Journeys Beyond Genocide: The Human Experience

Exhibit Review: Center for Holocaust, Human Rights and Genocide Education[1]

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Abstract: Chhange (Center for Holocaust, Human Rights & Genocide Education) at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft has an ongoing exhibit known as Journeys Beyond Genocide: The Human Experience. The exhibit takes visitors through the life experiences of Jews, Rwandans, and Armenians before, during, and after genocide. The exhibit title succinctly captures the essence of the museum curation because the information and pieces displayed present survivors' and communities' identities as more than "victims" of genocide. While the exhibit entirely explores the Holocaust, the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and the Armenian Genocide, the spotlight is shone on survivors' and descendants' testimonies from the communities who live in central New Jersey. The institution electing to present historical atrocities and cultural history through the voices of survivors instead of genocidal actors preserves the survivor-oriented nature of the space. Artistic stage-setting qualities of the museum curation uplift the survivor-oriented perspective and subtly comment on the human experience and systematization of genocide. The sectioning of information, colors and tones, and display of artifacts are evocative and promote the critical thinking of instances and repetitions of genocide. Chhange's space serves as a historical

[1] I would like to recognize the laudable work of the scholars and curators of the Journeys Beyond Genocide: The Human Experience exhibit, including: Sara Brown, Dale Daniels, Debórah Dwork, Khatchig Mouradian, and Susan Yellin.

museum but also as a call to action, promoting allyship during and outside instances of social injustice.

Journeys Beyond Genocide: The Human Experience is an ongoing exhibit at Chhange (Center for Holocaust, Human Rights &Genocide Education). Chhange is tucked inside the Brookdale Community College library in Lincroft, New Jersey. The exhibit is no larger than a college classroom yet powerfully conveys stages of genocide and the resilience of the human spirit. Chhange focuses on three instances of genocide: the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, and the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Since its inception, Chhange's museum has been a vehicle of education about the Holocaust and genocide. This depiction is tactfully done through visuals, content, testimonies, and artifacts pooled from community members and interpreted sensitively by professional curators. Survivor-oriented narratives of individuals and communities take precedence over the callous objectification of trauma too often seen in public history. Palpably, Chhange demands the captivation of community members and outsiders to see Tutsi, Armenian, and Jewish identities beyond victimhood. Visitors are invited to see them as multifaceted people who experience suffering, destitution, and oppression, but are not devoid of dignity, joy, and love. Chhange shifts the perspective of victimization, which can be retraumatizing to survivors, by bringing attention to agents of aid inside and outside of the communities.

Upon entering the museum, the visitor faces the first section and an array of three panels to their left-hand side depicting the Holocaust, the Genocide against the Tutsi, and the Armenian Genocide. In one glance, visitors see the beginnings of three unique journeys beyond–reinforcing that genocide is a repeated event. Creatively and subtly, curators use color to recapitulate that

genocide is a repetitive occurrence throughout history. The community's experience of genocide is portrayed against a backdrop of a particular and symbolic color. Information about the Holocaust is depicted against blue, which is part of the Israeli flag and a symbol of a Jewish ethno-state established after centuries of xenophobia against the Jewish people and the Holocaust. Rwanda, known as the "Land of a Thousand Hills," is portrayed against green, representing Rwanda itself as a country geographically located in a hilly place with beautiful greenery. Finally, crimson red, one of the colors in the Armenian flag, is the backdrop for the Armenian Genocide and serves as an eerie reminder that the genocide is a part of Armenian identity by representing the blood shed by Armenians in their struggle to survive and hold onto their Christian faith. Overarching patterns of genocide emerge within the color-coded subsections as the visitor physically travels through the three journeys presented in the exhibit. This museum stresses the concept of the sequence of systematic stages of genocide, while maintaining that those stages are strategically tailored to target the identity of the persecuted groups.

The visitor is introduced to the experience of each surviving group before the path to genocide occurs. Artifacts and pictures loaned or gifted by living or descendant community members show glimpses into this everyday life. The scholars established the historical foundation to give the visitor context, while portraying these communities in the place and time in which they were increasingly persecuted. Curators and scholars pose a bold question, asking how neighboring peoples can coexist. They venture to answer this question via multiple examples, such as through the stories about Armenians after being annexed by the Ottoman Empire. The museum conveys Armenians were highly peaceful and exceptional workers to have in this growing empire. Armenians, on average, spoke multiple languages, had numerous cultural talents, and sought educational pursuits, contributing significantly to an artistic and business renaissance in the

Ottoman Empire. However, Armenians were still considered second-class citizens and paid higher taxes than the Ottoman Turks. While the adaptability of Armenians under Ottoman rule is awe-inspiring, it is unsettling that assimilating was the only option for this community. Their ability to fully thrive was still thwarted by identity-targeting nationalist and assimilation policies (e.g., the higher taxes based on ethnicity and religious conversion). Having established this context, curators place survivors in the foreground through testimonies, family and individual photos, and belongings. The artifacts show families and individuals who were surviving within social and structural forces that sought to marginalize them.

As the visitor is absorbing this information, they are encountering these belongings through the mechanism of opening drawers. This is a consistent experience throughout all sections of the exhibit, and unique to Chhange. As a visitor myself, opening the first drawer piqued my curiosity and I became increasingly more inquisitive as I went through the museum–opening drawers added an element of suspense. It creates a controlled experience of shock and intimacy and adds a sense of anticipation. In a way, it feels like you have become privy to something personal about an individual's life because drawers include clothing, notebooks, report cards, and even love letters. Chhange intentionally does not overly use items, regalia, and photos of the perpetrators of genocide, or emphasize artifacts that contributed to the dehumanization of the community. I found this choice refreshing because it changed the feeling of the space. This curatorial decision creates more emotional safety for survivors and members of the community who visit this museum. Some historical memorial museums unintentionally tie survivors' identities to their perpetrators in the way information and items are displayed. And it is true that bigotry and hate are experiences of marginalized communities. Therefore, learning about those experiences will and *should* never be comfortable for anyone. However, public historians who carelessly open commentary about these

events from solely an outsider's lens risk retraumatizing survivors and descendants. They perpetuate disempowerment. Among many positive curatorial decisions is the choice to place a Nazi flag out of sight and in a bottom-most drawer, thus still sharing the Jewish community experience of living under the oppression of the hate-filled flag but using space and museum design to decenter a symbol of the oppressor. That eternally charged physical item becomes a choice to encounter during discussions of the Holocaust rather than being foisted upon visitors, nor is it placed too prominently in a way that overshadows the humanity of survivors.

As the visitor continues physically moving beyond intimate glimpses of everyday life for the Jews, Tutsis, and Armenians into depictions of how these vibrant communities were stripped of their safety and dignity, the hue of the bright blue, green, or red panel colors become shadowed. Subsections become framed with browns and black as one moves into darkening times of complete rollbacks of rights and growing eugenicist practices. The visitor is haunted by a question regarding how individuals choose to respond in times of danger and dehumanization. Examples of dehumanization and increasing hostility are shown via archival pieces. One example on an exhibit panel that gripped me was a political cartoon of Tutsi women, sexually depicting them in a way that directly undermined their modest culture. Radical Hutus were participatory in weaponizing dehumanizing propaganda toward Tutsi women to normalize genocidal sexual violence. In multiple senses, the visitor experiences the wickedness of this persecution as they look at items that would never be used again; pages of books that would be left untouched and testimonies of the atrocities that occurred. Simultaneously, the curators again use their color choices in building the backgrounds of these exhibits, shifting the chosen color schemes of blue, green, and red to darker and shadowy hues of these palettes. At the peak of genocide, the bright color in each section

was obfuscated to a near-black, a depiction of the darkness that is genocide, exponential from the systematic degradation of these groups.

Color and vibrancy are reintroduced after moving beyond those periods of darkness. Compelling testimonies of mutual aid, remembrance, and celebration of resilience are told and paired with faces and families of community members who have shared their history to educate Monmouth County. Chhange is a vessel of public history for the Jewish, Rwandan, and Armenian communities in central New Jersey, and a depiction of the abhorrence that continues to face these groups. The centralization of survivorship and the human experience counters the enmeshment of survivors and their perpetrators. This exhibit commands humanization of those confronted by severe marginalization and proclaims a call to action to rise against oppression and genocidal actors. It took my breath as I grappled with the reminiscing, sorrow, and hope emanating from words describing the events and retellings of survivors' lives. Choking on a sense of anticipatory grief as I gazed at vestiges of families and established homes, I was weighed down by a conflicting sense of foreboding and nostalgia when I looked into the eyes of those who had their lives taken from them or altered in ways that changed them forever.

Journeys Beyond Genocide: The Human Experience captivates visitors with its evocative solemnity and honorific curation. Chhange's curation and scholarship in collaboration with survivors of these genocides provides a space for Jews, Tutsis, and Armenians to grieve these sorrowful experiences of their group, celebrate their cultural resiliency, and share cautionary tales with others in hopes of positively shaping the future. Chhange is also a vessel of education for those learning what it means to be part of Jewish, Tutsi, or Armenian identity from the outside or inside these communities. No suffering and testimony of resilience should be told without hearing the experience through the voices of those who lived it. Chhange urges visitors to hear those voices

and to think of genocide in the present tense, or else be at risk of perpetrating injustice again. The exhibit asks the visitor to take accountability for their roles in active genocide, social injustices, human rights violations, and the preservation of the survivor-centered narratives.

Chhange impressed upon me the value of rising up for human rights and against social injustice and to accept responsibility for honoring survivors and countering erasure. We all have the choice to embrace our centers of public history that are willing to educate us so we cannot look away. Visiting centers like Chhange or other survivor-oriented museums is a way of embracing the necessity to educate ourselves and making us vigilant against injustice. Confronting the mechanisms of genocide, propaganda, and systemic violence fortifies how the human mind is susceptible to fatalistic stereotypes. Knowledge of our human fallacies and biases removes our claims of inculpable ignorance when we see repetitions of these events in the present age.

Arianna R. Votta is a senior at Monmouth University pursuing her bachelor's degree in psychology, with plans to enter the clinical psychology field. Through this program, she enrolled in a museum science psychology course that centers social justice, identity development, and museum curation science. Dr. Lisa M. Dinella, psychology professor and Executive Team Member of the Program in Gender and Intersectionality Studies, hosted the course and brought students to four museums, Chhange included. Arianna R. Votta wrote this critique of the museum curation at Chhange as a way to review the embodiment of the core values through which she navigates her academic endeavors, including feminist theory, strength-based perspective, cultural humility, human rights, and social justice.