Fragments of Life: A look at Artifacts in the Florida Holocaust Museum

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Abstract

The dominant trend in the current scholarship on artifact-based Holocaust museums, as evidenced by the positions held by James Young in *The Texture of Memory* and Oren Stier in *Committed to Memory*, claims all artifacts associated with the Holocaust should be viewed with the same suspicion, for these artifacts are understood only in terms of death, and not of life. In this thesis, I argue that the Florida Holocaust Museum, in its staging of artifacts, counters this claim, in large part, due to a section of the permanent collection dedicated to Jewish life before World War II. I describe what I call “distancing mechanisms”, which are tools that prevent the visitor from creating false memory experiences. The Florida Holocaust Museum uses distancing mechanisms to distance the viewer from the thickness of history without producing unmediated forms of memory that lead visitors to overly identify with Holocaust victims. Finally, I call attention to the importance of mundane artifacts, which, when effectively presented, create a relationship between the visitors and the past that emphasizes that these events happened to other people, without using the past to assault the visitor.
FRAGMENTS OF LIFE:
THE FUNCTION OF ARTIFACTS IN THE FLORIDA HOLOCAUST MUSEUM

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Introduction

When a group or individual is faced with teaching the horrors of the Holocaust, the first question that comes to mind might be, “How can this material be taught successfully?” To put it mildly, the Holocaust is not an easy part of history to teach. Holocaust educators and institutions of Holocaust education – including the museums I focus on in this thesis – must find a balance not only in what material they present, but also in how they present it. The material, if presented in its full detail, might horrify the visitors so much that they freeze, unable to absorb the information on display. There is also a risk that word may spread about the museum as nothing more than a shop of horrors, discouraging visitors. Even if visitors could absorb the material, there is a danger that the visitor will take only that horrifying information – the sickening images they see – away with them. On the other hand, the museum must be careful not to censor the material presented to the visitors. If a museum does not truthfully present the Holocaust by omitting parts of the historical period, it risks appearing to cleanse or even to revise history.

Among the many museums that tackle these issues is the Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM), located in downtown St. Petersburg. The main goal of the museum, according to its mission statement, is education: it is “dedicated to teaching the members of all races and cultures the inherent worth and dignity of human life in order to prevent future genocides”.\(^1\) In fact, part of the reason Holocaust education is required in the state of Florida is due to the Florida Holocaust Museum. Florida became the first state in the United States to mandate Holocaust education in public schools and the museum played a major role in reaching that

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\(^1\)Florida Holocaust Museum, 12 August 2011, [http://www.fiholocaustmuseum.org/About.aspx](http://www.fiholocaustmuseum.org/About.aspx)
milestone.\textsuperscript{2} Education has been the main goal of the museum since its beginning. In 1990, museum founder and Holocaust survivor, Walter Loebenberg, was able to make his dreams of a Holocaust center come to life. At that time, however, there wasn’t much of a concrete plan. Loebenberg had 28 posters from the Simon Wiesenthal Center that told the story of the Holocaust and needed a place to show them. He thought the center would be “a little room for a memorial” and a place “where people could go to read and reflect. That was all” (Bearden n.d., 1). After meeting with community leaders, the decision was made that a permanent Holocaust commemoration was needed in the Tampa Bay area.

What is now known as the Florida Holocaust Museum, a three-story building located in downtown St. Petersburg that has 27,000 square feet of space, started out as the Tampa Bay Holocaust Memorial Museum and Educational Center. The center was located in a 4,000-square-foot wing of the Jewish Community Center of Pinellas County (which is now a housing complex). In 1992, the executive director at the time, Steve Goldman, discussed how “the most important thing was education” and therefore the artifacts and exhibits would be used as a focal point for field trips (Vavala 1992, 1). Today, the ground floor of the Florida Holocaust Museum houses the core exhibit entitled \textit{History, Heritage, and Hope}. Beginning with a section dedicated to the history of antisemitism, the exhibit continues on to perhaps one of the most important parts of the museum, the section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII. The visitor is then led to a section about Hitler, the Nazi takeover, and the atrocities they committed while in power. The next few sections educate the visitor about other victims, legislation, the

\textsuperscript{2}Florida Holocaust Museum, 12 August 2011, http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/about/history.aspx
Kristallnacht pogrom of 1938, and the world’s response, including the story of the *St. Louis*, and those who took a stand against the Nazis. Slowly, the narration becomes more and more horrifying. The next section is dedicated to teaching about the *Einsatzgruppen*, deportation, and ghettos. The visitors then walk under a casting of the “Arbeit Macht Frei” ("work sets one free") gate from the Auschwitz I concentration camp, which leads them to a model of the Auschwitz death-camp complex. This is one of the most intense parts of the exhibit; here, artifacts from concentration camps and killing centers are housed, including parts of a barrack from Auschwitz. In the immediate area is the main artifact of the museum: boxcar #113 069-5, built in 1913 and known to have transported Holocaust victims to the camps (see Figure 1).

Walter Loebenberg went through many difficulties to bring the boxcar to Florida. When the museum obtained the boxcar, there were only two others in the United States. Loebenberg wanted the boxcar “to attract the community and serve as a catalyst for educational programs” (Gosier 1990, 1). The boxcar was not easy to acquire and the process was kept secret. It took months of negotiations and efforts to authenticate the boxcar, as well as a 35-day journey from Gdania, Poland to Tampa Bay. Jay Kaminski, Director of Development for the FHM, signed for the boxcar upon its arrival in January 1990, but was not even aware of what he was signing for until he got to the Port of Tampa. Loebenberg was hesitant to speak about the process by which the boxcar was obtained, but described it as “nearly impossible” in a museum pamphlet. In the same pamphlet, he commented that the Polish government did not want this (or any boxcar) to leave the country; nevertheless “with the help of some dedicated people” the boxcar

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3The *St. Louis* was a German ship that tried to find a home for 937 German Jewish refugees after they were denied entry to Cuba.

4Untitled Florida Holocaust Museum, n.d. From the collection of Madison Flashenburg
arrived in Tampa. Kaminski worked closely on the project, but over 20 years later, he still does not know all the details. In an interview, he discussed some of the problems that occurred. Loebenberg was vague in telling him specifics, but it was mentioned that even after the boxcar was loaded on a boat, the Polish government would not allow it to leave port. Allegedly, Loebenberg had to “make some friends, pay off some people, [and] do some things in order to entice them to allow the ship to leave with the boxcar on it”.  

Upon arriving in Tampa, museum staffers began working to ensure that the boxcar would not fall apart soon after being exhibited, and to restore it to its 1940's appearance. During this process, a tarp was put under the boxcar. As a conservator moved the tarp away, he saw something shiny and discovered a small ring. The ring is now displayed prominently alongside the boxcar, which rests on tracks from Treblinka in a climate- and light- controlled room. The small ring is a “poignant reminder of the boxcar's human cargo”; in the eyes of the museum administration, it represents life and the strength of the human spirit (Moore 1998, 2X). The first-floor ceiling above the boxcar is open, lowering the square footage of the second floor; there is a photograph wall that goes up the extent of the two floors. This photograph wall displays pictures (both as enlarged photographs and on screens that display slideshows) of victims, young and old — both those who were murdered and those who survived. The United States Holocaust Museum (USHMM) has a similar use of photographs. Instead of a two-story photograph wall, they have a three-story photograph tower that displays photographs from the Yaffa Eliach Shtetl Collection (see Figure 2). The collection is comprised of photographs taken between 1890 and 1941 from the small town of Eishishok, located in what is now Lithuania. The

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5 Kaminski, Jay. Personal Interview. 05 Jul 2011.
Photographs portray the vibrancy of the Jewish community, which existed for 900 years. Although the USHMM's photograph tower is much larger than FHM's photograph wall, both serve to "convey images of people fully alive, not yet victims of the Holocaust" (Linenthal 1995, 185).

Following the boxcar and photograph wall are sections dedicated to the Nuremberg trials, liberation, displaced-persons camps, partisans and resistance. The exhibit concludes with an area titled Lessons for Today, which focuses on genocides since 1945 and local hate crimes. There is also a ticker on display which goes up every 26 seconds, representing the statistic that a human dies from acts of genocide every 26 seconds. At the end of the first floor, just before the gift shop, is a small, quiet room for meditation. The room, which was recently renovated, is made of Jerusalem stone and visitors are invited to put a tzetel (a small piece of paper with a prayer written on it) into the walls, just as they would at the Western Wall. The prayers will regularly be removed and flown to Jerusalem to actually be put in the Western Wall.

Immediately following the meditation room is a staircase leading up to the second floor, which is used for temporary exhibits. These exhibits are often focused on a particular aspect of the Holocaust. For example, from October 13, 2011 to January 21, 2012, the museum housed an exhibit entitled Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges, on loan from the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. It begins with the story of Jewish

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7 This is the only part of the museum that encourages the religious practice of leaving prayers in holy places. It is important to note that this practice is not distinctly Jewish, as other traditions also follow this practice. For example, when visiting the St. Bonaventure Monastery, Roman Catholics often leave prayers written on slips of paper on the tomb of Solanus Casey (http://www.archdioceseofdetroit.org/AODOnline/News+++Publications+2203/Michigan+Catholic+News+12203+070803Solanusbeatification.htm). Iranian Muslim women leave pictures and prayers for their loved ones at the shrines of the family of the Prophet, specifically at the tomb of Zaynab in Damascus. My thanks to Dr. Adam Gaiser for this information.

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professors, scientists, and scholars that fled from Europe in order to escape Nazi tyranny. Upon arriving in the United States, many found it difficult to get jobs because of the antisemitic and nativist work atmosphere at the time. These attitudes led educators to find employment in the traditionally black colleges of the American South. The students at these universities grew up under the Jim Crow laws and faced persecution, intimidation, and terror from whites. *Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow* chronicles the coming together of these two groups, each a target of persecution, and how they managed to succeed in the segregated South. Many of the exhibits housed on this floor are contemporary art and offer the perspectives of the artists and how they respond to the Holocaust. The third floor of the museum contains offices, the largest Holocaust and genocide lending library in the Southeast, and a small genocide-related art gallery with rotating exhibits.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will argue that the FHM is a successful Holocaust museum because it affects people despite its distancing the visitor from the thickness of history. I will discuss the techniques of this distancing, which I call "distancing mechanisms," opposing them to the current consensus in scholarship on Holocaust artifacts, represented here by James Young in *The Texture of Memory* and Oren Stier in *Committed to Memory*. Distancing mechanisms are a problem-solving tool; they create an imagined but not actual closeness between the visitor and the victim. They create a balance between too much identification between the visitor and victim and too little identification. If there is too little identification, the visitor relates only with statistics and not people; if there is too much identification, the visitor

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becomes arrogant. One is literally arrogating something to oneself that is someone else's.\textsuperscript{9} By walking the reader through the permanent collection in the Florida Holocaust Museum, I hope to give him or her a sense of how the FHM counters Stier’s and Young’s point of view. While I am agreeing with the scholarly consensus that too much closeness is a problem, I am disagreeing with the claim that artifacts are limited. They can create a mediation in the spectrum of being either too close or too far from history. I will then discuss the killing center section of the permanent collection, focusing on the mechanisms by which the visitor is distanced from the past. Distancing mechanisms educate and move visitors without drowning them in the material and, I suggest, are even found in the museum's architecture.

In the second chapter of my thesis, I will pay specific attention to the section in the FHM dedicated to life before WWII. In giving visitors a sense of what life was before the Nazis came to power, this section helps visitors to keep in mind that Holocaust victims were actual people with stories and memories and multifaceted lives. I argue that, in glorifying the meaning of everyday life, the section dedicated to life before the Holocaust turns faceless victims back into human beings that led meaningful lives. In addition, I argue that this section dedicated to life before the Holocaust gives value to the artifacts in the museum’s collection that are associated with death.

In the third chapter of the thesis, I make general comments about the ways in which artifacts relate to the museum's mission. Young and Stier have argued that all artifacts are the same and have the same problems. Yet I argue that different relationships are created between the visitor and different types of artifacts. Artifacts are what tell a story and cause visitors to

\textsuperscript{9} My thanks to David Levenson for helping me conceptualize this issue more clearly.
imagine things. In this chapter, I discuss particular artifacts (not all of which are yet on display) such as a personal autograph book from a young girl escaping Germany.\textsuperscript{10} It is the artifacts and photographs in the museum from life before WWII that spark the imagination and give value to artifacts associated with death. I am not suggesting that FHM is consciously responding to Young and Stier or that the staff was even aware of their critiques, I am simply analyzing the narrative the museum gives to visitors. FHM reaches its mission and successfully educates visitors about the Holocaust, mainly through the use of distancing mechanisms and its section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII. All the while, it creates a unique relationship between the visitor, curator, and artifacts.

\textsuperscript{10} I handled some of these artifacts while interning at FHM in the Summer of 2011.
Figure 1. Photograph of the boxcar at the Florida Holocaust Museum. Photographer Unknown. Courtesy of the Florida Holocaust Museum.

Chapter 1
The Staging of Death Artifacts at the Florida Holocaust Museum and the Use of Distancing Mechanisms

The founders of the Florida Holocaust Museum, like every other Holocaust museum, had to figure out the appropriate method and technique of teaching the Holocaust to visitors. Perhaps, one might argue, a museum should expose the raw truths of the Holocaust and force visitors to witness the horror by covering its walls with enlarged pictures of piles of emaciated corpses from camps or ghettos, showing videos of people being shot into ditches, or displaying piles of human hair from Auschwitz. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) located in Washington D.C., this was a very controversial topic. For years before its opening, museum staff members and some survivors on the content committee debated the issue of the presentation of graphic material. The decisions made concerning what images to show visitors were certainly long, drawn out processes. The design team did not want to present visitors with “a horror show from beginning to end” but they also did not want to soften history for the visitor (Linenthal 1995, 194). Ultimately, the USHMM concluded that the use of privacy walls for some materials would allow them to reach a balance between images that were too graphic and not telling the full story of the Holocaust (Linenthal 1995, 198). The use of human hair also exemplifies the challenge of presenting visitors with graphic material. Human hair, brutally chopped from the heads of prisoners in Auschwitz, was to be put on display next to a photograph of shorn women in the camps and a photograph of bundles of hair ready for shipment for the use of manufacturing industrial felt and to be spun into yarn (Linenthal 1995, 211). Some argued that the hair created a more personal experience for the visitor because the hair was personal, unlike the metal of a Zyklon B canister or the wood of a
boxcar. In addition, the hair was not only a part of the person, but it represented the fact that
the Nazis used humans as products; they made material items from parts of the human body.
For members that supported the use of hair in the exhibit, the hair was necessary in order to
fully tell the visitor just how cruel the Nazis were. It showed how the Final Solution worked as
an extermination machine that “didn’t conclude with just the death of the victims, but...had to
include their processing and auctioning off of the products of their bodies” (Linenthal 1995,
212). Others argued that because it was so personal, it should not be displayed. For them,
putting something so intimate on display “would register as an act of defilement” (Linenthal
1995, 212). They argued that if the hair belonged anywhere, it should be in a memorial setting,
not a museum. This moral debate went on for several years and it was ultimately decided the
hair would not be displayed. It is currently in storage or, as Linenthal describes, “in limbo,
neither in place at Auschwitz nor in Washington D.C.” (Linenthal 1995, 216).

Because graphic material is so challenging to present, perhaps — someone else might
argue — a museum should aim at presenting only carefully selected (maybe to be dismissed as
“censored”) material, possibly focusing on one story with a happy ending, in which the entire
family escaped the Nazis and survived. For the imaginary museum that would present only such
edited materials, mundane items are proper representations of human life. The issue of
whether or not to display hair from Auschwitz or pictures of corpses never even comes up.
Representations of the Holocaust here would be safe. For this museum, a more appropriate
representation of life is something like the Paper Clips Project. This was a middle-school project
in which six million paperclips were donated to represent the 6 million Jews killed in the
Holocaust. For the “censored” museum, the project perfectly exemplifies the safe, restricted,
cleaned-up version of history (Smith 2001, C1). The project is safe because it is impersonal. When a viewer sees six million paper clips, they are not led to imagine the lives of six million victims. They simply see what is in front of them and are able to understand what the number six million looks like. They are not able to imagine the lives of the victims, only their numbers. Is it better to present the material in a censored way compared to presenting it in a graphic way? The presentation of extremely graphic material may be too much, but are six million paperclips really enough to communicate the horror of the Holocaust?

The extremes of over-horrifying and under-horrifying, that risk dishonoring the past in one way or another, seem to be everywhere. How can an educational institution such as a museum find a balance between the two extremes? What methods can be used to educate the general public about extremely difficult subject material? The Florida Holocaust Museum, I argue, utilizes a method of distancing visitors from the past without necessarily making them aware of it. As the visitors make their way through the museum, they are taken a step away from the atrocities committed against mankind during the Holocaust. At first glance, this may seem like a sort of protection for the visitor, or even a censorship of history that goes against the function of the museum as a disseminator of information. However, I argue that distancing visitors from the yawning chasm of one of history’s darkest times, if done in certain ways, can prove to be an effective teaching method. Because I will argue that effective distancing is always rooted in the encounter of the visitor with a certain kind of artifact, or with an artifact presented in a certain way, I will refer to this method of the museum’s use of artifacts as “distancing mechanisms,” to denote the way in which an artifact is the means of this distancing (as opposed to censoring practices which keep the material of the Holocaust at bay).
In current secondary literature on Holocaust museums and memorials, there is an apparent bias against artifacts as vehicles of producing Holocaust consciousness. In this chapter, I will discuss the arguments of James Young’s *The Texture of Memory* and Oren Stier’s *Committed to Memory* concerning the dangers of artifact-based museums. Both scholars claim that nearly all artifacts associated with the Holocaust should be viewed with the same suspicion, for in their eyes, artifacts are always understood in terms of death, and not life.\(^{11}\) The overall tone of Young’s 1993 book *The Texture of Memory*, which treats a variety of Holocaust memorials and museums, expresses a resistance to Holocaust artifact-based museums.\(^{12}\) His resistance is most clearly represented in his treatment of the museum at Auschwitz. In the section dedicated to the memorial camp of Auschwitz, the reader is given a brief history of the site. Young depicts how the camp was originally intended to be an internment camp for Polish political prisoners and how it became a separate labor and killing center (Young 1993, 128). The Germans built Birkenau over the Polish village of Brzezinka, which they destroyed in order to create the camp, making its “very foundation a bed of ruins” (Young 1993, 128). Young continues by pointing out that there are two blocks dedicated to telling the story of how Auschwitz came to be and other blocks were “converted into national pavilions, each with an exposition devoted to the national memory of a different country’s citizens at Auschwitz” (Young 1993, 132). Despite the individuality of each nation’s block, Young notes those blocks are not what visitors most remember, discussing that most visitors remember their “few moments” spent looking at huge displays of “floor to ceiling piles of prosthetic limbs, eyeglasses, toothbrushes, suitcases and the shorn hair of women” encased in glass (Young

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\(^{11}\) Young briefly treats artifacts from victims’ lives before the Holocaust, which I will discuss in Chapter Two.

\(^{12}\) See, for example, James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (Michigan, 1993), 133.
1993, 132). He questions what it is about extermination-camp artifacts that is so exciting to people and comes up with three answers to this question: historical knowledge, evidence, and emotional power. For Young, artifacts are a source of supporting evidence that prove the Holocaust happened. Visitors have a stronger response to seeing artifacts compared to hearing about them; the artifacts stir emotions within visitors including grief, horror, and revulsion (Young 1993, 132). In other words, visitors cannot help but feel a strange pull towards extermination-camp artifacts.

For Young, none of these reasons validate putting the artifacts on display. They have nothing to do with the visitor’s knowledge of historical events. He argues that Holocaust artifacts “force us to recall the victims as the Germans have” (Young 1993, 132). When the visitors see these artifacts, they recall the victims as a murdered people. They view them as a single, unbroken unit and do not recall them as a group of individuals; each person has unique characteristics, dreams, and hopes. The reader is then shown a photograph of a pile of suitcases with the names and birthdates of their owners written on them. For Young, artifacts such as a pile of suitcases from victim transports cannot represent human lives. This suspicion makes sense; there is a danger in using artifacts from the Holocaust that represent the loss of life, in reducing bodies to leather boxes. Young has a fear that the visitor will not look at Holocaust artifacts as a part of someone’s life, but only as a part of their destruction. Young argues these artifacts do not even have “traces of what bound these people together into a civilization, a nation, a culture” (Young 1993, 132). The artifacts do not represent the people as a community, let alone as individuals. The artifacts only tell the visitor that there were victims. For Young, the suitcases are like tombstones on display in which the victim wrote his or her own inscription
(see Figure 3). Young fears the visitor will see the suitcases as worthless objects or as abstract items that are nothing but names. He argues the victims are remembered “in the collected debris of a destroyed civilization” (Young 1993, 132). For Young, Holocaust artifacts only represent the destruction of European Jewry. He argues these artifacts (or as he calls them, “remnants”) remind visitors “not of the lives that once animated them, so much as the brokenness of lives” (Young 1993, 132). The artifacts force the visitors to see only destruction; the focus is only on the death of a people. Artifacts from death provide no focus on their lives before this unimaginable time in history. When it comes to artifact-based museums, Young fears that the use of these artifacts will lead to two things. One fear is that the visitors will see the artifacts only as representations of destruction. For Young, the artifacts are fragments of events that present themselves as the actual event. There is a risk that the piece will be mistaken for the whole event, “the implied whole for unmediated memory” (Young 1993, 127). By “unmediated memory” Young is referring the creation of memories and experiences that do not belong to the visitor, or the production of a substitute memory on the part of the visitor in which the visitor gains unmediated access to the dead. Unmediated memory-events exemplify Young’s fear that there will be too much closeness between the museum visitor and the past. Artifacts like the suitcases could indeed produce such unmediated memory, when the visitors put themselves in the victim’s shoes, creating undesirable memory-events if they are not presented properly.

The museum at Auschwitz is not the only museum he considers. Young also treats the USHMM in the final chapter of The Texture of Memory, dedicated to American museums and memorials. Here, treating the USHMM before its official opening, Young paints a much more
positive picture. For Young, no Holocaust memorial in America can compare to the USHMM. It is a national landmark built on American ideals, and therefore is of “fundamental significance to Americans” (Young 1993, 336). For Young, the USHMM does almost everything right — from its location, to its architecture, to its use of artifacts. Nevertheless, he is critical of the museum displaying artifacts from the victims’ lives, such as their shoes, because “any time an entire people is represented by the artifacts of their lives, something of life itself is lost” (Young 1995, 346). Concerning the use of these artifacts in the USHMM, Young applies the same critique that he made concerning their use in Auschwitz. Young’s critique of these specific artifacts is not enough to negate his many reasons for liking the USHMM. The museum’s placement on the Mall of Washington is appropriate because it sets a national standard for suffering, monumentalizing the Holocaust in America “as an ideal of catastrophe against which all other destructions will be measured” (Young 1993, 338). In addition, the architecture will “join the Capital urbanistically” while still being “abstract enough to accommodate all rememberers” (Young 1993, 339-40), and fundamentally positive. Young is more ambivalent about the USHMM’s use of ID cards given to visitors at the beginning of the exhibit. These ID cards contain a picture of a Holocaust victim and a brief biography, ending by informing the visitor whether the victim’s life was cut short in the Holocaust or if they survived. While they create a connection between a visitor and a victim — bringing the victim back to life through the visitor — Young argues that the ID cards also create unmediated memory and push visitors into drawing parallels between their visit to the museum and victims’ experiences in the Holocaust. Such an “experiential mode” in a museum “encourages a certain critical blindness on the part of the visitors” (Young 1993, 344). That blindness is most problematic for Young because it
undoes the goal of Holocaust museums: to prevent future genocides. When visitors imagine themselves as a past victim, they cannot imagine being a potential victim, which Young takes to be necessary for preventing future genocides (Young 1993, 344). When visitors only connect with victims of the past, and not current victims or potential victims of future genocides, they are not motivated to make changes in the world now. Young’s opinions on the USHMM are mixed, but the positive outweigh the negative. For him, the museum will “suggest itself as the ultimate triumph of America’s absorption of immigrants” which is to say both the immigrants and the memory of immigrants have become an integral part of American memory.

In order best to prevent his feared consequences of Holocaust memory in artifact-based museums, Young supports a Holocaust memorial culture that privileges the use of abstraction in monuments and art. Abstract monuments are a better representation for life lost. The story of Sol Lewitt’s monument titled *Black Form Dedicated to the Missing Jews* is one example of the abstraction that Young finds so appealing. The monument was a large black cube made of black stones, located in the community plaza in Munster, Germany. It “sat like an abandoned coffin” in the center of the plaza, like “a black light squatting in the center of a sunny and graceful university square” (Young 1993, 17). This type of monument is far better for Young than artifacts because there is no chance for the visitor to misunderstand what the monument means. It brings a darkness to an otherwise happy setting. A community plaza ideally is a place of clear skies and people relaxing in the sun, not a memorial site for the destruction of millions of people. The monument is clear in its purpose, unlike artifact-based museums. It boldly states that this is not a place where townspeople can impose their own narratives and desires on the past. Eventually, vandals covered it in graffiti, only creating a greater distinction between the
darkness the monument represented and its beautiful location. Due to a great amount of protest, the monument was demolished in March 1988. Yet the demolition of the monument is the most important part of the story for Young. Once the monument was destroyed, “an absent people would now be commemorated by an absent monument” (Young 1993, 18). This story represents Young’s belief that specific material things and artifacts cannot represent people. The message of the destroyed monument provides for a better Holocaust memorial site because visitors there are unable to create unmediated memories. The past is inflicted on the visitor.

In addition to destroyed monuments, Young finds other monuments, which he terms “counter-monuments”, strengthen his argument for abstraction in Holocaust memory. A counter-monument works best for Young because it “recognizes and affirms that the life of memory exists primarily in historical time” (Young 1993, 48). A counter-monument makes it very clear to the visitor that there is a strict dividing line between history and today. The visitor is allowed to learn about history and honor victims by remembering them, but they are not allowed to experience it. For example, in 1986 a monument designed by Jochen and Esther Gertz was unveiled in Hamburg, Germany titled Monument against Fascism. The monument was a 12-meter-high pillar made of hollow aluminum. Visitors were invited to write their names on the pillar and as more and more names were written, the pillar would be lowered into the ground. Eventually, there would be no pillar left at all. The monument demanded attention from people passing by. The goal for the monument was “not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet” (Young 1993, 30). The counter-monument does not allow visitors to create memories taken from history. It forces them to remember
what actually happened. Young finds that a vanishing monument is the best way to remember a vanished people. Counter-monuments remember history in its time. They make no attempt to bridge a gap between now and then; they remember a time they did not experience. Young believes that the abyss between the Holocaust and now is total. It cannot be crossed, and an attempt should not even be made. Artifact-based museums simply cannot do, in his eyes, what abstract monuments can do, which is recall the memory of victims without the visitors even having the slightest chance to create a memory that is not their own.

Oren Stier’s *Committed to Memory* expresses similar suspicions toward artifact-based museums as *The Texture of Memory*. In Stier’s chapter dedicated to Holocaust museums, he seeks an understanding of how Holocaust museums construct an accessible connection for the general public to the past. Before he begins his analysis, Stier emphasizes the risks of artifacts leading to unmediated memory. He stresses that museums must “be aware of the distinct separation from lived experience and social memory engendered by the placement of artifacts” so visitors do not take the experience as their own (Stier 2003, 114). He, like Young, is concerned that visitors will be unable to differentiate their experience in a museum from a victim’s experience during the Holocaust. For Stier, it is difficult for visitors to create a distinction between then and now because the artifacts do not create a distinction between then and now. They seem to exist both today, in the museum setting, and in a time before the visitor’s that cannot be understood. The artifacts do not provide a clear link between the visitor and the past. This creates “a highly charged atmosphere for mediation” (Stier 2004, 117). Because the artifacts seem to move through history, they encourage the visitor to move with them, inviting them to imagine memory events that they did not experience.
Another concern of Stier’s has to do with the removal of artifacts from their original location, or their displacement. The displacement of artifacts means that objects are placed “in an institutional context to create a fictional coherence” which is to say the museum uses artifacts as needed to fit into the museum’s narrative (Stier 2004, 118). The concern is that rather than building a museum’s narrative around the artifacts, the artifacts are determined by the narrative. This seems to take away some of the importance of the artifacts, as if they are merely pieces to a story rather than whole stories themselves. While this is indeed problematic, it is not Stier’s or Young’s biggest concern when it comes to the displacement of artifacts. Stier and Young argue that the common belief toward artifacts is that they embody the memory of victims (Stier 2004, 118, Young 1993, 127). When that is believed, visitors do not feel a responsibility for remembering the victims. They can simply leave the museum and forget about what they have seen and learned because the artifacts are the material witnesses. The artifacts are connected to the victims, so the responsibility to remember the past belongs to them, not to the visitor. The memory work is complete before a visitor enters the museum.

Finally, for Young and Stier, the biggest problem of all with artifact-based museums is that they remember the victims through their deaths.

Recalling that the Nazis themselves sought to establish in Prague a collection of artifacts by which their anticipated destruction of European Jewry would be commemorated, we should be aware of the potential problems associated with object-driven museum displays and wary of any overdependence on Holocaust artifacts in constructing museum narratives. As Young suggests: “That a murdered people remains known in Holocaust museums anywhere by their scattered belongings, and not by their spiritual works, that their lives should be recalled primarily through the images of their death, may be the ultimate travesty. These lives and the relationships between them are lost to the memory of ruins alone – and will be lost to subsequent generations who seek memory only in the rubble of the past. Indeed, by adopting such artifacts for their own memorial presentations, even the new museums in American and Europe risk
perpetuating the very figures by which the killers themselves would have memorialized their Jewish victims.” (Stier 2004, 128; citing Young 1993, 133).

Artifact-based museums not only lead to unmediated memory by the visitor and the abandonment of memory, but they memorialize the victims in the wrong way. For Stier, artifacts remember victims in the same way the Nazis would have remembered them in their museum. Stier’s book, without some of Young’s caution, more bluntly argues that in artifact-based museums, victims are not remembered for the lives they lived, but for the way they lost their lives.

While Young and Stier provide valuable insight to the risks of artifact-based Holocaust museums, in the remainder of this chapter I will argue that the Florida Holocaust Museum uses artifacts to narrate history and move the visitor without allowing them to participate in that story in the ways Young and Stier fear. FHM does this through what I call distancing mechanisms. Initially, such a term sounds like it belongs to a model of museums that dangerously censors the past. However, my argument for distancing mechanisms is heterodox. When artifacts are distancing mechanisms, they do not alter history. They do not hide the truths of the Holocaust; they simply do not allow the visitors to lose themselves in those horrifying truths. They prevent the visitors from imagining themselves as someone else, as someone murdered (and resurrected in the visitor). Distancing mechanisms are most easily understood when compared to techniques used by other museums. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as stated earlier, visitors receive ID cards upon arrival. This method, as Edward Linenthal describes in Preserving Memory, was used to “extend the boundaries of memory to connect visitors with some oft-overlooked victim groups” (Linenthal 1995, 187). The ID cards, as Young pointed out, are tools that could lead to the creation of
unmediated memory, but this has certainly proved to be a successful project at the USHMM. By using ID cards, the USHMM is trying to create a connection between the visitor and a particular victim. Because there were so many victims in the Holocaust, it can be overwhelming for visitors to imagine the magnitude of lives lost. In this case, the lessons of the Holocaust can be better taught when a person can focus on a specific individual. The visitors understand that they are not the person on the ID card. They may certainly feel an emotional connection to the victim on their ID card, but the connection is not necessarily so deep that the visitor feels as if he or she has died if the person on their ID card died during the Holocaust. The ID cards might prove to be a success, or might not. The USHMM can only hope that visitors respect the uniqueness of victims. But what does it mean not to distribute identification cards? By not following in the USHMM’s footsteps, the FHM is placing distance between the visitor and the past before the visitor even begins to explore the exhibits. The connections are made within the walls of the museum through the narrative it articulates. Unless the visitor has a personal connection to the Holocaust, the visitors are not allowed the chance for unmediated memory. They are unable to make others’ experience their own. They are given the opportunity to learn about the destruction of European Jewry and the destruction of all Holocaust victims only by looking at others’ artifacts and listening to others’ testimonies.

Distancing mechanisms are most pronounced at the Florida Holocaust Museum in the section of the permanent collection dedicated to the murder of the victims of the Holocaust. After viewing the section dedicated to deportation, visitors walk under a casting of the “Arbeit
"Macht Frei" gate, which welcomed prisoners to Auschwitz.\(^{13}\) As visitors pass under the sign, they feel as if they have gone through some sort of experience, potentially leading to unmediated memory. However, the moment does not equal the actual experience of being a prisoner and walking through the gates at Auschwitz; it marks a transition in FHM's narrative. This is because after passing through the gate, visitors are led to the section of the museum dedicated to the Final Solution, and the boxcar. FHM has two strategies for dealing with the risks associated with the sign recasting. The first strategy is docent-led tours. When the docent comes to the gate, the group is stopped and asked to look at the letter “B”, which is upside down. Then, a story is told that the letter is upside down because it was an act of defiance by prisoners who were forced to make the gate (See Levitt 2007, 248). According to Auschwitz-Birkenau’s museum website, the sign was made by a metalworkers’ labor detail, under the supervision of Jan Liwacz. The men turned the letter upside down as a “deliberate” but “camouflaged act of disobedience.”\(^{14}\) By telling this story, visitors are not allowed to form their own memory experience. The story creates a feeling of being taught by the inmates of the past, not a feeling of being an inmate. The second strategy is the placement of the boxcar after the gate. The boxcar prevents the Arbeit Matcht Frei gate from causing an experiential reaction on the part of visitors, because the boxcar does not lead to the section dedicated to the Final Solution. Holocaust victims were transported to camps in boxcars; this is not the case for visitors within the museum. Visitors only see a boxcar "inside" the camp after they pass through the gate. Visitors do not go from the boxcar to the camps; the narrative of victims' experience is


interrupted to prevent unmediated memory. The placement of the boxcar after the gate stops an experience before it can go too far, just as the docent-led tours do.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition, the staging of the boxcar at the Florida Holocaust Museum is a distancing mechanism that prevents unmediated memory. After passing through the gate, the visitor is led to the area where the museum’s boxcar lies. Visitors are able to walk around the full perimeter of the boxcar and examine it closely; they can even touch it if they like. However, the door remains sealed shut and visitors cannot walk through it as other museums allow. Why would a museum invite visitors to explore the inside of a boxcar? What does it mean to walk \textit{through} a boxcar that transported humans, stuffed in to the brink of suffocation, during the Holocaust? Walking \textit{through} a boxcar may offer a sense of redemption for some visitors, or at least participation. During the Holocaust, those that survived the journey were violently forced from the boxcar, only to find themselves facing screaming guards and vicious dogs. Today, the visitor is able to walk out of the boxcar to a safe environment. They can go back to their everyday lives and have the freedom to practice the lessons learned from the Holocaust. Does that sense of redemption provide justification for allowing visitors to walk through a boxcar? For the Dallas Holocaust Museum, the goal is to “give visitors the sense of having been there” (Young 1993, 298). This is problematic because visitors, unless they are Holocaust survivors, cannot even begin to imagine what it was like to board, or spend hours or days in, one of those boxcars during the Holocaust. At the USHMM, visitors also walk through a boxcar, which is located before the casting of the \textit{Arbeit Macht Frei} entrance gate. Visitors walk through the boxcar to

\textsuperscript{15} I am not making any claims that FHM purposefully placed the boxcar after the gate. Because of limited space, that may have been the only way to work the narrative. However odd the placement may seem, the pedagogical effects are positive.
reach the section of the museum dedicated to camps. Just as Holocaust victims encountered boxcars first and then camps, visitors of the USHMM walk through the boxcar in order to get to the section dedicated to camps. This may lead to visitors feeling as if they have travelled in a boxcar that led them to a concentration or death camp, creating a false experience. Though visitors are slightly detached because they walk on a metal grate installed over the museum floor, they are still physically inside the boxcar. This cannot but lead to visitors imagining themselves as part of the actual Holocaust narrative (not the museum’s re-situating of the Holocaust narrative). Boxcars are excellent artifacts that help visitors make connections with the past, but it is important that there is a separation between the past of the victim and that of the visitor. Boxcars create an experience for the visitor that is acceptable, as long as a distinction is made between the experience of the victim and the experience of the visitor.

Walking through a boxcar has its limitations. It is successful only if the visitor is diligent enough to draw a distinction between them self and a victim. But this is not something on which a museum can depend. A museum cannot post a sign above a boxcar saying, “Remember the distinction between past and present!” and count on the visitor to be mindful of that. It is the museum’s responsibility to not only guide the visitor’s thinking throughout the exhibit, but also to protect them – even if unconsciously – from making the past their own. The most obvious way to do this is to make it impossible to walk through, or even be inside, the boxcar as the Florida Holocaust Museum does. Walking up to a boxcar does not allow visitors to create a false event; it simply allows them to engage the boxcar. By walking up to the boxcar, visitors have the ability to gain an understanding of what the boxcar was like, not what it was like for a victim of the Holocaust to be in a boxcar. A boxcar through which individuals can walk is not
necessary. In addition, it is inappropriate on Young's criteria, for it places visitors in a position that invites them to imagine themselves as having others' experiences—experiences that are not properly theirs.

The museums that house boxcars through which people can walk are not Auschwitz; they are not where Holocaust atrocities occurred. Holocaust sites are distant from Americans; Holocaust memories are infinitely distant from museum visitors. A boxcar may lessen this gap, but it cannot close it up. This artifact that was the first point of death for so many Holocaust victims is vital to Holocaust education. Yet, one can experience the boxcar — its immense size, its rusted metal, and its rich wood smell — without entering it. This experience, even from the outside, can be dangerous. Smelling the wood might make visitors feel a connection to the past, leading them to think they understand what it was like to be in one of those boxcars. The FHM does not solve USHMM's problems completely by placing the boxcar on the other side of the Arbeit Macht Frei gate. At this point, it is important to mention the ring displayed prominently in front of the boxcar, which was discovered during the cleaning of the boxcar (see Figure 4).  

The ring prevents this unmediated memory from occurring. It stops the visitors from inserting themselves into the Holocaust, while still allowing them to imagine a life that belongs to someone else. Because visitors understand that the ring does not belong to them, they cannot imagine the boxcar as "theirs". The ring makes a victim's life present in the boxcar. The ring guides visitors into a series of possible thoughts. They could imagine the ring on the finger of a small girl, or that of a petite, delicate woman. They could imagine diamonds are missing because they had been lost before deportation, or a woman taking them to barter, perhaps by

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16 Kaminski, Jay. Personal Interview. 05 Jul 2011.
swallowing them. In each case, it is someone else who is on the visitor's mind. The vital parts of the boxcar that lead to engagement can be experienced without walking through it and without identifying with the past.

The visitor does not need to be subjected to walking through a boxcar, even though it does not even come close to what victims experienced. Walking through a boxcar is not the same as spending days on end crammed with up to 100 or more other people, without food, water, or sanitation in terrible weather conditions without even knowing your destination.\textsuperscript{17} For a visitor to walk through a boxcar, imagine what it was like, and then create their own unmediated memory experience does an injustice to victims. It is impossible to imagine; only those who were there will ever know what it was actually like.

Unmediated memory, however unintentional, is a risk that, with the right presentation, can be minimized. In the case of the boxcar, it is prevented by both the presentation of the ring and by closing it off. Closing off the boxcar also presents it as “off limits” and suggests that “at least some of the Holocaust is off-limits too”.\textsuperscript{18} Experiencing the Holocaust is off limits to those who were not there, as are the memories of those who experienced it. They cannot be taken as the visitors. That is not to say that all a visitor imagines when in the boxcar’s vicinity is unmediated memory, which is exemplified by the ring. The most important part is that the focus is on someone else. The visitor is not seeing the victims as the Germans did, as Young might fear.

\textsuperscript{17} Florida Holocaust Museum, 12 August 2011, \url{http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/exhibits/permanent.aspx}

Further undoing Young’s fear is the use of architecture at the FHM. The architectural settings are deeply important in the telling of a Holocaust narrative. The first thing visitors see when going to a museum is the outside of the building, after all. It sets a tone that determines the visitors’ time inside the museum. When compared to other museums, such as the USHMM, the Florida Holocaust Museum may seem conventional, or even quaint. It does not create an experience through its architecture as the USHMM does. The goal of the architect of the USHMM, James Ingo Freed, was to create a building that would create feelings of “inexorable, forced movement: disruption, alienation, constriction, observation, selection” through the use of “raw materials and organization of space” (Linenthal 1995, 88). Visitors are disoriented right from the beginning. The entrance gives no clear direction of which way to go, and the spaces created are unwelcoming and cold. To get to the exhibition, visitors must use elevators, a forced mechanical means of transportation – just as the trains were during the Holocaust (Linenthal 1995, 91). Freed’s use of brick walls, exposed beams, boarded windows, metal fences, and gates is to create a feeling of being in a different place. For Freed, the purpose of these architectural details was to get across to the museum’s visitors that “the Holocaust is an event that should disturb and be felt as well as perceived” (Linenthal 1995, 91). In short, the USHMM creates an experience of making the visitor feel as if they have been taken out of Washington D.C.

At the Florida Holocaust Museum, this is not the case. The museum’s architecture was not conditioned to take on the experiential approach that Young fears. With Freed, there is a heavy experiential mood that is not present at the FHM. The architecture most certainly has a purpose, but it is does not attempt to take the visitor out of St. Petersburg. A common theme in
the architecture of the building is the use of triangles (see Figure 5). Nick Benjacob, architect of the museum, wanted the building to convey a message to visitors before even entering the building. For Benjacob, triangles were the right shape to use because they are “a broken shape”, one that is “suppressing” and “hard” (Moore 1998, 2X). Their corners are sharp and they seem to make a complete shape only when put together. Benjacob did not want to use circles or squares in the design because they are “whole shapes” (Moore 1998, 2X). A circle or square seems complete, unlike a triangle. Everything about the architecture of the building focuses on the sharp angles of the triangles to depict the sharp message of the Holocaust. The two entrances to the museum (one for staff and delivery) are triangular and triangles continue up onto the outer walls. Eleven triangular gas lamps hang at the entrances of the museum, representing the eleven million victims of the Holocaust. The architecture works with the narrative and provides the visitor with a sense of foreshadowing of the intense lessons from history they are about to learn. The sharp triangles on the outside of the building give a message that a cutting lesson is about to be learned. While the majority of the architecture does not give any sense of creating an experience for the visitor, there are a few key elements inside the museum that could be interpreted in that way. For example, the stairway leading up to the second and third floors incorporates the shape of a triangle. It is wide at the bottom and narrow at the top to make the visitor feel constricted. Unlike at the USHMM, visitors have a choice between taking the stairs and taking the elevator. At the FHM, there is no forced method of transportation representing how the Holocaust was a machine-like process or an obvious disorientation. If the visitor chooses to take the elevator, they will see a few posters about upcoming events. Only the careful will notice that the lights in the elevator look strangely
Another example is the Bridge of Unity on the second floor, which the visitor must walk across to get to the exhibit. There are two railings; one is eight feet high and the other six feet high, which “evoke the forbidding double fences of the concentration camp” (Moore 1998, 2X). To evoke is not to experience; visitors do not look at the railings and fear they will get hurt. The metal is smooth and is not some sort of infliction of the past upon the visitors. These few examples fit in the narrative of the museum more than they create an experience. The materials are hard and steel, which is representative of the industrial revolution that made the Holocaust possible; they are used as teaching tools. While these examples may allow for unmediated memory, I find they are more for thematic purposes compared to being used as an experiential means to an end. The harshness of the triangles and the architecture do not only convey a message of darkness. Benjacob notes that the design for the bridge and stairs is “also very modern”, so the feelings that may be evoked by them are not overpowering. They simply fit in with late-1990s trends in architecture.

For Young, the techniques used by the USHMM are favorable to those used by the museum at Auschwitz. In history, the goals of the Florida Holocaust Museum’s founders were not the same as the goals of the founders of the USHMM. FHM’s mission does not have the weight of the Mall of Washington that the USHMM does. It does not have the responsibility of portraying a purely “American” presentation of the Holocaust. The goal is to teach about the Holocaust and genocide, and it does this by centering visitor's experiences on the victim. Not only is the FHM successful with its use of architecture, it is also successful in its presentation of artifacts of killing. The Florida Holocaust Museum, in its staging of the kinds of artifacts that

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19Mermelstein, Sandy. Personal Interview. 03 Nov 2011.
have the most power to lead visitors to think that they too have experienced the Holocaust, goes far in solving the problems that Young and Stier have with artifact-based museums: they essentially create false experiences.

One of the ways these false experiences can be prevented is through a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII. In my next chapter, I will further discuss how this section in the FHM functions. FHM's use of a photograph wall, which physically separates sections of life and death, exemplifies how life-before artifacts can seep into death artifacts. The focus on artifacts from Jewish life before the Holocaust shows how extraordinary the lives of victims were, based on their ordinariness. These artifacts create a spark in the visitors' minds, which causes them to imagine about lives that are not their own. Imaging the lives of victims before they were victims creates a deeper appreciation for the lives lost. When visitors are able to recall the lives of victims before the Holocaust, they understand the horrific events they will later witness as happening to others and not to themselves. A section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII is an essential part of a Holocaust museum's success and goes far in preventing unmediated memory.
Figure 3. Suitcases displayed at the museum at Auschwitz. Photograph by Madison Flashenburg.

Figure 4. Photograph of the ring found in the boxcar. Photographer Unknown. Image from St. Petersburg Times.

Figure 5. Photograph of the outside of the Florida Holocaust Museum. Photographer Unknown. Image courtesy of FHM.
Chapter Two
Pre-war Artifacts and the Lessons They Teach

In the last chapter, walking the reader through the permanent collection, I showed how the artifact placement in the Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM) counters Oren Stier’s and James Young’s concerns about Holocaust museums. By engaging in distancing mechanisms, such as not allowing visitors to walk through a boxcar or not giving them an identification card, FHM communicates the horror of the Holocaust without allowing the visitors to be stymied by death. It educates and moves visitors without drowning them in the material. Despite all the images and artifacts about death in the killing center section of the exhibit, the lines of life and death are blurred by something as simple as a wall of photographs. The photograph wall, which divides the section that houses the boxcar and the section dedicated to life before WWII, physically links the two sections and also provokes visitors to think about the lives of the victims, and not only their sufferings at the hands of the Nazis, countering James Young’s fear of artifact-based museums. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) also has a section dedicated to Jewish life before the Holocaust, which is Young’s only exception in his critique of artifact-based museums because those artifacts define the Holocaust “not as mere killing, but as an immeasurable loss” (Young 1993, 345). Nevertheless, Young raises this exception only in passing. He briefly mentions the USHMM to be successful in its use of a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII. However, that section is still not enough for Young to make artifact-based museums work. When he addresses the USHMM’s use of artifacts from Auschwitz, his same critique of the museum at Auschwitz and its artifacts remains in force. Young acknowledges the significance of the section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII,
but not that it infuses life into the artifacts associated with death and destruction.\textsuperscript{20} Young discusses artifacts from the Nazi era in only one category: artifacts associated with death. By understanding these artifacts in such a limited scope, he fails to acknowledge artifacts from life before the Holocaust. The visitor that only associates artifacts from the Nazi regime with death ignores a people’s struggle to survive and fight to hold on to their very existence. It is only the use of a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII that makes the presentation of artifacts from death acceptable.

In this chapter, I will pay specific attention to the section in the Florida Holocaust Museum dedicated to Jewish life before WWII. This section, in my view, is the strongest example of a distancing mechanism that prevents unmediated memory. Its success lies in its ability to give visitors an idea of what life was like for European Jews before the Nazis came to power — to encourage them to imagine what the lives of victims were like when they were not yet victims — and to teach visitors that Jewish history did not start with the Holocaust. I will discuss how the museum glorifies everyday life; this is what turns the anonymous victims back into human beings whose lives were full of meaning. In the conclusion to this chapter, I will further examine James Young’s argument that part of the danger of artifact-based museums is that the public will not view certain artifacts for what they really are — pieces of life — making them meaningless. On my account, seeing artifacts related to death, even after a section of a museum dedicated to Jewish life before the Holocaust, primes the visitor to ask questions about the victim’s life, a life that is understood as someone else’s. The section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII gives value to those artifacts in a museum’s collection that are

\textsuperscript{20} James Young, \textit{The Texture of Memory} (Michigan, 1993), 345.
associated with death, not only in sections dedicated to death camps, but in every section of the permanent collection. In my interviews with museum visitors, most found artifacts and photographs related to death to be the most powerful. For one visitor, the most moving part of the museum was an enlarged photograph of a Nazi soldier shooting at a mother who was using her body to shield her child.\textsuperscript{21} Several other visitors felt the boxcar made the most lasting impression.\textsuperscript{22} Even though museum visitors seem to remember artifacts and photographs from death, I argue it is the section from Jewish life before WWII that gives them power. While that section is where visitors are first encouraged to imagine about victim's lives, the placement of various prewar artifacts throughout the museum allows life to flow throughout the entire collection. However, those artifacts have power because there is a section in FHM dedicated to Jewish life before WWII; it sets the stage for the placement of artifacts of life next to artifacts of death. This section creates an understanding within visitors that artifacts from death were a part of a human life. It brings a new meaning and life to artifacts that were once only associated with murder. The acknowledgment of life and existence before the Holocaust allows these victims to be people again, not just prisoners, corpses or ashes.

In order to gain access to the areas of the museum discussed in the previous chapter — such as the replica of the entrance gate at Auschwitz, the boxcar, and the photograph wall — visitors must follow the narrative as it is designed for them. In the design of the first floor, before visitors are able to witness artifacts of the destruction of European Jewry, they must first learn about Jewish life before the rise of Adolf Hitler. When visitors first enter the museum, they encounter a timeline chronicling the history of antisemitism. Just in front of them, is the

\textsuperscript{21} Anonymous Museum Visitor #1. Personal Interview. 02 Aug 2011.  
\textsuperscript{22} Anonymous Museum Visitor #2. Personal Interview. 07 Jul 2011.
first section in the museum – *Jewish Life Before WWII: Ordinary People*. This title announces this section's aim: to teach visitors that the victims of the Holocaust lived lives of value, just like them. Victims did not belong to a group or class of people that were any worse or any better than anybody else; they were just like the visitors that walk through the museum today. Before visitors may become witnesses to death, they must become witnesses to life, however banal it may have been. Victims were not a meaningless group of people lost in history, but human beings with stories and memories, emotions and dreams. Just as the visitors to the museum have goals and hopes, so did the victims of the Holocaust.

In this section, the museum valorizes the meaning of everyday life. In its display of everyday items from the victims' pasts, the museum forces visitors not only to recognize that victims once had everyday lives, but thereby to understand them as something other than victims. Concentration camps, ghettos, starvation, and dehumanization were not the normal ways of life. The normal ways of life included playing in the street outside of the family business, visiting the local fruit stand or butcher shop, and generally holding positions of respect in the community, all of which are expressed through pictures and artifacts in this section of the museum. *Jewish Life Before WWII* encourages visitors to acknowledge that seemingly insignificant things are really the marks of a life that is as ordinary as anyone else's. Therefore, the section gets visitors to commit to the inherent worth of each and every victim of the Holocaust. Through its use of artifacts and photographs, the museum acquaints the visitor with the victims before they became victims, when they were not seen as unworthy of living, but when they were seen as people with lives of value. Others labeled them not as "Holocaust
victim" or *mischling* or "deportee", but simply by their name.\textsuperscript{23} This knowledge, combined with FHM's other distancing mechanisms, allows visitors to recognize that the events they are witnessing happened to others and not to themselves.

When visitors walk into *Jewish Life Before WWII*, they see enlarged photographs of people on the walls and displays of artifacts and information. The photographs draw the visitors in; the various faces appeal to them. The people in the photographs have so much to tell the visitors, but they must speak without words. They have the ability to convey emotion and to spark the visitor's imagination, leading them to wonder about the life of the photograph's subject. There are three enlarged photographs displayed which focus on groups of people; one of them comes from co-founder Edith Loebenberg. This photograph shows a large group of people, young and old, male and female, outside of a matzoh factory that her family owned in Germany before WWII (see Figure 6). Almost everyone in the photograph is wearing an apron. Some have rolled up sleeves, as if work has been put on hold for a moment to snap a picture. Most of the people have the slightest of smiles, their lips just curved upwards, one elderly woman stands above the rest, beaming proudly over the others, while some grimace and look as if they do not care to be bothered with taking a picture and one woman looks downright angry. In the bottom right corner is little Edie Loebenberg, munching on a piece of matzoh. The photograph cannot but incite the imagination. The visitor is naturally pulled in to figure out what is going on at the moment the photograph was taken. Why is that elderly woman in the back center, standing taller than everyone else, smiling so brightly? Is she simply more

\textsuperscript{23} *Mischling*, or "crossbreed", was the German term used during the Third Reich to denote persons of mixed origin, of which there were different degrees, as described in Roderick Stackelberg's *Hitler's Germany: Origins, Interpretations, Legacies* (Stackelberg 2009, 178).
photogenic, or are the matzoh factory and the people she works with her pride and joy? Did someone have to give little Edie a piece of matzoh to quiet her down in order for her to pose in the picture? Suddenly, the smiles that seemed more like grimaces appear to be an attempt to cover a laugh. Did someone say something really funny just moments before the photograph was taken? Perhaps the photographer noticed tension in the air and did what he or she could to coax a smile out of the photograph’s subjects. As for the woman that appears so angry, what happened to make her day so horrible that she was unable to mask her unhappiness for even a moment? As it turns out, little is known about what is actually happening at the time of the photograph. In my interview with the founder’s daughter, Sandy Mermelstein, she stated that the only relative of the Loebenbergs in the photo was the elderly woman with the beaming smile who turned out to be Edie’s mother. The photograph was taken just before Passover, when extra help was required in the factory (this factory was only one of two matzoh factories in all of Germany). This small piece of information remains unknown to the visitors and leaves plenty of room for imagination, spurring the visitor to wonder what life was like for these people. Even if the visitor were to know the conclusion, it would not stop them from imagining.

This photograph represents what a section dedicated to life before WWII should do: bring life to the victims without allowing unmediated memory, when visitors imagine their experience in the museum as being like a victim’s experience in the Holocaust. This is possible because visitors are invited to explore with their imagination what is happening in the photograph, but they do not imagine it as happening to themselves. Because visitors see the

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24 Mermelstein, Sandy. Personal Interview. 27 Jan 2012. Mermelstein also shared that her grandmother came to the United States with her immediate family, though other family members, such as her son-in-law, stayed behind. He believed "Hitler was a kook" and his power wouldn’t last. He was murdered in Auschwitz.
faces of the victims, they imagine things happening to those in the photograph, not to themselves. When a visitor sees this photograph, it is as if a question mark is forming in his or her mind. The photograph, like an artifact, is a glimpse into the past. However, unlike with other artifacts, visitors can see facial expressions and body language, leading them to draw conclusions based on what they see. Photographs are filled with potential to surprise. Whether the photograph from the matzoh factory or one from the photograph wall later in the museum, visitors can imagine so many possibilities as to what is happening in each photograph on display. Visitors will find themselves trying to figure out what is happening in each photograph, leading them to either reach a satisfying conclusion and move on, or to failure — encouraging them to keep trying to solve the puzzle. The questions make themselves present, and then they remain. The visitor's imagination, piqued by the glorification of everyday life, is where educational power comes from. By presenting the victims as ordinary, visitors find ordinary life to be extraordinary. In everyday scenarios, one does not often consider the joy in simply living, free to make simple decisions. This glorification reminds visitors of the wonder in everyday life and turns the faceless category of victims back into actual flesh and blood. By seeing these people and imagining what happened to them, they are put into the visitor's mind. Visitors are not imagining themselves as victims or potential victims. They are imagining someone with whom they've begun to get acquainted. They imagine that face — that life — and not their own. The visitors take part in a process in which they question without answering, imagine without solving, and engage without completing.

Immediately to the left of the matzoh factory photograph is one of a family (mother, father and two young boys) outside of a shop. The display case in front of it has two
photographs. On the far left is a smaller photograph of a different storefront and on the right a photograph of customers gathering around a produce stand owned by a Jewish grocer in the Jewish quarter of Berlin. Between the two photographs is a set of butcher knives with a caption that reads, "These butcher knives were used by a Kosher shochet in Poland." The knives are displayed with their case, which is made of wood and has clearly faced the effects of time; there is a long crack down its middle along with dents and scrapes throughout the case (see Figure 7). The use of artifacts — in this case, the butcher knives — engages the visitor. The use of the word "schochet" in the caption alone leads visitors to ask questions because many will not even know what the word means. The worn appearance of the knife case is also alluring. What has this knife been through? How many different sets of hands have worked with it? Was the butcher who used it loud and gruff in his shop, or was he quiet and calm? Did the butcher memorize his regular customers' orders, or was he so busy that he couldn't keep the orders straight? Did he take pride in his work or perhaps he followed in his father's footsteps and was simply trying to make ends meet? Visitors could also wonder about the types of people that went to that butcher. A young wife may have bought the same thing from the butcher every week to prepare her husband's favorite meal or a mother may have bought as much as she could to feed her growing children. The knives prompt visitors to not only imagine about the life of the butcher, but also the lives of those in his community. The coupling of the knives with photographs of similar shop settings further encourages the visitor's imagination in giving them a visualization of what kind of location the butcher shop would be in. By combining similar artifacts and photographs, visitors are presented with a more complete image of what a

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25 A shochet is a ritual slaughterer.
scenario would be like. When photographs and artifacts support each other, visitors can conjure up a better scene in their mind than if an artifact or photograph stands alone. When visitors see photographs of storefronts next to the butcher knives, they can picture what kind of shop the knives would be used in. They can envision what some customers might look like because they see customers outside various storefronts. Presenting artifacts and photographs that are similar in nature creates a more cohesive and complete picture in the sense that visitors ask more questions about that other person's life. It is clear that the use of photographs and artifacts alone conjures life, but together they are most successful.

The power that artifacts from life hold can be presented in many ways, one of them being the location in which they are displayed within the museum. It may seem to the visitor that all pre-war artifacts are housed in the section *Jewish Life Before WWII*; in actuality, pre-war artifacts are placed meticulously throughout the museum. Some artifacts from life before WWII that are not displayed in *Jewish Life Before WWII* include a Torah scroll, which is encased with several other religious items including a sabbath lamp, cantor's cup, a set of tefillin, and a shofar. These Judaic items appear in the section immediately after *Jewish Life Before WWII*, which is titled *The Rising Tide: Discrimination, Segregation, Isolation*. Although it may seem problematic that these pre-war artifacts are not displayed in the section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII, in my view, it may give more power to pre-war artifacts by strengthening one of their roles in the museum, which is to fuse life into sections dedicated to death. The placement of pre-war artifacts work to ensure that there is not a separation between the "death world" of the camps from the "life world" the victims had before. Because there are artifacts of life scattered throughout the museum and not limited to only one specific section, the life from
these artifacts emanates throughout the museum. Just as pre-war artifacts bring life to artifacts from death and the photograph wall links the vibrancy of life with loss and destruction, the placement of pre-war artifacts throughout the museum allows life to radiate throughout the entire museum.

Pre-war artifacts govern how visitors will respond to later sections centered on death. Without knowledge of life before, visitors learn only about mass murder. They will take with them only horror and destruction without any understanding of the value of human life that was taken on such an enormous scale. Artifacts represent not only individuals in their jobs or families in their homes, but also Jewish communities. One way in which these communities are represented is through Judaic objects. These religious artifacts hold a power — insofar as they mark what a community values as being of ultimate importance. Although some of these items may have been used by individuals, they represent practicing Jews and their religious community. For example, the Torah may have been used by individuals leading a congregation in prayer, but it specifically represents the Jewish community in Prague that worshipped at the Pinkas Synagogue. The Judaic objects accompanying the Torah scroll in display can also represent both a community and an individual. Although the items came from specific individuals, brought to America before the war by those fleeing the Nazi regime, they represent particularity in Jewish religious life, and not a particular individual's life. They call for examination by visitors and are capable of representing both communities and individuals.

This presentation of the religious aspect of pre-war Jewish life is also appealing to religious visitors. In the museum's visitor book, there are many religious messages —

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26 Blankenship, Erin. Personal Interview. 27 Jan 2012.
surprisingly including drawings of crosses and references to Jesus as well as God — suggesting that religious visitors may find a connection between their faith and the faith of the victims. A devout Christian may feel a deeper connection to the victims if they are presented as being very religious.\textsuperscript{27} Also, the items people brought with them to America tend to be religious items presumably because the items people chose to save were those of personal value. Although a person may not have even been a practicing Jew, a religious item may have been of great worth to them for other reasons (perhaps it was a family heirloom). Additionally, religious items are frequently made of more precious materials, such as silver candlesticks to be used on Sabbath, leading people to ascribe great value to them.

Some Judaic items are more successful than others in representing both individuals and communities. One item that is exceptionally successful in this representation is the museum's Torah scroll. The Torah came to the museum in September of 1996 as a permanent loan from the Czech Memorial Scrolls Centre of London, which is an organization that preserves and distributes Torahs that were taken from synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia by the Nazis.\textsuperscript{28} The organization has saved over 1,500 scrolls that were kept by the Nazis. It is believed that they were to be used in a museum Hitler planned for an extinct race.\textsuperscript{29} The museum's scroll came from the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague, Czech Republic (see Figure 8). The Torah, along with the other Czech memorial scrolls, is a "symbol of hope as well as sorrow, and also an intimate link with the individual historic congregations which were destroyed under the

\textsuperscript{27} Further research would require interviews with Christian visitors that I was unable to conduct.
\textsuperscript{28} \url{http://www.czechtorah.org/aboutus.php}
\textsuperscript{29} The museum was to be a “posthumous record of a religion which no longer existed” described by Grace Davie in \textit{Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates} (Davie 2000, 166).
Nazis. Although the way in which the Torah was acquired comes from a place of loss, horror, and destruction, the fact that it was taken by the society to be used again in the future inspires hope. It proves that despite Hitler's plans, Judaism survived during the Holocaust and continues to survive now. Despair is not all that remains when there are items that represent life. Artifacts from life before WWII, such as the scroll, provide visitors with a connection to the past. These artifacts introduce the visitor's imagination to a time and place it does not know, asking them to begin exploring the communal lives of Holocaust victims and survivors.

Although Judaic objects can successfully show an artifact's ability to represent both an individual and a community, and although it is true that many Holocaust victims were pious Jews, many victims were not particularly religious. Most people do not consider the diversity of European Jewry. If the majority of people are uninformed about Jewish history, it is necessary to present more than one aspect of Jewish life. During tours, all docents tell visitors that a majority of German Jews were totally assimilated and identified themselves first as Germans, then as Jews. It is necessary that both religious and secular Jews are represented. If a museum only displays artifacts of life that are religious, it is falsely suggesting that all Jews are religious. With the inclusion of pre-war artifacts that are not associated with religion, those members of the public that are unaware of Jewish history are able to learn that the history of the Jewish people is rich and multi-faceted. FHM's collection, all of which is not currently on display, contains many artifacts from Jewish life before WWII that are not religious in nature including shoes, handkerchiefs, clothes, lace, and suitcases, which were used when families came to the United States in the late 1930's. What is on display (at present) is a violin and ring from life.

http://www.czechmemorialsscrolltrust.org/

Blankenship, Erin. Personal Interview. 27 Jan 2012.
before WWII that belonged to Walter Hueman. Next to the violin is an information card, which describes Walter's time with the violin, from when he started playing it in high school to his arrest in 1942 to his liberation from Dachau, after which he was able to find his violin and resume playing. The ring and violin are displayed directly across from the boxcar, providing another example of artifacts from both life and death converging within the museum. Just as the photograph wall integrates life into a section that seems focused on death, the placement of artifacts of life throughout the museum brings the rich variety of lives into each of its sections.

When visitors see only pictures of corpses or of the walking dead, they do not — they cannot — imagine what life used to be like for those people. When confronted with horrific images, like photographs of scattered piles of corpses or of skeletal prisoners, visitors simply have no room to imagine the victim playing with their friends or laughing with their family. Those awful images are so different from what humans are supposed to look like, belonging to a world to which visitors cannot relate, that they are too shocked to see the victims as actual human beings. It is because of the photographs and artifacts from life before the war that the actual people are recalled, not as victims, but as humans, in sections dedicated to death and destruction. When visitors see photographs and artifacts in later sections dedicated to death and destruction, the victims are not nameless and faceless creatures. Instead, they become the once beaming elderly woman outside of a matzoh factory, a rabbi or congregation member that read from the Torah at the Pinkas Synagogue, or a young girl whose ring was lost in a railcar.

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32 Walter Hueman's ring is not the same ring that was discovered in the boxcar.
33 I am not suggesting that these images should not be shown at all, just that they should not be the first images a visitor encounters when entering a museum.
Perhaps the visitor imagines how the elderly woman carefully watched over her factory or how a congregation listened intently to the rabbi's sermon. Maybe the visitor wonders how the ring from the boxcar was given to the girl rather than how she lost it. Was it a gift from a father, a boyfriend, or a family heirloom gone back generations? Did she purposefully leave it in the boxcar or lose it in the confusion of being transferred like cattle? The artifacts and images, which lead to imagination, create a living Holocaust memorial. By actively thinking about victims, visitors are honoring them in a way that distributing ID cards — which, because it is assigned to the visitor, blurs the boundary between victim and visitor — does not. The ID cards are "inviting visitors to remember their museum experience as if it were a victim's Holocaust experience" (Young 1993, 343-44). The visitors do not imagine these events as happening to someone else, but as happening to themselves. For Holocaust victims to be honored and remembered, the spaces dedicated to their memory must provide an atmosphere that leads to appropriate memory work.

In my opinion, the success of the museum with its visitors depends on this section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII because in giving visitors a sense of what life actually was before the Nazis came to power, visitors get a sense of the textures of specific lost lives, and come to realize that Jewish history extends beyond Auschwitz. Not only do museums need a section dedicated to Jewish life before the Holocaust, but they need this section to begin their narrative. This type of narrative is also found in the Berlin Jewish Museum, designed by David Libeskind, and analyzed by James Young in *At Memory's Edge*. The museum covers an extensive history of Jews in Berlin starting long before the Holocaust. A museum dedicated to Judaism in a city that once purged itself of Jews has a weight to it unlike Holocaust museums in the United
States. Every aspect — from its architecture to its exhibitions — must be examined under a microscope. The museum's emphasis on Jewish history before the Holocaust does two things. It recognizes "both the role Jews had once played as co-creators of Berlin's history and culture and that the city was fundamentally haunted by its Jewish absence" (Young 2000, 152). Starting the permanent exhibit with a rich Jewish history represents Jews as contributing members of Germany's society, not just as victims. Visitors thus have the opportunity to learn about the lives of a people before they were subjected to the atrocities of the Holocaust. These lives are later recalled when visitors view the sections dedicated to death, giving them an understanding of the victims as actual human beings. If they are shown images of walking skeletons first, they are not even given the opportunity to recall the idea that life was not always like this. For example, at the USHMM, in its interest to portray the United States as liberators, visitors are first shown the perspective of the liberators (images of corpses at Ohrdruf and starving victims at Buchenwald). Then the narrative goes directly into Hitler's rise to power and the eventual destruction of European Jewry. When visitors see an image of a starved male prisoner of Buchenwald that has received a meal from Allied liberators, they do not imagine someone who once lived a normal life, someone who had the opportunity to provide for himself and perhaps his family as well. Visitors are unable to see anything beyond the shell of a man, helpless and broken. Although the narrative eventually comes to a section dedicated to Jewish life before the Holocaust, the previous images are so searing that they overpower a visitor's experience of the museum. Because the FHM begins its narrative showing visitors what life was for Europe's Jews before the Holocaust, the visitors are better prepared to understand victims as persons.

With the use of artifacts, pictures, and media, the section helps visitors bear in mind that these victims, whose destroyed lives they will later discover, were people with multi-dimensional lives, made up of stories, memories, and hopes.

The artifacts and materials found in the section dedicated to life before WWII reconstruct lives; just as importantly, they prime visitors to recall lives in later sections of the museum focusing on murder. They are simple, mundane, boring things that become captivating pieces from history. The artifacts from life before maintain a value for human life and represent all that victims had before everything they loved or cared for was so brutally taken from them. Their unique personhood is celebrated and the visitors are taught that a life lost does not have to be about heroism or achievements. This lesson is brought with the visitors into the sections dedicated to destruction. Without the section dedicated to life before WWII, artifacts from death cannot reach their full potential to teach visitors about the Holocaust in whole.

James Young has argued that part of the danger of artifact-based museums is that the public will not view certain artifacts for what they really are, pieces of life, making them meaningless. He states that "armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction" (Young 1993, 127). For Young, Holocaust artifacts are strictly artifacts related to death. He does not recognize the distinction between artifacts from life and artifacts from death or how well artifacts from life before the Holocaust infuse life into artifacts from death. He fails to recognize that life and death are overlapping. With life-before artifacts, death artifacts become about life too. For Young, a stack of suitcases with victim's information scrawled on it is like a tombstone. In his narrative of Auschwitz, he does not give the visitor a chance to see it for what it really is: a
piece of someone’s life. He does not give the visitor the satisfaction of allowing them to explore the object with their imagination. And yet, he is not at fault for interpreting the suitcases in this way. The interpretation of an artifact is based heavily on its staging. For without a section dedicated to life before destruction, the suitcases really are no more than tombstones. It is only after an understanding of what Jewish life was like before WWII is established that visitors might be able to see the suitcases as something more than markers of death. They could look at an artifact and imagine so many possibilities. On the suitcases, the visitor certainly notices the different styles of handwriting, leading them to further imagine the scenario of the victim writing their name. Were they in a mad rush, desperately scrawling their name and rushing to pack? Or did they take their time, carefully and beautifully writing in calligraphy? What did they put in their suitcases: their favorite shirt, family pictures, and personal keepsakes?

The section dedicated to life before the Holocaust gives value to those artifacts in a museum’s collection that are associated with death. Because the visitors have been permitted to examine the lives of the victims, they are able to recall them when face to face with artifacts from death. Jewish Life Before WWII puts arms in the sleeves of prisoner’s uniforms, feet in the work boots, and a finger into a small ring discovered in a boxcar. It brings a new meaning and life to artifacts that were once only associated with murder. The acknowledgment of life and existence before the Holocaust allows these victims to be people again, not just prisoners. It is only through the section dedicated to life before WWII that sections dedicated to the Final Solution and destruction have force. How can one acknowledge loss if there is no
acknowledgement of *what* has been lost? Without a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII, museums present faceless *Muselmänner* and are only remembering bones.\(^\text{35}\)

\(^{35}\) A *Muselmann* was a camp slang word to describe prisoners that were “the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection” as defined by Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz* (Levi 1958, 88).
Figure 6. Photograph outside of Edie Loebenberg’s family’s matzoh factory. Courtesy of FHM.

Figure 7. Photograph of display of butcher knives. Photograph by Madison Flashenburg.

Figure 8. Photograph of Pinkas Synagogue Torah. Photograph by Madison Flashenburg.
Chapter Three
The Educational Power of Artifacts

In the previous chapter, I emphasized the value of a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII in a Holocaust museum. I analyzed how the section places value on the everyday artifacts of everyday life and explained how the section creates an environment where visitors are moved by what happened to others, and not by what they imagine as possibly happening to themselves. In this chapter, I will further explore the museum's artifacts and the relationship created between those artifacts and museum visitors. I will then focus on the curator's responsibility to give the visitor an imaginative richness of a life. James Young and Oren Stier argue that all artifacts have the same problems, yet I argue that different relationships are created between the visitor and different types of artifacts. In the previous two chapters, I developed a distinction between artifacts from life and artifacts from death; in this chapter I will focus on specific artifacts and their educational power.

Artifacts are items of great significance that present a glimpse into an individual's life, assist in the telling of a narrative, and are a powerful educational tool. Artifacts, specifically from Jewish life before WWII, paint a picture to help visitors understand a victim's life. They work to express different aspects of life: the Judaic items represent a religious aspect, the butcher knives symbolize business life, and the photographs tie everything together to depict relationships between family and friends. They make clear images that are about the life of another person, making them very successful distancing mechanisms. These artifacts are the tool that ignite the visitor's imagination, without allowing them to imagine themselves in the situation of the victim. Visitors are thrust into a realm of imagination in which atrocities are happening to the victims they were introduced to in Jewish Life Before WWII, not to
themselves. When looking at artifacts from death and learning about the horrors of the Holocaust, visitors remember the people they met in earlier sections and the fact that these terrible things happened to people like them. The Florida Holocaust Museum's arrangement proves these claims to be true. The order of the narrative and the placement of Jewish Life Before WWII coming first create a space in which visitors learn about the Holocaust and its victims without risking unmediated memory. FHM's job is to spark visitors' imagination and its layout allows it to do so in an appropriate way, providing a narrative that I have argued is normatively better than a layout that does not begin with a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII.

The museum's ability to succeed in its mission is not something that simply happens, but is made possible in great part to the work of the curators. For artifacts to both tell a story and urge visitors to imagine, they must be dealt with carefully, their placement decided upon only after great consideration of many aspects. This includes the staging of an artifact, whether or not it has supporting materials, finding the most fitting place for it in the narrative, and even what type of display case and lighting is used. The curators and staff at the FHM are responsible for handling, caring for, and preserving artifacts. Throughout the year, it is necessary to rotate artifacts. Rotating different paper and textile artifacts is necessary because light and air can affect them. Even artifacts that will probably not be taken out of the permanent exhibit still have some changes made to them, like the Torah scroll from the Pinkas Synagogue, but different pages are shown every six months in order to protect the Torah as a whole.\footnote{Sometimes the museum rotates the pages to a specific passage depending on the Jewish calendar.} Sometimes, facsimiles must be used when an artifact becomes too damaged over time. It is
important to note that when artifacts are rotated, they are kept within the same storyline. The curators and staff members work hard to maintain the narrative they have created and it is their duty to present visitors with the imaginative richness of the lives lost.

To reflect part of a person's life through an item is no simple task. Artifacts must be presented in a way that can best serve their function, whether it is to educate visitors about a family business, (as is the case with the butcher knives), to articulate the specificity of those who died, (exemplified by both religious and secular artifacts), or to demonstrate how the artifacts of life belong to persons and not corpses, (exemplified by the display of the ring found inside the boxcar). It is absolutely necessary to consider the perspectives of the visitors and different ways they may interpret various artifacts, but it is also important to consider the curator's perspective on artifacts. Young and Stier are limited by their focus on the visitor's perspective. They focus on how visitors will be affected by artifacts and fail to address the curator's perspective. Artifacts of death come from scraps of the worst horrors in the world. Even with the appropriate background information, it is possible they may hinder the visitor from wanting to engage with them. Items associated with death, like the human hair belonging to victims on display at Auschwitz, are remnants of life and may not have a place outside of their original resting ground.\textsuperscript{37} When visitors look at the mass amount of hair, it no longer represents something of life. The hair could have once been on the head of a young girl whose greatest joy was getting her hair brushed by her mother. The hair, before it was brutally shorn from victim's heads, was once full of shine, blowing in the wind and falling playfully in the face of a young woman or being pinned back by a busy mother. On display, these possibilities are

\textsuperscript{37} The display of hair at the USHMM, displaced from its original location in Auschwitz, resulted in a long and controversial debate that was discussed in the first chapter.
lost. The hair is dull and lifeless, clumped together and taking on the same gray color (see Figure 9). The hair is very difficult to handle, both to the visitor and to the curator. The curator understands many things the visitor may not, but that does not make dealing with artifacts any easier. To actually work with the hair, to hold it, treat it, and smell it leaves an impression even more lasting than just witnessing its shear enormity, which is true when dealing with any artifact of death. One very valued staff member of the USHMM quit after several years, saying he "just couldn't take it anymore" (Linenthal 1995, 159). Even those working at Auschwitz, at the very site of mass murder, do not work to conserve the hair. Auschwitz's museum direction, Piotr Cywinski, said that preserving the hair would be "a brutal and morally unjustified disturbance" of human remains. For the FHM, the goal is not to horrify anybody, despite the fact that the Holocaust itself is horrifying. The museum does not want people to only remember the horror of the Holocaust. The goal is to inspire them, not scare them. This goal is reached because the placement of artifacts is carefully thought out, distancing mechanisms are applied, and still the visitor is motivated to imagine about the victims and their lives.

The value of artifacts cannot be fully appreciated if they are not presented in the correct way, which is the job of the curator. For Linenthal, curators have a duty to pass on information. It is a Holocaust museum's function to educate the public about the Holocaust and to ensure it is not forgotten in the hopes that it's memory will prevent future genocide (Linenthal 1995, 269). That is true, curators do have a responsibility to pass on information, but it is not that simple. They must find the most successful way to do it, whether that means displaying an artifact on its own or also alongside supplementary pieces. An example of an artifact that can

38 http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-501843_162-7313626.html
be successfully displayed on its own is a photograph book that the museum received in the summer of 2011 (see Figures 10 and 11). It belonged to Ellen Bernstein of St. Petersburg, who was a young girl when she left Germany for the United States in 1938. One of her good friends gave the book to her as a gift, after having friends and family members sign and place photographs of them next to their signatures. All who signed the book were Jewish; most of whom were her schoolmates from a Jewish school in Bonn, Germany. A few signatures were signed once Ellen came to the United States, but nearly everyone who signed the book from Germany was murdered. Over the last 75 years, the book has deteriorated greatly. It must be treated with great care; cotton or latex gloves must be worn when handling it to prevent any oils getting onto the pages. The binding of the book cracks with every turn of a page and photographs sometimes come loose as their glue loses its ability to hold fast. Upon first glance, the book appears mundane. Many people still have decades-old yearbooks, something very similar to the autograph book. Its history transformed the book from something as simple as a yearbook into a piece of history, an ambassador for the murdered who signed it. As the pages are turned, the book becomes more than just a book. The various signatures are not just names on paper — the murdered are given faces in that each person’s photograph is right next to his or her message. A glimpse of their personalities comes through, not just from their photographs, but also from their distinct handwriting and messages. Some people expressed their excitement for Ellen, some said how deeply they would miss her, and others drew in pictures or pressed flowers. Despite only a very small impression of a life seen on each page, the book itself comes to life.
The photograph book is one-of-a-kind. It, too, is a distancing mechanism. The book does not stop visitors from imagining a world, but provides them with the means not to imagine *themselves* in that world. The autograph book, though not yet on display, demands attention and requires a style of display that is different than other artifacts. For visitors to appreciate the full value of the book and its meaning, they need to be able to examine it. For the book to come to life, visitors need to turn the pages, allowing them to see the smiling faces in the photographs, the different styles of handwriting and word use, the drawings, and the pressed flowers. Allowing visitors to handle such a delicate artifact is simply not possible. One way curators may be able to give visitors the hands-on approach would be through the use of technology. If funds were available, they could be put toward the presentation of the photograph book. The book could be presented in its own case with an information card summarizing its history. In a display in front of the book, might be a touch screen. The pages of the book could be scanned into a computer system and then displayed on screen. Visitors could scroll through the pages virtually, while still seeing the actual book in a display case. This type of presentation would allow visitors to feel a taste of the excitement a curator feels as he or she handles an artifact, while still preserving the quality of the photograph book.

Not all artifacts are able to stand alone as the photograph book can. Some require support from other sources, such as photographs or detailed information panels. An example of this type of artifact is an accordion the museum received in the summer of 2011 (see Figure 12). The accordion belonged to Victor Shimon, who was a Russian partisan associated with the Bielski partisans, one of the most widely known Jewish partisan groups.\(^\text{39}\) Because of its relation

\(^{39}\) For more on the Bielski partisans, see Nechama Tec's book, titled *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*. 

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to both Jewish and Russian partisans, the accordion represents how artifacts can further the goals of a narrative. In effect, it dramatizes the issue of Russian-Jewish relationships during WWII. Its display must have a backstory to give specificity to this issue. During the winter of 1942-1943, the Bielski partisans and Russian partisans would come to Viktor's village for parties, and Viktor would play his accordion. Eventually, he became a contact for the Bielskis and even travelled to the ghetto in Novogrudok about ten times with his father, taking messages to Tuvia Bielski and other partisans. The story behind the accordion is fascinating. Partisan groups are a topic of great interest and particularly the story of the Bielski brothers because of the recent release of the film *Defiance*. The accordion represents the coming together of two partisan groups to celebrate, despite living in terrible conditions in a world that was upside-down. However, the story is not one that can simply be told by looking at the accordion. By looking at the autograph book, visitors would be able to work out its value. The accordion appears to be just a musical instrument. Therefore, it needs support from other artifacts and photographs to maximize its full value on display. Its home may be found in a story of resistance or one that teaches about the cooperation between Jews and non-Jews during the Holocaust. Artifacts that need supporting materials have no less value than those that can stand alone. They simply need support in their presentation. Just as the butcher knives in *Jewish Life Before WWII* are presented with photographs of similar scenarios, the accordion's powerful story can be told by presenting it along with supporting materials, portraying a whole picture of a culture.

The question of whether or not an artifact is better presented alone or with supporting materials is not always an easy one to answer. An example of a particularly difficult artifact to
present is shoes. One of the most well known displays of shoes is found at Majdanek. There, a barrack is filled with thousands of pairs of men's, women's, and children's shoes. As Linenthal has described, "the smell and the impact were overpowering, suffocating" and "the demands they made on a visitor were overwhelming" (Linenthal 1995, 162). The shoes are held in wire crates and there are aisles and aisles of them, a seemingly endless amount of shoes, drowning the visitors in their sheer number. An alternative to displaying a vast number of shoes is to display only a few pairs. The FHM has done this a few different times. In 2004, FHM received a temporary loan from the Majdanek State Museum that included several pairs of shoes and a prisoner's uniform. The shoes were displayed along the bottom level of the museum's staging of a barrack in the section dedicated to concentration camps titled *The Camps: Inhuman Internment*. The second example of FHM's staging of shoes is the permanent display of two pairs of children's shoes. The shoes are housed directly under the sign guiding visitors into *The Camps: Inhuman Internment*. There are two pairs of toddler's shoes. One pair is black with worn leather; the second pair is brightly colored and striped and one shoe has pink laces, while the other has white (see Figure 13). The shoes are housed with various items from camps including silverware, scissors, and rail spikes found in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The shoes were worn by two-year-old Doris Mathes, who died with her mother, Allie, at Auschwitz in 1943. The shoes were retrieved by her father, Richard, from the family's home in Antwerp and brought to the United States by the family's rabbi. Jacqueline Moch, the rabbi's niece, donated them. The display of two pairs of toddler's shoes is moving and perhaps there is an argument to be made that a pile of shoes is not as successful as a few pairs. The display of the toddler's shoes provides a critique against displaying a massive number of shoes. By displaying only a few pairs of shoes, FHM is
creating an atmosphere where visitors are more easily able to imagine the feet that once
walked in them and the people they belonged to. Seeing a small child's pair of shoes is perhaps
too heart-wrenching, especially because the information card reveals how soon Doris's life was
taken from her. However, visitors imagine what little Doris looked like, how her short life was
with her parents Allie and Richard. Though visitors are not given pictures of the family to
provide them with a face to imagine about, they are given names. They wonder where those
little shoes travelled, if they were a gift from a dear friend, or which pair Doris liked better. Did
she know how to put them on herself, or did her mother and father have to do it for her? The
presentation of only a few pairs of shoes eases visitors into exploring their imagination,
following the footsteps of little Doris.

However, that is not to say that displaying a pile of shoes is always negative. Certainly,
massive amounts of victim's shoes are overwhelming. Visitors can smell them, horrifying some
into believing they are smelling the feet of their owners. Walking through a barrack filled with
shoes is a terrifying experience and one that does not quickly leave a person. However,
displaying a mass quantity of shoes can still reflect life in an interesting way. At first, when
looking at thousands of shoes at Majdanek, they all seem to be the same — just shoes. As the
visitor's own shoes continue to move them through the barrack, they begin to see different
styles of shoes. Some belong to men, some to women, and some to children. Some have high
heels and some low, some are work boots and some were clearly for fancier occasions.
Although most are dark colors, there is a random pop of red as a woman's dress shoe makes
itself clear to the visitor (see Figure 14). Some have zippers or buttons and others are slip-ons

40 I saw this when I visited Majdanek with March of the Living in April 2007.
or lace up. It takes some time, but if the visitor is willing to take that time, the various styles of shoes present themselves. It is only after the different styles of shoes become clear that the visitor is able to imagine the people who possibly once owned the shoes. Although the different shoes reflect different personalities and, in turn, represent a person, they do not always have the same power to guide visitor’s imaginations as the presentation of only a few pairs has. It is unlikely that the visitor will put aside their shock and horror to be able to imagine the life of the woman who wore the red shoes. For the function of FHM, it best achieves success in presenting a limited number of shoes. It is clear that the presentation of shoes is fraught with risk. As Primo Levi stated, "Death begins with the shoes" (Levi 1958, 34). As he details life in Auschwitz, Levi expresses that shoes often caused painful sores, which would often lead to fatal infection. A prisoner with sores walked "as if he was dragging a convict's chain", meaning he would arrive late and was beaten as punishment (Levi 1958, 34). In the camps, a good pair of shoes was the difference between life and death. Curators must be sensitive to what shoes can do and the lost lives they represent.

The FHM's many artifacts work to tell a story, while stimulating the visitor's imagination, leading them to engage in a unique and exciting experience in which they are educated about the Holocaust and its victims. Some of the artifacts function alone, while others need supporting materials. Some are burdened with risk, while others fit into the narrative more easily. All three of the examples in this chapter, the autograph book, the accordion, and the shoes, show the importance of the mundane. If visitors came across these artifacts without any

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41 Although a massive number of shoes does not necessarily lead to imagination, I find it is appropriate that they be displayed in the camps. The presentation of thousands of pairs of victim’s shoes would not have the same power in St. Petersburg, FL as it does in Majdanek or Auschwitz.
knowledge of their meaning, they would have no way to appreciate them. Without the proper presentation, the autograph book is just a yearbook stuffed in the back of a closet. The accordion is not a tool to teach about Jewish and non-Jewish cooperating during the Holocaust, but an instrument that is seldom performed today. The shoes are not somebody's personal belongings with which they spent every day of their lives in, but dirty old shoes, stuffed together. The curators have a great responsibility when it comes to the care of their museum's artifacts. They must provide images and scenes that work with the artifacts to spur the visitor's imagination, causing them to ask meaningful questions. They must preserve and protect the artifacts, but also present them in a way that glorifies the mundane.

Figure 9. Image of hair on display at the museum at Auschwitz. Photograph by Madison Flashenburg.
Figure 10 and 11. Photographs of Ellen Bernstein’s photograph book. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of FHM.

Figure 12. Photograph of accordion by Johannes Hoess. Courtesy of FHM.
Figure 13. Image of a pair of shoes that belonged to Doris Mathes. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of FHM.

Figure 14. Photograph of a red woman’s shoe at Majdanek. Photographed by Rabbi Michael Torop.
Conclusion

The Florida Holocaust Museum achieves its success through the use of what I have termed "distancing mechanisms", its presentation of a section dedicated to Jewish life before WWII, and by creating a unique relationship between visitors and artifacts which focuses on the glorification of the mundane. I have argued that FHM is normatively better than other Holocaust museums that more commonly appear in the secondary literature. Distancing mechanisms create an environment in which visitors have a very clear understanding that the events they are learning about did not happen to them. They are not given the opportunity to feel as if they are experiencing what the victims have experienced. Throughout the museum, visitors may interact with artifacts that could lead to experiential modes of thinking, like the boxcar and the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign. However, the museum prevents unmediated memory with its artifacts' presentations. In the case of the boxcar, this is done through the display of the ring and because visitors are not permitted to enter it. For other artifacts, like the sign, unmediated memory is prevented by *Jewish Life Before WWII*. By introducing visitors to the actual people who suffered during the Holocaust and making them a part of the museum's narrative, visitors remember them when they are in sections dedicated to murder. When visitors walk under the gate or look at a pair of toddler's shoes or the ring found in the boxcar, they do not imagine themselves as a part of the story. They imagine the people they were previously acquainted with in *Jewish Life Before WWII*. Visitors are also prevented from unmediated memory because the museum is not an experiential museum. It is impossible for anyone to ever know what it felt like to go through the Holocaust unless they actually did. FHM makes no attempt at recreating Holocaust experiences, as is the case with other museums. To
imagine oneself as going through the Holocaust is an injustice to those who actually did go through it. FHM stays far away from committing such an injustice, and exists not to simulate the event, but to remember and honor the victims that actually experienced it. The museum honors Holocaust victims by teaching the public about what happened and how it happened to regular people. This is done through the emphasis of everyday items, which is significant in that it teaches visitors that victims were ordinary people.

The importance of these everyday items is something that is not often understood. Fairly regularly, people call the FHM asking if it wants their items from the war or from their lives before the war. These people, often survivors, liberators or their children, donate because they no longer want the items, or feel they belong in a museum. Many times, they do not realize the meaning behind their items. For example, one survivor called the museum asking if it would be interested in some of her items, as she was unsure as to whether or not they were of any value. It turned out that her items, including a pair of gloves and a shirt, are invaluable to the museum. The survivor was Magda Quittner, an American citizen living in Hungary at the time of the Holocaust. She was taken from her home by the Nazis, along with her aunt (named Molly Greenfield) and uncle, to a synagogue where they spent the night. They were then transported to a ghetto. During her time at the ghetto, her aunt gave Magda her own slip and made it into a shirt so she would have more clothes to wear. Eventually, Magda was put into jail, but then released after six weeks because she was an American citizen. Her aunt and uncle were sent to a killing center on June 4, 1944 and never made it out.

These mundane items may seem meaningless to some, but they are priceless to the FHM and, I suggest, other museums. The artifacts serve as a connection between life and death
within the museum; they do not leave death unattended from the world before. Their value is that they bring life into a place that seems to be filled with death. For how can people value the lives lost if they do not understand them as human lives in their ordinariness as well as their extraordinariness? It is important to mention these possible donations from life during the Holocaust because they are essential to the museum in achieving their mission. There is a profound need to secure donations from life before the Holocaust, before the last survivors die. Part of the museum's duty to survivors is to let them know their artifacts are all valuable. When a museum lets survivors know the value of their artifacts, it is performing its duty to serve as a center for the survivor community. Many survivors find solace in the museum's work and the lessons it teaches. One survivor, Jerry Rawicki, believes the museum is "the only way we can convey what happened to the public" (Vavala 1992, 1). As long as there are visitors, there are people learning about the Holocaust. Survivors also actively participate in the museum and feel "like they are a part of this organization." Survivors work with the museum in several different ways. Many survivors share their story with visiting groups or become docents. Others volunteer in the gift shop, with security, or help staff members with various projects. All of the survivors volunteering in the museum have shared their story in some way, whether that is telling others their experiences or donating their items to assist the museum in telling its narrative. Holocaust museums fulfill their mission by applying the lessons of the Holocaust to current genocides; their power to do so depends on their visitors being exposed to the power of artifacts from life before. The influence of the artifacts in Jewish Life Before WWII does not extend only to the section of the main exhibit dealing with the deaths of Nazism's victims, but

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carries into the section of the main exhibit dealing with other genocides and acts of racism, as well as the rotating exhibits on the second and third floors that deal with these matters. Therefore, I suggest that life-before artifacts, which balance visitors' identification with victims alongside varying distancing mechanisms, is instrumental in the prevention of genocide. When visitors go through a Holocaust museum thinking of someone else, and not themselves, they are prevented from taking on the attitude of demonizing others that is a necessary (but not sufficient) ingredient in genocide. People go through the FHM with persons in mind, not corpses. When they see exhibits relating to other genocides in the world on the second or third floor, they keep in mind what is being lost or what will be lost. The section gives value to a single life, to an entire community, and to those who are still persecuted around the world.
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