

Panel discussion of Global Cyber Peace Conference held on June 27, 2020

How do museums and memorial sites deal with contemporary atrocities and war?

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On June 27, this online discussion has been organised within the Rotary Peace Project Incubator (RPPI) initiated and hosted by the Swiss/Liechtenstein Rotarian Action Group for Peace: www.rppi.ch. Within the RPPI, we design various peace projects which utilise cultural resources and strengthen cooperation between Rotary Peace Fellows, Rotary clubs and other international experts. Please reach out to us at nsineaeva@gmail.com, if you are interested in learning more about the working group *Cultural Resources for Peace*.

The panel discussion featured representatives of several museums, memorial sites, and minority organisations which work with continuing atrocities and their victims within different cultural, social, and geographical contexts. The discussion was moderated by Shahriar Kabir - a Bangladeshi writer, filmmaker, and human rights activist, and Natalia Sineaeva - a genocide scholar, museum educator, and member of the 'NEVER AGAIN' Association. The live chat was facilitated by Emrah Gürsel, project coordinator at KIgA e.V.

The panelists focused on the projects they are implementing, and how they relate their work on the memorialisation of past atrocities with contemporary atrocities, human rights abuses and peace work. They also addressed contemporary challenges their communities are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the potential which museums and memorial sites working on mass atrocities have to address such issues as food security, growing violence and xenophobia, and social justice. The panelists were asked to think how their work can facilitate cooperation with Rotary clubs within Rotary focus area of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. In the context of the discussion, the concept of the

museum was understood as a broader centre for humanity, but is not limited merely to history and also incorporating the present and the future. Tali Nates, the founder and director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre and chair of the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation, presented a case study of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, which focuses primarily on the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, but goes broader to cover other genocides and mass atrocities. The centre explores the connections between genocides and contemporary human rights violations, inviting visitors to think about the consequences of prejudice, discrimination and racism. A human rights approach has been adopted to the exhibitions and educational programmes. The centre promotes social justice and cultural diversity, and develops critical citizenship. The history of genocide is an entry point to discussing the history of colonialism, racism, homophobia, and apartheid in South Africa. At the centre of any discussion is an individual who can be remembered through art, poetry, and films. The Centre encourages visitors to be upstanders, more active and critical citizens. Currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the centre focuses its work on contemporary African issues, such as food security. Its activities go beyond South Africa – it covers such issues, for example, as the persecution of minorities such as the Yezedi in Iraq, and the consequences of the civil war in Nigeria. One of its projects is a leadership programme for students to build resilience and resistance to violence, and to develop skills to challenge extremism.

Naomi Kikoler, the Director of the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum presented the focus areas of work and projects the museum has implemented. The center is a part of a larger institution. The USHMM is an independent US governmental institution. It was established as a memorial to Holocaust survivors, but also deals with

more recent history, and stands with those who are currently facing atrocities. It deals with societies that remain extremely sensitive when we are talking about crimes. The centre is highly contemporary in its focus. It works directly with policy makers, governmental officials, and a broader audience. It focuses on creating resources e.g. documentation and analysis, to help to counter denial of the Holocaust, but also of atrocities happening today. The aim is not only to educate, but to contribute to settling the historical record, and exert constant pressure for change, to serving as a preventive tool that other organisations can use. It develops tools to work with policy makers in order to prevent mass atrocities, and with civilians to help them to protect themselves. It uses its physical space to allow people to learn about the Holocaust, but also to think and reflect on contemporary dilemmas. Amongst its recent projects are an exhibition on Syria and crimes against Syrian people, and an online exhibition about the Rohingya refugees, which aims to reach new audiences in Bangladesh and Myanmar. What is unique here is that the community itself has been involved in creating it.

Mofidul Hoque, the founder trustee of the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum presented the museum profile and the work the museum does. The museum was established twenty five years after the Bangladeshi genocide in 1971 to commemorate the victims and bring justice to them. The museum has large physical space and facilities for visitors, but also does research and study of contemporary genocides. The aims are to bring awareness about the genocide, and bring justice to its victims. The museum is unique, as it directly focuses on work with the ongoing atrocities against the Rohingya, and the one million refugees based in Bangladesh. The museum staff, including researchers and volunteers, visit the refugee camps, meet with persecuted people, collect their testimonies (stories and arts), and publish them. The collected individual stories are also included into a digital interactive exhibition, Quilts of Memory of Hope, developed in cooperation with Asia Justice and Rights. The other one is youth-based online initiative of LWM volunteers and Harvard University Asia Centre students titled The Thread. The Rohingya victims are not passive partners: their resilience is our inspiration. Due to the pandemic, the museum's work with the refugees has

been temporarily disrupted. It is currently focused on using new technology to reach out to its audience.

Haider Elias, a co-founder and President for Yazda Organization talked about his organisation, which was established in 2014 after the Yazidi community went through the genocide committed by ISIS. His own family suffered, and many school friends and relatives were murdered. Yazda has been focused on humanitarian and advocacy oriented projects in Iraq. In 2015, Yazda founded Nadia Murad's campaign. It also conducts psychotherapy and educational programmes for children and women-survivors. It has mobile medical clinics to provide support in more than forty villages. The documentation project started in 2015 with the help of a co-founder of Voices of Rwanda. The organisation collects video testimonies of survivors and documents mass graves. As part of its justice project, it works with international human rights lawyer, Amal Clooney. It conducts multiple projects to strengthen the local economy, where Yazidi and Christian minorities live in northern Iraq. It helps to re-settle Yazidis in other countries, such as Canada and Australia. This genocide has cost nearly seven thousand Yezidi lives, nearly 6800 were kidnapped by ISIS, and the fates of many are still unknown. One of the project ideas for the organisation is a Virtual Museum to Preserve the culture, history, and collective memory of the Yazidis. The project aims to record interviews on video, take photographs of villages (houses, houses of prayer), the landscape, and the cultural, as well as everyday objects (pictures, statues, agricultural tools) and symbols. Moreover, they are going to record songs, stories and narratives as digital audio files. The project aims to raising awareness of the Yazidis and their culture amongst their diaspora and other audiences.

Kornelis Spaans from the International Committee for the Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes, talked about the mission of memorial museums, the various ways memorial museums can commemorate victims, and the challenges museums and particularly memorial museums and sites face due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when more than eighty percent of museums are closed. Most of them have found new methods of working through digital platforms. Some of them are attempting to restart their activities, but

the process can be challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new inequalities and threats to certain groups in our societies. Here, the role of museums can be crucial.

Walter Gyger stressed the key role museums and memorial sites are playing in understanding and analysing the present and taking decisions for the future through lessons from the past. He encouraged the panelists to get in contact with Rotarians in their respective countries and develop projects in a collaborative way.

The key takeaways/recommendations are:

- Museums or memorial spaces have a transformative effect on society, and can act as a catalyst for change.
- Museums and memorial sites work with historical atrocities to educate and to build awareness of crimes and atrocities, but its role is not merely educational. Museums and memorial sites are multifunctional: they have the ability to unite their departments to document continuing crimes and human rights violations, in addition to conducting research and assisting communities to deal with ongoing atrocities and to reach a wider audience.
- Partnerships with various institutions - including those of the public, private, and third sectors- are imperative to the work of museums and memorial sites.
- It is abundantly clear that museums and memorial sites need to broaden their activities and utilise new technologies to better engage with the communities where atrocities take place and the communities most severely affected by them. Newly planned projects should consider this factor.
- Museums and memorial sites have many common aspects. The focus for the future peace and human rights work for museums should include the humanisation of peoples' experience through training and other creative ways (especially online) to bring peoples' individual stories and bridge the physical distance we may have.
- Due to the nature of their work, their mission, resources, and experience, museums and memorial sites working with mass atrocities can engage victimised communities into the implementation of projects; they have a unique opportunity to address contemporary societal problems through their reference to history, and can be considered valuable partners for Rotary clubs around the world.

Presenters

Presenter 1: Tali Nates



Tali Nates is the founder and director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre and chair of the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation. She is a historian who lectures internationally on Holocaust education, genocide prevention, reconciliation and human rights. Tali has presented at many conferences including at the United Nations in New York (2016) and is a fellow of the Salzburg Global Seminar (2014-2020). She published many articles and contributed chapters to different books, among them *God, Faith & Identity* from the *Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors* (2015) and *Remembering The Holocaust in Educational Settings* (2018). Tali serves on the Academic Advisory Group of the School of Social and Health Sciences, Monash University (IEMSA), South Africa. Born to a family of Holocaust survivors, Tali's father and uncle were saved by Oskar Schindler.

Presenter 2: Naomi Kikoleris



Naomi Kikoleris is a leading expert and strategist on mass atrocity prevention and international human rights advocacy and human rights law. She is the Director of the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. As the Center's deputy director and policy director she led for four years the Center's policy engagement with the United States government, Congress and work on Bearing Witness countries. For six years prior she developed and implemented the Global Centre for the

Responsibility to Protect's work on populations at risk and efforts to advance the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) globally, including the Centre's UN Security Council advocacy.

She has worked as an adviser to the UN Special Adviser to the Responsibility to Protect and as an Adjunct Professor at the New School University. Naomi is the author of numerous publications. These include the 2013 Nexus Fund series on the emerging powers and mass atrocity prevention and the 2011 report "Risk Factors and Legal Norms Associated With Genocide Prevention" for the UN Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Jacob Blaustein Institute.

Prior to joining the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect in 2008, she worked on national security and refugee law and policy for Amnesty International Canada. She has also clerked in the Office of the Prosecutor at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, served as a legal consultant to the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement at the Brookings Institution and worked as a Carter Center election monitor in Kenya.

Naomi holds common law and civil law degrees from McGill University, a MSc. in Forced Migration from Oxford University where her thesis was on the Rwandan genocide, and a B.A. from the University of Toronto in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies. Naomi is a Board Member of the Canadian Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the Free Yazidi Foundation, and was called to the Bar of Upper Canada.

Presenter 3: Mofidul Hoque



Mofidul Hoque is a Bangladeshi researcher, publisher and essayist. He is one of the founder trustees of the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum. He is the Director of Center for the Study of Genocide and Justice of the museum. He organised six international conference on Bangladesh Genocide and Justice. He participated in many international events to highlight Bangladesh Genocide and its recognition. At present he and the CSGS are actively

pursuing the cause of justice for the persecuted Rohingya minority. He is a recipient of numerous awards such as Bangla Academy Literary Award (2013) for essays, Ekushey Padak (2016) and Shaheed Altaf Mahmud Medal.

Presenter 4: Haider Elias



Haider Elias is co-founder and President for Yazda Organization. Haider holds bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Houston, Haider worked previously for the US government in Iraq as a translator and cultural advisor. Haider lost his young brother in the attack against the Yazidi people in August 2014 and became involved in helping the victims and the advocacy to prevent future genocides against minorities. Haider was part of a group of Yazidi delegation to hold meetings with representatives at the White House when ISIS carried out a genocidal attack against the Yazidi minority. This resulted in the US intervention to authorize airstrikes targeted at ISIS locations and humanitarian airdrops to the thousands of Yazidis that were trapped on Mount Sinjar. Haider has been traveling around the world to create awareness of the Yazidi case. Haider co-founded Nadia Murad's Initiative with his friends at Yazda in December of 2015 and travelled with her to multiple countries advocating for the Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq and Syria.

Presenter 5: Kornelis Spaans



Tali Nates is the founder and director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre and chair of the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation. She is a historian who lectures internationally on Holocaust education, genocide prevention, reconciliation and human rights. Tali has

presented at many conferences including at the United Nations in New York (2016) and is a fellow of the Salzburg Global Seminar (2014-2020). She published many articles and contributed chapters to different books, among them *God, Faith & Identity from the Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors* (2015) and *Remembering The Holocaust in Educational Settings* (2018). Tali serves on the Academic Advisory Group of the School of Social and Health Sciences, Monash University (IEMSA), South Africa. Born to a family of Holocaust survivors, Tali’s father and uncle were saved by Oskar Schindler.



Organisers and moderators

Shahriar Kabir



Shahriar Kabir is a Bangladeshi writer, filmmaker and human rights activist. He has authored nearly 100 books and directed 14 documentary films focusing mainly on human rights and global peace. He is one of the champions of the civil society movement to protect rights of the minorities in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. When pro-Islamist govt. was in power in 2001-2006, he was arrested twice for his strong voice against persecution of the minorities. In 2001 ‘Amnesty International’ declared him a “Prisoner of Conscience.” At present he is the President of the 'Forum for Secular Bangladesh & Trial of the War Criminals of 1971' and General Secretary of the ‘South Asian Peoples Union against Fundamentalism & Communalism’. He has attended more than 100 international seminars and conferences on human rights and global peace. He is the recipient of several national and international awards including Bangla Academy Literary Award.

Dr Walter B. Gyger



Dr Walter B. Gyger is a retired Swiss ambassador. He is now the principal Representative of Rotary International to the UN Office and other international organisations in Geneva, the president of the Swiss/Liechtenstein Rotarian Action Group for Peace and Director of the Rotarian Action for Peace (global). He is the initiator of the concept and convener of the Rotary Peace Project Incubator <https://rppi.ch/>. This initiative aims to bring together Rotary Peace Fellows, Rotarians and other international experts to elaborate and implement jointly peace projects responding to urgent community needs.

Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska



Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska is a sociologist and member of the International Association of Genocide Scholars. Her Ph.D. dissertation deals with Holocaust denial, memory and identity in Eastern Europe. Her experience includes work at the POLIN Museum in Warsaw as well as cooperation with the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia and other museums and sites of memory in Europe and Asia. She has also worked with organizations monitoring racism and xenophobia such as the ‘NEVER AGAIN’ Association and the Kantor Center for Study of Contemporary European Jewry of Tel-Aviv University. She is a former Rotary Peace Fellow at Chulalongkorn University from Poland. She is a coordinator for Europe at the Rotary Peace Fellowship Alumni Association.

