HATE IS THE ENEMY. BUT SO IS TIME.

IN FIVE YEARS, less than 0.01% of World War II veterans will be alive and the youngest Holocaust survivor will be 79. Who do we want to tell their stories to the 1.9 billion young people across the globe who need to hear them?
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Why Holocaust Analogies Are Dangerous

Careless Holocaust analogies may demonize, demean, and intimidate their targets. But there is a cost for all of us.

Nazis seem to be everywhere these days. I don’t mean self-proclaimed neo-Nazis. I’m talking about folks being labeled as Nazis, Hitler, Gestapo, Goering—take your pick—by their political opponents. American politicians from across the ideological spectrum, influential media figures, and ordinary people on social media casually use Holocaust terminology to bash anyone or any policy with which they disagree. The takedown is so common that it’s even earned its own term, reductio ad Hitlerum.
This oversimplified approach to complex history is dangerous. When conducted with integrity and rigor, the study of history raises more questions than answers. And as the most extensively documented crime the world has ever seen, the Holocaust offers an unmatched case study in how societies fall apart, in the immutability of human nature, in the dangers of unchecked state power. It is more than European or Jewish history. It is human history. Almost 40 years ago, the United States Congress chartered a Holocaust memorial on the National Mall for precisely this reason: The questions raised by the Holocaust transcend all divides.

Neither the political right nor left has a monopoly on exploiting the six million Jews, who were murdered in a state-sponsored, systematic campaign of genocide, to demonize or intimidate their political opponents.

Recently, some conservative media figures explicitly likened Parkland, Florida, students advocating for tightened gun control to Hitler Youth, operating in the service of a shadowy authoritarian conspiracy. This allegation included splicing images of these students onto historical film footage of Nazi rallies, reflecting the ease with which many Americans associate the sound of German shouting with a threat to personal liberties. A state representative in Minnesota joined the online bandwagon in these accusations.

Perhaps most popular this year have been accusations of "Nazism" and "fascism" against federal authorities for their treatment of children separated from their parents at the US border with Mexico. "Remember, other governments put kids in camps," is a typical rallying cry from some immigration advocates. Even a person as well versed in the tenuous balance between national security and compassion as the former head of the CIA wrote, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Comparing and categorizing are natural human impulses. We all use categories and analogies to navigate through life. But the nature of Nazi crimes demands that we study the evidence, alert ourselves to warning signs, wrestle with the world’s moral failure. When we reduce it to a flattened morality tale, we forfeit the chance to learn from its horrific specificity. We lose sight of the ordinary human choices that made genocide possible.

Careless Holocaust analogies may demonize, demean, and intimidate their targets. But there is a cost for all of us because they distract from the real issues challenging our society, because they shut down productive, thoughtful discourse. At a time when our country needs dialogue more than ever, it is especially dangerous to exploit the memory of the Holocaust as a rhetorical cudgel. We owe ourselves more than that. And we owe ourselves more than that.

Edna Friedberg, PhD, is a historian in the Museum’s William Levine Family Institute for Holocaust Education.

It is all too easy to forget that there are many people still alive for whom the Holocaust is not "history," but their life story and that of their families. These are not abstract tragedies on call to win an argument or an election. They carry the painful memories of the brutal murder of a cherished baby boy, the rape of a beloved sister, the parents arrested and never seen again.

As the Holocaust recedes in time, some Americans (and Europeans) are becoming increasingly casual and disrespectful to the mass murder of millions. More dangerous, today the Internet disseminates insensitive or hateful remarks with unprecedented ease and influence. Online discussions tend to encourage extreme opinions; they allow people to live in echo chambers of their own ideologies and extreme opinions; they allow people to live in echo chambers of their own ideologies and extreme opinions; they allow people to live in echo chambers of their own ideologies and extreme opinions. Weimar Germany—the period between the First World War and the Nazi rise to power—is an exemplar of the threats that emerge when the political center fails to hold, when social trust is allowed to erode and the fissures exploited.

Quality Holocaust education may have the potential to bridge some of the divides our nation is experiencing. It enables people to pause. To step away from the problems and debates of the present. To be challenged by this catastrophic event of the past. That is what good history education does. It doesn’t preach. It teaches. It engages at a personal level. It promotes self-reflection and critical thinking about the world and one’s own roles and responsibilities. That engagement is lost when we resort to grossly simplified Holocaust analogies. As it demeans the memory of the dead.

In 1953, the British novelist L. P. Hartley wrote, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Comparing and categorizing are natural human impulses. We all use categories and analogies to navigate through life. But the nature of Nazi crimes demands that we study the evidence, alert ourselves to warning signs, wrestle with the world’s moral failure. When we reduce it to a flattened morality tale, we forfeit the chance to learn from its horrific specificity. We lose sight of the ordinary human choices that made genocide possible.
“My husband was the last man the military selected. It was the last time I saw him. When they took him, I tried to control my daughters. They were calling out for their father to come back to them.”

— MarJan, mother of twins Mokurama and Mokuddus (age 7)

IN DECEMBER, THE MUSEUM ANNOUNCED its finding that compelling evidence suggests the Burmese military committed genocide against the Rohingya, a Muslim minority population of Burma.

We recognize the tragedy of alerting the world to a genocide that was foreseeable, where the Museum and many others warned of the risks. In 2015 alone, we issued two reports that outlined the potential for genocide in Burma. In the years since, we used our own reporting and that of other organizations, including the Public International Law and Policy Group, which undertook a documentation effort for the US Department of State, and the United Nations, to perform a legal analysis. We worked with a bipartisan group of legal experts to review the evidence of genocide and other crimes.

As an institution, the Museum did not come to this conclusion lightly. We decided to make this announcement because we have a moral obligation to serve as a voice of conscience on behalf of communities that have experienced genocide and other atrocity crimes. We felt that it was important to stand with the Rohingya, who have been persecuted for decades and for whom the Burmese authorities deny the very right to exist as a people.

Of course, the bar to determine genocide is quite high. A formal determination is usually only made by a court, but we felt that it was of critical importance for us as an institution—just as we did on ISIS a few years ago—to announce our findings.

We hope the Museum’s determination leads to a review—by the US government and the international community more broadly—of policies toward Burma. We hope that it prompts a consideration of the types of tools that have been enacted in other cases, yet have not been enacted in this one, including additional sanctions toward senior-level
officials, the advancement of accountability, and the creation of a mechanism whereby individuals can be held responsible. We hope that it leads to consideration of how to address some of the root causes of violence against the Rohingya and also provide protection. We are very concerned about the plight of the remaining Rohingya in northern Rakhine state, roughly a half million people, according to various estimates. They remain at high risk for genocide and mass atrocities. We’re getting reports that every week more than one hundred Rohingya are trying to leave the country. Access to these communities remains a problem. One of the key tools of perpetrators is to deny access for outside observers to those who have been victimized. That continues to be a prevailing challenge and something that the international community needs to resist. Governments, the United Nations, and others need to be exploring every possible leverage point, tool, and engagement that can help prevent future atrocities. What is most urgent today is protecting those Rohingya who continue to face threats, including physical threats, and ensuring that the Rohingya who have escaped to Bangladesh are not returned to a situation where they could face genocide. We also feel that it’s important to set a historical record. As we know from the Holocaust, those who perpetrate atrocities all too often try to deny any evidence that crimes have occurred. We have seen the Burmese authorities try to raze to the ground communities where the Rohingya lived, to build new communities on top, to essentially deny that crimes took place. We want to help counter that very deliberate effort to deny the commission of genocide and help those Rohingya who continue to be at risk of genocide today. It’s important to note that our concern extends not just to the Rohingya, but to other ethnic and religious minorities in the country who face a risk of crimes against humanity and already have experienced those horrific atrocities. There’s been one constant in the history of Burma, and that has been the perpetrator: the Burmese military. We hope our announcement will galvanize efforts to gather evidence, preserve it, analyze it, and at a future date hold perpetrators accountable. I myself am the grandchild of Holocaust survivors. Every member of my grandfather’s family was killed. For the last decade, I have followed the plight of the Rohingya and the warning signs were so abundantly stark. And as an institution, we work to try to ensure that the commitment to prevent genocide is not merely just empty rhetoric. That “never again” actually means something. We have an obligation as an institution to try to do for communities experiencing atrocities today what was not done during the Holocaust for the Jews. Our hope is that the international community seizes on this moment and future opportunities to take action to prevent atrocities, protect those Rohingya who remain vulnerable, protect other communities in Burma that are at risk of attack by the very same military units that have targeted the Rohingya, and that we press for accountability for those who have committed these horrific atrocities.

Naomi Kikoler is the deputy director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

“When things became quiet, I came back to the village to look for my son. He was shot in the road in front of our house. I tried to bury him but the military returned and we had to run away. I couldn’t give him a proper burial.”

—Abdul (age 57)
The Elie Wiesel Act

In January, the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act was signed into law after advancing through Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support.

The Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide worked for more than three years providing expertise to lawmakers seeking to achieve more effective prevention. The law mandates State Department foreign service officers assigned to at-risk countries be trained on recognizing patterns of escalating violence, spotting early warning signs, and methods of preventing and responding to atrocities. The law also requires annual reports on the status of training, assessments of places at risk, the state of efforts toward prevention, and recommendations on further strengthening US capacity to prevent and respond.

Elisha Wiesel, son of the Museum’s founding chairman, expressed his family’s gratitude. “My father loved this country and believed in it as a powerful moral force in the world. We are grateful that his life’s mission to call atrocities by name and tilt the balance toward action will be enshrined in this important piece of legislation.”

The Executive Branch is responsible for implementation of the law, and Congress will continue to play a key oversight role. The Museum will continue to provide guidance to both branches.

Read more about the bipartisan history of genocide prevention at ushmm.org/magazine/atrocity-prevention.

12 YEARS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

A PODCAST BY
THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Holocaust history reminds us that the unimaginable is possible and that individuals have far more power than they realize. Discover 12 Years That Shook the World, a podcast from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum examining the impact of the Holocaust, both then and now.

JOIN US IN EXPLORING THIS HISTORY, ONE STORY AT A TIME.
The first episodes include:

• What a Secret Archive Taught the World Learn about the legacy of the Ringelblum archive in the Warsaw ghetto.

• Genocide, 1948 How much has the Genocide Convention done to prevent and punish genocide?

• Thousands of False Identities Uncover the amazing story of the Mantello rescue.

SUBSCRIBE ON ITUNES or LISTEN ONLINE at ushmm.org/12years-podcast. #12YearsPodcast #USHMM

“We are grateful that his life’s mission... will be enshrined in this important piece of legislation.” — ELISHA WIESEL

Elie Wiesel 1928–2016
Memory is a word with great power....
Most importantly, memory has the power to change.

—response by a student at Silver Lake Intermediate School to the essay prompt “Why We Remember”

Back in Wisconsin, the teachers worked together to incorporate the new material into their lessons. Kristin Harper, who is a special education teacher in the Oconomowoc Area School District, helped Dean Spangler, a language arts teacher, use Salvaged Pages, a collection of diary entries written by teens during the Holocaust. He wanted to use the text, but was concerned some students with learning differences would find it too challenging. To keep the entire class on the same page, Harper recorded herself reading the diary entries with the appropriate pauses to support comprehension, which allowed all the students to use and discuss the same material.

Spangler says those primary sources resonated with his students. “The readings make possible a new level of understanding and compassion,” he said. “It’s going from numbers to a person and a connection with that person.”

The new approach has sparked rich discussions not only at Silver Lake Intermediate School but, according to parents, around dinner tables in Oconomowoc as well. Spangler asked, “How do we help our kids understand they need to be a part of the world and not afraid of it?” The team hopes that greater understanding eventually makes their students better citizens who think about how their decisions impact others and who ponder their role in shaping their community.

In Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, History Teacher
Tina Kurtz worries about a trend familiar to many Americans. “We’re living in a world where civil conversations with people who don’t agree are very difficult,” Kurtz said. “That can make you feel very helpless and hopeless—until you realize that schools hold the greatest potential to foster change.” While attending the Museum’s annual teacher training in 2017, Kurtz realized that Holocaust history could further that potential by helping young people learn to “argue with reason in a civil way.”

Motivated to create this change not only in her classroom but in her school, Silver Lake Intermediate, in 2018, Kurtz returned to the Arthur and Rochelle Belfer National Conferences for Educators with seven colleagues. Usually, one or two teachers from a single school will attend; Museum staff could not recall any other team as large attending in a single year.

The Oconomowoc contingent included teachers in mathematics, science, and other disciplines beyond those that traditionally teach the Holocaust. For example, Kurtz knew it would be crucial to have a special education teacher as part of the team attending Belfer. Like many schools today, Silver Lake Intermediate classes include a spectrum of student abilities, from nonverbal to gifted. It was important to include them all in this new dialogue.

Kurtz’s school already had a vehicle in place for prompting student conversations about respect and tolerance. During the “all-school read,” teachers across disciplines discuss books with their students to help them grapple with “how the actions of others impact human experience.” While at the conference, the group of teachers used their Museum gift shop stipends to purchase a new collection of books to allow them to use primary sources in their teaching.

Jill Jones, an eighth-grade history teacher at Silver Lake Intermediate School, reviews student reflections on the importance of remembering the Holocaust. MIDDLE SHAW
On November 16, 1938, Americans lined up at a soup kitchen in Chicago. National Archives and Records Administration

By DANIEL GREENE and FRANK NEWPORT

AMERICANS RARELY AGREE as overwhelmingly as they did in November 1938. Just two weeks after Nazi Germany coordinated a brutal nationwide attack against Jews within its own borders—an event known as “Kristallnacht”—Gallup asked Americans: “Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?” Nearly everyone who responded—94 percent—indicated that they disapproved.
Yet, even though nearly all Americans condemned the Nazi regime’s terror against Jews in November 1938, that very same week, 71 percent of Americans said “No” when Gallup asked: “Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?” Just 21 percent said “Yes.”

Why this yawning gap between disapproval of the Nazi regime’s persecutions and a willingness to aid refugees? Gallup polling on these topics during the Nazi era helps answer this question, providing important context for understanding Americans’ responses to the threat of Nazism.

Americans’ widespread disapproval of the Nazi regime’s treatment of Jews could not necessarily be assumed in 1938, given evidence that the United States was not immune from its own xenophobia and discrimination.

“Partly Their Own Fault”
Prejudice against Jews in the United States was evident in a number of ways in the 1930s. According to historian Leonard Dinnerstein, more than 100 new antisemitic organizations were founded in the United States between 1933 and 1941. One of the most influential, Father Charles Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice, spread Nazi propaganda and accused all Jews of being communists. Coughlin broadcast anti-Jewish ideas to millions of radio listeners, asking them to “pledge” with him to “restore America to the Americans.”

Further to the fringes, William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Legion of America (“Silver Shirts”) fashioned themselves after Nazi Storm Troopers (“Brown Shirts”). The German American Bund celebrated Nazism openly, established Hitler Youth-style summer camps in communities across the United States and hoped to see the dawn of fascism in America.

Even if the Silver Shirts and the Bund did not represent the mainstream, Gallup polls showed that many Americans held seemingly prejudicial ideas about Jews. A remarkable survey conducted in April 1938 found that more than half of Americans blamed Europe’s Jews for their own treatment at the hands of the Nazis. This poll showed that 54 percent of Americans agreed that “the persecution of Jews in Europe has been partly their own fault,” with 21 percent believing it was “entirely” their own fault. Hostility toward refugees was so ingrained that just two months after Kristallnacht, 67 percent of Americans opposed a bill in the US Congress intended to admit child refugees from Germany. The bill never made it to the floor of Congress for a vote.

Sentiments Against Refugees
Reluctance to admit refugees most likely resulted in part from the profound economic insecurity that typified the times. During the 1930s, nothing captured Americans’ attention more than the devastating Great Depression, and hunger and employment took precedence over concerns about the rise of fascism abroad and its victims.

The Great Depression was in its eighth year when the US economy bottomed out again in 1937, the year before Kristallnacht. Unemployment spiked to 20 percent in 1938, and nearly half of Americans believed the United States had not yet hit the low point of the Depression.

Gallup Poll Question
Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?

November 1938

94% Disapprove

6% Approve

Germans pass by a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed on Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938. National Archives and Records Administration.
Prevailing sentiment against admitting refugees reflected the United States’ consistent desire to remain isolated from world affairs. President Franklin Roosevelt, harkening back to George Washington’s 1796 farewell address, promised Americans that the nation would remain “unentangled.” That’s what Americans wanted to hear. The United States stayed out of conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War, just as Americans hoped it would.

RELUCTANCE TO GET INVOLVED

Hindsight tells us that preparing for and fighting in World War II lifted the country out of the Depression, but polling reveals much more pessimism about the prospects for the war before the United States entered it. Even in July 1941, as the majority of Americans believed US entrance into the war was inevitable, 77 percent thought the war would be followed by another economic depression.

Americans remained reluctant to go to war against Nazism partly because of the lessons they took away from intervening in World War I, when some 116,000 Americans were killed. Even in 1941, with all of Europe at war and the United States on the brink of entry, about four in 10 Americans still believed that intervention in World War I had been a mistake.

Visitors to the Museum’s Americans and the Holocaust exhibition explore documents in an interactive display about the challenges of immigrating to the United States in the years before World War II.

THE NOTION THAT “THOSE REFUGEES” WOULD take “our” jobs prevailed across much of America, even though courageous individuals like Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins tried to convince colleagues in the federal government that immigration would spark economic recovery rather than slow it down. Even as late as the spring of 1939, with war pressures building in Europe, Americans were more likely to say economic issues were the most important problem facing the United States than they were to mention war. This economic insecurity no doubt helped to intensify anti-immigrant sentiment that dated back to the 1920s. By the time Americans became aware of the refugee crisis facing Europe’s Jews, America’s “golden doors” for immigrants had been all but closed for nearly 15 years, ever since the US Congress passed the 1924 National Origins Quota Act. The immigration process was designed to be exclusionary and difficult. In that regard, it “worked.” Most of Europe’s Jews who were unable to find haven from Nazism—whether in the United States or elsewhere—did not survive the Holocaust. During the 12 years of Nazi rule, historians estimate that the United States admitted somewhere between 180,000 and 220,000 Jewish refugees—more than any other nation in the world, but far fewer than it could have under existing immigration laws.

GALLUP POLL QUESTION

Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?

November 1938

71% NO

21% YES

8% NO OPINION

Visitors to the Museum’s Americans and the Holocaust exhibition explore documents in an interactive display about the challenges of immigrating to the United States in the years before World War II.
BELIEVING THE UNIMAGINABLE

Even during World War II, as the American public started to realize that the rumors of mass murder in death camps were true, they struggled to grasp the vast scale and scope of the crime. In November 1944, well over five million Jews had been murdered by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Yet just under one-quarter of Americans who answered the poll could believe that more than a million people had been murdered by Germans in concentration camps. 96 percent believed that 100,000 or fewer had been killed. Only with the benefit of hindsight can we connect dots that many Americans could not have at the time. And yet, the stark contrast of these two November 1938 polls, revealing the troubling gap between disapproval of Nazism and willingness to admit refugees, continues to resonate. These findings not only shine a disturbing light on Americans’ responses to atrocities during the Holocaust but also are consistent with polls conducted since. A Gallup poll just after the war still showed solid support for the help of these polls, we are able to show that a majority of Americans in Europe have been touched up for the rest of the exhibition’s run (until October 2021).

This article was originally published in the Gallup blog “Polling Matters” on April 23, 2018. It was written by Daniel Greene, curator of the Americans and the Holocaust special exhibition and adjunct professor of history at Northwestern University, and Frank Newport, then Gallup’s editor-in-chief. •

POLLING INTERACTIONS

GEORGE GALLUP REVOLUTIONIZED AMERICAN POLITICS AND CULTURE in 1935, when he founded the American Institute of Public Opinion. Today, “Gallup” is synonymous with public opinion, but polling was in its infancy in Europe, favored sending Japanese Americans to relocation camps, and doubted the extent of the Nazi’s murder of Jews. We included these polls in AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST primarily to help visitors understand that a range of concerns and fears shaped Americans’ responses to Nazism. We also hoped that these polls would engage visitors of all ages and backgrounds—and it seems to be working. In the comment book at the end of the gallery, museumgoers have called the polls “fascinating,” “impactful,” and “very powerful.” During the exhibition’s first few months, the finish even wore off the edge of the panels that were turned most frequently! By the time this magazine reaches your mailbox, they will have been touched up for the rest of the exhibition’s run (until October 2021).

—DANIEL GREENE

GALLUP POLL QUESTION

Do you think the persecution of the Jews in Europe has been their own fault?

APRIL 1938

54% PARTLY

35% NOT AT ALL

11% ENTIRELY

A visitor turns a panel in the Americans and the Holocaust exhibition to reveal the answer to a public opinion poll.
Quick Take

FRANK GRUNWALD didn’t find his mother’s letter among his father’s belongings until 1967, long after they were imprisoned together at Auschwitz-Birkenau. While Frank and his father, Kurt, were selected for labor, his older brother, John, who walked with a limp, was not. Vilma Grunwald chose to accompany her son to the gas chamber so he would not die alone. The letter she sent to her husband shows the state of mind—and humanity—of someone who was about to be killed:

“You—my only and dearest one—do not blame yourself for what happened. It was our destiny.... Take care of the little golden boy and don’t spoil him too much with your love.”

After the war, Kurt and Frank immigrated to the United States. He donated the letter to the Museum so it would be preserved for all time and be in the public domain “to reassure people that this is not fiction.... This is a real note, written by a real person just hours before she was killed.” Last year, Frank visited the Museum to see the letter on display. “When I’m gone, this letter’s going to be here. And I want people to see the strength of a person that really had a tremendous amount of dignity and a fantastic character—someone filled with love rather than hatred and resentment.”

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Hear Frank Grunwald tell his story: ushmm.org/magazine/grunwald-letter
Artifacts Close Up

SCHOLARS MAKE NEW DISCOVERIES BY EXAMINING OBJECTS

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE COILED BROWN LEATHER BELT—SCRATCHED and worn—appears ordinary. But as a witness to history, this Holocaust artifact has an extraordinary and very personal story to tell. It is an example of “material culture”—a focus of study at the new David and Fela Shapell Family Collections, Conservation and Research Center.

“Material culture” is generally defined as the study of ordinary objects. But Robert M. Ehrenreich, director of the Museum’s National Academic Programs in the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, said there’s more to it. “It’s about everything that’s been manipulated by people and how those things have been manipulated,” he said. Signs of use tell stories about the past. When archaeologists and anthropologists use artifacts to draw conclusions about culture, about how people lived, they are studying material culture.

“When you get to the last hole of the belt, it’s terrifying. He kept adding holes as he got thinner and thinner. It’s an incredible record of his starvation and should not be forgotten.” —JANE KLINGER

Twenty-one-year-old Zelig Appel wore this belt when he was a prisoner in Buchenwald concentration camp in early 1945.

Gift of Nathan M. Appel

“In the future, these objects are going to be the only Holocaust witnesses left,” he said. “The things that happened to them are going to show us what life was like.”

In October 2018, Ehrenreich and Jane Klinger, chief conservator for the Museum, led an academic workshop that included a day at the Shapell Center. Fourteen experts including archaeologists, anthropologists, conservators, and artists in the fields of material culture and Holocaust studies joined up to discuss how the things humans
“To me, the brooch signified several different things—the connections and relations between people in extreme environments like the Holocaust, the desire to have beautiful objects, the resourcefulness of the creators, and economies of exchange. The story of the object was captivating, as was the potential to learn more through a close analysis.”

Donated to the Museum in 1990, the brooch was handmade with found materials by a young girl imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Two other children in the camp, along with their father, traded the young artist a piece of bread for the brooch to give as a birthday gift to their American mother. “The mother could have left, but stayed with her family,” Ehrenreich said, noting that letting the artifacts “speak” for themselves serves as a reminder to keep asking questions about what these artifacts can tell us about history. While it’s not known what happened to the young artist, the family who traded for her brooch survived and immigrated to the United States in 1947. “The brooch shows how people were trying to hold on to their humanity and keep their families together.”

leave behind tell life stories. They also debat-ed how material culture can help us better understand complex traumatic histories like the Holocaust.

Most importantly, Ehrenreich said, the workshop was about “trying to get people to think about what our collection contains and what we can learn from it.”

So, what can something like an old belt teach us about the Holocaust? Twenty-one-year-old Zelig Appel wore it when he was a prisoner in Buchenwald concentration camp during four cold months between January and April 1945. His frostbitten fingers struggled to hold up his ill-fitting pants. He traded two pieces of bread—two days’ worth of food—for a Soviet prisoner’s belt. Over the months, Appel slowly starved. As his waist narrowed, he used the sharpened end of a spoon to carve more holes into the belt.

“When you get to the last hole,” Klinger said, “it’s terrifying. He kept adding holes as he got thinner and thinner. It’s an incredible record of his starvation and should not be forgotten.” Appel was liberated in 1945 and emigrated to the United States in 1949. He later changed his name to Stanley. In 2012, his son donated the belt to the Museum. Today, the artifact is part of a vast collection of 22,000 objects at the Shapell Center, located in suburban Washington, DC.

Professor Caroline Sturdy Colls, director of the Centre of Archaeology at Staffordshire University and a participant in the seminar, paid particular attention to the objects that embodied people physically, like hair or even photographs that were folded and hidden in victims’ mouths. “Such items humanize the people who experienced the Holocaust and reveal subtle details connected to their experiences that would likely not be available from other sources,” said Sturdy Colls, whose work focuses on the Holocaust. “They also show how peoples’ bodies were exploited by the perpetrators and how they were a means of resistance by those who were persecuted.”

She says material culture can also be a symbol of hope and strength. During the seminar, a small floral brooch made of cloth and metal caught the attention of Koji Lau-Ozawa, another participant at the seminar and a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Stanford University. His work focuses on materials associated with Japanese American incarceration. “To me, the brooch signified several different things—the connections and relations between people in extreme environments like the Holocaust, the desire to have beautiful objects, the resourcefulness of the creators, and economies of exchange. The story of the object was captivating, as was the potential to learn more through a close analysis.”

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“ABOVE: Artifacts under examination at the Shapell Center during the Museum’s Material Culture and the Holocaust workshop in October 2018.
RIGHT, TOP: Floral brooch made from found materials by a young girl imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Gift of Martin Spett
RIGHT, BOTTOM: Workshop participants examine artifacts at the Shapell Center.”
An Unending Crisis

Raed Saleh is the director of the Syria Civil Defence (the White Helmets), who will be honored by the Museum in April as recipients of the 2019 Elie Wiesel Award.

What was your life like before the protests?
I sold electronics in a town called Jisr al-Shughur and for a short time managed a refugee camp for displaced people. Life before 2011 was like any other dictatorship—people looking for food and peace and avoiding any political thoughts because that would threaten their life.

Tell us about the Syria Civil Defence (the White Helmets).
We started the early first teams of the Syria Civil Defence because we felt we needed to do something for those people under the rubble; we needed to help those people who were without first responders and hospitals after facilities were destroyed by air strikes. When the regime lost control of those areas, these services went too. I’m so proud of the 4,000 volunteers still working to save people in need.

What is the greatest challenge facing the Syria Civil Defence today?
There are areas that are out of our reach. We can’t work there because of threats from those in power, such as the Syrian government. Another challenge is meeting the needs of four million displaced people in the areas where we work. We are serving them day and night.

Under what conditions do you think people will return home?
The people will never think about coming back if they will not be safe.

What do you see as the greatest obstacle to peace in Syria?
The main obstacle is accountability. If there’s no accountability, we will have no peace. Accountability means starting to identify and punish those who violated human rights law and committed crimes against humanity.

Based on the populations that you work with, what do you see as the immediate needs of the Syrian people?
Right now they need to be safe; they need to feel a hope for their country and for the future of their children; and they need to have their loved ones released from prison—those who were arrested for nothing or maybe just because they demonstrated or wrote against the government. In the long term, displaced people need to have the option to return. When people start to have their family members with them, it would mean the first step toward justice.
Rafif Jouejati

Rafif Jouejati is the co-founder and director of the Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria (FREE-Syria) and is a research partner and public speaker at Museum events.

What was your life like before the protests?
I was living in the United States as a management consultant. I had very little interaction with Syrians. I visited Syria every two years or so to see family. My family is originally from Damascus. My father was a career diplomat for Syria from independence until he died. He also was instrumental in the Syrian-Israeli peace process. My Syrian identity reemerged once I saw young kids getting shot for demanding freedom.

What led you to become involved as an advocate for civilians inside Syria?
I founded FREE-Syria in 2012 to support those nonviolent activists. FREE-Syria was founded to support those nonviolent activists. Over time, the activists began to disburse—many are dead or in detention, others fled to Turkey or Europe. At FREE-Syria, we are looking forward to a new, civil, secular, democratic state—a new Syria.

How do you see the future for Syrians?
The question is, will the international community gloss over the fact that so many atrocities were committed? Will these war criminals get away with it? Will future dictators look to Syria as an example of what dictators can get away with? What is the actual moral compass of the international community? These lofty concepts we’ve bandied about—do they only apply to Western countries? I think a lot of your readership, people in the American Jewish community, have been so supportive. You are not letting people forget what is happening in Syria. I am so deeply grateful for that.

Based on the populations that you work with, what do you see as the immediate needs of the Syrian people?
Survival. Treatment for trauma. Rape has been used as a weapon of war against both males and females. But such a conservative society is afraid to discuss issues of sexual violence or trauma. We are supporting some people within Syria providing psychosocial support, but those efforts are nascent and under the radar. Syrians need everything, and it is difficult to know where the priorities are: Do you help those who have become amputees? Do you take children off the street and try to find their parents? Do you try to end starvation and disease?

In the long term, there needs to be some sort of national conversation to ensure that no one forgets what has happened. We can’t allow the regime to whitewash the conflict and to build statues of the Assad family as if they aren’t built on blood and flesh.

How can they say to Assad, “Don’t use chemical weapons?” Please let him kill us using chemical weapons, but you can kill the Syrian people using whatever you want—but not chemical weapons!” Please let him kill us using chemical weapons, but you can kill the Syrian people using whatever you want—but not chemical weapons!”

How would you rate the international response today?
How can they say to Assad, “Don’t use chemical weapons, but you can kill the Syrian people using whatever you want—but not chemical weapons!” Please let him kill us using chemical weapons, but you can kill the Syrian people using whatever you want—but not chemical weapons!”

After displaced Syrians began entering opposition-held areas, you founded the civil society network Union of Revolutionary Bureaus. What is its mission?
We created our organization in 2013 and now we have 650 employees, including 430 women. We work on education and awareness raising; services for women, children, and teenagers; medical care; sporting opportunities; and media—which is the most important. We have an FM station called Radio Fresh. We are looking forward to a new, civil, secular, democratic state—a new Syria.

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Raed Fares, a leader of Syrian civil society, had mastered citizen journalism with his social media posts and grassroots radio Fresh. Before he could fully respond to our questions, he was killed by unknown assassins on November 25, 2018. He was no doubt targeted because of his activism, underscoring the unique threats faced by members of Syrian civil society.

What was your life like before the protests?
I was born in Kafranbel and grew up here. I studied medicine in Aleppo for three years, then left the university and worked a lot of jobs. Syria was a big prison. We could eat, sleep, and nothing else. We were not allowed to talk, not allowed to do anything, lest we be sent to the prison.

It wasn’t a state, it was just like a farm, which was owned by Assad and his family. We were the workers and we had to obey the orders. No one was allowed to think. You had to say yes and nothing else.

How would you rate the international response today?
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Bernard Aptaker’s **ENDURING LEGACY**

**BORN IN ZAKRZOWEK, POLAND, IN 1926.**
Bernard Aptaker and his brothers, Stanley and Moshe, spent their childhood in a warm, observant household. When the Nazi occupation shattered their lives in 1939, strong family bonds helped the family survive until they were split apart. "When there's love in the family you can overcome just about anything," he said.

In the fall of 1944, the family was ordered to report to the Kraków ghetto after being turned out by a sympathetic Polish farmer who initially hid them but feared being found out by authorities. Bernard’s younger brother, Moshe, and his mother were deported to a killing center. Bernard, Stanley, and their father were sent to a series of camps where they endured unimaginable barbarity. By mid-1944, they arrived at the Flossenbürg concentration camp as forced laborers.

In the spring of 1945, the Germans forced Bernard, his father, and brother on a death march to Dachau. They survived. Bernard was 19 when he was liberated by American forces on April 29, 1945.

Thanks to his language skills in Polish, German, Yiddish, and Russian, Bernard worked for two years with US intelligence units in Europe to capture German war criminals. He immigrated to New York in 1947 and got a job working in a delicatessen. After relocating to Houston in 1970, Bernard launched what became an exceptionally successful real estate business and devoted his life to philanthropy. After his passing in 2015, the Museum received an extraordinary gift of more than $34 million.

In **His Own Words**

**In his 1996 testimony** with the USC Shoah Foundation, which is available at the Museum, Bernard Aptaker started by saying, “I lived through this nightmare and survived, perhaps to tell this story.”

**On experiencing antisemitism**
As kids, we couldn’t understand it. We were no different than the other... My parents would just say, “this is how things are.”

**On the start of the war**
I realized something terrible and tragic was underway. Life changed in that we were frightened.... We lived moment to moment.

**On going into hiding**
At night we slept in barns and attics.... I felt great confusion and fear.... many nights, I couldn’t fall asleep because I wondered what it would be like when you get shot in the head....

**On being discovered**
We were hiding out in hay.... One afternoon the farmer came running and he said, “They’re coming for you.” I hid, but suddenly heard screams. It was Moshe, who was nine.... I saw him in the middle of the field with at least a dozen farmers coming at him with pitchforks. He was frightened and crying. I walked toward him.... We were marched into the city. I was barely 15 years old.

**On his mother, Sarah**
The last time I saw my mother was in Kraśnik when we turned ourselves in.... Later, in Flossenbürg, we heard that my mother and Moshe had been shipped to [a killing center] and gassed.... No matter how old you get, it just doesn’t leave you — what you see in your mother had to endure in order to just die.

A 1945 snapshot of Bernard Aptaker from his recovered photo album (see page 34). "I lived through this nightmare and survived, perhaps to tell this story." —BERNARD APTAKER

**On surviving Flossenbürg camp**
If [my father] had a piece of bread, he broke it into three pieces, for me, for him, and my brother, Stanley. This is how we survived. [In April 1945] there was about 30,000 people in a death march from Flossenbürg to Dachau. It was the ultimate nightmare because you were starved, you were cold, you were hot, you were sick, and they shot you as soon as you sat down to fix your shoelace or anything.

**On liberation**
We didn’t know, but we were five days from being liberated.... There was much disarray at the camp. My father, Stanley, and I took off into the woods. Later, the three of us were picked up by American military units.... We would all have been doomed to a terrible end without the Americans.

**On survival**
To me, religion means tolerance. Everyone can choose the way they want to climb the mountain to their god.... We don’t have to accept others’ views, but if we don’t tolerate one another, we have nothing.

Thanks to his language skills in Polish, German, Yiddish, and Russian, Bernard worked for two years with US intelligence units in Europe to capture German war criminals. He immigrated to New York in 1947 and got a job working in a delicatessen. After relocating to Houston in 1970, Bernard launched what became an exceptionally successful real estate business and devoted his life to philanthropy. After his passing in 2015, the Museum received an extraordinary gift of more than $34 million from survivors and their families.
In 2007, Museum Curator Kyra Schuster received a large envelope from Alaska. Inside was an old photo album full of snapshots from the 1950s. The album also held something else: liberation photographs from Dachau. It also contained immigration documents and telegrams with a name on them—Berek Aptajker—along with a note saying the album had been found in a storage unit purchased by someone unrelated to the album. That conscientious person sent it to the Museum.

Schuster looked up Berek Aptajker online and reached out to the man, by then called Bernard Aptaker, in Houston. He replied, surprised to hear that the long-lost photo album had ended up in her hands. He had lived in Anchorage for a short time and the album must have been lost or left behind. He thanked Schuster and gave her permission to copy the Holocaust-related images for the Museum’s photo reference collection before she returned the album to him. Schuster had no idea that one day Aptaker would become one of the Museum’s biggest donors.

The Museum has named one of the collections wings of the David and Fela Shapell Family Collections, Conservation and Research Center in Aptaker’s honor.

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The Museum has named one of the collections wings of the David and Fela Shapell Family Collections, Conservation and Research Center in Aptaker’s honor.

Every object in the Museum’s collection tells the story of an individual. It serves as evidence of the truth. Aptaker’s oral testimony tells the story of life before and during the Holocaust. Digital images from his long-lost photo album tell the story of his life after liberation from Dachau. These items are permanently housed at the new David and Fela Shapell Family Collections, Conservation and Research Center.

“The collection is the physical bridge between the individuals, their stories, and the events of the Holocaust and our world today,” explained Travis Roxlau, director of collections services for the Museum’s National Institute for Holocaust Documentation.

In addition to collections that find their way to the Museum through the efforts of the general public, our professional team aggressively collects in an effort that spans 50 countries on six continents. The depth and breadth of our existing collection belies the fact that the majority of Holocaust materials are likely still out there, stored in attics, basements, and lost photo albums. This is why the Museum has accelerated its race to collect evidence while there is still time.

“When we no longer have our eyewitnesses, these items will be the remaining firsthand link to that period of time,” said Roxlau. The Museum’s oral histories, photographs, and other collections give the institution the ability to tell peoples’ stories, while also serving scholars who work to advance knowledge about the Holocaust (see page 24).

In addition to acquiring and preserving artifacts, an important goal of the Shapell Center is to make the collections accessible both online and onsite. Since its dedication in 2017, the Shapell Center has hosted a number of scholarly meetings, seminars, and workshops, including welcoming individuals from more than 40 museums, archives, and affiliated professional organizations.

“It’s a dynamic place,” Roxlau said. “We’ve always said we were going to build a state-of-the-art facility. Now we have, and it’s being recognized as the international gold standard.”

LEFT: A page of postwar snapshots from Bernard Aptaker’s photo album. ABOVE: Museum Historian Rebecca Erbelding discusses artifacts with participants during a multi-disciplinary research workshop at the Shapell Center.

View the Museum’s collections online, ushmm.org/collections.

ONLINE
I'm not saying it went away. I'm not saying it disappeared. But serious people don't give it the time of day. You see it, but not with the same vehemence as before.

What we're seeing more of today is what I call soft-core denial. For example, “Do we have to hear about the Holocaust again?” “Why are you always going on about the Holocaust?” Or, “Why do we have to hear about the Holocaust if we don't hear about other tragedies?” I'm not a specialist in what's happening to the Rohingya. I'm not a specialist in the Armenian genocide. I think we should hear more about other tragedies. But they're saying that there's so much attention to the Holocaust it pushes out other tragedies. I argue it's exactly the opposite. Rather than displace other events, the Holocaust teaches us what happens when people stand idly by.

Is there a relationship today between Holocaust denial and antisemitism?

LIPTSTADT: Holocaust denial is a form of antisemitism. When you hear someone say, “Why are Jews always complaining?” Or, “These Jews want special privilege.” Or, “They're claiming what happened to them is worse.” Those statements have their roots in antisemitism.

A denier's answer to the question, “Why do they insist on so much attention to the Holocaust?” generally will be, “Well, what did the Jews get out of the Holocaust?” And people will say, “Well, they got the state of Israel,” which actually historically is not correct. There would have been something there without a Holocaust. You'll also hear that Jews “got reparations,” which is a fancy word for money. In other words, Jews made up this story or made it sound worse than it is to benefit themselves. They're getting themselves a state, and money. If you want to find the defining characteristics of antisemitism, you look for certain typical stereotypes that are associated with a form of prejudice that is being promulgated, and with Jews it's nefarious use of power and money.

Can ordinary people play a role in countering soft-core denial?

LIPTSTADT: Yes, and you have to make a pest of yourself. You have to challenge those kinds of views. If someone says, “I've heard enough about the Holocaust,” and you're an American, ask “Would you say that about slavery?” And I would hope not. We haven't heard enough about slavery in this country. The only way to prevent genocide from reoccurring—and we haven't done a very good job of it in the late 20th and early 21st century—is by talking about it. Sure it's uncomfortable, sure it's difficult, but it has to be spoken about.

DEBORAH LIPTSTADT

Since you won your case against Holocaust denier David Irving in 2000, has the character of Holocaust denial changed?

LIPTSTADT: I define Holocaust denial in two broad categories: soft-core and hard-core. What we saw in the courtroom was hard-core denial. Hard-core deniers say there were no camps, there were no gas chambers. And we won such an overwhelming victory that that kind of denial was pretty strongly discredited.

I think the Museum's role is what it does best: To educate, to educate, to educate.

—DEBORAH LIPTSTADT

Is anti-communism no longer a hallmark of antisemitism?

LIPTSTADT: Yes and no. If you look at someone like Victor Orban, prime minister of Hungary, his attack on George Soros is clearly antisemitic. Everyone in Hungary knows Soros is a Jew, and Orban calls him out as a lefty, says he's trying to foment revolution. So it's not communism, per se, as it used to be, but it's leftist.

How can the Museum counter these trends?

LIPTSTADT: I think the Museum's role is what it does best: To educate, to educate, to educate. The Museum is not a defense organization. Every museum is a place of education. And I think that is what the Museum should be doing, and is doing.
HATE IS THE ENEMY. BUT SO IS TIME.

IN FIVE YEARS, less than 0.01% of World War II veterans will be alive and the youngest Holocaust survivor will be 79. Who do we want to tell their stories to the 1.9 billion young people across the globe who need to hear them?

Why Holocaust Analogies Are Dangerous

The Holocaust has become verbal shorthand for good vs. evil.

But calling our opponents Nazis degrades us all.