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THE MUSLIM WORLD

NEW HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

Indonesia

I enter the small room that is the museum. The collection on display is impressive, with each piece carefully curated to educate and evoke knowledge and empathy. At the center of the room, a massive triple-decker wooden bunk bed that replicates the bunk beds used in Nazi concentration camps. A photo of Jewish prisoners living in horrible conditions, taken from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website, is displayed on the middle bunk. Informational posters on the walls chronicle the rise of Adolf Hitler, the ideology of the Nazi regime, and the horrific crimes of the Holocaust. The posters feature several disturbing images, including black-and-white photographs of Nazi soldiers executing Jewish civilians and piles of corpses discovered in concentration camps.

None of this is unique in comparison to other Holocaust memorial museums. It is the location that makes this history museum historical in and of itself. The Indonesian Holocaust Museum, inaugurated in January 2022, is the first of its kind in the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, where the majority of the population either knows almost nothing about the crimes committed by the Nazis and their allies or, worse, entertains antisemitic notions and denies the Holocaust.

The founder of the museum is an Indonesian Rabbi, Ya'akov Baruch. It is part of the complex of the Sha'ar Hashamayim (The Gate of Heaven) synagogue, which Baruch opened in 2004 in Tondano, a secluded town with 68,000 residents on the island of Sulawesi in the predominantly Christian (67.3%) province of North Sulawesi in Indonesia.¹ Known for its natural splendor, the Province has a reputation for religious tourism and inter-faith tolerance.² The museum uses both Indonesian and English. Its construction took nearly three months.³ The inauguration took

- ¹ Jon Emont, "A Small Holocaust Museum Springs Up in a Remote Town – and Stirs a Big Backlash," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-small-holocaust-museum-springs-up-in-a-remote-town-and-stirs-a-big-backlash-11644677414>; "Number of Population of Minahasa Regency by District (Souls), 2020-2022 [Indonesian]," *Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Minahasa*, November 3, 2023, <https://minahasakab.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/2/OTEjMg==/jumlah-penduduk-kabupaten-minahasa-menurut-kecamatan.html>; and "Percentage of Population by Regency/ City and Religion, 2022-2023 [Indonesian]," *Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Sulawesi Utara*, September 12, 2024, <https://sulut.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/2/NzMylZl=/persentase-jumlah-penduduk-menurut-kabupaten-kota-dan-agama-yang-dianut.html>.
- ² "North Sulawesi Becomes the Proper Place for the Opening of a Holocaust Museum, Why? [Indonesian]," *KumparanNews*, January 29, 2022, <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/sulut-jadi-tempat-yang-pantas-untuk-pembukaan-museum-holocaust-kenapa-1xOzWiEWitO/full>.
- ³ Skivo Marcelino Mandey and Teuku Muhammad Valdy Arief, "Holocaust Museum is Built in Minahasa North Sulawesi, This Is Its Purpose [Indonesian]," *Kompas*, February 4, 2022, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/02/04/060700878/museum-holocaust-didirikan-di-minahasa-sulut-ini-tujuannya?page=all#page2>.

place on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in a ceremony attended by the German Ambassador to Indonesia, Ina Lepel, and high-ranking local Indonesian government officials.⁴

Rabbi Baruch was born in 1982 in Jakarta to a Minahasan Protestant father and a Mongondow Muslim mother, Toar Palilingan. Raised a Christian, he only discovered his Jewish roots as a teenager in a conversation with his maternal grandmother, Sylvia van Beugen.⁵ She revealed to him that his relatives on his mother's side descended from a 19th-century Dutch Jewish immigrant named Elias van Beugen.⁶ He also learned that up to 40 of his relatives perished in the Holocaust, including in Auschwitz and Sobibor.

Acting upon this knowledge and his grandmother's wishes, Baruch adopted Judaism as his religion and took the initiative to open Sha'ar Hashamayim together with Oral Bollegraf, a Jew living in Manado.⁷ Since then, he has led a small congregation of Sephardic-Orthodox Indonesian Jews.

Baruch told me he decided to dedicate a museum to the Holocaust rather than to Judaism in general in order to highlight a universal message. The Holocaust, he said, serves as a stark warning to humanity about the dangers of hatred, racism, and religious intolerance that must never be forgotten.⁸

The synagogue complex where the museum is situated is guarded by metal fences that separate the site from the street, adding to its secluded atmosphere. A small black monolith resembling a guard post is situated near the entrance, while a handful of tiny surveillance cameras monitor the premises, ensuring the museum's and synagogue's security. The museum's physical presence is complemented by its online presence on platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Admission to the museum, which is private and does not receive public funding, costs approximately one American dollar. Opening times are from Monday to Friday, from ten in the morning until six in the evening, but they are not strictly adhered to. For instance, during my visit, the gates were occasionally sealed and padlocked. This is because Baruch, who oversees the complex, lives in Manado, a city a few hours drive away, where he also serves as a lecturer at a local university. He attends the synagogue mainly on Friday evenings to lead the Shabbat service, returning to Manado after Shabbat concludes. This irregular schedule means visitors who arrive without prior notice may find themselves waiting at the locked gate. Locals, familiar with the situation, are generally sympathetic and direct visitors to a nearby Christian neighbor, Mr. Alfons, who serves as the caretaker in the rabbi's absence.

One particularly poignant experience for Baruch involved a group of conservative Muslim women in *hijabs* and *niqabs*. Upon seeing the photos of Jewish victims, they were moved to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rizali Posumah, "Rabbi Yaakov Baruch, a Dutch Jewish Descendant Who Grew Up in an Interfaith Family [Indonesian]," *Tribun Manado*, July 14, 2022, <https://manado.tribunnews.com/2022/07/14/rabi-yaakov-baruch-keturunan-yahudi-belanda-yang-tumbuh-di-keluarga-beda-agama>.

⁶ Norimitsu Onishi, "In Silver of Indonesia, Public Embrace Judaism," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/23/world/asia/23indo.html>.

⁷ Interview by the author with Rabbi Ya'akov Baruch, September 21, 2024.

⁸ Interview by the author with Rabbi Ya'akov Baruch, June 26, 2024.

tears, unaware of the Holocaust before their visit.⁹ Baruch recalled how deeply this experience impacted him, as it was a profound reminder of the museum's power to educate and inspire empathy, as well as a reminder of Indonesians' unfamiliarity with the Holocaust.¹⁰

Another group of Indonesian elementary school children also left a lasting impression on the rabbi. Although he felt uneasy introducing young children to the horrors of the Holocaust, he believed it was a vital part of their learning experience, even if they left the museum somber.¹¹

In addition to educating visitors about the Holocaust, the museum also highlights the ongoing dangers of Nazi ideology. Several posters address modern manifestations of neo-Nazism, Holocaust denial, and the use of Nazi symbols. The posters avoid mentioning Israel, a decision that reflects the museum's sensitivity to Indonesia's official stance on the conflict in the Middle East.

The museum also features a collection of Judaica artifacts from the Nazi era. These include a *Chanukiah* from the Netherlands (1940), Shabbat candelabras, a 1940s shtreimel from Poland, and a memorial book listing the names of victims of Nazi persecution in the Netherlands, including those of the Rabbi's family, the Van Beugens.

Despite the museum's achievements, it faces challenges. Limited space has led to removing some exhibits, such as a video display featuring testimonies from Holocaust survivors. Additionally, the museum's location in a small town means it is subject to occasional blackouts, and noise from the nearby street can disrupt the otherwise solemn atmosphere.

Visitor numbers have declined since the opening. To date, the museum has had as many as 2,000 visitors in three years of operation. After a busy start, the flow of visitors has gradually slowed from as many as 50 visitors a day to one visitor a day. Most visitors were from Indonesia, but others have come from Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, Singapore, the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Israel. Baruch remains optimistic, stating that the message of the Holocaust has already reached many Indonesians.¹²

One visitor, Fernando Bororing, a Christian Minahasan from nearby Tomohon, told me he came because "I want to know the history."¹³ Bororing said he learned about the Holocaust through YouTube videos but had never visited a museum dedicated to the subject. He was awestruck as he walked through the exhibits, touching the wooden bunks and examining the displays. The words "impressive" and "amazing" escaped his lips. His visit, he explained upon leaving, allowed him to experience history beyond what he had previously seen online. "In my heart, I feel relief that I can experience it and not only watch it on YouTube," he said.¹⁴

The establishment of the museum and its continued operation have more than symbolic importance. Discussion of the Holocaust in public, the media, and among academics has been

⁹ Interviews by the author with Rabbi Ya'akov Baruch, June 26, 2024, and September 20, 2024.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interviews by the author with Rabbi Ya'akov Baruch, September 20, 2024, and September 21, 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview by the author with Fernando Bororing, September 20, 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

rare in Indonesia, and Holocaust education is almost non-existent, nowhere to be found in the pages of government-prepared history textbooks.¹⁵ There are few Indonesian resources and experts on the Holocaust, making accessing and acquiring knowledge difficult. When raised in academic discussions on Indonesian campuses, the Holocaust is usually discussed as part of a broader context, rarely treated on its own.

The lack of proper education on the Holocaust has resulted, as well as was encouraged, by the proliferation of antisemitic propaganda. Antisemitism is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. It predated the Republic's founding, with influences reaching back to the colonial era.

In 1943, during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, Sam Ratulangi, a teacher, journalist, and first governor of the Island of Sulawesi, considered today a “national hero” in Indonesia, introduced excerpts from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in an article published in the journal *Asia Raya*. This publication, part of a Nazi-influenced Japanese propaganda campaign, marked the first time Indonesian readers encountered the notorious antisemitic forgery.¹⁶

Another Indonesian considered a “national hero,” the politician and diplomat Sukarjo Wiryopranoto, contributed to the spread of antisemitic ideas by depicting the Second World War as a conflict between Japanese collectivism (*Hakko Ichiu*) and Jewish individualism.¹⁷ Fascist-inspired political parties like *Parindra* and *Partai Fasis Indonesia* (PFI) emerged in the 1930s, adopting symbols and practices from European fascism, including the infamous Nazi salute.¹⁸

After the establishment of Israel in 1948, antisemitism in Indonesia was grounded primarily in anti-Israel sentiments. As the newly-independent, Muslim-majority nation aligned itself with the Arab world, Indonesian Jews were viewed with suspicion, including as agents of Israeli interests. Criticisms of Israel devolved into antisemitic rhetoric, with some Indonesians failing to distinguish between Judaism, Zionism, and the state of Israel.

Consequently, Indonesian Jews, some of whom descended from European colonists, became targets of hostility, linked to both Israel and colonialism. Rabbi Benjamin Meijer Verbrugge, an

¹⁵ Martina Safitry, Indah Wahyu Puji Utami & Zein Ilyas, *History* [Indonesian] (Jakarta, Pusat Perbukuan Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen, Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2021), <https://static.buku.kemdikbud.go.id/content/pdf/bukuteks/kurikulum21/Sejarah-BS-KLS-XI.pdf>, and “We Hope to Help Indonesian Teachers to Better Inform Their Students about the Holocaust and Genocide,” UNESCO, April 20, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/we-hope-help-indonesian-teachers-better-inform-their-students-about-holocaust-and-genocide>.

¹⁶ Jeffery Halder, “Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-colonial Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 94 (Carfax Publishing, 2004), 292-313.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rahadian Rundjan, “How People Understand Hitler in Indonesia [Indonesian],” *Deutsche Welle*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/id/bagaimana-orang-orang-memahami-hitler-di-indonesia/a-42440753>, and Yannick Lengkeek, “Parindra’s Loyal Cadres. Fascism and Anticolonial Nationalism in Late Colonial Indonesia, 1935-1942,” *International Institute for Asian Studies The Newsletter* 83 (2019), 22-23.

Indonesian Jewish leader, lamented that “people call us bastards because our grandfathers occupied Indonesia.”¹⁹

In the 1980s and 1990s, antisemitism remained widespread, fueled by the revival of Islamist groups.²⁰ In 1992, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was translated into Indonesian, and various adaptations of the text spread.²¹ A republication of Ratulangi’s antisemitic article in 1993 underscored the persistence of these ideas, with Indonesian editors seemingly remaining unaware that the Protocols were an antisemitic fabrication.²²

In the 2000s, antisemitic activities took new directions. From 2005 to 2006, *Angkasa*, a military and aviation magazine, offered Nazi-themed souvenirs like Iron Crosses and Waffen-SS keychains to attract readers to a trilogy of issues on Nazi military history.²³ Several years later, the Indonesian-language version of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was published after years of being banned. The book quickly became a bestseller, selling over 15,000 copies.²⁴ In 2013, the closure of the Beth Hashem Synagogue in Surabaya was forced by Islamist extremists protesting Israel’s military actions in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead.²⁵ Despite being a historic site, the oldest synagogue in the country, and a cultural landmark, it was targeted during anti-Israel demonstrations and was eventually demolished.²⁶ That same year, global attention was drawn to the *Soldatenkaffe* in Bandung, West Java, after the *Jakarta Globe* exposed its Nazi-themed décor, which included Swastika flags, portraits of Adolf Hitler, and servers dressed as SS officers. It turned out that the café had operated as a Nazi-glorification hub for two years. International outrage forced it to close down.²⁷ A survey conducted in 2014 found that 48% of the adult population at the time harbored antisemitic sentiments.²⁸

Jews in Indonesia are too few to have a political impact. The origins of today’s Indonesian Jews can be traced to Ashkenazi Dutch and European Jewish migrants who came to the Dutch East

¹⁹ Sebastian Strangio, “Opening of Indonesian Holocaust Museum Met with Islamist Backlash,” *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/opening-of-indonesian-holocaust-museum-met-with-islamist-backlash/>.

²⁰ Halder, “Translations of Antisemitism.”

²¹ Anthony Reid, “Jewish Conspiracy Stories in Southeast Asia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 38, no. 112 (Routledge, 2010), 373-385.

²² Halder, “Translations of Antisemitism.”

²³ “The Superpower of Nazi Germany (1933-1945) [Indonesian],” *Edisi Koleksi Angkasa, Angkasa*, 2005; “The Nazi’s War Machines [Indonesian],” *Edisi Koleksi Angkasa, Angkasa*, 2006; “Nazi’s Special Forces Core Troops of Nazi’s Power [Indonesian],” *Edisi Koleksi Angkasa, Angkasa*, 2006; and “Angkasa: Doesn’t Subside Flying Across Time [Indonesian],” *KumparanNEWS*, February 9, 2017, <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/angkasa-tak-surut-terbang-lintasi-masa/full>.

²⁴ Abdul Khalik, “‘Mein Kampf,’ ‘Das Kapital’ Free for Sale in Indonesia,” *The Jakarta Post*, August 7, 2008, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/08/07/039mein-kampf039-039das-kapital039-free-sale-indonesia.html>.

²⁵ Sudarto Murtaufiq, “Anti-Israel Demonstrators Seal Synagogue,” *NU Online*, January 8, 2009, <https://en.nu.or.id/news/anti-israel-demonstrators-seal-synagogue-KHidG>.

²⁶ Indra Harsaputra, “Group Protests Synagogue Demolition,” *The Jakarta Post*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/09/17/group-protests-synagogue-demolition.html>.

²⁷ Ynetnews with AFP, “Indonesia: Nazi-themed Café Sparks Outrage,” *Ynetnews*, July 23, 2013, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4408386,00.html>.

²⁸ “Global 100: Indonesia,” *Anti-Defamation League*, 2014, <https://global100.adl.org/country/indonesia/2014>.

Indies in the 19th century.²⁹ They were also joined by Jews from Iraq, Aden, and other areas of the Middle East.³⁰ The number of Jews in the colony already exceeded 2,500 in the late 1930s.³¹ It declined sharply after the Second World War, and by 1963, only around 50 community members were left in Indonesia.³² The small Jewish population that exists in present-day Indonesia is estimated at around 500 people in a country of over 270 million.

Indonesia has not ratified the Stockholm Declaration of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), and Judaism is not officially recognized as one of the country's six major religions, complicating efforts to address the circulation of Nazi and other antisemitic texts.³³

Days after the Holocaust Museum was officially inaugurated, several Muslim organizations in Indonesia protested, calling for its closure. Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Head of Foreign Relations and International Cooperation of the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), the country's top Islamic clerical body, voiced opposition: "We demand any exhibition to be stopped, and the Museum to be discontinued."³⁴ He linked his disapproval to the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, arguing that Jewish communities worldwide, including those in Indonesia, should recognize what he described as the atrocities committed by Israeli Zionists against the Palestinian people since 1948.³⁵

Leaders in the Islamist political party, Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), joined the criticism. Hidayat Nur Wahid (HNW), a senior PKS figure and Deputy Speaker of Indonesia's parliament, the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR-RI), argued that the museum was part of an effort to whitewash Israeli crimes in Palestine.³⁶ He noted that the museum was opened in cooperation with Israel's Yad Vashem, whose chairman, Dani Dayan, is a prominent supporter of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which are considered illegal by the United Nations.³⁷ Wahid claimed that the museum undermined Indonesia's long-standing support for Palestinian

²⁹ Nugroho, "Indonesia's Jews Come Out."

³⁰ Rotem Kowner, "An Obscure History," *Inside Indonesia*, June 20, 2011, <https://www.insideindonesia.org/archive/articles/an-obscure-history>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jordyn Haime, "Despite Unrest in Indonesia, a Jewish Community Finds Peace Among Other Faith Groups," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/2023/11/29/global/despite-unrest-in-indonesia-a-jewish-community-finds-peace-among-other-faith-groups>, and Rotem Kowner, "Indonesia's Jews," *Inside Indonesia*, June 20, 2011, <https://www.insideindonesia.org/archive/articles/indonesia-s-jews>.

³³ The People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, "HNW: Closing Holocaust Museum Proof of Indonesia's Solidarity with Palestine [Indonesian]," *MPR-RI*, February 6th, 2022, <https://www.mpr.go.id/berita/HNW:-Tutup-Museum-Holocaust-Bukti-Solidaritas-Indonesia--Dengan-Palestina>; "Prosecuting Beliefs Indonesia's Blasphemy Laws," *Amnesty International*, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa210182014en.pdf>; Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs – East Java, 1965, <https://jatim.kemenag.go.id/file/file/Undangundang/owiz1398054257.pdf>; and Johannes Nugroho, "Indonesia's Jews Come Out," *Tablet*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/indonesia-jews-come-out>.

³⁴ Jordyn Haime, "Indonesia Muslim Groups Demand Closure of Country's First-ever Holocaust Exhibition," *The Times of Israel*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/indonesia-muslim-groups-demand-closure-of-countrys-first-ever-holocaust-exhibition/>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, "HNW: Stop the Holocaust Museum at Tondano [Indonesian]," *MPR-RI*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.mpr.go.id/berita/HNW:-Stop-Museum-Holocaust-Di-Tondano>.

³⁷ Ibid.

independence and criticized it as counterproductive to the government's efforts to advocate for Palestinian statehood.³⁸

However, not all Indonesians shared these sentiments. Some offered more nuanced perspectives, emphasizing the educational value of the Holocaust Museum. Mukti Ali Qusyairi, Head of *Lembaga Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama* (LBMNU), Jakarta, a branch of the world's largest Islamic organization, *Nahdlatul Ulama*, stated that having a Holocaust Museum was reasonable as long as it did not promote the political interests of any specific state. He stressed that the exhibition could offer important lessons about dehumanization.³⁹

In North Sulawesi, the local community largely embraced the museum, viewing it as a non-political initiative that conveyed universal humanitarian values. Steven Kandouw, the Vice Governor of North Sulawesi, expressed support, noting, "Mistakes of the past, especially regarding human rights, must be fought against."⁴⁰ Sandra Rondonuwu, a politician from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and a member of North Sulawesi's Regional House of Representatives, also voiced no objection to the museum, noting the importance of remembering dark chapters in history in a television interview.⁴¹

Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs chose to downplay the controversy. Ministry spokesman Teuku Faizasyah stated that the museum was a community's social, cultural, and religious initiative and did not affect Indonesia's position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. He emphasized that the country's stance on Palestinian independence remained unchanged.⁴²

The museum also received initially some positive media coverage, with national outlets like Kompas, tvOne, and TribunNetwork expressing surprise, pride, and curiosity at the development. However, as protests grew, media coverage shifted, using terms like "controversy," "polemic," and "rejection" to describe the public reaction. On social media, opposition intensified, with the hashtag #TolakMuseumHolocaust (Reject Holocaust Museum) trending on X.⁴³ Some Indonesians speculated that the museum's inauguration was part of a broader effort to normalize relations

³⁸ The People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia, "HNW: Closing Holocaust Museum Proof of Indonesia's Solidarity with Palestine [Indonesian]," *MPR-RI*, February 6, 2022, <https://www.mpr.go.id/berita/HNW-Tutup-Museum-Holocaust-Bukti-Solidaritas-Indonesia--Dengan-Palestina>.

³⁹ Dedik Priyanto, "Polemic on Jewish Holocaust Museum in Minahasa, NU DKI Asks Not to Bring Interests of Certain State [Indonesian]," *KompasTV*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.kompas.tv/nasional/257602/polemik-museum-holocaust-yahudi-di-minahasa-nu-dki-minta-tidak-bawa-kepentingan-negara-tertentu?page=all>.

⁴⁰ Devira Prastiwi, "The First Jewish Holocaust Museum in Indonesia is Officially Opened in Minahasa [Indonesian]," *Liputan 6*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4876893/museum-holocaust-yahudi-pertama-di-indonesia-resmi-dibuka-di-minahasa?page=2>.

⁴¹ tvOne, "MUI Criticizes Holocaust Museum [Indonesian]," *Kabar Petang*, February 2, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwDPx_GLo1o&t=48s.

⁴² Fathiyah Wardah, "The First Holocaust Museum in Indonesia is Opened at Minahasa [Indonesian]," *VOA Indonesia*, January 29, 2022, <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/museum-holocaust-pertama-di-indonesia-dibuka-di-minahasa/6418015.html>, and Larasati Dyah Utami, "Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Response to the Attendance of German Ambassador in the Inauguration of the Holocaust Museum in Minahasa [Indonesian]," *Tribunnews*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2022/02/03/respons-kemenlu-ri-sikapi-kehadiran-dubes-jerman-dalam-peresmian-museum-holocaust-di-minahasa>.

⁴³ Dhea Alifia Firdausi and Nuraeni, "The Fight of Diasporic Jews against Antisemitism through Indonesian Holocaust Museum [Indonesian]," *Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society* 5, no. 2 (2023), 96-111.

Photos by Aryo Brahmantyo



The Indonesia Holocaust Museum, Tondano, Indonesia, September 2024

with Israel. These suspicions fed into pre-existing antisemitic stigmas, further complicating the museum's reception.

In response to the growing backlash, the news channel tvOne hosted a live debate on its program, *Catatan Demokrasi*, titled “Geger Museum Yahudi di Indonesia” (Jewish Museum in Indonesia Controversy).⁴⁴ Rabbi Baruch participated in the discussion, explaining his motivation for founding the museum, but was confronted with various forms of antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

One of the guests, Ustadz Haikal Hassan, made inflammatory remarks, calling the Holocaust “the greatest hoax” and claiming it was used to generate financial support for Israel. Hassan also questioned the historical accuracy of the confirmed historical depictions of the Holocaust. He presented distorted census data and said there may have been six million rats in Europe but not six million Jews.⁴⁵ He argued that supporting Holocaust education was equivalent to supporting Israel, reflecting the deep entanglement of the two issues in the minds of some Indonesians.⁴⁶

Despite the initial heated opposition, tensions gradually subsided after Baruch engaged in dialogue with museum critics, including representatives from MUI. In a phone call with Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, he clarified that the museum had no connection to Zionism or Israeli politics.⁴⁷ He invited MUI representatives to visit the museum to address any misunderstandings.⁴⁸ Abdul Hakim appreciated the gesture, calling it a positive step towards resolving the issue through

⁴⁴ tvOne, “Uproar over Jewish Museum in Indonesia [Indonesian],” *Catatan Demokrasi tvOne*, February 8, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdIB_gkuGvs.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Fathiyah Wardah, “The Long Road Education Effort of Holocaust Museum [Indonesian],” *VOA Indonesia*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/jalan-panjang-upaya-edukasi-museum-holocaust/6464275.html>.

⁴⁸ Interview by the author with Rabbi Ya’akov Baruch, June 26, 2024.

dialogue. He also acknowledged the humanitarian message of the museum, stating, “The Holocaust is a crime against humanity that goes against all religions.”⁴⁹

Gradually, the controversy faded. Baruch attributes this success to the role of dialogue in dispelling misconceptions and reducing antisemitic sentiment. He explains: “In Indonesia, we just need to sit together and talk heart to heart, and all the problems will be solved.”⁵⁰

– **Aryo Brahmantyo**

The United Arab Emirates

In a year that witnessed the proliferation of antisemitic rhetoric in Arab countries, the continued existence of the Holocaust memorial exhibition entitled “We Remember” at the Crossroad of Civilizations Museum in Dubai was a source of encouragement. Opened in May 2021 following the signing of the Abraham Accords, the exhibition was – and, sadly, remains – one of its kind in the Arab world.

Its initiator, Ahmad ‘Ubayd al-Mansuri (b. 1971), served as a Member of Parliament from 2011 to 2015. A businessman who gives the impression of having landed in our era directly from Victorian times, he established the museum in 2012 as a private enterprise in a building provided by the authorities to present his eclectic, passionate collection, including a magnificent gallery rich with Islamic books and artifacts and an equally impressive gallery showcasing pearls and how their trade shaped the region.

The Center for Study of Contemporary European Jewry discussed the courageous exhibition on the Holocaust in its first For a Righteous Cause Report in 2022⁵¹ as well as in an issue of Perspectives in 2023.⁵² When we approached al-Mansuri in October 2024, he explained that it was and remains important to separate the teaching of the history of the Holocaust from politics, and emphasized the singularity of the crimes committed by the Nazis compared to other genocides.

It is not clear how many Arabs have visited the exhibition since it opened. When we visited the museum in the spring of 2022, we found in the guestbook almost only comments from Israelis: some emotional, some patronizing. In October 2024, al-Mansuri said that the war had caused a sharp decline in the number of Israeli visitors, but not in the number of other visitors.

Since the establishment of the exhibition, only one school has refused to visit it; al-Mansuri could not remember a single case of visitors leaving the exhibition in protest after seeing its

⁴⁹ “Pro Contra of Holocaust Museum by Jewish Community in Minahasa [Indonesian],” *CNN Indonesia*, February 3, 2024, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220203062643-20-754330/pro-kontra-museum-holocaust-oleh-komunitas-yahudi-di-minahasa>.

⁵⁰ Interview by the author with Rabbi Ya’akov Baruch, June 26, 2024.

⁵¹ Ofir Winter, “Discovering the Past, Building a Future,” *For A Righteous Cause*, January 2022, 6-7, <https://cst.tau.ac.il/for-a-righteous-cause/>, and Uriya Shavit, “Notes From the Emirates,” *Perspectives* 23, April 2023, <https://cst.tau.ac.il/perspectives/notes-from-the-emirates/>.

⁵² Shavit, “Notes From the Emirates.”

contents. He estimated that, to date, some 2,500 people from the UAE and the Gulf at large have been to the exhibition, along with several thousand schoolchildren, but said it was hard to know how many of the latter are Arab because some schools in the UAE are mixed nationally. He holds that one of the most important contributions of the Museum are visits by Arab teachers, who know nothing or very little about the Holocaust.

Al-Mansuri told us that he did not receive a single demand or threat to close down the exhibition following October 7. It did result in one change of plans, as he decided not to hold Holocaust memorial events. He explained: “when Israel described what happened on October 7 as a Holocaust, it made my work more difficult. I deplore what happened [on October 7], I do not belittle it, but these statements mean that Holocaust memorial events will become politicized. The history of the Holocaust should be taught as history.”⁵³

In the more than three years that the exhibition has existed, al-Mansuri faced a few unexpected questions, although not from Arabs. He was surprised when Jewish visitors from Tel Aviv asked him why he did not dedicate space to teach about the *Nakba*. Ironically, it was for him to tell them that the *Nakba* occurred within the context of a war between two national movements, whereas the Nazis murdered Jews for no other reason than to see their total annihilation. He was equally surprised when several American Jews told him they had no idea that Jews lived in Palestine already before the Holocaust.

The exhibition includes information on the persecution of European Jews by Nazi Germany from Kristallnacht to the implementation of the Final Solution, photos and exhibits commemorating the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust, including Anne Frank, and personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors. At the center of the exhibition hall is a full-size figure of one of the most heartbreaking images of the Holocaust – the boy who raises his hands in surrender after the crashing of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Mishnah saying “whoever saves one life saves the world entire” and its Quranic (5:32) equivalent are presented on a poster. Another poster explains that Jews were the only group singled out for systematic annihilation by the Nazis. On a poster in a glassed cabinet to which a Star of David is attached, the eternal lines of the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Al-Mansuri believes the history of the Holocaust should be conveyed primarily through the stories of heroes who fought evil, and that this approach can be useful in Israel as well. The exhibition thus tells the story of the hundreds of Jews who found refuge in Albania in 1943 and were welcomed by its majority-Muslim population. It also tells the story of individual heroes, including Muhammad Hilmi, an Egyptian medical doctor who lived in Berlin and, at great personal risk, saved the life of a Jewish friend, Anna Boros, and several members of her family. Hilmi, who was helped by a German friend, Frieda Szturmann, was the first Arab to be recognized by Yad Vashem as “Righteous Among the Nations.”

⁵³ Conversation with the authors, October 15, 2024.

Photos by Uriya Shavit



The Holocaust gallery at the Crossroads of Civilizations Museum, Dubai

A large, colorful mural created by Israeli and Emirati artists graces the museum courtyard. It shows two young men, an Emirati and an Israeli, chatting and drinking coffee together against the backdrop of a sunset and skyscrapers. Above them is the word “cousins” in Arabic and Hebrew. Al-Mansuri belongs to a small group, yet one that deserves more attention, of patriotic Arabs who believe that peace is something that requires constant effort and patience. The establishment and uninterrupted operation of his memorial exhibition could not take place in the UAE without the government’s consent, indicating the strength of the Abraham Accords.

Asked why the existence of the exhibition about the Holocaust has been received so well in the UAE, as opposed to the controversies a similar enterprise initially stirred in Indonesia, al-Mansuri explained that his country allows people to develop in different ways, but not to attack others based on their race or religion: “We have people from places of conflict, for examples Indians and Pakistanis, Russians and Ukrainians, who live here in mutual respect. Here, it is not acceptable for Arabs to attack Jews or for Jews to attack Arabs.”⁵⁴

– **Prof. Uriya Shavit** and **Dr. Ofir Winter**

⁵⁴ Ibid.

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