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## NON-BANAL METAPHORS ON REPRESSIONS Lijana Birškytė-Klimienė

### **Museum of Genocide Victims**

Aukų St. 2a, Vilnius (Top floor exposition)

Designer: Skirmantė Vaitkevičiūtė

Accomplished: 2006–2007.

Contractor: UAB Ekspozicijų sistemos

### **A short history of the building**

The building which houses the Museum of Genocide Victims has witnessed the complicated events of Lithuanian occupation and is over 100 years old, originally the court of the Vilnius province of the Russian Empire, it was designed by the architect Mikhail Prozorov and engineer Leonid Viner between 1888 and 1890 according to sketches made by the academician Wassilij Prussakov. The construction was completed in two years, and on 13 October 1899 the opening ceremony took place. From 1914 to 1923, an extension was built in Aukų Street which currently houses the Museum of Genocide Victims, and in 1929, another extension was built in the present Vasario 16-osios Street. Until the August putsch in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, the building constantly housed one or another state institution of the occupying regime (except the year 1918, when a conscription centre for the Lithuanian Army and the commander's headquarters for the city of Vilnius were housed in the building for two of months): 1915–1918, German occupying institutions; January –April 1919, the departments (commissariats) of the Bolshevik government of V. Kapsukas and a revolutionary tribunal; 1920–1939, courts of the occupying Polish authorities; the autumn of 1940–June 1941, the Board of the NKVD of Vilnius, a remand prison, and from the spring of 1941, also the NKGB ; 1941–1944, the German Gestapo and SD headquarters, prison, and barracks; 1944–1991, a branch of the Lithuanian SSR of the NKGB (MGB, KGB) and a prison, renamed in 1959 as interrogation cells. At present, several institutions are based in the building: the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre and courts of justice, the Lithuanian Special Archive, where documents of the former KGB archive are kept, and The Museum of Genocide Victims. The latest exhibition of the latter is the subject of this article.

## **Expositions of the Museum of Genocide Victims and their authors**

Former NKVD–MGB–KGB inner prison (interrogation insulator) was opened to the public in 1992. The prison looks the same as it was left by the security officers exiting the building in August of 1991. In 1998, UAB Augvira (V. Kormilcevas, D. Baliukevičius) prepared a technical project for the future expositions of the Museum of Genocide Victims. The museum retained the KGB building layout of the 1960s-70s. The project was kept in mind when preparing new expositions “In the Execution Room” (2000) and the 1<sup>st</sup> exhibition hall on the ground floor “Lithuania 1940–1941: first losses...” (2002).

Designer Skirmantė Vaitkevičiūtė (UAB Ekspozicijų sistemos), who started working in the museum in 2000, prepared the ground floor and top floor expositions of the Museum of Genocide Victims together with the museum’s team of historians: manager of the History Department Virginija Rudienė, Director Eugenijus Peikštenis, senior keeper of museology funds Nijolė Čekavičiūtė, specialists Vilma Gauryte, Audrone Lėverienė and Vilma Juozevičiūtė. The project was supervised by Vilius Lunevičius, the manager of UAB Ekspozicijų sistemos, and the exhibition cases were designed by Raimundas Krivas. As previously mentioned, the project by UAB Augvira was realized in the 1<sup>st</sup> exposition hall. The idea was to retain the authentic interior of the building which could be seen through transparent exhibition equipment. However, the idea did not serve the purpose in reality. In the first exhibition hall, behind a glass partition, the interior of the office of the warden was reproduced with semi-transparent photographs.

Semi-transparent stickers not only obstruct the view of the office but also make it difficult to distinguish the details of the historical picture “Soviet military units crossing the Lithuanian border”. Therefore, the exposition curator Rudienė, decided that the exhibition hall should be renovated. Later, when installing other exhibition halls, semi-transparent photographs were abandoned. Moreover, after the installation of the ground floor exposition, it became clear that it is difficult for museum workers to replace originals (e.g., restore the showcase of partisan press, since the papers can only be exhibited for a limited period of time due to the harmful impact of light), and this was taken into account when designing the showcases for the top floor exposition. When preparing the permanent exposition, having learned from earlier mistakes the original designs were abandoned and improved. Despite minor defects, the ground floor exhibition halls tell the story of the occupation of 1940–1941 and the partisan

resistance of 1944–1953 in a modern and forcible way. The expositions are being constantly improved: museum workers are planning to renovate the ground floor exposition: install more computer terminals for the visitors to get as much information as possible and also watch documentary film footage. A virtual top floor exposition for the disabled is also planned.

### **The latest exhibition of the museum**

Here I would like to present the top floor exposition of the museum which was opened on 7 April 2006. The interior of this exhibition hall has been more successful compared to the ground floor. The ground and the top floors are connected by horrifying barred stairs which raise uncanny feelings for the visitors. People used to be taken up these stairs to the interrogation ward. Designer Vaitkevičiūtė has ingeniously decorated the lobby on a dark grey background; there are unnaturally large pictures from the family albums of the repressed individuals “staring” at the visitor: wedding pictures, family pictures – records of happy lives that will never return. At the end of the corridor, there is an old mirror where one’s reflection in the background of the dark corridor makes for uneasy feelings. The original idea was to hang a split mirror but the idea was abandoned for the safety of visitors. The mirror optically lengthens the already narrow corridor. All these elements are psychologically stunning, taking visitors back to the past, as if preparing them to understand, more deeply, the painful experience of the Lithuanian nation rendered in the exposition. On both sides of the corridor, there are small exposition halls: on the left, there are halls devoted to state prisoners, expatriates and one, still not opened, for anti-Soviet resistance; on the right, there are halls where the activities of the KGB and a secret listening room are exhibited – and there are six even smaller rooms with a separate narrow corridor. The coloring of the interiors successfully serves its purpose: the lobby is dark grey, exposition halls on the left presenting repressions are also in grey tones; another theme, i.e. KGB activity, is rendered through red, black and white.

The exposition area is quite small, and this forced the museum workers to limit the number of exhibits, and narrow the themes; moreover, for larger groups of visitors, the small hall is too tight... Nevertheless, designer Vaitkevičiūtė noticed that small spaces create the effect of closeness, and the designer had less trouble in deciding on the room layout. It was the first time I have seen a ceiling interestingly used as exhibition space: in the 5<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall,

rusty chandeliers and barbed wire render the atmosphere of the Gulag; in the 6<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall, pictures of crosses on the graves of expatriates move across the ceiling; on the ceiling of the 7<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall, visitors can read letters written in exile; and in the 9<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall, there are pieces of documents destroyed by KGB, stamps, newspaper subscriptions of Vilnius residents, - all placed in a glass box.

Colors, focused lighting, and enlarged pictures make an emotional impact in the rooms, information stands of the right size and colors help to create an integral style. The exhibition halls contain everything a required for modern exhibition, i.e. it makes an impact on visitors through different senses: sight (exhibits, surveillance cameras, parts of the authentic interiors – secret listening room, the planned photo-laboratory in the 8<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall; documentary film, computers), hearing (music in the background, recordings of conversations, train sounds), touch (the materials selected are resistant to touching). And the efforts to present exhibits in a warm way, revealing their previous environment as much as possible are praiseworthy. The enlarged pictures serve the same purpose and metaphors as well as various symbols. In the 5<sup>th</sup> exhibition hall “Lithuanians in GULAG camps: 1944–1956”, the allusion to the camps is rendered through the bars, barbed wire, and rusty chandeliers; in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> exhibition halls “Expatriation: 1944–1953”, the image of a graveyard of expatriates and the expatriation process are depicted on an arched screen (directed by Vytautas Paliulis, studio “Pro Patria”); the railway tracks with suitcases nearby symbolize the desire of expatriates to return to their homeland. What is most gratifying is that when presenting the themes extremely sensitive to every Lithuanian there is no excessive sentimentality, and non-banal metaphors are chosen. “Many want to see blood sprinkled on sand and not follow the color codes since it is always more difficult” - said the designer.

Designing the interiors of expositions is a specific area of activity involving collective work, and personal ambitions of architects or designers are unnecessary. This rule can be illustrated by the words of Ms. Vaitkevičiūtė who said that the final result is the outcome of the efforts of the whole team. The designer participated in the whole process of work from the initial stage of shaping the idea up to the final stage of designing the labels, which are also a very important part of the exhibition; she herself created their graphic design. The project manager was responsible for the terms of the project, and the suppliers. It was probably due to the bad aura of the building that glass broke for no reason, many things had to be redone

several times, the showcase did not fit through the doors due to mirror reflection accidentally included in the drawing. The main objective when designing the exposition was “to find a compromise between emotionality and informativity”. In this way the needs of different visitors are met including those who are interested in the exhibition in depth or on the surface. Both the informative and the visual parts of the exhibition are important. According to the museum standards (an abstract cannot exceed 50 words), there is an excess of texts, and after visiting the former prison premises and ground floor exhibition it is difficult to concentrate and read everything. The process of designing the exhibition can be described as follows: after presenting a conception, Virginija Rudienė attempted to ensure that the information provided to visitors is diverse, correct and meaningful, and the designer was looking for effective visual solutions to reveal the theme. Much work had to be done for the enlarged pictures on zinc plates to acquire the desired color.

Considering the fact that the exhibition is to be permanent, designing the exposition, stain-resistant, nonflammable, “kid resistant”, and “breathable” (mildew resistant) French materials. The lighting system is of Finnish origin, and the safety of exhibits is also taken into account. When asked if the original ideas matched the final result, Ms. Vaitkevičiūtė replied positively, nevertheless, some details were changed due to the current situation. The designer admits that she herself does not like reading notes while visiting museums but, rather, prefers getting information from examining the exhibits. When taking kids to museums, she noticed that traditional means of exposition are not very effective: “Modern people can only be interested by new means; compulsion is of no use, especially when we talk about history”.

### Notes:

1. The article gives information about the history of this building taken from V. Rudienė, “Tų rūmų lenkiamės“, “Laisvės kovų archyvas”, No. 12, volume 12, Kaunas, 1994, pp. 99–104; <http://www.genocid.lt/muziejus/lt/202/c/>
2. The designer worked with the movable exhibitions of the Museum of Genocide Victims, and the exhibition of the Pedagogical Museum, see <http://www.ekspozicijusistemas.com/en?page=1>