Je vous offre les oiseaux / Us ofereixo els ocells

Je vous offre les oiseaux - Us ofereixo els ocells (I offer you the birds) is an installation inspired by a perception expressed by many survivors of Nazi concentration camps: that they had never seen any birds overflying the camps.

The installation is a symbolic offering, but it also seeks to remind us that any act of memory is also a failed attempt to recover an event as it was experienced by its protagonists, whether victims or perpetrators. Therefore, all the elements that form the installation, starting with the title in two languages, are aimed at expressing the inherent difficulties implicit in any memorial act.

The installation takes the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau as its point of reference in order to highlight the contrast between day-to-day life and its distortion under a situation of extreme violence. Birkenau was both a concentration camp for those persecuted for political, religious, sexual and social reasons, and an extermination camp for European Jews, Sinti and Roma. Birkenau was also a large birch grove that later served as a screen to hide the gas chambers and the crematoria. In 1940, the ornithologist Günther Niethammer, who had enlisted firstly in the SS and later in the Waffen-SS, was granted permission to birdwatch in the zone. He catalogued 127 birds.

The installation invites visitors on a brief journey into some visual and sound landscapes at the camp as it is in the present through images filmed in Birkenau and a sound composition created from the sounds and songs of all 127 birds.

In 1937, the German ornithologist Günther Niethammer enlisted in the SS, the paramilitary force of the Nazi Party led by Adolf Hitler. In 1940 he joined the Waffen-SS (armed forces and with responsibility in the concentration camps). The same year he was sent to Auschwitz where he remained until 1942. Thanks to Rudolf Höss, commander of the camp, he was able to devote himself to bird watching in the so-called "Zone of interest", an area of about 50 km² located between the Vistula and Sola rivers, and the towns of Oświęcim (Auschwitz), Babitz, Rajsko, Brzeszcze, Brzezinka (Birkenau) and Harmeęże (Harmense).

After the war, Niethammer was sentenced to eight years imprisonment, but served only three. In 1949 he was reinstated as Head of the Department of Ornithology of the Museum Alexander Koenig in Bonn.

Niethammer was president of the German Society of Ornithology from 1968 until December 1973, just two weeks before his death. In 1974, Hans Kummerlöwe, a former colleague and friend, and co-founder of the Leipzig Federation of the Students of the Nazi Party, wrote a long obituary in the Zoological Bulletin in which he extolled Niethammer's scientific and human qualities. The international scientific community did likewise. His past as SS was erased as well as his pseudo-scientific studies on the superiority of the Aryan race.

Günther Niethammer published the study of the 127 birds he observed in Auschwitz in *Beobachtungen über die Vogelwelt von Auschwitz* (Observations on the Birds of Auschwitz), in The *Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums in Wien*, volume 52, 1941, p. 164–199

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Heinrich Himmler wanted to make of Auschwitz a model industrial and farming center. This *Interessengebiet* or "Zone of interest" had an extension of about 50 km². Within this area was built: Auschwitz I, the administrative headquarters and prison camp; Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the extermination camp; and Auschwitz III-Monowitz, the work camp established by the I.G. Farben chemical company.

During the Nuremberg Trials, Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, argued that Himmler had chosen Auschwitz because its rail connections facilitated the deportation of the Jews of Europe and because its extension would mask its function.

Höss made of Auschwitz the most efficient tool to execute the Final Solution of the "Jewish problem." In 1944, following the deportation of Hungarian Jews, 6,000 people were gassed every day.

By November 1944 a million Jews had been murdered out of the 1.1 million who had been deported; 21 000 Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) were murdered out of the 25 000 deported; 75 000 Poles were murdered out of the 150 000 deported; 15 000 Soviet prisoners of war were murdered out of the 15 000 deported. A total of 12 000 people from other nationalities were murdered out of the 25 000 deported.

The camp was liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945.

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Best estimates of civilians and disarmed soldiers killed as result of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution

Jews: 6 million

Soviet civilians: around 6 million

Soviet prisoners of war: around 3 million (including about 50,000 Jewish soldiers)

Non-Jewish Polish civilians: around 1.8 million

Serb civilians: 312,000

People with disabilities: up to 250,000

Roma and Sinti (Gypsies): 196,000–220,000

Jehovah's Witnesses: Around 1,900

German political opponents and resistance activists: undetermined

Spanish Republican: more than 7,000

Homosexuals: possibly thousands (and perhaps included in the number of criminal offenders)

Criminal offenders: at least 70,000

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Birkenau, "birch grove". Very close to the crematoria, birches and oaks and a small forest of poplars planted to mask the crime. Ashes were thrown into the two ponds facing the crematoria.

Today, we walk on the traces of the dead. Graves.

Today, tourists and school groups: yawns, photos and laughter. Someone has come out of a barrack leaving a trail of perfume. In concentration camps you are always out of place.

Today, a late summer day. So warm and misty that you could even say that it is a lovely day. I stand and sit. But sit, where? When I exit, just at the moment of passing through the threshold of the old entrance of the trains I turn my back to look at the field. Someone beside me cries.

A cloud of starlings insists on its elastic flight. There are jackdaws and ravens, robins and sparrows. Vengeance?

In the memory of many survivors, the trees appear: it is under the birch groves that the elderly, the women and the children waited before they were gassed.

Of birds, they say nothing: they never saw birds overflying the camps.

I offer you the birds.

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Audiovisual installation by Marta Marín-Dòmine
Museum of Jewish History
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