

They were children: the origins of a research project

by Sarah Gensburger

In 2012, the year of the commemoration of the Vel d'Hiv Roundup in Paris, the Mayor of Paris wanted to provide a historical exhibition for the public. I was asked to be the curator. In spite of my historical research on the persecution of Parisian Jews during the war, I was and remain primarily a sociologist interested in the relationship between memory and politics. Yet in addition to the significant interest of the project in itself, being solicited by the public authorities to create a “commemorative” exhibition provided a unique opportunity for an ethnographic study. It meant observing how a public narrative on history can be constructed through politics. I also kept a fieldwork journal from the beginnings of the exhibition.

Ultimately however, this didn't tell me much about the subject that had interested me for years: what kind of social effects produce this kind of public action, often described as a “vector of memory”? This interrogation was echoed by Valerie Tesnière, the director of the BDIC library-museum and curator of numerous exhibitions, as well as the questions of the *Labex: the past in the present* project. We decided to launch a phase of exploratory fieldwork.

Between June and October 2012, the exhibition *C'étaient des enfants* (They were children) attracted some 120 000 visitors. For three weeks in that autumn we carried out a collective study with the help of Sylvain Antichan, Carole Bachelot, Gabrielle Chomentoski, Arnaud Figari and Julie Lavielle. We conducted 73 interviews *in situ*; in 20 cases we observed the visits themselves before the interviews. Overall, one hundred observation sequences were conducted. Finally 880 questionnaires were completed and subject to statistical analysis by Yann Renisio.

If this study is by definition limited, it is also situated within a broader cumulative approach. Firstly, visits to the exhibition *C'étaient des enfants* are typical of visits to history museums in general. The public was mostly female, either under 30 years of age, or especially over 60 years, and with strong cultural and educational capital. Furthermore this exhibition was in the category of pictorial representations of the Holocaust. It is clear today that, contrary to common beliefs, this historical event was represented from the very beginning. Around this event a dual and not very empirical literature developed, on one hand focusing on the alleged social role of museums as vectors of education and tolerance and for building better citizens, and on the other emphasising the importance of images in transmitting history on the other. The *MEMU– Revisiting History Museums* project, developed to tackle these questions, particularly in light of the exhibitions staged as part of the centenary of the First World War.