

**Transcript of presentation given by Michael Berenbaum to the
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Thank you. Thank you very much, Paul, for an overly long and generous introduction. Let me begin. By saying something that picks up precisely where you left off. The subject of this conversation is the relevance of Holocaust museums - relevance, and sustainability. I have a dream that the Holocaust becomes irrelevant. And what I mean by that is that we live in a world in which the issues that the Holocaust raises are looked upon as something that from barbaric 20th century, that literally has no relevance to the world in which we live. The problem that we face is something radically different, which is the Holocaust has abiding relevance because it raises many of the critical issues that are central to the world in which we live. I'm going to present for a moment, a little bit of a PowerPoint to get into it. But the most important thing is the ideal [*that abounded*] when we were creating the United States Holocaust museum. The ideal ending would have been – look how foolish 20th century humanity was. That world is not all world. That world does not touch our world. That world is not part of our world. And the sad thing is that that cannot be said, and even the slogan “never again” cannot be uttered with a straight face because we have seen genocide rear its ugly head again and again and again. And even antisemitism, which for a period of time was depressed by the events of the Holocaust, has reared its ugly head in a new series of formats. And even within Germany, which had defined itself as the anti-Nazi, the Nazis that had been driven underground are now morphing and coming above ground. So sadly, tragically, the Holocaust has important and abiding relevance, and I wish it were not the case.

Let me go for a moment now and share my screen and talk a little bit about what museums do and what museums don't do. And consequently I think you'll find this of interest to all of us.

Okay. I have a philosophy of museum making, which says that the museum is a story telling institution. One of the most powerful means we have in our world today for telling the story is film, but the museum can't contrast with film as the museum has moving imagery. A film has moving imagery and a captive audience and a museum has captive imagery and a moving audience. And that is [when] you visit a museum you decided to visit a museum by the way in which you go, and you move from exhibition to exhibition.

The second principle that we talk about is an old principle from the Bible itself – “by the rivers of Babylon, we sat and we wept as we remembered Zion”. The place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it. Now, place is not only physical place, but place is also

spiritual place in a very basic way, because in a real sense, we change the way in which we visit museums and see institutions. The exhibition is not do not change what the audience does change. A simple example, everybody entering a Holocaust museum from here on, in is going to be interested in the question “how did people live in hiding?” Because we've all experienced six months in which our world has been diminished, in which we've seen many fewer people. We haven't seen as many things, we haven't been able to do as many things, - people are going to be intrigued with the question of how did you live in hiding?

People are also sadly intrigued by the question of 1919 to 1933. Which is how is a democracy overturned and come into an authoritarian and then a totalitarian system. And what is it about polarization? What is about the tearing apart of the social norms of society that allows totalitarianism to gain hold.

A historical museum must answer four basic questions. What, where with what and how. But simple questions do not necessarily yield simple answers. What do you have to say? And you know, Paul, from our work that the most important questions you have to ask is; what's the story we want to tell [and] where do we want to tell it? And consequently, it has a radically different meaning in the place. Let's use a vivid example. My friend, whom I adore Tali Nates (***Director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre***) has to tell a story in South Africa that must grapple with the question and the history of apartheid. And my friend, the courageous director of the museum at Auschwitz has to tell the story of Auschwitz because nobody arrives in Auschwitz accidentally.

And everybody understands that they're going to the, what shall we say? The “sacred anti-sacred place” that has become, what, the capital of evil, the symbolic capital of evil in the history of the world. The question then, after you decide what [and] where... is “with what”? And what are the tools we have? We have artifacts. We have film, we have text, we have visual imagery. We have survivor testimony. We have historical films. We have the creation of sites and imagery. We have artistic creativity. And the question of how, then becomes a question of design. Which becomes pivotal.



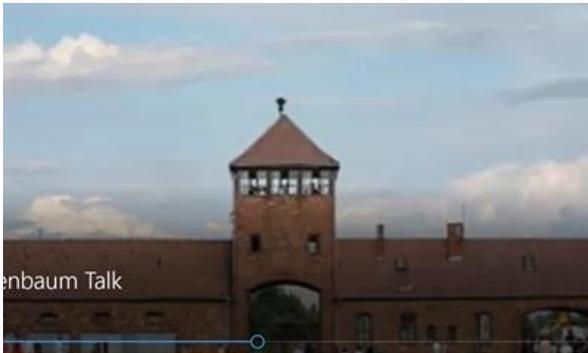
When we created Washington, we created in one sentence, something that was located in the heart of a nation's capital. And consequently, we had to deal with the question of what is American about a European experience. Therefore, we began in a very bizarre way. We begin with liberation - which was the way in which Americans encountered the Holocaust. But we had to show the Holocaust as using the tools of government; the instrumentalities of government. The location that we had is an interesting location. It was at the intersection of museum-Washington, Memorial-Washington, and Governmental-Washington, which showed the power of human beings in art and science and literature and technology. It showed the heroes of American life and it also showed the enormous power of government. We wanted to create the antithesis: what happens when all of these powers are not directed toward the common good and not

protected by the notion of inalienable rights [and] separation of powers. But are harnessed to an evil and to the power of government to destroy.



Many of you, if not, all of you have been to Yad Vashem. Here is the creation of Yad Vashem. And Yad Vashem, because it's in Jerusalem has a very intriguing ending. Notice here you have the two wings of the museum. And the wings of the museum concentrate your view so that you cannot see to the right of urban Jerusalem. And you cannot see to the left of an industrial Jerusalem. You mainly

see a pristine forest. And in one sense, it suggests what an ending is. Which is in the aftermath of the destruction, the Jewish people rebuilt in their ancestral land and created something of majesty and harmony. That is the answer, the response to the Holocaust. Obviously it can only do that by hiding the imperfect elements of any contemporary society, not grappling with the turmoil, the struggle of contemporary Israel.



We know that when you go to Auschwitz, the obligation of my friend Piotr (***Dr. Piotr M.A. Cywiński, Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum***) is to tell the story of Auschwitz and tell the story of what happened here. He has a site to preserve, which has a majesty and the power all its own. No obligation to tell the entire story of the Holocaust, but a deep and profound obligation to tell the story of the crime that happened at that place. And also a deep

evocation, which they've now increasingly learned to fulfil, of not only telling the story of the crime, but also telling the story of the victims who came to that site, for whom this was the end. And any of you who have been to the sauna, understand that what makes the sauna very different is you see the images, the pictures that people brought with them and the people that people who were there.



New York's museum of Jewish heritage, where Paul (***Salmons – internationally renowned curator and educator***) and I have worked on the Auschwitz exhibition, is located within sight of the statue of Liberty and within sight of Ellis Island. Therefore it has to tell the story of immigration. Because it has to tell the story of when America was not willing to accept the poor, the tired, the [*huddled masses yearning to*] breath free. When the gates were closed, when

immigration ended. And it's a story now that has to go in contrast to the values of contemporary society [and] contemporary government, which is trying to keep out the immigrants and not allowing it to happen.



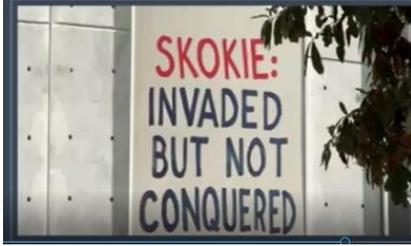
Here is the Berlin Memorial, which ironically one could give a PhD on that because, what is it saying in essence? It's saying that, as they were creating it, you had almost the Goldilocks story. Some said it was too big. Some said was too small. Some said it was too powerful. Some said it was not powerful enough. Some said it was too depressing, some said it was too exalting. And here is an abstract environment created by Peter Eisenman. And the

only thing that makes the Memorial really work is the educational centre that is underneath. Which inch for inch and pound for pound and space for space is one of the most powerful exhibitions on the Holocaust - which tells you what you memorialise (and if you don't know what you memorialise, a memorial cannot work). And again, this was an obligation of the German Government to build this because they wanted to create Berlin as the capital of Germany - of a reunited Germany. And it had to grapple with what happened when it was the capital of Germany, not a reunited Germany, but Nazi Germany defining itself at the antithesis.

What is the time at which we remember an event? All of us understand we're living in a transitional time. We have the last to live in the presence of survivors. We are living at a distance from the Holocaust, and one of the ironies and the powers of the Holocaust is that it has grown in import and influence year by year, since the event took place. One could say that it was more powerful in the fifties than it was in the forties, in the sixties than it was in the fifties, in the seventies than it was in the sixties. And it has become a mainstream of world culture. But we are at the important moment in the transition between "lived memory", which is the survivor's memory and "historical memory", which is given to all of us. And for many museums the question is what is going to take the place of the survivor who has been the living voice of the experience?

Let me say two more things about this. I've never understood the biblical story of Lot's wife. You know, that Lot fled Zoar with his two daughters, his wife turned around, turned into a pillar of salt. His daughters went on and thought they would last two women on earth. Their father, the last men, they got him drunk. He got them pregnant. They gave birth to two great nations and the Bible offers no condemnation, merely a description. If you look back too soon, you were paralysed by grief. Survivors in the initial period of time had to get on with the struggle to survive. And only at a distance did they begin to look back. And in a real sense, only at a distance could we begin to look back. Elie Wiesel had a notion that left us paralysed when we were creating the United States Holocaust Memorial museum. He said "only those who were there will ever know - those were there can never tell." We had to learn to accept the former book to reject the latter. Meaning - there is something that survivors know that we cannot know. I will never know what it was like to live one day in Auschwitz, but I certainly can listen to

the testimony of those who were there, who can tell me, and I can empathetically go back to that world and understand what it was like to be there. Although I will not know some of what they know. And in a very real respect, they will not know some of what I know.



[I want to go back] now again to “space”. Skokie, Illinois, which is one of the museums we developed, had to deal with the story of what happened in Skokie, when a community of 25,000 Jews, including 7,000 survivors, was chosen as the site for the Neo-Nazi march. This led rise to these survivors saying Skokie is invaded, but not conquered. And gave rise to a very real sense of what was needed.



And let me again say that you're trying in some museums to elongate the question of survivor's testimony. This is the “frontiers of memory”, the new dimensions in testimony of the Shoah Foundation, which allows you to ask questions of the survivor in real time and get a response. Because they filmed the survivor with 360 degrees, with more than a hundred cameras, answering a thousand questions. And one of the intriguing things is it only works if you already know the story of the survivor and therefore, you know what questions to ask the survivor? And thus we have to look at the different contexts in which this is done. And we still don't know, and I'm interested in having it educationally dealt with, whether this avoids kitsch or whether technology (and this is my rule of technology)... Technology is the midwife to experience - if you're oo-ing and ah-ing about technology, you're using it wrong. But if you're marvelling at what the technology allows you to experience, you're using it, right.

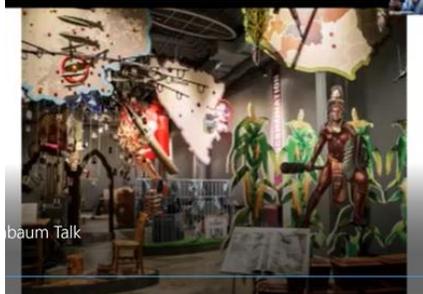
Let me conclude by saying in a very real respect that we are now being asked to do something else. And with this I'll conclude. museums of being asked to deal, not only with the Holocaust, but beyond the Holocaust. And to deal with other genocides as well, and also with the human rights issues.



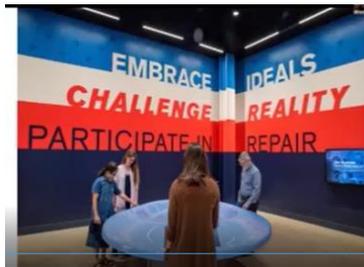
We had that challenge in Dallas, Texas, and we responded to it by creating a museum that dealt first of all, with the Holocaust in almost 50% of its space. Concluded with the double dimension of the Nuremberg trials, and then the convention on genocide and the universal declaration of human rights. Then went on to deal with genocide, but not to deal with genocide in the abstract. We used the notion of the 10 stages of genocide. The Stanton notion of the 10 stages of genocide (**Gregory H. Stanton Professor in Genocide Studies and Prevention**) And we showed each of the stages of genocide, related them



We even used an interesting device, which is a graphic novel to tell the story of being individual genocide, because we could not communicate that...



And then we used abstract art and sculpture, each of which contained the map of the genocide, the stage of genocide. So this is symbolisation - in Cambodia, where if you had glasses, if you read a book, if you dressed in a certain way, you were victimised. (POINTING TO VARIOUS PARTS OF IMAGE 14) Here is a map of Cambodia. These are the American bombers that came over Cambodia. And then the means of communication. And in each one of these 10 sculptures, you go through a similar element, but outlining one of the stages of genocide.



And finally, when we came to America (and this is part of the abiding relevance) we developed a three tier approach which was to “embrace ideals”, the ideals of America that are not realized, to “challenge the reality” and to “participate in repair”. And this is to my mind, a very important three stage tier, which challenges the visitor, not only what are you going to do? What have you learned from this? But what are you going to do with what you learned? And for us, we believe this makes an important transition to the question of how do you move **with** the Holocaust, not **from** the Holocaust to embrace other genocides and continue to consider issues that are part of, and implicated by, the Holocaust without moving away from it, but enhancing it and applying it to the world in which we live.

Let's conclude there and go to my colleagues...