

## **Metro Views: New Armenian genocide museum**

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Several blocks from the White House, Armenian-Americans are building a genocide museum. Like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum down the street, its location will make it impossible to ignore.

Genocide is a word that the White House avoids each April 24, when the Armenians commemorate the horrific event, which traditionally is dated from 1915. The US government acknowledges the atrocity without naming it, so as not to offend Turkey, which vehemently denies there was a genocide.

"Each year on this day, we pause to remember the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century, when as many as 1.5 million Armenians lost their lives in the final years of the Ottoman Empire, many of them victims of mass killings and forced exile," President George W. Bush said in a statement last April 24. "I join my fellow Americans and Armenian people around the world in commemorating this tragedy and honoring the memory of the innocent lives that were taken. The world must never forget this painful chapter of its history."

Memory is part of the mission of the Armenian Genocide Museum of America. The museum, to be constructed in the landmark building that was once the National Bank of Washington, is intended to commemorate the victims and educate the public about the Armenian genocide and subsequent crimes against humanity.

Many Armenians see the rescue of the survivors largely as an American endeavor, and as an American story. "This is the story of what Americans did for another people - saving them from starvation, bringing them back to life, creating the foundation for a community that wants to thank the United States for bringing it here, giving it its liberty and the security that allows for this expression in the museum," said Dr. Rouben Adalian, a historian and the museum's project coordinator.

And much of it has a strong Jewish component. Museum exhibits are likely to feature three figures: Henry Morgenthau, Franz Werfel and Raphael Lemkin, each of whom reflected on the genocide within his own field - diplomacy, literature and law.

IT WAS Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who first raised the alarm. "Deportation of and excesses against peaceful Armenians is increasing and from harrowing reports of eyewitnesses it appears that a campaign of race

extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion," Morgenthau wrote in a 1915 cable to the State Department.

Last month, the Armenian Genocide Museum passed a critical test when the District of Columbia's Historic Preservation Review Board approved a proposal for the museum to restore and use the former bank, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The site is about a 20-minute stroll along 14th Street from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Armenians learned much and lost much from the American museum, which held its dedication ceremonies 15 years ago, on April 22, 1993.

"The construction of Holocaust museums - especially the US Holocaust Memorial Museum - was illuminating in the sense that a story that is so stark and horrifying could be conceived and reconstructed in a manner that could be made comprehensible to general audiences and be respectful of the subject and the victims," said Adalian.

But the Washington museum, funded by tax dollars and private donations, gave short shrift to events before the Nazi rise to power. It uses a famous quote of Hitler's, made shortly before the invasion of Poland: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" The museum could say: "Not us."

"The US Holocaust Memorial Museum essentially committed itself to telling the Jewish story," said Michael Berenbaum, who was the project director for the Washington museum's permanent exhibition. "It made a couple of references to the Armenian story, but it did not fulfill the Armenians' fondest hopes, maybe even unrealistic hopes, to create an Armenian wing or maybe an Armenian memorial."

The Armenian museum, which is privately financed, is scheduled to open in two years.

"Jews should have a couple of eerie feelings as they enter an Armenian museum," said Berenbaum, now the director of the Sigi Ziering Center for the Study of the Holocaust and Ethics at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. "The first is: What would have happened to the remembrance of the Holocaust if Germany had denied the crime?"

The Armenian museum should also remind Jews to be grateful for survivors' testimonies, Berenbaum said, noting that technological advances had made these testimonies - the dramatic means for remembrance - inexpensive to produce and accessible on video. "We have so much more first-hand documentation, which they will not have because it was earlier, from a less articulate and less visual era," he said.

THERE ARE between seven million and eight million Armenians worldwide today. "Part of the damage of the genocide was the destruction of the civilization, and what remains is all the more precious to the Armenian people," said Adalian. The museum will have exhibits on the history and culture of the Armenians, as well as the genocide and the

bitter battle to have the Armenian fate acknowledged. "We understand that the denial and the challenge to the Armenian genocide is part of the story of the Armenian genocide."

Armenians see the genocide as the beginning of a pattern that began in one century and continued into the next. Along the way, its consequences were felt in the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur. The museum planners also envision an "action center," to help visitors prepare to respond to violations of human rights.

"We are not interested in having visitors come through and merely stare at an exhibit," he said. "We want them to come out of the exhibit further committed to defending human rights, anybody's human rights."

A week after Armenian Genocide Memorial Day, we will commemorate Yom Hashoa. The calendar is such that one day, 17 years from now, Yom Hashoa will coincide with the Armenians' memorial day. What will we do? We know they were murdered; to deny it is killing them twice. If we are silent, are we killing them yet again?

As we adamantly demand that Holocaust denial find no quarter, so must we insist that other genocides cannot be denied. By failing to do so, we diminish ourselves and squander the moral authority we gained - gained not only because Jews are commanded to remember, but because Germany owned up to its crimes.

The Armenians and the Jews have much in common: atrocities, expulsion, our own languages and cultures, and schisms within our faiths. But we Jews have been spared one grievous harm: as Berenbaum has noted, the fact that Germany acknowledged the Holocaust enabled the Jews to commemorate it appropriately - not to argue about whether it happened.

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