



International opening

Holocaust Memorial Center, Skopje, North Macedonia

A new permanent exhibition honours the more than 7,000 Balkan Jews who were murdered, says *Geraldine Kendall Adams*



Goran Sadikarijo is the executive director of the Holocaust Memorial Center

North Macedonia in the Balkans was once home to one of Europe's oldest Jewish communities – the site of the earliest known synagogue outside Israel. Before world war two, the country had a population of around 8,000 Jews, but on a single day in 1943, 98% of that population – 7,144 people – were rounded up by the Bulgarian army and deported to Treblinka extermination camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, where they were murdered in the gas chambers. Only around 150 Macedonian Jews escaped the Holocaust and the country was declared “judenfrei”, or free of Jews, by the Nazis.

The Holocaust Memorial Center in the country's capital, Skopje, has just opened a permanent exhibition to tell the all-but-lost 1,800-year history of the Macedonian Jews and their annihilation. The exhibition features a newly unveiled 500-year-old Torah scroll that was smuggled into the country during the Spanish Inquisition.

There's also a film about the most famous Jewish artefact in the Balkans, the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated manuscript that depicts scenes from the first testament, which survived Nazi occupation and the 1992 siege of Sarajevo.

A display on the Monopol tobacco factory in Skopje, where the Macedonian Jews were held in a ghetto before their deportation, features a suspended sculpture of suitcases and personal artefacts. Visitors can walk through a wooden cattle car of the type used to transport the Jews, ending up in a harrowing display about the Treblinka extermination camp. A large mural painted by local artists tells the story of the Macedonian partisans who fought the Nazis and their collaborators. The exhibition also explores the lives of the few Jews who survived the destruction of Macedonia, including some that made the turbulent journey to the nascent State of Israel.

The exhibition is the

culmination of a longstanding effort by the country's Jewish community, which now numbers around 200, to preserve and commemorate their past. The community opened the centre itself in 2011 and it acts as both a memorial and an education space to combat xenophobia, Holocaust denial and antisemitism in a region that suffers from sectarian violence and ethnic division.

Goran Sadikarijo is the executive director of the Holocaust Memorial Center.

What challenges did you face in creating an exhibition that deals with such a difficult and sensitive subject?

Goran Sadikarijo: As a member of the Jewish community myself, the creation of the centre and the exhibition was challenging and deeply personal. Our most significant challenge was to offer a historical account in a way that would connect with our audience and be relevant to them. The designers of the exhibition, Michael Berenbaum and Eddie Jacobs, were key in achieving the goal of making this an educational institution that will have societal impact.

How does the architecture and design reflect the subject matter?

The building was designed before the exhibition had been articulated. We knew we wanted a train car, so that was incorporated in the design. The building's constraints proved to be a blessing for creativity. For example, we initially thought



Above: a display on the Treblinka extermination camp

Below: a display of digital photos of some of the 7,144 Macedonian Jews who were deported to Treblinka

Facing page: the centre acts as both a memorial and an education space

Project data

Cost Undisclosed

Main funders Holocaust Fund for the Jews of Macedonia; Macedonian Ministry of Culture; Foundation for the Memorial of the Shoah in France; Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe

Design and concept Berenbaum Jacobs Associates

Fabrication Beck Interiors

Admission Adult 100 denar (£1.40), child 50 denar



that an open, three-story space preceding the entry to the train would be too narrow to use, but it became one of the most dramatic spaces in the museum, with Jacobs and Berenbaum creating a remarkable hanging sculpture of open suitcases and personal artefacts that express the hyper-accelerated ghetto experience in the Monopol tobacco factory.

Another example is the open core of the building. Here, the team created a memorial composed of 7,144 strands of beads hanging from the skylight and descending through the entire building to represent the 7,144 victims. They form an apparition of the “burning bush that is not consumed” from the Bible, where God first calls on Moses. It’s an allegory: they tried to burn us, but we survived and we will remember.

How are the stories of those who were murdered at Treblinka told?

There were only 67 survivors of Treblinka, none of whom were Macedonian Jews. We used the riveting video testimony of Samuel Willenberg, the last survivor of Treblinka, who died three years ago. We also included an expanded exhibition of the death camp, which includes the few images of Treblinka that exist, a virtual and physical 3D model, and

a full-scale replica of the tank engine used to pump carbon monoxide into the gas chambers.

Who will your audiences be and what do you hope they will take away with them?

Our main audience is young Macedonians who have little knowledge of the Holocaust and even less about who Jewish people are and their enduring relationship to North Macedonia. It is our hope that they will gain knowledge and an appreciation of that dark period in human history, as a cautionary tale of what intolerance, racism and xenophobia can create. It should also inspire them to act responsibly and positively in their own society and encourage upstanding behaviour.

Far-right politics is re-emerging in Europe – has this had any impact on the work of the centre?

The political situation in Europe has encouraged us to create Holocaust education platforms that are relevant, connected and engaging. This is critical to a brighter future. Emphasising the power of individuals to prevent the recurrence of hateful and destructive ideologies is a prominent factor in our museum and all of our educational programming.