Holocaust at HSC level with a tiny minority having taken a Holocaust history course at a university level. In both of the unit iterations, the advantages and challenges of teaching a conventionally historical and text-based topic through a site-based, experiential approach were thus clearly apparent.

The most significant challenge was the acquisition of adequate historical knowledge within a primarily museologically focused unit. For while the diverse academic and professional backgrounds of the student cohort enriched the learning environment, the general lack of knowledge of the historical period proved difficult to bridge in the time allocated. This lack sometimes resulted in facile and inaccurate historical parallels which, when time allowed, provided fruitful fodder for further debate but as often as not, also derailed the discussion at hand. These historical gaps necessitated remedial instruction that then impacted negatively on the time allotted for discussion of museological, commemorative and curatorial issues.

Achieving a level of historical depth that could facilitate a nuanced appreciation of the curatorial, educational and commemorative challenges facing practitioners at these sites was therefore perhaps the most difficult aspect of the teaching—evidenced in the failure of many students to realise a high level of both historical and museological analysis in their assessments. While more time to build historical knowledge would no doubt ameliorate this problem, as the unit sits within a Master of Museums and Heritage rather than a Master of History program, the time to achieve this level of historical understanding would be difficult to justify in terms of the overall learning outcomes that students must attain.

Finally, the emotionally difficult nature of the materials and the related affective commemorative missions of these sites necessitated a means of processing the emotional content as part of the learning and assessment structure. This educational imperative proved very difficult to assess. Students were asked to keep a reflective journal that tracked their own responses to the materials and sites under discussion. While many students found this to be a positive and helpful experience with regard to processing the unit's emotionally difficult content, applying normative academic standards proved extremely difficult due to the subjective nature of the journal task.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the choice to situate the materials in a museum studies unit meant it attracted a largely new cohort to the topic area. From a departmental perspective, this had the advantageous effect of broadening our reach across the university and also necessitated an explicit engagement with interdisciplinary methods. Working from an interdisciplinary basis was challenging both for instructors and students but ultimately enriching as the students were, at the completion of the unit, able to understand the multifaceted and complex nature of the work undertaken at these sites.

Further, unlike many Holocaust-focused units, where there is an (understandable) chasm between the history being studied and the students' own experiences, in this course the issues had immediate 'real world' application. This applicability

allowed students to make direct and deep connections between rigorous research methodologies and museological best practice. Those students coming from a history background were challenged to expand their historical repertoire to include material history approaches. The unit also encouraged engagement with local, national and international industry partners and provided the opportunity for students to witness and reflect upon the connections between Australian and international sites.

In conclusion, the unit provided a fertile environment to explore the potentialities and limitations for teaching both the content and practice of 'public history' in the university environment. Encouraging deep reflection on content development as well as reception, the unit proved an exciting testing ground for the potentialities of teaching Holocaust history through the consideration of one of its most ubiquitous and powerful representational forms.

**AVRIL ALBA** Avril is Senior Lecturer in Holocaust Studies and Jewish Civilisation in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney. She teaches and researches in the broad areas of Holocaust and modern Jewish history with a focus on Jewish and Holocaust museums. Her monograph *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Secular Sacred Space* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015.