

# 'I survived for a reason. We can't let people forget.'

*New memoir by Holocaust survivor reflects hope and humor amid despair and death*

By Bill Hendrick  
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It is a measure of Ben Hirsch's enduring, and perverse, humor that he can describe the Dachau concentration camp with a wry smile: The place now has a handicapped ramp, for its mostly elderly Jewish tourists. And a sign out front reads "No Smoking," only yards from the crematoria where thousands were burned to ashes.

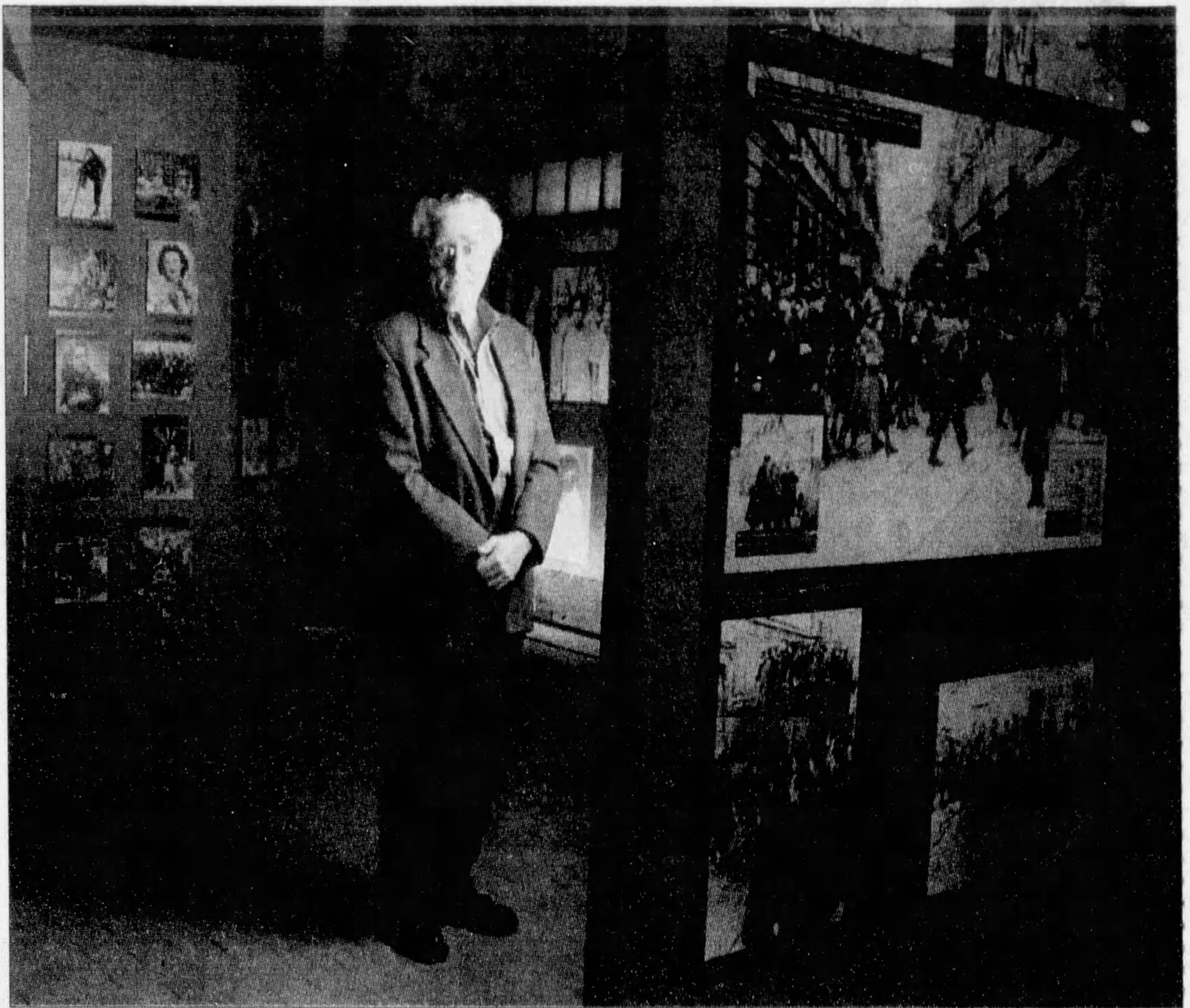
Sometimes such a twisted observation or gesture is the only way to deal with horrors such as the Holocaust.

On a 1995 pilgrimage to the Auschwitz death camp in Poland, where his mother, father and two youngest siblings were killed, Hirsch found himself standing on a set of railroad tracks. He urinated on them.

Hirsch's droll humor softens, but doesn't fully mask, the anger and pain that has shaped his life and work since he was 6 years old, when he escaped from Hitler's Germany. Through his architecture, he has strived to enlighten others about man's capacity to brutalize his fellow man, reflecting despair, but also undaunted hope and meaning. He has become a prolific designer of churches, synagogues and Holocaust memorials, including the Holocaust gallery of Atlanta's William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum.

Now Hirsch has written a poignant memoir, "Hearing a Different Drummer: A Holocaust Survivor's Search for Identity" (Mercer University Press, \$24.95). In his perversely funny way, "Drummer" delves into his life, psyche and dreams. It also attempts to trace the long roots of European anti-Semitism.

"I want people to get a feel for why it is, and how, that civilized people can become vicious mur-



BRANT SANDERLIN / Staff

Architect Ben Hirsch designed the Holocaust exhibit at Atlanta's William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. He has written a memoir, "Hearing a Different Drummer: A Holocaust Survivor's Search for Identity."

## THE BEN HIRSCH FILE

- **Age:** 67.
- **Residence:** Atlanta.
- **Occupation:** Architect, Benjamin Hirsch & Associates.
- **Family status:** Married to Atlanta native Jacqueline Hirsch, with four grown children and 17 grandchildren. Brother Asher Hirsch lives in Israel; brother Jack Hirsch lives in Atlanta. Two sisters who escaped from Germany with him are dead.
- **Religious affiliation:** Former president and current member of Congregation Beth Jacob.

## AUTHOR APPEARANCES

Will discuss and sign his book, "Hearing a Different Drummer: A Holocaust Survivor's Search for Identity":

- 7 p.m. Thursday at Barnes & Noble in Buckhead.
- 5 p.m. Sunday at Faith Presbyterian Church in Waleska.
- 7 p.m. Aug. 16 at Chapter 11's Briarcliff Village store.

derers," he says. His answer: The capacity to hate is a universal trait. "I'm hoping there are a lot of subtle lessons here about human behavior."

He plans a second book, about

oppression of Jews in Georgia. "I survived for a reason," he says. "We can't let people forget."

Hirsch has designed dozens of synagogues and churches, including Brookhaven Christian

Church and the Or VeShalom and Etz Chaim synagogues in metro Atlanta. His trademarks are low, wooden ceilings leading into towering sanctuaries, with skylights for natural light.

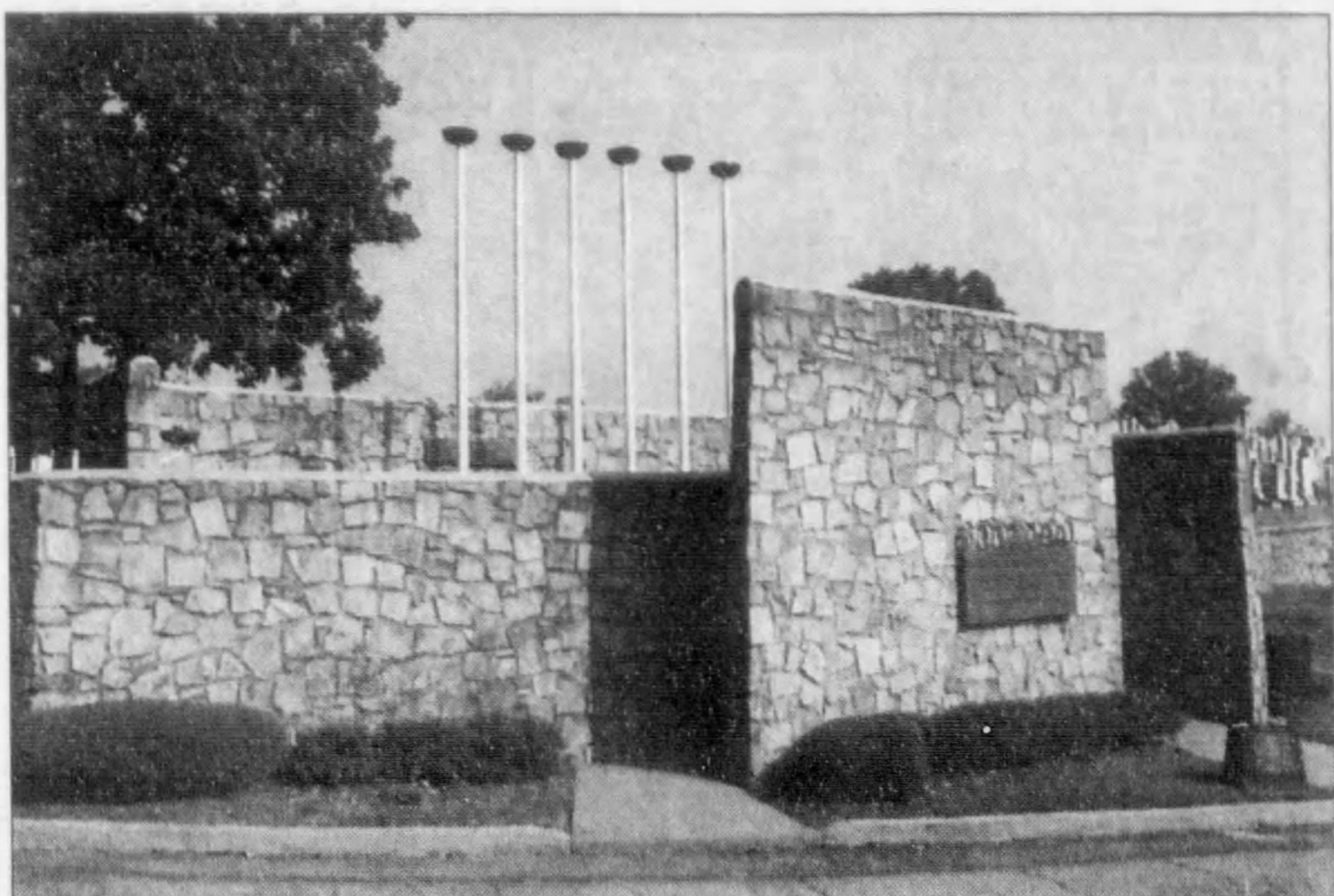
"We wanted a building that would reflect the African-American experience, and he listened very carefully," says the Rev. A. Knighton Stanley, pastor of the Peoples Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington. "We talked about how African-Americans and Jews had been persecuted, oppressed, for centuries, and he was able to draw upon his own experience."

The church's low ceiling represents Africans' sea journey to America, Stanley explains. "Then it rises about three floors, with skylights that are semicircular. This represents the new freedom we enjoy. You go from an area of despair into another representing hope."

Hirsch's own season of despair began in November

➤ Please see **HIRSCH, C3**





JEAN SHIFRIN / Staff

**Ben Hirsch's Memorial to the Six Million at Atlanta's Greenwood Cemetery honors the memory of those who died in the Holocaust.**

# Hirsch: Memoir finds hope amid Holocaust

► Continued from C1

1938, when he was 6. His father, Hermann Hirsch, a dentist, was arrested by the Gestapo during Kristallnacht, a pogrom against Jews.

His mother, Mathilda, decided to send young Ben and his four elder siblings to France, where they hid out for several years before escaping to America. She felt that Ben's younger brother Werner and sister Roselene were too small to travel.

The mother and her two young children were arrested in 1942.

Hirsch settled with a foster family in Atlanta. In the chaos of the war and its aftermath, he couldn't learn the fate of his family. But when he enlisted in the Army — a patriotic gesture to the nation that had helped liberate the camps — he was sent to his native Germany, where he found out what had happened.

"I just couldn't believe it," Hirsch says. "Who kills babies? I had always hoped they might still be alive."

Touring the Breman's Holocaust gallery one recent morning, Hirsch pointed to a huge black-and-white photograph of a German soldier murdering a Jewish woman and her tightly clutched infant with a single rifle shot.

"If people don't see anything else, I want them to see this," he said. "The soldier was so proud of that, he sent it home to his parents. How could that be? What was he thinking?"

Such images and questions have made Hirsch into a man who comprehends Dachau with a grim joke — with despair and hope. William B. Helmreich, now a professor at the City University of New York, met him 30 years ago. He says, "Beneath this very pleasant, seemingly gentle demeanor lies a man of steely determination.

"These experiences during the war have given him a heightened level of consciousness, both vis-à-vis Jews and vis-à-vis people in general. Yet he can be the most casual man in the world. He'll challenge you to a game of basketball and beat you with a smile. He shows us the remarkable ability of human beings to learn to live, laugh and love again."

One of Hirsch's designs is the fortresslike Memorial to the Six Million at Atlanta's Greenwood Cemetery, America's second Holocaust memorial, erected in 1965. Every year after Passover, hundreds gather there for a service of remembrance. "Anybody can share in it," Hirsch says.

Yet the site serves as more than just a symbol.

In 1970, Hirsch received a frantic call from a rabbi at Congrega-

tion Beth Jacob. A member of the synagogue had found four bars of soap from a Nazi death camp, each stamped "RJF," for "Rein Juden Fett" — "Pure Jewish Fat." Hirsch helped arrange to inter the soap by the Greenwood Cemetery memorial.

Some historians deny that the Nazis made soap from their concentration camp victims. But Hirsch, when he was searching for information about his family members, read the diary of an uncle, a chemist who had survived the Holocaust. The uncle said he knew the Nazis made soap from people — because he was forced to participate.

"Who in his right mind would talk about making soap from human remains if he didn't do it, in a memoir he never expected to be read?"

Hirsch worries that such horrors will be revised out of history.

"The attack on memory always bothers me. You can't discount memories of people."

So he tries to spread the truth as he finds it.

The harrowing gallery at the Breman Museum is packed with anti-Semitic posters dating back to 1475 and relics from the 20th-century Holocaust.

As visitors proceed through the building, windows decrease in size to illustrate the diminishing hope of the doomed Jews; lighting becomes dimmer, the images more violent. But the exhibit also documents courage, telling stories, many recorded on video by Atlanta Holocaust survivors, of resistance and rescue.

"What makes it work is what makes him tick: a sense of 'I survived for a reason; I want to discover that reason; I want to make sure I honor what was left behind and what was destroyed,'" says Rabbi Ilan Feldman of Congregation Beth Jacob.

Jane Leavey, the Atlanta Jewish Museum's director, says she can gauge the effectiveness of the exhibit by watching the startled eyes of thousands of Atlanta children who visit it every year.

"Last month, on a school tour, an eighth-grade boy said, 'My grandfather is a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and he didn't want me to come here. My mother said, 'That's exactly why I should come.''"

That sums up what Hirsch hopes to do — change closed minds. Including those who stopped believing in God after the Holocaust. His own experiences made Hirsch a more devout Jew, long active in his congregation.

"Yes, I believe in God," Hirsch says.

He winks.

"But sometimes, I feel that he owes me one."