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From 'the Children of the Holocaust: Stars Without a Heaven' exhibition at Yad Vashem highlighting the 1.5 million children murdered in the Holocaust and the few who survived

Yad Vashem: A beacon of hope

A moving visit to Jerusalem's famous Holocaust museum

By Paul Alster

I HAVE a confession to make; something I am not at all proud of. For much of the last 21 years I have lived in Israel and spent many hundreds of hours researching, visiting the Baltic states, then writing about certain events that took place during the Holocaust, in particular the dreadful toll it took on my extended family; but until very recently I had never visited Yad Vashem – the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.

Given that this is undoubtedly one of the world's most important museums, the litmus test against which other Holocaust museums around the globe are judged, it could be argued, with some justification, that I should be ashamed of myself. But it's not quite as simple as that.

I've written many articles for *The Jerusalem Report* in recent years on a wide variety of subjects, including the Holocaust, so when I was asked to contribute an article about Yad Vashem to coincide with the 2019 International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it struck me that my dilemma might be one shared by others who have either visited Israel regularly, or have made their home here.

Like millions of other Jews across the world I have been affected by the trauma of the loss of many tens of family members, even though the loss didn't affect my immediate family in England. I'm sure there are others, like me, who have felt that visiting Yad Vashem, directly confronting the images and stories of how their relatives and

so many countless others met their death in such an abhorrent, industrialized way, would be too traumatic an experience. I didn't want to risk being overwhelmed by feelings that might prove difficult to cope with. I suspect I am not alone in feeling this way.

When I took my teenage daughter to Yad Vashem recently to join a guided lecture tour relating to an Open University degree course for which she is studying, I hadn't planned on joining her inside the museum. But when the museum guide asked if I would like to accompany my daughter on the tour, I suddenly felt the urge to overcome a fear, even a phobia, that had dogged me for over 30 years.

Before I knew it, I had been equipped

And it's a subject matter that is probably more relevant now than it has been for many decades, given the alarming rise in antisemitism both in Europe and the United States, as well as in many other places around the world.

The building housing the Holocaust History Museum is a stunning piece of architecture, designed by legendary Israeli architect Moshe Safdie. The starkness of the walls and floors set at unusual angles throughout are illuminated during daytime by natural light streaming in through a glass ceiling that runs along the center of building. Even as our tour began and evening fell, the last remnants of light from outside the museum cast an eerie yet almost mesmerizing patina on the contents below.

The exhibition is designed to be viewed in sequence, visitors following a one-way path that begins in 1933, showing the depth of Jewish life and culture in Germany prior to the election victory in one of Europe's great democracies of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) party. Flags bearing the swastika and other memorabilia from that time are chilling to view given the benefit of hindsight.

There were already those who foresaw the danger epitomized by Hitler's "Mein Kampf," a book given to all newly married Aryan German couples during the Third Reich as a wedding present from Hitler himself. It was the premier antisemitic text that flourished at that time, but by no means the only one; yet most Jews clearly wouldn't countenance the possibility that the nation they loved, in whose army they had served, would turn on them and seek to exterminate them.

Using artifacts from the time set alongside impressive video compilations of Hitler's speeches, news footage of major events such as the Anschluss and Kristallnacht, and eye witness video testimony from Jews who lived through that horrifying time as the state controlled media drummed the caricature of the *untermenschen*, the sub-human Jews, into the collective psyche of the overwhelming majority of Germans, you can appreciate how the net closed in and just how difficult it must have been to escape the vicious cycle that was gathering momentum.

I was particularly struck by the reaction of those viewing the exhibition alongside me, those tourists, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, from all corners of the world. As the narrative moved on to the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps, and the rounding up of Jews into the ghettos, such as Lodz and Warsaw, among others, a collective hush pervaded the air. Each person took in the enormity of the meticulous genocidal plans conceived by a regime governing a country that had been the cultural seat of the world, in no small part thanks to its Jewish intellectuals, scientists and artists.

And lest you wonder if the exhibition overlooked the suffering of other communities, there are sections highlighting the persecution of Jewish communities in North Africa along with testimony from eye witnesses, as well as the acknowledgement that the Nazis also sought to exterminate homosexuals, the Roma gypsies, communists, and the disabled; the latter and their able-bodied relatives were told that executing the disabled was a kindly gesture of euthanasia by the Nazi state.

There are images, artifacts and stories of life in the ghettos; one section of the exhibition includes a cobbled street that was transported cobble by cobble from the ghetto to Yad Vashem, along with the tramlines that ran down it. There are photo images of life in the ghettos, many inspiring as you see how the Jewish communities tried as hard as they could to make life bearable and continue with some sense of normality, if only to protect the children from the awful reality of what most likely awaited them. I felt an overwhelming sense of pride and admiration at seeing how steadfast the teachers, the rabbis, the actors, musicians, and others had been in doing what they did to keep the community spirit alive until the very end.

The images of the massacres are, of course, shockingly disturbing, as too are the pile of shoes, but for me, the strength of the permanent exhibition is in the hope it portrays as the war came to an end and those liberated from the death camps began their journey to freedom, many of them heading to what would soon become the State of

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Israel. The stories of the righteous gentiles are also heartwarming, even though they sadly represented such a tiny minority of their respective populations.

I took ten minutes at the end of the exhibition to observe those concluding the tour and noted their reactions; they were many and varied, but the overwhelming feeling appeared to be a combination of deep sorrow, empathy, shock, and a degree of anger as to how such a terrible, unspeakably evil regime could have been allowed to flourish and do what it did.

The evidence of subsequent events in Cambodia, Rwanda, the Balkans and, most recently, in Syria has shown that brutal dictators, when combining skillful manipulation of the mass media with fanatical hatred, can still successfully commit mass murder and genocide under the collective noses of the international community whose empty promises and feigned expressions of shock and fury are as empty now as they were in the 1940s.

Because of this, Yad Vashem's message carried by numerous on-site, thought-provoking exhibitions and memorials remains startlingly relevant. Its outstanding website and educational resources, and its archive containing the name and a short biography of each one of the 4.3 million people so far identified – there are still close to two million not yet documented – are stunning testament to those lost in the Holocaust and also to those who have dedicated their lives to making sure we never forget. Personally, I took much consolation in using the online resource to discover a little more about some of my own relatives who perished, as shown in the record of the murder of one of my own relatives, Feiga Kalinkovich, in 1944.

I urge you not to make the same mistake as me and allow this essential memorial and outstanding symbol of hope to pass you by. ■