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DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE AS AN EXHIBITION THEME IN SMALL MUSEUMS: CASE EXAMPLES FROM THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Abstract: The article addresses the presentation of so-called difficult knowledge in small museums, using examples from two Moravian institutions: the Municipal Museum and Gallery in Hustopeče and the private Museum of the Iron Curtain in Valtice. In the exhibition activities of both institutions, visitors encounter challenging themes, such as war and periods of oppression, focusing on the regional and broader historical context of the 20th century in Central Europe. The first part of the article explains the term “difficult knowledge”, gives its interpretation and defines the environment of small museums. It is followed by a presentation of the museums above in the second part.

Keywords: difficult knowledge, museum exhibition, museum presentation, small museums

What is "difficult knowledge"?

Museums, in general, fulfil several important and indispensable roles in society. In addition to the preservation, professional processing and dissemination of cultural and natural heritage, which are primarily the domain of their

presentation activities, they also have a cultural character. As important institutions of collective¹, cultural² and social memory, they play a significant public role in shaping what society perceives as its heritage³. Social memory, which several authors perceive quite broadly – whether as intertextuality, a set of visual memories intertwined with moral issues⁴, the entire history of society⁵, or temporary memory with short-term recollections⁶ and the social formation of memory processes – is shaped by museums. Museums transmit preserved cultural norms and values through their communication with visitors⁷. Museums are more likely to present ethical, scientific or social achievements in society and culture, with the aim of positively inspiring visitors and promoting social cohesion through recognition, affirmation and appreciation⁸. However, history is not one-sided and does not only recount positive victories and the straightforward progress of human society. On the contrary, the history of society is strongly interwoven with problems and conflicts that can generally be described as negative, often far beyond the limits of generally accepted social norms and rules. In this field, too, museums, as places of social consciousness⁹, have increasingly engaged in recent years with the issue of so-called difficult knowledge – challenging topics that explain the social, societal and historical conflicts that society has experienced and needs to address.

¹ S. B. Anderson, *The construction of national identity and the curation of difficult knowledge at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2018, vol. 33, is. 4, p. 321.

² J. Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, "New German Critique" 1995, no. 65, pp. 125-133.

³ S. Küchler, *Social memory in the age of knowledge*, "International Social Science Journal" 2011, vol. 62, no. 203-204, pp. 57-66; R. Semon, *The Mneme* (1921), Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2009. Unlike social memory, which is temporary and transient, collective memory is temporal, stable and intended for long-term preservation. R. Simon, *The Touch of the Past. Remembrance, Learning and Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005.

⁴ A. Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity/Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance (Texts & Documents)*, The Getty Research Institut, Los Angeles 1999.

⁵ P. Burke, *History as Social Memory*, in: *Varieties of Cultural History*, ed. P. Burke, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 2013, pp. 43-59.

⁶ A. Assmann, *Transformations between History and Memory*, "Social Research" 2008, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 49-72.

⁷ I. Bondarenko, V. Tarasov, V. Severyn, T. Yermakova, *The Syntax and Semantics of Modelling Exhibition Spaces: A Case Study of the HryhoriiSkovoroda National Literary and Memorial Museum, Ukraine*, "Muzeológia a kultúrnededíctvo" 2023, vol. 11, is. 3, p. 10, doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.3.1.

⁸ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *'Difficult' exhibitions and intimate encounters*, "Museum and Society" 2007, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 65; S. Thomas, *Representing Difficult Histories and Contested Heritage in Museums*, in: *Museum Studies. Bringing Theory and Practice*, ed. N. Robbins, S. Thomas, M. Touminen, A. Wessman, ICOFOM and University of Jyväskylä/Open Science Centre 2021, p. 532.

⁹ S. B. Anderson, ..., p. 322.

What are difficult topics? The search for information about difficult knowledge will take us primarily to North America, where the concept is perhaps most widely developed. Difficult knowledge was defined in 1998 by Deborah Britzman as a concept referring to the representation of social traumas in the curriculum and individual encounters with them in education¹⁰. Angela Failler, Peter Ives and Heather Milne identified "difficult knowledge" as a term derived from educational theory, pointing not only to difficulties involved in learning about troubling histories and topics but also to how it is approached and what is done with that knowledge¹¹. Jennifer Bonnell and Roger Simon were even more specific, identifying "difficult knowledge" as traces of the past that can trigger heightened feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and ambivalence – negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and even trauma¹². They can even provoke unconscious distortions or a search for escape among museum visitors¹³. These themes relate to violence, death, loss of human dignity, discrimination, mental health, human rights violations, etc¹⁴. Heavy topics thus relate in content to controversial or disturbing areas, unjust past or historical violence¹⁵. According to the authors above, the common denominator of these problematic themes is the notion of intimacy¹⁶, which can be understood as receptivity that allows for a reflexive critique and a transformative perspective on the relationship

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- ¹⁰ D. P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects. Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*, State University of New York, New York 1998, pp. 117-119; A. Pitt, D. P. Britzman, *Speculations on qualities of difficult knowledge in teaching and learning: an experiment in psychoanalytic research*, "International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education" 2003, vol. 16, no. 6, p. 757, doi: 10.1080/09518390310001632135; D. P. Britzman, *When History Returns: Psychoanalytic Quests for Human Learning*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2024, p. XIII.
- ¹¹ A. Failler, P. Ives, H. Milne, *Introduction: Caring for Difficult Knowledge – Prospects for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, "Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies", 2015, vol. 37, no. 2-3, p. 102, doi: 10.1080/10714413.2015.1028824.
- ¹² *How can your museum engage children, young people and families with sensitive topics? Part 1*, 2021. <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-1-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-young-people-and-families-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [accessed: 06.07.2024].
- ¹³ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *Difficult Knowledge, Intimacy and Museum Exhibitions: A Case Study of Kulturen's Surviving: Voices from Ravensbrück*. Paper presented for the conference „Connections, Communities and Collections" in Miami Beach, FL, USA, July 10-12, 2006, p. 5. https://icme.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/01/ICME_2006_bonnell.pdf [accessed: 06.07.2024].
- ¹⁴ E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, *Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing*, in: *Curating Difficult Knowledge. Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, M. E. Patterson, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, p. 7.
- ¹⁵ N. Blumer, *Expanding Museum Spaces: Networks of Difficult Knowledge at and Beyond the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, "Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies" 2015, vol. 37, no. 2-3, p. 127, doi: 10.1080/10714413.2015.1028831.
- ¹⁶ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *Difficult Knowledge, Intimacy and Museum Exhibitions...*, p. 6.

between the individual and society to the past and participation. This intimate relationship manifests between the visitor-viewer and the presented objects, texts or other elements of the exhibition language. Intimacy prioritises the feeling of a particular experience, an emotional experience, over the actual acquisition of knowledge. An intimate encounter as a visitor's direct experience of the exhibition, its message and legacy¹⁷, consequently offers new insights into the world around them. Intimacy thus denotes the quality of a relationship in which one embodies a degree of unfettered exposure to the other. It occurs when someone is called into a relationship with someone or something¹⁸. Intimacy, then, is not about a sense of "knowing" the other but about being sensitive to the details of their experiences and disturbing emotions. In its own way, difficult knowledge triggers a collapse of experience and forces the visitor to confront the possibility that the conditions of our lives may be quite different from how we normally perceive them¹⁹. Julia Rosa defines difficult history in a similar vein, focusing on histories of oppression, violence and trauma as a category of memories that are full of pathos²⁰.

A survey of museum staff conducted by Children in Museums in 2019 defined several areas of key sensitive and difficult topics²¹:

- Climate change, environmental anxiety
- Death, grief, and loss
- Colonialism and imperialism
- Racism
- Discrimination against minority groups, including LGBTQ+
- Sex and sexuality
- Mental health and wellbeing
- War, violence and conflict
- Politicised topics

The difficult topics also included those that could be described as controversial or taboo, such as sexuality or politicised topics²². Controversial exhi-

¹⁷ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *'Difficult' exhibitions...*, p. 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁹ E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, ..., p. 8; H. Milne, *Human Rights and/or Market Logic: Neoliberalism, Difficult Knowledge, and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, "Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies" 2015, vol. 37, no. 2-3, p. 116, doi: 10.1080/10714413.2015.1028826.

²⁰ J. Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland 2016, p. 28.

²¹ *How can your museum engage children, young people and families with sensitive topics? Part 1*, 2021. <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-1-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-young-people-and-families-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [accessed: 06.07.2024]; also see: Challenging Conversation. 6.5.2019 <https://artsconnect.co.uk/challenging-conversations/> [accessed: 07.07.2024].

²² Topics of this focus are more frequently referred to as taboo, see e.g. E. M. Weiser, M. Bertin, A. Leshchenko, Anna, ed., *Taboos in Museology: Difficult issues for museum theory. Materials for a discussion*, ICOFOM 2022.

bitions can provoke serious public disagreements about the appropriateness and accuracy of the exhibits' narrative strategies and interpretive framework²³. Therefore, it is important to approach these issues with great sensitivity and deliberation²⁴.

The results of a questionnaire survey undertaken by A Merrie Noyse Music and Heritage Consultants, led by Susan Goodwin, for Arts Connect and the Heritage Education Leaders Group West Midlands, identified four broad areas of sensitivity²⁵. Firstly, there are issues of death, dying and problems associated with dying (infant death, premature death, the dying process). The second area includes social issues, social policy, class migration and different cultures (faith, religion, forced migration, child poverty, poor working conditions, slavery and gender issues). The third category brings together problems and conflicts within the community, including the political context, brutality and religious extremism, but also rape denial, genocide, as well as natural and man-made disasters. Finally, conflicts such as genocide, war, racial unrest and discrimination associated with violence, have become a larger and separately identified group.

The problematic "difficult" aspect of visitor experience thus combines both cognitive and emotional dimensions. J. Bonnell and R. Simon do not see the notion of a difficult exhibition as merely the presentation of difficult themes evoking negative emotions. They also include cases of exhibitions with unfinished or ambiguous narratives that are interpretively challenging for the visitor and provoke, for example, frustration, anxiety, anger or disappointment²⁶. Challenging exhibitions can also provoke feelings of identification with victims of violence or re-traumatisation of visitors who have themselves been confronted with violence in the past or have lived through similar experiences. These exhibitions can encourage visitors to think critically and emotionally about human rights, dignity, etc²⁷.

How to Present Difficult Topics?

Exhibitions with difficult topics are attracting increasing attention²⁸. They arouse public interest by offering expressive and often controversial stories,

²³ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *'Difficult' exhibitions...*, p. 66.

²⁴ J. Rose, ..., pp. 25-26.

²⁵ *Challenging Conversation: Teaching challenging and difficult subjects to children and young people in Galleries, Museums and Heritage Sites*. Arts Council England. 6.5.2019. <https://artsconnect.co.uk/challenging-conversations/> [accessed: 07.07.2024]

²⁶ J. Bonnell, R. Simon, *'Difficult' exhibitions...*, p. 67.

²⁷ N. Blumer, ..., p. 131.

²⁸ B. M. Trofanenko, *On difficult history displayed: the pedagogical challenges of interminable learning*, "Museum Management and Curatorship" 2011, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 481.

and they also attract visitors through unique presentation styles and a different atmosphere. However, museums often do not consider the emotional reactions of younger visitors, which can evoke unwanted feelings.

There are no precise rules or recommendations for presenting difficult topics. Each topic requires an individual approach, as does the approach to visitors. Each visitor is an emotional individual and may react differently, especially when confronted with difficult topics. Reactions can be unexpected²⁹. Therefore, in addition to adapting the exhibition language to different visitor groups, it is necessary to be prepared to respond flexibly, e.g., during lectures or within prepared educational programs. There is no doubt that it is necessary to prepare various communication channels in advance, tailored to different groups of visitors³⁰, and to always approach them sensitively and cautiously³¹.

Modern museums do not shy away from any topic. On the contrary, in recent years, there has been a growing understanding among cultural institutions to present real history without selection³². To build communication channels and gain visitors' trust, sincerity on the part of the museum is essential, as is the avoidance of unnecessary euphemisms³³. This is the opposite of how museum presentations were developed in the former Eastern Bloc countries until the 1990s, where political themes were deliberately ideologized, distorted, and often presented in a completely one-sided way.

Regarding the approach to visitors, the age appropriateness of difficult topics needs to be considered³⁴, which requires adapting the exhibition language and the way of conveying highly emotional and sensitive topics, especially to younger audiences. The visitor's relationship to the presented topic may also prove significant. A direct participant in a military conflict, such as a former soldier who has experienced the horrors of war, will likely react differently than a young person who has only learned about war from the media.

²⁹ E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, ..., p. 9.

³⁰ P. Tišliar, *Preparation and realization of compact touring exhibitions on the example of exhibition projects of the Masaryk University*, "Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo" 2023, vol. 11, is. 4, pp. 72-73, doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.4.5.

³¹ J. Jiroutová, *Fenomén difficult knowledge: jeho definície a možnosť uchopení v prostredí muzejníe xpozície*, "Museologica Brunensia" 2021, vol. 10, is. 1, p. 21, doi: 10.5817/MuB2021-1-2.

³² *Challenging Conversation: Teaching challenging and difficult subjects to children and young people in Galleries, Museums and Heritage Sites*. Arts Council England. 6.5.2019. <https://artsconnect.co.uk/challenging-conversations/> [accessed: 07.07.2024].

³³ *How can your museum engage children, families and young people with sensitive topics? Part 3*. 2021. <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-3-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-families-and-young-people-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [accessed: 06.07.2024].

³⁴ *When the Going Gets Tough: Confronting Difficult Subjects in Your Museum. Part 2*. 2021. <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/resources/part-2-how-can-your-museum-engage-children-young-people-and-families-with-difficult-or-challenging-topics/> [accessed: 06.07.2024].

Therefore, it seems more important to present the content of an exhibition in a way that allows visitors to form their own opinions about problematic matters first and then actively engage with them. As a next step, the Children in Museums charity in the UK suggests leading group discussions, particularly with younger audiences, by asking purposefully prepared questions and talking about the feelings they experienced in the exhibition space.

They also recommend preparing visitors in advance for sensitive topics by publishing basic information on key subjects in the form of FAQs, exhibition guides for educators accompanying pupils to the museum, or by defining specific concepts central to the exhibition. This information can be appropriately shared through public internet spaces, such as the museum's website. Conducting difficult conversations in a group discussion primarily involves humanising historical events using personal narratives, objects and photographs instead of hard factual data. It is advisable to prepare discussion questions in advance and to consider different scenarios for conducting a group discussion. In doing so, the museum environment should always act as a "safe space" for exploring and discussing difficult topics.

A Merrie Noyse Music and Heritage Consultants' research report emphasises that the challenge lies in choosing an appropriate way of interpreting sensitive topics. It is not so much the topic itself that is important but the way the content is interpreted and communicated, particularly to children and young people. The ability to work as a team, a high level of personal awareness and openness, and the recognition of one's own emotions which could hinder impartiality, all contribute to a successful outcome³⁵. At the same time, the report notes that there is a lack of specific training in practice to handle difficult discussions, which could be crucial for the successful preparation and implementation of such intentions.

We have already mentioned that a presentation focused on difficult topics aims to evoke emotions, offer visitors the opportunity to put themselves in the presented situation, feel the interaction and create a space for engagement that leads to understanding the exhibition's message. Exhibitions carried out in this way can serve as a more expressive platform for education, dialogue and expression, leading to a more inclusive and tolerant public³⁶. Difficult topics have the potential to guide current and future generations towards a more conscious

³⁵ *Challenging Conversation: Teaching challenging and difficult subjects to children and young people in Galleries, Museums and Heritage Sites*. Arts Council England. 6.5.2019.<https://artsconnect.co.uk/challenging-conversations/>[accessed: 07.07.2024].

³⁶ M. E. Patterson, *Part I: Bearing Witness between Museums and Communities. Introduction*, in: *Curating Difficult Knowledge. Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, M. E. Patterson, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, pp. 21-22.

and responsible life, respect for human rights, social justice and intercultural understanding³⁷. In this regard, Julia Rose, in her publication on difficult history, mentions two common phrases that she recommends history museums use when presenting such topics: "Never forget!" and "Never let that happen again!"³⁸. We should simply learn from the past.

A significant role in finding a suitable presentation is played by appropriate visualization and the creation of an engaging atmosphere in the exhibition environment. Photographic documentation has truth value, contributing to the openness of the museum. In many cultures, this type of a visual has the ability to convey an undeniable fact and different interpretations of its emotional and interpersonal impact³⁹. Visual art can be used similarly, providing a less literal form of expression and offering a safe space to depict difficult issues. Its use is possible when replacing photographic evidence depicting direct violence or human suffering, e.g., for child visitors, in a more stylized and accessible form. Authentic artifacts⁴⁰, contextually exhibited and supplemented by written testimonies, also have truth value. Oral testimonies in the form of audio and video sequences, capturing witnesses of events and offering various stylized additions can enhance the atmosphere of the space.

It is important to establish cooperation between the museum and persons (or groups) directly affected by the presented problem, having a direct relationship to the exhibited objects or having experienced something similar. This can help avoid potential mistakes that could cause, for example, offensive feelings⁴¹.

Case Examples of Selected Small Museums

Difficult topics are not limited to a specific type of the museum institution. It cannot be said that they are confined, for example, to large, national or supra-regional museums, nor that smaller institutions avoid such topics for various reasons. This would not be true. Even in small organizations, it is possible to engage visitors with emotionally attuned exhibitions, often focused on locally or micro-regionally traumatized histories. A good example of such museums,

³⁷ J. Jiroutová, ..., p. 21.

³⁸ J. Rose, ..., pp. 26-27.

³⁹ M. E. Patterson, *Part II: Visualizing the Past. Introduction*, in: *Curating Difficult Knowledge. Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. E. Lehrer, C. E. Milton, M. E. Patterson, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁰ B. M. Trofanenko, ..., p. 481.

⁴¹ A. Huhn, A. Anderson, *Promoting Social Justice through Storytelling in Museums*, "Museum and Society" 2021, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 352-353.

which often have a patriotic character and deal with local and regional history, and historical context, are small museums. These are often established by local public administration, a local government, or created by private initiatives.

The study discusses two examples of small museums that present topics considered difficult. One focuses specifically on the period of non-freedom (Museum of the Iron Curtain in Valtice), and the other one on local and regional war history (Municipal Museum and Gallery in Hustopeče). Both institutions are located in South Moravia in the Czech Republic. However, before we look at the content and presentation of these museums, let us briefly discuss the category of small museums.

What are small museums? Today, more than half of museum institutions in countries with a developed museum culture are small museums. Most of them have resulted from the development of museology in the second half of the 20th century⁴². These institutions are characterised not only by a small number of staff, usually up to 10 employees or fewer, but also by frequent and inevitable accumulation of several museum activities, a low budget for their activities and, consequently, fewer opportunities for further development⁴³.

Case Example – the Municipal Museum and Gallery Hustopeče

The Municipal Museum and Gallery Hustopeče⁴⁴ is a regional museum of the patrimonial type, established and operated by the town of Hustopeče⁴⁵. The institution, founded in 1999, is situated in the historic house U Synků, which represents the bourgeois renaissance buildings of the main square.

All the museum's exhibitions reflect a relationship to historical memory and care for local cultural heritage. The museum offers the public a total of five permanent exhibitions, apart from one situated in the main building. The ethnographic exhibition called Hustopeče Markets reflects the traditions of the

⁴² See in more detail, e.g., F. Candlin, *Micromuseology: an analysis of small independent museums*, Bloomsbury, London 2016; K. Hudson, *The Museum Refuses to Stand Still*, "Museum International" 2015, no. 261-264, p. 142; F. Candlin, J. Larkin, *What is a Museum? Difference all the way down*, "Museum and Society" 2020, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 115-116; L. Jagošová, *Malé muzeum: teoretické vymezení a pohled do české muzejní praxe*, in: *Aktuální trendy v muzejní prezentaci a edukaci: Edukace v malém muzeu*, Komise pro práci s veřejností a muzejní pedagogiku, Brno 2024, p. 11.

⁴³ L. Jagošová, *The concept of small museums from an international and local perspective: starting points for further research in the Czech Republic*, "Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo" 2023, vol. 11, is. 4, pp. 45-58, doi: 10.146284/mkd.2023.1.4.3.

⁴⁴ *Městské muzeum a galerie Hustopeče*. 2024. <http://www.muzeumhustopece.cz/> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

⁴⁵ *Městské muzeum a galerie Hustopeče*, in: *Město Hustopeče: srdce vinic a mandloní*. 2024. <https://www.hustopece.cz/mestske-muzeum-a-galerie-1> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

village, mentioned as a market village as early as the 14th century, and includes reconstructions of local folk costumes. The exhibition called Freudenreich's Cellar offers an introduction to wine culture and the family that occupied the building of today's museum at the end of the 18th century. Outside the main building of the museum, in the premises of the city shooting range, there is the most recently created exhibition, Shooting Range (2023), dedicated to the history of urban planning and the city's defence system.



Fig. 1: View of the Liberation 1945 exhibition. City Museum and Gallery, Hustopeče.
Photo: authors.

In addition to the facilities mentioned above, the museum has exhibitions reflecting the historical development of the town, including various complex periods of war, oppression and non-freedom. Significant events of the 20th century are touched upon in the History of the Town exhibition, which covers the period from the first written references in the 13th century until 1945. Part of it is dedicated to the prominent personality of the first president of Czechoslovakia, T. G. Masaryk, who had family and study ties to Hustopeče. Another

resonating theme of the exhibition is the nostalgia for local memorials. This includes the now-defunct original late gothic church of St. Wenceslas, which used to stand on the site of the present church from the 1990s, on the main square near the museum. The original church was damaged during the fighting for Hustopeče at the end of the Second World War. The disturbed statics of the tower, gradual deterioration of the church and the adverse effects of shocks caused by increased car traffic led to its spontaneous collapse in 1961. By a stroke of luck, the event occurred without any casualties. Despite protests from the cultural community to preserve the intact presbytery of the church with its architecturally valuable network vault, the authorities ordered and carried out the demolition of the church the following year⁴⁶.



Fig. 2: An exhibition panel with an illustrative map and interactive flip calendar. City Museum and Gallery, Hustopeče. Photo: authors.

⁴⁶ Před 60 lety se zřítla věž kostela v Hustopečích. V chrámu tenkrát nastěsí nikdo nebyl, in: *Českátelevize*, 2024. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/regiony/pred-60-lety-se-zritila-vez-kostela-v-hustopecich-v-chramu-tenkrat-nastesti-nikdo-nebyl-38658> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

However, the exhibition that most strongly reflects the issue under study – the horrors of World War II and local history – opened in 2018 under the simple title "Liberation 1945"⁴⁷. It was established following an event in 1946 when the Red Army cemetery (the second largest in the South Moravia region) was inaugurated in Hustopeče. Here, Red Army soldiers from 55 villages surrounding Hustopeče and Mikulov, who directly participated in the liberation, were laid to rest.

The exhibition showcases a portion of militaria acquired by the museum from a private collector and witness of the events from a neighbouring village, forming a unique collection. Like all other displays, this exhibition was meticulously curated with professional expertise and modern execution of the art-architectural project. The professionalism of the museum staff, who boast backgrounds in history and art history, is evident in the outstanding design comparable in quality to much larger museums in the Czech Republic.

In preparing the exhibition on the war theme, a wide array of sources and knowledge was utilised, derived from their own research within museum collections and archives, as well as from engagement with the local community. Thanks to collaboration with experts and memorials, including war veterans, and employing the oral history method, an accompanying audiovisual documentary was produced and directly integrated into the exhibition. The documentary includes animations on maps aimed at enhancing comprehension for school-age children. Part of the presentation details the liberation of South Moravia, a region of the Czech Republic, known as the Bratislava-Brno Operation, entrusted to the troops of the Ukrainian Front under Marshal R. J. Malinovsky's command.

The exhibition effectively utilises its limited space, engaging visitors with its visual, content and emotional depth. Interactive elements are seamlessly integrated, encouraging deeper exploration of the subject. These include a rotating calendar of battles in the Hustopeče region in April and May 1945, a map illustrating the progression of liberation battles in the same region in May 1945, and rotating wooden cubes depicting uniforms, among others.

The exhibition's concept supports a personal understanding of the topic, not only displaying militaria, period posters and other materials but also highlighting events through specific individuals involved. For instance, it features portrait photographs and medallions of key military figures associated with the liberation of Hustopeče (e.g., on exhibition panels like Plijev's Cavalry and Soldiers of the Last Days of War).

⁴⁷ *Muzeum otevřelo stálou expozici osvobození 1945*, in: *Město Hustopeče: srdce vinic a mandloní*, 2024. <https://www.hustopece.cz/muzeum-otevřelo-stalou-expozici-osvobozeni-1945> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

From its thematic approach and exhibition design, it is clear that the museum primarily targets the local community – children, school groups, adults and senior citizens – rather than relying heavily on attracting foreign tourists. The themes covered emphasise the relationship between the town and region, aiming to impart knowledge of local history and foster a connection with the place where visitors reside and work.



Fig. 3: Rotating cubes for assembling military uniforms. City Museum and Gallery, Hustopeče.
Photo: authors

Case Example – Museum of the Iron Curtain, Valtice

The Museum of the Iron Curtain⁴⁸ occupies an authentic building of the former customs house in Valtice, situated near the border between the Czech Republic and Austria, mere four hundred meters from the current Valtice/Schrattenberg border crossing. The institution chronicles Czechoslovakia's border security from the First Republic to the present day. The focal point of the exhibition delves into protection of the state border during the communist era from 1951 to 1989. Here, guards were tasked with ensuring absolute impermeability of the state border using advanced engineering equipment⁴⁹. Ironically, their duty was not to defend the country against external enemies but to prevent their fellow citizens from fleeing. They safeguarded not only the physical border but also the ideological boundaries of the state.

Founded by a private entity with connections to the military history club community, the museum has been open since 2011. It claims to be the Czech Republic's first and only museum dedicated to totalitarian border protection. Its presentation is conceived as a "journey beyond the borders of democracy,"⁵⁰ described by its founder as a "commercial project offering experiential museology."⁵¹

The permanent exhibition spans all three floors of the building – the ground floor, basement and attic – aligned with the original architectural layout of smaller rooms. It traces the evolution of uniforms, equipment and the border system from 1945 to 1989. A central feature is the reconstruction demonstration of the Iron Curtain, comprising multiple lines of high fences with electrified barbed wire, intensely guarded by border patrols. Border dogs, trained to physically apprehend intruders, were also part of the guard force. Various dioramas throughout the exhibition recreate specific workstations, such as the gendarmerie station from 1938, the 1950s border guard supervisor's post, and the final years of the border guard post.

⁴⁸ *Muzeum železné opony Valtice*, 2024. <https://www.muzeumopony.cz/> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

⁴⁹ *Muzeum železné opony Valtice*, in: *Kudy z nudy. cz: Czech Tourism*, 2024. <https://www.kudyznudy.cz/aktivity/muzeum-zelezne-opony-valtice> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

⁵⁰ *Muzeum železné opony Valtice*, 2024. <https://www.muzeumopony.cz/> [accessed: 10.07.2024].

⁵¹ *Valtice: Muzeum železné opony*, in: *Pamětní místa*, 2024. <http://www.pametnimista.usd.cas.cz/valtice-muzeum-zelezne-opony/> [accessed: 10.07.2024].



Fig. 4: A diorama of a border guard's office on patrol. Iron Curtain Museum, Valtice.
Photo: authors

The museum's collection includes many uniforms, weapons, equipment, photographs and documents that vividly illustrate the tumultuous times along the border. It prominently targets school groups among its diverse visitor demographics.

The concept of the entire exhibition employs simplicity, featuring visually straightforward yet impressive presentation elements. Beginning with the museum's location in a purpose-built structure that retains its original character, the interior spaces have undergone minimal adaptation, primarily for installing the exhibition. This preservation allows for a profound impact of the environment on visitors' emotions. Specifically, notable elements include a diorama portraying a failed attempt to cross the border, featuring a single strand of barbed wire with a lifeless human body behind it, including sound effects evoking persecution. Visitors can experience a reconstructed prison cell with accompanying equipment, try on military uniforms (including coats and caps) and view a relevant documentary film on the border security of Czechoslovakia and attempts to escape illegally to the free world (screened in a separate location). Equally poignant is the published list of victims, documenting unsuccessful crossings of the Iron Curtain resulting in fatalities, prominently displayed on an entire wall in a small room. Additionally, the basement room titled "The Story



Fig. 5: A diorama of a lifeless human body lying near a barbed wire fence. Iron Curtain Museum, Valtice. Photo: authors.

of a Border" stands out for its impactful and sensitively curated content. It features only a table and a chair, adorned with short text messages from various individuals involved in border events (e.g., border guards or local residents) and documentation of historical incidents affixed to the walls. In the form of brief newspaper-style announcements, these texts recount specific destinies and unsuccessful attempts to cross the state border, often with tragic endings. They also provide glimpses into the experiences of border guards and the impact of the strict regime on the local population residing near the state border. The original integration of a diorama with an audio recording depicting a fleeing individual (including rapid breathing, heartbeat, shouts of border guards, barking dogs, gunfire and the sound of high-voltage electricity) has been relocated to a room dedicated to border dogs, following visitor feedback regarding its intense emotional impact. Previous materials also mentioned an opportunity to simulate loading a gun in the basement, although this aspect appears to have been discontinued later⁵².

⁵² Compare: *Muzeum železné opony ve Valticích*, in: *Wikipedie. cz*, 2024. https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muzeum_%C5%BEeeln%C3%A9_pony_ve_Valtic%C3%ADch [accessed: 10.07.2024].



Fig. 6: Story of a border – the basement room with brief memories of events and fates of individuals. Iron Curtain Museum, Valtice. Photo: authors

The museum's defining element is the barbed wire/fence motif, symbolically separating visitors from exhibits in parts of the exhibition. This motif also features prominently in the museum's logo, promotional materials and exhibition panels.

Interpretation and Results

The international literature review reveals several characteristic features mirrored in specific examples from Czech small museums that address weighty themes such as war conflicts, military history events and surveillance of state borders – a poignant symbol of 20th-century oppression. Several key observations emerge from the analysis, as discussed below.

Difficult histories on a small scale

Small museums typically house local collections documenting specific regions or places of activity. They focus not on overarching history but on events with local significance or manifestations of historical events on a smaller scale.

Visitors can thus piece together a nuanced understanding of challenging topics by exploring various local museums. For communities rooted in these places, these issues carry personal connections resonating through generations – especially in border areas or venues historically marked by diverse ethnic and linguistic populations. These museums also prioritize networking with peers, maintaining connections with others handling similar or related topics, often through professional museum associations (both the Hustopeče and Valtice museums are members of the Association of Museums and Galleries of the Czech Republic).

Genius loci and the emotionality of original buildings

Placing the museum directly at the site of a significant event that the institution presents⁵³ through its exhibitions helps the visitor to establish a deeper connection to the topic and motivates them to learn more about it. Even more significantly, authentic objects in situ, closely tied to the themes and events presented, which have found their new purpose as museum buildings and exhibition spaces, have a profound impact. In several cases, including the Museum of the Iron Curtain in Valtice, the building itself can be understood as an authentic museum exhibit. With its emotionality and "spirit of place", especially with minimal or sensitively conceived alterations to its form, it engages the visitor with the topic more effectively than any newly constructed museum building.

The intensity of the museum's connection to difficult topics

Difficult topics themselves are not sought out by local museums in any complicated way. They usually stem directly from the history of a given place or region. Thus, the theme typically presents a chapter of general or military history or, more broadly, some harmful impact of natural and human forces in the past, manifested as various epidemics of human and animal diseases, natural disasters, acts of violence, vandalism, oppression and restrictions on human freedom, etc. These resonant themes, often very much alive in their regions for generations, are transformed by museums into exhibitions dedicated to war conflicts and life in unfreedom (especially in the Czech context, focusing on the history of the 20th century and the communist regime), vanished local monuments, significant native figures and regional personalities.

A key difference in the overall concept and impact of museum exhibitions lies in how intensely and uniquely the museum is connected to a difficult subject.

⁵³ Compare: J. Rose,...

There are museums with a mono-thematic focus on a difficult subject⁵⁴, whose exhibitions then provide a compact treatment of the issue and do not "distract" the visitor with other topics, variously distant in their focus and collection objects. However, it is much more common to encounter multidisciplinary and multi-thematic local small museums. These are institutions of the patrimonial type, having a wide range of topics and diverse collections (archaeological, ethnographic, art, natural science, technical) including, of course, other, quite specific topics, depending on the peculiarities of the place or region. For example, in the case of the Czech Republic and the South Moravian region, it could be viticulture, folklore, or local artists – painters, musicians, carving, etc. If a difficult theme is the only one of a spectrum of issues or exhibitions presented, it creates more "competition" in the interest of the visitor, who may tend to prefer less demanding, relaxing themes when visiting the museum during his or her free time. The intensity of a small museum's link to heavy themes is also often influenced by the fact that it more often directly affects the local population which may thus also participate in the creation of the exhibition.

Difficult topics in a museum and the human factor – who tells the stories and to whom

The approach to handling complex topics always depends on the capabilities of the museum institution – what collection it has at its disposal and what staff is available, with small museums being typically quite understaffed. More important than the number itself is whether museum staff possess professional education and competencies (or the willingness to self-educate) that

⁵⁴ It is interesting to compare them with contemporary war museums that specialize in war themes and chapters from military history. See e.g. C. Cercel, N. Parish, E. Rowley, *War in the Museum: The Historical of the Great War in Péronne and the Military History Museum in Dresden*, "Journal of War & Culture Studies" 2019, pp. 1-21, doi: 10.1080/17526272.2019.1580846; P. Verbytska, *War in European Museum Narratives and Cultural Memory*, "Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo" 2023, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 21-43, doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.4.2; S. Malvern, *War, Memory and Museums: Art and Artefact in the Imperial War Museum*, "History Workshop Journal" 2000, no. 49, pp. 177-203; T. Lawson, *Ideology in a Museum of Memory: A Review of the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum*, "Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions" 2003, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 173-183, doi: 10.1080/14690760412331326168. A very specific topic is museums affected by war conflict. See, for example, from among numerous works: J. Forsdyke, *The Museum in War-Time*, "The British Museum Quarterly" 1941-1950, vol. 15, pp. 1-9; S. Muravska, O. Hodovanska, *Organization of museums of western Ukraine after the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation*, "Museologica Brunensia" 2023, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 12-19, doi: 10.5817/MuB2023-2-2; J. V. Burakov, L. Pytlovana, *Military museums of the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014-2022*, "Museologica Brunensia" 2022, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 34-42, doi: 10.5817/MuB2022-2-3.

enable them to achieve professional results in both scientific and presentation activities. As demonstrated by the example of the Municipal Museum and Gallery Hustopeče, even a small number of staff, if professional, can achieve high-quality results comparable to museum institutions in large cities. Another key factor is the personal connection of these staff members to the topics they research. Museum staff in small museums often come directly from the given place or region, representing their region and thus having a personal connection to the subject matter. They are familiar with their area as part of the local community, making it easier for them to access information and potential collection objects through interpersonal contacts.

Museums established by private entities face a more challenging situation. While they may have highly motivated staff and are often aided by volunteers (groups of 'enthusiasts for the cause', family members), they often lack stable financial support for museum operations, which is most evident in exhibition standards.

As current research shows⁵⁵, museums typically expect interest from a wide spectrum of visitors, while small museums rely on local visitors and especially schools. This is reflected in the presentation of topics, which should be understandable to children and school students. However, it is not only about the textual part of the exhibition and the design of exhibition panels and other texts (especially descriptions of exhibits), but also a sensitive approach to presentation. The presentation of a difficult topic adapted for child visitors aims not to shock, avoiding excessive expressiveness and rawness (e.g., omitting photographs depicting violent death and the sight of a dead human body). In many cases, it offers visitors the choice of what they want and can see or experience, and what may be too much for them, which they are consistently warned about in advance (e.g., discomfort in smaller spaces, possible claustrophobic conditions, unpleasant feelings from the aura of exhibits, materials unsuitable for children). It does not impose or heavily emphasise an illustrative and completely open concept of presenting the topic to children but respects that visitors of any age may perceive the topic more sensitively, emotionally and personally. As it turns out, both presented museums advocate for this sensitive approach.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., A. Pitt, D. P. Britzman,...; *Challenging Conversation: Teaching challenging and difficult subjects to children and young people in Galleries, Museums and Heritage Sites*. Arts Council England. 6.5.2019. <https://artsconnect.co.uk/challenging-conversations/> [accessed: 07.07.2024].

Expression means presenting difficult topics, authenticity and the aura of collection items

In the presentation of difficult topics, small local museums employ various means of expression and varying degrees of reflection on current exhibition standards⁵⁶. Significant differences in the context of museum venue potential and exhibition halls, which tend to be smaller, are found primarily in the overall museum exhibition architecture, installation methods and the conception of exhibition texts. The Municipal Museum and Gallery Hustopeče utilises the services of a professional firm for the development of its visual and architectural solutions. At the same time, the private museum in Valtice prepared its exhibition independently. In both cases, however, there is a carefully considered exhibition concept and methods to bring the topic closer to visitors, incorporating elements of hands-on activities, experiential learning and interactivity⁵⁷. Both exhibitions feature audiovisual elements (films), opportunities for tactile interaction (rotating calendar), try-on experiences (wearing uniforms), personal narratives and storytelling (examples of specific individuals' stories). The exhibitions predominantly include authentic objects in terms of exhibit presentation or closely contextualised items. Material evidence is presented chiefly, and the aura of these objects plays a crucial role in eliciting emotional responses from visitors. Nevertheless, both observed museums acknowledge the importance of a wide range of resources, also incorporating relevant secondary textual and visual documents (such as chronicles, photographs and maps), and recognise the significance of reflecting memories from eyewitnesses (oral history).

Neither of the presented museums employs a museum educator, which is typical for small museums – hence, interactive elements are directly integrated into the exhibitions. Therefore, the museums emphasise the role of a guide/lecturer who communicates the subject matter and can respond to visitors' questions effectively.

The narrator's perspective on difficult topics and related ethical questions

Fundamental ethical questions arise in presenting difficult topics in museums, particularly concerning the approach to presenting the topic and, most importantly, the perspective from which it is narrated⁵⁸. The issue cannot be

⁵⁶ Compare: N. Wančová, *Discover stories from the 20th century: interactive and multimedia exhibition evaluation*, "Museologica Brunensia" 2023, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 16-30, doi: 10.5817/MuB2023-1-2; J. Jiroutová,...

⁵⁷ B. M. Trofanenko,...

⁵⁸ P. Verbytska,...

narrated "sterilely" without considering the participants in the events. What and who should be presented? In Czech museums, it is very common to present content through the lens of victims⁵⁹, especially for topics that are not too temporally distant, still very alive, perceived as controversial, or where the interpretation of the event varies significantly depending on the viewpoint of individual actors. What complicates the museum presentation for many topics is that events cannot be viewed in black and white, solely from the perspective of oppositions such as good/evil or victim/aggressor. There is a growing tendency in exhibitions to ensure that no participant in the difficult topics is omitted, as demonstrated by both of the museums studied. However, local small museums often encounter the "liveness" of a topic and the time that has passed since the events occurred is perceived as still insufficiently long. Also, memories or direct descendants of individual participants still live in the given region, often making it somewhat difficult for museums to prepare exhibitions focused on difficult topics. It shows that museums do not want to present events neutrally or impersonally through exhibitions. Therefore, they attempt to show various specific stories to visitors and key individuals, as well as multiple perspectives in the perception of events by individual parties⁶⁰.

Another crucial presentation question is the degree of vividness (as well as rawness and harshness) with which museums approach exhibiting difficult topics. In both museums studied, we also see how carefully they navigate the imaginary line of tasteful and sensitive presentation, which does not overlook key moments but conveys them considering the age, emotional development and state of their visitors, including the youngest among them. They appropriately choose how to present certain moments from various available options. Where it is more suitable, especially for younger audiences or those personally affected by the topic in their lives, they employ substitute presentation methods (for example, textual expression instead of drastic photographs, representation through dioramas or drawings instead of raw historical audiovisual recordings, etc.). Here, a verbal commentary of the guide/lecturer also plays a crucial role, acting as a communication bridge or mediator between the exhibition and the visitor. Guides convey information and stimuli to the audience, and consistently leave it to each visitor to freely form or revise their opinions and attitudes toward the topic.

⁵⁹ C. Cercel, N. Parish, E. Rowley,...

⁶⁰ T. Lawson,...

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TRUDNA WIEDZA JAKO TEMAT WYSTAWOWY W MAŁYCH MUZEACH: PRZYKŁADY Z REPUBLIKI CZESKIEJ (streszczenie)

Artykuł dotyczy prezentacji tak zwanej trudnej wiedzy w małych muzeach, na przykładzie dwóch morawskich instytucji: Miejskiego Muzeum i Galerii w Hustopeče oraz prywatnego Muzeum Źelaznej Kurtyny w Valticach. W działalności wystawienniczej obu instytucji odwiedzający spotykają się z trudnymi tematami, takimi jak wojna i okresy ucisku, koncentrując się na regionalnym i szerszym kontekście historycznym XX wieku w Europie Środkowej. Pierwsza część artykułu

wyjaśnia termin „trudna wiedza” i ich interpretację oraz definiuje środowisko małych muzeów, po czym następuje prezentacja omawianych muzeów w drugiej części artykułu.

Słowa kluczowe: trudna wiedza, wystawa muzealna, prezentacja muzealna, małe muzea

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