



Academic Event Report

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Event: Immortalizing Sacred Spaces: A Virtual Conversation

Venue: Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Ontario, Canada

Date: 30th April 2025

On 30th April 2025, the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Ontario, Canada, hosted a talk by Paweł Sawicki, an author and press officer at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (ABSM), as part of its “Conversations” series. Sawicki’s talk, entitled “Immortalizing Sacred Spaces”, was designed to coincide with the travelling exhibit “Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away” at the ROM. Sawicki’s presentation, live-streamed from the Auschwitz I section of the ABSM, was under thirty minutes in length and was followed by a period for questions and reflections, during which participants shared their experiences at memorial sites that commemorate tragic events.

Outside of the introductory remarks, Sawicki’s talk was divided into eight sections: ‘Creation’, ‘Development’, ‘Memorial’, ‘Space of the Memorial’, ‘Space of Memory’, ‘Preservation’, ‘Development for the Future’ and ‘Sacred Spaces’. Although the talk was designed to explain the development and evolution of the Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz complex and the ABSM, one of the main objectives of Sawicki’s talk was to discuss some of the challenges of preserving the site and maintaining the ABSM’s vision of how it should present itself to tourists.

Authenticity was a major component of Sawicki’s talk and his responses to questions: he used either the term ‘authentic’ or ‘authenticity’ approximately eighteen times. For Sawicki, authenticity is important since it “is helping us to tell the story”. One of the ways in which the ABSM has tried to cultivate a sense of authenticity is through the preservation of on-site structures, which is part of the mandate of the ABSM. Sawicki illustrated this with the example of a barracks. The ABSM engaged in a multi-year conservation effort to preserve it despite it being more cost-effective to demolish and reconstruct the barracks. He stressed that the ABSM aims to maintain the authenticity of the site “for as long as is possible”, a concern that Robert Jan van Pelt recognised: the site’s

authenticity continues to fade since it “constantly needs to be rebuilt in order to remain a ruin for us” (van Pelt, cited in Curry, 2010). There are reconstructed areas at the ABSM, including its execution wall, and as Sawicki correctly highlighted, visitors need to be aware that they are not interacting with the original structures used during the Holocaust. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt (2008) noted that such an acknowledgment has not always been the case for visitors to Crematorium I.

One of the questions following the presentation homed in on why trees and grass are present at the ABSM, as the questioner felt their presence created a false sense of “humanity” within the concentration/extermination complex. Sawicki suggested the answer comes back to authenticity: photographic and artistic images document trees at the site during the Holocaust, although trees are removed if they threaten the structural integrity of the buildings. Interestingly, such visuals at the ABSM can clash with the ways in which visitors have conceptualised the site, especially at Birkenau, as Sawicki noted the ABSM does not “want to turn it into mud”. Daniel P. Reynolds (2018) similarly observed that he “was not prepared to experience the tree-lined lanes among solid brick structures as superficially pretty” when he laid eyes on Auschwitz (p. 64), while Andrew Curry (2010) pointed out that the “peaceful” setting of Birkenau makes it “almost impossible to imagine the sea of stinking mud that survivors describe”. This raises one of the more common questions in Holocaust studies regarding representations: how can such an event be represented when even survivors are unable to fully articulate it? Sara Grossman-Weil, reflecting on what she witnessed at the Bergen-Belsen camp in 1945, captured this challenge: “It was a sight that is beyond any description or understanding or imagination” (Grossman-Weil, 1987, cited in Dwork and van Pelt, 2008, p. 397).

Sawicki noted the narratives the ABSM presents and the ways it manages visitors are a “work in progress”. The site has had to constantly negotiate with the requirements of its educational objectives, its mandate on preservation, the demands of tourism and the various socio-political influences that have all shaped the site into its current incarnation. In the ‘Development for the Future’ section, Sawicki discussed the need to strike a balance between preserving the site’s authenticity and building the infrastructure to support its educational objectives and manage the flow of visitors. During his talk, Sawicki mentioned the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, which was erected

between the remains of two of Birkenau's gas chambers in 1967. Henry Kamm (1967, p. 1), who covered the dedication of this monument, felt this location "provide[d] a setting no other monument can dominate". Sawicki asserted that this monument would not have been erected at that location had it been proposed today, indicating a shift in thinking at the ABSM since it does not currently "want to build any more monuments because we would spoil the authenticity of the space". Sawicki is also aware that such an approach "limits the commemorative aspect" at the site, and he contrasted this approach with the number of monuments erected at the Mauthausen site, which leads to the question of how memorials utilise the space that they have at their disposal. There is no single way in which to commemorate the Holocaust, and the nature of the memorial can be dependent on local contexts, including the condition of the space in which a camp is located and the nature of its remains, if there are any.

The ABSM bears an enormous responsibility since the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex is one of the main symbols of the Holocaust in the popular imagination, with its notorious phrase "Arbeit Macht Frei", and it has become a popular destination for tourists. It has been eighty years since the liberation of this complex, and the number of survivors of the Holocaust and of Auschwitz-Birkenau specifically has been steadily dwindling. Reflecting on this talk prompts me to question how the ABSM's role might evolve once the last of the Holocaust survivors have passed on—whether it will become more significant as a tangible space, or will it initiate any fundamental changes. Such concerns have been a part of Holocaust discourse, as Steven Cooke and Gilly Carr (2023) believe "Holocaust sites take on additional responsibilities as witnesses to the past" when there are no Holocaust survivors left to testify. The question of whether these sites will play an additional role in Holocaust remembrance is notably pertinent given the levels of Holocaust denial and ignorance. It also brings up the question of whether the ABSM will change its philosophy on monuments, especially at Birkenau. A monument in the form of a walkway 1,000 metres in length through the Birkenau site was proposed by Oskar Hansen and Zofia Hansen in the 1950s, and it had some degree of approval, but Dwork and van Pelt (2008, p. 378) noted survivors rejected it since it did not have a "place for them". Dwork and van Pelt (2008) believe that this monument could fit well into the Birkenau site once the last of the survivors have died. Whatever the future holds for the ABSM, it is likely that

the ways in which it represents the Holocaust will continue to be a site of academic and popular discussion.

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