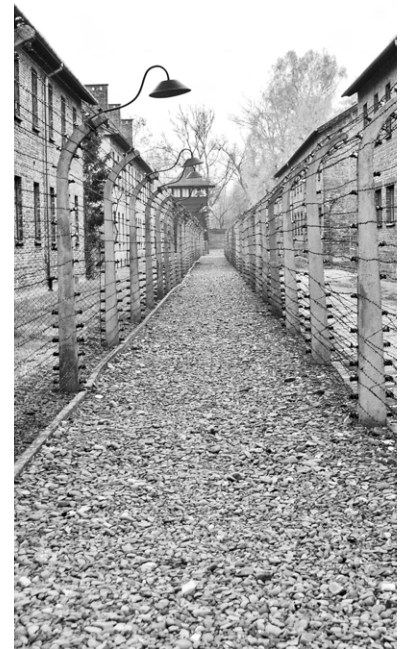
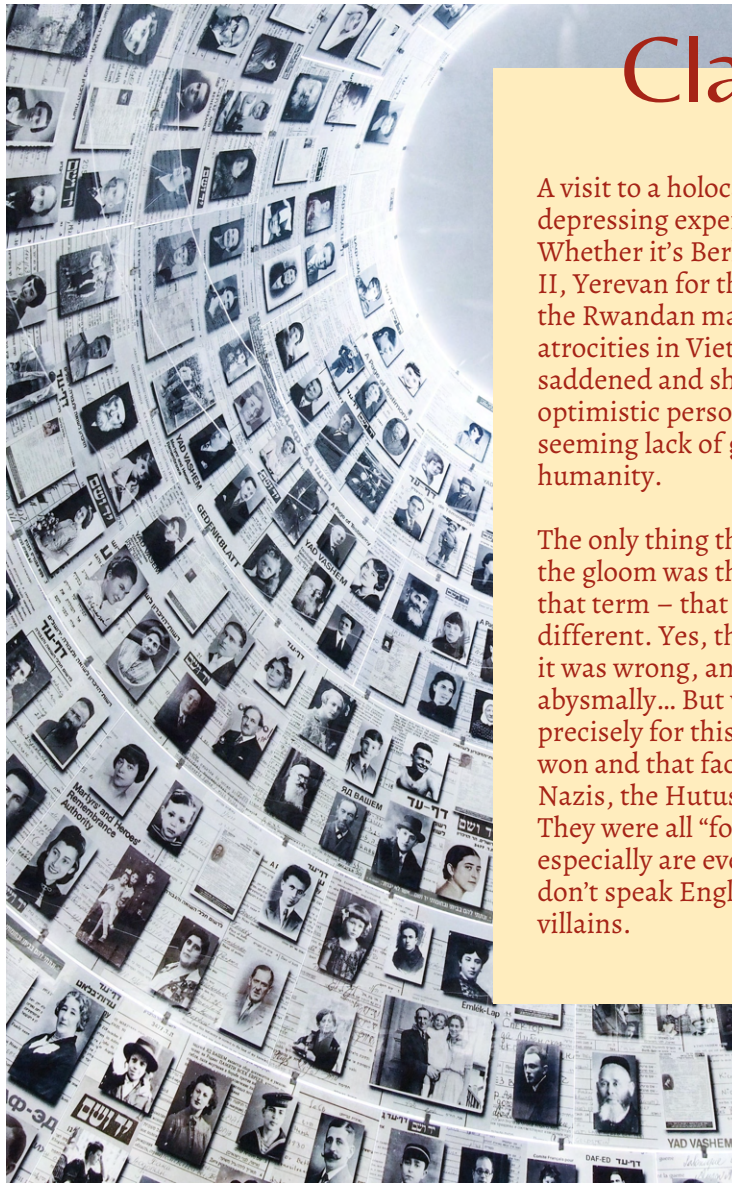


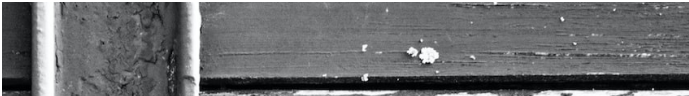
Claudia Flisi

A visit to a holocaust museum is going to be a depressing experience anywhere in the world. Whether it's Berlin or Los Angeles for World War II, Yerevan for the Armenian genocide, Kigali for the Rwandan massacre, or Ho Chi Minh City for atrocities in Vietnam, I have always emerged saddened and shaken. Even an intrinsically optimistic person can't help but despair at the seeming lack of global progress in our so-called humanity.

The only thing that in some small way softened the gloom was the consolation – if you can use that term – that the United States was somehow different. Yes, there was slavery in our past and it was wrong, and yes the slaves were treated abysmally... But we had fought a Civil War precisely for this reason and the Good Guys had won and that fact distinguished us from the Nazis, the Hutus, Pol Pots, Stalins, and the like. They were all “foreigners,” NIMBy, and Nazis especially are everyone's favorite bad guys. They don't speak English; it's easy to make them the villains.



WHAT IF THE BAD
GUYS ARE US?



That same year, the story of the St. Louis, the refugee-carrying ship that was denied entry into the US (sending almost 1,000 passengers back to Europe and death in concentration camps) is equally gut-wrenching.

An historically Good Guy president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was behind much of this deliberate inaction, which makes it more inexplicable.

What the U.S. didn't do in the 1930s and 1940s pales in comparison to what it did do in the 100 or so preceding years right here at home. The Museum of the American Indian makes this abundantly clear. I didn't need to be reminded that Andrew Jackson was a Bad Guy, that Custer had it coming, that Pocahontas died young, and that Geronimo died a prisoner. What I hadn't fully digested before my museum visit were the unremitting and officially sanctioned lies, deceptions, and double-dealing practiced by the US Government at all levels, right up to presidents and the Supreme Court. We the people of the United States killed 90% of the Native population in the course of creating our country. That is genocide by any definition.

True, the Nazis were more efficient, killing 12 million people in 12 years, while colonizers in the Americas decimated 56 million over 100 years. But that only makes us less efficient, not more noble. We are the ultimate bad guys.

That is really depressing.

Living abroad for almost 40 years, I always had a little frisson of pride in the admiration with which most of the 105 countries I have visited have viewed the United States. We weren't perfect, we made mistakes, but ultimately, we were the consummate heroes on the world stage. Some of our presidents were good, some not so much, but the latter were swept away by history while the former kept us on the side of the angels.

All that changed last week when I visited two museums back-to-back in Washington, D.C. – the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian. I was psychologically “prepared” for the Holocaust Museum, since I had visited others in the US and abroad. What I hadn't expected was a special exhibit on its lower level called Americans and the Holocaust. It covers in displays and exhibits what Ken Burns' new documentary about the Holocaust describes in video and reportage: the shocking antisemitism and yes, racism, that underpinned America's inaction in response to Nazi persecution of Jews and others in the 1930s.

The Burns film is called *The US and the Holocaust* and it makes the same points that I saw in the museum. Americans knew what was happening; there was no lack of information. Journalists and photographers made the situation crystal-clear, from Kristallnacht on. And the Nazis were equally clear about their intended goal. But the United States did nothing to facilitate the emigration of those marked for extermination by the Nazis. The U.S. immigration quota system remained locked at minimal levels and quotas for the period between 1933 and 1945 were not filled.

In 1939 a bill was introduced in Congress to allow the entry of 20,000 European children over and above existing immigration quota laws. The bill was co-sponsored by Republicans and Democrats and had powerful lobbying support and private sponsorship for all the costs. But two-thirds of Americans opposed it – not just racists or bigots or anti-Semites, but 67% of all Americans. So the bill died (as did the children).



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