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Review

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## “I can’t believe I’m holding this piece of history”: review of the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre, South Africa, 1999–2024

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Batya Glezer, a guide at the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre (CTHGC), is the daughter of survivors who fled the Nazis through the forests of Eastern Europe. Finding a temporary refuge in Uzbekistan, they spent some time in a Displaced Persons’ Camp in Germany after the Second World War, and eventually made their way to Cape Town. Their families had been murdered, but for a couple of siblings, and Batya recalls the mostly “unspoken” sadness that permeated her childhood home. As a teenager, she refused to join her parents on memorial occasions. She had had her fill of sadness. Decades passed before she could contemplate guiding at a Holocaust museum.<sup>1</sup>

Batya’s primary motive is to honour people whose “lives were ... snuffed out” and to show they had lives before they became victims. She gestures to the Bedzin installation in the Centre’s exhibition with its display of identity photographs of six hundred local Jews, taken to facilitate their efficient annihilation, juxtaposed with photographs from family albums of people before the Nazi occupation – as Batya elaborates, rowing, swimming, and celebrating marriages.<sup>2</sup> The Centre retains a close association with She’erith Hapletah (Association of Survivors, literally, the Surviving Remnant), and survivor testimony plays an important part in its programmes. The permanent exhibition features memorial elements including a children’s memorial at its entrance. It concludes with a collection of colour photographs taken in 1998 of survivors who made their homes in Cape Town after the war, a video of survivor testimonies, and a quotation from Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu on how learning about the Holocaust helps us to become better human beings.

This review focuses on the CTHGC, which belongs with the Durban

<sup>1</sup> Batya Glezer, interview with Cynthia Kros, 25 March 2024, Sea Point, Cape Town. Informed consent in writing was obtained from all interviewees. Ethics clearance was granted by the Ethics committee, Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and Johannesburg Centres to the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation. Through the Foundation the three centres work together and share resources to bring in exhibitions and visiting experts from elsewhere, while maintaining their independence and freedom to decide on how to interact with their different publics.<sup>3</sup> The CTHGC was the first centre to come into being following the success of the travelling *Anne Frank in the World* (AFIW) exhibition (1994–5), which found an expansive reception in a South Africa newly emancipated from apartheid. An “ancillary” exhibition on apartheid excited considerable interest.<sup>4</sup> The local coordinator of AFIW, Myra Osrin, was inspired to move ahead with plans for establishing a permanent Holocaust Centre, realized in 1999. Apparently, Osrin had a “compact space” in mind from the start,<sup>5</sup> and the Centre accordingly occupies only a single floor of a modest building on a campus that it shares with the South African Jewish Museum in the precinct of the Great Synagogue in central Cape Town, in an area sometimes referred to as the “Museum Mile”.<sup>6</sup>

The CTHGC’s main programming is orientated towards students and educators, although programmes are tailored for other groups as well and for the broad public. The Centre prepares student teachers from local universities to handle relevant curriculum areas. Using the permanent exhibition (updated in 2016) and the Centre’s own educational materials, it also delivers a four-hour education programme to thousands of mostly high-school students a year.<sup>7</sup> Thanks largely to the efforts of its first education director, Marlene Silbert, in consultation with departmental history subject advisers,<sup>8</sup> the Holocaust and the Second World War are, at the time of writing, in the Grade 9 curriculum and, in Grade 11 there is a topic on eugenics and other “pseudo-scientific ideas of race”, with a choice of case studies between colonial Australia and Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup>

3 Tali Nates, founder and executive director of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, interview with the author, 3 April 2024, online.

4 *Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre: 20 Years On* (Cape Town: Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre [CTHGC; <https://ctholocaust.co.za>], 2019), 8.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 11.

7 Orli Barnett, interview with the author, 26 March 2024, CTHGC; see also *Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre*, 21 for 2019 figures: 7,000 students per annum.

8 Barnett, interview; see also *Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre*.

9 Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, “Topic 3: Ideas of Race in the late 19th and 20th Centuries”, *National Curriculum Statement, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, Further Education and Training, Grades 10–12, History* (Pretoria: Department of

The permanent exhibition in the CTHGC is designed according to the metaphor of “the road to genocide”, taking visitors from the age-old origins and persistence of racism and antisemitism through the horrors of the Nazi regime, its expansion in Europe, developments culminating in the attempt to implement the “Final Solution”, and on to liberation, the Nuremberg trials, and survivor testimony. The “road” is divided into four interlinked passages mostly following a chronological order, with the Bedzin installation an exception. Placed at the end of the first passage, it introduces the visitor to the Polish town’s Jewish residents and tells of their deportation to Auschwitz before explaining the circumstances of their deportation.

The exhibition is fairly densely packed with artefacts and multimedia installations, especially in the last three passages. In the case of the second passage dealing with the Nazis’ rise to power, Nazi emblems and propaganda are mounted on one side in giant cases that seem about to encroach directly on the visitor’s path. An authentic concentration camp jacket from Dachau on the other side of the passage, with a red star denoting that the wearer was a political prisoner, apparently arouses much interest. High-school students are apt to identify it as a “striped pyjama” as in John Boyne’s work of fiction, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a prescribed text in many schools.<sup>10</sup>

With each stage of the Holocaust represented by the exhibition, the flooring changes, reinforcing what is commonly referred to as the visitor’s “immersive” experience, that makes them feel fleetingly as if they were “there”.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the Nazis’ rise to power passage, the carpeting gives way to concrete and grating. Cobblestones in a small enclave at the end of that passage contribute to the atmosphere of the Warsaw Ghetto, harsh and desperate but famous for its last-ditch resistance. The piece of train-track in the third passage, notorious metonym for the camps, is surrounded by gravel. In the last passage, which tells stories of rescue and the liberation of the camps followed by

Basic Education), 21, [https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files/caps\\_fet\\_history\\_gr\\_10-12\\_web\\_1.pdf](https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files/caps_fet_history_gr_10-12_web_1.pdf) (accessed 5 April 2024).

<sup>10</sup> John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2006); information from exhibition guide during tour with postgraduate students, Department of Historical Studies and the Kaplan Centre, University of Cape Town, organized by the author, 30 May 2024.

<sup>11</sup> “Immersive” is frequently used in CTHGC publicity, e.g. Museum Explorer SA, [https://museumexplorer.co.za/cape-town-holocaust-genocide-centre/#google\\_vignette](https://museumexplorer.co.za/cape-town-holocaust-genocide-centre/#google_vignette) (accessed 5 July 2024).

the portraits and testimonies of survivors, the visitor once again finds the carpet of the everyday underfoot.

In 2018, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre changed its original name to incorporate “genocide”. The change of name reflects the diminution of tension between a wider agenda and the desire of some survivors to protect the legacy of the Holocaust. Batya Glezer welcomes the broadening of the scope to other genocides and mentions the presence on the CTHGC’s staff of a Rwandan massacre survivor, Justine Changunda.<sup>12</sup> Tali Nates, director of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre and the daughter and niece of Holocaust survivors, maintains that in the case of the Johannesburg Centre, founded in the early 2000s, with “genocide” already in its title, anxiety about its reception occurred more in the minds of the planners than in the eventuality.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting on the common approach of all the South African Holocaust and Genocide Centres, Nates describes the Holocaust as “an entry point” to the study of genocide, which is well reflected in the design of the exhibition in the Cape Town Centre.<sup>14</sup> The CTHGC’s education director, Orli Barnett, stresses that “Holocaust” is the name of a particular genocide, albeit a powerful and exceptionally well documented example.<sup>15</sup> At the start of the exhibition, on a screen above panels detailing the evolution of “genocide” as a legal term with photographic images below, the names “Holocaust”, “Herero-Nama”, “Armenia”, “Bosnia”, “Cambodia”, “Rwanda”, and others are projected. They arrive, disappear, and then reappear, following each other in an almost hypnotic cycle. The scene is set for understanding that the Holocaust, “unprecedented” as it was in some respects, falls into the broader category of genocide. “Genocides” here are conceived not as sudden eruptions but as the culmination of developments increasingly coordinated by the state. An appreciation of the factors that made the Holocaust possible produces a taxonomy for identifying the mostly invariable risk factors for predicting and, hopefully, avoiding genocide.<sup>16</sup>

12 Glezer, interview. Jakub Nowakowski, director of the CTHGC, interview with the author, 26 March 2024, online, claimed that South Africa had dealt with this tension long ago.

13 Nates, interview.

14 Ibid.

15 Barnett, interview.

16 One of the education programme’s seminal references is “The Ten Stages of Genocide”, Holocaust Memorial Trust, <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/what-is-genocide/the-ten-stages-of-genocide/> (accessed 7 July 2024).

We are supposed to heed Primo Levi's famous caution, inscribed on a panel in the first passage, part of which reads: "It happened, therefore it can happen again".

Tracey Petersen, a scholar and former CTHGC education director, observes that over the course of the exhibition, the attention to other genocides wanes as the story of the Holocaust increases in volume.<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to imagine how it could have been done differently in the space of this small exhibition and given that the number of authentic artefacts that contribute to its immersive effect are related to the Holocaust. To follow the stories of other genocides would require an endeavour of intensive archival research, and perhaps they are best told through focused temporary exhibitions.<sup>18</sup>

Petersen also criticizes the Centre's representation of apartheid.<sup>19</sup> "The Apartheid System" is represented in the first passage under the broad theme of investigating and illustrating racism and racial "science" and the emergence of a racial state. A panel highlights some of apartheid's crucial components, resonating with features of the Nazi state to be encountered further along, including the pass system, racial segregation of amenities, and forced removals. In keeping with the exhibition's heuristic principles and the presentation of apartheid in the high-school curriculum, crucial pieces of legislation are represented as "building blocks". Apartheid, execrable as it was, did not, however, constitute a genocide as legally defined. Initially, I worried that its placing on "the road" might obscure its particular nature and outcomes. Subsequently, in discussion with staff, I came to understand that the display is in the first passage because it is conceived of as part of the conceptual introduction to racism and forms of

17 Tracey Petersen, "Teaching Humanity: Placing the Cape Town Holocaust Centre in a Post-Apartheid State" (D.Phil. diss., University of the Western Cape, 2015).

18 For the richness of the artefact collection and archival endeavours at the CTHGC, see Michal Singer, "Growing up on the Museum Mile: Introducing the Heritage Project of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre," *South African Museums Association Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2013): 51–64, <https://hdl.handle.net/1050/EJC137448>. An example of a temporary exhibition is Barry Salzman's "portraits of clothing" that victims of the Rwandan genocide were wearing when they were murdered, *The Way I Became another Genocide Victim*, CTHGC, opened 28 April 2024. See Tali Feinberg, "Making the Silence of Genocide Speak", *South African Jewish Report*, <https://www.sajr.co.za/making-the-silence-of-genocide-speak/> (accessed 5 July 2024).

19 Petersen, "Teaching Humanity"; see also Tali Nates, "'But Apartheid was also Genocide . . . What about our suffering?' Teaching the Holocaust in South Africa – Opportunities and Challenges", *Intercultural Education* 21 (2010): suppl. 517–26, <https://doi:10.1080/4675981003732183>.

racism engineered by the state. It is not the intention to conflate apartheid with genocide.

Pausing during a recent student tour of the exhibition at the Bedzin installation, Jakub Nowakowski, appointed the director of the CTHGC in 2023, who is Polish but not Jewish, remarked that its focus on humanizing the victims is in keeping with conventions of Holocaust museums.<sup>20</sup> Nowakowski grew up in a former Jewish neighbourhood of Kraków and for a long time was puzzled by the traces of the old residents, for example in his mother's use of Yiddish or Hebrew words. Gradually, he came to find out and was appalled by what had happened to Kraków's Jews. His view is that there is certainly still a place for mourning and commemorating victims and for celebrating stories of "courage". He also thinks that it has been important to open the space of the Holocaust Centre to accommodate other genocides.<sup>21</sup> However, gesturing towards the Bedzin installation, he made the point that he would like to see more exploration of the perpetrators and not only of the victims as human beings.<sup>22</sup> Nowakowski emphasizes that genocide "was all done by ordinary people", so the emphasis for students is on how "not to become a perpetrator."<sup>23</sup> His views are in line with the aims of both the exhibition and the educational programme, but perhaps in the exhibition, alongside the displays of spectacular propaganda and mass mobilization, there should be installations that would allow visitors to ponder why they were so effective. Why were so many Germans in the 1930s susceptible to their messages?<sup>24</sup>

Staff of the CTHGC, wary of children's fascination with macabre aspects of Holocaust representation and with Hitler himself, think that the emphasis should fall on the importance of making the right moral choices under duress.<sup>25</sup> All the Centres share a "Lessons for Humanity" orientation with recently published UNESCO materials to which some of their staff have contributed.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that perhaps it is the

20 Jakub Nowakowski, tour with postgraduate students, 30 May 2024.

21 Nowakowski, interview.

22 Nowakowski, tour.

23 Nowakowski, interview.

24 Glezer, post-interview discussion, said she encourages visitors to think about this question.

25 Barnett, interview.

26 See esp. Unesco and UN, *Teaching to Prevent Atrocity Crimes: A Guide for Teachers in Africa*, UNESCO UNESDOC Digital Library, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386136> (accessed 5 April 2024).



exhibition rather than the educational programme that might need some modification. Tracey Petersen, who was associated with the production of the UNESCO materials, cautions against a tendency to see the trajectory to genocide as inevitable, perhaps unintentionally reinforced by the exhibition's "road" to genocide from which it is impossible to deviate.<sup>27</sup> The highly commendable immersive effect rendered through the "recreated environments",<sup>28</sup> most impressively the Warsaw Ghetto, might also dull visitors' critical faculties. What if they think they have done the work required simply by imagining that they have briefly relived the ghetto experience or that of the concentration camp internee? They do not ask: how did it come to this, or might it have been possible that I would have been the camp guard, the bystander who watched Jews being humiliated and beaten on the street, or the bureaucrat who arranged for people to be transported to the camps? As Nowakowski suggests, it is vitally important to understand how the young blonde boy of the Hitler Youth poster on display became a ruthless murderer.<sup>29</sup>

In 2024, staff worried that negative perceptions of the CTHGC would develop following the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel war in October 2023, especially given several vociferous pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Cape Town, and the case of genocide against Israel that South Africa took to the International Court of Justice at the end of 2023.<sup>30</sup> The Centre is apolitical and does not attempt to offer material on the Middle East since this lies beyond the expertise of its staff and available resources. However, anxieties were allayed. The CTHGC continued to be popular on school itineraries – for under-resourced schools, the Centre provides travel subsidies. Also, supported by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, the team runs teachers' workshops in rural areas where educators often battle with severe resource deficits and classes of about sixty students. According to staff, teachers enthuse about the educational resources, particularly those not requiring advanced technology or electricity, as well as pedagogical strategies for teaching a difficult subject to large classes.<sup>31</sup>

It has been assumed that children distant from the European Holocaust

27 Petersen, "Teaching Humanity", 181, referring to the "relentless progression".

28 Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre.

29 Nowakowski, tour.

30 Nowakowski, interview; Barnett, interview.

31 Barnett, interview.



in time and place find it difficult to relate to,<sup>32</sup> and, in keeping with the presentation of *Anne Frank in the World*, the CTHGC continues to facilitate an exploration of apartheid, as mentioned earlier. However, for visiting children even apartheid may be receding into history. Glezer mentioned having known Holocaust survivors. Astonished, the children exclaim: “What! How old are you?”<sup>33</sup> Mitigating the distance, the USC (University of Southern California) Shoah Foundation’s AI-assisted *Dimensions in Testimony* allows students to be “in conversation” with Holocaust survivors. Barnett, however, tells the story of a simpler but perhaps equally profound encounter. A member of the education team brought in her family’s apartheid passbooks for students to examine. One student, moved by the experience, remarked: “I can’t believe I’m holding this piece of history!”<sup>34</sup>

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32 Nowakowski, interview; Barnett, interview.

33 Glezer, interview.

34 Barnett, interview.