

Inside Philanthropy

In an Era of Rising Antisemitism, Giving for Holocaust Education is in Flux

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January marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. As commemorations took place around the globe, many were quick to point to the rising tides of white nationalism and antisemitism that are reemerging in the public sphere. Holocaust education has long been viewed as an antidote of sorts to antisemitism, so one might naturally assume that the next generation of Jewish donors would look to place a renewed emphasis on the issue.

Yet younger donors haven't been shy about charting a different path than their parents and grandparents when it comes to Jewish giving, in ways that are affecting how funding flows (or doesn't flow) to religious institutions, arts and culture groups, and Israel-related causes.

So we wondered whether Holocaust education is being similarly affected. Is the subject losing momentum among younger Jewish donors?

An Antidote to Hate

[A Pew Research study](#) from January of 2020 found that basic knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust is waning. Fewer than half of Americans (45%) know that 6 million Jews perished in the Holocaust, and only a similar percentage know that Hitler was democratically elected. Younger generations know less about the Holocaust than older ones do.

These gaps in understanding matter. According to the Pew study, Holocaust awareness correlates with warmer attitudes toward Jews. Respondents who correctly answered 75 percent or more of the questions about the Holocaust scored nine points higher on a "feeling thermometer" about Jewish people than respondents who answered 25 percent or fewer questions correctly.

So based on Pew's findings, Holocaust education makes a difference when it comes to reducing antisemitic attitudes. But are next-generation Jewish donors as interested in promoting this critical cause as their forebears?

According to Dan Rothblatt, executive vice president of the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, the answer is an emphatic yes. "In general, our donors continue to generously support Holocaust remembrance and education projects," he told me. "Each generation finds their own causes, but some second generation remain deeply loyal to the causes supported by their parents."

With \$1.2 billion in assets for the year ending 2018, the Jewish Community Foundation made \$115 million in grants that year. Ten percent of foundation grants and 25% of donor grants went to the umbrella category of education, and while the foundation doesn't earmark a percentage of its grantmaking to Holocaust education specifically (making numbers difficult to come by), members include survivors who dedicate a significant portion of their giving to Holocaust causes. And Rothblatt notes that in most cases, their children and grandchildren are proudly carrying on that legacy. The foundation's grantee list supports this claim, with grants going to organizations such as the 1939 Club, the American Society for Yad Vashem, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and numerous Holocaust museums throughout the U.S. (two of which are based in Los Angeles).

Speaking of Los Angeles, the city may be ground zero for Holocaust education. That's partly due to filmmaker Steven Spielberg, whose [Shoah Foundation](#) is one of the leading proponents of the issue. Shoah has collected over 50,000 survivor testimonials, including those from Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and other minorities who were persecuted by the Nazis. The foundation continues to produce educational materials that confront prejudice, intolerance and bigotry, and per its founder's vocation, does so with a keen eye toward audiovisual engagement.

In addition to developing research programs, bestowing fellowships and organizing academic events, Shoah's Center for Advanced Genocide Research centralizes scholarly research on the Holocaust and other genocidal atrocities through its Visual History Archive. The archive houses over 55,000 video testimonies and over 115,000 hours of footage (not just of Holocaust survivors, but those of other attempted ethnic cleansings such as the Armenian and Rwandan genocides), with a stated purpose to "inspire action against intolerance for generations to come." Shoah began focusing on global outreach in

2015, and by the end of that year, the number of people engaging with their audiovisual testimonies nearly doubled to 6.5 million—many of them students from around the world.

Holocaust Education as a Means to an End

If the Jewish Community Foundation and Shoah are any indication, then Holocaust education giving will continue to thrive well into the next generation. Yet there is another trend in the works here that is worth considering: Many younger donors are prioritizing measurable outcomes and increasingly tying their grantmaking to organizations that move the needle on specific issues. Emerging Jewish donors are no exception, and their outlook is already having effects in the Jewish giving arena, such as [the sidelining of Jewish arts and culture](#) as a key grantmaking priority. Given that there's a fairly clear line from Holocaust education to reduced antisemitism, getting younger donors—or "[Generation Impact](#)," as they've been called—to back this work shouldn't be too hard of a sell. But as with so many areas of philanthropy, the details matter.

Legacy organizations like Yad Vashem and the Simon Wiesenthal Center collect and disseminate survivor testimony, provide resources for students and educators, and generally promote and support Holocaust education. For a long time, those initiatives were enough to keep the grant dollars flowing. Yet times may be changing. In [a recent op-ed for the *Jerusalem Post*](#), Efraim Zuroff, chief Nazi-hunter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and director of its Israel office, wrote that "while Holocaust education is undoubtedly an important component in the arsenal of tools that exist to assist in this effort (combating antisemitism), it is not a miracle drug and cannot immunize all persons everywhere against hatred." Whether intentionally or not, Zuroff's quote ties the issue of Holocaust education to the outcome of rising antisemitism, and seems to suggest that [the recent surge in antisemitic acts](#) is evidence that traditional Holocaust funding may need to be reevaluated, and perhaps augmented with novel approaches.

Steven Windmueller is an emeritus professor of Jewish communal service at the Skirball Campus of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. When I asked Windmueller for his thoughts on the current state of Holocaust education giving, he noted four trends in the works: (1) Earmarked giving to specific interventions associated with educational behavior, with funds specifically directed to social justice outcomes. (2) Donors employing the meaning and impact of the Holocaust in order to change human understanding of genocide and political violence. (3) Giving designed to change the political discourse. And (4)

support for activities designed to push back against contemporary forms of antisemitism and anti-Israel bias.

Those four trends directly tie Holocaust education to specific outcomes. If Windmueller is correct, this would imply that younger generations of Jewish donors are less concerned with the time capsule approach of aggregating the stories of survivors for future generations to access, and more concerned with present-day issues such as antisemitism, anti-Israel bias and politically or ethnically motivated violence. According to Windmueller, “we probably have two streams of donors: ‘traditional Holocaust education’ as represented by an older donor base, and the ‘next-gen donor crowd,’ who are looking at results-directed giving, especially in connection with the current politics of hate.”

I asked Windmueller if he finds this bifurcation worrisome. On the one hand, tying Holocaust education to outcomes helps narrow donors’ focus on the core issues, which in turn may help move the needle on those issues. On the other hand, if that needle doesn’t move, Holocaust education funding may soon dry up, as younger donors seek more results-driven opportunities. Windmueller maintains a decidedly optimistic outlook. “I will argue that these developments are positive,” he said, “as I believe that younger donors are drawing from the meaning and experience of the Holocaust in connecting with the present environment.”

Windmueller notes that tying outcomes to Holocaust education may, in fact, spur greater interest in the issue, given the parallels that younger donors see between today’s political moment and the lead-up to Nazi Germany. “Is this 1933?” he asks. “No, but the seeds of nationalism and authoritarianism are present. Antisemitic beliefs and anti-immigrant attitudes, among other behaviors, are very much being expressed in the public square. For emerging donors, the events of 1933-1945 may resonate with them, sparking their concerns to employ the lessons and experiences of history in fostering community organizing, social justice and political awareness.”

A Bridge That Spans Generations

Windmueller’s observation is perhaps what makes Holocaust education such a resilient issue in terms of donor interest. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we must fully understand how the past came to be. In the context of surging far-right extremism in the U.S. and Europe, it can be argued that Holocaust education funding has never been more crucial.

That sentiment was echoed by **Jeffrey Farber, chief executive officer of [the Koret Foundation](#)**. According to Foundation Center data, Koret granted \$146 million from 2013 to 2018, with over \$62 million allocated to educational causes. A portion of that grant money is allocated to nonprofits that touch on Holocaust education, such as the \$4.5 million gifted over several years to the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, which tracks the history of Polish Jews. [Koret recently announced](#) a \$10 million grant to Shoah and [Hold On To Your Music](#)—which uses music and arts to teach lessons about the Holocaust—to fund arts-based Holocaust education programs and interactive experiences with survivors. The unique program will reach 25,000 educators and 8 million students through educational programming, professional development, and innovative tools like live, virtual and immersive performances.

According to Farber, “many of the funders of today’s leading Holocaust education programs have been at it for years or decades, and have a personal connection to survivors. Here, we see a need for the next generation of philanthropists—those who can connect the lessons of the past to a future free of identity-based hatred—to back the programs that have proven results.”

Farber views Holocaust education as being inexorably tied to combating not just antisemitism, but the growing waves of hate facing all marginalized communities. “By teaching the lessons of history and imparting how they resonate within the context of today’s politics, Holocaust education programs can help reverse the worrying trend of growing identity-based hate.”

While numbers are difficult to lock down, our research suggests that Holocaust education is alive and well with younger Jewish donors. Yet those donors are increasingly applying a results-driven lens to their giving, and Holocaust education grants are no exception. So nonprofits looking to raise donor dollars on the issue may want to consider tying a deeper awareness of the Holocaust with the desired outcomes of the younger generation.