

Historical Investigations in the Exhibition

“Geschichtslabor 1933-45” (“History Lab 1933-45”)

A model project for new forms of historical learning in the Schöneberg Youth Museum

The Youth Museum’s new exhibition marks the start of the three-year model project “Hands on History – neugierig machen auf Geschichte” (“Hands on History – awakening curiosity about history). The project is sponsored by the federal program “Vielfalt tut gut” (“Diversity does good”) and is situated in the preventative educational area to effectively counter right-wing extremism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Using the example of historical learning, “Hands on History” wants to develop new concepts and methods, which, in particular, are directed at children and younger youth. It is already at this age that the basis for later development is laid.

The “History Lab 1933-45” is the first building block, which, using an unusual approach, enables children to make historical inquiries into the period of National Socialism. What happened to the Jewish children Manfred and Steffi who went to school in Schöneberg? How did Kurt fare as a “Pimpf” (member of the Hitler Youth)? Why did Renate have to hide? Who built the huge concrete bunker in Pallasstraße in Berlin-Schöneberg? Does Tempelhof Airport have something to do with the “Fliegerviertel” (“pilots’ quarter”)? One can find answers to all that and a lot more in the history lab.

A strong narrative and visually catchy, comic strips and comic book drawings provide the point of departure. The various drawings introduce different themes, for example, excluding Jewish children, surviving in hiding, Hitler Youth, resistance, war, “home front”.

At first glance, comics do not appear to be the appropriate way to approach such a serious topic. Nevertheless, in recent years, the number of comic strips that address the period of National Socialism has increased. A prominent example is the two-volume graphic novel *Maus I + II* by Art Spiegelman, which tells the story of a survivor. In 1992 for *Maus*, Spiegelman was the first comic book author to receive the Pulitzer Prize. These educational comics, whose pictorial language is easily accessible to children and young people, are already successfully used as teaching material in some schools and educational facilities including, for example, the Anne Frank Center.

For the “History Lab,” various comics by well-known illustrators like Eric Heuvel (“The Discovery”) and Joe Kubert were recombined and hung in new “picture sequences,” which frequently reflect people’s everyday life at the time.

In the drawings, one sees things that can be discovered as authentic objects and documents in the exhibition’s seven “viewer collections,” whose purpose is to be viewed, questioned and

studied exactly. On each of these objects, which frequently bears witness to a past life, a story might be hanging that one can research or reconstruct. Sometimes one also has to speculate and imagine, because the language of the old things is not always easy to decipher.

That is why, as a research place, the “History Lab” unfolds its correct effect first when it is also actually used as one. And like in a proper lab, one can also make mistakes while experimenting and try out alternatives. An accompanying archive and a mysterious depot with a lot of other objects is supposed to help deepen the children’s historical investigations.

“Hands on History” not only means concretely touching things with one’s hands, but also asking questions about history and actively looking for answers. Because it is, above all, the children’s questions, which reveal a lot about what they currently know about the topic, what interests them about it and how they apply it to their own life situation.

Perhaps one won’t only find the answers in the lab situation, but has to look for them elsewhere, on the street, in the family, at real places in the urban area. Because history is not only preserved in museums, it is also situated where people live or in the places they pass by daily. The history lab also leaves open this possibility of discovering history on site.

The exhibition is supposed to be an experimentation area for young people, but also an observation area for those who want to impart history – for the instructors in charge, for teachers, artists, scholars, who are supposed to learn more about what really happens in the minds and hearts of children when “learning about history” and how history is supposed to be applied to one’s own present.

In the future, there will be fewer and fewer contemporary witnesses available to tell about the period of National Socialism from first-hand experience. “Hands on History” wants to experiment with new forms of historical learning and thereby develop model approaches for the democratic education of young people.

“The history lab” is, in particular, directed at elementary school pupils in grades 5 and 6 as well as at younger middle school youth in grades 7 and 8.