THE FUTURE OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN CANADA

FRANK CHALK

Frank Chalk[1] is a historian and educator specializing in Holocaust studies, genocide prevention, and human rights. He is a professor emeritus at Concordia University in Montreal and co-founder of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS). Chalk's extensive work includes research on the origins and dynamics of mass violence, as well as innovative approaches to teaching the Holocaust. His publications and advocacy focus on fostering critical thinking, combating denial and misinformation, and preserving the memories of survivors through education and community engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Yehuda Bauer, one of the most distinguished historians of the Holocaust, never intended to make the study of the Holocaust his life's work. Although he recognized that Nazi annihilation of some six million European Jews was one of the most important historical events of the twentieth century, as a young scholar the significance of the subject frightened him. It was Abba Kovner – the Jewish poet and wartime partisan leader from Vilna – who gently nudged Bauer towards his lifelong path. Yet in October 2024, at the age of 98, Bauer confessed that the Holocaust had never ceased frightening him. Today, after many years as an historian of genocide, I understand the reasons for Bauer's fear. In the enormous challenge that the Holocaust poses to Western values from within our society, the Holocaust stands alone in the modern history of the West and in the history of genocide. As I first wrote in 1988:

> *Only by comparing the Holocaust with other cases of genocide can one fully grasp the fact that the*

1 As I look forward to the next 10 years in Holocaust education, I base my recommendations on four sets of experiences as a professor of history at Concordia University: 1) co-authoring one of the earliest textbooks on the history and sociology of genocide, a book which introduced students to some two dozen cases of genocide from ancient times to 1990; 2) designing and teaching a two-semester intermediate level undergraduate course on genocide from antiquity to the present and several graduate seminars about genocide; 3) researching and writing scholarly articles on the role of monitoring the national radio broadcasts of fragile countries to protect targeted groups against genocide by offering them early warning and survival advice based on my studies of the Holocaust in Hungary and the genocide to destroy the Tutsis of Rwanda; and 4) teaching a one-semester introduction to the history of the Holocaust at Concordia to classes of 80 students each for over 15 years. I also write as an historian who worked side by side with Concordia sociologist Kurt Jonassohn for over 30 years and believe that the contributions of other disciplines to our understanding of the Holocaust and of other genocides are vital.

Holocaust was the most carefully conceived, the most efficiently implemented, and the most fully realized case of ideologically motivated genocide in the history of the human race and that it is characteristic of aberrant quests for a "perfected" society in our time.

UNIQUE FACETS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Three facets of the Holocaust are unique among the genocides that I have studied:

1. Hitler's definition of all Jews as members of a subhuman race and his insistence that they be annihilated immediately and totally in order to save Germany and the Aryan race from racial pollution and death;

2. That the roots of the Holocaust lay in Germany, one of the most scientifically and industrially advanced countries of Europe; and,

3. That Hitler's weapons for carrying out the Holocaust included Germany's modern bureaucracy and involved the direct participation in the running of the machinery of mass murder of every highly skilled professional group in German society from railroad administrators and train crews, diplomats and lawyers, and engineers, and police, to military personnel, scientists and physicians, and economists and anthropologists.

HITLER'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE JEWS

Hitler launched his program to exclude, segregate, and isolate the Jews of Germany when he came to power in 1933, for he deeply believed in the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism and its equally phantastic twin, the theory that 'Judeo-Bolsheviks' were conspiring to destroy the German people. Then, in 1939, to fulfill his ideological beliefs, Hitler initiated the second world war, occupying western Poland and declaring war against France, first, to conquer more fertile soil for German settlements in the east and, second, to prepare to seize, hold, and exploit the Soviet Union's vast treasure trove of natural resources. Starting in June 1941 with his invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler distributed the stolen household goods that his armies robbed from Jewish families in the newly conquered territories of the west and the east to cement the loyalty of ordinary Germans to the Nazi state.

As worshippers of Western culture and the enlightenment prior to the Holocaust, German Jews had convinced themselves that human nature was fundamentally benevolent and rational. Theologian Richard Rubenstein argues that the mass slaughter and brutality that occurred in the trench warfare of World War I foreshadowed the coming of the Holocaust, but this is true only in retrospect. Nothing about the killing of soldiers by other soldiers allowed the West to anticipate the Holocaust, a catastrophe in which Hitler mobilized the full might of a modern industrialized state to accomplish the total annihilation of a group of unarmed men, women, and children living under the supposed protection of their own government, as in the case of the German Jews, or under the humanitarian provisions of international conventions governing a military occupation, as in the case of Jews in other parts of Europe. Himmler eventually paired the intimate, face to face violence of the Einsatzgruppen, which moved systematically from town to town in eastern Europe mowing

down Jews, with the carefully coordinated transportation of Jews in railcars to centrally located factories of death, killing camps equipped with gas chambers and crematoria ovens, a cheaper method also designed to reduce stress disorders among the members of his killing squads.

These brutal facets of the Holocaust challenged Bauer's understanding of western history and they challenge all of us today. Unlike the dead of ancient genocides, unlike the Cathars, the Japanese Christians, the Pequots and the Hereros, unlike the Armenians and the victims of Stalin's terror, the Jews and the Sinti and Roma were murdered in post-Enlightenment Europe by Germans, a people steeped in Western culture and rich in rational scientific knowledge. As theologian Irving Greenberg writes, "No assessment of modern culture can ignore that fact that science and technology – the accepted flower and glory of modernity – now climaxed in the factories of death."[2]

Hitler's terrible war against the Jews – the incarnation of his eliminationist antisemitism – highlights his delusional thinking and the core motives of the Germans who supported his ideological objectives, but we must acknowledge that what motivated many other Germans was simple greed and their lust for the spoils – Jewish property and Jewish money. By the end of world war two, Hitler's war had not only killed some 6 million Jews – it had also ended the lives of some 29 million non-Jews. Reviewing that "butcher's bill," Yehuda Bauer concluded in 1994 that:

> *antisemitism, and the Holocaust, were basic reasons for the death of many millions of non-Jewish Europeans. It thus is a central issue for all of civilization [not only Jews], and certainly for European civilization; it is the most extreme form of genocide so far – again, not because the victims suffered more than other victims of other genocides, but because of its unprecedented motivations and character, and the global impact it had and has… That is why we teach it.*[3]

"It is now clear in our time that every succeeding generation has the duty to educate young people about the history of the Holocaust and, whenever possible, the history of other genocides, for it is only then that we can redirect the public's focus from punishing the perpetrators of genocide to preventing genocides before they begin."

It is now clear in our time that every succeeding generation has the duty to educate young people about the history of the Holocaust and, whenever possible, the history of other genocides, for it is only then that we can redirect the public's focus from punishing the perpetrators of genocide to preventing genocides before they begin. Thus, it is

2 Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" in Eva Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 310–311.

3 Yehuda Bauer, "On Holocaust Education," Lecture for the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, n.d. (probably presented in November 1994).

most troubling that recent surveys reveal growing skepticism in Canada and the United States about the scale and seriousness of the Holocaust among persons between the ages of 18 and 34. And it is truly shocking that "32.9% of [teenage] students [in Canada and the United States] don't know what to think about the Holocaust, think the number of Jews who died has been exaggerated, or question whether the Holocaust ever happened." How are students learning about the Holocaust? At least "40 percent of students reported learning about the Holocaust through social media," one of the least reliable sources of information and one of the most important sources of "false news" in today's media world. As historian Doris Bergen insightfully concluded in the most recent edition of her widely used university textbook, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (4th edn., 2025):[4]

> *Decades after the war, Holocaust memory is contested and, some observers fear, fading… Distortion and denial are rampant on the internet and sometimes, fueled by antisemitism, racism, and misogyny they burst through the screen. The German shooter who went to the synagogue in Halle in Germany on Yom Kippur in 2019, intent on murdering Jews at prayer, articulated the connections in his manifesto: "I think the Holocaust never happened. Feminism is the cause of declining birth rates in the West, which acts as a scapegoat for mass immigration, and the root of all these problems is the Jew."*

CHALLENGES TO WESTERN HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION

The profound significance of the Holocaust for western civilization and for Jews and non-Jews alike requires us to expertly teach its history and meaning to each new generation of students even as we confront the rising denial that the Holocaust ever happened. The quality of the teachers we graduate and the methods that they choose to teach the history of the Holocaust will determine if we succeed. Some 23 American states have already mandated focused assignments, whole courses or parts of courses on the history of the Holocaust for middle school and high school students. Simultaneously, state legislatures and state departments of education have extolled Holocaust education for "encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and… nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions."[5] As well, many American state education department officials, teachers, and school administrators now look to Holocaust history courses as tools for "combating anti-Semitism and prejudice, fostering civic virtues at a time of intense polarization, creating awareness for the Holocaust as public knowledge recedes, and preserving the memory of the events as more and more survivors sadly passed away."[6]

In early 2025, here in Canada, two provinces, British Columbia and Ontario, are moving rapidly

4 Doris L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 4th edn. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2025), p.353.

5 Lindsey Stillman, "Executive Summary" in *Mandates on Holocaust and Genocide Education in the United States*, Phoenix Holocaust Association, September 2021, p.1 shprs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-10/207547%20-%20Holocaust%20Mandates%20Booklet%20FINAL%20DIGITAL%20%281%29.pdf

6 "State of Florida, 1994 bill," Ibid., p. 5.

towards implementing Holocaust education mandates for their students, while Quebec is preparing to introduce a sophisticated treatment of the Holocaust within a broader genocide curriculum. The Quebec curriculum results from an interesting grass roots movement. It originated in a 2022 pedagogical guide called *Studying Genocide*, which is now posted on the Internet.[7] Professors Sivane Hirsch (Laval University) and Sabrina Moisan (University of Sherbrooke) have developed the guide, in collaboration with the Montreal Holocaust Museum, the Foundation for Genocide Education (Heidi Berger, the daughter of Holocaust survivors) and organizations from the communities affected by the featured genocides. The curriculum is aimed at secondary cycle 2 (grade 9) History and Ethics classes, but the Museum has actually trained teachers and used the guide in different high school levels and CEGEP. It received financial support from the Quebec Ministry of Education. The curriculum can be taught to 343,000 students in 800 schools, enabling them "to study the history of nine significant genocides of the 20th century" (News release, Foundation for Genocide Education, April 26, 2022).[8] Berger wants the nine part genocide curriculum to be taught in Quebec high schools as a "mandatory separate module – maybe even a full course."[9]

Yale law professor Samuel Moyn argues in his book *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, that in today's world "The morality of individual rights substituted for the soiled political dreams of revolutionary communism and nationalism as international law became an alternate to popular struggle and bloody violence."[10] Today, the Holocaust symbolizes absolute evil; it serves as an example of why human rights are vital, and as an illustration of the importance of establishing guardrails against racism, antisemitism, and all other forms of discrimination against minorities. But the Holocaust is also the prime example of what can happen when politicians and voters in a flawed, polarized democracy like Weimar Germany's distort and jettison checks and balances in their constitution designed to bar the road to autocracy, monarchy, and dictatorship, followed by tolerating and even encouraging the suppression and elimination of the opposition through intimidation, censorship of the media, and suppression of civil rights. Today, as Samuel Moyn argues, "the program of human rights faces a fateful choice: whether to

"The Holocaust symbolizes absolute evil; it serves as an example of why human rights are vital, and as an illustration of the importance of establishing guardrails against racism, antisemitism, and all other forms of discrimination against minorities."

7 https://oraprdnt.uqtr.uquebec.ca/portail/gscw031?owa_no_site=1026

8 https://thecjn.ca/news/canadas-first-guide-to-teaching-about-genocide-is-launched-in-quebec-high-schools

9 Philip Authier, "Expand genocide education in schools, group tells Quebec," *The Gazette*, September 3, 2024. www.montrealgazette.com/news/article416330.html

10 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), Abstract and "Epilogue: The Burden of Morality," pp. 211–227.

expand its horizons so as to take on the burden of politics more honestly, or to give way to new and other political visions that are yet to be fully outlined."[11] I believe that the death of Germany's nascent democracy in 1933 and the Holocaust still have important lessons to teach us about the critical importance of "the path from morality to politics," as Moyn phrases it. For, as Bertold Brecht put it in the epilogue to his 1941 parable play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, "Although the world stood up and stopped the bastard, The bitch that bore him is in heat again."[12]

THE GROWING NEED FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

It is essential in my view that we help students today to learn – as I believe Vaclav Havel wrote after the 1968 Prague Spring many years ago – that "evil does not present itself to us with a stamp on its forehead." Students need to be trained in critical thinking and learn from history. Teachers should never teach the Holocaust as if the road to Auschwitz was obvious from the moment Hitler came to power in 1933 and as if everything was foretold; that would be wrong and play tricks on the dead. They need to emphasize the German state's slow, blundering evolution through the disorganized steps which the Nazis and their collaborators groped towards their sabotage of Germany's new democratic institutions and the eventual destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe, proceeding by trial and error to implement the new policies of segregating and isolating Jews, followed by refining the concept of "racial hygiene" until, by a circuitous route, they gradually arrived at the 'final solution to the Jewish question' and the destruction of their political enemies.

> **"An introductory course on the history of the Holocaust will also highlight that Joseph Goebbels manipulated the German public's fear and anxiety by widely disseminating "false news," that he urged Hitler to "Lie, lie, lie until people believe in you, then lie, lie, lie until you believe [the lies] yourself."**

An introductory course on the history of the Holocaust will also highlight that Joseph Goebbels manipulated the German public's fear and anxiety by widely disseminating "false news," that he urged Hitler to "Lie, lie, lie until people believe in you, then lie, lie, lie until you believe [the lies] yourself." It will highlight the rewards which Hitler used to bribe the German people and to bind them to his messianic view of the world. Above all, it will emphasize the Jewish victims' perspectives as the Holocaust gradually engulfed them one by one and help students to grasp that as Jews struggled to survive and to resist they faced what Holocaust literature professor Lawrence Langer, writing about Auschwitz, accurately called in 1982 "choiceless choices," choices that the Nazis overwhelming and

11 Moyn, Ibid. pp. 225–226.

12 Quoted in the epilogue to Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). The play, a satirical allegory, depicts the struggle of a Chicago gangster to control the cauliflower trust and his brutal murder of his rivals. The audience sees the parallels between Brecht's characters and Hitler, Goring, Rohm, Goebbels, von Papen, and von Hindenburg.

perverted use of power almost always converted into "bad" choices despite the best intentions of the victims.[13]

EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN CANADA

Until recently, those of us teaching the history of the Holocaust in high schools and universities invited Holocaust survivors into our classes to share their experiences and answer students' questions. Time and age have taken their toll and in 2025 most of the witnesses we can invite to accompany us in meeting with students were children during the Holocaust. To augment in the future what their parents can no longer testify to in class, we have for many years recorded and transcribed video interviews with adult and child Holocaust survivors. The outstanding interview work of Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Yad Vashem is widely known. Less well known are the valuable accomplishments of local Holocaust memorial associations and university oral history programs all across Canada and the United States. Montreal is fortunate to have 890 interviews completed by the Montreal Holocaust Museum, the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling of Concordia University, and the Alex Dworkin Foundation for Jewish Archives. These collections are now digitized and searchable. And in addition to the survivor memoirs published online and in hard copy by the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University and the Azrieli Foundation memoir series, thousands of Holocaust survivors have published their memoirs and students are using them, too, in their research assignments.

INNOVATIVE TEACHING APPROACHES

We are incredibly fortunate that university professors and high school teachers can now ask their students to complete research essays adopting the perspectives of Jews during the Holocaust, confronting their challenges and recounting their daily dilemmas. The assignment is modeled on the inspiring work of Oyneg Shabes, a team of volunteers led by Warsaw Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who from 1940 until his death at the hands of the Germans in 1944, led a team of historians, sociologists, scientists, teachers, and writers who struggled to record the details of every facet of life in the Warsaw Ghetto. At Concordia University, I divided the 80 students in my introductory Holocaust course into 20 groups of four students each, and assigned each four person team to a specific ghetto in eastern Europe. Within each four person team, one student mastered that ghetto's administration and economy; another student studied housing, health, and the ghetto's food supply; a third student reported on cultural life, resistance and accommodation to the Germans in their ghetto, and, finally, a fourth student became an expert on their ghetto's experience of German terror, deportations, and the eventual destruction of the ghetto. The four students in each of the 20 ghetto teams distilled their 1,000 word ghetto reports into combined PowerPoint presentations and wall posters, which they presented in class as research reports. All the students supplemented their study of

13 In chapter 2, "Auschwitz: The Death of Choice," Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 127–189.

survivor testimonies and published memoirs with reading specialized histories of their ghettos by professional historians. To synthesize each team's reports, every team collectively wrote a 250 word essay summarizing for future generations the most important lessons the team members learned by studying life and death in their ghetto. Finally, each team member wrote a 150 word paragraph stating what they had learned about themselves and how they thought and operated as a member of a team research project, concluding with suggestions to improve the assignment for next year's class. This assignment was one of the most productive and fulfilling for me as a teacher in my 59 years as a university professor. It generated empathy for the ghettos' victims, understanding of the Germans' goals and ruthlessness, and led students to reflect on the value of team research, while also honing their skill in communicating Holocaust research results with a wider audience.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS AND SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES

Another important resource in our toolbox for transmitting the history of the Holocaust is the extensive network of Holocaust museums dotting North America. Inspired by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, great museums like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles have developed strong educational programs. Canada's small museums in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver have already forged strong bonds with teachers in their regions, and regularly schedule visits to their exhibitions by elementary and high school students, local adults, tourists, and groups of fire and police officers, among others.

The Montreal Holocaust Museum (MHM) is leading the way in Canada among smaller Holocaust museums working to increase the number of their visitors and modernize their exhibitions. By 2027, it will inaugurate a new, stand-alone Montreal Holocaust Museum building on St. Lawrence Boulevard, north of Sherbrooke Street, close to the St. Urban area that housed many of the first Holocaust survivors to arrive in Canada and more accessible to tourists and francophone Montrealers. The new museum will feature a brand new, thematically-organized, artifact-based, and enlarged permanent exhibition co-curated by Professor Robert Jan van Pelt (Cultural History, School of Architecture, University of Waterloo) and Professor Marie-Blanche Fourcade (MHM and Museology, UQAM), who are supported by an international committee of renowned Holocaust experts. It will also feature a children's exhibition, a memorial room, an auditorium, classrooms, an interactive, artificial intelligence powered, immersive encounter with survivor testimony, a bookstore, and a cafe. The MHM's plans also include space for visiting temporary exhibitions and room to create temporary exhibits in Montreal for loan to other museums. Whereas the existing Montreal Holocaust Museum attracts 22,000 visitors a year, the new museum hopes to host 100,000 visitors annually.[14]

Paying for the design and construction of the new

14 View a short video portraying the award-winning design of the new Montreal Holocaust Museum by clicking the following URL and scrolling down to "Your New Holocaust Museum Here" just below Discover our new downtown Museum. museeholocauste.ca/en/give-voice

and much larger Montreal Holocaust Museum was only possible thanks to the generosity and forward looking commitment to Holocaust education of large and small Montreal donors supplemented by very large contributions from the Azrieli Foundation (Toronto) and the governments of Canada and Quebec. Altogether, the MHM has so far raised $115 million dollars to pay for the new building and future museum programs. The new museum represents one strong component of Canada's answer to the renewed threats we now face to the values of western civilization and Canada's democracy posed by the repeated lies of "truth effect" propaganda, Holocaust denial, neo-Nazism, bigotry, and antisemitism. The new museum's exhibitions will expose the assault on truth pioneered by Nazis like Hitler and Goebbels and strengthen the foundations of Canadian democracy by advancing the thoughtful and critical education of young and old visitors seeking to discover the true history of the Holocaust. It will also challenge visitors to the Montreal Holocaust Museum to ponder the significance today of post-Holocaust genocides, crimes against humanity, and serious war crimes.

CONCLUSION

I believe that the future of Holocaust education in Canada is in good and steady hands, the hands of people who never give up, who persist, plan well, and wholeheartedly give their energy, their intelligence, and their money to raising the excellence of Holocaust education and education for democracy in Canada. I understand, too, that there is always a risk of failure but I find comfort in recalling the spirit embodied in Samuel Beckett's famous lines from Worstward Ho: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again? Fail better!" Brothers and sisters, together, and with your help, we are getting the job done.