

# ALBUM

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*Željka Jelavić, Kosjenka Laszlo Klemar and Željka Sušić*

This article has been published in ICOM Education 28, the journal issued by ICOM CECA.

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ICOM Education 28 is also available in print version published by BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt (Germany). To be ordered on their website <https://www.bod.de/buchshop/>.

Cet article a été publié dans ICOM Education 28, la revue d'ICOM CECA.

Le numéro complet d'ICOM Education 28 est disponible gratuitement en version PDF sur le site du CECA <http://ceca.mini.icom.museum/publications-2/icom-education/>.

ICOM Education 28 est également disponible en version imprimée, publiée par BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt (Allemagne), à commander sur le site <https://www.bod.de/buchshop/>.

Este artículo está publicado en ICOM Education 28, la revista de ICOM CECA.

El número completo de ICOM Education 28 está disponible en formato PDF en el sitio web de CECA <http://ceca.mini.icom.museum/publications-2/icom-education/>.

ICOM Education 28 está disponible en una versión imprimada publicada para BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt (Alemania) que se puede encargar en el sitio <https://www.bod.de/buchshop/>.

ICOM Education 28  
Cultural action | Action culturelle | Acción cultural  
Editor Stéphanie Wintzerith

Copyright © ICOM (CECA) 2018  
ISSN 0253-9004  
ISBN 9783752885910 (print version)

A publication of:  
Une publication de :  
Una publicación de:



CECA – Committee for Education and Cultural Action is a committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) network.

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## A museum programme intended for people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia

*Željka Jelavić, Kosjenka Laszlo Klemar  
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### Alzheimer's disease and inclusive museums

According to the World Alzheimer Report 2016<sup>1</sup>, an estimated number of 47 million people worldwide live with dementia. Croatia has a total population of over 4 million inhabitants, out of which 17,7% are older than 65 years. In 2017 around 80,000 persons were diagnosed Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

In common usage, the words "Alzheimer's disease" and "dementia" are often used interchangeably, although dementia is not a disease. Dementia is an umbrella term which describes a wide range of brain disorders unabling persons to perform everyday activities independently. The symptoms include the loss of intellectual and social skills.

Among different types of dementia, Alzheimer's disease is the most well-known. It is a progressive disease that destroys memory and other mental functions. It starts with increasing forgetfulness or mild confusion, and through the course of time, persons with Alzheimer's disease have more and more difficulty concentrating and thinking, especially about abstract concepts. Managing finances or multitasking, for example, are therefore extremely challenging for them. However, until a late phase of the disease, people keep the ability to read, dance, sing or engage in crafts and hobbies.

Croatian society in general, as it is the case in many other countries, is not sensitised to the social group of people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. These persons are generally not involved in any form of social participation and can hardly be encountered in public places. In wider society, little is known about the patients and their lives. Hence, discomfort is often present among the members of the affected family. In Croatia, there are very few programmes<sup>2</sup> intended to raise the patients' quality of life and transform the existing social relationships.

Museums as agents of social inclusion and regeneration can deliver positive social outcomes, as Richard Sendall states (1998, p. 413). Following that statement, a joint museum programme of three museums was launched in fall 2017 as a part of new museum offer to include patients with Alzheimer's disease and dementia in early stages into social and cultural life. By giving persons with Alzheimer's disease and dementia the opportunity to participate on an equal footing in cultural activities, museums directly contribute to social, cohesive cultural strategies. This means, as David Fleming said, that "museums which

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<sup>1</sup> Report done by Alzheimer's Disease International (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Alzheimer café is a good way of helping people with dementia and educating caregivers (Alzheimer Croatia, 2018).

commit themselves to serving broad audiences, in all the ways [...], but primarily through *promoting learning, will, slowly but surely, impact on those people's lives*" (Fleming, 2005).

Research among CECA members done in 2017 by Arja van Veldhuizen and Jorge Albuja Tutiven has shown that there is no equal understanding worldwide of what is supposed to be "cultural action" as a part of museum education.<sup>3</sup> We consider the project

Cultural action is a dynamic concept. It offers an opportunity for socially marginalised groups to take part in culture.

intended towards people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia as a good example of cultural action related to education. In our understanding, cultural action is a dynamic concept. It is an opportunity for socially marginalised groups to be part of what is called mainstream culture

through educational activities in museums. At the same time such educational programs challenge mainstream values, overcome social stereotypes and contribute to the democratisation of society and to the empowerment of socially challenged groups.

## Why Album?

The project Album was created to give opportunity for persons with Alzheimer's disease and dementia in early stages to improve their quality of life, and in particular to stimulate their senses through direct contact with museum objects and through exhibitions. The course of Alzheimer's disease has several phases. Roughly it can be divided in three stages: mild, moderate and severe stage. People with mild stage have significant trouble with memory and thinking that impacts daily functioning. At that stage it becomes clear to the family that a person is having difficulties which call for medical intervention. In the moderate stage, people get more confused and forgetful, they begin to need more help with self-care and daily activities. In the late stage, people lose the ability to communicate coherently, they experience a decline in physical abilities and they need total assistance in daily activities.

Experts recommend to develop interests and hobbies as well as involvement in various social activities that stimulate cognitive and physical functions in order to reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease and dementia of all types. Therefore, carefully selected and prepared museum programs conducted by museum educators can surely be stimulating for persons with an early stage of Alzheimer's disease.

The project Album was carried out in fall 2017 by three partner museums from the city of Zagreb and financed by the Ministry of Culture. It was initiated by Željka Sušić, a museum educator adviser from the Typhlological Museum in cooperation with the Ethnographic Museum and the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla. The Typhlological Museum is one of the rare special museums in Europe dealing with the problems of disabled persons, especially of the visually impaired and socially challenged groups. As for the Ethnographic Museum, the major part of its collections consists of object representing the Croatian ethnographic heritage. It also holds a collection of non-European cultures. The objects mostly date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla, established in 1954 in Zagreb, follows in the tradition of the world's great science and technology museums. It holds many objects of everyday use which are typical of the industrial era of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>3</sup> Poster presentation at the CECA - DEMHIST annual conference Relevance: Are We Trying Hard Enough? 14-18 October 2017, Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, London, United Kingdom.

Why did we decide to name the project Album? Album has several meanings: in Ancient Rome, an album was a white plate used for the printing of important events, notices, names of senators, etc. In the Middle Ages, an album was a book for self-handwritten notes. In the modern era, printed photographs or stamps for example are kept in albums, usually nicely decorated hardcover books.

By choosing the name Album for the project, the intention was to suggest the similarity of creating an album full of memories and museum work. In both cases, it is about creating criteria, selection, describing and presenting. Hence, browsing the album invokes memories and encourages people to interact and activate memory, which were the aims of this project.

The objectives of the project were multifold. The main goal was to establish the museum as a space that contributes to improve the quality of life and the enjoyment of museum objects for people with Alzheimer's disease. Another objective was to present the social potentials and values of the museum to a wider public. In addition, the project also intended to use the social networks for promoting and raising awareness about persons with Alzheimer's disease and dementia as well as their social and cultural needs.

Main objectives: establish the museum as a place  
- to improve the quality of life,  
- with high social potentials and values.

## Planning the project

Prior to the beginning of the program, a plan of activities was launched by the museum partners with clearly defined goals, methods and forms of work to be implemented. In collaboration with the Croatian Association for Alzheimer's disease, a call for cooperation was sent to three homes for the elderly people on which two responded positively: the Medveščak Home for Elderly from the city center of Zagreb and the House for the Elderly Villa Brezovica from the suburban area of Zagreb.

In order to go on with the program, the three museums first had to connect with local Alzheimer organisations as well as with homes for elderly. This task was much more complicated and took more time than expected, although interest from their side was expressed for cooperation.

Non-governmental organisations which provide education for families and services for patients with Alzheimer's disease are based on volunteer work. We found it very difficult to establish a stable and undisrupted contact with one person in charge, so that the discussions took much longer than planned. In addition to that, our first idea that local organisations would help us connecting with patients and their families was not working either. Although the reasons were all different, the common ground was that a lack of additional help in logistic matters which prevented them from visiting the museum(s).

Therefore, we turned to homes for elderly. Medical staff and caregivers discussed and estimated who were the patients who could participate in the program in regard of their medical status. Besides, museum educators had to connect with social workers from the elderly nursing homes and discuss logistics and transportation issues.

Another important task was to choose objects from each museum's collection. Those objects need to be placed at the disposal to the group during their visit to the museum. Compared to an art museum for example, it was easier for us to choose the objects as

many of them have an everyday-use value. Conservation and security risks are also lower for those objects than handling works of art.

As the project was deemed to be a pilot project, in fall 2017 four visits to museums were organised, two to the Ethnographic museum and two to the Technical museum Nikola Tesla. Coordination of the project, media presentation, social media and carrying out the evaluation at the end of the project was the task of the Typhlological Museum.

## Carrying out the program

From the very beginning, it was clear that personalised approach was necessary. The first step was therefore to identify the skill levels and the state of the potential participants. Those involved in the program differed in terms of socio-economic status, life experience, education and professions. They also had different cultural background and origins from various parts of Croatia.

Having all that in mind, it was of high importance to create a warm and empowering atmosphere from the very beginning while entering the museum. This is a crucial point,

### Crucial implementation factors:

- a warm and empowering atmosphere,
- a personalised approach,
- direct handling of the objects.

as we learned from the project that was carried out by the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome (De Luca, 2012, pp. 211-219), to mention one example, a project which won a CECA Best Practice award in 2011. Each visit to the museum in the project Album began with a welcoming coffee and cakes, giving an opportunity to get to know one another. It continued with an exploration of selected

hands-on exhibits and exhibitions. Objects selected were especially chosen to stimulate and recall memory and emotions. They were on disposal to participant in a room close to exhibition hall in order to handle the objects in a quiet atmosphere.

Methods used in the museum program were based on an individual approach to each person and the direct contact with museum objects. The participants were asked to determine the type of material, describe the texture or to relate the object to their own body. The combination of verbal (narration, explanation), visual (observing, viewing) and audio (listening) methods was used to provide the best experience. The length of the program was one hour for each visit.

The Ethnographic Museum has selected objects from its textile collections and its collection of musical instruments. Everyday items like caps, purses and scarves were the starting points for recalling memories from the participants' younger years. The discussions developed about dressing styles, fashion, handwork as well as relationships between older and younger generations, parents, children and grandchildren.

Knowing that music is a powerful stimulant, musical instruments have been selected for the second visit in the Ethnographic Museum. Talks about traditional instruments led to revealing the memories of taking part in folk dances, rebellion of young generation, rock'n'roll bands and disco dances. This talk was so stimulating that some of the participants started to sing.



Picture 1 - Traditional instruments from the collection of the Ethnographic Museum were the starting point for revealing memories about songs and dances from youth.

Photo: archive of the Ethnographic Museum

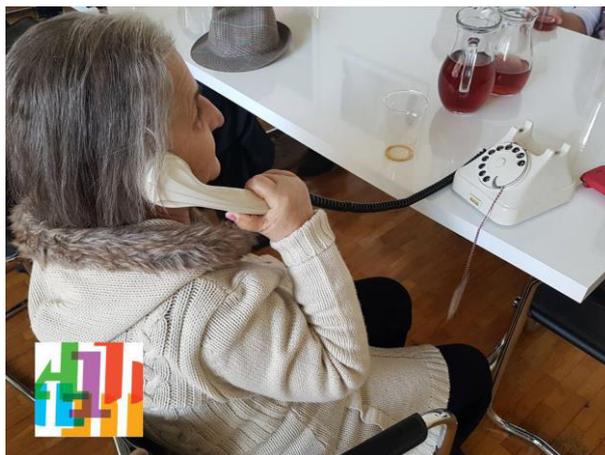
In the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla, the record player and records with songs of Vjekoslav Jutt – a famous Croatian singer during the 1960s and 1970s – opened stories about the first dances and young love affairs as well as a discussion about the quality of songs and singers.



Picture 2 - An old record player initiated talk about old popular songs.

Photo: Marijo Zrna, archive of the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla

The white dial phone spurred on stories of family relations and friendships. The hair dryer from the 1960s initiated stories of beauty styles and ways of socialising which ended up in stories about sports, in particular about skating in their youth.



Picture 3 - Revealing memories about long telephone talks with friends.  
Photo: Marijo Zrna, archive of the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla

While handling the objects as well as through the interactive guided tours, participants expressed a positive change of behavior. At the beginning, there was a “warming up” period. Through that period casual talks were going on. Although it looked spontaneous, the museum educator carefully led the conversation. In interaction with participants, it was important to include all group members, to use simple language and to pose questions one by one. It was also crucial to avoid very academic language as well as too many different concepts. As the time went by, participants opened up: they became more relaxed, more talkative, laughing and motivated to improve their skills.

During guided tour through the exhibition, a focus was directed on certain objects which, again, were the ones which stimulated memory and talks about the way of usage and a personal attitude towards the objects. Questions like What does this remind you of? or How do you feel about what you are seeing? were asked not only to stimulate memory but also to express the feelings using words and phrases they know. In the meantime,

Carefully designed museum programmes have a positive effect on the general status of patients with Alzheimer's disease.

the participants were encouraged to interact with the others. It is important to stress out that the attitude of the museum educator towards the participants was not a patronising one. It was an exchange of questions, answers and ideas based on mutual respect. Our programme proved, as results from other museum programs<sup>4</sup> have

shown, that carefully designed museum programmes and realised visits have a positive effect on the general status of the patients with Alzheimer's disease and dementia in early stage.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For example from the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Startribune, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> The MoMA Alzheimer's Project: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia (MoMa, 2018).



Picture 4 - Guided tour by the head of education at the Ethnographic Museum  
Photo: archive of the Ethnographic Museum

### Public visibility of the program

In order to make the whole program more visible in the general public, we took the strength of social networks and their influence on public opinion into account. Therefore, we regularly published posts about the Album project on Facebook during fall 2017. Statistics show that 45,966 Facebook users revealed posts and 578 users liked them, whilst 31 even shared them.



Picture 4 - Post on the Facebook page of the Typhological Museum  
Screenshot of the post<sup>6</sup> on 3 October, 2017

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Tifolo%C5%A1ki-muzej-271181719586258/>

Besides, local and national TV and radio stations broadcasted stories about the programme as well as internet news portal and specialized portals dedicated to specific audience like for example the one for Alzheimer's disease.

## Evaluation notes

At the end of the program in November 2017, its coordinator the Typhlological Museum carried out a summative evaluation. In total, 16 persons participated in the program which consists of four visits to two museums. Social workers evaluated the museum visit with participants upon returning to the homes for elderly. Participants expressed satisfaction

A high level of satisfaction was reached, the participants' emotional status was improved.

with the visit. Hence, caregivers who work with patients on everyday basis estimated the participants' emotional status after the visit as very good. Accompanying staff was very satisfied with the atmosphere, hospitality and interaction with participants.

All partners involved in the Album program expressed their satisfaction with the coordination of the program. Staff from one elderly home pointed out that more coordination within their own institution was needed to organise the visit to the museums. From the museum educators point of view, high satisfaction was also expressed with the carrying out of the programme and the interaction with all participants.

It is well-known that Alzheimer's disease causes some sudden fits of confusion, during which the patients feel absolutely lost and most of the time frightened. Though theoretically possible at any time, such an episode of confusion for one participant did not occur during the workshops or the visits. It happened once, nevertheless: outside the museum, on the way to the cars taking the participants back to their homes. The incident caused some uneasiness and reminded the museum educators of the specificities of the group of people they designed the project for. It also underlined the importance of training in order to know better how to handle that kind of unsettling situations, so the conclusion of the internal feedback discussions between the partner museums.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

All project partners agreed that such programmes are needed, in the future with more museums and more elderly homes involved and should become part of a regular offer. In this regard, it would be important to organise a presentation of the Album project to museum professionals as well as to caregivers. A training of museum staff about specific aspects of the work with persons with Alzheimer's disease and dementia would also be needed. Following those recommendations, the project was actually presented on two national and one regional conferences during winter and spring 2018. For running the programme on a longer term, it is vital to secure the continuity of financial support and a good intersectional cooperation. This is the aspect that all partners found very difficult. It would be important to develop a model for monitoring the project in cooperation with social workers and caregivers from elderly homes. Hence, regarding public visibility it is important to strengthen relations with different media and secure a permanent presence.

All partners involved agreed that projects like this present museums as responsible and socially engaged institutions.

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## Summary

This paper presents a joint project entitled Album intended for people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia, carried out by three Croatian museums in Zagreb in fall 2017 and financed by the Ministry of Culture. It was initiated by Željka Sušić, museum educator adviser from the Typhlological Museum dealing with the problems of disabled persons, especially of the visually impaired and socially challenged groups. It was realised in cooperation with the Ethnographic Museum and the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla.

This project was the first one in Croatia joining museums of different kinds to emphasise social inclusion of people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease in museums. The objectives of the project were multifold. The main goal was to establish the museum as a space that contributes to improve the quality of life and the enjoyment of museum objects for people with Alzheimer's disease. Another objective was to present the social potentials and values of the museum to a wider public. In addition, the project also intended to use the social networks for promoting and raising awareness about persons with Alzheimer's disease and dementia as well as their social and cultural needs.

In total, 16 persons from two elderly homes from the city of Zagreb participated in the program. During October and November 2017, two groups from each institution visited the Ethnographic Museum and the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla, in a total of four visits to the two museums. The coordination of the program activities and partners as well as the evaluation were the task of the Typhlological Museum.

The two museums selected objects related to music and everyday life. The Ethnographic Museum selected objects from its textile collections and its collection of musical instruments whilst the Technical Museum Nikola Tesla selected a record player, skates, a hair dryer and a telephone from the 1960s. The methods used in the museum programme were based on an individual approach to each person and the direct contact with the museum objects. The combination of verbal (narration, explanation), visual (observing, viewing) and audio (listening) methods was used to provide the best experience.

The length of the programme was one hour for each visit. While handling the objects as well as through the interactive guided tours, participants expressed a positive change of behavior. During guided tour through the exhibition, a focus was directed on certain objects which, again, were the ones which stimulated memory and talks about the way of usage and a personal attitude towards the objects. Questions like What does this remind you of? or How do you feel about what you are seeing? were asked not only to stimulate memory but also to express the feelings using words and phrases they know. In the meantime, the participants were encouraged to interact with the others.

All project partners agreed that such programmes are needed in the future with more museums and more elderly homes involved and should become part of regular museum offer. Hence this project is an example of responsible and socially engaged cultural institutions.

**Keywords:** museum, social inclusion, Alzheimer's disease, dementia

## Résumé

Cet article présente le projet Album destiné aux personnes atteintes de la maladie d'Alzheimer ou de démence sénile. Trois musées croates se sont associés pour ce projet, financé par le Ministère de la Culture et mis en œuvre à l'automne 2017 à Zagreb.

Il a été initié par Željka Sušić, médiatrice du Musée typhlogique, musée dont le thème principal sont les personnes en situation de handicap et en particulier les déficients visuels et les groupes marginalisés. Le projet a été réalisé en collaboration avec le Musée d'ethnographie et le Musée technique Nikola Tesla.

Album est le premier projet en Croatie à rassembler des musées de thèmes très différents afin de contribuer à l'inclusion sociale de personnes atteintes d'Alzheimer. Les objectifs de ce projet sont multiples. Le but principal est d'établir le musée comme un lieu où les personnes atteintes d'Alzheimer peuvent améliorer leur qualité de vie et profiter des objets des collections. Un autre objectif est de présenter au grand public le potentiel social et les valeurs du musée. De plus, les partenaires du projet comptaient beaucoup sur les réseaux sociaux pour soutenir et attirer l'attention du public sur les personnes atteintes d'Alzheimer ou de démence, en particulier sur leurs besoins sociaux et culturels.

En tout, 16 résidents de deux maisons de retraite de Zagreb ont participé au programme. En octobre et novembre 2017, deux groupes de chaque maison de retraite ont visité le Musée d'ethnographie et le Musée technique Nikola Tesla pour un total de quatre visites dans deux musées. La coordination des activités et des musées partenaires ainsi que l'évaluation du projet a été assurée par le Musée typhlogique.

Les deux musées visités ont sélectionné des objets de leurs collections liés à la musique et à la vie quotidienne. Le Musée d'ethnographie a choisi des objets de sa collection textile ainsi que de sa collection d'instruments de musique, alors que le Musée technique Nikola Tesla a choisi un tourne-disque, des patins à glace, un sèche-cheveux et un téléphone des années soixante. La méthode mise en œuvre dans le programme repose sur une approche individuelle de chaque personne et sur un contact direct avec les objets du musée. La combinaison des approches verbale (narration, explication), visuelle (observer, regarder) et auditive (écouter) a permis d'obtenir une bonne expérience globale.

Chaque visite a duré une heure. En manipulant les objets et au cours de la visite guidée interactive, on a pu constater une évolution positive du comportement des participants. La visite guidée de l'exposition a, là encore, mis l'accent sur des objets susceptibles de stimuler la mémoire et la prise de parole sur la façon de les utiliser et sur le lien personnel des participants avec ce type d'objets. Des questions telles que « Que vous rappelle cet objet ? » ou « Qu'éprouvez-vous en voyant cela ? » sont destinées non seulement à activer la mémoire, mais aussi à encourager l'expression de leurs sentiments en utilisant des mots et des formules familiers. Les participants ont également été encouragés à échanger entre eux.

L'ensemble des partenaires du projet s'accordent sur le fait que de tels programmes sont nécessaires et qu'ils devront inclure encore davantage de résidences pour personnes âgées. Ils insistent également sur le fait que de tels programmes devront s'établir pour faire partie de l'offre régulière du musée. Ainsi, ce projet est un exemple de l'action responsable et sociale d'institutions culturelles engagées.

**Mots-clés :** musée, inclusion sociale, maladie d'Alzheimer, démence sénile

## Resumen

Este documento presenta un proyecto realizado en conjunto, titulado Álbum destinado a personas con enfermedad de Alzheimer y demencia, llevado a cabo por tres museos croatas en Zagreb en otoño de 2017 y financiado por el Ministerio de Cultura. Fue iniciado por Željka Sušić, asesor de educadores de museos del Museo Tiflológico que se ocupa de los problemas de las personas discapacitadas, especialmente de los discapacitados visuales y los grupos con problemas sociales. Se realizó en cooperación con el Museo Etnográfico y el Museo Técnico Nikola Tesla.

Este proyecto fue el primero en Croacia que unió a museos de diferentes tipos para enfatizar la inclusión social de las personas con demencia y la enfermedad de Alzheimer en los museos. Los objetivos del proyecto fueron múltiples. El objetivo principal fue establecer el museo como un espacio que contribuye a mejorar la calidad de vida y el disfrute de los objetos del museo para las personas con la enfermedad de Alzheimer. Otro objetivo fue presentar las potencialidades y valores sociales del museo a un público más amplio. Además, el proyecto también pretendía utilizar las redes sociales para promover y crear conciencia sobre las personas con la enfermedad de Alzheimer y la demencia, así como sobre sus necesidades sociales y culturales.

En total, 16 personas de dos hogares de ancianos de la ciudad de Zagreb participaron en el programa. Durante octubre y noviembre de 2017, dos grupos de cada institución visitaron el Museo Etnográfico y el Museo Técnico Nikola Tesla, en un total de cuatro visitas a los dos museos. La coordinación de las actividades del programa y los socios, así como la evaluación, fue tarea del Museo Tiflológico.

Los dos museos seleccionaron objetos relacionados con la música y la vida cotidiana. El Museo Etnográfico seleccionó objetos de sus colecciones textiles y su colección de instrumentos musicales, mientras que el Museo Técnico Nikola Tesla seleccionó un tocadiscos, patines, un secador de pelo y un teléfono de la década de 1960. Los métodos utilizados en el programa del museo se basaron en un enfoque individual de cada persona y el contacto directo con los objetos del museo. La combinación de los métodos verbal (narración, explicación), visual (observación, visualización) y audio (escucha) se utilizó para proporcionar la mejor experiencia.

La duración del programa fue de una hora por cada visita. Al manejar los objetos, así como a través de las visitas guiadas interactivas, los participantes expresaron un cambio positivo de comportamiento. Durante la visita guiada a través de la exposición, un enfoque se dirigió a ciertos objetos seleccionados para estimular la memoria y que dieron la oportunidad para hablar acerca de la forma de uso y sobre la actitud personal hacia los objetos. Preguntas como ¿Qué te recuerda esto? o ¿Cómo te sientes acerca de lo que estás viendo? sirvieron de sugerencia no solo para estimular la memoria, sino también expresar los sentimientos usando palabras y frases que ellos conocen. Mientras tanto, se alentó a los participantes a interactuar con los demás.

Todos los socios del proyecto estuvieron de acuerdo en que programas como este son necesarios en el futuro, sumando a más museos y hogares para ancianos y que deberían de formar parte de la oferta habitual del museo. Por lo tanto, este proyecto es un ejemplo de instituciones culturales responsables y socialmente comprometidas.

**Palabras clave:** museo, inclusión social, enfermedad de Alzheimer, demencia