

Article

“To Show in a Frozen Moment”: Camp Models and Dioramas as Forms of Holocaust Representation and Memory

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Abstract: This article seeks to investigate the design and creation of several models and dioramas of Holocaust death camps as spatial and historical representations of Holocaust memory. It broadly discusses their use as pedagogical tools, forms of art, testimonial expression and memorialization. It also addresses questions concerning the intention of their designers and creators, as well as the ethical considerations of recreating these spaces.

Keywords: Holocaust; space; models; miniatures; dioramas; memory; representation

1. Introduction

On a visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in 2017, I purchased a miniature replica of the building that sits astride the main gate of the Birkenau camp. Sometimes referred to as “The Gate of Death,” it stands as a visual symbol of the Holocaust. My first impulse in buying it from the vendor set up across the street from the entrance to the camp was to add it to a personal collection of Holocaust-related ephemera acquired over the years. This collection includes postcards, posters, refrigerator magnets, and other items that might best be labeled what I considered a sort of tacky material culture of Holocaust tourism that could be purchased in and around the various Holocaust-related sites in Poland.¹

I am not sure why I found the replica to be in poor taste. It is a faithful recreation of the now iconic structure in miniature scale. Cast in resin and hand-painted, it took someone with some level of skill to create. Certainly, it was no different from the camp models and dioramas displayed as part of the permanent exhibitions at the memorials and museums located on the sites of five of the six Nazi death camps. Furthermore, I had seen other camp models and dioramas in numerous Holocaust memorials and museums, and I always gravitated to these types of spatial re-creations.² As an amateur on-again, off-again builder of plastic model kits, I certainly understand the impulse to recreate historical scenes in miniature scale, so rather than dismissing the replica as just another souvenir to add to my collection, it presented an opportunity to begin thinking about Holocaust-related camp models and dioramas as a form of Holocaust representation. Given that I was in an “on-again” period of model building at the time of this realization, I undertook a building project attempting to re-create a scale model of one part of the Chełmno death camp, where over 150,000 Jews from the Łódź Ghetto and surrounding areas were deported to the so-called “Manor Camp” (*Schlosslager*) between December 1941 and April 1943. Upon arriving at the camp, the victims were directed into the basement of the large house, sometimes identified as the castle, that stood on the grounds of the manor camp. It was here that they were ordered to strip and then marched down a hallway that emerged onto a courtyard on the side of the house. There they climbed a ramp and entered the enclosed cargo area of a special gas van that killed by redirecting the carbon monoxide fumes produced by the engine to the area containing the victims. The vans then drove approximately 4 km to a camp in the Rzuchow Forest (*Waldlager*), where the bodies were unloaded and burned.³

Choosing Chełmno for this project was deliberate. As the first stationary gassing facility used by the Nazis for the murder of European Jews, the camp played an important



Citation: Wraight, Jamie Lee. 2023. “To Show in a Frozen Moment”: Camp Models and Dioramas as Forms of Holocaust Representation and Memory. *Genealogy* 7: 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7020034>

Received: 5 April 2023
Revised: 24 April 2023
Accepted: 8 May 2023
Published: 10 May 2023



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role in the development of the Holocaust as it stands at the juncture of what Father Patrick Desbois called “the Holocaust by bullets,” meaning the mass shootings of approximately 1.5 million Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen* killing squads in the Soviet Union during the summer and fall of 1941, and the “death-camp solution” which began at Chełmno in December 1941 and expanded to include Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek (See Desbois 2009; Browning 1991, p. 31). Furthermore, as historian Patrick Montague points out in his history of the camp, Chełmno also stood at the nexus that connected the T4 Euthanasia Program to the camp via a shared connection of personnel with specific expertise in this type of killing (Montague 2012, pp. 1–47). Given its importance to the historical development of the Holocaust, it is surprising that so little is known about the camp, both historically and spatially. As Montague observes, “the literature on the Chełmno Camp remains meagre,” which is especially true of contemporary documentary and visual sources, as well as survivor testimony. Unlike the other death camps constructed by the Nazis, no physical, three-dimensional representation of the camp exists as part of a museum or memorial.

As I set out to re-create just one small part of the manor camp, I envisioned creating some type of formal reflection about building the model itself to accompany it. This initial approach focused on the practice of building models and dioramas with an eye towards what was possible to re-create given the large scale of the camp, as well as what materials were available for building the diorama. As the project progressed, it became apparent that the process of building the model, while important, raised questions regarding the limits of historical and spatial representations of the Holocaust, especially those that attempt to negotiate its most traumatic spaces. These considerations are important when looking at Holocaust-related dioramas and models, especially, but not limited to, those that re-create the death camps, in part or whole, as well as those that, like my model of Chełmno, include representations of the victims. Therefore, this approach, while inspired by the experience of reconstructing Chełmno, focuses more broadly on camp models and dioramas as spatial representations of the Holocaust as examples of re-creating spaces of Holocaust memory. These spaces, constructed from varying forms of primary and secondary memory source material, provide examples of the ways that space is integral to Holocaust representation and memory.

2. What Is a Model?

A good starting point for this discussion is to offer a definition of a model, or to be more precise, a scale model, which surprisingly is not easy to definitively categorize. According to *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, the definition of a model, at least as far as that term is pertinent here, is “a usually miniature three-dimensional representation of something existing in nature or constructed or to be constructed” and “a representation in relief or three dimensions in plaster, papier-mâché, wood, plastic, or other material of a surface or solid.”⁴ Not explicitly tied to the idea of a “miniature” in the above definitions is the concept of scale, which “is how we describe the size of the model as a fraction or ratio compared to the full-size subject.” (Kidwell 2021). This refers to a model's size vis-à-vis an existing, or imagined, object that it aims to recreate. Finally, these definitions identify a central idea regarding models; as multi-dimensional objects that are built to a certain scale, they are inherently *spatial* representations of reality. Closely related to the definition of a scale model is the definition of a diorama, which at its most basic, is two or more models set in a scene or landscape. *Merriam-Webster* offers a few definitions, the most pertinent here being “a scenic representation (as of a theatrical stage) in which sculptured figures and lifelike details are displayed usually in miniature so as to blend indistinguishably with a realistic painted background”, and “a scale model usually under glass exhibiting with precise detail some phenomenon of nature or the layout of some engineering project.”⁵

To the definitions offered above, we might add the following offered by Jörg Jozwiak, who defines what he calls “artisan miniatures” as “physical models which expound elements of craft and aesthetic appeal. [This] ... comprises utilitarian models (such as

miniature models in dioramas in museums or architects' maquettes) as long as aesthetic qualities are crucial to their design." (Jozwiak 2021, pp. 150–51). The emphasis on aesthetic considerations aside, Jozwiak's article offers some further characteristics that should be included in a definition of a model. Namely, that "they rarely reify the difficult-to-access mindscape of an individual but rather, represent the familiar." (Ibid., p. 151). Unlike abstract works of art, models aim to re-create a miniature version of a reality that is known. This scaled-down version allows one "to fly over it or drift past changing perspectives on a whim," offering a near omnipotent view that contains multiple, and nearly simultaneous, visual and spatial referents, giving them a depth that other forms of representation might not be able to provide (Ibid.). Finally, according to Jozwiak, "a miniature is not a copy, [of reality] but an interpretation of reality," and they should be "not only appreciated for their aesthetic appeal but also for epistemic reasons . . . they suggest that something can be learned from them." (Ibid., p. 160).

More simply put, scale models offer a three-dimensional spatial representation of a reality created in miniature, and regardless of their aesthetic appeal, they often have multiple stories to tell. That of the creators and the sources they used to design and build the model, and that of the scene they are trying to represent. Certainly this is true of almost any model or miniature, from plastic model kits built by amateur hobbyists to elaborate, museum-grade dioramas. Each is shaped and informed by the perceptions and sources used by the builder, and this influences the "story" that the builder and, by extension, the model, aims to portray.

3. Holocaust Representation

Of the many difficult issues raised by studying the Holocaust, one of the most challenging is the issue of representation, or more precisely, the ways the Holocaust is presented to those of us who were not primary witnesses to the event. Such representations include "documents, testimonies, photographs, memoirs, novels, interviews, dramas, artworks, films, monuments and other symbolic descriptions, created at the time and after the fact, whose subject matter is the Holocaust."⁶ The question of representation goes back, according to Saul Friedlander, to "the very end of the war, and Theodor Adorno's (often misunderstood) utterance about writing poetry after Auschwitz." (Friedlander 1992, p. 2). According to Magilow and Silverman, Adorno's statement "that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," is misunderstood "as a ban on representing the Holocaust at all [meaning] that any attempt to represent the Holocaust, whatever the medium, will fail to do it justice." (Magilow and Silverman 2015, p. 5). They also point out, however, that the misunderstood part of the statement is that the barbarism of the Holocaust, "perpetrated by one of the most cultured nations in the world, forces representation to surrender its lofty claims to making people better." (Ibid., p. 6). Here they identify the crux of what makes the issue of Holocaust representation so difficult; Can it be represented, and if so, what is considered an acceptable form of representation? To illustrate this idea, we might point to Elie Wiesel's statement that:

the literature of the Holocaust does not exist, cannot exist. It is a contradiction in terms, as is the philosophy, the theology, the psychology of the Holocaust. Auschwitz negates all systems, opposes all doctrines . . . A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka; for Treblinka means death—absolute death—death of language and of imagination.⁷

Like Adorno, Wiesel is not entirely arguing against trying to represent the Holocaust, rather, he is saying, according to Yehuda Bauer, "that there are aspects of the Holocaust, mainly the suffering of the victims and the brutality of the perpetrators, that can never be fully grasped or understood, and that therefore the Holocaust is ultimately inexplicable." (Bauer 2001, p. 15). Both Adorno and Wiesel's admonitions against true representation aside, they raise important questions. Can a novel, film, or painting about the Holocaust ever truly convey the reality of what it is trying to portray? Can an oral history "testimony" or a memoir written by a Holocaust survivor represent the suffering of the victims? Can

a photograph of a Holocaust perpetrator express their brutality? From an experiential or even philosophical standpoint, no. Holocaust representations, regardless of form, can never fully reveal the totality of the event.

4. Camp Models and Dioramas as Forms of Holocaust Representation

Given the broad scope of the different types of Holocaust representation mentioned above, it is difficult to provide an in-depth review of the literature surrounding all of the different forms Holocaust representations take. A more practical approach, at least as it relates to this study, is to categorize camp models and dioramas as “artworks” and summarize the “rules” of Holocaust representation in art laid out by Terrence Des Pres in 1987. First, artistic representations of the Holocaust must present it as a historically unique event. Second, they must be created with historical accuracy in mind, and finally, they must adhere to certain ethical considerations that uphold the sacred and solemn nature of the Holocaust and do not dishonor the victims.⁸ Des Pres’s “rules” are perhaps a bit “looser” than Adorno’s and Wiesel’s, allowing for artistic representation but also constraining it within a certain set of acceptable limits. Using Des Pres’s rules about Holocaust art as a jumping-off point to a study of camp models and dioramas, we might begin to identify a basic framework for looking at them as representations of the Holocaust in general, and as spatial representations of Holocaust memory, more specifically.

Much like the literature of the Chełmno camp, the literature surrounding the creation of camp models and dioramas as forms of Holocaust representation is meagre. Why this is so is difficult to pin down, although it may stem from two considerations. First, unlike other representations of the Holocaust, no uniform effort exists to identify and catalog them, especially in formal settings like Holocaust museums and memorial centers.⁹ Second, in some cases, very little documentation about their creation is readily available, so the provenance of many of these dioramas and camp models is incomplete, making the histories of their design and building often difficult to trace without visiting the site where they are displayed. This study then relies on the sources that are available remotely, and they consist largely of Holocaust memorial and museum blogs and news posts, scattered cataloging records, and articles from small, regional newspapers. Therefore, it should be stressed that any further examination of the camp models and dioramas in any context will require a deeper dive into what is available remotely, as well as in person, and proceed from there. In short, this study should be viewed as an introduction to deeper investigations of camp models and dioramas as Holocaust representations in general and spatial representations of Holocaust memory in particular.

With these boundaries in mind, I begin my discussion of camp dioramas and models by identifying and loosely cataloging those that are most publicly visible, either on the internet or in person, and in museums and memorial centers.¹⁰ These will be categorized as either formal representations of spatial Holocaust memory, meaning that they were designed and built by professional architects and sculptures, usually for display in a museum or memorial, or informal spatial representations of Holocaust memory, meaning that they were designed and built by non-professional model builders, whose motivations for constructing them can vary from a personal interest in the topic to testimonial, commemorative to juridical, or sometimes a combination of all three. Regardless of form, the camp models and dioramas discussed here fall under the definition of a scale model offered above. They are miniature, spatial representations of the Holocaust that, in whole or in part, aim to recreate what are often considered taboo spaces of death camps like Auschwitz, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and in the case of my project, Chełmno. Finally, both forms have multiple stories to tell about their design, creation, and intention.

5. Camp Models as Formal Representations of Spatial Holocaust Memory

The first formal representation of spatial Holocaust memory in the form of camp models and dioramas was designed and created by the Polish sculptor Mieczysław Stobierski. Stobierski, who was born in 1914 in Śladow, Poland, and attended the State School of

Decorative Arts and the Artistic Industry in Krakow, graduating in 1937 ([European Holocaust Research Infrastructure Archival Descriptions n.d.](#)). Following the German invasion and defeat of Poland in 1939, he “became involved in underground activities, illustrating publications, and copying and processing illegal documents.” (Ibid.). On a visit to the site of the soon-to-be-established Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with a friend and former Auschwitz prisoner in 1946, he met Tadeusz Wąsowicz. Wąsowicz, the first director of the museum, “contracted [Stobierski] to create a series of sculptures that illustrated the killing and mistreatment of camp prisoners.” (Ibid.). The commission resulted in the creation of “a series of thirteen plaster sculptures for the newly established museum, illustrating the killing and mistreatment of adults and children imprisoned in the camp.” (Ibid.). Although Stobierski was not a prisoner in Auschwitz, he conceived, designed, and built his sculptures from existing primary sources, including “camp documents [and] artifacts” as well as from interviews with former camp prisoners and personnel (Ibid.). The result was Stobierski’s “Model krematorium II—Brzezinka,” initially installed at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum when it opened in 1947 and later featured as part of permanent exhibitions at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* in Berlin, and at Yad Vashem-The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel (Ibid.). The model, cast in plaster in 1:15 scale, is 48 inches high, 336 inches long, and 144 inches deep.¹¹ Depicting a gassing operation at *Krematorium II*, the L-shaped model reveals:

a line of approximately 150 people being led down stairs and into an underground passageway. The middle section’s front is cut away to reveal the underground passage the figures are entering. The opening is filled with approximately 200 figures of men, women, and children in various stages of undress. Moving forward, the right portion of the model is a square shaped platform with a flat, smooth top and a large, T-shaped building towards the back. The front edge has been cut away to reveal hundreds of figures contained within an underground gas chamber. Standing on top of the gas chamber, on the left side, is a figure wearing a gas mask while pouring a substance into an open hatch leading to a column into the chamber. The front of the T-shaped building is cut away, revealing the interior spaces of the two floors. The attic area is an open space, while the lower rooms contain 5 large, rectangular blocks of crematorium ovens, piles of bodies, and prisoners carrying bodies on stretchers with guards looking on. The other sides of the building are closed, with the exterior visible, including multiple windows, a large loading door on the right end, and a large chimney at the back. Behind the building, is a scene depicting several guards shooting prisoners while a guard and dog look on.¹²

Although based on a close reading of documentary evidence, “Stobierski’s primary goal was to focus on the emotional experiences of the prisoners and to provoke an emotional response, leaving a shocked impression on the viewer.” (Ibid.). Stobierski succeeds in this goal and bridges the gap between the emotive and factual. The sheer size and large scale of the model reflects the magnitude of the crime it depicts. The unpainted plaster figures evoke the colorless world of Auschwitz. Furthermore, it portrays the victims in all phases of a “typical” gassing operation; clothed as they march into the underground killing facility, undressing before entering the gas chamber, being gassed, and finally, as corpses loaded into crematoria ovens by members of the *Sonderkommando*. It visually and spatially recreates a place that few lived to witness, and in the case of the gas chamber scene, where none survived. It also stands out for its inclusion and depiction of the victims and perpetrators in different phases of the killing operation, revealing and attempting to represent perhaps one of the most traumatic spaces of the Holocaust, a gas chamber and crematoria facility at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By representing every aspect of what such an operation would have looked like as it occurred; simultaneously, multi-dimensionally, and from different perspectives, it reveals and negotiates that traumatic space in ways that other forms of Holocaust representation are unable to fully represent. It is “also an artwork,” however, “factual yet emotive.” ([DHM-Blog. Deutsches Historisches Museum 2017](#)). Given the

number of yearly visitors at the museums where it is exhibited as well as the number of years it has been on display, Stobierski's "Model krematorium II—Brzezinka" is perhaps the most viewed spatial representation of Holocaust memory of its kind and although artistic in many respects, it serves an almost purely memorializing purpose.

Another example of a formal representation of spatial Holocaust memory that also depicts the scene at the Birkenau camp is the model designed by Gerry Judah and built by Ben Taggart for the Imperial War Museum in London in 1999. According to Taggart:

The model was to include the famous watchtower gates through which the railway brought the prisoners, the disembarkation ramp where the prisoners were 'sorted', a series of typical accommodation huts and finally the infamous building comprising the gas chamber and crematorium. The boundaries of the model enabled the entire story and purpose of the camp to be laid out in one single tableau, a diorama measuring twelve metres long and three metres wide. (Taggart 2020)

To achieve this expansive view, they designed and built the model in 1/87 scale. Although much smaller in scale than Stobierski's "Model krematorium II—Brzezinka," the Imperial War Museum model portrayed a much larger scene, though with less detail and depth. Unlike Stobierski's model, in which one *Krematoria* is the main focus, there are two *Krematoria* in this model, and they sit on its periphery, a sort of endpoint to the process that began when the trains entered the camp. This design also focuses much of its attention on the figures represented in the model; 6000 total, created from 350 designs "cast in a white metal lead alloy to produce the required amount." (Ibid.). Another central feature, the boxcars parked at the unloading ramp, were, according to Taggart, a main consideration in choosing the scale, as 1/87 is a standard model railroad scale (Ibid.).

This plan was perhaps also predicated on the sources used in the model's design. Although provided with reference material by the staff of the museum, both Judah and Taggart relied heavily on the photographs published in *The Auschwitz Album*, which documents the arrival of a transport of Jews from the Berehovo ghetto in the Spring of 1944.¹³ The album, consisting of 193 photos taken by German photographers, contains the only visual documentation of the arrival of a transport at Birkenau; from the unloading of the cattle cars to queuing up and undergoing *Selektion*, to the collection and sorting of the victims' belongings and ending, and finally, with them walking to the *Krematoria*.¹⁴ It shows the entire process of arrival up to the moment the victims enter the building, in essence providing a starting point to Stobierski's model, which continues the narrative inside the *Krematoria*.¹⁴ Why this model, unlike Stobierski's, stops its narrative outside of the *Krematoria* may arise from the intentions of its designer and artist, Jerry Judah, who stated:

The purpose of the model was to be educational. It was not to be a memorial ... It was to show in a frozen moment, the processing of people. Prisoners disembarking from the wagons, queuing for selection and being separated, some to join a workforce and many, unknowingly, are walking a kilometer or so towards the gas chambers. (Judah 2000)

In some ways, Judah's insistence that the Imperial War Museum Model was built to serve educational and not commemorative purposes highlights a key consideration when discussing camp models and dioramas, and that is the intention of the builder and designer. Looking again at Stobierski's model and its provenance, it was seemingly intended as a memorial built to honor the victims of the Holocaust. For Judah, the model's purpose is purely educational.

Moving away from Auschwitz and looking at other formal examples of camp models, we might consider several that are displayed at the memory sites of the former Operation Reinhard camps in Poland: Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Along with Chełmno, these three camps operated primarily as killing centers, meaning that, unlike Auschwitz, nearly all of the people transported to these camps were killed immediately upon arrival. Like Chełmno, these camps used carbon monoxide gas produced by combustion engines to

asphyxiate their victims. Unlike Chełmno, however, the engines used at the Reinhard camps had been removed from the vehicles and installed in permanent gassing facilities. These buildings, as well as the camps themselves, were much smaller in comparison to Auschwitz and the *Krematoria* buildings used there. Despite their smaller size and short period of operation (March 1942 to September 1943), approximately 1.5 million Jews were murdered in all three combined, a number roughly equal to that of Auschwitz.¹⁵

In 2004, a new museum and memorial site was opened at the former Bełżec camp in Eastern Poland. Part of the permanent exhibit is a model of the building where the gasings occurred. Although its scale is unknown, its size and focus on just one element of the camp, albeit very important, suggests that its large scale was chosen to highlight its importance. The model depicts a rectangular building with approximately 1/3 of the roof cutaway to reveal multiple empty rooms. The entrance is indicated by a fenced-in area that funnels to a set of three stairs leading into the building, which is surrounded by bare trees that are draped in camouflage netting. It is painted but in muted tones, and there are no figures representing either the perpetrators or the victims, and although it appears to be a faithful recreation of the gassing hut in Bełżec, very little information about its design and construction is available remotely ([Bełżec—A Death Camp n.d.](#)).

The camp model on display at the Sobibór Museum and Memorial was installed as part of a new permanent exhibition opened at the site in 2020 ([The State Museum at Majdanek 2020a, 2020b](#)). The sculpture, built by Wojciech Zasadni, was:

developed on a site plan created by group of historians from the State Museum at Majdanek using archival materials. It was prepared on the basis of source materials, situational sketches, as well as archaeological excavations conducted in the area of the camp . . . and was created of black, monochrome, coloured resin. ([The State Museum at Majdanek n.d.](#))

Built upon a series of raised pedestals, the model measures approximately 6 square meters and presents a small-scale, abstract view of the entire camp. Behind it are arrayed a series of glass panels that are printed with an aerial view of the camp's topography. The buildings and structures in the diorama are represented minimally, with no architectural detail other than their basic measurements and shapes represented in a scale approximating the one used by Taggart and Judah for the Imperial War Museum model of Birkenau. Unlike that model, however, there are no victims displayed, nor are there trains, though the train tracks leading to the camp are a prominent feature. The gas chamber, designed along the same lines as the one used in Bełżec and later at Treblinka, is not a central focus of the model; instead, and much like the Imperial War Museum model, it sits near the periphery, separated from the rest of the camp structures by some distance, yet connected to them via an enclosed pathway through which those arriving at the camp were marched to the gas chamber. The spartan nature of the model may be offset by two considerations. First, the emphasis on recreating the topography of the camp, which is highlighted by the museum and reflected in some ways by the source material and methodology used to design the model. Second, the way that the museum combined digital media with the model itself, adding detail that is missing from the spatial representation of the camp. This was perhaps predicated on the availability of the source material and technology accessible at the time the new permanent exhibit was designed and built ([LAJF Magazyn Lubelski 2020](#)). Combining traditional primary source material with multi-media lends the model more depth and conforms to new museum practices and pedagogy that incorporate "new media" into their exhibitions.

The last of the three memorial sites related to the Operation Reinhard Camps, the Treblinka Museum, features as a "main element of the exhibition . . . a model of the Extermination camp." ([Museum Treblinka n.d.](#)). Other than that, there is no other information available on the museum's website. Like the model at Sobibór, it shows the entire camp laid out in a small but unidentifiable scale. There are no victims or perpetrators included, but there is a train on the camp's railway ramp. One interesting note is that this model is painted, unlike Stobierski's, the Imperial War Museum's, and the one on display at the

Sobibor Museum, making it appear less abstract. A series of photographs depicting the camp during its operation are placed on the walls surrounding the diorama. There is also what appears to be a key to the model that lists the various structures and areas of the camp identified by small, numbered placards ([Museum Treblinka n.d.](#)). The photographs and the key lend some context to what the diorama is portraying, but these, unlike the materials used to support the display at the Sobibor Museum, do not necessarily align with what would be considered “multi-media” in recently constructed or renovated museums.

6. Camp Models as Informal Representations of Spatial Holocaust Memory

Examining these formal examples of camp models opens the door for discussions of informal examples of camp models as well. In these instances, the models were designed and constructed by non-professional builders, amateur historians, hobbyists, and, in two cases, survivors of the camps themselves. Often less polished than some of the formal examples discussed earlier, they nevertheless offer some interesting physical spatial representations of the camps they symbolize.

They are less abstract, in some ways less spatially precise (though in some ways more). They sometimes appear in museums but are not usually accompanied by any type of multi-media.

The first informal example of a camp model is the diorama of Sobibór created by Thomas Blatt, a survivor of the camp who escaped during the uprising of October 1943 ([Kaplan 2015](#)). Built in an unknown and small scale, the model portrays the entire camp, and although no figures representing the perpetrators or victims are present, it offers details that are absent from the model at the Sobibór museum ([Aktion Reinhard Camps n.d.](#)). This includes detailed reproductions of the camp’s structures, including a train and the barbed wire fences, which figure prominently in the model. Blatt designed the model from memory, as well as documents introduced at the trials of former camp guards in the 1960s. This makes it unique in that it serves a testimonial purpose, as well as commemorative and pedagogical, as it is on exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust ([Fuller 2019](#); [Aktion Reinhard Camps n.d.](#)). Therefore, it also provides an example of an informal camp model designed and built by a Holocaust survivor that is exhibited in a “formal” setting like a museum and memorial.

This is also true of the “large Treblinka model made by the late Chaim Sztajer in memory of his wife and child who were murdered upon arrival at the death camp.” ([Melbourne Holocaust Museum 2010](#)). Like Blatt, Sztajer escaped from Treblinka during an uprising that occurred there in August 1943 after working as a member of the camp *Sonderkommando* ([Melbourne Holocaust Museum 2022](#)). From available images, the model appears to be large in scale and focuses on several scenes at once, including numerous guard towers, gallows with three-dimensional figures hanging from it, and more three-dimensional figures that appear to represent perpetrators, including one on horseback. The perpetrators are “guarding” a group of female victims represented as two-dimensional paper figures who are walking down the so-called *Himmelstrasse* or “Road to Heaven,” which led to the area of the camp where the victims were gassed, and their bodies burned. This entire model is surrounded by oversized fences, barbed wire, and light posts. The layout seems to be condensed spatially and does not appear to adhere to one scale.¹⁶ It is, as Jörg Jozwiak points out in his article on miniature appreciation, an idealized representation of the camp. Not idealized in the sense that it is trying to represent an ideal version of the camp, but “by understanding it as [creating] a replica that is ideal to make the viewer see and understand an object in a certain way . . . it becomes a device to mediate its maker’s experience.” ([Jozwiak 2021](#), p. 169). I think this is also true of the Blatt model discussed above and the model of Treblinka created by Jankiel Wiernik, to be discussed below. As survivor-created models, they serve in some capacity as spatial narratives of their experiences in those camps. Their design and creation are mediated and shaped by these experiences, and therefore, it is possible to see how they remain historically important, even when they are not always spatially accurate, as is the case with Sztajer’s

model. When viewed this way, they serve a similar function to Holocaust survivor oral history testimonies.¹⁷

A last example of a survivor-created, non-formal camp model is the diorama of Treblinka on display at the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum and Archive in Israel. Designed and built by survivor Jankiel Wiernik in the 1950s, the small-scale model lays out the entire camp in some detail, and included are camp structures such as buildings (including the gas chamber), a rail line, barbed wire fences, and guard towers. Perpetrators and victims are absent from the model. To provide context, numbered labels are arranged throughout the diorama, presumably tied to a key that explains the significance of each location ([Ghetto Fighters' House Museum and Archive n.d.](#)). The model, used as an exhibit at the trial of Adolf Eichmann held in Israel in the early 1960s, is a centerpiece of the Hall of Camps exhibition, where it "stands [as] one of the most important exhibits in the Ghetto Fighters' House, as well as one of the most significant in existence bearing witness to the extermination of European Jewry: the scale model of the Treblinka camp." (Ibid). Wiernik's model then provides, perhaps, a singular example of a model that serves not only to memorialize or as a form of testimony but also a juridical purpose.

The final example of these informal representations are two models of Bełżec designed and built by William "Billy" Rutherford, "a talented model maker, historian, and Holocaust researcher" from Scotland ([Webb 2021](#)). The first portrays the camp during its first phase of operation (roughly March to June 1942) and contains six structures built in 1/160 scale.¹⁸ These include a latrine, a warehouse, and an enclosed split log path connecting the warehouse to an undressing barrack which is itself connected to a wooden gassing hut via an enclosed pathway ([Rutherford Models n.d.](#)). There are no perpetrators or victims represented in this scene, only the structures, which appear to be made of wood and are painted in muted tones. The second of the two models, also in 1/160 scale, consists of just one structure: the gas chamber building constructed during the second phase of the camp, which began in the summer of 1942, when a new gassing facility was built in a different area of the camp. This structure is the same one on display at the Bełżec museum and memorial. Rutherford's model also utilizes a cut-away roof that reveals several rooms, two of which are the actual gas chambers, and these are filled with figures representing the victims being asphyxiated. Unlike the somewhat abstract figures represented in works like Stobierski's and the Imperial War Museum's, which were specifically designed and built for the diorama, the figures portrayed in Rutherford's model appear to be pre-built, manufactured nude figures created in the same scale as the model. The majority of these figures are arrayed inside the gas chambers, and interspersed with them are clothed figure, which represent either Holocaust perpetrators, or more likely, members of the small group of prisoners kept alive at the camp that was forced to help facilitate the killing process. The portion of the model that is covered by the remainder of the roof is hiding the other two gas chambers. On the perimeter of the building on both sides are large open doors where other camp prisoners are shown removing the bodies of the victims under the supervision of what appear to be camp guards (Ibid.). Above the entrance to the building is a Star of David, and the words "*Stiftung Hackenholt*" (Hackenholt Society) are written to the left of the door.¹⁹ To the right of it is written "*Bade- und Inhalationsräume*" (Bath and Inhalation Rooms) (Ibid.). It is painted to represent the grey concrete and tar paper roof used to construct the building. In designing and building the models, Rutherford utilized source material, including seven sketches of the camp drawn by survivors and former camp guards, as well as photos taken by the perpetrators, including aerial reconnaissance photos. Rutherford also used data collected during archaeological excavations of the camp in the 1990s ([Bełżec Models n.d.](#)). Rutherford's models were incomplete at the time they were photographed, and unfortunately, he died in 2011, and the models were never completed ([Webb 2021](#)).

In many ways, Rutherford's model of the new gas chamber is the same design as the one on display at the Bełżec Museum and Memorial, the obvious differences being scale and color. What also marks it as different is the use of figures that represent both

the victims and the perpetrators, which, like the other models that include them, perhaps presents a more complex or complete scene than the one on exhibit at the Bełżec Memorial. Of the models covered so far, it is Rutherford's that highlights many of the issues regarding the creation and negotiation of traumatic spaces in miniature scale. This arises, I think, from several things. First, it may open itself to certain criticisms that are not apparent when looking at the formal examples discussed above. Unlike those models and dioramas, which were constructed to memorialize or educate and are displayed in a formal setting, there appears to be no apparent similar purpose behind Rutherford's creation. While this in and of itself does not diminish its importance as a spatial representation of the Holocaust—it uses the same types of sources and is as faithful a historic and spatial recreation of the camp as those formal recreations discussed above—the inclusion of the manufactured figures as victims could be viewed as an amateurish fetishization of a highly traumatic space, and this reinforces the question of Rutherford's motivations for creating it. This is a consideration raised by Sofia Trębacz in her discussion of the model of the Łódź ghetto on display in the Radegast Station Museum in Łódź, Poland.

Undoubtedly, building a historical model of a concentration camp or ghetto may also raise doubts or even serious ethical questions—after all, it recreates a particular space established by a totalitarian regime for extermination purposes. Additionally, it can be criticized because of a non-serious approach towards the history of the Holocaust . . . even a superficial interpretation of events (Trębacz 2018, p. 146).

To be clear, I do not view Rutherford's model of the *Stiftung Hackenholt* as an example of a non-serious approach or a superficial interpretation of the Holocaust. Indeed, I think it reveals something that is missing from the formal example of the model on display at the Bełżec Museum, and that is its representation of the victims and perpetrators, regardless of their aesthetic appeal. Still, of all the models discussed here, Rutherford's model most highlights the historical and ethical considerations regarding the creation and negotiation of the most traumatic spaces of the Holocaust. This tension—between historical accuracy, representation and solemnity—is one that I became keenly aware of while constructing my diorama of Chełmno and while I cannot speak to Rutherford's thought process, it may be appropriate here to speak to mine, at least in a general sense. The original goal of my project (and subsequent public presentations regarding it) aimed at investigating issues of historical and spatial representation, as well as memory and memorialization, as they relate to the Holocaust. I also hoped to investigate how historical evidence, which in the case of Chełmno is very scant, could inform and shape the creation of a spatial representation of the camp. Although this led many to comment on the originality and innovativeness of the project, some questioned my intention in building it, as well as the choice I made regarding the inclusion of victims. Certainly, this is something that deserves more study.

7. Conclusions

The limited overview of camp models presented above raises several questions about their role as representations of the Holocaust. First, can camp models and dioramas be considered a form of Holocaust representation? If they are, then what form of representation are they? Given their explicit spatiality, how do they support the idea that space is integral to the representation and memory of the Holocaust?

In discussing the first question, whether or not camp models and dioramas are a form of Holocaust representation, we might return to those rules laid down by Des Pres about artistic representations of the Holocaust. This is not to say that they are all works of art in a traditional sense, though an argument can be easily made that Stobierski's "Model krematorium II—Brzezinka" certainly is a work of art, considering Stobierski's formal training as an artist. What about the other formal examples? Some, like the Imperial War Museum model and the models on display at Bełżec and Treblinka, are artistic inasmuch as they appear as architectural models created by professional designers and model makers, what Jozwiak in his article on the appeal of models labeled "artisan miniatures." As such, they have a bit of a detached feel to them. This is offset, however, by the inclusion of the

victims and perpetrators in the Imperial War Museum model, and the Treblinka museum's model's use of color blunts its formality. In the case of the Sobibór museum model, however, the emphasis on portraying the topography of the camp, as well as the technology used to design it, do give it a more clinical feel. Certainly, this is offset by the use of multi-media to complement the model, and the pedagogical effectiveness of Holocaust-related models and dioramas in settings that employ these technologies is a discussion worth having, and indeed it is one that is already ongoing (Trębacz 2018).

Another discussion may be had around categorizing the informal examples of Holocaust representation identified above. Are camp models and dioramas designed and built by non-professionals considered acceptable representations of the Holocaust? That is a more difficult question and one that is centered on the motivation for building it. In the case of the survivor-created models of Sobibor and Treblinka, the motivation seems to originate from a testimonial impulse, as spatial narratives of their experiences in those places, or, in the case of Wiernik's model of Treblinka, a physical form of judicial testimony. As such, they certainly adhere to the definition of Holocaust representations laid out by Magilow and Silverman, as well as Des Pres's rules about Holocaust art. Rutherford's model of Belżec, however, is more problematic. Not for the sources he used to plan and design it or for his use of the manufactured figurines to portray the victims and perpetrators, but because his intention for building it was ambiguous.²⁰

Do the models and dioramas discussed here portray the Holocaust as a historically unique event? In the examples presented here, they do. This is important as the idea of presenting the Holocaust as a historically unique event is at the heart of its representation. This is also closely tied to the question of their historical accuracy. Are they created with historical accuracy in mind? Certainly, the formal examples of camp models discussed above are. They conform to a certain spatial scale and are created using numerous and varied primary and secondary source materials. Of the informal examples of camp models presented here, it seems only completely true in the cases of the Blatt and Wiernik models. Both appear spatially accurate, and both are highly detailed representations of those camps. Sztajer's model of Treblinka is more difficult to categorize as historically accurate, but if we view it, as well as the other survivor-created models as idealized versions of their experience with those camps, we see a kind of spatial narrative emerge.

Do camp models and dioramas uphold the sacred and solemn nature of the Holocaust while paying proper respect to the victims? In considering the first part of that question as it relates to the examples offered here, it appears to be the case. The second part, however, may be more problematic, as there appears some underlying yet undocumented tension about including representations of the victims in these models. Rutherford's use of manufactured, nude figure models raises question surrounding the use of such material to represent the victims. Looking at Stobierski's model, however, we see the victims represented in all stages of the extermination process, and although it is shocking in its detail, it does not come across as disrespectful or gratuitous. I think this almost certainly stems from the reasons why Stobierski built the model; as a commissioned piece designed to memorialize the camp and its victims. This is also true in the case of the Imperial War Museum model with its stated goal as an educational tool, and in both cases, the inclusion of the victims, as well as the perpetrators, seem necessary parts of what is being represented. This also goes for Rutherford's model, as well as Sztajer's, at least as far as the inclusion of victims and perpetrators, however represented, as attempts to provide a more total picture of the scenes they tried to reconstruct.

Having loosely established camp models and dioramas as forms of Holocaust representation, we might consider what kinds of representation they are. Of those identified by Magilow and Silverman, the "artworks . . . monuments and other symbolic descriptions" that qualify as forms of Holocaust representation seem to fit the best as they possess qualities of artistic expression and memorialization. As miniature recreations of real places and real events, they stand as symbolic spatial representations of the camps designed and created from those other forms of Holocaust representation identified by Magilow and

Silverman. They support the idea that space is integral to the representation and memory of the Holocaust by inviting us, as viewers, to “see” the space of the camps they represent, but as they want us to see it.

Notwithstanding the similarities and differences of camp models, they all share one unifying theme, and that is their implicit and explicit spatiality and their ability to represent these types of relationships visually. As Zofia Trębacz notes, a model’s “primary purpose is to preserve the memory of past events and places associated with them. At the same time, however, a model provides a unique opportunity to visualize history . . . it is not a museum artefact, but a modern object that tells a coherent story” (Trębacz 2018, p. 143). These stories are built, both figuratively and literally, from the same types of sources as other forms of Holocaust representation, which, I think, places them in the same category as those other forms. As scaled-down versions of the objects they aim to re-create, they represent a form of Holocaust memory that is inherently spatial and provide an example of at least one way that space is integral to Holocaust representation and memory.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Daniel P. Reynolds discusses this in his book, *Postcards From Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance* (Reynolds 2018).
- 2 For a discussion on the appeal of scale models and dioramas, see (Jozwiak 2021).
- 3 For a history of the camp, including its connection to the T4 program and significance to the development of the Holocaust, see (Montague 2012).
- 4 *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. “model,” <https://0-unabridged-merriam--webster-com.wizard.umd.umich.edu/unabridged/model> (accessed 24 February 2023).
- 5 *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. “diorama,” <https://0-unabridged-merriam--webster-com.wizard.umd.umich.edu/unabridged/diorama> (accessed 22 April 2023). The dictionary also includes the original definition of a diorama based on the invention of a form of photography invented by Louis Daguerre and Charles Marie Bouton in 19th century France.
- 6 (Magilow and Silverman 2015, p. 1). Magilow and Silverman provide an outstanding introduction and overview of the topic and the many issues and controversies that have occurred around it since the event itself.
- 7 Wiesel (1977, p. 405); quoted in Waxman (2005, p. 498).
- 8 Pres (1988, p. 217), quoted in Magilow and Silverman (2015, p. 6).
- 9 This lack of systematic categorization may reveal something about the pedagogical use of these objects in formal settings like Holocaust museums and memorials.
- 10 This list is not exhaustive and almost certainly incomplete. For instance, I do not discuss the diorama of Majdanek displayed at the camp museum and memorial in Lublin, Poland, or Peter Laponder’s model of Treblinka displayed Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda.
- 11 The scale of a model refers to its size vis a vis the real-life object it is recreating. In this case Stobierski’s model is 1/15 the size of the actual building.
- 12 EHRI.
- 13 The album was published in 1981 as, *The Auschwitz Album: A Book Based Upon an Album Discovered by a Concentration Camp Survivor*, Lili Meier (Meijer and Hellman 1981).
- 14 When comparing the two models of Birkenau, it may be worth noting that Stobierski did not have access to the Auschwitz album photos, at least not when he initially designed and built his model for the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in the 1940s.
- 15 For an overview of the establishment, administration and history of the Operation Reinhard Camps see (Arad 2018).
- 16 Melbourne Holocaust Museum-Virtual Tour, “Explore Chaim Stajzer’s model of Treblinka,” <https://mpembed.com/show/?m=3N9PKn8VC4H&ga=UA-166297925-1> (accessed 24 February 2023).
- 17 For a discussion on the spatiality of Holocaust survivor narratives see (Wraight 2008, pp. 127–44).

- 18 1/160 scale, also known as “N scale,” is a standard scale for model railroad builders.
- 19 This new building was designed by Lorenz Hackenholt, a member of the camp staff who also oversaw the gassing operations.
- 20 This may have been resolved had he lived to complete the project.

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