

MUSEUM OF MEMORY AND TOLERANCE

LEARNING SO WE NEVER FORGET

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“The bright side of human beings will not be shown, but rather the dark, less pleasant side.” This is the warning to those beginning a visit to the first room in the Museum of Memory and Tolerance, whose architecture gives the phrase meaning: in contrast with Mexico City’s springtime sunlight passing through the huge windows to the

exterior areas, once inside, the light is reduced to shadows that will transport the visitor to another time and place. But, though the time and place are different, they are no more alien.

AGAINST OBLIVION

Many faces surround the visitors, visible through little windows covering the walls. I recognize some of them: Franz Kafka,

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Photos courtesy of Museum of Memory and Tolerance.





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Albert Einstein, Anne Frank. In the entryway, at the top, a screen broadcasts a video that situates us: while World War II was raging, in Mexico, Agustín Lara was composing his most famous songs, and Mario Moreno, “Cantinflas,” was making audiences laugh.

Despite its being called a “world” war, the conflict did not seem to touch Mexico; it was something seen from afar. It was happening in Europe; but Mexico would play an important part by offering asylum to those persecuted by the Nazi regime. Gilberto Bosques was the Mexican consul for the Lázaro Cárdenas administration, who saved thousands of Jews by giving them visas to enter Mexico and creating two shelters in France where he fed them and made their lives easier, even risking his own freedom until he lost it for a year when he and his family were confined to a hotel in Germany by the Gestapo. Lillian Liberman’s documentary film *Visa to Paradise* is testimony to that counterpart that can always be found amidst tragedies like this one.

The Jewish Holocaust or “shoah,” as the Jewish community prefers to call it, demonstrates what human beings are capable of. A large-scale photograph of a snow-covered con-

centration camp and a model of the gas chambers and crematoria are displayed in this room. Sometimes, feelings make us comprehend certain events in history and brings us closer to them. The images of the prisoner transport trains and of the camps mix with those sensations and the imagination, with the need to identify, to understand people’s suffering despite their distance in time and space.

After World War II, one of the most shameful events in human history, other cases of genocide took place: the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Guatemala, Cambodia, Darfur, and Palestine. These are all examples and reminders of what continues to happen and remains to be resolved and changed. The battle against racism and discrimination has not been won.

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

In the Tolerance Section, which emphasizes respect for human rights, one of the rooms is dedicated to Mexico. The first exhibit displays the country’s great diversity of indigenous peoples and their languages. A video shows images of these people’s

CAMINANDO HACIA LA TOLERANCIA



Via un momento atrás y me
fue preciso que era un momento
después de ahora
y entonces que era un momento
finalmente lo vi a la obra
y era mi momento

Palabras clave: 1999-2000

Abraham y Edo
Tillerstein

daily lives today, their culture and traditions. The conditions of poverty are emphasized, but particularly underlined is the fact that these are surviving peoples of pre-Hispanic origin.

Mexico owes a great deal to these peoples: neither governments nor the rest of the general populace have recognized them or restored them to their rightful place in the cultural mosaic that is our nation. They have been pushed to one side, and for centuries, they have been victims of attacks and discrimination. The massacres in Aguas Blancas of peasants in Guerrero (1995) and in Acteal, Chiapas, of Tzotzil indigenous (1997) are examples of these attacks, both acts in which the government was a main perpetrator.

Movements such as the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in 1994, which has managed to establish an autonomous

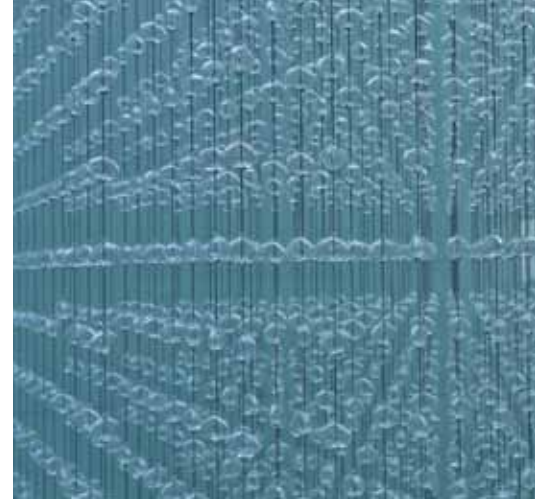
system of government, independent of the federal and state governments that respects the first people's traditions, customs, and languages, throws into stark relief the mistreatment, repression, and exclusion the indigenous communities have been the victims of. They have been segregated to such a point that few Mexicans are familiar with or would want to learn any of their languages; in addition, the indigenous have been forced to stop using their mother tongues and to learn and use exclusively or primarily Spanish. No educational plan exists to favor the preservation of the indigenous languages, and some of them are in danger of disappearing. We also must remember that the loss of a language accompanies the loss of an entire culture.

Historian Miguel León-Portilla has said that the indigenous are the true owners of the country, but that they live, impover-



Neither governments nor the rest of the general populace have recognized indigenous people or restored them to their rightful place in the cultural mosaic that is our nation.

ished and exploited, without the lands that are rightfully theirs.¹ However, they are not the only ones who have been mistreated and discriminated against. Among some of the violent events that have left their mark on Mexico and have not been resolved or for which no justice has been achieved is the student massacre of 1968, in which an unknown number of students were murdered during a demonstration of thousands in one of Mexico City's most emblematic spaces, the Three Cultures Plaza in Tlatelolco, ironically, to demand that repression against young people be stopped.



OTHER ALARM SIGNALS

The museum also mentions what have been called the “dead women of Juárez,” women who have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, simply for being women; the perpetrators of these murders have never been punished and these feminicides have not been stopped.

Another unresolved problem is that of Central and South American migrants in transit through Mexico toward the United States. Once the migrants enter our territory, there is no guarantee of their arriving at their destination alive, since along the way, they are often attacked or murdered by gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha or other members of organized crime. The cases are ignored, as though having entered the country without documents meant that they stopped being human beings with the rights that this confers.

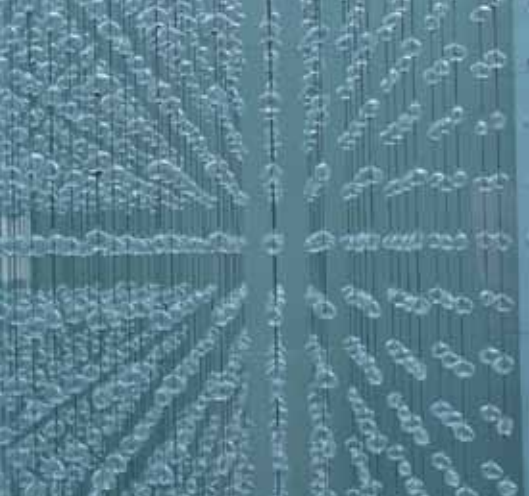
The museum also touches on the topic of journalists who do their jobs without any kind of protection, risking their

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lives. In recent days, the number of journalists murdered or attacked with impunity has increased noticeably. The statistics are overwhelming: 52 percent of the cases involve the government; 14 percent, organized crime; and in 17 percent of cases the perpetrators of the crimes are unknown. These figures situate Mexico as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for exercising this profession.

Lastly, a video is projected in which different Mexican artists denounce the disappearance of citizens in different parts of the country due to the existing insecurity and impunity and organized crime’s control over society. Disappearances have become more and more common throughout Mexico; families are missing some of their members and those who





disappear are never heard from again; and those who took them remain anonymous.

Indigenous people, peasants, young people, women, journalists, children: we can all be victims of attacks and discrimination. That's why a journey through the history of human rights violations and the atrocities committed both during World War II, and in later decades in different places on the planet, and finally in Mexico, even today, represent a global vision of the consequences of not putting into practice a value that seems simple, but sometimes becomes impossible to accomplish on a day-to-day basis: tolerance and respect for human rights, justice, and a rejection of violence.

"Tolerance is not putting up with something," says a sign at the start of the Tolerance Section. And it makes you think about other ways to define it. To me, tolerance could mean accepting, respecting, knowing how to co-exist with the other and different ways of being and living in this world, recognizing yourself in difference; because at the end of the day, we will always be the "other" to somebody.

STILL A WAY TO GO

It is true that legislation has been passed about some issues related to intolerance, and advancements have been made in several aspects. However, there is much pending on matters of discrimination and racism, migration, gender violence and homophobia, as well as on the rights and recognition of Mexico's indigenous peoples as living peoples and not cultures that can just be admired in a museum.

The Memory and Tolerance Museum can be, then, a spark that lights the flame of reflection in visitors, after recognizing that the atrocities of the Holocaust are not very different

from those that have been committed and continue to be committed in many countries, that the reality suffered by the Jews can be identified with that of the indigenous and other citizens discriminated against up until today.

This is a place where children or adults unfamiliar with these cases can be informed and become sensitized to them so that a memory of them can be created, one that reminds us that, as has happened in many cases, intolerance can take us down the road to de-humanization and barbarism. **VM**

NOTES

¹ For more about this important Mexican researcher, see <http://www.historicas.unam.mx/investigacion/leonportilla.html>. [Editor's Note.]

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Plaza Juárez. Centro Histórico
Phone: (52) (55) 51 30 55 55
Open to the public: Tues. to Fri., 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Sat. and Sun., 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

