



The curators' concept for the new Austrian exhibition

The new Austrian exhibition in Block 17 of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau (presentation at the Vienna Museum) bears the title “Far Removed. Austria and Auschwitz”. The notion “far removed” refers to the geographical distance between Austria and Auschwitz, which was part of the Nazi strategy to conceal the genocide. At the same time, removal was synonymous with extermination: it meant the physical removal of the deportees – from Austria and from the realm of the living.

The exhibition focuses on this notion of being “far removed”, bringing the historical origins of the events in Austria and their culmination in Auschwitz closer to the visitors, removing the distance between the two historical locations but without connecting them on a single level. In order to grasp this notion not only intellectually, but also visually and tangibly, the main elements of the exhibition consist of three interdependent and interrelated levels: “Here” (Auschwitz), “There” (Austria) and “The Void”.

The concept has four main areas of substantive focus, which are embedded in the realms “Here” and “There”. These key areas are “**the beginnings**” (the origins of the Nazi Party in Austria up to the *Anschluss* and the construction of the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau; “**structures**” (the Nazi machinery in Austria and the camp system at Auschwitz); the “**options available**” to people in Nazi Austria and in the camp at Auschwitz and their use of these options to become perpetrators, bystanders or members of the resistance; and the “**liberation**” as experienced in Austria and in Auschwitz.

“Here” tells of the Austrian victims and perpetrators from the moment of their arrival in Auschwitz. The genuine artifacts, contained in vitrines, are embedded in their immediate spatial context – at the location of the atrocities. “There” is dedicated to Nazism in Austria, its early history, the *Anschluss*, the development and structure of the Nazi reign of terror and the key figures involved, and the fates of the persecuted. This part of the exhibition, which will also be presented using artifacts in vitrines, is not actually there. Instead, it will be projected onto screens. The real “Here” and the virtual “There” are thereby connected to each other by virtue of the illusion that the real vitrines continue to extend into the projection, with the real and the virtual vitrines thus forming a coherent whole.

This illusion is shattered as soon as a step is taken behind the screens into the inner room, “The Void”. The part of the exhibition dealing with the historical developments in Austria and, as such, everything prior to and far from Auschwitz (in “There”), vanishes. It is exposed as a mirage, nothing more than a distant memory. The fragile threads connecting the two places, times and worlds are ripped apart. For those deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, their only reality was the system in the camp, which dictated who would live and who would die.

The new exhibition will portray the fates of the Austrian victims in Auschwitz, the acts of resistance carried out by Austrian inmates there and the involvement of Austrians as perpetrators of and accessories to the atrocities committed there. As well as providing historical information, it will also provide a space for collective commemoration and private remembrance. A separate area of remembrance is dedicated to memorializing the horrors of Auschwitz and the fates of the many, often nameless, victims murdered in the gas chambers.

With this special concept the curatorial team is stepping up to meet the challenges presented by the circumstances unique to Austrian history and by the need to firmly anchor the exhibition at the international memorial Auschwitz Birkenau. In contrast to the exhibitions of other countries, which all had in common their occupation by the Nazis, the starting point for the Austrian exhibition is a different one, due to the shared responsibility of large swathes of the Austrian population for the perpetration of Nazi crimes. People who lived in Austria were ruthlessly persecuted and murdered, becoming victims of the Nazi atrocities. Yet equally, people who lived in Austria or had been politically and societally socialized there were actively involved in the genocidal barbarism – some prominently, other less so. The notion of Austrians as perpetrators or people complicit in the crimes was essentially glossed over in the previous exhibition. For this reason, biographies of Austrian perpetrators of Nazi crimes will be included in the new exhibition alongside biographies of people from all groups of victims, which shall remain the focus. The portrayal of the entangled history of Austria’s victims and perpetrators is intended to be a contribution towards adequately conveying Austria’s role in the history of Nazism.

Terms and conditions for the substantive work on the exhibition

The exhibition’s content is being developed in close coordination with the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, which has issued the following general guidelines for the national exhibitions at the memorial:

The exhibitions must be of a historical nature. They must portray the deportations from that country and the circumstances surrounding them. They should not be a repeat of the permanent exhibition, but are instead to provide information on the fates of the deported and murdered peoples of that country up to the liberation of the camp on 27 January 1945. A discourse on the politics of remembrance that goes beyond the camp and its historical context is not welcomed in the national exhibitions. Prior to the exhibition’s installation, all texts must be approved by the Museum. In view of the international nature of the location, the exhibitions are to be displayed in three languages (native language, Polish and English).