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Struggling Diaspora Museum rejects donation of founder's luxury car

The cash-strapped Diaspora Museum declined a rare gift this week which once belonged to its founder: a Bentley 'T' Series Saloon automobile.

By Charlotte Halle

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The cash-strapped Diaspora Museum declined a rare gift this week which once belonged to its founder: a Bentley 'T' Series Saloon automobile.

The luxury vintage car, which was custom-made for Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann in 1969, was recently purchased by Las Vegas businessman Jack Wishna, who offered to loan or donate it to the museum as a permanent exhibit. But this week, director-general of the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Rani Finzi, rejected the proposal, citing lack of space at the museum, which is on the Tel Aviv University campus.

"The museum of the history of the Jewish people is not the exact place for such a unique car because it does not reflect the history of the Jewish people," Finzi added.

Renowned for his jet-setting and lavish lifestyle, as well as his achievements in the Zionist arena and his negotiation of German reparations for Holocaust survivors, Lithuanian-born Goldmann



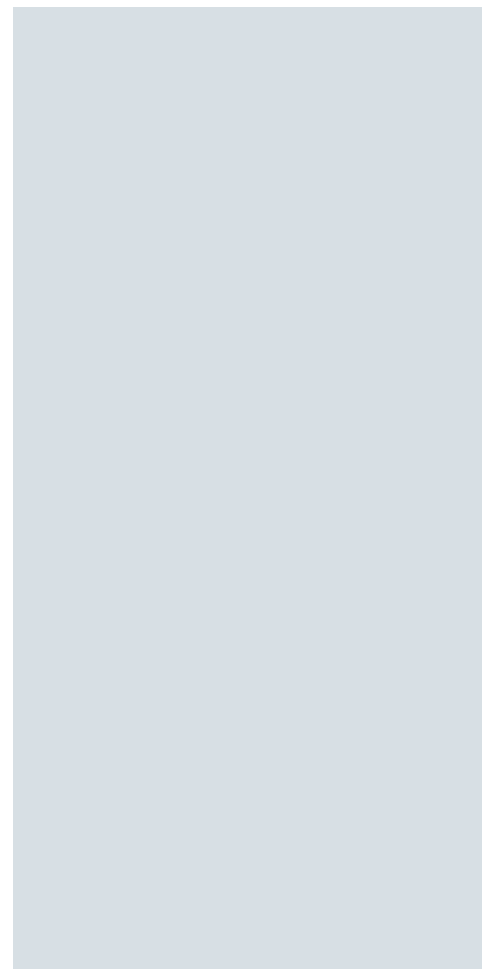
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founded the museum in 1978.

Once highly celebrated for its exhibits and use of cutting-edge technology, in recent years the museum's fortunes have plummeted. Sharp funding cuts, coupled with a drastic drop in the number of visitors, have prevented the museum from much-needed modernization. In the 1980s, an average of 450,000 people came to the museum each year; in 2002 numbers fell to just 73,000. In 2001 a recovery program to address the museum's estimated annual deficit of NIS 8 million was devised, which included major lay-offs and a reduction of the museum opening hours to four days a week. But in July of this year, bailiffs turned up with an order to repossess one of the museum's cars because of the institution's NIS 250,000 debt to the income tax authorities. In October, the museum was given emergency aid in the form of \$2 million dollars: \$1 million from the Israeli government and another \$1 million from the Claims Conference, which works to secure restitution for Holocaust survivors and their heirs. But the deficit at the end of 2003 is still NIS 8 million, according to Finzi.

None of this was known to Wishna, a vintage car enthusiast, who proposed in October that the rare automobile "come home" to Israel so it could be enjoyed by a "broader cross-section of people." Wishna, who refused to reveal how much he paid for the car, is Jewish but has never been to Israel. At present he drives the mint-condition car around Nevada at least once a week. There are two schools of thought when it comes to vintage car ownership, he told Anglo File this week in a telephone conversation from Las Vegas: "You can treat it as a museum piece and put it on a pedestal and admire it, or you can utilize it for its beauty and mechanics and operate it for what it was designed to be - a motor car."

Custom-made for Goldmann by Bentley-Rolls Royce, the two-tone car was delivered to its owner in Paris in 1969. According to Wishna, its most unique feature is the color of the roof, hood and trunk, which are "Astrakhan," a dark brown shade created by the company especially for Goldmann, while the rest of the car is sand-colored. Other features of the automobile, which was manufactured by hand, include deep pile Wilton carpets to match the beige interior leather and the distinct Bentley grill.

Prior to Wishna, the car was owned by legendary Las Vegas entertainer Wayne Newton, who has a huge vintage car collection and bought the automobile directly from Goldmann shortly before the Zionist leader's death in 1982. Wishna said that he had been intrigued by the car and its history since Newton - his friend and business colleague - first purchased it from Goldmann.

Diaspora Museum director-general Finzi said that the American Friends of the museum were now trying to investigate whether the historical automobile could be exhibited at the World Jewish Congress building in New York or at the nearby Leo Baeck Institute, where an exhibition about the life of Nahum Goldmann was recently shown.



Las Vegas businessman Jack Wishna standing next to the Bentley "T" Series Saloon automobile that used to belong to Nahum Goldmann.

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