

Angela Gottesburen - 2023 MCHE Holocaust Educator of the Year  
Acceptance Speech  
1 May 2023  
Delivered in the Social Hall of the Jewish Community Center

Good evening everyone,

It is a great honor to be standing before you as the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education's first Holocaust Educator of the Year. I would like to thank the other nominees for their laudable efforts in teaching the Holocaust; it gives me great hope to know that others are dedicated to teaching about the Holocaust as well.

When I found out a couple of years ago that the Auschwitz exhibit was coming to Kansas City, I went into my superintendent's office and told her that I had a dream, a wish that all of our students in grades 8-12th would be able to go. My dream came true. The people in this community thought that it was so crucial for middle school and high school students to attend the "Auschwitz. Not long ago, not far away" exhibit that they contributed enough funds that any school district in the area could bring their students to experience the exhibit at no charge.

Let's take a second to appreciate this. So many people in our community believe that learning about the Holocaust is vitally important that **25,000 of our local students** were able to see the Auschwitz exhibit, including my own 300 plus. A survey conducted by the Claims Conference in 2020 found that 56 percent of U.S. Millennials and Gen Z were unable to identify Auschwitz-Birkenau. While this is certainly a troubling statistic, we must take hope and pride because **25,000 of our own community's students** certainly know what Auschwitz-Birkenau is *if* they didn't know before, all because of **this** community's partnership and sponsorship. Indeed, so many people believed in the mission of Holocaust education that Union Station was able to sponsor four area teachers to go to Poland last summer, and I am forever grateful that I was one of those four.

My visit to Poland, as that of my colleagues who are now my dear friends, was made possible by a partnership between the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation. The Memorial Foundation calls the teachers that participated in this fellowship the honorable

title of “Ambassadors of Memory.” The Foundation, as well as MCHE, confronts the heartbreaking reality that every day there are fewer survivors left in this world. The Memorial Foundation asked themselves how they can continue to represent these people and their stories. They came to the solution that they would have teachers become the ambassadors of their memories. What an incredibly awesome honor. After walking the former sites of the Warsaw and Krakow Ghettos, standing in Oskar Schindler’s factory, and looking at the absolute vastness of Auschwitz-Birkenau, I am more resolved than ever to teach about the Holocaust and the shadow that it still casts today.

When it comes to teaching about the Holocaust, I hold Elie Wiesel’s words close to my heart: “To hear a witness is to become a witness.” I use his words as my guidance for teaching and learning about the Holocaust. I have had the great honor of meeting several Holocaust survivors in my life, and their stories are engraved in my heart. Oftentimes, history seems very far away to young students, but I try to make it come alive to them by sharing the personal stories of survivors and victims. One reason I teach about the Holocaust is because I think that it is a travesty what people did to their fellow men. I also teach about it because I think we owe it to so many lost to tell what happened to them; we are indeed the guardians of their memory. I also hope students learning about the Holocaust will take some time for introspection and what they want their own moral code to be. I think it is vital to teach about the Holocaust because its lessons apply resoundingly today, lessons such as the terrible consequences of hatred, that indifference is just as dangerous to individuals as evil intentions, and that it is vital to speak out against injustice ALWAYS. It is my fervent belief that this history must be remembered. I can’t fail my students by letting them think the Holocaust is just something that happened in history books. I have to share as many stories as I can about these men, women and children. We need to remember what happened to their past in order to protect everyone’s future.

The Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, and even more specifically, Jessica Rockhold and Dr. Shelly Cline, have helped me grow as an educator. Sometimes, some of my students say they already know about the Holocaust because perhaps they read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 8th grade. I always tell them that I have been learning about the Holocaust for almost thirty years, and I still learn new things about the Holocaust. The Holocaust education provided by the Center has not only increased my knowledge on the topic, it has moved me

toward a deeper understanding. Most importantly, the Center has allowed me to not only educate my students about the Holocaust, but give them a clearer picture of the men, women, and children that were deeply affected by the terrible machinations of Nazi policy.

When I teach about Kristallnacht, I tell the story of Steve Cole's mother Ilsa, who as a young woman was forced to flee her family home in the middle of the night, and then was horrified to realize that the night of terror being unleashed in her hometown was happening in every town across Germany.

When I teach about spiritual resistance, I include the story of Joyce Hess's mother, Sonia, and how when she was forced to put bodies into a furnace at a camp in Narva, she and her friend clung to hope and humanity by singing songs and dreaming about their future. Mrs. Golad said that this made it seem like a little heaven in the middle of such hell.

When I teach about how some Jewish people survived by hiding, I always include Sam Devinki's story of his parents living in a root cellar with other members of his family. The farmer where they lived said that Sam's two cousins needed to leave because they were too little; the children made him nervous about getting caught hiding Jews. Sam's family is not exactly sure what happened after the aunt and her boys left the hiding place, but the next day the farmer's son was wearing his little cousin's shoes.

When I teach about death camps, I tell my students Sonia Warshawski's story about seeing her mother sent to the gas chambers at Majdanek. We were able to see Sonia's mother's scarf at the Auschwitz exhibit; this was the only thing Sonia had to remember her mother by. She treasured the scarf and slept with this token of remembrance tucked under her pillow.

What better lesson could I teach about how love triumphs over evil than the story of Evy Tilzer's parents, June and Isaac Feinsilver? Isaac realized that his wife had survived when he received a letter from her. Isaac traveled on bicycle from Buchenwald across war-torn Germany for two weeks to get to his wife June in Bergen-Belsen.

All of these stories I know because of the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education. My students know these stories because of them as well, and I am grateful.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the United States is experiencing its highest level of antisemitism in decades, with a heartbreaking 3,697 incidents of harassment, vandalism and assault targeting Jewish people and communities last year. While I do not **know** how much my teaching has affected my students, I hope and believe that what I have taught them makes a difference. We have to keep fighting the good fight, and I truly believe education is the best antidote for intolerance.

This summer, I met two Holocaust survivors—over Zoom of course! They were Tova Friedman and Michael Bornstein, both liberated from Auschwitz when they were tiny children. It struck me that both survivors felt the same about education. They both said, “Education is everything. If you were to lose everything like we did, education is the one thing that no one can ever take from you.”

How powerful and humbling to know that whatever triumphs and struggles that our students will endure in life, the education we give them is something no one can ever take away from them. What an incredible gift to our students and what a great responsibility.

In closing, I would like to leave you with the final remarks that I share with the students in my History of the Holocaust class on our last day together. I think they are fitting for all of the wonderful, talented students that are in this very room. I always say,

“Remember what you have seen and heard and learned. It is our privilege to remember for the generations that will never be. It is our duty to remember for the generations that were destroyed. Speak up for what is right. Don’t let anyone marginalize you or any other person. Love your fellow men. Be kind and help others. When given the choice between hatred and kindness, choose love.”

Thank you for this incredible honor.