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*The Jerusalem Report*  
5/8/2007  
German Leadership Seminar-July 2007

### **Body Blows?**

The first blow had me reeling, the second one was almost a knockout. Though I had been to Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem several times before, I was caught unprepared by the new Holocaust History Museum, cold in the air-conditioned building after the summer heat and feeling suddenly very alone while facing what Yad Vashem is all about.

I had felt well prepared for the exhibition. As a former volunteer tour guide in the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial near Munich and a journalist covering German-Jewish relations and historical topics, not much could surprise me, I thought. But I didn't get very far with that for protection.

The exhibition starts with a collage of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Eastern Europe, projected onto a large wall. One film shows a large group of children, singing "Hatikva" on an ancient recording with a scratchy sound. I had not yet turned right into the first room off the main hall, when a bizarre visceral impression shattered my intellectual approach: From the entrance hall behind I still heard the angelic children's voices singing the Jewish anthem of hope, when from the other side, "Deutschland, Deutschland ueber alles" rang into my ears from the room showing the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany. Even though I knew it, I was ashamed when I physically realized that today's Germany uses the same melody with different words for its anthem. Hearing it mixed with "Hatikva" was even more embarrassing.

With my intellectual armor pierced on, I was unprepared for the second blow, which literally hit me close to home. Like most people, I have a soft spot in my heart for the place where I grew up: Hildesheim is a small town in northern Germany, well-known only to aficionados of ancient Egypt (due to an important museum) and of Romantic architecture (due to a famous church). To me it was my hometown, a personal place, somehow exempt from the ugly realities of history. So in Yad Vashem I was shocked to see, in the next section of exhibits showing how rampant anti-Semitism was in Nazi Germany, signs that my grandparents and their contemporaries had had to have seen 70 years ago: "Here in Hildesheim Jews are not wanted!" (Ten years ago, incidentally, a couple of families founded a new Jewish community there. Having moved away, I never really got in touch with them. Perhaps I should go and look them up and see how they are doing, sometime.)

For the rest of the time I spent in the exhibition, I didn't do much analysis of the new philosophy of Holocaust education, although I do try to follow developments in the field.

The museum, opened in 2005, is a prime example of a new concept focusing on the fate of individual victims instead of abstract historical facts, but this analytical interest never helped me keep my guard up. Nor did we talk much about our experience in Yad Vashem in our group of 14 "German leaders" - political advisers, diplomats, journalists - brought to Israel for a week by the American Jewish Committee. Quite a contrast to our other field trips (to the security fence and an immigration absorption center), after which we could hardly stop talking.

For three days we had discussed Israel's political situation, the Middle East conflict, and the Iranian threat.

I would not and could not debate the pros and cons of making Holocaust memory more personal. For me, it had been too personal for that.