

We cannot afford to forget.

In 2020, NBC news conducted a survey to discover how knowledgeable people are about the Holocaust. This was no small survey, rather, it was the first ever 50 state survey to uncover Holocaust awareness among millennials and Gen Z. The data collected came from 11,000 interviews throughout the United States, primarily between the ages of 18 and 39. The results were frightening. According to NBC news, “Sixty-three percent of those surveyed did not know that 6 millions Jews were murdered in the Holocaust,” and “over half of those thought the death toll was fewer than 2 million.” Furthermore, “11 percent of respondents believe Jews caused the Holocaust.”

This staggering, unacceptable statistic makes us question: Why do we study the Holocaust? Obviously, the data shown reveals that our newer generations are becoming less involved with the past, with a past that is not as long ago as we would like to believe. Have we become so obsessed with our own lives that we have forgotten the past? Or perhaps it is because some of our past is too painful or too monstrous to face? Let us presume for a moment that the answer is yes. Then we must ask the question: does our own laziness or lack of motivation to learn about a past so deeply important to the formation of our world today matter? Do we let our emotions drive us? If this were the case, every time someone ran into an obstacle, they would immediately stop and give up. This is not the way we ought to live. We must do better. A liberal arts education can provide us the push we need to learn about history, especially the Holocaust, it requires us to wonder about the past. It challenges us to ask: why does this matter? The answer is simple, it is a surface level answer, yet it requires much of us. We cannot *afford* to forget.

We cannot afford to forget about the people whose lives ended so brutally, so mercilessly. We cannot afford to forget about the millions of people who were imprisoned for being who they were created to be. The 6.4 million Jews, 5.7 million Soviet civilians, 312,000 Serbs, 250,000 disabled, 220,000 Roma, and thousands more each had their own story. They each had their own struggle, their own life that was stolen. Each had precious gifts stolen: their individuality and dignity. We cannot afford to lose our individuality because without it, we are stripped to nothing, we are forced to conform to dictatorship. There was no “I,” only “us.” Can a society that does not value the differences of its individuals truly thrive? The answer is unquestionably and unequivocally no.

We cannot afford to deny the dangers of propaganda, fascist dictators, nationalist groups, hate groups, extremist ideologies, and the consequences of abusing power. Did any of Hitler’s followers think him anything but a patriot, someone loyal to Germany after the first world war? Some people even thought he was a savior, a gift from

God, sent to save the German people. This is how nationalist and hate groups are started, by convincing people that they are the answer to their prayers, and if they trust in them, everything will turn out the way it was meant to. How is this accomplished? The answer is propaganda, which the government distributes with confidence, as means to slowly but surely manipulate and take control of millions. The people of the United States, and all countries at that, ought to keep an eye on the leaders we choose, on those we elect to hold power. For example, the Kristallnacht was a surprise attack on the institutions Jews held so dear to them— their synagogues, businesses, homes, places of entertainment— does not seem so far from the attack on Capitol Hill on January 6th, 2021 or the war tearing apart Ukraine at this very moment. Clearly, Kristallnacht's devastation was far, far worse than the January 6th riot. However, the idea is the same— those who hold power often take advantage of their citizens.

We must ask ourselves: how do we recognize evil leaders? A leader is evil when they do not protect every person's humanity and uphold their dignity, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. Perhaps if we knew enough about the past, we would have been able to stop the riot or perhaps even the war in Ukraine. It is necessary that we learn how to pick out leaders that do not protect our rights, and yet it is difficult to do so because leaders have the privilege to appeal to those that are most vulnerable and gain their trust before it is too late. Centuries of dictatorships and wars should have taught us to do better, and yet again we are in another human catastrophe in Europe. The thin line between dictatorship and government grows even thinner as time passes. One would think the Holocaust would have taught us to do better. Yet again, we are reminded of the intense fragility that is our current system of governments, and we know that we cannot afford to forget. We are already suffering the consequences of corruption.

Skepticism cannot skip generations; it must be taught to everyone. Without it, the risk of anarchy is never far. Questioning certain areas of our society allows us to learn from the mistakes that were made, and ensure it will never happen again. Skepticism must be ingrained into the education system; children must learn that they are not exempt from the evils of the government and dictatorship, as hard as it may be to learn. Children are often the targets of dictatorship because they easily accept what they are taught— seen through the terrifying accounts of Hitler Youth groups and camps that will haunt Germany for the rest of time. It is children whom we must continually instill values that allow them to encounter the dignity of the human person because they are the future. We cannot afford to forget, for the sake of the children *and* our future generations.

Furthermore, we cannot afford to forget about those artists and musicians who, in the midst of pain, continued to create. Those who took their feelings and experiences and splashed them onto a canvas or wrote them onto a musical score cannot be lost into the abyss of our minds; they must continually be brought up in conversation and daily life. Those whom the Nazis labeled as ‘degenerate’ cannot be forgotten, because they are the members of society that were able to express the very heart of humanity. Many artists and musicians use their positions to comment on their own struggles with mental illness, death, oppression, prejudice, and hatred without using actual words. If a government chooses to remove these people from our communities, how will we repent our mistakes and continue onward, as a stronger people? Artists and composers such as Hans Krasa, Alma Rosé, and Karl Stojka were able to attest to the tragedy that the world faced through their creativity (see end of essay for examples). If we do not learn about people like Judith Goldstein, Samuel Bak, and Frederick Terna, we are selling ourselves short of the truth and doing ourselves a disservice. The more we know about what they went through, the more we can learn about what humans can be capable of. Again, we recognize the importance of skepticism in our lives, something we must depend on if we want to be spared from dictatorship. By examining their art and music, we are able to keep not only their memories and experiences alive, but also memories of the millions who did not survive.

11% of people from the survey taken in 2020 said they believed Jews started the Holocaust. If we listen to the music and examine the art of people who experienced it, we can know for a fact that the belief that the Jews started the Holocaust is one of the biggest lies ever told, and we can counteract those who deny this ever happened. Someone who did not actually experience something so deeply horrifying would not be able to create art or music that captures such evil so perfectly. If a Holocaust denialist glanced at one of Karl Stojka’s paintings, would they continue to believe it was all a ruse? Or perhaps they should listen to Aleksander Kulisiewicz’s “Muselmann,” or Mordechai Gebirtig’s “Unnzer stetl brunt” (see end of essay for example). It is through their testament of tragedy, their inner expression that we are able to combat those who argue that this event occurred, or occurred as the fault of the Jews. We cannot afford to forget them, because once we do, we lose our link to the past.

It is our duty to remember. It is our duty to recognize the impact we have on history. Each day we have the opportunity to impact history and change the world. We cannot afford to forget how essential each and every person is to the development and betterment of our world. The Holocaust affected how we view the fragility of government, of our democracies, how we perceive civil rights, education, discrimination, and racism. It is essential to the good of society to recognize its mistakes and hold people accountable to their actions. Without this, evil will prevail and

those with power will continue to manipulate and spread lies. We have learned that manipulation can lead to genocide, but at a gradual process. If we can learn the factors that led to this calamity, we are so much better equipped to pay attention to the warning signs and put a stop to it before it is too late. The children of this country deserve to know their world and their past- grandparents, great-grandparents, uncles, aunts, who were affected. It is a crime against our humanity to think this occurred a long time ago and does not have repercussions today. Allowing innocent people to be killed because of greed and evil leaders must stop, and yet it continues now in Europe. We have not learned our lesson it seems, making it even more important that our children learn about their past so that they may learn from the mistakes made that will never be fixed. Those who suffered and died still have a voice, and it is shared through their families and friends that continue the work to educate, learn, and speak the language of love. Without this, there is no hope for tomorrow or light in the darkness. We cannot sit on the sidelines and watch people take advantage of each other, we cannot watch racism, anti-Semitism, discrimination, hatred, and injustice prevail. As Eli Wiesel said, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Holocaust artist/musicians contributions

Karl Stojka



“In Birkenau, there was no milk for the children”



“The gassing of 2,897 Roma and Sinti at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2 August 1944”

Samuel Bak



"Targeted"



"Holding a promise"

Click link to hear “Muselmann” by Aleksander Kulisiewicz

<https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/collections-highlights/music-of-the-holocaust-highlights-from-the-collection/music-of-the-holocaust/muselmanncigarette-butt-collector>

Click link to hear “Our Town is Burning” (Undzer Shtetl Brent)

<https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/collections-highlights/music-of-the-holocaust-highlights-from-the-collection/music-of-the-holocaust/our-town-is-burning>

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Samuel Bak,  *Holding a Promise*, Queensborough Community College City of New York.

Samuel Bak,  *Targeted*, 2008. University of Vermont’s Fleming Museum of Art.