

# Challenging Visitors to Move from Memory to Action at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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In September 1979, a commission established by President Jimmy Carter to consider the appropriate national memorial to the Holocaust in the U.S. issued its final report. In it, Chairman Elie Wiesel wrote that “Our central focus was memory—our own and that of the victims during a time of unprecedented evil and suffering.” He goes on to express the Commission’s aspiration to “...reach and transform as many human beings as possible. We hope to share our conviction that when war and genocide unleash hatred against any one people or peoples, all are ultimately engulfed in the fire.” True to the Commission’s vision, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was created to be a museum and a living memorial

that works to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity through study of the Holocaust and its lessons.

As the Museum has grown and evolved, so has its capacity to fulfill this idea of a living memorial. In April 2009, some sixteen years after opening to the public, the Museum opened an interactive installation called *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide*, designed to challenge visitors to move into the present and consider their own role in events today. In this article we propose to examine some key issues in the creation of this exhibition.

## A Foundation in Memory

The Museum’s permanent exhibition, *The Holocaust*, begins with an ascending elevator and the voice of an American GI stating these things “just don’t happen.” Towards the end of the final floor is a film of survivors’ testimony about de-humanization, suffering and loss, examination of faith, resistance, and the strength and will to survive. In between is a presentation of the Holocaust over three floors that intones “this happened.” The Museum’s reputation is founded on rigorous pursuit of history and a deep encounter with the evidence that bears witness to the events of the Holocaust. The exhibition asserts in unvarnished terms the veracity and complexity of this past and encourages visitors to reflect on its meaning for their own lives.

The conclusion of the permanent exhibition is a quotation by Martin Niemöller, a German pastor and early Nazi supporter who was later imprisoned for opposing Hitler’s regime. It is intended



Transition from the permanent exhibition to From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide. Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



Introductory panel bridging the past and the present. Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (image at left courtesy of Jehuda Widawski; image at right AP Photo/Jean-Marc Bouju).

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to encourage visitors to consider the individual's role and responsibility in responding to injustice:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade-unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Crowds exit the permanent exhibition and face the *Hall of Remembrance* where an eternal flame and candles flicker in honor of those who suffered and perished at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. At the end of the adjoining corridor, they see the words: “From Memory to Action”

### ***From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide***

The Museum's installation *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide* invites the annual 1.7 million visitors to learn about contemporary genocide and to reflect on their potential role in changing responses to threats of genocide. The introductory panel

displays two photographs: one from a concentration camp in Germany in 1945, in which survivors stare directly at the camera, and the other of a young man, head tilted sideways to show the deep scars across his face from a machete attack suffered during the Rwandan genocide in 1994. It explains how the events of the Holocaust compelled individuals and world leaders to devise new measures to identify, prevent, and punish mass violence against entire civilian groups including coining the term “genocide” and creating new international law.

This new space had to convey an unfinished story—responding to genocide in our lifetimes. It needed to inform and encourage visitors to explore the possibility of their involvement in this complex global problem. The exhibition team included Museum staff as well as design firms C&G Partners, Small Design Firm, and Potion Design. As the outset, we knew it was important to create a space that visually raised curiosity and engaged visitors of all ages. We also wanted to create an environment that encouraged exploration and open discussion. It would be necessary to create a dynamic installation that accommodated different learning styles and where visitors



Video testimony, text, photos, and interactive elements are included in From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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destroyed person  
by person.”  
Exhibition label

did not feel constrained by a perceived prohibition against talking or interacting with the display.

The space includes a multi-user interactive table to encourage group conversation around genocide prevention. Graphics are printed on colorful bands that wrap the perimeter of the room and contain text with color imagery which, in contrast to historical black-and-white photographs, help to bring the discussion to the present day. Video testimonies are a focal point, and an entire wall of projected graphics including a world map and a news feed is an immediate attract.

### **Maintaining Historical Complexity with a Call to Action**

The Museum did not want to depart from its commitment to presentation of historical complexities, despite a broad scope of areas to cover, the desire to engage visitors in action, and limited space. As a result, the room offers multiple perspectives that add layers of detail and nuance.

The installation consciously confronts three inherent tensions in the task of exhibiting content about genocide: between presenting a didactic lesson about the concept of genocide and telling

the stories of what happened in specific places; between the presentation of the history of any single case of genocide and the unique experiences of individuals; and between the reality of extreme violence against people in distant places and the attempt to inspire response to an often overwhelming problem from afar. These tensions are exposed, but not resolved, through three modes of organizing content, using both traditional and high-tech interactive formats. The static presentation wrapping the room’s walls serves as an organizing structure. Thematic headlines introduce visitors to major ideas about genocide. Under each heading three cases are profiled: Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1995), and the Darfur region of Sudan (2003-2005).

The heading, “There are always warning signs” illustrates that genocide is not a natural phenomenon. It becomes possible in places with a history of group-targeted violence, where leaders intentionally exacerbate inter-group tensions, most often in the context of armed conflict, and with specific preparations for violence against civilians. In a section titled “Groups are destroyed person by person,” images from the three cases detail how groups were targeted. Genocide in our

“Change requires new solutions and strong leadership. It will rely on an informed and active public.” Exhibition label

time can look very different from what visitors saw in the case of the Holocaust. This section shows roadblocks, machetes, and people gathered in what were hoped to be safe havens like churches in Rwanda. It presents still images of home videos filmed by Serbian paramilitary groups participating in massacres of men from Srebrenica. And it displays photography of violence, but also the malnutrition and illness that killed so many people from Darfur.

Under the heading, “There is more than one way to respond,” visitors are shown multiple ways to think about action including sounding the alarms, political responses, humanitarian aid, military action, and international justice. Next, they are introduced to some of the challenges societies continue to face beyond the end of killing. This element of the installation ends with the assertion that the future can be different. The Museum does not promise an easy program for changing the future, but states:

Greater attention to warning signs can prevent violence. More effective and better-coordinated responses can save lives. Rebuilding societies and aiding individuals afterwards can lead to a new future for those who have suffered so much and can act to break cycles of violence. Change requires new solutions and strong leadership. It will rely on an informed and active public.

Suspended from the ceiling in the center of the room, and functioning as the emotional fulcrum of the installation, are 15 video screens that cycle through 25 videos of eyewitnesses to these genocides.

Underneath the videos is an interactive table where visitors can learn more about each eyewitness. Among the eyewitness stories presented are those of survivors and one perpetrator, in addition to other important voices: human rights advocates, prosecutors, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, and politicians. The story of genocide that the Museum wanted to tell is one of agency. Therefore, the videos



*Writing pledges to act against genocide. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

profile the choices people make to commit genocide and the actions of targeted groups to try to avoid destruction, as well as stories of the wider international community documenting the facts, working to end conflicts, tending to those in need, and creating new forums for response.



*Growing collection of written pledges. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

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### **Empowering the Visitor**

It was crucial that the installation do more than present our visitors with an intractable problem. Visitors needed to be empowered to think critically about the phenomenon of genocide and to be inspired by stories of individuals who took action. However, one final challenge still remained: to shift visitors' perspective about their own role in the world today. To address this challenge, the room includes a third component, what we call the "pledge wall." It spans an entire wall of the room and becomes a surface for projecting messages of alert about today's violence and pledges to take action by the Museum's visitors.

Each visitor is invited to take a card that poses the question: what will you do to help meet the challenge of genocide today?" The question provokes a first-person response that almost always begins, "I will..." Each visitor's hand-written pledge is then projected onto the wall, making it visible to subsequent visitors. Thereby, the notion of taking action becomes less formidable and encourages people to write a pledge that is within their capacity to achieve. For instance, visitors have written: "I will educate myself so I will not be able to plead ignorance"; "The Holocaust Museum opened my eyes. I will help people." and "I will teach my students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English about genocide."

Visitors are invited to deposit the paper pledge into a fourteen-foot long glass vitrine that is lit from within. The accumulation of pledges makes a visual statement and encourages the participation of individuals who together form a community of conscience.

### **The Impact of the Exhibition**

In two years, over 116,000 pledges have been made. In the context of this installation, over the past ten months alone more than 4,000 individuals have asked to receive e-mail updates and information about contemporary genocide, thereby connecting the on-site visitor with the Museum's resources and programs on genocide prevention. Another indicator of impact is that visitorship to the space increased from an average of 10% to 30% of the Museum's total annual attendance.

The Museum does not expect visitors to promise to create a complex program that will alter their lives and transform threats today. It hopes they leave with a new or heightened awareness of contemporary genocide and an understanding that the history of the Holocaust and the reality of our world today demand that they see themselves as agents with potential to effect change. We want the exhibition to plant a seed of greater, and hopefully sustained, civic engagement.

The introductory panel of this installation contains a quotation from Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, Elie Wiesel: "When we say 'never again,' what do we mean?" *From Memory to Action* challenges visitors to determine the future for this oft-used phrase—to make it meaningful through their actions. ✨