

AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY MUSEUM OPENS IN PHILADELPHIA

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Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia PA, 5 December 2010



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The Museum is located on the southeast corner of 5th and Market Streets, in the "olde city" of Philadelphia, and it overlooks Independence Mall. I give this specific address (and the additional details which follow) for a reason that will be obvious.

On the Mall, just west of the Museum, is the Pavilion that houses the Liberty Bell, arguably America's most cherished icon.

One block to the south, between 5th and 6th Streets on Chestnut Street, is the Independence Hall complex, which is the southern end of the Mall, in the center of which is the Hall, where the Nation was born, and where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the Constitution of the United States was drafted. To its left, on the corner of 6th and Chestnut Streets, is Congress Hall, where the first Congress met, with the House of Representatives on the ground floor, and the Senate and the two rooms that became the Library of Congress, on the second. To the right of the Independence Hall is the Court House, where the first Supreme Court sat.

One block to the west of the Museum, at the corner of 6th and Market Streets, is the Independence Visitors Center, where the visitor to America's most historic square mile will get his free map, see a short film on the attractions of the city, get a snack, buy souvenirs and, in the summer, get his free timed ticket to see the Liberty Bell.

One block to the north, from 5th to 6th Streets on Arch Street is the Constitution Center, at the northern end of the Mall, which tells the story of the American Constitution. Along side it, on the northeast corner of 5th Street is the U. S. Mint from whose galleries the visitor can see American coinage being made. And, on the southeast corner of 5th and Arch Streets, is the grave of Benjamin Franklin, the greatest American who ever lived, on whose grave visitors drop a penny--despite Ben's maxim: "A penny saved is a penny earned."

And, these are just a few of the must-see historic sites in the easy-to-walk-around area.

What all of the above means is that when the millions of visitors to Philadelphia come to see where

the Nation began and to walk in the footsteps of those giants who created the greatest nation in the world, they will also see this unique Museum dedicated to the history of America's Jews.

It is easy to get to. The subway system's 5th Street Station is under the building. A bus route stops in front of the building, seven other buses stop on the opposite corner, two bus routes end just north of Market Street, one of the tour companies starts and finishes its tour on the diagonal corner, and the other tour company starts and finishes its tour one block to the north, near the Liberty Bell Pavilion.

And, what a museum it is. Four floors that tell the history of America's Jews from the time the first of them arrived in 1654 to the present. It tells of the contribution made by the Jews to America's art and culture, its commerce and science, its entertainment and sports, its literature and medicine--its very life--and it tells the story with repeated thanks to a country that enabled the immigrant and native-born to utilize his natural skills and talents as he could not do in other countries.

What is remarkable about the Museum is that from the first announcement to its opening took only 43 months--that's slightly more than three-and-a-half years! That included selecting the architect, selecting the exhibit designer, razing the building formerly on the site, clearing the ground, erecting the new building, gathering the artifacts now on display, and the myriad of other necessary steps before the doors were opened to the visitor.

Meanwhile. . . (Ah, some of you were expected a "meanwhile," weren't you?) in Washington, the Armenians are still at the stage where there is heated debated about the color of the interior of the broom closet on the second floor of the proposed Genocide Museum.

I feel an attraction to the Jewish Museum because a high-school friend gave the first \$25-million to get the project started. He did not demand, as a return for his donation, that the museum be dedicated to his pet hamster that died when he was five-years old. Knowing Sid as I do, if there was anything attached to his check, it was a note saying: "More if you need it."

The five-storey, 100,000-square-foot Museum cost \$150-million, and the Fund drive was oversubscribed, with "founding member" contributions from all 50 states!

What is it about the Jewish mind that it can see a need and fill it, can sublimate any biases and opinions when the greater need presents itself? And what is it about the Armenian mind that it cannot rise above its petty ego and will let a need suffer as it strives to take credit for something that its very inaction is preventing from coming to fruition?

And, while I am on that sad subject, permit me to talk briefly about the Holocaust Museum in Taiwan--that's right Taiwan. There are about 150 Jews among the 23-million Taiwanese, but they have decided to have a Museum dedicated to the memory of their martyred brothers and sisters.

True, it isn't in the capital; it's in Tainan, a city 90 minutes by train to the south. True, it is not a stand-alone museum; it is in space given to the Jews by a church. But, they decided that in their time, and before they leave this life, they would do what has to be done.

Meanwhile, in Washington. . . . Oh, I commented on that, didn't I?

✘ What is also interesting about the new Jewish Museum is that just about 100 yards to the north, is (or was, now) a Jewish Museum. Why another? The older one was erected in 1976. Deemed too small, for about eight years there was talk of building a larger one on the site when the new location presented itself, and the Jews acted quickly. A monumental sculpture dedicated to "Religious Liberty--which was originally displayed at the country's Centennial in 1876--that marked the entrance of the old Museum, now stands at the front of the new Museum.

Some of the exhibits of the Museum are aimed at the children, to teach them about their past, and to enable them to experience how the early Jews lived. There is a recording booth so that the visitor will be able to tell the story of his family! There is a cafeteria and a gift shop. The history tour begins on the fourth floor, with each lower floor nearing the present.

But, enough. Suffice it to say that nothing has been omitted that will tell the Jew and the non-Jew the history of a grateful people, whose contribution to this country far exceeds their limited number.

Meanwhile, in Washington. . . . Oh, I commented on this, didn't I?

A word to the anti-Semites out there. Don't visit this Museum. For your own peace of mind, please do not visit this Museum. You will not like what you will see. It will reinforce your worst fears about the superiority of the Jews, and you will return home and beat the wife and children and kick the dog and cat.

As for everyone else, when you come to Philadelphia, do visit this remarkable place. You can't miss it. It is that glass-fronted building with a LED light-sculpture called "Beacon" installed on the roof. It is visible for miles and is on 24 hours a day.

Meanwhile, in Washington. . . .

