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The Horrors of Auschwitz at a Museum in New York

By **Ralph Blumenthal** and **Joseph Berger**

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A boxcar of the kind the Nazis used to transport people like cattle. The barracks where they slept jammed into narrow bunks. The posts from fences that caged them in. A canister once filled with the poison gas pellets that sealed their fate.

With these artifacts and 700 others, the Museum of Jewish Heritage is set to bring Auschwitz to New York this spring, a major undertaking that will mean ripping out the museum's permanent collection for an exhibition designed to provide a vivid sense of the Nazi death camp where 1.1 million people were killed, a million of them Jews.



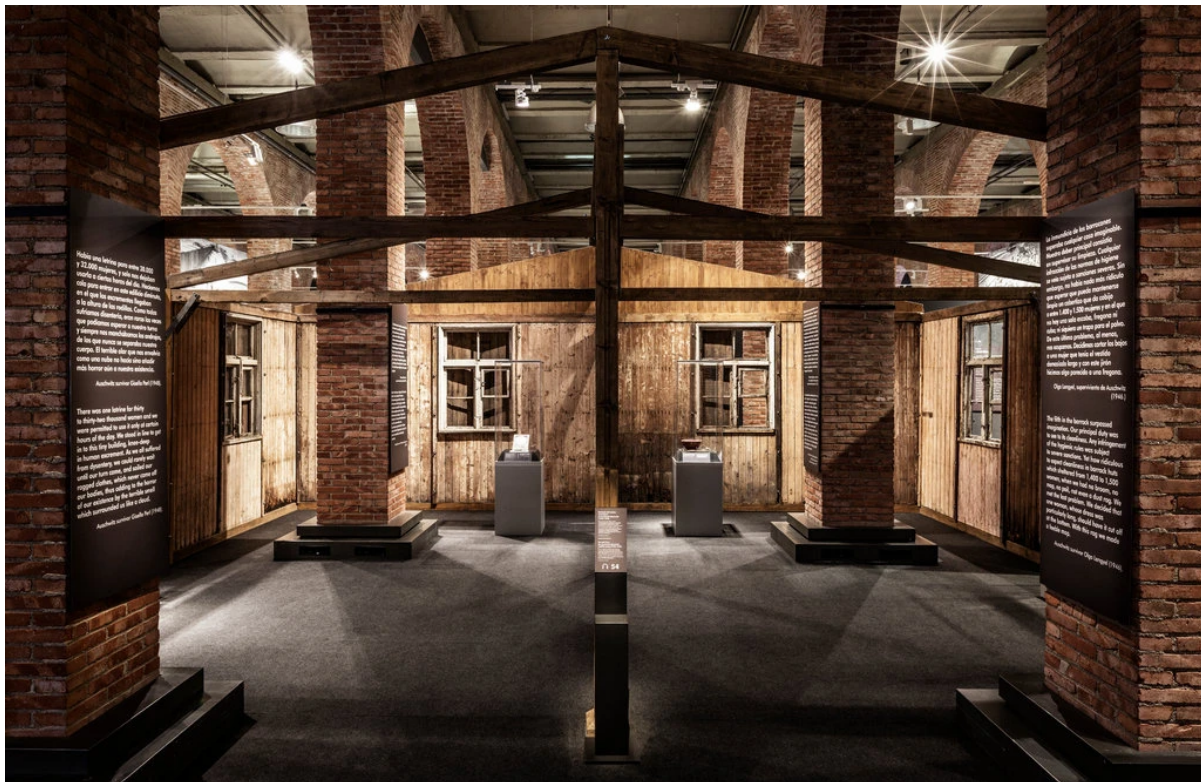
In 2018, more than two million people visited the former death camp at Auschwitz, where the sign the Nazis posted reads "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Sets You Free).

Katarina Stoltz/Reuters

The exhibition, titled “Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away,” is aimed at refocusing the heritage museum into one that will delve more deeply into the Holocaust at a time when Jewish leaders say anti-Semitism and other hatreds are growing and the memory of — and witnesses to — what happened to six million Jews and other victimized minorities three-quarters of a century ago are fading away.

“This exhibit reminds them, and it reminds all of us, where anti-Semitism ultimately leads” said Ronald Lauder, the philanthropist who helped raise \$110 million to preserve Auschwitz. “And the world should never go there again.”

Heritage Museum officials said they anticipate spending \$8.5 million on the project, split between the cost of installing the exhibition and the cost of other building improvements that are timed to coincide with it.



The exhibition in New York will feature one of the barracks from Auschwitz, seen here in Spain. via Musealia

Holocaust museums in Dallas and Houston, and the Holocaust galleries at the Imperial War Museum in London, are also expanding under projects initiated years ago, but which are now assuming greater relevance, their organizers say, because of growing concerns about the spread of intolerance, hate speech, nationalism and xenophobia. In the Midwest later this month, the Cincinnati Museum Center is scheduled to open a new 7,500-square-foot Holocaust and Humanity Center dedicated to “using the lessons of the Holocaust to inspire action today.”

Bruce C. Ratner, the developer and philanthropist who is chairman of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, said his institution and others had recognized the need for higher visibility in response to events like the violent 2017 march in Charlottesville, Va., where white supremacists displayed swastikas and chanted “Jews will not replace us,” and a counterprotester died in a car attack that injured several others.

“Given where the world is today, it is absolutely critical,” he added. “My interest and that of the board is how the Holocaust applies today.”

The Auschwitz installation, the first exhibition to feature major loans of artifacts from the former Nazi concentration camp in occupied Poland, is currently on display in Madrid and has drawn some 600,000 visitors. It will open in New York on May 8 — the date of the Nazi surrender in 1945.

The idea originated with Musealia, a Spanish for-profit company and creator of traveling shows including a world tour of Titanic items. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, on the site of the former camp complex, is receiving a fee to help produce the exhibition and it authorized Musealia and host museums to charge admission, a prospect that initially stirred some unease. But many Jewish leaders have endorsed the fees, saying they help to underwrite a highly professional introduction to artifacts that teach people who cannot travel to Auschwitz about the human capacity for evil.

In New York, the museum’s entry fee will rise \$4 to \$16, with free admission for Holocaust survivors, service members, police and firefighters and public school students and teachers. Leaders of the Heritage Museum said they hope the exhibition will heighten awareness of their institution, which two decades after opening continues to have lackluster attendance — 155,000 visitors a year — in a city with more than one million Jews. Part of the problem, officials suggested, stems from its conflicted identity.

With the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington a huge success, the New York museum at its founding in 1997 tried to distinguish itself with its Jewish heritage branding. Though its subtitle, “A Living Memorial to the Holocaust,” always called attention to those horrors, and temporary exhibitions were typically about suffering during World War II, the museum’s identity seemed generic — about culture, not loss.



The huge exhibition of artifacts from Auschwitz coming to New York is part of a larger plan to refocus the Museum of Jewish Heritage, putting a greater emphasis on the Holocaust. Annie Tritt for The New York Times



The museum's chairman, Bruce C. Ratner, said that the timing of the exhibition is important because it coincides with increased signs of anti-Semitism.

Annie Tritt for The New York Times

Now, said Mr. Ratner, whose company built the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, the museum will focus more explicitly on the Holocaust — its perpetrators as well as its victims — and the board is considering a change of name to reflect that.

“I believe this is the beginning of changing people’s perception of the museum,” Mr. Ratner said. “It’s a watershed.”

Mr. Ratner and Abraham H. Foxman, director of the museum’s center on anti-Semitism and former national director of the Anti-Defamation League, traveled to Madrid to see the exhibition. Both left sobbing, Mr. Ratner said.

The Nazi ingenuity for mass murder is immediately apparent in the exhibition. But the impact is amplified, those who have seen it say, by the intimacy of displays, such as a makeshift tin engagement ring that a Jewish woman, Zdenka Fantlova, 21, risked hiding under her tongue during an SS guard’s search. She and the ring survived. Her fiancé, Arnost Levit, did not.



Arnost Levit made this engagement ring out of tin and inscribed it “Arno, 13-6 1942.” He did not survive Auschwitz, but his fiancée, Zdenka Fantlova, did and her ring became a powerful symbol of love and perseverance. via Musealia

Robert Jan van Pelt, chief curator of the exhibition, spoke of what stirred him on the visits to Auschwitz that prepared him for his work. There were the mounds of belongings left behind bearing mute witness to the carnage there. The 700,000 pieces of women's underwear. The tons of human hair. The countless eyeglasses.

But what moved him most, he said, were the simple buttons that were found scattered in excavations at the site, all of them perfectly round with small nicks, stains or bits of thread, "The variety and the sameness," he said. "The same way as human beings are."

The exhibition he helped design will take up 40 rooms on three floors of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, a ziggurat-shaped building in view of the Statue of Liberty.



Robert Jan van Pelt, chief curator of the exhibition, said he was particularly moved by the sea of buttons found in excavations, mute evidence of the deaths, and lives, of so many.
via Musealia

Organizers said the exhibition, with timed tickets to manage expected crowds, will run through at least Jan. 3, 2020, with artifacts culled from Auschwitz, nearly 30 other museums and from the Museum of Jewish Heritage's own 40,000-piece collection. Some two-thirds of the 100 items to be shown from its own collection have never been displayed before, Michael S. Glickman, its chief executive, said.

Beyond the demonic mechanics of the camp itself, the exhibition provides voluminous context: the rise of Nazism, Hitler's campaign to exterminate the Jews while waging a three-front war, and the aftermath experienced by survivors who lost entire families. Also considered is daily life in

the melting pot market town of Oswiecim before the Nazis renamed it Auschwitz and commandeered almost 16 square miles for the camp.

Images of converging rail lines and the cynical gateway — “Arbeit Macht Frei” — Work Sets You Free — stand as archetypes of genocide. Other death camps, like Treblinka, where almost 900,000 Jews were gassed upon arrival, were leveled by the retreating Germans to obliterate evidence of the killing. Though its gas chambers and crematories were largely demolished, Auschwitz, 45 miles from Krakow, remains one of the best-preserved killing sites and has become a synonym for the Holocaust.



The killing chambers were filled with poisonous Zyklon B gas pellets from cans like this one, part of the collection of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

via Musealia; Pawel Sawicki

Last year, a record 2.15 million people visited the Auschwitz Museum, which includes the nearby camp at Birkenau.

As the actual survivors of the camps age — the youngest are in their mid-70s — the museums that seek to capture this history need to “reimagine what they will be in the post-Holocaust generation,” said Michael Berenbaum, a Holocaust scholar who helped curate the Madrid exhibition.

As institutions seek new ways of preserving and teaching this history, Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California, for example, has created an artificial intelligence archive featuring videos of 16 actual survivors who can respond to 2,000 questions based on recorded oral histories.

"The Holocaust is a mystery but that doesn't mean we can't describe it," said Mr. van Pelt, a 62-year-old Dutch-born Canadian historian and architectural scholar widely considered the pre-eminent expert on Auschwitz. He said the exhibition was not meant to replicate what people experienced in the camps.

"There isn't the smell, there isn't the fear," he said. "There isn't the overcrowding, the filth."

"You only see the shell," he said. "The shadow."

Correction: Jan. 23, 2019

An earlier version of this article provided an inaccurate estimate for the number of annual visitors to the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

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