

A Visitor's Introduction to the Iowa Holocaust Memorial

Located on the Capitol Grounds near East 7th Street and Grand Avenue



With brief essays by members of the
Iowa Council for Holocaust Education

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Dear Visitor,

Plans for the Iowa Holocaust Memorial were developed under the caring guidance of the Capitol Planning Commission over a period of several years. During that time, the Memorial's design (originally the product of a contest within Iowa State University's College of Design,) proposed materials, and contents underwent significant alteration.

One of the remarkable decisions made by the Commission was to select the site where the Memorial would be constructed. The site chosen, on the northwest side of the Capitol grounds, is perhaps a perfect location. As a project, it is the first of the monuments and memorials to be placed on the West Terrace. The Memorial, which by chance happens to be the first of its kind in the United States to be erected on the grounds of a state Capitol (it has since been joined by the memorial at the Ohio State Capitol in Columbus) fits compatibly within its natural setting. But most importantly, it stands en route between the Iowa State Historical Building, which is just across the street, and the Capitol building. It is very convenient for visitors to the State Historical Building, to stop by and spend some time at the Memorial prior to proceeding on to the Capitol.

The Iowa Holocaust Memorial is both artistic and highly informative. With quotations, narrative and photographs, the Memorial has a great deal of information inscribed on its walls. Yet, in the scope of the immensity and complexity of the Holocaust, it can offer just an introduction to topics visitors may wish to learn more about.

An independent body, the Iowa Council is pleased to make available this booklet containing brief essays about the site. We hope you will find the essays insightful and that they will add to your appreciation of the material you will find displayed on the Memorial.

– Members of the Iowa Council for Holocaust Education



The Iowa Holocaust Memorial at the Iowa State Capitol

With four walls of aluminum engraved with inscriptions and photographs, and arrayed in an artistic design, the Memorial was established to commemorate the millions, including six million Jews, murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II in Europe; to express gratitude to the Iowans who, as members of the U.S. armed forces, participated in the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945; and in honor of the survivors who came to Iowa.

The Memorial enshrines the lessons of the Holocaust: to protect democracy, to take action in the presence of evil, and to teach one's children by example to respect people different from oneself.

Twelve iconic pictures on the walls of the Memorial are displayed courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Photographic Archives in Washington D.C. A thirteenth photograph is reproduced courtesy of the Iowa Jewish Historical Society, located at the Caspe Terrace of the Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines in Waukee, Iowa, at which information about the project is archived.

Constructed the summer of 2013, the Memorial is a gift to the people of Iowa from the Jacqueline and Myron Blank Fund. The final design and construction of the Memorial was overseen by the Confluence landscape architectural firm of Des Moines. Educational initiatives relating to the topic are planned by the Iowa Council for Holocaust Education, established in conjunction with the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education. Material about the Memorial is being added to IowaHolocaustMemorial.com. For additional information, contact jrcr@dmjfed.org.

Encountering The Iowa Holocaust Memorial

– Prof. Dorothy Pisarski, Drake University

How should one visit the Iowa Holocaust Memorial?

There are so many messages, both obvious and subtle, at the Memorial site. I believe it is limiting to think about just one way to make the visit. Rather, I encourage visitors to be open to the multitude of possibilities.

Don't ignore the location of the Memorial.

Set on the hillside leading east toward the Capitol, it is inspiring to see the Memorial as a series of corridors that point walkers toward the gold dome atop the Capitol building. It reminds me that those we memorialize set their sights on a greater goal. We look upward, and we look eastward from the Memorial. Those directions help us focus on the sites of tragedies of the Holocaust in Europe, while also thinking about the eternal rest granted those who were victimized.

Which path to take?

If we can agree that a corridor is a path to get us from one place to another, then the Memorial is a series of corridors. But don't hurry through. Each panel along the way provides something of interest, something to contemplate. Start at one end and wind your way through, slowly, contemplatively. I began and ended one walk, steps away from the Memorial at the flagpole of the American flag, thinking about our own freedoms here in the U.S.

The Holocaust was a very sad time.

Indeed, that is true. The Memorial speaks to the tragedies in words and pictures. Some are disturbing. There is a photo of young children in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943 that will bring a tear to the eye of any parent. Another photo of barracks inside Buchenwald will stir stormy emotions.

But there are also stories of the liberators, especially those liberators who were Iowans. There are stories of survivors, too. Some came to Des Moines. A different group was sent to a temporary hostel in West Branch, IA. You can read their stories at the Memorial, too. And when you do, stop and think about how far from home these survivors were, and how much they had been through. Think, also, about the hospitality of Iowans and whisper a message of gratitude for the kindness of strangers that was a salve even in the most sad times.

Facts, details, and stories.

Yes, you will find all three at the Memorial. In a compact space, you will find quotations about the tragedy of the Holocaust, lists of U.S. Army divisions that liberated concentration and work camps, narratives, and photos. If you linger, the facts start to become a piece of the fabric of the story of the millions who lived – and died – during the Holocaust.

And then?

Take the story with you. Don't let the experience simply close. Do a search through a book or a report, linking one place or one day or one person from the Memorial with some facet that has been written about or drawn or painted elsewhere. Think about current places around the world where oppression and violence did impact or are impacting civilians today. Resolve to live so differences between people don't escalate into conflict. ■

“It’s Personal For Me”

– Prof. Harry Brod, University of Northern Iowa

I was struck by the waves.

That’s what those low winding walls of the new Iowa Holocaust Memorial looked like to me as I walked up the hill for the Memorial’s dedication. The impression of ocean waves was probably reinforced by their sloping hillside setting. That led me to picture those walls as waves carrying transport ships, taking ravaged refugees from Europe to the US and taking liberating soldiers from the US to Europe. Then the image broadened for me, and I visualized waves of history crashing down on those swept up in one of recent history’s most powerful tidal waves. They’re all represented here: the victims to be memorialized, the liberators to be thanked, the survivors to be honored.

I’ve seen those walls described as ribbons of steel. Ribbons? Like those black ones affixed to the clothing of observant Jews and then torn as part of mourning the dead according to Jewish tradition? Or like those color-coded, looped ribbons worn as reminders of dedication to some just cause? Not festive, celebratory ribbons, surely. Military decorations? Perhaps, but potentially a double-edged sword here – we would intend that they celebrated the heroism of those who fought the good fight, but they were proudly worn on the other side too. The phrase was intended merely to describe the memorial, but a ribbon of steel in another meaning also refers to railroad tracks. And that of course puts my mind on the transport trains with their cattle cars headed to the concentration camps. Is that inevitably the nature of a site like this, where architectural intent meets submerged memory, and every aesthetic component leads our imaginations back to the camps?

At the Dedication ceremony, survivors and families of survivors were asked to stand. I don’t get that many opportunities to publicly stand in honor of my parents, and I was proud and moved to be able to do so here. For I am a child of Holocaust survivors. Or, as I’ve spoken and written about this elsewhere, I am a child of what I call temporary Holocaust survivors, by which I mean that although my parents survived the war years themselves, they both died younger than I think they would have had they not had to endure the hardships and traumas of those years, my mother at age 48 and my father at 58.

The subject of the Holocaust is a component of courses I now teach at the University of Northern Iowa. When appropriate I share some of my family history with my students. My father was a Polish Jew who survived the war years in the forests near his home town of Lejansk; my mother was a German Jew who survived as a nurse in the Jewish Hospital of Berlin; and therein lie many astounding tales of struggle and survival. My parents were stateless refugees when I was born in that hospital in 1951, and we arrived as immigrants to the United States two years later, aboard the ocean liner SS United States.

So now, so many years later, I live in a state that has just constructed a new memorial to our collective past, with hopes for our collective future. Thanks. ■

The Experience of The Liberators

– Ms. Terri Toppler, Davenport Public Schools

US Holocaust Museum Teacher Fellow, 2005-6

“To liberate means to free. Liberators of concentration camps include not only the troops who broke down the gates to the camps, but also support troops who followed immediately afterward to provide medical care, food, clothing and loving-kindness. They too were rescuers.

These liberators share the bond of an uncanny experience, one that befell some of them briefly, some for a few hours, others for several days, and still others for weeks and months. They bear witness for those who were treated to tortures humankind has yet imagined. They offer that witness to us so that their memories will live and have enduring meaning long after they are gone, and ensure that an evil of this magnitude will never again be permitted.”

This is the opening text to the <http://qcliberators.com> site where the testimonies of several Iowa servicemen can be found. Their quotes are now engraved on the ribbons of steel of the Iowa Holocaust Memorial. My daughter, Caitlin Toppler, and I created the website in 2006 in dedication to our local area WWII liberators who were honored by the Quad City Yom HaShoah Committee using interviews conducted and text written by Dr. Marrietta Castle. I also wanted to make this information about QC area WWII liberators available for student research.

A visit to the Iowa Holocaust Memorial in Des Moines affords our students an opportunity to learn more about the role of our Iowa servicemen in liberating concentration camps and pays tribute to their acts of compassion. Such a visit honors the victims of the Holocaust and recognizes the survivors who settled in our state. It inspires us to learn from history and to be vigilant in our democracy. ■

The Iowa Holocaust Memorial In Context:

– Prof. Daniel Reynolds, Grinnell College

The memorial in Des Moines is part of an international phenomenon, with new Holocaust memorials appearing around the world in recent years in growing numbers. The appearance of many new memorials around the world, including here in Iowa, points to the increasing awareness that the remaining survivors and witnesses are passing. That awareness lends a sense of urgency to the international movement to memorialize the persecution and murder of Europe's Jews, but that same urgency is tempered by the need for each locale to think about the right message for its time and place.

Many places where the Holocaust was planned and carried out, like Berlin, Warsaw, or the concentration and extermination camps, have constructed large-scale national Holocaust memorials to serve as permanent reminders of the genocide that transpired in their midst. Often, these national Holocaust memorials around the world tend to be abstract, not wanting to impose an overly restrictive, government-sanctioned interpretation on visitors who must do their own interpretive work to comprehend them. Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, for example, is a field of large concrete blocks of varying height, bearing no inscription. Warsaw's Ghetto Heroes Memorial is a large block depicting on one side the heroic Jewish resistance from the doomed uprising against the Nazi occupiers in 1943, while the other side depicts victims being marched away; but again, no explanatory text appears beyond the minimal inscription. At Treblinka, Auschwitz, Majdanek, and other infamous places of mass murder, monumental abstract sculptures serve as places of reflection and commemoration.

If abstraction is one vernacular employed by Holocaust Memorials, clearly the new memorial in Des Moines takes a different path, and one that also speaks to the impact of the Holocaust on survivors, liberators, their friends and families, indeed, on the Iowa community as a whole. This memorial combines a thoughtful, inviting form – waving walls of inscriptions and photos that line pathways where the visitor may wander and read – with a very deliberate narrative. The memorial educates its visitors and asks them to think about the meaning of the Holocaust for their own lives, a task never more important than right now since the genocide is receding from lived memory. The aim is not to account for the totality of suffering that the millions endured – no single memorial can hope to accomplish that duty; rather, by engaging with the history of the Holocaust through an explicitly local perspective, the memorial poses universal questions. Through concise inscriptions that fill the surface of the memorial, survivors living in Iowa recall their experiences and losses, and also their lives after the liberation – an outcome that never came for too many victims. Liberators share haunting images of what they saw, and despite their roles as rescuers, one feels in their statements disbelief and even shame at their encounter with humanity's capacity for cruelty. These inscriptions share the walls with quotes from prominent leaders and thinkers from around the world and across time, allowing us to generalize without losing sight of what the memorial specially commemorates.

The abstract memorials at other places have their function – in their inscrutability, they force the visitor to think, to do the work of establishing the connection between the present and the past. The risk is that, in saying very little explicitly, such memorials may say very little at all to some people. That is why we typically find information centers and museums nearby, which ground the artistic expressions in concrete historical understanding. The Iowa memorial, by contrast, is an outstanding example of a monument's capacity to both universalize and specify, to communicate intended lessons while inviting reflection, all of which fulfill the memorial's objective to educate. A lesson I take is that despite our remoteness from the event in Iowa today, none of us enjoys any true distance from human suffering, and that we all bear the obligation to confront it. ■