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Preserving Sacred Memory: The Effort to Create the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Preserving Sacred Memory: The Effort to Create the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

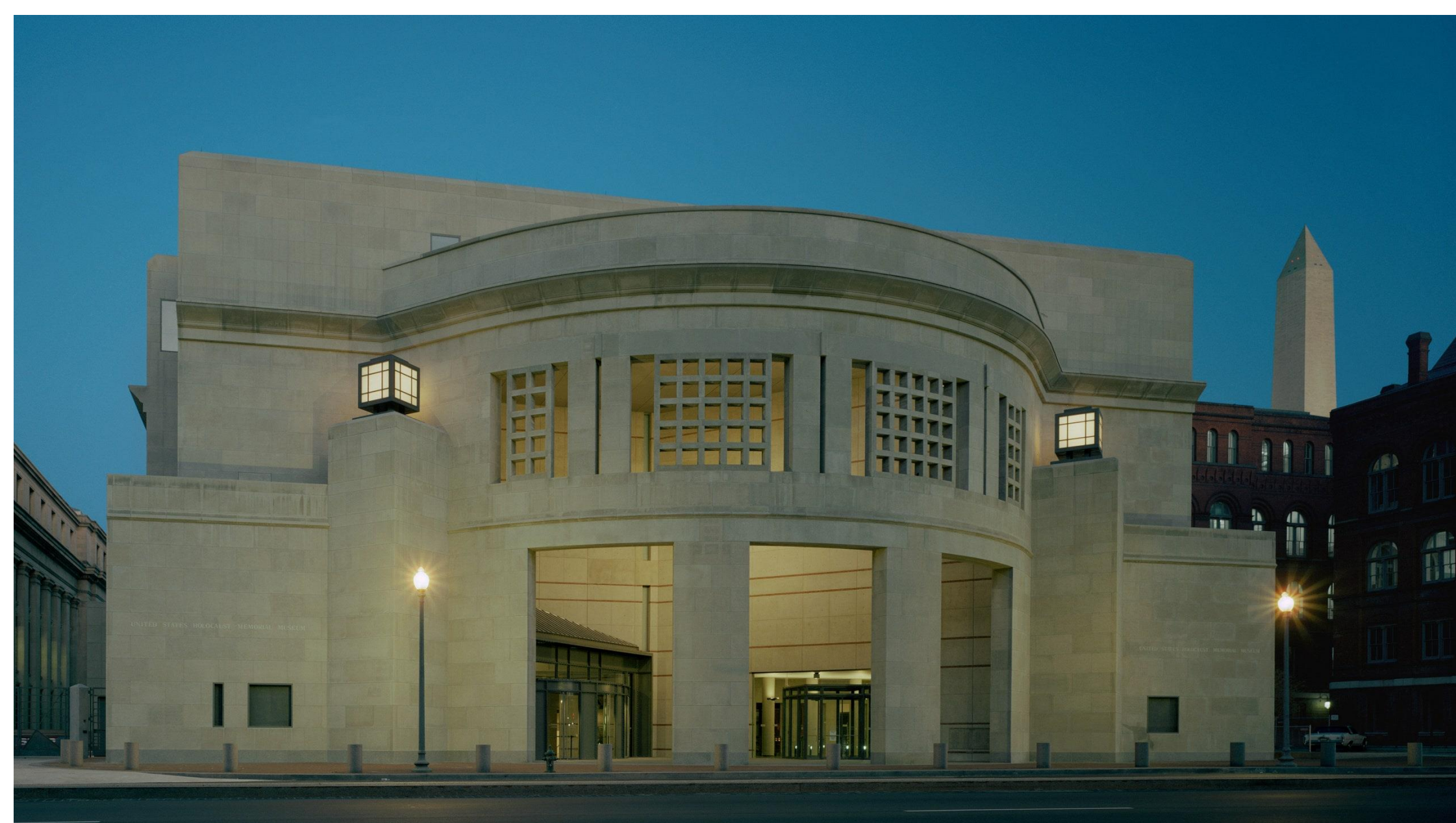
By: Jessica Wachtel; Adviser: Prof. Christoph Schiessl; Class: HON 3030

Background and Mission

- The USHMM first opened in Washington, D.C. on April 22, 1993, fifteen years after plans to make the museum had been announced first by President Jimmy Carter.
- The goal of the museum was to provide education about the Holocaust to an American audience and to provide Jewish victims with official commemoration.
- It provides a lesson for Americans about the dangers of Christian anti-Semitism and being bystanders to crimes.
- The government provided three reasons for making the museum:
 - American troops helped liberate death camps.
 - The United States needed to be held responsible for their slow response to the Holocaust.
 - Education could help prevent another Holocaust.

Structure and Location

- After debates between New York and Washington, D.C., the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council decided that D.C. was the best location for the museum.
- It was built in the National Mall alongside famous monuments and museums.
- They chose to build the museum in the Auditor's Building and its annexes that were previously used by the Bureau of Agriculture.
 - The structure of the building reminded Council members of Auschwitz, which would help the museum provide an emotional impact.



Above: An outside view of the structure of the USHMM building. The Washington Monument is in the background. Image source: Conde Nast Traveler

Elie Wiesel

- President Carter appointed Elie Wiesel as the chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council that was tasked with making the USHMM.
- Carter chose Wiesel because he was a well-liked and “non-political” Holocaust survivor and activist who could represent all victims.
- Wiesel criticized Carter’s stance on Palestine and his reported number of Holocaust victims.
- Wiesel also had problems with President Ronald Reagan in 1985 because the president planned to visit SS graves and compared Nazi soldiers to Holocaust victims. Wiesel and other council members threatened to resign from their positions if Reagan visited the cemetery.
- Wiesel stepped down from his role in 1986 because he felt that the creation process was too political.



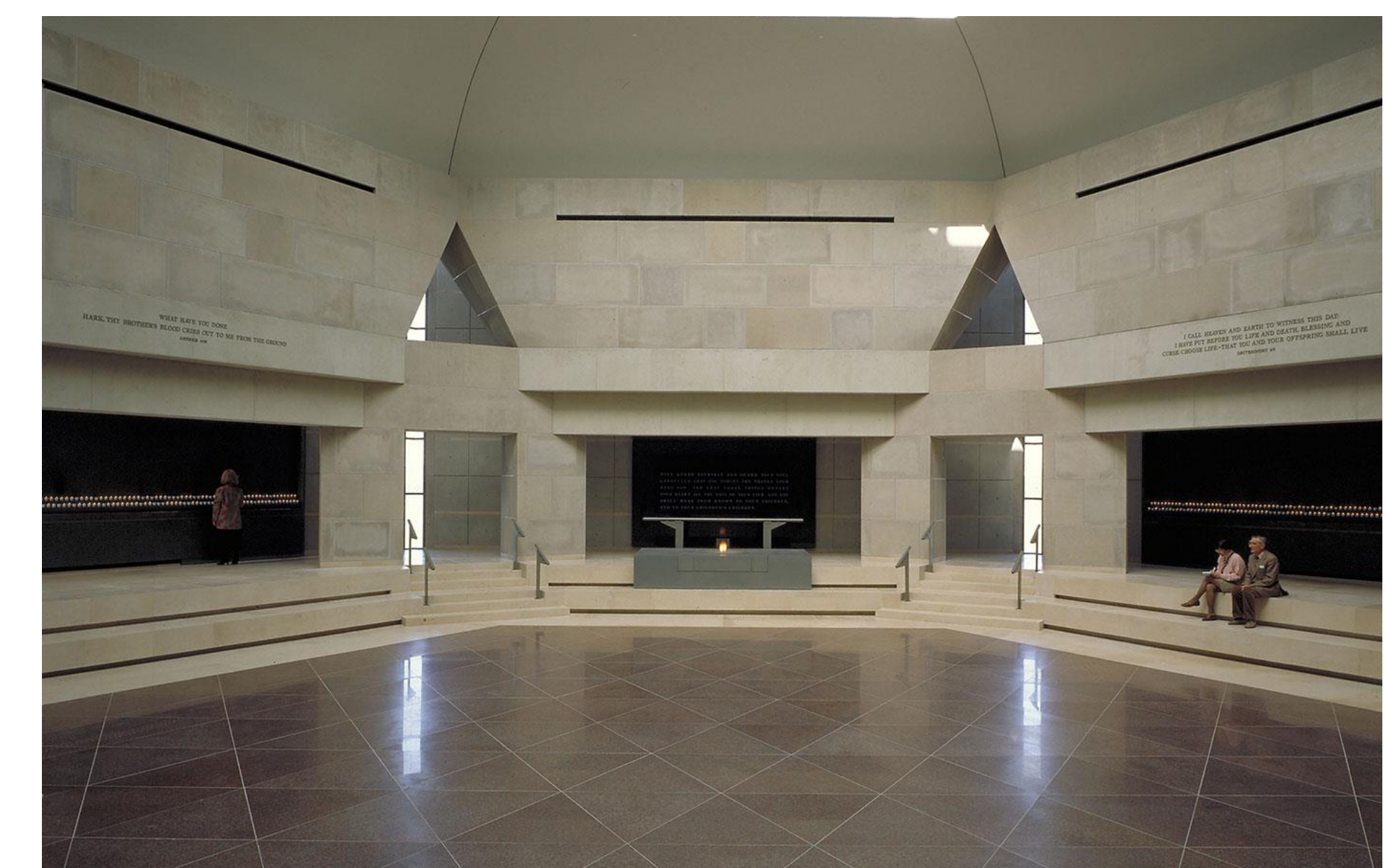
Above: Elie Wiesel. Image Source: Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Museum Exhibitions

- The permanent exhibition takes up three floors and tells the story of the Holocaust chronologically, top to bottom.
 - Nazi Assault, 1933-1939: This floor follows the rise of the Nazi Party and the treatment of European Jews before World War II.
 - The Final Solution, 1940-1945: This floor covers the ghettos, concentration camps, and killing centers. It contains oral testimonies from Auschwitz.
 - Last Chapter, 1945-present: This floor follows the liberation of camps, the end of the war, and the aftermath of the Holocaust. It contains video testimonies of survivors.
- Temporary exhibitions either focus on specific aspects of the Holocaust or relate to other genocides.



Above: A casting of the sign at the entrance of Auschwitz. The translation reads “Work sets you free.” Image Source: The Washington Post



Above: The Hall of Remembrance and the eternal flame inscribed with the names of concentration camps. Image source: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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