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### Lest We Forget

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Lest We

# Forget

**Confronting the Holocaust and its implications represents a challenge we should not evade — and a responsibility we should not avoid.**

**By Ronald J. Granieri**

I do not like talking about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, as a historian of modern Europe and especially of Germany, I have willingly accepted the responsibility to study and teach about the murder of more than five million Europeans of Jewish descent by the forces and allies of Nazi Germany.

Because I discuss the Holocaust in my classes and in public settings, I enthusiastically welcomed a suggestion from the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust to help develop a Summer Institute for Teachers on the subject. Education professor Scott Henderson and I hoped that this institute, which was held in June, would encourage other educators to incorporate the Holocaust and its lessons into their curricula.

It is always unpleasant to discuss terrible events, and I would be worried if anyone really enjoyed it. That fact, however, does not mean that we should simply avert our eyes and minds.

The Holocaust is one of the central events of the 20th century, leaving its mark on our politics, our culture and our society. Because the Holocaust was both so horrible and so central, every generation must confront it and its implications for the present and the future.

Just as we struggle today to comprehend the motives that could lead people to kill thousands of innocents in office buildings and airplanes, we must also struggle to understand those who would kill millions. By doing so, we are not engaging in intellectual masochism or a dose of historical castor oil. Some events call upon the living to honor the memory of the slain — and to consider our common humanity.

Why should we force ourselves to confront issues and events that we would rather avoid? The easiest answer is that we must remember so that the victims are not forgotten, and so that we can attempt to ensure that such things never happen again. Laudable as that goal is, however, we are confronted with the stark reality that no amount of remembrance has been able to help humanity avoid further destruction elsewhere. From Cambodia and Rwanda to Macedonia and the World Trade Center, mass murder mocks our ability to control human evil.





*Opposite: A warehouse full of shoes and clothing confiscated from prisoners and deportees gassed upon their arrival. (Photo by Lydia Chagoll; courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives). Left: The entrance to Auschwitz, where prisoners were greeted with the slogan "Work Makes One Free." (Photo by Mark Rowe)*

Some would argue that these other abominations should weaken our attachment to studying the Holocaust. Hitler was a monster, but the 20th century was full of monsters — Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot — all jockeying for position as the era's most bloodthirsty killer. The list of their victims, as raw numbers or as a percentage of their countries' populations, dwarfs even the worst Nazi crimes. If that is so, the argument runs, what purpose is served by placing special emphasis on the particular events in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s?

Despite the obvious horrors of other genocides (a word whose origins lie in the blood-soaked 20th century, as humanity strained to find a term to describe state-sponsored murder of entire ethnic groups), the Holocaust retains a unique quality. It offers the spectacle of a completely industrialized, "civilized" state in the middle of "civilized" Europe systematically consigning an entire people to destruction. The state targeted men, women and children, irrespective of their wealth, power, political ideology or potential value as workers, using resources to kill them that could have been used elsewhere in a world war.

One of the most cherished ideas in Western thought since the Enlightenment has been the proposition that humanity's progress toward a more perfect society is inevitable, the product of increasing freedom and education. Such sweet sounding words seem hollow when we confront the Holocaust. By challenging these confident notions of inevitable progress, the Holocaust forces all of us to confront our own limitations.

The Holocaust was an attempt to exterminate millions of human beings for no reason other than their membership in a particular ethnic group. It was a murderous enterprise using the most modern technology, carried out by people possessing the best education Europe could offer, and conducted by tens of thousands of individuals with at least the tacit acquiescence of millions more. That such a thing could happen forces all of us to reconsider our human nature, the meaning of "civilization," and our responsibility toward others. These are questions as old as Cain. They are questions all of us have been asking with greater urgency since the terrorist attacks of September 11.

We also need to study the Holocaust because there are too many dangers associated with forgetting. If we do not appreciate and understand what happened, too many people might try to confuse us or convince us either that it did not happen or that it was of no great significance. They would distort history to serve

*Top right: Ice-covered razor-wire fences at Auschwitz. Both photos of Auschwitz accompanying this article were taken during a Furman study abroad program in winter 1999. Bottom: American soldiers view a pile of human remains outside the crematorium in Buchenwald.*

their purposes, and they must not be allowed to succeed. It did happen, and it is vitally important that we understand its significance, even as mass murder continues in our barbaric age.

Holocaust deniers try to discourage examination of the Holocaust by claiming that such study is motivated by hatred for the Germans or by some fanatical desire for vengeance. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do not study the Holocaust because of anti-German sentiment, or because we wish to saddle future generations with a burden of unjustified guilt. Yes, the Germans have a responsibility to confront their history, in some cases more than they have, but others also need to admit their culpability as well. There is much blame to spread around, from the Germans who inflicted Hitler on the world to the Europeans who collaborated with Nazi genocide, to bystanders both in Europe and abroad (including in the United States) who refused to expend political capital or sacrifice military forces to help rescue the victims until it was too late.

An honest study of the Holocaust leaves little room to exercise our sense of moral superiority. It forces us to recognize how many “ordinary,” even “good” people were involved, however peripherally, in the killings. It should not make us feel superior, but rather should encourage us to consider our own failings and work to overcome the evil within ourselves.

History is the study of people in time, and of how people not completely unlike ourselves behave. If we find the study of the Holocaust disturbing, it is because we see that not only the victims, but also the perpetrators, were human beings, and we can see reflections of ourselves in both. We study the event so that we can try to understand how things happened, even if the why will continue to elude us. The Holocaust retains a special power to attract our attention precisely because of this connection. So many of us look to Europe as the source of what we call “Western Civilization,” and we cannot allow ourselves to forget what happened there.

The Holocaust is not simply a “Jewish issue,” but it is essential to remember the centrality of Jewish suffering. Recognizing that other groups — Poles and Roma (gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, gays and lesbians, Communists and devout Christians — were also victims of the Nazis does not minimize the agony of the Jews as the primary targets of Nazi hatred. This is an especially difficult issue for both Jews and non-Jews, as we attempt to understand the universal lessons of the Holocaust while remembering the specific identity of the victims.

The Holocaust retains its importance precisely because its roots lie in the fratricidal hatred between Christians and Jews. It reminds us of the unresolved tensions and prejudices that remain in our society.

Hitler and his henchmen were able to organize their genocidal program because they focused their murderous policies on a population that was already marked by its neighbors as alien and threatening, colored by centuries of lurid myth-making and ignorant hostility. The long tradition of anti-Semitism in European Christian society, no matter how contrary it may have been to true Christian principles or how surreal it may seem to us today, led many otherwise moral and godly people to look away while Jews were being murdered. Even if they did not share the hate, their deep-seated prejudices kept them from feeling the compassion necessary to stand up for their fellow human beings.

Studying the Holocaust can help us to see that the problem of unexamined prejudice remains in our society, and that we must work to ensure that such prejudices do not keep us from recognizing and cherishing our common humanity. This is an especially important issue for those who educate our young people. In our discussions during the Summer Institute, Scott Henderson and I tried to make this connection by encouraging the participants to consider the groups who are today marginalized and subjected to discrimination, and to consider how even the “benign” prejudices of those who would not themselves participate in violence can be dangerous.

Hatred and suspicion of individuals because of their group identity is an insidious force that weakens the bonds of civilization. As we stand before the obvious result of fanatical hatred in Washington and New York and try to balance our desire for justice with an awareness that hatred should not breed hatred, we wrestle with precisely the same moral questions that the Holocaust poses.

The Holocaust offers a continuing challenge to our sense of community, our common humanity. It is a challenge we should not evade and a responsibility we cannot avoid.

I do not expect anyone to enjoy confronting the Holocaust. The empty sense of horror that we feel when contemplating murderous hatred touches our deepest emotions and our darkest fears.

Despite many examples of goodness, the world can still be a violent and hate-filled place. As we mourn the thousands of victims of fanaticism and terror, we should not forget the millions who have died before. Horror cannot outlast hope, and we should never allow our sadness to drive us from our responsibility to mourn, and to remember.

No one can say if remembrance will prevent further tragedies, but we know that forgetting will only invite them. ●

*Ron Granieri, who holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago, has taught at Furman since 1997.*





MARK ROWE



RUTH SHERMAN/COURTESY USHMM PHOTO ARCHIVES

# The Holocaust Institute

“Understanding the Holocaust: An Intellectual and Social Inquiry” was the topic of a special Summer Institute for Educators held at Furman June 18-29, 2001. The interdisciplinary seminar was funded by the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust and taught by history professor Ronald Granieri, an expert in German history, and education professor Scott Henderson, a social studies specialist.

A study of the Holocaust as both a historical reality that affected millions of people from varying economic, religious and social groups and as a vehicle for exploring larger social issues, the course was designed in particular for educators in language arts and social studies. It examined such topics as Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust; the origins of anti-Semitism; the evolution of Nazi policy; the Jewish Resistance Movement; the place of other victimized groups in the Holocaust; the problem of bystanders and the limits of “collective guilt;” and the reactions of the United States and other governments to the Holocaust.

The goal of the program was to help teachers make the tragedy of the Holocaust more understandable to their students, and to incorporate the lessons of the Holocaust into a larger discussion of tolerance and intolerance in contemporary society. And clearly, the subject matter struck a chord, as the institute enrolled its maximum capacity of 25 people, with a waiting list of almost twice that number.

Both Furman and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust hope to offer a similar institute in the future.

## RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER STUDY

### NON-FICTION

Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, eds., *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined* (Indiana University Press, 1998)

Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler* (Basic Books, 2000)

Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Free Press, 1993)

Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Plume, 1989 reissue)

Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Origins of His Evil* (Random House, 1998)

### FICTION

Louis Begley, *Wartime Lies* (Fawcett Books, 1997 reissue)

Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (Penguin Books, 1992 reissue)

Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird* (Grove Press, 1995 reissue)

Andre Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just* (Bentley Publishers, 1980 reissue)

Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall* (Schocken Books, 1995 reissue)

### FILMS

*Europa, Europa* (1991)

*The Nasty Girl* (1990)

*Schindler's List* (1993)

*Shoah* (1985)