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Auschwitz Shifts From Memorializing to Teaching

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN FEB. 18, 2011

OSWIECIM, Poland — For nearly 60 years, Auschwitz has told its own story, shaped in the aftermath of the Second World War. It now unfolds, unadorned and mostly unexplained, in displays of hair, shoes and other remains of the dead. Past the notorious, mocking gateway, into the brick ranks of the former barracks of the Polish army camp that the Nazis seized and converted into prisons and death chambers, visitors bear witness via this exhibition.

Now those in charge of passing along the legacy of this camp insist that Auschwitz needs an update. Its story needs to be retold, in a different way for a different age.

Partly the change has to do with the simple passage of time, refurbishing an aging display. Partly it's about the pressures of tourism, and partly about the changing of generations. What is the most visited site and the biggest cemetery in Poland for Jews and non-Jews alike, needs to explain itself better, officials here contend.

A proposed new exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum here, occupying some of the same barracks or blocks, will retain the piled hair and other remains, which by now have become icons, as inextricable from Auschwitz as the crematoria and railway tracks. But the display will start with an explanatory section on how the camp worked, as a German Nazi bureaucratic institution, a topic now

largely absent from the present exhibition, which was devised by survivors during the 1950s.

Back then they wished to erase the memory of their tormentors, as the Nazis had tried to erase them, so they said as little as possible in their exhibition about the Germans who had conceived and run the camp. They focused on mass victimhood but didn't highlight individual stories or testimonials of the sort that have become commonplace at memorial museums as devices to translate incomprehensible numbers of dead into real people, giving visitors personal stories and characters they can relate to. Those piles, including prostheses and suitcases, also stressed the sheer scale of killing at a time when the world still didn't comprehend, and much of it refused to admit to, what really happened here.

As Marek Zajac, a 31-year-old Polish magazine editor who serves as secretary for the International Auschwitz Council, pointed out: "People who visited after the war already knew what war was, firsthand. They had lived through it. So the story of a single death did not necessarily move them, because they had seen so much death, in their families and in the streets, whereas the scale of death at Auschwitz was shocking."

The new exhibition would go on to describe the process of extermination, leading visitors step by step through what victims experienced, and end with a section on camp life, meaning the "daily dehumanization and attempts to keep one's humanity," said Piotr Cywinski, the bearish, red-bearded 39-year-old Polish director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

"If we succeed we will show for the first time the whole array of human choices that people faced at Auschwitz," he explained. "Our role is to show the human acts and decisions that took place in extreme situations here — the diversity of thinking and reasoning behind those decisions and their consequences. So, we may pose the question, should a mother give a child to the grandmother and go to selection alone, or take the child with her? This was a real choice, without a good solution, but at Auschwitz you had to make the choice."

A barrack once used for sterilization experiments, one of the few left nearly undisturbed since the war, may be reopened, and a new visitor center, replacing the

cramped one in use today, constructed to handle crowds. There will be few bells and whistles, Mr. Cywinski insisted, few if any videos or touch-screens in the main galleries, which would be impractical for masses of people. Nothing must overshadow the evidence of the site itself, he stressed.

“The more we use special effects,” he said, “the more we draw attention away from the authenticity of this place, which is unlike any other.”

All or nearly all visitors will be shepherded by guides to field questions and keep crowds moving.

That changes to Auschwitz must entail first of all calculating how to move increasingly large masses of people more efficiently, effectively and swiftly through the site is an uncomfortable turn of history lost on no one here. An explosion of mass tourism, dark tourism and education programs in Europe and elsewhere that send students abroad, has tripled the number of visitors to Auschwitz over the last decade. Some 450,000 people a year visited Auschwitz in 2000. Last year, that number was 1.38 million.

The increase — most obvious during warm months in the long, crawling lines and oceans of visitors pouring into and out of the narrow barracks onto fleets of buses to Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, the vast extermination camp the Nazis built a few miles away — has strained an antique exhibition conceived when not many people came. Today, travel agencies in Krakow hawk daylong tours combining Auschwitz with the picturesque Wieliczka salt mine, with its rock salt chapel, sculptures and chandeliers.

“We must take into consideration that more and more people just drop by,” Mr. Zajac said. “We may not endorse this tourism, but we don’t charge admission. This is a cemetery. You don’t charge admission to a cemetery.”

The gradual passing of survivors has also meant that Auschwitz faces a historical turning point.

“Teenagers now have grandparents born after the war,” Mr. Cywinski noted. “This is a very big deal. Your grandparents are your era but your great-grandparents

are history.

“The exhibition at Auschwitz no longer fulfills its role, as it used to,” he continued. “More or less eight to 10 million people go to such exhibitions around the world today, they cry, they ask why people didn’t react more at the time, why there were so few righteous, then they go home, see genocide on television and don’t move a finger. They don’t ask why they are not righteous themselves.

“To me the whole educational system regarding the Holocaust, which really got under way during the 1990s, served its purpose in terms of supplying facts and information. But there is another level of education, a level of awareness about the meaning of those facts. It’s not enough to cry. Empathy is noble, but it’s not enough.”

This is the theme to which officials here return often. Auschwitz, they say, must find ways to engage young people (some 850,000 students came last year), so they leave feeling what the director called “responsibility to the present.”

Exactly how that might be accomplished, if it can be, he admitted remains to be fleshed out in the questions and historical information presented by the exhibition and the tour guides. The very notion that people increasingly see Auschwitz as ancient history, that the site, with its haunted ruins, might no longer speak for itself but needs to be made relevant to a new century — all this reflects a wider change in education and scholarship about the Holocaust, and also the special burden felt by officials at Auschwitz. “Auschwitz is a pillar of postwar Europe,” Mr. Cywinski said, “and the key to understanding today.”

Each generation has gotten the stories it wants from the site. Under Communism, Auschwitz served as a national memorial to Polish political prisoners, who were the camp’s first victims. Birkenau, where hundreds of thousands of Jews from Poland, France, Germany, Hungary, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere were murdered, lapsed into neglect, because it didn’t fit the narrative.

After the Berlin Wall fell, painful struggles between Roman Catholics and Jews erupted over what was in effect symbolic “ownership” of Auschwitz, as a place of martyrdom and mourning, which led, among other things, to the creation of the international council, a board of advisors under the authority of Poland’s prime

minister, which includes survivors, museum directors, clergy, scholars and representatives of Jewish, Roma and other groups.

The international council could convene as early as June to review the proposed changes to the exhibition; an international competition would follow for a designer, and perhaps by 2015, Mr. Cywinski said, a new exhibition might open. The \$20 million cost, including necessary preservation work on the buildings, would be paid by the Polish government.

Mr. Cywinski is also looking to raise some \$160 million more for an endowment to preserve the whole of Auschwitz and Birkenau, which requires millions of dollars a year in conservation. Germany has committed \$81.5 million, Austria \$8 million, and the United States pledged \$15 million, so far.

“This may sound boring,” Mr. Zajac said, “but I believe tending to this place is a debt to the victims. I sometimes meet students whom I met here years ago, now grown, who say they were changed by their visit, who became responsible people, dedicated to charity, leading ethical lives.”

He said many of them feel compelled to return: “They feel ashamed to admit this because it sounds weird, but they miss the place. They need to go back.”

“I share this feeling,” he continued. “When I am at Auschwitz I start looking at the world and at my own life. I remind myself of what’s important, which is so easy to forget. In the kingdom of death you can find the meaning of life. At the biggest cemetery in the world I know what I live for.”

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