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From Swastika Selfies to Lessons on Nazism

Deeply worried by the surge in episodes of anti-Semitism, Holocaust and Jewish museums are working to use history to combat bigotry.



An exhibit on Nazism at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. Credit...Tamara Leigh

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This article is part of our latest special report on Museums, which focuses on the intersection of art and politics.

“Symbols of Hate” at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust had an unexpected beginning.

A group of high school students partying in Newport Beach, Calif., used red paper cups to create a swastika. They then saluted it, took selfies and circulated them on social media. The episode last March enraged some members of the community and inspired a torrent of news stories.

Concerned that the students knew little about the history of Nazism, a Holocaust scholar subsequently arranged for them to visit the [museum](#), where they met Beth Kean, its chief executive. The show was prompted by her impression that their knowledge of Nazism was limited.

Ms. Kean is not alone in her efforts.

Deeply worried by the surge in episodes of anti-Semitism — the number more than doubled in the United States in 2018 over 2015, according to the Anti-Defamation League — Holocaust and Jewish museums are working to develop programs and exhibitions that underscore the insidious nature of prejudice, whether toward Jews, blacks, Muslims or other minority groups.

“Many of our nation’s Holocaust and Jewish museums are taking on the renewed responsibility of strengthening contemporary understanding of what American Jews are facing today,” said Melissa Yaverbaum, executive director of the Council of American Jewish Museums.



Among the symbols of hate at the Los Angeles museum: an SS Totenkopf (“Death’s Head”) pin worn by SS battalions that administered concentration camps and an empire of slave labor.
Credit...Tamara Leigh

Some museums are getting either direct or indirect support from state governments. Last July, Gov. Gavin Newsom of California earmarked \$6 million for an expansion of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. Eleven states, including Oregon, now require Holocaust education, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Even in states where those laws do not exist, schools are turning to museums for help.

The Museums Special Section

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“We know that there is a need and increased curiosity about the Holocaust,” Ms. Yaverbaum said. “Audiences are responding, and we hope it will make a difference.”

Ms. Kean says her museum collects feedback from teachers to learn how students responded, and she believes the visits do.

In Tucson, Ariz., the Jewish History Museum has taken on what its executive director, Bryan Davis, called a multifaceted approach. “We are looking outward to build coalitions,” he said.

In January the museum organized a rally — called “No Hate, No Fear” — with the neighboring Prince Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The speakers included Mr. Davis, the Prince Chapel’s pastor, the outreach director for the city’s Islamic Center and the deputy consul of Mexico in Tucson.

“We have had these relationships for decades, but the current events have given our mandate a new urgency,” Mr. Davis said.

Kelley Szany, vice president of education and exhibitions of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, said it had seen a 90 percent increase over the past year in queries on how to respond to hate and anti-Semitism.

“All of the calls have come from schools where there have been anti-Semitic or anti-black incidents,” she said.

So the museum, which is in Skokie, created a tool kit that aims to teach about the Holocaust and explore students’ roles as citizens. “We are tying the resources of our museums to how to educate students to turn positive lessons of history into positive actions today,” Ms. Szany said.

In its Take a Stand Center, the museum also has mounted an Upstander Gallery highlighting 40 people known for working toward civil, social, health and environmental rights. They include Bryan Stevenson, creator of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Alabama; Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for female education; and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, a leader in the struggle to marshal Americans against Hitler in the 1930s.

“‘Upstanders’ is a term that has become popular in the education field and the museum world,” Ms. Szany said. “It is more accessible to encourage people to be ‘upstanders’ rather than heroes.”



The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Credit...Drew Angerer for The New York Times

In general, museum officials say their social media pages are drawing increased support. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington gets 1.7 million visitors a year. Its social media audience is more than 1.25 million, a 162 percent increase since January 2018. It has long followed a mandate to help explain how and why the Holocaust happened.

“Our lessons are rooted in the idea that hate is a virus and once you allow it, it spreads,” said Sara J. Bloomfield, the museum’s director.

Its exhibitions are aimed at reminding people that Nazism alone could not have perpetrated the Holocaust. “The goal is to make people think about their own role in society,” Ms. Bloomfield said.

Of its visitors, 24 percent are schoolchildren, according to research done for the museum.

Although contemporary Jewish museums have always been focused on Holocaust education, they are reacting assertively to recent political events and a rise in far-right extremism.

“Even before Pittsburgh, we were intensifying our program,” said Judy Margles, director at the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, referring to the shooting deaths in 2018 of [11 people at the Tree of Life](#) synagogue in Pittsburgh. “We trace our intensification to the election of President Trump and the heating up of rhetoric.”