

Kazerne Dossin: A Museography Based on People

The transit camp, settled in the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, played a fundamental role in the “final solution to the Jewish question” in Belgium and the north of France. This camp can be considered the antechamber of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and of death for 95% of racial deportees. In June 1942, in Berlin, the Nazis decided to start deporting Jews from Belgium, France and the Netherlands. Belgium and northern France came under the command of Alexander von Falkenhausen. His military administration handed over the Dossin barracks to the *Sicherheitspolizei-Sicherheitsdienst* (Sipo-SD). On 15 July 1942, the Sipo-SD appointed Major-SS Philipp Schmidt, already head of the Breendonk repressive camp, to organize an *SS-Sammellager für Juden* there. Twelve days later, it was done.

On 27 July the Dossin barracks opened and received the first of some 27 500 racial deportees and internees.



Fig. 1: Arrival of the first Jewish inmates in the courtyard of the Dossin barracks, around 27 July 1942.

Kazerne Dossin, Kummer Collection

Between 4 August 1942 and 31 July 1944, 25 272 Jewish and 353 Roma men, women and children were deported from the *SS-Sammellager für Juden* with 28 transports to Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹ Only 1 226 of them – or 5% – survived. Two hundred and eighteen other Jews, of specific nationalities, were sent from the Mechelen camp to Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen or Vittel. Exempted from systematic extermination, the survivors numbered 148, an exceptional proportion which exceeded two thirds of the total number of these exceptional transports.

Although the barracks were an essential link in the machinery of the “Final Solution” in the Western Zone, their importance remains unknown.² Even the “liberation” of the transit camp during the night of 3 September 1944 took place without evoking any public interest. The Nazis and their acolytes simply fled, leaving behind 552 inmates.³

Every day, *Kazerne Dossin – Memorial, Museum and Research Centre* strive to bring this assembly camp out of oblivion and make its history known to the general public. Doing so, this institution continues the mission of its predecessor, the *Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance*.

1 *Dossin deportee's database*, created by Laurence Schram, status on 26 November 2024.

2 Schram 2017: 11–12.

3 Schram 2024: 58

THE DOSSIN BARRACKS: A CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

The construction of the Malinese barracks met the common needs of the Austrian army and the city bourgeoisie. Lodging the imperial soldiers in the burghers' homes or in cloisters did not satisfy either the soldiers or the city's inhabitants. The City of Mechelen requested the construction of a barracks in 1744, but it was only in 1756 that construction began, by order of the Archduchess Maria-Theresa von Habsburg, Empress of Austria.⁴ In 1781, the barracks were acquired by the State.

This barracks is a perfect example of Viennese classicism. It is a vast rectangular building, very austere, surrounding a central courtyard. It housed some 2 400 infantry soldiers. Between 1781 and 1940, the barracks played a pure military role, which was met in various ways.

Until 1914, the building became an arsenal and from 1918, an auxiliary depot of the Belgian 7th Line regiment. In 1936, the barrack received the name of the commander of this regiment during the First World War: Lieutenant-Général Émile de Dossin de Saint-Georges (1854, Liège – 1936, Ixelles). He was honoured as a war hero, because of his crucial role, especially in the Battle of the Yser (17–31 October 1914).

The function of the barracks between May 1940 and July 1942 remains a riddle. The Sipo-SD reassigned the building to its sinister function as an assembly camp for Jews, comparable to the camps at Drancy in France or Westerbork in the Netherlands. Unlike the repressive Breendonk camp, which became a Nazi propaganda weapon during the occupation, the Dossin Barracks was intended to be as secret as possible.

In the immediate post-war period, the building was recovered by the Belgian State. In the days following the liberation, the authorities locked up suspected and known collaborators. On 15 April 1946, the last of them were released or transferred to other prisons in the country. The Belgian army got its barracks back, which became a school and training centre for officers of the administration and financial services of the Armed Forces.⁵

In the years following the liberation, the first memory to emerge was that of the resistance and patriotism.⁶ Most of the Jewish victims, who were neither Belgian nor members of the resistance, were omitted. Racial deportation was not yet understood. The Jewish survivors struggled to make their voices heard and to organize themselves into associations. The *Association des anciens Détenus de la caserne Dossin* (AADCD) in Malines was created in February 1945.⁷ Between 1946 and 1949, it acted as a civil party in the trials of the SS guards in Mechelen. On 30 May 1948, this association placed the first commemorative plaque on the front of the building.⁸



Fig. 2: The commemorative plaque installed in 1948 on the front of the Dossin barracks and the monument to the 6 million victims of the Judeocide, erected in 1986. Kazerne Dossin

4 <https://stadsarchief.mechelen.be/het-hof-van-habsburg-eeen-plaats-met-geschiedenis-2> & <http://www.hofvanhabsburg.be/geschiedenis.html> (last access: 4 August 2025).

5 Van Steertegem 1975.

6 Schram 2017: 12.

7 Statuts de l'Association des Anciens Détenus de la Caserne Dossin 1945.

8 Joodse herdenkingsplechtigheid te Mechelen 1948.

The plaque features a star of David. Its text, bilingual French-Dutch, is set in a frame evoking the Tables of the Law. It reads: “Belgians, remember that from this barracks, 24 161 Israelites were deported to camps in Germany – 1942-1944”. This explicitly Belgian patriotic message calls on citizens of Belgian nationality to remember, whereas over 90% of the Jewish population are foreigners and stateless. By replacing the word “Jew”, stigmatized by Nazi ideology, with “Israelite”, Judaism is limited to religious practice. Finally, the mention of camps in Germany fails to mention the location of Auschwitz-Birkenau in occupied Poland.

In 1946, concentration camp survivors founded the *Amicale des Ex-Prisonniers Politiques d’Auschwitz-Birkenau*. This association defended a political vision of the deportation to the detriment of racial specificity. The two associations were rivals. The *Amicale* was more representative, while the Association of former Inmates mainly concerned Jewish internees who had not been deported and were considered “privileged”. In 1950, it ceased its activities on the death of its founder, while the *Amicale* continued to operate. In 1980, it became the *Fondation Auschwitz*, a centre for studies and documentation on the concentration camp world.⁹

In March 1975, the Belgian army left the building for the more modern Peutie Barracks.¹⁰ The planned demolition work was never carried out. The building was left to deteriorate little by little. In 1982, the City of Mechelen bought it. In 1984, the façade had been recognized and protected because of its historic relevance. At the same time, the city authorities decided to convert the building into a luxury residential complex, the “*Hof van Habsburg*”. This Germanic title refers to Empress Maria-Theresa of Habsburg. Thus, any reference to the Nazi transit camp was erased.



Fig. 3: View of the interior of the barracks in the early '90s. Kazerne Dossin, Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance Archive

In 1986, a monument was also placed on the façade.¹¹ The occasion was the construction of the ring road around Mechelen. As part of this, the railway line running just in front of the barracks was broken up. Six rails were recovered and transformed into a memorial: six unequal, authentic bars from the railway line that had connected Mechelen to Auschwitz were to symbolize the approximately 6 million Jewish victims of all ages.

It was at this point that Jewish personalities or associations highlighted the historic and memorial importance of the barracks. They worked to ensure that a memorial was created in the place from

9 <http://www.auschwitz.be/index.php/fr> (last access: 4 August 2025).

10 100 000 rekruten... 1975.

11 Saerens 2008: 243

which so many Jews and Roma were deported. The realization of the specificity of the Judeocide and the *Porajmos* (the extermination of the Roma) emerged only in the late eighties in Belgium. This explains why the first museum dedicated to these subjects was only created in the nineties.

JEWISH MUSEUM OF DEPORTATION AND RESISTANCE (JMDR)

In the middle of the 1980s, Natan Ramet, a camp survivor who had been deported from Malines mobilized the Jewish community to set up a museum there, at the very place where the history of racial deportation took place.¹² After over three years of hard negotiations, the *Consistoire central israélite de Belgique* purchased a very small area of 310m² of the front part of the building, thanks to the help of the Flemish local government, the Province of Antwerp and the City of Mechelen. This space was so small that the Jewish community had to buy a modest part of the basement.

Following the first stone laying on 2 September 1992 and the official inauguration by King Albert II on 7 May 1995, the museum opened its doors on 11 November 1996. The exhibition was devoted to the history of Judeocide in Belgium and northern France. The challenge had been to bring the main aspects of the persecution of the Jews and Roma and their deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau into an extremely limited museum space.

Natan Ramet has surrounded himself with a small group of experts to create this exhibition.¹³ Maxime Steinberg, the leading historian of racial persecution and deportation in Belgium, was responsible for the historical and educational aspects. Paul Vandebotermert, the experienced museographer behind several EUROPALIA international arts festivals or Universal exhibitions, designed the scenography and layout. Historian Ward Adriaens was appointed to coordinate the project, before taking over as director in 1995. Patrick Nassogne, an audio-visual specialist, and Laurence Schram, then a documentalist, joined the team.

In "The Scenography of the Museum of Mechelen",¹⁴ the historians emphasize that "when leaving the museum, the visitor should have seized the singularity" of this "genocide dispatching centre".

"They should know (...) that the mass of deportees only stayed a few days in this place of history, that the convoys that formed there took most of the deportees to their immediate murder in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The presence of children, including infants, among the deportees (...) and their systematic killing as soon as they left the convoys set this Jewish deportation apart from any other deportation."

The exhibition started with an overview of Jewish diversity in Belgium before the outbreak of World War II. Photos from family albums illustrated the national, social and cultural differences of this population. This first sketch already focused on family and individual histories, an approach that has formed the DNA of all the projects that have succeeded or resulted from the JMDR.

The exhibition followed the chronology of events in Belgium. The next section drew a parallel between the rise of Nazism in Germany and that of the New Order movements in Belgium between 1923 and 1939. There was a short section on the invasion of Belgium on 10 May 1940 and the installation of the military government of occupation, before moving on to the seventeen anti-Jewish ordinances issued by the Nazis but implemented by the Belgian authorities and administrations. The compulsory yellow star, the last step before deportation, occupied a large gallery.

Visitors then discovered a room devoted to summonses for so-called work – in reality, deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau – and to the large-scale round-ups in the summer of 1942. The theme of the mass going of Jews into hiding, the roles of their rescuers and of the resistance and the underground occupied a dead-end room. From there, the tour continued in the room dedicated to the deportations.

There, one side of an authentic goods wagon covered an entire wall. On the opposite side, all deportation trains sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau were incarnated by a few portraits or family photos of

¹² Kazerne Dossin 1993.

¹³ <https://www.shalom-magazine.com/Print.php?id=430309> (last access: 4 August 2025).

¹⁴ Kazerne Dossin, Coll. Maxime Steinberg 1994: 1.

deportees. Deportees who were murdered by the Nazis were coloured in purple, survivors, in blue. The bottom of each panel showed the number of Jews and Roma deported from the Dossin Barracks, the number of Jews gassed at the end of the selection process, the number of people tattooed and put to work in the Auschwitz concentration camp and, finally, the number of identified survivors.



Fig. 4: View of the "Transports Room" in the former Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance. Mechelen, 2011. Erik Lauwers

This choice made each of the transports more human. Showing so many pictures seemed essential to us to make the statistics more concrete. The small size of the space meant that it must be made in a symbolic way and with raw graphics. It was essential that the visitors had the feeling that these photos could come from their family albums. This intimacy and humanity are the highlight of this room.

The tour continued in the basement. The first room was dedicated to the extermination of Jews, first as part of the Shoah by bullets, then in the killing centres, in particular Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was immediately linked to the history of the Judeocide in Belgium. The second room evoked the world of concentration, the conditions of survival and the death marches.

The following area dedicated to the murdered children was undoubtedly the hardest, but also the most moving. For the museum's creators, it was essential for the public to understand that the specific nature of genocide is to deprive people of any possibility of future existence. As a result, it primarily targeted those who carry the future within them, i.e. women and children.

The penultimate room symbolically presented an assessment of the decimation through family photos, in which the murdered Jews and the survivors were immediately recognizable by the colour code already used in the convoy room.

The visit ended in a projection room on the ground floor, with the projection of Emile Vos testimony. This survivor recounted his life before the deportation, the loss of his wife and three sons, his return and the final realization of his family's devastation.

This modest *Jewish Museum of the Deportation and Resistance* (MJDR) was a resounding success. Appreciated for its educational approach, a lot of schools from all parts of Belgium visited it.

BELGIAN EXHIBITION AT AUSCHWITZ MUSEUM

In 1957, the *International Auschwitz Committee* decided to internationalize the Auschwitz State Museum, which was created in 1947. Every country that applied could have an exhibition room in one of the stone barracks in the former Auschwitz I concentration camp. The space allocated to Belgium is on the first floor of Block 20, the former contagious disease block.

The first exhibition, designed by the *Amicale des Ex-Prisonniers Politiques d'Auschwitz-Birkenau*, was inaugurated in 1965. In the context of the Cold War, the concept held on to a communist, universalist and anti-fascist point of view that excluded racial persecution. The specificity of the fate of Jews and Roma and the difference between concentration camps and extermination centres was not yet perceived. All victims of Nazi ideology were subsumed under the same category. As Sarah Timperman, archivist of the Belgian *Auschwitz Foundation*, stated:

*"Although the Jewish deportation was not hidden in the exhibition scenario, it nevertheless appeared last and represented only one fifth of the exhibition. It was integrated into the wider picture of Nazi crimes as a whole."*¹⁵

In the 1960s, the political and memorial landscape in Israel and Europe began to shift. Jewish associations started to claim that their victims are properly honoured and represented in the Belgian Auschwitz Exhibition. The exhibition therefore had to be adapted.

Nonetheless, it was not until 1982 that this second exhibition opened in Auschwitz. It was realized by Serge Creuz with limited means.¹⁶ The focus was on political deportation. Racial deportation was still overlooked. Historical photographs of Belgium during the Nazi occupation were contrasted with an artistic installation made of ashen sandstone and rusty metal sheets. The aim was to denounce and symbolize the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp. No distinction was made between political and racial deportations. Neither the genocide of the Jews nor the particular fate of the Roma was mentioned.

Sixty years after the liberation of the concentration camp complex, this outdated concept no longer corresponded to historical research or to the way to commemorate the Holocaust. According to the exhibition architect Paul Vandebotermiet, *"the presentation had become so corny that it was no longer presentable"*.¹⁷ On 27 January 2005, during the 60th commemoration of the liberation in the Auschwitz State Museum, King Albert II, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and Minister of Defence André Flahaut observed the pitiful state of the Belgian national exhibition. It was high time to modernize it in terms of content and form¹⁸.

The Belgian government appointed several organizations to carry out the renovation. The Royal Military Museum, the Service for War Victims, the Foundation Auschwitz, the National Memorial of Fort Breendonk and the JMDR. After a few meetings, only the JMDR carried out the project. The team that produced the JMDR redesigned the Belgian House at the Auschwitz Museum. The new exhibition, which opened on 7 May 2006,¹⁹ focused on the history of persecutions and deportation of Jews and Roma from Belgium and Northern France.

The exhibition is structured around three topics. In the first smallest room, a very brief and didactic overview of the political situation in Belgium before and after the Nazi invasion: the rupture

¹⁵ Timperman 2016: 23.

¹⁶ Bulletin périodique 1982.

¹⁷ Vandebotermiet 2006.

¹⁸ Laporte 2006.

¹⁹ *De Belgische tentoonstelling...* 2007: 4.

between the King and his government, which continued its activities in London, the establishment of a military regime of occupation and the many forms of collaboration and resistance.²⁰

The second room is devoted to the legal status of the Jews implemented by the occupying authorities in Belgium from 28 October 1940 to 27 May 1942. The design is deliberately minimalist. The 17 ordinances, reproduced in large format, occupy an entire wall. The titles and essential text extracts are underlined in red, such as registration in the Register of Jews, prohibition on exercising certain functions (judges or university professors, journalists), creation of a Jewish council, depriving of their businesses and goods, exclusion of Jewish children from non-Jewish schools...

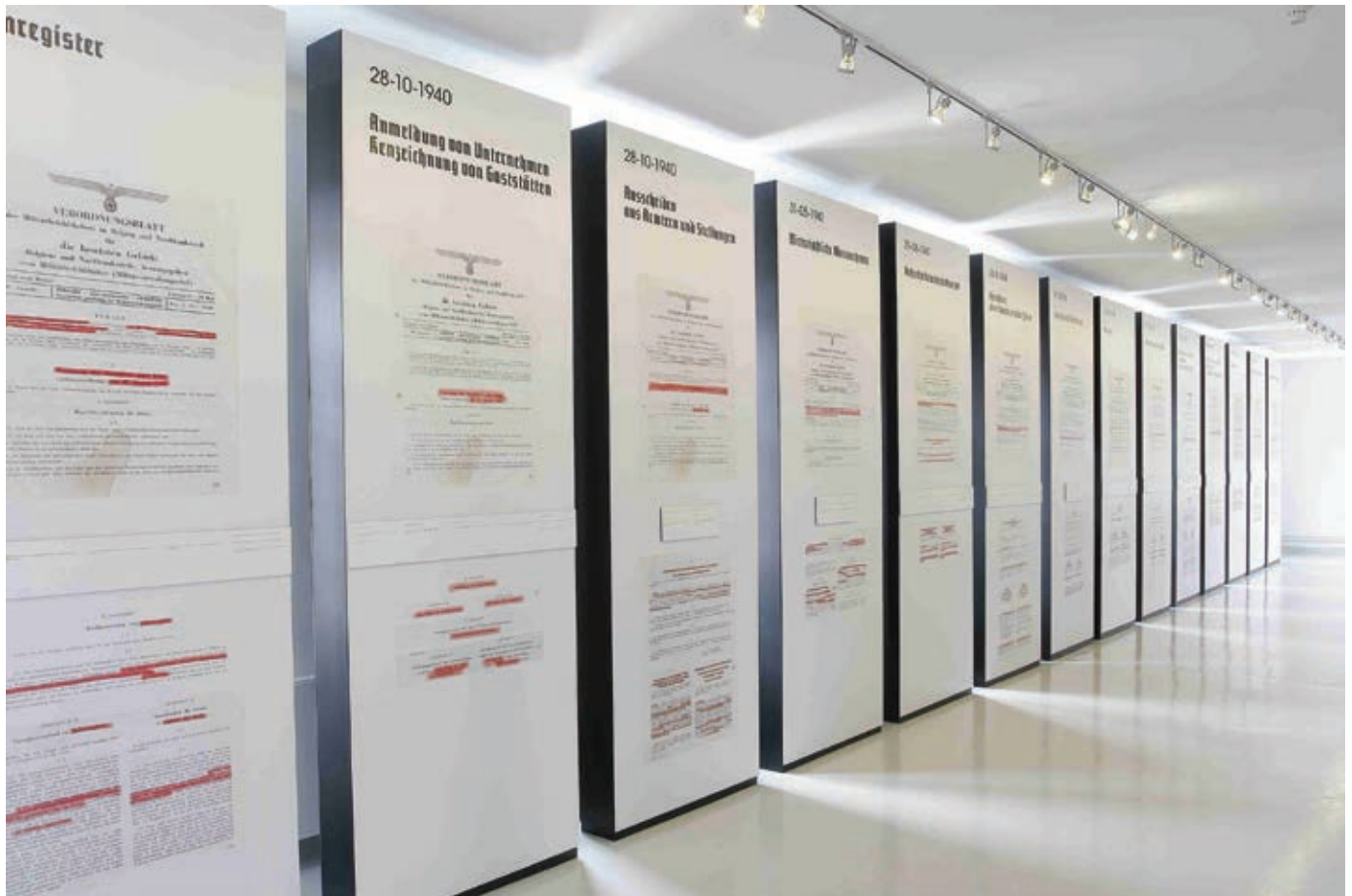


Fig. 5: View of the “ordinance wall”. Auschwitz Museum, Oswiecim, 2006. J. Sliwczynsk

Opposite this long wall, the impact of each of the ordinances on the daily lives of Jewish men, women and children is depicted in a selection of relevant documents, photographs and archives. For example, the compulsory registration in a particular register (28 October 1940) is illustrated by newspapers and posters announcing of the measure, as well as one identity card stamped with the words “entered in the Register of Jews”. To document the exclusion of Jewish children from non-Jewish schools (1 December 1941), the Jewish children now deprived of education are identified in red on class photos.

The last measure, undoubtedly the most dangerous and shocking, required all Jews over the age of 6 to wear a yellow star in public (27 May 1942). Given its importance, this point occupies two panels in the exhibition. The first one focuses on the reactions of the Belgian authorities and population. The Brussels mayors refused to distribute the star, unlike the situation in Antwerp. The pro-Nazi press was delighted, while the underground press protested against this stigmatization. On the second panel, there is only one image: a much-enlarged portrait of a child wearing the distinctive sign on his clothing.

²⁰ <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/visiting/national-exhibitions/belgium/> (last access: 4 August 2025).

Focusing on individual experiences arouses the visitor's empathy. A sort of closeness is established between him and the Jewish people whose experiences are recounted. This succession of seventeen anti-Jewish ordinances excluded Jews from society. By depriving them of all civil rights, the Nazis made them vulnerable and prepared them to deportation. As Eggert Reeder, head of the German military administration, noted on 15 June 1942:

*"With the measures taken previously, the legislation concerning the Jews can be considered closed in Belgium. The Jews have nothing more than a limited means of existence. The next step will be to achieve their evacuation from Belgium."*²¹

This section ends with images of Auffangslager Breendonk and the SS-assembly camp settled in the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, heralding the upcoming deportation. This is an introduction to the last part of the exhibition, which covers deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau and genocide.

The third and final section looks at the deportations from 1942 to 1944, with the 28 convoys that left Mechelen for Auschwitz. On entering the room, visitors come face to face with an impressive gallery of portraits. Large pre-war photographs of deportees are depicted on the front of each panel, transport by transport. The pictures are arranged chronologically by transport. In this series, one figure from this group is portrayed each time, symbolizing all deportees of the convoy in question. Invariably photographs are chosen straight from a family album. This also gives us an insight into the diversity of the Jewish community living in Belgium before the war.



Fig. 6: Panels devoted to the yellow star. Auschwitz Museum, Oswiecim, 2006. JMDR



Fig. 7: View of the "Transports Room". Auschwitz Museum, Oswiecim, 2006. J. Sliwczynski

Below the photos, there is information for each transport about its identifying number, the number of people deported, the number murdered in the Birkenau gas chambers immediately after arrival and the number sent to the concentration camp, and the number of people who survived.

²¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, RW36/189, *Tätigkeitsbericht n° 20 der Militärverwaltung für die Zeit vom 15. März – 1. June 1942*, Brussels, 15 June 1942, A50.

The back of each panel explains a specific story or the context of the transport in question. We mention, for example, the cooperation of the Antwerp police and the mass round-ups, the fate of Mala Zimetbaum, who was executed after escaping from the Auschwitz with her lover, the survival strategies of most Jews who went into hiding to avoid deportation, the attack on the 20th convoy, the collaboration and denunciations, the rescue networks that saved Jewish children, the deportation of the Roma, who were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in a separate transport in January 1944...

Auschwitz-Birkenau meant an abrupt death for most of the Jewish deportees. Therefore, the Belgian pavilion draws on the specificity and the fate of each convoy. From our point of view, it was necessary to respect the site itself, namely, the rooms in a block in a former concentration camp. We refused to get into sophisticated constructions. Simplicity was essential to leave the power of evocation of its walls.

According to designer Paul Vandebotermert:

*"Simplicity was essential so as not to distort the place and lose the power of evocation of its walls. The white colour, the luminosity, the dimensions of the room were suitable for a powerful scenography. (...) The principle remains the same as in the JMDR, but the richness of the photo library of the Dossin Museum made it possible to carefully choose emblematic pictures illustrating each convoy. Above all, we did not want to fall into a maudlin history. Our aim was to restore the human dignity of these people who had been stigmatized to the point of destroying them."*²²

There, where history comes to an abrupt end for most of the Jewish and Roma deportees, the Belgian pavilion draws up an inventory of history, and the fate of each transport receives all the attention they deserve.

KAZERNE DOSSIN – MEMORIAL, MUSEUM AND DOCUMENTATION CENTRE ON THE HOLOCAUST AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The *Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance* has been a growing success. It has gradually reached its maximum visitor capacity, with 30 000 school visits per year.

At the end of the 1990s, Belgian politicians realized the strategic importance of the memory of the Shoah at a time when the extreme right was recording alarming electoral results. In 2000, the Flemish authorities planned to create a big "Flemish Holocaustmuseum" in a highly communitarian Belgian context.²³ After the failure of this concept, a new project entitled "*Transit Mechelen. Museum over Vervolging en Volkenmoord*".²⁴ [Museum on Persecution and Genocide] was submitted in 2004. It trivialized the history of the Shoah, making it just another human rights violation among others. Its specificity was denied.

As one journalist pointed out,

*"The title of the report, »Transit Mechelen«, the suggested new name for the museum, does away with the terms Jew, Deportation and Resistance. It advocates absorbing the »Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance« into a large Museum of Human Rights dedicated to all genocide and other mass crimes."*²⁵

Moreover, its scientific committee consisted almost entirely of Flemish historians and no specialists in the history of the Shoah. With the exception of the curator, Ward Adriaens, the JMDR's founding team was excluded, including Maxime Steinberg, the pioneering historian of the persecution and deportation of Jews and Roma in Belgium and northern France. In September 2005, Yves Leterme, the new Flemish Minister-President, rejected the project as too theoretical, too empty, too chaotic and unrealistic.²⁶

²² *De Belgische tentoonstelling...* 2007: 17.

²³ Saerens 2008: 245.

²⁴ *Transit Mechelen...* 2005: 51.

²⁵ Brajbart-Zajtman 2006.

²⁶ Saerens 2008: 247.

A third attempt, initiated in 2006, finally led to the expansion and reorganization of the JMDR under the name *“Kazerne Dossin – Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on the Holocaust and Human Rights”* [KD]. In 2010, the JMDR closed its doors to be expanded and updated. The Flemish government turned finally the small private museum into a European museum. The architect bOb Van Reeth was in charge of the construction of a brand-new building. On 26 November 2012, this new permanent historical exhibition opened its doors in front of the historical barracks.



Fig. 8: Aerial view of the Kazerne Dossin site. The brand-new building (left) in front of the historic site of the former assembly camp (right), 5 September 2013, Vlaanderenvanuitdelucht.be/Marc Sourbron

The Flemish government has appointed a new committee, headed by Herman Van Goethem, historian and Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Antwerp. This time, JMDR historians, including Maxime Steinberg, were actively involved in the design of the new museum. The scenographer and historian Petra Gunst was appointed to strengthen the team. Neither Maxime Steinberg (1936–2010) nor Natan Ramet (1925–2012) will see the last of their work. Both died before the inauguration. However, their influence remains palpable.

KD's Board of Directors had also developed a new Mission Statement, in line with the requirements of the Flemish authorities:

“Kazerne Dossin uses the historical narrative of the persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust in relation to the Belgian case as a starting point for analysing the current phenomena of racism and exclusion of population groups and discrimination on the grounds of origin, belief, conviction, skin colour, gender or sexual orientation. This adds the new and ambitious challenge to integrate a Human Rights section into the permanent exhibition.”²⁷

²⁷ Van Goethem 2015: 3.

As Herman Van Goethem pointed out,

*'this is the first museum in the world to explicitly include the words »Human Rights« in its name. For this reason, it establishes a link between the historical theme of the Shoah and its relevance to our times.'*²⁸

But the concept focuses on the persecutions and racial deportations from Belgium and north of France and the Judeocide remains the central subject.

This exhibition is designed on three floors relating to three themes (Mass, Anguish and Death) linked to discrimination, persecutions, mass murders or genocide of other populations in other times. On each floor, visitors will discover an emblematic photograph related to the theme being explored.

1° Mass

On the first floor, a large photo of people enjoying music at Tomorrowland Festival introduces this theme. This depiction of a jubilant crowd is reminiscent of the mass phenomenon that characterized the 1930s. The 3rd Reich succeeded perfectly in ideologically fantasizing people. Within a huge group that engulfs them, individuals adopt their behaviour and act differently than if they had been on their own. Nazism mobilized people and led them to help commit the largest mass slaughter ever committed.



Fig. 9: View of the first floor "Masse" of the permanent exhibition.
Christophe Ketels

Faced with the rise of Nazism and the explosion of persecution, many Jewish immigrants took refuge in Belgium. The approach chosen emphasizes the social, political, economic, religious and geographical diversity of the Jewish population... It also draws parallels between the fugitives of the interwar period and today's refugees, and their respective journeys.

²⁸ <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/2012/11/24/de-la-shoah-aux-droits-de-lhomme-R4UIOWIAOVA7FK4OQOHUHQ63JQ/> (last access: 4 August 2025).

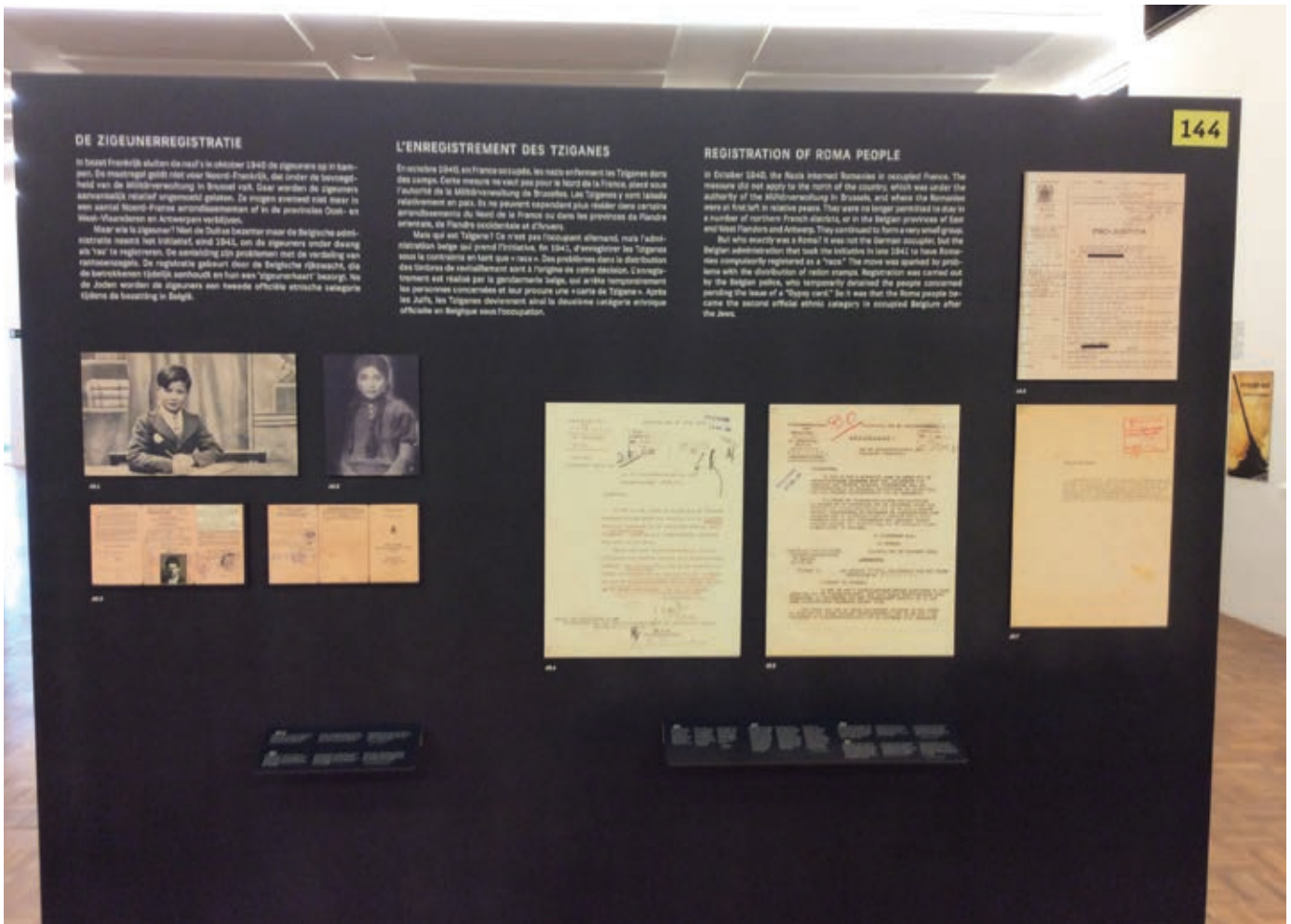


Fig. 10: View of the first floor. Panel showing the registration of Roma and other forms of administrative discrimination. Laurence Schram

The particular situation of the Roma is also widely explored. The legal discrimination developed by the Belgian and French states well before the Nazi invasion is highlighted. Finally, an important part of the exhibition shows the impact of the first Nazi ordinances on the daily lives of Jews, and the participation of the Belgian authorities in their execution.

2° Anguish

The large photo of Tiananmen's tank man illustrates the resistance of the individual to an authoritarian state. We might wonder whether the title given to this floor is appropriate. Does it refer to anguish, resistance or both? The anti-Jewish laws promulgated by the Nazis between 1940 and 1942 and their consequences are here the main subject. Photographs, objects and documents show how Jews lived when they were deprived of their rights. Particular attention is paid to their survival strategies, because they all tried to escape the Nazis.



Fig. 11: View of the second floor "Anguish" of the permanent exhibition. Stany Dederen

The fate of the persecuted is always linked to the actions of the perpetrators as well as those of the bystanders. Questions of room for manoeuvre and individual choices are induced by our triangular approach. These categories are not watertight. In a context where discrimination is established by law or encouraged by a regime that approves it outside a legal framework, addressing both resistance and collaboration is essential. Analysis of the attitude of public servants is also highly relevant. Obviously, the Human Rights section focuses on lynchings and racial segregation in the United States, the Belgian colonization in Congo as well as on Apartheid in South Africa.



Fig. 12: The wall devoted to genocide on the second floor of the museum.
Christophe Ketels

3° Death

A huge view of Birkenau's famous entrance gate was therefore the obvious choice of emblematic image for this theme. This floor establishes the link between the Dossin barracks, the antechamber of death, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Visitors can find out how the camp was organized and what role it played in the extermination of Jews and Roma. The SS ruled by terror and arbitrariness. The profiles of some of them are briefly reviewed, as well as some of the deportees' experiences.

The tour continues through niches filled with photos of deportees displayed in gilded frames. Some of the information on display includes the names and dates of birth of the victims, as well as figures for each transport. This aspect is directly inspired by the JMDR convoy room and the Belgian pavilion.

Then, visitors are led into a long narrow passage where the evolution of the genocidal process is developed. Its various phases are reviewed on both sides, left and right: the T4 euthanasia program for "worthless lives", the creation of ghettos, the mass murders perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen and the industrial-scale extermination centres, of which Auschwitz-Birkenau was the

deadliest. Although we wanted to avoid any morbid voyeurism, the photographs are harsh, as horrible as the reality was.

The 3rd area on this floor describes life in the concentration camps. Some stories of survivors and hidden children show how difficult it was to return to “normal life” in their world that the Nazis had decimated. While the survivors had to rebuild everything, the time of the trials of the Nazis and their collaborators began. Throughout successive trials (Nuremberg, Auschwitz, Eichmann...), new concepts have emerged in international law, such as crimes against humanity, genocide and crimes against the Jewish people. In Belgium, on the contrary, Nazi crimes were tried under national criminal law. This reflection completes the visit to the permanent exhibition.

The mechanisms that led to the extermination of the Jews and Roma are deciphered. Parallels are drawn with the genocide of Hereros and Namas, Armenians, Tutsis, the mass murders committed by the Khmer Rouge... in order to make our visitors reflect on the past but also on the present.

The museum’s analysis is based on theoretical frameworks. The first is the triangle formed by the perpetrator, the victim and the bystander. This approach highlights the wide range of human behaviours and raises the question of the room for manoeuvre. It is also important to bear in mind that these theoretical categories are not watertight.

Thus, an SS guard belongs by definition to the group of executioners. But, for example, if he helped the victims to survive, his profile could be nuanced. Similarly, some Jews, who were obvious victims, fell into the category of perpetrators by putting themselves at the service of the Nazis to ensure their own survival. The most interesting category is undoubtedly that of the bystanders, those who were neither victims nor executioners. Were they passive bystanders? Does passivity really exist? Do resistance fighters or rescuers fall into this category? Where do the Belgian civil servants who carried out Nazi orders and contributed to racial persecution rank?

This reflection immediately leads to the notion of room for manoeuvre and choice. This latitude obviously varies according to whether you belong to one or other of the categories described above, as well as other factors: gender, money, integration, social position, individual experience, age, etc. A single Jewish mother with her children will obviously not have as much room for manoeuvre as a Belgian collaborator. This margin varies according to one’s place in an established hierarchy.

A second approach is based on Stanton’s ten stages of genocide. The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish Polish lawyer who combined the words *genos* (in Ancient Greek: family, clan, tribe, race) and *cide* (in Latin: killing) to designate the systematic extermination of men, women and children (the Jews) of a particular population group. In his wake, US research professor in Genocide Studies and Prevention Gregory Stanton identified ten steps in genocide:²⁹ Classification,

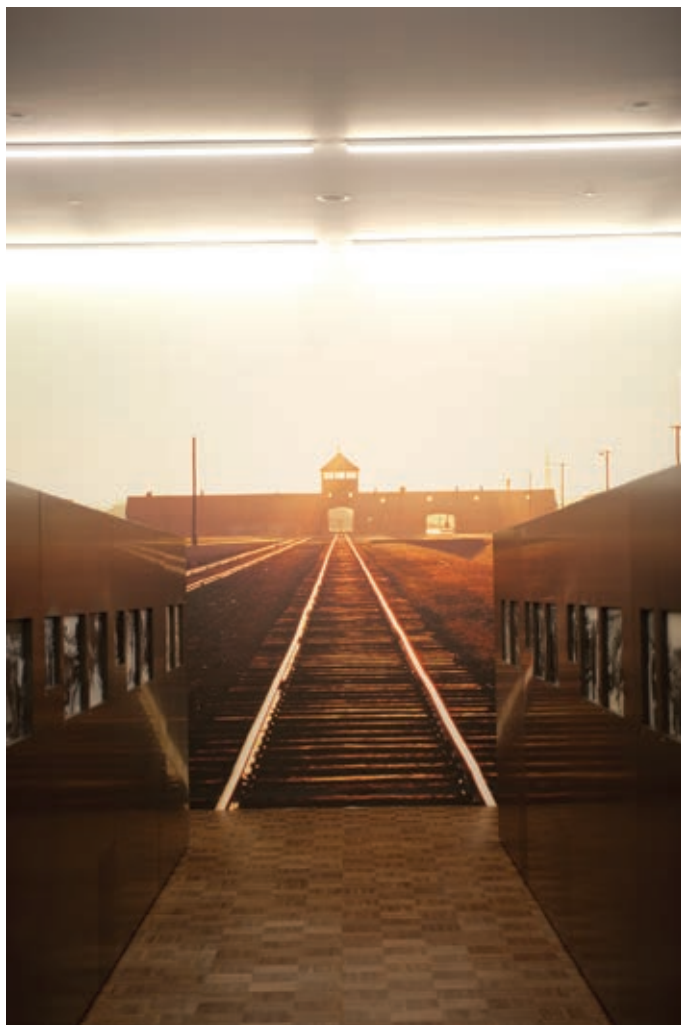


Fig. 13: The “tunnel” wall devoted to genocide on the second floor of the museum.
Christophe Ketels

29 <https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages> (last access: 4 August 2025).

symbolization/stigmatization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, denial, discrimination and persecution. Kazerne Dossin documents these different stages in the historical exhibition to provide visitors with a common thread. These developments are repeated several times in the Human Rights section. Of course, this is a theoretical diagram. Consequently, the chronological order of the stages may vary and some of them may not occur. It is, however, very useful if you want to identify the events that herald genocide or mass murder.

Remembrance Wall

The strongest point of the Kazerne Dossin museum is undoubtedly the wall of portraits. This wall extends from the 3rd floor to the basement. It contains over 21 000 photos of deportees. Every year, in November, a ceremony is held to add the portraits collected during the year to the wall. All 25 843 deportees have their place there. Grey silhouettes of men, women and children replace those whose photographs have never been found. Sepia tones identify survivors who had returned from deportation or escaped from transport.



*Fig. 14: The Remembrance Wall.
Pieter-Jan de Pue*

The long series of portraits begins on the 3rd floor, in the top left-hand corner, with the 1st deportee from the 1st transport. It ends in the basement with the last deportee from the last transport and the 218 deportees from the extraordinary transports. These small transports were sent to places other than Auschwitz-Birkenau. The decision to show only the portraits, without naming or numbering them, was a carefully considered one. We wanted to show all these Jewish and Roma people, men, women and children, in all their diversity. Creating a mass effect is a much more effective way of confronting visitors with the scale of the Shoah than numbers and statistics. It is also an obvious way to restore their humanity and their quality of human beings.

KAZERNE DOSSIN – THE RENEWED MEMORIAL

This new memorial is erected on the site of the former assembly camp, in the space formerly occupied by JMDR. For logistical and budgetary reasons, the first scenography of the memorial was created as well as possible under complex conditions. Deemed too cold and unattractive, the plan to completely redo it was born.



*Fig. 15: View of the first memorial exhibition.
Pieter-Jan de Pue, 2013*

The new version of the memorial was designed by scenographer Antoine Goldschmidt. It was inaugurated on 26 January 2020. The history of the *SS-Sammellager* is central.

The visitor first walks through a dark corridor. Multiple shifting eyes pierce through openings in one of the walls. If the French saying goes that the eyes are the mirror of the soul, here they are the simplest expression of the deportees' humanity. In the first large room, a patchwork of photos provides numerous snapshots of Jewish and Roma life before the war. These photographs are also projected onto the central wall in large format. Opposite, photos and films evoke the rise of Nazism in Germany.

Visitors are then directed to an interlocking door. An illustration of the barracks door as it looked in 1944 is stuck on the door. This is a symbolic way of suggesting that Jewish and Roma people are entering another world where they will be deprived of their freedom and their identity. The next step is to go to the *Aufnahme*, the camp's registration office. Here, newcomers were searched, their identity papers and their money, jewellery and valuables were seized by the Nazis. They were searched, humiliated, often molested and dehumanized. Jewish typists were ordered to register them on the deportation lists and to deal numbered card to wear around their necks. This was their new identity.

This procedure is illustrated here by two desks equipped with old typing machines. To the sound of typing, spotlights project the names of the deportees on white sheets of paper. All walls are

covered with reproductions of several hundred documents confiscated from the Jews at the *Aufnahme*. This dispossession of the victims' identity means that they were now entering an unknown lawless world and where they were no longer considered as human beings. Through a series of administrative measures, the Nazis sought to impose further dehumanization, another step in a merciless process aimed towards extermination.



Fig. 16: *The Aufnahme Room*.
Guy Kleinblatt, 2020

Leaving this room, visitors arrive in a large, bright room with a view of the inner courtyard of the Dossin barracks. The following section is dedicated to the deportee's miserable daily life at Dossin. The inmates, particularly the Jewish artists put to work in the *Malerstube*, the painters' room, bore witness in their drawings and paintings to daily life in the assembly camp. A lot of objects or documents are shown here: a wooden *Hanukkia*, an embroidered belt, several drawings, a *Ketubah* ... and especially a collection of letters and postcards sent by inmates of the Dossin barracks or thrown out of the trains by deportees. All letters were recorded by men women, teenagers, children, elderly people with different voices. Texts were recorded in Dutch, French and English. The visitor can listen to the content of these messages through earpieces.

The bell that hung in the courtyard of the Dossin barracks set the pattern of the prisoner's day, from dawn to bedtime. In this room, one hour symbolizes two years, one day lasts in 5 seconds. The bell resounds to the rhythm of the departures of 28 deportation trains. In 1942, 17 transports followed one another in 100 days. From November 1942, departures to Auschwitz-Birkenau became less frequent. Six transports left Mechelen in 1943, five others in 1944.

The visitor then descends a staircase that leads to the memorial's space of recollection and remembrance. In this dark room, the Hebrew letters "Zachor" stand out in metal from a parterre which contained as many white stones as there were deportees. Since October 2023, we have organized a project called "Every name counts". This project is open to everyone, from the families

of deportees to any interested people. The aim is to record the first names, last names and ages of all deportees from Mechelen. We hope to obtain as many voices as there were deportees.

All native languages are welcome, from the Belgian national languages to Hebrew, Yiddish or others. Recordings are expected to be completed by 2025 and will be heard in this room.

The walls and ceiling of the next room are covered with portraits of children under the age of 15. This part is entirely dedicated to the systematic murder of Jewish and Roma children, a primary target of the extermination. Genocide means the will to deprive a human group of any future existence. Therefore, the executioners will foremost eliminate those who carry the future within them: women and children. This display was already present in the JMDR. The idea has been taken up again as it was, with the addition of new photographs of children.



*Fig. 17: The Children's Room.
Antoine Goldschmidt, 2020*

After the opening of the new memorial, we noticed that visitors were taking the white stones from the "Zachor" room to write a thought on and place them in this space. This place is undoubtedly the most emotional part of the Memorial.

The memorial ends on survival. The visitor is confronted with the poignant and harsh testimony of Emile Vos. Deported with his wife and three sons, he was the only survivor. His testimony is particularly interesting because he only talks about the lack, the absence of his family. He perfectly conveys the difficulty survivors faced. His world was destroyed, and he had to overcome many difficulties to reconstruct himself emotionally and physically, to rebuild a family, to regain a place in society. He succeeded in this formidable challenge and rebuild a family. He adopted a hidden child, Norbert Vos, whose father died in deportation. The story of this child's rescue is told in this room, and some of his personal objects are exhibited there.

Returning to the ground floor, the visitor returns to the room of pre-war Jewish life and is left with the feeling of the scale of the destruction of the Jewish and Roma populations.

CONCLUSION

Since the JMDR opened its doors, several museum projects have followed in its wake. The small private museum has grown and gained international recognition. Despite the fact that different teams have been involved in the various projects, the same principles can be found in all of them.

A Belgian Context

Unlike other Holocaust museums that seek to synthesize the different aspects of the Holocaust in the Reich and in Eastern Europe, our approach focuses on the context in Belgium and northern France. This choice is obviously motivated by the fact that the museum (or memorial) is located in the Dossin barracks, on the very site where the crime began. The place is therefore not insignificant, it is both a bearer of history and memory, like Block 20 at Auschwitz. Respect for the sites led us to develop a synthetic, refined and luminous museography, while many memorials always favoured dark rooms.

The Individual is at the Centre of our Concerns

Throughout all our exhibitions, the emphasis is on personal stories, illustrated by archive documents. This point constitutes our originality. The mass of racial victims who succumbed during the Shoah often reduces them to numbers or statistics. These data are certainly essential, but they have the effect of erasing the individual. Our biggest challenge was to visualize the huge number of deportees for our public. Our goal was to restore the identity, the image, the dignity and the humanity of each of the deportees. In addition, the use of individual or family journeys allows us to reach a wider audience, to make history accessible to them and to arouse their empathy.

The Politics of the Lesser Evil

At the end of the 1970s, the historian Maxime Steinberg was the first to denounce the policy of the lesser evil and the passive cooperation of the Belgian authorities, sometimes even their collaboration. His work paved the way for other researchers until the publication of the report *“La Belgique docile”* (2004). The evolution of historiography had to be integrated into our exhibitions. The Belgian authorities refused to enact anti-Semitic laws but never refused to execute them. This concept of passive execution makes it possible to analyse the depth of the involvement of Belgian high-ranking officials in the policy of persecution of the Jews.

Perpetrators – Victims – Bystanders

Human behaviour is at the centre of this question. It differs depending on whether one is alone or in a group. Individuals will tend to fade under the pressure of a mass and influences the actions of each individual. Thus, our analysis of events will no longer be Manichaeian. It will take into account the multiple shades of “grey” that exist between “black” and “white”. The “grey” accomplices are generally sidelined in foreign museums, which tend to emphasize the (main) German culprits. Finally, questions about room for manoeuvre arise from the very essence of this reading grid.

Stanton’s Ten Stages of Genocide

This analytical schema makes its explicit appearance in Kazerne Dossin’s concept. This theoretical tool makes it possible to identify the processes and mechanisms that precede mass murder or genocide. Detecting these warning signs could make it possible to combat them and halt the spiral of violence. It applies as much to past massacres as to those we are currently coping with.

Philippe Mesnard, Director of the Auschwitz Foundation in Brussels, described our approach in these terms:

“Another major challenge, and one that has been brilliantly met with intellectual risk, is the way in which the permanent exhibition constantly establishes links between what led to the Shoah, in the specific situation of the Second World War, and – without in any way diminishing the specificity of this genocide – the mechanisms of discrimination and mass violence that enabled other collective violence against minorities or dominated groups, generally victims of racial stigmatization.”³⁰

A Human Rights museum

As required by the specifications, a section of the exhibition was to be devoted to Human Rights. The tragic episode of the extermination of Jews and Roma is undoubtedly the one in which all the human rights of these two groups were violated, if not annihilated.

The question of which human rights violations would be presented in the museum was a complex one. It was impossible to be exhaustive. What events should be presented? The obvious solution was to link the stories to the themes of the floors. On the first floor, the stories of refugees and immigrants who came to Belgium are retraced. The second-floor deals with discrimination encouraged or established by the authorities. On the third floor, the theme of genocide and mass murder takes centre stage.

This point of view in no way trivializes these various events. On the contrary, it is by comparing them that we can identify their uniqueness and specificity. The facts are comparable, but not identical. History does not repeat itself. However, the underlying mechanisms work in the same way.

Une scénographie lumineuse et didactique

Contrary to the current trend in museum scenography, successive scenographers Paul Vandebotermert, Petra Gunst and Antoine Goldschmidt have avoided dark rooms and immersive reconstructions

“that invite visitors to immerse themselves, through empathy, in a simulated atmosphere that would bring them closer to the experience of the victims (and provide them with the redeeming illusion of this impossible proximity).”³¹

The rooms are bright, with high ceilings, and the information is easily accessible and perfectly intelligible, thereby emphasizing the didactic aspect of the representational economy.

Finally, to conclude, the main missions of Kazerne Dossin are to keep the memory alive, to defend Human Rights and encourage visitors to think critically about the world today, to form their own judgement and become actors rather than spectators.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

100 000 rekruten kregen er hun opleiding – Mechelse kazernes worden ontruimd 1975.

Het Volk n° 50. 28 February

Brajbart-Zajtman, Sara 2006: À Malines, le Musée Juif de la Déportation et de la Résistance est menacé de disparition par une commission d'historiens qui veut banaliser la Shoah. *Le Soir* 16 January.

Bulletin périodique 1982 December. Amicale belge des Ex-Prisonniers politiques d'Auschwitz-Birkenau – Camps et Prisons de Silésie.

De Belgische tentoonstelling in Auschwitz. Het boek - L'exposition belge à Auschwitz. Le livre. Mechelen, 2007.

³⁰ Mesnard 2013: 110.

³¹ Ibid.

Joodse herdenkingsplechtigheid te Mechelen. *Gazet van Mechelen* 31 May 1948. (<http://www.auschwitz.be/index.php/fr>; last access: 4 August 2025).

Kazerne Dossin, Coll. Maxime Steinberg: *La scénographie du Musée de Malines. Concept note for the Ministry of Education* 24 May 1994.

Kazerne Dossin, Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance Archive. *The Museum of Deportation and Resistance* 14 May 1993.

Laporte, Christian 2006: Une présence plus digne à Auschwitz. *La Libre Belgique* 3 May.

Mesnard, Philippe 2013: Caserne Dossin (Malines). Le parti pris de la clarté et des droits de l'homme. *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* nr. 115. 110–119.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.1163>

Saerens, Lieven 2008: Mechelen: de Dossinkazerne – De moord op Joden. In: Tollebeek, Jo et alii (eds.): *België, een parcours van herinnering*. Amsterdam, 235–249.

Schram, Laurence 2017: Dossin – L'antichambre d'Auschwitz. Brussels.

Schram, Laurence 2024: La "libération" de la caserne Dossin. *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* nr. 139. 51–62.

Statuts de l'Association des Anciens Détenus de la Caserne Dossin. *Moniteur belge* act. 315. 24 February 1945.

Timperman, Sarah 2016: De l'Amicale de Silésie à la Fondation Auschwitz: Construction de mémoires. ASBL Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Brussels, 23 December. (translation by the author).

Transit Mechelen: Museum over Vervolging en Volkenmoord. [s.l.], [s.ed.], 2005.

Vandebotermiet, Paul 2006: *Conceptnota*. 13 November. Kazerne Dossin, Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance Archive.

Van Goethem, Herman (ed.) 2015: *Syllabus – Formation des Guides*. Mechelen.

Van Steertegem, Clement 1975: Adieu Malines. *Vox* nr. 27. 31 July.