Holocaust Museums as Civic Spaces: Yad Vashem and Alternative Museums in Israel

Stephanie Shosh Rotem

The first National museum, of any type, to be built in Israel was Yad Vashem, a Holocaust museum founded in 1953 just 5 years after the declaration of Israel as an Independent state. At that time, the Jewish population of Israel numbered 716,000 and was comprised of people that immigrated before World War II others that fled to it, straight from the ashes in which 6 million European Jews were murdered. They arrived from dozens of countries, cultures, and languages. Israel was a meeting of people from East European countries, mainly Poland, Russia, and Romania; Western Europe mainly Germany, France, and Great Britain; the United States, South America; the Middle East - Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Persia; and Africa - Egypt, Morocco and Tunis. They spoke different languages, ate different foods, dressed in modern and traditional clothes, and even practiced their Jewish religious rituals in different manner.

The State's main mission in these formative years was to form a cohesive society that would share common ideals and values. Many steps were taken towards achieving this goal, including the creation of a museum to narrate a shared history of undisputed significance. Thus, the National memorial, respected and revered by all sectors of the newly emerging society, became a civic space of great importance.

In the past decades, however, alternative Holocaust museums have sprung up in diverse locations and communities in Israel, contesting the National museum. In place of Yad Vashem's unifying story, these museums display a particular account of the events, represented in a mode that adheres to their communities' traditions and manner. In this paper I will first present the historical account of the establishment of Yad Vashem and its role in assimilating a collective identity, and then, demonstrate the emergence of alternative museums by presenting two small museums that suggest narratives that contest and subvert the cohesiveness of the national stance.

Although Yad Vashem is a national institution it began as the personal vision of political activist Mordechai Shenhavi. According to his account of the events, he first heard of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe in the summer of 1942 and immediately had a dream in which "millions of Jews were walking towards Zion carrying tombstones on their backs… each one of them removed the stone and placed it in order or not, and the monument of their lives was thus founded." He reacted to his dream by writing a detailed plan for a commemorative site which he presented to the Jewish National Fund. (Remember that before 1948 Palestine was ruled by the British; therefore, there were no Jewish governing institutions. The Jewish National Fund was but one of many organizations

active in Palestine. Shenhavi was an active member of this organization, which was the reason that he presented his plan there).

The plan he proposed was monumental by any standard. The institution was to be situated within a 500,000 square meter “Garden of the People”, surrounded by what he described as “pavilions of Jewish heroism throughout the ages”, a cemetery, a “symbolic cemetery”, a sanitarium, a hotel, a central archive that would also include an archive of photographs, sport facilities, a convention hall, offices, and dormitories for “the orphans of Israel and victims of the war.”

The Jewish Fund did not accept the grandiose plan but did not completely reject it either. Undecided, deliberations were put on hold. Two years later, after learning that competing projects by the Hebrew University and the Jewish Agency were being discussed, talks were resumed. In preparation for the committee’s renewed activity, Shenhavi rewrote his proposal and named it for the first time – “Yad Vashem”, which means in Hebrew “a place and a name” and is quoted from the Book of Isaiah: “Even unto them will I give in my house and within my walls a place and a name better than that of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off". The project, however, was still unapproved when Israel’s War of Independence broke out in 1947.

The committee did not reconvene until March 1953, after enactment of the “Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Law - Yad Vashem”. Under this law, a nationally funded authority would create a memorial of Holocaust commemoration to collect, investigate, and publish testimonies, cooperate with other commemorative institutions and represent Israel at international memorial ventures and ceremonies commemorating the victims of the Nazi regime. Yad Vashem, the memorial campus and museum, were thus conceived as a civic institution, which meshes the historical events of the Holocaust with the creation of the State of Israel and writes a meta-narrative of “ashes to life”.

The site chosen for the museum is in Jerusalem, adjacent to Mt. Herzl, the official military cemetery and the burial site of the nation’s leaders, including Theodor Herzl, “Prophet” of the modern State. The land was officially allocated to Yad Vashem in July 1954 and appropriately named Mt. Remembrance. The proximity of the memorial to Mt. Herzl is symbolic of the conceptual tie explicitly drawn between the destruction of Jewish Diaspora and resurrection in the form of the State of Israel. In later years a walking path was paved between the two sites, further emphasizing this connection.

Since its inception Yad Vashem has become the supreme Israeli authority on Holocaust commemoration. All the State ceremonies take place there and all Israeli schoolchildren are brought to Yad Vashem on field trips as part of the State’s educational curriculum. As part of the diplomatic

protocol, all official visits to the State of Israel include a tour of Yad Vashem and a ceremonial wreath-laying in its memorial hall.

As the State solidified and became more tenable, collective identity began to be questioned; hidden voices surfaced and individual experiences became more valued. In this spirit, a new ideological discourse emerged in the 1980s, in both academic and public spheres, which began to criticize the manipulative use of the Holocaust by the State to strengthen Zionist ideology. As a result, Yad Vashem's hegemony as an institution of civic indoctrination began to disintegrate and its sequential narrative re-examined: whose story is narrated – who's is overlooked? What are the lessons to be learned? Do they necessarily lead to the advent of the State or are there other, more universal lessons to be learned from the historical events? These and other questions began to surface and led to the inception of grass-root museums created to counter the State's meta-narrative.

I will now present two of these museums:

The first is located within the "Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center", founded primarily to expose the ignored tragedy of Thessaloniki Jewry. For many years, the history of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, Greece was not included in the collective memory of the Holocaust. To this day, its story is not a part of the permanent exhibition at the Yad Vashem, the National museum but is displayed separately, outside the museum halls, in the research institute's corridor.

The Jewish community of Thessaloniki began to form in the 2nd cen. BC, and on the eve of WWII counted over 50,000 – more than a third of the city's general population; it was the largest Jewish community in Greece and one of the most prominent in the Balkan. The Thessaloniki Jews spoke Ladino, a language unique to the Jewish descendants of Spain, made their living from banking, commerce, and industry, mainly weaving and textile dying.

The Nazis invaded Thessaloniki in 1941 and cast their racial laws on the city's inhabitants in 1943. Between March and August of that year, 19 transports left the city, exiling 48,533 Jews to Auschwitz Concentration Camp where most were murdered in gas chambers. At the end of the war only 2000 of Thessaloniki's 50,000 Jews survived. Few returned to the city. Approximately 1000 survivors immigrated to Israel, and the others to the United States, Canada, Australia, and South America.

The small community that immigrated to Israel was, as mentioned before, but one of many ethnic groups who found refuge in the newly founded state. Thessaloniki Jews settled in cities and villages across the country, learned to speak Hebrew, acquired job skills, and adjusted to their new lives. Like most immigrating communities, a larger emphasis was put on assimilating into their new surroundings than maintaining their unique culture, language and traditions. Thus, while the Holocaust, as I explained before, was inscribed as a key event in the construction of Israeli identity and citizenship, the particular story of the Thessaloniki tragedy was not recognized. The

metanarrative was built upon the events and experiences of the hegemonic group - East European Jews, mainly of Polish, Romanian, and Russian descent, excluding the stories of lesser known communities, such as that of Thessaloniki.

A strong desire to bring their story to general awareness began to seethe in the late 1980s amongst the small community of Thessaloniki's descendants. In addition to the general shift of discourse mentioned before, this surge may also be attributed to a music album published at that time by Israeli singer Yehuda Poliker, himself the son of Thessaloniki survivors. The album, named "Dust and Ashes", sings not only of the community's tragic tale but also of its sad longing and yearning to the beloved hometown of the past.

Eventually, this rising need was translated into the creation of an exhibition at The Ghetto Fighters' House, the second largest Holocaust museum in Israel. Curated by Yoel Marcel, a scholar of Greek Jewry, the exhibition "Thessaloniki - A Sephardic Metropolis" opened to the public in 1993.

The exhibition, which was funded by the community members who were also involved in developing its contents, was on display until 2010, when the museum underwent major renovations. The exhibition panels were then removed, stored in a 12 meter long container, and transferred to the Naval Academy in Acre - but not put on display. Concurrently, renewed interest in commemorating Thessaloniki Jewish history was also stirred amongst the residents of the Leon Recanati home for the aged.

This institution, which was founded in 1956 in Petah Tikva, a satellite city of Tel Aviv, houses approximately 200 descendants of Greek, Turkish, Egyptian, and Bulgarian origins, whose primary language is Ladino. It was initiated by Leon Recanati, an affluent banker and prominent member of the Thessaloniki community in Israel as a philanthropic act to provide the community's elders with a retirement home that they would be comfortable in – a home that speaks their mother tongue, serves familiar food and conforms to their traditions.

The residents of the home decided to create a small exhibition based on their memories and experiences. At first they a collected an eclectic array of artifacts: a documents, photographs, costumes, and even kitchen utensils; however, as their exhibition began to take shape they recognized the need to add historical and pedagogical content. They located the Ghetto Fighter's House stranded exhibition panels and persuaded the museum to donate them to their passionate, however non-professional, project. The panels were then transported to the home and are now the core of the small museum.

The museum is divided into three sections: the history of Thessaloniki Jewry from the first century BC until the invasion of the Nazis in 1941; the traditions and lifestyle of the Thessaloniki Jews; and in a separate room the Holocaust and its commemoration. Two additional rooms were added to the

small museum to form the “Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center”: a research library and archive, and an informal lounge that contains books and records for public use run by Mathilda Cohen-Serano, an author and storyteller, whose spirit and energy are inherent to the site.

True to the spirit of a community museum, the “Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center” has become an active meeting point and educational site for schoolchildren, soldiers, adults and senior citizens. It offers activities tailored to divergent groups: lectures and informal encounters with survivors residing in the home for the mature visitors; arts and crafts and storytelling for the children. The center also hosts multi-generational Friday night dinners in the spirit of Thessaloniki Jewish tradition, and has recently began to offer free traditional Bar Mitzvah ceremonies to disadvantaged children.

Thus, the “Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center” and the museum that is at its core suggest an alternative setting to Yad Vashem, the National museum. Rather than writing a cohesive meta-narrative, which accentuates the common experiences of the multifarious Israeli society, it narrates the particular, overlooked story of one of its factions. Created by a group of non-professional but passionate elderlies, rather than an army of professionals – historians, curators, and designers - this museum is intimate and personal, and therefore welcoming rather than daunting.

Another example of an alternative Holocaust museum is “The House of Being", which was established in 1999 by Tsipi Kichler, a retired schoolteacher and daughter of Holocaust survivors. It is a place like no other: not really a museum, clubhouse, or memorial site – it is all the above combined. Assembled in a former two bedroom, forty-year-old private home, the House of Being, like all Holocaust museums, includes an exhibition and library, but also scattered sofas and armchairs for social encounters, a television and DVD, a piano, and an active kitchenette to prepare coffee and light meals. Among the various activities offered at the center are workshops for memoir writing, support groups, informal encounters between visitors and survivors, choir practice, a puppet theatre, and drama therapy.

The center is located in a residential neighborhood of Holon, a city of 180,000 inhabitants adjacent to Tel Aviv, and is entered through a park surrounded by apartment buildings. Visitors first encounter two statues and a memorial wall planted in the garden that surrounds the center. A tall pole rises from the wall carrying a sign that says "To Be" – referencing the site's raison d'être: a place where Kichler explains, survivors and their families can be "loved, respected and free just to be." According to Kichler, the House of Being was founded to be what she describes as "a new and different kind of Holocaust pedagogic center"; a place that doesn't "give answers" but is a receptacle for questions. "You can't come here to learn", she claims, "you come here to feel!" Her intent was to create a place where the “lessons of the Holocaust” could be deciphered, without allowing hatred

and depression to overcome hope and optimism for the future. Holocaust survivors are encouraged to become members and consequently are presented with a "certificate of love" signed by the mayor of Holon that marks their courageous return to life. Their children, the second-generation survivors, are also expected to become involved and eventually, after the passing away of the aging, continue the center's work and mission. Apart from Kichler who is employed by the city, the House of Being is run by volunteers – first, second, and now also third generation survivors. The survivors lecture and guide visitors, their children run workshops and educational activities, and their grandchildren have constructed the museum's website and are in charge of its representation in the social media.

These two museums are both different and similar. Both were conceived to challenge the existing Israeli metanarrative of the Holocaust set by the State and inscribed in its national museum – however, from different points of contention. While the "Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center" protests the exclusion of a particular community from Israeli collective memory, the House of Being reprimands the ritualistic and stately form that Holocaust commemoration has assumed. Both museums were created and are now maintained by first and second generation Holocaust survivors, with minimal funding from governmental or municipal organizations. The many volunteers running these museums are completely invested and involved, which raises serious questions of their futures: who will continue their work as they age and pass away? It is a popular assumption in regard to Holocaust commemoration that the memories of survivors must be recorded and conserved by institutions such as museums. Will these subversive museums and the contested memories they treasure be revered by subsequent generations or will they be once again buried under the weight and burden of collective memory and identity?

Museums are considered to be important civic spaces: they construct citizenship by presenting a consolidating narrative to shape collective memory and identity. National museums, such as Yad Vashem, indoctrinate the states' history, traditions, values and ideology. Citizenship in the 21st century, however, cannot be understood anymore in one form or structure. Civil society as we live it today is shaped by a multitude of voices, values and beliefs. Therefore, I believe, that although the two grass root museums I presented may seem subversive to the national stance and in opposition to Yad Vashem's doctrine, they are in fact complimentary to it. Citizens in the 21st century, are both part of the "big story" – striving to belong and connect to the nations' history and values – but also appertain to their own particular community. These museums do not necessarily challenge Yad Vashem's prominent position but rather provide space for more, less dominant, voices to be heard.