

13 Holocaust tourism in a post-Holocaust Europe

Anne Frank and Auschwitz

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Introduction

This chapter looks at two places that represent different extremes in Holocaust tourist destinations in post-war Europe. One place is compact and focuses on an individual's story. The other is expansive and memorializes the suffering of over a million victims. These two places are not only the most visited Holocaust sites in Europe, but their names have become symbols, universally recognizable and representative of the Holocaust. On the one hand, there is the Anne Frank House, a place where no blood was shed but the suffering of a young girl is recorded and remembered. This site approaches the Holocaust from an individual level, through an examination of the life of one person. On the other hand, there is Auschwitz–Birkenau, a place where 1.1 million persons were murdered and thousands more suffered immeasurable brutality (Piper 1994).

In their different ways, both sites represent the Holocaust, and both have been visited for different reasons by millions of people. Unlike many memorials and museums around the world, specifically those in Israel and the United States, these sites are where the actual events happened; thus, they are primary sources of the Holocaust. Beginning with an inquiry into the reasons why these sites were initially preserved, this chapter examines how these places have evolved over the past 60 years into iconic sites and universal images that represent the Holocaust, while also briefly commenting on the debates and controversies surrounding their development.

Anne Frank

Anne Frank's diary is used as an educational tool for learning and studying the Holocaust by millions of school children throughout the world (Moger 1998). Annelies Marie Frank, born on 12 June 1929 in Frankfurt-am-Main, was the second daughter of Otto and Edith Frank. In response to the increasing persecution of Jews in Germany, Otto moved his family to Amsterdam in 1933. The family prospered there until the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in 1940 instituted measures excluding Jewish persons from all spheres of social life. By 1942 Otto Frank, with the cooperation and help of his business colleagues, organized a hiding place in the upstairs annex of his former workplace, the Opekta Works office building

located at 263 Prinsengracht in the centre of Amsterdam. On 6 July 1942, the Frank family, later followed by the van Pel family and Fritz Pfeffer, moved into the Secret Annex. For the next two years, these eight Jewish occupants lived in fear and absolute silence, before being betrayed by an unknown informant. During this time Anne kept a meticulous diary recording her activities in hiding as well as her thoughts, feelings and dreams. On 4 August 1944, the Gestapo broke into the Secret Annex and arrested everyone, including their Dutch protectors. The Jews who had been hiding were sent to Westerbork, a transit camp for Jews to places further east and then on to Auschwitz in September. Anne and Margot eventually ended up in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, where both sisters died of typhus in March 1945, one month before the camp's liberation.

Otto was the only member of the group to survive. He received Anne's diary from Miep Gies, one of the rescuers who had discovered it after the family's arrest. After reading the diary, Otto decided to publish the work, in accordance, he believed, with Anne's wishes (Prose 2009).

The diary, the fame, the museum

Like any iconic figure, Anne Frank and her resulting image as the innocent Holocaust victim, was an evolutionary process. The Anne Frank House has been visited by millions of people throughout the world, and her diary has been read by millions more (AFH 2011). How did Anne Frank, a young Jewish-German girl living in the Netherlands and recording an adolescent's diary, become a universally recognized figure? And how did her hiding place and virtual prison for two years become a site of pilgrimage, as well as a popular tourist site?

Publicity surrounding Anne and her diary began almost immediately after the war; however, it would be another ten years before it achieved any significant international attention. In April 1946, a Dutch journalist reflected on the power of this seemingly inconsequential diary of a child ("schijnbaar onbetekenende dagboek van een kind"), proclaiming that Anne's spirit ("geest") and childish voice embodies the real hideousness of fascism, more so than all the evidence presented at Nuremberg ("in dit door een kinderstem gestamelde 'de profundis' alle afzichtheljkheid van het fascisme belichaamd, méér dan in alle processtukken van Neurenberg bij elkaar") (Romein 1946). This article, written only 13 months after Anne's death, was the first to recognize the diary's future importance and role in delivering and shaping post-war memory. After the diary's publication in the Netherlands in 1947 under the title *Het Achterhuis* (*The Secret Annex*), subsequent publications followed in Germany and France (both in 1950), and then in English as *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* in 1952. The diary was scripted into a Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play and was adapted into a film in 1959, which won three Academy Awards. Finally, in 1995 an unexpurgated edition was published in English, revealing the diary in full for the first time as entries pertaining to Anne's sexuality and difficult relationship with her mother had been previously removed. Today, the diary, having been read and translated into 50 different languages, is one of the most popular books in the world (Enzer and Enzer 2000).

The diary's notoriety led to a movement to memorialize the hiding place and create a permanent site of remembrance for Anne. In December 1954 the Dutch newspaper *De Nieuwe Dag* reported that Anne Frank's 'Secret Annex' was marked for demolition in order to make way for a new office block along the canal. Otto's former office building:

the spot where the 'Secret Annex' is located, right up to the Westermarket will be taken up by ateliers and offices of the clothing factory N.V. Berghaus. It is not known when the demolition work will begin.

(DND 1954)

Fortunately, this destruction never took place. Otto Frank, in collaboration with Amsterdam's Mayor Gijs van Hall, moved to save the site by appealing for popular support to turn the building into a museum. The place had already become a sight of pilgrimage for "countless foreign visitors" who wished to see the place where Anne had hidden and to pay homage to her memory (DND 1954). Fundraising and support, both domestic and international, was widely successful and allowed plans for a permanent museum at the House to become a reality (Young 1994).

The Anne Frank Museum at 263 Prinsengracht opened on 3 May 1960. *The New York Times* briefly reported its opening, noting that Otto Frank wished the site would be not only a memorial to Anne and her suffering, but also "a building in which the ideals of Anne will find their realization" (NYT 1960). Two years later, the Museum was mentioned in several travel articles and advertisements in the United States highlighting tourist destinations within Amsterdam (NYT 1962). Four years after the museum's opening one travel writer concluded that while in Amsterdam, "An American reader finds this book [the diary]... tragic and tender. When one puts it down and visits the narrow house at 263 Prinsengracht where Anne lived, the impact is overpowering" (NYT 1964). The site retains this emotional reaction today. Nearly ten years after reading the diary in the seventh grade, I finally visited the museum in March 2009. Despite the many years that had passed, Anne's words remained a vivid guide that clearly illustrated the angst, hope, love and frustration she recorded during her two years in hiding.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the Annex emerged as an established tourist site, a must-see destination in the Netherlands. In the first year alone 9,000 people visited the Secret Annex. These numbers grew exponentially throughout the following decades from 180,000 in 1970, to 600,000 in 1990, to over one million in 2007 (AFH 2011). Throughout the years the museum has grown and adjusted its presentation in order to accommodate the increasing number and variety of visitors. This process entailed the reinforcing of structures, establishing of educational programmes and exhibits, and the presentation of a more universal message that would speak to diverse audiences about current issues. The museum is a self-directed tour that is designed to encourage free exploration and individual learning. According to the official museum webpage, "The House is a museum where visitors are given the opportunity to personally envision

what happened on this very spot” (AFH 2012). While the rooms of the Secret Annex retain their authentic state, they are empty as the furniture was removed immediately following the August arrest. However, detailed information, documents and objects belonging to the former occupants are displayed along the walls. Furthermore, the building adjacent to the former office has been incorporated into the museum and houses both temporary and permanent exhibitions, including an interactive programme that highlights current human rights violations around the world. The popularity and success of the museum has ensured that the Secret Annex is fully incorporated into the tourist attractions of Amsterdam and represents an important tourist facility for the city.

While there are many reasons for the rise in popularity of the Annex as a tourist destination, one of the most self-evident explanations was the rise in public awareness of and interest in the Holocaust on a global scale. Increased interest in the Holocaust by the wider public can be further observed by examining the 60-year history of the Memorial Museum of the Concentration Camp at Auschwitz–Birkenau. While the two sites are located in separate countries and present different histories, both witnessed dramatic international attention and recognition as the most prominent sites displaying the horror of the Holocaust. An examination of the timeline for post-war Auschwitz – with particular attention to events after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 when foreign travel to Poland was relaxed – will reveal some of the key movements and public attitudes that have led to the exponential growth of the Holocaust tourism industry over the past two decades.

Auschwitz

Konzentrationslager Auschwitz was the largest and deadliest concentration and extermination centre during the history of the Third Reich (Dwork and van Pelt 1996). The camp was built outside of the Polish town of Oswiecim in southeastern Poland, 30 miles outside of Krakow. It was initially constructed for Polish political prisoners in 1940, yet its purpose changed dramatically in 1942 when Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS), designated the camp as a centre for extermination as part of the “Final Solution to the Jewish question” (Gutman 1998: 6).

In 1942, Camp Commander Rudolf Höss began construction of Auschwitz–Birkenau, in the nearby town of Brzezinka. Four crematoria and four gas chambers were constructed at the new site over the following three years. During this time nearly one million Jews throughout Europe were murdered in the gas chambers at Birkenau, and thousands of others were killed slowly through starvation and overwork. The Soviet Army liberated the camp on 27 January 1945. However, few prisoners remained since most had already been evacuated to camps in Germany proper by the SS guards ten days earlier.

Creation of the museum

Poland suffered tremendously during the war, losing over six million of its citizens (including three million Jews) (Gross 2006: 26). Many former prisoners and rising

politicians of the new Communist government in Poland felt the need to establish a museum and a memorial at the Auschwitz site by making use of the remaining structures (Charlesworth *et al.* 2006).

Auschwitz was officially established as the State Museum at Oswiecim-Brzezinka on 14 June 1947. The date commemorated the seventh anniversary of the arrival of the first transport of Polish political prisoners. Over 30,000 people, almost entirely Polish, attended the opening ceremonies (Huener 2003: 32). The newly elected prime minister of the Polish Socialist Party, Jozef Cyrankiewicz, a former political prisoner at Auschwitz, spoke at the opening ceremonies and called for peace, reconstruction of the devastated Polish state and hope for the future (Huener 2003). A great emphasis was placed on Polish martyrdom and sacrifice (as opposed to the Jewish losses), which was to become a central theme at Auschwitz for the next 60 years. In fact, the 1947 directive establishing the camp museum declared that the museum was intended as “a monument to the martyrdom and struggle of the Polish and other peoples” (Smolen 1990: 261). Auschwitz was fashioned into an official state symbol that commemorated the four million people who had died there at the hands of fascism (Webber 1990: 281). The figure of four million was established by the investigations of the Soviet Commission immediately following the liberation of the camp in February 1945. This figure remained official until the fall of communism in 1989. It was later re-evaluated to 1.1 million (Piper 1994). Ceremonies concluded with a Holy Mass and the singing of ‘Rota’ (The Pledge), a Polish nationalist song with strong anti-German undertones. Nothing was mentioned or reserved for the Judeocide that had occurred in the nearby gas chambers of Birkenau.

The opening of the museum received little global media attention. Due to the emergence of the Cold War politics between the Eastern Communist Bloc and the West, Auschwitz was primarily accessible only to Polish visitors, and as a result, the museum’s early years reflected this demographic. Unlike the Anne Frank House, advertisements to visit the site did not appear in the international press.

Auschwitz immediately became a political tool for the government of the Soviet Union in order to legitimize the triumph of communism in Poland over German fascism and Western capitalism. This aspect of memory manipulation was a battle of -isms – communism, German national socialism (fascism) and capitalism – which left an indelible impression shaping the message and organization of the site. The museum’s administration, prodded by government and communist party leaders, chose to highlight particular aspects of the camp while downplaying others. The museum highlighted Auschwitz I (the main camp) and the Polish population that had been incarcerated there. While museum officials did not deny the unique treatment and awful fate of the Jews at the Auschwitz camp complex, particularly at Auschwitz–Birkenau, the information was scarcely reflected in the museum’s exhibitions (Gordon 2006). The Communist regime further reinterpreted the reasons and responsibility of the concentration and death camp. Instead of blaming Nazi racial ideology and anti-Semitism, museum representations pointed the finger at fascism and Western capitalism, furthering their own communist agenda and legitimization.

The Auschwitz Museum became a site dedicated to the memory of Polish suffering at the hands of the Nazis with little attention given to Auschwitz's Jewish victims. Instead, the unique experience of the Jewish victims and their particular fate according to the Nazis' 'Final Solution' was ignored or downplayed because the Polish government and museum administrators interpreted it as a distraction from Poland's victimization (Gordon 2006: 13). The debate over Polish victimization and culpability for the Holocaust remains, and Auschwitz often ends up caught in the middle of various interest groups.

In the early years of the museum, Auschwitz's historical role was largely disregarded in favour of the government's political agenda. By choosing to ignore Birkenau and its leading role in the gruesome history of the camp, museum officials chose political favour over historical accuracy. Political propaganda and ideology shaped the message and image of the museum during its first three decades. In fact, the racial policies of the Nazis were barely touched or reflected upon. While Poles and communists received special attention as groups that suffered in Auschwitz, the number of Jewish victims was never addressed in the museum's first exhibitions. By becoming a site dedicated to the celebration of the Polish resistance and the condemnation of Western political ideology, Auschwitz became a victim itself to the politics of the era.

Changes at the museum

The mid 1950s ushered in subtle changes to the museum's design and agenda. Stalin's death in March 1953 provided a relaxation of the Soviets' tight grip on Poland's political infrastructure that carried over into the government-run museum. In 1956 Poland experienced a period of democratic reform under its new leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka (Huener 2003). Instead of being defined by its Soviet overtones as an anti-fascist and pro-communist site, Auschwitz regained its original Polish-nationalist outlook. During the first ten years of its existence approximately 1,771,300 Poles and 79,600 people from outside of Poland visited the museum (Huener 2001: 528). The camp became a required field trip for all Polish youth, and was often visited by Poles who wished to commemorate a loved one who had perished there. The museum did not, however, receive many international visitors from outside of Soviet Bloc countries due to the continuation of Cold War politics between the East and the West.

Despite its primarily nationalist agenda, the museum nevertheless had to cater to international interests. Many public events, including the tenth anniversary of the camp's liberation in 1955, the Eichmann Trial in Israel in 1961, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials that took place a few years later, and even the rising popularity of Anne Frank's diary, drew the international press to the subject of Auschwitz. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, interest in the Holocaust as a subject increased dramatically. A large number of memoirs were published, including some of the first comprehensive scholarly works examining the Holocaust by Gerlad Reitlinger and Raul Hilberg. Television and Hollywood followed suit, first in the widely popular television series *Holocaust* in 1978 and then in Claude Lanzmann's

monumental documentary *The Shoah* in 1985, cementing Auschwitz as an identifiable place and a symbol of the Holocaust.

Today, the museum receives over one million visitors a year from across the world. The year 2007 was the first time the museum received over a million visitors (as noted earlier, the same is true for the Anne Frank House). The vast majority of visitors come from Poland, followed by the United States, Great Britain, Italy and Germany (Stanczyk 2007). In 2010, nearly 47,000 people from South Korea, 59,000 from Israel and 11,800 from Australia visited the memorial, thus truly demonstrating its global appeal (Urbaniak 2010: 20).

In 2007 it was reported “over 30 million people from over 100 countries have visited the Auschwitz Museum” (Stanczyk 2007). The number of visitors from Western Europe and the United States rose dramatically after 1989 when diplomatic relations between the East and West improved, which opened up the country’s borders for tourism. Every year after this date the museum has witnessed an increase in visitors. Before this date, the majority of visitors came from communist Eastern Bloc countries, often sent by their respective governments. Poland, as well as some other Eastern Bloc countries, often absorbed the travelling costs associated with visiting the site, as well as mandating that all Polish schoolchildren take a field trip to Auschwitz (Cole 1999). It was important to the communist authorities that their populations should commemorate and be educated at the Soviets’ primary site of martyrdom, Auschwitz. Tim Cole remarked that after 1989, the busloads of school children from Eastern Germany were replaced by Western tourists and the rise of the “Holocaust Industry” (Cole 1999: 116).

The 1955 permanent exhibition remains the primary focus of the museum, although some figures and vocabulary have been changed to reflect current historical research. The exhibition is housed in the former barracks of Auschwitz I and features both prisoner and perpetrator artefacts, from clandestine prisoner artwork to SS uniforms. In addition, the museum contains an extensive collection of personal possessions, which were stolen and collected from the 1.1 million victims of the Auschwitz gas chambers. Auschwitz II Birkenau remained largely untouched. Today it is a harrowing field of chimneys, barbedwire, guard towers and the dynamited ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria. While entry to the museum is free, allowing for independent learning and visitation, hiring a museum-sanctioned guided tour is strongly encouraged and is mandatory for groups. The official museum website suggests 90 minutes for Auschwitz I and 90 minutes for Birkenau with the statement that “it is essential to visit both parts in order to acquire a proper sense of the place that has become a symbol of the Holocaust as well as Nazi crimes against Poles, Romas, and other groups” (Memorial and Museum Auschwitz–Birkenau 2012). A free bus covering the three kilometers from the main camp to Birkenau is provided for visitors every hour.

The rise of Holocaust tourism

Norman Finkelstein, a historian and son of two survivors, originally coined the term ‘Holocaust Industry’ in his highly controversial book, *The Holocaust*

Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering (2000). Finkelstein accused various countries and Jewish groups of exploiting the memory of the Holocaust for profit. His scathing critique built upon previous works that also expressed concern over the global exploitation of the Holocaust, notably Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* and Tim Cole's *Selling the Holocaust*, both published in 1999.

Cole illuminated the emerging differences between what he described as the "myth of the Holocaust" and the "Holocaust itself". This 'myth' was not a reference to the revisionists' theory of Auschwitz; rather, it was the mass-marketed and Hollywood-produced image of the Holocaust that had emerged through film over the previous 20 years. This image has furthermore coincided with a unique interest in a particular form of tourism. Cole offers the observation that "At the end of the twentieth century death tourism is big business... There is a fascination with the sites of 'significant' deaths." Cole labels the Auschwitz–Birkenau Museum and Memorial as "Auschwitz-land" that is "created for tourist consumption and [is] the end product of Holocaust tourism" (Cole 1999: 113–114). One outraged visitor from Israel described Auschwitz as a 'Jewish Disney' in a newspaper editorial in 2007 (Sorsby 2007). While Cole's remarks were quite harsh and cynical towards tourists' motivations for visiting Auschwitz, he nevertheless raised serious issues concerning the substantial increase in visitors and paid tours (see Figure 13.1).



Figure 13.1 A dark tour passes under the well-known gates of Auschwitz

The ‘Holocaust Industry’ was the result of an increased interest in the subject within Europe and abroad throughout the past 50 years. The popularity of Holocaust films released during the 1990s brought further attention, particularly via Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film *Schindler’s List*, Roberto Benigni’s 1997 Italian Film *La Vita e Bella (Life Is Beautiful)* and Roman Polanski’s 2002 film *The Pianist*. The tourist industry was quick to respond to Spielberg’s success by establishing ‘Schindler tours’ that visited historical sites appearing in the movie (including Auschwitz–Birkenau). Hollywood had already had significant success with Auschwitz, most notably with *Sophie’s Choice*, a William Styron novel adapted to the big screen in 1982. While the literature about Auschwitz and former inmates’ experiences has consistently received a wide readership in the West since the 1960s, it is undeniable that in the visual and media-driven world of today, Hollywood has reached a far greater audience (Doneson 2002). Marshman has noted, “1993 has been described as the ‘Year of the Holocaust’”, referring to both the Spielberg film and the opening of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington DC (Marshman 2005). The Holocaust had come to Hollywood, and in response, attraction and interest in the Holocaust was booming. The interest has only increased throughout the past 15 years, leading to more movies, more tours and, in general, more knowledge and awareness of the Holocaust and the horror that unfolded throughout Europe during World War II.

Holocaust sites are often incorporated into packaged tourist deals. Thus, visitors to Munich are encouraged to visit Konzentrationslager Dachau; Terezin is a half-day trip from Prague; Auschwitz is often included in a ‘package deal’ designed to ‘save time and money’ with the Wieliczka Salt Mines in the vicinity of Krakow (seekrakow.com 2011); and the Anne Frank House is a ‘must see’ in Amsterdam (Virtual Tourist 2011). Yet the question remains: Why do people, in increasing numbers, visit these sites? The reasons are undoubtedly numerous and impossible to isolate. Nevertheless, these sites of atrocity have become ‘necessary’ sites on the tourist trail. In other words, according to many travel books and brochures, when visiting Poland, “a visit to Auschwitz is a must” (Lunsche 2008). Popular travel guides, such as *Lonely Planet*, *Fodor’s*, *Let’s Go* and *Frommer’s*, all feature popular Holocaust sites and even give ‘travel tips’ about visiting. Furthermore, Auschwitz has become “an obligatory place of pilgrimage for all visiting heads of state” to Poland in order to honour the Jewish and Polish victims of the Holocaust (Cole 1999: 117). Former president Gerald Ford was the first US president to visit Auschwitz in 1975 followed by the much-publicized visit by Pope John Paul II in 1979 (Szulc 1979). These visits “serve not only a symbolic purpose, but a diplomatic one” (Sanger 2003) for statesmen and countries (Smith 2005). The Anne Frank House is also an ‘expected’ stop on a diplomatic tour and has been visited by numerous world leaders including Hilary Clinton and Yasser Arafat.

While these ‘dark’ historic sites are often psychologically difficult to visit, they do offer the visitor the chance to get closer to an understanding (albeit, from a distance and from an outsider’s perspective) of the horror and suffering that occurred there. People can walk through the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate and imagine the apprehension and fear of former prisoners, or from a more sinister standpoint,

the power and clout of the Nazi guards. Similarly, they can also walk through the confining rooms of the Secret Annex and try to visualize Anne's years of angst and hiding. Visiting Holocaust sites has inevitably become one way in which tourists can learn about or vicariously experience atrocities and death. In other words, these sites are available in an authentic, unadulterated form as they allow the visitor to form their own memories and interpretation of the site beyond what textbooks have explained or what Hollywood has promoted. This interpretation is then incorporated into the global memory of the site, which in turn shapes and configures the history, which, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, is constantly evolving.

By the 1990s, the names 'Auschwitz' and 'Anne Frank' were among the most recognized and identifiable places and names associated with the Holocaust. Auschwitz is often the only concentration camp that many people are able to name, and Anne Frank certainly stands out among, and at the same time apart from, the six million Jewish victims. Coincidentally, the images of Auschwitz and Anne Frank tend to subsume all evocations of the Holocaust. The reasons behind this movement are many and complex, and are likely the result of particular, universal events and movements such as the Eichmann trial and the overall growing curiosity and appreciation for the Holocaust and other genocides, as seen through the rise in post-Holocaust literature, national and universal educational programmes, and Hollywood. James Young, who referred to the House as a "monument to innocence", attributed this to the fact that "the Anne Frank House is the most likely introduction to the Holocaust, for it is an easy, accessible window to this period" (Young 1999: 224). In the United States, Anne Frank's Diary is often the first, and in some cases the only work associated with the Holocaust that many people have read, as the diary is 'ubiquitous' and often a mandatory part of the curriculum in middle and high school English classes (Spector and Jones 2007). Auschwitz, likewise, sustains particular attention as a dominating site of the Holocaust due to its status as the deadliest Nazi annihilation centre and the focus of many government initiatives, survivor memoirs and Hollywood movies.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the evolution of two Holocaust sites in Europe. It has addressed Holocaust tourism not only as a unique development within the tourism industry, but as a growing and evolving phenomenon in a post-Holocaust, post-Communist Europe that not only affects local communities, but the global community as well. It has illustrated how two sites have evolved into international tourist destinations, which now serve both a didactic and haunting experience.

The Anne Frank House and the Auschwitz Concentration Camp were originally preserved after the war as memorials for their respective victims; however, they have moved beyond mere memorials into universal symbols of the Holocaust. Despite the sites' *symbolic* power as representative of the Holocaust and of Nazi oppression, the *physical* sites are still important and sacred. The growing attention and increased visitation to the museums demonstrate that these physical sites

“deeply matter to people”. Thus, as Jonathan Webber has noted concerning Auschwitz:

Even so long after the end of the war, care must be exercised to express the right meanings for the place, to preserve Auschwitz in a manner fitting to the memory of those who died there.

(Webber 1990: 281)

The Anne Frank House attracts similar concern and attention, as the recent battle to preserve the large chestnut tree outside the Secret Annex demonstrates (Coughlan 2007).

Today these sites house important museums and education centres, which together welcome over two million visitors a year. They are sites of pilgrimage as well as centres of conversation and discussion. Nevertheless, controversies over the interpretation and design as well as the meaning and message of the museums continue to shape and influence the sites. While some disputes are site specific, both the Auschwitz Museum and the Anne Frank House have had to grapple with renovations to the construction and re-evaluations to outdated exhibitions. As these monuments continue to age and deteriorate, tensions have emerged between maintaining authenticity and performing reconstruction to maintain their appearance and to allow safe access for tourists.

Ultimately, these issues revolve around ownership and the ability and right to interpret and present a historical narrative. However, since these sites have emerged as universal symbols, tensions have arisen among competing interest groups, all of which have a ‘claim’ to the site itself. To whom do these sites belong? Are they ‘owned’ by their respective national governments, the European Union, Israel or perhaps the international community? Who has the authority to dictate changes? What is the overall message the sites should portray? In the case of Auschwitz, the scope is limited to the Holocaust, while the Anne Frank House has embraced a more universal appeal against intolerance and genocide. Whoever ‘controls’ the site exerts broad influence on creating the narrative that is to be presented and dispersed. This history will reproduce and describe not only what the past once was, but also what that past says about the present and expected future.

The importance of these places, as sites and symbols, remains. Auschwitz survivor and writer Primo Levi wrote about visiting Holocaust memorials:

With the passing of years and decades, these remains do not lose any of their significance as a Warning Monument; rather, they gain in meaning. They teach better than any treatise or memorial how inhuman the Hitlerite regime was, even in its choices of sites and architecture.

(Levi 1994: 185)

The future for these sites remains to be seen, but their importance within the understanding of the Holocaust, despite the different ways they communicate their messages, as well as their current role in the global community, is undeniable.

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