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“Bystanders, Not So Innocent ‘Some Were Neighbors,’ at U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum”

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WASHINGTON — Whatever larger themes are sounded when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum commemorates its 20th anniversary here this weekend, whatever is said at a Monday ceremony by former President Bill Clinton or by the museum’s founding chairman, Elie Wiesel, and whatever assessments are made about its influence, accomplishments or limitations, it will take a visit to its new exhibition, “Some Were Neighbors,” to grasp one aspect of this imposing institution’s power. It reveals the demonic not in grand forces, but in the most minute details.

In one video interview, for example, a Lithuanian witness, Regina Prudnikova, recalls that before the massacres, she cared for a Jewish child in her town, Pilviskiai. But, “I was very young and had a very red face,” she explains, and was “on the chubby side.” That wasn’t good. “I was told that Jews cut you and take your blood.” She stopped baby-sitting. She now mocks such beliefs, but her tone becomes uncertain: “I know that they say the Jews can’t live without Christian blood. During their holidays they had to have at least a drop of that blood to taste.” Then, the recollection returns. The Jews were taken away and shot, their homes plundered. And we see a photograph of a wagon piled with loot being auctioned to passers-by.

Or listen to Stanislaw Ochman, who transported the Jews of his village, Zdunska Wola, in Poland, in a wooden wagon to the cemetery where they were murdered. The children, holding their mothers’ skirts, were often too short for the raked gunfire, and fell into the pit, still clinging, as soil was piled atop them. After the ditch was covered, he recalled, breathless with more than half a century of disbelief, “the soil was still moving,” because, he said, “they were still alive”: “The earth was moving!”

“Collaboration & Complicity in the Holocaust” is the exhibition’s subtitle, and its focus is not on the nature of Nazism or the history of anti-Semitism. And it isn’t as impressive as two of the museum’s more ambitious recent shows, about Nazi propaganda, and about the perversion of Nazi medicine.

But its power is considerable, and on this occasion, revealing. The emphasis is on individuals, those who may appear in the backgrounds of photographs: the women who brought empty baby carriages to carry off loot from Jewish stores in Dessau, Germany; the firemen in Bühl, Germany, who poured water on buildings during Kristallnacht to ensure that the synagogue fire didn’t spread to any non-Jews’ buildings; the neighbors who watched from windows as Jews were rounded up in Amsterdam.

And here and there, more astounding because of the contrast, we learn about somebody like Giovanni Palatucci, chief of police in Fiume, Italy (today, Rijeka, Croatia), who ordered that registries identifying Jews be destroyed after the Germans took power in 1943. He saved perhaps 5,000 Jews but was himself deported to Dachau, where he died.

It is probably no accident that this exhibition is being mounted as the museum celebrates its 20th anniversary. By almost any measure, the institution has been an astonishing success. Its building, by James Ingo Freed, was acclaimed from the first; its allusions to 1940s Brutalist architecture and evocations of an industrial enterprise going about its horrific work do not descend into cliché. (Contrast that with Daniel Liebeskind's preciously skewed Jewish Museum in Berlin.) The museum has had 35 million visitors, about a third from schools. And despite early concerns about its focus's having limited appeal, about 90 percent of attendees, the museum says, are non-Jews.

But many issues raised during the museum's planning are still latent here. There were objections by Poles to being treated as perpetrators rather than victims. (The permanent exhibition takes that complicated combination into account.) There were questions about the extent to which the Holocaust should be viewed as the history of murdered Jews, since Gypsies, dissidents, homosexuals and people with disabilities were also killed (an issue left unsettled, though President Jimmy Carter's sweeping assertion of 11 million killed, including 5 million non-Jews, should be explicitly countered. Nazi-overseen murders encompassed some six million Jews and perhaps, historians believe, a half-million others).

And how broad a brush could be used to characterize the villains? Weren't there differences between the faithful and bystanders? How did dissenters act, and what difference did they make?

Finally, what historical lessons does the Holocaust offer? And how could a Holocaust museum justify its national imprimatur?

This new show is an attempt to look at one set of contested issues by trying to make ethical distinctions: "What were the onlookers thinking?" Were tax officers "complicit in the persecution of the Jews"? What about looters in a Polish ghetto emptied of its occupants?

"Should I take the risk to help?" asks one heading. Some do, if the money is right; some do even if it isn't; and some readily don't. "Reflection quotes" are offered at the end: "To protect ourselves, we distance ourselves from victims" (Ervin Staub, psychologist) or "A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction" (John Stuart Mill, political philosopher).

Unfortunately, the show's details are more vivid than its analysis. What does become clear is how widespread cooperation was with the enterprise of death and how difficult it was to oppose. These two extremes — the extent of complicity and the danger of dissent — make the exhibition's moral queries seem like relics of ordinary life, while the history is of a different order.

Yet moral lessons have been a project of the museum from the beginning, outlined in the 1979 report of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. The institution wouldn't just teach about a particular atrocity; it would help prevent future atrocities. The Holocaust inspired the concept of genocide; the Holocaust museum was inspired by the idea of genocidal prevention.

It is interesting, though, that there is almost no sign of that impulse in the permanent exhibition. Unchanged, apart from small modifications since it was first mounted by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, it avoids homily in favor of vivid, careful

narrative. It remains overwhelming, an astonishing achievement after two decades; the only contemporary rival I have seen (though more rigorous and thorough) is in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

The Washington museum's hortatory theme, though, has expanded over time (and has become even more evident in other Holocaust museums). Now, after the permanent exhibition here, you reach the educational wing, the Wexner Center, and its 2009 exhibition, "From Memory to Action." It begins with a survey of the horrific mass killings in Rwanda, Bosnia and Sudan as part of the museum's Center for the Prevention of Genocide. But what do we learn that resembles what we have seen? We have barely begun to understand the killing fields of Lithuania. Are the same factors evident elsewhere? There is too little information to compare carefully. Yet the urge to generalize from the Holocaust to genocide or to call for "tolerance" or other forms of "action" has become commonplace.

"Can we make 'Never again' more than a promise?" one of the museum's recent promotions reads. "Absolutely. Learn how."

"Never again," the museum proclaims in another tagline. "What you do matters."

How? In some remarkable cases, it is clear, which is why the museum is honoring the Polish war hero Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, on Sunday. But what is urged upon museum visitors? The Web site proposals for "actions" include: "Take the Museum's online pledge to meet the challenge of genocide today" and "Share with your social network a photo or news item about someone taking action to confront hate." Or another: "The Museum seeks to inspire new generations to act upon the lessons of the Holocaust. Tell us what lessons matter most to you."

It is difficult to object to moral lessons, but are the right ones being revealed? After decades of Holocaust education, are analogies to its horrors more wise? They seem instead to have become more profligate. And why sweepingly generalize? It would seem out of place in museums about American slavery, World War I or American Indians.

Such questions remain. But the museum also transcends them. And its power comes not from high-concept homilies but from the relentless pursuit of historical details: the sight of the moving earth.

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"Some Were Neighbors" is on view through 2016 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington; ushmm.org.

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