



The Aesthetics of Disarrangement, Neglect and Solidarity: Independent Commemoration at the Mauthausen Memorial

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Imagine a small group of people – two men, an elderly woman and a child – entering a museum or a memorial site with a few heavy bags. They pay entrance fees and walk straight to one of the walls of the museum. They put the bags on the floor in front of the wall and take out work tools and construction materials: a hammer, manual drill, nails or screws, plaster, trowel, water bottle. Then they take out a big stone plate inscribed with text. Attached to it is a small black-and-white portrait of a young man, printed on an oval piece of porcelain. They talk quietly. The old lady helps with the heavy plate, carefully, worried. The two men drill a few holes in the wall. Some visitors stop to look at them, curious, others continue undisturbed. When the holes are ready the men attach the plate to the wall, add plaster, tighten the screws. The old lady holds the child's hand firmly, observing the men work. A guided group approaches; the guide pauses briefly, looking at the men installing the plate. He guides his group to pass carefully around the working men and continues the tour elsewhere. When the work is done the two men embrace the old lady. She places a red rose on the plate's frame and passes her hand over the small porcelain photo. They ask a random visitor to take their photo next to the plate and then leave.

In any other museum, a happening like this is either impossible, part of an authorised art performance or it is stopped immediately through museum staff or police intervention. Legal consequences are sure to follow. At the Mauthausen Memorial however, there is nothing unusual or criminal about visitors independently installing plaques, photographs, other objects or inscriptions directly on the memorial's walls.¹

Dedicated as a memorial in 1947, the former Nazi concentration camp is not only one of the first memorials of its kind,² it is also a pioneer and quite a unique practitioner³ of an ever

1. However, there have been cases of neo-Nazi slogans painted on the memorial's outer wall in recent years, which the Mauthausen Memorial erased and brought to police attention.

2. For a general overview of the history of the Mauthausen Memorial, see Bertrand Perz: *Die KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen. 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (Innsbruck 2006).

3. It seems that this practice also arose at other memorial museums and other sites of former subcamps of the Mauthausen concentration camp. With regard to the Lern- und Gedenkort Schloss Hartheim, at which this practice has similar roots and began around the same time, Hartmut Reese and Brigitte Kepplinger write that especially French and Italian visitors, reacting to the lack of official engagement with the site, began to affix notes to the doors of the former gas chamber – cf. Hartmut Reese/Brigitte Kepplinger: *Das Gedenken in Hartheim*. In: Brigitte Kepplinger/Gerhart Marckgott/Hartmut Reese (ed.): *Tötungsanstalt Hartheim. Oberösterreich in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, vol. 3 (Linz 2013), pp. 523–547, here p. 526.

growing and transforming, unattended, unregulated visitor-made commemorative exhibition. This phenomenon at the Mauthausen Memorial started more than sixty-five years ago, probably around 1949. Since then, visitors have left more than 2,000 commemorative plaques, photographs and other objects in the Mauthausen Memorial. Hundreds more were installed in the memorials at some of Mauthausen's former sub-camps like Gusen, Melk and Ebensee. Strangely enough, although being quite unique in the landscape of memorials to the crimes of National Socialism, or any kind of museum in general, this phenomenon has attracted significant research from neither a historical, nor a sociological, nor a museological point of view. The lack of research makes it difficult to evaluate its origins and the circumstances that allowed this form of commemoration to flourish in Mauthausen. This text offers a few assumptions and a preliminary description of the phenomenon. More in-depth, dedicated research is desired.



In 2009 I visited Mauthausen for the first time. I received a short, generic tour by a young volunteer, a 'Zivildienstler'. Towards the end of the tour we entered the museum building, the former 'Reviergebäude'. As we approached the crematorium my attention was immediately drawn to what I saw inside. I entered the room and looked at the walls. They were covered from floor to ceiling with plaques of different sizes and styles, decorated with symbols and inscriptions in different languages. Attached to the plaques, etched on them and installed between them were dozens of photographs, black & white portraits, mostly of young men.⁴ Other commemorative

4. I refer to the absence of photographs of women at the end of this text.

souvenirs were left next to, and even inside, the crematorium furnaces that occupied most of the small room: plastic flowers, candles, ribbons with names written in gold, national and associations' flags, decorated stones, poems printed on paper.



Opposite the crematorium furnaces, a large wooden frame with two locked glass doors was installed on the wall. Inside it, organised in rows but not entirely straight, around a hundred small black and white photographic portraits were attached with pins to the back of the frame. Small pieces of paper with a few lines of text were attached to each photo with another pin. The papers had turned yellow, some of the photos' edges had curled up with old age.

For a second I thought it might have been an installation by Christian Boltanski⁵ but what I saw there wasn't as 'clean' and tidy; it looked too diversified and disarranged. It was the 'real thing' and it was fascinating. The abundance of portraits and plaques, their irregular assembly, the shine of the polished stone plates and golden frames, the vivid colours of the ribbons, flags and plastic flowers juxtaposed with the black and white sombre photographs, and all of this together surrounding the crematorium furnaces, was overwhelming.

These aesthetics of eclectic, collaborative anarchistic design interfered with and intervened in the awkward crematorium block in the middle of the room, depriving it of its unchallenged

5. French artist, known for his installations using objects such as old photographs, small lights and clothes that trigger associations of shrines or altars and the memory of the past, death, and the Holocaust.

dominance. This form of ritualised sacralisation added another meaning to the furnace. It was no longer about the ones who are commemorated; it was also about those who were left to commemorate. In a way, the presence of life – its continuation and persistence – prevailed over the presence of death – of annihilation and disappearance.



There are other parts of the memorial with zones dedicated to independent commemorative plaques (and other ritual objects) for individuals or groups. Parts of the French and Italian monuments on the grounds of the former SS barracks are covered with plaques and photo-ceramics.⁶ Many walls in the former washrooms and the former ‘Bunker’ area are covered with graffiti left on the walls by visitors.⁷ Some other walls adjacent to the crematorium are slowly filling with plaques as well.

6. However, when individual plaques and commemorative objects are placed on – or are in the context of – a national monument, then these national and political narratives might alter the meaning of ‘independent’ commemoration. The scope of this text is too limited to define the different shades of individual commemoration in the different contexts at the Mauthausen Memorial.

7. See Nina Aichberger. BesucherInnen-Graffiti und Gedenkorte, Eine Annäherung an die Inschriften der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen. In: Bundesministerium für Inneres/Andreas Kranebitter (ed.): KZ-Gedenkstätten und die neuen Gesichter des Rechtsextremismus. Jahrbuch 2014 der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen | Mauthausen Memorial. Forschung – Dokumentation – Information (Vienna 2015), pp. 41–56.

Most of these plaques are produced by the funerary industry all over Europe (but also the USA, Israel and other places) and display a wide repertoire of funerary cultures in these countries and their evolution over the last sixty-five years.



This phenomenon at the Mauthausen Memorial could be described as an ongoing, permanent (yet ever changing) commemorative exhibition, curated/created by the public in an independent (yet participatory) way.

Some aspects of it might resemble the appearance of spontaneous shrines⁸ but its context, duration, and the relations between the participants and the host institution make it unique. To understand why and how this phenomenon established itself at the Mauthausen Memorial it is crucial to look at particular aspects of the Mauthausen concentration camp and the first few years after its liberation:

- Politicised actors and international solidarity:

The prisoners of Mauthausen were extremely politicised, multi-ethnic and international. Many of the prisoners were politically persecuted as communists and socialists; many of them

8. See Jack Santino (ed.): *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (New York 2006).

were involved in resistance to National Socialism and fascism in their respective countries. Many fought in the civil wars in Spain and Italy, were active in the resistance and as partisans in France, Yugoslavia, the Soviet territories and in other countries. They tried to organise secretly as prisoners in Mauthausen and to form an international committee even before the liberation. The idea of international solidarity was a strong element in the collective perception of the survivors of Mauthausen.

- Between neglect and commitment:

The former camp was handed over by the Soviet Army to the state of Austria in 1947 to be turned into a memorial. However, the state of Austria and the general public didn't show a particular interest in the memorial in the first few decades after the end of the war.⁹ The officials of the Ministry of the Interior, which has been responsible for the memorial since 1948, were based in Vienna, far removed from the memorial, physically and mentally. Instead, it was the survivors who were very engaged and committed to the goal of commemorating their murdered comrades and their own sufferings, who felt responsible for the development of the memorial. Some of them worked on the premises, maintaining the memorial.¹⁰

- Commemoration vacuum:

Due to the lack of engagement on the part of the state, no official, clear and comprehensive plan for the memorial was prepared by the state. The state's plan of destroying the camp and erecting an illuminated cross instead, for example, was averted by the Soviets at an early stage.¹¹

- Absence of graves:

Due to the nature of extermination at Mauthausen, the victims did not have individual graves or any graves at all. Many of those who did get buried were buried in mass graves outside the memorial's grounds. Relatives and friends of the victims did not have a specific place to visit in order to mourn their loved ones and practice their rituals.

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As a result of this set of circumstances, relatives and friends of the victims, and survivors who came back to visit the memorial did not face official guidelines and restrictions on the commemoration of their loved ones. The survivors who were taking care of the memorial – members of the International Mauthausen Committee (CIM) – probably sympathised with them and were ready to support and assist. Their pragmatic approach and ideal of international solidarity¹² allowed the ritualised practices of other relatives and survivors from all over Europe to happen from a place of tolerance and fellowship. A line from the Mauthausen Oath written by the CIM and read out on the roll call area

9. See the article by Heidemarie Uhl in this volume.

10. For a detailed discussion of the Ministry's policies and its connection to survivors and survivors' organisations see Perz: Die KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, pp. 77–168.

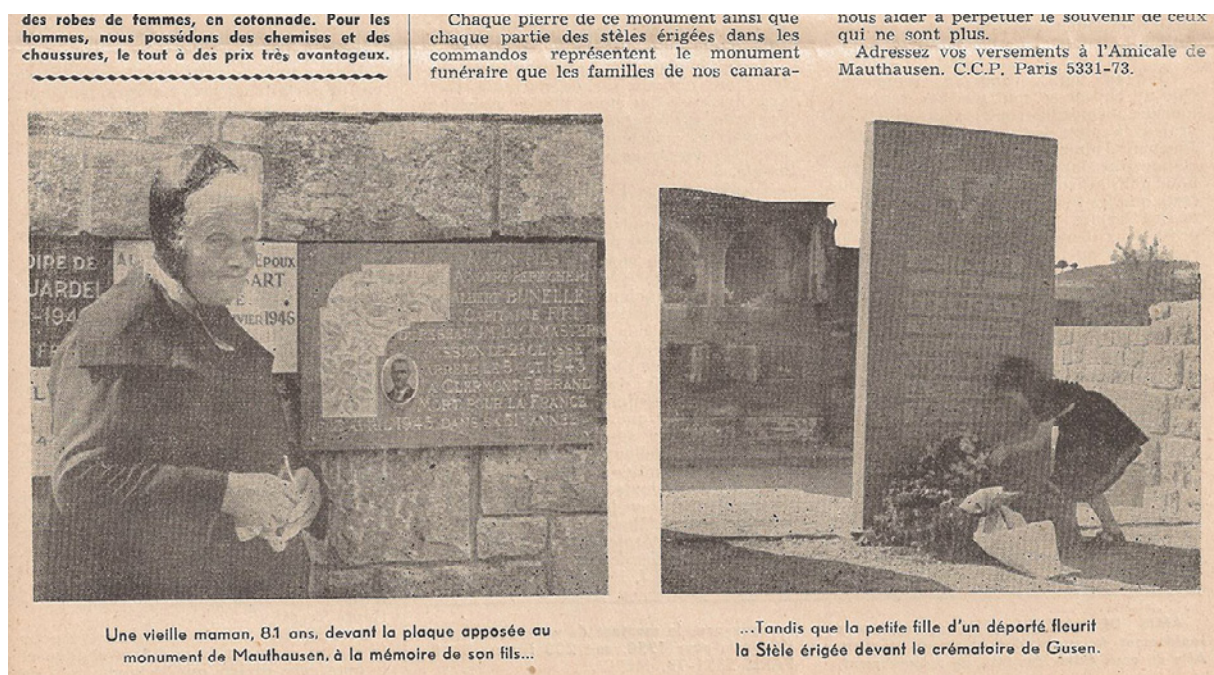
11. See Perz: Die KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, p. 102; Perz: Ein Blick auf 60 Jahre Gedenkstätte Mauthausen. In: Bundesministerium für Inneres (ed.): mauthausen memorial neu gestalten. Conference report on the 1st Dialogforum Mauthausen (Vienna 2009), pp. 25–32, here p. 26.

12. But at the same time, this 'solidarity' was not always inclusive. Some groups of victims (homosexuals, so-called 'antisocials', 'criminals', etc.) were in some ways excluded or misrepresented in commemoration.

(Appellplatz) on 16 May 1945 already predicts the commemoration culture in Mauthausen: ‘...we wish to conserve the international solidarity of the camp in our memories...’¹³

The first documentation in the Mauthausen archive of an independently mounted plaque is dated 1954, commemorating citizens of Jesenice in Slovenia who died in Mauthausen.¹⁴ However, the practice must have started several years earlier:

The French monument, built in March 1949, was the first monument in Mauthausen to commemorate a national group.¹⁵ It was built by the association of French survivors – Amicale de Mauthausen – and probably played a key role in the development of independent commemoration practices in Mauthausen. It is designed as a 20-metre long wall covered with stones and a 10-metre high square post with a metal heart at the top. The right side of the wall is curved inside and creates half a circle, reminiscent of an apse. On it, over two hundred individual plaques of different sizes and shapes are mounted. It seems as if this apse was made especially by the designer of the monument for the mounting of plaques.¹⁶ In the 16th issue of the Bulletin de l’Amicale de Mauthausen, published in July 1950, below a description of a commemoration trip (Pèlerinages) to Mauthausen in May 1950 there is a photograph of an old lady standing in front of a few commemorative plaques mounted on a stone wall. The caption reads: ‘An old mother, 81 years old, in front of a plaque affixed to the monument in Mauthausen, in memory of her son...’¹⁷



13. See Hans Maršálek: Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen. Dokumentation (Vienna 2006), p. 410f.; see also the article by Guy Dockendorf and Andreas Baumgartner in this volume.

14. Archive of the Mauthausen Memorial (AMM), database documenting memorial and commemoration signs.

15. See Hildegard Schmid/Nikolaj Dobrowolskij: Kunst, die einem Kollektiv entspricht... Der internationale Denkmahlain in der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen (Vienna 2007).

16. E-Mail from Daniel Simon to Jerome Segal, 1.12.2015.

17. Bulletin de l’Amicale de Mauthausen, vol. 6 (July 1950) No. 16, p. 2.

The Italian monument, built in 1953, followed the same tradition. Built as a long stone-covered wall, its reverse is covered with more than 300 plaques and photoceramics for individuals and groups.



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The independently installed plaques, photographs and other objects in Mauthausen are impressive, expressive, sad and beautiful. They can touch and move visitors in a way that the official, national monuments and plaques cannot. They are smaller and modest, intimate, direct and painfully honest. It's hard to find a text on any of the national monuments that can convey something about the personal experience of loss as poignant as this text on one of the plaques on the crematorium wall:

“Fred, my only Brother, I painfully miss you every day!

The Raw Power of the NAZI Cowards and the Inaction of
Politicians, Religious Leaders and the Informed
SILENT MAJORITY of all Civilized Countries in the World took
you away from me and murdered you brutally here in the
serene landscape of Mauthausen. I am asking GOD,
THE POWER OF THE UNIVERSE, to open me and Human Kind
to lessons of Love, Peace and Tolerance, and to make us
able to Live with our personal Past and to create
Hope for the Future of Humanity.”¹⁸

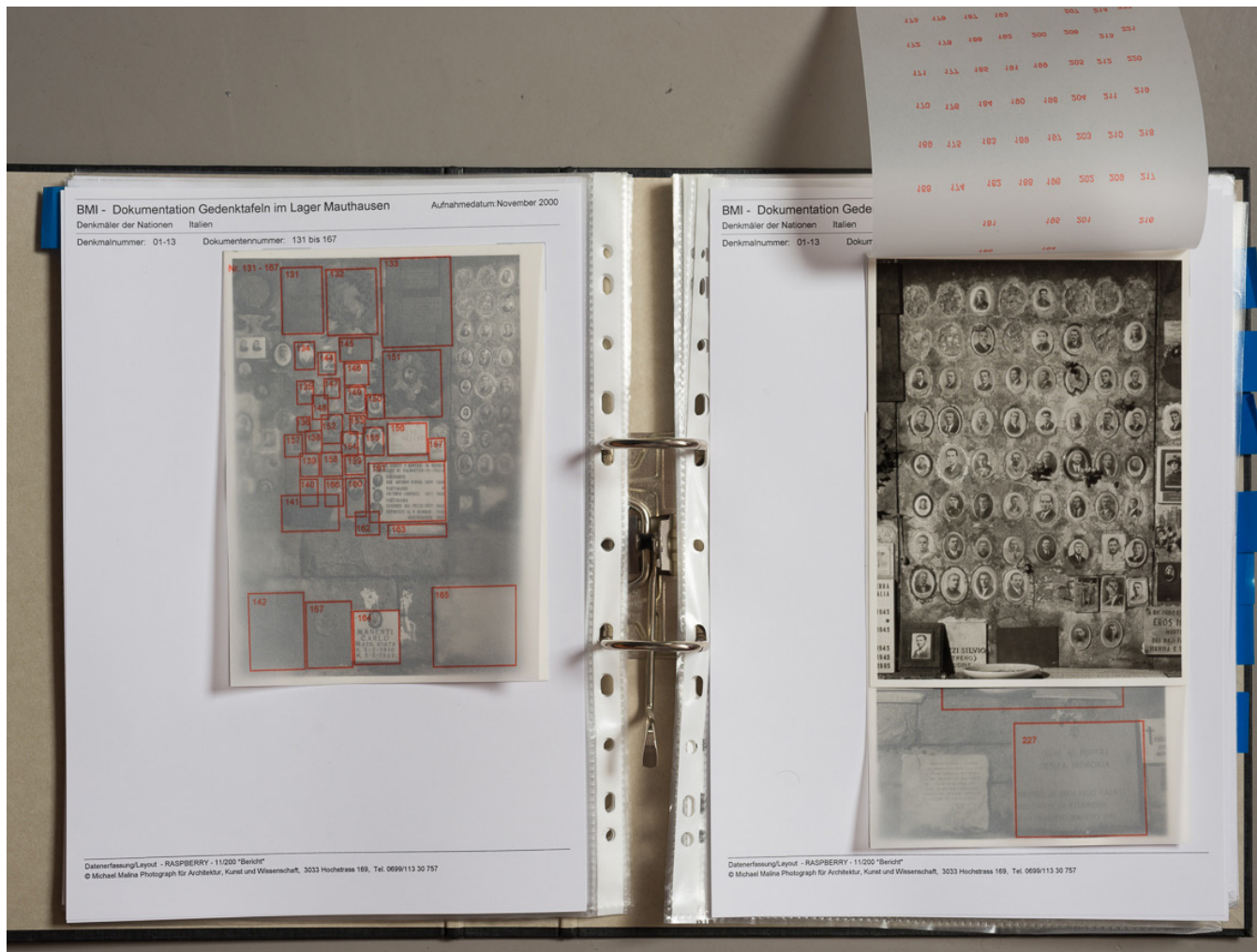
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However, the independent commemoration in Mauthausen poses difficult challenges as well: What is the status of these objects? How should they be treated? Should they be archived? How to write about and refer to these objects? Should they be cleaned? Should they be conserved? What to do with offensive, disrespectful or erroneous inscriptions or with vandalism? What was meant to stay permanently and what is regarded as temporary? What should this phenomenon be called?

There is a fair amount of wear and tear of the objects, especially to those that were installed outdoors. The materials and techniques used to install them are not consistent and some objects fall and break. Images on some of the photoceramics left outdoors fade. Some of the staff and visitors are offended or saddened by the appearance of the damaged commemorative objects. It is difficult for the staff to determine – and there are no clear guidelines on – which objects are meant to stay and which can be removed: stones with inscriptions, paper works, offensive graffiti, used or unused candles, prints not attached to the wall, beads, things left on the floor... The same question poses great challenges from archival and conservational points of view.

18 Plaque for Alfred Joseph Kreisberg, born in Frankfurt Am Main on 27 July 1920, murdered in Mauthausen in September 1941. Dedicated by Isbert Kreisberg, Los Angeles, California, 2000.

In 2000 the memorial took up a monumental challenge and documented thousands of the independently installed plaques, photographs and other commemorative objects in Mauthausen, Gusen, Melk, and Ebensee.¹⁹ The objects were photographed and numbered, inscriptions were transcribed and translated into German, and the measurements, condition, material and other information were entered into datasheets. This difficult and impressive work demonstrates the respect and sincere commitment of the memorial to the independent commemoration phenomenon. However, in the fifteen years since the completion of this survey, many new objects have been added, others have gone or were removed, but the archive has not been updated.



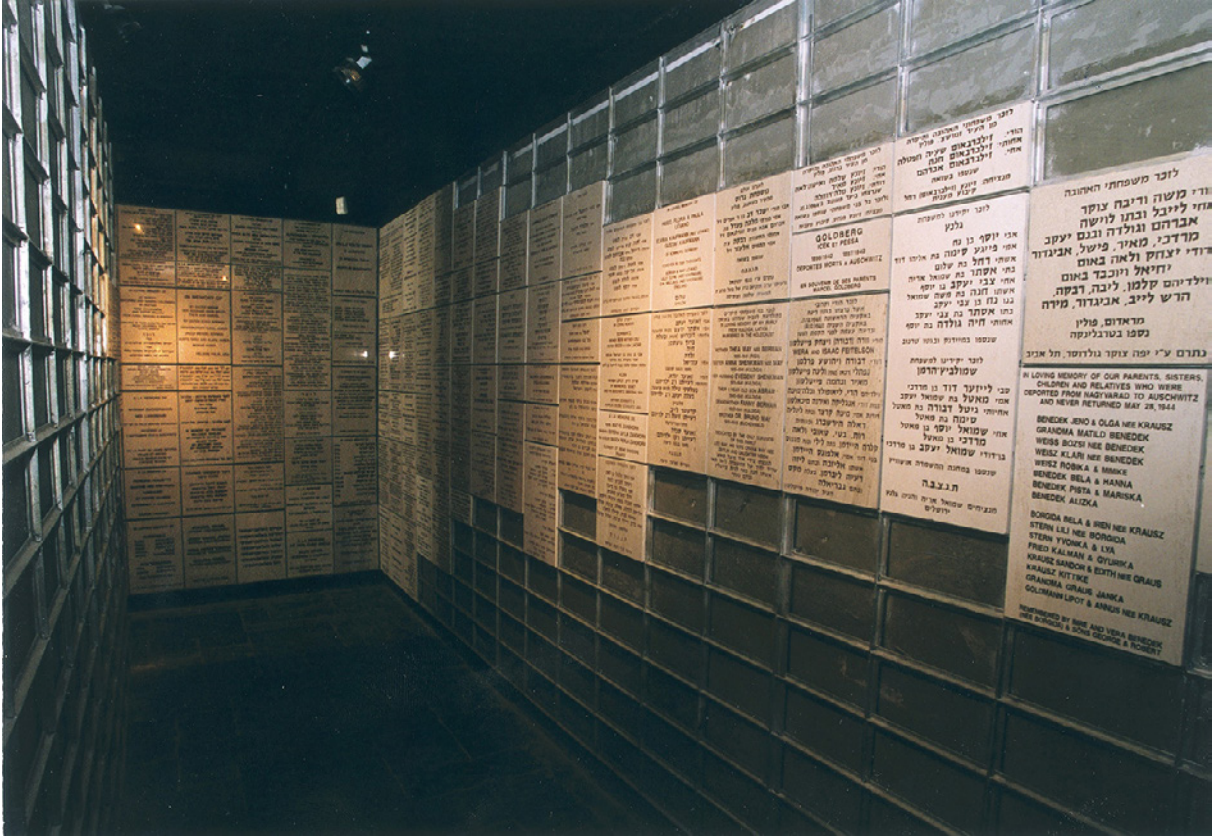
In 2007, to meet some of these challenges, the memorial introduced new guidelines for visitors who wish to install commemorative plaques. A standardised application has to be sent to the administrative unit responsible for running the memorial and a few formal conditions have to be met.²⁰ The new guidelines mainly seem to concern the issues of limited space at the

19 The project was carried out by photographer Michael Malina (Firma Rasperry) who worked over several intensive months measuring, estimating and photographing each object. This archive comprises 20 folders, stored at the Archive of the Mauthausen Memorial (signatures AMM T/01 to T/04).

20 “Richtlinien zur Anbringung von Gedenktafeln in der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen sowie ehemaligen Nebenlagern”, 17.3.2007.

memorial and being able to manage the installation, archiving and documenting of the plaques better. The freedom of the design of the plaques was not compromised.

To understand the implications of these decisions that seem to allow the continuation of the independent commemoration phenomenon in Mauthausen, it is interesting to look at the 'Memorial Cave' at the Yad Vashem memorial in Israel. In 1981, participants of an international conference of Holocaust survivors convened in Israel. Independently they had produced small stone plaques commemorating their relatives who died in the Holocaust and asked Yad Vashem to keep the plaques. The plaques were installed in a small cave in the grounds of the memorial complex. However, the memorial authorities were concerned by the fact that the plaques were not standardised and decided to institutionalise and regulate the practice. A new cave was dedicated, next to the cave with the original plaques from 1981. Straight walls were prepared and a metal grid was placed on the walls. Since then, the memorial offers the possibility to commemorate individual victims of the Holocaust on these walls. The plaques offered come in a standardised design and a few sizes. Yad Vashem prepares and installs the plaques for the relatives of the victims who are interested in the commemoration. The families pay for the preparation and installation of the plaques; the prices increase according to the size of the plaques.²¹



Everything is set and standardised, the material, font, and installation. Only text can be placed on the stones. The families compose the text, which is limited by the plaque size.

21 See http://www.yadvashem.ca/pages/monument_cave/index.html (accessed on 26.12.2015)

In both memorials, Mauthausen and Yad Vashem, the plaques are referred to by the same name: individual commemorative plaques. However, the differences in the practices, attitudes and aesthetics in both cases reveal the different circumstances, contexts, narratives and cultures of commemoration between the two places.

In 1994, a Holocaust survivor filed a lawsuit against the Yad Vashem memorial, claiming that the Memorial Cave establishes inequality.²² He claimed that families who cannot pay or do not wish to pay are discriminated there.²³

However, the comparative exercise reveals a little more. While commemoration at the Yad Vashem cave resembles the aesthetics of military cemeteries more than anything else, and commemoration in Mauthausen seems very participatory and based on civilian notions, the opposite is revealed when looking at the commemoration of female victims. At least 4,000 women were prisoners at Mauthausen, more than 500 of them were killed there,²⁴ but there are almost no independent plaques that commemorate them. Of the hundreds or thousands of photographs of victims left at the memorial, it's very hard to find those for the female victims. Perhaps the French influence on commemoration culture in Mauthausen was also at play here and the 'fraternité' aspect of solidarity and heroism was the only one possible. In this model, women took an active part in commemorating the victims, but much less so were they commemorated as victims themselves.²⁵

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At the Mauthausen Memorial, a concoction of elements – an uninterested society of perpetrators; the geographical and mental remoteness from the memorial of policy-makers; committed and politicised survivors with a pragmatic approach and an idealistic principle of international solidarity; the lack of individual graves for the victims; and a pinch of good old Austrian sloppiness – contributed to the establishment of a unique phenomenon of independent commemoration.

It remains to be seen how this phenomenon, which has preceded other, supposedly (and only superficially) similar ones, will be approached at the Mauthausen Memorial in the future.



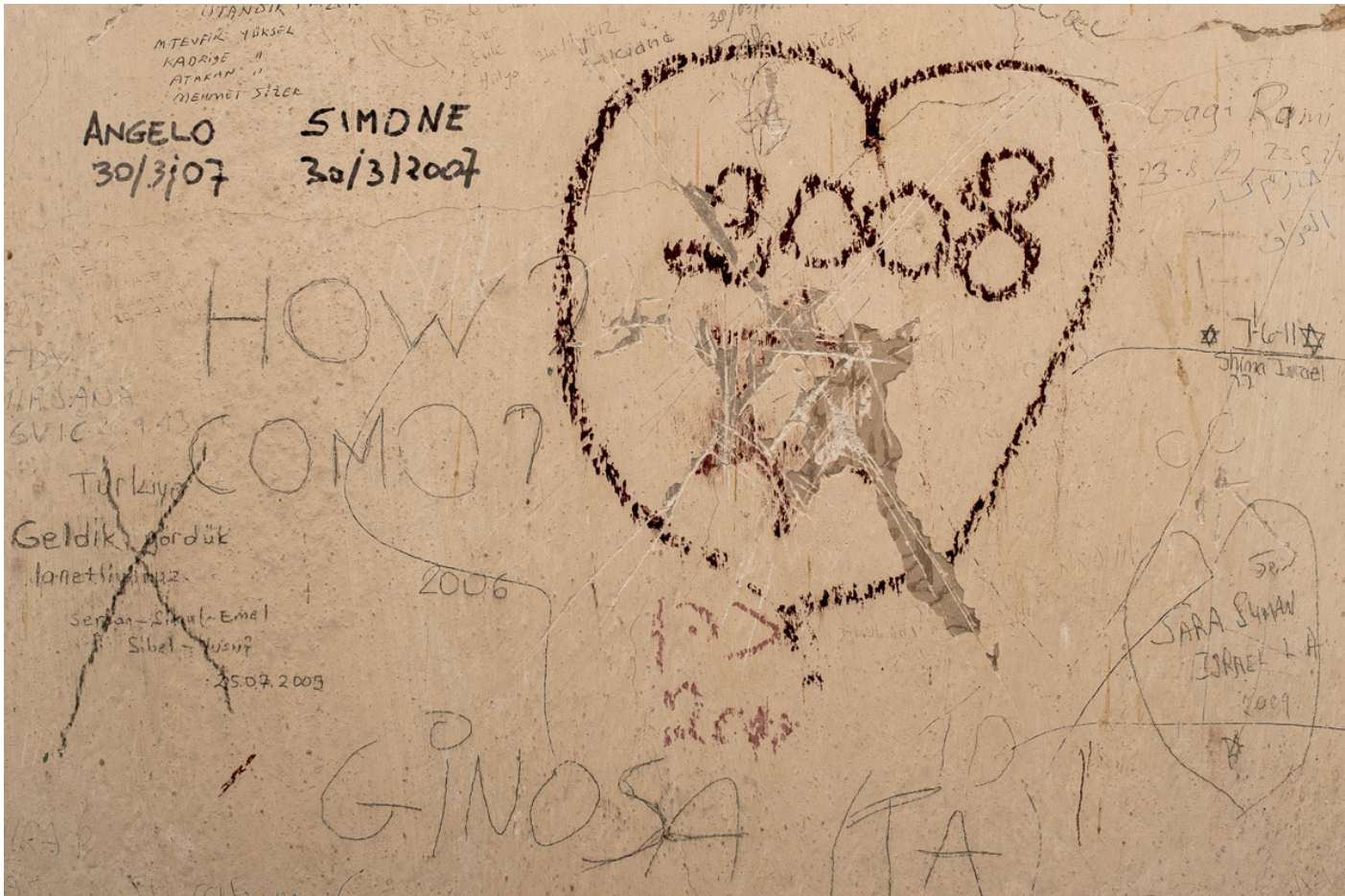
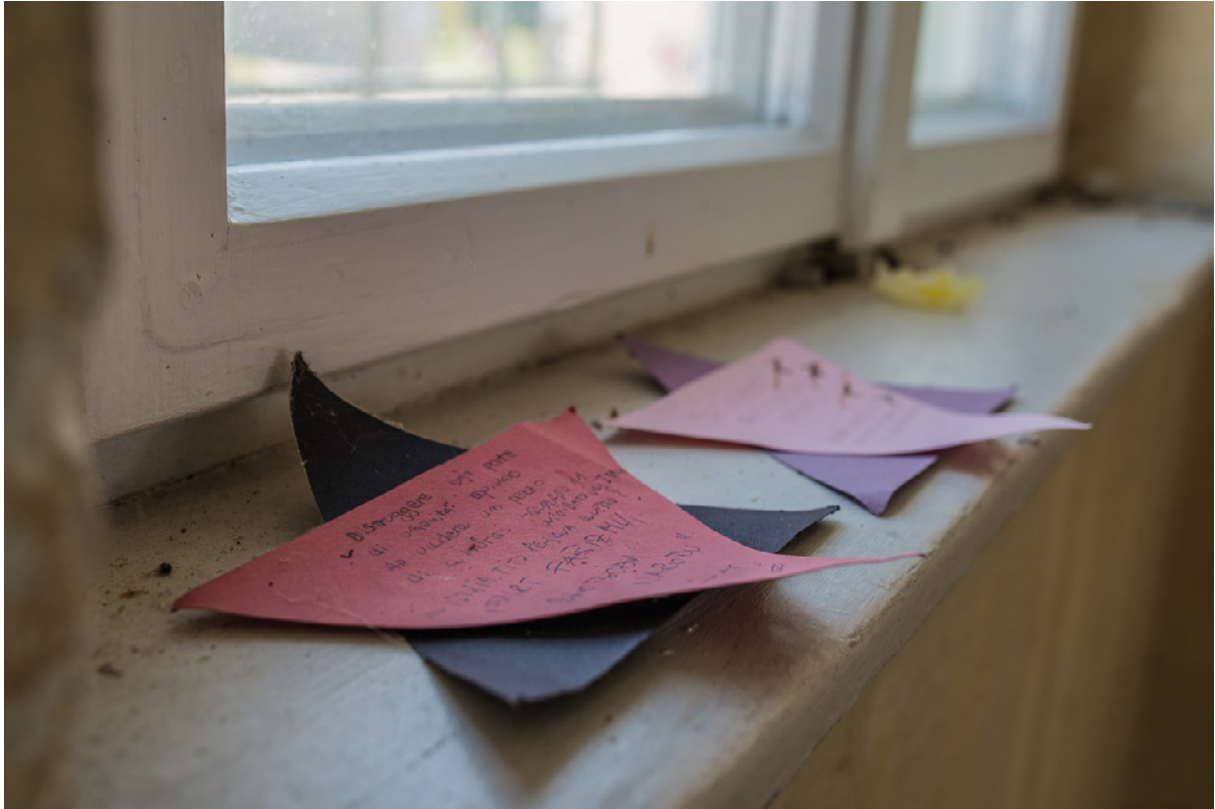
22 Uri Huppert vs Yad Vashem, at the High Court of Justice, 5394/92.

23 Mr. Huppert lost the case but the court advised Yad Vashem to consider flexibility in the cases of families with limited financial means.

24 Cf. Andreas Baumgartner: Die vergessenen Frauen von Mauthausen. Die weiblichen Häftlinge des KZ Mauthausen und ihre Geschichte (Vienna 1997); also the article by Florian Freund and Andreas Kranebitter in this volume.

25 Shame and self-censorship on the part of female survivors probably played a significant role in the misrepresentation of female victims in independent commemoration at the memorial.





NEI LAGER NAZISTI











Photos in this essay:

The former crematorium, Mauthausen Memorial:

Pages 3, 4, 5, 6, 14

The former crematorium, Gusen Memorial:

Pages 1, 16 (bottom), 17 (top), 19 (bottom), 20 (top)

The Italian Memorial at the 'memorial park', Mauthausen Memorial:

Pages 9, 16 (top), 17 (bottom), 18, 19 (top)

The former 'Bunker' area (Lagergefängnis):

Page 15

Archive of the Mauthausen Memorial:

Pages 11, 20 (bottom)

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Except of: page 8 © l'Amicale de Mauthausen; page 12 © Yad Vashem (Memory Cave)

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