

Verbyc'ka, Polina

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STUDIE/ARTICLES

CHILDHOOD IN THE SHADOWS OF WAR
IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

POLINA VERBYTSKA

<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2024-1-1>**ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:**

This article focuses on the presentation of the complexity of war-affected childhood in museum exhibitions and learning environments. The paper addresses contemporary museological practice and its educational dimension in the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, the Second World War Museum in Gdansk and the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina. The study reveals that museum exhibitions often depict war-affected childhood through a variety of media, including images, artefacts, personal stories, oral history sources, as well as reconstructions and simulations of the past. The analysed museums have developed interactive exhibits and a variety of educational programmes that allow young visitors to critically engage with the past, and practise competencies of democratic culture. The author argues that museum education assets, aimed at stimulating social dialogue about the impact of war on children and society, are crucial, especially in conflict and post-conflict societies.

**Dětství ve stínu války
v muzejních výstavách**

Tento článek se zaměřuje na prezentaci složitých podmínek dětství poznačeného válkou prostřednictvím muzejních výstav a výukových prostředí. Příspěvek se zabývá současnou muzejní praxí a jejím vzdělávacím rozměrem

ve Vojenském historickém muzeu Bundeswehru, Muzeu druhé světové války v Gdaňsku a Muzeu válečného dětství v Sarajevu v Bosně a Hercegovině. Výsledky studie ukazují, že muzejní výstavy často zobrazují válkou poznačené dětství prostřednictvím různých médií, zahrnujících obrázky, artefakty, osobní příběhy, prameny orální historie, stejně jako rekonstrukce a simulace minulosti. Muzea, která byla předmětem analýzy, vytvořila interaktivní exponáty a různé vzdělávací programy, které umožňují mladým návštěvníkům kritický pohled na minulost a uplatnění znalostí o demokratické kultuře. Muzejní pedagogika zaměřená na stimulaci sociálního dialogu o dopadu války na děti a společnost má podle autorky klíčový význam, zejména v konfliktních a post-konfliktních společnostech.

KEYWORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

childhood – museum – exhibition – learning environment – museum education
dětství – muzeum – výstava – výukové prostředí – muzejní edukace

Introduction

Sustaining the vitality of democratic institutions hinges on a supportive environment and the active participation of citizens. At the core of this engagement lies the cultivation of education, critical thinking skills, and a profound respect for human dignity,

particularly crucial for the younger generation as members of society. Understanding our collective history and preserving its memory is foundational for fostering mutual understanding. In this pursuit, competencies for democratic culture emerge as indispensable elements.

Transitioning into the role of museums in nurturing social cohesion, these institutions serve as spaces for the exchange of best practices and experiential learning. Education within museums extends beyond mere dissemination of information; it is a vital component of a broader endeavour to build a world that may not be perfect but has the potential to be slightly better than the present one.¹ Especially significant is the capacity of museums to educate young people while imparting lessons in non-violent conflict resolutions to the next generation.

Museums, with their semi-sacred aura of the narratives that shape understanding of identity and history, are considered appropriate venues for exhibiting war-related materials, thus inviting exploration of complex moral dilemmas.² De Jong (2018) asserts that museums serve a dual purpose: to commemorate and pay

¹ BAUER, Patricia J. *Remembering the times of our lives: Memory in infancy and beyond*. London: Psychology Press, 2007, p. 181.

² WINTER, Jay. *Museums and the Representation of War*. In MUCHITSCH, Wolfgang (ed.). *Does War Belong in Museums?: The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 21–38.

tribute to the deceased through memorialization, and to educate by transmitting historical knowledge through didactic means.³ Jaeger indicates the multitude of aesthetic, emotional, didactic, narrative, meta-representational, and experiential functions that constitute representational dimensions conveying the realities of war in contemporary museums.⁴

The discourse on childhood in war museums, holding significant importance within the European process of collective remembrance, further emphasizes the importance of museum education in shaping collective memory and engaging the entire society in critical conversations on both the violent past and present through active participation, utilizing museums as flexible platforms for dialogues, debates, and discussions.⁵

The profound impact of undeniably traumatic war experiences underscores the necessity for critical thinking and the value of considering multiple perspectives. It highlights the challenges in effectively teaching history through narratives based on the study of museum objects and contextualizing them within broader educational frameworks across different historical periods.⁶

³ JONG, Steffi de. Sentimental Education. Sound and Silence at History Museums. *Museum and Society*, 2018, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 89–91.

⁴ JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 2.

⁵ Memory exercises: activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 143–145.

⁶ Object-based childhood history from museums to university: the Latvian project. *Paedagogica Historica*, 2022, pp. 13–14.

1. Aim

Exploring the dimensions of war and reassessing them through cultural heritage are significant fields of study and practical implementation in museums especially during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Emphasizing the educational dimension, the research focuses on presenting the complexity of war-affected childhood in museum exhibitions and learning environments.⁷

The research questions are as follows: How is the childhood dimension represented in the war museum exhibitions and museum learning environments? In what ways do museums communicate using narratives to promote understanding of the war childhood complexity?

The paper combines theoretical approaches with field studies on specific museum educational practices and experiences. In particular, it reveals the analysis of pedagogical approaches employed by selected museums in Germany, Poland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely, the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, Dresden, Germany; the Second World War Museum, Gdansk, Poland and the War Childhood Museum, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina. The museums in Dresden and Gdansk were chosen as examples of modern approaches to the display of cultural memory issues of the Second World War. In contrast to them, the museum in Sarajevo

⁷ I express gratitude to colleagues in Collegium Carolinum, Munich, Germany, and particularly to Prof. Dr. Martin Schulze Wessel for the support of this research and discussion that enriched it. I am grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for the financial support of my scholarship. And I sincerely thank the staff of the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, Bundeswehr Military History Museum, Dresden, and Second World War Museum, Gdansk, in particular, museum curators Ines Schnee, Amina Kravac, Marec Zambrycki, and Łukasz Gurfinkiel for their assistance.

commemorates the 1990s wars in the Western Balkans. The fieldwork was conducted within the period from November 2022 until March 2023. The research incorporates the data from exhibition observations, expert interviews, and catalogues.

2. Theoretical approaches

According to scholarly studies, modern museums are not seen as mere repositories of historical artefacts; they serve as dynamic platforms for interpreting and understanding historical experiences.⁸ Particularly for the younger generation, museums are crucial in shaping historical narratives, emphasizing emotions and personal experiences.⁹ They acknowledge the importance of history as a vehicle for commemoration and remembrance, while also incorporating an ethical perspective and contributing to the discourse on collective remembrance, especially regarding the contentious issue of war.

Museum professionals employ specific approaches to address and engage with challenging and sensitive topics about war-affected childhood in museum exhibitions. Viewed to enhance the relatability of individuals' experiences and emotions to visitors, the anthropologization of war history in the museum narrative aims to comprehend the intricate nature of war and its profound effects on human existence. This approach

⁸ THIEMEYER, Thomas. Work, specimen, witness: How different perspectives on museum objects alter the way they are perceived and the values attributed to them. *Museum and Society*, 2015, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 401–402.

⁹ Memory exercises: activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 139–152; JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 23.

seeks to depict at the exhibitions not only the military operations but also the experiences of civilians and soldiers marked by loss, suffering, and trauma transcending national and cultural boundaries.¹⁰ Among civilians, children are the most sensitive group suffered in war. New museology recognizes the significance of personal narratives and the diverse range of experiences in shaping the collective memory of historical events.

There are two main perspectives on childhood in the museum's exhibitions: nostalgia and the image of the child as a victim. In the first case, childhood is considered the period of life associated with innocence, freedom, and imagination. In this state, a child can experience joy and freedom and simultaneously be protected from the severe reality of the outside world.¹¹ From the perspective of a victim, "child is a passive casualty of a corrupt and corrupting adult world that sees it as an incomplete person".¹² Museums can exhibit childhood in two other categories – they can display modern images of childhood, or they can exhibit artifacts from the history of childhood.¹³

One of the critical elements of the museum's war-childhood exhibitions is to evoke emotional

response in visitors. Emphasizing emotions helps to preserve the memories of those who lived through the war, as emotions are often intertwined with personal recollections and experiences.¹⁴ Recognizing the significance of emotions, personal stories, and the ethical dimensions of historical events contribute to the development of more nuanced and inclusive narratives within museum spaces.¹⁵ It is also linked to the idea of affective pedagogy,¹⁶ which seeks to elicit a productive emotional response to the representation of violent pasts and stimulate sustained attention, concern, and corrective action.¹⁷

War museums, as integral parts of the cultural landscape, provide visitors with the opportunities to raise critical questions about the boundaries of representing violent events that result in humans, especially children, suffering.¹⁸ For example, Moore analyzed the importance of children's diaries in displaying the children and youth in the museums during wartime Japan.¹⁹ During WWII, the teachers encouraged children to write their daily memories in diaries. Educators trained

children to do the "life writing movement", which meant writing detailed daily records as a form of "self-cultivation".²⁰ As a result, it provided a powerful source of information for depicting children during wartime.

In addition to acquiring knowledge and appreciating what is institutionally preserved and presented as a valuable heritage, there is a need for practices of social memory that recognize cultural inheritance as an ongoing process. The pedagogical perspective in the curatorial work in the museum focuses on constructing exhibitions to create a transformative experience for visitors.²¹ Through introducing into museum activities a participatory and social approach, it refers to the concept of "mutual knowledge".²²

The following features characterize museum experience that fosters social change: designing interactive experiences that encourage visitors to engage with the content on both cognitive and emotional levels; and providing opportunities to engage visitors in communication about the exhibition content.²³ It involves engaging young visitors by inviting active visitors' reflections and sharing their experiences of the past in the museum.²⁴ By engaging

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 171.

²¹ Memory exercises: activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 147–149.

²² MACLEOD, Suzanne. Image and life: Museum architecture, social sustainability and design for creative lives. In BEISIEGEL, Katharina. *New Museums: Intentions, Expectations, Challenges*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2017, pp. 175–184.

²³ Memory exercises: activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 139–152.

²⁴ BERGEVIN, Jennifer. Narratives of Transformation: Stories of impact from activist museums. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 348–358; JAEGER, Stephan.

¹⁰ THIEMEYER, Thomas. Work, specimen, witness: How different perspectives on museum objects alter the way they are perceived and the values attributed to them. *Museum and Society*, 2015, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 403–405; KAŁAŻNY, Jerzy, Amelia KORZENIEWSKA and Bartosz KORZENIEWSKI (eds.). *Druka wojna światowa w pamięci kulturowej w Polsce i w Niemczech. 70 lat później (1945–2015)*. Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku, 2015; JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.

¹¹ ROBERTS, Sharon. Minor concerns: representations of children and childhood in British museums. *Museum and Society*, 2006, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 156.

¹² Ibidem, p. 159.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 156.

¹⁴ KAŁAŻNY, Jerzy, Amelia KORZENIEWSKA and Bartosz KORZENIEWSKI (eds.). *Druka wojna światowa w pamięci kulturowej w Polsce i w Niemczech. 70 lat później (1945–2015)*. Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku, 2015.

¹⁵ JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 23.

¹⁶ WITCOMB, Andrea. Understanding the role of affect in producing a critical pedagogy for history museums. *Museum management and curatorship*, 2013, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 255–271.

¹⁷ SIMON, Roger I. A shock to thought: Curatorial judgment and the public exhibition of 'difficult knowledge'. *Memory Studies*, 2011, vol. 4, no. 4, p. 206.

¹⁸ THIEMEYER, Thomas. *Fortsetzung des Krieges mit anderen Mitteln. Die beiden Weltkriege im Museum*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010.

¹⁹ MOORE, Aaron William. Children we have lost: Diaries, memoirs, and museum displays of childhood and youth in wartime Japan. *Cultural and Social History*, 2022, vol. 17, no. 5, pp. 715–729.

with the young generation, the museum opens to various voices, creating a more inclusive and representative space for dialogue and interpretation.²⁵

3. Museum Cases

3.1 Affective objects: war toys in museum exhibitions

Pirker and Rüdiger define historical authenticity in two ways: as witnessing and as experiencing the past.²⁶ In Gaskel's opinion the sense of touch is a matter in exhibition mediation: "people generally want to touch the things they are examining".²⁷

The objects exhibited in museums, acting as witnesses, possess a certain aura stemming from their connection to a historically significant event, situation, or individual.²⁸ Toys are traditional attributes of childhood, and playing is a universal human activity shared across different cultures. It allows children to construct a world of their own design through imaginative play. However, children during wartime directly experienced the devastating impact of real weapons and bombs. On the other hand, children are exposed to violence and warfare through various sources, including

The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 23.

25 WITCOMB, Andrea. 'A Place for All of Us?' Museums and Communities. In WATSON, Sheila (ed.). *Museums and their communities.* London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 133–156.

26 PIRKER, Eva Ulrike and Mark RÜDIGER. Authentizitätsfiktionen in populären Geschichtskulturen: Annäherungen. In *Echte Geschichte. Authentizitätsfiktionen in populären Geschichtskulturen.* Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010, p. 17.

27 GASKELL, Ivan. The life of things. In HENNING, Michelle (ed.). *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies.* Volume 3: Museum Media. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, p. 170.

28 THIEMEYER, Thomas. Work, specimen, witness: How different perspectives on museum objects alter the way they are perceived and the values attributed to them. *Museum and Society*, 2015, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 396–412.



Fig. 1: A toy car dug out from under the rubble of a house in the town of Kalisz in September 1939. Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland. Photo: M. Zambrzycki

the media and witnessing real-life events, and incorporate these experiences into their play, engaging in games centred around war and combat.²⁹

Museum collections in military museums typically include war toys used for play. As Jaeger noted, in the traditional war museums of the twentieth century, models of

war toys such as tanks were often used as artefacts to depict real war machines in miniature.³⁰ Modern innovative war exhibitions taking a distinctively different approach to such objects indicate a clear shift away from the imitation of military equipment toward the display of stories about the cultural impacts of war.

29 PIEKEN, Gorch and Matthias ROGG. *The Bundeswehr museum of military history: Exhibition guide.* Dresden: Sandstein Kommunikation, 2012, p. 76.

30 JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality.* Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 1.

To showcase innovative approaches embraced in the museum exhibitions, we will provide several examples from different museum exhibitions and pedagogical methods for displaying toys in the museum. In the exhibition section “German Crimes in Poland” at the Second World War Museum in Gdansk, Poland, visitors can see a child’s toy car – a toy truck found among the ruins of a house in Kalisz, which was destroyed during a German bombing raid in September 1939. The object’s description is: “A toy car dug out from under the rubble of a house in the town of Kalisz in September 1939” (see Fig. 1). The symbolic meaning of this toy as a museum exhibit is that it expresses the fate of Polish children and the civilian population in September 1939. The toy truck appears to symbolize childhood innocence and hopes for a better future.³¹

The “War and Play” thematic section at the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden highlights the influence of war legacies on the generations of children traumatized by war.³² Among the exhibits on display in this section, there is a burnt toy tank made by the Gama company. The toy tank was burnt out on Webergasse in Dresden on 13 February 1945. The description note says that the tank was found by archaeologists during excavations in the old town and nothing is known about its owner’s fate. Today, a shopping centre is located on the site of the findings. Mechanical Gama tanks, which emitted showers of sparks, were among the most popular toys in the times of the Third Reich. In the 1950s, they were sold again

in Germany in a slightly modified version.

War toys reflect the prevailing values and political ideologies of a certain time.³³ The narrative at the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History also addresses the controversial issue of wartime propaganda in the children’s rooms. It is illustrated through another example of the toy in the museum collection. The French game “A mort les boches” (Death to the Germans) produced in France in 1915, includes three figures in German uniforms that raise their arms to signal surrender. The children could “shoot” these “boshes” by throwing balls at them.

The exhibition in this section not only displays the objects but also demonstrates the negative impacts of military toys and their presence in a social discussion following the Second World War. Despite the contradictory nature of war toys, there has been no significant demilitarization of children’s playrooms, and the topic remains highly contentious.³⁴

3.2 Personal stories

Visitors are more impressed when historical events are presented through the lens of individual stories rather than through dry facts and statistics. Due to the importance of the narrative about the human and social dimension of World War II in the museum, the authentic accounts of those events’ participants personalize the narrative. The elements of the exhibition in the Second World War Museum in Gdansk, Poland are several dozen stories of individual people from various backgrounds including children.

Representation of the Second World War in museums follows the presentation of the Holocaust by focusing on individual experiences and memories to express the authenticity of testimonies and the incomprehensible multiplicity and diversity of this experience.³⁵ Contemporary witness accounts possess significant potential for the didactic and pedagogical communication of history, as they bring historical events and developments to life through the condensed experiences of individuals.³⁶

The exhibition section titled “German crimes in Poland” at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk features suitcases strewn on the floor, serving as a reminder of the German air force’s attacks on the columns of defenceless refugees. Large-format photographs and wall-mounted monitors also document other instances of German crimes in Poland. On display in this space of the exhibition, visitors can also view the figure of a Polish boy, Zdzislaw Wysocki (1926–1939), one of the many thousands of victims of German air attacks on the civilian population. Related artefacts follow a brief informational description. He was wounded near Łuków, during the evacuation from Warsaw and died at the age of 13 in a hospital.

The main medium dedicated to the suffering of the civilian population in the “City Under Siege” exhibition space is focused on the siege of Warsaw in September 1939. It is depicted in photographs and a film by the American war correspondent Julien Bryan, who came to Warsaw with the intention of documenting

³¹ Ibidem, p. 1.

³² PIEKEN, Gorch and Matthias ROGG. *The Bundeswehr museum of military history: Exhibition guide*. Dresden: Sandstein Kommunikation, 2012, p. 76.

³³ Ibidem, p. 76.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 76.

³⁵ ASSMANN, Aleida. *Shadows of trauma: Memory and the politics of postwar identity*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016, p. 33.

³⁶ Memory exercises: activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia’s National Museum of Memory. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 139–152.



Fig. 2: The ten-year-old Kazimiera Mika cries beside her older sister Anna's lifeless body. Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland. Photo: P. Verbytska

In a personal interview, Amina Krvavac, the Executive Director of the War Childhood Museum, highlighted the museum's mission in comparison to other museums in the city and the country: *"The museum presents the platform for dealing with the past. People come to visit museums without previous experience. The exhibition communicates with visitors from the perspective of children, creating an opportunity to deal with their own past when other people can learn from their experience. Usually, in other museums, children are not at the centre of the narrative. However, they have a lot to say and we should listen to them"*.³⁷ The permanent exhibition at the War Childhood Museum focuses on childhood experiences during the 1990s wars in the Western Balkans and how these experiences relate to children currently affected by conflicts around the world. It presents a wide range of personal objects and stories of children related to their experiences of war.

The international collection at the War Childhood Museum comprises artefacts from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

This is the story "My Mother's Child" by Anja, 1993: *"My whole life has been marked by the name of the person who harmed my mother... I'm not a child of an evil man. I'm my mother's child. I am not a child of hatred. I am a child who was raised with the love of my mother and my stepfather, nurtured by my family's love. I am not a child of shame, I am a child who saw the promise of the future in her mother's eyes and is now building that very future. I am my mother's child"*.³⁸

³⁷ KRVAVAC, Amina, 2022. Interviewed by the author. Sarajevo, 07. 11. 2022.

³⁸ Oleksandra Matviichuk: BiH-Ukraine Cooperation is Key. In *War Childhood Museum* [online]. 24 February 2023 [accessed 2023-10-24]. Available from www: <<https://warchildhood>.

life in the besieged capital. The images are screened in a specially arranged mini-cinema. Large-format photographs taken by Julien Bryan are complemented by an interactive stand. One of Bryan's photos depicts a nine-year-old boy Ryszard Pajewski sitting on the rubble of a house on the corner of streets in Warsaw shelled by German aeroplanes in September 1939. In the next photograph, visitors can see ten-year-old Kazimiera Mika crying beside her older sister Anna's lifeless body. The description states: *"Anna*

had been digging potatoes with six other women when German planes appeared overhead and opened fire on them". The photograph appeared in "Life" magazine and was seen around the world becoming a symbol of Warsaw under siege.

3.3 Witnesses' accounts and personal experiences of growing up in wartime

The topic of children, war and migration and their consequences are the main themes of the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo.



Fig. 3: The permanent exhibition at the War Childhood Museum, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina. Photo: P. Verbytska



Fig. 4: Exhibit to the story “My Mother’s Child” displayed at the War Childhood Museum, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina. Photo: P. Verbytska

The story “War Games” by Kostiantyn, 2008 (Ukrainian collection) is the following: *“As soon as my friends and I came home from kindergarten each day, we went to the playground together. Each of us had a toy gun and we played war games by pretending to fight invisible zombies. Soon our imaginary war games gave way to real war. Instead of fighting invisible zombies, we had to attend fire safety training and learn how best to escape and find cover if real shooting began. I kept my toy gun and took good care of it because I knew my mom wouldn’t be able to afford a new one and even if she could, I wouldn’t have wanted her to spend money on plastic toys”*.³⁹

The story “Postcard from Home” by Daryna, 2002 (Ukrainian collection) features the most prominent location in Crimea. *“I bought it in the summer right before I left our home in Simferopol. It shows shells, the sea and figs which remind me of pleasant September days. I could talk about these things for hours – about its bust train station, the clock tower*



Fig. 5: Exhibit to the story “War Games” displayed at the War Childhood Museum, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina. Photo: P. Verbytska

and the history behind each place. When I left Simferopol, I thought that I’d soon be returning to my parents and swimming in the sea again. But it didn’t turn out that way. Now this postcard reminds me not to set expectations so high. Looking at it makes me feel good because it symbolizes all the places that I love”.⁴⁰

Personal stories in the museum exhibition are based on the meaning and value of the exhibited personal objects. The stories highlight particular personal experiences of growing up in wartime, thus showing the complexity of the war childhood. The War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo actively promotes the remarkable message of human

org/2023/02/24/oleksandra-matviichuk-bih-ukraine-cooperation-is-key/>.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

values, inspiring the younger generation regardless of their ethnicity. This represents a counter-narrative to the prevailing ethnocentric narrative of the Bosnian War.

3.4 Reconstruction of the past

The reconstruction of selected places allows visitors to experience the lives of people during the war. All military history museums aim to generate authenticity, but the form of authenticity varies.⁴¹ On the one hand, the authenticity of witnessing can be achieved through first-hand accounts, historical places, or objects from the past. On the other hand, historical authenticity can be reproduced through simulations of the past that can be achieved with replicas, historical re-enactments, and the evocation of authentic feelings that relate to the mood or atmosphere of the past.

The threat of bombardments changed the lives of children. The compulsory darkening of windows and preparations for air raids transformed the daily lives of urban residents dramatically. Many needed to move into shelters. The fear of bombardments was accompanied by anxiety about chemical attacks, which had been substantial in the First World War. This time none of the sides chose to use chemicals.⁴² In the Second World War Museum in Gdansk, the interior of an air-raid shelter was set up at a London Underground station in the space “Living with bombardments”. Visitors cannot enter this block, but get acquainted with its contents from the outside, observing through a special



Fig. 6: London Underground station in the space “Living with bombardments”. Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland. Photo: P. Verbytska

window an artistic installation, which consists of a scenography resembling an improvised London Underground shelter and a display of photos of people staying there.⁴³

Another example of the reconstruction in the museum is a special space designed for children under the age of 12. The exhibition for children is titled “Journey in time. The story of a family in 1939–1945”. It is both an exhibition and an educational space.⁴⁴ The lesson takes place in a reconstructed classroom from the second half of the 1930s, as well as in the living room of a Warsaw flat, which is presented in three different periods: a few days after the outbreak of World War II, during the German occupation and just after its end.⁴⁵

⁴³ Exhibitions. In *Museum of the Second World War* [online]. [accessed 2023-10-24]. Available from www: <<https://muzeum1939.pl/en/exhibitions-the-museum-of-the-second-world-war.html>>.

⁴⁴ ZAMBRZYCKI, Marek, 2023. Interviewed by the author. Gdansk, 08. 03. 2023.

⁴⁵ Muzeum II Wojny Światowej: Raport z działalności Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku za rok 2017. In *Muzeum II Wojny*

The first room of this exhibition is a reconstruction of a classroom from the second half of the 1930s. Visitors are able to see what a school looked like at that time, while the use of testimonies and memories woven into children’s stories illustrates what the school taught and what civic attitudes it demanded of its pupils. In the next sections of the exhibition, students can learn about difficult wartime topics through the example of the fate of the Jankowski family, as it relates to familiar everyday life issues.

Young visitors enter the first flat and learn the basic facts about the fictitious family to which it supposedly belonged. Under the supervision of an educator, they can touch some of the objects, learn about their characteristics and purpose, and listen to a specially prepared

Swiatowej [online]. 2017 [accessed 2023-10-24]. Available from www: <<https://muzeum1939.pl/sites/default/files/pdf/5a2e7a46fe341fb0812be527c8719deb8485.pdf>>.

⁴¹ JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From narrative, memory, and experience to experientiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.

⁴² Muzeum II Wojny Światowej: katalog wystawy głównej. *Res Gestae. Historical Journal*, 2016, vol. 3, pp. 273–293.

audio narration.⁴⁶ Moving on to the next room, they can see the same flat, but with changes caused by the ongoing war, (some of the furnishings are missing, etc.). Here, the children will learn, among other things, about the repression suffered by the family at the hands of the occupying powers – the Third Reich and the Soviet Union – as well as the family’s involvement in resistance against the Germans. The situation is repeated when the children leave the 1943 flat and move to a room reproducing the post-war reality. Here, visitors can see the changes for themselves, and the educator will help them learn about the fate of the family at the centre of the story. In each of the rooms, the children have the opportunity to learn about the realities that exist outside the walls of the flat, helped by special multimedia presentations displayed on monitors installed in the windows. Additionally, a significant aspect of the story delves into the plight of the Jewish community, using the fate of the Jankowski family’s pre-war Jewish neighbours as an example.

Through the changing elements in an apartment of the Jankowski family during World War II, young visitors can observe the progressively worsening living conditions experienced year after year. The exhibition displays the challenges faced in obtaining provisions, the hardships imposed by the occupiers, and the various strategies employed to overcome these difficulties.

The exhibition shows what everyday life was like for children in Poland during the war, but also documents the complexity of childhood historical experiences. It helps young visitors identify with the lives and experiences of the

exhibition’s protagonists, making it easier to learn and understand history.

3.5 Museum activities

People experience things in museums through the mediation of one kind or another. By far, the most common for most museum visitors is the mediation of gallery display.⁴⁷

In the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, Dresden, Germany “*all of our educational offers place the exhibits in the centre of attention. The main form of mediation is the guided tour. There are non-personal as well as personal mediation forms of education in the museum. Non-personal mediation is going through the museum educational stations in the exhibition*”.⁴⁸

The areas of chronological museum exhibition, namely, “1300–1914”, “1914–1945” and “1945–present” include 25 educational stations, which go into detail about certain aspects of the exhibition. The stations are situated behind doors next to the showcases. Each one is labelled with a pictograph. The educational stations are designed and arranged in such a way that they make the visitors want to interact. The information available is mainly aimed at visitors who wish to explore the exhibition with children since here they are allowed and even encouraged to touch the items and to become active themselves. Especially notable is a station in the “1914–1945” chronological exhibition that focuses on the smell of war and death in the cabinet trench warfare. It serves as a reminder that war impacts all the

senses. People hear, taste, smell, see, and feel the violence. Smells in people’s memories are associated not only with pleasant experiences but also with traumatic ones.

Educating youth is a key focus of the Second World War Museum in Gdansk.⁴⁹ The main visitor groups include high school and university students, as well as families with children. The museum, developed by the Museum Department of Science and Education, offers lessons for children and young people, themed curatorial tours, educator-led discussions, competitions, film screenings, educational events, historical and landscape walks around the Westerplatte Peninsula, as well as online lessons and digital educational projects. Museum educational offerings are accessible on computers, smartphones, tablets, and VR goggles. Through these tools, the museum aims to engage young people with a valuable and captivating historical message, fostering their interest in the story of World War II.

The general idea behind the exhibition at the Second World War Museum in Gdansk is to encourage children to analyse the issues presented, developing their perceptiveness and independent thinking. The competence-oriented museum education programs are worth emphasizing. Each program or activity lists the main skills students should acquire with reference to the core curriculum requirements. For instance, through involvement in museum activities students from primary school may: get to know selected issues concerning education in the inter-war period; get to know the most important aspects of children’s lives during and just after the war and occupation; get to know exhibits

⁴⁶ GURFINKIEL, Lukasz, 2023. Interviewed by the author. Gdansk, 07. 03. 2023.

⁴⁷ GASKELL, Ivan. The life of things. In HENNING, Michelle (ed.). *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*. Volume 3: Museum Media. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 167–190.

⁴⁸ SCHNEE, Ines, 2023. Interviewed by the author. Dresden, 23. 03. 2023.

⁴⁹ ZAMBRZYCKI, Marek, 2023. Interviewed by the author. Gdansk, 08. 03. 2023.

such as sources of information; share their observations and emotions; learn to formulate statements; learn the rules of behaviour in a museum.⁵⁰

In addition to the main exhibition, the spatial organization and design provide several places for visitors to expand their knowledge about World War II, including a separate room for educational activities and small cinema rooms located throughout the exhibition.

Recognizing the educational value of peace education, the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo regularly organizes educational activities for students of all ages, raising awareness about the importance of peace among the younger generation. These activities and materials focus on peacebuilding, human rights, and encourage youth to recognize their individual responsibility in the peace-building process. Workshops and materials emphasize children's rights, empathy building, solidarity, and mutual understanding. During these workshops, children and young people are engaged with museum educators, local artists, actors, IT or experts from various fields and are encouraged to explore different skills, experiences and ways to interact with others in a team.

In anticipation of the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, a research project titled "Children and Genocide" was conducted by the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo in collaboration with the Humans

of Amsterdam platform and the Srebrenica Memorial Centre.⁵¹

The objective of this initiative was to document the Srebrenica Genocide from the perspective of children. The campaign focused on fourteen individuals whose childhoods were deeply affected by the genocide, presenting their portraits, personal belongings, and narratives. The project involved extensive efforts, resulting in the collection of over 70 hours of video testimonies and the documentation of more than 100 personal stories. As part of the project, a global online campaign and an exhibition were organized in July 2020. The campaign findings were shared across various social media platforms, and two pop-up exhibitions took place in Sarajevo and Stockholm, reaching an extensive global audience of over 11 million people.⁵²

4. Conclusions

The article examines war-affected childhood representation in museum exhibitions and learning environments. By presenting the history of the war in a way that is engaging, informative, and accessible to younger audiences, museums support fostering a sense of continuity and connection between generations.

By encouraging young visitors to critically engage with the exhibition narrative, museums prioritize the principle of polyphony, embracing a multi-perspectival approach to its content.⁵³ This approach empowers

visitors to actively contribute to the museum experience and promotes inclusiveness and diversity in the museum narrative.

The museums endeavour to communicate messages to young visitors by means of their exhibits and educational activities, acknowledging that the memory of war can have an influence on their present and future. Introducing new museology trends into museum practice offers the opportunity for a more diverse and multifaceted narrative of the war, encompassing various historical, social, and cultural aspects. It also recognizes museums' assets to serve as effective cultural media for a peaceful future, fostering democratic social transformation. By doing so, museums can effectively inspire and engage the younger generation, transforming them into active participants in the museum's educational programmes and activities.

Museums seek to portray the realities of war and its impact on the young generation. Childhood is constantly presented in the museum exhibition in images and artefacts. However, exhibitions not only display war toys and games but also engage in discussions about their impact on children and society. The analysed museums have developed interactive exhibits that allow visitors to engage with the history of the war in a more immersive and experiential way. This includes not only displays of historical artefacts but also personal stories, oral history sources, reconstructions and simulations of the past.

The assets of museum education to promote social dialogue in the community addressing controversial issues is crucial, especially in conflict and post-conflict societies.

⁵⁰ Muzeum II Wojny Światowej: Raport z działalności Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku za rok 2017. In *Muzeum II Wojny Światowej* [online]. 2017 [accessed 2023-10-24]. Available from [www: <https://muzeum1939.pl/sites/default/files/pdf/5a2e7a46fe341fb0812be527c8719deb8485.pdf>](https://muzeum1939.pl/sites/default/files/pdf/5a2e7a46fe341fb0812be527c8719deb8485.pdf).

⁵¹ Oleksandra Matviichuk: BiH-Ukraine Cooperation is Key. In *War Childhood Museum* [online]. 24 February 2023 [accessed 2023-10-24]. Available from [www: <https://warchildhood.org/2023/02/24/oleksandra-matviichuk-bih-ukraine-cooperation-is-key/>](https://warchildhood.org/2023/02/24/oleksandra-matviichuk-bih-ukraine-cooperation-is-key/).

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ SANDELL, Richard. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017; BERGEVIN, Jennifer. *Narratives of Transformation: Stories of impact from activist*

museums. In JANES, Robert and Richard SANDELL (eds.). *Museum Activism*. Oxford: Routledge, 2019, pp. 348–358.

By presenting the complexity of childhood affected by war in both exhibition and learning activities museums contribute to fostering critical historical thinking of youth and a better understanding of the past and present. Furthermore, the museums establish a connection to the universal message of the resilience exhibited by ordinary people during times of conflict, which is increasingly relevant in today's turbulent global society. In such ways, museums support a peaceful sustainable future. The results of the research contribute both to the scientific discourse and museum initiatives in war-affected countries like Ukraine.

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POLINA VERBYTSKA

Department of History, Museology and Cultural Heritage, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Lviv Polytechnic National University, Lviv, Ukraine

Polina.V.Verbytska@lpnu.ua

Polina Verbytska works at the Department of History, Museology and Cultural Heritage at Lviv Polytechnic National University. Her research area are cultural memory, museology and didactic, with emphasis on Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies. In 2022–2023 she had a scholarship in Collegium Carolinum, Munich, Germany, and researches the theme “Cultural

Heritage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: New Frameworks for Narrating and Displaying”. Her last publications devoted to the museology topics: a chapter in collective monograph *In the Labyrinths of Narratives: the experience of museums in Lithuania and Ukraine, Between amnesia and the ‘war of memories’: politics of memory in the museum narratives of Ukraine, Decolonization of museum narratives of Donbas, War in European Museum Narratives and Cultural Memory*.

Polina Verbytska působí na Katedře historie, muzeologie a kulturního dědictví na Lvovské polytechnické národní univerzitě. Předmětem

jejího výzkumu je kulturní paměť, muzeologie a didaktika s důrazem na kulturní dědictví a muzea. V letech 2022–2023 absolvovala studijní pobyt na Collegium Carolinum v německém Mnichově a věnuje se výzkumu na téma „Kulturní dědictví v konfliktních a post-konfliktních společnostech: nové rámce pro vyprávění a zobrazování“. Mezi její poslední publikace věnované tématům z oblasti muzeologie patří: kapitola v kolektivní monografii *V labyrintu narativů: zkušenost muzeí v Litvě a na Ukrajině, Mezi amnézií a „válkou vzpomínek“: politika paměti v muzejních narativech o Ukrajině, Dekolonizace muzejních narativů o Donbasu, Válka v evropských muzejních narativech a kulturní paměti*.



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