

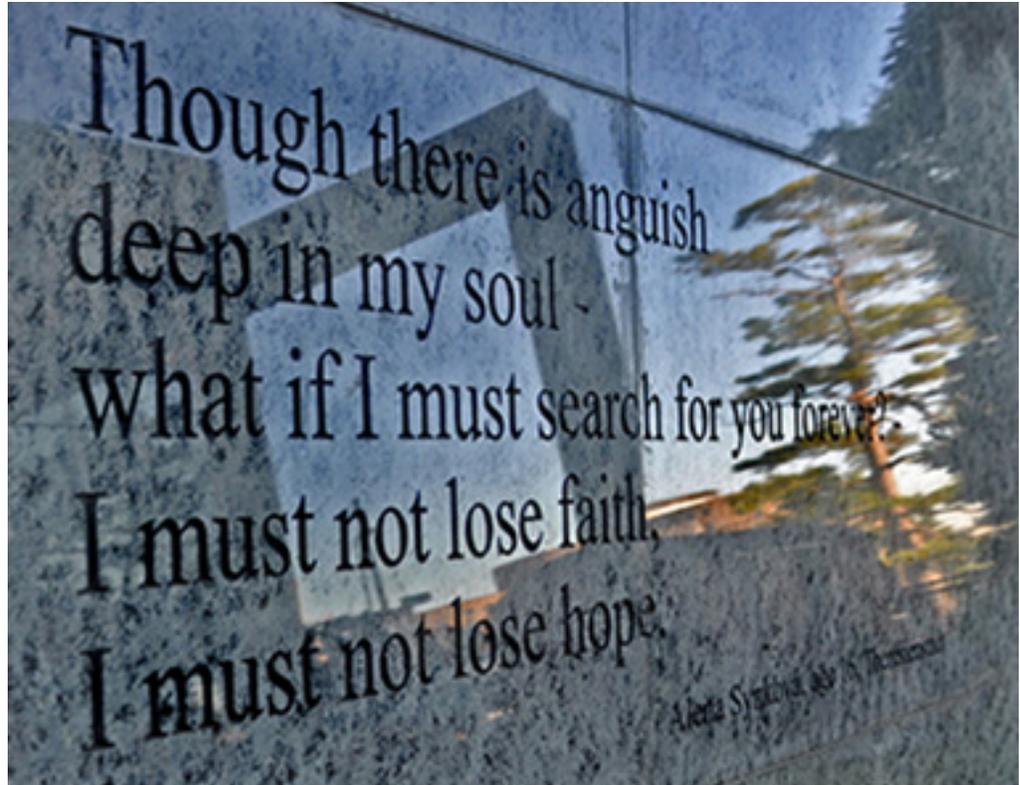
Holocaust Museum Houston: Never Forget

By Victor Romero

The extermination of six million Jews during World War II was a horrific event that will be remembered forever.¹ In the city of Houston stands a distinguished building that has engraved within its walls the memories and stories of some of the survivors. The Holocaust Museum Houston's mission is to remember those who perished in the Holocaust; to educate people about the dangers of hatred, prejudice, violence, and apathy; and to instill hope by working to repair the world.²

Siegi Izakson conceived the idea for the Houston museum. In 1981, he traveled to Israel to participate in an international gathering of Holocaust survivors where he met hundreds of people like him who had survived. He realized that eventually he and the rest of the survivors would be gone from this world and with them the memories of their experiences. Even though other cities had erected memorials, Siegi returned to Houston with the mission of building a Holocaust education center and memorial here to keep the memories alive.³

Siegi presented his idea to the leadership of Houston's Jewish Federation, but the museum was sidelined until 1990 when Sandra Weiner, president of Houston's Jewish Federation, embraced the idea. In 1992, the Holocaust Education Center (HEC) organized the Circle of Tolerance, a blue ribbon fundraising committee with Ben Love, Stanford Alexander, and Harry Reasoner as its chairs. These prominent Houston business leaders raised the money to organize the construction and fund the exhibits without any government funding.⁴ Prior to opening, the name changed to the Holocaust Museum Houston.⁵ In March 1996, when the Holocaust Museum had its opening ceremony, Siegi saw his vision become a reality. Speaking to those in attendance, he said, "This means the Holocaust story will not go away. It means the Holocaust is going to be told through education and memorial."⁶

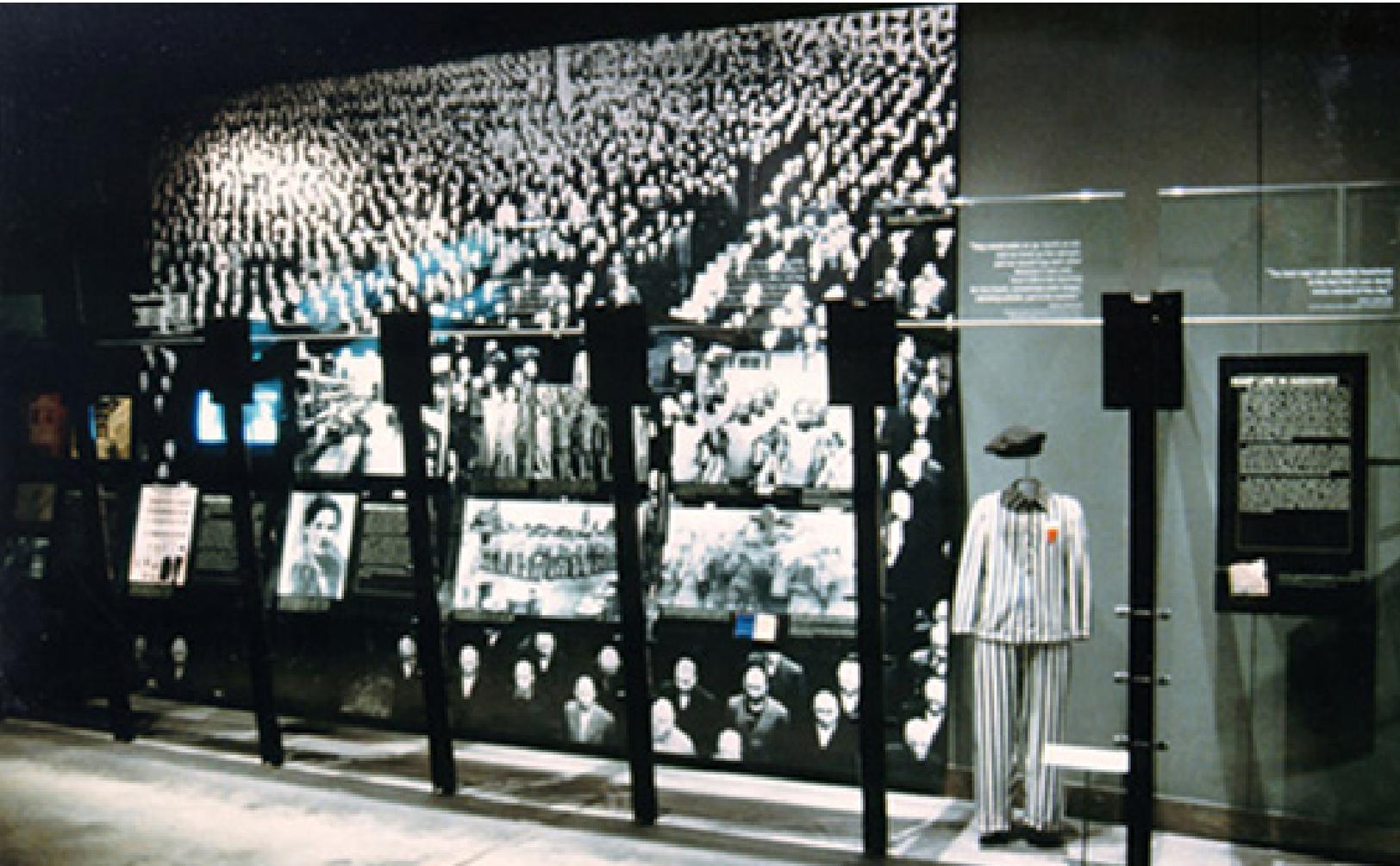


This stone stands in the Eric Alexander Garden of Hope, which is dedicated to the eternal spirit of children and in memory of the 1.5 million children who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Visitors are encouraged to place a stone in the garden as a marker of their visit and remembrance.

All photos courtesy of Holocaust Museum Houston.

The Holocaust Museum Houston stands in the middle of Houston's museum district, attracting the eye with its unique architecture. The two priorities for the museum were to have a memorial space within the building as well as gallery space for the permanent exhibits. Soon it became evident that the original one-story office building was not sufficient to do the exhibit justice; it needed a new wing to double the available gallery space. The museum now occupies more than 27,000 square feet that include a memorial room, 105-seat theater, permanent exhibit, galleries, library, and classrooms.⁷

"What the survivors wanted was a building you could not ignore. They wanted a building that told a story even if you never went inside," explained Ira Perry, director of marketing and public relations for the museum.⁸ Ralph Appelbaum, a New York architect, fulfilled that vision. The tall black cylinder stands at the center to remind people of what happened in the crematoriums, while the fenced slope gives the impression of a barbed wire fence. The stone slope is cut into square sections that have inscribed names of a number of Jewish communities de-



Bearing Witness: A Community Remembers is part of the museum's permanent exhibit. Featuring the testimony of Houston-area Holocaust survivors, it begins with pre-war Europe and reveals the flourishing Jewish life and culture there. Authentic film footage, artifacts, photographs, and documents expose Nazi propaganda and the ever-tightening restrictions on Jews in the steady move toward the "Final Solution."

stroyed by the Nazis. The visitor can see right away that a story waits within the walls.

Once inside the museum is wide open, inviting, and completely lit; but as you go into the building and hear the story of the Holocaust, it starts to get tighter, the walls start to come down, it gets narrower, it becomes dark, gloomy, and depressing. Intentionally designed this way, it shows how the people started with freedom, then had it stripped away, and became prisoners.⁹ "As you walk down the hall you see what appear to be railroad tracks ... they start off very wide and get narrower and narrower as they take you down toward the railcar. Three million people died by rail," Perry pointed out.¹⁰

The museum exhibits are powerful. These are not pictures hanging on the wall that you can ignore; they tell the story of the Holocaust as seen and experienced by survivors who came to Houston and became our neighbors. Perry explained how the museum had to be different to give the tragic events proper respect, "[Holocaust survivors] knew that if you just saw a photo on a wall, after a while it wouldn't mean anything to you anymore ... but if you saw a picture of your neighbor and you saw your neighbor's story, that you will remember, that will have some impact."¹¹

One of the permanent exhibits, *Bearing Witness: A Community Remembers*, starts off by showing what life was like in Europe before the Second World War, how established the Jewish culture was there, and the history of their persecution. The exhibit then leads the visitor through the rise of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler coming to power in Germany with displays of Nazi propaganda showing how the Nazis restricted the Jewish people. Visitors also find film footage and photography of the aftermath that show how the government steadily moved towards its "Final Solution."¹²

The exhibit tells stories of survivors like Chaja Verveer, who now resides in Houston. When Chaja was one year old, she was separated from her family after they went into hiding when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands and ordered the deportation of the Jews. Chaja's father was killed but she survived and was reunited with her mother after the war. While visitors learn about her story, they also see Chaja's baby dress, which her mother kept with her as a link to her daughter. These artifacts elicit deep emotions when learning about the struggles the war created.¹³

Museum goers learn about the atrocious living conditions and hardships found in the Nazi-imposed ghettos

as well as the special mobile killing units and the death camps like Auschwitz. Every person that follows the path through the museum sees how prejudice led to the murder of millions of men, women, and children.¹⁴ As one visitor explained, "I've never been in a place I wanted to stay so long and at the same time leave as quickly as possible!"¹⁵

Visitors also learn through the exhibits about the resistance efforts, like that of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, acts of sabotage, and prisoner revolts. The exhibit ends with two films, *Voices* and *Voices II* that present testimonies of Holocaust survivors who now live in Houston. They share their stories that are made even more powerful and real by the fact that they are our neighbors.¹⁶

The museum uses two different forms of transportation to tell two important stories of the Holocaust: one of people being led to their end and the other of people being rescued from certain doom. The museum's railcar is authentic from World War II and represents the type used to transport millions of people to their deaths. Although it is impossible to know if the museum's railcar was used to transport people to the camps, modifications to the train strongly suggest that it was.¹⁷ The museum's fishing boat resembles those used by Danish fishermen to transport thousands of Danish Jews out of Denmark and into

Sweden in 1943, as the Nazis began building camps and forts to contain them. As Perry noted, the fishermen saw this not as rescuing Jews but as rescuing their neighbors.¹⁸

The museum created the Eric Alexander Garden of Hope to remember the 1.5 million children who perished in the Holocaust. Designed by Houston architect Carlos Jimenez, it is located at the end of the main corridor; the garden is outside the museum where it is surrounded by a beautiful, tranquil open space. When visiting the garden it has become tradition to place a stone at the monument made out of blue granite. Placing the stone demonstrates that the person was there and will remember what he or she has seen. The monument is inscribed with a poem by Alena Synkova who wrote it while imprisoned in Theresienstadt at the age of sixteen.

*Though there is anguish
deep in my soul-
What if I must search for you forever?
I must not lose faith.
I must not lose hope.*¹⁹

Over 9,000 volumes are housed within the museum's Laurie and Milton Boniuk Resource Center and Library.

As Communism fell in Eastern Europe, Bosnia-Herzegovina was embroiled in a civil war with Bosnian Serbs from 1992 to 1995. An estimated 100,000 people lost their lives, including 8,000 men and boys from Srebrenica in the largest massacre in Europe since the Holocaust.





The Holocaust Museum Houston works diligently to educate students and the public about the dangers of prejudice and hatred in society, not only in the past but today. Since it opened in 1996, impassioned notes, poems, artwork, and other gifts attest to the life-changing thoughts just one visit to the museum can yield.

It includes a reference section, a rare book collection, juvenile literature, audiovisual collection, and a general collection of non-fiction and fiction. The archival collection includes items presented in the permanent exhibit as well as items from changing exhibits, manuscripts, emigration documents, photographs, and clothing. Private collectors and Holocaust survivors who donate the items make the collection available for research and display. The Oral History Project is considered one of the most important missions of the museum. The project has almost 300 oral testimonies that are stored on VHS tapes accompanied by paper transcripts. The testimonies were used to construct the *Voices* and *Voices II* films.²⁰

Educating the community remains the main goal of the museum. In the years before the museum, Holocaust survivors spoke to local groups to raise public awareness of the Holocaust and advocate tolerance. The museum came into being in an effort to institutionalize these actions. One Holocaust survivor, Celina Fein, said, “When

we cannot talk anymore, let the museum talk for us.”²¹

The museum also tries to reach out to those who are unable to visit in person. The museum developed the Curriculum Trunk program in 1998. The program originally sent trunks filled with books, media, and lesson plans to schools for free for a three-week period. The materials have since been digitized and are distributed on iPods.²²

The Holocaust Museum Houston seeks to do more than just show what happened during the Holocaust. It tells the story of the people that went through the Holocaust and remembers all of those that did not survive. It teaches us how hatred and prejudice can lead man to do heinous crimes. It also gives us hope that by remembering these stories and educating the community about these evils that we can be better people.

Victor Romero received his bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Houston in 2015.

The Holocaust Museum Houston is located at 5401 Caroline Street. Members and students with a valid ID are admitted free, non-members are \$12, active military and seniors over 65 are \$8. The museum is not recommended for children under ten years of age. Hours are Monday to Friday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. The Laurie and Milton Boniuk Resource Center and Library is open Monday to Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday noon to 5 p.m. Visit www.hmh.org.



The Danish Fishing Boat, a Symbol of Hope

By Lindsey Brann

The Danish fishing boat and railcar stand side by side on the grounds of the Holocaust Museum Houston.

The fishing boat *Hanne Frank* stands proudly next to the railcar at the Holocaust Museum Houston. One of only three such boats in American museums, it serves as an example of those used by Danish fishermen to help Danish Jews escape to Sweden.

During World War II the population of Denmark was roughly 4.5 million people, including 8,000 Jews.²³ After Germany invaded Denmark in 1939, the country signed a non-aggression pact to keep its own government and live without the strict conditions imposed on other countries.²⁴ Under the Nuremberg Laws, the majority of European Jews could not, for example, own businesses, radios, or bicycles; nor could they go to parks, cafes, swimming pools, or theaters. Countries like Austria and Germany arrested those who did not comply, but Denmark assumed that since it had made the pact with Germany that its citizens would remain safe from the Nazis' wrath.

In 1943 under pressure from Germany, Denmark's government leaders resigned, and Hitler sent word to start deportation of the country's Jews to Eastern Europe. Danish authorities "refused to cooperate," and protests arose from churches, the Danish royal family, and various organizations. The Danes "organized a partly coordinated, partly spontaneous rescue operation."²⁵

The task of transporting the Danish Jews to Sweden began in October 1943 and lasted three weeks. Over 7,200 Jews survived, along with some non-Jewish family members who risked deportation. Boats could only carry seven to ten people at a time, so this process involved many time-consuming trips and hiding the evacuees until their turn to leave arrived. When the passengers got on the boats, they stowed away in a dark hole under the deck, where the fisherman normally kept their catch.

Not every Jew escaped before the deportations began. The Nazis found some in hiding and sent them to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. With help from the Danish Red Cross, the majority of Danish-born Jews survived, but others given refuge in Denmark did not share the same fate.

World War II ended in 1945, and many Danish Jews held in Theresienstadt or evacuated to Sweden returned to their homeland. They often found neighbors had watched over their houses for them, and within a year of the war's end, most of the rightful owners had moved back into their homes.²⁶ The Danes showed quiet courage in standing up to the Nazis and treating their fellow citizens with respect. The fishermen who risked their lives saving the Jews did not ask for recognition; instead, they went about their daily routine as if nothing had happened. They saw this as simply an opportunity to help their neighbors.

Former museum director Susan Myers wanted to acquire a fishing boat for the museum to show a side of the Holocaust that tends to be forgotten—that good people stood up to the injustice of the genocide. While vacationing in Denmark, Myers located a broker in the coastal town of Gilleleje who helped her find a boat to symbolize those used in the evacuation. The boat stands 37.1 feet long, 13.9 feet wide, and 5.7 feet deep.

The fishing boat's restoration is being led by Walter Hansen, who began building wooden boats with his father-in-law. Hansen learned about the Danish fishing boat in 2011 while attending a conference; so when Carol Manley, the director of collections and exhibitions at the museum, approached him to work on it, he felt a duty to lead the restoration. He has about twenty volunteers who help, and donations given specifically for the boat go toward funding its restoration. To Hansen, "The boat represents the way that people spontaneously came to the aid of those who were in danger."²⁷ The boat tells a story of the Holocaust that is not widely known and offers a symbol of hope that people will not forget its atrocities.

Lindsey Brann received her BA in history at the University of Houston with a minor in Jewish Studies. She has been a docent at the Holocaust Museum Houston for six years and will be teaching social studies at Queen of Peace Catholic Church School in fall 2015.