

Armenians seek place in museum

Wiesenthal center's lack of an exhibition on the 1915 genocide is criticized. Museum says a display is in the works.

By Christopher Reynolds
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Since the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance opened its doors in 1993, its founders have aimed to commemorate the Holocaust and to explore prejudice and persecution worldwide -- a daunting dual mission that has won admirers from Jordan's King Hussein to Hollywood's Arnold Schwarzenegger.

But as the institution's 10th anniversary approaches, a widening circle of critics has gathered to press museum officials with a single question: Where are the Armenians?

The museum, those critics assert, has backed away from its own pledges to include the first genocide of the 20th century -- the Armenian genocide of 1915 -- as a part of its permanent exhibition. That genocide is effectively absent, some of those critics suggest, because of a 21st century political alliance between Jewish leaders and the Turkish government whose predecessors carried out that genocide.

"It's kind of ludicrous, if you're going to talk about the 20th century, not to mention it. It's like teaching U.S. history and beginning with the Civil War," said Ardashes Kassakhian, director of governmental relations for the western region of the Armenian National Committee of America.

Museum director Liebe Geft acknowledged that the Armenian genocide, once featured in an introductory film, hasn't been part of the museum's permanent display or introductory film presentation for five years. But she dismissed the criticism as "unrealistic and erroneous."

Geft noted that the museum does recognize the Armenian deaths as an act of genocide -- a view still contested by the Turkish government -- and has taken many steps to acknowledge that. From 1993 until an update at the end of 1997, she said, the museum's introductory film included the genocide. Temporary exhibitions have touched on the topic, she said, and upon request, visitors will find that the museum's library and learning center have at least 70 books and two videos about the Armenians. Geft also said a display including the Armenian genocide will be added to the institution's permanent exhibitions "very soon."

Most historians agree that the genocide of 1915 brought the deaths of up to 1.5 million Armenians, through executions, starvation and forced marches that occurred until the Ottoman Empire fell in World War I and was replaced by a Turkish republic in the early 1920s.

The Armenian deaths have received renewed attention in recent months, following the release of the Atom Egoyan film "Ararat" and publication of the book "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide" by Samantha

Power. Seizing the moment, Armenian American activists have accelerated their campaigning.

The result is a thorny three-way negotiation over history, memory and tragedy that touches an estimated 500,000 or more Jews, 150,000 Armenians and 5,000 Turks in Los Angeles County -- and puts museum leaders under a microscope.

"There's a struggle that is going on in the United States today about how to appropriately recognize the Armenian genocide, and it's all tied up in politics with Turkey and NATO and the Middle East," said John K. Roth, a professor of philosophy at Claremont McKenna College and veteran of about 30 years studying the Holocaust and genocide.

"This is the politics of memory," said Elazar Barkan, professor of cultural studies and history at Claremont Graduate University. Whether or not the Armenian genocide is present in the museum, he said, "it's a political statement. Either way."

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, a member-supported nonprofit organization founded in the late 1970s by Rabbi Marvin Hier, spends about \$28 million yearly on a mission of "education and social action related to racism and prejudice within the context of the Holocaust." The center's ventures include the museum in Los Angeles, plans for a New York Tolerance Center (to open in mid-2003) and a Jerusalem Center for Human Dignity and Museum of Tolerance (to open in 2006-07).

As a museum director, Geft said, she hews to no political agenda, just a mandate to reach visitors, in part by remaining topical. In recent years, she said, that has meant less attention not only for the Armenians but also for issues such as the Cambodian genocide of the late 1970s.

For evidence of the museum's strategy, Geft said, visitors need only look to its displays on civil rights in the U.S., its references to Rwanda and the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, or its entire third floor, where the museum on Feb. 11 will unveil a celebration of American diversity that traces family histories of poet Maya Angelou, comedian Billy Crystal, musician Carlos Santana and baseball player and manager Joe Torre.

However, Wiesenthal Center officials do acknowledge that because of Turkey's historically benign treatment of its Jewish population, and because of Turkey's status as an ally of U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East, many U.S. Jewish leaders are alert to Turkish sentiments. As recently as Nov. 10, the Wiesenthal Center issued a release urging the European Union to admit Turkey as a member.

"When you have a society that didn't throw you into ghettos, there is a reservoir of goodwill toward Turkey among many Jews, including myself," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who serves as the Wiesenthal Center's associate dean and has worked on museum projects since before its opening. In the last five centuries of Jewish history, Cooper said, "interaction with Turkey is one of the bright spots in an otherwise horrible, miserable period of exile."

When the Museum of Tolerance opened in 1993, Cooper asked, "Were the Turks happy that we put in a segment on the Armenian genocide in the Museum of Tolerance? Absolutely not. We had letters and we had visits." But none of those efforts played any role in any museum decisions, Cooper said.

Meanwhile, in the Los Angeles Turkish Consulate office, Acting Consul General Ozgur Kivanc Altan said that, in recent years, "obviously, there has been contact between the consulate and the museum, but not in the dimension you are mentioning."

Altan said the consulate has not contributed to the Wiesenthal Center or the museum and has made no efforts to influence museum exhibitions. However, he noted, he has visited the museum, and "our position is well-known by the Armenians and also by the museum itself."

That position, in a nutshell, is that the crisis that began in 1915 "would not merit inclusion in the museum if it would be presented as Armenian genocide," Altan said. "What we are saying is, yes, a terrible tragedy took place, and yes, many Armenians lost their lives terribly. But also in that war, more than 2.5 million Turks and Muslims lost their lives."

The conflict between Armenians and Turkish leaders has persisted through nine decades and has spilled into Southern California. Armenian militants assassinated two Turkish diplomats in Los Angeles in 1973, and another in 1982.

Meanwhile, at colleges nationwide, Turkish officials have pledged funding for professorships, drawing charges from Armenians that the gift conditions will taint scholarship. UCLA's history department, offered \$1 million by Turkey in 1997, declined it on an 18-17 vote.

And at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., which opened two months after the Museum of Tolerance in 1993, lobbying by Armenian, Turkish and Jewish groups was in full cry before visitors ever stepped in.

In their book "The Holocaust Museum in Washington," that institution's founding director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, and co-author Rina Elieli recall intense lobbying by Armenian Americans seeking inclusion of the 1915 genocide, a counter-campaign by Turkish officials opposed to any mention of Armenians, and further lobbying from the Israeli embassy, weighing in on Turkey's behalf.

Ultimately, the Holocaust Museum's leaders included three mentions of the massacre in permanent exhibits, including the display of a quote attributed to Hitler on the eve of invading Poland in 1939: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of Armenians?"

>From its first days as a proposed offshoot of the Wiesenthal Center, the Museum of Tolerance has stood out as a likely new ideological territory for the Turkish-Armenian struggle.

At first, the Armenians seemed to have the upper hand. In 1985, when then-Gov. George Deukmejian, an Armenian American, granted \$5 million for the museum start-up, the legislation noted that Californians should be informed about the hatred and prejudice "which have so adversely affected the lives and well-being of so many human beings, through such mass murder as the Armenian genocide and the Nazi Holocaust and other genocides." Also, in interviews before the eight-level, \$55-million museum opened in February 1993, Hier was quoted repeatedly as saying that the Armenian genocide would be included. And so it was, for the next four years. Though no permanent exhibit at the museum has focused specifically on the Armenian experience, the events of 1915 were included prominently in an 11-minute introductory film at the museum: "It's Called Genocide." But at the end of 1997, museum officials made several changes, including the replacement of that film with a new 8 1/2-minute documentary "In Our Time," which omits Armenians and focuses more on horrors in the 1990s.

Former Gov. Deukmejian, now retired, said he had not visited the museum recently, but the omission of the Armenian genocide would be "very disappointing. It was my understanding that [the museum] would provide information regarding not only the Armenian genocide but all genocides through the world" in modern times. State Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg (D-Los Angeles) made similar points in a June 2001 letter seeking a permanent exhibit recognizing the Armenian genocide "in keeping with the promises extended to the Armenian community at the museum's inception."

In fact, said museum director Geft, the museum has been planning such an exhibit for more than two years, a "genocide wall," with information on many horrors through history, including the Armenian deaths. That project had been delayed by financial concerns and the press of other projects, Geft said, but should be completed "very soon." She said she couldn't specify a timetable.

The museum's critics, however, are unpersuaded.

"I have two reasons to suspect foul play here," said Harut Sassounian, publisher of the Glendale-based California Courier, an Armenian newspaper. "If it was an innocent rearrangement of exhibits, and the leadership believed that the Armenian genocide was an issue, they would have some kind of reference.... But it's totally eliminated," said Sassounian. "And the second reason is knowing the degree of cooperation between the Turkish government and various Jewish-American organizations."

Samantha Power, executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard, is more measured in her view, but said she, too, is perplexed by the museum's choices.

"It's a mistake" to leave the Armenian deaths out of any serious look at 20th century genocide, she said. Because of Turkey's campaigning, the Armenian genocide is "the only hard one [for curators] that's out there, and it's conspicuous that the hard one is missing."