

Why does the exhibition at the historical museum of Yad Vashem opened with an exhibit describing the massacre of the prisoners at Klooga camp?

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Yad Vashem is the central institute in Israel today for commemoration, research and education about every aspect of the Holocaust. The meaning of the name 'Yad Vashem' comes from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible; in Hebrew, the word 'Yad' means: a hand but is synonymous with the word 'Memorial' and 'Shem' means: name, so the actual meaning is: to remember by the name.

The question of which exhibit should be used to open the museum is a question whose answer was not easy to find for the curators and historians who were involved in the planning of the exhibition. The first display that the visitor sees in an exhibition may be compared to an introduction to an article - which is a summary of the meaning of the whole article. Thus, in a historic exhibition the first display must give the visitor a significant view of the whole exhibition.

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If so, why has the terrible example of the massacre of the Jewish prisoners at the Klooga camp in September 1944 been chosen as the starting point for the beginning of the exhibition of the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, an exhibition that opened to the public in 2005?

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This question becomes clearer when the following points are taken into account:

The idea behind the exhibition of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem Museum is chronological. It begins with the lives of the Jews before the war and proceeds through the 1930s in Germany and the rise of the Nazi regime. This is followed by the outbreak of war, the deportations and murder under Nazi occupation, until liberation, ending with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Placing the murder at Klooga as a subject between the Jewish world before the war and the rise of the Nazi regime, clashes with the chronological concept. It presents the visitor with an action that happened towards the end of the war - before the visitor has even begun to understand what the Holocaust was and what he is about to see in the museum.

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Several iconic expressions in Holocaust history have come to symbolize atrocities and human evil. These include the 'Kristallnacht pogrom', "Treblinka Death Camp" and of course, "Auschwitz Death Camp". These terms have become symbols of the Holocaust identified by many people, certainly in Israel. It is probable that 99% of the visitors to Yad Vashem have never heard of the massacre at Klooga before their visit. Compared to the enormous sea of atrocities during the Holocaust, it would appear to be a marginal event - so why take this example as the starting point?

It took only one day for this massacre to take place, a massacre in which 2,500 people were murdered. This is in contrast to Auschwitz-Birkenau where over one million Jews were murdered in an extermination camp that was in operation for three years.

Most of the murdered Jews at Klooga were Jews who had been deported to Estonia from the Vilna Ghetto, whereas Auschwitz-Birkenau Jews from all over occupied Europe were murdered. So the action at Klooga

does not necessarily seem to be a symbol of the mass murder of Europe's Jewish population.

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If we try to understand what was special about this massacre, a number of main points arise:

- 1) It was the first meeting of the liberating Red Army soldiers who were shocked and appalled by the awful sight of the murder of innocent civilians.

Because the Germans had not had enough time to cover up their murderous acts as they had done in other camps, this was the first time that the liberators were exposed to the Nazi cruelty in such a brutal way.

- 2) The way that this massacre was carried out is clear from the photographs. Detailed documentation like this is almost unheard of.

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- 3)

The fact that the bodies were not burned completely as intended, together with the fact that the prisoners had their last personal possessions in their pockets, created a unique situation in which the corpses were not anonymous .

It was possible to identify them from their photographs and their documents. These documents were their most important possessions that they succeeded in keeping until the very end, even after three years of warfare. In this way we could learn much of the essence of the personalities of each and every one of them. Because of what they managed to keep reflect their identity.

So to summarize what is unique about the case here is that in most of the camps, not only were the people themselves murdered but all traces of their existence disappeared. While Klooga is one of the only sites where there is a full documentation of the people at the time of their death.

In order to understand why these points resonated with the curators of the new museum at Yad Vashem during the planning stage in the 1990s, it is helpful to know a little about the history of Yad Vashem and of the conceptual development that took place over time.

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The idea of establishing a site for commemorating what happened to European Jewry was understood even before the State of Israel was established and remarkably, even before the scale of the extermination was fully known at the end of the war.

Documentation of the events during the Holocaust began within the ghettos and after the liberation of Jews from the camps it continued. In the DP camps where the bulk of survivors lived after the war, it continued actively and deepened in scope. Yad Vashem, as the national institute for commemoration of the Holocaust in the State of Israel was established in 1953 and has undergone several cycles and structures. The actual building of Yad Vashem began in 1954 on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem.

Yad Vashem's character has developed and crystallized over the years. On the one hand, it is an active site of remembrance and at the same time it has become an institution for research and documentation of the Holocaust. It is important to keep in mind that the perception of the Holocaust in Israeli society has changed over the years and this is reflected in the development of Yad Vashem.

In the initial stages, Yad Vashem did not have a separate building for the museum, rather - exhibits and exhibitions were dispersed throughout the campus. Several of these stressed the bravery of the helpless Jews who faced the Nazi extermination machine.

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In 1973 the first museum was opened with an exhibition in keeping with museum standards of the time, portraying the history of the Holocaust. The display presented a clear route through the length of the museum and exited to other sites on the Yad Vashem campus.

The museum's basic premise at the time was to present a chronological historical depiction of the Holocaust. This was done primarily with photographs, many of which were unfamiliar at the time to the Israeli public. They showed of the deportations, the brutality and the killings

In accordance with museum perceptions of the time, there was no place for personal artifacts and the exhibition focused on the appalling collective experience suffered by the Jewish people as a whole. From the point of view of Yad Vashem's collection policy, for the first 30 or 40 years, the focus was on photographs and documents.

Then, in the twenty years that passed between the opening of the first museum to the beginning of the planning of the new museum in the early 1990s, Israeli society and Yad Vashem as an institution, has undergone many changes. The most significant of these changes is the highlighting of the individual experience within the collective narrative and the perpetuating of the memory of the victims.

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Recorded survivor testimony has become an important source in Holocaust research. Education and teaching departments search out the survivors' personal stories and the museum's curators are well aware of the power of personal possessions kept by the survivors to tell the story of their fate. So from now on every artifacts that was added to Yad Vashem museum became a "gate" to tell also the individual story.

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Even personal every day items became significant because of the events of the war. For example, the story of Gitel Londner, a girl who was supposed to join her parents in a work camp, but who never arrived. She was deported and murdered. Her parents, who survived, preserved one of her sweaters as a final memento and then donated it to the collection at Yad Vashem.

The museum's collection of personal artifacts and drawings which depict Holocaust experiences expanded during this period.

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So, at the planning stage of the history museum that was carried out at the end of the twentieth century it was clear that the exhibition in the new museum would move along two parallel paths: one would follow the chronological events and the other would emphasize the personal stories of individuals and of families during this period. [Slide #11a](#)

If we return to the question of the curators and historians - how to give the visitor an understanding of the museum at one glance - What happened at Klooga is a form of micro-history of the Yad Vashem Museum's concept that moves between the telling of the big historical picture to the telling of the individual and personal story.

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The visitor who enters the museum, like the liberating soldier who experienced the cruel atrocities that happened to helpless people, is shocked by what he sees. Even before he understands the background for these events, he comes into contact with the individual stories of those who were murdered.

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In the pockets of Shabtai Prushan, a 30 year-old who played football for the "Macabbi Stella" team in Vilna, are photographs of the football team and photographs of his friends in Vilna Ghetto.

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Ya'acov No'ach Lev was 24 years old when he was murdered. He was a member of a Zionist youth movement and hoped to leave Lithuania and come to Eretz Israel. The documents left in his pockets include an application to study medicine .

Engineer Israel Kuniski kept his diploma in his pocket. He was an electrical engineer. As the manager of the Vilna electric company's power-station, he received a silver cross medal in recognition of his work during the great flood of 1931 in Vilna.

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A unique artifact that is presented among the Klooga victims' artifacts is Dr. Wlodzimierz Poczter's watch. A photograph of Dr. Poczter with his wife, Frieda, and their young son, Isidor, was found in his pocket.

When he realized that he was about to be executed with the other prisoners, he was able to give the watch to his sister's sons, Nisan and Benjamin Anolik.

I quote from Benjamin Anolik's testimony:

"...we saw all the prisoners, two thousand five hundred, sitting cross legged on the ground with their hands on their heads". Uncle Poczter, stepped out of line and approached my brother with his pocket watch and told him: "take the watch, I won't need it anymore". We still have the watch."

The brothers understood what was in store for them and managed to slip away and hide in an abandoned building hearing the sound of gunfire. They stayed there until the Red Army forces arrived and discovered the bodies of the murdered prisoners placed among the burning logs.

The pocket watch that Dr. Poczter had given to his nephew a short time before his murder was preserved by Benjamin Anolik as a final memento. It froze a moment in time when the brothers parted with

their uncle – the fateful moment when they decided to escape and save themselves.

Benjamin immigrated to Eretz Israel and became a member of Kibbutz Lohamei HaGeta'ot.]

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Other artifacts that tell a personal fate but serve also as historic evidence of the Klooga camp are the prisoner number tags belonging to Falk and Eliezer Oleiski. These two, also from Vilna, were among the few survivors of this cruel massacre and their number tags have been preserved as evidence of their lives as prisoners in the camp. Thanks to their testimony we are able to reconstruct the harsh experiences of the prisoners who were being deported from Vilna, on that terrible day:

Here is a summary of Eliezer Oleiski's testimony:

Already, on the previous evening, a certain restlessness was apparent among the guards. Early in the morning, all the prisoners were brought together and told to kneel down at the assembly ground. The strongest were chosen, and after a while, these prisoners were seen dragging large lengths of wood from the camp to the forest. Soon after the remaining prisoners heard shooting.

Eliezer understood what this meant and he decided to escape. First he tried to run away to the latrines but the German guard hit him on the head and so he returned to the assembly ground. Later he succeeded in escaping to the sewing workshop with Falk where they hid in the attic with another woman. One night they even hid themselves, secured by a rope, in a chimney. They heard the groans of the dying in the hut. After four days without any food and almost nothing to drink, they were liberated by the Red Army by a unit led by a Russian Jew, Dimshitz. It was only then, on September 22 1944 that the survivors saw how the prisoners had been murdered and how their bodies had been set on fire in the forest.

To summarize:

The items found in the murdered men's pockets show the essence of their identities in that they were the last things that they chose to preserve with them.

The aim of the Klooga display in Yad vashem is to describe the massacre and to highlight "the individual" within the pile of bodies and in this way to demonstrate the concept of Yad Vashem as the central Institution for the Remembrance of the Holocaust in Israel – to remember that the victims of the Holocaust had a personal identity. They had faces and they had names.

And as I said at the beginning of my talk concerning the meaning in Hebrew of the words, "Yad Vashem", literally – a monument and a name - we must remember that the victims of the Holocaust are not anonymous every one of the them was human being and his unique name defined him.