

THE LIVING MEMORIAL

What is a Living Memorial?

It is: alive, interactive, inclusive, educating, challenging, transforming and temporary.

It is distinctive. A beacon. An inspiration. Iconic. Envisioned, created and realized by Living Memorials; people – family members of missing persons – who are committed to keeping alive the memory of those who went missing as a result of conflict (in the former Yugoslavia).

A Living Memorial doesn't nurture blame, or guilt, or accusations, or judgments, or comparisons, or stereotypes, or prejudices, or ignorance, or denial, or sectarianism, or racism, or bitterness, or hatred, or resentment, or revenge, or fear.

It is a transitory event where, as difficult and painful as it may be, family members of missing persons, regardless of national, ethnic or religious affiliation, can:

- Pay tribute to missing family members jointly with dignity;
- Strengthen communal forms of remembering, and increase respect and tolerance for all;
- remember a disputed history in a safe and measured way so as to learn lessons and Guard against future conflict; and
- Actively demonstrate that different perspectives can be accommodated in a sensitive and tolerant way, and in so doing preserve individual dignity.

What does a Living Memorial look like?

In order to channel the families of missing persons' efforts into developing universal forms of commemoration, ICMP has developed the concept of a living memorial.

There is widespread interest in memorials and remembrance across the whole spectrum of civil society, including associations of families of missing persons in the Western Balkans. But opinion on memorials, commemoration and remembrance is splintered. Some individuals and groups support a process that aims at joint commemoration of all missing persons irrespective of ethnic, religious or political persuasion. Others oppose such an approach until states in the region have acknowledged who were the perpetrators and who were the victims. A third group think that a process that will arrive at joint commemoration of all missing persons can only begin once all missing persons have been found and identified.

In addition to these considerations, other questions include whether or not civilian missing persons should be memorialized alongside combatants, or whether the names of missing persons should be inscribed in a memorial, which can pose challenges to establishing a permanent physical memorial. In this context, the notion of temporary memorials and commemoration assumes increased importance, as a short-term means of paying tribute to the missing and as a vehicle that can lead towards more permanent forms of memorialization.

The concept for the living memorial is very simple. It involves gathering a number of family members of missing persons, in equal numbers from two or more ethnic, national or religious groups.

At the gathering, each family member is invited to bring a possession that belonged to their missing relative and which has particular significance for them. Each family member then speaks unscripted about the item and how it connects them with their missing relative; how it *signifies* their missing relative. It is recommended that family members not bring a photo of the missing family member. A photo reflects *the family member's memory* of the missing person: the living memorial calls for an artifact of the missing relative that connects with *the life of the relative*.

Family members need not bring any possessions that belonged to their missing relative. Indeed many may not actually have any such possessions. It is their own participation in the Living Memorial that is key and that should be encouraged; they have their memories and should have the opportunity to express them, and to be heard.

It is recommended that no more than four family members participate in any one living memorial session.

The audience listens to the family members recall memories about their missing relatives. This is solemn and respectful but also a celebration of the lives of the missing. After the living memorial, and a short break for the purposes of decompression, it is appropriate for the audience to share insights or express solidarity, and so on.

Who is the audience? What are the goals?

Other family members of missing persons? Politicians? Young people? The media? The living memorial's audience can be any of these groups depending on the desired goals of the living memorial session. If the goal is to build solidarity among family members of missing persons, to strengthen common understanding, to contribute to reconciliation, then the audience ought to be one of peers, of other family members of missing persons from other ethnic, national or religious groups. If the goal is to use the living memorial as a form of public advocacy to push forward the agenda of the families of missing persons in terms of lobbying the authorities to locate, recover and identify missing persons, then the audience will consist of politicians, and authorities and institutions involved in the missing persons process. If the goal is to enhance cooperation between senior family members of missing persons and youth activists who are interested or involved in the missing persons process, youth activists should be the audience. Finally, if the goal of the living memorial is to raise awareness of the missing persons issue among the general public, to raise the visibility of the issue in the mainstream, then the media is the natural target audience. Concerning any living memorial that takes place in a public space or will have media coverage, it is critical that participating family members are suitably prepared.

N.B. The Living Memorial is an emotionally charged activity and needs to be planned, and managed well.

Added value of a Living Memorial

The living memorial is a collection of items gathered together and at the same time an entire process of expression of memory by the family members of missing persons – and attentive listening by those present. The family members of missing persons who express their memories are in fact Living Memorials themselves.

The living memorial is collective or joint commemoration that demonstrates empathy and solidarity

between and among family members irrespective of their national, ethnic or religious background. The very nature of the living memorial encourages personal reflection and the expression of more and more profound memories of the missing relative and is therefore more likely to remain free of politicization.

The living memorial is interactive in the sense that the families speak and engage the audience, giving the items they carry with them meaning, significance and context.

It is also temporary, thereby creating a forum for joint commemoration while avoiding the obstacles and challenges that can and do arise in on-going debates on perspectives for a joint permanent physical memorial to all missing persons.

Finally, the living memorial has the potential to engage family members in remembrance of the lives of their missing relatives in a more positive way; instead of dwelling on the moments of disappearance and death, the living memorial creates a space in which the lives of the missing can be celebrated.

Critically, family member that participate in a living memorial should not bring with them items that are likely to offend family member from other communities. Religious and national symbols ought not to be permitted.

Recognizing the temporary nature of the living memorial, with its benefits, but also its limitations (for example, that no permanent physical object will remain), consideration should be given to creating a record of the living memorial by capturing the event on film. This will provide a measure of permanence to an event whose primary value lies in its cathartic transitoriness.

The living memorial lends itself to being incorporated in workshops on personal narratives, subjective truth, commemoration and dealing with the past. In the context of ICMP's programs in the Western Balkans, the living memorial contributes to the development of universal expressions of commemoration that transcend ethnic, national or religious differences, while drawing attention to notions of the legacy of the missing persons issue in the Western Balkans.

Personal truth, storytelling and the recovery of memory

It is a truism to state that establishing the forensic truth about missing persons – the facts: what happened to whom, where, when, how, and who was involved – is critical for any thoroughgoing process of dealing with the past. However alongside the forensic truth there is increasing recognition of the importance of personal or narrative truth as expressed by the family members of missing persons. This is the truth of personal recollection and memory. It is important to provide an environment in which victims can tell their own stories in their own words about their missing relatives. Living memorials should be spaces for storytelling not silent exhibits. They can assist by providing a platform for the expression of personal truth and in so doing contribute to the process of reconciliation by ensuring that the truth about the past includes the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless. Personal stories are not the whole of truth, but they are integral to the truth that leads to justice and to the recovery and preservation of memory.

What family members of missing persons have said about the Living Memorial

Snezana Zdravkovic: "How do I feel about the Living Memorial? Not at the time, but now? While I was telling my story I realized I was telling it to my new family – with whom I have shared things these past 14 years. I felt the presence of my father. Not that he was here, but I felt that I was talking to him. I know these stories are not easy but I must say that I feel much more at ease now."

Lush Krasniqi: "When I share my story with others it eases the pain. We need to listen carefully to each other. Those that weren't affected by the war don't understand us."

Haki Kasumi: "I would evaluate the Living Memorial we had highly. But we have to take special care with our choice of words so as not to offend each other, so that we don't hurt the other side."

Gordana Djikanovic: "We must continue to use the Living Memorial. I believe it is essential. It is facing yourself. That process of sharing emotions with the group is the heart of the group and at the heart of the process of searching for the missing."