

The “Sajmište” (Exhibition Grounds) in Semlin, Serbia: The Changing of Memory

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In 1937 a national exhibition site opened in Belgrade. Originally intended to represent indigenous advancements, in 1941 it became a Nazi concentration camp called Sajmište and its main use became the extermination of Jewish women, children, and elderly. This was not recognized until the 1980s; until then the climate was one of socialism. During the nationalist era, history was propagandized by the state to suit its own purposes, and truth was concealed. This cleansing of the real history, however, was subsequently obscured to the extent that the area of the camp and its “hospital” was transformed into a nightclub. The commemoration of the truth about the former camp requires the intervention of the political and financial elites.

The Belgrade Exhibition Grounds, or Sajmište, was established in 1937 as a national representative exhibition complex. The Sajmište Exhibition Grounds was the most prominent modern architectural complex of the city at the time, a significant landmark of the city’s and the national identity.[1]

In the spring of 1941, the conflict with the Axis powers resulted in the military and political collapse of Yugoslavia. Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, commander of Army Group F, arrived in Belgrade on 15 April. He and his headquarters were authorized to establish the Supreme Occupation Command on the part of the

Yugoslavian territory that was occupied by Germany. On 17 April, Yugoslavia formally, unconditionally capitulated.

The “administration” of the Jewish issue in Belgrade can be divided into three stages. During the first, which lasted from April to August, the Nazi forces completed the tasks of registering and marking the Jews in Belgrade, limited their freedom of movement, looted their property, and introduced forced labor and other forms of imposed obligations. During the second stage, which lasted from late August to November, Jewish males were incarcerated in Topovske šupe, a camp on the outskirts of the city. The first inmates were Jewish males over fourteen deported from the Banat region, followed by all male Jewry from Belgrade, who were treated as hostages and executed on an almost daily basis. During the third stage, in the autumn of 1941, once the male Jewry of Belgrade had been destroyed, the German administration began to look for a location that would be suitable for the detention of the remaining Jews – women and children and the old, whose age, gender, and physical capabilities made them unfit to be hostages.[2]

The location of the Sajmište Exhibition Grounds, separate from the city center on the left bank of the Sava River, survived the bombing of 6 April and was relatively undamaged. During the first six months of the occupation, this site was marked to be another internment camp. At the beginning of the occupation, the former exhibition pavilions and the auxiliary facilities of the Exhibition Grounds were transformed into a concentration camp for the detention of Jewish women and children. From the autumn of 1941 until mid-1942, the Semlin[3] Judenlager (in English the term Semlin – Zemun in Serbian – is used to refer to the camp and the term Sajmište to the exhibition grounds, although in Serbian, Sajmište is used for both) was a concentration camp for Jewish women, children, and elderly, primarily from Belgrade, and they either perished right there on the spot or faced death in the mobile gas vans on the way to the Jajinci execution site.

This policy required the formal approval of the authorities of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), who administered this territory. The Croatian authorities' authorization was given to the German envoy to Zagreb, Zigfrid Kasche, on condition that the camp management would be under German control and that the inmates would come from Serbia, not from the Croatian territory.[4]

About 6,500 Jews, mostly from Serbia, perished in the camp or after leaving it, and thus Serbia became the first occupied European country that was Judenfrei.[5] Some researchers of the Holocaust believe that the case of the Semlin Judenlager was of special significance in the creation of the Nazi policy toward Jews since that time; the use of mobile gas vans and the efficient liquidation of civilians anticipated the establishment of death camps and made the Holocaust machinery that followed more intensive and routine.[6] Once Serbian Jewry had been destroyed, the Semlin camp was used as a transit camp and an execution site for civilians, as well as supporters and members of the People's Liberation Movement from the whole of Yugoslavia. It is estimated that about thirty thousand people went through the camp in this period. They were mostly deported further to forced labor or death camps, while more than ten thousand perished in the Semlin camp itself.

The camp was closed in September 1944.[7] The major part of the complex was destroyed during the Allied bombing, and in that condition the location awaited the liberation.

The Minimizing of Persecution

On the symbolic roadmap of suffering during the occupation that was constructed during the time of communism, the key landmarks of Belgrade were Banjica and Jajinci. The largest camp in Serbia, the Semlin camp, was marginalized. Banjica was a camp used primarily for political prisoners. Numerous members of the armed or political resistance went through this camp. Jajinci was a site used also as an execution ground for interns from all Belgrade camps. These two constituted better

material for the purpose of ideology and of narrative and spatial memorial construction than the image of occupation in the Belgrade Semlin camp. The civilians who died in Semlin usually were not subject to political or police investigation.

During the first stage of formulation of the commemorative legacy of World War II in Yugoslavia, ideological priority was assigned to resistance. The postwar government regularly commemorated the sites of resistance and fighting of the People's Liberation Army and the illegal fighters. Commemorating the sites of suffering and persecution of civilians by the occupiers and their associates was of secondary importance. In other words, for the postwar, socialist, national awareness of the multinational Yugoslavia, it was more opportune to cherish the victorious Partisan cult of the rebellious people than the martyrdom of the occupied people and the victims.[8] As noted by Ignjatović and Manojlović Pintar, "putting emphasis on the Partisan victims, laid to the altar of the revolution, gave an image of something native to the liberation movement and gave the national identity something of a transcendental framework of socialism."[9]

During the first forty years after the liberation of Sajmište, some of the pavilions, seriously damaged during the bombing, were pulled down, and the remaining ones were used as temporary or permanent housing for the youth work brigades, artists' studios, or simply housing for citizens. It was only in 1974 and 1984 that adequate commemorative marking of the site was organized. This included the commemorating plaques laid by the Association of Fighters of the People's Liberation War (SUBNOR) and by the local social-political organizations.[10]

Since the second half of the 1980s the interest in the actual events of World War II has increased. The site has also been formally marked as a commemorative one, and once a year ceremonies are held at the monument to commemorate the inmates. In 1987 the location was proclaimed a protected complex of the city of

Belgrade and a site of cultural and historical significance. Apart from the attempt to consolidate the socialist system and ideology that was strengthened by different means after the death of Tito, greater focus on Sajmište as a memorial site can be explained by the almost simultaneous “tide of restitution of Serbian national identity which was also declared through the myth of the martyrdom of the nation and its identification with other martyr nations in history.”[11] This site at the very gates to the capital city well lent itself to this trend.

The adoption of a new set of landmarks has been a gradual but inevitable process. The changes in how World War II is remembered and the new mode of presentation of civilian victims of the war, who in the past were nationally and not otherwise differentiated – or only weakly so – as “victims of fascism,” involve a gradual shift from the evocation of “patriots” and “fallen fighters” to the remembrance of the “Serbian children” and the “slaughtered people.” By the mid-1990s “victims of fascism” – not only from the Semlin camp – were transformed into the “Serbian victims of fascism.” This term was used in the context of the public depiction of the Yugoslav wars as the continuation of World War II, which was increasingly perceived as a civil war and not so much as one against an occupier. The “Serbian victims of fascism” of the 1941-1945 narrative of resistance, in which one’s own side in the current conflict was self-declared as the antifascist one, assigned a new meaning to the phrase “victims of fascism.”[12]

The Serbian Emphasis

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Sajmište site has been instrumental for the purposes of the regime in power. Proposals were put forward to establish a Serbian Yad Vashem at this site. Sajmište is used as a memorial center for the sufferings of Serbs under the Independent State of Croatia, and since 1995 it has been the main site of commemoration for victims of the Jasenovac camp.[13]

The restructuring of collective memory and the creation of a new Serbian identity focuses on three key periods of the more recent Serbian history: World War II, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and its disintegration through wars. The state along with the political, social, and intellectual elite has a monopoly over this process.[14]

The national project of Greater Serbia, as it was designed and attempted to be achieved, inevitably produced conflict with the national minorities. Justifying nationalism and populism, and along with them the policy of Serbian aggression toward the neighboring countries and national minorities, required reinterpreting Serbia's more recent history and Christian Orthodox tradition. The goal of such a strategy was, on the one hand, to bestow legitimacy on the war policy as a response to past crimes against the Serbs while, on the other, laying the foundations for the building of a new Serbian identity. The attempt to implement the Serbian national project was accompanied by the establishment of right-wing political parties[15] and numerous nationalistic, chauvinistic, and racist organizations. The right to freedom of thought and speech in Serbia[16] was frequently interpreted as the right to use hatred in everyday speech, which was and still is practiced openly, as is the right to express anti-Semitism[17] and philo-Semitism.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Sajmište is no longer even the site of "reductive" history, which it predominantly was during the time of socialism, nor of "instrumentalized" history, which it predominantly was during the nationalistic period, but rather a site "cleansed" of history. The political changes of 5 October 2000, with the new, ideological, hegemonistic coalition's assumption of power, have relegated World War II, its context, and its results to public oblivion. Apart from specific amnesia under the influence of right-wing ethnic Serbian elements, the key guidelines for the current image of World War II and its consequences are

historiographical revisionism, banal anticommunism, selective memory, and anti-antifascism.[18] With such trends shaping the public political domain, the most opportune approach to the Sajmište site is simply not to commemorate it, that is, continued marginalization.

Commercialization

The association of Sajmište with the purpose for which it was used during the war has faded to the point that the key feature of the whole area where it is situated has, in recent years, become a night club. Called Posejdon (pronounced Poseidon in Serbian), it is located at one of the remaining facilities of the old Belgrade Exhibition Grounds, known as the Spasić pavilion, which during the war was the site of the camp hospital.[19]

After the club had, in recent years, provided entertainment for many citizens of Belgrade and their foreign guests with a series of parties and other events, some people remembered to remind the public that this place used to be an integral part, the hospital, of the Semlin concentration camp. The whistle blowers were mostly different organizations and civil associations, national and international, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The practice of using Sajmište, one of the worst execution sites in the history of Belgrade, as a location for commercial entertainment has been interrupted, at least temporarily, by the “Kosheen scandal,” in which the British musical group Kosheen was supposed to perform on 3 November 2007 at the Posejdon club.

Many contentious practices have come to light. Different authorities have unconvincingly distanced themselves from the matter, and the question of how a location with such a past ended up in private hands has not received clear answers. There is also the fact that the issue only emerged in relation to an announced performance by an internationally known musical group. It was this that

forced the authorities along with the general public to reconsider whether it is appropriate to hold entertainment events at sites of such suffering and death.

The general Serbian lack of interest in the events that occurred in this Holocaust death camp is evident in a statement by the owners of Posejdon. They claimed that they have “repeatedly requested from the municipality to provide them with guidelines for their operation, but have received nothing in response.”[20]

Why did the question of the use of this former death camp arise at a time of general oblivion and/or revisionism regarding the issues of World War II in Serbia? One possible answer relates to the national framework. Since the 1990s, the memory of World War II has been transfigured by changing the focus from resistance to fascism to the victims of fascism, with the genocide against the Jews, and also against the Serbs, presented as the most tragic element of this history. Regarding Posejdon, the mayor of Belgrade, Zoran Alimpić, said he “hopes that this whole story, which of course was unnecessary and does not really portray us in the best light, will end with the site becoming a memorial center....”[21] The lack of marking of the site, the general oblivion about the human suffering in Sajmište, and the concern over the image this creates evoked sincere sentiments. And yet, the declarations that someday this will be rectified by creating a new memorial site remain unfulfilled, nonobligatory references to an indefinite future.

Those mentioned as potentially involved in developing the memorial area include both the political and financial elites. This, however, is likely to lead to marginalizing the historical legacy of the site. The synergy between the political elite, with their dominant policy of noncommemoration, revision of the antifascist struggle, and its consequences, and the financial elite, with their commercial interests, results in the increasingly frequent mention of the future spatial development of Sajmište in a way different from the ideas that circulated immediately after the Kosheen scandal. It would no longer be developed as an exclusively memorial area – as is most often

the case with sites bearing a similar past – but rather as a so-called multifunctional center.

In other words, instead of a memorial complex to the victims of fascism and of the Semlin camp, suggestions are made through the media to develop, among other things, a museum center that would include, for instance, the Museum of Sajmište, the Museum of Tolerance, and several similar museums, including art museums.[22] Other alternatives mention the idea of integrating the memorial site with other features such as restaurants, cafes, and concert halls, possibly razing the remaining pavilions of the camp, and so on. During the Architecture Salon 2008,[23] such an approach was epitomized in a proposal to the makers of an exhibition with the topic of the future design of Sajmište: that “remembrance of those who perished there should be a feature which is present, but not dominant.”[24]

Such an approach both marginalizes and redesigns the specific historical memory and at the same time leaves room for commercial interests aiming to exploit urban space. If the Sajmište site were at a less central location, the proposals for its design would presumably have been different. However, the former camp’s attractive location in a central, built-up part of Belgrade invites the involvement of commercial interests not only with respect to the physical design but also the symbolic space.

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Notes

[1] The branding of nations dates at least as far back as the holding of the first world exhibitions. Goran Bolin, “Visions of Europe: Cultural Technologies of Nation-States,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9 (2006): 193.

[2] There were a total of four mass incarceration campaigns; the last and largest one was from 18-26 October 1941. Apart from a group consisting of three hundred to four hundred detainees, planned to be used for reconstruction of the pavilions in the Exhibition Grounds as barracks for the women and children, there were no surviving Jewish men. Ženi Lebl, *Do konačnog rešenja* (Belgrade: Čigoja, 2001), 313, 321. [Serbian]

[3] A German term for Zemun in Serbian.

[4] Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom Sajmištu 1941-1944*, (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu isroriju, 1992). [Serbian].

[5] Already in August 1942, the German state secretary Harald Turner reported to Berlin that Serbia was the only country in which the issue of Jews and Gypsies had been resolved. Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom Sajmištu 1941-1944* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu isroriju, 1992), 41. [Serbian]

[6] Christopher Browning, "The Final Solution in Serbia: The Semlin Judenlager – a Case Study," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 15 (1983); Jovan Byford, "Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory," www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin.

[7] "Sajmište," Shoah Resource Center, International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem, 1990; "Sajmište," *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

[8] The building of "New Belgrade," as a manifestation of postwar socialist revival and construction, perhaps also involved putting away memories and building an ideology that required oblivion of the past.

[9] Aleksandar Ignjatović and Olga Manojlović Pintar, "Staro Sajmište i sećanja na Drugi svestki rat: Prostori selektovanih memorija (2)," *Helsinška povelja*, 117-18 (Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2008), 33. [Serbian].

[10] Jovan Byford, "Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory," www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin

[11] Ignjatović and Pintar, “Staro Sajmište i sećanja,” 34.

[12] From what used to be a poorly promoted “execution site of the peoples of Yugoslavia,” Sajmište became exploited by the media as the Serbian Yad Vashem. Ildiko Erdei, *Medijska konstrukcija realnosti korišćenjem različitih vremenskih modela i perspektiva, Kulture u tranziciji* (Belgrade: Plato, 1994), 131. [Serbian]

[13] For details, see Jovan Byford in “Peščanik,” 1 February 2008, www.B92.net.

[14] Izvestaj pravne grupe za prava, *Sigurnost građana u nedovršenoj državi* (Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2006). [Serbian]

[15] If one takes into consideration that most of the right-oriented political parties implicitly legitimize problematic individuals and problematic periods of the more recent Serbian history, one can then speak of direct and indirect acceptance of anti-Semitic theology and ideology in the Serbian political scene. The rehabilitation of fascism, or of “national antifascism” in the interpretation of those who promote it so as to normalize nationalism, is a context in which, along with racism and xenophobia, anti-Semitism appears as well. Todor Kuljić, “Antifašizam i anti-antifašizam: Propuštanje korisne prošlosti,” *Politika*, 10 August 2006. [Serbian]

[16] The fall from power of Slobodan Milošević did not result in a full break with the nationalist policy. On the contrary, even after the lost wars, nationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance remain key features of political and social life in Serbia.

[17] The Serbian authorities have made practically no adequate responses to anti-Semitic propaganda, incidents, publications and, generally, hate speech including anti-Semitism. According to Article 134 of the current Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, anti-Semitism is a criminal act that can be prosecuted as a form of dissemination of religious, national, or racial hatred. The request made by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia and Montenegro to include also in

the code specific provisions for criminal acts of anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, minimizing the number of victims, and promoting Nazi ideology was not granted. In addition, Article 38 of the Public Information Law of the Republic of Serbia prohibits the publishing of ideas, information, and statements encouraging discrimination, hatred, and violence against persons or groups based on racial, religious, national, ethnic, and other origin. Nevertheless, a great number of criminal reports against publishers of anti-Semitic literature, filed by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia and Montenegro, have not been acted upon. Aca Singer (president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia and Montenegro), "Izvestaj o stanju jevrejske zajednice danas," *Danas*, 26-27 March 2006. [Serbian]

[18] Todor Kuljić, "Prevladavanje prošlosti: uzroci pravci promene slike istorije krajem XX veka," *Helsinška povelja*, 10-14 (Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2002), 405, 441. [Serbian]

[19] The lack of scruples on the part of private capital, which is allowed to profit from exploiting an asset of historical value that the city granted to private owners, is also confirmed by the statement of the concert organizers, the Long plej agency. They rented out the Spasić pavilion and, in response to public and city authorities' reactions, stated among other things that "this legacy of Nikola Spasić at the time of war was just a hospital in which the death of inmates was determined."

[20] "Juče logor, danas koncerti, vest na internetskom portalu," www.B92.net, 26 October 2007. [Serbian]

[21] "Alimpić: Grad traži rešenje za Staro sajmište tekst," Beta news agency, *Danas*, 7 November 2007, 18. [Serbian]

[22] M. Ć. Prelević, "Tolerancijom na stradanje," *Večernje novine*, 6 November 2007. [Serbian]

[23] Part of the Belgrade Design Week in May 2008.

[24] N. Tasić, "Tolerancijom na stradanje," Blic, 22 April 2008. [Serbian]