

08 / MAY 2018



MEMORIA

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THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM TURNS 25

**30 YEARS OF THE MARCH
OF THE LIVING:
INTERVIEW WITH
AHARON TAMIR**

**'THE FUTURE OF
HOLOCAUST RESEARCH'
CONFERENCE**

**PHOTO EXHIBITION:
'SURVIVOR: MY
FATHER'S GHOSTS' BY
HANNAH KOZAK AT
LAMOTH**

**"IT'S GOOD TO BE ABLE
TO HAVE, SEE AND
TOUCH SOMETHING..."
THE WORK OF THE ITS
ARCHIVE**

CONTENT

LINKING THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD

THE UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM AT 25

EXHIBITION: 'CHILDREN IN THE BERGEN-BELSEN
CONCENTRATION CAMP'

"IT'S GOOD TO BE ABLE TO HAVE SOMETHING..."
THE WORK OF THE ITS ARCHIVE

INTERVIEW WITH AHARON TAMIR: "WE NEED TO CARRY
THE TORCH OF MEMORY." 30 YEARS OF MARCH OF THE
LIVING

CONFERENCE: 'THE FUTURE OF HOLOCAUST RESEARCH'

PHOTO EXHIBITION:
'SURVIVOR: MY FATHER'S GHOSTS' BY HANNAH KOZAK

AN INTERNATIONAL CONSENSUS BUILT AROUND THE
IMPORTANCE AND HISTORY OF AUSCHWITZ

THE TAILOR PROJECT

SCHOLARLY CONFERENCE
**'THE FUTURE OF HOLOCAUST
RESEARCH'**

On April 25-26 2018, the City University of New York – Graduate Center and the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust co-presented the international scholarly conference 'The Future of Holocaust Research' in New York City.

The participants included leading scholars in the fields of Holocaust and genocide studies from across North America, Europe, and Israel. The conference, which was open to the public, was sponsored by a range of international organizations. The aim of the conference was to foment discussion into the current state of the field of Holocaust research, its relevance now in the early twenty-first century, and the outlook for the field and its global relevance, not only to research, but also politically and mnemonically in the coming years and decades.

The salience of a conference focusing on the present and future trajectory of Holocaust research seems self-evident: over 70 years have passed since the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps, and the generation for whom these events form part of their living memory is inevitably fading away. The Holocaust is fast becoming an abstracted item of historical memory, mediated through school curricula, public memorial events and institutions, and cultural media, all of which offer only a second- or third-hand entry into this darkest chapter of the twentieth century. This necessarily raises questions on the implication not only for Holocaust research, but also for its dissemination and relevance as we progress through a new century with its own challenges, upheavals, and atrocities.

A central concern raised by a number of speakers, including Chase Robinson,

President of the CUNY Graduate Center, in his opening remarks, revolved around recent claims that the younger generation knows increasingly little – sometimes frighteningly little – about the Holocaust. These concerns go back, amongst other things, to recent reports following a study conducted by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany in February 2018, widely reported in American and international media around Yom HaShoah in April, which found that two-thirds of American millennials surveyed could not identify what Auschwitz was, while 22 percent of millennials said they had not heard of the Holocaust or were not sure whether they had heard of it.

Coupled with this concern was the issue raised throughout the successive panels of the conference concerning the populist turn in Europe and North America in recent years and the impact this has not only on Holocaust research and remembrance, but also on the normalization of revisionist narratives, even denial, of the Holocaust and of the actions of various peoples and nations, especially but not exclusively Germany, during World War II. These trends toward the fading from memory of the Holocaust as a real historical occurrence, coupled with the appropriation and even subversion of its memory for nefarious political ends in the present day, are indeed a cause for concern.



That being said, one can safely surmise that the Holocaust has never before occupied such a central place in academic, memorial, and political discourse as it does in the present day. Concerning research on the Holocaust, Professor Wendy Lower of Claremont McKenna College, who is Acting Director of the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, remarked in her keynote speech that “the field has exploded” in recent years.

Lower pointed by way of example to the almost incomprehensibly vast collection of testimonies recorded at USC Shoah Foundation, which currently hosts a total over 165,000 hours of footage, but which still only amounts to the testimony of a fraction of the survivors of the Holocaust. The opening of archives following the end of the Cold War in 1989/90 and the adoption of the Holocaust by the now greatly expanded European Union





as a keystone in its political and educational agenda have moreover led to a veritable “Europeanization”, as it was repeatedly termed throughout the conference, of Holocaust research. International and transnational studies, such as those pioneered by Timothy Snyder, not to mention local and diffuse studies on hitherto neglected areas and themes of the Holocaust as are accumulating in various European countries, all suggest a growing momentum behind Holocaust research, and its increasingly international, even global, visibility and relevance.



These observations were augmented by the introductory words of David Gill, the Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in New York. The very presence of the German consul general, including the support for the conference by the German embassy and the German Academic Exchange Service, underscored his assessment that the Holocaust is today recognized as “a part of the history of Germany and of civilization,” as well as his reference to the former German Federal President Joachim Gauck that “there is no German



identity without Auschwitz." Gill's speech addressed head-on the challenge of continuing to educate about the Holocaust in an age where the contemporary witnesses will soon no longer be among us, equally addressing the rising problems, including in Germany, of right-wing populism and revisionism, not to mention resurging antisemitism.

The answer to these issues, and the emphasis of the conference, continues to be on research and education: there are now numerous institutions dedicated to the study of the Holocaust, along with manifold university professorships and classroom curricula dedicated to this history, in Germany, Austria, Israel, the

United States, and elsewhere. The Holocaust is today commemorated officially not only by numerous countries such as Israel and Germany, but also by the UN and the EU. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of Holocaust memorial sites great and small scattered across Europe, North America, and elsewhere. In short, the "memory boom", as it has been called in recent years, shows no immediate signs of abating, and thus stands in perplexing contrast to the troubling reports that the Holocaust is being forgotten among younger generations.

A significant trajectory of the conference was the relation of Holocaust research and commemoration to wider studies of genocide, to mass political violence, and not least of all to the European and extra-European contexts of colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement. In this respect, as Professor John Torpey from the CUNY Graduate Center commented in his closing remarks, which were live-streamed following the final session of the conference held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the Holocaust has occupied a central, unique, and historical role not only in broader research into genocide and memory, but also in the development of human rights legislation, the prosecution of genocide and other crimes against humanity, and in the international political commitment to justice and responsibility. Precisely given the recent trends of forgetfulness, coupled with a resurgence in right-wing populism and antisemitism along with new forms of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee politicking, it seems clear that Holocaust research still has a central

role to play here – to learn from past tragedies of human making and thereby to strengthen democratic values in the present and future.

The cover of the conference program featured the infamous gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the background as a visible reminder of the centrality of Auschwitz to the memory of the Holocaust. As demonstrated by this high-profile international conference, Holocaust research, commemoration, and education is analogously central to the pursuit of justice, responsibility, and human rights in the global community today. The Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust was proud to co-present this important event, and remains committed to the realization of these lofty ideals through its ongoing public educational work.

