

THE YARNTON DECLARATION OF JEWISH INTELLECTUALS ON THE FUTURE OF AUSCHWITZ

Preamble

The commission established in the autumn of 1989 by the Polish prime minister, Mr Tadeusz Mazowiecki, to consider the future of the Museum and monuments at the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau has indicated that it would welcome suggestions from the Jewish world as to how its tasks could best be carried out. Accordingly, a group of Jewish intellectuals from nine countries met at Yarnton Manor, Oxford, on 6-8 May 1990 to formulate a considered response. As a group, we decided to recommend that the following general principles and concrete suggestions should be taken into consideration in any reorganization of the Museum.

A. General Principles

A1. At least 1.6 million men, women, and children were murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex. Respect for their memory must guide all aspects of the organization of the Museum.

A2. The Museum displays and monuments should show clearly that over 90 per cent of those who were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau were Jews. It should be made clear that the Jews were, apart from the Sinti and Rom, the only people condemned to torture and death for the mere 'crime' of existing.

A3. In addition, the Museum displays and monuments should acknowledge the very large numbers of non-Jewish victims. The key role of the camp in the Nazi campaign to destroy Polish nationhood should be given full recognition.

A4. The people murdered at Auschwitz, both Jews and non-Jews, were drawn from all walks of life and all political persuasions. Their cultural, religious, and national diversity should be made evident in the exhibitions.

A5. Exhibitions should stress that the atrocities committed at Auschwitz were perpetrated by the German National Socialist regime and its collaborators.

A6. In reorganizing the displays and monuments at the Museum, the commission established by the Polish government should seek to consult as widely as possible, including with survivors' organizations and with Yad Vashem and other Holocaust institutions.

Disquiet has been expressed in many quarters at the instrumentalization of the Auschwitz site and the increasing introduction of religious and other symbols. Accordingly, no further unilateral changes should be introduced in the physical organization of the Museum without consultation, and innovations not authorized by the authorities responsible for the administration of the Museum should be stopped.

/contd.

B. Concrete Suggestions

B1. We view with concern the possible detrimental effects of large-scale tourism and the evident difficulties of accommodating so many visitors (currently 700,000 per year) without harming the dignity and integrity of the site. In this context we would welcome the formulation of a comprehensive plan for the Museum and its environs, to be drawn up by the Museum authorities. The plan should display creative sensitivity to the needs of future generations, including the question of a Jewish centre or monument(s).

B2. New concepts need to be devised for orienting visitors, both before they enter the Museum and on completion of their visit. The preparation of new audiovisual materials would be a good start in this direction.

B3. The national displays housed in the former barracks of Auschwitz should give proper emphasis to the large proportion of Jews among their deported nationals and should show their contribution to national life before the Shoah. They should also draw attention to the complex problems involved in the attitudes of local populations towards the deportation of the Jews. Those responsible for the administration of these exhibitions should be encouraged to achieve this. The display in the Jewish pavilion could then be revised to fulfil the role of giving a broad overview of Jewish religion, society, and culture, past and present.

B4. To enable individual visitors to see all parts of the Museum, a shuttle-bus service should be provided between the carpark at Auschwitz and the entrance to Birkenau.

B5. A new guide book for the Museum should be prepared as soon as possible. The Museum should also commission supplementary reading material catering for the different religious, national, and cultural interests of visitors.

B6. The recruitment and training of guides need to be carefully reviewed. In addition, for those not wishing to take a guide, cassette-players with headphones should be provided.

B7. In reorganizing the displays in the Museum, particular attention should be given to the depiction of the Nazi policy of mass murder and its roots. Care needs to be taken to show how this policy was organized and implemented in the camp.

B8. There should be a review of existing inscriptions and signs, and a uniform policy adopted as to their size, character, and informational content. Hebrew should be included among the languages used.

B9. An area must be set aside, possibly in the administration block at Birkenau that overlooks the former concentration camp there, in which a continuous tape listing the names of victims should be played. This would help to perpetuate the memory of those murdered, in the face of the oblivion to which the Nazis condemned them. A facility enabling those who wish to add to the names on the tape should be provided.

B10. The Museum bookshop should stock a wide selection of books and audiovisual material on Jewish civilization and on the Shoah. The Museum authorities should encourage a programme of translation of appropriate works on these subjects.

B11. The Museum restaurant should have food prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws permanently available.

B12. Difficult issues relating to ethical, philosophical, and religious problems of the Shoah should be the subject of a carefully worked out programme of displays, seminars, and discussions at appropriate locations.

B13. A new set of guidelines for standards of dress and behaviour in the Museum should be drafted and widely publicized.

B14. We should like to see the involvement of Jewish intellectuals in the implementation of these proposals.

This declaration was handed by us to the following representatives of the Polish government's Commission on the Future of Auschwitz who assisted us in our deliberations: Mme Krystyna Marszałek-Miynczyk (Chairman), Mr Stefan Wilkanowicz (Secretary), and Dr Stanisław Krajewski.

SIGNED BY THE CONVENORS
(On behalf of all the participants)

Mr ANTONY LERMAN
Institute of Jewish Affairs

Prof. ANTONY POLONSKY
Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies

Rabbi Dr NORMAN SOLOMON
Centre for the Study of Judaism and
Jewish/Christian Relations

Dr JONATHAN WEBBER
Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies

Yarnton Manor, Oxford
8 May 1990

/contd.

PARTICIPANTS

Mr Rex Bloomstein (UK), Prof. Raphael Draï (France), Prof. Maurice Goldstein (Belgium), Prof. Jan Gross (USA), Dr Anne Grynberg (France), Prof. Jean Halpérin (Switzerland), Mr Ben Helfgott (UK), Dr Lukasz Hirszowicz (UK), Dr Stanisław Krajewski (Poland), Dr Simon Lauer (Switzerland), Rabbi Dr Jonathan Magonet (UK), Prof. Michael Marrus (Canada), Prof. David Novak (USA), Prof. Antony Polonsky (UK), Prof. Gillian Rose (UK), Dr Moshe Rosman (Israel), Prof. Richard-Rubenstein (USA), Dr Raphael Scharf (UK), Rabbi Michael Schudrich (USA), Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon (UK), Dr Michael Steinlauf (USA), Prof. Herbert Strauss (West Germany), Prof. Shmuel Trigano (France), Dr Jonathan Webber (UK), Mme Annette Wieviorka (France), Prof. James Young (USA).