MICHAEL BERENBAUM

by ANDREA GOLLIN

Michael Berenbaum stands at a podium at the University of Miami and he talks and talks, the words flow, his style conversational, graceful, compelling, as he relates facts and statistics he seems to know by heart. He recounts that the total staff at Treblinka was one hundred and twenty – thirty Germans and ninety Ukrainians effected the killing of between 700,000 to 870,000 Jews; there were one hundred known Jewish survivors. Chelno used mobile gas vans. Of 500,000 Jews in Belzec, two survived that we know of. Auschwitz had forty-four parallel train tracks feeding it; New York's Penn Station, by contrast, has twenty-one. Hungarian Jews – 437,402 of them – arrived primarily at Auschwitz in one hundred and forty-seven transports in the fifty-four days between May 15 and July 9, 1944, and eighty to ninety percent of them were murdered on arrival. When Auschwitz was liberated, after the Death March there were only about six thousand people left there. Also left were fourteen thousand pounds of human hair and 358,000 suits.

Before there's time to wonder what happened to the hair, he is speaking of that too, and more. He doesn't raise his voice, he is not agitated, but he is focused and urgent. "The human being was consumable raw material to be recycled. The gold went to Switzerland. The hair was used to line submarines and stuff mattresses. The human fat was used as fertilizer; there's no evidence that it was used in soap…clothing, shoes were reused. Gold and silver was melted down. It was a highly efficient, assembly line notion of killing."

This is a man who has spent the greater part of his career telling the story of the Holocaust. He has told it in many ways, to many audiences, over many years. He has told it in museums, in books, in films, in university classrooms, in lectures. He is fluent in Holocaust. He is a translator of sorts, a traveler bringing us this story, trying to teach us, hoping that something may come of the telling.

Berenbaum is a gifted speaker, verging at times on lyrical. Of the victims, he says, "When they said they were hungry, they ate in 1941 and again in 1945, and that meal often killed them. When they said they were cold, they got cold in October and warm again in May."

When he finishes speaking, there's only time for five questions, each of which he greets with interest. One man in the audience has raised his hand, not to question but to comment. "I've never heard anything discussed in such depth and in such a short amount of time – congratulations," the listener tells Berenbaum, as others nod in agreement.

"Thank you. You can collect your money outside," Berenbaum jokes.

He travels the world – he has worked on museum projects from Mexico to Japan, from Chicago to Jerusalem. He has written or edited seventeen books, not including overseeing the award-winning 2006 new edition of the twenty-two-volume *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, for which he served as executive editor. He directs a think tank in Los-Angeles, the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust, which holds seminars and runs programs, and is part of American Jewish University, formerly the University of Judaism. He's a college professor, who taught full time at Wesleyan for seven years, as an adjunct for fifteen years at Georgetown, and for shorter stints at several other universities, including visiting professorships. More recently, he has become increasingly involved in films, sometimes as a consultant, sometimes as a narrator, sometimes as a producer.

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It all began with his work for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where he spent several years. He was a research fellow there in 1987–1988, became project director from 1988–1993, and was director of the research institute from 1993–1997. Of course, one does not simply become the project director of a museum being built on the Mall in Washington, D.C. It really began before that, when he was appointed to the President's Commission on the Holocaust, for which he was deputy director in 1979–1980, an opportunity that prompted him to leave his teaching job at Wesleyan.

But really, it began where things begin for most of us; it started in childhood, at a time when the Holocaust was not discussed, but was clearly in evidence. "I am not the child of survivors, but I am a product of them," he says. "I was shaped by that epoch."

Berenbaum, born in 1945, grew up in Kew Gardens, Queens, the child of parents who came to the U.S. from Europe as very young children – his mother at age one, his father at eight. American children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, both were raised to embrace America.

Berenbaum was brought up "deeply Orthodox," as he describes it, was educated at New York *yeshivot* (he went on to receive his rabbinical ordination from the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in 1967), and, while growing up, attended a synagogue whose members were German and Belgian refugees desperate to make a life in America.

"It was a shattered culture," he explains. "In school we didn't study the Holocaust. I was educated by Hebrew-speaking teachers who were for the most part Holocaust survivors but didn't use the term. They were refugees. I saw things that were never explained. One teacher couldn't move his left arm and his hand had no fingers. It was a fist – he would hold chalk in it. We saw tattooed numbers on arms. We didn't know what they were. We heard words like 'children,' and 'death,' and 'murder.'"

In this world, just after the war, educated by these men, he felt that he and his classmates "were a small elite and had to make up for an entire culture that was lost."

Although the Holocaust was seldom discussed, it was a constant presence. He remembers rising at dawn as a teenager to listen to a daily 6:25 A.M. report on the Eichmann trial on his clock radio, a new invention at the time.

He attended Queens College, where he received a bachelor's degree in philosophy, then went to graduate school, first at Boston University and then at Florida State University, where he earned a PhD in religion and culture. He began graduate school with the idea of exploring the question, through the history of religion, of why some cultures are destroyed after defeat while others are not. The idea of studying the Holocaust had not occurred to him and didn't until someone else pointed out the link.

"A guy came up to me and said this was a contemporary question, and he told me to read Holocaust literature," Berenbaum recalls. He found that Holocaust literature was asking many of the same questions he was interested in, and that the literature "resonated" with him.

He had every intention of spending his career at Wesleyan when the Holocaust came calling. It was 1979, and he had just bought a house in Connecticut, which he and his family had lived in for three months, when, as he puts it, "a bizarre piece of – in retrospect – not luck but destiny" occurred. The President's Commission on the Holocaust was being formed, and Berenbaum was offered the position of deputy director. The job entailed a move to Washington, D.C. – he says he got the position because "no one else could go." Previously, he had worked at the Holocaust Resource Center in New York while he was on leave from Wesleyan.

Berenbaum began working on the conception of what ultimately became the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1979–80, but wound up leaving the position in 1980 after a clash with Elie Wiesel over the issue of whether non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust would receive attention in the museum. Berenbaum argued for their inclusion. Wiesel "saw me as an agent of de-Judaization of the Holocaust because I told him, in the way a young man tells one's elders [that the museum should include non-Jews]," he recalls.

Berenbaum and his family decided to stay in D.C., where he held several jobs during the next seven years. He taught at various universities before taking a position as the executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington for three years. Then he began teaching at Georgetown as an adjunct professor of theology, where he taught courses on modern Jewish thought and rabbinics and offered a course on the Holocaust each year. When he started at Georgetown, he also began working in journalism, at the *Washington Jewish Week*, where he spent three and a half years as editor of the Opinion Page and an overlapping year as acting editor, a work experience he calls "a lucky break." To this day, he advises graduate students to spend six months at a newspaper as a preemptive cure for writer's block. "It helped me write quickly and well," he says. "I suggest it to all my graduate students…because they will no longer be afraid of the empty screen. If you don't write and you procrastinate, you will get fired."

In 1987, Berenbaum once again took a position with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, after Wiesel left as chairman. He became the project director of the museum, returning with a somewhat different perspective gleaned during the intervening years and from his teaching experience. "I went back to it as an agent of Judaica and protecting Jewish memory," he says.

Berenbaum stayed at the museum for the next ten years, an experience he calls "the opportunity of my life, which was to shape the museum. In certain respects it was something for which my entire life had trained me. I became the translator into America idiom and visual idiom of what had been bequeathed to me in silence. I gave voice to what these people [his childhood teachers] had communicated in silence but could not tell at that stage of the game."

The U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum is a "monumental achievement of tremendous intellectual and moral magnitude that has really changed the landscape of Holocaust commemoration," says Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel Office. He notes that the museum has a significance and an impact that derive not only from the building's contents but from its context. "The very notion of a museum dedicated to the Holocaust, built with the assistance of the federal government on federal land, on the Mall in Washington, D.C., gave the commemoration of the Holocaust a tremendous push outside the Jewish community," Zuroff explains. "The Jewish community never had any doubts about the Holocaust's significance as a watershed event in world history, but that was not initially obvious to others." Zuroff cites the "highly effective manner in which the museum was created," and its ability to "walk a very fine line" as a government museum that "had to tell the tale in a way that was not victim-centered and not perpetrator-centered, but that had to find the right balance" as factors in both the ultimate moral resonance of the institution and its subsequent success in steadily attracting large numbers of visitors (as of 2008, nearly thirty million since the museum's dedication in 1993).

In 1997, Berenbaum left the museum, and left Washington, D.C., to take a position as the president and CEO of Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (now the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education), created to gather video testimonies from survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust.

The position was not ultimately a good fit for him, and he left in 1999 to work on his own, primarily as a consultant to Holocaust-themed museums, films, and other related projects. In going out on his own, his thoughts were that he "had devoted fifteen years to the creation [of institutions] but also to administration…I had done a lot of what I wanted to do. I wanted to see if I could do the creative work and not the administrative." He has since been involved in numerous projects ranging from books to films to museums and memorials, and calls this phase of his career "very productive."

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Observing Berenbaum lead an afternoon planning meeting for a modest Holocaust museum in Hollywood, Florida that's in the planning stages is watching a master at work. He addresses a room full of people, explaining the museum's scope, objectives, and proposed layout, using only floor plans as visuals, yet managing to conjure a vivid, detailed image of what the institution will be. He is direct and he is honest, and he repeatedly tells his listeners that he wants to hear all of their criticism.

"A museum building is a combination of story and space. A good museum should be like a symphony with themes," he says. Yet, in the case of a Holocaust museum, certain elements function quite differently from those in typical museums. Like other museums, the idea is to "grab you, move you a continent away, a universe apart," he says. But, "museums usually show the pristine and the beautiful. With us it's the anti-pristine and the anti-beautiful. Normally you would want to see a beautiful, elegant Torah. Here, the desecrated Torah becomes more powerful."

In the case of the museum in Hollywood, the institution needs to convey not only facts and figures but also certain messages. The museum should "tell you that before they were victims, they were people. They were people like you and like me. It should create a sense of empathy." It will do this by recreating "a shadow of what the survivors experienced. [It will] shatter and shape and enlarge the human spirit and teach the fundamental values of human conscience," Berenbaum says.

On a more prosaic level, he mentions that maps are essential, because "we have kids who don't know where Europe is." Keeping the audience in mind, there is the goal that "the students should be able to answer certain questions" after they have toured the museum. Then there's the message, the take-home lesson, and it's one that Berenbaum says must be shaped not just to its subject, the Holocaust, but to its audience, its place – to school kids in South Florida. "Kids don't need the message that the world's a lousy place and there's nothing you can do. That's nihilism, that's despair. We want to tell them – it's a little false – you can make it better. We want to teach that courage takes many forms."

And then he gets to the crux of the audience issue, which is that you simply do not know how the story you tell will affect your audience, so care must be taken. Yes, the building will be "one of the morally most important buildings in your city." Yes, it is a story that must be told. Yes, we have failed at the whole notion of "never again," but "that doesn't mean the effort is not important." Yes, we Jews "are a people who remember evil, who remember anguish, who remember suffering."

But that does not give us leave to present the story purely from the teller's point of view. It must be shaped, it must be appropriate to its context and to its audience; in this case, primarily schoolchildren. "Kids are unformed – we are formed," he says. "I, unfortunately, can no longer be a ballerina." His point? To keep in mind that the museum's objective is to impart knowledge and engender empathy, it is not to traumatize. And that children can be traumatized without much effort. Care must be taken.

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Not to traumatize. How does that apply to the teller of the story? It's more than thirty-five years since Berenbaum began studying Holocaust literature as a PhD student. How does he continue to do this work, to study, to teach, to tell of the atrocities through books, movies, museums? "It's hard," he says. He mentions that he has had advantages that have helped him, primary among them being his children – he has four children, from two marriages. "When I first started I had young children, and young kids are life personified. Their life force, their zeal, is infectious," he says. Their joy helped balance the darkness of his work.

Nevertheless, he says, "You do pay a price for it. My kids did, especially my older kids." You never really know how your work, your decisions, impact your children. However, when they write their college admission essay about your work, you start to get an inkling. His oldest daughter, Ilana, who is now a rabbi, never mentioned that, growing up, she knew Berenbaum had stored a box of canisters of Zyklon-B, the poison gas pellets used at Auschwitz and other concentration camps, in the family garage, behind the ski equipment. But she wrote about it.

How the box got to the garage is a saga in itself. The canisters were the property of the Holocaust Museum, but when they arrived, staff members had a strong negative reaction. They were "a powerful symbol of evil. Some feared that their power could reach into the present," Edward Linenthal reports in his book *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum.*

One staff member claimed that proximity to the material was making him impotent and threatened to sue. Testing the pellets to see if they were toxic would cost thousands. Berenbaum took matters into his own hands – one night after work he loaded the box of pellets into his car, and drove it to his house. It was never mentioned at the museum again, he says. He hid it in his garage for years, eventually found a low-cost way to test the material, which was judged safe, and at long last brought the box to a museum storage facility, thinking that was the end of it. And it was, until he read his daughter's essay about, "what it was like to grow up where Zyklon-B was stored next to your ski boots," he says.

Humor also helps. Berenbaum laughs as he recalls the evening when his wife turned to him and said, "I don't want to see another Holocaust film. Let's go see *Hotel Rwanda*" (a film about the brutal murder of one million people in Rwanda). Irony can come in handy as well. When he drove to Dachau in 1972 there was a gasoline strike in Germany. "I couldn't get gas for my car. I said, 'Should I say that I'm the first Jew who couldn't get gas at Dachau?'" Berenbaum the scholar quickly steps in to point out that he "subsequently learned that Jews weren't gassed at Dachau."

Then, as if he's giving himself advice, he points out that balance in life is important, "so that it's not just Holocaust." For him, in his career that has become "harder and harder…I've become a victim of my own specialty. Twenty-five years ago, I got invited to speak on many more topics." That, in part, is why he recently took on the massive task of editing the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, a three-year project to significantly rewrite the twenty-two-volume, five-million-word endeavor, first published in 1972, which had been updated a few times but never re-crafted. As he worked on it, he anticipated that it would broaden the subjects he was asked to lecture on, although that has turned out not to be the case, he says.

But there are rewards, too. "Any of us who teach the Holocaust understand that we impact in ways we cannot imagine," he tells the audience at the University of Miami. "I was in that hotel in Rwanda right after the genocide. I walked in and was greeted by a beautiful blond young woman. She had been my student in 1982, she had become a doctor, and she was volunteering for Doctors without Borders." She told Berenbaum the reason she was volunteering was because she had studied the Holocaust with him at Georgetown, and she asked him to meet with her parents and explain to them why what she was doing was important.

However, teaching is a delicate matter, one in which the lessons you impart must be carefully thought through, he says. "It is not enough to educate people," Berenbaum says, time and again, in conversation, in lectures, in presentations. "Education must be joined with values. Are we educating students to be sensitive human beings…with a respect for human rights? When I taught at Georgetown I was always afraid some student would be taking notes, thinking, 'Germany made mistakes here, made mistakes there, when I'm back in Asia, Africa, etc., I will do better.'"

That fear, the fear that in educating students about the Holocaust he is teaching aspiring perpetrators of atrocities, doesn't stop him from continuing on day after day, telling this story in every way he can think of, to as many people as he can reach, in as many different media as he can gain access to.

Why? Why keep telling the story? Why keep building museums, making films, writing books, studying the event? "People are asking that less and less," Berenbaum says. "Thirty years ago people asked why the Holocaust was relevant. The world is such that now they do understand why…It happened. It is the definitive event of twentieth-century humanity. We *have* to learn from it."

And have we?

The answer, Berenbaum says, clearly not for the first time, is, "Yes, no and maybe. We have learned, but our narrative is much more complex. Jews thought we had figured out from the history of the Holocaust that we were victims because we did not have land and did not have adequate power; we were without an army and a state. The irony of contemporary Jewish history is that Israel's weakness is its strength, and its strength is its weakness. Its greatest vulnerability is that it is perceived as being so strong that nothing it does to defend itself is regarded as just.

"But there is such a residue of victimization that the Jewish community continues to see things as having Holocaust-like peril when there is no actual relationship. This is not 1930. No one is going to ship you and me off to the gas chamber. We don't perceive ourselves the way others do. Israel is a military superpower, but it still feels victimized and vulnerable."

We have learned, too that the "political will to combat genocide is often not as strong as the political will to commit genocide," he says. "I learned this deeply in Rwanda. We could have stopped that with a very limited amount of force. The British and French left, then the Americans came in to save the Americans. The United Nations was impotent. It didn't have to happen but no one had the impetus to go against it.

"We used to think the answer was never again. But we can't say that with a straight face because we have had genocide since and indifference to genocide since. The answer is, not this time. *Not on my watch.*"