

A DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

by Thomas Hauser



Muhammad Ali and his wife Lonnie lay white roses at the eternal flame in the Hall of Remembrance of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

On June 24, 1997, Muhammad Ali awoke in the nation's capital at 5:00 a.m. He said his prayers, ate a light breakfast, and read quietly from the *Qur'an*. Then, accompanied by his wife Lonnie and several friends, he left the Hay-Adams Hotel and drove to a unique destination—the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The museum was not yet open to the public when Ali arrived at 7:45 a.m. He had come early because he feared his presence during normal visiting hours would cause a commotion unsuited to the decorum of the surroundings. Several staff members greeted Muhammad and his party when they arrived. There were introductions, and the tour began.

The mission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is to inform, honor, and inspire. More specifically, it is designed to present the history of the persecution and murder of six million Jews and millions of other victims of Nazi tyranny, to commemorate those who died, and to encourage visitors to contemplate the moral implications of their own civic responsibilities.

Ali began by assimilating facts as he walked through the museum. . . . One and a half million children were exterminated in The

Holocaust. . . . It wasn't just Jews . . . Gypsies, the physically disabled, mentally handicapped, and other "undesirables" were also victims. . . . Books were burned, synagogues destroyed. . . .

As the tour progressed, Muhammad began to draw parallels between The Holocaust and the slavery that his own ancestors endured. Ali has spoken often about how black Americans were robbed of their African names and given slave names instead. Now he learned of people whose Jewish names were replaced by numbers tattooed on their forearms. Standing in a boxcar used to transport Jews to death camps in Poland, he imagined himself in the cargo hold of a slaveship two centuries earlier.

Midway through the tour, Ali came to a glass wall bearing the names of thousands of communities eradicated during The Holocaust.

"Each of these names is a whole town?" Muhammad asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"I never knew it was that bad."

The tour went on. . . . A pile of shoes taken from the dead at Majdanek. . . . Bales of hair cut from the heads of concentration camp victims. . . . A crude metal table where bodies were placed and gold teeth extracted with pliers. . . . Grainy films of nude bodies piled high

being bulldozed into trenches.

Ninety minutes after the tour began, Ali stopped to read a quotation in silver letters on a gray wall:

First they came for the socialists.

And I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists.

And I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews.

And I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me.

And there was no one left to speak for me.

Finally, Ali entered the Hall of Remembrance and placed a white rose beside the museum's eternal flame.

During the course of his life, Muhammad Ali has taken many courageous stands. But his presence at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on June 24, 1997 is among his most important statements of principle.

The victims' faces on this particular morning were Jewish. But they could just as easily have been faces from Cambodia, Bosnia, or Rwanda. By virtue of his presence, Ali demonstrated once again his solidarity with all victims of persecution. And he joined his spirit with millions of Holocaust victims and with the survivors who remember them.

