



Kansas Holocaust Memorial By Shelly Cline

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Hi, I'm Shelly Cline, Historian and Director of Education at the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, in Overland Park, KS.

Today I'm going to tell you the story of Kansas City's Holocaust memorial. It's one of the first in the nation and possibly the only one in Kansas.

Many people don't realize that after the second world war, the Kansas City area became home to a thriving community of Holocaust survivors. Many of these new immigrants first came to New York and were encouraged to look at other cities to make their home.

By the end of the 1950s, one group of survivors, mostly from Poland, formed a group they called The New Americans Club. This group of survivors had two major initiatives: create a memorial service to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which then became our Yom HaShoah service which we continue to this day, and create a memorial to the six million Jewish lives lost.

In 1958, they commissioned a nationally known artist, Maurice Newman, to make the piece. And in June of 1963, former president Harry Truman attended the dedication of this Holocaust memorial, one of the first in the country. What makes this memorial so special is both that it was so early in terms of international Holocaust memorialization and the form this sculpture takes.

Early memorials were put up immediately after the war on the actual sites of atrocity, such as Bergen-Belsen or Auschwitz, but it took longer for memorials to be put up on secondary sites and outside of Europe. It was only in the 1960s that this process began, so for our community to have one commissioned in the 50s and built by the early 60s is unique.

The memorial was funded entirely by the survivor community. They were able to raise, in today's worth, \$120,000. This is especially incredible when you consider these families had only been in the country for less than ten years. Each family was able to choose the names of those they lost to be inscribed on the memorial itself.

So, what does it look like? It's somewhat hard to describe, but it's made entirely of aluminum and has the basic shape of flames rising out of rubble. On the back side there is a very detailed map of the Warsaw ghetto. You can see street names and other landmarks. Even Mila Street, the headquarters for the resistance, is marked. Below the ghetto, which is striking because it's empty, there are no people – it's a void. The people, are below, shown in a forced exodus toward a fiery door – representing the death camps, specifically Treblinka in this case – because that's where the majority of those in the Warsaw ghetto were sent to their deaths. As you move around to the front of the piece you see skeletal figures reaching out for remembrance. The front of the memorial shows a dual exodus: one of ancient times show Moses leading his people out of Egypt, and another, this one of Jews leaving Europe and coming to America. Above this we see flames, flames of remembrance on which the names of those lost in the Holocaust are written. Within those flames we also see a warrior figure that symbolizes the burning persistence of memory.

In addition to the inclusion of Moses, we also see a figure of King David, a set of Torah scrolls, and a menorah. The clear and overt Jewish symbolism included is another thing that makes this memorial so special for its time. The very first Holocaust memorials looked more like generic war memorials and lacked examples of Jewishness linking the memorial to the victims it was meant to commemorate. Sometimes this decision was taken out of fear of antisemitism.

This memorial was originally located in Kansas City, Missouri at the site of the former Jewish Community Center. When the center moved to Johnson County in the 1980s, the memorial came along. Today it sits on the edge of the parking lot, where many people pass it by without knowing its very interesting history or that it is connected to the Holocaust.

For those people listed on the flames, there are no gravesites to visit. Sometimes there's not even a known place of death. For survivors and their families, they can come to this place and remember those they lost.

And for the rest of us, it's a place to not only remember Holocaust victims, but to remember those survivors who came to our community and began courageous new lives.

This transcript of "Kansas Holocaust Memorial" is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.