

Erected on the banks of the river Dyle, Kazerne Dossin consists of two sister buildings since 2012. A memorial was installed where the old museum used to be, while a monumental concrete cube harbours the new museum. It is indeed an impressive memorial complex. Time to meet its chief curator who, as a university professor, combines research and memorial practice at the level of society itself.

→ Interview led by **Philippe Mesnard** and **Anneleen Spiessens** (Translation: Sarah Voke)
on 28 November 2014 in Antwerp with Herman Van Goethem, professor in Law and History
at the University of Antwerp and chief curator at Kazerne Dossin (Mechlin, Belgium).



CLEARLY, THIS MUSEUM CONSTITUTES A WORK OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY



How did Herman Van Goethem come to be interested in memory?

Herman Van Goethem: I studied History and Law and I always strove to work at the junction of these disciplines. I have gained a lot from this. I became a professor very young, at the age of 31, as I was lucky to be able to follow a professor who was finishing his career. As far as teaching, I have primarily taught on the History of Law and Institutions. As far as my research, which I feel is a real vocation for me, I delved into the fascinating archives on the political history of Belgium in the 19th and 20th centuries, namely what is termed the “community problems” of the country, the relations between Flemish and Francophones, and State reform. I also took a great interest in sorcery trials. They are terribly interesting. I also spent time on trials such as Nicolae Ceaușescu’s, on 25 December 1989.

He was a famous sorcerer...

H.V.G.: Yes. It really was, to refer to René Girard, a scapegoat trial, a totalitarian trial. The phenome-

non of collective violence, the kind of violence which takes on the shape of rites, mass rites, is the point I focused on. In 1994, I published a vast study on King Leopold III with Jan Velaers (Velaers & Van Goethem 2001); I then edited the war journal of a minister (Van Goethem 1998). Around year 2000, after the publication of Lieven Saeren’s book on Antwerp and the persecution of the Jews (Saerens 2000), I moved toward questions of law pertaining to the town of Antwerp’s responsibility during the occupation, as well as the organization of the raids, the police, etc., I was guided by questions such as: Where was the burgomaster? What about the King’s Prosecutor?

I turned toward a thorough investigation of the administrative collaboration for which there lacked an historical framework, despite valuable advances in the research on this subject. It is easy to study the administration of France during Vichy. Collaboration was official and anti-Semitism was rooted in the daily lives of the administration much more than it was in Belgium, where collaboration was more reserved. Two ●●●



●●● subjects here were particularly interesting to study as far as the administration: collaboration and the repression of resistance. It was indeed important to know what public prosecutors had done in the face of a resistance which had been declared illegal. It was not allowed to commit attacks if one was not a member of the military, to kill people in the street, or to publish without the name of the legally responsible publisher – a statutory requirement in Belgium which was obviously not respected for tracts. This was an illegal resistance, but what legal actions were taken? An eminently political question! On top, there is the very delicate dossier on the persecution of the Jews. The vast project was then to study Belgian Administration during the Second World War. The starting point was Antwerp, as these archives were closely available, rich and numerous. I spent years studying the archives of Antwerp's police until I had assembled an overview, though not complete, nevertheless understandable enough to apprehend how it had functioned.

Then in 2008, I was asked if I would be interested in heading up the creation of a museum. It was certainly very different from anything I had done up until then. Expertise was really crucial and I had the required skills. An extraordinary coincidence: the site of the Dossin barracks holds a concentrated amount of history on the Second World War in Belgium: its administration, its collaboration with the recording of the interned, all of this by Belgian authorities. Without fully knowing what was going to happen, deportation was carefully prepared on the administrative level, not only in Antwerp, but also in Liege, Brussels and elsewhere. Yet at the time of the raids, people took a step back. Are we also going to cross this line? In Brussels, people said, "No!". In other towns, people did get involved in the raids. My own experience had equipped me with the knowledge and the analytical tools for this subject. Moreover, I had been told that we not only needed a museum about the Holocaust in Belgium, but on Human Rights. This was more complex to think through and represented an important challenge.

So, I worked on the museum concept for a year. If the approach to the Holocaust in Belgium did not present any problems for me, the question of how to articulate it through a museum remained. The option was to build our axis on the analysis of mass violences. What happens when a man kills not only one human being, but many? What is considered normal in an army context (a uniform, a number, a ritualized violence), is it



also accepted when it comes to assassinating women and children? In order to explain this, history and/or law was not sufficient. Humanities at large were needed. I felt ready; it took me a year to put together a concept which was then unanimously approved.

So, Kazerne Dossin was the first commitment of this kind for you?

H.V.G.: Indeed, this project is not part of my career, yet it lies at the very core of my research and is the continuation of all that I have gathered over 35 years. I took a special interest in the conception of an exhibition and in photography. I have done a lot of research on 19th century photography, namely for an exhibition on Antwerp from 1850 to 1880, then, on a completely different level, with an exhibition on the history of Jesuits in Antwerp in the 16th and 17th centuries. The starting point were archives from the Saint-Charles-Borromée Church. Since 2003, I have been teaching a course on "history and image", which explores how images are used as an historical source. This is essential for the creation of a museum on the Second World War, and moreover on the Holocaust. I worked with Petra Gunst and her firm Tekst & Beeld for the elaboration of the museum in terms of space and arrangement. She was responsible for the lay-out and the multimedia. I took care of the content. Together we chose the objects. We did this with a small team of people.



Photos © Ph. M.

What was your approach? What are the basic principles of this concept which clearly, by the arrangement of the spaces and by the themes discussed, distinguishes itself from many other European museums?

H.V.G.: We focused on the process of mass violence. The first floor deals with the masses producing violence in Germany, already between the two wars and in Belgium from 1939-1940 onward. On the second floor, we raise the question of fear, both the fear victims experienced and that of ordinary people who also wondered, “Can I do something?”. This is why, on the second floor, for the entrance panel, I chose the symbolic cliché where a man, anonymous and vulnerable, stands tall in front of tanks at the Tien An Men Square. And the third floor focuses on death.

On the first floor, we privileged pictures which show this active mass. People breaking things and laughing, smiling children. And there is this picture, essential in my opinion, taken at the very beginning of Nazi Germany, which portrays a man sitting on a goat, holding a sign which we cannot make out what is written, with the SA standing next to him and the entire village gathered around. There are in fact two pictures. I only show one, the first one, as he walks around the village. The second one perfectly illustrates ritualized violence. There is most likely written on the sign something like “*Ich bin eine volks fremde*”. This has nothing to do with the Jews. It was a SPD socialist Burgomaster, arrested

in May 1933 by the SA and humiliated at the occasion by the crowd. He was interned in a camp and liberated by the Americans in 1945, after which he became again the burgomaster of his small town. This picture is very representative of the theme of masses. It portrays children laughing. We understand that what was happening in Germany (at the time) was frightening. People sprung on the Jews and devoured them. This mass, which held a huge amount of power, was instrumentalized by a State which used it as a political force. It is a formidable weapon capable of producing extreme violence, and the State moved from one legality to another: what is done is perhaps still illegal, but this no longer is an interesting question. The persecution of the Jews became the logical consequence of the political situation, and the Night of Broken Glass, an evidence. Throughout all of Germany signs that read “*Juden betreten diesen Ort auf eigene Gefahr*” were put up. Imagine today people putting up signs claiming: “Muslims enter this village at their own risks and perils”. What does it mean to accept that in a State! We insisted on the fact that racial, anti-Semitic and repressive ideology was very important in the context of the 1920s and early 1930s. This ideology was perhaps then not yet the State’s, but it was nevertheless generally accepted.

It is not easy to find such pictures and it is also very difficult to interpret them. For example, there are pic- ●●●

••• tures of the first of May 1933 in Germany, during the boycott of Jewish products, and there are pictures of people passing by. But how can we distinguish the people who simply happen to be passing by from those who had an anti-Semitic intention? On one picture of the Night of Broken Glass, a couple is laughing. We suppose they are laughing. We always say that it is a couple, yet how do we know that it is a couple? Simply because it shows a man and a woman together, we think they are a couple. They perhaps don't even know each other. So, it is in fact very difficult to interpret these pictures. There is a recurring choice of pictures in the permanent exhibition, which come back again and again. For the guides who walk through the museum, this is an underlying theme. They can choose, and they can link what they explain to this specific picture.

In this way, the museum finds itself at the crossroads between an academic world and civil society. And when you speak of guides, we can sense that you are preoccupied that knowledge be transmitted; we can feel your desire for transivity, to address the visitors.

H.V.G.: The museum was conceived for visitors, either individuals or groups. The latter always ask for guides. As for individual visitors, the essential key to understand is generally the introductory film they can watch at the entrance. The analysis of anti-Semitism is found in the film, and hardly at all in the museum. The film really is the introduction. Thus, when ordinary visitors see photos of masses on the first floor, they read them with the film they have just seen in mind and thereby understand the reasons for our choices. As for groups, the museum firstly fulfils a pedagogical project. Clearly, this museum constitutes a work of collective memory. The person who was twenty years old in the 1970s knew very little. People had a very vague image of what the collaboration was. A huge effort has since been made and the museum roots itself in the continuation of this work, as a continuation that is alive, dynamic and in link with society. One must understand that Flemish nationalism in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s was a movement of the masses. Intellectuals were the ones who reflected on democracy, such as Hendrik De Man, from Antwerp and president of the socialist party. In doing so, the collaboration took root in this popular nationalism and involved a vast political collaboration of society, larger than on the Francophone side. A memorial study, which aims to understand this context and its specificity is important. It has taken

Flanders decades to see and to understand this history. The museum must be an instrument of understanding.

Yet, there was also resistance in Flanders?

H.V.G.: Indeed; however, it was much less present than on the Francophone side. This work on memory has been engaged with already. University historians have written a lot in the press and they have also often participated behind the scene. Debates have been organized and there have been publications. A real work has been accomplished, there was a great unanimity at universities and among journalists of the VRT (Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organization). A certain connivance; we were all on the same wave length. We succeeded. It has taken twenty years. Around the year 2000, we have more or less arrived. There have also been public and practically official excuses by Frans-Jos Verdoodt, one of the representatives more or less accredited to speak in the name of the Flemish movement, publicly declaring that the collaboration had been a mistake, that it should not have happened. There were also important moments of conscious awakening in certain Flemish circles. The N-VA, a Flemish-nationalist political party in Belgium, has adopted this line. As a democratic party, it distances itself from this disturbing heritage, even if a certain duplicity can be felt in its speech. I now don't have to explain to my students that the choices made by the Flemish movement were a fundamental error. It has become obvious.

Still, there is an important amount of nationalism on the Walloon side.

H.V.G.: Yes, and there is generally a lack of studies on that. However, more people in Flanders than in Wallonia hoped for a German victory. After the war, statistics on convictions revealed that for 56% of the population residing in Flanders, excluding Brussels, there were 62% of convictions. Proportionally, that is 11% more than in Wallonia. But I am certain that there were many more cases dismissed in Flanders. This has yet to be researched. We have statistics on resistance which are absolutely certain because they are not samples: 25% of resistance press was Flemish. This is obviously remarkable since 56% live in Flanders. Resistance was much more Francophone. I included all of this data in the museum, in the form of statistics and maps. During the training for the Flemish and Francophone guides, weeks prior to the



© Ph. M.



The museum mainly aims to be about the Holocaust and the history of Belgium. But it was also important to link it to situations which, today, concern the public and, among others, schools.



opening of the museum, I explained all these points with statistics. I told them to look at the map, Flanders, Wallonia, the resistance. The Flemish guides said: “Oh yes, of course, that’s how it was, we know it.” But the Francophone guides answered: “But sir, if you show this, you’re going to reinforce all the prejudices against the Flemish. There still was a Flemish resistance, look: 25%.” Therefore, I added information on the Flemish and Dutch resistance, so that the guide could deliver his speech. Nevertheless, the progression in how the past is now understood, differing to earlier understanding, is not contested. It is accepted. The journey is complete.

In the museum, this local aspect which deals with Flanders also joins, at a completely different level, with the question of Human Rights and its universal dimension. This is namely seen as you progress from one floor to another and are confronted with pictures of the Apartheid and lynching. How did this come together?

H.V.G.: The museum mainly aims to be about the Holocaust and the history of Belgium. But it was also important to link it to situations which, today, concern the public and, among others, schools. The introductory film also focuses on migration problems of the 1960s, the lynching crimes, King Leopold II’s Congo, the Apartheid, and other genocides. It was important to see these transitions throughout the museum as people move up the floors. They convey another universal meaning, and guarantee a link with the following floor. But what is equally very striking on the second floor, is that on one of the large pillars it is shown that in April 1941 in Antwerp, there was a mini “Night of Broken Glass”. We see a crowd ready to break everything and burn down the synagogue on the Oostenstraat in Antwerp. Pogrom is too strong a word because people weren’t killed, but if the rabbi had been there, he may have been thrown out of the window. It is pure coincidence that nobody was killed. What is shown here can be compared to the lynching of blacks in the United States. The structure of the violence is not identical but nevertheless similar. It is “illegal”; it is not authorized; it cannot be done. However, official discourse condones anti-Semitism, like in the United States where a racist discourse decreed the inferiority of black people. Actual laws discriminated black people. And the official discourse ended up making them into culprits, scapegoats. So sometimes, when things would not go well, the crowd would be there and would begin to break things and kill. This is a very interesting case because we notice well-dressed people laughing. These are absolutely shocking pictures. There are also pictures of the Congo under Leopold II. It was not a genocide, yet mortality rates were situated between five and ten million human beings. Blacks were dehumanized, treated like animals. In the same way as dogs’ ears were cut off, so were black people’s hands. This form of violence is founded upon an ideology and thereby becomes widespread. The third floor presents mass killings, but of a genocidal nature where the State is directly involved. The big difference between the second and third floors is that the third floor centres on the State as an organization which regulates and administers the crime. The ●●●



© Ph. M.

- second floor does not deal with State structures, but rather initiatives which come from everywhere.

When we analyze the figure of the criminal, as we do within Human Rights, we are introducing into the museum a new focus which is generally not very present in museums on the Holocaust. We also wish to analyze criminals in order to show that they are very ordinary people, who resemble us and who, often without any previous criminal records, are capable of committing mass crimes. It is not a question of analyzing high state officials but ordinary people, in light of, for example, analyses by Christopher Browning (1992) or Harald Welzer (2005).

In counterpart, there is also an ethical project which consists in showing that unarmed resistance and refusal were possible even under Nazi occupation. There were margins; there always are. Some people said “no” during mass executions in Poland when it was about killing women and children. Browning found that 5% of the people showed resistance, which is not a lot but still not insignificant either. Here as well, for example, a police officer in Antwerp refused to partici-

pate in the raids. He lost three days of paid holiday and that was all. Brussels’ burgomaster was an important figure. What he did in June 1941, publicly exhibiting his protest against the Germans, was courageous. And public opinion changed in Brussels; it was no longer defeatist. This resistance was very important and we made it present on the first and second floors, which end in September 1942. This here is mainly a question of individual resistance. Organized resistance became much more widespread in Belgium in October-November 1942, in another context than the persecution of Jews. This resistance was important, though it came too late for the 17,000 Jews who had already been deported. Jews were in turn helped by many individuals, most of whom remained anonymous. They also become organized, of course, especially within the Committee for the Protection of Jews.

Such a vision of resistance is also a pedagogical concept, in the same way as the conception of the museum proposes a global view of history to a much wider audience than simply an academic one. Yet there is not only

content. The museum also distinguishes itself with a clear aesthetic stance, different from many other museums. The spaces are very light, very open, the visitors never finds themselves overwhelmed or overridden by emotion.

H.V.G.: Actually, the building had already been built before the museum was conceptualized. These large spaces, completely white, with an artificial neon lighting, are fundamental choices for a museum. I did not take part in the conception, but it suited me, for it facilitated a distancing which I personally needed in order to face working on such a subject. I did not seek to exploit emotions because things in themselves were already so intense. Showing them in all their bareness and cruelty was already sufficient. So, I followed the approach to the building such as the architect had planned it. And in order to counterbalance the coldness, we placed right at the entrance of the museum space images of people's faces. A wall with 26,000 people who are looking at you. There is an economy which consists in neutralizing the coldness of the building, yet without adding to the horror or slipping into pathos. The entire set functions, even though some people esteem that there should be a more emotional approach and that the space could be more conducive to a sort of "community of compassion". As far as I am concerned, I am hostile to visitors being conditioned as if they ought to experience an event which they did not live and cannot live again, fortunately. It would very quickly become kitsch. We have a lift for thirty people. Should we shove people inside and then say: see what it feels like to be locked in a wagon? We did not use a scenographer, except at the beginning, though we had to let him go quickly. In the end, the only scenographic element, if it can be so called, is the long corridor on the third floor where we see the walk toward Auschwitz. Minimalist scenography. Let's keep our distance. It is already terrible enough. Yet, people even suggested that I put pictures of corpses on the ground, in this corridor, which the visitors would have then trampled. There were numerous debates on this point. On the other hand, I find the Memorial on the ground floor of the older building [the original barracks] too cold. It needs some changes. From the start, I had the feeling that it was not right, whereas a similar atmosphere satisfied the museum space.

Let's talk about the institutional affiliation of the museum. Is it linked to a ministry?

H.V.G.: Yes, we are a kind of small island on the



As far as I am concerned, I am hostile to visitors being conditioned as if they ought to experience an event which they did not live and cannot live again, fortunately.



Flemish Prime Minister's budget. It was a project that was taken up by Luc Vandenbranden, the minister president of Flanders at the end of the 1990s. He came from Mechlin. The idea first sprung from there. Then, Patrick Dewaele, whose grandfather died in the camps, carried on when he was himself minister president in 2001-2002. The initiative comes back to him. I think this is how it is happening: Flanders is becoming more autonomous and therefore wants to have its own museums. In Flanders Fields in Ypres for 1914-1918 and Kazerne Dossin in Mechlin for 1939-1945. On the other hand, we do not have any museums in Flanders on the 19th century: as if nothing happened... ■

→ **Works cited**

- ◆ Browning, Christopher, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: Aaron Asher Books & HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.
- ◆ Van Goethem, Herman (ed.), *August De Schryver. Oorlogsdagboeken 1940-1942*. Tielt: Lannoo, 1998.
- ◆ Saerens, Lieven, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2000.
- ◆ Velaers, Jan & Herman Van Goethem, *Leopold III: de koning, het land, de oorlog*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2001.
- ◆ Welzer, Harald, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2005.