

The Enduring Relevance of Holocaust Education

Akiva Erezim, Program Specialist, Holocaust Education Liaison

Earlier this year, I attended a professional development featuring the story of Beba Epstein¹, a survivor of the Holocaust who led an extraordinary life.

At one point, she was trapped in the Vilna ghetto² as her family and many from her community meanwhile perished in Ponar. She would live through three concentration camps until her liberation by allied forces. Later on, moving to the United States thanks to the work of Los Angeles' Jewish Family Service, she would build a family, share her experiences, and live until two-days shy of her 90th birthday³.

One of my main takeaways from learning about her and her family, as well as their lives, is the notion: **"We should not be so foolish to believe it could not happen here"**.

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The relevance of Holocaust Education is made clear by so much of what is happening around us in today's world.

The rates of antisemitism are at record-breaking numbers (the highest ever in the US since they have been recorded)⁴.

Violent acts are commonplace toward Jews of every sort, and those who simply "appear Jewish"⁵, and especially the most visibly Jewish (i.e., religious/Hasidim, etc.) within the community⁶.

Racism, racial inequalities, and direct violence towards non-WASP⁷ communities, continues to affect our society, in education, but also every other sector of society⁸.



A Jewish Woman and her two young children await deportation from the Krakow ghetto. (1941-43)

(Source: USHMM Photograph 76093)

¹ <https://www.yivo.org/Beba-Epstein>

² <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/vilna>

³ [1] Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/antisemitic-incidents-hit-a-record-high-in-2021-whats-behind-the-rise-in-hate>

⁵ <https://www.adl.org/audit2021>

⁶ <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/public-safety/2022/08/29/arrests-made-in-connection-to-attacks-against-hasidic-jewish-men--nypd>

⁷ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)

⁸ <https://www.gao.gov/race-america>



A decrease in liberal values, those ideals that contribute to a free and open society, is becoming the norm⁹. Individuals and organizations across political, religious, and other domains, are silencing democratic dialogues, critical conversations, and discourse on controversial subject matters¹⁰.

All of this leaves one to ask: *what can be done?*

Holocaust Education addresses each of these issues and more.

The Aims of Holocaust Education

When conversing with any given educator, scholar, researcher, docent, or student of Holocaust Education, you will hear some common phrases, but also countless individual interpretations of the purpose, aims, and outcomes of Holocaust Education.

The Holocaust, and other genocides, touch each person in a unique way. As Arthur Miller, author of *The Crucible*¹¹ and *Focus*¹², wrote: "It [the Holocaust] entered my work through my bones..."¹³

In Washington, according to our state requirements (explained in the next section), we look to the Holocaust Center for Humanity¹⁴ to provide us with clear proposed outcomes for Holocaust instruction.

1.) Students and learners should learn about the Holocaust.

- a. The Holocaust was a genocide involving the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Six million Jews were murdered, as well as millions of non-Jews, including Roma/Sinti, people with disabilities, Slavic peoples (especially Poles and Russians), gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others for political and ideological reasons.

2.) The Holocaust, like other genocides, was fueled by prejudice, hatred, and intolerance.

3.) The Holocaust could not have occurred – or could not have occurred at this scale – if more people would have protested, resisted, or otherwise opposed Hitler and the Nazi Party.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crucible

¹² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_(novel))

¹³ *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, by Deborah Lipstadt, 2016, p.60

¹⁴ <https://holocaustcenterseattle.org/>

4.) Every person – young and old – has a voice. Every person has the power to speak out against hatred, prejudice and intolerance and, in so doing, can help make the world more inclusive for all.

Through these proposed outcomes, and the content of the instruction, educators facilitate the creation of democratic learning environments, where individuals may share their views, as well as ask (and interact with) hard and enduring questions about others and self.

By exploring the Holocaust and learning about other genocides, students connect to civics lessons, examining what rights and protections they currently have, and how these can change given the historical and socio-cultural situations they find themselves in.

Educators, students, and communities acquire a deeper understanding of the cost of deindividuation: how “ordinary men”¹⁵, not monsters, commit atrocities like that of the Holocaust and other genocides. Mindless obedience to authority, as Stanley Milgram explored in his research, can propel society into a state of industrialized destruction.¹⁶



August Landmesser, 1936, Hamburg, Germany. August Landmesser was a German worker at the Blohm and Voss shipyard in Hamburg. In this photograph, Landmesser is identified as the man refusing to perform the Nazi salute at the launching of a vessel.

¹⁵ <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/ordinary-men-christopher-r-browning>

¹⁶ <https://www.amazon.com/Obedience-Authority-Experimental-Perennial-Thought/dp/006176521X>

This opens the door for students to gain awareness of their own potential. To be an “upstander”, who will not just move in concert with the herd, but recognize despotism, otherizing ideologies and behaviors, as well as recognize the moments to speak up and disavow the unconscionable.

This realization within learners and educators, builds capacity to enter society as vocal participants, active and prepared to dispel antisemitism, racism, ableism, and other forms of hate and intolerance as they appear, erupt, or exist already within current systems.



Kiel, Germany, 1931. Rachel Posner wrote on the back of this photo: "Chanukah, 5692. 'Judea dies', thus says the banner. 'Judea will live forever', thus respond the lights"

Holocaust Education therefore is antiracist education. It is imbued with lessons concerning diversity, inclusion, and positionality, as well as efforts to actively protect those most vulnerable to prejudice, discrimination, and other permutations of hate.

This education has the enduring power to remind us of our capabilities toward creation or destruction.

State Requirements

As of 2022, there are approximately 20 US-states that have some form of mandate for Holocaust Education¹⁷. As of yet, Washington state is not one of them. However, it does have a law enshrining a “strong encourage[ment]”¹⁸ to provide this instruction to its students.

If educators do indeed choose to teach about the Holocaust and other genocides according to the law, they “must follow the best practices and guidelines”¹⁹ developed by the

designated “expert Washington non-profit organization”, in this case: the Holocaust Center for Humanity²⁰ located in downtown Seattle.

The law states that curriculum should include:

...events of the period in modern world history known as the Holocaust, the systemic, German state-sponsored persecution and murder of Jews and other innocent victims by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between the years 1933 and 1945. The instruction may also include other examples of genocide and crimes against humanity. The studying of this material is intended to: Examine the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and intolerance; prepare students to be responsible citizens in a pluralistic democracy; and

¹⁷ <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/where-holocaust-education-is-required-in-the-us>

¹⁸ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.115>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ <https://holocaustcenterseattle.org/best-practices>

be a reaffirmation of the commitment of free peoples never again to permit such occurrences.

Thanks to the hard work of Paul Regelbrugge, Director of Education, and many others at the Holocaust Center, a robust and high-quality set of required [Best Practices](#) has been developed and introduced to many of the districts, schools, and communities across the state. If you are interested in free professional development for your staff on implementation of Holocaust Education, please reach out to [Paul Regelbrugge](#).

Please, also be sure to reference the document on the [OSPI Holocaust Education webpage](#): "[Combatting Antisemitism in Education](#)" for additional information on prevention of antisemitism in your school community.