

## **A "Glocal" Memory**

### **The Collective Memory of the Holocaust from a Global and Local Perspective The "Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority - Yad Vashem" And the "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum"**

**Orit Engelberg-Baram**

Historical museums fulfill a key role in commemorating past events, thus creating social cohesion and fostering the common values required to construct an identity. In recent years, research exploring the significance of museums has revealed the methods through which the artifacts on display in historical exhibitions are selected to create a narrative aimed at honoring a heritage and educating the public. It has become evident that museums are storehouses of knowledge, meant to further cultural, social and political agendas. The narrative told by a particular museum reflects the value system and political interests of the individual or group who were instrumental in establishing the institution. Thus, the narrative of one museum may differ from that of another, even though both museums are addressing the same historic event. Therefore, while there are many sites around the world dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust, each one supports "a different Holocaust."

My research is closely aligned with the aforementioned studies, showing the ways in which museums "mediate" the past, transform meaning and are influenced by current identities. This research compares Yad Vashem, the official Israeli Holocaust memorial, with the United States Holocaust Museum (henceforth: USHMM). Unlike similar memorials in Europe, they are not geographically connected to the place where the events which are commemorated took place; rather they both exist, not as preservation sites, but as tributes to the values upon which the decision was made to establish them. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that the two museums deal with the same subject and have even been influenced by one another, they represent different

narratives, and the lessons they hope will be gleaned from the atrocity also differ from one another.

It is worthwhile noting that most of the museums in Israel were established as a result of grass root initiatives by individuals who considered it important to perpetuate a story related to them on a personal, family, or national level. However, in spite of the fact that private entrepreneurs worked tirelessly to bring their vision to fruition, both Yad Vashem and the USHMM museums were essentially built as a result of government decisions. Being endorsed by national interests had a substantial influence on the memorialization of the Holocaust and the artifacts exhibited.

### **To Remember and Also to Forget**

In the case of Yad Vashem, the initial visionary and promoter of the center was Mordechai Shenhavi who, when knowledge of the extermination first came to light, suggested founding a national memorial for European Jewry. His goal was twofold: to commemorate the communities of European Jewry that were being annihilated, and to strengthen the ideological connection to the Jewish settlement and pioneers of Eretz Israel.<sup>1</sup> In other words, even then, while the trains were transporting and the gas chambers were running, the settlers in Eretz Israel worked to extract a lesson from the tragedy as a moral justification for Zionism. Following the establishment of the state, the notion of a Holocaust memorial sparked a number of debates, particularly in regard to the way in which the Jewish reaction to the Holocaust would be presented, and what aspects would be presented as heroic. In the 1940s and 50s, the idea of passivity (which was not regarded as "passive resistance") would be differentiated from the armed warfare in which the Nazis engaged. This disassociation fit in with the Zionist ideology of "negating the Diaspora" and the perception that Jewish life outside of Eretz Israel was characterized by subjugation, acceptance of one's punishment, fear, and passivity. In contrast, life in Eretz Israel represented the birth of the

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<sup>1</sup> Brug, 2002.

"new Jew:" independent, rebellious, and aspiring to a sovereign nation of his own.

As such, the partisans and Warsaw Ghetto revolutionaries aroused the emotions of the Jewish settlers in Eretz Israel, who linked these acts of courage with the Masada rebels during the time of the Second Temple, as well as with other historical heroes who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their people and their land.<sup>2</sup> The victims who did not take up arms were thought to have submitted "like sheep to the slaughter," in keeping with the image of the meek Jew of the Diaspora. With this in mind, a frame of reference was established, whereby lessons from the Holocaust emphasized the central theme that Zionism was the most desirable alternative.

Therefore, in the early years following the founding of the State of Israel, a need arose to both remember and forget the Holocaust: on the one hand, the atrocity represented the ultimate consequence of Jews living in the Diaspora, and as such should be forgotten; after all, the Zionist ideology at the time was to dispel the idea of a Diaspora. On the other hand, the Holocaust constituted proof that without their own country, Jews would always be vulnerable; thus the event should never be forgotten. According to James Young: "Yad Vashem functions as a national shrine to both Israel's pride in heroism and shame in victimization."<sup>3</sup>

### **Holocaust Memory and Heroism**

The disassociation of the Holocaust from heroism remained the norm in the Israeli consciousness for many years. However, during this time, a transformation began to take place in regard to understanding the concept of heroism as it was portrayed in Israel's remembrance of the Holocaust; the

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<sup>2</sup> For the way that the negation of the diaspora was integrated into public discourse during the 1950s in relation to heroism in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, see in Hebrew, for example: Stauber, 2000; Zerubavel, 1994; Gorni, 1998; Weitz, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Young, 1993.

change found expression in the permanent exhibition at Yad Vashem, which opened to the public in 2005.

It is customary to view the Eichmann trial of 1961 as a turning point leading to a change in the Israeli perspective of the Holocaust. During the trial, over 100 survivors took the stand as witnesses, testifying to their experiences of pain and loss, thus gaining sympathy in the eyes of the public. The trial was considered an unprecedented media event in Israel at the time, and a catalyst for change in the Israeli public's perception of the Holocaust. Later, the subject which had been repressed and silenced became a legitimate topic, open for public discourse.

The trial allowed the survivors who were not partisans or ghetto fighters to take center stage; during the trial, the survivors - those Jews from "there" – became the accusers rather than the accused and, in addition to the veneration for ghetto fighters, a new admiration developed for the quiet heroism of the so-called meek. The trial contributed to the notion that the Sabra was not the only image worthy of admiration. The conceptual wall separating the "Holocaust of sheep submitting to slaughter" and the "heroism of the ghetto fighters" came down as a result of the trial, although it did not disappear entirely. Much of the trial's influence remained latent and found expression only years later. The transformation, beginning in the 1960's and 70's, began slowly, undiscernible at first.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in the previous incarnation of Yad Vashem, which opened a decade after the execution of Eichmann, there was little evidence of changes in the stories of Holocaust survivors. However, in the new museum, the transformation is definitely discernable.

### **From "Sheep to Slaughter" to "Lived and Died Honorably"**

Upon entering the permanent exhibition at Yad Vashem, the visitor is confronted with a hall of images unlike any seen in the previous museum: Jews in the narrow roads of the *shtetl* or streets of Paris and Warsaw – praying, playing

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<sup>5</sup> Yablonka, 2001.

music, singing, dancing, and working – the varied aspects of the life of European Jewry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This impressive video-art, "I Still See Their Eyes - The Vanished Jewish World" (or *Nof-Chaim / The World as It Was* in Hebrew), created by Michal Rovner, is projected on a wall of the large triangular-shaped entrance to the museum.

In a meeting which took place in August 2002, the philosophy of the exhibit was formulated, including an emphasis on empathy towards the victims and identification with a variety of images of Jewish life. Nonetheless, in spite of an emphasis on Jewish vitality and diversity, it was important for the museum planners to preserve a unified framework. In the protocol of the content-meeting dedicated to designing the concept of the video-art installation, it is stated that "Judaism=Nationality" – without any explanation accompanying the remark. At its conclusion, however, another comment appears: "An unsolved dilemma: What is the Jewish motif that will accompany us throughout the exhibition? What is the most powerful symbol that characterizes the concept of Judaism? [...] the issue has not been solved and requires further consideration and thought, by creating a dialogue on the subject with the curator/artist."<sup>5</sup>

The question regarding the one characteristic that could encapsulate all of Jewry under a single motif, that could provide a theme for the memorial exhibition, was left open. After all, what motif or narrative could unify all Jewish communities with their various religious traditions and cultures? Could it be that the solidarity of the Jewish people is based, first and foremost, on the awareness of a mutual trauma, the memory of which Yad Vashem is dedicated to preserve?

It is interesting to examine the outline of the exhibition plan approved by the directorate of the American Holocaust museum, and its similarity to the aims of "The World as It Was" video-art shown in Yad Vashem. The decision was that

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<sup>5</sup> Summary of deliberation from 1/8/2002, Institutional Archives, Yad Vashem, Section AM-2, File 2171. (Hebrew)

visitors would meet a mosaic of Jewish-European communities on the eve of the Nazi occupation, an array of evidence and recollections that would relate the diversity and vitality of those people and communities that had vanished. In this way, visitors would encounter those who were attacked not as victims but as part of humanity, and could then understand what would soon be lost.<sup>6</sup>

The difference between the two museums is that, while Rovner's installation demonstrates the abundance and variety of Jewish existence before the war,<sup>7</sup> a Zionist message lingers as a Leitmotiv. Indeed, Rovner's video-art experience takes the visitor far from the images typifying the historic perception of the "negation of the Diaspora" (in which Jews are meek victims), to a view of the vitality and diversity of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Yet in its soundtrack, the cantorial songs and the melodies of the *klezmers* are incorporated in the voices of children singing an early version of "Hatikva" (the national anthem of Israel):

As long as within the heart,  
A Jewish soul still yearns,  
Then hope will not be lost, our ancient hope  
To return to the land of our people,  
To the City of David,  
The eye still gazes toward the land of Zion.

In addition, the recurring theme in "The World as It Was"—waving hands of the people – is a kind of twofold "hello:" it can be seen as a welcome to those visiting the museum, a sign of hospitality of a sort – "come, enter our world" - but it is also the parting salute of one who is about to be annihilated. There are other themes as well in "The World as It Was" which encourage viewers to pursue the subject of homeland: empty houses once occupied; trees; and a map showing

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<sup>6</sup> Exhibition Story Outline Presented to the Content Committee, 11.5.1988, USHMM Institutional Archives, Accession Number 1997.016.1 Box 1.

<sup>7</sup> Michal Rovner, proposal for film fresco at Yad Vashem Museum, Institutional Archives, Yad Vashem, 2171. (Hebrew)

those places where Jews once lived. What is a home? Which country provides a home for the Jews? Where are their roots, the roots of both the family tree and of the nation? <sup>8</sup>

Another way in which the museum “reminds” the visitors of the Zionist message is reflected in the integration of the architecture, design and curatorship to create an experience of reorientation: As visitors begin their tour of the exhibition, they must turn away from the Jews in the video-art and turn towards the huge triangular glass window at the extreme far end of the building. The light of the Jerusalem landscape shining through it “echoes” the vanished European world.

One of the last displays in the exhibition is a film from the trial of Eichmann. Dorit Harel, the museum's designer, described the dilemmas encountered while the museum was being planned. She testified that the steering committee pondered the question of how to present the Eichmann trial.<sup>9</sup> From her words, it is apparent that the committee had doubts about how to depict the trial, but the question of "whether" to depict it was never raised. We can surmise that the inclusion of the trial in the narrative of Yad Vashem was taken for granted. Its significance in the narrative is obvious: Here we have the genuine finale to the story - not the end of the war and the freeing of the camps, and not even the founding of the State of Israel, but the state trying Eichmann in the name of the victims of the Holocaust and the Jewish people. This is "the bottom line" at Yad Vashem – the Jewish state brings the heinous Nazi criminal to justice within its sovereign territory, on behalf of the entire Jewish nation.

Indeed the Eichmann trial opened a crack in the conceptual wall separating Holocaust and heroism, but it was clearly the embodiment of the expression “Holocaust and Rebirth.”

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<sup>8</sup> Perry, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Harel, 2013

At USHMM, the exhibition begins with the testimony of an American soldier who took part in liberating the concentration camps, and ends with excerpts from a video showing Holocaust survivors who came to America after the war and made it their home. This suggests a closed narrative created to emphasize that America is a refuge from persecution and implies a celebration of democratic values.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, following the screen projecting testimonies of survivors, there is yet another part of the exhibition which complicates the narrative and its agenda: the display of Israel's Declaration of Independence. Also displayed are the flags of nations which took part in the liberation of the camps, of partisan units, and of the organization of Warsaw Ghetto fighters. The displays are only loosely connected, but they embellish the narrative, which includes both the victims' points of view and those of the witnesses/liberators.

At the end of the exhibition there is a hexagonal memorial hall; hidden beneath an eternal flame in the hall is earth brought from the extermination camps, concentration camps, sites of mass executions, ghettos in European regions overcome by the Nazis, and cemeteries of American soldiers who fought and died so that Nazi Germany would be defeated (as written in a caption to the exhibit). The mixture of symbols suggests a conflict between the desire to be a Jewish memorial site and the need to be an American site.<sup>11</sup> The tension between specific and universal messages, between the global and the local, has led to the creation of a "Glocal" Memorial.

### **"Never Again" or "Never Again for Us?"**

Although the Holocaust is an historical fact, the lesson derived from it is subject to one's point of view, which is largely dependent upon location. Comparing Yad Vashem to USHMM characterizes the debate between universality as opposed to particularity in the presentation of the Holocaust by each museum. It is

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<sup>10</sup> Hansen-Glucklich, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> On the numerous dilemmas concerning how to design the Hall of Remembrance at the end of the USHMM exhibit, see: Linenthal, Edward T., 1997.

understandable that a memorial to the Holocaust founded in a place which is home to the largest dispersion of Jews in the world (other than Israel) does not provide a narrative that suggests the problematic nature of Jewish life in the Diaspora, nor that the revival of Zion provided the ultimate solution to the Holocaust.

From the moment in 1978 when American President Jimmy Carter declared his intent to form a presidential committee to address the subject of commemorating the Holocaust, a whirlwind of debate and questions arose. When, in 1983, it was announced that the site chosen for the memorial was the National Mall in Washington D.C. – "the monumental core" of American memorialization - the decisions became even more difficult, and the conflict continued for fifteen years, until the opening of the museum in 1993.

Following the announcement of the physical location of the museum, the question remained as to how to define its placement from a rhetorical point of view. How should the museum building be integrated - from an architectural and content perspective – within its surrounding environment?<sup>12</sup> There were those who argued that the museum did not belong on the site, just as the Holocaust did not "belong" to America.

Over and over again, the planners of the USHMM debated how to tell the story to the general public in America, whose knowledge of the history of the Holocaust was limited, and who may not have grasped the connection between an event that took place decades ago on a different continent and the present generation. The predominant question that arose was: "What is the message that we want visitors to take with them upon leaving the museum?" Michael Birnbaum, director of the project, maintained that the museum should be American in the broader sense of the word; this is to say, that the Holocaust experience should be shown

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<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Shosh Rotem, 2013.

in a way that would be linked to the stories of the American people, to different types of interpretation and ways of understanding. According to his approach, the mission required establishing a connection between two worlds, presenting new information in a familiar context, and utilizing rational/emotional/symbolic language to explain the Holocaust in terms Americans could understand.<sup>13</sup>

The need to integrate the museum into its physical surroundings meant that the planning committee had to allow for the "Americanization" of the Holocaust.

This term is often used to describe the "commercialization of the Holocaust," or more precisely – turning the remembrance of the Holocaust and its presentation into something banal. However, the Americanization of the Holocaust can also be considered as an attempt to turn the memory into a moral and humanistic notion, accessible to everyone. Among the museum planners were those who advocated a more specific Jewish focus (led by Eli Weisel) and those who proposed a more universal approach (led by Michael Birnbaum). The political dilemma, whether to integrate or not, resurfaced at many stages during the planning of the museum, and found expression in the curatorial, design and architectural aspects of the memorial.

The founding of a national American museum in memory of the Holocaust provoked not only questions related to communicating the narrative to the non-Jewish public, but fundamental and painful issues connected to the politics of identity relative to ethnic minorities in America. From the moment it was decided to construct the museum, pressure was exerted by many minority groups: Poles, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Gypsies and Armenians – all of whom wanted to be included in the memorial to the Holocaust which would be designed as a national American museum. The discord around "ownership" of the memory was almost religious in its tone, with accusations and blatant insults cast all around. The feeling was that any errors in the presentation, either of an historic or aesthetic

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<sup>13</sup> USHMM Institutional Archives, Accession no. 1997.014, box 27.

nature, would not be considered a mere "mistake," but rather a defamation of the sacred.

The burning question was **what would be memorialized**, or more precisely **who**. Strong pressure was put to bear by the "Roma" – one of the ethnic groups classified by the Nazis as "gypsies" and considered, like the Jews, an inferior race targeted for annihilation. In 1984 they were promised that their story would be included in the exhibition.

Some were of the opinion that the massacre of Armenians, which did not take place at all during World War II (but rather in 1915), should be included in the exhibition. They fought to stretch the definition of the Holocaust and asserted that the American memorial board ought to lend a sympathetic ear – and space in the memorial – to the suffering of the Armenian people, which they considered a prelude to the Holocaust. At the same time, political pressure was being exerted by the Turkish ambassador to the United States, the Israel Foreign Office, and the Jewish community in Turkey not to include this act of genocide in the museum. According to Linenthal, what tipped the scales was the importance of Turkey as an ally to both Israel and the United States. This is one example among many of the linkage between commemorations to politics.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, there is only a brief mention of the Armenian genocide: a reference that appeared in the "Obersalzberg Speech," which was given by Adolf Hitler to Wehrmacht commanders on August 22, 1939, a week before the German invasion of Poland.

I have issued the command – and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad – that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formations in readiness – for the present only in the east - with orders to them to send to their death mercilessly and without

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<sup>14</sup> Linenthal, 1997.

compassion, men, women and children of the Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

### **Every Person Has a Name**

For many years, Israel commemorated the Holocaust in an impersonal and generalized manner.<sup>15</sup> In the new exhibit at Yad Vashem, an effort was made to allow the victims to speak out in their own voices and to portray them as human beings, as opposed to being seen as merely victims. The museum utilized various devices, such as personal photographs, video recordings of the survivors, and a computerized data bank in the Hall of Names, which made it possible to search for personal information about individuals who were exterminated. This orientation towards the "individualization of the story" was made possible by technological advancements which had taken place since the establishment of the previous museum, but there was also a conceptual change that had developed: a decision to witness the world that was, and to hear the voices of the survivors themselves describing their experiences in an official and public setting.

This time around, the Yad Vashem planning committee defined its main goal as presenting the Jew as an individual at the core of the exhibition, and organizing the narrative from the point of view of the Jews, rather than that of their persecutors. The video testimonies of the survivors serve both sides of that purpose. The planning committee protocols reveal two main dilemmas regarding the presentation of survivors' stories. First, should there be a succession of testimonies (a relatively limited number of witnesses, "hosts" of a kind, who would accompany visitors along the path of the exhibition and the historical chain of events)? Secondly, in what language would the witnesses speak? These appear to be technical decisions, but at their core lies the question of formulating the museum's message - the very essence of the memorial.

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<sup>15</sup> On the subject of memorials to the Holocaust in Israel, see, for example: Rein, 1992; Brutin, 2005; Tydor Baumel, 1998. (Hebrew)

Contrary to the recommendations of the museum's media advisor, Boris Maftsir,<sup>16</sup> the committee did not limit the number of people acting as "hosts" to the visitors, who were meant to assist them in forming a personal and emotional contact with the survivors, but rather it chose to select **hundreds** of personal testimonies which appear in the video. The choice of **quantity** was probably meant to serve both a statement against Holocaust deniers (it is impossible to deny an event that has so many first-hand witnesses) and to deliver a message of particularity: the Holocaust of the Jewish people was unprecedented in its magnitude – therefore it was **unique**.

The planners also rejected Maftsir's advice regarding the language used in the testimonies; most of the stories are told in Hebrew and not in the language of the witnesses at the time the events took place. The message that drove this choice was stated explicitly by Avner Shalev, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate since 1993 and Chief Curator of the new museum: "In reference to the original languages – the issue raises the problem of a double translation. Another problem is **the fact that Yad Vashem is interested in imparting a hidden 'Zionist message.'** Therefore, whoever wishes to speak Hebrew (a decision of principle) – will speak Hebrew (most of the survivors came to Israel for a reason, and speaking in Hebrew will only emphasize that)."<sup>17</sup> Of course, among the possible reasons that refugees came to Israel are a lack of choice and immigration by chance, but it is clear that the main message the planners wished to impart was a Zionist world view.

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<sup>16</sup> Summary of deliberation from 17/03/2002, on the subject of testimonies and videos on the subject, Institutional Archives, Yad Vashem, Section AM-2, File 2171 (also appears in File 2162).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## **Summary**

Over the years since its inception, Yad Vashem has developed and grown; almost every year, new exhibits, monuments, sculptures and the like are added to the site. Yad Vashem has become part of the narrative of the Israeli state, a shrine of sorts to the national experience. However, with the increasing attention which the western world has given to the Holocaust, particularly in the United States, Yad Vashem began losing its exclusive position as the repository of Holocaust history. Thus, with the opening of USHMM (in 1993), it was decided that a new museum of the history of the Holocaust would be developed and a revised Yad Vashem was opened to the public in 2005.

The current Yad Vashem permanent exhibition, like other aspects of Israeli culture, has been strongly influenced by globalization and American culture. Unlike the previous museum, it focuses on the voice of the individual and the destroyed world of the Diaspora Jews, including those victims who did not take up arms. However, although non-Jewish victims are also portrayed in it, for the most part, Yad Vashem presents the Holocaust as an event particular to the Jews, and the "answer" to it is the revival of the Jewish state.

It is clear that the USHMM, due to its location, could not choose a narrative within which the ultimate solution to Jewish persecution was Zionism; therefore its solution is humanistic-universal: In order to prevent another Holocaust, there must be tolerance for minorities, and one should not look away from instances of injustice perpetrated on any ethnic group.

The two museums, Israeli and American, have created sacred sites presenting the dichotomy of "here" as opposed to "there." At Yad Vashem, the "here" means redemption while "there" refers to the Diaspora; "here" is the revival and "there" is the victimization of Jewry. In the American museum, "there" refers to the liberation of the camps, and testimonials about heinous crimes that took place "there," while "here" refers to the National Mall, a symbol of democracy and the

promise of freedom, equality and justice for all citizens. In this way, both museums have nationalized the Holocaust; the Holocaust is presented as the antithesis of the two modern nations in which the museums are located.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the similarities between the museums are greater than the differences.

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<sup>18</sup> Cole, in: Cesarani (editor), 2005.

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\* אני מבקשת להודות לארגון איקו"ם ישראל, שבסיועו תורגם המאמר לאנגלית.