

Four hopes for the future of Holocaust education

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Let me begin with a story from the Shoah.

Sylvia, 18, was from the town of Stojpnica, a shtetl in southern Poland, where, on the eve of World War II, two-thirds of its roughly 6,000 inhabitants were Jewish. During the war, she worked as a slave labourer in one of the many camps set up by the Nazis to persecute Europe's Jewish population. One day, she was too ill to work – in fact if she had reported to work, she would not have survived the day. The women in her barracks, realizing her plight and attempting to save her life, rolled her into a blanket and slid her under her bunk, where they hoped she would remain until they returned. In fact, the women did save her life—but not their own. When Sylvia finally awoke later that day, it was to a new group of unfamiliar faces, the next set of female slave labourers. Her friends never did return, as they were all executed that day.

The story is just a fragment of a much longer odyssey, but it reflects a pattern so often found in many Holocaust accounts – the abject cruelty of the Nazis, a brave and desperate act of kindness by people risking their own lives, the will and the determination to live, and the sheer random good luck that saved one young Jewish woman during the Holocaust.

Of the estimated 9.5 million Jews who were alive during the period the Holocaust – of whom six million were murdered – each one is a story filled with the same elements – Nazi cruelty, human kindness, the will to live, exceptionally good luck, along with a

host of other complicated twists and turns.

A noted Holocaust educator was once asked: what is the purpose of Holocaust education? Many answers could have been given, including such notable and laudable goals as keeping the memory of the victims alive, learning about the dangers of racism and anti-Semitism, creating a more just world today, etc.

But his answer was simply this: “to tell the story.”

This should be the central vehicle, the starting point of all Holocaust education. All other goals come later.

As has been said so aptly, “six million Jews were not murdered during the Holocaust. Rather, one by one by one, each was murdered, until we reach the number six million.”

Each one of the six million represented a story, albeit a story cut short, in their own right.

In about half a century from now, it is these individual stories, along with those of the survivors, that I hope are the focal point of Holocaust education. Indeed, the USC Shoah Foundation, the Azrieli Foundation, the March of the Living Digital Archives Project, Holocaust centres across Canada, and institutions in other parts of the world are deeply engaged in preserving the stories of Holocaust survivors – and their martyred families – while there is still time to do so.

My second hope for the future of Holocaust education has to do with Jewish identity. The recent findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews (2013) found that in answering the question of “What Does It



Mean To Be Jewish?, the highest number, 73 per cent, said that “remembering the Holocaust” was more important to them than any other Jewish value, including leading an ethical/moral life, working for justice/equality, studying, Israel, being part of a Jewish community, observing Jewish traditions, etc.

As important as the Holocaust is, Jewish life must not be sustained with the Shoah as its main pillar. Its ethics, values, traditions, music and culture – which have sustained us for over 3,000 years – need to be given the central place they deserve. Judaism cannot sustain itself based on a negative, based on something that was done to us – rather it should be celebrated for all the joy, meaning and goodness it brings to us, and to the world. Over-emphasis on the Holocaust,

is akin to making our slavery in Egypt the main focus of Jewish identity, rather than the Exodus, and eventual entry into the Promised Land, and the ethical lives we were commanded to lead.

My third hope is that the Holocaust not be taken out of context and used for far afield subject matters, to which it really has no connection. The Shoah is often trivialized, when used to “prove” points regarding everyday social issues – bullying in schools for example. Not every noble and just cause needs the imprimatur of the Holocaust to prove its validity.

The Shoah is also needlessly invoked during political debates, when certain leaders or candidates we don't like are equated with Adolph Hitler and/or the Nazis.

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Neither President Barack Obama, presidential candidate Donald Trump, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or the late prime minister Yitzchak Rabin should ever be compared to Hitler or the Nazis, regardless of whatever criticisms people on either end of the political spectrum may harbour. One need not drag Hitler and the Holocaust into every political debate.

Far worse, is when the Holocaust is exploited to demonize Israel. The most egregious example, is when those bent on attacking Israel claim that the Israelis are the new Nazis and Palestinians are the new Jews. Regardless of one's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, this charge is so outrageous, one scarcely knows how to even begin to respond.

One of my Israeli colleagues told me about a group of diverse overseas students who she took on a trip to Poland. On their last moment in Auschwitz-Birkenau, near the ruins of the crematoria, the students pulled out a banner, reading: "Free Palestine." Later they even argued there was no difference between the barbed wire fences in Auschwitz, and the security fence/barrier separating Israel from the territories.

Whatever one feels about the Israeli-Arab dispute, artificially superimposing the

Holocaust on the difficult terrain of the conflict in the Middle East is beyond the bounds of any reasonable discussion.

The Gaza Strip is not the Warsaw Ghetto or the Auschwitz death camp, Hamas leader Khaled Mashal is not Mordechai Anielewicz - and Israel is not Nazi Germany. Need I even have to write this?

The flip side of this is when some Israeli residents of the Gaza strip were forced out of their homes by Israel during the 2005 evacuation. They wore stars emblazoned with the German word "Jude", equating their plight with that of Holocaust victims who were forced to wear the yellow star – an entirely inappropriate use of the Holocaust, irrespective of what one thinks of the merits of Israel's voluntary evacuation of the Gaza Strip.

My fourth and final hope has to do with the evolution of human ideas. Science settles issues – we learn from it, and then progress even further. We don't slip back into the scientific mistakes of the past.

No one argues anymore that the sun evolves around the earth or that gravity does not exist.

People attach lofty goals to Holocaust education – fighting racism and intolerance, combating injustice, celebrating diversity etc. My hope is that by 2060, hu-

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manity will have sufficiently assimilated these self-evident and universal truths, so that the Holocaust would not be needed any more as the teaching vehicle.

I began with a story so let me conclude with one I once heard from former Canadian senator and humanitarian Lt.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire.

From what I remember, he was speaking about a Tutsi village in Rwanda that had been wiped out by the Hutus during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. Dallaire, who was heading up the UN mission in Rwanda at the time, had come too late to rescue the village – save for one little boy, who somehow managed to survive the massacre. Holding up the crying boy in his arms, Dallaire found himself suddenly wondering what he was

doing so many miles away from his home in Canada, in a different country and culture, in the middle of this heartless conflict.

All of a sudden he looked into the boy's eyes. In his frightened eyes, he saw the same eyes as his little children back home in Canada, wanting protection, love and care.

And then he realized why he was there. It was then he finally understood that "no human is more human than any other human."

Why do genocides occur? he went on to say. Because we haven't yet figured out the simple, yet critical truth, that "no human is more human than any other human."

Look across the globe today – millions of innocent lives are in jeopardy. But we fail to act, because somehow, we do not see their humanity in our own, somehow they are just a little less human, a little less deserving of life, than we are.

By 2060, let us hope and pray that the entire world recognizes its common kinship, its shared humanity – that the fragility and preciousness of every human life is recognized and valued above all else.

And let us hope that this is a truth learned, from which there is no going back. n

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