

## CONDENSED

### CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND TO "DARK TOURISM"

Elsewhere, Foley and Lennon (1995, 1996, 1997) have argued that there has been a significant growth in tourism associated with sites of death, disaster, and depravity - a concept these authors have titled "dark tourism." Indeed, the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in Paris has served to reinforce the power of this phenomenon both at Kensington Palace (her U.K. residence), the site of the accident (in Paris), and at gathering points across the world. However, as Seaton (1996) notes, visits to death sites have been an integral part of tourism consumption long before the 20th century. However, the development of media and communications-driven tourism motivations are a feature of the late 20th century, essentially because these technologies deliver global events into situations that make them appear to be local (i.e., via television and other news media). These images are then reproduced and reinforced via other media forms (e.g., films and novels).

### THE U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has received visitation levels in excess of 2 million per annum since its opening in April 1993. It was built with \$168 million in private funds and is the first major cultural institution to open in Washington in the past 10 years. Notwithstanding the gravity of its subject matter, neither the site of the museum (in downtown Washington) nor many of the displays (some of which are replicas) have an authentic connection with the Jewish Holocaust. Moreover, a feature of the experience of the museum for the user is the acceptance of the identity of a Jewish citizen of Hitler's Germany. This identity is presented on a card gained upon entry that can be updated at various stages in the visitor's progress through the museum - intimating whether the visitor has been arrested, imprisoned, transported to a concentration camp, gassed, and so forth. Some commentators have drawn attention to the irony of discarded identities in litter bins at exit points and on the street outside the museum. Nevertheless, the museum in total presents a powerful experience, which its market research indicates evokes a strong and largely favorable response from visitors (Eskenazi 1994b). Memory and remembrance are central to this type of tourism. As Young (1993) notes,

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum that opened in 1993 has not been short of controversy, and opinion was initially very divided on its purpose, role, and the nature of the message. The question, Why does the United States (a country that is 97% non-Jewish) need such a museum? Because it was not the site of mass execution (Poland), the homeland of the perpetrators (Germany), or possessed a significant relationship to the victims (Israel). It has been argued that the original proposal for this museum under then President Jimmy Carter was programmed to appease Jewish supporters angered by the sale of F-15 fighters to Saudi Arabia (for further discussion about the political background to the decision to develop this museum, see Miller 1990). Its origins then were in the Carter administration, wherein the vague idea of a memorial to the Holocaust was originally proposed. Following this, a presidential commission on the Holocaust was created incorporating survivors, scholars, researchers, and others. Following visits to various infamous European sites and concentration camps, a report was produced in September 1979. The report proposed a living memorial museum that would tell the story of the Holocaust. The museum was created from an act of Congress, unanimously approved in 1980, which created a Holocaust Memorial Council of 55, appointed by the president with five members of the House of Representatives and five members of the U.S. Senate as part of this governing body. The federal government agreed to give 1.9 acres of prime land in the capital for the purposes of the project, on condition that all building and equipment costs were funded by private donation. Daily operational costs are funded by the federal government (approximately \$21.2 million in 1993) to ensure free access in line with other Washington museums. The private funding of the development was achieved via the highly successful fund-raising program

"A Campaign to Remember" (for further discussion, see Moore 1993). Targeted direct mail packages specifically designed for certain audiences were extensively used. Certain materials were sent to people whose names appeared as predominantly Jewish on mailing lists, whereas a different designed package was used for general mailing, the latter stressing the key role of the United States in the Second World War and focusing on the U.S. liberation of Dachau. Just 2 years from commencement, \$10.5 million had been raised by direct mail. Sophisticated narrative focusing on links through religion, culture, and involvement were used in this state-of-the-art campaign. However, such fundraising activity came in for criticism from the Washington Post in 1992, which compared the process of screening surnames with that used by the Nazis to identify Jews.

## MEDIA AND INTERPRETATION - THE WASHINGTON EXPERIENCE

The museum's permanent exhibition, which takes up three floors, contains 5,000 artifacts, including photographs, uniforms, letters, a Polish rail car used to take people to the death camps, and a Danish fishing boat used to transport Jews to safety in Sweden. Audiovisual theaters are scattered throughout the exhibition. Near the exit, one theater shows excerpts from more than 200 interviews with witnesses to the Holocaust. Video monitors that display particularly graphic or disturbing material are located behind privacy walls to put them out of sight of children and give visitors a way to avoid viewing them.

The concern with replication and simulation is, of course, central to the treatment and analysis of dark tourism. The concern some may have with the pastiche that such a museum may offer is worthy of further consideration. Does re-creation of objects, use of interpretative techniques, and experimentation with identity adoption (via the ID card) displace real history behind a facade of education and historical narrative? Not all of the objects are created; authentic cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto are used as well as objects of everyday life - sewing machines, prams, bicycles. In addition, a range of other artifacts, including inmates' hair, shoes, and other remnants from Auschwitz-Birkenau, are on display. Central to the interpretation is the use of newsreels, radio broadcasts, and papers. The reality of the 1930s and 1940s is re-created in the way U.S. citizens were actually informed of the rise of Nazi Germany and the progress of the war. Media once again emerges as central to understanding the interpretation of the events.

The primary purpose of the museum has been defined by the director as educational; to make visitors understand how attempts to annihilate an entire people came to be and how this was executed (Weinberg 1993). It is literally a reminder of the dark side of human nature (Eskenazi 1994a). Indeed the level of interest has been considerable. In the first year of its operation (April 1993-April 1994) the museum had over 2 million visitors and 36,000 requests for teaching materials.

[To interest the American visitor] memory has been made relative to the United States, yet the Jewish Holocaust was a uniquely European event. In some commentators' views, to compare this with the United States serves only to distort perception by presenting the Holocaust as some form of therapeutic mass cultural experience (cf. Gourevitch 1993). The actions of the museum's interpretative staff were both deliberate and intentional as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's director of public information commented,

Well, we have to tell the whole story, but it's pretty Americanized in that it opens with an American at liberation, liberating one of the camps, it was the Soviets that did that, but we needed to start with that connection. . . . We tried to lay out the history in a straightforward manner, telling the U.S. role, both the positive and the negative, and we end up in the end with the liberation and the survivors coming to our country. (Eskenazi 1994a, p. 13)

However, to commence the interpretation via the role of the U.S. forces in the liberation of Dachau immediately identifies the U.S. participants as heroes. This, coupled with the attempt to individualize the experience through the use of the ID admission card, can blur the understanding of the museum visitor. The danger here is that interpretation, since it confuses history and uses narrative techniques to maintain interest, will remove the real that much farther from the simulation - a distance that Levi (1987) referred to as a gap in reality: "the gap that

exists and grows wider every year between things as they were 'down there' and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films, and myths" (p. 58).

This museum succeeds in providing an extensive historical narrative of the Holocaust and offers a cogent memorial to its victims. Indeed, the interpretation is clearly superior to the ideologically biased and relatively primitive work found at many of the real sites in Poland, for example. Yet, museums are obliged to win and reward the attention of the visitor. Museums are an entertainment form as well as an educative one. If the unimaginable, grotesque, and violent are central to American society's postemotional state, a state in which deep identification with the suffering and pain of others beyond the immediate family circle is difficult, then this museum fulfills this emotional deficit amply (Mestrovic 1996).

## CONCLUSION - CONTROVERSY AND INTENTION

The imagery of dark tourism and the interpretation relating to the Holocaust can exert considerable interest. The subject matter is darkly fascinating and seductive (Steiner 1971). Furthermore, the educative mission is far from proven. Simply put: "Is exposure to barbarism an antidote to that very barbarism?" As Gourevich (1993) concluded,

One way history is doomed to repetition at the Holocaust museum is that day in and day out, year after year, the videos of the Einsatzgruppen murders will play over and over. There, just off the National Mall in Washington, the victims of Nazism will be on view for the American public, stripped, herded into ditches, shot, buried, and then the tape will repeat and they will be herded into the ditches again, shot again, buried again. I cannot comprehend how anyone can enthusiastically present this constant cycle of slaughter. (P. 62)

This institution succeeds because it combines memorial with museum and has been commissioned by an act of government. Rarely does any state commemorate its own crimes; such commemoration is primarily enacted by former victims, survivors or relatives. In the case of the monument to the civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama, this was commissioned by the Southern Poverty Law Center (the chronicle/prosecution of civil rights cases) and later endorsed by the state. Thus, the government was able to provide the distance between itself and past crimes. As Young (1993) questions,

Only rarely does a nation call upon itself to remember the victims of crimes it has perpetrated. Where are the national monuments to the genocide of American Indians, to the millions of Africans enslaved and murdered, to the Russian Kulaks and peasants starved to death by the millions? They barely exist. (P. 21)

The fate of the Native Americans and the plight of African Americans will also be commemorated on this famous mall of Galleries and Museums in Washington, D.C. But the critique offered that the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum should cover other acts of genocide is both simplistic and unrealistic. To create (as was proposed during the development period) a hall of genocide would have been macabre and confusing. To develop a museum like this without controversy would have been self-defeating. Noncontroversial memorials themselves become invisible very quickly. As Musil commented,

There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument . . . they are no doubt erected to be seen - indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off. (Quoted in Wieseltier 1993, p. 19)

The enormity of the systematic destruction of the Jewish people is beyond comprehension, interpretation, and explanation. Language, images, and art are inadequate in this area and the scope of the subject will inevitably remain difficult to comprehend. As Wiesel (1968) poignantly asked, "How is one to speak of it? How is one not to speak of it?" (p. 36).