

Simone Schweber, “Holocaust Education in Desperate Times”

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Simone Schweber, Goodman Professor of Education and Jewish Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has dedicated her academic career to researching how we teach and learn about the Holocaust. With the expansion of its academic agenda to include issues of Holocaust education, the Strassler Center invited Schweber to discuss some of the challenges that pertain to teaching in our current complicated times. In her virtual lecture, sponsored by the Legacy Heritage Fund, Schweber reasoned that Holocaust education is essentially malleable. In carefully calibrated language, Schweber described how education is open to the imprints of those who teach it, reflecting current political needs and goals.

The question of Holocaust exceptionalism has emerged as a matter of controversy, especially after Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez described detention centers for immigrants at the US-Mexico border as concentration camps. Schweber pondered whether we can analogize the Holocaust, asking whether it is as an example of a distinct event unique in its scale, yet similar and comparable to other genocidal events in its features. Schweber demonstrated these distinct attitudes by summarizing the teaching approaches of two noteworthy organizations whose origin stories reflect their political and educational orientations. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) pointedly serves a dual purpose of commemoration as well as education. In keeping with the ideology of Elie Wiesel, the USHMM presents the Holocaust as a unique historical event that should not be compared to other events. Their widely distributed teaching materials clearly reflect this point of view in contrast to the stance of the museum’s research arm. The more open, multifaceted approach to Holocaust education of Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) reflects founder Margot Stern Strom’s experience in pre-civil rights era Memphis. Moreover, as a teacher, Strom was more concerned with applicability and impact. FHAO emphasizes that current racism, antisemitism, and bigotry are legacies of past injustices that society must still confront. Thus, they emphasize collective history and its effect on current societal ills, without awarding the Holocaust or any other historical event, a unique position.

While the USHMM has broadened its historical research to include other genocides, according to Schweber, the “commemorative” rather than “research” sector determines its educational aims. As a result, the Holocaust remains in the incomparable realm in their teaching and learning practices. The discrepancy within the USHMM between the comparative historical research and the particularistic educational approach is a symptom of a wider societal problem, according to Schweber, namely the issue of undervaluing education as a field. She suggested that Holocaust education, as an applied rather than a purely theoretical field (such as history or mathematics, for instance), can be understood as the “undervalued wife of Holocaust history,” and is thus classified as a “pink,” feminized field. As such, Holocaust education is generally overladen with responsibilities to address an unrealistic range of topics from anti-Semitism to democratic participation and critical thinking. Such overly broad goals and expectations, in turn, undermine the overall effectiveness of Holocaust education.

Ultimately, Schweber reasoned that teaching the Holocaust as an exclusive event is not only erroneous but largely incongruous with teaching itself. Exceptionalism in Holocaust education is not only very difficult to maintain and justify, but according to Schweber, it might have always been a fantasy, as sacralization is an enemy of inquiry and as such defies education. In the process of educating it is essential that students have the ability to openly question, challenge, and take risks. Compare and contrast is a standard teaching method and, in the context of Holocaust education, this comparative approach promotes solidarity without eliding difference.

In conclusion, Schweber underscored the difference between Holocaust commemoration and education, acknowledging the possibility of overlaps between them. She called for restoring teaching as a profession and for continuing to do really important work in slightly different ways through Holocaust teaching. During our current “desperate” times, Schweber remains optimistic and calls for us to rethink teaching practices in order to achieve education that is holistic, comparative, and socially esteemed.

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