

In conversation with Volkhard Knigge on the realisation of the new concept for the Buchenwald memorial

Dr. Volkhard Knigge, born 1954, studies in history, German language and letters, literature, additional training in psychoanalysis, wrote his doctorate on the "trivial" perception of history, numerous publications on the triad history-art-psychoanalysis, director of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora memorial foundation since 1994.

Photo: Joachim Fleguth



"Most visitors regard memory as something quite authentic"

Hanno Loewy: *The Buchenwald memorial, in GDR-times the largest national memorial site, became a symbolic point of controversy in 1990, leading to the demand for a reassessment of reunited Germany's relationship to its history. The opening of the permanent exhibition on the history of the Buchenwald memorial centre since 1945 marked the preliminary completion of that undertaking. What did this involve?*

Volkhard Knigge: Initially, we had to deal with the former prison camp and the surrounding area, including the SS installations, i.e., the perpetrators' infrastructure. A large part of this area, which covers about 300 hectares, was not included in the GDR memorial site and was overgrown and neglected. There were just the two prominent places: the monument of 1958 and a part of the prison camp. The first step, therefore, was to literally unearth the complex site of the camp, make it visible, comprehensible, as a monument from that period in history. This involved digging, marking, laying new paths. We concentrated on four areas: the "small camp", where most of the people died in Buchenwald, which was cordoned off by barbed wire in the 1970s and thus made inaccessible; this was where the death marches ended. Then the SS area, so as to show that the camp was not some island of evil dropped from the sky. The commanders' villas, the Waffen-SS training areas and the factories were located right beside the prison camp. Laying these relics bare meant taking this dimension in account once again, the proximity of the SS living-quarters to the prison camp. Then the so-called camp zoo, 50 metres from the crematorium, the leisure area for the SS and the workers from Weimar employed in the Gustloff Works, which belonged to the concentration camp. Finally, the camp railway station, to document the civilian infrastructures that had become part of the machinery of exclusion and murder, and as a symbol of the closeness of Weimar to

Buchenwald – and of the link between Buchenwald, the concentration camp, and Auschwitz, the death camp.

The second stage began in 1993 with the monument to the Jewish victims of Buchenwald, designed in accordance with the principle that monuments at historical sites must also be signs pointing to what happened in the history of the respective place. The monument is oriented around the ground plan of the block which was occupied mostly by Jewish prisoners. In 1995 came the monument to the Sinti and Roma – at that time, the first monument on the grounds of a former concentration camp commemorating the exclusion and murder of Sinti and Roma. The two monuments within the prison camp avoid overwhelming this empty space. Both point to the extreme act of genocide, although Buchenwald was not a death camp. Symbolically, they cancel out the exclusion of those groups of victims who, from a communist perspective, did not fit into the scheme of political persecution.

In 1995, the 50th anniversary of liberation, the new exhibition on the Nazi concentration camp was opened. The "concept" it pursued was not to topple an existing monument or substitute an "eastern" for a "western exhibition". Instead it undertook new research on the sources. By then it was possible to use archives, for example, in America or Israel, that had not been taken into account in 1997 saw the inauguration of the permanent exhibition on the history of the Soviet special camp that existed on the site of the former Buchenwald concentration camp from 1945 to 1950. Those who died in that camp were buried directly below the camp fence and trees were allowed to grow there so as to conceal the graves. In 1995 the concealed graves of the internees were transformed into a wooded cemetery.

In 1998 the graveyard near the 1958 memorial was restored. The concentration camp prisoners who died directly after liberation in 1945 were buried there, but were not given individual graves. We found the burial register in Warsaw and our impression was that the names had been deliberately excluded. In GDR-times it was said that an alphabetical list would have placed "genuinely" persecuted antifascists alongside "justifiably" imprisoned people, so to speak, criminal prisoners, for example, and that is why there were no names on these graves.

The art museum was opened in 1998, showing works of art produced illicitly in the camp which also serve to document its reality. The exhibition also includes works by survivors of Buchenwald who became artists and whose works deal with their experience of the camp and the theme of memory. The museum also has works by contemporary artists. The final element of the new concept is the permanent exhibition opened in late 1999, the theme of which is the history of the construction and use of memory, its functionalisation, taking the example of the history of the memorial site from 1945-1990.

HL: *What is the relationship between this new exhibition, which extends into the present, and the history of the camp and the decidedly historiographical exhibitions?*

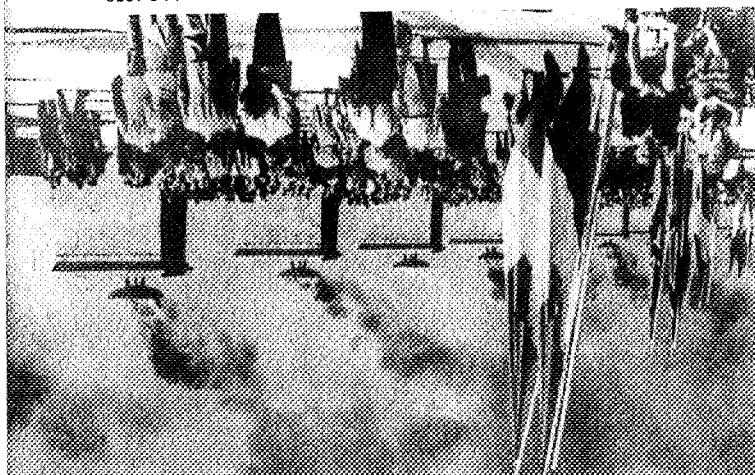
VK: Most visitors regards memory as something quite authentic. This exhibition, however, forces them to realise that every form of memory is construction – in the case of Buchenwald, state-commis-sioned political construction. Buchenwald appears less as a place commemorating a concrete crime or mourning the death of concrete persons, and more as a national, state-influenced GDR monument. This exhibition says a lot about political ways of functionalising me-mory and commemoration. And even if we are dealing here with the GDR, a basic fact is also referred to, namely, that there is no memory without functionalisation, without construction. The difference bet-ween this and a democratic culture of memory would be that the latter has not got just one authoritarian memory-constructor but tolerates competing viewpoints, and that debates on how to repre-sent memory would not be immediately stifled.

HL: *And yet the exhibition shows not only a process steered from above, but a number of conflicts surrounding the design of this monumental site and related to the reality of the early post-war years in the SBZ (Soviet occupied zone) and then the GDR. Structurally speaking, many of these conflicts went beyond the boundaries of the GDR. For example, the conflict between the camp survivors' expectations of the memorial site and the view of all others. Yet the course these conflicts took was characteristic of the history of the GDR, specifically of the Buchenwald camp, because from the start the political prisoners understood their imprisonment in very different ways. For the German communists, Buchenwald was symbolic of the fact that the German Communist Party had fought victoriously on German soil to the end, for the French resistance fighters it was a symbol that they had not ceased to assert themself-*

A second conflict about the role of the Kapos is also typical of Buchenwald. Was this a form of collaboration, or were they also actively protecting others in a grey area, as it were? One could say that the Cold War began in Buchenwald, not only because the Ame-ricans raised the question of the Kapos in 1945 and Buchenwald Kapos were among those accused (though not convicted) in the Dachau trials. At the same time, the new elite, the Moscow emi-wary of the Buchenwald prisoners, fearing their self-confidence and assuming that a new Central Committee had perhaps been founded in Buchenwald. Thus the construction of the German-communist memory of the Buchenwald survivors was undertaken with a dual intent: to ward off the reproach not only by the West against the Kapos, with a reference to international solidarity, but also that of their own party leadership. This escalated repeatedly between 1945 and 1950 and also influenced the question of whether remembrance should be of the dead, a culture of mourning – essentially, commemoration of the victims – or of political models, symbolised in the fighting anti-fascists. This is a remembrance that emphasises not so much terror and torture, helplessness and defencelessness, but more the fact of not having been broken, of having remained faithful to political aims.

HL: *The exhibition documents the decision to build the memorial and how to deal with the site of the former camp – including the controversial decision to raze it completely and plant trees, which was later done only partially, leaving behind a barren area. Was an attempt made to reconstruct the reception of this memorial site in GDR society?*

Opening of the Buchenwald national memorial and commemoration centre on 14.9.1958
Photo: Buchenwald memorial



unwillingly and indifferently to Buchenwald as the West German population to Dachau, for example. Initially, the city of Weimar treated Buchenwald with extreme indifference. Then there are documents from 1950 showing the city's great interest in using the materials and infrastructures in the special camp for its own purposes, the Gustloff-Works, for example, so that refugees from the east could work there, or the camp laundry as a municipal laundry. The argument was that Weimar was entitled to this as the city "had suffered" most under the concentration camp. That was not the ideal image of the anti-fascist German who, as the GDR jargon claimed, regarded Buchenwald as an outstanding monument to the workers movement.

"The site of the former camp is no longer authentic, it is interpreted"

HL: The exhibition begins with the dead, those found by the liberators and those who died shortly after liberation as a consequence of imprisonment in the camp, and ends with a quotation from a survivor, Jorge Semprun. Why?

VK: We were aware that this new kind of exhibition demanded a lot of the visitors: The site of the former camp is no longer authentic, it is interpreted. The sites themselves have been variously transformed for the purposes of memory or denial. To prevent people becoming indifferent to the place and saying "that's all constructed", we begin where the concentration camp exhibition ends, in the "liberated" camp. This is what it looked like, with the piles of corpses. The first desperate attempt on 12 April to demonstrate what was still a reality on 10 April 1945 was to show the piles of bodies to those who had not experienced the camp. This is a way of freezing time, leaving the camp in the state it was, because any form of representation and symbolisation would diminish, if not play down the effect. This particular practice of remembering is a theme in the first part of the exhibition: repeatedly reconstructing piles of corpses, representing torture, communicating the terror one suffered oneself. Then a survivor has the final elucidatory word: Even if memory is more or less construction, even if it can be functionalised, this does not mean that it is superfluous. It all took place: the camp, the suffering, the dying, the forms of resistance. And this asks questions of the present.

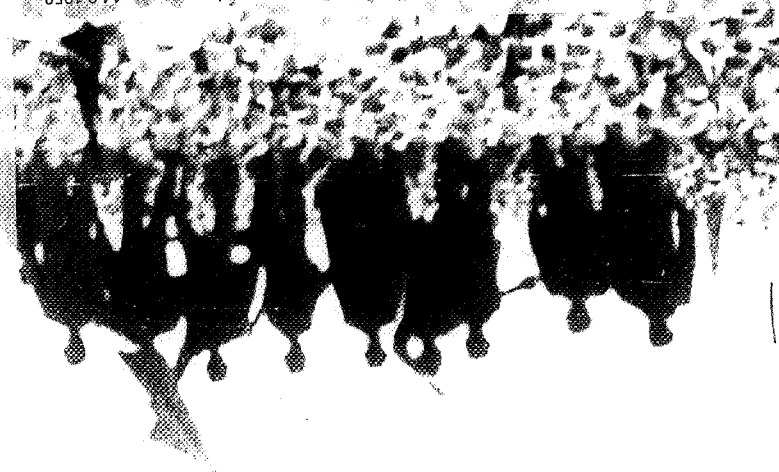
HL: The exhibition cover the necessity to remember the crimes and the difficulty, indeed impossibility of representing them, as well as attempts to use these crimes as legitimisation for action in the present. Was that just a GDR-speciality?

VK: That is the reason for the exhibition's comparison of Dachau and Neuengamme, to show what was happening in the West at the same time, though often with the aim of minimising the representation of the crimes. If visitors come to understand that memory is construction, but that it is possible to distinguish the real content,

VK: We tried, but it was impossible, as there is a lack of source material. One possibility would have been to interview contemporary witnesses, but this would hardly have been representative. The GDR was not interested in the reception because as a state propaganda site Buchenwald had a fixed agenda, which remained almost unchanged until 1989. Some early letters have been preserved complaining about people walking around eating sausages, wanting mainly to see the crematorium and basically behaving as if they were at some kind of sensational adventure site. These were written by staunch comrades who expected the atmosphere to be solemn and wanted people to be moved and identify, and who demanded disciplinary measures.

HL: The reactions to the production of Peter Weiss' play "Die Ermittlung" in the GDR in 1965/66 are another possible source. For example, letters were written to the East German television station indicating that even in the GDR not all opinions were in keeping with the anti-BRD propaganda, but that some people regarded "Auschwitz" as a "German theme" and the issue of the perpetrators as a problem for the GDR as well. Was there nothing of that kind in Buchenwald?

VK: No. There were no visitors books at the memorial site that might have contained such critical statements. There are indications that when the last variation of the GDR camp exhibition was opened in 1985, some historians tried to alter the presentation of the prisoners, pointing out that some were persecuted not only for political but also for racist reasons. They were unsuccessful however, so the mode of interpretation remained unchanged. We have included a small part of that 1985 exhibition in the new exhibition to show the ambivalence of those attempts to introduce new aspects without abandoning the old ideology. We have taken the example of a panel on which a gypsy is mentioned for the first time in Buchenwald. His story is presented to the effect that he was "saved by a communist prisoner", thus making him an object of communist solidarity. The Jews are presented in the same manner. There are very few letters in which foreign visitors complain about this. One letter of 1961, from an Israeli scholar at the Humboldt University, himself a German Jew, asks: "Why are our people not remembered, was the mass murder of the Jews not the epitome of National Socialist crimes? Why does Buchenwald only commemorate groups of political prisoners or nations? We are not included!" To which he received the curt reply: "You are included, in the nations." The man made a second attempt, remarking: "but this does not lend expression to the character of our persecution", however, the correspondence then ceased. There are three or four documented cases of robbery from the memorial site and of highly irregular behaviour, for example, young people telling macabre jokes in the crematorium. In another case in 1957, one of the steele at the monument site was damaged during building work, but it was not clear if this was malicious vandalism or a deliberate attack. This was kept quiet by the police, as was the arson attack in 1951 on the provisional monument in Weimar. There are indicators that at least part of the GDR population reacted as



Opening of the Buchenwald national memorial and commemoration centre on 14.9.1958
Photo: Buchenwald memorial

the credibility, the legitimization of that construction, then the exhibition constitutes a lesson on manipulation. If people finally grasp this and still take Semprun's statement seriously, namely, that memory is necessary in order to realise over and over again how unusual goodness is, then they might hesitate before making hasty equations such as that between Auschwitz and Kosovo. We were not interested in putting the GDR in the dock, but in saying: what you see here is a prototype of the political functionalisation of memory for specific purposes, in this case to present the GDR as the better Germany. But functionalisation is everywhere, it is probably unavoidable, for everything we remember we remember for a particular purpose. Nevertheless, different qualities of memory can be distinguished, whether one must raise objections to functionalisation or not, whether memory is the result of discourse or merely a power tool, whether competing forms of memory exist, whether undesirable memories are admissible or whether they create collective identification. What we have here is a very specific case of memory policy under undemocratic circumstances.

HL: The memorial centre is a site saturated with emotion, whereas the exhibitions take a rational approach, deliberately preventing themselves as a visual depot for archive or research material. How do the visitors react to this antagonism?

VK: We still need a broad-scale evaluation of the visits to all the memorial centres. The exhibitions in Buchenwald deliberately separate places of enlightenment and places of mourning, so as not to abuse mourning for the purposes of manipulation or momentary emotional impact. The GDR always mixed graveyard commemoration and historical enlightenment, with exhibitions installed in a dim light and a funereal atmosphere. To criticize these exhibitions was to dishonour the dead. We wanted people to be able to see. Our exhibitions have been mounted by historians, specialists, who are open to criticism. On the other hand, we are fully aware of the fact that the camp site itself, the crematorium, this huge barren area, the monuments, and the art exhibition can awaken intense emotions.

HL: Have the kinds of people who visit Buchenwald changed over the past ten years?

HL: What consequences does this have for the relationship between remembrance, mourning and historical enlightenment?

VK: They often contradict one another. The places and roles must be precisely defined. It is difficult to imagine someone not being moved by this place and its history, its murderous installations, its relationship to "classical" Weimar. Whoever is willing to take the place in knowledge. To this extent, we rely on the fact that people want to know more, and that they can be shocked without using the crude means of emotional paedagogics, which was previously part of Buchenwald. Many visitors require a kind of guidance, so the educational services are important. Experience has shown that a short visit is of little use. The visitors need guided tours or the possibility to stay here longer in order to be able to handle their feelings towards the camp and its complex history. These feelings – assuming they are genuine and not superficially stimulated – always relate to the present. It is not just sadness and shock because such things happened in the past, but because they are apparently being repeated, because the present and future seem to be completely released from the past. That past is potentiality, and that disturbs people much more. It was different when the focus was on a completed phase in history, as in GDR-times, when a monument made it possible to regard National Socialism as an abyss, as a catharsis in a meaningfully complete and salvaged history: "We live in the better Germany, here the roots of fascism have been crushed and only survive in the West, in the Federal Republic and America." This kind of memory is antiquarian or a military weapon. GDR paedagogics were always paedagogics of identification, identification with social progress, the better state, the anti-fascists, the future. Today we would say that Buchenwald stands for a paedagogics of responsibility. People can decide whether they want to act in a good or evil way, and their decisions are influenced by their social circumstances, education, culture, and the prejudices prevailing in that culture. It is not a matter of human "nature". People can be influenced in the one or other direction, but they still remain responsible for their actions. Anyone who is willing to get involved with Buchenwald gets involved with uncertainty and threat.

But we also believe – to put it bluntly – that commemoration without knowledge has very little to do with enlightenment. We believe that only self-critical awareness can lead to clear-minded action in the present – and from Buchenwald that means becoming conscious of exclusion mechanisms, of socially and "racially" motivated persecution, up to and including racist annihilation.

Like all memorial centres, many visitors come here to be emotionally shaken for a moment, to access a kind of special emotional area, an exceptional emotional state. But that has nothing to do with enlightenment.

interview

"Today it is a German and European memorial site including Israel and the USA"

HL: Is the exhibition on the special camp thus an exhibition on National Socialism?

VK: We have always said that Buchenwald commemorates the concrete history of the camp and with it the histories of concrete perpetrators and victims, and not just "totalitarianism", as many would have liked. Through these people, the history of National Socialism appears in small-format, but as we all know, those "small fry" were decisive for National Socialism to function. The problem here too, is how to deal with such a crime. What should the victors do? Initially, Soviet practices were not so different, i.e., the Americans, Soviets, British, and French were all confronted with the question of what to do with a people responsible for a crime committed at both a political and social level. How does one handle the fact that the concentration camps provided such dreadful visible proof of that crime? What does one do with the realization that there were just too few democrats and antifascists to be able to replace the elites?

Buchenwald raises such questions. I was happy when a group of Bundeswehr soldiers from Erfurt destined to join the KFOR troops in Kosovo reacted to what we are showing in Buchenwald as follows: "With the help of the history of the special camp we would like to address the question of whether there is such a thing as a just occupation, for we are now faced with that problem."

HL: Has Buchenwald's function changed compared to other memorial centres in Germany? In 1990 Buchenwald was a national memorial site, today ...

VK: Today it is a German and a European memorial site including Israel and the USA, countries to which many survivors fled. That is an important difference. It is a German memorial site because it aims to represent the history of the actions carried out here. Its main theme is "a crime at the heart of Germany, committed by Germans". That is to say, it is not just a place for the victims. It is also a European, quasi-international memorial site in the care of the Germans, if viewed from the standpoint of the prisoners, the dead. And it is not just a place of ritual, but a modern museum of contemporary history, with the corresponding infrastructure, archives, collections, libraries, educational services. I believe that this clear distinction between its functions and the attempt to handle them constructively is something very special. Buchenwald is an institution which aspires to enlighten, and this also means not leaving the construction of the image of history to politics, but always asking: "What can we say about Buchenwald that is well founded and what can we not say?"

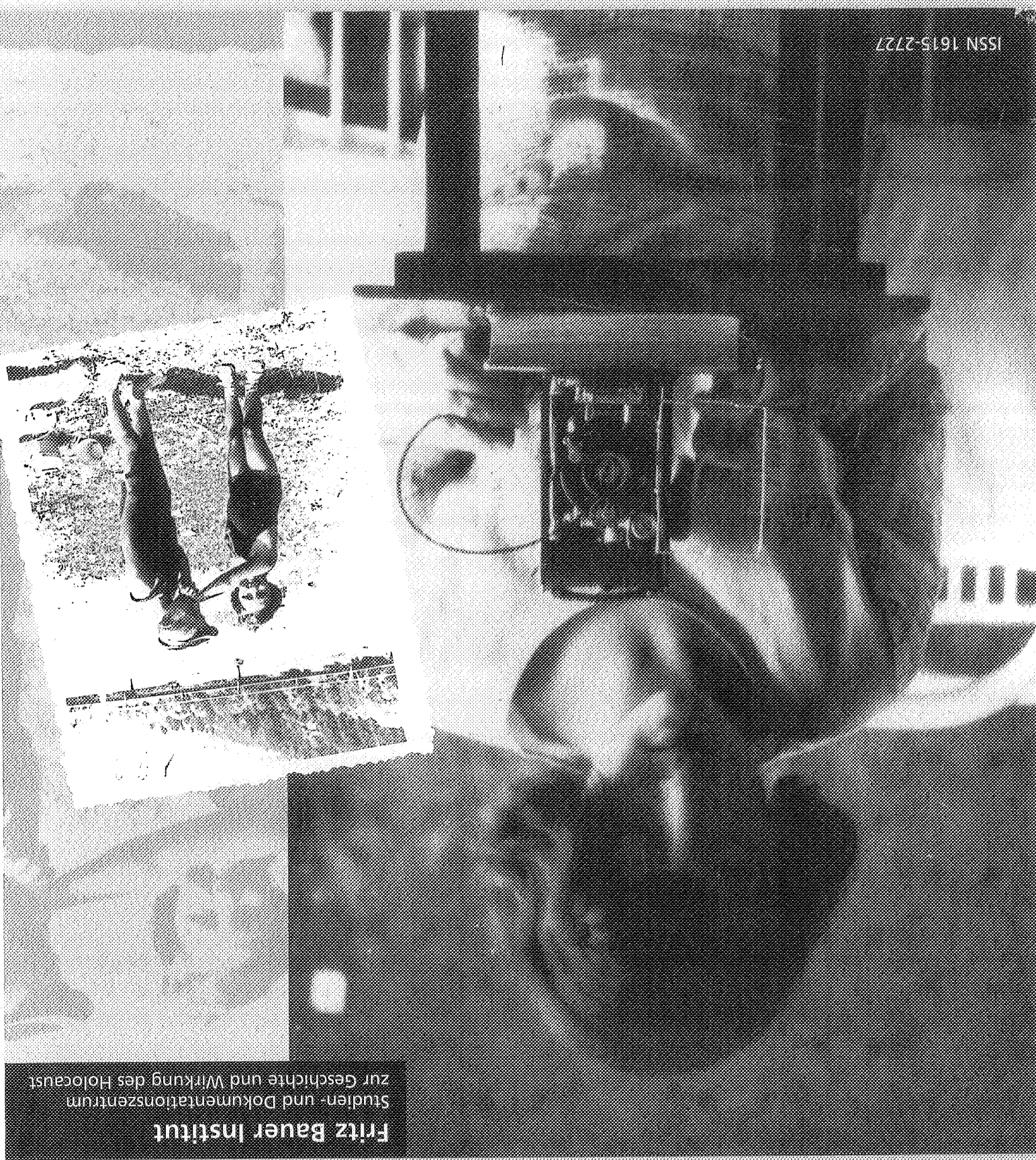
VK: The people decide to come of their own accord, there are no more state-organised visits, mass events on particular holidays. With visits by classes of school pupils it is an open question what the individual's motivation is. Furthermore, visitors are supplied with material to help them move around this complex on their own. The emphasis is now on the individual's own responsibility, on clearly distinguishing commemoration of the dead and historiography, not strictly separating mourning and enlightenment, emotion and reason, but allowing each its own necessary space. This means replacing identification with a state and its heroes by personal responsibility, responsibility for one's own society, its humane qualities.

HL: This is presented most radically in the exhibition on the Soviet special camp. Here the temptation to identify is possibly more ambiguous, the challenge greater to engage more critically with the specific actors.

VK: The special camp exhibition (but also the concentration camp exhibition) focuses on ordinary people in the National Socialist era, not reducing history to either victims or anti-fascist heroes. The issue of everyday participation in National Socialism is raised most decisively by the prisoners in the special camp. Most, though not all of them, were followers and bystanders, participants in the Nazi regime, even with minor official functions, people the Americans would not necessarily have interned, but would also not simply have denazified. The point is to remember their dual significance, as actual victims of Stalinism, as prisoners silenced in a camp where no legal means were available to them, where the hygiene and food were such that many of them died. But victims of Stalinism could also have a co-responsibility for the Nazi system. No one was forced to join the NSDAP. I have been accused of "incitement" for this simple statement. For the memorial centre, this meant enduring conflicts and insisting on the difference between on the one hand people persecuted for political or racist reasons and resistance fighters within National Socialism, including emigrants, and on the other hand all those who decided to become part of the Nazi system as followers, bystanders or perpetrators. This distinction is necessary if memory is to serve democratisation and not just be a manipulatory cult of the dead.



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