

## TIME IN THE MUSEUM, THE MUSEUM IN TIME: THE HISTORY OF THE AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MUSEUM

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The topic of memory, collective memory and memory culture has been the focus of extended contemporary scholarship (Boyarin 1994, Fentress and Wickham 1992, Gillis 1994, Hutton 1993, Huyssen 1995, Le Goff 1992, Middleton and Edwards 1990, Nora 1989, Olick 1999, Schwartz 1991, Terdiman 1993, Yerushalmi 1982, Young 1994 and 1993) and has also been accompanied by the resurrection of older studies on the topic (Halbwachs [1950] 1980 and 1992, Mannheim [1928] 1952).<sup>1</sup> Much of the discussion of memory is already related to the Holocaust (Young 1993, 1994, Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, Felman 1992, Huyssen 1995) and this paper studies a central Holocaust memory-object-- the Auschwitz-Birkenau State museum.<sup>2</sup>

The research offered here looks at the interconnections between state projects and collective memory. I trace the history of the display in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State museum, relating it at major turning points to social, political and economic events happening in and outside of Poland (e.g. Cold War, Six Day War, spread of Capitalism to the eastern bloc, etc.). This is a case study of the politics of memory. It brings to the front the way in which the past is always remade for presentist purposes, while stressing that the process of historical reinterpretation is a slow one, in which past interpretations limit the possibilities of new ones in discursive and material ways. This study makes clear that the making of memory in the framework of a historical museum is not a neutral professional act on behalf of curators and historians, nor is it isolated from various influences. Decisions about memory are necessarily decisions about what may be forgotten, and they are done within a certain framework of available social understandings (e.g. Polish state communism). This framework doesn't only change with time. The local Polish network is also concentric to other social configurations that focus on the memory of Auschwitz -- the State of Israel and the American Jewish community. For this reason the social historical map that results from this study resembles a cat's cradle web, in which each player tries to draw certain threads in order to

arrive at the desirable pattern from his/her point of view.

Simply put, in the following pages I ask, Who are the authors of the museum? Drawing from the extensive literature on the production of knowledge (from Barth to Clifford), I look at the museum as a text. This text has one or more authors, and if the production of the final result is to be comprehended, and the authority producing it demystified then the authors' political projects and particular social-historical (and often economical) locations need to be pointed out, and their representational strategies scrutinized.

Some writers (Young 1993, Steinlauf 1997, Dwork and Jan van Pelt 1996) have already demonstrated that the museum in Auschwitz cannot be seen in isolation from the political and economic changes in Poland. What I wish to argue here is that the museum, and its international committees of curators and administrators, have to be placed within a network of relationship that includes *not only* the politics and economics of Poland but also the politics of Israel, as well as those of American Jewry, and by extension those of the United States<sup>3</sup> (because it is often "Jewish America" that is involved with issues concerning Poland and Israel such as the ones highlighted here).<sup>4</sup> What I have done in the portion of my paper published here, which is based on several--mostly secondary-- sources, is to try weave together three stories: those of the connections existing between Holocaust consciousness and politics in Israel, Poland and the United States. These stories come together in a braid-like form. Each strand is complete in and of itself, but each story's progression and historical turning points can be seen as influencing and influenced by the other two stories. The chronology you are about to read is not a year by year one, and it is not teleological. It is an attempt to describe the history of the museum display by identifying major turning points in its developments-- turning points that are related to local and global events.

For the Israeli part of the story I rely mainly on Segev (1994), but also on Keren (1998) as well as on personal knowledge and

newspaper accounts. Studying developments in Poland I draw mainly from Steinlauf (1997) and Young (1993), but also from works by other writers as well as from accounts written by the Auschwitz museum staff, and printed in *Promemoria* (7) which is a source that can be seen both as primary and secondary. For writing about the United States I work mainly with Linenthal (1997) but also with Seidel (1996) and Kugelmass (1994). While some of these sources may seem obscure, they are almost all that is available in Hebrew and English about the history of the museum. I have done my best to use them conscientiously. It is important to note that I use these different sources in distinct ways. Most of the time I use them technically, that is to say, using the data they collected about changes in the museum or their detailing of certain political events. At other times I use these writers theoretically, that is to say, I use their arguments to support or move forward my argument.

My analysis progresses along lines of inquiry both similar to and different from those taken in the other studies mentioned above. It is similar to these studies because the museum in Auschwitz is a museum and a memorial with a history, with designers, and with visitors like any other. Yet it is different from other studies because this museum is a contested object both symbolically and physically -- issues of ownership and memory are interconnected here as they are limited by physical borders and distances between nation-states. A study of this museum is also different because the museum is enveloped by a deep (and justified) sensitivity attached to the events that it attempts to capture,<sup>5</sup> and so its status differs from those of other memorials and museums.<sup>6</sup>

#### 1944- 1966: Poland<sup>7</sup>

The complicated history of the museum actually dates back to the time before its official opening,<sup>8</sup> and looking at the developments in the museum in this early period and even later on, we must keep in mind the more global background of the Cold War. Two years after the liberation of the camp, and two weeks after the museum was officially opened to the public, on July 2, 1947, the Polish government declared that what remained of the camp needed to be preserved in its entirety and considered a monument of struggle against the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> That struggle was phrased in terms of the Polish identity of its participants, and with the exclusion

of all Jewish markers. The decree said: "On the site of the former Nazi concentration camp, a monument of the martyrdom of the Polish nation and of other nations is to be erected for all times to come" (Salter et al. 1996:420). The same message was unequivocally expressed in the museum, and was related both to postwar communist politics and to the fact that for a variety of reasons (see Steinlauf 1997) Jews at the time were victimized by the most explosive conflicts in postwar Poland up to that point.

The above should frame our understanding of the following activities undertaken by the museum staff. In 1952, the International Committee of Auschwitz, consisting of survivors and relatives of victims, was organized to supervise the project of commemoration, and

[t]hough most of [the committee]'s members were Jews, their identity as survivors was defined largely by their experiences as resistance fighters and as Socialists. From its conception, therefore, the memorial at Auschwitz assumed a decidedly internationalist cast. ... the blocks at Auschwitz I were converted into national pavilions, each with an exposition devoted to the national memory of a different country's citizens at Auschwitz (Young 1993: 130).

One of these pavilions was assigned to be the "Jewish pavilion," and was locked most of the time, being opened only on special occasions (Steinlauf 1997:70). The exhibition inside the Jewish pavilion was prepared by Polish organizers with cooperation and help from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Center for the Documentation of the Jews in Paris, and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem (Zbrzeska 1997:99). The Birkenau portion of the camp, where the tracks of the trains taking Jews to their death in the gas chambers ended, and where ruins of the barracks, the "selection" platform, and the crematoria lay around "remained inaccessible and desolate, rarely viewed by visitors" (Steinlauf 1997:70). Given the aims of the national decree of commemoration, as Dwork and Jan van Pelt put it, "it made sense that the museum would concentrate the state's meager resources on the part of Auschwitz where Polish resisters and hostages had suffered and died" (1996:364).

In 1957, the Auschwitz Committee launched a competition overseen by sculptor Henry Moore for a monument that was to be

used as the focal point of official commemorative ceremonies in Auschwitz. Yet in 1958 Moore announced that no project submitted to the committee was fully satisfactory, and the design that was finally approved in 1959 was a cooperative work of three groups of artists who were selected from the initial pool of suggestions. After a few more years of challenging financial issues the commission and the government accepted the following design:

... the monument consisted of a row of blocklike sarcophagi, slightly elevated, and a stone tower of cubist figures. Although the memorial sculpture has been described as sarcophagal, it also suggested human forms: three abstract figures emerged from the stone. In these vertically rectangular shapes rising to round blocks, one could see the cubist shadow lines of a torso with rounded head perched on top. In their number and sizes, they resemble a human cluster: two parents and a child (Young 1993:139-141).

However, despite its official acceptance, the fate of the chosen design was yet to be determined.

#### 1966-1967: Israel and the United States

Between 1959 and 1970 about 320 people from Israel visited the Auschwitz museum. In 1966, and again in 1967, delegations of young people from Israel visited the death camps in Poland. Yet with the break of the Six-Day War, Poland, like most of the Communist bloc, severed diplomatic relations with Israel, and the visits to the camps ceased (Segev 1993:478). In Israel, talk about the war was saturated with Holocaust imagery and anxieties, and this discourse approximated the perception of the war by American Jews.

It is generally agreed (Seidel 1996, Segev 1993, Linenthal 1995, Friedlander 1994, Young 1993, Kugelmass 1994) that "[b]y far the most important event in the resurrection of Holocaust imagery in American as well as Israeli life ... was the Six-Day War." Fear of "another Auschwitz" intensified, and once the war was over, America's Jewry did not withdraw into their pre-1967 hiding/indifference.<sup>10</sup> Indeed "Never Again" was heard not only from the Jewish Defense League, but also from the mouths and pocketbooks of many American

Jews" (Linenthal 1995:9). In fact, visits by American Jews to Poland began as "inducements for securing donations from wealthy and often nonobservant elite within the Jewish community," later these led to the organization of visits by groups of teenagers (Kugelmass 1994:178). Between 1959 and 1970 around 35,000 Americans (presumably almost all of them Jews) visited the museum.

#### 1967 - 1968: Poland

The late sixties were crucial in terms of the Polish state's relationship with both its living and dead Jews. It was then, after the Six-Day War, during the intense Polish government's anti-Jewish purges that the Jewish pavilion in Auschwitz was closed "ostensibly for renovations, and remained closed until 1978, when it was rededicated" (Young 1993:130). Moreover, the version of the memorial discussed above was not what was unveiled to the public in Auschwitz in 1967. While some snapshots show evidence that the figures did stand as planned for one week, just before the dedication itself, the carved stones were replaced by a polished square of black marble with a triangle in the middle, with no official explanation for this change to this day. This is what, Young suggests, is at the heart of this:

... in their different sizes, the stones did not satisfactorily define the political character of the victims desired by the authorities. Although the triangle represented all the victims, it does so in the figure of specifically political inmates. By contrast, the different sizes of stones in the initial sculpture suggested children, who could not have been killed as political prisoners, but only as Jews. In 1967, the discerning critical eye of the authorities apparently caught this subtlety of meaning, which led them to replace human figures with a symbol of political suffering (1993, 141).

#### 1968-1986: Israel and the United States

After the anti-Zionist campaign of the late 1960s, as Steinaluf puts it, "[a]broad, it was believed that the history of the Jews in Poland had come to an ultimate conclusion; it was common to speak of "the end of a thousand years"(1997:93). For most of the 1970s, the publication *American Jewish Year Book*, which published news of even the smallest Jewish communities around the world stopped mentioning Poland in its reports. Between 1971

and 1980 only 245 Israelis visited the museum. Unable and not willing any longer to save a special place for Poland in the commemoration of the Holocaust, in 1975 Israel installed a smaller version of Nathan Rappoport's Warsaw ghetto monument (the original of which is in Warsaw) at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and memorial center in Jerusalem. However, by the 1980s, the changes in Poland were known in Israel, and in 1983 "an unofficial delegation of Israeli historians was received at Polish academic institutions" (ibid.:104).

In a way the end of the seventies can be marked by the American Jews renewed interest in the Holocaust. In 1979 Yaffa Eliach wrote that "the American Jews had discovered the 'vast educational and financial potential of the Holocaust.'" It was, she said, "an instant Judaizer, shocking people back into their Jewishness ... One may sadly reflect that 'there is no business like Shoah business'" (Linenthal 1995:13). That the Holocaust was, to use Eliach's term, "an instant Judaizer," is arguably at the heart of later American visits to Auschwitz today and in the past, and one reason that it functions in this way is the potential it has of making Jewish visitors feel politically better about themselves.<sup>11</sup> During the seventies, more than 82,000 Americans visited the museum at Auschwitz. Misreading the contemporary Israeli-Arab conflict, some Jews were using the Holocaust "as a weapon by which [they] claimed innocence and righteousness through their suffering."<sup>12</sup> This ... blinded them to the injustice ... inflicted on the Palestinians", and made the Holocaust into a kind of "safe haven" for some Jews (ibid.:15).

#### 1968-1986: Poland.

In 1978, the Jewish Pavilion in the Auschwitz museum was reopened on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The display was totally redesigned, and before its construction, repeated consultations were carried out between the Polish organizers and representatives of the United Jewish Appeal Federation, The Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, Yad Vashem, and the Center for the Documentation of the Jews in Paris.

In June 1979, Pope John Paul II visited Poland, and gave a mass at Auschwitz, one that was connected not only to the struggle surrounding the Carmelite convent, but is also connected to the more recent one concerning the crosses at Auschwitz. Undoubtedly, the pope's visit added to the domestic visits to the museum,

and between 1971 and 1980 more than 5,200,000 Poles visited the museum. But the most important event in Poland at the time historically speaking was the rise of Solidarity. As Hobsbawm characterized it, "from ... [1956] until the triumph of Solidarity at the end of the 1980s, Polish politics and economics were dominated by the confrontation of irresistible mass, the regime, and immovable object, the working class" (1994:398). Solidarity, which began as a struggle for the right of Polish workers to be represented by an independent trade union, quickly evolved into much more. By the end of its initial period of legal existence, "Solidarity, both as an organization and as a spirit ... allowed people finally to look each other in the eyes, [and] had penetrated into every corner of civil society, indeed, it had become that society" (Steinlauf 1997:97). However, in 1981 the Polish state ceased to accept Solidarity's challenge to its authority and the breach it caused in the state's monopoly of power. In December of that year General Wojciech Jaruzelski proclaimed martial law, and began a campaign to smash solidarity and "restore order," causing Poland to split into two worlds, "on one hand, a visible daily public life of deprivation, decay, and frustration [and] on the other hand, an invisible private life, lived 'underground,' of emotional warmth, intellectual and spiritual energy" (ibid.:101-102). Simultaneously, many younger Poles started to express interest in Poland's Jewish past. Some Polish historians and intellectuals even succeeded in maintaining contact with western Jewish colleagues.

#### 1986-1993: Israel and the United States

The renewal and development of visits by high-school students to Poland (Keren 1998:93-100) are key in tracing the later part of this history. It is a vivid example of how the different interest groups involved in this story often speak to each other through visits to the museum, transforming it either directly as a means for their speech or indirectly, along the way.

In 1988, the Ministry of Education began organizing visits of Israeli high school students to Poland. However, the very first visits were not initiated by the Ministry of Education but were organized by the association of the Kibbutzim who sent official delegations of youth to Poland back when it was still under a Communist regime.

The first pictures from these visits, showing Israeli teenagers crying on the extermination commemoration sites in Poland caused a public commotion in Israel, especially among young people. Upon their return, the young visitors kept describing their experiences emotionally, emphasizing that "everyone must visit Poland," and stating that "in Poland I understood why the state of Israel is important," "Now I'm sure I'll never emigrate," etc. (quoted in Keren 1998). Many educators, especially among the Kibbutzim, were very satisfied with the educational accomplishment illustrated by these teenagers' statements. And Keren argues that after a long period of trial and error in the attempts to educate teenagers toward a Zionist commitment and shape their Jewish identity, it seemed as if the best way for achieving these ends was finally found.

Another significant phenomenon, according to Keren, was the almost intentional exclusion by both trip organizer and participants of anything having to do with Poland and the Polish people. All Poles, in the past and in the present, were perceived as anti-Semitic, and during the Communist era, up to 1990, some Israeli visitors derived pleasure from seeing the poverty and difficult conditions existing in Poland at the time, saying more than once, "They got what's coming to them" (cited in Keren 1998).

All the while, the number of educational institutions and students wishing to visit Poland each year has grown incredibly. In recent years, around 12,000 Israeli teenagers have been visiting Poland annually, and they in turn constitute only a part of the general number of Israelis visiting the country. Between 1981 and 1990 about 23,000 Israelis visited the museum, and they were followed by around 50,000 more between 1991 and 1995.

By the mid-eighties, General Jaruzelski met with World Jewish Congress president Edgar Bronfman in New York. And in 1989, the Washington museum council embarked on a publicized trip to Poland, "structured as a pilgrimage, complete with wreath-layings, lightings of candles, [and] the recitation of the kaddish." During the visit, the group collected bricks from the Warsaw ghetto wall and other relics from Auschwitz to be displayed in the American museum (Linenthal 1995:165). By 1992, Miles Lerman, the chairman of the international-relations committee of the

Washington museum had signed official agreements with almost every Eastern European country, thus allowing the museum not only to collect vast numbers of artifacts, but also to copy massive amounts of archival material previously inaccessible to scholars. The immense task of collection meant establishing relationships with Holocaust museums in Europe. (ibid.:152).

However, what is probably best remembered from the eighties, in terms of the history recounted here, is the struggle surrounding the Carmelite convent near Auschwitz. In 1984, a group of Carmelite nuns moved into a building neighboring the state museum structure.<sup>13</sup> In 1985, a Belgian Catholic organization appealed to receive support for the convent using the language of Catholic triumphalism, which led Edgar Bronfman to raise the issue of the convent with Polish authorities. An agreement was reached according to which the nuns were to move out within two years. However, by the expected date nothing was done towards moving the nuns to a new location. In 1989, a group of American Jews led by a New York Rabbi climbed over the convent fence and began an angry demonstration. Rising out of a war, the museum zone was turning again into a war zone -- only this time it is a war over the meaning of the original one.

Against the background of changes in the museum display, to which I will now turn, the convent signified continuities in terms of what was believed by many to be the authentic Polish response to the Holocaust. Meanwhile, however, Americans were contributing their share to the commercialization of Auschwitz, as between 1981 and 1995 about a quarter million Americans visited the museum, more than half of them arriving after 1991.<sup>14</sup>

#### 1985-1993: Poland

Up to the last moment of the struggle, Polish politics were infused with war time symbolism. Seen vis-a-vis the Warsaw ghetto memorial, it is evident that competition to appropriate the meaning of the uprising was reaching its climax in 1988, for its forty-fifth anniversary. Solidarity's commemorative activities differed from the government's, which used the occasion to dedicate new monuments around the ghetto memorial. These new commemorative additions were, interestingly enough, developed with informal Israeli input (Steinlauf 1997:108). Indeed, by the mid-eighties, Poland began to reestablish its

connections with Israel, severed twenty years previously. This was expressed both in contemporary politics and in politics of the past.

Soon after the political change, Prime Minister Mazowiecki convened a commission to discuss the future of the State museum directly, and in this acknowledged the change in official memory that came with the new government. The new Auschwitz council, under the direction of the Polish Ministry of Culture, was "charged with redesigning the museum and monuments at Auschwitz, reorganizing the ruins in ways that strip them of their previous Marxian undergirding" (Young 1993:150).

In 1990, the museum director since 1955, Kazimirz Smolin -- who was a prisoner at Auschwitz-- already 70 years old at the time, was replaced by Jerzy Wroblewski (in *Auschwitz-History, Present, Future*, a 1994 documentary directed by Miklaszewski), and it was made clear that "[t]he official exhibition, which was established in the late 1950s, is considered outdated [and] is supposed to be replaced by a completely new version within the next few years" (Spielman 1994:169). Also in 1990, the Foundation for Commemoration of the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death camp was established. Financed solely by private and institutional donors from Poland and abroad, the foundation has since been involved with many changes in the museum display and in the museum's conservation efforts (Marszalek 1997:127).

The memorial monument erected in Birkenau in 1967 consisted of a combination of ruins and sculpted art. On twenty stone tablets the following message was inscribed: "four million people suffered and died here at the hands of the Nazi murderers between the years 1940-1945." Yet, with Poland's change in regime twenty-three years later, these inscriptions were removed from the tablets, as the new estimate of the number of Auschwitz's victims now revolves around 1,100, 000 (Olesky 1997:7). The question of how many died in Auschwitz<sup>15</sup> is a good example of how knowledge of the past is presented and to what political aims (see also the 1992 Documentary *Auschwitz: Recollections of Prisoner # 1327* directed by Smolen):

The figure of 4 million was as wrong as it was round, arrived at by a combination of the camp commandant's self-aggrandizing exaggerations, Polish perceptions of their great losses, and the Soviet occupiers'

desire to create socialist martyrs. The inflated number may have diminished Stalin's own crimes, even as it created millions of Polish and Soviet martyrs at Auschwitz (Young 1993:141).

Other changes became noticeable as museum labels for the exhibition and the museum's publication were reformulated to formally acknowledge the fact that the majority of the camp's victims were Jews (which was not acknowledged prior to 1989). To the existing museum labels in Polish and German were added occasional English ones. In 1990, the new museum committee also came up with the Yarnon Declaration, a framework within which negotiations over the use and memory of Auschwitz can be conducted.

And in continuation with Hobsbawm's observation that "[i]n regimes where politics was so obviously in control, no sharp line between political and economic developments can be drawn" (1994:397), economic considerations cannot be left out of the picture of post-socialist Poland. By the 1990s the Polish economy was changing drastically, and visits to what has been sometimes called the country's "number 1 tourist attraction" definitely contributed to it.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1990s, we have been witnessing, as Kugelmass puts it, the

responsiveness, if not the very solicitousness of East European countries themselves. Floundering economically, and pressed for hard currency, they find that Western tourism represents a relatively simple way to generate income. Here, then, lies an obvious, if not entirely happy, marriage: the East European thirst for income, the Jewish search for roots, and finally, the recent emergence of the Holocaust as a subject of popular Jewish discourse, indeed, as one of the tenets of what Jonathan Woocher refers to as American Jewish "civil religion" (Kugelmass 1994: 176).

All of this is made even more interesting, and the Polish economic project more complex, if we take into consideration the fact that the general number of visitors to the camp, as at all the concentration camps in Poland, has dropped significantly in recent years. This is largely due to the demise of officially sponsored group (and especially school) visits from the ex-communist world (Salter et al. 1996:419). In other words, even if Auschwitz has always been a site of mass

tourism, and even if the museum was prepared to deal with the number of visitors, since the late eighties it had to take into account the fact that the composition of tourists changed.

### 1993: Israel and the United States

Nineteen-ninety three was a year of a general increase in the Israeli State involvement in the visits to Poland. By then criticism of the way teenager's visits to Poland were organized had mounted and a public debate opened up, leading the Ministry of Education to search for ways of improving the content of the tours and the quality of the guides. The Ministry of Education then began training guides to accompany groups going to Poland. The goals of the teenagers' trips were redefined and a new emphasis was placed on learning about the Jewish existence in Poland in the past, and about the cultural and social pluralism that characterized Polish Jewry in its 1000 years of existence. Likewise, the importance of learning about Polish history was brought to the front as was knowledge of the Polish people and the complexities of Jewish-Polish relationships before, during, and after the Holocaust. The trips began to include meetings with Polish students, as well as meetings with "Righteous among the Nations." The same year, the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was the first Israeli leader to visit Poland, attending the ceremonies marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the (soon to be discussed) Warsaw ghetto revolt.

While central in both Israel and Poland, "[f]or most of the Jews of the world, the Warsaw ceremonies were hardly central; in the United States that role was filled by the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C." (Steinlauf 1997:131). Besides the opening of the American museum, the Americanization of the Holocaust found another expression that year. Nineteen-ninety three saw the most publicized and popular manifestation of America interest in the Holocaust - the box office success of Steven Spielberg's movie *Schindler's List*, which received the Academy Award for the best film of that year.

### 1993: Poland

In Poland, the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising was symbolic of the changes that have taken place in the relationship between the three bodies of interest:

The ceremonies included an ecumenical ceremonial service at the Warsaw synagogue with the unprecedented presence of Church officials, and climaxed with an official wreath-laying ceremony at the ghetto monument that included President Lech Walesa; Marek Edelman; the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin; and the U.S vice president, Al Gore. Thousands of Jews from all over the world were present as well. These included elderly Holocaust survivors but also many young Israelis who surrounded the monument in a sea of Israeli flags. Most Poles, lacking the special passes required to approach the monument, watched the proceedings from great distance behind police barricades (Steinlauf 1997:131).<sup>17</sup>

That year, 1993, an international symposium was organized in Oswiecim entitled *The Future of Auschwitz: Should the Relics be Preserved?* Despite the difference in opinions, the final result has been a successful re-incorporation of Birkenau into the museum. Today, the number of museum visitors making the trip to Birkenau is estimated as 80% of all museum visitors (Olesky 1997:9).

With the connections with Israel renewed, and with the rise in the number of Jewish visitors, in 1993 the area that was used for the "selection" process by the Nazis was extensively renovated. In a clear digression from previous committee attitude and decisions (see Rawecka and Rawecki 1997:13-20), the ramp was no longer "preserved as original" but became more clearly visible, as new ballast was placed between the rails, and gravel was added. The museum administration also decided to put up dozens of signs on the grounds in order to provide more information to visitors.

Indeed, in 1993 ties with Israel strengthened to such a greater degree, that the Israeli National Holocaust Authority and Educational Center, Yad Vashem, after initiating courses for the training of Israeli guides, began to host an annual seminar in Jerusalem for Polish guides. This cooperation has meant that for three weeks a year several dozens of the Auschwitz museum guides study the Holocaust and Jewish history and culture in Jerusalem (written communication with Olesky, 17 November, 1998).



### 1993- 1998: Israel and The United States.

By the mid 1990s it had become impossible to see the rise in Jewish American visits<sup>18</sup> and the Jewish American identity project in isolation from their Jewish Israeli counterparts. In 1996, about 20,000 Israelis and 40,000 Americans visited the museum, with similar numbers following them in 1997. I agree with Kugelmass that

[o]ne cannot help but think that the popularity of events such as the March of the Living, a pilgrimage to the death camps involving thousands of North American Jewish school children, is increasing in direct proportion to the ambiguousness of the Middle East situation: as long as Israel was perceived as a David against Goliath, there was no need for a ritual to convince participants and spectators of the vulnerability of the Jewish people. But with the increasing perception of Israel as Goliath - the use of stones by Palestinians is also a rhetorical strategy - there is increasing need for Jews to formulate a counter-rhetoric of remembered victimization. Certainly, the Holocaust's attraction is its very lack of ambiguity (Kugelmass 1994:179).

One incident that in a way expresses many of these interconnections is the statement made by Israeli Major General Yossi Ben-Hanan who accompanied Netanyahu's 1998 delegation to Auschwitz. Ben Hanan said that the oath of allegiance to the State of Israel taken by the elite units of the IDF should be from time to time administered at death camps such as Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau (Melman:1998). Ben Hanan was in Poland as part of Netanyahu's delegation, part of a government initiative to join the March of the Living on Holocaust Memorial Day, and combine this visit with an attempt to apply pressure on Poland to close a certain highly valued helicopter deal with Israel. He had met with the Polish chief of staff as well as senior defense officials in order to promote the arms deal between the two countries.

### 1993 – Present : Poland.

While in the museum itself several dozen staff members were busy with tasks related to the March of the Living, a day before Netanyahu's arrival, "thanks to glitches in communication and preparations" Poland's leaders were out of the country. The reasons for

this may be many, and Poland's government difficulties with the helicopter memorandum are surely relevant. Yet Israeli media also reported that in speaking about the confusion, Polish government sources suggested that the government was disappointed that Netanyahu's visit was for one day only and that most of his time was going to be devoted to events commemorating the Holocaust (*Haaretz* April 22, 1998). This is not the first Polish criticism of the specific lessons that Israel chooses to draw from the Holocaust. Wilkanowicz critically remarked that since Israel is always potentially on a verge of a war, and since it has a heterogeneous population "it is understandable that Shoah has become as if a national ideology... [but this is hazardous, for] it hinders thought of the future, and sometimes engenders hostility toward those whom many feel to be too focused on their own misfortune..." (1997:28).

In 1998, the International Council of the museum included among its members Polish Senator Wladislaw Bartoszewski, Poland's Minister of Culture and Arts, Joanna Wnuk-Nazarowa, Deputy Minister Stanislaw Zurowski, and Andrzej Sikora who is also the Polish Government's special representative. In the past 50 years, therefore, despite changes, the two states and the American Jewish community have not ceased to communicate with each other through Auschwitz- both symbolically and on the physical grounds of the museum itself through marches, ceremonies, committees and delegations.

Lately, there have been more changes planned by the museum committee. Probably in response to the March of the Living, the route followed by the Jews sent to the gas chambers at Birkenau will be established for pedestrians. Other plans include integrating a buffer zone around the former Auschwitz and Birkenau camp, with the reassignment of all the existing historical objects that were once auxiliary to the operation of the camp. There is also a plan to reconstruct the "Judenrampe" that functioned for unloading prisoners, to renovate the sauna building in Birkenau, and to display an exhibition of family photographs "depicting in a symbolic way the world of the European Jews in which most of the victims had lived, and which was irreparably destroyed as a result of the Holocaust" (museum bulletin 1998:2-3). Today, the educational activities of the museum include sending Polish teachers to seminars in Israel, and hosting Israeli teachers at Polish seminars.



Up to 1989, the museum was funded by the Polish state alone. By 1997, the museum was being supported not only by the Foundation but also by Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Russia, the Netherlands, Switzerland and of course Israel. Clearly, the museum today is not the same one it was 50 years ago.

### Conclusion

Historical museums tell a story, and it is this story that we have seen the different interest groups try to manipulate and control, each for its own ends. For as White wrote, "every fully realized story ... is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imagined, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence... [and similarly] every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralise the events of which it treats" (1987:15). It seems as if it is not only the case that ideology is built into history-- i.e. that narrating, explaining, describing, interpreting and translating are not independent activities-- but that it is also true that the very existence of conflicting interpretations is inherent to historical representation. This is so because only when the status of events as manifestations of reality is not contested are they not narrativized. If the events could truly "speak for themselves" there would be no need to place them in a historical narrative, which is to say that "it is because there is a contest that there is something to narrativize" (ibid.:19). Put differently, "[u]nless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened" (ibid.:20). Needless to say, White's historian can be replaced with the history museum and with the states involved.

The different projects we have seen here (the identity politics of American Jews, the paternalistic relationship between the US and Israel, the political educational ambitions of an Israel concerned with securing its allies, motivating its future soldiers, and protecting its economy, and the stormy political changes of Poland combined with the new and challenging economic developments) are all linked through wars (the Six Day War, the Cold War), movies (e.g. the internationally successful and influential *Schindler's List*), money (via touristic exchanges), and museums (e.g. the relationship between the Auschwitz museum and the national

Holocaust memorial in Washington D.C.). This suggests not only that a complex net has to be cast in order to capture the different locations which are involved in the production of knowledge/experience, but also that the final product is constantly in flux, for it is forever produced anew, with each representation and interpretation of it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professor William Roseberry, whose attentive guidance and meaningful insight helped me with the MA thesis from which this paper evolved. I also want to thank Professor Ikegami and the entire "State, Market, Culture" proseminar at the New School (Fall '98-Spring '99) for their remarks on earlier versions of this paper, and to all the smart people who asked me important questions in the different occasions on which I presented parts of this paper. Similarly I want to thank Kathrine Ziegler, Laurie Hinck, Jean Hoaninger and Ilisa Lam for their wise comments and support throughout the year. The MA thesis development group was an excellent idea. Finally I want to thank my husband Assaf for his wisdom and for his confidence in me.

<sup>2</sup> I understand The Polish State Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau to be the complex which includes the exhibitions, the ceremonies and

events that take place on the museum grounds, the museum's preservation and educational activities, the monuments that adorn it, the language of its signs and so on and so forth. These aspects of the museum are all concerned with the production of historical knowledge and memory. I use the term 'historical knowledge' to signify that the museum teaches visitors about a historical event -- the Holocaust-- and use 'historical memory' to signify that it tries to produce a memory of a historical narrative--the meaning of the Holocaust. These two are very complicated processes and they are not at all independent of each other. Also, taking its inspiration from different studies (Young 1989, Linenthal 1995, Seidel 1996, Segev 1993) that look at the history and the political construction of different memorials and historical museums, (as well as from works such as *Lieux de Memoire* which focuses the historiographic gaze on the phenomenon of commemoration itself), the part of my research presented in this paper seeks to subject the State Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau to a similar historical-political analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Yet all of the above is not to say that the three different groups, these three memories, are monolithic, and that they can only be limited by each other. It is important to first introduce the role of the "State" in both the process of constructing a representation of history and in the perception of this construction, but it is also important not to let the "State" obstruct the view entirely, and prevent us from recognizing sites of resistance. There is resistance to official political interpretation of the Holocaust coming from guides, curators, visitors and survivors within each group. However, the focus of the part of my research presented here is not on resistance. The success with which the different aims are achieved, or put differently, the degree to which the different interest groups succeed in constructing the museum according to their interpretations and aims is the second step in this investigation, the first one being the process of construction itself-- how the museum came to represent the Holocaust in a certain way as a result of the push and pull of different political ambitions. To summarize then, the museum is seen in this paper as an institution caught up between three bodies of interests, each of which wishes to use it as its own ideological apparatus, and each of which faces obstacles both from within (obstacles raised by dissenting members

of the same group) and from without (difficulties raised by the two other states).

<sup>4</sup> A full analysis should also consider the role of Germany (the state and the visitors), but methodologically this lies outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> It is here that I would like to emphasize that while I look at the way the museum experience is constructed, this is not to deny that many come to the museum for personal acts of remembrance. What I am concerned with is demonstrating that not all visits to the museum are spontaneous and that the final result is always also dependent upon political structures larger than the individual visitor.

<sup>6</sup> Graburn wrote that travel is secular societies' modern equivalent of the annual and life long festivals of more traditional societies (1989:23), and in this he drew from Durkheim's discussion of the sacred and the profane. But these issues of sacredness and profanity become even more complex in the case of visitors traveling to the Auschwitz museum, not only because of the specific (and different) religious issues involved for both Jewish and Catholic visitors, but also because of the agreed upon sacredness of the dead. References to this sacredness abound, and I believe that this intense affect is related both to the force with which the different national and identity projects that surround the museum are capable of fueling themselves, and to the problematic definition of the museum visitor. As Cohen had noted, there is a general agreement that a tourist is one who "travels for pleasure" (1974:529). This definition is undoubtedly linked to the difficulty of conceptualizing the visitors to the museum as tourists (and is also, in my view, related to the issue of the legitimacy of deriving any kind of pleasure from Holocaust-related experience, even fiction, hence Adorno's statement "poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarity"). Sensitivities to the term "tourists" differ greatly. Some use 'visitors' and 'tourists' interchangeably, while others (me included) are guilty of enjoying the shock value derived from using the term 'tourists' in relation to the Holocaust. Still others are absolutely averse to using this term. And while museum staff and other observers are always concerned that some visitors (especially teenagers) enjoy themselves inappropriately, this reproach is irrelevant because the *is* question cannot be settled by an *ought* answer, and so the question persists -- are

visitors to the Auschwitz museum tourists? This question is, in a way, discussed in the second half of this paper, which deals with visitors' experiences and is more ethnographic in terms of materials used, for in exploring this and related questions I draw from visitors' private and public textual productions and personal communication.

<sup>7</sup> My account of Poland begins right after the war, while the two other narratives offered here begin only in the 1960s. For various reasons the 1940s and 1950s were characterized by an especially dormant Holocaust awareness in Israel (see Friedlander 1994) and the United States (see Novick 1994), and thus I have not found it worthwhile to try and take the story so far back in history. Read in light of the Cold War we must recall that "the first thing to observe about the socialist region of the globe [is] that for most of its existence it formed a separate and largely self-contained sub-universe both economically and politically" (Hobsbawm 1994:374). Because of changes in Polish politics the most important transformations in the museum that have taken place in relation to international pressures have only begun in the late 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, it dates back to the time of the war. In 1944 one of the camp's prisoners who later became an important member of the museum's staff made the first sketches of a future monument in Birkenau following the orders of a leader from the resistance movement (Rawecka and Rawecki 1997:13). Right after the war, a group of former prisoners began to organize and take care of what remained of the camp (Szymanski 1997:45). These ex-prisoners were not state officials, but their actions were continuously limited and governed by the state, and the Ministry of Culture and the Arts was the body to eventually step in and make official staff appointments. The relationship between the staff and the Polish state was complex, because staff members sought government funding, while resisting some of the government's imposed interpretation of the camp's significance. In that early period, before the structuring of the museum has been firmly established there was more flexibility in terms of the presentation of the camp and the ambivalence of the state-museum relationship was expressed in it. While in accordance with state ideology visits to Birkenau later stopped for a long while, in the early period museum guides were taking visitors

first to Birkenau and from there to Auschwitz (ibid.). Yet soon enough the training of guides became formalized, and they were being educated in courses co-organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts. The Museum was officially opened on June 14, 1947, on the anniversary of the arrival of the first transport of Polish political prisoners to Auschwitz. The number of museum visitors was initially capped at 50,000 by the concerned museum director. The ceremonies were led by Polish Premier Jozef Cyrankiewicz, himself an Auschwitz survivor.

<sup>9</sup> While the following information is not divulged by the museum itself, right from its first moments as a post-Nazi camp, the camp which was preserved as the museum in Auschwitz was physically different from the one that operated under Nazism. Not only did the fleeing Nazis bomb the gas chambers and crematoria, and burned dozens of barracks, but when the Red Army liberated Auschwitz, the Soviet soldiers, to prevent the spread of disease, also burned down several of the barracks at Birkenau, while local Poles dismantled yet others as they searched for building materials and firewood. Many other barracks as well as most of the portable stables at Birkenau were dismantled and taken away to shelter construction crews in Warsaw. Other changes occurred during the months that the Polish Red Cross Camp Hospital operated in the former Auschwitz camp, and housed patients in post-camp buildings, and still more alterations took place simply because people were stealing camp property. Yet these are not the only alterations. In fact, while there are no indications to that effect, the museum's visitor center stands where the camp itself already existed in 1945. Most visitors assume that the main building which houses the restaurant, the cafeteria, the cinema and the book shop was built after 1945, but in fact it is the very same building that used to serve as the prisoners' reception center, housing a delousing installation as well as nineteen structures for disinfecting clothing, a laundry, and a bathhouse for the prisoners. Moreover, the point where one now enters the parking lot used to be the main entrance to the living area of the camp. In front of it, visible from between trees and a concrete wall and off-limits for tourists are stucco structures that belonged to Auschwitz but that are now used as low income housing and as military quarters for the Polish army:

There was a crippling lack of housing in Poland in 1945, and these structures were spacious, well-built, intact and available for immediate occupancy. Then too, it was easier to transform the camp into a museum with a

specific, controlled, ideological message when the site was confined to a more limited area (Dwork and Jan van Pelt 1996:360).

It is difficult to point out which is the cause and which the effect in terms of these developments, yet it is clear the museum's grounds being bounded in such a way, allowed for the "Arbeit Macht Frei" arch to become a major symbol of the Holocaust, while in fact, "very few of the Jews deported to Auschwitz ever saw that gate" (ibid.:360-361). Another important thing to note is that the reconstructed crematorium just outside the museum in which the official tour of the camp traditionally concludes is hardly ever presented as a postwar reconstruction to the visitors. History, therefore, never stood still for the museum to capture its traces, not even in the latter's first moments. However, as we will see, the museum staff is currently trying to address these very issues of historical (mis)representation.

<sup>10</sup> Young related these developments in a similar way: "In fact, without the traditional pillars of Torah, faith, and language to unify them, the majority of Jews in America have turned increasingly to the holocaust as their vicariously shared memory. This preoccupation with the Holocaust may have led, in turn, to the massive outpouring of support for Israel in May 1967 – when the Jewish state seemed threatened with destruction. For many Jewish Americans, the point of common identification with the Jews of Israel seemed to lie in their potential destruction" (1993:348).

<sup>11</sup> In relation to this Young wrote: "When Israel came to be perceived as less a potential victim, it also became less a source of identity and pride among American Jews. And as identification with Israel waned during the late 1970s, reaching its nadir during the Lebanon war, the other half of secular Jewish identity – Holocaust Memory—assumed a greater proportion of Jewish time and resources" (1993:348)

<sup>12</sup> Yet there is another way to see this focus on the Holocaust, one that sees it as a shift from Israel and towards the Holocaust not as a way of encouraging Israel, but as one motivated both by a disappointment with Israel and by a fashionable American search of ethnicity (Seidel 1996:39).

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the same building has been a theater before the war, and that it

functioned as a storehouse during the war only because plans to transform it into an SS casino were never carried out, (Dwork and Jan van Pelt 1996:369).

<sup>14</sup> While the Americans were contributing to the rise in number of visitors to the museum, it is also false to present the Poles as interested in as many visitors as possible for financial or political events. In fact, quite early on people were voicing their concern as to the danger that Auschwitz will be turned into a "historical circus" (Rawecka and Rawecki 1997:15).

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that in *Orbis Invites You*, a brochure describing touristic excursions in Southeastern Poland, printed by Poland's most famous travel agency, and handed to visitors nowadays, the camp is described as the place in which more than 4 million persons lost their lives (n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> This claim is supported by the fact that in the first half of 1998 alone 32 film and television crews came to the museum and filmed, among other things, material for short films about tourism in Poland. Similarly a considerable section is dedicated to Auschwitz in guide books, and the inscriptions on buses and in brochures, positioning Auschwitz between touristic visits to the salt mines and to Zakopane suggest the same, see photocopies.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note as far as reception is concerned that even "[t]hough former [Polish] prisoners may have been marginalized in the context of the ceremonies, a public opinion survey taken in the weeks before commemoration revealed that many Poles still identified with much of what this older generation represented. Forty seven percent of those polled believed that Auschwitz was primarily a place of Polish martyrdom, while only 8 percent believed that most of its victims were Jews" (Steinlauf 1997:141).

<sup>18</sup> The first March of the Living was organized to include thousands of Jewish school children from across North America and Israel. The event was so successful that rabbis who participated as group leaders have begun taking their congregations on similar pilgrimages, and the event has been repeated for other school children (Kugelmass 1994:179, note 16). See further discussion of the MOTL in the second part of this paper.