

THE IMPERATIVE OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

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When I began my career almost 50 years ago, I emphasized in my speeches that one day there would be no Holocaust survivors to say, “I was there,” or to show their concentration camp tattoos, or to recount their first-hand testimony of being the victims of the worst brutality known to humankind. Sadly, we are almost at that point.

Twenty-two years into the 21st century, the biological clocks of these witnesses are winding down, and each year, many are taken from us. Fortunately, some are still able to speak in schools, at commemorations and in interviews, to tell their stories. And the many programs and projects devoted to recording thousands of testimonies over the past few decades have created a permanent record of the suffering they endured, much of which is accessible over the internet.

And yet, the passage of time and the increasingly short concentration spans of younger generations make us anxious about the future. Grandparent survivors, who helped to create a chain of continuity about Holocaust remembrance, are now in their late 80s and 90s.

But what of those families who either never had, or no longer have, that connection? In the United States, only 16 states have mandatory Holocaust education programs. A good number of universities have Holocaust studies programs, but unless you are a student seeking to obtain a degree in the subject, or if you are just interested in taking a course or two, the likelihood is that you'll never encounter a discussion about Hitler's campaign to eradicate the Jewish people.

Over the past 30 years or so, the callous and careless use of the word “genocide” and the trivialization of such terms as “concentration camp” and comparison of mundane, everyday matters to the Holocaust is tearing away and weakening the uniqueness of what the Jewish people experienced between 1933 and 1945. Viewers of the popular television situation comedy “Seinfeld” will recall a character nicknamed “the Soup Nazi,” a surly restaurateur who featured take-away soups. This kind of casual, off-handed minimization of the perpetrators of the worst possible crimes is not a laughing matter. Worse, if one has no context of exactly who the Nazis were, and what they did, you could wind up repeating these trivializations, all the while further exacerbating the problem.

In 2020, the Claims Conference (the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany), the organization which has, for the past 70 years, provided Holocaust survivors with financial and other

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material assistance, and which funds numerous Holocaust education and remembrance programs, issued a groundbreaking study about Holocaust awareness. It was a global survey, focusing on Millennials and Generation Z-ers and their knowledge of basic facts about the Holocaust. The results were disturbing: 63% of the respondents did not know that six million Jews were murdered; 36% thought it was two million or fewer. Almost half of those surveyed could not name a single concentration camp. Most shocking: 11% thought that Jews themselves were responsible for the Holocaust.

If these real-time results are surfacing when there are Holocaust victims and concentration camp liberators still among us, one can only speculate about the future. But an equally serious threat to remembrance is upon us, and it is growing in intensity: Holocaust denial.

When I entered the field of Jewish communal affairs in the 1970s, there was no internet, but there were Holocaust deniers. In the United States, people like Arthur Butz, an engineering professor who wrote “The Hoax of the Twentieth Century” and Willis Carto, founder of the Far-Right Liberty Lobby, and the Institute for Historical Review (on whose board Butz sat) promoted a cocktail of anti-Semitic, conspiracist theories that blamed Jews for concocting the Holocaust to advance their own interests. The messages of these deniers was conveyed mostly by mail, or when they might convene to feed upon their twisted, maleficent view of history.

Today, the Holocaust deniers have the internet through which to spew their hatred, aided and abetted by social media freelancers from the Far Left, the Far Right and from Islamic extremists. These purveyors of revisionism are anywhere and everywhere. Indeed, today a good deal of denial emanates from Iran, not content with just calling for Israel’s elimination on a daily basis.

The regime in Tehran famously sponsored an international cartoon contest, whose objective was to lampoon the Holocaust. One year the prize winner depicted an old-fashioned cash register, on which the number 6,000,000 appeared as the number that had been rung up. Written on the cash drawer were the words “Shoah Business.” And on the key to open the cash register was a tag, festooned with a Star of David, on which was written, “B’nai B’rith.”

Last year, the British newspaper The Guardian, reported on gatherings of former Labor Party members, and some Far Right figures who traffic in anti-Semitism demagoguery. One participant, a convenor of the meeting, spoke of “storybook gas chambers.” Another attendee stated that there were no deaths in Auschwitz.

Then there was one of the leaders of Germany’s Far Right AfD party, who described the period of Nazi rule as nothing more than “a speck of bird poop.”

The major social media platforms have been slow to move against the deniers, though they profess to be interested in doing so. Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey originally agreed to delete expressions of Holocaust denial, but then retreated. Said Dorsey to a Congressional Committee, in a twisted bit of having it both ways, “It’s (Holocaust denial) misleading information. But we don’t have a policy against that type of misleading information.”

Allowing the re-writing, or the erasure of history, in this unique case where tens of thousands of witness-victims are still with us, is unconscionable. In the United States, with its First Amendment constitutional protections, that major social media platforms wrestle with this issue is confounding. Holocaust denial is anti-Semitism. It is not only the ultimate rebuke to the victims, but to those who entered the camps and liberated them. It simply must not be countenanced.

A perfect storm of the passage of time, ignorance, hatred and denial has presented us with an imperative. The need for Holocaust education, remembrance and research has never been more apparent. Looking to the not-too-distant future, there will come a time when the last survivor and the last liberator will pass, and on that day, or the next, satellite news, TV, newspapers, news websites, and other media outlets will report the story.

And then what? Will the troubling numbers of the Claims Conference survey come back to haunt us? Will, ironically, “memory” be forgotten, or worse, will an illegitimate narrative of the Holocaust be advanced with few to push back?

We have the opportunity—now—to devote the resources and dedicated energy to setting in place several levels of Holocaust education, not only in schools, but for diplomats, law enforcement, the judiciary, elected officials and many more. Equal emphasis needs to be placed on related subjects: finally finishing, in a number of European countries, the many outstanding Holocaust era-assets issues, like property restitution and looted art, the establishment of museums using the latest technology, and to additional funding for documentaries in a way that brings previously untold stories and information to light.

This is a global challenge. The clock is ticking, and 77 years have passed since the end of the Holocaust. Are we up to the task?