Early in 2014, the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong, presented a temporary exhibition, *Surviving Evil: The Pictorial Language of Sara Atzmon*, which was the remarkable outcome of the collaboration between three cultural institutions, namely the Hong Kong Holocaust and Tolerance Centre, the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong. Strictly focused, the display exclusively included artworks by Sara Atzmon, a survivor of the Holocaust who was born in Hungary and who now lives in Israel. Many of these artworks are large-scale, highly impactful paintings that reflect the artist’s memories of her harrowing experiences during the Holocaust. In 1944, Ms Atzmon was deported first to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland and from there she was sent, under terrible circumstances, to Bergen-Belsen in Germany.

As an adult, Ms Atzmon became a gifted painter committed to employing her dramatic and explicit paintings towards raising awareness in contemporary society of the hardship families like hers endured a mere two generations ago. In so doing, she was educating young people to appreciate and practise tolerance, to foster understanding and compassion between people of different religions and cultural backgrounds. We welcomed Ms Atzmon to Hong Kong and invited her to lecture and to engage with our university students and high-school pupils and the wider Hong Kong community.

The exhibition itself was displayed at the Goethe-Institut, where we showed both thought-expressing and -provoking preliminary sketches,
and at the University Museum where we displayed the much larger, at times monumental, paintings and multimedia installations. All artworks were accompanied by descriptive captions as well as catalogue entries in a bilingual (English/traditional Chinese) book. These captions were composed of an artist statement or memory connected with the event and place represented as well as my own, the curator's, paragraph describing, in a more neutral schoolbook manner, the historic incident in focus.

During this exhibition we gave personalised guided tours designed to speak to certain age groups and, with school classes, to their academic focus. The topic at hand allowed us to teach Holocaust history by describing both the fate of a single participant and her family, as well as the larger, more holistic picture of World War II history during the early to mid-1940s. We further concentrated on art topics and communicated information on creating art from personal experience and memory, as well as in an attempt to overcome anxiety. We lectured on history painting and taught contemporary painting materials and techniques.

It was particularly important to us to connect museum visitors to the particular, personal, although sadly not unique history of a surviving observer, and to stress personal values, for example, to classes of young teenagers, that Sara Atzmon was just 11 years old on her release from the
camp. We spoke with visitors about the qualities of painting based on memories and alerted them to the fact that medically this technique is used to work through trauma. Away from the more personal connection between artist and onlooker, we also discussed history painting as a traditional, and often propaganda tool, and related genres that continue to be practised through the ages.

Although the exhibition was well received and our programming was well attended, we did – in retrospect – miss out on further important opportunities. During the public presentation in Hong Kong, we did not put enough emphasis on having community members tell or paint their memories. We also did not record the history of the Jewish community in Hong Kong or China, and omitted to juxtapose Ms Atzmon’s work with contemporary Chinese history paintings. Our focus was keenly concentrated on the artist’s experience in 1944 and 1945, and her memories thereof, and although we collaborated closely also with colleagues and students from the university’s European Studies programme, we did not sufficiently engage a younger generation writing academic papers on the material presented in our galleries. We have done this more successfully since.³

Key to the presentation of the exhibition, the affiliated programming and the publication was a consistently neutral, almost unemotional curation that allowed the artist to ‘speak’ and visitors to ‘feel’. When I prepared the texts for the catalogue and captions, I deliberately reduced my role to that of an historian describing facts and circumstances that have been debated and taught ever since the war. I also sought the help of a colleague, Professor Glenn Timmermans, who teaches European history and literature, and is of British-Dutch and Jewish origin, to proofread and edit my text.³

In Europe, where Ms Atzmon spent the most tragic part of her childhood during the last six months of World War II, the history of the Holocaust is well studied and taught in schools. The fate of her and many other Jewish families is widely known and it is the photo-journalistic oeuvre of the time and rare paintings, such as the impressive and exemplary pictorial expressions by Ms Atzmon, which help us visualise some of the atrocities suffered by the many millions who were murdered during the war, and by the few who survived. Our
museum catalogue, which we addressed to teenage school pupils and handed out for free, set itself the goal to communicate this episode of European history to a community half a world and 70 years removed. We enjoyed seeing how well the exhibition was received and how school children, in particular, prepared and engaged with the material that we helped high schools integrate into their existing twentieth-century world history lessons.

We have since – in exhibitions such as one with Chinese artist Chen Xi, as well as the African-American Rising Above – displayed and taught content that is historically solidly founded and socio-politically critical. Our emphasis remains on teaching art and history as well as social science and humanities-related content, and on making first-time museum-goers more familiar with the physical and aesthetic properties of artworks in order to stimulate interest and art appreciation. Each and every one of our outreach programmes differs as we strive to collaborate with topic-related university department on campus in an effort to deliver specific and nonetheless varied educational experiences.

For more information visit: http://www.umag.hku.hk.