Bergen-Belsen: Then and Now

*What remains of Bergen-Belsen? How does its memory fit into the consciousness of modern European society?*

Images of Bergen-Belsen’s liberation are seared into the collective consciousness of the West. Yet, these scenes of overcrowding and death represent only a few months in the camp’s entire history.

On Wednesday, April 13, at 7:00 p.m. in the Social Hall at the Jewish Community Campus, MCHE’s public historian, Dr. Shelly Cline, will discuss the full history of Bergen-Belsen, from its beginnings as a POW camp to the memorial site it is today. Dr. Cline will also explore how the camp’s history fits into the consciousness of modern European society. Reservations are requested by calling 913-327-8196 or emailing rsvp@mchekc.org.

Bergen-Belsen was established in 1940 near the small towns of Bergen and Belsen in Germany. In April 1943, the SS took over a portion of what was until then a POW camp and converted it for use as a concentration camp. Belsen underwent another significant shift in late 1944 as it became a destination for thousands of prisoners evacuated from eastern camps in advance of Soviet forces. It was at this time that the camp was plagued by overcrowding, disease and starvation.

In April 1945, British forces liberated the 60,000 prisoners they found there. Five months later, a British court tried those responsible for staffing the camp. This trial, which took place prior to the International Military Tribunal convened at Nuremberg in November 1945, was the first time the Nazi system was put on trial by the West.
Oh, for a crystal ball! Writing this message in time to meet our print deadline, neither we nor the pundits nor the pollsters can predict who will still be on the road to the White House by the time this reaches you. Perhaps that is best, since our goal is neither to endorse nor reject any one party or candidate.

Every election cycle brings with it promises and possibilities, oratory and opposition. Each of us would prefer to believe that we can distinguish between rhetoric and reality, idealism and initiative, pomposity and pragmatism. But can we? Do we take the time and effort to do that? Do we know how to do that? Or do we hear just what we want to hear and dismiss the finer points? Can we recognize propaganda or are we swayed by the emotion it stirs within us?

**Biased Information**

Propaganda is biased information designed to shape public opinion and behavior. Although not all propaganda is negative, the danger lies in the suppression of alternate ideas.

Propaganda is nothing new to the election process, but this year, the hold it has on the voting public seems to be stronger and more negative than ever. Techniques include name-calling, testimonials by celebrities, playing on fear, and “plain folks” (an attempt to convince the audience that a candidate’s ideas are “of the people.”)

Concerned and sensible people are making comparisons to the Nazis’ legal rise to power within a democratic system and with that the scuttling of civil rights and, ultimately, genocide. While it is often said that history repeats itself, nothing (particularly the Holocaust) is ever “just like” anything else, and it is a tenuous and risky leap from 1930s Germany to the United States in 2016.

**Universal Lessons**

That said, there are universal and relevant lessons to learn from the Holocaust:

- Democracy is fragile. We must do our utmost to protect it and never take our freedoms for granted.
- We must stand up for the rights of others—responding to the first warning signs of bigotry. “Never Again,” applies not only to the Jewish experience, but also to any group singled out for persecution. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”
- As a responsible electorate, we must be critical consumers of information, not only what we hear from the candidates, but also what we read in the media and on the ever-expanding and often unfiltered Internet. We need to do our homework, consider the source, fact-check, and remember the old adage, “Don’t believe everything you read.” It is important to discuss this with our children—tomorrow’s voters—as well.

**Informed Decisions**

One problem with negative propaganda is its appeal to the masses of people who are already prone to a particular point of view. If we forego critical thinking and simply accept the claims of those who agree with us, we relinquish the power to change our minds and to make informed decisions. It is as if to say, “My mind’s made up. Don’t confuse me with the facts.”

“I’ve changed my mind” is a powerful statement, far different from, “I was wrong.” And it may well be that after a thoughtful and thorough reality check, we conclude that our first decision is still the right decision. That, too, is a powerful statement.
As an eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, embarking upon an historical analysis project such as the White Rose Student Essay Contest is an excellent way to address many academic standards. This interdisciplinary unit exposes students to a critical chapter of human history while also challenging them to do an unprecedented amount of research and composition. The contest’s primary sources illuminate the dangers of apathy and remaining indifferent to the suffering of others. Students gain an appreciation for what it means to be a responsible citizen and the importance of standing up to injustice, and they gain a better understanding of prejudice and an appreciation for diversity in their own communities. White Rose changes lives—and I see it every year—one eighth grader at a time.

— Dan Blumeyer, Harmony Middle School

The contest is a great way to incorporate more of the Holocaust into the curriculum and to personalize the Holocaust because of the requirement to focus on an individual or family. I appreciate that the topic changes every year because it keeps it fresh for me, and the use of primary sources in the essay fits perfectly with what I do in my teaching. My students benefit by having another opportunity to practice research skills and by being introduced to a topic or an individual’s story they probably would never have otherwise experienced. They appreciate any time I offer them a look at how the Holocaust impacted a specific person. It helps to shrink the enormity of the Holocaust just a little bit.

— Christopher Bobal, Lee’s Summit High School

The White Rose Essay competition provides a rich opportunity for my high school students to learn and practice a wide variety of English language arts skills. I use it to teach how to conduct research with primary sources, which are always provided and organized online by MCHE with each essay theme. I also use the online tools that come with the essay to teach and emphasize ELA standards, such as essay organization, implementation of grammar and mechanics conventions, and the articulation of a meaningful thesis.

Past winners of the contest, available online, are wonderful examples of academic writing that always seem to be exemplars of the hard-to-teach quality of voice, and my students absolutely respond to those winning essays with admiration and strive to meet those standards.

MLA citation and documentation standards are not a delight to teach in any class, but the White Rose Essay, with its built-in requirement for a consistent citation convention, allows me to displace some of the responsibility for the necessity of learning citation skills onto an outside authority. This becomes a grand lesson on how to never, ever plagiarize. The White Rose Essay not only brings students into our A.P. social studies program who are uniquely prepared to excel, but MCHE offers annual professional development, tailored to the essay’s theme, that is some of the best I have experienced. I have used their lessons on the Holocaust in both my English and A.P. social studies courses.

— R. Gina Renee, Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy

The 21st White Rose Student Essay Contest theme asked students to research the goals and methods of Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda and to explain how that propaganda affected one Jewish person or family during the Holocaust. Essays were to be submitted by March 31.

As in previous years, entries are judged in a preliminary round to identify 10 finalists in each of two divisions (Grades 8-9 and 10-12). A Blue Ribbon panel of judges then chooses first, second and third place finishers in each division. All decisions are based on blind judging.

This year’s Blue Ribbon panel:
• Debby Ballard, President, Sprint Foundation
• Barbara Bayer, Editor, Kansas City Jewish Chronicle
• Dr. Kurt Graham, Director, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum
• Dr. Amy Milakovic, English Department Chair, Avila University
• Josh Sosland, President, Sosland Publishing Company

Finalists and sponsoring teachers will be honored at a private reception in May where the top winners will be announced. Visit www.mchekc.org/essay beginning May 16 to read the winning essays.

This year’s contest is sponsored by members of MCHE’s White Rose Society, listed on page 4.
Inaugural Lunch and Learn Series Draws Lifelong Learners

Enrollment in MCHE’s inaugural Lunch and Learn course, taught by Dr. Shelly Cline, MCHE’s public historian, was filled to capacity. For five weeks in February and March, 28 participants learned about the pivotal year of 1941. Topics included life in Polish ghettos, Jews on the Eastern Front, preparations for the “Final Solution,” and Jewish experiences in the Axis countries.

Cline noted, “Because this was MCHE’s first lunch and learn class, we didn’t know quite what to expect in terms of response. We were delighted to see such enthusiasm for this format. We will certainly offer another such course.”

There is so much more to the Holocaust than the concentration camps. Through readings, videos and discussions, we’ve looked at the smaller steps that led to the camps, as well as the historical context behind the Holocaust. By examining the wide range of people involved, from the most infamous of names to the commonest of people, I feel like I am finally understanding a deeper level to the Holocaust, which is surely one of the most important lessons of history.

—Robynn Andracsek

I’ve always had a curiosity and interest in WWII, especially the Eastern Front, and in particular the life of the people who were occupied. These sessions, while only 75 minutes long, really challenged me to imagine how I would have lived through that period and, more importantly, to examine lessons that might be applied to today’s challenges. It’s easy to say the words “Never Again,” but what do we need to do today to make sure that those words ring true?

—Craig Wall

Teachers from schools throughout the Midwest are learning age-appropriate and pedagogically sound methods for teaching the Holocaust from MCHE.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, in partnership with Fort Hays State University and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, MCHE’s director of education, Jessica Rockhold, led 66 educators from Colorado, Nebraska and central and western Kansas through a modeled classroom activity, asking them to arrange and discuss a visual timeline that featured events from the Holocaust and World War II while highlighting the roles of propaganda and occupation throughout Europe (see History-Based Holocaust Lesson Plans at mchekc.org/lessonplans). Rockhold also provided instruction on the use of primary sources and discussed the integration of survivor testimony, literature and art into Holocaust education.

Each participant received a copy of the Echoes and Reflections Teacher Resource Guide. As one noted, “This was a wonderful experience! I can’t wait to apply this to my classroom.”

Schools and school districts interested in scheduling MCHE-led workshops for their teachers should contact Jessica Rockhold at 913-327-8195 or jessicar@mchekc.org for details about content, scheduling and fees.

MCHE’s teacher education programs are funded, in part, by the Jewish Federation of Greater Kansas City.
Traveling Exhibits Offer Unique Educational Opportunities

Examining the Fate of Jewish Lawyers in Nazi Germany

Lawyers Without Rights: Jewish Lawyers Under the Third Reich, on display April 4 through May 6 at the Federal Courthouse in Kansas City, Kansas, illustrates how the Nazi government purged Jewish lawyers from civil service as one of the early steps in attacking the rule of law and individual rights in Germany.

By focusing on the riveting experiences of 15 individuals, the exhibit portrays the collective fate of this vibrant professional community, whose members were systematically stripped of any and all rights to continue their practice and were publicly tormented as the Nazis ostracized all Jews from civic and social life.

The panel exhibit also demonstrates how Hitler, as dictator, enacted laws and issued edicts, one by one, to subvert all semblance of justice and to eliminate all Jews from the judicial system. It also provides an historic commentary and present-day reminder of the dangers that exist when the law is unjustly applied.

Created more than 15 years ago by the organized bar of the Republic of Germany, the exhibit has been presented in more than 80 cities, mostly in Europe. With support from the German Federal Bar and American Bar Association (ABA) officials, Lawyers Without Rights made its American debut in 2010 at the spring meeting of the International Law Section in New York City. That summer, it was featured at the ABA Annual Meeting in San Francisco. Since then it has traveled to Mexico and throughout the United States.

Whoever Saves a Single Life

EXHIBIT FRAMES RESCUE WITHIN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Whoever Saves a Single Life… Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust remains on display at the Jewish Community Campus April 26 through May 15.

Arranged thematically, the exhibit features character traits displayed by rescuers, showcasing individuals who chose to shelter and safeguard Jews in a time of overwhelming death and destruction. On loan from the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous (JFR) in New York City, it reminds us that, although exceedingly rare, instances of rescue were an important part of the Holocaust.

Since 2000, MCHE has been recognized by the JFR as a Center of Excellence, co-sponsoring local teachers and MCHE staff to attend institutes and seminars offered and subsidized by the JFR. Centers in the program make a commitment to teach the Holocaust in a comprehensive manner and to include the subject of rescue. Teachers who attend JFR programs—known as Alfred Lerner Fellows—form a cadre of educators for each local center as well as for the JFR.

In January, Dr. Shelly Cline, MCHE’s public historian, spoke at JFR’s Advanced Seminar on the topic “Women at Work: The SS Aufseherinnen and the Gendered Perpetration of the Holocaust.” Other speakers included Dr. Christopher Browning, Dr. Timothy Snyder and Alexandra Zapruder.

Munich, 1933: Doorplates of Jewish lawyers were plastered with warnings to the public, “Visits prohibited! Jew!”
Our Community Remembers the Holocaust

SUNDAY, MAY 1, 1:30 P.M.
Jewish Community Campus
Lewis and Shirley White Theatre
5801 West 115th Street, Overland Park, KS

The community is invited to attend this year’s Yom Hashoah service, commemorating the 73rd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the 53rd anniversary of the dedication of Kansas City’s Memorial to the Six Million.

Benny Harding, son of Holocaust survivors Dorothy and Harry Harding, both of blessed memory, will chair the program, which will feature the traditional lighting of six candles in memory of the six million Jewish victims. It also will include readings and images related to the arrival of survivors in Kansas City, which began 70 years ago.

“I am deeply honored to be this year’s Yom Hashoah Chair. As someone whose parents endured the horrors of the Nazi past, it is engrained within me to honor the memory of the victims and to remember the survivors of the Holocaust.”

—Benny Harding

Yom Hashoah
ITS ORIGIN AND MEANING

Yom Hashoah, the day honoring Jewish victims of the Holocaust, is marked according to the Hebrew calendar on the 27th day of Nisan, the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. This year that corresponds to May 5. The full name of the day is Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah—in Hebrew literally translated as the “Day of (remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism.” The date was selected in a resolution passed by Israel’s Parliament, the Knesset, on April 12, 1951.

In Israel, the sound of a siren stops traffic and pedestrians for two minutes of silent devotion, both on the eve of Yom Hashoah and the day itself. Places of public entertainment are closed by law. Israeli television and radio air Holocaust-related programming.

In 1979, the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, established by President Carter, commemorated Holocaust Remembrance Day in the U.S. Capitol with an unprecedented ceremony attended by the President, Vice President and many members of Congress. Since then, ceremonies have been held in Washington, DC, and in individual states and cities. These range from synagogue services to communal vigils and educational programs. The theme is the importance of remembering—recalling the victims and ensuring that such a tragedy never happens again.

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27—the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau—as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, urging every member state to honor victims of the Nazi era and to develop educational programs to help prevent future genocides. The significance of the resolution is that it calls for a remembrance of past crimes with an eye towards preventing them in the future.

Except as noted, all programs described on this page are free and open to the public.

MONDAY, MAY 2, 1:00 P.M.
Kansas State Historical Museum
6425 Southwest 6th Street, Topeka, Kansas
State of Kansas Holocaust Commemoration Service Survival and Remembrance
Proclamation presented by Governor Sam Brownback Recognition of Holocaust survivors, their children and World War II veterans Keynote speaker: Nancy Geise, author, Auschwitz 34027 – The Joe Rubenstein Story Light reception to follow Sponsored by the Kansas State Holocaust Commission Call 785-272-6040 to RSVP or for more information.

MONDAY, MAY 2, 7:00 P.M.
Congregation Beth Torah
6100 W. 127th Street, Overland Park, Kansas

Jewish Soul: A Musical Journey from the Shtetl to the Stage
Presented by Kansas City Symphony Concertmaster Noah Geller and his ensemble, Shir Ami Tickets are $20 in advance, available at the Jewish Community Center and at thejkc.org.

MONDAY, MAY 2
Rockhurst University
1100 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri
Reading of Names 8:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. Kinerk Commons Prayer Service 2:30 – 3:00 p.m. Finucane Jesuit Center Participation by Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy and Rockhurst University choirs Contact Bill Kriege (816-501-4855 or bill.kriege@rockhurst.edu) to read a 15-minute block of names.

MONDAY, APRIL 25
Metropolitan Community College – Maple Woods
2601 NE Barry Road, Kansas City, Missouri Arbor Room in the Campus Center Remembering the Holocaust Through Music and Art Contact Jim Murray for more information: 816-604-3305 or jim.murray@mckc.edu.

MONDAY, APRIL 18
Rockhurst University
1100 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, Missouri

Reading of Names 8:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Kinerk Commons
Prayer Service 2:30 – 3:00 p.m.
Finucane Jesuit Center
Participation by Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy and Rockhurst University choirs
Contact Bill Kriege (816-501-4855 or bill.kriege@rockhurst.edu) to read a 15-minute block of names.
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* of blessed memory

Visit mchekc.org/mche-newsletter for an online version of this newsletter.

MCHE ANNUAL MEETING AND ELECTIONS

HONORING MCHE MEMBERS OF 20 YEARS OR MORE

Tuesday, June 21, 2016, 7:00 p.m.
Jewish Community Campus Social Hall

Dessert reception following the program.

The community is invited to attend at no charge.
MCHE members will receive mailed invitations.

Reservations are requested by June 10: 913-327-8196 or rsvp@mchekc.org.