

We Are Witnesses

Kenneth L. Woodward

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THE first thing that strikes you on entering the new United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which President Bill Clinton is expected to dedicate this week, is how hard it is to see out from the inside. There's no clear view of the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial or any of the buildings along the nearby mall that celebrate Freedom and Democracy, Enlightenment and Progress. That's how it should be. This is a history museum, and the story it tells forever shattered the Enlightenment illusion of human perfectibility. At every twisted turn, the museum's industrial architecture evokes the closed, monitored world of the Nazi death camps and the planned genocides in which 6 million Jews and 5 million others—Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, . . . the handicapped, plus the entire Polish intelligentsia—were systematically exterminated in less than a decade. Dante is the poet of this space: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

Controversial from the start, the museum dares speak memories that some camp survivors still regard as too sacred for words and images, too transcendently evil to be displayed in another time, another place. This is not the only Holocaust museum in the United States—another, smaller one opened this February in Los Angeles—but in design, scope and ambition it rivals Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the Nazis' victims. Inevitably, the building and its brutally explicit permanent exhibit raise many difficult questions. Why here rather than in Eastern Europe? Why now? Why memorialize *this* singular, Godforsaken episode in Jewish history when we still have no building recalling what the United States did to Native Americans or to its African slaves?

Those who have visited the camps in Europe, as I did 32 years ago, know the compelling need to remember what man has done—can do—to man. They will also recognize immediately the red brick façade of the first-floor Hall of Witness. The skylight above is a crosshatch of cold, contorted steel beams recalling the bleak testimony of the prisoners: the only thing the Nazis could not take from them was the daylight. To personalize the experience, each visitor is offered a computer-generated ID card with the picture of a Holocaust victim whose story can be followed by

inserting the card in monitors stationed throughout the exhibition. The doors of the elevators are gunmetal gray; they open and shut heavily, like the doors of an oven. But the initial sounds we hear inside are the shocked voices of American troops who liberated some of the camps in 1945. A plaque on the wall quotes Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's reaction to what he saw. This is another answer to why such a museum is necessary: despite the noxious arguments of revisionists who deny that the Holocaust took place, there *were* outside witnesses.

The entire exhibit, which works downward from the fourth floor and covers 36,000 square feet, requires at least three hours to experience and absorb. Along with posters, proclamations and other artifacts, two brief films document the rise of German anti-Semitism and Adolf Hitler's creation of a police state. Jews are tagged and numbered, ghettoized as non-Aryans, deprived of civil rights. Kristallnacht (Nov. 9, 1938) is memorialized with charred Torahs and scenes of plundered Jewish shops.

Not surprisingly, the German government has objected to this reconstruction of its Nazi past and has asked that the museum create an additional exhibit on postwar German democracy—a request the museum's directors vigorously rejected. But, as the permanent exhibition makes clear, there is enough guilt for several countries to share. Ample space is devoted to the Evian Conference, called by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938, at which representatives of a dozen nations turned their backs on Jews trying to escape the Third Reich. Here, too, is the story of the St. Louis, the shipload of Jewish emigrants who were refused asylum in the United States and returned to their Nazi tormentors. What did Americans know of the Holocaust and when did they know it? Front-page newspaper reports show that readers in New York, St. Louis and other cities were informed of Hitler's genocide plans as early as 1933. "This is one of the important reasons for the museum," says Raye Farr, a filmmaker who is director of the permanent exhibition. "The role of the bystander is central to the story we have to tell."

On the third floor the story lunges dizzyingly from purgatory to hell. A cobblestone street and a wooden bridge introduce visitors to the Warsaw ghetto, created in 1933 to isolate and eventually eliminate a half-million Jews. There's a milk can, one of two in which historian Emanuel Ringelblum buried his archive of ghetto life. A film shows Nazis trucking off aged hospital patients to their deaths. Here's the gate of the Jewish cemetery in Tarnow, Poland, where hundreds of Jews were rounded up and

shot. Other exhibits depict the mobile death squads that followed German troops into the Soviet Union and wiped out entire villages in an afternoon. A cattle car like those used to transport Jews to the camps stands at a mock siding, open for boarding. On the other side, we observe pictures of stunned Jews, husbands separated from wives and children. To the side are mounds of eyeglasses, combs, toothbrushes and suitcases. Overhead is a cast of the mocking entry sign to Auschwitz: ARBEIT MACHT FREI (WORK WILL MAKE YOU FREE).

Then come the voices, and we take a needed pause to sit and listen to transcriptions of survivors telling their tales. We enter a reassembled barracks from Birkenau that includes the hard wooden bunks where emaciated prisoners slept six in a space fit for two. Here, too, are the striped uniforms, the food bowls and crude shoes which were all that prisoners could call their own. Altogether, the museum has collected 23,000 of these nightmare artifacts. And then, there it is: the cast of a gas chamber plus several canisters of Zyklon B—fumes of the Final Solution.

Mass graves: But there is more—maybe too much more. Across a glass bridge we enter the final destination. On one side, a heap of 4,000 shoes. On another, a mural of bald female inmates, blank-eyed in their humiliation. The museum was prepared to display bales of hair, which the Germans used to stuff their pillows, but survivors on the museum committee wouldn't permit it. "That could be my mother's hair," one member objected. In an adjacent alcove is an oven, beside it the zinc-lined table where teeth were relieved of gold fillings. At last we enter a square, three-story tower. Covering the walls are 1,500 photographs reflecting the entire population of Ejszyszki, a once lively *shtetl* (village) in rural southern Poland. All but 29 survivors were machine-gunned and dumped into mass graves.

The museum strains to end on an upbeat note. It harbors a wooden boat of the kind the Danes used to ferry Jews to Sweden. There's a tribute to Raoul Wallenberg and other "righteous Gentiles" who risked their lives to hide and save Jews. The one noticeable omission is the thousands of Christian clergy, Protestant and Roman Catholic, who were also interned and liquidated in the camps. Fittingly, the museum's domed, hexagonal Hall of Remembrance allows visitors to sit and meditate on the horror of it all, in the glow of an eternal flame. Silence is needed to assimilate what happened—and to realize that mass extermination is a recurring nightmare. It is happening again in parts of Africa and, especially now, in the former Yugoslavia. Another reason to remember.

The museum also hopes to educate. Its archives are open to scholars; although museum officials caution against letting children under 11 view the permanent exhibit, they offer outreach programs for schools and churches. But there are limits to turning the Holocaust into an educational experience. In L.A., for instance, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance provides a similar re-creation of the Holocaust. Designed for what director Dr. Gerald Margolis calls "the intelligent 17-year-old," it displays a sequence of miniature scenes and videos dramatizing how Hitler achieved power in a democracy and then executed a plan to exterminate Europe's Jews. The hourlong exhibition concludes with videos of the camps that visitors watch while sitting in a darkened concrete room which strongly resembles a gas chamber.

So far, the museum has been a success, drawing an average of 1,000 visitors a day. But in their efforts to attract the public, museum officials have handicapped their presentation with a didactic opening exhibition aimed at exposing hidden prejudices and behavior in American life. Visitors must first pass through a neon-lit interactive game room in which they are taught to recognize—and reject—racist, sexist and other stereotypes. A half hour of this soft-core political correctness and you yearn for a monologue from Don Rickles. Valuable though these preliminary lessons in civility may be—particularly for tense, multicultural L.A.—they do not prepare visitors for encountering the Holocaust.

Indeed, although the Holocaust occurred on foreign soil, the decision to memorialize its victims on the Washington Mall seems right, if not altogether just. "The building is a seal that the Holocaust happened," says Edward Linenthal, a professor of religious studies at the University of Wisconsin in Oshkosh who is writing a book on the museum's history. "It's also an insurance policy that Jews are welcome in America." But monuments can bind as well as release memory. The Holocaust Museum will succeed if, like its eternal flame, it continues to shed light on surpassing darkness.