

## Words from the Director



Mina Cohn

Faced with the Covid-19 Pandemic and the first lockdown in Ontario last March, the Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES) was forced to cancel live activities and search for new ways to deliver meaningful Holocaust Education Month (HEM) programs through which we honour the lessons and legacy of the Holocaust each November.

By July, three programs were in the early stages of development: *Zikaron BaSalon*, a new concept for our Ottawa audience that would be featured on November 4th; a film telling the CHES story and celebrating our many accomplishments since our establishment five years ago would be premiered on November 8th; and the artifacts of the Pop Up Museum, which were submitted two years ago, would be uploaded to an online platform (<https://carleton.ca/hempopup/virtual-museum/>) and unveiled in a webinar on November 15th.

With the understanding that Zoom, a new medium for CHES, would become the vehicle to reach our audience, the follow-

ing months found CHES committee members busy creating the new initiatives. A sub-committee researched and suggested potential topics for our film, which was entitled *Voices for the Past, the Present, and the Future*. It was time-consuming but rewarding to manage the contract with film maker **Yolanda Papini-Pollock**, develop the script, review to-date, nine versions (called “cuts” in movie terminology) of the film, and provide detailed comments. Important additions to the November 8th program were **Professor Irwin Cotler** and **Dr. Avinoam Patt**, the voices of contemporary expert opinions on Holocaust education in the 21st century,

The launch of the newly named Virtual Holocaust Museum on November 15th was a collaboration between CHES and the Zelikovitz Centre. To augment the 2018 artifacts, a call went out to survivors and members of their families for additional submissions. One additional artifact rounded out the collection which now has 48 artifact posts in nine categories.

For years, researchers were not convinced that artifacts donated by survivors could add anything to Holocaust research, but this attitude gradually changed over time. Therefore, it was fitting to invite Sarah Shor, the manager of artifacts at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and **Dr. Robert Ehrenreich**, director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) national academic program, to participate in the webinar. Three local participants in the 2018 Pop Up Museum were invited to share the stories behind the artifacts they submitted.

### “Relations, Resistance, Resilience”

On November 18th, the Montreal Holocaust Museum and the Montreal Jewish Public Library were joined by the Zelikovitz Centre and CHES for a collaborative workshop featuring rare books and objects from their collections. These historic artifacts chronicle over 350 years of the complex connections and disconnec-

tions between the Jewish and Christian communities of Europe. The presentation, “Relations, Resistance, Resilience”, focused on rare books and Holocaust-era artifacts from three centuries of Christian-Jewish relations.” (See “Books that Speak to My Grandfather’s Resilience, Page 20). (<https://museeholocauste.ca/en/news-and-events/relations-resistance-resilience/>).

### Parliamentary Petition

With the increase in antisemitic incidents in Canada and around the world, **Dr. Art Leader**, a CHES member, worked with CHES members and author and lawyer **Maureen McTeer** to create a petition urging Canada’s Parliament to address the pressing challenges presented by the growing antisemitism, Holocaust deniers, and those who distort the true nature of the Holocaust. **Anita Vandenbeld, MP** for Ottawa West-Nepean, is the petition’s sponsor in Parliament.

### Developing Partnerships

During the late summer and fall, we were approached by several organizations seeking collaboration with CHES. These include the Wiesenthal Centre in Toronto, The Centre for Genocide Education in Montreal, Canadian Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants Toronto, and the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Meetings were conducted in Covid-19 style via Zoom. We believe that working together with likeminded organizations across the country will only strengthen our cause and are excited about the potential for developing projects together.

I want to thank all who joined us for another successful and meaningful month of events and for signing the parliamentary petition. Special thanks go to **Yolanda Papini-Pollock** for her help in producing CHES film *Voices for the Past, The Present and Future*.

Wishing you all an easy and safe winter.

## Presenting Holocaust Education Month During a Pandemic: **An Overview of CHES Initiatives**

Sheila Hurtig Robertson



Sheila Hurtig Robertson, Photography by Valerie Keeler, Valberg Imaging

Since 2015, CHES has been bringing year-round Holocaust education programs to Ottawa and environs with Holocaust Education Month (HEM) being the focal point throughout November.

Forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to cancel live activities, the volunteers who comprise CHES were determined to deliver a meaningful HEM that honours the lessons and legacy of the Holocaust. The result was three imaginative and sensitive Zoom events: the social initiative Zikaron BaSalon; an evening with two celebrated speakers and the premiere of a celebratory film commissioned by CHES; and a virtual Pop Up Museum.

### November 4th, 1:00 p.m. – Zikaron BaSalon

Zikaron BaSalon, or “Remembrance in Your Living Room” originated in Israel in 2011 and brings together a community of people who choose to commemorate the Holocaust in an intimate and mean-

ingful way. Zikaron BaSalon events typically occur on the eve of Yom HaShoah Memorial Day on 27th Nisan in tens of thousands of homes and communities in Israel and abroad.

Adhering to the traditional Zikaron BaSalon format of three components, the CHES event focussed on “Testimony, Expression, and Discussion”.

“Testimony” featured the remembrances of survivor Kati Morrison; participants in “Expression” expressed their feelings about the Holocaust through a creative lens; and “Discussion” included a facilitated segment focusing on the memory and significance of the Holocaust.

The event concluded with a discussion that built on Kati’s testimony and included lessons that can be learned from survivors about hope, faith, and strength during the Holocaust and in the troubled times we are currently experiencing.

This event was developed in cooperation with AJA 50+ (Active Jewish Adults) and was only open to their members.

### Zikaron BaSalon A Powerful Experience

Annette Wildgoose

Sheila Osterer, executive director of AJA, and CHES member Minda Chaikin welcomed over 40 participants and introduced the evening’s program and presenters.

In her gripping presentation entitled “Nothing Will Break Us: Hope in Difficult Times”, Kati Morrison shared her testimony which demonstrates how the human spirit and the belief in human kindness was sorely tested during the Holocaust. She spoke of her family’s traumas in Hungary during

the Holocaust and the essential role her grandmother played in saving Kati and her sister. After her parents were both taken away, her mother to Dachau concentration camp and her father to a work battalion, she and her sister were in the care of her maternal grandmother, the first female ophthalmologist in Hungary, an accomplishment that would save their lives. Forced from their home, they found themselves sharing a two-bedroom apartment with 80 others in a building that housed several hundred Jews. In January 1945, members of the Arrow Cross, a far-right fascist organization, showed up and ordered the residents to line up.

“One Arrow Cross man motioned to my grandmother not to join the line so instead we hid under the staircase. Unfortunately, my aunt, who was screaming for them not to take the children, ended up in the line and she, and all the others, were taken to the banks of the Danube River and shot. We were the only survivors of that action. Why? Because that Arrow Cross man had been my grandmother’s patient. Her profession saved our lives.”

The Holocaust affected most survivors for many years, and it is only in the past 15 years that Kati has been able to share her experiences with others. The survivor strategy of denial and luck was a coping mechanism for many Holocaust survivors. However, Kati suggested that new coping strategies are needed today. “We all must be alert, not be silent and be ready to stand up for human rights for everyone,” she explained.

Guitarist Joel Yan, a member of the Ottawa Simcha Band, performed three musical selections that reflected the

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solemnity of Zikaron BaSalon; Eli, Eli, words by Chana Senesh, music by David Zahavi; Ani Maamin-, Z'l, words from Maimonides' 12th principle of Faith, music by Rabbi David Fastag; and The Partisan Song, words by Hirsch Glick, music by Dmitry Pokrass.

CHES member Hilda Bleyer read a poem by Primo Levi entitled "Shema", a favourite of her late husband, Stephen Bleyer, who had survived Auschwitz as a young boy and greatly admired Primo Levi.

## Why Primo Levi?



Hilda Bleyer

I was asked to read a poem for Zikaron BaSalon, an event which was a first for CHES. I knew immediately I wanted to share the poem known as "Shemà" or If This Is a Man, written by my late husband's favourite author of Holocaust literature, Primo Levi.

When Levi describes the process of writing "If This Is a Man", the 178-page autobiographical work that contains the eponymous poem, he speaks of being pushed by the urgency of the memories. "In a few months of work, it was done... I had written the 17 chapters almost precisely backwards... Then I wrote the Preface and in the end I added as Epigraph a poem that was dancing in my head already in Auschwitz, and that I wrote a few days after my return".

Levi the poet forcefully commands you to listen, Shemà. Immediately, the reader is drawn in, involved, implicated, when

he calls out, "You who live safe in your warm houses" and then again shouts to you, beckons, and commands, and implores finally, with threats of dire consequences, all the while fulfilling the vow he took in camp to speak so all will hear and never forget.

In the December 2015 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, William Deresiewicz reminds us that Levi wrote that his one conscious purpose in life has been to make his "voice heard by the German people, to 'talk back' to the SS... and their heirs". In 1961, fourteen years after the book's initial publication, it was translated into German.

**Stephen Bleyer** was a child survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau. A tall strong 13-year-old, Steve (Istvan) was directed by his mother to stand with the men upon their arrival in the camps from Hungary. It was the last time he saw her. It took time and his outrage at the denial of the Holocaust to break the heavy burden of silence and allow him to act on his perceived responsibility as a survivor.

Stephen joined others speaking to groups at the Montreal Holocaust Museum and in schools and colleges. In a June 1991 address that he named "Remembering the Holocaust in Museums and Education", he said, "I would like to dedicate this short talk to the memory of my favourite author of Holocaust literature: Primo Levi".

On January 26, 1995, in a piece written for the Canadian Jewish News, he describes himself at liberation 50 years earlier in the makeshift infirmary which "was in effect a waiting room for the dying skeletons" who knew their "lives were hanging on very thin threads". Primo Levi's poem was published alongside. Stephen was then President of the Montreal Holocaust Museum continuing the work he felt was important.

Primo Levi, author, poet, chemist, was born in Turin, Italy in 1919 in a Jewish community, but growing up, he knew little about the practice of Judaism. He was a gifted student and when he graduated from university with honors in Chemistry, his diploma was stamped OF JEWISH RACE. It was an individual

professor who had enabled him to complete his work in spite of the anti-Jewish environment. In Fascist Italy, he had to get a false identity and forged papers in order to find work. After his father died, his sister and mother went into hiding and Levi joined friends as ill-equipped partisans in the hills north of Turin. They were soon arrested and, when the Germans took over, "Levi was sent to Auschwitz (Buna-Monowitz, otherwise known as Auschwitz III, was the largest slave labour camp in the Auschwitz complex); he was 24."

Stephen and Levi were in that huge complex of diabolical camps for some of the same period and were liberated at the same time. Later they ended up in the same city for a short time, Turin. For Levi, it was a return home after a very long journey that is the topic of another autobiographical book, *The Truce or The Reawakening*.

Stephen spent months in the Russian camp hospital before being able to travel back to Hungary to see what family he could find. He found his older brother, and they eventually became refugees in Italy as they waited for a permanent home. Meanwhile, Stephen started his architectural studies in Turin.

Neither Primo Levi nor Stephen Bleyer were recognizable to the first person seeing them upon their return; both write of that moment. Stephen has more to say about getting to see what he looked like at liberation. "I recognized myself only because of the number"; this was his reaction to finding a photograph of himself by chance in the book, "Auschwitz: a History in Photographs". It is the name of the submission for the Pop Up Museum on the CHES website.

Levi's experience as a chemist allowed him to get a "job" in a laboratory in the synthetic rubber factory next to the camp. This meant a little more food, a change of clothing, and some heat in his workplace. He acknowledged what he called his "good fortune"; workers in the camps generally were "disposable" but when Levi arrived, they were in short supply as was the gas and ammunition used for killing.

From the very beginning of his camp experience, Levi admits he was engaged in observing, recording mentally to be ready to tell the world. With directness and simplicity, he tells what he sees, how he survives. He exchanged bread for German lessons from the beginning, explaining how horrible it was for those prisoners who could not even understand the shouted commands with sometimes terrifying results. Primo Levi said, as did Stephen, it was fortunate to arrive reasonably healthy and knowing some German.

Levi describes being in the camp infirmary at the time of Liberation, “fortunate” to get scarlet fever, not too serious an illness, at the right time. Stephen too felt that his infected feet might prove lucky. They both were too weak and sick to join the forced march and were left behind.

In Levi’s methodical report of the last 10 days, he describes how three men, a barely mobile Levi included, work together to care for others suffering from typhus and diphtheria. They hunt for frozen potatoes and clean ice to melt, and “steal” a stove that they manage to repair. As Paul Bailey points out in the introduction to Levi’s “If This Is a Man”, the book ends on a hopeful note. Work is no longer the humiliating drudgery imposed by the SS, instead it is finding and sharing food and healing the helpless. The tired, cold, and hungry, wrapped in the blankets and rags abandoned by those who left on the forced march, or who had died, were now creeping out of the shadows, and slowly becoming men again.

Stephen and his favourite Holocaust author never met. But Stephen was fortunate to have the support of Levi’s words and ideas so deeply infused with humanity as he took up his own efforts to describe the indescribable, to consider his own experience, and to make his contribution. No meeting, but perhaps a meeting of the minds.

## Shema Poem by Primo Levi

You who live secure  
In your warm houses  
Who return at evening to find  
Hot food and friendly faces:  
Consider whether this is a man,  
Who labours in the mud  
Who knows no peace  
Who fights for a crust of bread  
Who dies at a yes or a no.  
Consider whether this is a woman,  
Without hair or name  
With no more strength to remember  
Eyes empty and womb cold  
As a frog in winter.  
Consider that this has been:  
I commend these words to you.  
Engrave them on your hearts  
When you are in your house, when you  
walk on your way,  
When you go to bed, when you rise.  
Repeat them to your children.  
Or may your house crumble,  
Disease render you powerless,  
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

## November 8th, 7:00 p.m. – Voices for the Past, the Present, and the Future

CHES was established on the eve of Kristallnacht 2015, and chose November 8, 2020 to reflect on its many accomplishments.

A new film, *Voices for the Past, the Present, and the Future*, celebrates the fifth anniversary of CHES and covers its inception, achievements, programs, out-



reach to schools and educators, symposiums for descendants of survivors, and special events.

The film presentation was followed by an animated and informative discussion featuring **The Honorable Irwin Cotler and Dr. Avinoam Patt**, who are experts in the importance of Holocaust education today.

**Irwin Cotler** is the Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, an Emeritus Professor of Law at McGill University, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, and an international human rights lawyer. He spoke about the importance of Holocaust education in today’s world and CHES’ role in this vital work.

**Dr. Avinoam Patt** is a professor of Modern Jewish History at the University of Hartford and Assistant Director of the university’s Maurice Greenberg Center of Judaic Studies. He facilitated a timely webinar entitled “Obligation and Challenges of Teaching the Holocaust in the 21st Century”, based on his new book, *Understanding and Teaching the Holocaust*, which he and Laura Hilton edited.

## Highlights of the Speakers’ Remarks

Marion Silver

**Irwin Cotler**, just appointed Canada’s first special envoy for Holocaust remembrance and combating anti-Semitism (November 25, 2020), spoke about the importance of speaking out against hatred and intolerance. He has called “anti-semitism an assault on our common humanity.” He stated that Kristallnacht is a sanitised term for the pogrom that was the precursor to the Holocaust. This night, all over Germany and Austria saw the pillaging of Jewish homes, the burning of synagogues, and the rounding up and killing of people who were Jews. The Nuremberg laws which were passed in 1936 served to delegitimize and disenfranchise the Jewish community. Nazism was a regime anchored in antisemitism.

What are the lessons? The imperative of remembrance, *zachor*: Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were targeted

victims. Unto each person there is a name, each person is a universe.

The danger of silence: This results in complicity with evil itself.

State-sanctioned culture of hate, state-sanctioned incitement of hate. The Holocaust did not begin with the horrors of the camps, but with words, Raoul Wallenberg, as a righteous bystander, demonstrated how one person can confront hatred and transform history.

Antisemitism did not die in Auschwitz but remains the canary in the coal mines of humanity. Never again must we be indifferent to racism and hate, antisemitism, mass atrocity, but we will speak out against all forms of hatred. This day is an act of remembrance.

Where antisemitism is laundered by the far left, progressivism, we must unmask it and expose it for what it is.

Jews have a sacred obligation to remember. The study of genocide allows for memory of a civilization.

The Holocaust is a paradigm for radical evil; antisemitism is a paradigm for radical hate, but indifference or inaction results in complicity with the perpetrator and not the victim.

**Dr. Avinoam Patt** shared that in the United States young people, millennials, and Generation Z have demonstrated a shocking lack of knowledge and awareness of the Holocaust.

Many could not name a single concentration camp or had ever heard of Auschwitz. Moreover, there was no correlation between states that taught about the Holocaust and students knowing more. In general, students showed an overall lack of knowledge of other historical events as well.

The danger is that there is so much Holocaust denial on social media with rampant misinformation available on all social media platforms.

Teaching the Holocaust demands a great deal of knowledge. My book (Understanding and Teaching the Holocaust) offers strategies and key topics of the Holocaust and suggestions to teach multiple facets of the Holocaust as well as integrate aspects of the Holocaust with other areas of the curriculum.

COVID-19 has had an impact on the collective memory of the Shoah. The observance of memorial events has changed due to COVID-19 and Zikaron BaSalon takes place more and more. The war against COVID-19 resembles the fight against antisemitism: both are fought against an invisible enemy.

Children of survivors can relate the experiences of their parents, but their stories are mediated by memory and do not adequately reveal the depth of the trauma

Holocaust education can be used to teach about antisemitism, but we must confront directly, all forms of anti-Semitism.

## **November 15th, 1:00 p.m. – Virtual Holocaust Museum: The Importance of Artifacts to the Research of the Holocaust**

### **Background**

*On November 4th, 2018, Temple Israel was the setting for a Pop Up Museum featuring Holocaust artifacts submitted by survivors and their families. The museum, which was the brainchild of Rabbi Rob Morais, featured 47 documents, letters, books, movies, short videos, a Tora Scroll, and a tallit rescued from a Berlin synagogue. The positive response to this event prompted the inauguration of a Holocaust Virtual Museum on November 15th, 2020. All the artifacts belong to Ottawa-area Holocaust survivors and their families. These items have a connection to their experience of the Holocaust and are testimony to survival.*

*The artifacts allow us to honour the humanity of Holocaust victims. They*

*reflect family stories and encourage learning and remembrance. The variety of the artifacts reveals the richness and diversity of the lives lost while ensuring that they are not forgotten.*

*The Holocaust Virtual Museum continues to accept new submission. For information, contact: [jewish\\_studies@carleton.ca](mailto:jewish_studies@carleton.ca)*

On November 15th, a Virtual Holocaust Museum was launched on the websites of CHES and the Zelikovitz Centre. The first venture, entitled the Pop Up Museum project, was part of HEM 2018 and was created by the Zelikovitz Centre in cooperation with CHES and Temple Israel Synagogue.

**Anita Vandenberg**, MP for Nepean-Carleton, set the tone for the webinar with impressive and genuine remarks. Although she is not Jewish, she clearly has a deep understanding of the Holocaust and its lasting impact on so many people. A strong and vocal supporter of CHES, she spoke of her roots to the Netherlands, her family's connection to acts of bravery in saving Jews, and of growing up with stories of the war. (See Holocaust Education Petition Addresses Challenges of Growing Antisemitism).

Traditionally based on a theme, a Pop Up Museum welcomes people to share information about an object relevant to that theme. For the launch of its virtual Holocaust Museum, CHES and the Ze-



**Birthday Card, Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection donated by Benjamin (Brandt) Kolton, Bellevue WA, USA**

likovitz Centre chose the theme of “The Importance of Artifacts to the Research of the Holocaust”. The Virtual Holocaust Museum features over 47 photographs of artifacts, all submitted by survivors and their descendants who live in Ottawa.

CHES website: <https://carleton.ca/hem-pup/virtual-museum/>

Zelikovitz Centre website: <https://carleton.ca/jewishstudies/>

**Sara Shor**, manager of the Artifacts department of Yad Vashem Jerusalem’s Museum Division, has been involved in in documentation and research for over 30 years. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, she discussed how these items enhance Holocaust research in a presentation entitled “The Importance of Objects to the Study and Research of the Holocaust”. Her presentation was fascinating as she focused on a birthday card found by a survivor as Auschwitz was liberated in January 1945. Sara explained the card’s long journey to Yad Vashem where work began to identify the talented artist who created it and the three prisoners whose names appeared on it, including the one for whom it was intended. Eventually, painstaking research over many years identified the recipient and two of the three men; the man named Jacques has not yet been found.



Brooch from Buchenwald, United State Holocaust Memorial Museum collection

**Dr. Robert Ehrenreich**, director of National Academic Programs at the USHMM, is the author or editor of four books, an international journal, and over 30 articles and reviews on the Holocaust, Holocaust studies, and European history and prehistory. In his talk, “Viewing the Holocaust Through Objects” he showed how objects, especially groups of items, can provide insights into human nature, community, and interconnections documents and oral histories may neglect, overlook, or suppress.

Robert shared the story behind a brooch that was made for Sala Spett while she and her family were imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The brooch, made by a young girl from Warsaw who was also an inmate in the camp, was given to Sala by two of her children. The brooch, rich in detail, posed many unanswered questions for researchers, included how the Polish girl was able to get materials for the brooch. Robert stressed the importance of learning as much as possible about such artifacts in order to glean some understanding of people’s lives during the Holocaust. Another example was small fragments of Bakelite taken by survivors as keepsakes of their labour in an ammunition factory.

Three local contributors who submitted personal artifacts described their selections in stirring detail.

**Les Grumach** spoke of the tallit his father, as a teenager, bravely salvaged from his synagogue in Berlin the day following Kristallnacht. His father survived the Holocaust and eventually settled in Australia. Les also showed a Rosh Hashonah card with a message in German and Hebrew.

**Dora Goldman**, a survivor from Hungary, spoke movingly about three artifacts. The first was a yellow star made by her mother and worn by her. The second was a worn leather homespun bag that carried her family’s food following deportation from the ghetto. The final artifact was three buttons etched with the edelweiss, Austria’s national flower. These were saved from a dress given to her by an Austrian villager – a woman who worked in the suitcase factory where her mother worked. Dora and the other children were locked in an empty garage while their parent(s) were at work (from 8 am to 6 sometimes 7 pm). “These buttons remind me that even in the most difficult times, I witnessed humanity in people,” said Dora.

**Marlene Wolinsky’s** story focused on her beloved father, **Arnold Sprecher**, and the dancing puppet he began to create while imprisoned in Dachau and the guitar he made while interned as an alien in Sherbrooke, Que. He hid these and other items in the back of his closet for 50 years, unable or unwilling to speak of his ordeal before finally revealing them to her and her children. A family reunion led to the creation of a wonderfully detailed book entitled “The Sprechers of Cologne: An Intimate History”, which Marlene also displayed.

CHES member **Abigail Bimman**, an award-winning journalist and Ottawa-based correspondent for Global National, emceed both webinars with warmth and professionalism.

This link will take you to the webinar on “The Importance of Artifacts to the Research of the Holocaust”

<https://carleton.ca/jewishstudies/videos>

## Holocaust Education Month at Sir Robert Borden High School

**Kenra Mroz**

This is a very different school year for everybody, one wherein semesters have been replaced by quadesters and the turnaround between classes is quite rapid. With less time in which to cover important course material, club-hosted, school-wide events that are scheduled during instructional time are, of necessity, few and far between. This is why Sir Robert Borden High School's Social Justice Club was thrilled to have been granted approval to organize a "virtual" school-wide DEAR (Drop Everything And Reflect) event to commemorate 2020 Holocaust Education Month.

Our event included a slideshow and video presentation outlining the dangers of hatred and stereotyping. Our intent is to not only highlight representative student voices, but also to educate our school community regarding the many ways in which Holocaust history and legacy continue to be relevant in this day and age. We also prepared optional letter writing and creative response activities for teachers and students to do following our presentation, which are intended to encourage them to continue to reflect upon, connect to, share and discuss what they have learned.

Ultimately, we wish to inspire our school community through a message of hope: that there are no limits to the positive results that a community of kindness, inclusiveness, and caring can achieve.

\*The Social Justice Club wishes to express our sincere gratitude to Mina Cohn for the loan of her personal copy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's publication, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda*.

## Holocaust Education Petition Addresses Challenges of Growing Antisemitism

Sheila Hurtig Robertson

Dr. Art Leader, the son of Holocaust survivors and a member of the Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES), was alarmed, and with reason.

In 2019, statistics reported by B'nai Brith Canada revealed that, for the fourth consecutive year, antisemitic incidents in Canada rose to more than 2,000 annually.

Also concerning him was the fact that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Holocaust remembrance events were virtual and, with schools closed nationwide, Holocaust educational activities were halted. He further noted that for working youth, Holocaust education is non-existent. And with the passing of time, decreasing numbers of eyewitnesses who survived the Holocaust are able to share their knowledge and relate their experiences, resulting in minimal awareness of atrocities they witnessed and endured.

Then, in 2020, the National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa was vandalized only two days after International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Later in 2020, anti-Nazi graffiti on a memorial in an Oakville, Ont., cemetery, which honours the 14th Waffen SS Division, was initially considered a hate crime by Halton Regional Police. Although the police later apologized for using that terminology, it was particularly distasteful to Dr. Leader, whose mother often spoke of the brutality of soldiers from that division and how they assisted Germans in the murder of her entire family.

"Canada has demonstrated a commitment to remembrance and Holocaust education and to fighting the antisemitism and racism that threaten and erode the multicultural and pluralistic nature of our society," says Dr. Leader. "Holocaust education sensitizes Canadians to the role racist ideology and government propaganda played in the systematic murder of millions of Jews and other persecuted

groups and helps youth to understand the dangers of indifference to the oppression of others."

Convinced that the time is right to develop a comprehensive inventory of best practices in Holocaust education and relevant resources offered in Canadian schools and communities, Dr. Leader, working with CHES and author and lawyer Maureen McTeer, created a House of Commons petition urging Parliament to address the pressing challenges presented by the growing antisemitism, Holocaust deniers, and those who distort the true nature of the Holocaust. Anita Vandenberg, MP, is the petition's sponsor in Parliament.

The petition urges the government to build upon its previous investments in Holocaust education, research, and remembrance initiatives; determine the current availability of Holocaust education across Canada; identify new strategies to reach those who are targeted by racist and hate propaganda online; and urgently fund community organizations to preserve the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, thereby educating Canadians about the destructive impact of hate and intolerance on our Charter Freedoms, to the detriment of current and future generations.

Supporters include former Prime Ministers Paul Martin and Joe Clark, members of the Carleton University community including President Benoit-Antoine Bacon, as well as Rabbi Reuven Bulka, Rabbi Idan Scher, the Ottawa Jewish Federation, Kehillat Beth Israel Synagogue, Holocaust survivors, prominent Ottawa lawyer Lawrence Greenspon, and local Members of Parliament,

CHES and the Zelikovitz Centre urge readers to sign the petition and share the link with family and friends. The petition was open for signature until November 19, 2020. Supporters' identities are protected by Canada's privacy laws

## Ontario Students Face Critical Gaps in Holocaust Education and Awareness

Michaela Bax-Leaney

In the wake of a widely shared report on low levels of Holocaust awareness in the United States, there are growing calls across North America — including a parliamentary petition in Canada — for what many have been urgently seeking for years: comprehensive Holocaust education in schools.

Splashed across the home page of the Guardian news site on Sept. 16 was a startling headline that read: “Nearly two-thirds of U.S. young adults unaware 6M Jews killed in the Holocaust.”

While the survey probed the Holocaust knowledge of American respondents, Canada is hardly immune to the phenomenon. A study commissioned by the Azrieli Foundation and the Claims Conference in 2018 found 22 per cent of Canadian Generation Z and Millennial respondents haven’t or don’t think they have heard of the Holocaust.

For those who work in Holocaust scholarship, that disturbing picture is one they’ve been trying to draw attention to for years.

While the curriculum for Ontario public secondary schools provides some mention of the Holocaust, it is often left to the discretion of schools and individual teachers to incorporate Holocaust education in the classroom, said Mina Cohn, the director of the Ottawa-based Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES).

“The Holocaust is taught in Grade 10 as part of World War II, with at best two classroom periods dedicated to the topic. However, the amount of time dedicated to the topic varies depending on the interest of the teacher,” said Cohn.

While the Holocaust may be touched on briefly in other courses, those brief lessons in Grade 10 history class is the extent of the mandatory Holocaust education high school students in Ontario will receive.

Those variables mean that for secondary students in Ontario, there is very little consistency in the programming they receive around Holocaust education, and it’s introduced quite late.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines the Holocaust as “the systematic state-sponsored killing of six million Jewish men, women, and children and millions of others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II.” However, Holocaust educators warn that even this bare-bones summary is not as universally known as one would hope.

“A ‘typical’ high school student’s knowledge of the Holocaust varies tremendously, which points to the gaps in both teacher training and the age of instruction . . . We need to begin Holocaust education at a younger age and provide teachers with appropriate training,” said Melissa Mikel, the director of education at the Toronto-based Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies.

Concerns about whether young Canadians are being adequately educated about the Holocaust have grown louder in recent years, particularly as anti-Semitic incidents continue on an upward trajectory.

As B’nai Brith, a Jewish advocacy organization, has reported, 2019 saw anti-Semitic incidents in Canada increase for the fourth consecutive year. Ontario had the greatest increase of any other province, with a 62.8-per-cent rise from 2018.

In fact, in July, CHES member Arthur Leader initiated a parliamentary petition calling on the federal government to improve and expand Holocaust education nation-wide. The online petition, which currently has 642 supporters, will continue to gather signatures until November.

The petition, sponsored by Anita Vandenberg, the Liberal member of Parliament for Ottawa West—Nepean, makes specific mention of the need to better educate young Canadians.

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The main gate of Auschwitz, one of the most infamous Nazi concentration camps. It is in Oświęcim, Poland. Photo licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 AT



Leader's petition states that Holocaust education helps young Canadians "understand the dangers of indifference to the oppression of others," while noting that as time passes, fewer Holocaust survivors are able to share with us their accounts, and fewer young people are aware of the atrocities committed.

Leader also makes note of the importance of Holocaust education in combating Holocaust deniers, who have found a platform and an audience in the digital age — an audience that could include impressionable young Canadians.

However, even when individual educators incorporate more Holocaust education into their classrooms, it can be challenging.

Mikel notes that because most teachers are not required to provide instruction about the Holocaust, it is not included in their training.

Unless teachers seek out training from organizations like ours, there is no standardized training to prepare teachers for this topic," said Mikel.

"The Holocaust is a very broad topic, and most teachers lack knowledge and do not

know how to deal with the subject," added Cohn. "A new revised core provincial curriculum that mandates teaching the Holocaust, which includes best practices by Holocaust educators across Ontario, is needed."

Cohn and Mikel encourage teachers to make use of the resources available to them. The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre has a best-practices guide for Holocaust education available, and CHES hosts an annual teachers' workshop to help train educators within Ottawa.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, for its part, says it is "committed to ensuring students understand and appreciate the significance of the Holocaust." OCDSB schools will host Holocaust survivors for students to hear from, and the board has also partnered with organizations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Centre.

However, with the Ontario curriculum as the guiding framework, Ontario school boards are left largely to devise their own plan about when and how Holocaust education is introduced.

The consequences of inadequate Holocaust education, Mikel warns, are serious.

"Many children are told that Hitler was crazy, or evil, and learn nothing about the widespread popularity of Nazism, or Europe's long history of anti-Jewish violence . . . We need to equip young people with the tools to think critically about our past if we want them to be engaged citizens in the present."

For Cohn, Holocaust education goes well beyond remembrance, presenting students with questions about morality and human behaviour that still echo today, as well as developing social awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and moral reasoning.

"Many people don't understand that conversations around human rights today were born out of the ashes of the Holocaust," said Mikel, "acknowledging that the post-war reckoning with the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime has radically altered the way we think, discuss, and legislate human rights issues."

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## CHES Speakers' Bureau

Marion Silver

An important component of CHES' mission is imparting the legacy of the Holocaust to today's youngsters. This is especially critical in the increasing climate of overall racism and Holocaust denial.

Working in partnership with the local school boards, CHES encourages educators to invite Holocaust survivors, or their descendants, to address their classes. In the academic year 2018-2019, more than 3000 students in the areas of Ottawa and Kingston were given the opportunity to learn about this tragic moment in modern history. The numbers of students were significantly reduced in 2019-2020 due to work stoppages by the teachers and then the onset of COVID-19.

Noting the importance of Holocaust education, one high school teacher recently remarked:

*"We have recently finished an intensive Holocaust study unit and the students have been applying what they have learned and developed through this unit towards a greater understanding of the profound and lasting impact of discrimination as well as towards an understanding of how the events of the Holocaust must be recognized and used as a means of promoting positive change in our world. We have made it a point to examine and discuss how the legacy of the Holocaust serves as an important reminder of the need to work towards a culture of inclusion and kindness."*

Unfortunately, due to the ongoing COVID-19 virus, it is impossible for in-person school visits to take place. However, by means of Zoom, Holocaust survivors continue to deliver their vital message.

The survivors deserve the highest praise for the crucial role they play in conveying their lived experience to the younger generation. Their stories serve as a wake-up call so that today's students recognize the dangers posed by bigotry and racial intolerance.



CHES members Annette Wildgoose (l) and Marion Silver.

## Books that Speak to my Grandfather's Resilience

Mina Cohn

"Relations, Resistance, Resilience" offered information about the history of the Montreal Jewish Public Library, which was established in 1914, and included an interesting presentation about books from its rare book collection. We learned that immediately after the World War II, a warehouse in Offenbach, Germany, held over one million Jewish books, manuscripts, and objects looted by the Nazis and which the United States army attempted to repatriate to their original owners.

Eddie Paul, head of Bibliographic & Information Services of Montreal's Jewish Public Library, said: "The so-called 'orphan' books whose original owners could not be found were distributed to libraries in areas where Jewish populations had settled." Some 1,500 such books salvaged from the Nazis arrived in the early 1950's from Offenbach to the Montreal Jewish Public Library and were recently catalogued. Eddie Paul and Nicole Beaudry, Researcher and Facilitator, Risen Leaves Rare Books Initiative, discussed three books from the collection, including the antisemitic polemic, *Entdecktes Judentum*, by Johann Andreas Eisenmenger, published in 1700. Eddie Stone presented the book, *Machzor B'nai Roma*, which Daniel Bomberg published in Venice in 1526.

As part of its contribution to the discussion on "Relations, Resistance, Resilience," Andréa Shaulis, curator for The Montreal Holocaust Museum presented

four objects and discussed their origins. The museum was established in 1979 by local Holocaust survivors. All 13,500 artifacts in the museum were donated by survivors or their families who wanted their story of survival preserved <https://museeholocauste.ca/fr/expositions/exposition-permanente>.

The topic of the workshop took me back to my maternal grandfather, Zvi Yitchak Wacholder, a Holocaust survivor from Poland. He was a modern orthodox, kindly man, the youngest and sole survivor of 11 adult brothers and sisters who perished along with their extended families.

After the war, thousands of Jewish used books and numerous other Jewish ritual objects found their way to public markets in Europe. These objects had been pilaged from their original owners by the Nazis, their collaborators, or by the owner's neighbours themselves. One of the first things my grandfather acquired were prayer books and Bibles to replace those he lost during the war. Some of these books had been published in various European publishing houses in the second half of the 19th century.

Among the books I inherited from my grandfather is a *Machzor* for Sukkot published in Prague in 1869; the "Book of Numbers" published in Vilna in 1886; and the "Books of Joshua and Judges", with commentary in Yiddish, published in Lublin in 1899; these books speak to my grandfather's resilience.

It is important to note that the books include handwritten dedications, signa-

tures, and probably the names of previous owners, who might have perished a few years earlier in the Holocaust.

CHES' webinar on November 15th on the importance of artifacts to Holocaust research taught us about the research potential hidden in such dedications. Realizing that these books also serve as memorials to their previous owners, we handle them with care and respect.

I want to thank Dr. Deidre Butler for this initiative; CHES is looking forward to many more such opportunities.

CHES Newsletter Editor: Sheila Hurtig Robertson



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