

THE HORROR ON DISPLAY

The peril of hatred is front and center at museum exhibit on Auschwitz

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Not far from the parks and gardens of Battery Park City lurks a husk from history's nightmares.

The windowless boxcar outside the Museum of Jewish Heritage was built some time between 1910 and 1927 and was used by the Third Reich during World War II. There is no evidence that this specific vehicle was used to transport European Jews to Nazi extermination camps, but it is identical to those that did. Its presence and weight hits in a way that no replica could.

It is part of a new show at the museum called "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away." The exhibit occupies three floors of the 20-year-old museum and features more than 700 original objects and 400 photographs. It has one primary mission: to educate.

"Anti-Semitism and hatred should be gone and past, but we must redouble our efforts, especially with the younger generation," the museum's chairman, Bruce Ratner, said during a press preview last week. "[In] the exhibit you will see the famous poem by Martin Niemöller, 'First they came . . .' It answers the biggest question, 'How could this happen?'"

World Jewish Congress leader Ronald Lauder cited recent polls suggesting two-thirds of millennials don't know about the Holocaust and addressed the rise of so-called populism in Europe.

"This must be fought; there's nothing we can do but let people see the horrors of Auschwitz," he said.

The exhibit pulls no punches. Upon entering, an audio guide

does what it can to prepare you for "the darkest chapter in history" and "complete inhumanity." One faces concrete pillars and barbed wire brought over from the Polish extermination camp, and again the difference between reading about these things and seeing them is made abundantly clear.

Auschwitz, the most famous Nazi camp, is a microcosm for the attempted destruction of the European Jews (6 million of whom were killed), but the site, itself, served many functions before it became a factory of death. It held Soviet prisoners of war, exploited slave labor on behalf of IG Farben, and then, once engineers devised the cruel use of gas chambers and furnaces, it was where nearly 1 million Jews and thousands of others were murdered.

This exhibit is comprehensive. The town, known as Oswiecim in Polish, dates back to the Middle Ages. Jews were a part of its society for centuries, with some merchants making use of its well-situated train station for trade. Artifacts from earlier centuries give little hint of what is coming.

We see the roots of anti-Semitism, World War I and the rise of the Nazi Party, connecting the dots as best as one can to explain how hatred and violence can manifest as state-sponsored policy.

The museum's interim president and CEO Jack Kliger feels the artifact with the most resonance is a 16th century edict stating Jews must wear an identifying symbol, a precursor to the yellow star of the Nazi era. The proclamation was given to Hermann Göring by Reinhard Hey-



The show, titled "Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away," is at the Museum of Jewish Heritage through Jan 3.



A barrack from Auschwitz-Monowitz satellite camp (1942-1944).

drich as a birthday present, as if to suggest they were on the right path. Now it sits under glass in a museum analyzing cruelty and hate.

It is alongside anti-Semitic children's books, propaganda posters and a screen showing Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will."

Then we see the result of political scapegoating: xenophobia, bloodshed and the systematic destruction of a people unmatched in human history.

Though "highlights" is hardly an appropriate term, the exhibit includes a drawing of mandalas made by Anne Frank and the

trumpet belonging to Louis Bannet, the "Dutch Louis Armstrong."

Some areas are especially wrenching, such as displays of ovens that were able to burn 4,416 corpses per day, and medical equipment similar to that used by Dr. Josef Mengele. There is a section devoted to the treatment of children. A third-floor room focused on persistence and resistance is situated under a skylight offering a temporary respite.

Kliger said the museum has raised funds to bring in 100,000 schoolchildren. (Over half of the 25,000 presold tickets are for class trips.) Specialized tours have been devised by age group, the youngest for age 11.

"Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away." begins with the cattle car out front. Yet at its conclusion, on the third floor, facing New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty is revealed — still a worthy symbol of light against darkness.