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“Papa, should I tell you what I think of this exhibition, I would cry.” An Analysis of Visitor Impression Books at the Bosnian Historical Museum in Sarajevo

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“Papa, should I tell you what I think of this exhibition, I would cry.”

An Analysis of Visitor Impression Books at the Bosnian Historical Museum in Sarajevo

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ABSTRACT

Visitor impression books are often overlooked objects in museums. However, a study of these books can provide insight into a whole range of topics regarding museum and/or memory studies, especially in consideration of the larger socio-political climate. By nature, the books are both intensely personal and inherently collective – as they constitute an assembly of personal emotions and evaluations of the exhibit. This allows us to examine the books on a microscopic, individual level *and* in a global context.

My research involved an examination of the visitor impression books at the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and focused on the museum's Besieged Sarajevo exhibit. I supplemented my analysis of these books with observation of and conversations with visitors to the museum, as well as conversations with a number of people living in the city (from a variety of backgrounds), and two 'war tours.' These outside interactions were crucial in helping to contextualize both prior literature and the comments in the museum book.

I found that that visitor books, indeed, can be a useful analytical tool in museum studies, and that the visitor impression books at the Bosnian Historical Museum allowed for three main conclusions: 1) the exhibit serves the dual role of providing both a memorial and a museum, 2) this dual role is representative of contemporary Sarajevo politics of memory, and 3) museum visitors, for the most part, were able to benefit from the double identity of the museum.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper comes from a 2012 entry buried in one of the visitor impression books (*knjige utisaka*) at the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. The original comment is written in Italian, presumably by the commenter's father, and reads "*Pape, se ti dico quello che penso di queste mostre, vi vorrei che piangere.*" The entry is undated, but the father has written his daughter's name and age (five years), in addition to the girl's own signature and drawing. An anonymous commenter has added an English translation, presumably later on (as the handwriting and pen pressure is markedly different from the father's): "Daddy, should I tell you what I think of this exhibition, I would cry."

This comment is representative of the *knjige utisaka* in general. Like almost all other comments in the book, it references the "Besieged Sarajevo" exhibit, but is actually part of an impression book for the neighboring exhibit, "Bosnia and Herzegovina through the Centuries." It is in Italian, one of the more common visitor languages, marking the father and daughter as foreign tourists. It deals with the visitor's own emotional response to the exhibit, but also includes acknowledgment of her role as a museum patron (the reference to the exhibit itself). There is an accompanying drawing, which fits into the category of "graffiti" (including pictures, symbols, and other extraneous comments) that I have borrowed from Sharon Macdonald's analysis of visitor books at the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, and an interaction between museum patrons who have probably never met in person (the included translation).¹ The fact that a five-year-old girl made such a statement is not only emotionally stirring, but also raises questions about the appropriateness of young children viewing materials such as those presented in the museum.

¹ Sharon Macdonald, "Accessing audiences: visiting visitor books," *Museum and Society*, no. 3 (2005): 119-136.

In short, a single comment can provide a window through which we can analyze the books, the exhibit, and, by extrapolation, the cultural institutions of Sarajevo. The goal of my research is to study this comment, along with ten other visitor impression books (the earliest of which holds entries from 2005 and the most recent of which is still in the exhibit), to figure out what museum patrons are saying (and what they are not), how their comments define not only visitors, but the museum as a whole, and whether or not such an examination can provide a conclusive analysis about the larger culture of memory in Sarajevo.

A society's memorials and museums are direct reflections of how that society approaches its own history, as well as its willingness to take initiative in protecting (or forgetting) these constructed historical memories. The museum is a primary actor in the portrayal of the past, and, as museums exist at the intersection of the government and civil society (two of the main vehicles by which social change is driven), the position of the museum as an institution is not that of a "historical truth-keeper," but an agent in promoting historical narratives that have the potential change or even create cultural memories and perceptions. The concept of a "neutral museum" is therefore virtually impossible.² An analysis of the museum can provide insights into the climate of memorial politics in Sarajevo, just as an analysis of the political climate could provide insight into the actions and status of cultural institutions. Thus, Sarajevoan politics of memory are important not only in regards to understanding the past, but also as interpretations of contemporary society.³

The visitor impression books are an invaluable, yet often overlooked, access point through which one can examine a museum exhibit. However, the complex nature of human

² My position on the non-neutrality of museums is based partly off Marita Sturken's assertion that memory and history are inseparable, as introduced in the book *Places of Public Memory*, which I discuss later in the literature review.

³ Or, as Sturken says in the introduction to her book *Tangled Memories*, "Memory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions. We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present."

“impressions” lends itself more to an interdisciplinary critique; hence, further research into the perceptions of museums in the eyes of the Bosnian government and public, as well as a general understanding of history, are helpful in contextualizing these comments. As Chaim Noy remarks in his essay on visitor books at an Israeli museum, “The acts of inscribed communication in a visitor book do not serve as a purely functional means of conveying information as much as they constitute a dynamic, embodied, and aesthetic cultural site in and of themselves.”⁴ And, as he theorizes in another of his essays, these visitor books are in reality a stage.⁵ This stage, like all stages, draws upon countless narratives, memories, and frames of reference and builds from them a comprehensive caricature of ourselves.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout my study, I mainly used observation to gather data; I primarily observed visitors to the museum and the visitor impression books.⁶ I supplemented my observations by holding informal conversations with a number of people living in Sarajevo and a few museum visitors, and followed up three of these conversations by email with a series of written questions (questions are provided in Appendix A). Theoretically, my target population was anyone and everyone who visited the Siege exhibit, or even just had an opinion about the current state of cultural institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (from here on *Bosnia* or *BiH*). In practice, this turned into conversations mainly with foreign visitors, ex-pats, and Bosnian citizens who have had major experience abroad: in effect, a very internationally-oriented population sample. For the sake of privacy I have excluded the names of all the respondents, and, even though the

⁴ Chaim Noy, "Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, no. 2 (2008): 176.

⁵ Chaim Noy, "Pages as Stages: A Performance Approach to Visitor Books." *Annals of Tourism Research*, no. 2 (2008): 509-528.

⁶ Though most of the comments I used were written in English, I personally translated some of the comments in BCS. I am grateful to Stéphanie Côté for translating comments in French, and Narges Samirah for translating from Farsi.

impression books can be considered a public stage, I also decided exclude the names of individual commenters. I have, however, kept indications of age, country of origin, and occupation and/or status markers.

In considering the role of visitor comments in impression books, I kept Noy's conclusion in mind that:

Although the book poses no explicit questions to the visitors, the entries therein are nevertheless response-utterances in terms of their genre, since: they are inspired by earlier utterances, both inside and outside the book; they "tell us something about the individual's position or alignment in what is occurring"; and they are "meant to be...assessed, appreciated, understood" by others (Goffman, 1976/1981, p. 35).⁷

But it was Macdonald's detailed description of how she went through the process of analyzing the comments that I found to be the most helpful. For example, she considered different "areas" or contexts to be watchful of when reading through visitor comments:

These areas are (1) the context in which inscriptions in visitor books are made, a matter that also involves the second area of more detailed consideration: (2) the imagined receiver of the inscriptions; (3) the style of comments; and (4) visitors' comments on the nature of exhibition and the role of exhibiting, and, more specifically, the way in which they relate to the exhibition of history.⁸

Furthermore, Macdonald described her method of reading comments and separating them into categories by hand. Building off of her approach, I chose to separate the comments in the books at the Bosnian Historical Museum into three broad categories: theme oriented, museum oriented, and "graffiti."⁹ The thematic comments often involved emotional invocations or addressed the Sarajevan/Bosnian people directly. These comments focused on the commenter's reaction to the theme of the exhibit, rather than the exhibit itself. Museum oriented comments, then, are the opposite. They tended to focus on the physical exhibit or the role and perceived importance of

⁷ Noy, "Mediation Materialized," 184.

⁸ Macdonald 121.

⁹ Of course, splitting human expression into defined categories is an imperfect art. Though not many, there were some comments that did not fit into any of these categories, most of which consisted of comments I could not read properly. There also were several comments that fell into multiple categories.

the museum. They tended to be more *objective*, while the thematic comments were more *subjective*. Graffiti I deemed as any graphic object, signature without comment, or phrase not relevant to the exhibit or the exhibit's theme.¹⁰

A note on my own positionality...

Although as researcher I strive to keep an unbiased opinion, there are aspects of my own background that fundamentally construct the lens through which I view my research. One interesting aspect of my identity is that of an art student, which also influences the way I view sites such as memorials, monuments, and museums. Though I think this has the possibility to add the potentially needed element of art-criticism to the discussion, I had to be careful to not conflate memorials with pure art objects, especially in the Sarajevan context, where recent history is still very much attached to the sites and objects displayed. Furthermore, I am used to interpreting art (and by extension museums) in an open-ended manner. In fact, it was only after completing my research that I realized that I had unconsciously viewed the visitor books as art objects (or, as Noy would say, cultural sites) to be interpreted rather than as documents that provide conclusive data. And indeed, Cher Krause Knight's description of public art's function allows for this interpretation: "Perhaps public art's noblest function is to nurture participatory citizenship, to create an unfettered intellectual space for debate and socio-political engagement that is not necessarily tied to a physical place."¹¹ She further refers to public art as being a "shared social experience," which, in my opinion, is an apt description of the visitor books.

Another aspect of my identity is that, as a student of Russian language, history and culture, my experience with Eastern Europe has largely been in the context of Soviet and/or

¹⁰ I decided to group these types of comments together based on their visual presentation in the book. Someone who signs his name in the museum visually represents the same concept as someone who only writes "I was here," draws a picture, or writes a curse word. This reflects the graffiti commonly found on the street. The intentions behind these acts are, of course, as varied as the graffiti types themselves.

¹¹ Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 38.

Russian history. Though there are relevant themes, and this knowledge can actually be beneficial in my broader understanding of memory studies in post-communist systems, the fact that Yugoslavia was subject to a different type of communism and underwent a severely different break-up than the Soviet Union cannot be ignored. For example, the Russian state has capitalized on its museums and historic monuments in order to promote a unified national memory. The Bosnian state, however, has not, and to even try to analyze the actions of the “Bosnian state” as if they were those of a unified Russian, or even American, state is impossible for a variety of reasons. I therefore had to ensure that any comparisons or contrasts I found accounted for the enormity of differences between entities.

Finally, perhaps the largest aspect of my identity that came up during my research is my position as an outsider, and especially that of a United States citizen. I grew up in a specific political system, and was taught a specific historical point of view. While studying memory and constructed histories has allowed me to be more aware of my own ingrained cultural memories, I recognize that they color my perceptions of events. This is especially relevant since I was, for the most part, observing visitors to both the museum and Sarajevo – a position I, myself, was in. Fortunately, I found that my outsider perspective allowed me to step back and view sites and documents associated with the war, as well as the visitors themselves, with a less emotional and more critical lens. However, in my examinations of the visitor books, many times I found I had to stop for a moment to regain some of that neutrality – either because a comment attacked the exhibit in what I had considered an “unfair” way, or because the sincerity of the emotional suffering someone else – in effect an “outsider like me” – had experienced simply left me breathless. These emotional responses have undoubtedly surfaced in my paper, though I hope I

have presented them in a way that allows for unbiased analysis. One such quote even found its way into the title of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because there is not much literature explicitly related to my topic, I have assembled a collection of texts that with broader themes of memory and museum studies, as well as those that are more specific to the politics of memory in post-Dayton Bosnia, and Sarajevo. I have divided these sources into a few categories based on geography: theoretical texts on memory, global case studies, memory studies in the former Yugoslavia, and texts about Sarajevo.

I am basing my theoretical overview off *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* by Paul Williams, *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* (a collection of essays edited by Dr. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott), and, as I mentioned earlier, the introduction to Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories. Memorial Museums. Memorial Museums* and *Places of Public Memory*. The first two provide a more grounded theoretical approach as they analyze actual sites around the world in the context of memory theory, whereas Sturken's introduction provides a broader theoretical analysis.

My selection of global case studies includes texts specifically relating to the study of museum visitor books. Chaim Noy has written two articles, "Pages as States: A Performance Approach to Visitor Books" and "Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site" looking at the Ammunition Hill National Memorial Site in West Jerusalem. The other article I found helpful in laying a foundational approach for looking at museum visitor books was "Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books" by Sharon Macdonald, about the visitor books at the Documentation Center of the Former Nazi Party Rally Ground in Nuremburg, Germany.

Narrowing the field to Post-Communist Europe actually provides a wealth of possible case studies, as virtually all Post-Communist countries are struggling with questions of memorialization and nationalism, and can provide comparisons and insights regarding Bosnian politics of memory. The collection of essays *Politics of Memory in Post-Communist Europe (History of Communism in Europe)* edited by Marius Stan and Corina Dobos, along with the essay “The Vanishing Truth? Politics and Memory in Post-Communist Europe” by Lavinia Stan provide a theoretical overview of the politics of memory in the region. The article “Old cities, new pasts: Heritage planning in selected cities of Central Europe” by G.J. Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge focuses on specific post-communist cities and the way they chose to use their past, and the articles “Hard and soft in cultural memory: political mourning in Russia and Germany” by Alexander Etkind, and “Memory of the Past and Memory for the Future: History on the Crossroads of Nation Building” by Yuliya Yurchuk look at nationalism and memorialization in Russia and Germany, and Ukraine, respectively.

The post-Yugoslav space also has a large selection of related memory research. The articles “Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide” by Bette Denich, and “Non-Commemoration and the Nation: The Politics of Identity, Memory and Forgetting in the Former Yugoslavia” by Alysse Kushinski look at the post-Yugoslav region as a whole, discussing nationalism and the politics of memory in a Yugoslav context, while “Managing ‘Spoiled’ National Identity: War, Tourism, and Memory in Croatia” by Lauren A. Rivera focuses on specifically on Croatia.

Finally, the texts I found dealing with Sarajevo include articles from *The Economist* and *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*. These types of articles help to build my current understanding of the political situation in Sarajevo, as well as the state of the museums. This news-based

approach is supplemented with three academic texts, “Museums and the History of Identity of Sarajevo” by Emily Gunzburger Makaš, “Compromising Memory: The Site of the Sarajevo Assassination” by Paul B. Miller, and “Touring the *Traumascapes*: ‘War Tours’ in Sarajevo” by Patrick Naef, that provide a more thorough examination of Sarajevo memory sites.

Even though some of the articles are a little dated, I believe that such a broad selection of texts will help me understand the context both of the field of memory studies, particularly in relation to monuments and museums, as well as better acquaint me with the efforts of the field in the region, and in Sarajevo specifically.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo

The Bosnian Historical Museum was established on November 13, 1945 in Sarajevo, and, after having been housed in National Library in Town Hall, moved to its current location in 1963.¹² The museum has changed names numerous times, the most recent change being from the “Museum of the Revolution” to the “Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina” in 1993.¹³ The museum’s research and collections encompass all periods of Bosnian history from the arrival of Slavic tribes to the Balkans until present day. The website boasts that “in the past 60 years of existing and working, this museum realized 125 thematic exhibitions, 3 permanent museums displays, and numerous permanent museum displays of memorial museums.”¹⁴ Though Makaš writes that the museum “has focused much of its exhibitionary efforts in the past two decades on presenting the history of the 1990s conflict in general, and the siege of Sarajevo specifically,” it is important to note that since 1993, only 16% of the museum’s exhibitionary

¹² The Historical Museum of Bosnia and Hercegovina, "Historijski muzej Bosne i Hercegovine," <http://www.muzej.ba>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

focus has been on the period between 1992-1995, while 30% has dealt with World War II, and 20% on the Middle Ages, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires.¹⁵ In fact, only one of the 1990s exhibits (the current siege exhibit) was an initiative of the museum – the others were proposals by outside institutions and/or artists.

An important element in contextualizing the exhibit is the current status of the Historical Museum regarding its financial situation, along with six other Sarajevo cultural institutions.¹⁶ The cause of the funding crisis is the complex political system of the country, established by the Dayton Peace Accords that divided the country into two entities: Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This division has left the former state-level institutions caught on a boundary line – neither state nor regional governments want to take responsibility for these institutions. Naef quotes the Deputy Director of the National Museum regarding the current situation: “There is now no more Ministry of Culture at the State level, only at the entity level. But this museum is not an entity museum. So we have now big problems of funding.”¹⁷

The initiative *Culture Shutdown*, started by “Azra Akšamija and Maximilian Hartmuth, joined by a group of academicians, artists, librarians and other cultural activists” from all over the world, is a group attempting to raise awareness of the situation of these institutions and provide tools to address it.¹⁸ The website published an excerpt from a report by Charles Landry about the crisis, which comments on the inherent political issues regarding cultural institutions in the country as a whole:

¹⁵ Makaš, Emily Gunzburger. “Museums and the History of Identity in Sarajvo.” Paper presented at the 11th annual conference on Urban History “Cities and Societies in Comparative Perspective”, Prague, Czech Republic, Aug 21–September 1, 2012, 11.

Amra Čusto, Lecture, Muzej bez revolucije, Sarajevo, April 19, 2013.

¹⁶ The seven institutions are: The National Museum of BiH, The National and University Library of BiH, The Art Gallery of BiH, The Historical Museum of BiH, The National Film Archive of BiH, The Museum of Literature and Theatre Arts of BiH, and The National Library of the Blind and Partially Sighted Persons in BiH.

¹⁷ Patrick Naef, “Touring the Traumascape: ‘War Tours’ in Sarajevo,” Oxfordshire: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 11.

¹⁸ Culture Shutdown, “CultureShutdown.net,” Last modified 2013, <http://www.cultureshutdown.net/>.

The lack of a state level forum to discuss cultural policy and funding powers restricts possibilities and reduces aspirations. It is difficult to create a powerful cultural vision for the country as a whole. It means that ambitious initiatives cannot take place either in maintaining current assets such as the institutions above or Donja Gradina and the national parks in RS or in developing new ones.¹⁹

Despite the lack of funds, and a brief period of closure in January 2012, the Historical Museum has continued to host several important exhibits, including its exhibit “Besieged Sarajevo,” which has been running in one form or another since 2003. After a temporary stay in Sweden in 2005, the exhibit returned to Sarajevo and has stayed there ever since. Emily Makaš provides the following description in her essay “Museums and the History and Identity of Sarajevo”:

The exhibit takes a thematic approach with objects and information grouped under headings such as water, light, food, weapons, communication, hygiene, medicine, sport, and so on. The mediation of this exhibit tries hard to focus on daily life of civilians and to avoid the political and military context of the conflict; however the graphic images, the newspaper articles, and artifacts included in this exhibition suggest the senselessness of the siege and the innocence and helplessness of the city’s residents.²⁰

The Historical Museum, though a less popular tourist destination than the “Tunnel of Hope Museum,” is an important contribution to the landscape of 1990s memorials in Sarajevo, a concept that is consistently reflected in the visitor impression books.

The Intersection of Museums and Memory: A Theoretical Overview

Returning to Noy’s argument that visitor impression books constitute a stage, I extrapolate that they must also be a metaphorical “play within a play,” as the museum (including its exhibits) can also be compared to the theater. Both the theater and the museum need directors and set designers, stage props and lighting experts. Both weave intricate stories, make cultural references, use a combination of language and image, and rely on the existence of the audience.

¹⁹ Charles Landry, Culture Shutdown, "Cultural Policy in Bosnia Herzegovina: Expats Report (Council Of Europe)," Last modified Sept 29, 2002, <http://www.cultureshutdown.net/cultural-policy-in-bosnia-herzegovina-experts-report-council-of-europe/>.

²⁰ Makaš, 11.

The only element missing in a museum are the actors (if a museum's props are its collections, then the actors, for the most part, are already dead). And like most plays, most museums also attempt to convey some sort of message, whether they choose to play a didactic role, or merely seek to inspire reflection.

Similarly, like the literature and art they often display, museums can also serve as a critique of the society they are supposed to represent. To return to Sturken, "history can be thought of as a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises."²¹ Museums, then, can be analyzed as direct reflections and promoters of this "sanctioned narrative," a narrative which Sturken sees as being related to the concept of "cultural memory." Like Sturken, I believe that history and memory, rather than being opposites as posited by theorists such as Pierre Nora, are entangled. Sturken adds that, despite this entanglement, it is important to keep in mind that "there are times when those distinctions are important in understanding political intent, when memories are asserted specifically outside of or in response to historical narratives."²²

Nowhere are memory and history more intertwined than in Paul Williams' concept of a "memorial museum." Williams describes the inherent contradiction of words:

A memorial is seen to be, if not apolitical, at least safe in the refuse of history...honest evaluation of the dead is normally seen as disrespectful. A history *museum*, by contrast, is presumed to be concerned with interpretation, contextualization, and critique. The coalescing of the two suggests that there is an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts.²³

This balance of memory and history I believe to be present in all museums, especially those conveying historical narratives, and is a concept that I will return to later.

²¹ Sturken, Marita, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

²² Sturken, 5.

²³ Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums*, New York, NY: Berg, 2007, 8.

Without patrons, though, *any* museum, be it an art museum or a historical one, becomes nothing more than a well-displayed archive. The objective of museums is not only to preserve history, but to distribute it. In this case, James Loewen's proposal that public monuments and memorials are marked by three "histories" is relevant. His theory is that memorials encompass 1) the history of the person/event depicted, 2) the history of its creation, and 3) the history experienced by the modern viewer.²⁴ The first history is what museums tend to focus on in their presentation, though in some cases (primarily in regards to art) it is actually the second history that overshadows the first. The first history is also often why visitors come to the exhibit, especially in the case of memorial museums; in one study, Avital Beran concluded that "tourists' motives are varied, and include a desire to learn and understand the history presented, a sense of 'see it to believe it,' and interest in having an emotional heritage experience."²⁵ As an interesting note, this rationalization was also present in my conversations with tourists; one of the main comments I heard was that they wanted to come to Sarajevo (and by extension, to the museum) not only because they wanted learn more about what happened during the 90s, but because they wanted to do so *in the city itself*.

To return to Loewen's theory, it is the third history, the history that the viewer brings with him/her, that finds an outlet in the visitor impression books. And, in the case of such books, I would posit that a related "fourth" history is created somewhere in-between the second and third – not completely occupying either, in that the experience of writing in one of the books both exemplifies the visitor's own personal account and understanding of history, but also adds to the history of the museum's creation. A physical example of such a history would be the

²⁴ Greg Dickinson, Blair Carole, and Brian Ott, *Places of Public Memory*, (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 30.

²⁵ Avital Beran, as quoted by Patrick Naef, 5.

collection and storage of the notes, stuffed animals, medals, and similar items left at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Just as visitors to the memorial leave behind corporeal tokens of remembrance, sorrow, sympathy, and commemoration, inscribers in impression books leave behind condolences, tokens of appreciation, commendations, and even criticisms. Furthermore, “an exhibition’s visitor book should, perhaps, be seen as an integral part of that exhibition – an interactive exhibit in which many visitors participate (either by writing or reading) – and, therefore, included in any exhibition analysis.”²⁶ These interactions between visitor and museum constitute a dialogue that becomes not only part of the visitor’s history, but part of the museum’s as well.²⁷

Thus, my interpretation of visitor comments rests on “the ‘active audience’ perspective,” proposed by Macdonald, which “seeks to access visitors’ own active meaning-making, and the assumptions, motives, emotions and experiences that this may involve.”²⁸ Rather than evaluate the effectiveness of the museum at imparting any particular message upon its patrons, I approached the comments with the intention to see what the visitors themselves brought to the exhibit. Very frequently, visitor comments included recollections of their own experiences (Loewen’s third history) right next to comments about the didactic role of the museum.

The border between personal and impersonal, or even between memory and history, is reflected in the placement of the book in the museum. Like many such books, the visitor impression book at the Bosnian Historical Museum is near the exit – in this case, on the table near the stairs leading away from the two main exhibits. In describing another book at the

²⁶ Macdonald, 119.

²⁷ My creation of this fourth history can be further supported by Sturken on a theoretical scale: “Personal memory, cultural memory, and history do not exist within neatly defined boundaries. Rather, memories and memory objects can move from one realm to another, shifting meaning and context. Thus, personal memories can sometimes be subsumed into history and elements of cultural memory can exist in concert with historical narratives (Sturken 5-6).”

²⁸ Macdonald, 120.

Ammunition Hill National Memorial Site in Jerusalem, Chaim Noy also captures the essence of the one in Bosnia: “Located on the borderline between the inside and the outside domains, it is a transformative communicative medium that facilitates a shift from impressions to expressions.”²⁹

The Visitor Impression Books: Data and Analysis

The physical books are not typical of most visitor books I have encountered, but they seem to embody the museum. They are unobtrusive, and their hardcovers often contain pictures of animals or wildlife. The pages are standard-sized, have graph lines, and are quite thin. The books can be assumed to be inexpensive (which makes sense when one considers the problems with funding), are lightweight, not tied to the table in any way, and are, in general, informal and somewhat easily overlooked. From my own observations, the book had the most success in attracting visitor comments when two conditions were met: a) it was spread open on the table so that the previous comments were showing, and b) visitors observed *other* visitors leafing through and/or writing in the pages.

The books, like the museum itself, can be thought of as visibly showing the effects of the funding crisis.³⁰ However, it is interesting to note that the informality of the physical book has not noticeably altered the comments in a similar direction. The same themes that both Noy and Macdonald observed, I found in the books at the historical museum (though perhaps in differing quantities). I therefore found it appropriate to build off of their methods of comment analysis.

While reading through most of the comment books, I mainly kept a mental impression of the styles of comments. However, I also wanted to collect numerical data to check my mental

²⁹ Noy, “Mediation Materialized,” 185.

³⁰ This is in contrast to the visitor book at the other main siege-related exhibit – the Tunnel of Hope – which is formal looking, half a meter tall, and has hundreds of heavier blank pages. The design of the book makes it hard to leaf through and virtually impossible to lift its prominent position on a pedestal next to photos of famous visitors, such as ambassadors, Orlando Bloom, and Michael Moore.

tabulations. To do this, I selected one book that covered comments from late 2007 through late 2010. The book appeared visually typical of all other books and spanned a few years, allowing me to account for irregularities in any one year.

To analyze the book, I focused only on comments in English and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BCS).³¹ I then further split the thematic category into sub-categories of: (1a) responses that addressed the need to remember and the senselessness of war, (1b) emotional responses, and (1c) direct address of Sarajevans/Bosnians; and the museum critical comments I divided into comments about: (2a) the importance of the exhibit, including comments that specifically mention the commenter having “learned,” (2b) criticisms (both positive and negative), and (2c) a general catch-all category that commended the museum, often in short, one or two word phrases, such as “Super!”, “Excellent!”, or “Interesting exhibit!”³²

The data showed that the category with the greatest percentage of comments in both languages belonged to the catch-all (2c) category (27% for comments in English and 35% for BCS).³³ The rest of the comments in English were pretty much evenly distributed among the remaining categories.³⁴ The notable exception to this is the criticisms section (2b), which constitutes around 5.5%. For BCS, criticisms also make up a small amount of comments, along with (1c), those that address Sarajevans, both with 4.5%.³⁵ The low number for (1c) is probably because commenters writing in BCS are likely to consider themselves insiders and thus do not feel the need to address Sarajevo/Bosnia directly. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that one

³¹ The sample size of the English comments was 231. The sample size of the comments in BCS was 43.

³² For reference, I include stereotypical phrases from these categories in the Appendix.

³³ As a note, I did not analyze about ten comments in BCS because the handwriting was too difficult to read. Many of these were longer comments, and thus the results of the data may slightly inflated in regards to the catch-all category (2c), which often contained shorter, clearer responses.

³⁴ For those interested in the results for the English comments: (1a) – 16%, (1b) – 15%, (1c) – 16%, (2a) – 17%, (2b) – 5.5%, (2c) – 27%. (about 3.5% of comments I labeled as being “other.”)

³⁵ Statistics for the comments in BCS: (1a) – 14%, (1b) – 21%, (1c) – 4.5%, (2a) – 16%, (2b) – 4.5%, (2c) – 35%. (4.5% of comments I classified as “other.”)

of the two comments that makes up this category was written by a group of Turkish school children.

Theme Oriented Comments

Thematic comments accounted for about 47% of the total comments made in English.³⁶ Of these, one of the common themes was category (1c) – or a direct address to Sarajevo/Sarajevans, or less frequently, to Bosnia/Bosnians. I was inclined to consider direct address as being subjective mainly because direct addresses tended to use emotional invocations, typically in the form of “wishing Sarajevo the best,” expressing that the commenter could not imagine the horrors citizens endured during the siege, or making a remark about the resilience of Sarajevo and its people.

The concept of “direct address,” though primarily emotional, also raises questions of Orientalism. This is especially relevant because of the significant difference in numbers regarding category (1c) between English and BCS comments. In fact, as I already stated, one of the two BCS comments in (1c) was made by a group from Turkey. (The other was made by a commenter who addressed an unnamed audience (presumably those who started the war) in a negative manner. For reference the comment is provided in Appendix B.) Though in all cases I encountered, comments that specifically addressed Sarajevo were positive (such as talking about the city’s strength), they still inherently contain an element of “the other.”

The outsider position is not necessarily negative as, indeed, visitors to the museum *are* outsiders. However, it is interesting to see occasions of Orientalism unintentionally creep into visitor comments, most typically in that the commenter has a perception of what a “recovered” city looks like. Typically, the imagined image only goes surface deep as is clearly evident in

³⁶ Comments in BCS were split into 39.5% (thematic), 56% (museum critical), and 4.5% (other). This is a reflection of the larger portion of BCS comments belonging to category (2c). (See footnote 33)

comments like the following from an American woman (of course, comments from countries other than the United States also contained similar undertones, such as in an Albanian comment provided in Appendix B):

My heart to you Sarajevo for your perseverance and ability to survive such horrible human behavior. To look forward requires so much trust, courage, and grace yet you do so without hesitation or question. My time here in this museum and in your city has opened my eyes to things I only saw on TV as a young 20 year old girl. Keep the Sarajevo spirit alive, looking to the future, a peaceful successful future.

More than anything, a comment such as this shows the lack of a deeper understanding of cultural and political issues in the former Yugoslav space. Though the Sarajevans *she* talked to may have exhibited “trust, courage, and grace...without hesitation,” such a sweeping generalization cannot correctly be made of *all* Sarajevo, nor would an outsider (myself included) understand exactly what it takes in the Sarajevan context “to look forward.” However, critical analysis aside, the comment shows a generally positive attempt to understand Sarajevo, and a genuine wish for peace – which was typical of nearly all (1b) comments.

The fascination with the Siege was also reflected by the tourists I talked with in their desire to see Sarajevo *because of* the siege.³⁷ Though this represents a positive trend in that citizens of other countries display interest in learning about the war, it also represents a trend in tourism, known as *dark tourism* or *thanatourism*, which is typically defined as tourism of trauma sites.³⁸ Both ‘war tours’ I went on mentioned, of all the tours they offered, the tour having to do with the siege was by far the most popular.³⁹ Though not inherently negative, dark tourism contains fundamental elements of the sensationalizaion of tragedy, and raises questions about the

³⁷ I, myself, am not exempt from this, as one of the primary reasons I chose to study abroad in the Balkans was the fact that the region suffered from recent conflict, the effects of which are still being dealt with today.

³⁸ Patrick Naef’s article, “Touring the *Tramascap*: ‘War Tours in Sarajevo,’” provides an interesting analysis of Sarajevan war tourism.

³⁹ The tours I used were: “Sarajevo Total Siege Tour” by Sarajevo Funky Tours, and “Times of Misfortune” tour by Insider Sarajevo. As an added note, the section “Tourism: Wish You Were Here” spanning pages 140-146 of William’s *Memorial Museums* discusses many of the issues of dark tourism, especially in terms of the motivations behind this form of tourism and tourist behavior at “dark tourist sites.”

educational role of the museum in the midst of such tourism. Should the museum be considered an educational space for foreigners, a memorial space for Sarajevans, or is it possible to be both, i.e. in the form of a memorial museum?

The role of the Besieged exhibit as a memorial museum makes more sense when looking at the other thematic comments, especially category (1b), which accounts for the emotional responses of visitors.⁴⁰ The most common response typical of this category was to call the exhibit “moving,” but this category includes many different levels of emotional response, from the signature-less “just crying” commenter to longer, emphatic appraisals of the commenter’s emotional state. One typical example of this category was made by a male Swede in October 2004: “A very moving exhibition of the maintenance of human dignity under conditions of terror and war.” Though the comment mentions the exhibition as a whole, he positions the exhibit in an emotional context, using words such as *moving*, *human dignity*, and *terror*.

Williams brings up an interesting point about these types of emotional responses: “Memorial museums are particularly evocative because they usually exist in setting where we can imagine lives otherwise being lived out, rather than those, like cemeteries, that are explicitly marked off as inert and chiefly associated with the afterlife.”⁴¹ In this context, the location of the museum on what used to be known as “Sniper Alley” cannot be ignored. The physical act of walking to the museum is in itself a voyeuristic experience and may condition the visitor to view the experience emotionally even before s/he even reaches the museum.

I added a further subcategory to the English comments (1b) that looked specifically at the concept of guilt. Four out of the 35 comments in (1b) addressed a feeling of guilt on the part of

⁴⁰ For clarification, there were many shorter comments that could have either belonged to (1b) or (2c). The way I separated these had to do with the “emotionality” of the comment. For example, a comment that used emotionally neutral words, such as “interesting” or “excellent,” I classified as (2c). Words that are inherently emotional, such as “moving” or “powerful” I classified as (1b).

⁴¹ Williams, 140.

their country, or the world as a whole, for allowing the siege to happen, or a personal inability to do something to help Sarajevans.⁴² Throughout all of the books I found instances of guilt mentioned by citizens of the United States, Turkey, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and other countries. The comments typically sounded like the following (written by an American woman): “The spirit of the people of Sarajevo is so impressive! As for the rest of the world, we are all guilty.” References to guilt were, for the most part, explicit.

The theme of guilt is an important issue in contemporary memory studies; “Holocaust literature and scholarship has also explored guilt in relation to two themes: guilt about surviving (and guilt about the gratitude that one was never present), and guilt about inaction or not having done enough.”⁴³ However this comparison seems almost out of place, as the comments I found were written in English by foreigners. Why would they feel guilty? The answer, I think, can be found in the (1a) category – that addressing the theme of remembrance, and the concept of “never again.” As one man who positioned himself as being from “Dublin/Beijing” wrote, “Rwanda / Sarajevo / Syria!!! / History keeps repeating itself. / We’re running out of excuses. / People of Sarajevo, we salute you.” Many of the comments from (1b), as well as from other sections, also included references to watching the conflict on the television.⁴⁴ The experience of having watched the conflict from afar may not only be a reason for people to visit the museum, but also a source of guilt.⁴⁵

The (1a) category may also be addressed in terms of guilt, though perhaps with a more future eye than the (1b) category. However, my classification of the comments in (1a) did not

⁴² A related sub-category I added to the BCS comments was that of mentioning personal experience during the war. Three out of nine comments in (1b) addressed personal experience.

⁴³ Williams, 127.

⁴⁴ A German couple I talked to also explained their visit Sarajevo this way. They watched the war from afar, and wanted to see the city in person.

⁴⁵ The role of mass media on dark tourism is discussed on pages 141-142 of *Memorial Museums*, in reference to a study by J. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley.

exhibit a uniform theme.⁴⁶ Though “never forget” and “never again” (or, *ne zaboraviti* and *ne ponovio se*) were common, there was a tension between what these words meant. This tension was most commonly expressed in the concept of forgiveness. While on one page a couple from Helsinki wrote “Never forget. Always forgive,” on another page a different man wrote, “Damned are the ones who forgive and ever forget.” Williams connects the difficulties in accepting the term “never again” with raw emotions, in that “involuntary, solipsistic feeling of personal inadequacy, guilt, anger, or dismay may not lead themselves so easily towards remembering and resolving ‘never again.’”⁴⁷

Several comments also expressed a similar element of cynicism. For example a male commenter from Washington State wrote that “‘Never again’ are two words that seem to hold no real meaning.” On the end page of one of the books, a German woman wrote about her disappointment with the other commenters:

It is very disappointing that some of the comments in this book are still talking about revenge and accusations. The pictures should have taught everyone just how horrible war is for those involved and that the same mistake should never be made again and cannot be justification by history blood lines, and rights or wrongs of the past.

Williams echoes the cynicism of some museum-goers and asks a crucial question regarding the call of *never again*: “Just what, as a general human populace, [should we] ‘never again’ do?”⁴⁸

He further asks:

Should we never again be victims, or never again act as perpetrators? Should we never again succumb to an invading army? Never again support an undemocratic government? Never again allow ourselves to be unarmed and defenseless? Never again watch tragedy unfold from afar? Never again allow ourselves to act on negative human emotions?⁴⁹

⁴⁶ In Paul Williams’ description of memorial museums, he mentions that many such museums incorporate the theme of remembrance so as to avoid future atrocity into their missions. Though the Historical Museum does not, the comments in the visitor book suggest this as a theme anyway.

⁴⁷ Williams, 146.

⁴⁸ Williams, 155.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

As an answer he only offers yet another cynically clichéd question: In light of all that has happened since the Holocaust and the first outcry of “never again,” what is it that encourages our belief that the creation and maintenance of memorials, such as the Besieged Sarajevo exhibit, will actually offer hope of heeding this cry?

Museum Oriented Comments

Museum critical comments constituted about 49% of the English comments. As I stated before, the largest category of comments contained remarks that referred to the museum as being “interesting,” “super,” or “nice.” The comments may have had some elements of emotional connection, but the overlying theme was primarily *about* the exhibit rather than the commenter’s own emotional *reaction to* the exhibit. For example, a longer comment I classified as belonging to (2c) said, “Great museum, very quiet though, we had it all to ourselves! Interesting and thought provoking material – let’s hope the future is more peaceful!” In my opinion, these types of comments reflect the desire of a commenter to say something positive about the exhibit without touching upon more emotionally or politically wrought subjects.

The (2a) category I divided into two sub-categories – those that talk specifically about the importance of the exhibit, and those conveying that the commenter learned something.⁵⁰ I saw these two sub-categories as being related mainly because the common rhetoric surrounding the necessity of museums often includes their instructive or educational role.

In the first sub-section, one particularly interesting note was made by a ten-year-old boy in August 2012, who described himself as being from “Munich, Germany, Europe, The World.” He wrote that “Exhibitions such as this one educate people about the world and about the horrors of war.” Though the words of the comment itself are somewhat typical of this category, the

⁵⁰ In English, around 59% of the (2a) category (or 10% of the total comments) specifically referenced that they “learned” something, while only one out of seven comments addressed this in BCS.

positionality of the commenter was particularly interesting. Not only did the boy “zoom out” his identity to identify himself as a citizen of the world, but his age is also relevant for two reasons. One is that some of the content of the exhibit is graphic, and his comment supports the notion that a child can see and learn from such content without being “mentally scarred.”⁵¹ The second reason is that the exhibit is succeeding in “meta” terms, in that not only is the child learning about the siege and about war, but he recognizes that the act of learning *itself* is important, and thus extends this importance to all museums and all people. Further comments on the importance of museums can also be found in other languages, including BCS and French (examples are provided in the Appendix). The second-subsection I see as being related to some of the criticisms, and will return to later.

In the criticism category, I included not only negative comments, but also positive appraisals and reactions to the physical state of the museum. In fact, the majority of criticisms that I found in the books tended to be fairly positive. For example, a male student of Cultural Heritage Management at the University of York in the United Kingdom left this comment: “Simple but effective – good museum practice. Good balance of objects, images and text, and does admirably well to convey the reality of the siege without being ideologically loaded. Well done, this exhibit should be preserved and promoted more!”

Negative critiques often focused on the state of the museum – commenters perceived the exhibit as being too small, cold, or the museum itself seemed run-down. However, these types of comments were rather rare.⁵² Constructive criticisms were more popular, with visitors suggesting

⁵¹ In a conversation I had with Elma Hašimbegović, Senior Curator at the Historical Museum, she mentioned an incident in which a child had visited the museum with a school trip. The mother later complained that the museum’s exhibit had mentally traumatized her child.

⁵² In my statistical analysis, English comments on the physical state of the exam made up about a quarter of criticisms in general, or about one percent of the total. In BCS, one of the two criticisms commented on the physical state of the building. The writer was from Serbia, and the comment read: “*Lep muzej, samo nemate klime* (Beautiful museum, only you do not have climate control [meaning heating]).” It is interesting to note that someone else

various improvements in addition to pointing out flaws. One woman from Malaysia wanted to see more details about peacekeepers and UN troops, one commenter suggested that the photos and documents be made into a book, and the majority of constructive criticisms wanted to see more information about the beginning of the war and Yugoslavia under Tito in general.

However, I encountered an interesting “battle” of sorts between two different camps of opinion regarding the presentation of information. Some people wanted more explanation, but others praised the decision to present the photos without detailed explanations. For example, one commenter from Los Angeles, California in 2009 wrote that she felt “some details are needed as to why it started, how long it lasted, and the outcome. As a visitor I feel none of my questions were really answered here.” But later, in 2012, a woman from North Wales commended the museum: “You got it right, no bias or propaganda, only factual events from the people who lived and breathed it every day. Thank you from my heart.” This discrepancy may be indicative of the personal knowledge (or of Loewen’s third history) that visitors bring with them to the exhibit, or of a commenter’s positionality in general. However, it may also have to do with the perceived role of the museum as an educational, historical institution.

Regarding this, comments from the second subsection of category (2a) – those that mention learning something from the exhibit – can be viewed as related to the criticisms regarding the lack of information. For example, a comment in 2010 from a couple from New Zealand expresses thanks “for providing this excellent museum. We have learnt so much more about this tragic war through this museum.” Though not exemplary of all (2a) comments, there is a slight difference in this comment regarding the commonly perceived unbiased instructive role witnessed in the criticisms category. This is that while criticisms (along with some of the other

responded to this comment by calling the original commenter “*glupačo* (an idiot)” and referring to the fact that there was no heat during the war.

(2a) comments) remark on the exhibit's explanatory quality, the decision to describe the war as *tragic* conveys a more emphatic quality. Both the (2a) category comments and the criticisms regarding the lack of information implied that the museum's role is to teach. However, there is a difference in understanding over whether that role is to convey the sense of the *tragedy* of war, or provide details about the causes and events of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Siege of Sarajevo.⁵³

Remaining Observations

There are three observations that I made during my study of visitor impressions that I have not yet addressed. The first is the category of graffiti. I counted signatures (without commentary) in this category, even if they included dates, origins, age, or profession. Such signatures often came in lists, which can either be attributed to group visits, or to the fact that later commenters copied the style of earlier visitors. I also included comments that were not related to the exhibit (such as "I was here!") under graffiti. Many younger children chose to draw pictures, or attempted to write their names. Sometimes the pictures were thematically relevant (of a man weeping, peace symbols, etc), were normally accompanied by comment, and were not necessarily drawn by children. Graffiti generally accounted for less than 10% of the total book.⁵⁴

The second observation is that sometimes comments were hard to interpret as far as intention went. For example, one BCS commenter wrote that the museum was great, but that there were no animals. (Which I assumed to be graffiti, but could be a relevant comment that I do not understand.) Another such comment was made by a woman in 2009, and read "*Preživjela sam ovdje predivne trenutke!* (I survived wonderful moments here!)," which I was unsure

⁵³ This is interesting when one considers that the museum sees its exhibit as a commentary on the personal survival of Sarajevans during the siege. On the Museum's website, the description of the exhibit makes it actually seem as if the target audience is Sarajevans themselves, rather than international visitors – in essence, it is portrayed more as a memorial exhibit, rather than a historical one.

⁵⁴ This statistic is based off of the same book I used to evaluate comment categories.

whether to read it literally, as sarcasm, or if the writer simply was not a native BCS speaker and therefore meant a word other than *predivni*. I also could not be completely sure what the commenter meant by “here” – whether she was referring to the exhibit or the war, though the use of the word *preživjela* makes me assume that she was talking about the war. Additionally, there were, of course comments that had multiple intentions and were able to be simultaneously separated among different categories.⁵⁵

Finally, I noticed an interesting scarcity of overtly political comments. Of course, there were overtones of politics in some of the other categories – for example category (1a) is, by nature, political. However, many commenters refrained from addressing specific politics of the region – even nationalism and ethnic politics, prominent political themes, were barely mentioned. If politics were incorporated into the comment, it was often in terms of the visitor’s own country of origin and their own experiences with post-Communism (such as in a comment from Warsaw), or their own experience with division (such as in a comment from North Ireland). The other common political comment referenced the need to protect Bosnia’s Islamic identity and history, and often came from commenters in Turkey, or in one case, Iran (in Appendix B).

In regards to nationalism, there was one remark that struck me as interesting (the full comment is provided in Appendix B, under “Others”). It was from a French-Canadian, who had originally positioned himself as being from Montreal, Canada, but then drew a line through Canada and wrote “Quebec” followed by a smiley face instead. I found it interesting that he chose to make a display of nationalism in a museum memorializing a tragedy largely brought about by nationalist politics. Political comments such as these raise questions about what message visitors to the museum take away with them back to their own countries, and though the

⁵⁵ Sometimes I split these comments between two categories – giving each category .5 of a comment.

visitor books provide a glimpse into a commenter's mind, two sentences and a crossed out country name is not enough to draw a solid conclusion about what that message might be.

Looking at the Larger Picture: The Exhibit in Context

Though the visitor comments can provide a method of analyzing the museum, it is also important to consider the larger context. Such a consideration both strengthens themes found among the visitor books and denotes areas of cultural understanding in which the typical visitor may be lacking.

As evidenced by the scarceness of overtly political comments *in addition to* the tendency of comments in category (1b) to oversimplify the recovery of Sarajevo, *and* the few criticisms regarding the physical state of the museum, one of the biggest blank areas in visitor knowledge seemed to be in the general understanding of the political and financial situations. This is somewhat expected, as I have been told even by native residents that the political system of Bosnia is extremely, even unnecessarily, complicated.

All explanations of the funding crisis I have heard and read attribute it to corruption and the political structure of the country, and some continued to add that the problems are a direct reflection of nationalism and/or ethnic-based politics. One of my interviewees summed up his opinion rather succinctly: "There's a crisis with funding for the cultural institutions because of selfish leaders who are interested in preserving power/money, rather than solving problems in the country."⁵⁶ Another interviewee, a Bosnian-American, talked about the closure of the National Museum; "The museum probably gains absolutely no profit, and considering Bosnia's trend toward capitalism, it has negative value. That compounds with the political state of the country.

⁵⁶ Interviewee A, personal communication, April 30, 2013.

There is too much corruption and very little emphasis on cultural or social preservation.”⁵⁷ And a third interviewee added that a sense of the importance of museums does not exist “neither among political officials nor public. The pressure from the public is low and more symbolic because the majority of our ordinary people have to fight with some other issues, such as how to survive with almost no money.”⁵⁸

One of the conversations I had was with a journalist originally from Banja Luka. He saw the funding issues as being related to the deeper problem of ethnically divided politics, and believed that museums and institutions that promote a unified version of history over that of a specific ethnic group are seen as less important, and even detrimental, to people in power. This tendency to ignore museums that promote a state-wide, inclusive narrative is interesting when one considers countries such as the United States, which frequently uses its museums to promote a unified national narrative. In her book *Memorial Mania*, Erika Doss talks about how such narratives are “aimed at evoking intimate, emotional and authentic ties between different American publics and the United States, encouraging an affective allegiance to the nation that would be as strong and sacred as that extended to a family, region, religion and/or ethnic and racial group.”⁵⁹ This tactic was also widely used by the Soviet Union, especially in regards to World War II history, and is also relevant in the creation of a national history in present-day Ukraine. In her essay on the nationalization of history in Ukraine, Yulia Yurchuk may as well be talking about Bosnia:

In the first half of the 20th century Maurice Halbwachs wrote: ‘Society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other.’ What the beginning of the 21st century in Ukraine seemingly demonstrates, though, is the unwillingness of Ukrainians to ‘erase from their memory all that might

⁵⁷ Interviewee B, personal communication, April 30, 2013.

⁵⁸ Interviewee C, personal communication, April 30, 2013.

⁵⁹ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, 26-27.

separate individuals' and the willingness, instead, to remember some of the things that divide.⁶⁰

She further concludes that “when we have a divided society where both elites and civil groups are not willing to cooperate and do not have a common vision of the future, the process of coming to terms with the past is saturated with conflicts and tensions.”⁶¹ This is the same problem facing Bosnia today, and an article on the Culture Shutdown website by Marzia Bona argues this point particularly well:

In concrete terms, the lack of political action targets the shared cultural heritage preserved by the seven institutions...According to Robert Donia, such policy of inaction is part of an attack to the country's shared memory and can be interpreted as a continuation of the more showy attacks committed during the war...Since the mid-nineties, cultural institutions have become an instrument of national identification in each of the former Yugoslav republics. Not so in BiH, because of the potential problems in recognizing and establishing a national identity to act as a glue for the entire country...The political inaction in this area has over the years caused the deterioration of the seven institutions, of the history, and therefore the identity of the country, revealing an effort to deny the existence of a shared culture and history that constitute an element of legitimacy of the country itself.⁶²

The decision of the museum to not include extensive contextual information, then, can also be read as a political statement. Sturken writes that “photographs are often perceived to embody memory, and cinematic representations of the past have the capacity to entangle with personal and cultural memory.”⁶³ Letting the pictures and objects speak for themselves allows museum patrons to infuse their own understanding and interpretations of the siege into the exhibit, rather than get hung-up on what one individual may perceive as a biased presentation of

⁶⁰ Yuliya Yurchuk, “Memory of the Past and Memory for the Future: History on the Crossroads of Nation Building,” Paper presented at the conference “Current Issues in European Cultural Studies”, Norrköping, Sweden, June 15–17, 2011, 135.

⁶¹ Ibid, 144.

⁶² Marzia Bona, Culture Shutdown, “Bosnia: Rampant Festivals and Bankrupt Museums,” Last modified Sept 6, 2012, <http://www.cultureshutdown.net/bosnia-rampant-festivals-and-bankrupt-museums/>.

⁶³ Sturken, 11.

history or an insensitive wording. Additionally, the scarcity of information could be interpreted as a physical representation of the country's lack of a unified history.⁶⁴

The absence of explanation also supports the idea that the exhibit is caught between a memorial and a museum, between forgetting and remembering. Even though it seems inherently contradictory, many memory theorists see the memorial as an agent in the forgetting process. In his article about the plane crash that killed the then president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, and many other prominent Polish military and political leaders, Morgan Meis describes this contradiction:

[Memorials] are, as the word suggests, about memory. The memorial is thus a physical manifestation of memory. It makes memory a real thing in the world...But here is where the paradox comes in. *We put up memorials to remember, but we also put them up to forget...* You cannot spend all your time remembering or else nothing new happens...And so we do something to mark the moment. We put up a memorial to the trauma, to the important event, to the struggle, to whatever. Putting up the memorial is an act of payment. *It is a payment to the past in order to proceed into the future...* The monument says that we can start forgetting now. We can let the past be the past. (emphasis added)⁶⁵

Nationalized history, in contrast, is not so much concerned with “moving on” as it is with the construction of a narrative that can be folded into the country's historical tradition. By not providing a narrative, the museum lets the visitor decide what role the exhibit should take – that of an instructive history, or of a cathartic memorial.

It seems that Sarajevo as a whole is also caught between remembering and forgetting the recent past. But Sturken's assertion that “the survivors of recent political events often disrupt the closure of a particular history; indeed, history operates more efficiently when its agents are dead,” provides a partial explanation for this in that the siege is still present in individual

⁶⁴ It is also important to keep in mind the significance of context, as, in fact, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum uses the technique of emphasizing photos and documents over written explanations in its section about contemporary genocides, including the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. However, in a completely different context away from the Bosnian political and memorial climate, that decision cannot be interpreted in the same way.

⁶⁵ Morgan Meis, “A Monument to Forgetting,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 87, no. 4 (2011): 238-245, <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2011/fall/meis-a-monument-to-forgetting/>.

memories.⁶⁶ However, the effects of tourism in influencing the siege narrative must also not be ignored. When I asked my interviewees why they thought they thought some museums in Sarajevo were doing well while others were struggling, one answered that:

Most of investments for local politics are generally invested in something I call ‘war culture’ – they still want to remind people of what actually happened to Sarajevo during the war time. Sometimes I think that is ok, but honestly that is not the only important period in Sarajevo. They actually forgot there are parts of our history that shouldn’t be forgotten.⁶⁷

It is interesting, then that the Historical Museum, as the house of the Besieged Sarajevo exhibit, has not benefited from this perceived investment in “war culture.” As others have suggested, this is because the museum is not only devoted to the memory of the siege, but also to remembering the ‘parts of history that shouldn’t be forgotten,’ such as the World War II period, or Bosnia under the Ottoman or Hungarian empires: histories that show a unified Bosnia over the currently divided one.

Though the number of comments in the visitor book may not reflect it, the exhibit is as much an opportunity for foreigners to learn about the siege as it is an opportunity for Sarajevans to remember. “The visitor book is somewhat akin in its function to a mirror in which visitors can see themselves and other visitors...This projection can occur because in tourism, the medium must appear to be morally disinterested if it is to be influential (MacCannell, 1999, p. 24),” but moral neutrality is also beneficial to visitors who merely wish to pay their respects to memory, or even read other people’s memories, without leaving behind a token of themselves.⁶⁸ The decision to exclude an official narrative, at least for the time being, allows the exhibit to play the dual role of memorial and museum.

⁶⁶ Sturken, 5.

⁶⁷ Interviewee C, personal communication, April 30, 2013.

⁶⁸ Noy, 192.

CONCLUSIONS

Though not everyone who visits a museum writes in the visitor book, the comments found there collectively form a sampling of the differing impressions held by museum patrons. Commenters' reasonings behind visiting the museum, and their further decisions to write in the book, are acts that in and of themselves signify meaning. They let us know that commenters view the institution not only as important enough to visit, but as significant enough to physically incorporate the museum into their own personal histories. Noy eloquently describes the act of inscription:

These traces remain long enough to be consumed and responded to by other visitors, and to be incorporated into the overall impression of their visit. This stability has significant consequences: it enables visitors to interact with one another – to “meet” and “talk” – in and through the medium... These traces also travel forward in time: inscribers' utterances will be consumed by future visitors, and the book thus offers a touch of immortality, as it were, a modicum of immobility and stability amidst the dynamics of traveling and visiting.⁶⁹

The act of writing in a visitor impression book is a conscious choice to become part of museum, and a significant act that many would not perform if the individual did not feel in some way encouraged to do so. One of my interviewees said that he left comments in visitor books only if he was “thrilled and touched by what [he has] seen in these museums.”⁷⁰ I would also argue that in addition to the content of the exhibit, the placement and conveyed importance of the book itself (either by the museum or by other visitors) also encourage visitor responses.

So, if museums are the gatekeepers of history (and memory), then visitor impression books are histories of histories (or memories of memories) – i.e. a play within a play. If memorial museums provide a place to remember tragedy, then the books are an active agent in the process of that memorial. While an analysis of the exhibit lets us know what the museum

⁶⁹ Noy, 189.

⁷⁰ Interviewee C, personal communication, April 30, 2013.

sees as important, an analysis of the comments provides insight into why the museum *itself* is important. What Sturken pointed out, especially in reference to cultural memory, is that “what memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past.”⁷¹

Though the concepts of collective memory and national history are inherently related, and at times almost impossible to distinguish, the main difference between these two terms are their intentions. (Whether or not they actually succeed in these intentions is a different debate.) History’s intention is to provide knowledge, but memory’s intention is to provide knowledge that informs the present. This distinction is important when considering the Bosnian Historical Museum, and is why I would argue that the Besieged Sarajevo exhibit is a memorial museum exhibit, based on Williams’ classification of memorial museums, housed in a historical institution.

The majority of visitor comments are typical of what I would imagine to be commonly found in the visitor books of other memorial museums. But it is the fact that such an exhibit is found in the Bosnian *Historical* Museum that explains the confusion over the role of the museum evidenced in many of the visitors’ criticisms. By contextualizing the exhibit in terms of the larger political and memorial climate of Bosnia, and of Sarajevo, this “in-betweenness” seems to fit. The theme of being “caught in-between” is a common narrative in the region – from the location of the Balkan Peninsula between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, to the division of Bosnia itself between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, to the dead space of funding for Sarajevan cultural institutions between State and entity levels of government – the Historical Museum’s memorial-historical role division seems almost expected.

⁷¹ Sturken, 9.

In the future, the continuation of the Besieged exhibit and other cultural institutions depends on political actors and on the actions of Sarajevans themselves; and, as anyone studying the country would quickly observe, it is difficult to predict the direction of politics in Bosnia. I will note, however, that there seems to be acknowledgement in Sarajevo about the need to remember. Whether this need is primarily a push from the Sarajevan people, or from outside influences is a different study; all I can say is that I have seen it mentioned by both.

In conclusion, I have found that while visitor impression books can be extremely helpful in defining the role of an exhibit and pointing out the “black holes” in visitor understanding, at least in the case of the Bosnian Historical Museum, they cannot provide a conclusive analysis of the larger state of the Sarajevan culture of memory for two reasons. The first is that visitor comments are from a primarily foreign (outsider) perspective, while the second is that they provide insight into only one of the memorial sites in Sarajevo. By including a contextual analysis of the exhibit, though, it is possible to hypothesize about the state of Bosnian cultural memory. In context, the data point to the city of Sarajevo as struggling to both remember and forget recent events. While on one side ethnicized politics promote separate memories of one nation over the others, on the other side the force of tourism keeps memories of the recent war on the surface, at least to those institutions and individuals who regularly come in contact with tourists, and encourages a more unified approach to remembering history.⁷²

One final question to keep in mind considers the future not only of Sarajevan cultural intuitions, but of the city of Sarajevo itself, and Bosnian culture of memory as a whole. Building a memorial is a physical expression of the need to remember, but quickly becomes a reason to forget. If, as the visitor books and observations suggest, the majority of people visiting the

⁷² The tour guides from both war tours (both Muslims) emphasized the impossibility of stereotyping *all* Serbs as the “enemy,” since a number of ethnic Serbs fought against the Bosnian-Serb army in defense of Sarajevo.

Historical Museum and other memorials sites are foreign tourists, then it would seem that, despite the underlying issues with the political structure of Bosnia, Sarajevans are trying to “move on.” The question is: will the Besieged Sarajevo exhibit follow? At what point will the *memory* of the siege become a *history*, if ever? That is, if it has not started this transition already.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

One of the major limitations of my study was amount of time I had in which to complete my research. One month is hardly enough time to examine one visitor book and all of its multi-lingual comments, while still taking into considering the larger context of the political issues surrounding cultural institutions in Bosnia today, let alone all of the books I had the opportunity to document. Ideally, I would have had more time to interview museum goers – especially during the more popular summer tourist months, and especially Sarajevo residents who have visited the exhibit.

A related limitation was that my language skills are limited in that I was proficient enough only to read comments in English and Russian comfortably, and moderately comfortably those in (BCS). I was lucky enough have friends translate a sampling of comments from languages such as French, BCS, and Farsi. However, comments in Italian were a major contribution to the memory books, but, as I did not know someone off-hand who spoke fluent Italian (and felt I had enough other comments to sort through in my limited time frame), I made the decision to not include them in my study. The same goes for other languages, such as German, Turkish, Chinese, etc.

Finally, almost by nature, the informal conversations I held tended to be with educated, liberal individuals, especially those with experience living or travelling in the West. This is because most visitors to the museum are foreigners, and most individuals interested in preserving

cultural heritage *when it is not necessarily in the obvious national interest* tend to lean more progressive. Furthermore my method of contacting individuals was to invite conversations through the website *Couchsurfing.org*, a site dedicated to connecting people travelling abroad, tended to connect me with people who held less traditional views. Another limitation of my population sample is that the opinions I gathered were predominately male; there was a decent spread of ages, but a notable exclusion of the elderly population.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

As stated in the previous section, I was unable to thoroughly examine all comments, and unable to translate entire language groups. Though my research provides an example of how to look at such comments, it is far from comprehensive. One option for further study would be to look at these comments in other languages to see if they follow similar patterns, as well as to consider the influence of the commenters' own cultural background in their perceptions of the exhibit. Also, further observation of and interviews with the visitors to the museum could provide interesting insights into what visitors consider the strong and/or weak points of the exhibit. Repeating this study after a significant amount of time has passed would also be beneficial in order to investigate changes (or commonalities) in visitor responses and the status of the museum, especially if the situation of the Bosnian government or the Sarajevo cultural institutions has changed significantly.

Another option for further study would be to investigate the visitor books at other cultural institutions in Sarajevo, or in other areas of Bosnia, such as in Herzegovina or in Republika Srpska. The aim of such research would be either an attempt to triangulate some of the findings of this study in Bosnia through the lens of visitor comments, or to open new areas of discussion and interpretation, especially in regards to museums in other regions. A similar analysis could

also be performed on visitor comment books in other areas of the Former Yugoslavia, such as in Serbia, to analyze the politics of memory there; in Belgrade, of particular interest would be the Museum of Yugoslav History and the House of Flowers mausoleum.

Future research could also dig deeper into native Sarajevo participation and responses to the crises facing cultural institutions. The visitor books tell us one story, but what would a greater sampling of the Sarajevo population have to say? Such research would be extremely helpful if it were to encompass a broader range of viewpoints (outside of my predominately liberal, male sampling), and/or tackle the political and funding issues in a more direct manner. For example, what progress have cultural institutions had in engaging local concern?

In short, museum studies in Sarajevo, and the in the former Yugoslavia in general are limited, and academic study of visitor impression books is scarce. This is especially the case when looking at link between museums, memory studies, and politics. Virtually any further study would be insightful and beneficial to the field.

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APPENDIX A

List of questions I sent to interviewees:

- What are your perceptions of the funding crisis facing cultural institutions? Why is there a crisis?
- Why do you think some institutions are succeeding fairly well (such as the assassination museum, the War tunnel...?) while others are struggling in comparison?
- If you've been to/remember the siege exhibit, what are your impressions of it? What's good about it? What was lacking?
- Do you think that there is a culture of memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina? What is it focused on (pre-1900s, WWI, WWII, Tito's Yugoslavia, the 90s, etc)? Who is propelling it, who is it targeting, is it succeeding, and is it helpful, harmful, or neutral?
- What do you believe the function of a (historical and/or memorial) museum is? Do you see the need for these types of institutions today/in the future? Why?
- When you visit museums, do you leave comments in the visitor impression books?

APPENDIX B

Examples of comment categories:

(1a) – Responses addressing the need to remember

- a. August 17, 2006, “Very moving exposition, that allows us to realize more and to not forget the hell the thousands of people lived for more than three years. We must also not forget the number of people that are marked for life, and the different regions of the world that are living such situation, and that is not about to be resolved.” [male], France (translated from French)
- b. August 26, 2012, “...This is more than a national treasure. It is a world memory and should never be forgotten.” [male], England

(1b) – Emotional responses

- a. March 29, 2006, “Images speak by themselves. An exposition that stirs our historical and collective conscience.” (translated from French)
- b. August 8, 2007, “What to say ? Nothing, obviously nothing will be just enough to describe all of this. This exposition for not forgetting, is remarkable and painful. And, Sarajevo is so beautiful today...” 8/8/07 (translated from French)
- c. June, 2012, “Devastating. Beautiful pictures of terrible things.” United Kingdom
- d. “How do you not hate?” [female]
- e. “...Seeing the emotion on peoples’ faces in this wonderful – but at the same time, extremely sad – exhibit, I can see emotion that I’ve never felt before – and probably never will...” [male], 34, USA

- f. “A very beautiful, very powerful history lesson. I understand better why I wanted to come to Sarajevo.” France (translated from French)
- g. Example of guilt: June 3, 2010, “...I was only a small child when the most recent war but on behalf of my country I can apologise that more was not done to help. The spirit of the people here puts me, my countrymen, and fellow Westerners around the world to shame. Thank you so much for opening my eyes and your incredible hospitality despite a lack of help from others.” Aberdeen, United Kingdom
- h. Example of personal experience: October 20, 2009, “Like many I am left without words. I survived the war here and I cannot contemplate all of this with a clear head. I came to look at the architecture. I saw the truth. Everyone’s truth. We must never forget. Never allow something like this happen again anywhere on the earth – never, to no one, nowhere!” (*“Kao mnogi ostala sam bez teksta. Preživjela sam rat ovdje i opet ne mogu o ovom svemu razmišljati čiste glave. Došla sam da gledam arhitekturu. Vidjela sam istinu. Istinu sviju nas. Nikad je ne smijemo zaboraviti. Nikad dozvoliti da se ovako slično dogodi igdje u svijetu nikad, nikom, nigdje!”*)

(1c) – Direct address

- a. July 19, 2012, “I hope Bosnia and Hercegovina can continue to overcome the divisions that are still around today. Buildings are easy to repair but history isn’t.” [male], United Kingdom

- b. (Referenced on Page 21) 2010, “I am sorry for what happened to you. But now everything looks good in Sarajevo. And I wish you and no one can suffer again.”
– Albania
- c. (Referenced on Page 21) August 31, 2010, “Who are you? People who have done this? Are you the human species? What did you want? Have you really achieved your goal?” (*“Tko ste vi? Ljudi koji ste ovo radili? Da li ste vi ljudska vrsta? Što ste hteli? Da li ste zaista positeli svoj cilj?”*)

(2a) – Comments on the importance of the exhibit

- a. August 13, 2006, “We would like to take this exposition as a message of hope, that tells us that such horrors will never happen again, nowhere. The exposition is very beautiful and moving, I hope that the message will be passed on...” [male], Paris (translated from French)
- b. August 1, 2012, “Belgium is so far away... It is only by coming here that I "realize" the horror of this war, of war” [female] (translated from French)
- c. August 26, 2012, “This is more than a national treasure. It is a world memory and should never be forgotten.” [male], England
- d. “I hope the museum will keep going on into the future – that it will keep showing/representing both to BiH’s people and the outer world the history of Bosnia-Hercegovina! Keep up!” [female], Norway
- e. “Forgive, but do not forget!!! Tell and show your children history and what caused us to be scattered all over the world.” (*“Oprostiti, ali ne zaboraviti!!! Pričati i pokayivati svojoj djeci istoriju i šta nas je dovelo da se raštrkano po cijelome svijetu.”*)

- f. “There is one photo in particular which must be one of the most sickening ever taken. I shall refrain from expressing myself in crude terms.”
 - i. [in response to above comment] “War is hell, it needs to be shown and not censored like in North America.” [male], Canada

(2b) – Criticisms

- a. August 23, 2008, “Interesting place, building condition memorable, but like others have said, more history explanation could be useful. However one only needs to read some history of area first to appreciate this museum more. The history during Yugoslav era could also be a bit more detailed. Very worthwhile museum. Hvala!” [male], Brighton, UK
- b. June 21, 2012, “Astonishing – I admire the decision to let the exhibits speak for themselves. More should be learnt from this and the exhibition is an excellent focal point. Thank you for telling me about it.” London.
- c. August, 26, 2012, “Very interesting museum even if some pictures are a little bit shocking. Except that it was kind of nice. But I still preferred the ground floor.” [female], 12 years old, Paris (translated from French)
- d. “Excellent exhibition but it could be much better. I hope you find the money to invest in it. Good luck to everyone.” Italy
- e. (Referenced on page 30) 2011, “In the name of God, There is a lot to say about the history of this land upon visiting this museum, but before one can speak, a heavy sorrow weighs on their hearts upon seeing the 'fuller' of this museum. Why must the documents of this beautiful yet painful history be kept in such a building without proper and standard facilities? I hope that the original documents and

examples of the military equipment are kept in a better place. One of the best ways to destroy a nation is to destroy its identity, and the identity of the nation becomes trivial. Protecting history is the requisite and front matter of preserving a nation's identity. Therefore, all ability and efforts must be put forward to its preservation, especially if the history is part of Islam and Muslims' history, on which today all powers are set on its destruction. This is an epic leaf of Islam's glorious history and Muslim elite and scholars must pass this history to the next generations.” an Iranian Muslim - Mohammad Hussain Abbasi [Persian date: 15th of Khordad 1390] (translated from Farsi)

(2c) – Catch-all commendations

- a. October 30, 2012, “Thanks for an interesting museum. All the best going forward.” [female], Norway
- b. “It is an amazing thing you are doing here. I will do my best to help if and when I am able.” [male and female], Brooklyn, New York

Graffiti

- a. “We wanted to go to the commercial center, but our teachers brought us there.”

b. Name lists:

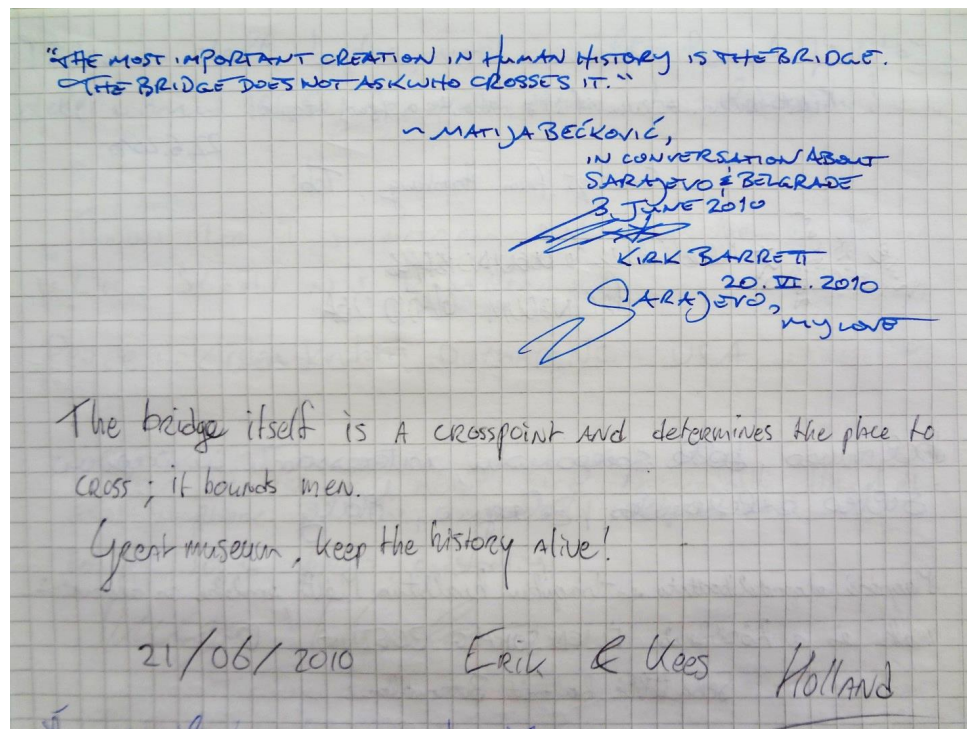
don d'argent chereux fleur Chere
Agostino Elena
16 April 2009
Helga Björnsdóttir Reykjavík
Iceland
Hilma Kinnunen — n —
H. Juttilu Ohto-Stalio
16/04/2009 Toriune Doumou

c. Picture:



Others

- a. (referenced on page 30) “What beautiful museum that must be kept forever. A life lesson that brings us back down to Earth. Thank you for this beautiful museum.”
Yann Montréal, ~~Canada~~ 7/02/07 Québec :) (translated from French)
- b. “Was this the reason the peace process started in N. Ireland about the same time?”
Ireland
- c. Interaction between visitors:



- d. Politically themed interaction:

