

essay

## Holocaust Horrors

Auschwitz on tour stands to be a powerful teaching tool.



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Contributing  
Editor

**TOP LEFT:** A prisoner's eyeglasses found at Auschwitz.  
**TOP MIDDLE:** A shoe and a sock from a child imprisoned at Auschwitz.  
**TOP RIGHT:** A German SS officer's belt buckle with an Auschwitz past.

There's intriguing merit in Poland's plans to stage a first-ever international traveling exhibit of 600 original artifacts from the Auschwitz network of concentration and death camps operated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

The long-planned tour of 14 cities in Europe and North America, timely amid swelling anti-Jewish sentiment, will remind older generations and teach younger ones about just how maniacal and savage the ruling Third Reich truly was in "the womb of the most technologically advanced society of its time."

Cities to be visited will be announced soon. The tour will range seven years. It will supplement, not replace, the amazing work of permanent Holocaust memorials, including the Detroit Jewish community's Holocaust Memorial Center. HMC wasn't an initial applicant, but indicates it would consider being a future host if a scaled-down version of the up to 27,000-square-foot exhibit were offered, the presentation cost proved affordable and HMC's temporary exhibit space worked.

With the number of survivors dwindling daily, the exhibit tour, titled "Not Long Ago, Not Far Away," is positioned to be an out-sized attempt to illuminate the Holocaust and its goal of destroying European Jewry.

Spreading the story of

Auschwitz will immensely benefit the Jewish world in helping reinforce the cry for "Never Again." The tour will help expose our impressionable youth to the seminal story of genocidal hatred, notwithstanding Western growth in studying the Holocaust.

Between 1940 and 1945, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates, Auschwitz, outside Krakow, brutally sounded the death knell for 1.1 million people: 960,000 Jews, 74,000 non-Jewish Poles, 21,000 Roma, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and 12,000 others, including people who were homosexual or who had a disability.

### MONEY GRABBING?

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum is located in Oswiecim, a Polish town that was 60 percent Jewish before the war. The institution caused gasps among some Jews when it announced the 14-city artifacts tour more than 72 years after U.S.-led Allied forces liberated the camps of Auschwitz.

Exhibit and museum organizers quickly sought to allay concerns that admission fees would fleece tour visitors as opposed to helping cover travel and display costs and provide a defensible stream of income to reach a wider audience. The hallowed grounds of the largest and most-publicized death camp won't be desecrated by a profiteering scheme once the \$1.5 million exhibit goes on tour by year end in Madrid, organizers vow. Students will be admitted free.

Tour organizers acknowledge nothing can replace an actual visit to Auschwitz to sense the magnitude of Hitler's fury. But as Piotr Cywinski, museum director, said in announcing the tour, the exhibit "can become a great warning cry for us all against building the future on hatred, racism, anti-Semitism and bottomless contempt for another human being."

The Spanish family-owned company Musealia, curator of a *Titanic* artifacts exhibit, is the Auschwitz exhibit's project director.

Examples of what will be shown on tour include a pair of eyeglasses worn by an Auschwitz prisoner, an original German-made Model 2 transport train, an original bar-rack from a sub-camp, a German SS officer's belt buckle, a tin with

deadly Zyklon-B pesticide crystals and a wooden box carved by another prisoner.

### TOUR THEMES

Exhibit-goers are bound to experience deepened empathy, says Robin Axelrod, director of education at our local HMC. As she told the *JN*: "While photographs can certainly be powerful, seeing a pair of shattered glasses that someone once wore provides the visitor with a more immediate connection with the object and, by extension, to the individual who wore them."

"We are left to wonder about the back story: 'Why are the glasses broken? Who wore them? Where did the person come from? And we wonder about the fate of the person behind them. Did she or he survive? Is there anyone alive today who knew that person and can tell us about the life the person led?'"

Axelrod, ever adding insight to lessons of the Holocaust, reminded that each victim had a name, a face and hopes and dreams — "just like we all do."

"The Holocaust," she said, "cannot be viewed as six million Jews, but rather as the murder of individual Jews six million times."

"It is also important to remember that while 1.1 million people, mostly Jews, were killed in Auschwitz, there were thousands of other killing sites throughout Europe. The people who perished in those places also need their stories told."

Most of the artifacts going on tour belong to the Auschwitz Memorial Collections. Some objects are on loan from Yad Vashem-World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, private collections, other museums and survivors.

### SHARED HEADLINE

The July 26 announcement of the tour came 2½ weeks before anti-Jewish and racially charged hatred descended upon Charlottesville, Va.

A counter-protestor was killed and 19 others were injured in a violent clash triggered by an Aug. 12 rally organized by white supremacist, neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan and white nationalist sympathizers marching against city plans to remove a publicly displayed statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. Two state troopers monitoring the situation died in a helicopter crash.

In an emboldening act two days later, U.S. President Donald Trump inexplicably and inexorably placed parallel blame for the violence in Charlottesville on the Jew-haters and racists who led the protest and the counter-protestors, largely there to resist the hatred, but unfortunately tainted by some violence-seeking anarchist extremists tied to the Antifa movement.

Two days after that, Aug. 17, the museum at Auschwitz tweeted in a message left open to interpretation and posted in several languages: "One of the hardest lessons for us today: Perpetrators were people. They accepted an ideology that rationalized and promoted hatred & evil."

Beneath those words: a photo of Auschwitz-stationed German SS officers and guards smiling and playful (*see Nazi Mindset*), seemingly unmoved by Third Reich orders to mindlessly kill.

On Aug. 20, according to the Associated Press, the museum at Auschwitz again took to Twitter, adding clarity to its earlier tweet by suggesting the death camp memorial stands today not only "as a painful reminder" of what racist and anti-Jewish ideologies can lead to, but also "of what may happen when people hate."

Understanding the intersection of how Auschwitz came to be and what it means for our worldview today is central to the artifacts tour. Such understanding also is critical to appreciating why there could not possibly be moral equivalency between Charlottesville marchers bound by ethnic and racist hatred and those among the counter-protestors who were non-violent and drawn by such core American ideals as liberty, equality and justice.

That's a thought to ponder as the High Holidays near.

*L'shanah tovah tikatevu.* May you be inscribed for a good year. ♣



PAWEL SAWICKI/AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM, COURTESY MUSEALIA



U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

### NAZI MINDSET

In a photo important to understanding the derangement of the Third Reich, German SS officers and guards laugh and joke en route to or returning from Solahutte, a Nazi military retreat outside Auschwitz. The photo is from the personal scrapbook of Karl Hocker, adjutant to the commandant of the German death camp in Poland. In 2007, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum received the historically significant scrapbook, showing Nazi insouciance in 1944 during the Holocaust.

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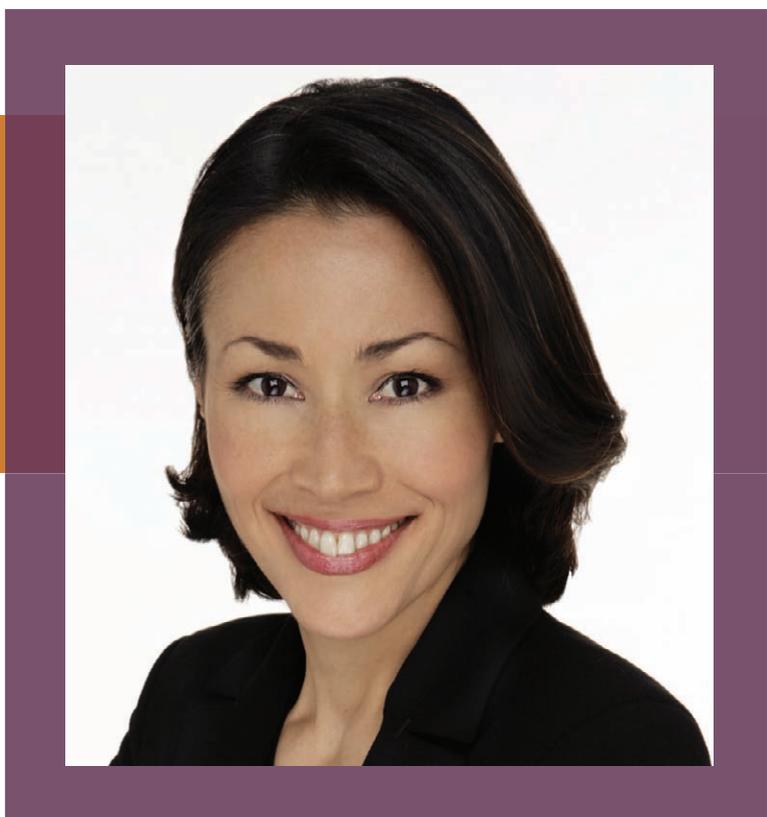
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