BEHOLD NOW BEHEMOTH

The Holocaust Memorial Museum: One more American theme park
By Philip Gourevitch

I am a first-generation American, born, like the nation, in Philadelphia, the child of refugees from European barbarism. Both my parents, in their separate youths, escaped the Nazi effort to murder all Jews; many in my family were not so lucky. I knew this fact, in some form, from as early in my life as I remember knowing anything significant. To a degree, I derived pride and a sense of romance from the distinctiveness of this awful yet dramatic heritage: I was glad to have a story that gave shape and meaning to my origins, and thereby provided me with a consciousness of destiny. I understood that my life belonged not only to me but to the course of history.

Yet the story, the details of which I knew only sketchily until I was nearly twenty, worried me too. I had a dream around the age of seven or eight, a dream I may have dreamed more than once, of a vast, darkened plain across which masses of people fled in chaotic haste, pursued and at times surrounded by other equally chaotic masses. Fire at the margins of the scene illuminated the action, the only possible outcome of which seemed to be isolation and annihilation. I survived, of course, because I woke up; the slaughter ended before I did.

The phrase that became attached to this hateful vision was, “The Nazis are coming.” I don’t know if I thought the words in my sleep, or if I added them afterward. The experience seemed at once absolutely true and absolutely useless. Nothing could be learned from it, nothing taken away; there was nothing in it for life.

I was reminded of this dream of terror last April, when I visited the newly opened United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the latest addition to the federal museum system—a $168 million facility built by federal decree on a plot of priceless federal land just off the National Mall in Washington, D.C. There I spoke with Michael Berenbaum, who was the museum’s project director throughout its planning and construction. A rabbi and professor of theology at Georgetown University, he explained to me that the museum’s mission is twofold: to memorialize the victims of Nazism by providing an exhaustive historical narrative of the Holocaust; and, at the same time, to present visitors with an object lesson in the ethical ideals of American political culture by presenting the negation of those ideals. Berenbaum has coined a phrase to describe the latter part of this mission. He calls it “The

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Americanization of the Holocaust."

"In America," he said, "we recast the story of the Holocaust to teach fundamental American values. What are the fundamental values? For example—when America is at its best—pluralism, democracy, restraint on government, the inalienable rights of individuals, the inability of government to enter into freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and so forth."

The museum, then, is meant to serve as an ideological vaccine for the American body politic. A proper dose of Holocaust, the thinking goes, will build up the needed antibodies against totalitarianism, racism, and state-sponsored mass murder. "The Holocaust," Berenbaum has written, "can become a symbolic orienting event in human history that can prevent recurrence." He and his colleagues have designed the national Holocaust museum so that as much of the American public as possible—particularly the school groups that are expected to make up a large percentage of visitors—will, in a sense, walk through my childhood nightmare. This experience, they believe, will teach Americans both to celebrate and to think critically about their political culture.

"When America is at its best," Berenbaum told me, "the Holocaust is impossible in the United States."

The fact remains, however, that the Holocaust was a European event, and that even at its utter worst, America has been a place where the Holocaust—a program of genocidal extermination mandated and implemented by every organ of a nation-state—has never entered the realm of possibility. America's problems and America's faults, however extreme, have been and remain different from those of fascist Germany. To suggest that there are meaningful comparisons can only distort our already feeble understanding of European history and—worse—obscure our perception of current American reality.

The museum's dedication ceremony on April 22 was an exercise in official pageantry and speechifying, attended by virtually unanimous celebration in the nation's press. President Clinton addressed the gathered thousands—survivors, foreign heads of state, American dignitaries, and assorted citizens—describing the museum as "an investment in a secure future against whatever insanity lurks ahead." He went on to say that "if this museum can mobilize morality, then those who have perished will thereby gain a measure of immortality."

The President's "if" had a particularly sinister resonance on that day; as he spoke, Serbian forces in the former Yugoslavia were pressing forward with the slaughter of their Bosnian Muslim neighbors. There, in the heart of Europe, the Serbian program of murdering innocents, and the sickening euphemism "ethnic cleansing" (with which even the American press masked the bloodiness), was glaringly reminiscent of—though not equivalent to—the Holocaust. As of that moment, the international response to this atrocity had amounted to expressions of outrage and the decision to stand by. Indeed, many of the world's leaders stood in Washington with the National Mall as their backdrop, the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial looming in the near distance, and applauded President Clinton's suggestion that the Holocaust museum could redeem the deaths of Nazism's victims by serving as "a constant reminder of our duty to build and nurture the institutions of public tranquility and humanity."

In Yiddish, the language Hitler sought to eliminate along with the Jews of Europe, such talk is called chutzpah. There is something dangerous-
ly facile about opposing evil fifty years after the fact. Yet that is the price one pays for Americanizing the Holocaust; as soon as the Holocaust is set up as a metaphor for national ideology, it comes back to haunt us, making its utterance a constant potential embarrassment and tainting the otherwise irreproachable impulse to commemorate the dead. As an American, and as a Jew, I am deeply discomforted to have to point out these things. I do not, for a moment, want to suggest that the Holocaust should be forgotten, remembered in silence, or ignored. I want only to serve a reminder, as this museum becomes a major new touchstone in America's narrative of national identity, that denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good.

Not surprisingly, the museum has been highly politicized from its inception. Jimmy Carter initiated the project, in large part as a means to mend his poor relations with the American Jewish community. The idea of a memorial had been kicked around by Carter's Jewish advisers for some time, but the president only latched on to it in 1978, in the wake of Jewish outrage at his decision to sell a fleet of F-15 fighter planes to Saudi Arabia. Carter appointed Elie Wiesel to chair a commission on the Holocaust, and in the fall of 1979 Wiesel presented Carter with the report that became the museum's founding document. In 1980 a unanimous Congress approved the plan, providing the federal land near the Mall. The rest of the museum's $168 million cost was raised privately, mostly within the Jewish community.

Debates about how Jewish and how universally American the museum should be have shadowed the project since its prehistory. Wiesel finedessed the point by arguing that "the universality of the Holocaust lies in its uniqueness: the Event is essentially Jewish, yet its interpretation is universal." In his report to the president, he described the Holocaust as ripe with lessons that reinforce democratic American principles of pluralism and tolerance. And although he made clear that Jews were the primary victims of the Holocaust, the only group singled out by the Nazis for total elimination, the council overseeing the development of the project decided that the museum should also represent the victimization of such non-Jewish groups as Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political prisoners.

Wiesel has since appeared to vacillate on the merits of universalizing the Holocaust. When, shortly after receiving his Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he quit his post as council chairman, he gave as his chief reason his fear that the museum was losing its Jewish focus. Nevertheless, he played a central role in the museum's dedication ceremonies, even scolding Clinton for his inaction on Bosnia, and shortly afterward he appeared to want the chairmanship back. Evidently Wiesel has come to accept what Berenbaum has been arguing all along: that the Americanization of the Holocaust is inevitable.

In his essay "The Nativization of the Holocaust," Berenbaum has written that "the place from which an event is recalled inevitably shapes memory" and that therefore "only a part of memory involves the past." In this understanding, memory becomes a fundamentally antithistorical phenomenon. Berenbaum, however, does not seek to correct this tendency; rather, he embraces it, declaring, in effect, that because memory will be relative, it is okay to relativize it. Now that the museum is a fait accompli, it is as much a memorial to this notion as to the Holocaust story it tells. For decades and presumably centuries to come, visitors to the National Mall will be able to puzzle at the fact that some American Jews sought to establish a sense of security in America by presenting the Holocaust to the nation as a therapeutic mass-cultural experience.

To draw people into this strange new American civics lesson, exhibition designers have devised a gimmick for audience participation in the Holocaust narrative. Upon admission, visitors are issued an identity card—matched to their age and gender—imprinted with the name and vital statistics of an actual Holocaust victim or survivor. As they pass through the three floors of the museum's permanent exhibition, museumgoers will be periodically able to plug these bar-coded cards into computerized stations and measure their progress against the fate of their phantom surrogates, most of whom were murdered.

The sample I.D. card included in the promotional materials that the museum sent me is stamped with the name and photograph of Haskel Kernweis, who was born in 1920 and lived in the rural village of Kolbuszowa, Poland. "His family is very religious," the card explains, although it does not name their religion. For the years 1933–1939, we read that "Haskel now calls himself 'Charley,' for his passion is no longer religion but English...." He writes to Eleanor Roosevelt telling her that he loves English and wants to speak it in America one day. She responds enthusiastically. The German police order Charley to work for them." Between 1940 and 1944, Charley fled to the woods with a group of
Jews after learning that the Germans meant to kill him. Returning to town one day to buy bread, he was caught by Polish peasants and, the card announces, "his friends found him—dead, a pitchfork stuck into his chest." The card's final entry is: "1945-. . Charley's entire family was gassed at Belzec. Only one of the Jewish fighters who went to the woods with him survived the war."

There are some five hundred visitor I.D. cards, but it is no accident that the one selected for publicity purposes should tell the story of a man who is described as having converted from Judaism to Americanism before his death at the hands of Nazi collaborators. The card's narrative even implies that the animosity of the Nazis was a consequence of Haskel/Charley's Americanism. When I asked Berenbaum about this, he said, "Clearly, when they're sending out fund-raising cards, they're sending out fund-raising things they want to attract American people—to attract and interest the Americans without falsifying events."

Entering the Holocaust museum from southwest Fifteenth Street (now renamed Raoul Wallenberg Place, after the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews from Nazi extermination), one is confronted by a black marble wall engraved with the passage from the Declaration of Independence celebrating "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Opposite this, chiseled in gray limestone, are words from George Washington: "The government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

From the I.D.-card dispensary one is ushered directly into an elevator, where a video monitor plays footage of an armored vehicle rumbling over bleak European terrain while the voice of an American soldier describes coming upon a Nazi death camp without knowing what it was. After less than a minute, the elevator doors open on the fourth floor and the permanent exhibition begins with a wall-sized photograph of some twenty American G.I.'s looking down on a massive heap of charred logs and charred corpses. These are the calcined remains of concentration camp inmates at Ohrdruf, Germany, in April 1945—twisted limbs, broken torsos, blackened skin crumbling from skull bones. Along the same wall, video monitors play ghastly color footage of the liberation of Dachau, and a giant color photo presents a starved Buchenwald inmate sipping a post-liberation meal from a tin bowl. This man is the picture of cosmic woe; cadaverous in his short-panted, striped pajamas, he sits in dazzling sunshine, squinting up at his photographer with a face so harrowed by unhappiness that it calls into permanent question just what it means to say that he has survived.

Before visitors even reach the first exhibit on the rise of Nazism, they have been dealt a visceral, emotional wallop with the graphic evidence of the end result: Jewish corpses. The effect is, at the least, shocking. A wincing, uncomfortable silence hangs over the crowded gallery, punctuated only by clucked tongues and staccato gasps of outrage—sounds that become less frequent as the museum tour continues and visitors recoup their defenses or become accustomed to images of horror.

The museum's designers explain the decision to begin the exhibition with the American liberation of the camps as a means of orienting visitors who may have no knowledge whatever of history. The idea is to ease the passage from the festive present of a visit to the Mall to the alien hell of Nazi Europe by discovering that hell through American eyes. Of course, opening the show from this vantage point will also comfort Americans by identifying them immediately as heroes. An odd spin, this: clutching their I.D. cards, museumgoers are asked to identify simultaneously with the victims and their saviors. Placing the American liberation of the camps in the foreground of the exhibition also nudges to the background the third role visitors are being asked to consider: that of the bystanders who participate in history by an acquiescent failure to act. The decision further blurs the understanding of the role of bystanders by creating the impression that Americans knew nothing of Hitler's "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem" until the end of the war. That was true of many American G.I.'s, but the American government, some members of the press, and some of the public, especially the American Jewish community, had known of the death camps for years. This is a matter examined at several points later in the exhibition. By then, however, the issue is likely to be confused for anyone who does not already have a firm grasp of the events under examination.

Shortly before he committed suicide, Primo Levi, the most lucid and probing of survivor-authors, wrote about receiving a lecture from a fifth-grader on how he should and could have escaped Auschwitz, a detailed plan of action that the child concluded with the words "If it should happen to you again, do as I told you. You'll see that you'll be able to do it." To Levi, the boy's remarks illustrated "the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were ‘down there' and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approxima-
tive books, films, and myths." Every aspect of the Holocaust museum’s exhibition that promotes Americanization drives the museum deeper into that gap.

On either side of a darkened hallway, the history of Germany from 1933 to 1939 looms behind glass—a montage of photographs, artifacts, text and video displays. The section headings tell the story: “Nazi Takeover of Power,” “The Terror Begins,” “The Boycott,” “The Burning of Books,” “Nazi Propaganda,” “The Nuremberg Laws.” Here is an exhibit devoted to Nazi race science: photo charts of human heads describing various “racial types,” images of scientists taking cranial measurements from human specimens, a pair of metal calipers, a sampler of different types and colors of human hair hanging from the wall. Here is a giant color photograph of a Nazi rally, radiant blond children frozen as they give the stiff-armed “Heil Hitler” salute. Here is a school desk from the period, and over it a photograph of a little German girl cheerfully reading The Poisoned Mushroom, a popular anti-Semitic children’s book that took its title from Hitler’s description of Jews in Mein Kampf. Here is a section on laws against interracial relations, with images of Jewish-Aryan couples forced to wear signs confessing their crimes before mocking crowds in the public streets.

In the section titled “Expansion Without War,” the Anschluss is seen on video: the Nazis’ triumphal arrival in Vienna, the joyous Austrians swarming to welcome them. Next to the monitor hang the famous images of Vienna’s Jews, forced on all fours to scrub the city’s streets with hand-held brushes while passersby stop to enjoy the show. Europe’s indifference to such goings-on is conveyed by a large color photograph of Neville Chamberlain, beaming and doffing his bowler hat in an open car beneath snapping swastika banners in Munich, 1938.

In an alcove dedicated to the “Mosaic of Victims,” an authentic Gypsy caravan stands beneath images of Gypsies and Jehovah’s Witnesses and mug shots of German men arrested on charges of homosexuality. Desecrated Torah scrolls spill over the floor beneath a defaced ark from a German synagogue in the exhibition’s treatment of Kristallnacht. Four video monitors play footage from that night showing stores being smashed, synagogues burning. Festive martial tunes drift across the gallery from a nearby display on Nazi high society. Further along, a wall of photographs tells of the torture and murder of the Polish intelligentsia in the winter of 1939: mass executions, mass graves, blindfolded people stumbling through the woods to their deaths. Around the corner is a display on the murder of the handicapped: a metal hospital cot with restraint bands stands before a 1941 photo of the Hadamar Euthanasia center in Hadamar, Germany—a large, factory-like building at the edge of a quiet-looking town. Smoke jetting from its chimney comes from a crematorium. Another photo shows a naked girl held upright on a bed by a strong-armed attendant. The caption informs that she is mentally disabled and about to be murdered.

After this, there is a long gallery on American reactions to the events in Europe, a chronicle of journalistic alarm and official isolationism that provides a short breather before one descends to the third floor and the story of the Final Solution. Here, the exhibition halls narrow and lift onto a bridge over a pavement of cobble-
stones imported from the Warsaw Ghetto. The process of herding Jews into ghettos, moving them about in railroad transports, and finally deporting them to death camps is carefully chronicled. Ghetto life is evoked in all its grim and hopeless detail.

By the time I reached the exhibit on the Einsatzgruppen, or mobile killing squads, I felt I'd had enough. In just a few hours I had already seen images of hundreds of dead bodies, many of them naked, and hundreds more people starving, beaten, and otherwise brutalized. Now a photograph hung before me of a man squatting at the edge of a mass grave, corpses beneath him, Nazis behind him, a pistol at his head about to be fired. Below this picture, the crowd—which was impossibly dense throughout the gallery—was even thicker than usual. I waited to draw closer and found, behind a low "privacy wall" designed to keep young children from particularly graphic material, two video monitors playing footage of the killing squads at work.

This is what I wrote in my notebook: "Peep-show format. Snuff films. Naked women led to execution. People are being shot. Into the ditch, shot, spasms, collapse, dirt thrown in over. Crowds of naked people. Naked people standing about to be killed, naked people lying down dead. Close-up of a woman's face and throat as a knife is plunged into her breast—blood all over. Someone holds a severed head in his hand. Mass graves of thousands. Naked. Naked corpses. Street beatings. The gun, the smoke, a figure crumbles. Naked corpses. Naked women dragged to death. Shooting. Screaming. Blackout. The film begins again."

It was not exactly depression or fear or revulsion that overcame me as I stood before this exhibit, though I experienced all those reactions at one moment or another in the museum. Nor was it that I had seen it all before. The problem was simply that I could not make out the value in going through this. The Holocaust happened—it should be remembered and it should be found repellent. But I felt the way I did when I was a child waking from my nightmare: I know that this is hell and I know that it is true, but the ethical dilemmas and the political choices that I face in my life are not those of the Holocaust; nor are the crises of America those shown in this museum. If that should change, and I should find myself in the shoes of any of these brutalized people whose stories surrounded me, nothing I could learn from having studied their plight would help me. I would try not to wind up at the edge of a pit looking down at the corpses whose number I was about to join, but I might wind up there. Along the way, I hope I would try to help others, but I might not have the wherewithal and I might not succeed.

Shortly before I came to the murder videos, I had passed through a sitting area off the main gallery and encountered an elderly gentleman dressed in a dark suit and an embroidered black velvet yarmulke. He was wearing a museum tag around his neck with the name Jacob printed on it. From a conversation he was having as I approached, I learned that he was a Holocaust survivor who had volunteered to be on hand to talk to visitors. When we were left alone together, we stood a few feet apart without a word. He looked tired and sad, and avoided making eye contact, and I could not think what to say to him. Now, as I stood scribbling in front of the video monitor, I overheard a mother and her daughter discussing this man.

"I couldn't get much out of him," the mother said. "He didn't seem to want to tell his story."

"So why would he be here?" the daughter said.

"He didn't want to talk. It just must be too painful."
“Of course,” the daughter said. “I understand that. But if that’s the case, why on earth would he want to be here?”

The daughter was asking a very good question. Jacob was no Ancient Mariner; his burden was unspoken. Perhaps that was the lesson he took home from the museum—a far cry from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But then, I thought: What about the rest of us here? Why would anyone want to be here?

I hurried on, up a platform, past images of deportation, and into a railroad freight car, an actual railroad car on actual iron railroad tracks—one of the gifts to the museum from the Polish government. During the war, cars just like this one hauled Jews to Treblinka to be murdered. It was small and dark inside. I felt like a trespasser, someone engaged in an unwholesome experience, the way I might feel if I were asked to lie in someone else’s coffin.

On the exit ramp, I stood behind another family group, a stout older man with his wife and two daughters. They were examining a wall of mug shots of Auschwitz inductees, and after a minute the man said, “Nope, these are all 1942.”

“You were there the next year?” his wife said.

“Yup.” He turned to his kids. “Let’s move it, eh?” He glanced ahead to see where he was going and found that he was about to pass under a cast of the metal gate that hangs over the entry to Auschwitz with the message ARBEIT MACHT FREI (“Work makes one free”). For a moment the man appeared to hesitate. Then he grinned and said, “Oh, yeah, I want to be free.”

I was not surprised to see people crying at different points during my visit to the museum. What astonished me was to see visitors with cameras photographing the displays: the room full of thousands of shoes of concentration camp victims, the twisted metal truck chassis used as a grill to bum bodies at Mauthausen before the crematoria were perfected, the table where victims had their gold fillings extracted from their teeth before they were murdered. People even photographed photographs—of ghetto dwellers and slave laborers, of the dead and their remains, the hair shorn from the heads of Auschwitz inmates.

I cannot imagine what anyone would want with such photographs, most of which are available in books, but as I watched these tourists with their cameras I became more alert to the aesthetic sensibility with which the museum’s artifacts and graphics have been selected and displayed. In these galleries, the relics of Nazi genocide become if not glamorous then distinctly elegant, even—as with the torn Torah scrolls or a photo mural of seventy-two forearms reaching to the left displaying concentration camp tattoos—eerie beautiful. Museums, after all, are places of entertainment. However serious their subject, they are obliged to win and reward the attention of their audience. Traditionally, museums are places of celebration, presenting cultural achievement or the wonders of nature and science. The horrifying quality of Holocaust material does not transform such a context; rather, it is transformed by the context.

Violence and the grotesque are central to the American aesthetic, and the Holocaust museum provides both amply. It is impossible to take in the exhibition without becoming somewhat injured to the sheer graphic horror on display; indeed, it would be unbearable to be defenseless in such a place. A flat response, however, is less unsettling than is the potential for excitement, for titillation, and even for seduction by the overwhelmingly powerful imagery. The museum courts the viewer’s fascination, encouraging familiarity with the incomprehensible and the unacceptable; one is repeatedly forced into the role of a voyeur of the prurient. (By contrast, Claude Lanzman’s wrenching film Shoah holds one mesmerized for nine hours without a single violent image.)

During the American Civil War, people used to go out to the battlefield to watch the fighting, an activity that was known as “going to see the elephant.” They were out for the show, something enormous and exotic and terrifying. The spectacle was its own reward. There is already an elephant on the National Mall, a trumpeting bull elephant stuffed in the lobby of the National Museum of Natural History; there are already train cars in the National Museum of American History; there are even airplanes, rocket ships, blimps, and fabulous films that make you feel that you are flying in the National Air and Space Museum. But the new show in town is more wondrous strange yet. Never mind the elephant; as the Lord said to Job:

“Behold now behemoth.”

When General Dwight Eisenhower toured the mass graves at the Ohrdruf concentration camp, he said, “We are told that the American soldier does not know what he was fighting for. Now at least he will know what he is fighting against.” Ike’s remark could serve as the Holocaust museum’s motto. Americans, it seems, are no longer confident asserting their principles and ideals affirmatively. The new museum has been compared with Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial as providing a critique of the iconog-
raphy of progress and state power that abounds on the Mall. But the Holocaust museum seems less to repudiate traditional American boosterism than to invert the rhetoric in which its claims are made. Here we are told not what we stand for but what we stand against.

When I asked various museum officials why America should set aside one of the last remaining plots of land on the Mall to commemorate the Holocaust, they responded by pointing out that national museums of Native-American and African-American history are also planned. The comparison explains nothing. Those museums will present American history, not European history, and they will cover hundreds of years of each people's history, their accomplishments as well as their tragedies. Nobody talks about a Trail of Tears museum or a museum of slavery.

The Holocaust museum, on the other hand, installs Jews on the Mall as a people identified by their experience of mass murder. If Jews had not had that experience, Jews would not have this museum. This fact points to the centrality of victimology in contemporary American identity politics. At a time when Americans seem to lack the confidence to build national monuments to their ideas of good, the Holocaust has been seized as an opportunity to build instead a monument against absolute evil. The absolute, however, is a treacherous place to seek lessons. By definition, it does not yield. Like the God of Exodus, it is what it is and it shall be what it shall be. For that reason, the absolute is useless as metaphor. It is incomparable. While it is common to hear something referred to as "like the Holocaust," references to the Holocaust as like something else—except, of course, that other absolute, hell—are unheard.

Among the forces that the Holocaust museum is explicitly designed to combat are the "historical revisionists," those crank historians who deny that there ever was a Holocaust. This objective is in keeping with the one certain lesson I am willing to draw from the Holocaust—that it happened. That is reason enough to study it, to remember it. Beyond the fact that it happened, however, all claims made in the name of the Holocaust are suspect.

When I say that there is nothing in my childhood dream of Nazism for life, I mean that political and ethical madness, however methodical, teaches nothing about political and ethical sanity. Sanity cannot be asserted by its negative. Racism, hatred, the dehumanization of one's fellow human beings are bad not because they can lead to Auschwitz, not even because they can lead to murder. These things are bad because they are not good. They are unethical and unjust. Justice requires that all be treated with equal humanity. If there is a lesson that needs to be taught in the world today, it is this difficult affirmative lesson in the most fundamental of American values—what true justice is and why it is good.

After I left the museum, I bought a soda and strolled along the Mall. When I finished my drink, I found a trash can and was about to toss it in my bottle when I noticed a familiar-looking gray card sitting atop the garbage already there. I reached in and pulled it out: Holocaust museum identity card No. 1221, Maria Sava Moise, born June 1, 1925, in Iasi, Romania. Maria, a Gypsy, had survived the war, only to wind up as part of the litter of a Washington tourist's afternoon. As I continued my walk, I kept my eye on the trash cans. Along the way, I picked up card No. 1151, Berta Rivkina, born April 23, 1929, in Minsk, Belorussia, a Jew who also survived; No. 2411, Esther Morgenstern, born ca. 1927 in Kalusyn, Poland, a Jew murdered at Treblinka at age fifteen; and No. 2557, Kathe Ert Reichstein, born June 7, 1882, in Hanover, Germany, killed at the Belzec extermination camp in Poland, September 1942.

The front of each identity card is stamped with the Holocaust museum's logo, an American eagle clutching an E PLURIBUS UNUM banner in its beak, haloed with the motto "For the dead and the living we must bear witness." During my visit to Washington, I had spoken to a number of the museum's top brass, and all of them had recited to me some version of Santayana's tired, self-congratulatory maxim that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. But history's lessons are not at all self-evident. There is every reason to believe that exposure to barbarism is not an antidote against it. After all, barbarians learn from history, too: the first-ever plan for a Holocaust museum was drawn up by the Nazis; it was to stand in Prague, a collection of artifacts and images of European Jews, as a triumphant memorial to their annihilation.

One way history is doomed to repetition at the Holocaust museum is that day in and day out, year after year, the videos of the Einsatzgruppen murders will play over and over. There, just off the National Mall in Washington, the victims of Nazism will be on view for the American public, stripped, herded into ditches, shot, buried, and then the tape will repeat and they will be herded into the ditches again, shot again, buried again. I cannot comprehend how anyone can enthusiastically present this constant recycling of slaughter, either as a memorial to those whose deaths are exposed or as an edifying spectacle for the millions of visitors a year who will be exposed to them. Didn't these people suffer enough the first time their lives were taken from them?