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A Redesign for Future Generations

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An exhibit of killing centers is at the Zekelman Holocaust Center

Zekelman Holocaust Center plans new core exhibit with expanded content and interactive components.

Since 2008, thousands of visitors have learned the history of European Jewry before and during the Holocaust through the core exhibit of the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills. Multi-faceted presentations depict the centuries of vibrant Jewish life in European communities before the Nazis gained power and eventually implemented their “Final Solution” — the horrific systematic murder of 6 million European Jews.



Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld
Ron Lieberman

“Over the past few years, we’ve come to realize the core exhibit needs to change to meet the needs of current and future generations,” said Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the Zekelman Holocaust Center. “As the population of survivors dwindles, most future visitors to the Holocaust Center will not be able to meet a Holocaust survivor face-to-face and hear them speak. Our job is to give people an opportunity to connect with these individuals and their stories throughout time. We believe our new core exhibit will do just that.”

Jewish Family Service, which assists many local Holocaust survivors, estimates that there are 400 to 600 survivors living in the Detroit area. This compares with 4,000 to 6,000 immediately after World War II.

The totally redesigned core exhibit will encompass new research about the Holocaust, additional stories of local survivors, especially women, and new technology to facilitate visitor interaction with the content. According to Rabbi Mayerfeld, recent research has broadened the “understanding of the killing fields in Eastern Europe, including 30,000 people killed at Babi Yar and 1.5 to 2 million murdered in their own backyards.”

The new exhibit, which has been planned for six years, will provide access to 700 testimonies of Michigan Holocaust survivors. With new technology, the Holocaust Center will be able to rotate local narratives in the exhibit for different storytelling purposes, and customize media to commemorate certain events and anniversaries, such as Kristallnacht and the liberation of Auschwitz.

“We want to avoid it becoming just another part of history. We want it to be more immediate,” Mayerfeld explains. Uniquely women’s stories of rape, sexual violence and the loss of children will be an important element, he says.

Patricia Mooradian, president and CEO of The Henry Ford, who has collaborated with the Holocaust Memorial Center, agrees that individual accounts of the Holocaust are essential. “It’s hugely important to hear the voice of the person. You can hear passion, fear and relief by their expression if you can see the person. Oral interviews are a part of our collection — a way to tell and re-tell history. The exhibit may change but the stories will last,” she says.

The new Holocaust Center exhibit will also include more material about contemporary antisemitism, asking, “What can I do and what can we do?” says Rabbi Mayerfeld.

“You deal with ignorance by education,” he says, noting that the Zekelman Holocaust Center has provided training to 1,000 teachers and that students visit from as far as Grand Rapids, Michigan’s thumb region and the Upper Peninsula.

The need for relevant, impactful exhibits is underscored by the recent increase in antisemitic incidents in the U.S., as well as research that indicates many younger Americans are unfamiliar with the Holocaust. According to a 2020 national survey conducted by the Claims Conference (the international nonprofit organization that helps Holocaust survivors receive financial compensation from Germany), 63 percent of Americans born between 1981 and 2009 do not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust; 36 percent think there were 2 million or fewer victims. Almost half can’t name a concentration camp or ghetto.



“Cultural institutions help to stimulate learning and educate in interesting ways. They give people something to think about and may inspire them to have a new thought or to act,” says Mooradian.

The Zekelman Holocaust Center is investing \$31 million for development and maintenance of the new exhibit. Ralph Applebaum Associates (RAA) of New York is the project designer, and Design and Production Inc. (D & P) of Virginia is the exhibit fabricator. Neumann/Smith Architecture is the architectural firm, and Sachse Construction, also locally based, is the contractor.

“The current exhibit has been a hallmark of our Center for more than 15 years. I encourage everyone to see it once more before May 25. The transformation of the physical space will introduce a new and exciting era that gives our local survivors the first and last word in the recounting of the history of the Holocaust, honors their legacy and transfers memory to future generations,” said Rabbi Mayerfeld when the project was announced.

During construction of the new exhibit, which begins on May 25, the Holocaust Center will be open for public events and temporary exhibitions. Virtual learning will continue for teachers, students and adult groups.

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