

Items from Texas synagogue hostage crisis to be displayed

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Two items from the Jan. 15 hostage-taking at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville will be displayed at the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

On that day less than three months ago, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker welcomed a 44-year-old British national into the Texas synagogue shortly before Shabbat services and offered him a cup of tea. Midway through the service, the visitor pulled out a gun and took Cytron-Walker and three others hostage.



A chair from Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History)

After a nearly 11-hour standoff, Cytron-Walker threw a chair at the hostage-taker, distracting him and allowing for an escape.

Both the teacup and the chair are now at the Philadelphia museum, where they will be exhibited alongside a video recorded with the rabbi and the three other hostages. The exhibit also names the three hostages: Lawrence Schwartz, Shane Woodward and Jeffrey Cohen, in addition to Cytron-Walker.

The standoff galvanized a national conversation about antisemitism. Cytron-Walker became a hero. He testified before Congress and advocated for increased synagogue security funding.

Last month, President Joe Biden included \$360 million in funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program in his 2023 federal budget—doubling the amount of money in the program.

Separate from the Colleyville items, the museum is preparing for an exhibit titled “The Future Will Follow the Past,” guest-curated by New York-based video, sculpture and photography artist Jonathan Horowitz.

Misha Galperin, president and CEO of the museum, said the two items will be part of a broader exhibit titled “The Future Will Follow the Past,” guest-curated by New York-based video, sculpture and photography artist Jonathan Horowitz.

Galperin said the exhibit will include events that “bubbled up over the last two years” within the American Jewish community including racism, COVID-19, political polarization and antisemitism.

Other items will include a shrouded sculpture of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and a visual rendering of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, site of the massacre of 11 Jews in 2018.

The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History has been closed to the public over the last two years because of the pandemic. It opens with a gala on May 1 and will open to the general public on May 13.

The museum, located in a glass-encased building just off Independence Mall in Philadelphia, has undergone a lot of change since it first opened 12 years ago.

In 2020, it entered bankruptcy proceedings, unable to overcome a debt burden of about \$30 million. The following year shoe designer Stuart Weitzman rescued the museum with an undisclosed donation that has allowed the museum to buy back the building and secure an endowment.

The formal reopening will coincide with the annual Jewish American Heritage Month, celebrated each May since President George W. Bush proclaimed it in 2006.

The museum's concourse level features a multimedia exhibit, the Only in America Gallery Hall of Fame. The inductees displayed in words and images include Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, Louis Brandeis, Albert Einstein, Emma Lazarus, Golda Meir, Jonas Salk, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Steven Spielberg, Barbra Streisand and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

While the United States has a plethora of regional Jewish museums, Galperin said: "We're the only museum focused on national Jewish history. The others are focused on Holocaust or have a local context."