



Forgotten Horrors

Remembering the Holocaust amidst the rise of white supremacy

By Alex Harrell

It's 2019 and anti-Nazi stickers and symbols litter the streets of the city; displayed in restaurant windows, plastered over stop signs and bar bathroom mirrors. The swastika — what was once a jarring emblem of a fascist regime so violent that one felt revolted just from seeing it in a public school textbook — is now almost unavoidable. But the resurgence of the general-prohibition-of-swastikas-symbol is here for a reason: the rise of Neo-Nazis.

“Seventy-three years ago, after the world saw the haunting pictures from Auschwitz, no one in their right mind wanted to be associated with Nazis,” said Ron Lauder, founder and chairman of The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation Committee and president of the World Jewish Congress. “Today, three generations

later, people have forgotten — or, they never knew.”

That's why the Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust is presenting “Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.” To remind us, in the starkest ways, where anti-Semitism can ultimately lead and why we must never return to that ideology again. After all, it wasn't *that* long ago, and it wasn't *that* far away.

“The exhibit is really about learning. For young people, who certainly wouldn't remember the Holocaust or event that much discussion about it,” said Bruce Ratner, chairman of the board of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and a driving force behind bringing the exhibition to America. “Different surveys have shown that young people don't even know what Auschwitz is; some people thought that the Holocaust happened in the 1800s.”



Shirt in Foreground Worn by a Political Prisoner in Auschwitz
From the collection of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum
Photo courtesy of Musealia

While that seems hyperbolic, he's not wrong. According to a study conducted by Schoen Consulting, commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, over one-fifth of millennials haven't heard of, or are unsure if they have heard of, the Holocaust. Six million Jews were exterminated, yet 31% of Americans and 41% of millennials believe that only 2 million (or fewer) were killed. More than half of the adults and millennials, respectively, studied cannot identify what or where Auschwitz was.

Not to mention the rise of white supremacists in the United States in recent years, according to a study done by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia held in August 2017 attracted some 600 extremists, chanting slurs such as "Jews will not replace us." In March, a Brooklyn subway advertisement of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

If there was ever a time for the most comprehensive Holocaust exhibition about Auschwitz ever showcased

in North America, it's now.

"Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away." was produced in partnership with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland and the international firm Musealia. An international team of experts led by historian Dr. Robert Jan van Pelt curated the exhibit, which opens on May 8 and runs through January 3, 2020.

The opening day marks the anniversary of Victory Day in Europe (DE) in 1945, when the allies celebrated Nazi Germany's surrender of its armed forces and the end of World War II.

The exhibition arrives after a successful run at Madrid's Arte Canal Exhibition Centre, where it was extended twice and drew more than 600,000 visitors in Europe last year. The exhibition explores the dual identity of the camp as a physical location — the largest documented mass murder site in history, that is — and as a symbol of the borderless manifestation of hatred and human barbarity.

Featuring more than 700 original objects and 400 photographs, the New York presentation lets visitors explore and experience artifacts from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, including hundreds of personal items that belonged to the survivors and victims.

"The issue is [grasping] what happened," Ratner said, referring to Holocaust-deniers. "When you see an artifact like the freight car, or the barbed wire and concrete posts that were electrified; when you see the child's shoe with the sock still in it before the child was murdered in a gas chamber — that's when you realize this *really* happened."

"Auschwitz did not start with the gas chambers. Hatred does not happen overnight; it builds slowly among people."

Luis Ferreiro, director of Musealia and the exhibition project

Other objects include concrete posts that were part of the fence of the Auschwitz camp, fragments of an original barrack for prisoners from the Auschwitz III-Monowitz camp, possessions of the first and the longest serving Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, a gas mask used by the SS, Picasso's "Lithograph of a Prisoner," and an original German-made Model 2 freight wagon used for the deportation of Jews to the

ghettos and extermination camps in occupied Poland.

“While commemorating the victims of Auschwitz, we should also feel moral discomfort,” said Dr. Piotr M. A. Cywiński, director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, recognizing that the anti-Semitic, hateful and xenophobic ideologies that led to the Holocaust are still alive and well in current society. “They still poison people’s minds and influence our contemporary attitudes,” he continued. “That’s why studying the Holocaust shouldn’t be limited to [just] history classes. It must become part of the curricula of political and civic education, ethics, media, religious studies. This exhibition is one of the tools we can use.”

“Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.” traces the development of Nazi ideology and tracks the transformation of Auschwitz from an ordinary Polish town known as Oświęcim to the most significant Nazi



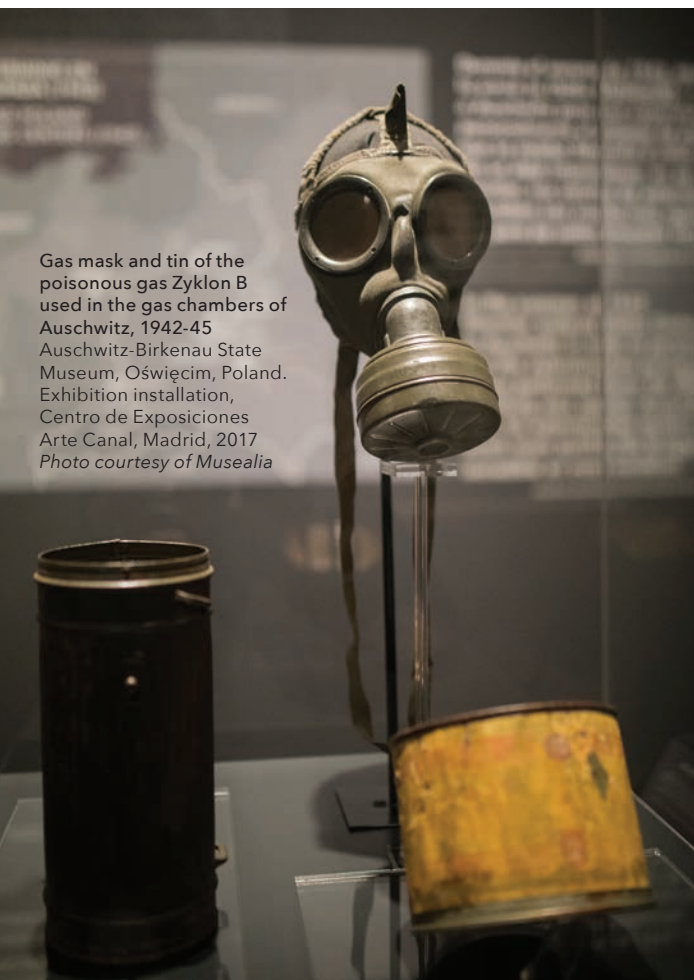
site of the Holocaust — at which approximately one million Jews and tens of thousands of others were murdered. The Museum of Jewish Heritage has incorporated into the exhibition more than 100 rare artifacts from its collection that relay the experience of survivors and liberators who found refuge in the greater New York area. The 18,000-square-foot exhibit introduces these artifacts and Holocaust survivor testimonies throughout 20 thematic galleries.

“All through the exhibition, there are stories — stories about individuals and families, about communities and organizations, stories about ideologies that teach people to hate, and responses that reveal compassion and love,” said Dr. Robert Jan van Pelt, chief curator. “These are stories of victims, perpetrators and bystanders; stories with heroes and villains — stories that all merge into an epic story of a continent marked by war and genocide.”

And while the exhibition is painful and powerful, the emotional heaviness isn’t the only feeling visitors should walk away with. Instead, they should take that disgust and repurpose it into a call to action.

“We have to make sure we don’t promote hate, to make sure we stand up when we see the kinds of things that happened during that dark period in our world’s history,” Ratner said. “We have to do what we can to let others know about it, take the lessons from it and do everything we can to assure it doesn’t happen again.”

Following the New York presentation, the exhibition is intended to tour other cities around the world. Tickets are available for purchase online and are free for Holocaust survivors, active members of the military and first responders, as well as New York City public school students and educators.



Gas mask and tin of the poisonous gas Zyklon B used in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, 1942-45
Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim, Poland.
Exhibition installation, Centro de Exposiciones Arte Canal, Madrid, 2017
Photo courtesy of Musealia