

Study Visit and Action Day in Stara Gradiška

Author: Helena Redmer

I don't think I have ever visited a place that created so much cognitive and emotional dissonance within me as did the old fortress in Stara Gradiška. Having been built during the Austrian rule, nature now reclaims the place and the outside view upon it could certainly make it to the cover of some "mystery lost places" magazine. It is a "lost place", indeed, that commemorates the history of some of the most brutal crimes of humanity conducted against humanity on the European continent throughout the centuries. Presumably having been used as a prison from the very beginning, the fortress had been converted into a concentration camp during the second World War by the Croatian fascist Ustaša regime. During the socialist Yugoslav period, it continued to be employed as an inhumane political prison. Finally, in the 1990s, the fortress was once more used for detaining people based on ethnicity, this time by the self-proclaimed Serbian regime of Krajina.

But first things first. History needs to be remembered, including its cruel and inhumane facets, in order for repetition to be prevented. That proposition sadly seems to get affirmed lately, not only in Croatia, but all over Europe, with awareness of historical events declining and right-wing populism growing seemingly everywhere. So, only two days after the much-discussed concert by Thompson in Zagreb, we were able to participate in a kind of contrast program to that event: A study trip of awareness raising, in which we were introduced to three important sites of Croatian history. We, that is an actually not so small group of people from all over Europe who are interested in the history of the region.

At the first evening we had a theoretical introduction into that history, focusing on the 20th century. That prepared us for our trip to the memorial site of Jasenovac on the next day. Jasenovac was the location of the main concentration camp which the Ustaša regime built and run, imprisoning and murdering an unthinkable number of Serbians, Jews, Sinti and Roma and regime critiques between 1941 and 1945. The museum contains, next to several exhibition pieces, documentations of temporary witnesses. Especially touching are the narrations about the fates of children imprisoned and murdered in that place.

Linking the legacy of the Second World War with the more recent history of Croatia, we visited Pakrac in the afternoon, a town that was important during the 1990s wars. Here, we got a guided tour by a contemporary witness and were introduced to a group of activists who had been working together in humanitarian aid in the city during the 1990s wars. Working together, that is, despite of their different ethnic backgrounds.

All comes together in Stara Gradiška, which we visited on the second day of the trip. Transition had been mirrored unimaginably fast in that place. Now, nature is taking over, trees grow through the roof of the old fortress and bats are swimming in the water-swamp basement which used to contain torture cells. History needs to be remembered, yes. But in cases where the continuation and restoration of memorial sites seems to be impossible as is the case with the fortress in Stara Gradiška, maybe it's a good thing if nature takes over and covers the perceptibly haunted place beneath fresh, green leaves – not to be forgotten, but to finally be released from human-induced brutality.