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Sybir Memorial Museum

Trauma and the Museum Exhibition: How to Create an Exhibition on Traumatic Experiences?

On December 1, 2023, the Sybir Memorial Museum in Białystok launched its first temporary exhibition since its opening: *Only Pain Is Mine*. Curated by Magdalena Zięckowska-Tuchlińska, Katarzyna Śliwowska, and Dr. Karolina Mosiej-Zambrano, the exhibition portrayed the harrowing experiences of women deported to Siberia. It encompassed artistic, display, and psychological elements, navigating diverse themes.

The exhibition aimed to depict the experiences of women in Siberia from a distinctly female perspective. As employees of the Sybir Memorial Museum, we knew about the deportation of women—their activities in exile, who they were with, their eventual return, and the immense ordeal they endured. We had access to exhibits, archive photos, testimonies, and memoirs. However, we lacked insight into what was happening to **them**—their bodies, souls, and minds. For instance, how did they manage menstruation when deprived of basic hygiene products in exile? Where did they find the strength to survive? Did they suffer sexual violence, and to what extent? Most importantly, how could we translate all this into an exhibition?

As a curator, I recognised two potential approaches to the chosen theme. The first was a historical, chronological one, presenting objective information about the women sent to Siberia—an approach already used in the museum's permanent exhibition. This is how the initial script for the

exhibition took shape: a relatively safe framework, relying on archives, known facts, and well-trodden paths.

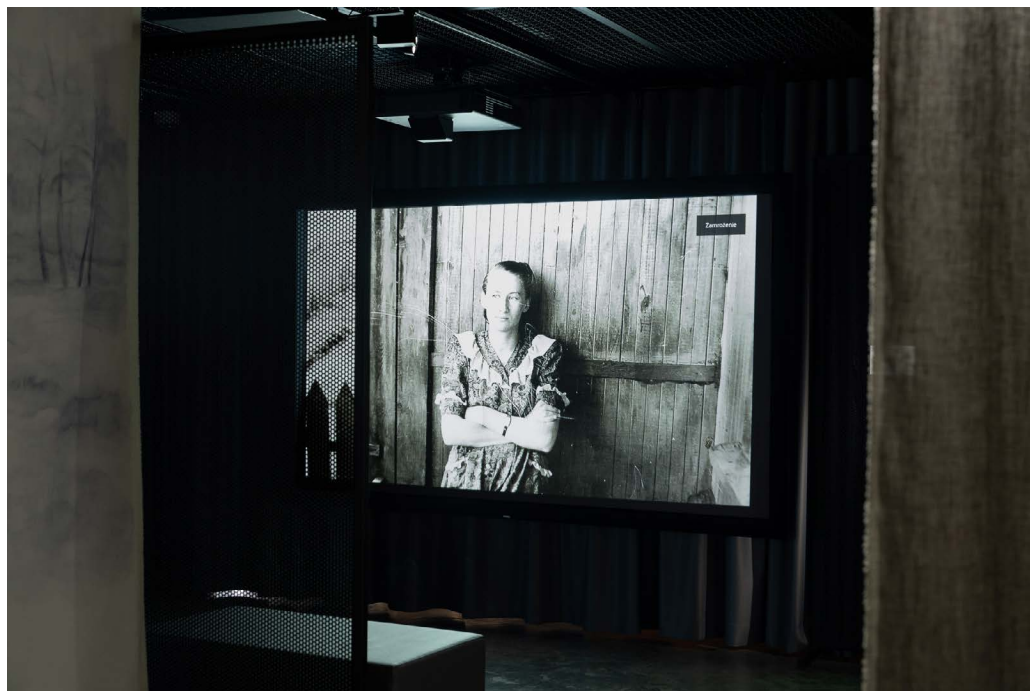


Fig. 1. Fragment of the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

The second way of presenting an exhibition on women's issues, however, demanded a new approach. It involved addressing topics that remain taboo to this day, topics that even we—the curators, the women, the museum professionals—felt uneasy discussing. How do you talk about violence? How might the surviving Siberian deportees, who still work actively with the museum, respond? What will their daughters and granddaughters feel? Could an exhibition like this (re)traumatise them? Should trauma itself be acknowledged within the exhibition? We realised that just as we struggle today to openly discuss difficult or personal subjects, these women, who lived through Siberia, had even fewer opportunities and less confidence to express their experiences. It became our duty to give them a voice, enabling them, decades later, to speak not only about the historical events in which we know they were involved. Thus, we chose a more challenging path, one that delved into taboos and difficult emotions. In our search for a guiding point, we turned to literature. The exhibition's title, *Only Pain Is Mine*, is a quotation from Wojciech Tochman's book *Dzisiaj narzysujemy*

śmierć (Today We Will Draw Death), which tells the stories of women who survived the Rwandan genocide.¹



Fig. 2. Title board of the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

The Sybir Memorial Museum’s temporary exhibition hall is a small, darkened space where the exhibition system was completed in 2023.² The exhibition itself was divided into three sections: a multimedia presentation of archival photographs, a display of paintings, and three multimedia kiosks.

¹ “Yesterday, after you left, a pain tore through my guts. It felt like something was gnawing at my flesh —from the inside out. My body is not mine. Only pain is mine. I think that’s what grief for life feels like. What do you think, white man?” [Tochman 2018: 64].

² A. Rzeźnik, K. Skrigajło-Krajewski, *Projekt wykonawczy systemu ekspozycyjnego z przeznaczeniem do Sali wystaw czasowych*, [<https://sybir.um.bialystok.pl/zamowieniapubliczne/wykonanie-wyposazenia-sali-wystaw-czasowych-na-potrzeby-muzeum-pamieci-sybiru.html>]; accessed on: December 19, 2023].



Fig. 3. Fragment of the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

The multimedia presentation introduced visitors to the exhibition space, particularly since the title revealed little about the subject matter. It was accompanied by a sound background that can be considered ambient music. The collection of photos depicted women and girls in various contexts of exile (some taken before their deportation, but featuring women later sent to Siberia), showing them at work, in group portraits, on identity cards, and at commemorative events such as funerals. The mosaic of photographs, interwoven and overlapping, compels viewers to pause and gaze into the eyes of the women and girls, who become the protagonists of the exhibition. The ways in which the selected photographs intermingle—the close-ups often focusing on faces and eyes—evoke a sense of both transience and disappearance, while simultaneously highlighting the diversity of the women's situations and tragedies.

The main feature of the exhibition was a series of paintings by artist Edyta Urwanowicz.³ “In the artist's hands, the testimonies—remarkable evidence of both pain and female strength—were given new form, with

³Edyta Urwanowicz, DFA, [<https://pg.edu.pl/p/edyta-urwanowicz-1006874>; accessed on: March 20, 2024].

memory and words transformed into image and shape” [Mosiej-Zambrano 2023: n.p.]. The installation consisted of irregularly hung white and grey sheets, each depicting the silhouette of a woman in various poses and stages of life. Each figure represented an aspect of life in exile or prison, speaking of violence—physical, psychological, and sexual— and bodily changes due to hard labour or starvation, derealisation, mental illness, and emotional turmoil. The artist had been given a script by the curators and nearly sixty testimonies from which she selected about twenty. As described in the exhibition catalogue:

The works were created using painting techniques on various textile substrates, then arranged in the exhibition space without a predetermined plan. This results in their intermingling, touching, and dialogue. They are like real bodies, words, and emotions—naturally varied. This labyrinth of stories, emotions, and sensations allows viewers to engage freely and personally with each element, bridging women’s experiences from different historical moments to our present reality, which, as it turns out, may still be similar from a woman’s perspective [Mosiej-Zambrano 2023: n.p.].



Fig. 4. Fragment of the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

The interwoven drawings and silhouettes created overlapping layers, just as each day in exile built upon the next in the lives of these women. Moving through the exhibition space, visitors could explore each silhouette, created from a selected account or the memories of women or witnesses to their experiences. They were also provided with a brochure featuring testimonies selected by the curators, such as this excerpt from Siberian survivor Janina Kwiatkowska:

I had suffered from poor nerves for a long time, which led me to wander from the village into the steppe, where I would sit for hours like a stone. I didn't know what I was doing, who I was, or what I was searching for in that distant expanse. I hallucinated, seeing our family home, the river, my father on horseback, and my mother working like a busy bee. When I returned from my dreams to reality, I had no idea why I had been sitting alone on the steppe. I became afraid of myself, afraid of my own breath, and then I would start running home as fast as I could. And there was always someone chasing me, always unseen and terrifying.⁴

Nursing women were very weakened, with feverish eyes, filling the mouths of their whimpering babies with empty, sagging breasts.⁵

Having only the accounts at our disposal, it is difficult to fully grasp the hardships faced by women and girls during war, mass crimes, and repressions—for example, during deportation, life in Siberia, or imprisonment in Soviet gulags. This is why the exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine* aimed to bring out often brief fragments of testimony recounting the most harrowing experiences of women in Siberia. These are aspects typically mentioned only in passing, sometimes omitted entirely, yet they touch on femininity in its broadest sense, with a primary focus on women's bodies and their role [Mosiej-Zambrano 2023: n.p.]. We therefore created a list of specific themes to clarify and highlight the experiences we felt were crucial to the exhibition. These included hunger (with particular attention to its emotional and physical consequences), illness (focusing on specific symptoms—from skin lesions to infections and swelling), physical, psychological, and sexual violence, mental illness/loss of senses, childbirth, postpartum recovery,

⁴ The recollection of Janina Kwiatkowska, née Szrodecka, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum.

⁵ The recollection of Leokadia Orlicka, née Wozniak, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum.

menstruation or its absence, disability, loss of femininity and intimacy, among others.

To isolate these themes, we also developed guidelines for collecting testimonies, dividing the sources among several people so that they could support us in finding the fragments of interest in the context of the exhibition without being emotionally overloaded. These guidelines specified, among other things, the length of accounts, sources (including the Institute of National Remembrance, the KARTA Centre, the Sybir Memorial Museum's collections, and literature), and a historical outline. Additional notes were provided, such as: "The account may come from a male perspective—the key is that the passage describes any of the female aspects raised in the exhibition." An example of such a testimony is the following recollection of Józef Dzikowski:

One day, near the end of that cruel winter, Mrs. Maria Krynicka returned home late in the evening, her hands covered in icy blood. She told her roommate, horrified by this ghastly sight, from the doorway: "I left Basia with the Gutkowskis. I wanted to kill myself. Dress my hands. They'll bring Basia tomorrow." Maria had cut her wrists, but it could be assumed that the freezing cold had stopped the blood from flowing. After washing her wounds and applying bandages, Mrs. Noiszewska kept vigil over the poor Maria by the smouldering fireplace. Late at night, she dozed off. When she woke, Maria was gone. In the vestibule, Maria had knelt and hung herself from a strap fastened to a hook in the wall. The next morning, they discovered Basia wasn't with the Gutkowski family, nor with anyone else.⁶

This stage of the temporary exhibition was particularly challenging for both the curators and the artist. As museum professionals working at the Sybir Memorial Museum, we were familiar with the reality of Polish citizens deported to the East. During the construction of the museum and the development of the permanent exhibition, analysing testimonies was a core part of our work. However, in this case, focusing solely on these emotionally charged experiences proved incredibly difficult. The memories we sought were not easily accessible, often succinct, and filled with profound suffering and trauma. This trauma can be understood as "psychological harm occurring at various stages of life (crises, conflicts, life-threatening

⁶The recollection of Józef Dzikowski, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum.

chronic somatic and mental illnesses) combined with the risk of emotional, cognitive, and social disturbances” [Steuden, Janowski 2016: 551].

As women, we were deeply moved and felt a sense of responsibility for the people sharing these memories and the words they left behind. A poignant example can be found in the audio-recorded testimonies of female Siberian deportees. The interviews were most often conducted by men, and the questions regarding their time in Siberia did not delve into female-specific issues. We understood that sharing deeply traumatic experiences—such as rape or the loss of a child—with a male stranger would not be easy. However, we noted that the questions asked during these interviews remained rather shallow and general. To safeguard our mental health, we created **a safe space** to openly discuss and share our impressions, inspired by the trauma-informed therapy technique.⁷



Fig. 5. Meeting between female Siberian deportees, exhibition curators, and artist Edyta Urwanowicz, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

A “safe space” within the context of *Only Pain Is Mine* can be understood as an environment where collaborators worked under mutually agreed

⁷ P. Mućko, *Bezpieczne miejsce jako technika wspierająca terapię traumy*, October 7, 2022, [<https://www.niebieskalinia.pl/aktualnosci/niebieska-akademia-warszawska/bezpieczne-miejsce-jako-technika-wspierajaca-terapię-traumy>]; accessed on: January 31, 2024].

rules, fostering a sense of calm, emotional care, and support. The aim was to create a setting where participants could freely and honestly exchange opinions and emotions without fear of judgement, especially when working with such difficult materials. An example of these materials is the recollection of Mrs. Leokadia Orlicka:

In the semi-darkness, women unwrapped their babies, stood with them before the “committee” led by the starost, and then returned to their seats. And so, according to the list, the condition of the babies was inspected. The name of an actress was called, but she refused to approach the inspection. Clutching her baby’s sleeping bag tightly, her eyes filled with animal fear. Another woman took the bag and handed it to the “table” (...). When the sleeping bag and filthy nappies were unwrapped, what lay inside was shocking. The baby had been dead for days, its body already decomposing, and patches of flesh were sloughing off into the soiled nappies.⁸

We held regular morning meetings to calmly address any issues concerning the exhibition in a warm atmosphere, while also tending to our own emotional well-being. During these meetings we restricted access to telephones and computers. The meetings were planned and structured with limited agendas. We divided the testimonies among ourselves to spread the emotional burden. We sought support from colleagues. We exchanged feelings and emotions when analysing various elements of the exhibition. We consulted a psychotraumatologist to ensure the well-being of everyone involved. In hindsight, we realise these were crucial decisions that helped us successfully organise the exhibition and related activities.

The Siberian experience is just one of many traumatic events that women have endured—and continue to endure—during war, armed conflict, and mass repression. That is why the third part of the exhibition featured accounts from women across different eras and locations. This aimed to emphasise the universality of the feelings, sensations, and emotions that women experience during moments of historical hardship. The final section of the exhibition included three touchscreens with headphones and seating. The screens displayed women’s accounts relating to the theme of the temporary exhibition, particularly those used for the art installation. They were presented alongside testimonies from women in Ukraine, living

⁸The recollection of Leokadia Orlicka, née Wozniak, from the collection of the Sybir Memorial Museum.

through the current armed conflict. We also included stories from other war-torn regions, such as Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Syria, and Belarus, sourced from public reports and literary works. Each touchscreen presented the same set of accounts in Polish, English, and Ukrainian.

There were three of them. They picked one of the girls. Two of them held her legs while the third raped her. She cried and called for help. They were all silent. No one moved. They gagged her. Then all we could hear was her sobbing. When they were finished, they left. I only pretended to be asleep. I was too afraid that when I fell asleep, they would kill me and my children.⁹

I was lying on the floor, and they were standing over me, kicking me in the teeth, beating me with their hands and feet. One of them shoved his military boot into my mouth. (...) While they were beating me, they kept repeating: “You wanted freedom? Here’s your freedom!” Each time they said “freedom”, they kicked or beat me harder. Suddenly, the mood changed, becoming even more threatening. They told me that if I didn’t start talking, they would rape me.¹⁰

From the outset of our work on the concept for the temporary exhibition, we knew that it would not suffice to address a topic of such emotional and social weight. We were aware that we were tackling a **topical** issue. Anticipating challenges in the exhibition’s implementation, we were prepared to push beyond our comfort zones. Our goal was for the exhibition to transcend a purely artistic function and also take on educational and therapeutic roles. As a result, the exhibition included guided tours for both young people and adults, recordings, interviews, meetings with female Siberian deportees, and art workshops where youth explored portrait painting.

The first initiative primarily focused on female Siberian deportees, with the project named *Ambassadors*. This additional programme ran in parallel with the temporary exhibition and integrated the voices of the Siberian women—the witnesses to the events the exhibition depicted. The project’s main aim was to create a safe space for them while also expanding the discussion around challenging topics. We wanted to pass on knowledge to younger generations and demonstrate that an exhibition can be a dynamic, living space rather than a static museum display. Through the ambassadors,

⁹ A. Sobolewski, *Wojna w Bośni — świadectwa kobiet zgwałconych w Srebrenicy*, Zarfa Turković’s account, [www.tvn24.pl; accessed on: June 13, 2023].

¹⁰ J. di Giovanni, *Tamtego ranka, kiedy po nas przyszli. Depesze z Syrii*, an anonymous account (Nada), Wołowiec 2017, p. 26.

we highlighted the importance of speaking about what happened and shed light on the violence that women continue to experience during wars and internal conflicts.

What did it mean for the female Siberian deportees to become ambassadors of the exhibition? Above all, it meant an opportunity to be involved—emotionally, substantively, and creatively—at various stages of the exhibition’s creation. This collaborative approach was the project’s cornerstone, providing the Siberian women with a safe space to discuss topics that had remained hidden throughout their lives. This also lent credibility to the project.



Fig. 6. Female Siberian deportees examining sketches of paintings for the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

The *Ambassadors* initiative included several components: meetings during the exhibition’s design phase, a meeting with the artist preparing the paintings, and a visit by the Siberian women to the museum during the installation process. A photographic session was also arranged, where traditional portraits were taken, along with photos of each woman holding an image from her youth. Additionally, interviews were conducted, asking each woman three key questions: “What was the hardest thing for women to endure in Siberia?”, “What does femininity mean to you?”, and “What would you say or wish for women today?” As a result of their involvement, the Siberian deportees received certificates as exhibition ambassadors,

their own portraits, and individual profiles in the exhibition catalogue. However, the most significant outcome was the freedom to engage in open dialogue, fostering care, which made them feel safe.



Fig. 7. Female Siberian deportees examining sketches of paintings and selected accounts for the temporary exhibition *Only Pain Is Mine*, Białystok 2023. Photograph by Jan Szewczyk.

Recognising the challenges our ambassadors might face, we enlisted the help of psychotraumatologist Izabela Trybus from the Polish Centre for Torture Survivors,¹¹ who provided support to both the Siberian deportees and the curators throughout the project. Additionally, the Foundation partnered in the *Kobieta i wojna – perspektywa kulturowa, społeczna i psychotraumatologiczna* (Woman and War—Cultural, Social, and Psychotraumatological Perspective) conference,¹² held at the Sybir Memorial Museum the day after the exhibition's opening. Alongside its insightful presentations, the panel *Praca z traumą w kontekście kultury, sztuki i relacji* (Working with Trauma in the Context of Culture, Art, and Relationships) featured voices from the curators and the artist. Meetings between psychotraumatologists and the Siberian deportees were organised before key activities, such as reviewing the artwork sketches, setting up the exhibition, or participating in the conference, to prevent any risk of retraumatisation.

¹¹ Polish Centre for Torture Survivors, [<https://pcts.org.pl>; accessed on: February 14, 2024].

¹² “*Kobieta i wojna – perspektywa społeczna, kulturowa i psychotraumatologiczna*”. *Podsumowanie*, [<https://pcts.org.pl/pl/kobieta-i-wojna-perspektywa-spoeczna-kulturowa-i-psycho-traumatologiczna-podsumowanie/>; accessed on: February 14, 2024].

Looking back, I can say that the endeavour was difficult to execute. At every step, there was the fear of crossing boundaries, retraumatizing individuals, or emotional numbness. We faced numerous challenges, including learning how to talk more openly about feminine hygiene, integrating femininities, and ensuring the deportees did not feel exploited for the exhibition's sake. Constant concerns lingered about how the exhibition would be received and whether certain elements might be considered too disturbing. I can confidently say that our collaboration with psychological and psychotherapy professionals was crucial to the project's success. Having the ability to share our worries and doubts and gaining a deeper understanding of the subject's complexity allowed us, the curators, but also the museum staff, to understand difficult emotions and themes, providing us with essential tools. Careful planning of time and task distribution, as well as addressing the most challenging issues in a structured way, were also invaluable. The creation of a safe space let us reduce stress and calmly analyse the material.

During the project, the safe space was clearly defined and scheduled, ensuring that the museum's daily work did not interfere with sensitive conversations or decision-making. The curatorial team, along with key colleagues from promotion and education, met early in the morning in a space where they could share a meal and converse in peace, without access to phones or computers. The team used publicly available tables with specific tasks, allowing anyone interested to familiarise themselves with the work ahead. Each meeting concluded with task-setting and, when possible, scheduling the next meeting.

The question "How do you create an exhibition on traumatic experiences?" does not have a straightforward answer. Each traumatic experience is shaped by unique events, even if trauma's consequences may be repeated. From the example of *Only Pain Is Mine*, I can offer future curators, artists, museum professionals, and educators two basic and likely universal challenges. First, the need for care—psychological, emotional, and even physical—for both the organisers and participants of the exhibition cannot be overstated. One should not delude oneself that trauma does not affect those involved in cultural and artistic activities dealing with difficult subjects. While it is common to offer support to the victims of tragic events and they are sometimes ensured care during the implementation of projects, care for those creating the exhibition and are exposed to trauma must not be

overlooked. This is akin to the so-called martyrdom allowance for employees of museums and martyrdom departments,¹³ which acknowledges the emotional toll on third parties.

Second, it is essential to consider the role of survivors and their relatives—the heroes and heroines of cultural exhibitions and projects, whose suffering is, unfortunately, the focus of various projects. There is always a risk of crossing boundaries, especially when these individuals are heavily involved from the start. Continuous assessment of their emotional and psychological states and confirming their consent at every stage of the project are critical. This includes ensuring that each interview, recording, or other potential stimulus has their explicit and ongoing consent. Clear communication about alternatives and respect for refusals is key. Simply put, we must not fear a “no” and must provide reassurance should they change their minds or withdraw their consent. This principle should also guide contracts or agreements. It is the responsibility of those organising any project that delves into such deep and sensitive topics to offer participants the choice and to be prepared with alternative plans in case they change their minds, ensuring emotionally and physically safe spaces.

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¹³ “Employees of martyrological museums and martyrological branches of other museums, whose work involves direct contact with relics of martyrology, are entitled to an allowance for particularly difficult working conditions amounting to 20 percent of their basic salary”, according to the Order of the Ministers of Culture and Art and Labour and Social Policy of December 12, 1990, on the principles of remunerating employees disseminating culture, M.P. 1991 no. 1, item 6, § 7 point 1.

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