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At Riveting Auschwitz Exhibition, Troubling Lessons For Today's America

[Anya Ulinich](#), May 9, 2019

Before I went to see “Auschwitz, Not Long Ago, Not Far Away,” a massive show at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, I had never set foot in a Holocaust exhibit. I didn’t want the inevitable manipulative clichés of exhibit design — dramatically lit artifacts set against wall-sized photo murals of emaciated people in striped pajamas — to place me on the seesaw of voyeurism and guilt. I knew that, however hard I might try to feel situationally appropriate emotions, I would always come up short, simply because it wouldn’t be my dead child’s shoe I would be looking at, but somebody else’s. To summon up situationally appropriate feelings, I would have to imagine my own child murdered, her sneaker placed in a museum vitrine, and me looking at it. In that case, I would smash the vitrine, or die of grief on the spot, and the show would have to be shut down. From this, I concluded that exhibits commemorating murder are not merely incapable of conjuring empathy for the victims, but are counter-indicated for that purpose. (Steve Kandell wrote a fantastic essay about this problem, called “The Worst Day Of My Life Is Now New York’s Hottest Tourist Attraction.” Google it.) I thought that the adjective “educational” when applied to Holocaust exhibits meant sentimental education — getting people sad and shocked and angry so they internalize the message of “never again.” A Soviet Jew whose family narrowly avoided Nazi extermination, I had my “never again” pretty firmly internalized, thank you very much.

Instead, the exhibit turns out to be a riveting demonstration of how modern technological, bureaucratic, and scientific methods, innovations, and even values — the sorts of things we associate with progress and better living, can be employed in the service of ghastly human rights violations when people lose sight of the “forest” of everybody’s common humanity behind all the “trees” of bureaucratic order, technological improvements, and the promise of cultural validation. Whether or not our industrialized society currently has the conditions for sliding into murderous populism, this exhibit certainly invites identification. Anyone who stores Auschwitz in the same part of their brain as, say, Jeffrey Dahmer - under the label of “evil so freakish as to be incomprehensible to me, a nice, normal person, so never again seems pretty easy, duh” - this show will be a disturbing eye-opener.



Photo by Anya Ulinich

Hierarchy of Footwear: A red shoe from an unknown deportee is the focus of one display.

It begins in a passageway where video screens play home movies of Jewish and Roma life in late 1930s Europe. Several of these films are in color - a shrewd choice to drive home the idea of "not long ago, not far away." The families who could afford color home movies in the 1930s are relatable in other ways, too: they're well-dressed and urbane, likely museumgoers themselves. They don't look contemporary, exactly, but a few frames of a Dutch toddler playing on the beach look like they could have been filmed in 1960s suburban America.

The passage leads to the obligatory manipulative room - a somber chamber that looks exactly like what I had anticipated. Opposite a fragment of Auschwitz's electrified fence, a red, medium heel woman's shoe is displayed in a brightly lit case with a mirror at the bottom. Behind the case is a wall-sized photograph, where the pretty shoe shows up again in a huge pile of other, less colorful ones. All of these shoes belonged to people who perished in the gas chambers or were exploited as slaves, and it was sad to see artifacts of suffering prioritized according to Hollywood glamor hierarchy. Were we supposed to feel especially bad for the owner of the sexiest shoe? Why not fetishize the old lumpy size 12 sandal, whose wearer had suffered too? I walked out of "Schindler's List" when it first came out, because I was offended by Spielberg's use of a similar device, the girl in a red coat. I had just turned twenty then. A new immigrant, I had notions that Hollywood's sentimental aesthetic shouldn't dare enter certain narratives.



Collection of the Auschw...

Auschwitz Fence: Concrete posts that were once part of the fence of the Auschwitz camp (1940 - 1945). These posts were covered in barbed and electrified wire, ensuring that no prisoner could escape

However, the rest of the exhibit dispenses with affectation and begins to inform. It is dense and earnest, reductive and compulsively thorough at once, at times awkwardly installed, but completely absorbing. Produced by the Spanish company Musealia and Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland, the show traveled from Madrid, where it occupied a larger space, and the curators have done an admirable job fitting a massive amount of information and 700 artifacts into the three floors at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. This is not a high-concept installation, and its design is strictly no-frills: the show tells the story in chronological order, breaking it down into numbered sections and sub-sections, like a textbook.

Even though the exhibit was modified for a New York audience, it retains much of its European perspective. First, it puts Oświęcim on the map, both literally and figuratively. In my native Russian, the name of the Polish border town is synonymous with “concentration camp,” just as its German name, Auschwitz, is synonymous with “concentration camp” in the U.S. With a few documents, film footage, and a display of bottles from the town’s Jewish-owned liquor factory, we get some idea of the place and its history. A foreboding 1936 photograph shows Polish military men next to the barracks that would, a few years later, form the basis of the concentration camp.



Gift of Alfred Kantor Mus...

Arrival In Auschwitz: Artist Alfred Kantor's depiction of arriving in Auschwitz.

The show goes on to explain the Jews. Five short paragraphs of wall text, titled "Jews and Judaism, An Introduction," summarizes where Jews came from, what they believe, and what they do, for the benefit of an audience that presumably doesn't have the slightest idea. The show proceeds to breathe through relations between European Jews and Christians from the Middle Ages to the 1800s in the space of a single room. Whatever problems can be found with this narrative - what it omits, what it includes, and why - this is your chance to look at something striking: a German imperial proclamation from 1551, showing the yellow circle that Jews had to wear on their clothes in sixteenth century Germany, a design inspiration for the Nazi yellow star. In 1940, Reinhard Heydrich framed the proclamation and gave it to Hermann Göring for his birthday.



Museum of Jewish Heritage...

Yellow Star: A badge that Jews were forced to wear by the Nazis.

Moving onto WWI and its aftermath, I realized that one of the strengths of this exhibit is its emphasis on showing connections, emphasizing the threads that make up the fabric of history. Chemical weapons were first used in WWI. A 1915 letter from a German soldier describes the use of gas in the battlefield, and his depiction of a French battalion's 15-minute progression to "total death" is eerily similar to descriptions of what took place in Nazi gas chambers.

We proceed to the Weimar Republic, that culturally schizophrenic place. A section on artistic and social innovations is juxtaposed with artifacts that reflect the German people's economic insecurity and deep bitterness in the aftermath of the Versailles treaty. A dizzying inflation chart is accompanied by a framed display of corresponding Weimar currency in absurdly high denominations, and a photograph of someone using money as scrap paper. Next to this is a children's card game called "Lost Land," each card showing photos and maps of places that Germany had to relinquish in its defeat. What did the socially progressive urban intellectuals have in common with the people who bought "Lost Land" for their kids? Obviously the U.S. economy is doing great, and we haven't lost any land, but parallels to our contempt-soaked cultural echo-chambers are impossible to ignore. The Jews were, naturally, scapegoated. All the vile Anti-Semitic cartoons here will make you want to take a shower. A grotesque Jew with a massive cleavage, wearing what seems to be a chef's toque, is shown stabbing a German soldier in the back with a huge knife as he is about to take a shot. It's hard to say what this is specifically about, but the emotional content is unmistakable: this is drawn from the heart, by a very angry person.

So the Nazis arrived with the promise to make Germany great again - which may sound hyperbolic, but not if you're looking at a somber German soldier, rendered in stark black-and-white, who peers at you gravely from an election poster. "National Socialist: Or Otherwise Their Sacrifices Were in Vain," the poster proclaims. This type of emotional propaganda appears to be nearly irresistible, and the formula has been used again and again, practically unchanged. Its muted version has worked to elect Trump in the U.S. Its direct adaptation is working great for Putin in Russia, where the state whips up people's feelings about Soviet sacrifices in WWII, then channels the sentimental energy into a form of patriotism that sees Russia as a long-suffering force of good in a hostile world, bolstering Putin's power.

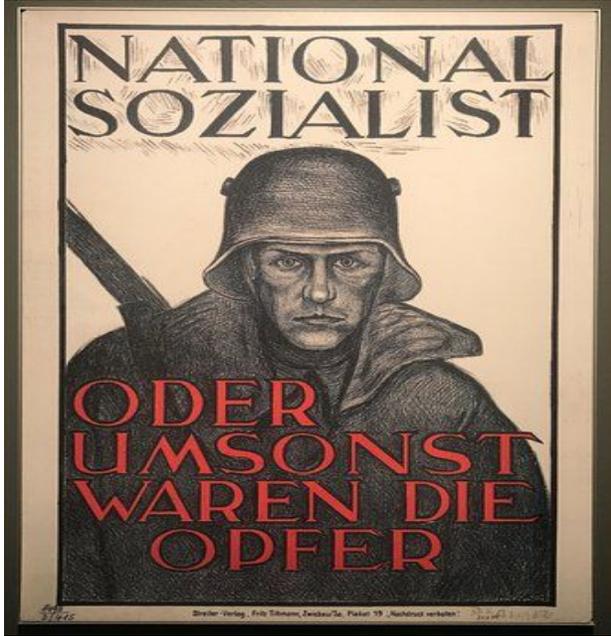


Photo by Anya Ulinich

On Display at the Museum of Jewish Heritage: Election Campaign Poster

No matter how bad of an artist Hitler was, the Nazis understood the importance of design, marketing, and branding, and the exhibit does a good job showing the appeal of bright posters and rousing rallies, and also how this cleaned-up, newly hopeful society dealt with what people it deemed racially toxic human garbage.

What makes the Nazi experience especially pertinent now - and what this show demonstrates so well - is how neatly the seeds of genocide were able to be planted within the framework of an existing social establishment.

“Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz,” wrote German philosopher Theodore Adorno. This quote, from the essay “Education After Auschwitz,” appears in the show. Why single out Auschwitz, and Nazi atrocities in general, as opposed to some other genocide? Auschwitz was not the biggest instance of mass murder, nor was it the most efficient. Ten years before Auschwitz, there was Holodomor, literally “Death by Starvation,” during which Stalin murdered an estimated 3 to 7 million Ukrainian people within the space of two years by confiscating their food supplies. However, I suspect there weren’t a whole lot of Soviet civilians who condoned this murder. Stalin was an ancient despot type in a society that was accustomed to despotic rule. He never needed popular support - from the beginning, his was a reign of terror.

What makes the Nazi experience especially pertinent now - and what this show demonstrates so well - is how neatly the seeds of genocide were able to be planted within the framework of an existing social establishment. It was as if the German people, with notable exceptions, were hypnotized by the framework itself, and unable to see through to the content.

Take children's books. These are nice, didactic things. They teach children to brush their teeth, for example, via cute animals and happy colors. In Europe, where foraging is a thing, they sometimes warn against bad mushrooms. Or bad mushrooms with long noses and beards, which appear in a picture book on display. "Our boys and girls must learn to know the Jew," the book instructs "They must learn that the Jew is the most dangerous poison mushroom in existence." The form remains the same, - the children's book is still cute, isn't dripping with blood, and therefore, remains in the realm of acceptable things to clean well-behaved people.

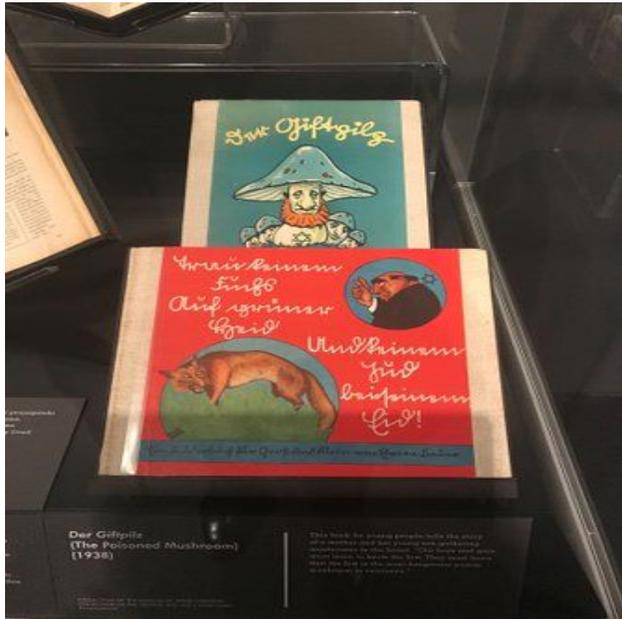


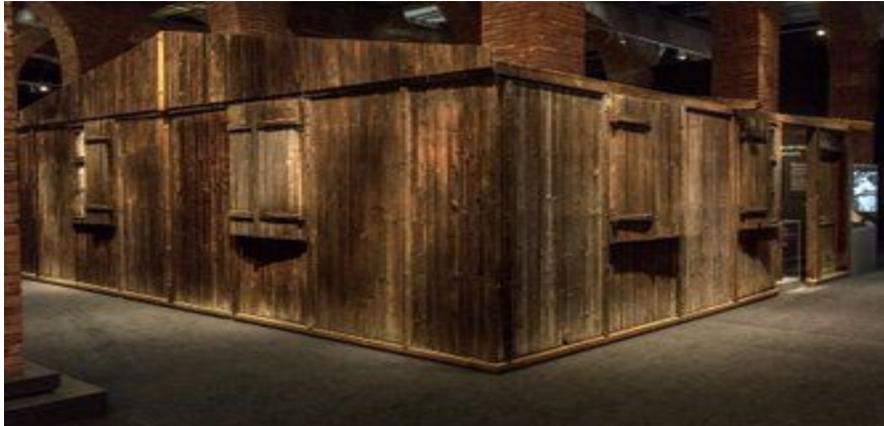
Photo by Anya Ulinich

Children's Books: Literature from the period likened Jews to poisonous mushrooms.

Or, take science. The show documents ethnographic research the Nazis conducted about the Roma people, complete with a very slick eye-color chart for the study of race. In the early 1940s, a Ph.D. candidate named Eva Justin assembled forty Roma children at an orphanage for her dissertation research. In a color film, we get to see what she was looking at: a boy playing with a wooden marble run; a group of girls learning dance steps. However, she didn't see what we see - she saw research. When she completed her Ph.D. In 1943, the children, no longer useful to her, were sent to Auschwitz, where most died. Here we see how easily the scaffold of scientific method and academic traditions such as the awarding of degrees can easily become unmoored from the essence of the human endeavor.

In "Education After Auschwitz," Adorno speaks of the "veil of technology": "People are inclined to take technology to be the thing itself, as an end in itself, a force of its own, and they forget that it is an extension of human dexterity. The means — and technology is the epitome of the means of self-preservation of the human species — are fetishized, because the ends - a life of human dignity - are concealed and removed from the consciousness of people." More broadly, this "Veil" includes other distractions and fetishes, such as social convention, bureaucracy,

realpolitik, and branding. And in our country today this veil is quite thick, as we prize technological innovation while attempting to ignore the chains of exploitation beneath. This show makes it apparent that for the sake of “never again” it’s important to stop perceiving Nazis as an inscrutable gang of sadists, and instead examine how we teach science, for example. Perhaps we must begin with the ethics, and then move on to facts and methods. Teach young children philosophy. Teach history not as a costume pageant with quirky characters, but through sociology, showing societal forces that operate beneath discrete political events.



2017. ©Musealia

Auschwitz Barrack: Barrack from Auschwitz III — Monowitz Labor Camp, 1942-44. Also known as Buna, Auschwitz III Monowitz was a concentration camp where slave labor was integrated into the Nazis’ policy of extermination.

The Auschwitz project was the climax of this progression of innovation away from human values. It was the iPhone of mass murder. All the terms of appreciation we apply to today’s business and tech leaders, when we call them disrupters, when we speak of elegant solutions and relentless experimentation, of starting small and expanding fast, eerily apply to the Nazi perpetrators. Initially set up to house Polish prisoners, the camp had to be rapidly expanded to accommodate increasing numbers of Jews when Germany invaded the Soviet Union and other European countries. A nearby village of Brzezinka (Birkenau in German) was demolished and replaced with barracks. The original method of mass killing, by a firing squad, had been inefficient, and once the Final Solution was officially set in motion, methods of chemical extermination were tested. The first gassing victims were killed with engine exhaust inside a delivery van. Then two houses in Birkenau were turned into experimental gas chambers. There was some disagreement between the people in the extermination business about what method would be the best. Their friendly debates are quoted in the show. Eventually, state-of-the-art gas chambers were designed and built to accommodate the extermination of Jews deported from Hungary. At its peak efficiency, 6000 people were gassed in Auschwitz each day with fast-acting common insecticide.

There is a cross-section drawing of Crematorium 3 in the show, as well as life-sized models of a gas chamber door and a gas delivery column. In a single cleverly laid out building, the victims

were undressed, killed, autopsied if scientifically interesting, and their bodies burned. Their valuables and belongings were sorted and funneled into the German economy as part of a program called Kanada - a reference to Canada's wealth of natural resources. All of this was very clever, and utterly insane.



Photo by Anya Ulinich

Not Long Ago, Not Far Away: Suitcases from the Hungarian transport to Austria

With many architectural models and drawings, both historic and contemporary, the show does an effective job demonstrating the scale of this madness, and the speed of its expansion. The artifacts include a bunk bed, a giant soup cauldron, uniforms, suitcases, a fragment of a barrack, clothing, and many other personal objects and photographs that tell stories of tragedy, but also of perseverance, heroism, and ingenuity. There are heartbreaking videos of interviews with survivors that place these objects in context of their first-hand experience. You come away from the "Life in the Camp" section of the show understanding the logistics, and inspired by the fact that people can survive such a thing and go on to have lives and families.

On the whole, this exhibit manages to disabuse any thinking person of the notion that Holocaust was an aberrant glitch in Western society, that history ended there, and began again afterward. Among the most haunting objects in this show is a page from a photo album, showing a group of ordinary men and women out in the country, having fun. They're Germans who worked at Auschwitz on their day off. Some of them were murderous sociopaths, but they couldn't have all been. Most of them probably just didn't think too much about it, as it was just a job. The scenes from this Nazi outing are juxtaposed with photos of their Jewish victims' pre-Auschwitz lives. These people were also having fun. One family poses for a formal group photo, all wearing yellow stars on their chests, probably trying not to think too much, either.

The show is very comprehensive. It addresses the experience of the Roma, gay Germans, Afro-Germans, and Poles. It presents the Jewish response to Anti-Semitism before the Holocaust. There is a section about Aktion T4, the Nazi euthanasia program aimed at the disabled and mentally ill, and the only such initiative that had to be officially ended as it lacked

popular support. Apparently German people, indifferent to the fate of the racially inferior and foreign Untermenschen, didn't like their own relatives exterminated – just a tiny, little bit like we wouldn't want our children working in factories where their clothes are made.

It is impossible to see all this without having your critical thinking kicked into high gear. Including about the politics of putting on such a show when you are a Polish state museum, and how it might affect the way you present the issue of returning survivors. Unsurprisingly, this is entirely glossed over. The wall text says the following: "Many Jewish survivors returned to the places they called home, only to discover they were the only ones left. With no home, they sought refuge in so-called displaced persons camps in Germany and Austria ..." I have so many questions about this. About the logical leap between being "the only ones left" to having "no home." Until we can openly say, and teach our children, that these survivors had no homes because a lot of the time, their neighbors had occupied their homes, we are merely on break between civilization breakdowns.

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