

A Thesis That Hurts

By: Eli Rubenstein

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Over the past few weeks, much ink has been spilled over the University of Toronto master's thesis written by Jenny Peto, "The Victimhood of the Powerful: White Jews, Zionism and the Racism of Hegemonic Holocaust." The thesis attacks two student programs – the March of the Living and March of Remembrance and Hope – that I have been intimately involved with for a combined total of 30 years.

Both programs involve student visits to the sites of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe (including Auschwitz-Birkenau) as well as many former sites of Jewish life and culture.

The March of the Living, which also includes a week long trip to Israel, is mainly aimed at Jewish high school students. Its goals are both universal (to make them better human beings, to fight racism and injustice etc.) and particular (to fight anti-Semitism, to strengthen their Jewish identity and connection to Israel).

The March of Remembrance and Hope is aimed at university students, from diverse faiths, ethnicities, and origins. The program has attracted students from a variety of backgrounds including First Nation, Rwandan, Sudanese, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Baha'i, Atheist and others. Through the study of the Holocaust and other WWII genocides, the March of Remembrance and Hope teaches about the dangers of intolerance and strives to promote better relations among people of diverse cultures.

A key element of both programs is the testimony of Holocaust survivors who share the memory of their war time experiences with the young people in the very places where they unfolded.

The crimes Ms. Peto accuses both programs (and the Canadian Jewish community) of include: Jewish-Canadian responsibility for the genocide of Aboriginal peoples, the promotion of a sense of victimhood that marginalizes the experiences of non-white participants, covering up of the actions of "racist and imperialist Israel", and the further entrenchment of white privilege of Jews in the West.

Ms. Peto acknowledges not interviewing even a single person from the programs she so heavily criticizes, because "master's students rarely conduct "large-scale" interview efforts". In truth, she did not bother calling one student, one staff person, or even one survivor who took part in the March of the Living or March of Remembrance and Hope programs.

Had Ms. Peto done so, she might have come across the following statement made by a Muslim Canadian student after the March of Remembrance and Hope program:

"The trip forced us all to transcend our religious, political, and cultural boundaries in order to bear witness to the common humanity we all share..This common humanity is what should unite us when injustice is inflicted upon any of us, on the basis of these differences. "

Or this, from a Rwandan-Canadian survivor of the Rwandan genocide:
"‘Never Again’ is a mission that has become the passion of my life. We must teach children to value life, their own and others, and to pass on these values to future generations."

Ms. Peto's thesis suggests that identifying with Israel and the Jewish community, while supporting human rights, is impossible. Had Ms. Peto tried a little harder, she would have learned that contrary to this contention, and her belief that the March of the Living is a "racist" program, recently published impartial studies show the exceptionally positive long-term impact of the March of the Living on universal values. In the area of commitment to human rights (fighting genocide and combating general racism) an average increase of 89% was recorded since their participation in the March of the Living. 87% felt an increase in their feelings of tolerance for other groups after their experience on the program. These same students surveyed also felt a heightened commitment to their Jewish identity and Israel after the trip, illustrating that a commitment to Israel and to human rights are mutually compatible values.

Just a little more effort by Ms. Peto, would have shown her that Canadian students and alumni of the March established two organizations dedicated to combating racism and speaking out against genocide. These organizations, *SHOUT* (Students Helping Others Understand Tolerance), and *STAND* (Students Taking Action Now: Darfur) were created by March alumni, who felt compelled to act after their experience of visiting the sites of the former Nazi death camps hand in hand with survivors of the Holocaust.

Had Ms. Peto simply picked up the phone, or had her university insisted she properly research the topic, she could have found this information out quite easily. But neither did.

The Holocaust survivors – and I have spoken to a number of them - have been especially hurt by her charges. Many have lost their entire families during the war, yet still share their stories on the trip, despite the enormous personal cost. Every time they speak, the memories return, as they recall lost mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. But they do so, because they want to build a better world for all members of the human family. Ms Peto's response? Criticism of her is a smear effort by “right-wing, pro-Israel groups and individuals who are dragging her through the mud” and “an abuse of anti-Semitism to slander vocal critics of Israel.”

At the end of the day, this discussion is not about freedom of speech. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts. Ms. Peto clearly did not properly research her chosen topic; U of T showed a complete abandonment of academic standards.

Sadly, it is the Holocaust survivors who will bear the greatest burden for their mistakes.

Eli Rubenstein has been National Director of the March of the Living for over two decades, and was the founder of the Canadian March of Remembrance and Hope program and the co-founder of the international program of the same name.