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## KULTURA AUTOBIOGRAFICZNA

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# The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a global human rights advocate - that is, about the politicization and institutionalization of the discourse on the Holocaust in the USA

### Summary

One of the most renowned places of remembrance of the Holocaust is The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (USHMM). It was erected next to the monuments to America's leading heroes – Jefferson and Lincoln. Had the Holocaust been treated as a European problem that could have been avoided? This article deals with the politicization and institutionalization of the discourse on memory of the Holocaust in the USA in the form of the museum that is a cultural institution as well as a federal institution. On the account of recreation the discourse due to documentation from the archive of the USHMM, this paper shall provide evidence not only for the expected contribution of the USHMM in emphasizing the importance of human rights, but also of being a world's advocate of them.

### Keywords

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, memory policy, human rights

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## Introduction

Every year millions<sup>1</sup> of people visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington – a living memorial of the Holocaust “on American soil”. T-shirts, bags and key rings with the words: “What you do matters” and “never again” are the most popular souvenirs from visiting the museum. The core exhibition entitled “The Holocaust” is divided into three sections, the first of which tells about the Nazis’ rise to power and its consequences, so the viewers, in a way, travel back in time before the Holocaust. On exhibitions panels, the chart shows the percentage of Jews living in various European countries before the war. Just twelve years after the Nazis came to power, most European Jews would be exterminated. The photo of an SS officer with a dog tells more about the Nazi regime than a thousand photos. The secret police were prepared to carry out all arbitrary decisions of the government (e.g., removal of political and racial enemies) without regard for legal restraint. The story of the Holocaust within the museum shows how a totalitarian regime can ruthlessly crush all forms of dissents and deprive many people of their rights (“The Holocaust”). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which “grew on American soil,” has one overriding goal – to make the Holocaust (an unprecedented mass murder) universally comprehensible and to educate that only democratic values can prevent history from repeating.<sup>2</sup>

The link between human rights, democracy, and the commemoration of the Holocaust in the USA came from US President Jimmy Carter, who was known for fighting for human rights. For this purpose, he established a special commission known as the President’s Commission on the Holocaust. It should be noted that while the facts about the Holocaust were censored in Central and Eastern Europe at that time (due to the Soviet regime, also associated with a regime of terror and totalitarian rule, especially during Stalin’s rule) the discourse about the Holocaust in the USA was possible due to American democracy – with its free media and cultural system that is independent of the government. In the end, the above-mentioned rules<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Visitors to the Museum since opening in April 1993: More than 47 million, based on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

<sup>2</sup> Elenor H. Ayer, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. America keeps the memory alive* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company 1994), 13–20; “Report to the President. President’s Commission on the Holocaust, September 1979”. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 2001.165.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault introduces the term archive in order to embrace the collections of rules that in a given epoch and society determine discourses, which is what can be talked about and how it can be done. Foucault’s archeology discourse describes formation rules which determine a discourse structure; whereas, genealogy researches the historical conditions of discursive formations emergence, that is how power relations affect the discourse; David Howarth, *Discourse*, translated by Anna Gąsior-Niemiec (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2008); Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, “Postfoucaultowska analiza dyskursu: przypadek sporu o Jedwabne”,

of discourse were approved by the President's Commission on the Holocaust<sup>4</sup>, and the Holocaust Memorial Council, appointed by the Congress to build the museum and create an exhibition that would encourage visitors to engage in defense of human rights. While most members of the Council claimed that "[they] believe that the story [of the Holocaust – post-script of the author of the article] can be told,"<sup>5</sup> the chairman of both bodies, Elie Wiesel, an advocate of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and one of the founders of the US Holocaust discourse, was from the beginning of the opinion that the Holocaust could only be commemorated because it could not be understood: "How was all this possible? We do not have the answer, Mr. President. Perhaps there is none. And any given answer must be the wrong answer."<sup>6</sup> This is how Wiesel wrote as Chairman of the Commission that Carter once appointed as a way to commemorate the Holocaust in the USA. However, both bodies (the Commission and the Holocaust Memorial Council) and Wiesel wanted to achieve the same goal – to make the "never again" slogan come true. The words of Wiesel as the Chairman of the Presidential Commission also evidence this: "The murder of one group inevitably provokes further murders".<sup>7</sup>

### Doors to progress in the defense of human rights

Collective violence is an inglorious part of history. At the time of the birth of nation-states, war became mythical, and people shed blood for their nation. The cruelty and ruthlessness of the Second World War, in the heart of civilised Europe, led to a deep upheaval and a desire to punish those for it, as expressed in the Nuremberg Trials. The International Military Tribunal indicted the twenty-three high-ranking Nazi officials on one or more of the following four counts: conspiracy, crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity<sup>8</sup>. The verdict was issued on 30<sup>th</sup> September and 1<sup>st</sup> October 1946 respectively. Two years later,

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in: *Analiza dyskursu publicznego: przegląd metod i perspektyw badawczych*, eds. Marek Czyżewski et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Sedno, 2017), 311–344.

<sup>4</sup> "Report to the President's Commission on the Holocaust, September 1979".

<sup>5</sup> "Remarks by Dr. Michael Berenbaum. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Presentation to a Joint Meeting of the Museum Development Committee and the Content Committee, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1988, the National Gallery". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 1997–016.1.

<sup>6</sup> Presentation of the Report of the President's commission on the Holocaust to The President of the United States by Elie Wiesel, Chairman, The Rose Garden, The White House, Washington. D.C. 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1979. Based on the data provided by Jeffrey Carter, Management Officer & Institutional Archivist (May 1998–April 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Presentation of the Report of the President's commission on the Holocaust.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals, the 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama", *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002), 1: 19.

a provision on genocide was included in international law.<sup>9</sup> The creator of the concept of genocide is Rafał Lemkin.<sup>10</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly passed the *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. It was referred to as the *Lemkin Convention*. It also marked a new starting point for research into the issues of genocide – including the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup>

The Nuremberg Trials brought to light the extent of the human rights violations conducted by the Nazis, which so far had not been protected at the international level by the realm of legal reality. This began to change slowly, with institutions being created in this area. In 1946, the United Nations established a Commission on Human Rights within its system. As the chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was the driving force in creating the *1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. President Roosevelt also made his contribution to it. Thanks to him, World War II was portrayed to the American public as the war of ideals: freedom of speech, freedom from fear, deprivation, and religion. It was, at the same time, an eloquent expression of what America and American institutions are; in other words, “an eloquent expression to the tenets of liberal democracy”.<sup>12</sup> The Declaration, although not a law, but an expression of political will, is a precedent in the history of mankind, because it gives the opportunity to assert human rights from the state. It has also been intensified by the very history of the development of political and legal doctrines, especially liberalism, which adhered to freedom and the era of the Enlightenment, proclaiming equality between people on the moral and political level and respect for the principles of tolerance. America, in particular, appeared to be the country of freedom. In fact, an example of this is *The U.S. Declaration of Independence*<sup>13</sup> – which was then an unprecedented act. In it we read: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty,

<sup>9</sup> Konwencja w sprawie zapobiegania i karania zbrodni ludobójstwa, uchwalona przez Zgromadzenie Ogólne Narodów Zjednoczonych dnia 9 grudnia 1948 r. (ratyfikowana zgodnie z ustawą z 18.07.1950 r.), Dz.U. 1952. nr 2 poz. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Bogumił Rudawski, “Czym jest Zagłada dla historyka?”, *Ethics in Progress* 5 (2014), 2: 305.

<sup>11</sup> Lech, M. Nijakowski, “Pojęcie ludobójstwa: definicje, propaganda i walki symboliczne”, in: *Auschwitz a zbrodni ludobójstwa XX wieku*, eds. Alicja Bartuś et al. (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2012), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Adriana Krawiec, “Representation of the Holocaust in American culture on the example of the USHMM” (paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Interdisciplinary conference *Memory guilt and shame*, Gdańsk, 21–22 October 2021).

<sup>13</sup> “The U.S. Declaration of Independence”, National Archives, access 2.07.2022, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

and the Pursuit of Happiness”.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that the catalogue of freedom rights in the new state included all groups from the beginning but the belief in the superiority of reason over other human competences also had dark sides and led to the belief that European culture has a natural advantage over cultures in other parts of the world.

These acts have opened the door to progress in the defense of human rights, but the task is not finished, as every day brings examples of human rights violations around the world, as President George W. Bush expressed in his words about the end of the illusions in the perfection of human nature.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, democratic institutionalization has a lot to offer. The U.S., as the world leader in democracy, is accused of not always ratifying all treaties that support human rights,<sup>16</sup> but it remains indisputable that the U.S. has a tremendous track record of defending it, negotiating peace deals, inhibiting and stopping conflict development through socio-economic mechanisms. Their role, as a world powerhouse in giving importance to issues, is difficult to question.

A global example of democratic institutionalization in the defense of human rights and the prevention of genocide is the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., which is not just another museum, but an institution that can influence societies and that has created an exhibition being a masterpiece in the field of education about the Holocaust as an unprecedented, and at the same time, universal event, and thus a weapon in the struggle for human rights.<sup>17</sup> This would not have been possible if it had not been for the ideas of the Enlightenment and if Americans, who were not victims of the Holocaust, had not decided to commemorate this event in their country and if it had not been for the presentation of it through a cause-and-effect chain, of which every link is set against liberal democracy.<sup>18</sup> However, it should be taken into account that liberal democracy also can take on a different institutional expression depending on the historical, geographical and socio-economic conditions of the nation that shapes it and can be nothing more than the tyranny of the majority and clichés.<sup>19</sup> Elie Wiesel, in this context, is an example that liberal democracy is still moving in the direction outlined by President Roosevelt.

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<sup>14</sup> “The U.S. Declaration of Independence”.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory. The American experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 239–240.

<sup>16</sup> Longin Pastusiak, “Prawa człowieka w polityce Stanów Zjednoczonych”, *Przegląd Dziennikarski*, 15.05.2018, access 23.07.2022, <https://przegladdziennikarski.pl/prawa-czlowieka-w-polityce-stanow-zjednoczonych/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Report to the President. President’s Commission on the Holocaust, September 1979”.

<sup>18</sup> Based on the author’s visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *O demokracji w Ameryce, 1835–1840*, translated by Marcin Król, Barbara Janicka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia, 2019).

Even though Elie Wiesel resigned as chairman of the council responsible for erecting a centre that glorified American democratic values, he was still a symbol of the ethical dimension of the museum. The museum's inauguration coincided with the events in the former Yugoslavia, which ended two years later with the Srebrenica massacre. Even during the opening of the Holocaust Museum, Wiesel called for greater involvement in the Balkans: "And, Mr. President, (...) I was in the former Yugoslavia last autumn. I cannot sleep since for what I have seen. As a Jew I am saying that we must do something to stop bloodshed in that country!"<sup>20</sup> At the same time, on the eve of its opening, in 1992, the museum issued a press statement comparing the events in the former Yugoslavia to the crimes of the Nazis.<sup>21</sup> This activity of the museum is a striking example of its involvement in politics and acting as a human rights agent. Moreover, as one of the few centres in the USA it has the legitimacy for such activities. It is not just another museum devoted to the history and culture of the Jewish community or another Holocaust museum which can be counted by hundreds in the USA, such as the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles or the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York.<sup>22</sup> It is a federal institution, and a national memorial<sup>23</sup> erected in Washington next to the monuments of America's leading democratic heroes – Jefferson and Lincoln.<sup>24</sup> Had the Holocaust been treated as a European problem that could have been avoided?

#### Politicization of the memory of the Holocaust

"Holocaust" as a term was not used immediately after the war, neither in the USA, nor in Europe, for example, Germany commemorated victims of fascism.<sup>25</sup> Although there were testimonies in the form of places such as Auschwitz, the Holocaust was also not treated accordingly in Poland under the influence of the USSR. What is more, until 1989, the extermination of Polish Jews was included in Polish matrimony or was included in the extermination of

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<sup>20</sup> "Remarks by Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel at The Dedication of The United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, Washington, April 22, 1993". Based on the data provided by Jeffrey Carter, Management Officer & Institutional Archivist of the USHMM.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory: The Rhetoric of Displacement at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Albany: Suny Press, 2016), 163.

<sup>22</sup> "In Fitting memory: Holocaust memorials and Political culture". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 2001.165.

<sup>23</sup> "Report to the President. President's Commission on the Holocaust, September 1979".

<sup>24</sup> Based on the author's visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>25</sup> Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands Heritage and identity in Europe today* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), 192.

millions of citizens of different nationalities.<sup>26</sup> Block 4 in Auschwitz told the story of 4 million nameless victims of Hitlerism that came from Europe. The redefinition of Auschwitz in Poland started after the fall of the Soviet Union. It was then that the period of writing the history of World War II began anew because in the People's Republic of Poland, Auschwitz served as a propaganda tool against West Germany and the West, which were vulgarly described by the USSR as heirs of fascist imperialism and capitalism.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the USSR used Auschwitz in the Cold War to show the doctrine of liberal democracy in a negative light.

Israel seemed to be the only country interested in the Holocaust at that time. It had been alone for a long time in the fight for the truth. It was only due to the American democracy that the issue became popular (especially expressed in *The Bill of Rights*), which has enabled such freedom. It raised the issue from Jewish schools and the Jewish community, and after many years of silence it became popular in American society. In 1959, *The New York Times* was the first to use the word Holocaust to refer to the description of Yad Vashem that had existed since 1953. The term Holocaust was also used by the Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, American Jew, Elie Wiesel, who frequently spoke in the American media.<sup>28</sup> In the 1960s the media in the USA broadcasted the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the prominent architects of the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup> Then, due to the American series "Holocaust" aired on a popular TV station, this term began to be adopted.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to this, the world learned what happened to the Jews in Europe during the Second World War. The USA, a country of democratic freedoms, could not ignore this problem. The end of the 1970s marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The advocate of international human rights, US President Jimmy Carter, signed two international treaties on political, cultural, and economic rights that remained unapproved by the Senate.<sup>31</sup> On the subject of the Holocaust, an issue that was not important on an international scale at that time, he did not need any approval. On 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1978, he established the President's

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the politics of commemoration, 1945-1979* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Wolff-Powęska, "Zwycięzcy i zwyciężeni. II wojna światowa w pamięci zbiorowej narodów", *Przegląd Zachodni* 2 (2005): 7.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas D. Fallace, *The emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 13, 26–27.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Linenthal, *Preserving memory. The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 8–12.

<sup>30</sup> Linenthal, *Preserving*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Gilian MacNaughton, Mariah McGill, "Economic and Social Rights in the United States: Implementation without Ratification", *Northeastern University Law Journal* 4 (2012), 2: 367.

Commission on the Holocaust and charged it with the responsibility to suggest an appropriate memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust.<sup>32</sup>

Before the Commission's Report reached the hands of the President of the United States, the issue of commemorating the victims of the Holocaust had prompted numerous speeches. It was about the number of those killed in the Holocaust. Even before the establishment of the Presidential Commission, the American authorities, speaking about the legalization of memory, cited an amount of 11 million victims of the Holocaust, of which 6 million were of Jewish origin and 5 million were non-Jewish victims. Wiesel, as President of the Commission, disagreed with such a definition, proposing to base it on the amount of 6 million Jews and millions of victims of other nationalities, which he justified that a definition without putting Jews at the centre could make the Holocaust appropriated by all nationalities.<sup>33</sup> This binding definition was then protested by numerous groups representing the interests of nationalities, whose population died in concentration camps, including that of Poland. Particularly active were members of the Polish American Congress, a nationwide federation, which is a political representative of Americans of Polish origin, who objected to the lack of information about 3 million Poles of non-Jewish origin, in commemorating the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>34</sup> The problem, however, resulted from the lack of knowledge of Poles about the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a result of the censorship of the USSR and the Iron Curtain, which deprived this country of the opportunity to confront their own memory of World War II with the memory of Jews and research conducted in the West.<sup>35</sup>

The Holocaust problem, which entered the public debate in the U.S. three decades after the war, caused a belated shock in democratic society. To deal with the shameful heritage of humankind, the scientific and intellectual community turned to Greek tragedy.<sup>36</sup> The significance of their narrative was limited to the statement that evil is in all people, and that respect for human rights is the guarantee of not allowing evil to happen.<sup>37</sup> Due to such a narrative, the problem of the Holocaust had already become a problem of the US authorities. The Holocaust Commission showed the government a perfect plan on how to commemorate the Holocaust in the USA, so that every American could learn from it. According to

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<sup>32</sup> Jeshajahu Weinberg, Rina Elieli, *the Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 1995), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Linenthal, *Preserving*, 38–50.

<sup>34</sup> Linenthal, 38–40.

<sup>35</sup> Huener, *Auschwitz*, 33–133, 180–225.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Culture trauma, morality and solidarity: The social construction of 'Holocaust' and other mass murders", *Thesis Eleven* 132 (2016), 1: 9.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander, "Culture", 9.



the members of the Commission, a commemoration should not be limited to a monument expressing America's empathy for the victims. There had to be more to it. And this is how the idea of a living memorial was born, which was related to human rights. In the Report to the President, the members of the Commission stated that the Holocaust should be commemorated in the USA in the form of a living memorial, that is a museum, and the museum itself should become a federal institution.<sup>38</sup> A living memorial was, and still is, able to achieve the goal of counteracting similar criminal acts in the future. This was outlined in the Report to the President by a sentence pointing out that what threatened people in the past may endanger others.<sup>39</sup> To lead the nation in commemorating the Holocaust in the form of a living memorial, in 1980 Congress established the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.<sup>40</sup> The very process of creating the museum lasted almost a decade and a half. During these years, the Council debated on how the living memorial goal can be achieved in the architecture, exhibitions, and exhibits.<sup>41</sup> The years of the Council's deliberation were associated with the fact that it was not easy to transfer to "American soil" something that had happened long ago in Europe occupied by the authoritarian government of the Third Reich.<sup>42</sup> It was clear to the Council that a display based on objects would not be legible to Americans. It had to be a completely different museum from other centres.<sup>43</sup> It was also clear to the Council that the future museum had to be in a popular public place in order to fulfil its broad educational purpose. The choice of location fell on the National Mall, the site of national monuments and the cradle of American history – one of the most famous places in the world. This meant that the memory of the Holocaust would subsequently become a part of American national history. It was also connected with the fact that all Americans had to understand the Holocaust – an event that Wiesel and many could still not understand. For this reason, he resigned as president of the Council. Were it not for the perfectly refined narrative and concept of the interior, (the enormity of the acquired artefacts is in this

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<sup>38</sup> "Report to the President".

<sup>39</sup> "Report to the President".

<sup>40</sup> An Act to Establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, Public Law 96–388.

<sup>41</sup> Content Committee meeting minutes, 29<sup>th</sup> February 1988. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 1997–005.07.

<sup>42</sup> "Remarks by Dr. Michael Berenbaum. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Presentation to a Joint Meeting of the Museum Development Committee and the Content Committee, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1988, The National Gallery". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 1997–016.1.

<sup>43</sup> "To Bear Witness, to Remember, and to Learn". A Confidential Report on Museum Planning prepared for the United States Holocaust Memorial Council 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1984. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives. 1997–014.

context less important), the topic could have been trivialised or reduced to a chronological history. However, the work was entrusted to great planners, and although they were constantly changing, the best of their ideas survived.

The museum's first planners, Anna Cohn and David Altshuler, acting under the authority of the Holocaust Council, are credited with the authorship of three zones within the memorial site, which were subordinated to various functions: Holocaust testimony, meditation and public ceremonies, and teaching about the Holocaust: Hall of Witness, Hall of Remembrance and Hall of Learning. The Hall of Witness was supposed to be the voice of witnesses and survivors. The Hall of Learning was to contain not only an exhibition space, but also an educational pavilion (immense institutions within the museum, but this is a topic for another article). The Hall of Remembrance was the culmination of the visit and a place of contemplation in a sacred atmosphere.<sup>44</sup> And what was going to be contemplated? – The visitor's responsibility for the world's future. It was not supposed to be a place that encouraged visitors to make their own meanings.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is considered that this innovative and post-modern museum is based on the model of a modern museum which is rhetorical. And indeed, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum tells what one comes here for. However, it did not have to be if Wiesel's vision had come to fruition. Thus Wiesel not only opposed a chronological history of the Holocaust, but he also wanted the future museum to allow for an individual Holocaust reflection, although the need for the historicity of the centre was slowly becoming doomed. The Council sought the chronological possibility to develop civic responsibility in viewers in the face of human rights violations.<sup>46</sup> It contradicted the vision of Wiesel, whose vision allows visitors to make their own meanings. He stepped down in 1986. It was then that the Council handed over the plans for the future museum to Michel Berenbaum. Berenbaum opted for a chronology that ensured pedagogical dimensions ("We must convey information about an event that took place both a continent away and a generation ago").<sup>47</sup>

In 1986, the future architect of the centre, James Ingo Freed, was also invited to cooperate.<sup>48</sup> Also, thanks to him, the museum is neither about Hitler, nor about Jews, but about democracy and human rights. Still, Jews are the most important in the story presented in

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<sup>44</sup> "To Bear Witness, to Remember, and to Learn".

<sup>45</sup> Exhibition Story Outline Presented to the Content Committee, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1988. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives.1997-004.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard-Donals, *Figures*, 2016, 44–45.

<sup>47</sup> "Remarks by Dr. Michael Berenbaum".

<sup>48</sup> Weinberg, Elieli, *the Holocaust*, 2.

this narrative museum<sup>49</sup> as they became the model community that the regime had deprived of human rights. To create a place in the USA that best reflects the past of the Holocaust, James Ingo Freed proposed a building without windows overlooking the Mall. It is a creepy building, different from the rest of the museum facilities in the National Mall.<sup>50</sup>

The viewer and even the US government were obliged to counteract any acts of violence

In ancient times, the museum was a creative and literary category. In the Renaissance episteme, there was no such thing as misinterpretation, and each reading was potentially valid. In the modern episteme, analogy and series and reading unity became the most important. This is the time of the modernist museum, and the patronage over it fell to the state. Tony Bennet believes that such a museum, like a prison, is characterised by its rationality that serves power. The public museum, according to the thesis of Bennet or Michel Foucault, is a place that supports the dominant ideology. Although the modernist museum had its luminous years in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the public museums in the world are modernist museums. It operates on striving for an ideal: a complete collection. It assumes that there are universal laws and can be learned through objects. At the same time, it disseminates authoritative knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

The museum in Washington is certainly not a modernist museum. It prompts people to ask questions and is a highly interactive and a multimedia centre. It is full of video monitors and mini theatres where films and testimonies are shown. Although the Holocaust Museum in Washington is considered a new type of museum, a part of the so-called new museology, it is authoritative in one aspect – it forces people to reflect on their own responsibility for the evil of this world. The visitor comes here to learn about the importance of democracy. When the viewer crosses this emblematic building, he enters the perfectly recreated world of dictatorship – each stage of his visit here has been perfectly planned by the designers, just like in a theme park. The visitor is, for example, transported by a darkened elevator to the world of the Holocaust, so different from the beauty that spreads out from the National Mall. Due to such a narrative of the architecture, the visitor can appreciate democracy. On the fourth floor the visitor experiences the same shock as the American soldiers who liberated the camps. Their reportage is an introduction to the Holocaust exhibition, in which

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<sup>49</sup> More on narrative museums: Anna Ziębińska-Witek, *Historia w muzeach. Studium ekspozycji Holokaustu* (Lublin: UMCS, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Based on the author's visit to the USHMM.

<sup>51</sup> Ziębińska-Witek, *Historia*, 9, 18–19, 21.

visitors are subjected to various experiences intended to give them a substitute for the emotions experienced by Jewish victims. Cramped corridors, a railway boxcar through which visitors walk as a part of the permanent exhibition's third floor – were to evoke a similar fear in visitors that accompanied Jews during their transports to the places of execution.<sup>52</sup> The Permanent Exhibition had to be designed to be aimed at the most diverse audience. It was also necessary to explain how life in the ghettos differed from present-day life or life as we know it. Thanks to the chronological history on the fourth floor, visitors learn about Hitler's rise to power and its consequences: the violation of all democratic rights, excluding people and depriving them of their citizenship. The exhibition shows that the crimes against the Jews began with the deprivation of their rights, then their dignity. The persecution of Jews on the eve of the beginning of the war ended with Kristallnacht, which manifested itself in the burning of synagogues, Jewish businesses, and homes. The initiation of World War II by invading Poland decisively contributed to the subsequent extermination of races and citizens considered by Hitler to be subhuman, primarily Jews. Hans Frank took over the occupied territory in which concentration camps were built. The Holocaust exhibition on the third floor is somewhat understandable only thanks to this introduction. And it did not have to be that way, because Elie Wiesel argued to the end that the Holocaust could not be understood. If his vision triumphed, the museum would only be a Holocaust memorial. Thus it would express only the politics of regret. Meanwhile, the Museum explains what the Holocaust was and what the US involvement in the war was – a counteract against human rights violations. To sum up, The Holocaust Museum in Washington is a sui generis centre in which work on the remembrance of the Holocaust has been completed and is still ongoing. The Museum has the power to link what is seen with other crimes in the world. The best example of this is mentioned coinciding with the opening of the museum with the events in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the statements of both the Museum and Elie Wiesel. Their meaning can be reduced to two slogans: “*What you do matters*” and “*never again*”. It was possible to bring about peace talks which prevented further crimes of genocide in that region.

To answer the need for lessons on the Holocaust, a Committee of Conscience was established at the Museum.<sup>53</sup> Its aim was to advise the Government of the United States in a consultative capacity in matters relating to the Holocaust for the purposes of preventing any repetition. Its statements had such an impact on US policy, and through the US position in the international arena and also world politics, that it provoked a discussion about its closure, fearing a potential conflict of interest of the American government and the Commission.

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<sup>52</sup> Based on the author's visit to the USHMM; Bernard-Donalds, *Figures*, 25–26.

<sup>53</sup> “Report to the President.”

Although the Commission was not closed, it was questioned whether the Commission itself could use the term genocide to refer to contemporary crimes around the world regardless of government interpretation. Democratic governments, including the US government, are likely to be reluctant to use this term, as it often requires military action.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusions

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum, initiated by Carter and established in 1993, is a new type of a memorial museum and *sui generis* memorial commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. Still, above all, it is a so-called living memorial. It stimulates leaders and society to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and strengthen democracy. It contributes to democracy and the promotion of human rights due to lessons learnt from the Holocaust. Carter's idea to initiate a debate on how to link the memory of the Holocaust with American history was controversial as Americans were not victims of the Holocaust, but the Holocaust Commission convinced him that America had a responsibility to remember the Holocaust – firstly, because the US military had liberated the camps, and secondly, because liberal democracy cannot distance itself from the suffering of others. America as a world democratic leader was to set an example. The museum operates as a moral compass for the USA and the whole world. The memorial reflects the US Government's responsibility for the shameful heritage of humankind. The museum focuses on both the "unique" Jewish and the "universal" meaning of the Holocaust and therefore shows the dangers of authoritarianism to a democratic society, US constitutional rights, and Western civilisation. Thus, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a global human rights advocate.

The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. in the United States is both a lesson and a warning that such a tragedy should never happen. The slogan accompanying this lesson, "*never again*", has been popularised worldwide, and it symbolises struggles for peace and counteracting violations of human rights acts. At the same time, it comprises President George W. Bush's statement about the end of the illusion of humanity's perfection. Still, the civilisation in which we live in can fight with "the awful extreme of a spectrum of ignorance and intolerance that we see every day".<sup>55</sup> It is due to that that civilisation has such forms of institutionalization of democratic values as the USHMM with such extraordinary strength as a museum.

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<sup>54</sup> Bernard-Donals, *Figures*, 99–100.

<sup>55</sup> "Remarks by the President at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum", The White House, access 25.07.2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/23/remarks-president-united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum>.

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## **Narodowe Muzeum Holokaustu w Waszyngtonie jako światowy orędownik praw człowieka – czyli o polityzacji i instytucjonalizacji dyskursu o Holokauście w USA**

### Streszczenie

Jednym z najbardziej znanych miejsc pamięci edukujących o Holokauście jest Muzeum Holokaustu w Waszyngtonie w USA. Wzniesiono go obok pomników czołowych bohaterów Ameryki – Jeffersona czy Lincolna. Nie mogłoby do tego dojść, gdyby Holokaust potraktowano jako problem Europy. Artykuł traktuje o polityzacji i instytucjonalizacji dyskursu o Holokauście w USA, którego wykładnią jest wspomniane muzeum, instytucja kultury, a jednocześnie instytucja federalna. Dzięki odtworzeniu dyskursu o Holokauście w USA przy pomocy dokumentacji z archiwum waszyngtońskiego muzeum, artykuł ma za cel zobrazować zakładany wkład tego muzeum w nadawanie wagi problematyce praw człowieka oraz dostarczyć dowodów na to, że instytucja jest światowym orędownikiem tych praw.

### Słowa kluczowe

Narodowe Muzeum Holokaustu w Waszyngtonie, polityka pamięci, prawa człowieka

### PROSIMY O CYTOWANIE ARTYKUŁU JAKO:

Adriana Krawiec, „The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a global human rights advocate – that is, about the politicization and institutionalization of the discourse on the Holocaust in the USA”, *Autobiografia Literatura Kultura Media* 2 (2022): 139–154. DOI: 10.18276/au.2022.2.19-11.