

December 1, 1994 (Vol. 10, no. 7)

Dear Colleague:

The Nazi concentration camps made victims of the Jews, who were reduced to a state of almost utter helplessness--almost total passivity--in the face of overwhelming force. Total passivity is, of course, death. The "almost" that characterized the condition of camp inmates was a brief pause, useful to the Nazis, on the way to the gas chamber and death. Commemoration of the event in Holocaust Museums is possible and desirable because the Jews were as close to pure victimhood as a people could get and still remain briefly alive. Before the onset of Nazism, Jews prospered and played key roles on the cultural stage of the West. After the defeat of Nazism, they again prospered and a powerful symbol of that prosperity (economic and intellectual) is the State of Israel, a beacon of democracy and modernity in the Middle East, as Egypt and Jordan would now agree. Between these periods of well-being was the Horror--a sort of Black Death inflicted on the Jews by a nation that claimed to be highly civilized. Holocaust museums remind humankind that, unless people keep watch, the Horror may return to disrupt once again the on-going, highly successful life of a people. And who knows which human group will be targeted next time?

What about museums dedicated to another sort of Holocaust--slavery in the United States? There is a problem here, as the controversy over the enactment of slave life at Colonial Williamsburg shows. Not all African-Americans like the idea of showcasing slavery, and those who do are not quite sure how to present it to the public. Should the emphasis be on oppression--on the brutality of the slave owners--and thereby claim the mantle of victimhood, which has a certain cachet nowadays (thanks to radical-liberals), or should the emphasis be on triumph--that is, on the success of the blacks to create a viable and superior culture of their own, despite oppressive circumstances? If the stress is on victimhood--on passivity--then one can hardly simultaneously stress cultural triumph. If triumph is highlighted, then the viciousness of the slave system falls ipso facto into the shade. What to do? I suspect that African-Americans themselves prefer to emphasize the triumph even if this diminishes the demon status of slave owners. Black docents at the museums remind visitors that many white people in ante-bellum South lived no better than slaves. The docents are too polite to add that whereas oppressed blacks contributed to universal culture (Negro Spirituals, for example), oppressed whites contributed mostly their brawn. (See Michael Durham, "The Word is 'Slaves': A Trip Into Black History," American Heritage, April 1992. My thanks to Steve for this reference.)

Best wishes,

