

Universal meaning or historical understanding?

The Holocaust in history and history in the curriculum

In this powerfully argued article Paul Salmons focuses directly on the distinctive contribution that a historical approach to the study of the Holocaust makes to young people's education. Not only does he question the adequacy of objectives focused on eliciting purely emotional responses; he issues a strong warning that turning to the Holocaust in search of universal moral lessons – 'lessons' that merely confirm what we already believe – risks serious distortion of the past. Citing widespread use of the Holocaust as a rhetorical device, Salmons' contention is that failure to engage with its historical and highly complex reality in fact leaves young people open to manipulation and coercion from those who would use the past to push their own social or political agendas. What he offers here is not merely a justification for the Holocaust's position as a compulsory element of the school history curriculum – but a fundamental defence of the place of history in school.

Paul Salmons

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A group of students huddle together in Auschwitz-Birkenau, participating in a memorial service by which they are visibly moved. They light candles, listen attentively as the words of survivors are read out and join in sincere declarations of 'Never again'. Some say prayers. Some cry silently. A few hold on to each other for mutual support. Now they move away from the ruins of the crematoria and the gas chambers, slowly, with their teachers, down the ramp where, two generations earlier, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children from all over Europe climbed out of cattle trucks and railway carriages, and walked to their deaths. As they leave, some shake their heads and wonder aloud, 'I just don't understand how this was possible. I can't imagine how anyone could do this.'

Nearby, another teacher stands with his own group of students and overhears these conversations. Some months later he relates the story, and ruefully remarks that this must count as a somewhat unusual educational activity: we generally do not take our students out of school, and travel such long distances, for them *not* to understand something.¹

This is not, of course, to suggest that students should stop visiting Auschwitz. Clearly such visits can be enormously powerful, and provide rich educational experiences. It is, however, to point out that going on such a visit does not mean that you have understood why or how Auschwitz-Birkenau was built in modern Europe or how it relates to the broader history of the Holocaust. It is also to question whether an emotional experience, *when shorn of historical understanding* – no matter how powerful, memorable and engaging, and regardless of whether it takes place at an authentic site, a film or theatre performance or in the school classroom – can really be said to constitute *learning about the Holocaust* at all.

Shaping the Past?

*Holocaust education must first be about exploring and attempting to understand and explain the historical context of the Holocaust. To be meaningful, it is vital that the past is not shaped to serve the needs of any moral, political, social or ideological agenda.*²

European Agency for Fundamental Human Rights

Strikingly, the research report of the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London into current teaching about the Holocaust reveals that, for many teachers in schools across England, historical understanding is not a major aim when teaching about this period.³

In a survey of more than 2,100 teachers, and interviews with a further 68 teachers across the country, the universal aims 'to develop an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping in any society' and 'to learn the lessons of the Holocaust to ensure that a similar human atrocity never happens again' were, even among history teachers, far more popular than historical aims such as 'to understand and explain the actions of people involved in and affected by an unprecedented historical event' or 'to deepen knowledge of World War II and twentieth century history'.⁴ This emphasis on broad, trans-disciplinary aims may partly account for the difficulty many teachers found in trying to articulate why the Holocaust should be a mandatory element within the history curriculum. In interview, some argued strongly that history had an important role, but many others struggled to say what was distinctive about exploring the past in the history classroom.⁵

Why is the study of the Holocaust *as history* afforded a relatively low status even among many history teachers? Why is it difficult to articulate the distinctive contribution of the history classroom to learning about this subject? Does this reflect a lack of confidence in the value of disciplinary understandings following years of PLTS (Personal Learning and Thinking Skills) and the advocacy of a 'competencies curriculum'?⁶ And if we struggle to make the case for teaching such a significant historical event in the history classroom, what does this mean for our ability to demonstrate the importance and relevance of history in the broader curriculum?

It may be that the power of the Holocaust as a universal warning, as a rhetorical device to advocate a broad array of social aims, coupled with the challenge of conveying the complexity of this history in limited curriculum time, has overwhelmed fundamental historical questions of why and how it happened, explanations of motivation and intent, examinations of different interpretations and an understanding of how narratives and meanings are constructed. In this article, however, I wish to argue that a study of the Holocaust which ignores such an explicitly *historical* approach not only risks distorting the past in the service of presentist aims and misses deeper and more complex meanings, but also leaves young people open to manipulation and coercion from those who use the past to push their own social, political or other agendas. Furthermore, I will argue that the study of the Holocaust *in the history classroom* should be an essential part of young people's educational literacy, and that historical forms of knowledge based upon a sound disciplinary approach can provide our students with powerful ways of knowing the world. This article is intended, then, not only as a rationale for why the study of the Holocaust is mandatory in England's national curriculum for history, but also as a contribution to ongoing discussions about what school history is for, how it should be taught and why history should occupy a central place within the broader school curriculum.⁷

The Holocaust as a rhetorical device

I suppose anyone can excavate from the rubble of mass murder a piece of testimony to support his or her

*philosophy or system of belief or critical point of view. Many of us who explore the terrain of atrocity are occasionally guilty of that. But not at the price, one hopes, of distorting the truth.*⁸

Lawrence Langer

For Langer, many representations of the Holocaust appear less about efforts to confront and to understand the depths and the significance of this history, and more about attempts to appropriate the Holocaust for private moral agendas. The power of the Holocaust as a motif, a metaphor or a rhetorical device, is used to advocate a bewildering array of special interests, social and political agendas. We do not have to search very far on the internet to find examples:⁹

- The Holocaust has been used by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) to campaign against the meat industry. The 'Holocaust on your plate' campaign equated the murder of human beings in the death camps with the slaughter of animals in abattoirs. Matt Prescott, the originator of the campaign stated, 'The fact is all animals feel pain, fear and loneliness. We're asking people to recognise that what Jews and others went through in the Holocaust is what animals go through every day in factory farms.'¹⁰
- According to the *Chicago Tribune*, in 2005 Pope John Paul II wrote that 'abortion is today's Holocaust.'¹¹
- Elsewhere, a website compares the Nazi policies during the Holocaust to the British policies in Ireland during the potato blight: 'As no Jewish person would ever refer to the "Jewish Oxygen Famine of 1939–1945", so no Irish person ought ever refer to the Irish Holocaust as a famine.'¹²

The Holocaust, then, has become 'a ruling symbol in our culture' used to strengthen almost any political, moral or social position we care to argue.¹³

Remembering to forget?

*...by using the term 'myth' I do not suggest – as the so-called revisionists and Holocaust deniers do – that six million Jews were not murdered during the course of the Second World War, many of them by gassing. The historical reality is that around six million Jews were murdered in Second World War Europe... The term myth of the 'Holocaust' – for all its problematic connotations – is useful for distinguishing between the historical event – the Holocaust – and the representation of that event.*¹⁴

Tim Cole

In a media-driven world that can at times seem saturated by what Cole refers to as the myth of the 'Holocaust' (and which he carefully distinguishes from the reality of the historical Holocaust) – in a world where not a week goes by without references to Hitler and Auschwitz in feature films, documentary series, newspapers and literature – it may seem perverse to speak about a 'struggle for memory'. But what is at stake is not *whether* the Holocaust is remembered, but what we choose to remember from this past – what kinds of stories do we tell about the Holocaust, and how far do we seek to incorporate Cole's *historical* Holocaust into our collective memory?

Each day on my way between St Pancras railway station and my office at the Institute of Education, I take a short cut through the courtyard of the British Library, and walk past a small tree, shown in Figure 1, that was planted there in 1998. A plaque nearby reads: 'To commemorate Anne Frank and all the children killed in wars and conflict in this century.'

Few would argue with the importance of public acts of remembrance for the innocent victims of war. But what does such a memorial tell us about the child in whose name it was dedicated? Anne Frank was killed during wartime, of course, but not as a casualty of either war or conflict. Anne Frank was a victim of genocide: she was not one of the 'collateral' deaths of modern warfare – but rather she was specifically targeted for death because she was a Jew, in an unprecedented programme to murder all people of this group everywhere that the perpetrators could reach them. The universal message contained in this dedication includes no mention of this historical reality and conveys a quite different understanding of the circumstances of her death. As such it could be said that it has become another of Cole's 'Holocaust' myths. To reiterate, the term myth is not used here to imply that the story told on the plaque is false, but rather that it is employed as 'a story that evokes strong sentiments, and transmits and reinforces basic societal values'.¹⁵

The problem, of course, is not with the 'basic societal values' themselves, but that in the pursuit of such universal meanings we risk distorting the past. After all, why stop with the deaths of children in wartime? If we choose to universalise even further, Anne Frank died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen, so on this reckoning those remembered on this plaque could be extended to include 'all children who have died of disease': an equal tragedy surely, and a tragedy not only of greater number than children killed in war but arguably one that is more preventable. The cause in both cases – drawing attention to the tragedy of young lives cut short by war or by disease – is unmistakably and unreservedly good; but the 'lessons' in each case have little to do with Anne Frank or the Holocaust.

If the cause is good, why does this matter? By universalising this young girl's murder, we dissolve it of meaning. By decontextualising Anne Frank's death, we fail to confront the historical reality that 90% of all Jewish children in German-occupied Europe were intentionally murdered. Not 'killed in war and conflict' but sought out and murdered as part of a state-led plan to kill every Jewish man, woman and child everywhere that the Nazis and their collaborators could reach them. Surely, this difference matters. But whatever 'lessons' this may hold for our society, they are 'pre-empted' (in Langer's phrase) by a rendering of the past that makes the Holocaust itself more manageable, more palatable, more comfortable: locating it within a frame of reference – 'war is bad', 'racism is wrong', 'evil should be confronted' – upon which there is already broad consensus.

When we go to the past to confirm our pre-existing ideas and world view, what *learning* has actually taken place? The Holocaust is frequently invoked in the classroom to teach universal lessons about the dangers of man's inhumanity to man, the evils of racism and the need for a more tolerant society.¹⁶ The sentiments are noble and important, but do we

Figure 1: A tree planted in the memory of Anne Frank, in the plaza of the British Library, London



really need the Holocaust to demonstrate their value? Racism is wrong not because of the gas chambers of Treblinka, but – intellectually – for its weak and faulty view of human beings, and – morally – for the widespread injustice and suffering it causes in the contemporary world on a daily basis.

In resorting to such universal lessons we risk missing other important insights that come from deeper understandings of the specific historical event. While it is clearly the case that without the Nazis' racist ideology and radical antisemitism the Holocaust could not have happened, still to reduce the Holocaust to a lesson in anti-racism is an oversimplification which:

...does not reveal the complexities of historical process to the student. It leads to the assumption that there was a straight path from racist ideology to the extinction of a people. It overlooks the possibility that there was a 'twisted road to Auschwitz'.¹⁷

Franklin Bialystok

The role of the history classroom

The presence of the Holocaust in our collective memory, in mass media and public discourse, and the use of Holocaust imagery and motifs in the service of diverse political and social agendas, make it essential for young people's educational literacy that they understand this central event of our time and are able to evaluate critically the diverse claims made about it. The many sources and forms of information about the past to which young people are exposed, and the meanings and messages they are used to convey, raise the question of whether all opinions, all interpretations, all representations of the past are equally valid. If not, how do we distinguish between them? These are important ideas for young people to grapple with. What is the status of knowledge? How do we know what we know? How do we weigh different truth claims? They are also essential questions for the history classroom.

Figure 2: How do we read an image that is unreadable? What is the relative importance of the information a source contains and the context in which it is produced when using it as historical evidence? *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, www.auschwitz.org.pl*



If one is to argue that some kinds of emplotment are admissible and others are not, then one must propose some criteria in order to make that judgement. Those can be criteria belonging to the realm of truth or to the realm of morality (and they are not mutually exclusive). But if one argues that all historical representation is relative, then one would be hard put to apply such criteria. Nor is it clear why certain modes of emplotment would be unacceptable, especially if we do not make a distinction between facts and interpretation, truth and lies, reality and image.¹⁸

Omer Bartov

The history classroom has a vital role to play in providing such criteria on the basis of evidential enquiry and disciplinary understandings. Alberto Rosa argues:

...special attention should be paid not only to the events portrayed... but also to the way they are plotted together and the values they convey... there is an unavoidable need to teach the rules of the trade of historiography as a safeguard against the manipulation of the past.¹⁹

Restoring complexity to the past

An activity developed for the IOE's Holocaust Education Development Programme begins by exploring students' presuppositional knowledge of the past – asking how they account for the actions of those who took part or collaborated in the killing, those who tried to prevent the genocide or who rescued people and those who did not take any active role.²⁰

Typically, a view emerges of killers as evil, psychopathic Nazis or else people who had no choice – if they did not kill, they would be killed themselves; of rescuers as heroic, good and noble; and of the rest: ordinary people who did not know what was happening, didn't care or were too powerless or frightened to do anything about it.

Students then test their ideas against a wide range of historical case studies, placing the individuals that they investigate along a continuum on the classroom wall that displays the categories of 'Perpetrators' through 'Collaborators' and 'Bystanders' to 'Rescuers and Resisters'. Through the examination of these detailed accounts, photographs and associated documents, they also search for motivation and intent, writing on post-it notes their *researched* explanations of the decisions and choices made by real people, and then sticking these interpretations on to the case studies which are now displayed across the classroom wall.

The picture of the past that is revealed is far more complex – and far more unsettling – than anticipated. Students discover that there is no record of anyone being killed or sent to a concentration camp for refusing to murder Jewish people, while there are records of people refusing to murder who were simply given other duties or even sent back home. They learn that, while Nazi antisemitic ideology was the driving motivation of many decision-makers and killers, others participated in mass shootings because of peer pressure, ambition or a warped sense of duty. They find examples of rescuers who were antisemitic but who still risked their lives to save Jewish people, while others with more enlightened views did nothing. In a picturesque Austrian town they discover local women, elderly men and teenage boys joining in the hunt for escaped Soviet prisoners of war and murdering them; in a village in Burgenland they find people deporting the extended family of their Roma blacksmith but keeping the blacksmith himself rather than losing his skills. And students uncover the widespread acquiescence of people who enriched themselves through the despoliation of the Jewish people, affirming their support for the regime's persecutory policies by flocking to public auctions where they bought the possessions of their deported neighbours. The past reveals a shocking truth: you do not need to hate anyone to be complicit in genocide.

It is in the cognitive dissonance between how we perceive the world to be and how it is revealed to us when we explore the complexity of the past that we open a space for real learning: not simply taking in new information but having to reorder our categories and our understandings.

Essentially the moral lessons that the Holocaust is often used to teach reflect much the same values that were being taught in schools *before* the Holocaust, and yet – in themselves – were evidently insufficient to prevent the genocide. Notions of tolerance and of human rights have been advocated since the Enlightenment; belief in the intrinsic value of human life, the 'golden rule' of treating others as you would have them treat you, ideas of kindness, courage, charity and goodwill to those in need are all part of the ethical and moral teaching that have underpinned the values of Western society for centuries. And yet it was from that same society that the Holocaust sprang.

The implications are deeply unsettling:

[As] educators we must acknowledge that to educate after, in spite of and because of Auschwitz, we also have to face the very worst dilemmas. There is no way out... Auschwitz meant the collapse of all faith in the capacity of civilized society to instil humane values. Educators have to come to terms with the enormous significance of Auschwitz for our ideals of education.²¹

Matthias Heyl

If we do not face Auschwitz, if we simply turn it into a metaphor for the 'lessons' we wish young people to learn, then we deprive them of the opportunity to ask the challenging and difficult questions that come from the specificity of the event itself. How was it possible that not long ago, and not far from where we live, people collaborated in the murder of their Jewish neighbours? Why didn't people do more to save them? How does the genocide of European Jewry relate to the other atrocities committed by the Nazis: the genocide of the Roma and Sinti (or Gypsies); the mass murder of disabled people; the genocide of the Poles and Slavs; the persecution and murder of political opponents, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and others? How did the victims respond to, and how far did they resist, the unfolding genocide?

There are no simple answers, and the process of enquiry will be challenging and unsettling, but as Paddy Walsh has argued: 'history is made easier at the price of making it less significant.'²²

The struggle for memory

Returning to the young students referred to at the start of this article, standing in Birkenau, deeply moved but unable to understand and left flailing at the limits of their imagination, we may reflect upon Bialystok's contention:

The weakest curricula... resist the mandate to teach. Their approach is grounded in asking the student 'How do you feel?' rather than demanding 'What do you know?' The key to learning about the Holocaust is knowledge, as it is about any other topic.²³

In the case of genocide, such knowledge is especially precious, and especially fragile. Surveying the countless examples of human atrocity, one might conclude that – until the Holocaust – the story of genocide has largely been a history of forgetting. Mass murder has been perpetrated across the world, at all times, but few such crimes have been incorporated into our national narratives and collective memories, into the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Hitler's now famed question on the eve of the Holocaust, 'Who today remembers the Armenians?' still resonates. For centuries, communities have written out of the historical record their deliberate destruction of other human groups. Until 1944, when the Polish Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin first coined the term 'genocide', we did not even have a name for such crimes. This selective forgetting of our past has occurred largely because the victims do not survive to tell their stories. Only the perpetrators remain to choose the stories that they tell about themselves.

Figure 3: A clandestine photograph taken by the Jewish *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944, showing the burning of bodies in open pits. *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, www.auschwitz.org.pl*



In the light of this, we may ask our students to consider the rarely-published, and shadowy photograph in Figure 2 (p. 60) and to try to discern its content and its meaning. What does this photograph show? What is happening? What is its significance? All are questions that are common enough in our history classrooms. We will return to this particular image shortly.

Had the Nazis won the Second World War, their crimes would have been hidden from history. In October 1943, in a speech at Poznan, Heinrich Himmler congratulated his SS officers on their role in 'the extermination of the Jewish people', a 'page of glory,' he said, that would never be written:

I am referring here to the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish people. This is one of the things that is easily said: 'The Jewish people are going to be exterminated,' that's what every Party member says, 'sure, it's in our programme, elimination of the Jews, extermination – it'll be done.'

Figure 4: Documents written by Zalman Gradowski, member of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* working at the gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Discovered buried in the soil of Birkenau, after the war. *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, www.auschwitz.org.pl*



And then they all come along, the 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his one decent Jew. Of course the others are swine, but this one, he is a first-rate Jew.

Of all those who talk like that, not one has seen it happen, not one has had to go through with it. Most of you men know what it is like to see 100 corpses side by side, or 500, or 1000.

To have stood fast through this and – except for cases of human weakness – to have stayed decent, that has made us hard. This is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory in our history.²⁴

Some fourteen months earlier, Himmler appointed SS officer Paul Blobel to lead *Aktion 1005*, a plan to destroy all forensic evidence of the mass murder of European Jewry. At the mass graves of Chelmno, bodies were dug up and burned. The sites of the graves were flattened, ploughed and replanted to hide all trace of what had happened there. Later such scenes were repeated at the death camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. When Himmler spoke of his ‘page of glory’, prisoners had already reopened the mass graves at Babi Yar, a ravine on the outskirts of Kiev, and burned the bodies of some 33,000 Jewish men, women and children who had lain buried there for almost two years.

The destruction of mass graves under *Aktion 1005* continued at sites across the occupied Soviet Union, Poland, Belorussia, the Baltic states, and Yugoslavia. According to Gregory Stanton, attempts to hide material traces of mass atrocities always accompany such crimes, and constitute for him the final stage of genocide.²⁵

In this context, the disciplinary question – how do we know what we know? – takes on new meaning. First, we have the huge amount of written evidence that the perpetrators failed to destroy – a surviving copy of the Wannsee Protocol; written orders and directives; reports by the *Einsatzgruppen*

giving detailed accounts of their mass shootings; and millions of pages of other captured documents. Then there are the confessions of the perpetrators themselves, the reports of eyewitnesses, the archaeological evidence that remains despite the attempts to remove all traces, the blueprints for the construction of the crematoria and the photographs of mass murder. In short, the defeat of the Nazi regime ensured that vast amounts of material did survive. So much, indeed, that the Holocaust is without doubt the most documented genocide in human history, and – consequently – the most studied and best understood.

And yet, this material, essential as it is for understanding why and how the genocide was perpetrated, leaves us with a partial narrative of the Holocaust: one that – according to the IOE research – still dominates much of our teaching and learning and overly reflects the perspective of the perpetrator.²⁶ A perpetrator-oriented narrative (unwittingly) casts the Jewish people as passive objects of persecution, appearing on the stage of history only to be brutalised, humiliated and murdered, rather than as subjects with agency and lives before the persecution: real people in extraordinary circumstances, who responded to the unfolding genocidal process as best they could. But when the Nazis’ explicit aim was to destroy utterly all trace of the Jewish people – except for a planned museum to a ‘vanished race’ that would be exhibited in Prague after the war – how can we discover the voice of the victims and incorporate it into the classroom?

In the history classroom we continually seek to engage students in more sophisticated readings of evidence that draw together text – information that a source contains – with context – the circumstances in which it was produced. But at times it is hard to move them beyond a simple comprehension exercise and a formulaic ‘who produced this source, why, and for what audience?’ or – worse – ‘is it biased?’ It may be that a source such as the photograph in Figure 2, in which the ‘text’ is so obscure as to be unreadable, can help move our students to a fuller realisation of the importance of context in making meaning. This blurry image is a photograph taken in secret by members of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz-Birkenau. A little questioning may help students to understand its meaning: given that the *Sonderkommando* were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria of the death camp, what do students think they were trying to photograph and why? Most will deduce that the image is trying to capture the killing process; the image itself should also reveal something about the danger involved in this attempt, trying to record evidence of mass murder while standing among the perpetrators who were committing these crimes. And the more we reflect on that context, the more starkly the image resolves itself – we glimpse in its shadows something of the perspective of the victims. Not what they were actually trying to show, but – in their very failure to capture a clear image – a sense of the extraordinarily dangerous risk they were running in attempting to do so.

But what if this were the only such image to have been taken? It is of such poor quality that it would hardly count as evidence at all. In fact, it is one of four photographs (of which Figure 3 is another example) that were taken and smuggled out of the camp in September 1944 by two political prisoners, with a note for the outside world:

We send you photographs from Birkenau – people who have been gassed. The photograph shows a heap of bodies piled outdoors. Bodies were burned outdoors when the crematorium could not keep pace with the number of bodies to be burned.

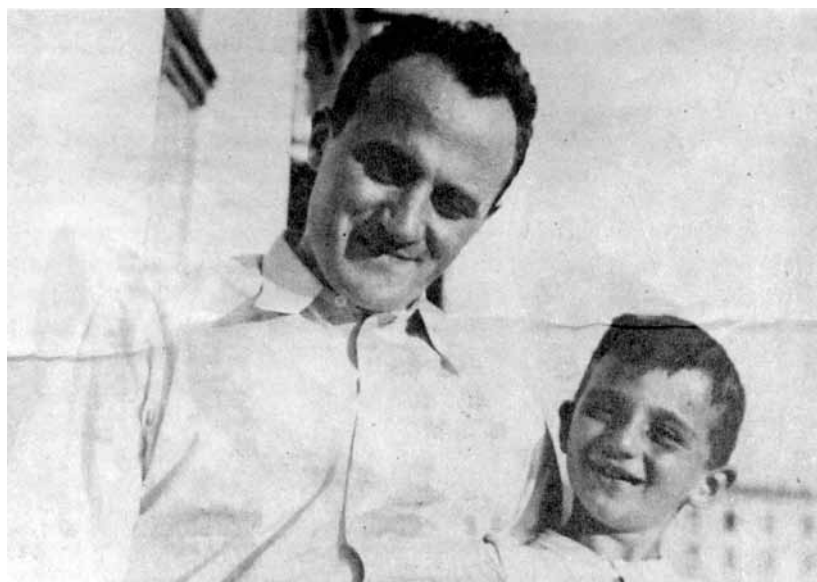
Since the end of the war, a number of documents written by members of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* have been discovered buried in the very soil of Auschwitz-Birkenau. One, a note by Zalman Gradowski written on 6 September 1944, was hidden in an aluminium flask (see Figure 4). It reads:

*Dear Finder
Search everywhere, in every inch of soil. Tens of documents are buried under it – mine and those of other persons – which will throw light on everything that was happening here. Great quantities of teeth are also buried here. It was we, the *Sonderkommando*, who expressly have strewn them all over the terrain, as many as we could, so that the world should find material traces of the millions of murdered people. We ourselves have lost hope of being able to live to see the moment of liberation.*

Elsewhere, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, whose picture can be seen in Figure 5, led an effort to document daily life inside the Warsaw ghetto. The *Oneg Shabbat* archive was buried in tins and milk churns and only discovered after the war. The documents contained in this secret archive preserve the memory of the victims and give an invaluable insight into the responses of the people of the ghetto to the persecution by the Nazis.

Ringelblum, his wife and their young son were all shot in the ruins of the ghetto in 1944. Zalman Gradowski was killed leading a revolt of the *Sonderkommando* that resulted in the destruction of one of the crematoria buildings. These people, and many others like them, resorted to history as their means of defiance, determined that the crimes perpetrated against them would not disappear without trace. They risked their lives to document and record their experience of persecution and to cry out to subsequent generations to know what happened to them. I have argued that the complexity of the past defies easy packaging into neat moral lessons, and that the history of the Holocaust may raise profoundly unsettling questions about our society and about the human condition. Many educators may be rightly concerned about the impact that such a study could have upon the young people in their care, the distress and disorientation that it may cause. But it seems to me there is another imperative, and that is our ethical responsibility to the people whose lives and deaths we study. Our students are not able to change what they find, but neither are they altogether powerless. When studying the Holocaust, in the very act of historical enquiry, in struggling to learn and to understand, they make common cause with the people in the past and join with them in an act of resistance against the desecration of memory. Those who privilege presentist aims perhaps miss the sense in which – in this case at least – the pursuit of historical knowledge is itself an ethical and moral endeavour, given attempts by the perpetrators to destroy the evidence and the risks taken by the victims to document and preserve it.

Figure 5: Emanuel Ringelblum, with his young son, Uri Yad Vashem



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