

## The Holocaust and Wars: Curating in Israel

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### ABSTRACT

The curator's role in displaying a variety of articles is often overlooked or minimized. In this paper, we will analyze the curating experience in a rather segregated setting: the historical museums. There is a poignant motive in selecting a venue that does not even display, for the most part, objects of art, but instead, is focused on articles of history. To organize the thematic arrangements of these in a sensible and instructive manner requires the highest of curatorial attributes.

In this particular article, we are restricting our scope to museums in the state of Israel. The discussion covers the category called War Museums. Because of unusual and localized circumstances, in Israel, there are two distinct types of war museums: Holocaust-related and those intertwined with particular episodes of wars and conflict.

It is also understood that he who owns the prize, does what he wants with it -- meaning the museum "owner" is the primal curator. The specifics are concentrated in war museums located in Israel.

### WHY IS ISRAEL DIFFERENT?

Ben Gurion proclaimed the state of Israel on May 14, 1948.

From the time of the 1948 War of Independence, there would follow an endless series of military conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Bello, 2001)

Leading up until this landmark miracle, the ethos of war and defense occupied most citizens' minds. The fine arts were of little concern, and indeed modern galleries and art museums did not flourish until the beginnings of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What was pervasively thought of was primarily the Holocaust and with many future battles confronting the newly established state the concept of wars would give rise to "war museums"



The Shack

## The Holocaust and Wars: Curating in Israel

The initial two museums were both for Holocaust commemoration; one was in Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetaot and the other, catering exclusively to religious commemoration and lamentation was the Martef Hashoa Museum in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> They fit the needs of the bereaved as well as the heroic resistance fighters who were mostly found in Kibbutz Lohamei Hageetaot.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the psychological needs of the populace,<sup>4</sup> at the time, needed to examine this subject matter. Doron Bar has explored the interplay of national narrative and commemoration to a great extent.<sup>5</sup> Thus the very first museum edifice at the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum was a tiny building, known as The Shack.

As a young state during its infancy, the nation's soul was riddled by the trauma of the Holocaust. And, within a few years, wars and conflicts sealed a simple fact: the country was facing existential threats 24/7. It was a society inhabiting such a country that was tasked with formulating a national narrative.<sup>6</sup> Early on commemorative practices were geared to serve these narratives.<sup>7</sup>

### Sorting the Museums

A quick analysis of the history of museums,<sup>8</sup> is helpful in understanding how, over time, a differentiation akin to variegation, would slowly evolve into distinct types of museums, ranging from art museums to natural sciences museums to historical museums.<sup>9</sup> What initially began as private collections of the rich, over two centuries, progressed to venues more typical in the modern world. For the purposes of this article, and in Israel, the majority of museums, especially in the formative stages, evolved into history museums, with a later subspecialty of Holocaust museums.<sup>10</sup>

While the Law of Yad Vashem was established in the early 1950s,<sup>11</sup> the future grand museum would wait until 2005 to open. However, ideas formulating commemoration were laid out in the

early 1940s.<sup>12</sup> Later on, as Israel experienced the 1967 War and the 1973 War, it became evident that military commemoration was inculcated into the national narrative.

### The Tale of Museums

Following along the aforementioned historical timeline, it became evident that museums would need clarification and hence, subsumed a separation into Holocaust museum and war museums. The matter may appear complicated, but this is when the first curatorial efforts emerged. Ironically, it would come to the State of Israel and the Knesset<sup>13</sup> to assume this role.

What emerged was a duality of purpose and hence a "cellular division" into Holocaust museums and War museums.<sup>14</sup> A complex situation evolved initially, because to orient the nationhood and personhood roles toward a rational approach to museums, would take time and effort.

### Creating the Curator

As just mentioned, the finessing of museal typology was a dual effort by society and the state. The main Holocaust museums would become the Martef Hashoa museum in Jerusalem, the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz Museum (in the Galilee) and the Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem; the order of mention here is chronologic. In a differential effort the war museums were divided into a completely different set of museums.<sup>15</sup> These maneuvers took time and effort and the cooperation of citizens and the state.<sup>16</sup> As stated in the introduction: he who owns the museum is the primal curator. Thus, in most cases, but not all, the state sets the pace. Once again, we have interplay between statehood and personhood.<sup>17</sup>

### WHO WAS CURATOR AND WHO WAS NOT?

This actually complex question turned out to be a matter of totally differentia list choices. For the three Holocaust museums mentioned, the curatorial theme, or ethos, was quite different for each one. In the case of the Ghetto Fighters' Museum, built along the premises of heroism and rebellion, the maintenance of these ideas would become more distinct as it evolved in time. Martef Hashoah was based on the premises of *Kiddush Hashem and*

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<sup>2</sup>(Livon, 2011)

<sup>3</sup>(Gabriel Mayer, 2018)

<sup>4</sup>(Bar, 2004)

<sup>5</sup>(Bar, 2005)

<sup>6</sup>(Gabriel Mayer, 2019)

<sup>7</sup>(Brog, 2003)

<sup>8</sup>(Richman-Adbou, 2018)

<sup>9</sup>(Libraries)

<sup>10</sup>(Bartov, 1997)

<sup>11</sup>(Knesset, [https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/pdf/YV\\_law.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/pdf/YV_law.pdf))

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<sup>12</sup>(Brog, 2002)

<sup>13</sup>(Shoham & Lamay, 2006)

<sup>14</sup>(G. Mayer, 2017)

<sup>15</sup>(Hansen-Glucklich, 2014)

<sup>16</sup>(Kark & Perry, 2012)

<sup>17</sup>(Zick, 2004)

## The Holocaust and Wars: Curating in Israel

*sanctification*. It began as a religious enterprise and continues as such today. Yad Vashem began as an idea first put into law by the Knesset<sup>18</sup> and gradually evolved into ideology befitting a museum.<sup>19</sup> The controlling entities were the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz, Rabbis and ultra-religious entities, and the State of Israel, in that order. The war museums took on their name and role as the

<sup>18</sup>(Knesset, 1953)

<sup>19</sup>(Yad-Vashem, 1993-Current) and (YadVashem, <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/>)

decades proved the need. They each specialized in certain foci of the Jewish state's history and finally were segregated into a new class of war museums, called the IDF museums and run by the Ministry of Defense.<sup>20</sup> As time passed, the wisdom of these choices became evidentiary with war history.

The MOD museums are smaller in number than the entire class of War Museums as may be seen in the following two images:

<sup>20</sup>(Gabriel Mayer, 2016a)

- **"Beit HaGdudim"- Jewish Legion Museum.**
- **Clandestine Immigration and Naval Museum.**
- **Etzel Independence Museum- Jaffa.**
- **Haganah Museum – Tel Aviv.**
- **"Beit HaShomer" Watchman's House- Kfar Giladi.**
- **Acre Underground Prisoner Museum.**
- **Underground Prisoner Museum- Jerusalem.**
- **Palmach Museum – Tel Aviv.**

*MOD museums [photo credit MOD]*

The above list may be compared to the entire War Museum collection:

Museum	City	Phone
> Also see: Defense Forces Memorial sites		
Museums Division of the Ministry of Defense (Hebrew)		
Museum of Underground captives - Akko prison	Akko	04.9911375
Israeli Air Force Museum	Beer-Sheva	08.9906853
Museum of Navy and Haapala	Haifa	04.8536249
Museum of Underground captives	Jerusalem	02.6233166
HaShomer Museum	Kfar Giladi	04.6941565
Israel Police Museum	Kiryat Ata	04.8478710
Museum of Jewish Soldier in World War II	Kiryat Ono	08.9224764
Armored Corps Museum	Latrun	08.9784315
Goara Museum	Ramot Menashe	04.9597402
Etzel Museum	Tel Aviv	03.5253307
Hagana Museum	Tel Aviv	03.5608624
Lechi Museum	Tel Aviv	03.6837582
Palmach Museum	Tel Aviv	03.6436393
Yad Mordechai Museum	Yad-Mordechai	08.6720559

*War Museums in Israel*

The point being made here is that by delegating museums to specific activities or events, multiple, sometimes conflicting, interests were satisfied.

This completes the generality of museum establishments.

Next we will meet the specific curators.

## CURATORS AT WORK

A work in progress still, each museum's collection has to be displayed in a fitting, both esthetically and culturally, manner. A series of huge changes were to take place from the early 1950-1960s period.<sup>21</sup> In

<sup>21</sup>(Dinur, 1957)

the beginning, collections and displays were based on whatever could be found, or recovered. Soon, a vast amount of displayable objects and archival paperwork, led to the obvious conclusion that an approach needs to be made. In addition, the Holocaust museum notion was now an international idea and Israel had to make sure to keep up.

The best illustration is to follow the general flow of museal history at Yad Vashem. Early on, after a decade of analyzing documents, it became obvious that they needed to display some objects. That was in 1972, and “the museum was added almost as an afterthought.”<sup>22</sup> Yad Vashem began to focus in on artifacts and other collectible items.<sup>23</sup> By the late 1990s a hunt for all thing collectible became a furious effort.<sup>24</sup> And as the New Yad Vashem Museum opened in 2005, the emphasis was being placed on establishing historicity through research.<sup>25</sup>

Since the years past 2000, curating Holocaust museums, along with other historical museums, became a refined technique. Each artifact, each fragment assumed greater and greater importance as it became more and more possible. This sometimes included traveling far to interview family members whose relatives may have owned an artifact. We owe a debt of gratitude to Haviva Peled-Carmeli who was the first visionary curator and set the ideals for future acquisitions and displays.<sup>26</sup>

Yad Vashem initiated a campaign "Gathering the Fragments" in order to recover as many historical articles as possible.<sup>27</sup>

Curating became a precision instrument. Of course, aesthetics were important. By the time the 21<sup>st</sup> century rolled about, even the landscapes, the surrounding views were considered as part of the structure; they would now be considered as memoryscapes. Thus curating in Israel has served the national narrative as well as being true to historiography.

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<sup>22</sup>(Rotem, 2013)

<sup>23</sup>(Gabriel Mayer, 2016b)

<sup>24</sup>(Kol-Inbar, 2013)

<sup>25</sup>(Guterman & Shalev, 2005)

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