

Holocaust Museums and Artifacts: Linking History and Culture

Gabriel Mayer

ABSTRACT

This thesis entails an examination of three prominent Holocaust museums: Yad Vashem and Ghetto Fighters' House Museum (GFH) in Israel and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. They were chosen because of a combination of prominence as regards their early inception-the two Israeli museums- and the extent of influence on Holocaust historiography, scholarship, and related cultural ramifications. Utilizing methodology drawn from the discipline of material culture, much of the work was focused through the lens of artifact collections. Part of the objective was to relate cultural and political influences to museum ethos, and in turn, take notice of the impact of museum development on the culture without. An indirect but unavoidable relationship was noted in the evolution of Holocaust historiography. The methodology consisted of an examination of specifically chosen artifacts from each museum, conducting an in-depth examination of the circumstances related to their acquisition and collection, along with detailed historical analysis of background information of involved individuals, families, communities, and as it turned out toward the end of the exercise,

the involvement of the curating staff. The research work included a number of interviews with individuals closely linked and involved during the developmental stages of each museum, along with examination of internal documents, whenever available. An overall viewpoint emerged regarding each museum individually and as relates to Holocaust narrativization in combination. As the work progressed it also became clear, that wholly separate from institutional influence, the artifacts related information (history) accrued from individualized narratives, which remained unaffected by these external forces. Thus the artifacts collections appear to render a "populist" message of witnessing, very much in keeping with personalized memory transmission. The museums were seen as representing an ethos, mostly shared as regards Holocaust narrativization, while the artifacts-individually and as items of acquisition and collections-addressed ethnos, relayed individual agency and represented personalized narrativization.