

Museums and Comics as Manifestations of Public History

A Study of the Israel Museum, Yad Vashem, and King Ludwig II of Bavaria

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(Intro pantico)

Introduction

Rami: How is history made accessible to the public? And what different media are used to present historic events to a broader public? Let's take a closer look at the multiple dimensions of how past events are turned into public history. Together, we'll explore the two-dimensional world of comics as well as the three-dimensional world of the museum. In our quest for these answers, we'll take you back in time and across the globe—from Bavaria to Jerusalem but also to Japan and the United States. Before we will start our journey in Jerusalem a short introduction of who we are:

Clara: Hi everyone, I am Clara. I am from Munich and I study history, political science, and also communication science—and I am very excited about our podcast.

Alexandra: Hi, I am Alexandra, also a history student from Munich. I am looking forward to talking with you about public history today.

Rami: And I'm Rami from Jerusalem, and I'm currently studying anthropology, sociology, and history and I will be focusing on the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

(Film reeling sound)

Rami: Completed in 1965, the Shrine of the Book exhibit at the Israel Museum houses one of the most important archaeological finds in Israel's history. Home to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the unique architecture of the Shrine of the Book has since become a permanent part of the Jerusalem landscape. Its very design holds the secret to its relevance in the collective memory and national identity of modern-day Israel.

Alexandra: Very interesting, Rami, I am looking forward to hearing about it! And let me add: collective identity is not only formed in museums, it is also depicted in entertainment media. I am thinking about historical novels or movies, but recently I got also interested in historical comics. They are opening history to different—and sometimes foreign—audiences. I came across two comics about Ludwig II who is still an important part of Bavarian identity. I was curious to see how they make the historical figure accessible for the modern public.

Clara: This sounds fascinating, Alexandra, I can't wait to hear more about it!

My interest, when it comes to public history, lies in what is—without a doubt—a central theme, if not the central theme of twentieth and twenty-first century history: the Shoah and its culture of remembrance. It is an important part of the public representation of history all over the world—and in particular part of both Israeli and German identity.

Holocaust museums and memorials have become tourist attraction that draw millions of visitors a year—some even refer to it as “dark tourism.” Therefore, let's take a closer look at Yad Vashem —Israel's official memorial site to the Holocaust and second most visited site in Israel. Especially in the light of the immeasurable historical horror of the Holocaust and in light of the immense significance for national identity and collective memory one may ask the question: how is it possible to make remembrance of the Holocaust to the public accessible in an adequate way?

(Pantico)

Museum as a Medium

Clara: One of the strongest expressions of collective memory is “the museum.” Museums not only present history, they shape collective identity. It is said that without memory, there can be no identity. In order to create a national identity, countries and nations therefore need to reflect and make countless decisions about how they present that history to the public. In museums, history is not merely displayed, but carefully curated to identify a unified narrative that has developed over centuries. What to display and how to display it are the main objectives here. The artifacts and artworks displayed in any given museum are just the tip of the iceberg of each museum’s collection, with the majority stored carefully in the storage rooms out of sight of the public. The material presented is a curated decision. The story told, a conscious one.

Alexandra: So, how do museums work as a medium and create national identity? Let’s take a closer look at one exhibit in particular that consciously shapes national identity, turning ancient history into public history.

(Museum sounds)

Rami: Standing in the Shrine of the Book, one is overwhelmed by the silence and the feeling of enclosure. Dimly lit with cool air, the warm dome stretched above you gives you the feeling of being in a sacred space. Indeed, a shrine. Home to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem was designed as a dedication to history and to the relevance of these scrolls within the national narrative. One doesn’t merely enter the Shrine of the Book, one “descends” into a dark hallway, designed to replicate the cave in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. At the end of the hall, you climb a few steps and rise into a warmly lit rotunda, with the glass enclosed scrolls at its heart. On the outside of the exhibit, you can see the top of the structure emerging from the ground—a large white Hershey kiss of a structure, designed to replicate the lid of the vessel in which the scrolls were kept hidden from history. Across from the dome, stands juxtaposingly a black basalt wall. This stark contrast of color and form struck my curiosity from the moment I first set eyes upon it.

My first time in the Shrine was when I worked for the Israel Museum as a security guard on the Museum staff. Other than the impressionist art, the Shrine of the Book was the one exhibit that required an armed guard. Photography was strictly forbidden. And a blanket of silence was never requested, but somehow settled nevertheless. This was not a mere art exhibit—this was a national treasure—one to be guarded closely and cared for attentively. I was intrigued by the design of the exhibit—in the conscious effort to convey not only the context of the scrolls, but also the relevance of its discovery.

Hidden away for centuries, not to be discovered until 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls came to symbolize the Jewish presence in the ancient homeland and a testament to our exile. Their return to Israel in 1954 paralleled the return of the sovereign Jewish state just six years prior, when Israel gained independence.

During these early years of the State of Israel, turmoil and terrorism embedded a duality of “us” vs. “them” in the collective psyche. The national narrative was strongly dependent on this binary. The Shrine of the Book, built during these early years, serves as a physical embodiment to this binary in its architecture and in the very message of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Within the text of the scrolls is told the story of the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness—a prophecy on the apocalyptic battle before the coming of Messiah. This ancient story of “us” vs. “them” was embodied in the architecture of the exhibit, in the black and white of the Shrine’s contrasting structures. I wanted to learn more about the use of black and white in this exhibit, and its employment as a tool to forge a collective narrative. So, I sat down with Dr. Adolfo Roitman, Chief Curator of the Shrine of the Book.

(Film reeling sound)

Rami: I’m curious how this binary of “good vs. evil,” “black vs. white,” “us vs. them”—what was its importance on the national level—on the collective? I’m curious how this architecture was maybe also of an expression also of what was happening at that time.

Dr. Roitman: Well, the architects, what they tried to do was to express through shapes and materials and colors one of the basic religious contents in the scrolls—the scrolls, they speak about two powers in cosmos that are always in struggle, until the end of history. And this

tension between light and darkness, purity and impurity, good and evil are represented through the architecture of the Shrine. So, in this sense, the architects—what they are trying to do—is to tell a story. They are very good story tellers. And in this sense also, it's very clear the tension at the campus of the Shrine of the Book between the architectural language of the Shrine and the architectural language of all the other buildings of the Israel Museum—they actually reflect, they represent the international style language that was very popular in the late 50s and early 60s in Israel. And in this sense, at the campus itself, we have two different architectural languages.

Rami: Dr. Roitman pointed out to me an element I had not previously considered. The importance of the Shrine of the Book in its larger context. As Dr. Roitman observes, the historical relevance of this museum is revealed in its location and proximity to other buildings and sites of national importance.

(Film reeling sound)

Dr. Roitman: In real estate, you always say that “location, location, location” is the key. Also in architecture. Usually, when I explain to people about this aspect—there is a field in geography called the hermeneutics of the space. So, the space is a text that can also be read in the same way that you read the text. Now when you read the text and you ask the question about the meaning of words, what is the coming question? In which context! Right? The same is with buildings. Try to figure out, Rami, the same Shrine of the Book in Tel Aviv—the same one. Obviously, the message would be quite different because the specific message coming out from the building is related to other buildings in the area. Now, the Shrine of the Book is located at the heart of the Jewish nation. All the central political and cultural institutions of the nation are located in that area.

Rami: The significance of the Shrine in constructing a national identity is seen in its proximity to the other important cultural and state buildings. The Shrine of the Book stands at the literal heart of Israel's national identity. Dr. Roitman explained to me that it is no coincidence that this exhibit is called a “Shrine,” but rather, it was intentionally created as a holy space dedicated to ancient history. Even its architecture was designed to mimic the Second Temple.

(Film reeling sound)

Dr. Roitman: Another aspect is the interior of the Shrine. When you get into the shrine—actually the inner space of the Shrine can be divided up into three different rooms, right? The first one is what we call in museology the “orientation room” just for general explanations and then you have the second room—the tunnel—which is the first area of display, and then you have the third room underneath the white dome. Now the triple division of space also reminds us of the division of ancient temples that also were divided up into three, including Solomon’s Temple. So, in this sense, it’s not by chance that according to the original designs of the architects, the scrolls are supposed to be on display in the third room, exactly where in Solomon’s Temple the ark of the covenant and the ten commandments were held in the third room, the final room.

(Film reeling sound)

Rami: With the main exhibit paralleled to the Holy of Holies, this makes the visitors on the level of the high priest himself, interacting with the heart and epicenter of the Israeli collective narrative. As Dr. Roitman pointed out to me, the tension conveyed in the architecture of the Shrine of the Book is just one mechanism through which the Israeli narrative is strengthened. The very purpose of the museum’s existence was to reinforce the “Israeli” identity, serving as a literal shrine to our ancient roots and our reconnection to our ancient homeland. In the early years, archaeology was the modern religion of the modern state and the Shrine of the Book stood as the cultural epicenter of the country.

When we think of black and white as a visual tool to establish binaries of good vs. evil, or “us” vs. “them,” one thinks of the epic lightsaber battle between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader, or the simple symbol of contrasting forces of the Yin-Yang. These contrasting colors have long been employed to establish opposing forces, and in the case of the Shrine of the Book, further portray the narrative of good vs. evil on a historical plane—and paralleled in the modern Israeli narrative.

Black and white also plays a central role in the very language of the Israeli and Jewish narrative. Our binding religious text, the Torah, is written with black ink on white parchment, and in Kabbalistic interpretation, the letters are read as “black fire on white fire.”

Cognitively, black and white creates a different effect neurologically, as opposed to seeing images in color. Warmer colors like red seem closer, while colder colors like blue seem further in depth. The world around us is not black and white, and therefore seeing images without color creates a sense of alternate reality. When confronting the past, black and white can present a challenge in turning history into public history. Artisans are challenged to come up with creative ways for bridging this cognitive gap. In his 2018 documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old*, director Peter Jackson brilliantly revived World War I footage, adding color and sound—bringing the previously distant images of a bygone era back to life.

Museums like Yad Vashem also face this challenge in bridging this visual gap of black and white in order to create national identity and public history. In order to ensure “NEVER AGAIN,” Yad Vashem has had to creatively present the distant horrors of the past, estranged in a black and white world, and make the evidence of the past just as prevalent to our present and future.

Yad Vashem and the Shrine of the Book have become a permanent part of the Israeli narrative. In his 2013 trip to Israel, U.S. President Barack Obama visited only two sites: Yad Vashem and the Shrine of the Book. The two stand as the Yin and Yang of the Israeli collective narrative, one honoring death, while the other commemorating life.

(Pantico)

Clara: Thank you, Rami, for giving us such a great insight into the Shrine of the Book. I feel like I very much got to know a sense of the place and the meaning of it to Jewish identity—although I have never been there. So, without further ado, let’s dive into the topic of how the Shoah is represented at the museum of Yad Vashem.

As I mentioned, my research interest lies in the culture of remembrance. Given the fact that this is a project that was developed in a seminar of students from both Munich and Jerusalem, I decided to take a closer look at Yad Vashem, which is one of the central Holocaust museums worldwide and a very special place for Israeli identity.

Personally, I have visited both the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. However, I haven't been to Yad Vashem. So, from an outsider perspective I am trying to get some insights into the museum. During my quest to gain some insights into Yad Vashem from an outside perspective I was wondering if I can get a virtual insight into Yad Vashem. Especially considering the fact that currently all museums are closed because of COVID I wanted to know if the internet is a useful medium to make public history accessible.

Yad Vashem—judging from its website and social media accounts, gives great importance to its online appearance. It presents online video testimonies and even so-called online exhibitions. However, the online exhibitions do resemble, I would say, just a normal internet page and don't create an atmosphere of an exhibition. So, to be honest this was rather disappointing. On social media, they give a short insight into their work. But I had the impression that it is rather a way to communicate with very well-informed followers and the public, and they do not really address the broader public as they would in a museum. But maybe this might change in the future. Because the COVID-19 pandemic might force public historians and institutions like museums to try to create new ways of presenting public history through the internet.

Rami: Even before the pandemic, the Israel Museum has gone through great lengths to digitize the Dead Sea Scrolls in order to make them accessible to the public. On the archive's website, you can actually read through the entire Scrolls, verse by verse, with an interactive translation available. This, to me, is unprecedented technology. Without any knowledge of how to read Hebrew—let alone ancient Hebrew—anyone can log on to this website and learn the literal translation from the original text itself. Although translating a text nearly 3,000 years old proved to be very challenging, the Shrine of the Book states on their website that “[t]he museum's mission here is to provide you with the background information required to reach your own objective perspective when reading this English translation of the biblical text.” This is a shining example of “doing public history”—taking ancient history and making it presentable and accessible to the public—through the incredible tool of the internet.

Clara: That sounds so interesting. I think, I must check it out. So as far as Yad Vashem is concerned, I didn't get that much inside information through the internet, I would say. But yesterday, I just figured out that in the context of the Holocaust Remembrance Day, which

was yesterday, Yad Vashem just launched a new social media project which is called “IRemember.” “IRemember Wall” is a unique and meaningful opportunity for us to participate online and you can join the “IRemember Wall” and then, I think, your name will randomly be matched with a name of a Holocaust victim. I think this project is pretty cool. Apart from that I think it is still difficult to get real experience of the museum Yad Vashem.

So luckily, Rami is here to help us. I’m curious to gain some valuable insights from an inside perspective on how the Shoah is represented as public history in the museum of Yad Vashem. So, Rami, you have been to Yad Vashem. So, could you tell us about your experience at Yad Vashem?

Rami: Well, I’ve actually been to the museum three different times in my life and each time represented a different stage in my life. The first time I went was the classic example of going on Birthright. I had never been to Israel and this was my first experience in the country, returning to my homeland for the first time, and going to visit Yad Vashem was an incredibly moving experience since it was my first time in Israel. The second time I went, I was actually serving in the Israel Defense Forces, so that added a level of meaning. Here I was, fighting for our modern nation to make sure that the Holocaust would never happen again and defend our future. And again, I went later after the army—I was accompanying a group of United States veterans. So, to see Yad Vashem from their perspective—a group of non-Jews who had served in the U.S. military—was very inspiring to see it from that perspective.

Different experiences each time and it was different because the context was different and the people who I was with. But it was also extremely different because our tour guides were different each time. And I think that might be one element that, I wouldn’t say I “dislike,” but I would say that there is a huge pressure that comes with tour guiding at Yad Vashem. You can really “make it or break it” for someone’s experience. Thank G-d my first time—I mean every time I had a great tour guide—but the first time I went, which was the “make it or break it”-moment, I *did* have a good tour guide and it really made the experience more meaningful for me. I also really love the architecture of the museum—the way that it’s set up. And I don’t want to give any spoilers, but the whole museum is set up in a zigzag and at the very end, there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. So, your whole journey is kind of through this convoluted dark path and you can’t necessarily know how to get to the end. But you do get to the end and you do get to the light and it’s really beautiful and unique and that’s infused into the architecture. So, it wasn’t just a building, but they take meaning and infuse it

into every corner. Another criticism that I've heard about Yad Vashem—from a Holocaust survivor actually—is that he called it a “cemetery of history”—that this is where the Holocaust memorial is, and this is where it ends. But I think I feel differently. I think they do a great amount to commemorate the memories of the survivors and their stories continue. But that's just one criticism.

Clara: Thank you, Rami, so much. That sounds so interesting and also so fascinating that you had totally different experiences depending on the context in which you were visiting the museum. And I think it's also very interesting that you speak of the different experiences depending on your tour guide. I guess we'll come back to it later on the way.

Another question ... because when I was doing some research, I came across some statements that despite of being one of the most significant and influential global Holocaust memorial sites worldwide, I mean, it is a very local Israeli *lieu de mémoire*. On the website they say that Yad Vashem's aim is to remember and research the unique Jewish perspective on Holocaust history. So, I was wondering about the narrative the museum is presenting? Maybe you could tell us more about it?

Rami: Okay, so for those who don't know: *lieu de mémoire* means memory space, is that correct? [Clara: Yes, sorry that I added some French.] No, it's great. A lot of Americans are only speaking English. As far as the narrative is concerned, I know that Yad Vashem is very focused on life. I've been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC and the first thing you see when you walk is scenes of death. You can't run away from it. That's the first feeling you get when you walk in. Yad Vashem is the exact opposite. The first image you see when you walk in is a mural of daily life in Europe before the Holocaust, to give a sense of what life was. And then you're taken through this journey of how that all fell apart and was destroyed. But I know that's definitely part of the narrative. And the architecture, like I said before, also adds to the narrative. It is its own narrative, paralleling that of maybe the experience of the survivors themselves. But again, focusing on life, there's so many artifacts that they show of daily life. These little fragments of daily life are very impactful and contribute to the larger narrative of what exactly happened, how the Holocaust happened.

And there's also, of course, this shrine of the names at the end, which is an incredibly powerful part of the museum, as—spoiler alert again—you go in and there's shelves and shelves of binders full of pages and pages of names. And that being at the very end of the

exhibit is very powerful because you see photographs, you see artifacts, but it's hard to understand what six million really looks like. And then, when you get at the end, it hits you really hard.

But that's not the very end of the exhibit—and this is the biggest spoiler alert—but once you really leave the building you see in front of you the Jerusalem skyline. And adding that into the narrative, at the end of all this destruction, to see that it wasn't from not, that at the end of all of this horror we were able to have a statehood. And again, starting with life and ending with life seems to be the recurring theme in the narrative of Yad Vashem.

Clara: Thank you so much for giving me that insight! And also, I believe, that it is very important to not only present the atrocities and how lives were destroyed, but also to present artifacts of daily life and narrate how people lived during and before this period. And I also can imagine that the architecture plays a crucial role in connecting it to present-day Israel because, as you said before, it must be—I only saw a picture—but it must be very interesting to just be at this museum and then just look at modern Jerusalem.

During my research I was also really fascinated by the architecture of the museum—even if I only saw pictures. And I was very intrigued by the Hall of Names, which is the centerpiece of the museum, serving as the central memorial to the six million murdered Jews. And I specifically researched the meaning of the architecture of the Hall of Names. So, to give you a better idea of what it looks like: The wall of the Hall is covered with the so-called Pages of Testimony, which serves as a documentation of all Jewish victims identified so far. In the middle of the room there is an upward and one downward-extending cone. Inside the upward-extending gold cone are black and white pictures of Holocaust victims. And the downward-extending cone is filled with water, which also reflects the pictures. The surrounding Hall is also made up of empty spaces. Along the walls there is still room to receive the Pages of Testimony documenting the fate of one-and-a-half million Jews that are still unidentified. Their names are not known yet.

Thus, the aim of the Hall is to create an atmosphere of remembering both the identified and missing victims. The triangle structure suggests on the one hand the physical connection to the Mount of Remembrance on which Yad Vashem has been established and on the other hand an ascent towards light and heaven, which gives it also a sacred dimension, I guess. And even just looking at the pictures, it seems to create a very powerful atmosphere.

Personally, I can't even imagine what a powerful experience it must be to directly stand there.

Also, I was deeply impressed by the pictures I saw from the Children's Memorial outside of the Museum. The visitor enters a room in complete darkness until finally a light appears, the light of candles. Their light is multiplied and reflected almost infinitely by mirrors. In that room there are also black and white pictures of children that are installed along the walls, floor, and ceilings—which in the end resembles a galaxy of the victims so to say. This also very much reminded me of the black and white aspect you talked about before, Rami. Without doubt, it seems like the architecture is a very powerful tool for the museum experience but also to express the national identity of the museum.

So, Rami, overall, what do you like about the museum the most? How does it manage to inform the broader public about the complex history of the Holocaust? And what makes Yad Vashem a place of public remembrance?

Rami: Yad Vashem is really an incredible treasury of records and archives. I appreciate how tightly it tied itself into the national significance. Like I said before, it's not just a cemetery of history. They host dignitaries. When I've been there, I've seen soldiers and high-ranking officials from foreign militaries going to visit, because it's a part of the landmark. It's a landmark in the Israeli landscape, it's a central point. So, everyone who's important, who comes to the country has to go and visit it, feels compelled to visit a part of the history.

Specifically, I think expressing the horrors of this history is not its main focus—the museum in Washington is more about that, like I mentioned. When you first walk into Yad Vashem, it's more about life. But in terms of taking this dark chapter in our history and making it accessible for the public, I think they do a good amount of hosting events and every year there's memorials that happen. So, I do think that there's a cognizant effort to bring the museum to the public—not just making it available but inviting the public in and having annual events.

Clara: Thank you, Rami, for giving me such a great insight. As I figured out yesterday, the "I Remember Wall" is also such an online event you could say, which underlines what you just said. From your description, it seems like a very powerful experience to be there. And to me, I mean I have never been there, but from what you say and what I have figured out so far,

it seems like the museum puts a lot of effort into making the most difficult and painful historical event accessible to the public, but also trying to give adequate space for remembering the individual victims and their stories [...].

Comic as a Medium

Clara: And what was very interesting, during my research I came across a graphic novel which deals with the experience of Yad Vashem and the culture of remembrance. This graphic novel puts the emphasis on how its author experienced a visit to Yad Vashem. The graphic novel is called “Understanding Israel in 60 Days or Less,” which was created by the American author and comic artist Sarah Glidden who herself has a Jewish background. The graphic novel is based on her experience during the *Taglit* Birthright trip. Rami mentioned it earlier, but for those who do not know about *Taglit*: the State of Israel offers the opportunity for young Jewish adults to participate in a free ten-day diaspora-heritage trip. And the aim behind that trip is to strengthen the Jewish identity of those participants and thus constructing an attachment to Israel. Needless to say, as strengthening the Jewish identity and creating a feeling of community is a central goal, Yad Vashem constitutes a central element of the Birthright trip.

Sarah Glidden tries to describe the complexity of Israeli identity and society and the conflict of the Middle East from a Jewish-American—I would say rather leftist—perspective. And it is impressive how well she portrays the complexity of Israel. She recreates the Birthright trip within the graphic novel. And it is very interesting how she presents her experience at Yad Vashem. Overall, Glidden has a rather negative experience at Yad Vashem. She criticizes the way the Holocaust is presented at Yad Vashem. And she very much criticizes the tour guide, feeling rushed through the museum, that leaves no space for remembering the horrors of the Holocaust in an adequate way. As she writes: “His robotic delivery combined with the fact that I can see the other groups ahead of us makes me feel like I’m on a conveyor belt, mechanically moving through the darkest moment in 20th century history.” She states further: “I feel like our guide is distracting me from what could be a really emotional experience.”

So, Rami, what do you think about her experience? I mean, this depiction diverges very much from the official picture of Yad Vashem, which presents itself as a museum in which every single Jewish victim shall be remembered and aims at creating an atmosphere of adequate remembrance.

Rami: I think that she was simply robbed of a potentially very powerful experience and she's painfully aware of it. And it's not because of the museum per se, but rather the failure on the part of her tour guide and of the overall poor planning of her Birthright coordinator. Yad Vashem is a very vulnerable experience your first time and her experience is a testament to the weight and importance of the tour guide in creating a make-it-or-break-it moment. I don't think everyone is fit to be a tour guide, just like I don't think everyone is fit to be a rabbi, or a teacher, or a parent even. But there are just some bad eggs and she unfortunately got stuck with one. In my three times at Yad Vashem, I can say I've had one tour guide who was exceptional, but I guess that's the luck of the draw.

Clara: Yeah, I also believe that the experience at a museum very much diverges depending on what tour guide you have. I mean I had similar experiences at different museums. Given the fact that a lot of people visiting the museum of Yad Vashem choose tour guides and the guide-tourist relationship is, as we already said, a complex one, some visitors might have the same experience that their expectations weren't met during a guided tour which may be, I think, very regrettable. But one should always bear in mind that museums are a medium for conveying history to the public which very much is based on a mutual interaction between the place and the visitor, which is sometimes "translated" by the tour guide.

Alexandra: I totally agree. And there is also the possibility of visiting museums without a tour guide at all, which makes the experience even more personal, depending on your own preferences and the focus.

Clara: But not only, as we just said, tour guides might influence the experience at a museum. Also, the different use of media at a museum has an impact on your experience. During my research about Yad Vashem I came across some articles focusing on the curation of the museum per se and the use of different media. And Yad Vashem has been collecting and

creating these media all over the years. By now, these days, countless objects, pictures, paintings, and films, and also video testimonies are presented. All in all, the use of media aims to put great emphasis on the “individual voice” of the victim by presenting different media, different pictures and so on. Thereby, the museum creates a multi-layered “picture” of the past. And this multi-perspectivity creates an interplay between the visitor and these different media—which leads to individual experiences of a museum visit. So, depending on what media you focus on, or depending on how fast you go through the museum, you might have a different interaction and thus experience.

So, Sarah Glidden gets very much to the heart of the challenge of public history and the museum’s mission in presenting the Holocaust. Overall, I think it is surprising how well she portrays the complexity of Israel. All in all, this shows that graphic novels are sometimes a fitted tool to make a very complex and difficult topic more accessible.

(Pantico)

Alexandra: As Clara has mentioned, graphic novels have become a quite popular medium to represent history. And they can be accessed through the internet as well. Art Spiegelman’s MAUS graphic novel about the Holocaust made the genre of graphic novels in public history popular. Thanks to Clara, we gained a short insight into Sarah Glidden’s graphic novel about her experience at Yad Vashem. And I will now focus on two graphic novels on King Ludwig II.

First, I agree with what you said, Clara, about comics being able to make the complexity of history more accessible to the public. Recently, I read two comics about the Bavarian King Ludwig II, also known as the “fairytale King” or “Moon King,” who is well known for building various castles, like Germany’s most famous castle, Schloss Neuschwanstein, which inspired Disney’s Cinderella Castle. Ludwig II is a big deal in Bavaria because of his unusual character traits and his mysterious death. Have you been to any of his castles yet?

Clara: Honestly, I’ve never been to castle Neuschwanstein even though I am very much from Bavaria. I think it’s a very touristy place and I believe that it’s more popular to tourists than to people from Bavaria. But I have been to Schloss Linderhof, which is another smaller castle. And I mean it’s true, he is very famous in Bavaria due to his famous castles.

Rami: I've only been to Disneyland, so I can't say.

Alexandra: I think most Bavarian people at least know his face, from tourist shops, and cups, and merchandise. Wouldn't you agree, Clara?

Clara: Yeah, I totally agree with you. I mean, personally, I don't like all those tourist shops because they often present a way too kitschy image of Bavaria, I would say. But it is definitely true that Ludwig II is a big deal at tourist shops and is well known in Bavaria.

Alexandra: Yes, but what struck me the most is that the two comics that I found about Ludwig II depict him as a totally different character and with that, kind of different images of Bavaria, too. First things first: While the comic "King Kini" was made in Bavaria in 2002 with an art-style similar to the famous comic "Asterix and Obelix"—"Kini" was the nickname of Ludwig meaning "King" in Bavarian, so it's basically called "King King"—the Manga "Ludwig II" is a Japanese manga and dates from the year 1996. It is a series with three volumes in total. The Mangaka You Higuri made it after her trip to Germany. So, she actually visited the places she tells about.

"King Kini" focuses on a fictional adventure of King Ludwig, including the display of various parts of Bavarian culture, while the Japanese "Ludwig II," is part of the popular genre of Shonen-Ai manga, meaning "boy-love." So, it's a homo-erotic love story between two men. That's why the story mainly focuses on the love story between King Ludwig and his servant, Richard Horning. What comic would you expect to be more historically accurate?

Clara: I guess obviously the Bavarian one since, I guess, it's more authentic.

Alexandra: Yes, I thought the same first but, surprisingly, I found this not to be true. The Bavarian comic starts with Ludwig's day of birth and introduces the family of the king, the Wittelsbacher monarchs. But afterwards the comic is only very loosely based in history. The main focus is on the culture of Bavaria, like Bavarian inns, beer, and the Oktoberfest, of course.

Another interesting fact: The townsfolk are speaking Bavarian instead of German, which is also communicated in the English volume. I just read one sentence: “All here? Hope ye didn’t havda wait too long. Let’s get on wit it though!” I think, it should be pronounced that way.

Rami: So, are there any elements of the comics that *are* historically accurate?

Alexandra: Yes, there are some historical facts depicted, mainly about the characters: On the one hand, the comic mentions Ludwig’s family. We get to know his grandfather, Ludwig I, his mother Marie, his brother Otto, and his famous cousin, “Sissi,” the Empress of Austria. Furthermore, it depicts the crown prince of Prussia and Richard Wagner.

But on the other hand, the flat character of Ludwig II himself is far from history. Two things are historically correct: depicting him taller than the other people around him—since Ludwig II was 1,93 m tall—and his love for the music of Richard Wagner.

Clara: Ah, that’s interesting. So, what about any historical buildings? I guess, the comic depicts Neuschwanstein?

Alexandra: Yeah, of course. The comic has to show Schloss Neuschwanstein, but it also includes some other cultural places in Munich like the Old City of Munich, the Hofbräuhaus, the Theresienwiese, the Residenztheater, and Schloss Nymphenburg. But if we compare them with the depictions in the Japanese manga, they are far less detailed and restricted to places in Munich, while the manga depicts places all over Bavaria, also Schloss Linderhof where you have been to, Clara.

Rami: So, are there any historical events in either comic?

Alexandra: There is some historical information at the start of the Bavarian comic and one short note about Bavarian, Austrian, and Prussian politics in 1866. But overall, not very much.

But now the surprising part: The manga is actually pretty accurate in terms of historicity—except from some artistic liberties, of course. The manga is about the last years of Ludwig’s reign and ends with his death. It focuses on his relationship with his lover Richard Hornig but also on the psychological character of Ludwig II as well as on politics and conspiracies. So, it depicts a lot of historical events. For example, Ludwig’s betrothal to Sophie, various political events, the building of his castles, and the dismissal of Ludwig as King in Volume 3 and the events of his death are extremely close to the historical events. Furthermore, there are a lot of info boxes which explain the historical background of the story and various historical figures around Ludwig II. And last but not least, it carefully relates the shown places to the actual events happening there.

Clara: Oh, I didn’t expect that it would be so thoroughly researched.

Alexandra: Yes! Most impressive to me is the character of Ludwig II himself. Ludwig II is a complicated character. By critics, the manga is described as a psychological study of Ludwig II, closely connected to history. In the manga, Ludwig gets called various terms like: “innocent heart,” “intelligent,” “tax wasting stupid king,” “unreliable,” “plain crazy,” “popular with the mountain folk,” and “legendary King”—so, a lot of things. On the one hand, the manga shows the complex personality of Ludwig II, on the other hand, the different opinions of his surroundings.

Rami: What about his looks? Is he as tall as “King Kini” from the comic?

Alexandra: Yeah, he is! Apart from this, his looks fall under artistic liberty, giving him the looks of a typical boy-love manga protagonist, while “King Kini” was designed quite similar to the pictures of Ludwig that you find nowadays in the tourist shops.

So, on the one hand, there is little history depicted in the Bavarian comic, which was quite surprising and—to be honest—a bit disappointing. The historical period seems to be a simple frame for the author to tell his story and depict the different parts of Bavarian culture. The lack of historical accuracy is also criticized by the mostly negative reviews.

On the other hand, I was positively surprised by the manga! Even though Ludwig II is a boy-love manga, it is closely connected to the history of the actual Ludwig II. The period

isn't just a frame for the story but affects the story and the characters strongly. Apart from certain artistic liberties, the author tries to give her readers a sense of historical knowledge of the period, the politics, and the personality of Ludwig II. Even more impressive: at the end of Volume II, You Higuri actually quotes her various source material—another strategy to underline historical authenticity.

Clara: That's very interesting, everything that you just said and pointed out! These two comics are both about the same person, but why are they so different?

Alexandra: Well, in comparison the difference of the two comics is quite clear. While the German comic hardly cares for the historical background and focuses more on the culture as a form of creating identity for the German/Bavarian reader, the Japanese manga relies strongly on history. I think, the author of the Japanese manga cares less about creating German identity than for the—for her—foreign and maybe wondrous themes itself. Since You Higuri writes for a non-German audience, she needs to explain the historical background to them and introduce her audience more carefully to the period and the characters. Her source material shows that she did her research in depth. Her story then edited the historical knowledge to an engaging read, which her Japanese readers would be interested in.

In a nutshell: Both of the comics use history for their storytelling but with very different approaches. The German comic tries to showcase Bavarian identity by using an iconic figure and telling a story about Bavarian culture. The Japanese manga uses the probably homosexual King Ludwig II as the protagonist for a boy-love story, history for engaging events and a tragic death, and historical sites as an aesthetic frame of the story.

I got the feeling that the German comic focuses on Bavarian identity but fails to consider history properly, while the Japanese manga cares for the actual history itself and does a great job in making the problems of the periods and the complicated character of King Ludwig accessible.

(Film reeling sound)

Concluding Discussion

Rami: Together, we took you through two monumental museums in Israel—the Shrine of the Book and Yad Vashem—and we discussed the different mechanisms through which they forge and present a collective narrative and national identity. We also took you through three different comics that each in their own way convey the complexities of history, bringing it into the public forum. But what do you guys feel are the possible pros and cons of using comic as a medium in making history “public history?”

Alexandra: Well, I think, one strong point of comics is that they can be entertaining. In that way, they are able to engage with a broad audience which otherwise might not be interested in history. On the downside, a popular comic has to be entertaining. So, they often change some historical facts to make the story a better read. What do you think, Clara?

Clara: In my case, the graphic novel of Sarah Glidden was not as entertaining, I would say, as your comic, but was rather a medium to present or to underline a certain message. But honestly, I was impressed on how well the comic depicted the complexity of her experience at the Birthright trip. So, sometimes I think graphic novels are a good way to present rather complex issues.

However, I think that the audience is still comparatively small, I mean compared to a museum, as I guess only people who are really interested in the topic buy a comic about it. But at the same time, in times of COVID-19 especially, you can buy it online, so it’s accessible everywhere, in Germany, Israel, Japan.

Alexandra: Yeah, that’s right. So, what do you guys feel are the strengths and weaknesses of museums as platforms for “public history?”

Clara: The museum presents a central, if not the central medium of public history. Museums represent a powerful tool to present the past—as the visit as a whole is a powerful experience. I feel like the architecture and visual tools are very important to reinforce the experience, which is very important especially in the context of presenting the Shoah as public history.

All in all, I guess you can't really compare the experience at a museum with an online experience or a comic—as it is way more intense. However, we shouldn't forget that the experience at a museum is very much dependent on the tour guide or on how much time you have to spend at the museum, or also depending on your previous knowledge. So, the experience in general often varies, I would say.

Rami: Right, I have to agree. A museum is not just a visual tool, like a comic. It's not just an experience, it's a curated experience. And interacting in that space, the visitor becomes a part of history and an active member in bringing that history into the present. What's special about a museum, I think, is that there are multiple narratives involved: the narrative behind the objects presented, there's the narrative expressed in the exhibit itself, and then there's the narrative that's created together with the audience interaction. As far as public reach is concerned, the question remains how to make that exhibit accessible to everyone.

On Israeli Independence Day—the day that congeals our national identity—admission is actually free to the Israel Museum. And a lot of people come in droves and bring their children as well, it's a kind of celebration. And exactly in the space between the white dome and the black wall of the Shrine of the Book, there are performances of traditional Israeli folk dance, and viewers are invited to partake and learn the dances. And Israeli folk dance also happens to be another integral part of Israeli national identity. So, on this day of the year, the Shrine of the Book is open to everyone in celebration of our history, our culture, and our nationhood.

Alexandra: We have talked about a lot of different and new ways to present history to the public. However, the future decides whether these encounters with public history will become popular, how they will evolve further, or if it will remain a thing of the past.

(Pantico)