

# ENCOUNTERING JEWISHNESS, DEAD AND ALIVE: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE ON THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN COMBATING ANTISEMITISM

An initiative of jMUSE, **The Jewish Museums Project** explores how archives, libraries, and museums use their unique strengths and collections to spotlight Jewish history and culture, combat antisemitism, and create lasting change.

The Jewish Museums Project experiments with new ways to present important ideas and innovative content; supports the dissemination of knowledge; and works to ensure that Jewish museums and Holocaust museums can serve as the backbone of Jewish cultural engagement in communities around the world.

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Commissioned by jMUSE, August 2023

## Holocaust Memory: Contentious Beginnings and Shifting Centers

Jousting over Holocaust commemoration began less than a decade after the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. In 1953, the *Centre de documentation juive contemporaine*, or Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center (CDJC), laid the first stone for what was envisioned as a world memorial to those who died in the Shoah. Following a series of passionate arguments with the CDJC, the Knesset responded by approving a law to create Yad Vashem, billed as the “World Holocaust Remembrance Center” in an attempt to assert Israel as the hegemonic destination for remembering and producing historical scholarship about the Holocaust (Wieviorka, 2006). The tenor and objectives of Holocaust remembrance would shift over the course of the 20th century as new institutions and archives took hold.

In 1949, a group of Holocaust survivors in Israel founded the world’s first Holocaust museum, Ghetto Fighters’ House, to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). Yad Vashem and Anne Frank House opened to the public in 1957, just a year after Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris was completed. And in 1961, the predecessor to Holocaust Museum LA opened its doors, signaling a shift in the center of Holocaust historiography and memorialization from Europe and Israel to the United States. As German historian Jacob Eder asserts, several factors contributed to the awakening of American interest in the Holocaust in the 1960s and 70s, including the widely televised trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961.

For American Jews, the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War unleashed strong feelings of patriotism and reinvigorated vulnerabilities in the face of seemingly insurmountable enemies, prompting comparative reflections on Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis (Eder, 2018). Additionally, the controversial NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, criticized by Elie Wiesel and the survivor community, nevertheless introduced a large American audience to the history of the Holocaust and helped bring about the United States Holocaust Memorial Council in 1980, planting the seeds for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993. As Eder writes, these events and media “served to acquaint and confront Americans with this history” and enshrined the Holocaust as “a national trust” and moral compass. Lastly, galvanized by events like the planned Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois in 1977, Holocaust survivors across the United States began sharing their stories, giving rise to what French Holocaust scholar Annette Wieviorka called ‘the era of the witness.’ With the creation of the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale for Holocaust Testimonies and Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Visual History Foundation, the United States became the undisputed leader in recording and disseminating survivor testimony.

However, as Wieviorka points out, there is a paradox lying in the heart of America’s significant engagement with the Holocaust since the 1960s. She writes in *The Era of the Witness*, a seminal text in the field of Holocaust Studies, “recent surveys aimed at assessing knowledge of the genocide of the Jews show that Americans, compared to the French, English, and Germans, are by far the most ignorant, while at the same time it is in the United States, to all appearance at least, that the Holocaust is most palpably present” (2006, p. 118). While Holocaust museums are increasingly vital institutions for fighting Holocaust denial and preserving survivor testimony, their objective to educate about the Holocaust as a means of combating antisemitism, a thorny and pervasive reality, has proved to be much more complicated.

Jewish American writer Dara Horn explored this phenomenon in her 2021 book *People Love Dead Jews*, a collection of essays meditating on what she perceives as an outsized fixation on Jewish suffering and death hampering understanding and empathy for living Jews and Jewish civilization. [In an article for The Atlantic](#), she expanded upon the assertions she makes in her book, questioning whether Holocaust education is equipped to tackle contemporary antisemitism. Horn further excavated this topic on the Jewish Funders Network [What Gives? The Jewish Philanthropy Podcast](#), discussing the rise of Holocaust education and memorialization in America. Citing a [2015 study](#) conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, Horn says Holocaust education does not effectively prevent antisemitism, a problem she attributes to the universalization of the Holocaust.

It can be observed that Horn's critique of Holocaust education conflicts with her desire to see Jewish memory culture in cities where Jewish life no longer flourishes, such as the example of Harbin, a city where Russian Jews once settled and thrived, that is mentioned in her book. As Linda Kinstler writes in [her review of People love Dead Jews](#), "Horn struggles to navigate this contradiction—between her conviction that Jewish suffering has been made overly totemic and her argument that it's inadequately attended to." However, Horn, like Wieviorka, is right to flag a profound gap in general knowledge among non-Jews about the particularity of Judaism and antisemitism. Attempting to envision an educational landscape that encompasses these aspects of Jewish identity, it can be useful to examine the history of Holocaust museums within the larger chronology of Jewish museums, which have long sought to combat discrimination by putting Judaism and Jewish history on display.

## Defending Jewish Culture on the World Stage: the Rise of the Jewish Museum

To trace the story of Jewish representation in the museum, it is imperative to understand the origins of the modern museum as a public institution. Tony Bennett, a British sociologist who played a central role in the development of museum studies as an academic field, traces the development of the modern museum in his seminal book *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. According to Bennett, the museum crystallized into its modern form in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a means of solidifying national identity and state hegemony (Bennett, 1995). They were also informed by Darwinist racial theory, which situates human development along an evolutionary journey from uncivilized beginnings to a civilized telos. In institutions like the British Museum, according to Bennett, “the exhibition of other peoples served as a vehicle for the ‘edification of a national public and the confirmation of its imperial superiority (1995, p. 79).” Natalia Berger, an Israeli curator and museum studies scholar, notes how the Louvre and the British Museum were institutions which “underscored the ‘common denominators’—those characteristic elements and symbols that formed the backbone of a nation’s unity” (Berger, 2017, p. 21).

So where did Jews fit into this framework? According to Berger, Jews who had achieved or were in the process of achieving success in Europe “wanted to think of themselves as part of European history,” leading to the development of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism), a Berlin-based intellectual movement that explored Jewish literature, history, and culture (2017, p. 5). This interest in researching and publishing Jewish cultural achievement coincided with the desire to emphasize Jewish culture as an advanced and civilized religious group.

Thus, the first Jewish displays in European museums included ceremonial objects, historical artifacts, and art, laying the foundation for the notion that ritual, history, and culture were worthy of being exhibited (Berger, 2017). These initial exhibits, like the exhibit of objects donated by the French Jewish composer Isaac Strauss at the Paris World Fair in 1878, laid the foundation for the first Jewish museums, which were centered around collections of Judaica.

The Jewish Museum in New York, the first of its kind in America, modeled itself after Jewish collections in Vienna, Danzig, Paris, and other European cities (Berger, 2017). Emerging from the collection Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York in 1904, the Jewish Museum assumed its present-day title and location in 1947, moving to the prestigious "Museum Mile" on the city's Upper East Side (Miller & Cohen, 1997). While this move marked the culmination of significant efforts to legitimize the Jewish community as a vibrant and important part of the American cultural landscape, it coincided with a new challenge in the American Jewish community: grappling with the then recent events of the Shoah and the objective of memorialization.

While JTS and the Jewish Museum did not function as spaces to commemorate these atrocities, Louis Finkelstein, who became JTS President in 1940, focused his energies on presenting Judaism to the American public as a means of preventing further violence against Jews. He edited a volume, published in 1949, titled *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion* (Miller & Cohen). Additionally, Finkelstein envisioned the Jewish Museum "an effective instrument, making for national solidarity and for increased good will among men across differences of creed" (Miller & Cohen, p. 326).

This brief chronicle of early Jewish museums and their efforts to promote understanding of the unique aspects of Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish culture, offers a historical perspective for contemporary concerns about the role of museums as bastions against antisemitism.

## Bringing Jewish Ingenuity and Particularism into Present Focus

Despite ongoing debates about the efficacy of Holocaust education in curbing antisemitic beliefs, Jewish and Holocaust museums remain valuable spaces for the public to encounter Jewish ritual, history, and culture, as well as art that reflects the Jewish experience.

Reflecting on the history and trajectory of Jewish museums in 1991, American Jewish scholar Ruth Seldin wrote, "In an age marked simultaneously by curiosity about things Jewish and great ignorance of them, the museum is uniquely positioned to make Jewish culture available to the widest possible audience" (Seldin, 1991, p. 72). She also notes that smaller museums with more local audiences have made a significant impact through outstanding exhibitions highlighting salient elements of Holocaust history through Jewish art and culture (Seldin, 1991). This remains true in the 21st century, with smaller and mid-sized institutions harnessing the ingenuity of their curators, staff, and volunteers to produce exhibitions that punch above the weight of their institutional footprint.

In 2020, The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life opened "In Real Time. Arthur Szyk: Art & Human Rights (1926-1951)." Showcasing the work of Jewish artist and political cartoonist Arthur Szyk, the exhibition highlights his unique artistic style and reveals how his experience as a Jewish refugee during World War II informed the political commentary of his work, which critiqued the rise of fascism and cast a light on broader themes of human suffering. The museum, located at the University of California, Berkeley, recruited undergraduate student researchers to digitize over 400 pieces of Szyk's art, enabling visitors to zoom in on individual elements of his intricate work. This digitized [collection](#) brings Szyk's art to a global audience.

*Stitching History From the Holocaust*, an exhibit first curated and displayed at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee in 2014, is another recent exhibition generated from a small team of museum professionals. It tells the story of Hedwig and Paul Strnad, a couple living in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. As the situation for Jews across the continent worsened, Paul reached out to his cousin in Milwaukee in a letter, enclosing copies of his wife Hedwig's dress designs in the hopes that she and Paul could secure affidavits to leave Europe. When descendants of Hedwig and Paul Strnad discovered this correspondence, they donated it to the Milwaukee Jewish Archives, which organized and opened the Milwaukee Jewish Museum in 2008. With fewer than ten people on staff, the Museum collaborated with local organizations and Holocaust researchers around the world to uncover the story of the Strnads and to bring Hedwig's sketches to life. Inspired by a visitor who suggested the museum recreate Hedwig's dress designs, the museum partnered with the costume department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater to interpret and construct each dress. The resulting exhibition is a culmination of visitor engagement, institutional partnership, and creative vision. "Stitching History From the Holocaust" has since traveled to museums around the country, bringing this exceptional chapter of history to new audiences.

These exhibitions, incubated through new research and experimentation, illustrate the effectiveness of educating visitors about antisemitism and the Holocaust through the art and ideas of Jewish individuals who lived through these harrowing years of history. Faced with limited resources and the perpetual challenge of getting visitors through their doors, these institutions provide a hopeful glimpse into a future of Holocaust and Jewish museums capable of defying limitations and expectations to deliver groundbreaking and penetrating narratives and experiences.

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