

Preserving the Memory

The Unknown American Holocaust Memorializations



By Jerry Klinger

“Grandpa, what are you reading?” my young grandson asked.
“I am reading the obituary of a Holocaust Survivor I had known.”

“Grandpa, if he is a Survivor, why is he dead?”

William Rabinowitz

“Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption.”

Baal Shem Tov

We all have curious curiosities about our personalities. Mine, fortunately not being a Cohen, is an esoteric form of historic tourism. I am a volunteer photographer for Findagrave.com. Findagrave is an online site that preserves images of the gravesites of over 70 million people. Thousands of biographies of famous people and their final resting places are preserved and digitally accessible at their website. I have contributed hundreds of images and written

numerous famous biographies, including that of Theodor Herzl. For computer bound historical tourists who want to touch a distant part of history, Findagrave is an incredible resource.

Being a volunteer photographer permits me to help other people, both Jewish and Non-Tribal. Requests are sent to volunteer photographers, like me, asking if we can find the resting place of a loved one or a distant family member interred in a cemetery near where we live. The location of the family member is frequently only vaguely known. If we can locate a gravesite for a family, we are asked to photograph it and enter the picture in the family memorial online page. It is an interesting and enriching experience to help Christians and Jews “reunite” with their families. It is also a living study into history and culture. A friend once described cemeteries as “outdoor museums.”

I happen to spend the winter of the Jewish migration season in the warmer climes of Florida. A request came in to photograph a few gravesites at Palm Beach Memorial Gardens in Lantana, FL. I took up my trusty camera and went in search of the resting places of three Christians.

While looking for the Christian resting places, I discovered a Jewish world that is largely unknown, forgotten and beyond obscure. I discovered, or perhaps it was intended that I discover, a major opportunity to be of service to the Jewish people, to the Holocaust Survivor community and to the Holocaust Survivors who have passed. What I discovered was an obligation to the unknowns of the Holocaust and the effort to remember them, that no one will admit is being forgotten.

Everyone thinks it is a great idea, Rabbis, lay people, academics, 2nd Generation Holocaust memorial groups. Everyone thinks it surely was already done. Everyone is “wow” what a right thing to do. No one has ever done it. No one was doing it.



Palm Beach Memorial Gardens is a non-sectarian cemetery alongside of the superhighway, super busy Rt. 95 connecting Miami and points north. I have driven by it many times but never had a reason to stop there until the Findagrave email request to help a family came in. The

cemetery is divided into sections, including a consecrated one for Jews. The local Chabad Rabbi has said the Jewish cemetery section is Kosher.

All the gravesites are identified by flat stone grave markers three inches below the thick green matt of the cemetery field. It makes finding anyone very difficult. The Jewish section is no different from the Christian. But it was different. There is a large stone memorial divided by a prominent white colored Star of David in the middle. Naturally, it drew my attention. I wandered over.

The memorial is two carved rectangular, gray, hard polished, granite sections. The wording on one side of the two gray polished granite sections is simple and short, a quote from the Baal Shem Tov,

"Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption."

The left side is carved with a much longer text:

"The Holocaust"

"Now and forever enshrined in memory are the six million Jewish martyrs who perished. Their suffering and heroism are forever emblazoned upon our conscience and shall be remembered from Dor L'Dor Generation to Generation."

It is a striking, dramatic memorial with crypts around the base where Holocaust Survivors sleep until the end of time.

The Monument's words are strong. Similar words have been written in many places and solemnly spoken at many a Holocaust Yom Ha'Shoah service. The reality of Yom Ha'Shoah commemorations is different. The suffering and heroism is fading from the conscience as the generation of the Shoah passes. The Dor L'Dor remembrances are thin and getting smaller at every service. Children are a rare sight. The Rabbis have failed or declined to institute a special day of religious observance for the Holocaust. Not a single mandated and universally accepted Holocaust specific prayer has been added to Jewish liturgy. The observance date for Yom Ha'Shoah is controversial and not agreed upon in the Jewish world.

In Israel, Yom Ha'Shoah is formally called Yom HaZikaron la Shoah ve- la G'vurah: "Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day". Colloquially it is called Yom Ha'Shoah. It was inaugurated in 1953, anchored by a law signed by the Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion and the President of Israel Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. It is held on the 27th of Nisan (April/May), unless the 27th would be adjacent to the Sabbath, in which case the date is shifted by a day. There were bitter debates in the Knesset in 1953 about Yom Ha'Shoah. Many objected to the ceremonial recognition of Jewish weakness and passive wholesale slaughter. They wanted to honor the heroic resistance to the Holocaust and the rebirth of the modern State of Israel as the shining example of *Never Again*.

At noon, in Israel, sirens sound for Yom Ha'Shoah. Cars stop in mid street. Passengers get out and stand in silence. With every year, fewer and fewer people stop by the side of their cars for the moment of silence. They hurry on to make the light. All acknowledge the Holocaust but they also acknowledge their own personal, present concerns – a son, a father, a cousin killed fighting to protect Israel, or perhaps a terror attack. The Holocaust was a long time ago to them. It was a Holocaust to someone else.



Photo by Kamran Saraf-Wikipedia

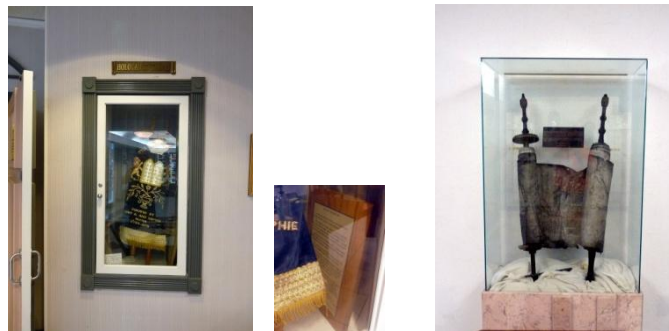
Miami has an incredibly powerful Holocaust Memorial, an arm reaching imploringly to Heaven in a plaintive appeal to God. The arm is covered with figures of humanity in terrible suffering and torment. The Holocaust Memorial is world famous. It has been written up, photographed thousands of times and featured in many Holocaust centered stories. Web searches for Florida and Holocaust Memorials are almost exclusively directed to the Miami Holocaust Memorial site. The Holocaust Memorial, in Palm Beach Memorial Gardens, is not one of the search results.

I wondered. What other Holocaust Memorials exist that no one knows about? Where my parents are buried is an early Holocaust Memorial – a thin stone pillar about five feet high with a stone eternal flame on top. The word Zachor – Remember- is carved on one side. The Memorial is obscured by overgrown arbor vitae bushes. Dedicated in 1949, the memorial contains the names of thousands who perished in the Holocaust. No one knows it is there except for the few that visit the row where their loved ones and my parents rest.

For the next week, I visited Jewish cemeteries in South Florida, synagogues and local communities in search of Holocaust Memorials. I searched online and in libraries. The question became an answer. Where were the Holocaust Memorials in the U.S. State with the second highest concentration of Holocaust Survivors in the county? Did they not want to remember or did they remember and no one knew?

I always called ahead to the synagogues I was going to visit and asked if they had a Holocaust Memorial. The question caught them off guard. The person answering the phone usually did not know if they had a memorial even when they did have one. Almost everyone had to ask someone else, did they have a memorial?

Sometimes they would say that they had a single memorial. When I arrived, I found three. Many synagogues did have Holocaust Memorials of some sort. What was surprising, and certainly not expected, was that a significant number of synagogues did not. The general assumption that all Jews memorialized the Holocaust is probably wrong.



A few synagogues have Czech Holocaust Memorial Torahs rescued from the Shoah. The Torahs were displayed by some synagogues in prominent locations and in others in wall cases that were not so prominent. Some synagogues had Memorial plaques and wall art. One synagogue's Holocaust Memorials had a large dusty plastic shrub blocking the view of the Memorial.

One synagogue had a Holocaust memorial garden. They asked their non-Jewish custodian to show me where it was. He took me behind the building to an alleyway. The Memorial was

hidden by high bushes. I doubted if even the membership knew it was there. The Holocaust Memorial garden was a simple thing, a few stones with the names of some of the concentration camps and a bench. It had been created just seven years earlier and seemed to be forgotten now. The only recent visitors to the Memorial were the local Florida lizards and the Hispanic grounds men who very poorly maintained the grass.

A local Rabbi candidly shared with me, "when I first came here sixteen years ago, we had a Holocaust Memorial plaque on a wall in the synagogue. The building was renovated. We moved the plaque to an outside Holocaust Garden. Then a hurricane hit. The garden was destroyed and the plaque was ripped from the Garden wall. It was lost. We do not have a Holocaust Memorial today. And, I do not know of any in this part of the county."

Memorials are not the only memory being lost. A distressed Holocaust Survivor living in Philadelphia shared with me his synagogue's changing attitude. The membership in the synagogue had created a Holocaust Research Library of over 600 volumes. Every Yom Hashoah a display of Holocaust artifacts and historical photographs were brought out into the synagogue lobby. He told me that the library is curtained off now away from general access. The space is used as a bride's changing room. The Holocaust artifacts and historical photographs were no longer permitted in the general synagogue. It was felt that it might be too traumatic for the children. He did not know where to go to preserve the library and their artifacts anymore.

There are an unknown number of Holocaust Memorials in the United States today – no one knows where they are. They have never been catalogued and photographically archived. Some memorials are cemetery memorials, some are rescued Holocaust Torahs, synagogue plaques, memorial boards, free standing Memorials indoors and outdoors, stained glass windows, gardens, interpretive art works, research centers, libraries, web sites, self published biographies, University Holocaust Studies chairs, major city or state sponsored Holocaust Memorials, Museums etc.



"In memory of the 23,500 Jewish victims living in the town of Rowno and vicinity, who were murdered during the Holocaust in the woods of Sosenkes, by the Germans and Ukrainians, Nov. 7-8, 1941,"

The early ones are quite different from later ones in form and purpose. The methods, the types, the purposes of Holocaust Memorializations have changed over time. Memorialization has gone from very specific places and even individual names to generalized, existential interpretations of what the Holocaust means and its lessons for today.

American Memorializations of the Holocaust were first begun by the Shoah refugees. Most were erected by Survivor Associations and Survivor City Mutual Aid Societies. They erected simple, carved Memorial stones and placed them in Jewish cemeteries. They wanted to create Memorials for those of their families and communities without a piece of soil to say they ever existed. The refugees were not concerned with forgiveness or any larger, deeper existential meaning to the Shoah that later American and culturally homogenized Jews would seek to interpret. Some of the Survivor Community Memorials wanted God to take revenge, to seek justice. All wanted memory and peace for the souls of the victims.



“Murdered in the Holocaust”



“May God Avenge their Blood”

There were no niceties in the early Holocaust Cemetery Memorials. They were blunt and horrifically graphic in few words they had carved in their stones.

“In memorium... for the many sainted martyrs of our hometown Grybow, Galicia who were brutally slaughtered by the German barbarians. Three hundred and sixty of these are resting in one common grave in Grybow were murdered on August 20, 1942. This monument was erected by their American landsleit.”¹

¹ <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/hm-main.htm>

“To the eternal memory of the heroic martyrs, fighters in the ghetto’s and concentration camps, and to our own sisters and brothers of our home town of Rotchev (voiner Bugernie), and of all those departed whose remains for many generations rested on the cemetery of our old hometown, whose tombstones have been demolished. We will remember them all, and we will hereby vow never to forget or forgive the Nazi murderers who annihilated six million of our Jewish martyrs. Honor and glory to their memory.”²

“This monument stands as a grim reminder of the Nazi brutality and cruelty inflicted upon our bretherer of Wishnowitz Volyn in the year of 1943. Their sacred memory is deeply enshrined in our hearts.”

The Hebrew text below the English of the same marker translates quite differently. It was as though the Memorializers only felt secure to express their true feelings in the Holy Language. They did not want it accessible in English.

“In eternal remembrance: This memorial monument is for the martyrs of Wishnewitz Volyn who were killed for the sanctification of the G-d’s name at the hands of the Nazis and Ukrainians. May their names be erased during the days of the destruction and ravage in the year 1943. May the Almighty avenge their spilt blood.”³

Thirty three years after the end of the war, the Shoah went mainstream with the mass media introduction of a T.V. miniseries simply titled, “the Holocaust”. The show, historically controversial, was viewed by millions of Americans and others worldwide. For the first time, millions of people learned about the Holocaust. The T.V. series ignited twenty five years of energetic waves of Holocaust Memorializations across the U.S.

The Holocaust, in contemporary American society, is presented and understood as a horror, a failure of humanity. The horror is used to create an existential positive. From the evil of the Holocaust came the lessons of *Never Again*. It is an often repeated phrase. The Holocaust, its meaning, the very term, is no longer Jewish owned. The word Holocaust has passed into common usage and application – the “Holocaust of Genocide” of any people, the “Holocaust of Abortion”, the “Holocaust of Animal Euthanasia,” the “Holocaust of destruction” after a tornado devastates a small Kansas town. The word Holocaust and its applications has become generic. It is applied to almost anything.

Museums, city and state memorials, school programs, university endowed departments developed to explain the Holocaust as an evil that must never be permitted to happen again to any people. Education is popularly promoted as the key to preventing another Holocaust. How

² <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/hm-main.htm>

³ <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/hm-main.htm>

successful has education been is open to debate – Sudan, Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, etc. Educational success or failure does not abrogate the responsibility to try.

The Mission Statement of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington: “A living memorial to the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity...

...the Museum provides a powerful lesson in the fragility of freedom, the myth of progress, the need for vigilance in preserving democratic values. With unique power and authenticity, the Museum teaches millions of people each year about the dangers of unchecked hatred and the need to prevent genocide. And we encourage them to act, cultivating a sense of moral responsibility among our citizens so that they will respond to the monumental challenges that confront our world.”

The Holocaust Memorial Center – Farmington, Ill., “The education that one absorbs in the HMC veers one towards constructive social consciousness. By highlighting and disseminating knowledge of the acts of the righteous and their constructive consequences, the HMC serves as a powerful antidote and countervailing force to the hatred and evil forces of destruction.”

The Holocaust Museum and Learning Center – St. Louis, Mo.; “Using the history and lessons of the Holocaust, the Holocaust Museum and Learning Center envisions a world where hatred and indifference are transformed into understanding and compassion, where all people are treated with dignity and respect.”

The El Paso, Texas Holocaust Museum: “The mission of the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center is – to educate the public, particularly young people, about the Nazi Holocaust as a way of ensuring that similar acts will not be repeated. To honor those who perished in the Holocaust and those who survived; To oppose prejudice and bigotry by reminding the world of the importance of acceptance, the value of dignity of human life, and of the consequences of negating these principles.”

It is with oblivious irony that some contemporary American Jewish Holocaust Memorials are erected in Jewish cemeteries. They are still intended to educate about the evil of the Holocaust.

The meaning of American Holocaust Memorialization, though centered on Jews, has changed. It has changed to become a universal yardstick of humanist morality that is neither Christian nor Jewish. The Holocaust, to Americans, was an assault on the fundamental ideals of being Americans. American Christians and Jews understand that the Holocaust needed un-American values to succeed. The Holocaust was a rejection of mutual toleration and different religious paths. The Holocaust rejected free speech and the press. The Holocaust promoted intolerance. It promoted historical personal and societal bigotry. It promoted the perception of societal

economic victimization, allegedly caused by the “elitist Jews”. The Holocaust deeply offends American sensitivity to the treasured value of even a single life.

The American Holocaust attitude and the American legal system share Judeo-Christian values. Politically correct, the American Holocaust attitude does not refer to God, Torah or the New Testament. The mission statements of Holocaust Museums are self evidence of that.

A criticism of the American interpretation of the “Holocaust” is that it has become a business. A different criticism is that American Jews periodically lay claim to exclusive ownership of the Holocaust if political advantage can be derived from it.

Anti-Semitism has been held in check for many years in the Western world by the knowledge of the Holocaust. Holocaust denial is slowly gaining an audience in the West. Holocaust denial is mainstream in the Muslim world. The Holocaust shield against anti-Semitism is being breached.

The threat to all people, not just Jews, of Holocaust denial is very serious.

Jews wishing to remember the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the murder of its victims use the term “Shoah” (Disaster) instead of “Holocaust”. Jews are very reluctant to ascribe a higher meaning to the “Disaster” that is beyond comprehension. No one has coined a special term for the five million non-Jewish victims.

“Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption” the Baal Shem Tov said. With every passing day the Memorials of Remembrance are no longer being remembered. For that purpose, *Preserving the Memory* was created to *“Never Forget.”* It is a duty, an obligation, a privilege for us today and for them tomorrow.



A historic, searchable web based archive is being built. The initial effort is a special project of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation.

<http://www.jewish-american-society-for-historic-preservation.org/americanholocaustmem.html>

Photographs of Holocaust Memorials are requested to be sent to:

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www.JASHP.org

