

Brett Winestock: MUSEUMS OF SHAME: Dovid Hofshteyn's Vision of Holocaust Remembrance

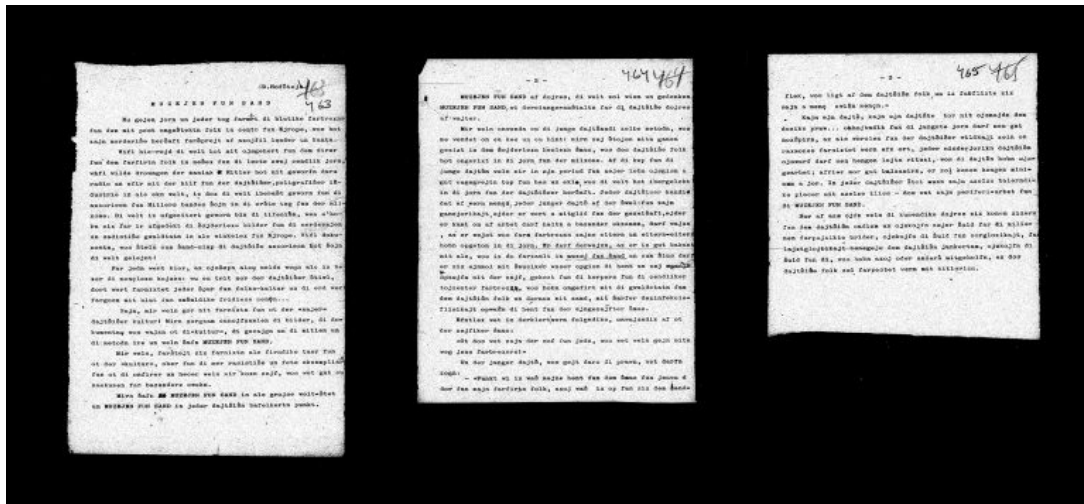
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In early 1944, shortly after the liberation of Kyiv, the Yiddish poet Dovid Hofshteyn (1889–1952) returned home from evacuation and was confronted firsthand with the horrors of the Holocaust. This encounter moved him to pen the passionate essay *Muzeyen fun shand* (Museums of Shame).[1] As a writer who had lived through pogroms and civil war, Hofshteyn was no stranger to expressing his reaction to violence and destruction through literature. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, he became a member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), a group largely made up of Soviet Jewish cultural figures whose work was meant to reach a Jewish audience both within and outside the Soviet Union. In an attempt to rally political, financial, and military support for the Soviet war effort, their work was regularly sent to Yiddish presses in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain but also as far as Argentina and South Africa. It was this position as a member of the JAC which made it possible for Hofshteyn to receive information from the front while he was evacuated, to write, and eventually, along with a group of other writers, return home and survey the devastation.

Soviet writers were among the first to publish their accounts and descriptions of a devastation that was almost incomprehensible at the time. Initially, it was assumed that Nazi violence against Jews would be similar to that of earlier pogroms, yet it turned out to be immeasurably worse. Hofshteyn was moved, in particular, by indisputable, visual, and immediate evidence, the “horrible pictures of massacres and sadistic acts of violence.” Yet, rather than finding himself immobilized by his grief, as was the case with many Soviet Jewish writers, he was ready not just to rebuild what had been lost, but to create something new. He suggested gathering pictures, documents, and tools of this terrible time that were to be displayed in so-called museums of shame in “every major city in the world and in every point of German population.”



Typewritten of Dovid Hofshteyn's *Muzeyen fun shand*. GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 90, 463-465. Published courtesy of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv rossiiskoi federatsii, GARF).

More than 50 years later, Hofshteyn's vision has partially come to life: Holocaust memorials and museums are common today in Germany and across the globe. Institutions such as the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism, which opened in 2015, aim to gather and display evidence of Nazi crimes for educational purposes. Such sites, however, lack some of the most remarkable features of a museum of shame as envisioned by Hofshteyn. For example, in *Muzeyen fun shand*, the poet invoked the widespread belief that the Nazis made soap from Jewish corpses, a belief he turned into a powerful symbolic performance: Young Germans were to be lathered with soap made from the bodies of the worst Nazi perpetrators in order to wash off the stain that lay upon the entire German people. Along with passing an exam on the crimes committed during the Holocaust, this cleansing would become a ritual that every young German had to undergo before entering adulthood, becoming a member of society, or even calling themselves a human being (*a mentsh*). Also absent from today's Holocaust memorials is what Hofshteyn called the "peripheral work" of his imagined museums of shame – the gallows which should stand in every German city and hang everyone incapable of washing away the savagery of their ancestors.

Hofshteyn had called Kyiv his home since 1907. He first rose to prominence as a member of the so-called "Kyiv Group," the unofficial name for a loosely connected collective of modernist writers that had begun working around the time of revolution and civil war in the late 1910s. Though he briefly left for Mandatory Palestine during the turbulent 1920s, Hofshteyn remained closely tied to the city of Kyiv for much of his life. Returning to it in 1944, he searched tirelessly for his mother and brother who had been left behind, only to discover that they had been murdered at the Babyn Yar ravine – along with tens of thousands of other Jews in one of the Nazis' largest mass shootings. Neither a documentation center nor a museum of shame had yet been built at the site of Hofshteyn's most personal loss. Accordingly, in 1961, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko began his famous poem "Babi Yar" (the title reflecting the Russian rather than Ukrainian name of the ravine) with the line, "There are no monuments over Babi Yar..."[2] In the absence of a physical memorial site, Yevtushenko instead erected a

literary monument. The first monument was established as late as 1976. However, due to the Soviet nationalities policy which had begun to discourage minority expression and instead sought to unify the country by portraying the entire Soviet people as equal victims, the site did not specifically mention the Jewish victims executed at Babyn Yar. Though there was no explicit Soviet guideline on memorializing the Holocaust, the saying “Do not divide the dead” best expressed a policy which tacitly erased the uniqueness of Jewish suffering.

A menorah-shaped monument in memory of the Jewish victims was erected in 1991 and, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there were plans to fully open the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center by 2023 – though those plans have certainly been hindered by the latest war of aggression on the territory of Ukraine. On March 1, Russian forces even damaged the site of Babyn Yar; the symbolism of such an attack was noted by many, including the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy who asked on [Twitter](#) the same day, “what is the point of saying «never again» for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babyn Yar?” However, even prior to the Russian war against Ukraine, the Memorial Center was already shrouded in controversy. Some critics were wary that certain funders – Russian oligarchs with ties to Putin – would seek to turn the site into an outlet for Kremlin propaganda with an anti-Ukrainian bias that focused predominantly on Ukrainian collaborators. While a number of Ukrainians were indeed collaborators during the Holocaust, even more Ukrainians became victims of the Nazis. Other critics thus argue that a sober look at the crimes committed by Ukrainians as well as by the German occupiers is a sign of the mature civil society which has emerged in Ukraine.

Covering a territory of almost 1,500 square kilometers, the Memorial Center would have eventually consisted of museums, research centers, works of art, and other audio-based and visual exhibits, including a 3D topographical map, a mirror field of reflective columns riddled with bullet holes, and a sound sculpture that murmurs the names of the dead in an endless loop. This combination of traditional and modern, interactive elements was criticized for not being somber enough for such a memorial; critics have gone so far as to deride the project as a “Holocaust Disneyland.” Advocates, on the other hand, simply describe it as a modern museum that makes use of all the technological and creative elements at its disposal to educate an audience which is more than three-quarters of a century removed from the crimes of the Holocaust. The tools may thus differ significantly from what Hofshteyn originally imagined, but in its focus on education through sensory immersion, the Babyn Yar memorial site’s aims are not that different from Hofshteyn’s museums of shame.

At a time of great mourning, Hofshteyn’s call for education was remarkable.

“Mir veln onwendn tsu di yunge daytshn di zelbe metodn, vos me vendet on tsu kets un tsu hint: mirn zey shtoyshn mitn gantsn gezikht in dem shoyderlekhn heslekhn shmuts, vos dos daytshishe folk hot ongerikht in di yorn fun der milkhome.” [3]

We will use the same methods with the younger German generations that we use with cats and dogs: We will push their entire face into the horrible, disgusting filth that the German people have done during the war. (*My translation.*)

This focus on the full-bodied and multisensory experience of shame is best understood not as vindictive but as educational. In fact, it was a language of “reeducation” similar to that of the denazification of Germany. Hofshiteyn’s museums of shame were thus the very first step away from grievance and toward indictment. The eventual charges made against the perpetrators were built on a mound of evidence provided by the same impetus to collect and document, which forms the basis of the museums of shame. Though they would never be built in accordance with his vision, Hofshiteyn foresaw and demanded the will to indict which would eventually become vital in prosecuting the Nazis, in marking the legacy of the Holocaust, and in ensuring the veracity of the words “never again.”

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[1] The unpublished essay is today found among the materials of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, GARF*); Dovid Hofshiteyn, “*Muzeyen fun sand.*” GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 90, 463–465.

[2] The poem was first published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on September 19, 1961. It can be found republished in Evgenii Evtushenko, “Babii Iar,” in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Sovetskaia rossia, 1987), 309. An English translation can be found in Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *The Collected Poems, 1952–1990*, eds. James Regan, Albert C. Todd, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 102–104.

[3] Hofshiteyn, “*Muzeyen fun sand.*” GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 90, 464.

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