

We Count on You: Seniors and Disabled in the Centre of Interest of Museums

Introduction

The Centre for Presentation of Cultural Heritage, one of departments of the National Museum, is focusing this year on museum visitors with specific needs. In its methodical and educational activities which involve other memory institutions in Czech Republic as well, the Centre will aim above all at visitors with disabilities and elderly people.

Different impediments in the form of various barriers still stand in the way of access to cultural heritage, especially for people with special needs. Some of these impediments are caused by age and the outdated facilities of the buildings in which museums are situated; others arise from the lack of understanding of specific needs by the general public.

Legislative setting

The legislative setting of the Czech Republic takes into consideration the needs of people

with disabilities. Museums and galleries are part of the public space for all the people. This is bound in the *Act No. 122/2000 Coll., on protection of collections of a museum character and on amendment to certain other laws*, as amended by Act No. 483/2004 Coll., which determines in §10a, Article No. 4 duties of Czech museums and galleries to fulfil the standards of physical accessibility, understood here as *eradicating architectural and other barriers where possible due to the building structure or where it is not impossible because of other serious reasons disallowing people with limited ability to move and with limited orientation to use standardized public services*.

General technical requirements on barrier-free buildings are also dealt with in Enactment No. 398 of November 5th 2009. Czech law works with the term "persons with limited ability to move and with limited orientation" for people with motor disabilities and especially for people in wheelchairs, elderly people, persons with sensory impairments (acoustic and optical), for persons with mental impairments,



The permanent exhibition of the National Memorial on the Vítkov Hill at the opening event



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but also for pregnant women and people accompanying children's strollers or a child up to three years of age.

It can be difficult to meet all the requirements set for the adjustments to the inside and outside of buildings for access by persons with disabilities. Significant numbers of Czech museums are situated in buildings that were originally not intended for use as museums and which are often protected by the law for preservation of historical monuments. In case of reconstruction of the museum object, the building code specifies an obligation to provide barrier-free access. Unfortunately, impediments are not only on the architectural level.

Workshops

Other barriers for persons with disabilities stem from ignorance, incomprehension and prejudices of - not only - employees of museums and galleries. This is why the workshops for museum employees will be held. Their aim will be to make the employees - responsible for preparation and realisation of exhibition projects and accompanying programmes - aware of the special needs of the above-mentioned groups of visitors. The participants of the workshops could be divided into the following groups:

The first group of target recipients will consist of employees who prepare and realise exhibition projects and accompanying programmes - who are responsible for the products of the museum activity. These products are to be adjusted to be accessible for all persons, in accordance with the above-mentioned laws. These are first of all architects, designers, employees of the exhibition departments, curators and museum educators. Key information has to be delivered to employees of public relations departments, managers of the museum shops, cafés and restaurants.

The other group consists of museum em-

ployees who work directly with a visitor. The behaviour of these employees and their attitude towards visitors has a major influence on the museum experience and plays a key role for the relation with persons with disabilities. An employee of the museum has to know how to approach these visitors, to give advice and - if necessary - to help. He or she must be well-informed about all the services provided by the museum for visitors with disabilities. This group of target recipients consists of guards, visitor assistants, employees of information desks, cash desks, elevator operating personnel, employees of museum shops, cafés and restaurants.

What do we want to convey to participants?

We have to be aware of the fact that providing physical accessibility is necessary not only in the museum object itself but also in museum exhibitions and other programmes. For the sake of attractive designs and architectural solutions we often forget the basic needs of movement of a person in a wheelchair. Museum exhibits, multimedia-based and interactive elements should be installed regarding specific needs of people with limited ability to move and to use visual orientation. Attention should be paid to specific requirements for the installation of exhibits and accompanying texts and labels regarding the field of vision of these visitors and to adjust the system of circulation of the audience in the exhibition. Barrier-free access to all other customer services like museum shops, cloakrooms, sanitary facilities, cash desks and cafés should be a matter of course. Providing barrier-free services does not necessarily mean costly building investments. Some arrangements can be made quickly and are not expensive. This concerns above all providing walking carts for elderly people, lendable pushchairs, providing an as-



sistance service for persons with limited mobility and orientation etc. Nevertheless without easy access to the object these arrangements are of no use.

Making the exhibition accessible for persons with limited orientation abilities, especially for people with low vision, means for instance to install Braille buttons in elevators, guidelines, sound orientation signal system and haptic maps. To create a haptic exhibition is another step - in fact a separate product serving not only visitors with low vision, but all others as well. The fact that the museum building and all its services are barrier-free should be well known particularly among audiences with limited ability to move and with limited orientation. This information should be mentioned on the institution's Web page and in all the promotional and information leaflets. Different NGOs active in the field of care for citizens with physical and visual impairments and elderly people can take part in providing the target groups with this information. In the near future, Web

pages of the cultural institutions - at least of the most important ones and of those managing haptic displays - should be made accessible to sightless persons and persons with low vision according to "blind-friendly Web" rules. Web pages should be supplemented by information about nearby parking places, barrier-free public transport system, barrier-free entrance, accessibility of lavatories and so on.

Conclusion

The most basic prerequisite for a successful museum - offering an experience without barriers - is its employees' awareness of specific needs of persons with limited ability to move and with limited orientation. Even in the barrier-free object it is necessary to take into account that the exhibitions must be barrier-free as well and that the exhibits have to be arranged with regard to the field of vision of all the visitors. An attractive architectural solution need not be a detriment to visitor comfort.



Platform
for the disabled
in the National Memorial
on the Vítkov Hill





Transport accessibility for people with disabilities is not to be omitted - it is necessary to provide parking places and barrier-free public transport facilities.

At the same time the question of standards for physical accessibility - above all for elderly people - is an essential challenge for the future. It is necessary to focus on the fact that as a result of demographic developments elderly people will soon compose a significant percentage of visitors. In addition to that persons with limited ability to move make up a strong potential target group to which museums can offer an easy and attractive leisure time activity. They often don't do so because of various physical barriers.

We can only hope that the workshops that will be held in autumn 2010 in cooperation with various NGOs will be successful among employees of museums and galleries and that the negative experience of people with disabilities - who often meet with incomprehension of the museum stuff - will be diminished in the future. For example, it should never happen that the responsible employee is unable to run the lifting platform and therefore claims that it is out of order. Participants in the workshops will be offered to visit a museum on a wheel-

chair. This will provide an opportunity to empathise with persons with disabilities and to understand through their own experience the specific needs of these people. The workshop will aim to provide employees of museums with necessary information and prepare them for the specific needs of persons with disabilities and of elderly people. At the same time it will be a message directed at people with disabilities: "we count on you".

Visitor Rate of Czech Museums, Art Galleries and Memorials¹

The chart shows how the visitor rate has changed over the last twenty years. The number of art and cultural heritage institutions has more than doubled; however, the visitor rate is slightly lower than twenty years ago. On the one hand, this illustrates the growing number of private art galleries after the fall of the Iron Curtain; on the other hand, the statistics prove the interesting fact that the growing number of galleries and museums does not attract more visitors, as the most visited institutions are still the National Gallery and the National Museum, both situated in Prague.

¹ Statistics based on the National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture, prepared by Jakub Hauser

