

Local Holocaust Museums Grow Amid Worries About Future

'The Generation That Gives Money Is Moving On,' Said One Expert

By Gal Beckerman

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The numbers speak for themselves: There are now 16 Holocaust museums in the United States, from Albuquerque, N.M., to Houston, to Richmond, Va. And these are just the biggest of nearly 150 Holocaust centers all over the country.

The proliferation of museums detailing the story of what happened to European Jewry during World War II has been largely a phenomenon of the 1990s, part of the general increase in Holocaust awareness in the culture at large. But it has by no means slowed: The most recent museum, in Skokie, Ill., opened last spring, while construction continues on a second Los Angeles museum, to open in the summer of 2010.

With a substantial, federally-backed national museum in Washington, critics are increasingly wondering about the need for so many local museums. Even more important, the question of whether these institutions will be able to financially sustain themselves into the future — given the heavy costs of maintaining collections, and the dying off of the Holocaust survivors who founded them — is of great concern to museum directors.

“We just had a board meeting in December in New York City, and we all talked about the dwindling of funds,” said Susan Myers, executive director of the Holocaust Museum Houston and vice president of the Association of Holocaust Organizations, referring to her fellow museum directors. “We’re all competing for the same money. It’s an everyday conversation we’re having.”

Those who defend the existence of the regional museums do so on the grounds that they serve populations that cannot visit the nation’s capital.

William Shulman is president of the association, which was founded in 1985 with 25 members and now has 282 affiliated Holocaust centers worldwide, the majority of which are in the United States. He denied that there are any serious, long-term financial concerns for these institutions, and emphasized instead that the museums are playing a critical role in Holocaust and genocide education.

“The rationale for having them is because most people don’t get to Washington,” Shulman said.

Even Sara Bloomfield, director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — the institution that, by most accounts, would have to bear the burden in the future of caring for the collections of any museums that can no longer support themselves — agrees that these local museums are important.

“The national museum is becoming so national and global in our work that we now are depending on these smaller, local organizations to be on the ground everyday in their communities,” Bloomfield said, “because we can’t be in all 50 states at once.”

The concerns about these institutions fall into two broad categories. First is the worry that heavy investment in Holocaust museums and monuments is taking away funds from other more critical needs in the community.

“There is a very profound question of how much of our limited resources we are going to put into that as opposed to other things,” said Jonathan Tobin, executive editor of Commentary magazine. “This is a time when Jewish education is going begging, when Jewish schools are under siege financially, as well as having the need to maintain basic social services for the elderly and the poor. These things have to be taken into consideration. It begs the question of how many of these institutions do we need in this country.”

But the even greater worry about these local institutions — shared by those who run them — is how to keep them financially viable.

Unlike the national museum in Washington, which, according to Bloomfield, is almost halfway toward its goal of raising a \$400 million endowment, the majority of the regional museums were started by survivors, with the goal of keeping alive the memory of the Holocaust in their communities. The generation that strongly supported them is beginning to die out. Only the larger of these museums have endowments at all, and then relatively small ones.

In Richmond, the Virginia Holocaust Museum was started in 1997 by Jay Ipson, who was born in Lithuania and was still a young boy when he arrived in the United States as a survivor. The museum was housed first in five small rooms at a local synagogue, and mostly told the story of Ipson’s family. In 2000, the State of Virginia donated a dilapidated 120,000 square-foot tobacco warehouse as a new site. Ipson also managed to get the backing of Marcus Weinstein, a real estate mogul and local Jewish philanthropist.

According to Ipson, who calls Weinstein his “angel,” the philanthropist has underwritten the transformation of the massive warehouse into a sprawling museum that opened in 2003. It has no endowment, and Ipson’s hope is that Weinstein’s promise of supporting the museum in perpetuity holds true.

“I’ve been told — I haven’t seen the paperwork — that he left in his will that we should continue to get those funds at a minimum,” Ipson said.

Weinstein said he would support the museum as long as there’s funding. “I can’t say what will happen in a hundred years,” he said. As for his will, he declined to comment.

Michael Berenbaum, a Holocaust scholar who is the director of the Sigi Ziering Institute at American Jewish University, is not opposed to the proliferation of these local Holocaust initiatives and has even acted as a consultant for many of them.

But he, too, has concerns about the future. “The generation that would give huge money to create that is moving on,” Berenbaum said. “The survivor who was 18 when he survived is now 82. The survivor who was 30 is now 94. That generation is unfortunately going the way of all flesh, and therefore the question for every institution is, how do you create for the future. Endowments in particular used to look like the safest bet, but these past years have shown us that they are not such a secure choice anymore, which is why the presidents of museum boards are pulling their hair out of their heads.”

For many Holocaust museum directors across the country, the solution has been to look outside the Jewish community for support.

Myers said that 50% of her donors in Houston are non-Jews. She has also reached out to such corporate sponsors as AT&T and Continental Airlines. The shift in focus away from a Jewish audience and donor base has also affected the content of the museum, which is evidenced, Myers pointed out, in its two current exhibits: one about John Paul II’s role in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation, and the other about Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust.

And still, the building of new museums continues. The latest is in Los Angeles. In a city that already has a

Holocaust institution in the Museum of Tolerance, a new 30,000 square-foot building is being constructed for an older institution, the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, now housed on the ground floor of the ORT building, on Wilshire Boulevard.

Mark Rothman, executive director, was unapologetic about the addition of yet another museum to the Holocaust landscape. The Museum of Tolerance, he said, was more generally focused on human rights — “It’s in the name,” he said — while his museum more narrowly tells the story of the Jewish experience of World War II.

Rothman sees hypocrisy in those who criticize the building of Holocaust museums while using the Holocaust to raise funds for other community needs, including for the local federation. “As soon as they can stop using the Holocaust in some way to raise money, I think that at that point it’s valid to say maybe it’s not reasonable to spend community resources on museums,” he said.

With a projected endowment of \$2 million to \$3 million — not yet raised — he, too, sees problems that his institution might face in the future. But, he added, they are no different from the challenges that will confront all institutions of Jewish life.

“In 15 years, I think the questions being raised about Holocaust institutions are also going to need to be answered by every Jewish federation in the country,” Rothman said. “In general, your profile remains older people who are not going to be with us at some very near point in the future. That’s the profile of our donors, and that’s the profile of the donors for every Jewish organization in Los Angeles.”

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