

OAKLAND COUNTY

Zekelman Holocaust Center opens new survivor-focused exhibit



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Farmington Hills — The Zekelman Holocaust Center will reopen its core exhibit Jan. 28 with an altered approach: featuring the experiences and voices of Holocaust survivors and victims, and balancing the horror of the Holocaust with themes of resilience and defiance.

The museum was opened in 1984 but has been operating from Farmington Hills for 20 years, with Holocaust survivors initially active in the design and daily activities such as conducting tours, said CEO Eli Mayerfeld. A survivor still speaks at the museum every Sunday, but there are fewer and fewer to share experiences of the Holocaust, Mayerfeld said.

"The Holocaust Center has to center the stories of the survivors because they're not here to tell us themselves, and so you're surrounded by their stories," Mayerfeld said. "Everywhere we walk, you're really hearing their insights, and they represent not just those who survived, but also those we lost."

The \$31 million new exhibit has been in the works for the last seven years; construction began last spring. The exhibit begins with Jewish life in Europe before World War II and takes visitors through the rise of Nazi Germany, the start of the war and violence against Jews, life in and liberation of concentration camps and the aftermath.

Through a carefully curated pathway of galleries and exhibits, the museum tells the story of the Holocaust through its victims and survivors rather than focus on the perpetrators, said director of education Ruth Bergman.

"Of course, we have to talk about what they did, but we want to talk about its impact on the people who were the victims and also how they reacted, and what they did, and how they resisted," Bergman said. "One thing that was very important to us was that the story of the Holocaust begin and end with the voices of survivors."

One of the exhibit's goals is to help Michigan students make sense of the subject, even though the events of the Holocaust were decades ago, said Mark Mulder, director of curatorial affairs.

"This is still relevant, this still matters," Mulder said. "It's less, 'This is what happened,' although there is plenty of that, and a lot more of 'This is what it was like when this happened to me.'"

The center is a source of information for the community, and Mayerfeld said there has been increased interest from the public since Oct. 7, when Hamas militants attacked Israel, killing roughly 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and capturing another 250. People want to understand the roots of antisemitism, he said.

Since Oct. 7, Israel has responded by heavily bombing Gaza, a coastal territory roughly the size of Detroit that is home to 2.3 million people, and launched a ground invasion, vowing to dismantle Hamas and free the 100 hostages still held there.

Around 85% of Gaza's population have left their homes and a quarter are starving with limited access to food, water and medical supplies, according to the United Nations. The Palestinian death toll has surpassed 25,000 people, the Associated Press reported.

Each gallery in the exhibit highlights a blend of themes and ideas, physical artifacts and real stories told through quotes written on walls and filmed interviews with survivors. It also features videos of everyday life, family photographs, postcards and media produced by the Nazis, including photos and videos from concentration camps and antisemitic propaganda.

The museum intentionally limited graphic images of violence and the concentration camps in the exhibit.

"We don't want to not talk about the evil, but how do you do it in a way that's going to actually be helpful and productive and educational, and not traumatizing," Bergman said.

Photographs and videos of graphic violence can cause trauma and force people into "fight or flight" mode, Bergman said. They want the exhibit to teach, not frighten, people.

"By tempering the actions of the Nazis with the perspectives of the survivors and their resilience and their bravery ... (it) helps to tell that story and at the same time, hopefully, our goal is to empower people when they leave here, not to be afraid, but to want to act," Bergman said.

For example, the museum replaced an older exhibit of graphic and violent scenes from the liberation of concentration camps with artifacts found in the camps by liberating soldiers, including wedding rings and children's toys.

"We're trying to tell stories, these are people's stories," Mulder said. "These are (artifacts) that we can't tell the stories of because we don't know the people anymore. They've been separated from who they were, and it's a great tragedy that we don't know anymore."

Stories include Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish University of Michigan alumnus and architect who saved thousands of Jews in German-occupied Hungary, and photographs are offered of the Sonderkommando, a group of inmates forced to work around gas chambers in Auschwitz who secretly took the pictures. They are scattered throughout the exhibit to show different forms of resistance to the Holocaust.

Oppression and personal narratives are a repeating theme. One hallway is lined on one side with constantly shifting excerpts from hundreds of laws passed in Nazi Germany to limit the rights of Jews while the other displays quotes from survivors describing the feelings of isolation.

"It's not just, 'Look what the Nazis did,' it's looking at how it impacted the people who were living there," Mulder said.

Curators also kept the focus on Michigan-based survivors when possible, Bergman said. One gallery, for example, focuses on the killing of Jews in the Soviet Union after the Nazis invaded. The gallery looks at the town of Davyd-Haradok, located in modern-day Belarus, as a case study because many members of its Jewish community moved to Michigan before the Holocaust.

While much of the exhibit focuses on humanizing the victims and survivors, part of it also seeks to humanize, but not exonerate, the perpetrators, Mulder said.

"The people who committed these terrible atrocities were human beings. ... These were our neighbors who managed to do these things," Mayerfeld said. "One of the things that we want people to know when they leave the museum is that I am capable of doing this, that this level of atrocity doesn't happen because it's like a hurricane or an earthquake. It happens because individual people make decisions."

The exhibit concludes with the personal stories of survivors, displayed beneath the building's six spires that symbolize the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust, as well as a history of the

word genocide and other historical examples of it.

South Africa recently accused Israel, which was founded in the aftermath of the Holocaust, of committing genocide against the Palestinian people at the United Nations' top court. Israel has rejected the claim.

"People want to understand what does genocide really mean, what are the lessons that we can take from the past and apply so that we understand what a just war is," Mayerfeld said.

"We all acknowledge the terrible cost to civilians during war. Genocide, however, is the targeting of a people for destruction. The accusation against Israel is false because Israel is not intentionally targeting civilians," Mayerfeld said. "All nations have an obligation to defend their citizens from attacks, like Hamas', that are aimed at murdering their population. Using the term genocide is a form of antisemitism called Holocaust inversion, because it falsely accuses the Jews of acting like the Nazis.

"World War II was a war that sort of everyone agreed was a just war. What are the lessons of how that war was fought and what mistakes were made and what can we do differently today? So learning from history is really important."

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