



AT LARGE

Remembering the Unbelievable

By Doug Bandow on 8.24.10 @ 6:09AM

JERUSALEM -- Love it or hate it, Israel is unique. A young nation created amidst conflict and sustained under siege, it retains an ethic forged in the famed "exodus" from Europe after World War II. While Israel exhibits a superficial commonality with Europe -- Tel Aviv has the relaxed feel of other Mediterranean cities -- there remains a hard inner core. One might question the wisdom of particular Israeli policies, but no one should doubt the Jewish people's willingness to do whatever is necessary not to repeat the past.

The best way to understand that commitment is to visit Yad Vashem. Established in 1953 as the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem (the name comes from Isaiah 56:5) is a 45-acre complex on Har Hazikaron, or the Mount of Remembrance, overlooking Jerusalem. The site commemorates the Holocaust, or Shoah (meaning totally unimaginable catastrophe). To visit the history museum is to journey back into a human nightmare highlighting the utter depravity of mankind.

When the horror did end, Israel was one of the unintended results. The museum lives up to its goal of serving "as a bridge between the world that was destroyed and the life that resumed."

A new complex opened five years ago. The museum is built into the mountain using a unique triangular design, with numerous side exhibition halls.

Shortly after entering the hall carpeting gives way to simple concrete: a rough road is about to begin. The first exhibit illustrates Jewish life before the Holocaust. Jews typically constituted less than one percent of the populations of Western Europe and were largely assimilated. In Eastern

Europe the Jewish share of the population rose, hitting 10.3 percent in Poland. At 3.3 million, Poland's Jewish population was Europe's largest and largely unassimilated. The Soviet Union followed with three million, but that constituted only 1.8 percent of the total population.

Included are some amazing film footage and photographs. One sees a lost world that was vibrant and diverse. Although anti-Semitism existed in West, the most vicious antagonism was further east. Industrialized and sophisticated Germany was one of the last societies in which one would have expected Nazism to take hold.

Next comes an exhibit of Nazi Germany at peace, when anti-Semitism was turned into official law and practice. It is a familiar story in some ways, but the museum turns abstract history into brutal reality. There is anti-Semitic literature, including the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Beer drinkers could use an anti-Semitic beer stein decorated with detailed reliefs. There even is an anti-Semitic board game for children, with the objective of capturing the Jewish figures: never lose an opportunity to teach children to hate.

Through photos, posters, relics, and text, the story of the Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht, and much more is told. Nazi policies came as a shock to German Jews who, the museum explains, "considered themselves loyal patriots, linked to the German way of life by language and culture." But nothing would protect them from the Nazis' warped ideology.

Controls over the economic, professional, and cultural life of Jews were steadily expanded. Photos of the period remind us how Adolf Hitler built support, imprisoned opponents, and persecuted Jews. "The Fateful Year," according to German documents, was 1938. An anti-Jewish campaign began which, according to the museum, "included the demolition of synagogues, mass arrests, destruction and looting of shops, and registration of Jewish property for expropriation purposes." Deportations of Jews with Polish citizenship also started.

Moreover, the bloodless conquests of Austria and Czechoslovakia placed more unfortunate Jews under Hitler's control. Still, Western nations were loath to offer sanctuary; the exhibit covers the tragic voyage of the *St. Louis*, turned back to Europe where many of its Jewish passengers ended up perishing. Jews had no sanctuary. Observed Chaim Weizman, President of the World Zionist Organization, in 1939: "the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places where they cannot enter."

Still, despite all this, no one could imagine mass murder. The onset of the war on September 1, 1939, again expanded, dramatically, the number of Jews under German control, and made possible -- indeed, necessary, in the warped Nazi mind -- the physical elimination of the Jews. The broad war story is standard for any World War II buff. But the museum emphasizes how the conflict impacted Jews, who faced expropriation of their property, arrest, and abuse. The abundant photos have lost none of their power over the years. No practice was too degrading or humiliating not to use on hapless Jews. Even the common troops joined in, usually with no prodding from above.

At this point the hallway steadily narrows to illustrate the diminishing options for Europe's Jews. Germany had to come up with a policy towards the millions of Jews now under its rule. In Western Europe, home of kindred racial peoples in Hitler's view, "the Nazis did not ghettoize the Jews but enforced racial legislation and introduced Aryanization and discrimination," explains the museum. In the east the policy was far harsher: Jews were forced into ghettos, isolating them

from employment, culture, and the rest of the world.

The next side gallery -- they are growing in size even as the hallway shrinks -- tells the horrifying story of the ghettos in Kovno, Lodz, Theresienstadt, and Warsaw. Included are a bench, cobble stones, and even section of train tracks from the Warsaw ghetto. Again, photos and art show us a life that is unimaginable, filled with forced labor, starvation, and disease. Nevertheless, residents fought to preserve a community and cultural life, especially for children. Tragically, Jews so effectively imprisoned "were doomed to humiliation, poverty, decline, and death."

The death of millions was made inevitable by the German invasion of the Soviet Union, covered in the next gallery. Millions more Jews fell into Nazi hands. In January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference -- the villa where the meeting was held is a museum in Potsdam, Germany -- the decision was made for the "final solution." At first the killings were slow and inefficient: the four Einsatzgruppen could only shoot so many people.

Yet the photos of these operations are among the most striking in the entire museum. We see those about to be murdered and those who have been murdered. We also have a few horrifying images of the moment of death, of German personnel shooting, smoke escaping from their guns, and the victims' bodies poised at the top of a ditch, about to topple onto the corpses below. This was murder at the retail level, up close and personal. How can someone willingly commit such a crime? It is a question that carries forward through the ages.

The Einsatzgruppen did their best to kill promiscuously. But it was not enough for a regime bent on mass murder. Thus the ever-efficient Germans organized deportations to assembly-line death camps. The largest gallery in the history museum covers this period. The Nazis emphasized quantity. Heinrich Himmler explained in July 1942: "The existing extermination places in the East are unsuited to a large scale, long-term action. I have designated Auschwitz for this purpose."

The museum presents the entire horrid saga -- the forced deportations, the ruses to defuse suspicion, the suffocating rail trips, the humiliating arrivals, and the extermination of millions. Again, the story is not new, but the photos, relics, and testimonies remind us that real people lived and died. The numbers constantly threaten to overwhelm, but we see individual victims. Of course, not all Jews went willingly. The Warsaw Ghetto uprising was followed by resistance in other Jewish ghettos. Still the Nazis continued with the killings.

Perhaps the most poignant exhibit, which comes next, details "The World's Silence." We will never know how many Jews could have been saved had the allies targeted the extermination camps and accepted Jewish refugees early and often. But it is a moral stain that will never be washed away. At least there were "Righteous Among the Nations," as the museum terms them, who acted, often at great personal risk, to save individuals and families. Their stories continue to inspire decades later. Raoul Wallenberg is well known. There were many others who are less famous but who were equally brave.

The next hall explores life in the camps, forced labor as well as extermination. Photos, artifacts, models, art, and testimony all detail a regimen of cruelty and death. Even the imminent end of war did not end the horror. For some liberation remained just out of reach, with death marches and execution. The purposes of the brutal evacuations were many: preserve needed labor, eliminate potential witnesses, and continue killing Jews. But others did survive, and soon the

world knew everything.

The last exhibit covers the plight of the survivors. They managed to stay alive. But at what cost? They had been ravaged physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Their families had been killed, their communities had been destroyed, their nations had been wrecked. Survivor Herta Goldmann observed: "Slowly they told me they're all gone, you've got no one left. I had survived alone. All the hope that I had a family, someone to return to, all of life, all those years, I prayed that I wouldn't remain alone in the world. That's that, the hope disappeared and then came the despair."

How to move forward? Even liberation was only partial for many former inmates, who ended up in displaced persons camps, or victims of renewed pogroms in the east. How to rebuild an old life or build a new one? The desire to do the latter was, of course, a driving impulse in the creation of Israel.

But it was not just other Jews who lost so much from the Shoah. It was the rest of us. The Hall of Names brilliantly illustrates this point. The circular room is ringed with notebooks containing names and biographies of and testimonies about millions of victims. Explained my guide, one of Yad Vashem's "primary objectives was to give victims back their names. We are not talking about six million numbers, but six million people." After she found a page of testimony about her grandmother's half-brother, who died at Auschwitz, "I was so excited. It meant he existed. All of a sudden the number had a name."

The ceiling, essentially a cone rising skyward, contains more than 600 photos of the Nazis' victims -- men and women, young and old. A cross section of humanity that happened to be Jewish. My guide -- a wonderfully expressive lady who hailed from Brooklyn -- pointed at the pictures and said, there was the cure for cancer. And maybe it was, along with a new symphony, an improved source of energy, and a better computer -- not to mention a richer and more diverse human community.

The hallway ends with a balcony overlooking Jerusalem. It is a stunning end to a powerful trip through one of the worst, if not the worst, period of human history. There's more to the complex, including the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations, which acknowledges gentiles who saved Jews, as well as the Children's Memorial, to the 1.5 million children who died in the Holocaust. And Yad Vashem's mission is not just to display but to research and educate.

Human history is filled with much tragedy, war, and mass murder. But there's nothing quite like the attempt by the Nazis to wipe out Europe's Jews. It is an experience that should never be forgotten. And Yad Vashem will help ensure that it never is forgotten. Especially by Israelis.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Crossway)*.