

# Working with the Exhibition *Some Were Neighbors*: USHMM and German Partners Co-Crete New Holocaust Educational Models

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## Origins

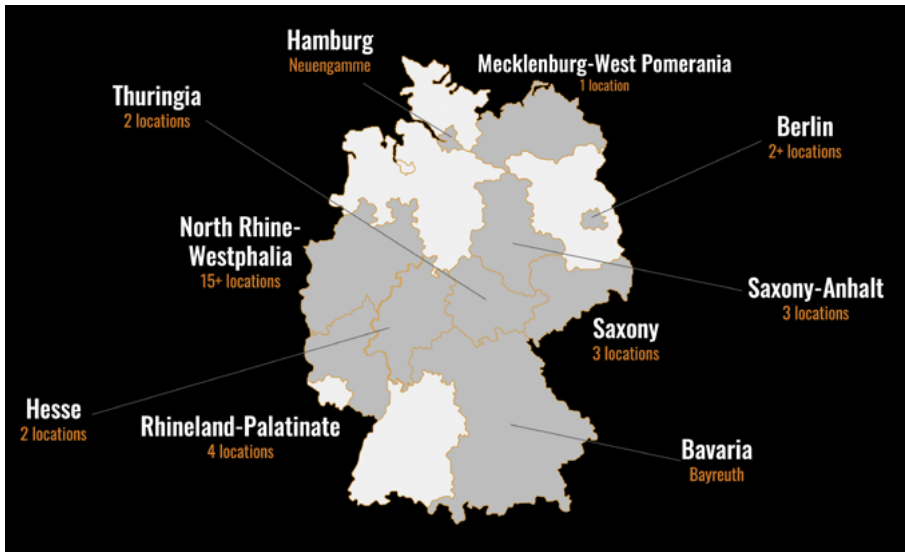
The seeds for this project began in 2013, when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) opened a new special exhibit in Washington, DC, called *Some Were Neighbors*. Rooted in the concept that Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders did not perpetrate the Holocaust alone, *Some Were Neighbors* uses case studies from Nazi Germany and across occupied Europe to show that ordinary people contributed to those events, making a wide range of choices and with a myriad of motivations. These influences often reflected antisemitism, career concerns, community standing, peer pressure, or chances for material gain. It also looks at individuals who did not give in to the opportunities and temptations to betray their fellow human beings, reminding us that there are alternatives to conformity, complicity, and collaboration even under the most despotic regimes. The purpose of the exhibition was to disrupt the simple explanation and encourage visitors to more deeply consider the behaviors of ordinary people.

In 2017, a group of German NGOs working on antisemitism and other discriminatory issues – visiting the Museum for a week-long workshop – saw the exhibition and remarked that the question-driven structure of the exhibition would allow them to engage audiences in new ways. They inquired about the possibility of showing the exhibition in Germany. Their strong interest dovetailed with the Museum’s goal of developing a resource that broke down common Holocaust narratives, which often tend toward over-simplistic explanations of this complex past, and that could be used easily by a wide variety of organizations in their educational programming to have conversations about those issues with their audiences. This led to the creation of a 22-panel version, including three short videos, that could be shown outside of the United States.

***Some Were Neighbors: Choice, Human Behavior & the Holocaust*** launched at the German Bundestag in January 2019 for International Holocaust Remembrance Day. As the themes of the exhibition are relevant far beyond Germany, it was also presented at the United Nations headquarters for International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2020, and has been shown in some two dozen countries through the UN’s global network of information centers. Since January 2022, the exhibit has been shown across Poland.

## Partners

The exhibition aroused the interest of many different partners across Germany, who joined the Museum in its effort not only to show it, but to develop educational programming for local students. Our partners liked that the exhibition did not look at big events, but focused on individual, personal lives. The concept of “neighbors” was understandable and resonated for everyone. The title *Some Were Neighbors* narrowed



So far, we have worked with more than 40 venues in 10 German states. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

the focus to highlight neighborhoods and how neighbors reacted during National Socialism, thereby bringing the history closer to home, surfacing difficult questions, and prompting discussion.

The Museum sought out a diverse set of partners to learn how different audiences would approach the exhibit and to jointly develop an educational model that would resonate locally. We wanted to explore whether there were different responses to the material or interest in different materials from audiences in urban or rural settings, in the east or the west of the country, if the display/discussion location had impact, and the size of the partner institution made a difference. So far, we have worked with more than 40 venues in 10 German states.<sup>1</sup> Our partners included the Villa ten Hompel in Münster, who arranged to bring the program to more than 20 museums, memorials, and archives in North Rhine-Westphalia. Miteinander – Netzwerk für Demokratie und Weltoffenheit scheduled displays in Saxony-Anhalt at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, at the Gardelegen Library, and at the state parliament in Magdeburg. The German Cities Association connected us to city halls across the country; the exhibit was displayed at national memorials, including the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, the House of the Wannsee Conference, and the Prora Memorial; and the headquarters of the German police in Wiesbaden displayed it on their campus. German Ambassador to the U.S. Emily Haber introduced us to the head of the Conference of State Ministers of Education and Culture (KMK), who connected us to the Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial in Rhineland-Palatinate. The Museum’s long-standing relationship with the German Hygiene Museum Dresden brought us to Saxony, just to name a few.

The strong positive response and geographical spread of the presentation of the exhibition was greatly facilitated by endorsements from the Bundestag and the German Cities Association, as well as minister presidents, ministries of education, and antisemitism commissioners in several German states.

Developing strong working relationships with German partners was, from the early stages, a key structural component of the program. In every part of the work, a high-

Some Were Neighbors  
on display at the  
Martin-Luther-  
Universität Halle-  
Wittenberg.  
(US Holocaust  
Memorial Museum)



level of connectivity was created between us, with many options and avenues for communication to be responsive to institutional and mutual needs and possibilities. The most productive partnerships developed with institutions who saw how the program could help them achieve their own goals. Together we explored opportunities for mutual learning and for developing larger questions, including:

- How can educators in the US and Germany better connect Holocaust education to local and regional history?
- How can we rethink our approach to Holocaust education in formal and non-formal education?
- How can we use a participatory learning approach to help visitors explore the exhibition and critically engage with potentially challenging ideas?
- Which didactic and participatory concepts are necessary to meet the questions of a new generation?

Built into the project was the intention to do an evaluation, which is focused on two areas. First, achieving learning outcomes in the educational activities accompanying the exhibition, specifically that youth increasingly: 1) Challenge the idea that the Holocaust was the fault solely of Hitler and his close colleagues (i.e. The Holocaust required the complicity and complacency of ordinary people); 2) Understand that a range of actions were possible and exercised; and that 3) Different motivations and pressures drove people to behave in a variety of ways. Second, the experience of our partners with the exhibition and the program; did our partners feel that it helped engage audiences in new ways? Throughout this program, the Museum has worked with an outside evaluation firm based in Berlin, hired to observe audience engagement with the educational activities and to solicit feedback from partners. Although the project and the evaluation are still in process, interim reports indicate that the Museum's intended outcomes are being met. Information from the interim reports is included throughout this essay.



Sara J. Bloomfield, director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, speaks at the opening of *Some Were Neighbors* at the Municipal Building in Muenster. January 2020 (Maren Kuitert, for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum)

### Developing an Educational Model

In our collaboration with Thomas Köhler, Pädagogisch-wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter und zweiter stellvertretender Leiter at the Geschichtsort Villa ten Hompel<sup>2</sup> in Münster, we adapted the participatory learning model to create educational resources to accompany the exhibition. With extensive experience in educating German youth and state employees (public administration, police, fire fighters, judiciary, army) on the topic of National Socialism, Köhler and his education team collaborated closely with the Museum over several months – in workshops both in-person and online – to develop, refine, and practice techniques to engage visitors, and to develop educational activities that would make the exhibition resonate locally with German youth age 14–25. For Köhler, the exhibit meant an extension of their “ordinary men” focus on police in the Nazi period to one on “ordinary citizens”, and he welcomed the joint development of educational work in this respect. Together with the Villa ten Hompel, we have created a set of activities that can be offered in connection with the exhibition, along with a methodological framework for the activities that allows others to adapt them according to their needs. We have come to call this package of information the “*Some Were Neighbors* educational model.”

The educational model encourages visitors to engage with the questions the exhibit asks and to critically explore the photos on display. In developing the educational model, we explored together with our German partners what parts of the exhibit raise difficult and complex questions for a German audience and offer a space for critical thinking. How could we facilitate a group discussion on the lead question “how did the Holocaust happen?” that went beyond the key role of Hitler and the Nazis and looked also at wider responsibility and culpability. In this approach, we are less concerned with the quest for a final agreed upon answer, but believe the struggle with this question, and the discussion and debate among visitors is worthwhile and important. The recent Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor (MEMO) study, by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University,



Entrance to the Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial (NS-Dokumentationszentrum Rheinland-Pfalz/Gedenkstätte KZ Osthofen)

found that respondents estimated the share of perpetrators among the German people as comparatively small and the share of victims and helpers as comparatively large, and that these distortions were even more pronounced in their knowledge of the involvement of their own ancestors.

Working with local guides and facilitators, we explored together which approaches enable an open participatory engagement where a personal learning process is both possible and central. This approach invites young audiences to explore how the events of the Holocaust and ordinary people's involvement in it is relevant to them. Our colleagues in Osthofen noted that the exhibition's concrete, everyday examples of exclusion and personal enrichment led students to better understand "how was the Holocaust possible?" The students themselves recognized that similar phenomena exist today and were not unique to the National Socialists. The facilitators said they "didn't have to ask the question 'Why are we dealing with this topic 90 years later?'; the exhibition itself more or less spoke for itself."

### Implementing Educational Activities

To implement our educational model, we developed a menu of possible activities that could be adapted by each venue and offered to visitors, including a film study, a photograph analysis, a local tour, and a workshop.

Acknowledging that each new generation brings their own questions and that the Holocaust is both challenging and complex, we engage students at the outset of a program by asking them three questions: 1) how was the Holocaust possible, 2) what was the role of ordinary people, 3) why do you think so many went along with it? This third question surfaces many of the preconceived notions, and typically reveals that many visitors assume ordinary people had little scope for personal action, did not know what was happening, or were too frightened to intervene. After surfacing their prior knowledge, we invite them to test their own hypotheses by watching a video of



historical footage included in the exhibit, about a young couple publicly shamed in the center of their village for having a “mixed race” relationship, according to laws at the time. The footage of this very public spectacle clearly shows the active participation by a broad group of people, almost none of whom are wearing Nazi uniforms.

Students in Münster visiting a local site. (Hendrik Snethkamp, Ratsgymnasium Münster)

### Photo Activity

Our educational approach intends to complicate students’ thinking. In facilitated group discussions, participants are the driving force in surfacing the implications of the historical events as we ask them to examine carefully the photographs in the exhibition. We regard the photographic evidence as a powerful primary source in *Some Were Neighbors*. Joint analysis of the photos leads students to a deeper understanding of how the events and ordinary people’s involvement echo with us today. Students were particularly drawn to the many photos in the exhibition, and this interest led us together to develop the photo analysis activity, which became a powerful tool for partners to engage their audiences.

The Osthofen Concentration Camp Memorial in Rhineland-Palatinate was an important partner in implementing photo analysis activities in educational programs. As Martina Ruppert-Kelly, the pedagogical director of the memorial, remarked: “the focus is on what else can be seen in a photo, and not on what one had the focus on anyway.” Inspired by *Some Were Neighbors*, Osthofen explored their own material and employed the use of photo analysis in their existing (non-*Some Were Neighbors*) onsite programs. This new approach was also fruitful in their work with audiences with learning disabilities. Osthofen reported that working on the photos together allowed all participants, even those with different levels of prior knowledge, to engage in the process. The result was like a jigsaw puzzle: a large whole is created from many small comments. No student had to fear being discriminated against or exposed for lack of knowledge.

The external team hired by the Museum evaluated the educational activities in different locations. The evaluation showed that the work with primary sources – both photographic and film material – contributes to a large extent to the success of the activity. The students found it more meaningful to engage in conversation with each other during the analysis of the photo and film material, and to share observations, emotions, and thoughts that came to mind while looking at an image with their classmates, than to have the material described and explained to them, as on a traditional guide-led tour. In addition, the photo analysis allowed students to see historical agents as individuals and better understand the impact of choices. The fact that local source material was used also helped the students discover personal relevance, significance, and meaning in these historical events.<sup>3</sup> At Krefeld, in response to pandemic conditions, Villa Merländer piloted a new format that allowed students to explore different sites in the city independently, equipped with historical photos and observational tasks. What emerged regarding the significance of localizing history is that students – despite knowing that Jews were deported from Germany – were not fully aware that deportation took place in their own town, at their train station.

### **Localization**

In Halle, our local partner Miteinander suggested that local historians and staff of the Gedenkstätte Roter Ochse could offer a tour of the area as a complementary program to the exhibition display. The local history provided in the tour strongly resonated with visitors and made the history in the exhibition even more relevant for them. Drawing directly on that experience, we integrated the local tour into the educational model, specifically linking *Some Were Neighbors* to the history of the city where it was on display.

Combining a visit to the exhibition with a visit to historical sites in the immediate vicinity allowed participants to unpack the implications of what happened in their own town or village. At each location, Museum staff and venue facilitators adapted the exhibition's educational material to best suit local circumstances. As a result, the Museum and venue partners became joint stakeholders in developing an approach tailored to the local audience.

While specific programming varied from venue to venue, the educational activities helped young adults to process the implications and feelings that arose when they considered the difficult fact that ordinary people in their own towns became complicit in the Holocaust. It also allowed discussion of the reactions and potential involvement of their own family members.

For example, in Münster, the Feibes family, local Jewish merchants, owned a department store on the Salzstraße before World War II. Today the newly constructed building is a chain clothing store located on one of two central pedestrian shopping streets in downtown Münster. Amid this everyday atmosphere, the facilitator discusses the site's history with participants. Drawing on the events of the 1938 November pogrom, the facilitator shares an excerpt from a 2014 interview with Münster-resident Mechthild von der Horst, who described her recollections as a 7-year-old girl:

“Oh that, the Night of Broken Glass...My brother was in school, too, and what did he do? There was the Feibes Store, where everything had been destroyed and put out on the street, then he showed up with ...he had taken the bike to school, of course—with



a bird cage! [...] And that made my parents very uncomfortable, right? And he didn't think anything of it...it had been lying on the street! And he took it! [...] I know that my parents were uncomfortable with that. It seemed like stealing to them, didn't it."<sup>4</sup>

In groups of two or three, the participants discuss potential motivations for why the boy decided to take the birdcage, and why his parents might have considered that act stealing. What did he understand from the atmosphere and from the people around him on the day after the November pogrom? What about the situation conveyed to him that it was probably acceptable to simply take the birdcage? Why does the sister seem to still struggle today with the fact that it was stealing? What does it mean that the birdcage was never returned, but stored in the family's cellar?

Including local stories and photographs continued to play a significant role in other cities and in the educational programming of exhibit partners. Local tours, combined with visits to the exhibit, also took place across the country.<sup>5</sup> Our colleagues in Krefeld at Villa Merländer found that connecting local events, monuments, and memorial plaques to the exhibit – and focusing on the involvement and reactions of ordinary people – created opportunities for connection and relevance for students to the topic despite the distance in time since the end of the Holocaust. We heard from students visiting the exhibition who were surprised to learn that events of the Holocaust in fact occurred near where they live: "Everything happened near here. And that really was a blow! You know, you stand on a ground and something bad has happened here exactly and not far away in Berlin, but exactly here!"<sup>6</sup>

Taking localization a step further, the memorial site and state documentation center Osthofen developed a supplement to the exhibit, collecting local historical photographs of events in Rhineland-Palatinate and positioning those additional posters as history at their doorstep. We welcome this outgrowth of presenting *Some Were Neighbors*, as it deepens the experience of both the institution and the visitor/participant to reflect on the relevance of the local history.

Exhibition tour with pupils in the foyer of the Münster district government. (Hendrik Snethkamp, Ratsgymnasium Muenster)



### **Workshop Activity**

Exploring the behavior of ordinary people raises important questions about personal agency, responsibility, and the motivations that inform behavior. In another educational activity, a facilitated workshop setting, students operate in small and independent groups, drawing on why and how individuals within groups contributed to the events, influencing how they turned out, as they acted as part of the wider public.

This facilitated approach forefronts student agency, critical analysis, and student ability to synthesize evidence across multiple resources; students are able to construct their understanding of the past and make claims based on the evidence. While facilitators give up their traditional roles, they play an integral part, asking guiding questions and prompting discussion.

### **European Scope**

The earlier-referenced pan-European scope of *Some Were Neighbors* was both an asset and a challenge. It allowed multiple entry points into the history, which our partners found helpful for encouraging visitors to confront their own story. For facilitators and educators in Germany, however, sometimes this pan-European scope could be challenging if they were less familiar with the Holocaust history of other countries, and thus they tended to focus their work on examples from the Germany section of the exhibition. However, in an online multiplier meeting with a school at Ingelheim (in Rhineland-Palatinate), a group of gymnasium students demonstrated one way of examining the interrelations between German perpetrators, Ukrainian auxiliary forces, and Jewish victims through a photograph from Tschernigow. Employing critical analysis and historical context, they were able to explore and discuss the possible ways the three groups might have perceived each other in the moment prior to execution.

All of this suggests several lingering and larger questions: How to represent both German and wider European responsibility, what were the motivations and pressures that informed their actions, where to place the emphasis, and what issues are at stake here for our collective memories and meaning-making?

### **Preparing Facilitators**

The Museum team held “Multiplier Meetings” to work with venues to prepare local facilitators and educators to run these activities alongside the exhibition, gathering them within and beyond state borders, both online and in person. The multiplier meetings were a key element of communication and gave our partners the time and space to develop the project with us. The meetings helped us to more fully understand the different and complex challenges of varying pedagogical environments in which our partners operate, and to learn more about their local and regional work. The format of the multiplier meetings – joint discussion and participatory learning – mirrored the format of the educational model and gave participants opportunities to practice and to feel confident about the modes of engagement. Our partners at Aktion Zivilcourage in Pirna told us that the exhibition “triggers new emotions and thoughts even in educators who have been working with the Holocaust for years or decades. In this exhibition, you don’t just go to the next picture, you don’t just turn the page; you stay with a picture for a long time, you look deeper into what you actually see, you look into the faces of the people back then. It is important that facilitators both feel this emotional



impact and overcome it in order to achieve in themselves a somewhat neutral position, and thus allow participants to experience this impact and make meaning out of their shift in understanding.”

### Next Steps

It is unusual for the institution that created the traveling exhibition to work so closely together with the institution hosting it, co-developing the educational programs that support learners and visitors. Why was this effort a success? In part it was because the entire program was a learning process. The Museum was not just offering German colleagues a traveling exhibition or an educational program, but was focused on developing a learning model for everyone working with the exhibit. Developing the project with German partners allowed the Museum to learn what elements of the exhibition they found interesting and resonant. Regular communications with partners really facilitated the Museum’s understanding of what made the exhibit interesting on the ground. In addition, the exhibit offered questions – on the role and responsibility of ordinary people and of neighbors – which many partners felt were not well covered in schools or in much of the wider public discourse on the period. This absence is also reflected in recent German academic surveys of the attitudes of 16–25 year olds toward the history of the Nazi era.<sup>7</sup> Thus the timing seems to be right for these conversations about ordinary people and the Holocaust.

Going forward the Museum and several German partners are implementing a new structural concept into the overall program, what we are calling an educational Hub. A “Hub” is a network of institutions that promote the Some Were Neighbors educational model within their state. Each Hub is led by a “Hub Partner,” an institution that worked with the exhibition in the past. By creating such “hubs” we are trying to transfer the innovative and successful elements of the exhibition and educational model to other educational institutions within each state/region. We are working with

Exhibition opening in Osthofen in the presence of the patroness, the Rhineland-Palatinate Minister of Education Stefanie Hubig. (NS-Dokumentationszentrums Rheinland-Pfalz/Gedenkstätte KZ Osthofen)

Additional panels  
focused on local history  
and developed by  
the Osthofen Concentration  
Camp Memorial.  
(NS-Dokumentations-  
zentrums Rheinland-Pfalz/Gedenk-  
stätte KZ Osthofen)



“Hub Partners” in four different German states: North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, and Saxony. Each Hub Partner has received one copy of the exhibition to loan out for display. They work with these “sub-letting” institutions to implement the participant-centered educational models. In addition each Hub is developing additional activities and offers that they believe will resonate in their region. For example, having heard from partners that a digital pool of the local photos and stories that venues used with audiences in the context of the exhibition would be helpful, the Villa ten Hompel and Villa Merländer teamed up, applied and received funding from the Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung in North Rhine-Westphalia to create such a digital pool. This database will offer suggestions and ideas for new venues who are about to work with the exhibition.

As we move into the next phase of our project and the work of these Hubs, the Museum along with its key German partners intend to assess whether and how a national/federal institution or organization might foster what is emerging as a network of individuals and institutions using Some Were Neighbors and its educational model.

- 1 These states include: North Rhine-Westphalia (21 locations), Rhineland-Palatinate (9), Saxony (6), Saxony-Anhalt (3), Berlin (2), Hesse (2), Thuringia (2), Bavaria (1), Hamburg (1), and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (1)
- 2 During the Holocaust, the Villa ten Hompel was used by the Uniformed Police and it was the headquarters of the whole of North Rhine-Westphalia and the area around the nearby city of Osnabrück and parts of Belgium.
- 3 Camino Evaluation of Some Were Neighbors on display at the Prora Center on the island of Ruegen. Data collection occurred August-September 2021.
- 4 Interview at Villa ten Hompel, with Mrs. von der Horst: "My Brother and the Birdcage from Feibes and the Family Reaction."
- 5 In addition, Gisela Küster at the Gedenkstätte Zellentrakt in Herford used the educational model to develop guiding questions for their new exhibit on the local Jewish community there ("1700 Years of Jewish Culture in Germany") and the accompanying educational program. They did combined tours of the exhibition and the local area.
- 6 Camino report from Prora.
- 7 Nearly simultaneous to our project, three organizations were running survey studies on 16–25 year olds and their attitudes toward the history of the Nazi era. Each study provides important empirical data on which our discussions of educational pedagogy can rest. The three studies, which took placed independently of each other (and of course of the Museum), were:  
 "Gen Z and Nazi History: High Receptivity and Strange Fascination" by the Rheingold Institute, commissioned by the Arolsen Archive  
 Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor (MEMO) by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University  
 "Anti-Semitism in the School Context (Berlin): Interpretations and behavior of teachers in Berlin schools" and "Anti-Semitism in everyday (school) life: Experiences and ways of dealing with Jewish families and young adults" by the Competence Center for Prevention and Empowerment, of the Central Welfare Office of Jews in Germany (ZWST)

Each survey found a high level of interest in Nazi history among this generational cohort, as well as a strong connection between Nazi history and the current challenges facing society today. The nature and goals of each study produced different findings, providing important nuances for those examining existing and new pedagogical tools. The Arolsen study differentiated between respondents with and without a migrant background and is one of the first to detail how the latter look at the Holocaust. The MEMO study found that respondents estimated the share of perpetrators among the German people as comparatively small and the share of victims and helpers as comparatively large, and that these distortions were even more pronounced in their knowledge of the involvement of their own ancestors. The ZWST studies show the need to understand antisemitic manifestations in schools, and the need for training to strengthen pedagogically responsible teachers. Taken together these surveys provide an important larger context for and evidence of the relevance of our Some Were Neighbors project.