

**Triumphing Comprehensive Content Over Moral Messaging:
Exhibiting the Holocaust at the Reagan Library**

Stephanie Gerson

Professor Bernstein

HIST 194AH-BH

March 2024

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Setting the Scene: Representations of Pre-Holocaust Jewish Life, Tracing the Origins of the Holocaust and Attempting to Diminish Distance Between Visitors and Auschwitz	14
The Absence of a Localized Connection to Auschwitz	15
The Wheelset, the Shoe and the Statistics Galleries	19
Galleries Depicting Pre-Holocaust Jewish Life	22
Explaining the Rise of Nazism and Enforcement of Nazi Policies	27
Exhibition Messaging	29
Chapter 2: Representing Inconceivable Horror: Graphic Images, Survivor Testimony and Museological Retellings of Life in Concentration Camps	33
Images of the Holocaust	34
Alternate Presentations of Atrocity in Holocaust Exhibitions	40
Survivor Testimony	41
Interactive Testimony	46
Experiential Elements	48
Chapter 3: Beyond the Exhibition's Walls: Designing Holocaust Exhibitions to Prompt Reflection and, Ultimately, Action	54
How the Exhibition Ends	55
Alternate Endings: How Permanent Institutions Close the Narrative	62
The Exhibition Metaphorizes the Holocaust Rather than Drawing Parallels	64
Conclusion	68

Acknowledgments

This thesis was made possible with the support and consultation of my peers, friends, family and UCSB faculty. Thank you to my numerous peer review groups in the History Senior Honors Seminar for reading my work, asking important questions and welcoming me into the course as the sole Art History major. I appreciate the effort you all put into giving feedback and words of encouragement throughout this process. I would like to thank Dr. Hilary Bernstein for all of her support throughout the course and guidance in writing a research paper of this depth and length. Professor Bernstein read my work with the highest level of detail and offered insight that further developed my thesis.

My thesis advisor Dr. Harold Marcuse was instrumental in this process and has advised my research on Holocaust museums and exhibitions since 2022. Professor Marcuse inspired me to pursue this project, pointing me toward the best primary and secondary sources for this topic. I deeply appreciate the time Professor Marcuse spent proofreading my thesis and pointing me in the right direction, lending his expertise on Holocaust history.

I would also like to acknowledge the Musealia and Ronald Reagan Foundation & Institute staff I interviewed. These interviews, which are quoted in my thesis, provided me with valuable information about this exhibit for which I am so grateful.

Lastly, I would like to say thank you to my friends and family, some of whom visited these exhibitions with me during my research trips, for giving me the confidence to take on this thesis and being there for me during every step of the process.

Introduction



Fig. 1 A cattle car stands outside the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum entrance.

(Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2023)

Upon arrival at the *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* exhibition, visitors are greeted by the chilling presence of a wooden cattle car mounted atop train tracks – the same model of one of the thousands built to transport European Jews and other targeted groups to Auschwitz, the Nazi-operated concentration camps in which their death was almost certain (Figure 1). Its object label includes a photograph of nine-year-old Roma girl Settela Steinbach looking beyond the door of an Auschwitz-bound wagon before it closes, reminding visitors that Jews were not the only group subject to persecution and, in Steinbach’s case, death.¹ The label also features a quote from Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, who penned his famous memoir *Night* about his experiences: “At one point, my father looked out the window of the cattle car and he read the name of the station: ‘Auschwitz.’ And we didn’t know what it meant; no one did.”²

¹ Object label for German-made Model 2 freight wagon in the collection of Musealia. In exhibition *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA. Seen on: November 5, 2023.

² Object label for German-made Model 2 freight wagon.

As the first of many survivor quotes included in the exhibition, Wiesel's words illuminate the stories of those imprisoned in Auschwitz – stories of the people who, unlike Steinbach, lived to share their experiences of Auschwitz with the world.

The cattle car serves as an introduction to the story that unfolds inside the exhibit. It is the first artifact visitors see out of the 700 primary artifacts on view at the exhibition, each object speaking to the terror, resistance and survivorship of Auschwitz. For the exhibition's stop at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, running from March 2023 to January 2024, the train car at the entrance stands atop a hill with sprawling views of Simi Valley. Banners of Nancy and Ronald Reagan clothed in classically American dress - relaxed button-ups, denim and beaming smiles – flank the gated entrance, juxtaposing the somber undertones associated with the train car. To reach the exhibit, visitors walk through these eerie gates which are unintentionally reminiscent of the gates of Auschwitz known as the Gates of Death.

About the exhibition

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library is the fourth host venue of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, a traveling, narrative exhibition about the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz organized by the Spanish, for-profit company Musealia. Previous host venues include Madrid's Centro de Exposiciones Arte Canal from 2017 to 2019, New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage from 2019 to 2020, Kansas City's Union Station from 2021 to 2022 and Malmö's MalmöMässan Exhibition and Congress Center from 2022 to early 2023.³

The official exhibition catalog for the United States Holocaust National Memorial Museum, one of the first Holocaust museums in America that also follows a narrative structure,

³ "'Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away" exhibition opened at the Reagan Library in California," Auschwitz Birkenau Memorial and Museum, March 3, 2023, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away-exhibition-opened-at-the-reagan-library-in-california,1605.htm>.

defines a narrative exhibition as one that “affects visitors not only intellectually but also emotionally,” giving visitors the space to “project themselves into the story and thus experience it like insiders while at the same time remaining at a distance, with the intellectual perspective of outsiders.”⁴ The Auschwitz exhibition begins by presenting Jewish history in Europe before educating visitors, in chronological order, about the rise of the Nazi party, the events of the Holocaust, and life in Auschwitz, ending the exhibition with the liberation of Auschwitz and the fall of the Nazi regime.

While such an exhibit seems like a surprising project for a Spanish company, Musealia specializes in organizing educational, blockbuster exhibitions, with another project, *Titanic The Exhibition*, amassing over three million visitors during its international tour.⁵ Due to the company’s lack of connections to Germany or Jewish studies, Musealia created *Auschwitz* in collaboration with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and 50 other public and private collections, which together loaned 700 original objects and 400 photographs for the exhibition.⁶ When creating any of their exhibitions, Musealia hires experts most knowledgeable about the exhibition’s topic. Musealia director Luis Ferreiro coordinated a team of Holocaust scholars to serve as members of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*’s curatorial team and lend their expertise to the challenging task of gathering original objects, designing the exhibition’s layout and stringing together a Holocaust narrative that unfolds as visitors walk through galleries of artifacts, guided by a self-paced audio tour and ample wall text. Robert Jan van Pelt, Michael

⁴ Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York, N.Y: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1995), 49.

⁵ “Titanic,” Musealia, <https://www.musealia.net/titanic/>.

⁶ Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 5.

Berenbaum, Miriam Greenbaum, Paul Salmons and Djamel Zeniti form this curatorial team.⁷

The chief curator is Van Pelt, known for his book on Auschwitz, titled *Auschwitz: 1270 to Present*, which unpacks the history of the Polish town Oświęcim (later renamed to Auschwitz after the German invasion in 1939); this understanding of Oświęcim's former heritage and population make up one of the first galleries of *Auschwitz*.

A series of Zoom interviews with Musealia and Reagan Library staff conducted by the author in November 2023 explained how and why the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library located in the small southern Californian town of Simi Valley landed this educationally rich exhibition. In a conversation with Musealia's Director Luis Ferreiro, Ferreiro noted that following the exhibition's 2017 debut in Madrid, emails started pouring in from institutions' representatives eager to host the blockbuster exhibit. The email address of Melissa Giller, Chief Marketing Officer at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, whose role is to secure special exhibits for the library, frequently appeared in Ferreiro's inbox after Giller read about the start of the exhibition's tour in an article published in June of 2017 by *The New York Times*; Giller later viewed the exhibition in Madrid to see *Auschwitz* for herself.⁸ The combination of Giller's persistent communication with Musealia and the Library's large temporary exhibition space that had hosted several other traveling exhibitions made the Library a convincing candidate, eventually blossoming into a partnership between the Spanish company and the Presidential Library.

Historical Context

Since the 1990s and the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

⁷ Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 142.

⁸ Joanna Berendt, "Auschwitz Artifacts to Go on Tour, Very Carefully," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/arts/design/auschwitz-exhibit-tour-holocaust.html>.

(USHMM), Americans have had the opportunity to increase their knowledge of the Holocaust by visiting dedicated Holocaust and Jewish museums across the country. A federal Commission on the Holocaust, led by survivor Elie Weisel, was created under President Jimmy Carter in 1979, recommending the construction of a national museum to promote “an understanding of the Holocaust” and, in the words of the museum’s director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, to teach the lesson that “to be a bystander is to share in the guilt” of this genocide.⁹ Around the time of USHMM’s 1993 opening, a slew of Holocaust museums also opened their doors to the public, bringing visitors in contact with artifacts and photographs that serve as evidence of the Nazis’ war crimes. Yet even with tens of Holocaust institutions across America, the wide success of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away* can be attributed to its novelty as the first exhibition of touring artifacts from Auschwitz on such a large scale.

This paper’s discussion of *Auschwitz* is guided by primary and secondary sources about the exhibition displays of USHMM as a “model” for permanent Holocaust exhibitions in the United States and in comparison to visits to Holocaust Museum LA (LAMOTH) and the Museum of Tolerance (MOT). Open to the public in 1993 by the efforts of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, named after Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal, the Museum of Tolerance aims to serve “not only as a symbol of society’s quest to live peacefully together but also as an important resource on how to achieve that goal.”¹⁰ The museum features four main exhibits: The Holocaust Exhibit, Social Lab, Anne and Finding Our Families, and Finding Ourselves. For this thesis, only the exhibition content of MOT’s Holocaust Exhibit, which tells the story of European Jews from

⁹ Susan Bachrach, “‘Bystanders’ in Exhibitions at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” In *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, edited by Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2019), 309-310, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04hm8.20>.

¹⁰ “Our History and Vision,” Museum of Tolerance, <https://www.museumoftolerance.com/about-us/our-history-and-vision/>.

the 1920s until 1945, and the Social Lab, an exhibit adjacent to the Holocaust Exhibit which provides interactive opportunities for visitors to explore modern forms of prejudice, will be analyzed.

Yet, some American institutions memorializing the Holocaust were founded even earlier, including the survivor-founded LAMOTH, which organized touring exhibitions of survivors' artifacts beginning in the 1960s until the size of the artifact collection required being housed in a museum.¹¹ The project for such a museum was spearheaded in 2004 by former LAMOTH director Rachel Gigoda Lithgow and president Randy Schoenberg who settled on the site of Pan Pacific Park, which already contained Joseph L. Young's Los Angeles Holocaust Monument, which was unveiled in 1992.¹² Lithgow hired modernist architect Hagy Belzberg to design the museum as a space that was thoroughly integrated into the park, and the museum opened in 2010.¹³ This paper will examine the permanent exhibition content of LAMOTH and the museum's efforts to discuss local Holocaust history and survivorship.

Historiography and sources

To date, literature on Holocaust museums and exhibits has focused mostly on examinations of permanent Holocaust institutions on the East Coast, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington D.C., and abroad at venues such as Yad Vashem in Israel and the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Galleries in London. Scholarship on Holocaust museums scattered throughout the Midwest and the West Coast is limited, due to USHMM's national reputation, which overshadows that of smaller museums, such as LAMOTH. Holocaust historical literature rarely discusses the *Auschwitz* exhibit due to its recency, thus

¹¹ Eran Neuman, "Folding Memory: The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and the Commemoration of the Shoah," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 34, no. 1 (2020): 7.

¹² Neuman, "Folding Memory," 11-12.

¹³ Neuman, "Folding Memory," 13.

exhibition reviews published in newspapers, the author's interviews with museum staff, official exhibition catalogs, and the author's multiple visits to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, as well as LAMOTH and MOT, serve as primary sources in understanding and analyzing this traveling exhibition on Auschwitz.

Notable published reviews of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. have focused on whether the exhibition acknowledges contemporary issues and the rising concerns about antisemitism from Jewish audiences of the exhibition. "*Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum," written for historical journal *The Public Historian* by Brian J. Griffith, reviews the exhibition through a lens of modern history, noting the several unnerving acts of antisemitism from the U.S. Republican Party in the past decade that are left unaddressed inside the exhibition but truly make the content feel neither long ago nor far away. *The Wall Street Journal's* Critic at Large Edward Rothstein and Dara Horn writing for *The Atlantic*, position their reviews by discussing the exhibition's effect on Jewish visitors. Rothstein's review for *The Wall Street Journal*, titled "An Auschwitz Exhibition Fails the Jews," criticizes the exhibit for making Jews feel "like afterthoughts" in the beginning of the exhibition amidst the exhibition's discussion of other groups targeted by the Nazis; Rothstein also expresses dismay towards the exhibit's description of antisemitism as comparable to racism and xenophobia.¹⁴ Horn's "Auschwitz Is Not a Metaphor" takes Rothstein's review in an intellectual direction, critiquing the exhibition for metaphorizing the Holocaust while failing to address the very visible, lasting effects of the Holocaust that have evolved into modern forms of antisemitism. While all reviewers praise the exhibition for its extraordinary display of artifacts and its attention to detail in its presentation of Auschwitz, there is an agreement that there is

¹⁴ Edward Rothstein, "An Auschwitz Exhibition Fails the Jews," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/an-auschwitz-exhibition-fails-the-jews-11557572400>.

more the exhibition can do to bring its material into the present.

Secondary sources for this paper include books and articles on the components of Holocaust exhibitions, including photography, artifacts, experiential elements and survivor testimony. Barbie Zelizer's book, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*, discusses the process of photographing liberation by the Allied forces, exploring how these photographs shaped public memory of the Holocaust and the commonality of using Holocaust imagery or referring to mass atrocities as "the Holocaust" in discussion of acts of genocide after 1945. Janina Struk also explores Holocaust photographs as "fragments" of a broader Holocaust narrative developed by historians and curators, describing the image-making practices of the Nazis and overlooked images of the Holocaust, some of which will be discussed in this paper.¹⁵ As the exhibition chooses to not include atrocity images, scholarship against the use of such images will also be presented, such as the article, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," by Susan Crane. Crane claims that atrocity images, unless shown with the identification and recognition of victims or survivors and proper captions that explain the historical context, should not be shown.¹⁶ As artifacts and survivor testimony make up the majority of the exhibition's content, articles regarding their importance and uses provide a baseline for the history of prominent elements in Holocaust exhibitions as well as methods for analyzing the efficacy and emotional content of an exhibit on this topic. In "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," Alison Landsberg introduces the concept of a Holocaust exhibition as a "transfential space," in which visitors make memories in spaces associated with events

¹⁵ Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 14.

¹⁶ Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478766>.

such as the Holocaust that they have not experienced for themselves.¹⁷ These experiences ultimately help visitors empathize with victims and survivors of genocide. Edward T. Linenthal's article about the presentation strategies at USHMM, titled "The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," similarly argues for elements that promote further connection for visitors with the exhibition material, praising USHMM for its success in implementing experiential and sensory elements. To understand one of the most-used, empathy-garnering elements in Holocaust exhibits, Tony Kushner's "Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting" presents the history of gathering testimony from survivors of the Holocaust.

As the exhibition aims to explain Auschwitz in its reality as a site with pre-existing history, scholarly works on interpretations of Auschwitz, both in a historical and metaphorical sense are important to this research. The book that serves as a rough outline for the exhibition is *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, written by the exhibition's chief curator Robert Jan Van Pelt in collaboration with Deborah Dwórk. Seen as the most thorough work of scholarship about the history of Auschwitz, the book's goal is similar to that of the exhibition: to affirm Auschwitz not as a far-away, mystical place of evil but as a town that once was. Holocaust historian Omer Bartov also delves into what Auschwitz means in the article "Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth," noting that the two main arguments on the significance of the Holocaust take the stance that this genocide is a core event for "humanity as a whole" placing "the tragic Jewish fate as its centerpiece" or that the Holocaust "overemphasizes the Jewish experience, human depravity and ineffable forces."¹⁸ These Holocaust scholars, in studying

¹⁷ Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): 66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488559>.

¹⁸ Omer Bartov, "Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth," *History and Memory* 5, no. 1 (1993): 90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618643>.

Auschwitz and memory, develop frameworks for understanding Auschwitz in its different roles as an idea, place, and in some cases, a metaphor, to provide evidence towards the validity or invalidity of the exhibition's messaging about the concentration camp.

Research Questions

Through an in-depth examination of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, I aim to analyze the exhibition's contents, display strategies and messages that it hopes to instill in visitors. As a component of this examination, I use existing Holocaust exhibitions at the MOT and LAMOTH as a basis for comparison, understanding the shared and contrasting strategies employed as well as the content included or excluded in exhibits shown at both Jewish and non-Jewish institutions. The following questions further guide this examination of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* First, how do the display formats and exhibition elements in *Auschwitz* work together to create an educational but also emotional narrative? Second, does *Auschwitz* make the concentration camp in Poland feel physically and symbolically close to visitors? Finally, to what extent is *Auschwitz* designed to inspire visitors to further their Holocaust education, memorialize victims and acknowledge modern antisemitism following their visit?

Arguments and Thesis Statement

Compared to Holocaust galleries at permanent institutions including the Holocaust Museum LA and the Museum of Tolerance, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* provides an extensive, emotional retelling of the events of the Holocaust and the experiences of those imprisoned and killed in Auschwitz, delving into greater detail and displaying more artifacts attributed to Auschwitz than most Holocaust institutions. Yet, unlike other Holocaust museums that aim to encourage visitors to reflect on their time in such exhibits, commemorate victims and apply the lessons of the Holocaust to other events in history or their lives, this exhibit's goal is

purely educational. *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. tries to make the Holocaust not feel distant in time or location, but the exhibition's Europe-focused approach to diminishing the distance between its host venues and Auschwitz does not translate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. The galleries' lack of identifiable main messages and parallels to contemporary prejudice and genocides leave Auschwitz and its relevance in the far-away past.

Thesis Roadmap

This paper takes a chronological approach in analyzing the exhibition content of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*, interwoven with observations of the content, organization and messaging of Holocaust exhibits at Holocaust Museum LA and the Museum of Tolerance. Chapter 1 explores how the first galleries of *Auschwitz* draw visitors into a space that tackles challenging and sensitive content as well as introduces the history of Jews, the rise of Nazism and the exhibit's 'not long ago, not far away' messaging. This chapter argues that while the educational content of this section is more than adequate, the beginning galleries struggle to connect Reagan Library visitors to Auschwitz by leaving the exhibition narrative mostly European-focused, devoid of ties to local history. Chapter 2 examines representations of camp life in *Auschwitz* which includes the use or non-use of atrocity images, survivor testimony and interactive elements. By analyzing the lack of experiential elements and atrocity images in *Auschwitz* as compared to other Holocaust exhibits, the chapter argues that visitors of the exhibition are less engaged throughout and will struggle to extract important messages, or develop an empathetic, emotional response. Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the final rooms and visitor experience of *Auschwitz*, revealing the lack of a powerful concluding message, no parallels to contemporary genocide and antisemitism and the absence of exhibition elements that allow for reflection, survivor acknowledgment and victim memorialization upon visitors.

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene: Representations of Pre-Holocaust Jewish Life, Tracing the Origins of the Holocaust and Attempting to Diminish Distance Between Visitors and “Auschwitz”

Introduction

The first moments of visitors’ experiences in a Holocaust exhibit set the tone for the remainder of their eye-opening journey inside. Before presenting the emotionally charged artifacts that have been salvaged from Auschwitz, this exhibition eases visitors into the more distressing exhibition content with basic information on the Holocaust and by situating visitors in Auschwitz geographically. Using maps, Musealia’s exhibition *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. emphasizes the location of this historical site to establish its relationship to centuries of Polish history, as a place with meaning outside of the Holocaust. *Auschwitz* also takes a “beginning at the end” approach, starting the exhibition with the first two objects, out of 700 in total, to explain the discovery of the camp by the Soviet Red Army in 1945 and posing rhetorical questions that aim to be answered – with mixed success – in the galleries that follow. Unique to this exhibition is the extent to which it travels back in time to explore the history of the site that was to become a center of mass murder. In this exploration of pre-Auschwitz history, when the town was still known as the Polish town of Oświęcim, the exhibition hopes to bring visitors in by educating them on the populations that were decimated by the Nazi regime – the Jews, the Roma, the non-Jewish Poles and Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) – and generate sympathy for these groups by telling the individual stories of victims. Yet, in these early galleries packed with centuries of European history, a consistent message on the importance of studying Auschwitz, which will guide visitors throughout the entire exhibition, is subtle and generalized, to encourage visitors to draw their own meaning from the exhibit. Additionally, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not*

Far Away. struggles to tailor its geographically-rooted approach, which was conceived originally for a European audience in Madrid, for a Southern California audience at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The Absence of a Localized Connection to Auschwitz

After visitors receive their audio guide but no further introduction or warnings about the heavy content of the exhibit – despite a brief mention that there is no bathroom access from inside the exhibition – from Ronald Reagan Presidential Library staff, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. attempts to diminish any distance visitors might feel from the Holocaust in the first gallery titled “Auschwitz: A Time Not Long Ago, A Place Not Far Away,” presenting visitors with a wall-sized, world map created by Musealia containing two dots that identify Los Angeles and Auschwitz. Perhaps this method of diminishing distance through maps worked more effectively in the exhibition’s stops in Madrid or Malmo, with Poland being just a few countries over from these European host venues. Yet, the map at the Reagan Library highlights the vast Atlantic Ocean and North American continent separating Europe and Simi Valley, struggling to evoke a strong emotional response from visitors who see Auschwitz as a distant town with little connection geographically or ideologically to California (Figure 2). Following this map is another one locating the town of Auschwitz in Poland and one in which Poland is seen enveloped in the Greater German Reich in 1943. Additionally, the first wall label visitors read in the exhibition attached to the map of Los Angeles includes a working definition for genocide, which the exhibition defines as an “ideology, represented in Germany by Nazism and elsewhere in Europe by various fascisms” which was “used to exclude political opponents, real or imagined, from society.”¹⁹ The definition of genocide feels unconventional, as genocide is not

¹⁹ Object label for *Auschwitz: A Time Not Long Ago, A Place Not Far Away*. In exhibition *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA. Seen on: November 5, 2023. All of the

only an ideology, but commonly seen as associated with the motivation to actively obliterate a population, culminating in an event.



Fig. 2 A map at the beginning of the exhibition displays dots on a map representing Los Angeles and Auschwitz. (Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2023)

Following the map section, the exhibition brings in a piece of U.S. history to appeal to an American audience in the form of a clipping from the January 28, 1945 edition of the *New York Times*, taking visitors back in time to the discovery and liberation of the camps by the Soviet Red Army. Using newspaper clippings to ground exhibitions in a broader, more international

following cited object labels in this chapter are attributed to *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*, unless stated to be exhibited at Holocaust Museum Los Angeles or the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

historical context is a common tactic used by Holocaust exhibitions. At the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, the museum brings in hyperlocal history in its permanent Holocaust exhibit, including World War II-era newspaper clippings from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Examiner*. Placed on every corridor-facing wall in the Los Angeles museum, the newspaper clippings provide visitors a glimpse of the information Los Angeles residents were receiving about the Holocaust.²⁰ Forming a connection to the exhibition material and its host venue and location may not add to the richness of the Holocaust narrative that an exhibit strives to tell. Still, it strengthens local visitors' ties to the genocide. In the case of newspaper clippings as primary evidence, visitors learn how their local communities were informed of this genocide, forming the visitors' own thoughts about how they might react to receiving such news for the first time. Establishing local ties to an event that appears to have happened on the other side of the world from California could have been a more effective method for *Auschwitz* to emphasize that the Holocaust occurred not long ago and not far away.

Despite the first gallery of the exhibition's struggles to connect with Southern California visitors, this unsuccessful curatorial effort equally reflects the spacial limitations of the Reagan Library special exhibition space. In the author's interview, Robert Jan Van Pelt, the chief curator of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. and author of *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* discussed the challenges he and exhibition designer Djamel Zeniti faced when adapting Musealia's large exhibit, originally planned for a 25,000-square-foot space in Madrid, for the Reagan Library's designated space which is a mere 10,000 square feet. A core aspect of reinforcing the distance-focused messaging of the exhibition lies in the addition of artifacts to *Auschwitz* that are loaned from the exhibition's host venues and communities to highlight

²⁰ Object label for *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1942. In permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: July 9, 2023.

localized connections to the Holocaust; the addition of such content depends upon ample space at the host venue. When New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage hosted the exhibition from 2019 to 2020, 100 artifacts from the museum’s collection were included to tell the story of “survivors and liberators who found refuge in the greater New York area.”²¹ Van Pelt noted that when the exhibition traveled to the MalmöMässan exhibition hall in Malmö, Sweden in 2022, new exhibition content was added to incorporate Danish and Swedish history.²² Along with content about the arrival of liberated Auschwitz survivors to Malmö in 1945, MalmöMässan exhibited information about the rescue of Danish Jews in October of 1943. The Imperial War Museum’s website explains that while “95% of Danish Jews survived the Holocaust” due to rescue efforts by non-Jews who transported them by boat to Sweden, the remaining Jews in Denmark were sent to a ghetto in Germany called Theresienstadt before being transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.²³ By making connections to local history, those additions to the exhibition made known the widespread and long-lasting effects of the Holocaust and Auschwitz specifically.

The Musealia team intended to curate, but ultimately did not execute, a gallery in *Auschwitz* at the Reagan Library which would include additional information regarding Ronald Reagan’s service in World War II, Reagan’s presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel and the controversy surrounding Reagan’s visit to Bitburg. The connection between Reagan and World War II is not nearly as strong as other host venues’ ties to the events of the war. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Ronald Reagan Foundation and Institute curated a web page illustrating Reagan’s wartime resume. Reagan never set foot in Europe due to his “poor eyesight” — which exempted him from overseas service — but served in the First Motion

²¹ “Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.” Museum of Jewish Heritage, <https://mjhny.org/exhibitions/auschwitz/>.

²² Robert Jan Van Pelt in discussion with the author on Zoom, January 29, 2024.

²³ “Rescue of the Danish Jews,” Imperial War Museum, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/rescue-of-the-danish-jews>.

Picture Unit (FMPU) in Los Angeles, a new unit established by Jack L. Warner, President of Warner Bros. Studios. Reagan produced “propaganda and training films” for the FMPU. The sole event that the Reagan Foundation and Institute highlights as a deeply impactful moment for Reagan during the war was the moment the FMPU received images taken at concentration camps for processing, images that Reagan claims “human eyes should not see” due to their graphic nature.²⁴ The more fraught connection between Reagan and Auschwitz lies in his May 1985 visit to a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, which included the graves of 49 SS men, to mark 40 years since the end of World War II.²⁵ Ahead of the Bitburg visit in April 1985, Reagan awarded Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel the Congressional Gold Medal, during which time Wiesel said, “May I, Mr. President, if it’s possible at all, implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.”²⁶ Van Pelt notes that the Reagan Library did not take issue with including this less honorable moment in Reagan’s history in *Auschwitz*, but space did not allow for it. Thus, visitors walking through the exhibition at this venue do not obtain the same connection to exhibition material and the host venue as would visitors in other locales.

The Wheelset, the Shoe and the Statistics Galleries

After the map section, a quote by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi hangs over the second gallery of the exhibition and reads: “It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”²⁷ The quote is seen almost

²⁴ “Why Reagan,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/special-exhibits/auschwitz-exhibition/why-reagan/>.

²⁵ Andrew Glass, “Reagan visits German war cemetery, May 5, 1985,” *Politico*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/05/this-day-in-politics-may-5-1985-565776>.

²⁶ “Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel and on Signing the Jewish Heritage Week Proclamation,” PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/resources/reagan.html>

²⁷ *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*

as a slogan for the exhibition (Figure 3). The secondary gallery isolates three primary objects, a wheelset from the German National Railway, a woman's single red shoe and concrete posts bound with barbed wire that once lined Auschwitz's perimeter which are paired with an anecdote on the Soviet Red Army's liberation of the camp.



Fig. 3 A quote by Primo Levi hangs above a gallery displaying a German National Railway and a victim's shoe. (Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2024)

Such objects encapsulate different parts of the Auschwitz story: the industrialized killing operation facilitated by the Nazis who sent their victims to death camps by train, the individual stories of the victims who perished and the world's discovery and reaction to this atrocity. A widely known symbol of the Holocaust, viewing a Holocaust victim's shoe can often evoke greater feelings of empathy than viewing photographs from the camps themselves. Memory studies scholar Alison Landsberg describes a similar display of thousands of shoes at USHMM, noting that "the mimesis one experiences with these 'object survivors' is not an experience of

presence, but rather an experience of profound absence.”²⁸ Through this process of acknowledging the shoe’s owner’s absence, visitors begin to understand the gravity and impact of this genocide, amplified by the photograph of piled shoes behind the single red shoe in the glass case.

The story of the discovery of Auschwitz, supported by a display of concrete posts from its fencing, aims to explain the shock Soviet Red Army soldiers felt upon seeing the conditions of the camp, the piles of bodies left unburied and the remaining, emaciated survivors. The audio guide prompt for this artifact, written by exhibition curator Paul Salmons and narrated by scriptwriter David McFetridge, adds a human aspect to the exhibition’s narrative and acts in place of an employee-guided tour, which the Reagan Library does not offer.²⁹ This prompt incorporates sensory elements to recreate the sound of soldiers’ boots walking on the gravel of the camp, asking visitors a rhetorical question: “The challenge for us today is the same that faced the Soviet soldiers. How is this possible?”³⁰ Here the audio guide engages visitors by challenging them to think of their preconceived notions of this question of “how” before the exhibition teaches them about the origins of the Holocaust. A subsequent gallery, introduced by another quote attributed to Primo Levi on liberation, presents panels with Holocaust statistics that are a component of nearly all Holocaust exhibits: 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz, one million Jews perished in Auschwitz, six million Jews were murdered all over Europe. Also outlined on the informational panel is the United Nations addition of genocide as a term in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which the panel refers to as “systematic

²⁸ Alison Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488559>.

²⁹ “Audio tour: *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.*,” Paul Salmons Associates, <https://paulsalmons.associates/projects/audio-tour-for-auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away>.

³⁰ Audio guide prompt for *January 29, 1945*.

massacres and exterminatory policies that are defined as crimes of war and crimes against humanity.”³¹ These statistics are reiterated in the audio guide to ensure visitors are not glossing over such statistics that quantify this event and categorize the Holocaust as a genocide, an attempt to eradicate an entire group of people.

Galleries Depicting Pre-Holocaust Jewish Life

Equipped with the story of Auschwitz’s discovery by the Soviet Red Army and the numbers of those who perished in Auschwitz, the exhibition travels even further back in time in the “Coexistence” gallery to educate visitors on the history of Jewish people and of Oświęcim, the Polish town that became the German killing machine known as Auschwitz. The content in these first few rooms reflects the work of Auschwitz historian Robert Jan Van Pelt, featuring an illustration of the town plan of Oświęcim ca. 1350 and archival photographs from pre-war Oświęcim history.³² While a review of the exhibition’s stop in New York written for *The Wall Street Journal* by its Critic at Large Edward Rothstein criticized the exhibit for beginning “a bit too long ago and too far away,” “Coexistence” lays a foundation for the history of Auschwitz, positioning the town as one that thrived before the annexation of Poland, a town with history – especially Jewish history – that was obliterated.³³ *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present*, Van Pelt’s 443-page book on the history of Auschwitz emphasizes the purpose of studying the town’s earliest history: “For most of us, this necropolis of night and fog with its terminus that received trains from all over Europe has very little connection to an ordinary town named Oświęcim—the prewar Oświęcim and the Oświęcim of today [...] the camp remains imprisoned in its own

³¹ Object label for *Civilians Murdered*.

³² *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*.

³³ Edward Rothstein, “An Auschwitz Exhibition Fails the Jews,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/an-auschwitz-exhibition-fails-the-jews-11557572400>.

universe.”³⁴ A particularly violent period of five years permanently altered the town’s contemporary meaning but centuries of culture and Jewish residency previously defined Oświęcim, which boasted a majority Jewish population until 1941.³⁵ In each gallery are objects whose owners have been identified as victims of the Holocaust, starting with a desk from the office of Oświęcim resident Alfons Haberfeld who traveled to New York in 1939 and did not return once the war broke out. His family members who stayed in Oświęcim were later deported to the Krakow ghetto and perished in the death camp of Belzec.³⁶ The Haberfelds’ story illustrates that people did not just die in Auschwitz; they lived, operated businesses and raised their families in Oświęcim. This tactic of emphasizing specific personal belongings of those living during the onset, chaos and aftermath of Nazi Germany – used extensively throughout the exhibition – increases the emotional impact on visitors who begin to understand that the Holocaust’s victims were also people with families and stories that were cut short.

Most Holocaust museums dedicate limited space to pre-Holocaust Jewish life, yet *Auschwitz* carefully lays out centuries of Jewish history and culture in its museological retelling with the assumption that the majority of the exhibition’s visitors are non-Jewish and lack knowledge about Jewish culture. In the following galleries, the history of Judaism unfolds, educating visitors on Jewish traditions through objects, drawings and documents. The exhibition reproduces artworks from artist Bernard Picart’s 1723 series, *Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World*, depicting Jewish customs including the Passover seder and religious items such as tefillin and Torah scrolls.³⁷ In a nearby glass case, the audio

³⁴ Deborah Dwórk and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* (New York: W.W, Norton & Company), 18.

³⁵ Dwórk and Van Pelt, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present*, 33.

³⁶ Object label for *The Haberfelds*.

³⁷ Object label for *The work of Picart (1723)*.

guide describes a tallit that belonged to Auschwitz victim Solomon Krieser. The guide describes the tradition of wrapping Jews in their tallits when buried, noting visitors “shouldn’t be able to see this tallit, it should be with Solomon Krieser now, a dignity he was denied at Auschwitz.”³⁸ By this point in the exhibition, a format for acknowledging the previous ownership of the exhibition’s artifacts is established and is poised to access the emotions of visitors.

Juxtaposed with the celebrations of Jewish culture are reminders that anti-Judaism and antisemitic ideas date back to the pre-Enlightenment era. Wall text explains to visitors that in the Middle Ages, Christians blamed the crucifixion of Jesus on the Jewish people who should thus be treated “only in a state of misery – a condition that would provide proof of God’s judgment against the Children of Israel.” Part of this punishment, in addition to limiting Jewish activity in the economy, subjected Europe’s Jews to wear clothing or badges to distinguish their religion and prevent Christians from interacting with them. The exhibition displays an imperial proclamation from 1551 that orders Jews in Germany to don a yellow circle. This artifact was given to Nazi party high-ranking official and Hitler’s successor Hermann Göring as a birthday gift from Security Police chief Reinhard Heydrich in 1940.³⁹ This simple piece of paper devalues an entire group of people, with the rich and centuries-old traditions described previously, by requiring a yellow circle on their clothing that denotes Jews quite literally as a target. The 1551 proclamation’s claim of the unworthiness of Jews would only evolve ever so slightly to be represented as not a circle but a yellow star 400 years later when Göring received the present.

A separate sub-gallery titled “Jews and Non-Jews in Pre-WWII Europe” continues the discussion about the gradual increase of hatred towards Jews and plans to rid European society of them, such as German nationalist Paul de Lagarde’s idea of shipping eastern European Jews to

³⁸ Audio guide prompt for *Tallit (prayer shawl) and bag of Solomon Krieser (ca. 1910)*.

³⁹ Object label *A proclamation (1551/1940)*.

Madagascar to get rid of them.⁴⁰ Through presenting artifacts of the past, such as a post-medieval era document denouncing Jews, and the more recent past, such as a 1916 map of Madagascar, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*, communicates the repetition of history and solidifies the understanding that the hatred of Jews did not arise when Hitler rose to power. The exhibition provides an excellent definition of antisemitism, explaining that the ideology arose from preexisting anti-Judaism which constituted a judgment against the religious practices of Jews in the eyes of European Christians. Antisemitism, a wall label notes, regarded Jews as “racially different and, by extension, inherently inferior to other Europeans of ‘Aryan’ descent.”⁴¹ Offensive caricatures from the late nineteenth century accompany this definition, showing figures with exaggerated noses depicted as controlling the world and threatening European society. The visitors of *Auschwitz* are most likely to already know what antisemitism is. But antisemitism is often taught as a purely German-held prejudice, which prevents Americans, such as those walking through the exhibition at the Reagan Library, from understanding that early antisemitism also existed in the U.S. before the twentieth century.

At the Museum of Tolerance, the Holocaust exhibition’s main narrative method is video-based, with educational tableaux positioned among recreations of camp environments and glass cases of artifacts from the camps. Such tableaux, narrated by characters representing a researcher, a designer and a historian describe the phases of the Holocaust and the Nazis’ foundational ideologies. One educational tableau titled “Nazis Come to Power” describes the party’s momentum in the 1920s, displaying the dissemination of antisemitic publications such as the German-owned *Der Stürmer* tabloid. Other publications from around the world promoting the same stereotypes and conspiracies are also highlighted, including America’s own Henry Ford’s

⁴⁰ Object label for *Map of Madagascar (1916)*.

⁴¹ Object label *Antisemitism*.

The International Jew, a series of antisemitic booklets published in the 1920s in the States and around the world in various languages.⁴² Early artifacts of antisemitism in the U.S. are hard to bear and shameful. Acknowledgment of American involvement in Jewish prejudice is crucial, however, not only for historical accuracy but for providing a link to localized history, contradicting the idea that antisemitic behavior was not practiced in America. By continuing to maintain a Euro-centric discussion of these concepts in line with the creation of the exhibition by a European company, visitors at the Reagan Library and other U.S. venues that have hosted the exhibition cannot grasp that antisemitism grew in popularity everywhere and continues to exist everywhere.

In the same section highlighting the traditions of Europe's Jewry is a discussion of the history of the Roma people, of which twenty-three thousand were deported to Auschwitz with a mortality rate of 91%, the second smallest population of prisoners killed by ethnicity ahead of the fifteen thousand Soviet prisoners of war.⁴³ Edward Rothstein's review of the exhibit takes issue with this inclusion, as he claims it directs attention away from the primary persecuted group: the millions of Jews who perished.⁴⁴ As the first large-scale traveling exhibition on Auschwitz, the exhibition takes responsibility for identifying all groups of people persecuted in the vast German camp complex in Poland. Contrary to Rothstein's opinion, Jews are certainly not afterthoughts in this exhibition; the exhibition dedicates the most space to describing the experiences of Jewish and Polish victims and survivors with all quotes and survivor testimony videos in the exhibition attributed to Jews or Poles. For visitors who have seen exhibits at

⁴² Audio for *Nazis Come to Power*, in Holocaust exhibition at the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 14, 2024.

⁴³ Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 127.

⁴⁴ Rothstein, "An Auschwitz Exhibition Fails the Jews."

dedicated Holocaust museums, such as Holocaust Museum LA and the Museum of Tolerance, whose focus is solely on Jewish Holocaust victims, this amount of information about the Roma might come as a surprise but fits in line with the traveling exhibition's goal to address a gap in the Holocaust historical record that fails to describe non-Jewish victims who underwent the same experiences.

Explaining the Rise of Nazism and Enforcement of Nazi Policies

With education as one of the exhibition's primary intentions, *Auschwitz* wants to push the understanding of *why* the Holocaust – an event that would go on to serve as the definition of genocide – occurred, citing in the galleries after “Coexistence” the destruction and instability of Germany that led to the rise of Nazism and Hitler's all-powerful regime. From a narrative perspective, the exhibition's story flows smoothly and logically, explaining the events leading up to the Final Solution in generalized yet intellectual terms through the audio guide, wall text and object labels. A brief recap of German losses in World War I provides context for the best-known variant of antisemitism: Nazism. The exhibition's format mirrors the gradual progression and path to the growing popularity of Nazi ideologies. Just one year after the war, the exhibition shows that ideas promoting the scapegoating of Jews for Germany's defeat and war debts were already circulating. Archival photographs, quotes and letters emphasize the stirring of Hitler's conscience dating back to Hitler's attempted coup against the Weimar government in 1923 which resulted in his arrest, the writing of *Mein Kampf* in prison and the mobilization of the Nazi party. The many steps that resulted in the rise of Nazism are contextualized through greater world history, citing the Great Depression as the crisis that attracted Germany's civilians to the alternative, fascist government of the Nazis.⁴⁵ Set in front of an enlarged photo of a Nazi rally is

⁴⁵ Object label for *Nazism*.

a video of Hitler at one of these rallies, beaming at the mobilization of his ‘comrades;’ the audio guide notes that the men at the rallies “haven't been brainwashed or forced to attend. They’ve chosen to attend.”⁴⁶ In *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, all main actors of the Holocaust have an in-depth history, even the perpetrators. Emphasizing the characteristics of the perpetrators by hearing clips from Hitler’s speeches to the masses, visitors of the exhibition can draw parallels to similar, authoritarian governmental styles that continue to exist in the contemporary world.

While this realization comes slowly, visitors become aware of why so much space was dedicated to describing the Jews and Roma before World War II in the sub-galleries of Gallery 5, which detail the implementation of Nazi policy. These galleries show the further escalations of the discrimination and prejudice both groups faced in the pre-war period and decades prior. As part of a larger effort to rid Germany of these groups whom Hitler deemed as undesirable and asocial, early concentration camps were established as early as 1933 when Hitler came to power.⁴⁷ Moving through the exhibition, signature images of Nazi Germany begin to appear: a striped prisoner’s uniform worn in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, a chart showing prisoner markings such as the colored triangles and yellow stars that assigned a prisoner’s identity, the infamous 1935 Nuremberg Laws and a diagram outlining the permitted and forbidden types of marriages between Jews and non-Jews in Germany. The human aspect of the exhibition remains present, exhibiting the stories and objects of survivors, including the delicate birthday card Friedrich Hoyer sent to his wife from Dachau in 1934, grounding the exhibition from a personal level. Before the galleries that detail the events that occurred inside the concentration camp of Auschwitz, the exhibition returns to a discussion of the town of

⁴⁶ Audio guide prompt, number 12.

⁴⁷ Object label for *Gallery 5.2: Culling the Nation*.

Auschwitz in the context of the German annexation of Poland in 1939. A photograph shows women in 1940 who created signs in German to replace those existing in Poland. Oświęcim no longer belongs to its people but rather will become the site that kills them.

With so many existing Holocaust exhibitions and museums to use as examples, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. meets the educational requirements for a Holocaust exhibition, going above and beyond in many regards. As Dara Horn notes in her review of the exhibition during its 2019 stop at New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage for *The Atlantic*, *Auschwitz* is "thorough, professional, tasteful, engaging, comprehensive, clear," a museum show that "checks all the boxes" for what a Holocaust exhibit should include.⁴⁸ The exhibition explains the ghetto system and the Warsaw ghetto that housed those eventually sent to Auschwitz, the 1942 Wannsee conference during which this mass killing plan was devised, the German invasion of the USSR and the original use of Auschwitz as a place to torture Soviet prisoners of war. All of these exhibition elements either exist or should exist in a narrative Holocaust exhibition or museum. Yet, the consequence of the overabundance of information and artifacts, while educationally rich and teeming with emotion, is clear: moving through Galleries 1 through 6 out of the 19 galleries in the entire exhibition takes visitors over an hour if they listen to each of the audio guide prompts and fully engage with all objects.

Exhibition Messaging

Exhibition director Luis Ferreiro claims that when he plans an exhibition, the intended messages of the exhibition to be left with visitors are not the main emphasis. Rather, the main emphasis is storytelling and the process of linking Musealia's audio guide with the exhibited objects, a formula that the traveling exhibition company considers to be its signature. This does

⁴⁸ Dara Horn, "Auschwitz Is Not a Metaphor," *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away/591082/>.

not mean that Ferreiro finds no meaning in studying the history of this Polish town and German concentration camp. In an interview with the author, Ferreiro said he believes that Auschwitz itself is a “message from the twentieth century to us citizens of the twenty-first century; it’s a century of horrors.”⁴⁹ Despite Ferreiro emphasizing the importance of studying Auschwitz in the twenty-first century to bolster visitor empathy and identify modern forms of prejudice, the exhibition does not reiterate these ideas in its content. Any messages wished to be imparted upon visitors in the exhibit are so implicit and generalized that they could apply to any act of prejudice in history. Primo Levi’s quote that introduces the first gallery of primary objects, the first of several survivor quotes throughout the exhibition, could reference any act of violence anywhere if unattributed to a Holocaust survivor. Unlike museums such as the Museum of Tolerance, whose goal of fostering tolerance is clearly outlined in its name, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*, treads lightly in this regard, avoiding messaging that explicitly encourages visitors to acknowledge modern instances of antisemitism and fascist governments.

Rather than promoting a specific lesson about the everlasting issue of antisemitism, the main message expressed in the first few galleries of *Auschwitz* is one often discussed by Holocaust and memory studies historians when examining the concept of Auschwitz as the most symbolic and significant Nazi concentration camp. Affirming that Auschwitz was a real place, in addition to challenging Holocaust deniers, promotes the study of the Holocaust through a lens of reality. In the journal article “Representing Auschwitz,” Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi explores literary representations of Auschwitz through survivor-written memoirs and other media that tend to either see Auschwitz either as a black hole of sorts, another world of evil or, on the other hand, a

⁴⁹ Luis Ferreiro in discussion with the author on Zoom, November 20, 2023.

real place in which survivors experienced years of often banal yet insufferable daily life in the camp. In the first half of the exhibition's content that describes the lead-up to Auschwitz's use as a concentration camp where over one million Jews were murdered, the exhibition takes the approach in representing Auschwitz that Ezrahi describes as "affirmation that Auschwitz was a fact, a real place or a real event," a line of thinking that has become "the constitutive base of late twentieth-century ethical discourse."⁵⁰ The maps of Poland and detailed stories of Oświęcim's residents and culture in the first galleries of the exhibit work to ground the exhibit in its prior history, in Oświęcim's Polish history rather than its typical association with German-instigated violence.

Conclusion

The early galleries of Holocaust exhibits must convince visitors to care about this atrocity, often using strategies such as showing visitors a preview of what's to come later on in the exhibition, as seen in the beginning gallery that retells the discovery of Auschwitz in 1945. The second component of making visitors care about the millions who perished at the hands of Nazis is educating visitors on the rich history and traditions of the Jewish people that were lost as well as the centuries-old prejudice of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. The exhibition does both of these things rather well, paying the utmost attention to detail. Yet, throughout the first galleries, Auschwitz still feels very far away both geographically and symbolically with the absence of any local history connecting Simi Valley to Auschwitz and all content described from a solely European, rather than global, perspective. This limitation is partially due to the spatial restraints of the Reagan Library's exhibition space that did not allow for an additional gallery connecting Reagan with the Second World War, exhibiting the tension Reagan's actions during his

⁵⁰ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Representing Auschwitz," *History and Memory* 7, no. 2 (1995): 144, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618691>.

presidency caused between the former president and Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel. Among the galleries dedicated to providing an in-depth history of Oświęcim and Germany before the Holocaust, there is little reinforcement of a message that will guide visitors throughout their visit in *Auschwitz* or reminders that the origins of the Holocaust should serve as warning signs for a modern population that wishes to prevent genocide's occurrence. Instead, the beginning galleries establish Oświęcim as a place, an ordinary town – albeit one on the other side of the map from the Reagan Library – which was transformed into a factory of death under extraordinary, yet historically-backed circumstances.

Chapter 2: Representing Inconceivable Horror: Graphic Images, Survivor Testimony and Museological Retellings of Life in Concentration Camps

Introduction

In addition to displaying hundreds of artifacts, *Auschwitz* approaches its retelling of life and death inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex through a host of elements: videos of survivor testimony, three-dimensional models of the camp, quotations by survivors, photographs, and artworks. At this stage in the exhibition, around an hour of audio guide script has already explained the history of the town of Oświęcim, World War I, the rise of Nazism, the first concentration camps and the German invasion of Poland. The audio guide approaches its second hour and the Holocaust has finally begun. Missing from the story of life in the camps are images of the atrocities that occurred. In the shadow of a decades-long debate involving museum designers and historians over whether to display such atrocity photographs in Holocaust museums, *Auschwitz* barely displays any, opting for other documentary methods to capture the horrific mass killings due to the lack of atrocity images taken by SS men in Auschwitz.⁵¹ This choice reflects a sensitivity towards visitors and survivors and makes the exhibition more accessible to younger audiences. At the same time, it is not fully explained to visitors, a reflection of the exhibition's occasional lack of explicit context in its approach of curating a highly educational exhibit with the goal of displaying as many objects and images as possible.

As in the previous galleries, visitors are expected to read information about camp life without having many opportunities for interactivity. Such opportunities, which might appear in the form of touch screens, interactive interviews of survivors, or life-sized recreations of the

⁵¹ Franziska Reiniger, "Inside the Epicenter of the Horror - Photographs of the Sonderkommando," Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/epicenter-horror-photographs-sonderkommando.html>.

camp environments, give visitors the opportunity to dive deeper in their Holocaust education and connect further with the exhibition material in a way that feels more profound than reading text on a wall. Compared to other Holocaust exhibits, opportunity for engagement and physical connection during this section, which educates visitors on arguably the most violent and murderous part of the Auschwitz story, is lacking because the visitor engagement is intended to stem from viewing the primary objects themselves.

Images of the Holocaust

In *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.*, Holocaust-era images are reproduced in various scales to tell a visual story of Auschwitz, from photographs of women and children stepping out from train cars to images of the SS men who operated the camp and more recognizable images of Auschwitz's prisoners in striped uniforms with shaved heads. Photographs accompany the hundreds of original objects from Auschwitz and Nazi Germany, either serving as evidence on their own or used as a backdrop for displays of items referenced in the photographs; life-sized images of Jews and Poles arriving at Auschwitz occupy entire walls near a glass case of their suitcases and belongings that were left behind (Figure 4). Musealia sourced these photographs from Yad Vashem, USHMM and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum with many images of Auschwitz's victims hailing from an infamous collection of photos from Auschwitz called the Auschwitz Album. A book titled *The Auschwitz Album*, published by Yad Vashem and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, contains all photos from the album as well as an in-depth story of the album's discovery.

On the day the Americans arrived to liberate the Buchenwald-Dora camp on April 9, 1945, the photo album was discovered by former Auschwitz inmate Lili Jacobs near a bed in an abandoned SS barrack. When Jacobs looked through the album, she began to recognize the

photos of the prisoners inside: some were her relatives, others hailed from her hometown of



Fig. 4 A display of photographs from the Lili Jacobs album behind prisoners' suitcases. (Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2023)

Bilke. Jacobs returned home in July 1945 and her neighbors also took part in identifying their family and friends in photos in the album. In the years to follow, the album made its way to several institutions around the world to be duplicated and published, and ultimately displayed at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and Yad Vashem, where the original album is permanently housed.⁵² One survivor's accidental discovery unearthed a vast archive of images that would serve as the dominant representation of camp life in Auschwitz – and one of the main sources of images for the exhibition – from the moment Jews arrived in cattle cars to the moments before they entered the gas chambers.

⁵² Israel Gutman and Belah Guterman, eds., *The Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*. Translated by Naftali Greenwood and Jerzy Michalovic, Second and Updated edition (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 76-86.

Despite the album's hundreds of photographs, none of the photos show the actual killing process in Auschwitz. The SS men operating Auschwitz who took those photos did not document the gas chambers of the camp, most likely so that the outside world would not learn about this killing center. Only four images, secretly photographed in 1944 by Alberto Errera, a member of the *Sonderkommando* that consisted of a group of Jewish prisoners forced to burn and bury the bodies of those killed in the gas chambers, illustrate the actual killing process.⁵³ The exhibition displays this set of four photographs that depict women walking towards the gas chambers and burning piles of bodies. The photos were smuggled outside of the camp with the intention of showing the world the horrific acts happening in the camps.⁵⁴ The set of photos in the exhibition are reproductions of the original photographs, and from afar look unidentifiable as they were taken in secret and in haste. This is the only time atrocity photographs from the Auschwitz camp complex are presented in the exhibition. These are the only images of their kind in the entire visual archive of Auschwitz, except for photos taken and staged during and after liberation, because the Auschwitz Album has none.

The Sonderkommando photos are not the only instance in which visitors of *Auschwitz* bear witness to the murder of Auschwitz's prisoners. Later on, the exhibition describes the evacuation death marches from Auschwitz, ordered by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in late fall of 1944. He also ordered the destruction of its murder facilities.⁵⁵ A film in the exhibition that describes the march using survivor testimony and images states at the beginning:

⁵³ Reiniger, "Inside the Epicenter of the Horror - Photographs of the Sonderkommando."

⁵⁴ Object label for *Four photographs taken by Alberto Errera (1944)*, In exhibition *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA, Seen on: January 19, 2024. All of the following cited object labels in this chapter are attributed to *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. unless stated to be exhibited at Holocaust Museum Los Angeles or the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

⁵⁵ Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan Van Pelt, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 123.

“There are no known pictures of the Death March from Auschwitz. The following film is comprised of archival imagery of death marches from other camps.”⁵⁶ In the film, survivors describe the terrible trek, noting how they witnessed those who had died in the cold on the side of the path; on the screen, an image of Holocaust victims who perished in the cold of the death marches is shown for around ten seconds. Here, the exhibition’s curators felt it was necessary to display an atrocity image, even though the featured image does not depict victims from Auschwitz and goes against Musealia’s commitment to not show atrocity images. The online ticketing page for the exhibition’s run at the Reagan Library ensures that there will be “no gratuitous depictions of violence” out of “profound respect for the victims, but also for [the Library’s] visitors” so that visitors can “safely explore this history.”⁵⁷ In the author’s interview with Director of Musealia Luis Ferreiro, Ferreiro explained that other images in the exhibition depict just as much violence as atrocity images would without being so difficult to view.⁵⁸ There is truth to this statement, and the other images in the exhibition, such as one that shows naked prisoners awaiting their “showers” in the gas chambers, reference parts of the Auschwitz story that are inherently violent. In order to ensure that a wide population of visitors from a large age range attend the exhibition, images depicting the atrocities of the Holocaust are avoided. Yet, isn’t the story of Auschwitz a story of gratuitous, unnecessary violence perpetrated by a group grounded by illogical ideas about Aryan racial superiority? The entire exhibition is about unnecessary violence from the explanations of early antisemitism to the first concentration camps established and the medical experiments performed; avoidance of such violence in a Holocaust exhibition is impossible.

⁵⁶ Object label for *The Death March*.

⁵⁷ “Online Ticket Sales,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/special-exhibits/auschwitz-exhibition/the-exhibition/>.

⁵⁸ Luis Ferreiro in discussion with the author on Zoom, November 20, 2023.

Displaying such atrocity images has been a contested topic in Holocaust studies and museology for decades, a subject with which modern exhibits grapple. Susan Crane argues against the use of atrocity images, as viewing such images often “revivifies the perpetrator’s gaze, re-enacting the dehumanization and terrorizing of the victim.”⁵⁹ Crane is not incorrect in noting that most atrocity images depict and validate the perpetrator’s point of view. Hence, atrocity photos taken by fellow victims such as the set of photos captured by Sonderkommando member Albert Errera that are on display in *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* provide an alternate view of the atrocities, since they were captured by victims with the intention of raising awareness as to what was happening in Auschwitz. Unfortunately these survivor-made images are sparse. Yet Crane offers an anecdote that suggests an alternate approach to showing atrocity images taken with malicious intent by the Nazis is to go an extra step to identify victims and survivors in the photos. In 1993, Auschwitz survivor Stephen Bleyer found a book of Auschwitz liberation photographs in which he found an image of himself as a young boy. Bleyer researched the image to find the original housed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and asked not for the removal of the image but for the image to include an updated caption that identified him by name. Crane implores historians and students to do the work of identification and further education before recirculating or even learning about such atrocity images.⁶⁰ This process of identification offers a solution to the question of showing the violent images captured by SS photographers that *Auschwitz* does not take up. *The Auschwitz Album*, the facsimile book created by Yad Vashem and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, includes the images from the album that are reproduced in the exhibition but acknowledges the work of survivors in the immediate

⁵⁹ Susan A. Crane, “Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography,” *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008): 311, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478766>.

⁶⁰ Crane, “Choosing Not to Look,” 327.

post-war period up until the 1980s who helped identify victims in the photographs. In a photograph of Jewish prisoners assigned to slave labor in the camp, the exhibition's object label for the photograph reads: "Hungarian Jewish men after their registration into the camp (1944)."⁶¹ Yet in the corresponding book, two of these men in the photograph have been identified by survivors as Shimshon Falkovis and Istvan Balasza; they are not just "Hungarian Jewish men" as the object label in the exhibition defines them.⁶² Choosing not to name the victims of Auschwitz makes the viewing experience for visitors as violently voyeuristic as the experience of the perpetrators who photographed victims. For an exhibition that explores Auschwitz in such a high level of detail in so many other regards, this lack of identification feels remiss.

Despite the exhibition's effort to display hundreds of primary objects, its galleries often fail to point to the larger historical significance of focusing on this particular concentration camp and the lessons visitors should learn from their experience, especially in the context of camp photographs. In such cases, properly labeled and explained atrocity photographs could provide an important layer of educational richness and support of the exhibition's overarching goal. The names, family histories and artifacts of Auschwitz's perpetrators are specifically made known. Along with the desk of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss are photos of his family enjoying a splendid afternoon in 1943, with naked, blonde-headed German children splashing around their home's backyard in the Auschwitz I complex, just under two miles from the Birkenau crematoria.⁶³ Learning about the Holocaust's perpetrators is important and most Holocaust exhibitions do not include the primary artifacts belonging to perpetrators. In the group of images of Höss's family joyfully frolicking at their Auschwitz summer house, however, there should be

⁶¹ Object label for *Hungarian Jewish men after their registration into the camp (1944)*.

⁶² Gutman and Guterman, *The Auschwitz Album*, 207.

⁶³ Object label for *The Höss family in their garden (1943)*.

a photo of Rudolph Höss's fate after Auschwitz. Documentary photographer and lecturer Janina Struk notes in her book *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* that Höss was hanged at Auschwitz in 1947 after a trial; the photo of his hanging is "unquestionably symbolic" illustrating the murder of the Commandant of Auschwitz as "the last death of Auschwitz and the last public execution on Polish soil."⁶⁴ Yet due to the exhibit's policy of not showing violent images, this powerful photograph is not shown, not even alongside the description of Höss's eventual hanging in the exhibition's slideshow about perpetrators and their fates in the liberation section later on in the exhibit.⁶⁵ All visitors will remember of Rudolph Höss are photos of him in uniform and at his summer home with his family, smiling gleefully while Jews are being killed in proximity. There is little value in educating visitors on the names of perpetrators in Auschwitz and displaying their personal belongings without teaching visitors how these SS members were viewed in the public eye during the post-war period: as criminals who faced consequences as extreme as the death penalty. Here, more valuable lessons on human responsibility, aided with the visual power of the violent photograph of Höss's hanging, could have been drawn from the exhibition if not for its content sensitivity.

Alternate Presentations of Atrocity in Holocaust Exhibitions

Other exhibits see atrocity images as crucial to the Holocaust narrative. At Holocaust Museum Los Angeles, not only are atrocity images shown in sections about daily life in Nazi concentration camps, but they are also valued as important educational tools. The images in the museum are blown up to a larger scale on the panels of each separate gallery that details a period in Holocaust history. At the top of each panel is a simple descriptive label that explains the

⁶⁴ Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust : Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 123.

⁶⁵ Object label for *The fate of the key SS personnel of the Auschwitz concentration camp*.

subject of the panel with a prompt to the corresponding audio guide entry with more information about the photograph and historical context. One of the Sonderkommando atrocity images is presented on a slightly less than life-sized scale and titled ‘Burning Pits;’ above the Sonderkommando picture taken in Auschwitz is a photo of piles of bones inside the crematoria under the simple label ‘Crematoria.’⁶⁶ This set of photos is displayed in plain sight at the end wall of the U-shaped exhibition and, if needed, parents of young children could quickly walk past these atrocity images without children viewing such violence. Yet arguably the most grotesque atrocity image in the permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum Los Angeles which features a pile of mangled bodies discovered by soldiers during the liberation of Buchenwald, is placed on a panel that visitors can only see if they are inside the Liberation gallery, thus shielding such atrocity from the eyes of young children and visitors who wish not to see this violence, yet providing this undisputable evidence of the Holocaust to the eyes that wish to see it.⁶⁷ Holocaust Museum LA sees these atrocity photographs as an important extension of Holocaust education and its larger mission outlined on its website: “Holocaust Museum LA continues its mission to commemorate those who perished, honor those who survived, educate about the Holocaust and inspire a more dignified and humane world.”⁶⁸ Without the presentation of these harrowing photographs, the museum believes its retelling of the Holocaust would have been incomplete, arguing for the display of challenging images as vital to the museum experience.

Survivor Testimony

Although it does not show graphic photographs, *Auschwitz* uses numerous victim and

⁶⁶ Permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 15, 2024.

⁶⁷ Permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 15, 2024.

⁶⁸ “Mission & History,” Holocaust Museum LA, <https://www.holocaustmuseumla.org/mission-and-history>.

survivor-created drawings and paintings as forms of testimony. The artworks by David Olère, Jan Komski and Felix Nussbaum, created both during and after the liberation of Auschwitz, are spread throughout throughout the exhibition to explain the lives of prisoners. Komski, who survived Auschwitz, produced drawings in the 1970s that are arguably the most violent images in the exhibition, sketching the shooting of prisoners by the SS and images of corpses piled inside the crematoria. A small section of a wall in the exhibition in which Komski's drawings are first shown to visitors includes a short biography of the artist printed on a card so small that visitors must be within two feet to read. It notes that "the many drawings he created after liberation provide important visual testimony of life in the camp."⁶⁹ The artworks on their own are very powerful artifacts that emphasize how survivors used art-making practices to cope with the trauma of their time in the concentration camps. Yet, a proper explanation of why artwork is the only medium to depict the bodies of victims should be included in the exhibition. These powerful artworks get lost among all of the other artifacts fighting for a space on the walls, losing their sense of firsthand testimonial power.

Amidst many primary objects in *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* that are weathered with rust and wear, several of the objects' owners remain unidentified. In such instances, an entire family perished and did not live to identify their few personal items brought to the camp. Alternatively, prisoners' belongings brought with them on their journey to Auschwitz might have been taken by the SS and eventually burned when the SS vacated the camp in 1945 and attempted to torch all evidence. In a gallery titled "The Lethal Core," one of these unattributed items, a child's shoe with a sock tucked inside of it, is highlighted in a glass case (Figure 5).

⁶⁹ Object label for *Jan Komski (1941)*.



Fig. 5 A child's shoe with a sock left inside stands before a recreation of a gas chamber door

(Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2023)

The audio guide prompt for this object notes, “This little shoe bears witness to the killing process” and tells the story of how a child or parent consciously tucked a sock into his shoe before the child’s “shower” in the gas chamber.⁷⁰ These unidentified objects speak for the thousands of fellow victims, the thousands of other children who also anticipated to return to their shoes after their “showers,” who cannot speak about them. In a similar vein, the recorded testimony of survivors in the exhibition speaks for the victims of Auschwitz whose deaths rendered them voiceless.

The amount of testimony in the exhibit is attributed to the rush to record Holocaust survivor testimony that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s as video recording technologies advanced and the number of living survivors dwindled. In the article, “Oral History

⁷⁰ Object label for *Child's shoe with sock, 1944*.

at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting,” Tony Kushner notes that by 2000, there were over “100,000 Jewish testimonies collected – in written, oral, and video form.”⁷¹ Every gallery in the middle of *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* features tens of survivor quotes and video testimonies, actively commemorating the victims who lived through the experiences about which other Auschwitz survivors now speak. Quotes by Viktor Frankl, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and other survivors, many of whom have written memoirs about their lives in Auschwitz, line the walls.

A distinctive aspect of the prisoner experience in Auschwitz further increases the amount and believability of survivor testimony in the exhibition: the permanent physical traces the camp left on the bodies of prisoners, in particular the prisoner numbers tattooed on their forearms. In an examination of uses of survivor testimony in international Holocaust exhibits, Steffi de Jong’s chapter, “Exhibiting: The Witness to History as a Museum Object,” in her book, *The Witness as Object: Video Testimonies in Holocaust Museums*, presents a discussion of various modes of displaying Holocaust testimony and the effects of these displays. De Jong identifies Holocaust survivors as “authentic representatives of the past,” as “the traces that the past has left on their bodies authenticate their testimonies.”⁷² Unique to survivors of other Nazi concentration camps, Auschwitz survivors subjected to slave labor in the camp carry very visible physical traces of the past on their bodies in the form of numbered tattoos.⁷³ Permanent, physical marking solidifies their witness authenticity that visitors cannot deny. A gallery in the camp life section covering

⁷¹ Tony Kushner, “Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting,” *Oral History* 29, no. 2 (2001): 84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179711>.

⁷² Steffi de Jong, “Exhibiting: The Witness to History as a Museum Object” in *The Witness as Object: Video Testimonies in Holocaust Museums* (New York, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2018), 115, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znzsd.10>.

⁷³ “Stamps for tattooing prisoners discovered,” Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/stamps-for-tattooing-prisoners-discovered,1057.html>.

the topic of medical experiments to which prisoners were subjected without consent includes a quote by Auschwitz survivor Lidia Maksymowicz in which she identifies her number: 70072. On a nearby wall, a particularly moving testimonial film shows survivors unveiling their tattoos, everyday reminders of horrific past trauma. Each testimony film compiles the experiences of several named survivors of Auschwitz from a variety of European countries, shedding light on each of their individual experiences during different phases of camp life. Visitors are encouraged to sit at benches in front of the projected films and listen to the testimonies through their audio guides that synchronize with the audio of the films.⁷⁴ Rather than passively reading text about camp life in Auschwitz, these testimonial films, which are each under five minutes each in length, aim to actively engage visitors through listening. The concept of survivorship of this atypical event brings visitors closer in, promoting the idea that if survivors have lived to tell their stories in a time of videotaping technologies, perhaps the events of Auschwitz did not occur so long ago.

However, the exhibition's aim for visitors to patiently listen to the survivor testimony films in *Auschwitz* might be overly aspirational. With no single dedicated room to exclusively show survivor testimony films, testimony sections are sandwiched in between other artifacts and images that distract visitors from the stories recalled by survivors. Once visitors reach the exhibition's section about Auschwitz as a concentration camp, they might feel tired after spending the previous hour learning about pre-war Jewish traditions, Hitler's rise to power and the camp's original use to torture Soviet POW's; thus, they might be inclined to unplug their audio guide and not listen.

⁷⁴ *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*

Interactive Testimony

In contrast, Holocaust Museum LA approaches testimony in a more interactive way, developing strategies on concentrating survivor testimony to acknowledge the weight of survivors' experiences and draw visitors to listen. At Holocaust Museum LA, multiple opportunities to hear testimony arise during a walk through the permanent gallery. The open space dedicated to education about the various camps is dotted with freestanding touch screens, each representing a concentration camp. Visitors can interact with any of the touch screens, sifting through the different subtopics related to each camp: "Introduction," "The Camp," "Statistics," "Victims," "Survivors," "Perpetrators" and "Artistic Responses."⁷⁵ By clicking on each subtopic, visitors are presented with slideshows of images and testimonies from survivors of each camp to which they can listen using their audio guide. There is no waiting for a section of the exhibition to clear of visitors in order to view a testimony film or read a quote, yet the permanent exhibition does line its gallery space with banners of testimony that describe the lives of victims and photos from their pre-Holocaust lives.

Arguably the most impactful form of hearing testimony is conversing with a living Holocaust survivor, an experience growing more rare each year as the number of living Holocaust survivors dwindles. *Dimensions in Testimony*, an exhibit at Holocaust Museum LA, provides the next best thing in the form of an interactive video of Auschwitz survivor Renée Firestone.⁷⁶ The exhibit is a project of the USC Shoah Foundation, an institute founded by *Schindler's List* director Steven Spielberg in 1994 with the goal of recording interviews with survivors of the Holocaust to "preserve their testimonies, and make them accessible for research,

⁷⁵ Permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 15, 2024.

⁷⁶ "What Did Renée See," Holocaust Museum LA, <http://www.holocaustmuseumla.org/dimensions-in-testimony>.

education, and outreach for the betterment of humankind in perpetuity.”⁷⁷ *Dimensions in Testimony* differs from the standard audio-visual interviews with survivors shown in *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* in the way that it uses advanced filming techniques to present 1,000-question interviews with survivors of the Holocaust and various instances of genocide, allowing museum goers to ask their own questions to survivors. The exhibit is currently on view at twelve Holocaust and Jewish Museums around the world with plans to expand and make more interactive biographies of survivors of genocide available to the public.⁷⁸ Adjacent to the floating stands that deliver testimony from the camps at Holocaust Museum LA is a small, glass room that seats three visitors at a time to experience this special exhibit. As visitors enter the room, they make direct eye contact with the life-sized image of Firestone. Holocaust Museum LA invites visitors to ask questions of their choice to Firestone but also provides a handout with various question prompts. The sets of questions are tailored to the different ages of the museum’s visitors, with questions for eight- to eleven-year-olds such as “What is antisemitism?” to questions for all ages such as “How would you describe Auschwitz?”⁷⁹ Once visitors ask questions, within a few seconds Firestone speaks and responds to the best of her ability. This level of connection between survivors and visitors is not achieved in *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* even though the concept of *Dimensions in Testimony*, especially the use of a pre-recorded interview with an Auschwitz survivor, falls in line with the exhibition’s title. However, it is unclear as to whether this exhibit could travel easily as *Auschwitz* makes its way through its global tour destinations. In a hyperdigital age, such interview technologies provide exciting opportunities to dive deeper into Holocaust education.

⁷⁷ “About Us,” USC Shoah Foundation, <https://sfi.usc.edu/about>.

⁷⁸ “Dimensions in Testimony,” USC Shoah Foundation, <https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>.

⁷⁹ Permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 15, 2024.

Experiential Elements

The power of testimony as a method to describe the atrocities of the Holocaust and visitors' belief in the truth of survivors' words has long been established. A second layer in not only making visitors believe in the reality of concentration camps but also in helping them understand what those difficult times were like falls into the hands of museum curators. With a knowledge of the facets of visitor experiences, museum professionals introduce changes in the exhibit's environment and architecture that are both exciting for visitors as well as educational. Experiential elements safely communicate glimmers of the inconceivable horrors to visitors whilst maintaining an engaging and didactic purpose. In *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.*, the layout and presentation methods remain unchanged as the exhibition progresses to explain the implementation of the Final Solution, aside from one gallery about medical experiments subjected upon prisoners which is encased in a wooden reproduction of an Auschwitz barrack.⁸⁰ In order to harbor empathy, visitors should be put in the metaphorical shoes of victims and survivors. In a discussion of the design of USHMM, Edward Linenthal explains how the museum's visitors feel removed from an American space in Washington D.C. with artifacts including the shoes of victims that are displayed without a glass case and smelt by visitors. An exhibition element used by many Holocaust exhibits, including Holocaust Museum LA, allows visitors to walk through or sit in a German rail car and understand the space constraints of this mode of transport.⁸¹ Linenthal argues that "these visceral experiences are designed to reduce the distance between European Holocaust sites and an outpost of Holocaust memory" and in doing so "reduce the space between the living and dead."⁸² The absence of any exhibition design that

⁸⁰ Permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: January 15, 2024.

⁸¹ Edward T. Linenthal, "The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1994): 428, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713271>.

⁸² Linenthal, "The Boundaries of Memory," 429.

achieves this in *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* raises questions about whether the exhibition's title reflects its content accurately. The exhibition's transition from the beginning of the discrimination of Europe's Jews to the implementation of Extermination through Labor and gas chambers is subtle, marked only by a chunk of wall text. Discerning the exact date in Auschwitz history that this change occurred proves difficult without the use of a dramatic altering of the exhibition layout and sensory elements. Is viewing and reading materials about Auschwitz sufficient to bring visitors as close to the concentration camp in Poland as possible?

At the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, nearly a visitor's entire experience in the Holocaust exhibit is experiential. Upon the start of the tour, visitors are given the identification card of a victim whose story they will follow throughout the exhibition, eventually learning their victim's fate. The tour, which is completed in under 90 minutes, guides visitors through a series of rooms that completely immerse visitors in each setting from a gallery that recreates a pre-war German street to one that evokes the starkness of the gas chambers. Narration of the Holocaust story plays from loudspeakers rather than audio guides, ensuring that visitors hear every part of the story. Visitors place themselves in the story of the victim on their identification card from start to finish. Interspersed within the different rooms are educational tableaux that look like classrooms that play educational videos with archival footage to explain how the Holocaust happened.

Upon explaining the implementation of the Final Solution, visitors walk to a gallery in which the floor's texture has changed from smooth to rough concrete, the lighting has dimmed and a large reproduction of an open gate adorned with barbed wire stands before them. A placard placed on a faux brick wall explains the arrival of Jews to the concentration camps: "Millions

passed through gates like these, never to return.”⁸³ Visitors cross the threshold of humanity and inhumanity, of life and death. A prisoner’s camp uniform, locks of prisoners’ hair and medical tools used on prisoners from the camps, displayed next to a small-scale reproduction of Auschwitz-Birkenau, are historical artifacts that authentically represent the Holocaust, reminding visitors of the reality of this event that exists in tandem with the faux reproduction of the Auschwitz gate.



Fig. 6 At the Museum of Tolerance, visitors walk through either an “Able-Bodied” or “Children and Others” tunnel to simulate the selection process. (Photo by Stephanie Gerson, January 18, 2024)

After visitors walk through either an “Able-Bodied” or “Children and Others” faux brick tunnel to simulate the selection process, they arrive at a concrete gallery representative of the gas chambers (Figure 6). In this room, archival footage and some atrocity images are projected onto the walls as visitors sit and watch. Through loudspeakers, survivor testimony plays in the room

⁸³ The Holocaust Exhibit in the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: October 22, 2023.

before visitors exit to watch a film about liberation. The timed tour format with minimal objects moves visitors in under two hours rather than exhausting them with reading.

This blended approach of artifacts, experiences and testimony is what Andrew Hoskins calls a “layering” of memory in which different layers of memory stemming from different times collaborate to authenticate each other.⁸⁴ Many of the testimony films in *Auschwitz* make reference to photographs and artifacts that are exhibited nearby, linking the object to a story. For the extensive amount of survivor testimony in *Auschwitz* to be the most convincing and emotionally effective, it could be paired with the aforementioned experiential exhibition elements that make visitors understand the experiences of survivors because they themselves have sat inside a reproduction of a cattle car, as shown at Holocaust Museum LA or walked through ‘gates’ of Auschwitz, as recreated at the Museum of Tolerance. In *Auschwitz*, there are attempts to vary the visitor experience in galleries about camp life. The wooden barrack that surrounds one gallery adds a dimension of tangible history back into the exhibition. Sound effects in the audio tour recreate the sounds of trains arriving at Auschwitz for a brief moment.⁸⁵ Yet for the most part, the exhibition’s objects, even its three-dimensional recreations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex and gas chamber doors, feel like static objects rather than ones with which visitors can interact. For an exhibition without atrocity images, which in themselves have the power to evoke strong emotions in visitors, the curators of *Auschwitz* could have leaned more on other methods to boost visitors’ emotional and educational engagement.

Even if the goal of *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* is to influence visitors to eventually see Auschwitz for themselves at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, which organized the exhibit with Musealia, bringing the artifacts of Auschwitz to local communities

⁸⁴ De Jong, “Exhibiting: The Witness to History as a Museum Object,” 125.

⁸⁵ *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*

should also mean bringing a sense of the Auschwitz experience, replicating some of the environments that originally housed these artifacts. Such a display, while facing the risk of being non-serious and kitschy, could also help visitors understand the historical significance of objects which is often difficult to discern in the overcrowded gallery space of the exhibition's run at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Alison Landsberg writes extensively about the effect of immersive Holocaust exhibits on visitors, defining the Holocaust museum and exhibit as a "transferential space" that allows for visitors to form "experiential relationships with events through which they themselves did not live."⁸⁶ The Holocaust-era objects in *Auschwitz* do transfer some emotional power onto visitors on their own. In the Death Marches gallery, a blanket that identified survivor Siegfried Ferdid shared with other prisoners during the freezing nights of the march instills a heaviness in the hearts of visitors.⁸⁷ Yet, when visitors walk through designed museum spaces that simulate the same environments that camp victims lived through, these memories form feelings of true empathy, memories that Landsberg refers to as "prosthetic" memories as the events of the Holocaust will never be our own.⁸⁸ The memories visitors form at *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.* fade away quicker in the challenge of remembering the individual artifacts and the text printed on the wall in an exhibition with so many of both, in every gallery.

Conclusion

In these galleries about life in the concentration camp of Auschwitz, the exhibition prioritizes disseminating historical information over fostering emotion and engagement in line with the exhibition's goal of providing the most in-depth history of the site of Auschwitz. In

⁸⁶ Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): 66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488559>.

⁸⁷ Object label for *Blanket (1940s)*.

⁸⁸ Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory," 85.

doing so, the exhibition also censors its content, abstaining – though not entirely consistently – from showing atrocity images. Despite other Holocaust institutions' use of atrocity images as an educational tool for visitors in understanding the torture of Jews by the SS, *Auschwitz* attempts to make up for this lack by showing survivor-drawn images of the horror. The illustrations by Jan Kowski and David Olère seep with testimonial power but, along with the ample number of videos of survivor testimony, they are not given the dedicated space to reflect their importance. The galleries about daily life in the camp are devoid of interactive or experiential elements whose presence in other Holocaust exhibits scholars claim to foster a deeper level of understanding of the Holocaust and bridge the gap between that past and the visitors' present. Such experiences for visitors not only foster empathy by forming museum memories in such experiential spaces, they also align with the title of this traveling exhibition, making the Holocaust feel real, recent and lived.

Chapter 3: Beyond the Exhibition's Walls: Designing Holocaust Exhibitions to Prompt Reflection and, Ultimately, Action

Introduction

Holocaust exhibitions are usually designed to educate visitors on this Nazi-perpetrated genocide that caused six million European Jews to perish and commemorate the lives lost during this violent period. Another common aim is to inspire visitors to use the knowledge gained in these exhibitions to acknowledge modern forms of prejudiced behavior and genocidal policy, become active bystanders, and prevent future hatred. With the continuation of acts of antisemitism around the world during contemporary times often thought to be more tolerant and accepting of differences, Holocaust exhibitions and dedicated museums are seen to be more important than ever as spaces that 'train' people to be more understanding and tolerant, translating the lessons learned in the exhibition into their own lives. Curating a visitor's last few minutes in a Holocaust exhibit to continue a larger conversation about antisemitism and discrimination proves to be a very challenging task, yet an extremely important one. Space should be granted to visitors to reflect upon the information they have learned inside the exhibit and sit with this information, acknowledging the sheer scale of the Holocaust and the ideas and actions that led to it. Additionally, victims should be adequately commemorated, and the lasting experiences of survivors should be recognized. In the moments before exiting the exhibition and before a visitor fully exits the institution, core messages are imparted to them that will shape their overall opinions of their visit with the opportunity to point them to ways in which they can further educate themselves and stand up to hate. After being inundated with information and images of violence and suffering for somewhere between two to four hours, there is little space or opportunity at the end of the exhibition for visitors of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far*

Away. to pause and reflect. The exhibition closes with the end of the Holocaust, thus avoiding controversial discourse about contemporary issues, and choosing not to provide a reminder that antisemitism and acts of genocide continue to pervade modern society in forms parallel to those discussed inside the exhibition. This approach is in line with its design as an educational space, not one to promote a specific way of thinking about genocide. As a result, the final opportunity to bring Auschwitz into the present is missed.

How the Exhibition Ends

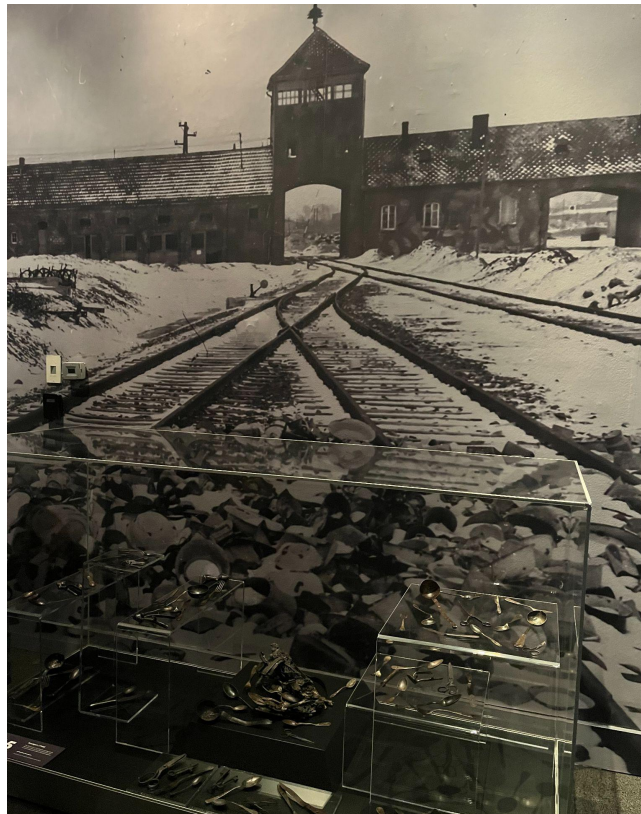


Fig. 7 A photo of cutlery salvaged from Auschwitz against a backdrop of the Birkenau gate in the “Liberation” gallery of the exhibition. (Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, January 19, 2024)

Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away. dedicates just three small galleries – “Liberation,” “The Survivors” and “The Site” – to the end of the Auschwitz story and Allied victory in World War II, in comparison to six galleries devoted to pre-Holocaust Jewish and non-

Jewish life and eleven galleries describing life in the concentration camp. The liberation story has already been explained to visitors at the very start of their visit with the description of the liberation of the camp by Soviet Red Army soldiers on January 27, 1945, a moment the exhibition's catalog calls "The Encounter."⁸⁹ Still, little space is devoted to discussing the liberation of Auschwitz and its aftermath. In "Liberation," the focal point is an enlarged photograph of the Auschwitz-Birkenau gate used as a backdrop for a glass case of salvaged cutlery ca. 1945 from the camp's storage sheds known as Kanada (Figure 7).⁹⁰ The photograph, which most visitors recognize from billboards and online ads promoting the exhibition, holds a different meaning for the exhibition's attendees who now know the truth about what occurred beyond the gate. A grouping of photos from liberation shows prisoners leaving Auschwitz; one photograph shows men still in their striped camp uniforms smiling slightly as they walk out under Auschwitz's signature "Arbeit Macht Frei" signage.⁹¹ The phrase, which translates from German to "Work Sets You Free," was co-opted by Nazis as just one of the ways its concentration camp prisoners were misled by the promises of the camp and tricked into believing in the goodness of this 'work', which was categorized as slave labor by prisoners themselves and historians. Yet, the photo points out that work did not set the prisoners free, the Soviet soldiers did. In this section, visitors learn about the forensic history of Auschwitz, including the work of the "Soviet Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices," which interviewed camp

⁸⁹ Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 37.

⁹⁰ Object label for *Amalgam (1945)*. In exhibition *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA. Seen on: November 5, 2023. All of the following cited object labels in this chapter are attributed to *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. unless stated to be exhibited at Holocaust Museum Los Angeles or the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

⁹¹ Object label for *Leaving the camp (1945)*.

survivors and examined what was left of the camp site, portions of which had been set ablaze by the SS to destroy the evidence of what had transpired there. The death toll was first miscalculated to be four million, later corrected to be 1,100,000.⁹² Another wall displays a television screen that shuffles through a slideshow of perpetrators and their fate after liberation including trial, detention, and in the case of Kommandant Rudolf Höss, execution.⁹³ Here, one would expect a similar installation detailing the fates of survivors and what life looked like for them following liberation, their various careers, and the places to which they returned or made their home.

References to the world's responses to this atrocity are limited in the exhibit's final galleries. A copy of *Life* magazine from May 7, 1945 stands as the only artifact representing how the world learned about the atrocities of the Holocaust through the mass publication of atrocity images taken at the liberation of the Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps, camps to which select Auschwitz prisoners who survived the death march were deported.⁹⁴ Barbie Zelizer's book *Remembering to Forget* focuses on the US and British photography of liberation including the infamous photos of atrocity printed in *Life* magazine in 1945. Under the argument that these photographs "went straight to the heart of collective memory," Zelizer proposes that such images "superseded words as the more effective carriers of the atrocity story."⁹⁵ As in the start, the exhibition remains bound to a European worldview, loyal to its retelling of just the Auschwitz story and its impact on Europe even though the exhibit wishes to impact the entire world through its traveling nature. A missed opportunity to connect with an American visitor

⁹² Object label for *Forensics*.

⁹³ Object label for *The fate of the key SS personnel of the Auschwitz concentration camp*.

⁹⁴ Object label for *Life* magazine, May 7, 1945.

⁹⁵ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 141.

audience, core details about the liberation of other camps, which relied on the efforts of the other members of the US's Soviet ally, go undiscussed despite the fact that several camps that US soldiers liberated to included many Auschwitz survivors who evacuated from the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex.

The final testimony film of the exhibition compiles archival footage of survivors speaking about the lessons they drew from their experiences and messages they wish to impart to visitors. In contrast to the previous films throughout the exhibition whose basis are detailed descriptions of specific moments recalled from their arrivals in Auschwitz and harrowing camp experiences, survivors speak generally on how to be more tolerant and the importance of Holocaust education. Roma survivor Anton Mason says in the film, "The only thing I can say is be considerate to other people. Accept the differences."⁹⁶ The gallery also uses this space dedicated to the discussion of survivors' post-war lives to explain *The Porajmos*, which translates from the Romani language to "The Devouring," to acknowledge the murder of half of the Roma population, mentioning that "today, Roma in Europe and the Americas continue to experience discrimination and violence."⁹⁷ Left undescribed are the lived experiences of Jewish survivors and their descendants in contemporary times. The only address of contemporary Holocaust history is in Gallery 19.2, named "The Site," which describes what happened to the land occupied by the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex and its transformation into the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in 1947 at the request of survivors.⁹⁸ *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* knows it cannot replicate the experience of visiting the site itself, thus

⁹⁶ Audio guide prompt for *Testimonies*.

⁹⁷ Object label, *The Porajmos*.

⁹⁸ Object label for *Gallery 19.2 - The Site*.

it sees visiting the venue of the exhibition's collaborating partner as the ultimate method of making Auschwitz feel close.

The last room of the exhibition includes a montage of archival footage of "The World That Was Lost" showing videos of European Jews before the Holocaust that play on several television screens set to a wistful violin soundtrack that visitors hear through their audio guide. At the Reagan Library, just two small benches are placed in the center of the gallery to accommodate the exhibition's hundreds of visitors to watch the films and reflect on their time inside the exhibition. Thus, reflection is difficult in this space prone to overcrowding. The wall of the final room bears a poem by Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo:

You who are passing by
 I beg you
 Do something
 Learn a dance step
 Something to justify your existence
 Something that gives you the right
 To be dressed in your skin in your body hair
 Learn to walk and to laugh
 Because it would be too senseless
 After all
 For so many to have died
 While you live
 Doing nothing with your life.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Object label for *Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo (1971)*.

As the last words in the exhibition, Delbo's poem serves as the final message of the exhibit. It instructs visitors – who are searching for some sort of closure or profound moral to complete their many hours in the exhibition – to simply do something with their lives. Out of all the powerful, painful quotes spread throughout the exhibit's walls, this poem does not evoke the same strength and perseverance of survivors nor does it directly mention the Holocaust. Even survivors, whose numbers are dwindling as the years go by, want those living in the current moment to retain gratitude. But with the rise in antisemitic incidents, graffitied swastikas and shootings in synagogues, is it ethical for an exhibit on the Holocaust – which claims to provide important reminders of what hate can turn into – not to give visitors an impetus to identify modern antisemitism and work to end its reach? Where the audio guide prompts visitors to inquire, "How is this possible?" in one of the first galleries explaining the discovery of Auschwitz in 1945 by the Soviet army, a similar moment of reflection should be offered to visitors before they leave the exhibit and carry on with the rest of their visit at the Reagan Library.

A panel on the wall encourages visitors to scan a QR code to give their feedback about the exhibit before being forced to walk through the Reagan Library's gift shop as it is the only exit from the exhibition. Inside, a curated display featuring memoirs of Holocaust survivors and books about Auschwitz seems respectful and thought-provoking until it is positioned in an environment filled with Reaganalia and other tchotchkes emblematic of ardent, American patriotism (Figure 8). In a review of the exhibition's stop at the Reagan Library published in *The Public Historian*, historian Brian J Griffith also finds that amidst the exhibition's "admirable qualities," the exit through the gift shop, referred to by Griffith as a "brutish passage between Holocaust commemoration and carnivalesque marketplace of contemporary American politics,"

dampened the contemplative nature of the exhibition.¹⁰⁰ Any feelings of profound reflection felt from the exhibit are stunted by a display of commerciality; there's even a table of merchandise from the exhibit where visitors can buy tote bags and mugs bearing the exhibition's name to prove to their peers that they did the "work" by going to the exhibition.



Fig. 8 A curated table of Holocaust survivor memoirs stands among patriotic merchandise in the gift shop of the Reagan Library. (Photograph by Stephanie Gerson, November 5, 2024)

The creators of the exhibition did not intend for the exhibit's ending at the Reagan Library to take shape in this way. In the author's interview with Robert Jan van Pelt, the Chief Curator noted how he and exhibition designer Djamel Zeniti originally planned for the exhibit to end at the Library's lower floor, which opens up to the eastern side of the building with sprawling views of the Santa Susana Mountains, a perfect place for a moment of reflection. However, a request from the Library's staff mandated that all special exhibitions end close to the

¹⁰⁰ Brian J Griffith, "Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library," *The Public Historian* 1 (2023): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2023.45.4.115>.

gift shop, a prominent source of revenue for the institution.¹⁰¹ Eventually, visitors of *Auschwitz* gain access to the outdoors after exiting through the gift shop, but the post-exhibit reflection process remains interrupted.

Alternate Endings: How Permanent Institutions Close the Narrative

In line with using Van Pelt's book *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* as a guideline for the narrative of the exhibition, the ending of *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.* corresponds with the conclusion of the book, which was first published in 1996: with information about the creation Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Ending the exhibition at this point, at the cessation of Auschwitz's use as a concentration camp, creates a false resolution of history. Robyn Autry's chapter "Museumification of Memory" in the book *Desegregating the Past: The Public Life of Memory in the United States and South Africa* notes the commonality of this approach, emphasizing how the failure to address the present creates an "illusion that consensus has been reached not only about a set of lessons about the nature of past conflict, but also that conflict and trauma are both indeed objects of the past."¹⁰² In Holocaust exhibits across the US, a similar curatorial approach is often adopted that does not carry the Holocaust narrative into the twenty-first century, but these exhibits grant ample space for visitor reflection on the meaning of the Holocaust today or have implemented other exhibits adjacent to their Holocaust exhibits to address modern genocide and hate.

At the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, the Holocaust exhibit ends with a film about liberation, emphasizing how grateful survivors felt towards their liberators, the Allied troops. The film plays testimony from US soldiers who liberated some of the camps; one former

¹⁰¹ Robert Jan Van Pelt in discussion with the author on Zoom, January 29, 2024.

¹⁰² Robyn Autry, "Conclusion: Museumification of Memory," in *Desegregating the Past: The Public Life of Memory in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 188.

soldier describes the scene of liberation, referring to the camp as a “creation of hell on earth.”¹⁰³ Little information is provided about survivors’ lives after 1945. The exhibit uses its final few square feet to pay tribute to the ordinary people who risked their lives hiding, rescuing and liberating victims of the Holocaust through a wall installation with biographies of these courageous people, bearing the quote of an unnamed liberator: “I only did what I hope others would do for me.”¹⁰⁴ The message relayed to visitors is one of inspiring compassion and standing up to hate while hate persists. The Museum of Tolerance instead chooses to discuss the current experiences of survivors during visitors’ very first steps and last steps exiting its Holocaust Exhibition through its display of survivors’ portraits that line the spiral ramp that serves as an entry and exit point from the exhibit. Plenty of space is allotted for visitor reflection in the building’s spacious lobby and outdoor space accessible immediately after the exhibit. At Holocaust Museum LA, the narrative also ends in the mid-century. Photo-bearing wall panels tell stories of Jewish emigration to countries around the world after liberation, the series of Nazi war crimes trials that began in 1945, and Jewish solidarity with other social causes, ending with Rabbi Joachim Prinz’s 1963 speech during the March on Washington. Ample space is given at the end of the exhibition for sitting and reflecting, with easy access to the adjacent green space of Los Angeles’s Pan Pacific Park in which the museum is positioned.

Thus, both the Holocaust Museum LA and the Museum of Tolerance end the narratives of their permanent Holocaust exhibitions shortly after liberation, a tactic seen in the Auschwitz exhibit. However, both museums have recently implemented new technology-rich additions to connect visitors to contemporary Holocaust discourse that go beyond the historical content of their permanent exhibits. Holocaust Museum LA’s *Dimensions in Testimony* exhibit, mentioned

¹⁰³ The Holocaust Exhibit in the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: October 22, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ The Holocaust Exhibit in the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: October 22, 2023.

in Chapter 2 of this paper, encourages visitors to ask questions to a pre-recorded, interactive video filmed in 2015 of Auschwitz survivor Renee Firestone with question prompts that ask Firestone whether she has met survivors of other genocides and whether another event similar to the Holocaust could happen today. The Museum of Tolerance's Social Lab exhibit, which is right at the exit of its Holocaust exhibit, brings current issues and resurgences of old prejudices to light through videos that document modern-day antisemitism and interactive activities discussing global crises and how to aid them.¹⁰⁵ Not only does the Social Lab provide a clear reminder that forms of prejudice including antisemitism persist, but it uplifts visitors of all backgrounds to do something about prejudice and invites visitors to envision solutions.

The Exhibition Metaphorizes the Holocaust Rather than Drawing Parallels

For any Holocaust exhibition, representing contemporary issues requires courage and a degree of risk. With the discussion of antisemitism in educational settings comes criticism for not addressing racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other issues. To address such concerns in a limited way, exhibitions either position the Holocaust as a metaphor for all -isms or as a jumping-off point from which parallels to other genocides can be drawn. Unlike in other camps, Auschwitz's prisoners were not solely Jews, meaning the Auschwitz story has the potential to evoke more universal messages than exhibitions that exhibit the Holocaust more generally. In an article about the exhibition for *CBC News*, Van Pelt noted that "While the Holocaust and Auschwitz overlap significantly, they're not identical" because "what makes it unique is that in Auschwitz, Christians from Poland were killed, as well as Russian prisoners of war (POWs) and the Roma, as well as prisoners from other countries who were not Jewish."¹⁰⁶ And the exhibition

¹⁰⁵ "Social Lab," Museum of Tolerance, <https://www.museumoftolerance.com/visit/exhibits/social-lab.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Kate Bueckert, "Auschwitz 'not far away politically' from today, says Waterloo prof," *CBC News*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/waterloo-robert-jan-van-pelt-auschwitz-exhibit-new-york-1.5140099>.

ensures to consistently note that those subjected to Nazi medical experiments, imprisonment and murder in Auschwitz were of many different backgrounds. One section of an early gallery's wall tells the story of Afro-German man Theodor Wonja Michael who was imprisoned in a German labor camp while a few steps away is a photo of a Roma man whose face is being made into a mask by German technicians for research purposes.¹⁰⁷ Especially in contemporary times which have a strong awareness of persistent racism and xenophobia, the curators of *Auschwitz* see these inclusions that describe non-Jewish persecution as nods to modern forms of discrimination of people of color and ethnic minorities. It is important to understand that groups other than Jews were persecuted during this period, but, I contend, the intention of such an exhibition should not be for visitors to leave with an encyclopedic knowledge of Auschwitz.

The imprisonment and murder of those in Auschwitz was a historical event of the Holocaust, which was centered around an ideology of Jewish hatred, but the camp's more diverse prisoner population makes it easier for the exhibition to dangerously position Auschwitz as a "metaphor for the boundless expression of human barbarity," as Luis Ferreiro says in his essay in the exhibition's corresponding catalog.¹⁰⁸ Metaphorizing historical events can diminish an event's singularity and historical impact, contradicting the purpose of creating an exhibit about Auschwitz alone. If done with sensitivity, such exhibitions about atrocity can draw parallels to similar events around the world, rather than metaphors, to help visitors understand the Holocaust within a larger historical context of genocide. At Holocaust Museum LA, the permanent Holocaust exhibition includes lawyer Raphael Lemkin's theory of genocide developed in 1943, showing visitors that acts of genocide have occurred all over the world from

¹⁰⁷ *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*

¹⁰⁸ Luis Ferreiro, "...As to the heart of the matter" in *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.*, ed. Luis Ferreiro, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt (New York, N.Y.: Abbeville Press, 2019), 16.

the Armenian genocide in 1915-1918, to genocides that occurred after the Holocaust in Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur.¹⁰⁹ Without making such parallels to the ongoing acts of genocide that happened after the Holocaust, *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. falls short in championing Auschwitz as the ‘lesson’ on human hatred and a way to impart the idea of historical repetition.

Conclusion

Throughout a visitor’s journey in this exhaustive exhibition, there is hope that the exhibit will make one final effort to connect Auschwitz to the present in the same way that the exhibit becomes entwined with the past in the very first galleries, demystifying the concentration camp as not some other world but a place created due to the accumulation of hateful ideas that are resurfacing today. Historian Omer Bartov’s research explores the dominant arguments about the singularity of the Holocaust, highlighting the two main claims that see the Holocaust both as an “ineffable, incomprehensible and therefore somewhat ahistorical event” and simultaneously as a real historical event representing evil of the “greatest conceivable degree.”¹¹⁰ Exhibits about the Holocaust wrestle between these two ideas of the abstract and the concrete. *Auschwitz* begins with the concept of the place of Auschwitz as a concrete idea, using location-based thinking and historical artifacts to describe this town in Poland. Germany’s annexation of the country left the town’s identity forever changed. Throughout the galleries, physical artifacts tied to personal stories further bind the exhibit to the camp’s reality. By the exhibition’s end, however, Auschwitz feels like an abstract concept again with the absence of historical parallels and acknowledgment of current Holocaust survivorship to bring it into modernity. The goal of

¹⁰⁹ Object label for *Rafael Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* ix. 79 (1944). In permanent exhibition at Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA. Seen on: July 9, 2023.

¹¹⁰ Omer Bartov, “Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth,” *History and Memory* 5, no. 1 (1993): 89-90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618643>.

Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away. is to educate and consider the history of Auschwitz through a historical lens. Yet, the end of the exhibit leaves Auschwitz once again feeling like a camp halfway across the world, now standing on a vast, partially destroyed and reconstructed landscape in southern Poland.

Conclusion

Antisemitism did not fade away as the Holocaust ended. This is a disappointing truth that the exhibition's creators and its host venues recognize. In 2022, the Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism reported the occurrence of 3,697 antisemitic incidents in the United States alone, a number that continues to climb.¹¹¹ Even the creators of *Auschwitz* witnessed the prevalence of antisemitism in current times, when social media comments on posts advertising the exhibition's arrival in Madrid expressed the antisemitic rhetoric that their exhibition deemed extremely harmful.¹¹² The reality is that one exhibition cannot solve antisemitism, nor does this aspect make *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. a 'failure' as a Holocaust exhibition. Rather, the title of the exhibition and the heavily implicit messaging aim to connect the exhibition's content to the present and for visitors to make analogies to modern prejudices themselves. Yet can we trust visitors to make these comparisons while heavily immersed, both visually and auditorily, in the 20-gallery exhibition? The exhibition is filled with heart-wrenching photographs, powerful survivor testimonies and artifacts that transport visitors to Auschwitz – on very few occasions, experientially through sound effects played in the audio guide and environment changes such as the encasement of a gallery in a wooden barrack structure from the Auschwitz-Monowitz satellite camp. Visitors thus feel very close to Oświęcim and its history in the beginning galleries as well as to Auschwitz in its function as a concentration camp. However, American visitors might find difficulty projecting themselves – and thus drawing parallels to their own experiences and gaining empathy – into the exhibition's narrative which remains fixed in Europe throughout the Auschwitz story. By the exhibition's

¹¹¹ "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents," Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2022>.

¹¹² Guillermo Altares, "Hate campaign strikes major Auschwitz exhibition in Madrid," *El País*, November 20, 2017, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/11/16/inenglish/1510832744_414338.html.

end, explicit parallels to modern injustices and a reminder of the persistence of antisemitism are absent, leaving the question of what this exhibition means for us today unanswered. The exhibition rather hopes to make an impact on the cities it enters, to leave these cities with its legacy. To do so, the exhibition hosted a corresponding event series for the public with local survivors and authors of Holocaust books at every host venue.¹¹³ However, neither of these events are publicized heavily inside the Library nor are further ways to act against the spread of antisemitism and modern genocide. Once the exhibition's run ended, so did any traces of the potential lessons visitors can learn from Holocaust education.

Analyzing museums and their exhibitions is very difficult to do without considering the politics and values of the museums themselves. During my multiple visits to *Auschwitz*, I felt I was at a moral crossroads between being a Jewish person with a strong belief in the memorialization of Holocaust victims and acknowledgment of survivors of this genocide, but also someone whose values could not align less with the Republican Party that the Ronald Reagan Library and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Institute and Foundation represent. The popularity of the exhibition, which resulted in the galleries being packed with visitors each time I visited the exhibition, gave me hope that this exhibition was doing good and inspiring its visitors to understand the long-lasting impacts of the Holocaust into the present day. However, the lack of contemporary parallels drawn by the exhibition felt especially unnerving in the context of American Republicanism and the rise of far-right groups and leadership. Brian J. Griffith's review of the exhibition lists several neo-Nazi activities of the contemporary Republican party, the most notably the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville during which protesters

¹¹³ "Past Events," Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/programs-events/past-events>.

chanted “Jews will not replace us!”¹¹⁴ Today, Jewish stereotypes dated in the exhibition to the nineteenth century, including Jewish control of the media, are continuously perpetuated, as in Kanye West’s offensive rhetoric discussed in Chapter 3.

Yet, discussions of museum politics at Jewish museums are also inescapable, as the Museum of Tolerance has also come under fire in recent months for its political leanings. In light of the increasingly violent conflict between Israel and Palestine in 2023-24, some ardently Israel-supporting, Jewish museums have become new sites of protest. According to the Los Angeles Times, MOT hosted a private screening on November 8, 2023 titled “Bearing Witness to the October 7th Massacre,” which showed footage compiled by the Israel Defense Forces from the personal devices of Hamas members on October 7, 2023 when, according to the Israeli government, over 200 Israelis were taken hostage and 1,400 Israelis were murdered. Outside the museum on the night of the film screening, pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian groups demonstrated, resulting in violent protests and police intervening to break up a brawl between protesters with opposing viewpoints.¹¹⁵ Such an event and its response have called the Los Angeles museum’s idea of tolerance into question.

A very hopeful outlook believes that Holocaust exhibitions ‘solve’ antisemitism, one that I previously held. To fully understand the impact that these Holocaust exhibitions have on visitors and whether exhibitions can change their outlook or inspire them to combat hate, further research related to this thesis would focus on visitor experience data from those who attended the exhibition to deduce how visitors might find the exhibition content relevant to current issues.

¹¹⁴ Brian J Griffith, “*Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library,” *The Public Historian* 1 (2023): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2023.45.4.115>.

¹¹⁵ Josh Rottenberg, “Inside the Museum of Tolerance’s screening of Hamas attack footage,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-11-08/israel-hamas-oct-7-terror-attack-footage-museum-of-tolerance-bearing-witness>.

Near the exit of *Auschwitz*, the exhibition presents visitors with a QR code to share their feedback on the exhibition. The resulting website offers visitors with a survey of questions about the exhibition's 'efficacy.' Gathering such information and comparing its responses to those of the exhibition's other host venues might produce an interesting set of results, especially when comparing responses from the East Coast, Midwest and West Coast. Additional work on *Auschwitz* and more interviews with its creators would explore the curators' openness to revising the exhibition, whether that might be to think of new ways to further connect visitors to Holocaust history or to mention the prevalence of antisemitism. All told, these exhibitions provide visitors with the important message that hateful ideas can escalate to violence and even genocide, but if visitors are not explicitly reminded that this form of hatred, which has existed for centuries, continues, and what antisemitism looks like in its modern forms, such exhibitions struggle to be effective in deriving contemporary meaning from the Holocaust.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Altares, Guillermo. "Hate campaign strikes major Auschwitz exhibition in Madrid." *El País*, November 20, 2017.

https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/11/16/inenglish/1510832744_414338.html.

"Audit of Antisemitic Incidents." Anti-Defamation League.

<https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2022>.

"Audio tour: *Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.*" Paul Salmons Associates.

<https://paulsalmons.associates/projects/audio-tour-for-auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away>.

"Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away." Museum of Jewish Heritage.

<https://mjhnyc.org/exhibitions/auschwitz/>.

Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away., Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

Bueckert, Kate. "Auschwitz 'not far away politically' from today, says Waterloo prof." *CBC*

News, May 18, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/waterloo-robert-jan-van-pelt-auschwitz-exhibit-new-york-1.5140099>.

Ferreiro Luis, Miriam Greenbaum, and Robert Jan van Pelt. *Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away*. NY, New York: Abbeville Press, 2019.

Ferreiro, Luis. In discussion with the author on Zoom, November 20, 2023.

Griffith, Brian J. "*Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library." *The Public Historian* 1 (2023): 115–122.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2023.45.4.115>

Hernandez, Melissa. "Holocaust Museum LA invited Kanye West to a private tour. Now it's

target of antisemitic attacks.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2022.

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-10-25/kanye-west-holocaust-museum-los-angeles-private-tour-antisemitic-hate>.

Horn, Dara. “Auschwitz Is Not a Metaphor.” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2019.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away/591082/>.

Holocaust Museum LA, Los Angeles, CA.

Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, CA.

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to Elie Wiesel and on Signing the Jewish Heritage Week Proclamation. PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/resources/reagan.html>.

Rothstein, Edward. “An Auschwitz Exhibition Fails the Jews.” *The Wall Street Journal*, May, 11, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/an-auschwitz-exhibition-fails-the-jews-11557572400>.

Rottenberg, Josh. “Inside the Museum of Tolerance’s screening of Hamas attack footage.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 2023.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-11-08/israel-hamas-oct-7-terror-attack-footage-museum-of-tolerance-bearing-witness>.

Van Pelt, Robert Jan. In discussion with the author on Zoom, January 29, 2024.

“Why Reagan.” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute.

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/special-exhibits/auschwitz-exhibition/why-reagan/>.

Secondary Sources:

“About Us.” USC Shoah Foundation, <https://sfi.usc.edu/about>.

Autry, Robyn. *Desegregating the Past: The Public Life of Memory in the United States and South Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Bartov, Omer. “Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth.” *History and Memory* 5, no. 1 (1993): 87–129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618643>.

Crane, Susan A. “Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography.” *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25478766>.

De Jong, Steffi. “Exhibiting: The Witness to History as a Museum Object.” in *The Witness as Object: Video Testimonies in Holocaust Museums*. New York, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znzsd.10>.

“Dimensions in Testimony.” USC Shoah Foundation, <https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>.

Dwork, Deborah, and Robert Jan van Pelt. *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present*. First edition. New York; W.W, Norton & Company, 1996.

Ezrahi, Sidra DeKoven. “Representing Auschwitz.” *History and Memory* 7, no. 2 (1995): 121–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618691>.

Glass, Andrew. “Reagan visits German war cemetery, May 5, 1985.” *Politico*, May 5, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/05/this-day-in-politics-may-5-1985-565776>.

Gutman, Israel and Belah Guterman, eds. *The Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*. Translated by Naftali Greenwood and Jerzy Michalovic. Second and Updated edition. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004.

Kushner, Tony. “Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a

Museum Setting.” *Oral History* 29, no. 2 (2001): 83–94.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179711>.

Landsberg, Alison. “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997).

<https://doi.org/10.2307/488559>.

Linenthal, Edward T. “The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1994): 406-33.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2713271>.

Neuman, Eran. “Folding Memory: The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and the Commemoration of the Shoah.” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 34, no. 1 (2020): 1–23.

“Online Ticket Sales.” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute.

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/special-exhibits/auschwitz-exhibition/the-exhibition/>.

“Past Events.” Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute.

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/programs-events/past-events>.

Reiniger, Franziska. “Inside the Epicenter of the Horror - Photographs of the Sonderkommando.”

Yad Vashem. <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/epicenter-horror-photographs-sonderkommando.html>.

“Rescue of the Danish Jews.” Imperial War Museum.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/rescue-of-the-danish-jews>.

“Stamps for tattooing prisoners discovered.” Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

<https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/stamps-for-tattooing-prisoners-discovered,1057.html>

Struk, Janina. *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

“Social Lab.” Museum of Tolerance. <https://www.museumoftolerance.com/visit/exhibits/social-lab.html>.

Weinberg, Jeshajahu, and Rina Elieli. *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*. New York, N.Y: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1995.

“What Did Renée See.” Holocaust Museum LA.
<http://www.holocaustmuseumla.org/dimensions-in-testimony>.

Zelizer, Barbie. *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.