



How Germans Remember the Holocaust

by Roie Yellinek

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The selective details on display at the Documentation Center of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds, a museum in Nuremberg, give an indication of the ways in which the German people choose to remember the Holocaust and the era of Nazi rule.

The Nazi race laws that led to the murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust were enacted in the city of Nuremberg. Nuremberg is a quintessentially German city, and the events that took place there have a particularly great significance in German historical memory.

In Nuremberg, Germany has constructed a museum in the north wing of the unfinished remains of Congress Hall, the grounds of the Nazi party's enormous rallies. This area was bombed by the Allies at the end of WWII.

The museum's introductory video makes a great effort to connect the past, the present, and the future. It contrasts what exists today in the area of the museum (green grass, sports complexes, a lake) to what was there in the past (a huge construction project designed to glorify the name of Hitler and his party).

What the video does not do is address the consequences of the decisions that were made in that place. It tries to create a comforting, generic image of yet another historical museum, rather than focus on the location's unique status as the one-time epicenter of the Nazi party.

The video expresses curiosity and even pride at the tremendous size of the Nazi-era construction project, while conveying no indication of guilt or understanding of its historical meaning. The smoothly edited video is accompanied by pleasant music, and the actors who appear in it are all young and "cool."

The museum itself displays the historical process that began with the birth of Hitler and ended with the Nuremberg trials, which took place after the war ended. The lack of attention paid to the Holocaust is striking, as is the museum's approach to presenting the Nuremberg Trials.

The language of the museum is of course German, but headphones are provided for visitors so they can understand the captions. Unfortunately, Hebrew is not one of languages provided. The Museum's mission appears to be more inwardly focused: to give the German public a more comfortable way of looking at the events that occurred in Nuremberg.

The exhibition starts with the background in which Hitler grew up and from which he developed his murderous ideology. It exhibits his book *Mein Kampf* as a precious and rare object, though it is forbidden for sale or distribution in many parts of the Western world. The museum discusses the consequences of WWI for the Germans, including damage to the national pride and to the country's financial situation. It appears to be suggesting that Germans were pushed toward war by the harsh realities they faced after WWI, a message that at least partially absolves them of culpability for their subsequent genocidal history.

The museum devotes a large exhibition space to German internal resistance to the Nazi party, which it portrays as a major movement. This phenomenon was in fact marginal and almost entirely ineffective. The museum's framing tries to paint the war and the Holocaust as events that were almost imposed on the Germans, not as Nazi initiatives that could not have been implemented without the participation and support of the vast majority of the German population.

That participation is mentioned by the museum, but in a manner that appears nostalgic. Nazi festivals were held once a year in Nuremberg, and the museum points out more than once that Hitler himself arrived at the city's central train station to welcome those who had come to the festivals.

In the entire museum, the Holocaust is mentioned only three times, with one more indirect mention. This downplaying of the Holocaust illustrates the revisionist narrative the museum is trying to promote.

At its first mention (Exhibit 1605), the Holocaust appears with a very short explanation (relative to the rest of the displays) of the systematic extermination of Jewish and non-Jewish people in the concentration camps – a program that was planned, constructed, and operated by Germans. The caption states that slightly more than half the victims were murdered in concentration camps, the

rest dying of disease, malnutrition, and other causes. This too sounds like an attempt to reduce the Nazis' burden of guilt.

The second mention is two blurry images of piles of bodies. The bodies have no faces or names, and the pictures are from a great distance. This reduces the magnitude of the horror depicted, and mitigates the fact that the deaths shown in the images were the result of the unfolding of the terrible things described in earlier sections of the museum.

The third mention of the Holocaust is near the monument to the six million dead (Exhibit 2002), which was built in cooperation with the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum and other organizations. The reference on the monument is to "people," not "Jews," though the names appearing on it are Jewish and the number is identified exclusively with the Nazi genocide attempt against the Jewish People.

The museum does not attempt to address that carefully planned genocide attempt. It anonymizes the victims, stripping them of any specific ethnic-religious identification. In doing so, the museum planners, on behalf of the official bodies of the Nuremberg municipality and other German officials, are trying to reshape the history of the Nazi atrocities.

The last section of the museum deals with the Nuremberg Trials. It describes them as an important contribution to the development of modern international law, indicating a not insubstantial degree of local pride. The museum's creators blur the fact that the judges were Americans and others, while the criminals were Germans or affiliated with them.

The museum, those who planned it, and those who took part in its establishment have tried to bestow on themselves and the German people a history that is easier to stomach than the historical reality. The museum's narrative states that 1) the Germans were led into a situation that almost forced them to start the war; 2) things took place during the Nazi regime that Germans can be proud of; 3) the Germans were also victims, and some of them opposed the regime; and 4) the Holocaust belongs on the margins of historical memory.

The museum is an effort to ease the collective German memory and absolve the German people of the enormous difficulty of living in the shadow of their past. This message makes it easier to justify German hostility toward Israel, the world's only Jewish state. When Germans support Iran, which seeks to destroy Israel, it is incumbent on us to remind them of their true history, whether they are willing to hear it or not.

Roie Yellinek is a doctoral student in the department of Middle East Studies at Bar-Ilan University, a fellow at the Kohelet Policy Forum and the China-Med Project, and a freelance journalist.