

REMARKS BY SARA J. BLOOMFIELD  
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PUBLIC HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST  
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Thank you for inviting me to deliver remarks on the Museum's approach to "public history." Our tag line is What You Do Matters—but it could also be as simple as History Matters. In fact, our location on the National Mall makes the same point. Standing near the Smithsonian that celebrates human achievement, we are a stark reminder of human frailty. And situated in between our monuments to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, we offer a cautionary tale about the need for vigilance in preserving democratic values. So our setting is the context for an engagement with the public that begins well before they walk through the doors. Over 35 million people have visited, so we have asked what is the primary source of their real-world engagement and how can we sustain it in the virtual world?

We know from research conducted with our visitors—90% of whom are not Jewish—that it is the way we present history, using collections to bring it alive. In focus groups, visitors indicated they had some prior knowledge of the Holocaust, but stated that the Museum experience took their understanding to a whole new level because of the way we "personalize" history. When asked what they meant, they cited the shoes, suitcases, uniforms, photos, and testimonies.

But of course, unlike other museums, our Museum—indeed most Holocaust museums—are based on events and ideas, not around a collection. Our collection does not drive the stories we tell, but it is the indispensable ingredient in how we tell them. So the challenge has been how to bring the collection and those stories to the broadest possible public, stimulating conversations about history and its meaning today.

Naturally we started with our Website, now available in 15 languages, which was visited by almost 13 million people last year. Although the one-way, broadcast model of communications is useful for getting specific information, if our goal is to engage people in the history of the Holocaust and its relevance, we need new models. New models for organizing content and collections and for relating to our audiences. As you all probably know, 35% of the world has access to the internet, and 50% of the world is under age 30. In the coming decades, a projected 5 billion more people will have access to the internet, and they will increasingly access it through mobile devices. This is the biggest opportunity for public history and public accessibility of humanity's historical heritage EVER!

We, like most of you, are just at the cusp of this exciting revolution, and I hope that by sharing with you some examples of our efforts, we can stimulate a conversation among ourselves as to how we can learn from, and work more effectively with, one another.

Our approach is to encourage the public to think about not just that the Holocaust happened, but why the Holocaust happened. We do this by focusing on various themes that affect all human societies, such as propaganda, free speech, science, and complicity. One theme is America's response to the Holocaust, featured in one of our earliest public history efforts on the St. Louis. The story of the St. Louis is of particular significance to us because we give strong emphasis to

America's opportunities to respond to the Holocaust and her tragic failure to do so. Two Museum historians began a research project to trace the ultimate fates of all 937 passengers who sailed on the 1939 refugee ship that was denied entry to Cuba and the US and sent back to Europe.

Similar to investigative reporting, the project reached out to the public in a grassroots way – online quests, media advertisements, vintage telephone books, cemeteries, community and genealogical records, synagogues, social service agencies, and neighborhood visits. As a result, it was members of the public who eventually helped us write this history.

Then we took this further, creating an educational exercise on our website for students to step into the shoes of our historians, examine the very same documents or “clues” and draw their own conclusions. The students' conclusions were then compared with those of our staff, giving the students practical experience and insight into how professional historians interpret and weigh evidence.

Another project **Remember Me?** highlights the fate of individual children. After the war, many surviving children were photographed by relief agencies to help them find their families. The Museum created the Remember Me? Website, posting more than 1,000 of these photographs and asking the public if they recognized anyone. We encourage them to share the site with others to help our quest become more viral and to raise awareness about the experiences of the most vulnerable victims of war and genocide. To date, the public has helped us identify the names of more than 360 of these children now living in 16 countries on 5 continents.

A second “crowd-sourcing” initiative **the World Memory Project** was launched in partnership with Ancestry.com—the leading online genealogical research company. The project focused on creating a names index for the millions of names contained in the massive amount of archival documents in our collection. Even with a large team of cataloguers, it would have taken many years to do this – years survivors don't have. So the idea was to get help from the public. Via the web and using Ancestry's tools, we recruited volunteers all over the world to key name-related information that is added to searchable databases of historical collections that are available to anyone free of charge.

To date, more than 2,800 volunteers have indexed 445,000 names. Among the volunteers are high school students who index documents as school projects or as part of their community service commitment. It gives students a chance to work with primary sources and participate in an international project that supports researchers and at the same time honors the victims and survivors.

Finally, as a complement to our exhibition on Nazi propaganda, we developed an interactive text messaging tour for secondary school students entitled **Mind over Media**. Students were invited to call a number where they heard an invitation from a Holocaust survivor to participate in the tour. Through a series of text messages the survivor directed students to 9 places in the exhibition, challenging them to examine certain ideas and artifacts and how they relate to the use of propaganda today. For example, in a section on the Nazis' campaign strategies, students were asked to look at election posters from 1920s Germany and text the survivor an example of

an audience the Nazis were targeting for support. This cued their attention to the Nazis' technique of tailoring messages to influence specific audiences. In a subsequent message the survivor reminds students that this technique is widely used today to persuade voters. In assessing this project, we found teachers, students and parents all loved this use of cell phones to encourage closer examination of history and that students who participated in the texting activity spent four times as long in the exhibition than those who did not.

These various efforts are part of our ultimate goal of providing not just access to, but engagement with, all of our content, including our collections, via the internet—for anyone, anywhere, anytime. In some fields, institutions take a proprietary view about their intellectual assets, but we are not just any field. Holocaust memory is a cause that transcends institutions and belongs to humanity.

That's why we believe that information on our collections, including its underlying data, not only should be shared but must be shared. For that reason, we've built our online catalog on an open source platform to make data-sharing with other organizations easier. As some of you may know, we've already provided collections data to EHRI, making it available for their use. And we've collaborated with a number of other organizations here on data sharing projects.

Our **new online public access catalog** launched last December already includes more than 215,000 records and allows researchers to search by media and by topic across our collections, including objects, documents, films, photographs, oral histories, and publications.

In addition, the catalog enables researchers to have direct access to digital surrogates for much, but not yet all, of the material to the extent permitted by privacy and other legal constraints. In its first six months, the online catalog had over 160,000 visits from more than 120 countries. Almost a third of the users are from Europe. For those of you who are interested, there will be a demo of the catalog during lunch.

Putting collections online has significantly enhanced our public history efforts. Many members of the public have contacted us after viewing a collection record or image, some to provide new information about an item and others to donate materials to our collections. These relationships often begin narrowly with a dialog about an artifact or catalog record, but they have the potential to grow into a broader engagement with our institution and, more importantly, with the history itself.

For those of us devoted to Holocaust history, the loss of the eyewitness generation and the rise of denial are cause for alarm. But there is also reason for hope because technology is changing the way people learn and relate making possible a very bold ambition that encompasses not only global awareness of the Holocaust, but also ways to engage vast new audiences in meaningful, sustained dialogue that can help ensure the permanent relevance of the Holocaust.

This will not be easy. There will be problems, mistakes, and unintended consequences. But if we work together and, most importantly, learn together, we can achieve enduring impact in a rapidly changing world. It will require a shared commitment to collaboration, experimentation,

innovation, transparency, and above all to serving the largest possible public audience. We owe this to the past as much as to the future.

I'll close by recalling a street in Warsaw that also held dreams for the future. There, 70 years ago, the Jews collected thousands of pages documenting ghetto life—letters, diaries, poetry, and more. When deportations threatened, the archive was hidden. 19 year old David Graber, who helped bury it, included a note that might never have been found. But it was. It said:

“What we were unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground... I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth at the world. So the world may know all. ... We would be the fathers, the teachers, and educators of the future... But no, we shall certainly not live to see it, and therefore I write my last will. May the treasure fall into good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened... We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.”

Today we can say to David Graber – and to all the others—your treasure is in our hands. We will always be here to attest for you. You fulfilled your mission. Now we pledge to you that, working together, we will fulfill ours.