



WASHINGTON

Print This Story

## Holocaust museum accused of neglecting Muslim anti-Semitism

By Eric Fingerhut

WASHINGTON, Jan. 25 (JTA) — The grand mufti of Jerusalem made an alliance with Adolf Hitler during World War II. Yet, visitors to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., will learn nothing about it.

Some Jewish activists want to change that.

The locally based Holocaust Museum Watch is urging the museum to take a leadership role in exposing Arab and Muslim anti-Semitism both during the Holocaust and in the present day.

The absence of programs or information on the topic is a “dereliction of duty” by the facility, HMWatch chair Carol Greenwald charged last week, speaking during a forum at Ohev Sholom Talmud Torah.

HMWatch had asked U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council chair Fred Zeidman to speak at last week’s program, but he declined the invitation.

Greenwald and other panelists — who included Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) — all lauded the museum for the work it has done in bringing the story of the Holocaust to millions of Americans and others around the world, but accused it of avoiding the issue of Muslim anti-Semitism for political or proprietary reasons.

Among their complaints is the museum’s failure to detail Jerusalem Grand Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini’s connection to the Nazis. The two met in Berlin in 1941, and Hitler pledged his assistance in ridding the Arab world of Jews.

Later in the war, the mufti, among other activities, broadcast radio messages supporting the Nazis and helped recruit Muslim SS units in the Balkans.

The museum also bypasses the persecution of North African Jews, said Shelomo Alfassa, founder of the Sephardic Holocaust Project and executive director for the International Society for Sephardic Progress.

Nothing in the museum details the forced labor camps in Tunisia, from which 4,000 Jews were deported to European extermination camps, Alfassa said. Nor, he said, is there mention of the “Vichy restrictions” forcing Jews into ghettos in Morocco during the wartime period.

Edwin Black — author of “Banking on Baghdad, a history of Iraq” — points out that the museum makes no mention of the Farhud, a 1941 pro-Nazi pogrom in the Iraqi capital city that killed more than 200 Jews and destroyed hundreds of Jewish businesses.

Efforts to get the museum to recognize the anniversary of the Farhud have been rebuffed, he said. Black emphasized that he was not a member of HMWatch, but was representing himself on the panel.

He believes that the museum has avoided the topic because if museum historians “didn’t discover it, grow it and package it, it doesn’t exist.”

Others blame political demands for the museum’s failure to include such information in its permanent exhibit, or to explore concerns about current Muslim anti-Semitism in the same way the museum has sponsored programs on the genocides in Sudan and Rwanda.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, president of AMCHA, The Coalition for Jewish Concerns, recounted the Clinton administration’s ill-fated 1998 attempt to have then-Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat tour the museum.

Then-museum director Walter Reich — who is Weiss’ brother-in-law — refused to escort Arafat on a tour, and was forced out of his position just a few weeks later.

“Often the political demands being made on the museum by the government is in conflict with keeping the Shoah’s memory pure,” said Weiss, who in his speech did not offer any additional examples of such political pressures in recent years.

The museum receives more than half of its funding from the government. In fiscal year 2004, according to the museum’s annual report, the facility received approximately \$28 million in private funds and \$40 million from the federal government.

In an interview, museum director of media relations Andy Hollinger avoided responding directly to the activists’ specific grievances and accusations, but emphasized that the museum’s “very existence” is predicated on demonstrating “what the consequences are of anti-Semitism anywhere.”

“Every exhibition we’ve done speaks directly to anti-Semitism and what its potential consequences are,” Hollinger said.

The museum, he added, had plans in the works for an exhibition on the famed anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that would include information on the background, history and contemporary circulation of the book.

“We’re going to continue to fulfill our mission,” Hollinger said.

Michael Berenbaum, who served as project director during the creation of the museum and later as the director of the museum’s research institute, was more emphatic in his criticism of HMWatch’s goals.

“This is an instrumentalization of the Holocaust,” said Berenbaum, “in order to suit a contemporary political agenda.

“The museum should not be transformed into another Jewish defense agency,” like the Anti-Defamation League or the American Jewish Committee, added Berenbaum, now a consultant on the development of museums.

“It has a different task, to educate the American people” about the Holocaust and be “a moral voice against genocide,” he said, adding that the museum must “save its moral platform for the most serious efforts against genocide.”

Berenbaum said the areas at issue were discussed during the museum’s formulation. The mufti, he said, was no more than a “bit player” in the Holocaust, and deserves a few photo “captions at best.”

He acknowledged that the North African story is more significant, but pointed out that it was difficult to “tell that story” — with its relatively small scale — when compared with the “main thrust of the story” in Europe.

He noted that “other things were left out” as well, including information on Western Europe during the Nazi era.

Former museum director Reich also said it was “understandable” that North Africa, which lost 1 percent of its Jews, gets less mention at the museum than Europe, which saw more than two-thirds of its Jews murdered. Nonetheless, he said in an interview, the museum “should pay more attention than it has to the suffering of the Jews in North Africa during the Holocaust, particularly at the hands of the Vichy French authorities and the Germans.”

“There’s no question the Holocaust museum should be doing something about it, such as holding special programs or a temporary exhibit,” said Reich, a professor at George Washington University.

Greenwald said that HMWatch’s next step will be to see when and if the museum responds to a letter from Engel on the issue. She also said the group is working on a conference to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the Farhud on June 1.

 [Print This Story](#)

[Back to top ^](#)