

Testimony of Dr. Michael Berenbaum  
Planning Inspectorate Considering the Holocaust Memorial  
November 4, 2020

It is a high honor to participate in your deliberations.

Permit me to begin by answering the unasked question you were so polite to avoid: why should an American, a Yankee, have the audacity to request to testify before this austere body?

Therefore, allow me to state my background:

As a young academic I came to Washington, D.C. in 1979 to staff the President's Commission on the Holocaust. We were charged by President Jimmy Carter to recommend "an appropriate national memorial to the Holocaust." I authored its *Report to the President* that recommended that the United States create a "living memorial to the Holocaust," a public-private partnership; a Museum to tell the story of the Holocaust, an educational center to help educate the American people on the Holocaust, an archives and library to gather documents and works essential to scholarship and a scholarly center to advance research along with a Committee on Conscience to warn the nation and its leaders of impending genocide. The President accepted his Commission's recommendations, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Council was created, first by Executive Order and then by unanimous Congressional Legislation to create the Memorial Museum and all its component parts. I then returned to my academic career.

Seven years later, I was called back into national service as Project Director overseeing the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where we confronted many of the very same issues that have engaged this body including why bring to the nation's capital an essentially European event. What place does it have among the sacred monuments and memorials of the nation? Would the public be interested?

We even faced opposition within the Jewish community who wondered if the funds would not be better spent in Jewish education or support of Israel and whether the Holocaust was not occupying too central a place in the Jewish narrative. Why introduce the Jew as victims when Jewish history and Jewish memory is far deeper than victimization? Jewish critics spoke out against the lachrymose theory of Jewish history.

Other critics, even if they did not object to the Museum, objected to its placement among the sacred shrines of Washington. "Anywhere, but there," they argued. "Anywhere but there."

The Museum was controversial until its opening; its success silenced its critics.

Visitation was so robust that a press conference was held to discourage visitors from coming. And visitors not only voted confidence with their feet but also with what was most precious, their time. The average visit to a Museum on the National Mall was around an hour and visitors were spending three to four times that amount of time seeing the exhibitions and visiting the learning center. Museum visitation has remained robust through its 27 years until the pandemic. I will answer why in a few moments.

After years of service to the Museum, I served as President and CEO of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation which took the testimony of 52,000 Holocaust survivors in 57 countries and thirty two languages and compiled the largest video testimony collection of any historical event.

More the point, I have been the conceptual developer of Museums and Memorials in North Macedonia, Mexico and Poland, advised the Swedish Commission on their report to the Prime Minister, Yad Vashem on its exhibition in Block 27 at Auschwitz and created Museums and Memorials in the United States in Illinois, Florida, Texas, Ohio, New Jersey. I also co-curated the exhibition in Madrid, which is now in New York *Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away*.

Most specifically, I advised the late US Ambassador to Germany Richard Holbroke as the Berlin Memorial to the Holocaust, the project most analogous to the one you are considering, was evolving.

I have also advised on non-Holocaust related Museums, Memorials and exhibition but these are tangential to the issues you confront today.

In short, I humbly believe that my experience may be useful to these deliberations. As I have followed these deliberations, the questions and comments being offered here have been asked elsewhere and have been successfully addressed in memorial projects.

Enough about myself -- perhaps too much -- let me address some basic principles.

- *The place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it.*

This principle is as old as the Psalmist: "By the Rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept as we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137) Zion was remembered differently in exile in Babylon than in the ruins of Jerusalem.

The Holocaust is remembered differently in Washington than it is in Jerusalem, In Warsaw than in Budapest, in Paris than it is in London, at Auschwitz than it is in Bergen Blesen.

*And place is not just a spatial concept but a temporal one.* The time at which you remember an event –

We are at a transitional time: we are all too rapidly moving between lived memory and historical memory. We are the last, the very last, to live, in the presence of survivors, yet we live at a 75 year distance from the event. And as I shall argue that distance will have to shape the way in which the Memorial is envisioned, and the educational center created.

When we created the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, we took our physical place seriously. We were situated at the intersection between Museum Washington, Memorial Washington, and Governmental Washington.

Museum Washington: The Museum was to be situated adjacent to the great Museums of the Smithsonian Institution.

Monumental Washington: The Museum was to be situated within site of the Washington and Jefferson Memorial, within a distant view of the Lincoln Memorial and now within the World War II Memorial, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, and even the Eisenhower Memorial.

Governmental Washington. To the Museum's left in the National Mint, across the street were governmental departments. Step out in the street and one can see the White House. Go down the block and turn to your right and one has a magnificent view of the Capitol.

We entered into dialogue with these institutions because the Holocaust poses fundamental questions to the institutions.

Everywhere surrounding the Museum, they celebrate the powers of government, human achievement in art, science, technology and history, human ability to land on the Moon and to nurture the power of the Atom. The visitor can see monuments to great and important people and events. The Holocaust Museum tells an American story, albeit about a European event.

The Holocaust shows what can happen to these powers if they are not linked to Constitutional government,

- Restraint on the powers of government
- Checks and balances
- Basic inalienable rights
- Freedom of Speech and Assembly, freedom of Religion and the Separation of Powers.

We started the exhibition with the liberation of the camps by American and Allied troops to serve as a transition between Mall and the Museum, to move the visitor back then 50 years in time and to move them a continent away and to have them encounter what American and British soldiers saw as they entered Dachau and Bergen-Belsen.

The proposed location in London is both a challenge and an opportunity to have the Memorial and the Educational Center engage with the core of the British narrative, to challenge and also to reaffirm the great British contributions to democracy, human rights and human dignity.

We did not shy away from challenging America. At the conclusion of the top floor and again at the last floor of the Museum the visitor is given the interactive opportunity to consider what did America know and what did it do, what did it not do with that information to confront the unfolding genocide and to alleviate the condition of the victims.

We were true to the historical record and we did not face any political pressure to soften the harsh judgments of American inaction. We dealt with the non-bombing of Auschwitz and with the Memo on the Acquiesce of American Government to the Murder of the European Jews. We dealt with the failure to receive immigrants and the creation of what historians have called “paper walls” to keep them from reaching America’s shores. An even more elaborate special exhibition was created on America was created to mark the Museum’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and interest is so high that it will remain at the Museum for some four years.

Incidentally, our visitors come away asking questions about the world in which they live. We present the history truthfully, honestly, apolitically and the audience deals with these issues in the here and now, connecting it to their lives, their time, their moment in history.

So a word of advice: *the proposed site offers an unequalled opportunity to grapple with the history of Great Britain and its values. Placing it anywhere else reduces the power of what it can achieve.* The men and women you will choose to create the Memorial and the Education Center must be equal to the challenge.

Second piece of unsolicited advice humbly offered: *Do not create a Memorial alone but a Memorial and an Educational Center together as an organic whole.*

The reason is simple: Experience has taught us that a Memorial is effective for the generation that knows what is being memorialized; it is less effective in subsequent generations.

Three examples with suffice.

The Memorial in Berlin should be instructive. Despite the power of Peter Eisenman's artistic representation, it might have become a place for young people to roller blade and for couples to have a private place to embrace, without its learning center beneath the Memorial. Visitors who see the Memorial alone come away with a radically different experience than those who visit both the Memorial and the Learning Center. Square meter by square meter the Learning Center is one of the most powerful and effective learning centers in the world and does a commendable job of conveying the importance of the Holocaust for German history and for German citizens, reinforcing basic values of the country, now a democracy committed to human rights and tolerance.

So too, the difference between Treblinka and Belzec, two of the three Aktion Reinhard camps, is instructive.

Under Communism in the 1960s a moving and powerful memorial was created on the site of the Treblinka death camp where some 925,000 Jews were murdered between the 23rd of July 1942 and the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1943.

In February of 1960, the Warsaw Regional Council selected the design for a memorial at Treblinka II from two Poles, sculptor Franciszek Duszenko and architect Adam Haupt. The design was focused on the experience of the victims and the loss of the Jews who were murdered at Treblinka. A field of 17,000 jagged stones was erected each in a different shape, 700 hundred of them had the names of the towns, villages and hamlets from which Jews were deported to Treblinka. Only one individual was mentioned by name, Janusz Korczak, the famed Polish Pediatrician, writer and radio personality who ran an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, When offered the opportunity to escape to the Aryan side, Korczak valiantly attempted to save his children. When he could not, he marched together with his children to the death that awaited them in Treblinka. Emanuel Ringelblum, the great chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto described the procession: "This was no march to the train cars, but rather a mute protest against the murderous regime... a process the like of which no human eye every witnessed." The ghetto stood by in silence as the children marched.

The stones outline the contours of the camp. At the entrance way concrete blocks give the impression of railroad ties that abruptly veer to the left and move up to an area which conveys the sense of being the ramp. From there a straight path to the monument which is built on the site of Treblinka's gas chambers and beyond. The Germans called this path the *Himmelstrasse*, the pathway to heaven as part of their macabre sense of humor. And beyond the memorial monument is a pit, which is at the site of one of the fields in which the bodies of Jews were burned. At Treblinka Jews were first buried in mass graves. Later on, those bodies were dug up by prisoners and burned on pyres to solve the "disposal problem" and to erase evidence of the crime.

The Memorial is brilliantly effective. It evokes the Presence of Absence and seemingly offers to visitors to Treblinka a sense that the victims, whose graves were the sky, have been given a final burial place.

Small stones are left on some of jagged stones, Visitors regard Treblinka as the architects and sculptors intended it, as a cemetery.

Only a few words are used: the crime is reiterated, as are the countries from which Jews were shipped to the camps and even in Communist times, the word Jew is mentioned and there can be no misimpression that the people murdered in Treblinka were Jews. Visitors to the site whisper, unmistakably aware that these are visiting a sacred site.

Yet, visitors to Treblinka do not learn the story of what happened there in any detail. *They visit a Memorial, a memorial which brilliantly conveys feeling and the magnitude of the loss, but not the nature of the crime.*

So even though visitors travel some two hours to arrive at Treblinka from Warsaw, unless they know what the camp was and how it operated, unless they hear from its victims, they do not learn it at Treblinka, which is why Polish authorities are now contemplating creating an educational center at the camp.

I was deeply involved in the creation of the Memorial and the Museum at Belzec, the site of the murder of some 500,000 Jews between March and December 1942.

The submission by Polish artists and architects Andrzej Solyga, Zdzislaw Pidek, and Marcin Roszczyk won unanimous approval. The model we viewed was so powerful that indeed the choice of these artists proved to be the easiest part of the project. As the design was implemented, it exceeded even our most exalted hopes.

Their design called for the use of the entire camp.

A fence and walled-in area would mark the outlines of the camp. The Memorial consists of a long path – a tube, evoking the tube that prisoners would walk from the ramp to the gas chamber -- with walls on both sides growing ever higher, leading to a Memorial Wall with an appropriate inscription. One might think of the wall at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. but as the Vietnam Wall grows higher on one side, the second side is open and provides a sense of safety, of escape if you like, from the pressure of the wall. At Belzec, there would be no escape. A Biblically sensitive visitor might think of the words from the Song of the Sea: “And the water for them forms a wall to the right and to the left.” The Walls seem to be holding back the deluge.

As the visitor walks more deeply down, the Walls made the visitor feel dwarfed. As the visitor reaches the Memorial Wall, the inscription’s letters in Hebrew, English and Polish blend into the contours of the Wall seemingly like tears. “Earth, do not cover their blood, let there be no resting place for their outcry,” was the verse from Job.

On the back of the Memorial would be two areas for additional inscriptions; in the end it was decided that one wall contain the first names – not the last name because for every Moshe, there were hundreds; for every Sarah there were thousands. On the other wall inscribed are the names of the cities and towns, villages and hamlets from which the Jews were deported to Belzec.

At each end of the Memorial Wall, there is to be a staircase ascending from the depths and the visitor would emerge to see the entire landscape of the camp. The main area of the camp is marked by industrial sludge – giving the impression of what our planet might look like after a nuclear catastrophe. No visitor could walk on the field. It would be forbidden territory. The late Stephen Feinstein described it as “volcanic lava field.” And the areas of the camp that were the site of mass graves were darkened so that as one viewed the entire site, the presence of mass graves would be apparent. From the top of the

Memorial Wall, the visitor walks around one half of the camp and each concrete landing would be marked by the name of the towns from which the Jews were deported; town by town, month by month for each of the ten months that Belzec was operational.

The inscription is on steel letters with the Polish and the Yiddish name of the town. Over time these steel letter began to rust. To a few visitors, the rust gives the impression of an area not well preserved; to most, the significance is apparent, the letter are bleeding, just as the Jewish inhabitants of these cities and towns bled.

As one entered the camp to the left was a Memorial to the trains and to the right the entrance to the Museum and the "visitor center" where restrooms were available after the long ride to Belzec and a visitors' desk that doubles as a modest bookstore.

The modest educational center is integral to the Memorial, essential to informing the visitor intellectually as well as moving them emotionally.

### III

Let me conclude this testimony by stressing that the creation of a Memorial/Education Center in so prominent a place in London will reverberate throughout the entire country, stressing the importance of the Holocaust and the implications of the Holocaust for contemporary Britain. It will provide an opportunity to disseminate knowledge, to increase interest and importance and to spur learning opportunities.

Why give such prominence to the Holocaust?

Because it happened.

21<sup>st</sup> century humanity must understand the evil, systematic evil, state-sponsored evil, industrialized killing, mass murders that was the essence of the Holocaust. We must understand its emblematic invention, the death camp and the people who served in these camps. Their assignment: mass murder. Some were sadists and criminals – people unlike us -- but many more were ordinary men trying to do their best, to fulfill their obligations. Some were even professionals, lawyers and doctors, who used the skills they had learned to become more efficient killers. Some were enthusiastic, others more reluctant, all became killers.

We must understand the circumstances of the victims, who had to make choiceless choices between the impossible and the horrific, and who faced conditions of such utter powerlessness that they could do so little to determine their fate.

And we must understand the indifference of neutrality. In the struggle between powerless victims and an overwhelmingly powerful killing machine, neutrality is anything but neutral. Indifference is a death sentence.

We can learn so much about evil in studying the Holocaust that it leaves us numb, that despair overtakes us, that we sense our own helplessness. Indeed, the Holocaust was an atrocity, senseless and anguishing. But there were a few, a precious few men, women and even children who opened their homes and their hearts and provided a haven for the victims, a place to sleep, a crust of bread, a kind

word, a hiding place. What makes such goodness possible? Why were some people immune to the infection of evil? Why do some people become Upstanders/Rescuers?

These are the people whose deeds we may wish to emulate, who can serve as a model for how we want to behave and what we want to become.

The Holocaust began slowly. Age-old prejudice led to discrimination, discrimination to persecution, persecution to incarceration, incarceration to annihilation. And mass murder, which culminated with the killing of six million Jews, did not begin with the Jews nor did it encompass only the Jews. The violations of one group's rights are seldom contained only to that group.

Democracy was eroded, polarization divided a society, a charismatic leader turned the people one against the other. That leader was enabled by those who thought they could control him, that the office of Chancellor would force moderation or they could benefit with political and economic power so why get along, go alone?

The study of the Holocaust is not easy, emotionally or intellectually. The Memorial and the Education Center is a tool, a tool that will be enhanced by the creativity of its creators, their artistic and educational capabilities. It will express the importance of this event for the people of Great Britain and its implications for tolerance, decency, human rights and human dignity. It will not only serve as a moral beacon to those who visit but the word will go forth from that site and reverberate throughout the country.

I know it can be done because I have seen it done elsewhere. Now is your time, your challenge, your opportunity.

Thank you for this consideration.

I am honored to answer your questions.

