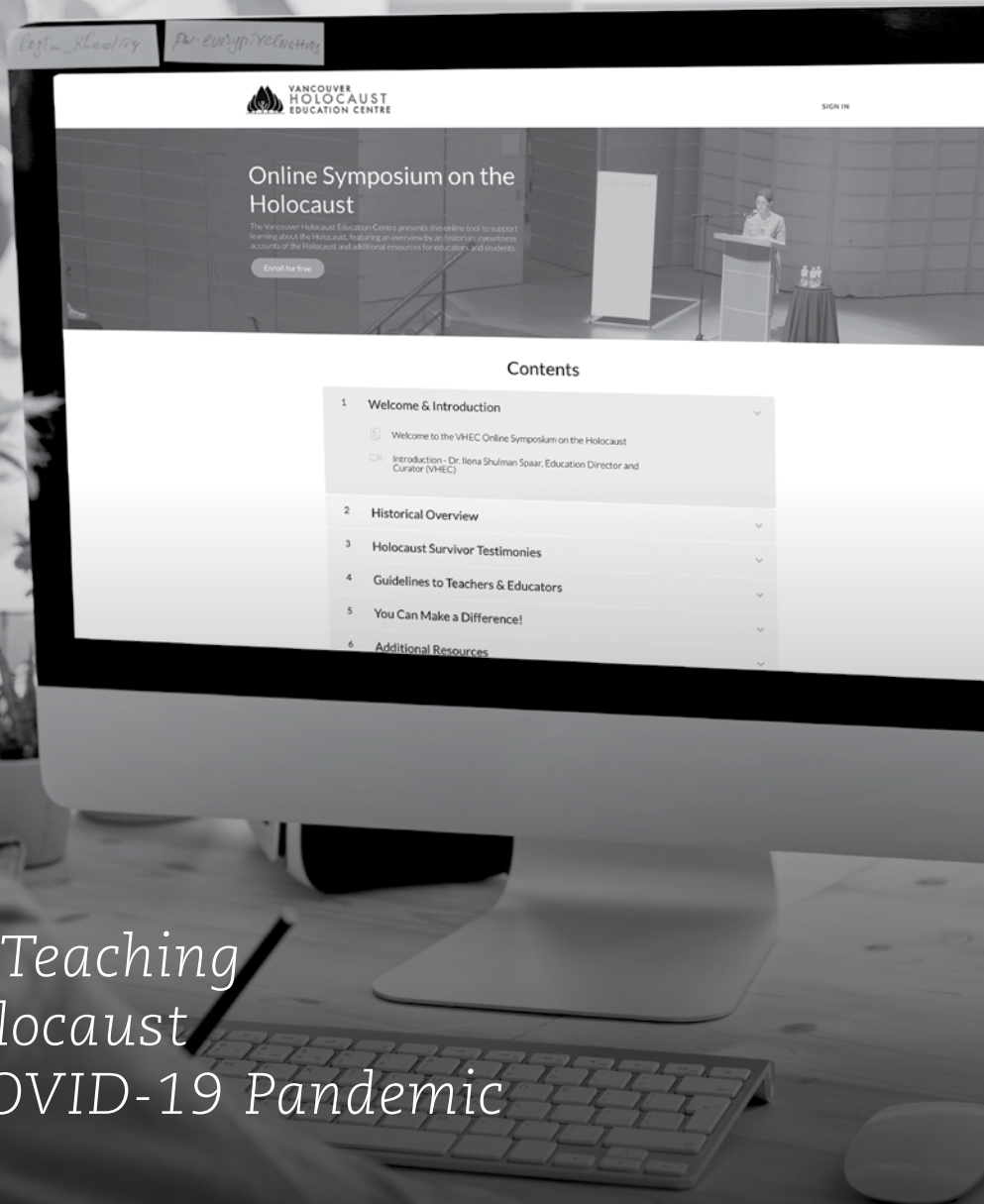


VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE

# ZACHOR



*Learning and Teaching  
About the Holocaust  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

**FALL 2020**

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MUSEUMS AS SITES OF LEARNING  
AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

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ISOLATION: REFLECTIONS ON  
CATASTROPHE AND SURVIVAL

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IN SEARCH  
OF MIRACLES

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VANCOUVER  
HOLOCAUST  
EDUCATION  
CENTRE

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**FALL 2020**  
**ZACHOR**  
*Remember*

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Cover: The VHEC developed its first-ever Online Symposium on the Holocaust for students to access during home-based learning. Courtesy of Pexels. Photograph by Julia M. Cameron.

VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE



# TREASURED BELONGINGS

THE HAHN FAMILY & THE SEARCH FOR A STOLEN LEGACY

We are very pleased to welcome visitors to the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre to view our acclaimed exhibition, *Treasured Belongings: The Hahn Family & the Search for a Stolen Legacy*, by appointment only.



Your timed visit will allow us to coordinate your entrance to the building with the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver and to ensure a safe experience at the VHEC.

We have implemented new visiting procedures and physical distancing measures for your safety, and ours. We ask that all visitors follow the procedures and code of conduct outlined on our website and onsite. Please carefully review this information in advance of booking your visit. Procedures are subject to change, so check for any updates before your arrival.

Appointments to view the exhibition are available on

**WEDNESDAYS BETWEEN 10 AM AND 3 PM.**

Please contact [info@vhec.org](mailto:info@vhec.org) or **604-264-0499** to schedule a booking. We look forward to seeing you soon!

Dear Readers,

Our last issue of *Zachor* was created in a different, pre-pandemic world. My colleagues and I could not have envisioned our reliance on video conferencing and the indefinite interruption of our on-site school tours and symposia—two core educational programs central to our mandate. Today, as we look forward to the upcoming school year, there are many questions and much uncertainty. Yet, the work of the professional team over the last several months—characterized by excellence, collaboration and innovation—lays the foundation for our continued adaptability and engagement with our audiences, who in turn are engaging with the Holocaust and its ongoing relevance in new ways.

In these pages, you will learn about the development of our first Online Symposium on the Holocaust and some of the remarkable feedback this resource has generated from students and teachers. In an article also appearing in a diversity and inclusion-themed issue of the BC Museums Association's magazine, I consider the opportunities the anti-racism movement permeating North America presents for cultural institutions. Alongside updates about our programs, collections and funding, this issue also features writing by a range of contributors, from Holocaust survivors to a member of the third generation. As always, we are grateful to all those who entrusted their memories and reflections to us to share with our community.

The reopening of the Centre to public visitors by appointment in mid-July was an exciting moment, and we have been thrilled to welcome a steady stream of visitors in recent weeks. If you have not yet viewed our current exhibition, *Treasured Belongings: The Hahn Family & the Search for a Stolen Legacy*, please visit the 'Plan a Visit' page on our website for more information about our safety protocols. Given this spring's interruption to our opening hours, we are very pleased to announce the extension of this exhibition through June 30, 2021 and will have further updates about related programming in the near future.

Between issues, we regularly update members about our upcoming initiatives via email. If you are not currently receiving our e-mails and wish to do so, please contact [info@vhec.org](mailto:info@vhec.org).

You will soon be receiving an invitation to an important virtual public program on October 27th presented in partnership with the Consulate of the Federal Republic of Germany, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria, featuring German-American author and illustrator Nora Krug. Moderated by Globe and Mail arts correspondent Marsha Lederman, the event will explore themes of identity, memory, inherited responsibility and the cultural legacies of war in Krug's visual memoir, *Belonging: A German Reckons With History and Home*, winner of the 2018 National Book Critics Circle Award in Autobiography.

**Please also save the date for our virtual Annual General Meeting on Wednesday, October 14th, with a notice to members to follow.**

As the High Holidays approach, the VHEC Board and staff joins me in wishing you and yours a happy, healthy and safe New Year.

Sincerely,



Nina Krieger  
Executive Director

# Learning and Teaching about the Holocaust During the COVID-19 Pandemic

BY ILONA SHULMAN SPAAR

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the Annual Symposium on the Holocaust. The first symposium on the Holocaust in Vancouver was organized by Dr. Robert Krell, a child survivor of the Holocaust and professor of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and Vancouver-based scholars Graham Forst, William Nicholls and Robert Gallagher, as part of their ambitious project collecting and recording survivor testimonies. Krell, Forst, Nicholls and Gallagher recognized the educational potential of eyewitness accounts for a general audience, and the impact that survivor testimonies could have on students and teachers. This first symposium featured Holocaust survivor speakers who shared their experiences before, during and after the Holocaust, and became an annual event, organized by the Canadian Jewish Congress—Pacific Region's Standing Committee on the Holocaust, then by the VHEC, starting in 1995, with the support of its High School Symposium Committee. Over the decades, day-long symposia on the Holocaust, typically held each May at UBC, were attended by more than 500 high-school students annually. Students engaged with survivor speakers in small group sessions, viewed films and heard from a historian and/or special guest speaker.

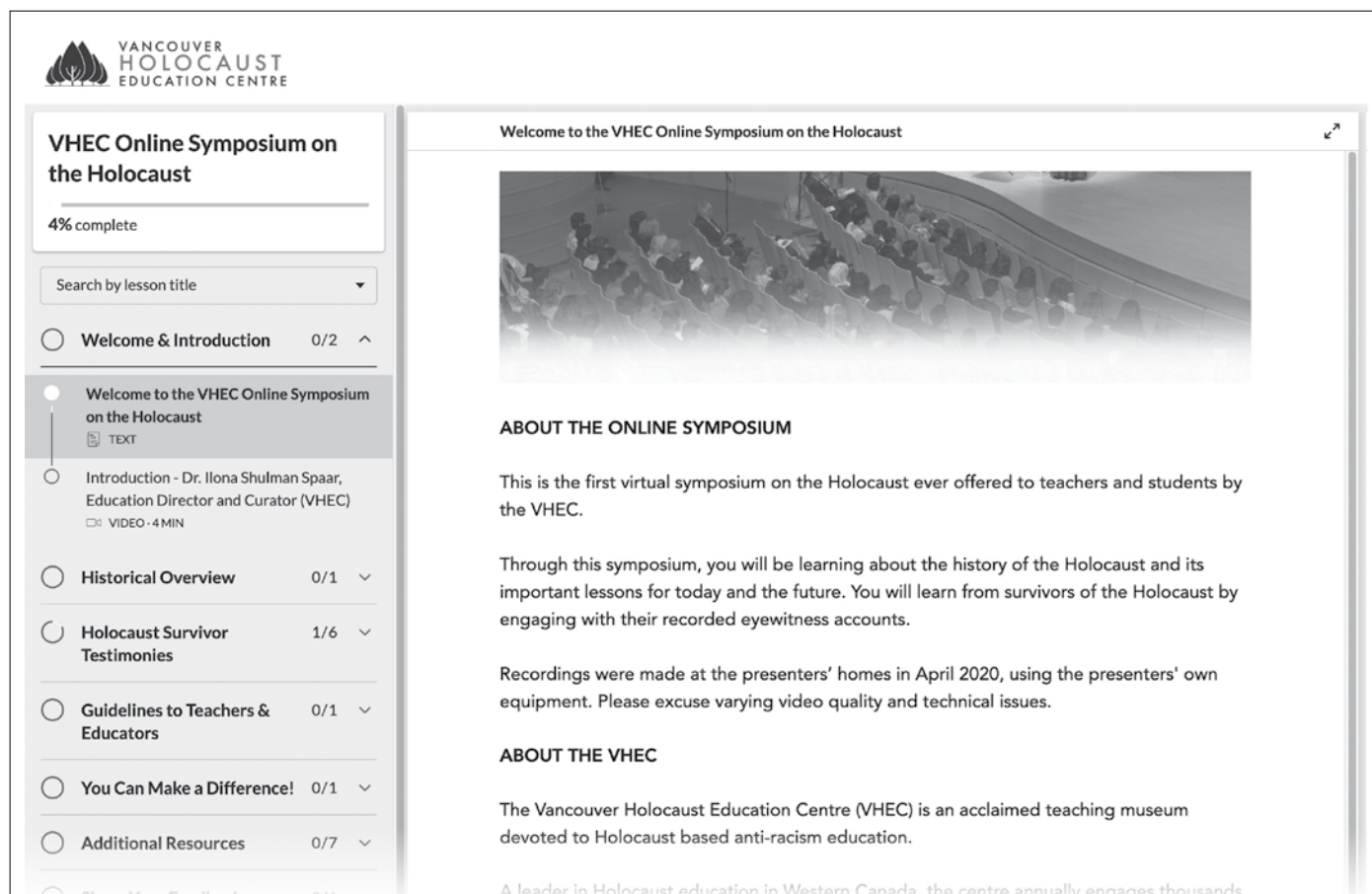
In response to demand for the annual symposium from local schools, the VHEC and its Outreach Committee launched half-day symposia on the Holocaust in school districts across the Lower Mainland. Over the years of symposia programming in Vancouver, thousands of students and educators have learned about the Shoah and its important lessons for the present and the future through engagement with eyewitnesses of the Holocaust. Many students are moved to comment on the memorable learning experience they have while attending symposia, some even describing the experience as “life-changing.”

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 45th Annual Symposium on the Holocaust, as well as several district-wide symposia, were cancelled. To replace the in-person gatherings, the VHEC developed its first-ever Online Symposium on the Holocaust.

Before deciding on the program, the VHEC considered several questions: What is the appropriate format for a virtual symposium, to best suit both teachers and students? How do we record speakers while ensuring their safety during the pandemic? What platform should we use to present the content? And how do we best provide flexible access? Perhaps the most challenging question was: Will there be interest in and time for attending an online symposium among students and teachers, given the unprecedented and turbulent circumstances of adjusting to home-based learning and teaching? Never mind the significant competition with other online educational programming offered by organizations at the onset of the pandemic.

After consultation with members of the Teacher Advisory Committee and other teachers in the Lower Mainland, the VHEC's education team quickly developed a virtual program that supports students and teachers in a variety of settings, including home-based learning, and recommended for grades 10 through 12. With assistance and technical support from VHEC staff, recordings for the virtual symposium were made at the presenters' homes in April 2020.

Moderated by Education Director Dr. Ilona Shulman Spaar, the symposium includes a video-recorded historical overview on the Holocaust by Dr. Lauren Faulkner Rossi of Simon Fraser University and video-recorded eyewitness accounts, and answers to frequently-asked questions, by Holocaust survivors



Welcoming page of the first Online Symposium on the Holocaust, launched in mid-May 2020. The resource was created using a software program created by Vancouver-based technology company Thinkific.

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz and Dr. Robert Krell. The symposium includes guidelines for teachers, a note to students on how they can make a difference in combatting racism and antisemitism, and links to further resources.

Once registered with Thinkific, the platform hosting the symposium, users can access symposium contents free-of-charge at any time, offering different levels of engagement and learning at the user's own pace. It can be taught in half a day, or over several days or weeks.

From its launch in mid-May until the summer break in June of 2020, approximately 530 students and teachers from 35 schools in British Columbia signed up for the online symposium. Schools included public, private and alternative schools in cities including Vancouver,

Surrey, Richmond, Burnaby, New Westminster, Mission, Abbotsford, Langley, Chilliwack, Salmon Arm, Kamloops and Prince George.

The VHEC received positive and moving feedback about the virtual symposium, both from teachers and students:

*I cannot express how valuable it's been to have "salvaged" the Holocaust symposium. A huge shout-out to you [Education Director] and your team for putting this incredibly powerful event together during these very challenging times. I was very impressed with how quickly the VHEC pivoted to the online format. The symposium continues to embellish my classroom, specifically my Social Studies 10 human rights unit, and our school. —Teacher, Social Studies 10*

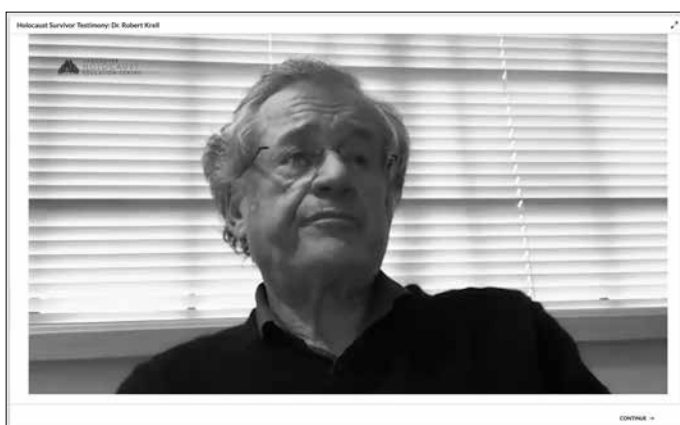
*I would like to thank you on teaching me about the severity of the Holocaust. Before I never thought about the consequences too much. I knew it was bad and all, but I never gave it much thought. It didn't help that [I] come from the other side of the world where I never saw the effects firsthand and only heard stories. Now I know that I was very naïve when it came to this subject. I thought that I could sweep it under the rug, and I did not need to worry myself about it. I was wrong, the Holocaust and Nazi regime is something that must be in our minds [...] Once again thank you for further explaining the seriousness of the Holocaust and mass genocide. I would have ignored it and not concerned myself with it. Now I know better. Thank you again. —Student, grade 10*

*I wanted to say thank you for all the time and effort you put in to organize the symposium online this year! It was still very impactful, and I think it was possibly even more meaningful. When I was watching Ms. Boraks-Nemetz's testimony, I was so drawn into what she was saying because I could really see all the emotion she was experiencing as she was talking. She is such a good speaker and it was very powerful. Thank you again for everything! This was a very important experience. —Student, grade 10*

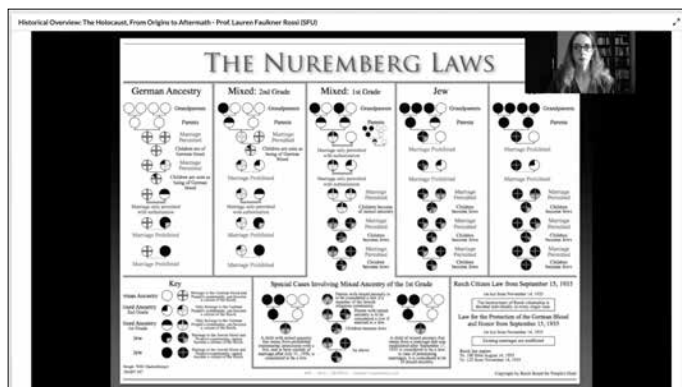
*I just wanted to say how inspired I am by Dr. Krell's growth in Canada. The fact that he not only used his experience to fuel his profession as a child psychiatrist, but founded organizations and helped encourage*

*other survivors to identify is amazing. [...] Like him, it makes me wonder what the millions of persecuted Jews could have accomplished if they lived to see today. Now, it reminds me that I should be grateful for the opportunities I have in a generally peaceful world. We may be in a time of a pandemic right now where my graduation plans are severely altered and certain things are unknown, but at least I am with my family. Things could be a lot worse right now, after all, but fortunately we are all together. Apparently, it took a Holocaust symposium to remind me of that despite it all, I am still so blessed. —Student, grade 12*

*I want to thank you for the virtual experience you have provided for students during this difficult time of COVID-19. Being a history fanatic. I have watched countless documentaries and survivor testimonies, but I found this particular experience to be far more impactful than anything I have ever seen. I sometimes find it hard to believe that something so horrific could take place. Seeing a member of my community, a man you would pass on the street without a second glance, tell his story put things into perspective for me. These are real people, with real lives, who lived through real tragic events. There are physical human faces to each statistic, and these faces walk among us in our everyday world. By telling their stories, the survivors define them, but instead they define the Holocaust. Thank you for teaching people like me the importance of the human story behind every history lesson. —Student, grade 12*



Screenshots of video-recorded presentations by Holocaust survivor speakers Lillian Boraks-Nemetz and Dr. Robert Krell, as presented in the Online Symposium on the Holocaust.



Screenshots of the historical overview on the Holocaust as part of the virtual Symposium, presented by Dr. Lauren Faulkner-Rossi, professor of history at SFU.

During the past two decades, the VHEC has created and offered many online teaching resources to accommodate learning about the Shoah in remote learning settings. Primary Voices, teacher's guides related to past exhibitions, and online exhibitions, with their integrated lesson plans and supporting material for student engagement, became increasingly relevant to the VHEC's work during the recent transition from in-person to home-based teaching. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the continuing relevance of virtual teaching resources about anti-racism and social justice.

Currently, the VHEC is developing new online resources that foster historical and critical thinking and allow flexible user settings, including home-based learning. The following virtual projects will be launched in the school year 2020/21:

- A student guide on anti-racism, with emphasis on enhancing students' media literacy skills and how they can stand up against different forms of racism
- A workshop about antisemitism, hate and propaganda with a focus on enhancing students' media literacy skills to detect antisemitic tropes and how they can confront them
- A virtual exhibition tour of *Treasured Belongings: The Hahn Family & the Search for a Stolen Legacy*

- A online exhibition of *Treasured Belongings: The Hahn Family & the Search for a Stolen Legacy*
- A online exhibition of *In Focus: The Holocaust Through the VHEC Collection*

Virtual resources do not replace in-person programming, but rather complement it. There is no doubt about the great impact of engaging an audience in real time and in person with a survivor speaker or museum educator in order to foster empathy, historical and critical thinking, as well as the understanding of social justice. The VHEC is keen to resume real time, in-person learning through sessions with volunteer Holocaust survivor speakers at schools and through volunteer docent-led museum exhibition tours. Staff look forward to recommencing these powerful in-person lessons once COVID-19 restrictions on group gatherings are lifted. ■

**Follow these three easy steps to access the online symposium:**

- Visit: <https://vhcsymposium.thinkific.com/>
- Click on "Enroll for free"
- Register with your e-mail contact and password

**Dr. Ilona Shulman Spaar is the Education Director and Curator of the VHEC. She developed the Online Symposium on the Holocaust together with Program Coordinator Zoya Siddiqui.**

# Museums as Sites of Learning and Agents of Change

BY NINA KRIEGER



Students on a group tour at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 2018. Photograph by Ilona Shulman Spaar.

Founded by Holocaust survivors who settled in Vancouver after the Second World War, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre was envisioned as a legacy for the citizens of British Columbia in the form of an anti-racism education centre. The VHEC is now Western Canada's leading Holocaust teaching museum, dedicated to the promotion of social justice, human rights and genocide awareness. The Centre's exhibitions, programs and resources engage students and the general public in learning about the consequences of antisemitism and racism left unchecked.

Holocaust scholars and educators are wary of drawing direct comparisons between the Holocaust and current events, which risk trivializing the enormity of the

Holocaust and diminishing the complexity of our present-day challenges. Yet there are important lessons to draw from engaging with the history of the twentieth century's paradigmatic genocide—lessons about the dangers of dehumanizing any group of people, about the role of media in propagating fear and hate, about what is at stake when remaining a bystander. Fundamentally, Holocaust education promotes self-reflection and critical thinking about the world and one's own roles and responsibilities within it.

Now, as the number of Holocaust survivors and other eyewitnesses central to many of our programs declines, the need to advance anti-racism education is more urgent than ever. This urgency is underscored by evidence

of persistent and mounting antisemitism, racism and xenophobia globally, including in our own communities in British Columbia. The VHEC is being called on with increasing frequency to offer programming in direct response to specific incidents of antisemitism in educational settings, from elementary schools to postsecondary institutions.

In reflecting on the role of education in countering discrimination, it is important to acknowledge that education in itself is not enough. During the Holocaust, highly educated lawyers, judges and physicians were instrumental in perverting justice and medicine to enable Nazi crimes based on racist ideology. A number of the leaders in the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) responsible for murdering approximately one-and-a-half million of the Holocaust's six million victims held doctorate degrees. To support a civil and pluralistic society, our learning must promote historical knowledge, historical thinking, critical thinking, empathy and social justice. Education must be actively anti-racist, confronting structural racism and fostering multiculturalism.

As sites of learning and public engagement, museums play a vital role in reinforcing and enhancing education that takes place in classroom settings. Through exhibitions, collections and programs that speak to the histories and present-day realities of diverse communities in our province, cultural institutions provide opportunities for students and public visitors to learn about historic injustices and the contributions of cultural and other minority groups. Several of the VHEC's past exhibitions in our rotating program—including *Too Close to Home: Nazism and Anti-Semitism in Canada* and "Enemy Aliens": *The Internment of Jewish Refugees in Canada, 1940–43*—have explored relatively unknown and exclusionary aspects of Canadian history. Other exhibitions such as *Shanghai as a Refuge During the Holocaust* (bilingual in English and Mandarin) and *Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals, 1933–45*, have broadened understanding of the scope of the Holocaust and engaged new audiences.

The VHEC has frequently convened intercultural, and often intergenerational, dialogues to provide opportunities for exchanges among and between



Left: Éloge Butera (left), a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, frequently shares his experience with BC students alongside Holocaust survivor Robbie Waisman (right), 2016. Photograph by Katie Powell. Right: Chief Robert Joseph of Reconciliation Canada has been a keynote speaker at several VHEC Symposium. Photograph taken at the 2017 Annual Symposia on the Holocaust. Photograph by Sarika Kelm.



The VHEC's latest exhibition, *Treasured Belongings: The Hahn Family & The Search for a Stolen Legacy*, examines the cultural loss that accompanies genocide and the intergenerational legacies of the Holocaust, 2020. Photograph by Ilene Yu.

community groups affected by persecution, including survivors of Indian Residential Schools and survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. These exchanges have illuminated the unique experiences of these groups and also parallels between them, including remarkable resilience in the face of injustice. Partnerships with other cultural and community groups have been an important means of advancing the VHEC's mission. While such partnerships have typically been mobilized for specific programs, we are eager to forge more sustained relationships with individuals and institutions that can deepen our conversations and broaden our impact.

To be agents of change and to advance values of diversity and inclusion, museums must recognize, interrogate and dismantle their own structures and practices that contribute to exclusion and oppression.

Museums in BC and beyond are engaged in the essential work of diversifying staff and boards and creating actively anti-racist products and processes. This includes ensuring transparency about collecting practices rooted in colonialism, increasing awareness of diverse audiences served and acknowledging that the sourcing and allocation of funds has often supported white privilege. Moving forward—and strategically working towards a culture of equity and inclusion—will take commitment and resources, including time and funding dedicated to core operations and for gradual, ongoing change. To be actively anti-racist, museums must shine a light on society's and our own injustices, achievements and the in-between—all essential for collective memory and imagination. ■

Nina Krieger is the Executive Director of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. This article appeared in the Fall 2020 issue of *Roundup*, the quarterly magazine of the BC Museums Association.

# A Special Acquisition

BY SHYLA SELLER

Jannushka Elisheva Jakoubovitch<sup>21</sup> first connected with the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre in 2003, when, after moving from Victoria to Vancouver, she offered to tell her story to students through the VHEC's Survivor Outreach Program.

In a letter to the program's coordinator, Rita Akselrod, Jannushka explains that she decided to tell her story to students "not because I feel 'proud'—of what? I wish it had never happened to my entire family who disappeared from the surface of the earth. And 'we' the survivors, especially the 'children,' as I was a child, all our life felt so guilty to have survived, it destroyed a part of our lives because, at least for myself, I felt I didn't deserve to have so much opportunity and to be happy... What a waste!"

Jannushka's mother had given her, as she writes in her letter, "one of the infamous yellow Stars of David,

just before she passed away, for me to tell my story (how could I forget?) and keep one of them which she had put on my clothes before we went into hiding, my brother and I. I keep it ... I've shown it to several students in Victoria. It's very painful but rewarding when some students touch my arm before giving me a hug and say, 'Oh my G-d, it's not from the television ... you are a real person'!"

Jannushka's mother had sewed a soft cloth lining on the back of her star badge before stitching it on to her daughter's clothes. Through the years Jannushka volunteered as a survivor outreach speaker, she always kept this yellow star badge with her and pulled it out to show students during her presentations. It served as a constant reminder of the antisemitism she was confronted with throughout her life; from her childhood in Paris pre-war and time spent in hiding in other parts of France,



Left: Jannushka Elisheva Jakoubovitch's Star of David badge, <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/objects/8317>. Center: Jannushka Jakoubovitch, her mother and brother in the 18th arrondissement, Paris, before the Holocaust, circa 1930s. Right: Hosiek/Max Jakoubovitch, Louise Jakoubovitch, and uncle David in England, circa 1930s. From the Jannushka Elisheva Jakoubovitch fonds.



Jannushka Elisheva Jakubovitch with students at Topham Elementary School, Vancouver, in 2015.

to her experiences travelling abroad as a young woman and, later, while addressing groups of students in Canadian classrooms. These experiences with antisemitism are detailed in her memoir, *Tales of a Parisienne*, which can be read online in the VHEC's collections database at <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/objects/8316>.

In December, 2019, counsellor and coordinator of survivor services Donna Cantor visited Jannushka in her home for what would be their last visit. During this visit, Jannushka gave Donna her yellow Star of David badge marked *juif*, and a copy of her recent memoir, for deposit into the VHEC's library, archives and museum collection. The materials arrived at the Centre with a note from their owner: "Nina, please use my full name, Jannushka Elisheva Jakubovitch."

The VHEC is honoured to be the permanent home for Jannushka Elisheva Jakubovitch's Star of David badge, her testimonies, digitized family photographs, and her memoir. The Centre will work to ensure these materials serve her legacy of work in Holocaust education and remembrance, confronting different forms of antisemitism around the world. With respect to her legacy, Mount Boucherie Secondary School teacher Jason Hudson writes: "Jannushka was an amazing, inspirational woman. My students still talk about her presentation and how amazing she was. It was a true honour to meet her and listen to her life experiences. She encouraged so many students to find their voice and stand up for what they believe in, she will truly be missed." ■

Shyla Seller is the Archivist at the VHEC.

# Pathways into the Collection: New Online Galleries

BY SHANNON LABELLE

The VHEC has created four new online galleries to highlight its holdings and to support researchers and teachers.

## Spotlight on Electronic Resources

(<https://collections.vhec.org/Gallery/398>)

Launched in July, showcases a selection of electronic books, reference resources, journals and other publications that can be accessed from home while the library remains closed due to the pandemic.

## Intergenerational Aspects: Descendants of Holocaust Survivors

(<https://collections.vhec.org/Gallery/378>)

Launched in June, features resources by and about the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors. This gallery includes catalogue records describing memoirs, novels, studies, poetry, art, archival holdings, museum artefacts and other material about those living with the intergenerational legacies of the Holocaust.

## The Warsaw Ghetto and Its Uprising

(<https://collections.vhec.org/Gallery/380>)

Launched in April to coincide with Yom HaShoah and the anniversary of the beginning of the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943, highlights resources related to the Warsaw ghetto and the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

The resources in this online gallery include memoirs, chronicles, a graphic novel, a film, survivor testimonies and artefacts including letters and postcards from the Warsaw ghetto.

## To Bear Witness: Holocaust Remembrance and Commemoration

(<https://collections.vhec.org/Gallery/379>)

Launched in April for Yom HaShoah, offers an array of historical and contemporary resources dedicated to commemoration including books, theses, remarks, artefacts, photographs and survivor testimonies. From local Holocaust remembrance initiatives such as the Vancouver Holocaust Memorial Committee to national endeavours such as Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, from individual memoirs to public monuments, the resources in this gallery speak to the many manifestations of how the memory of the Shoah is preserved by diverse communities.

These and more galleries can be viewed in the VHEC's online collections database: <https://collections.vhec.org/Gallery/featured>. Questions about the galleries and requests for help with Holocaust-related research can be sent to [collections@vhec.org](mailto:collections@vhec.org). ■

Shannon LaBelle is the Librarian at the VHEC.

The VHEC Library will be offering takeout service for VHEC members and BC teachers starting September 15, 2020. Members and teachers can browse the online catalogue (<https://collections.vhec.org/>) and email requests for items in the library collection to [library@vhec.org](mailto:library@vhec.org). When takeout orders are ready, staff will be in touch to schedule a pickup appointment.

## Collections News

BY SHYLA SELLER

### BC Heritage Award

In May, 2020, the VHEC received a BC Heritage award of honour for high achievement in planning and management. This award recognizes individuals or organizations that have produced reports, studies and other efforts that demonstrate best practices of innovations and traditions, community consultation, long-term sustainability, building resilience, and accessibility, and who advance the diversity and inclusivity of heritage. The VHEC received this award for its Digital Preservation Policy, created in 2017 with the support of the Library and Archives Canada's Documentary Heritage Communities Program. The goal of this DHCP-funded project was to create a long-term policy and strategy document to guide digital preservation activities at the VHEC, specifically to preserve the Centre's large collection of Holocaust testimonies which had been digitally captured from degrading U-matic tapes. The project contributed to the VHEC's understanding of the fragility of tape and the life of a digital record. Thereby, it helped prevent the obsolescence and loss of these important recordings. The BC Heritage awards jury said: "This is an important and needed piece of work that will serve the organization for many years."

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### New in Finding Aids

Newly described and digitized materials are now available for research in the online collections database at [collections.vhec.org](http://collections.vhec.org). These include René Goldman's family photographs and documents relating to his parents, Wolf and Mira Goldman, and his time in French orphanages after the war. Amalia Boe-Fishman donated photographs and documents related to her childhood in hiding in Holland and the two families who cared

for her. Arthur Hollander (who was involved with the VHEC's Second Generation Group) donated photographs and documents, including his account of his parents' story of survival from the Warsaw ghetto and Siberia, to Tehran, central Africa and finally Canada. In 2008, Robert Krell donated 28 postcards mailed by Sylvia Loewy to her husband, Fritz. The postcards were sent to shtetls, camps and ghettos across the Polish Central Government region in an attempt to reach Loewy's husband, who had been rounded up with other Jews in Oslo, Norway, and deported in 1942. Postcards can now be read online along with research into the fate of the Loewys.

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### Irving K. Barber BC History Digitization Program

The VHEC was successful in its request for funding from the Irving K. Barber BC History Digitization Program, which supports increased access to BC's historical resources. This year's application focused on the digitization of Sidi Schaffer's recent donation of photographs, audiovisual tapes and textual records documenting the Gesher Project exhibition, which travelled across Canada in 1999, displaying artworks and texts created by Holocaust survivors, child survivors and children of survivors.

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### Guidance with Archives and Artefacts

Collections staff have been working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, and are available to answer questions regarding what in your home might be of long-term archival value and what might be potentially useful to the VHEC for its activities in Holocaust education and remembrance. We can also offer guidance on how you can best store and take care of the family archives and artefacts in your care. Email [collections@vhec.org](mailto:collections@vhec.org). ■

## Funding News

Amidst the financial uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the development and delivery of many of our programs, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre has received a number of grants to sustain and grow our work.

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### **Vancouver Foundation Community Response Fund**

The VHEC has been awarded \$25,000 from the Community Response Fund, a grant launched by four partners, Vancouver Foundation, Vancity, United Way Lower Mainland, and the City of Vancouver, to support community organizations through the pandemic. The grant helps cover loss of revenue due to pandemic-related suspension of activities and supports the development of initiatives such as our Online Symposium on the Holocaust.

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### **BCMA Resilience Fund**

British Columbia's museums, galleries, Indigenous cultural centres, and heritage organizations are experiencing unprecedented hardship due to COVID-19 shutdowns. In partnership with the Government of BC, the BC Museums Association launched a Resilience Fund to offer small, one-time grants to organizations facing an immediate need for funds. The VHEC received the maximum grant allocation of \$4,000.

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### **Virtual Museum of Canada**

The VHEC has been awarded a federal grant of up to \$149,893 to develop a bilingual online exhibition for the Virtual Museum of Canada based on our acclaimed exhibition, *In Focus: The Holocaust Through the VHEC Collection*. Featuring artefacts, documents and photographs from our collection and community, the website will be accompanied by teaching resources facilitating student engagement with primary sources.

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### **Jewish Community Foundation**

A grant of \$25,000 from the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Vancouver will support the development of a new student workshop themed on antisemitism, hate and propaganda, developed for both classroom-based and virtual formats.

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### **Vancouver Talmud Torah**

The VHEC would like to thank the grade seven students of Vancouver Talmud Torah for choosing the VHEC as a recipient for their Mitzvah of Valuing Philanthropy program funds.

Executive Director Nina Krieger met with the students virtually to discuss the centre's mission of promoting social justice, human rights and genocide awareness through Holocaust education and remembrance. Nina described the educational programming and outreach the centre provides to more than 25,000 students each year. She was delighted to 'attend' their virtual awards ceremony, where she learned that the VHEC was one of the lucky recipients of a generous gift of \$1,976. Other recipients included the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver, Jewish Family Services, IsraAID, Tikvah Housing Society and the Vancouver Yaffa Housing Society.

On behalf of our Board of Directors and staff, we commend the students for raising these funds for philanthropy and for engaging in such a meaningful process to allocate them during the global pandemic. We wish all Vancouver Talmud Torah grade seven students a heartfelt mazel tov on their recent graduation and our very best wishes for great success as they enter high school in the fall.

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THE VHEC is grateful for all grants, donations and bequests which support our mission to advance social justice, human rights and genocide awareness. ■

## In Search of Miracles

BY ROBERT MERMELSTEIN

*On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass away and how many shall be brought into existence; who shall live and who shall die.* —PHILIP BIRNBAUM, DAILY PRAYER BOOK: HA-SIDDUR HA-SHALEM

My hometown Munkács (formerly Mukacevo, Czechoslovakia) is located at Hungary's eastern border. It is far from Hungary's capital of Budapest and it is where the country's deportations first started. Two days after the end of Pesach in 1944, my father Salamon (a leader in the town's Jewish community), was arrested, while my mother Blanka, my brother, Paul and I were marched with a group of Jews to the local brickyard. There we met my mother's sister Janka, her physician husband and their two children.

About a week after being imprisoned in the brickyard, Paul and I were separately smuggled, inside empty soup pots, into the ghetto by Rose Goldberger, one of the women escorts of food supplied to the ghetto. Rose, known to us as Rozsi, was the senior saleswoman in

my parents' glass and china store, located on the main street in Munkács. She also escorted our mother from the brickyard into the ghetto, where my parents were briefly reunited, and my father urged my mother to, "Go and save the children!" That was the last time I saw my father.

My mother and I hid in a room in the ghetto for about a week; I was told that my new, Hungarian-sounding, family name was Meszaros, and warned never to undress in the presence of strangers. I was also told not to ask questions, to memorize some basic Christian prayers, and to follow the instructions of family members. My brother Paul was in hiding with our Aunt Ilonka at another location in the ghetto and given identical instructions. One evening at dusk, my mother and I left our room



Guards check the identification papers of women entering the ghetto in Munkács, circa 1944. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, © Beit Lohamei Ha-Getaot.

and passed through a gate to where a taxi, with a Christian electrician sitting in the front passenger seat, waited. The taxi took us to a railroad crossing close to the train station and the three of us walked between the tracks for about 200 meters and boarded a waiting train from the back. Our overnight ride was uneventful; fortunately, at that early stage of Jewish persecution, there were no document checks at the station in Budapest. My Uncle Emil, stationed with a labour battalion in a Budapest suburb, was able to rent us a room for a month. Paul and Ilonka, who had made the same journey with the electrician a few days earlier, were in that room waiting for us. We had forged Christian identity papers which were obtained by my father and were able to avoid any situation in which they might be closely inspected.

Between June and early December 1944, our mother and aunt arranged for Paul and I to live in a Franciscan monastery's orphanage near Budapest's Elisabeth Hospital. It provided refuge to a number of hidden Jewish children. There I learned the Lord's prayer, Psalm 23 and how to make the sign of the cross, along with basic arithmetic, reading and writing. I got along well with the other boys and played games with them during recess. By mid-December we heard the sound of Russian heavy weapons and saw bright flashes in the sky at night. Ilonka appeared and ordered us to pack our small suitcases. She insisted to the guards at the monastery gate that these two small boys had to join their relatives for the upcoming Christmas holidays. She took us to the nearby apartment of a communist couple, named Rakosi, who were hiding several Jews, including our mother. We spent nearly two weeks in their apartment, until the sound of approaching artillery shells chased us to the basement of the building. On the third or fourth of January 1945, the first Russian forces entered our shelter, which was crowded with frightened women and children.

We returned to Munkács in March 1945 to establish who of our relatives had survived and what property or assets, if any, could be recovered. All of the returnees

were anxious to locate surviving family members. Most survivors left to restart their lives elsewhere in Europe, the British-mandate Palestine, or North America. It soon became apparent that our father, grandparents, aunts (save for one), uncles and cousins had all been murdered. Several of our former neighbours told us that our father and closest relatives were on the last train transport from Munkács, which arrived in Auschwitz two days before Shavuot, 1944.

Our looted home, with most of its furnishings and contents stolen, became a temporary haven for several friends and acquaintances. Conversations primarily revolved around the severe conditions in concentration camps and how most inmates' fates depended on the duration of their confinement—although determination, perseverance and luck also played a role. I listened intently to the returning adults talk about the past several months of their lives, but most of the names they mentioned were unfamiliar to me. Our neighbour's son, Amos Rubin, who had hid with a local Righteous Gentile family, was the only Jewish adolescent I encountered during our brief return to Munkács.

It became apparent to me that Amos, Paul and I were the only survivors younger than sixteen out of a group of an estimated 3,000 Jewish youth who lived in the Munkács region in April 1944. Three thousand Jewish youth from one city were murdered and apparently, only three young boys had survived.

In mid-July 1945, about six weeks prior to the scheduled closing of the Russian-Hungarian border, we returned to Budapest with nothing but a change of clothing. I was nine years old and had very little understanding of what had occurred in the world between April 1944 and our liberation from hiding. We resumed using our real name, Mermelstein, and resumed our education. While there was a strong effort by the Jewish community to involve its youth in social, cultural and recreational activities, neither Paul nor I met anyone from Munkács in these Jewish youth groups. My Bar Mitzvah celebration was a very modest

event, held in school due to our dire financial situation.

Our family of four (mother, aunt and two boys) left Budapest for Vienna, Austria in 1949, with the intention of moving to Israel. We eventually decided to emigrate to Canada. The foundation of my Jewish identity was formed during these turbulent five to seven years, between the end of the Shoah and our first couple of years in Canada.

We arrived in Halifax on July 4, 1951 and travelled to Montreal. The next fifteen years can best be described as a typical immigrant experience: two adults struggling with a difficult financial situation due to limited employment skills, while Paul and I concentrated on our education. My science teacher, Mrs. Gottesman, awakened in me an interest in science which ultimately led to a PhD in chemistry and two years of post-doctoral training in life sciences. At the age of 30, I joined Xerox Corporation as a research scientist.

During the summer of 1968, my wife and I made our first trip to Israel. There we met Amos Rubin and his mother, who I had not seen since 1945. It was an extraordinary, emotional meeting; we discussed the circumstances of how each of us survived the Shoah. I asked Amos whether he knew of any other Jewish youth from our hometown who had survived. He mentioned a young boy, Matyash, who was deported, but survived initial selection at Auschwitz due to his unusual height. This specific detail remained buried in my memory for more than 50 years.

Amos survived by a combination of my mother's advice, his parents' guidance and the heroic actions of the Righteous Strausz family.<sup>1</sup> His late father's biography quotes a conversation with my mother just before Passover, "You have a Christian benefactor who can be of great assistance," and continues, "Mrs. Mermelstein said in full confidence that all of us will perish, but if there is any possibility of escape, our duty is to do everything possible [to achieve such an outcome]." During my retirement years, I have made it a practice to

## STANDPOINT.

### Memories of a long lost Jewish world

The town immortalised by Roman Vishniac's images where I was an infant was, for many, prosperous and contented before the Shoah

Michael Pinto-Duschinsky Features 03/12/2018



Mixed swimming by a lake in Carpatho-Ruthenia. The author's mother is top left (COURTESY OF MICHAEL PINTO-DUSCHINSKY)

What was it really like to live in a traditional Jewish community in Eastern Europe before it was obliterated by the Nazis? The question is important because the physical destruction of six million Jews was also a cultural catastrophe. The danger is that our understanding will consist of noble caricatures. This essay was stimulated by the contrast between the highly influential scenes recorded in 1930s Munkacs by Roman Vishniac and family snapshots from the same period.

In the process of commissioning photographs which would help to raise funds for

A screenshot of *Standpoint*. <https://standpointmag.co.uk/issues/december-2018-january-2019/features-december-2018-michael-pinto-duschinsky-munkacs-roman-vishniac-mukachevo/>.

search once a year for any new mentions of my birthplace. In May, 2019, I found an article titled: "Memories of a Long Lost Jewish World," by Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, published in the December 2018 issue of the British magazine *Standpoint*. Pinto-Duschinsky, referencing notes left by his mother, writes: "I was smuggled out of the Munkács ghetto on May 5 at less than a year of age; she was smuggled out two weeks later... Had the Christian woman recruited to visit the ghetto carrying false papers arrived a week later, it would have been too late to save her. Her mother was included in the final transport from

<sup>1</sup>Amos Rubin's story of survival is on Yad Vashem's website: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/strausz.html>

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## A Holocaust Survivor Now Struggling to Pay Rent

Zoltan Matyash witnessed “the worst of human agony” at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Now he and his wife, Mera, are trying to get by on a fixed income in Borough Park, Brooklyn.



Zoltan Matyash in the subsidized apartment in Borough Park, Brooklyn, that he shares with Mera, his wife of 61 years. Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

By Masha Goncharova

Published Dec. 22, 2019 Updated Dec. 24, 2019

Zoltan Matyash grew up in Czechoslovakia, the oldest of two boys and four girls. He was born a Kohen, part of a line of priests who in the Jewish tradition are responsible for transmitting God's

A screenshot of *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/neediest-cases/holocaust-survivor-struggles.html>.

town, survived slave labour in Auschwitz and further camps but died a year and a half after her release.”

These five lines clearly indicate that Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, extracted as an infant from the Munkács ghetto in May 1944, makes him the fourth known child survivor from my hometown. The story of his survival is similar but not identical to the circumstances of our family. Pinto-Duschinsky's grandmother was on the last transport from Munkács to Auschwitz. All of the available information (supplied by surviving friends and neighbours upon our return to our hometown in 1945) indicated that our father, grandparents, aunts and cousins were also on that last transport. This three-day

train journey in cattle-cars under horrible conditions (no water, food or toilets), forms the basis of an indelible emotional connection between our families.

In late December 2019, my nephew sent me an article titled: “A Holocaust Survivor Now Struggling to Pay Rent,” published in the *New York Times*' Neediest Cases Fund section. The article described the difficult life history of a Mr. Zoltan Matyash, who reached his Bar Mitzvah age in early 1944, shortly before his deportation from Munkács. The Matyash family of 20 people (grandparents, uncles and cousins), were deported to Auschwitz. Eighteen perished, and only Zoltan and his father survived. When Dr. Mengele asked Zoltan Matyash's age, his father “said he was 18, which would make him fit for labour.” In this way he survived the concentration camps and returned to his hometown to be reunited with his father. Matyash married and worked as a furniture upholsterer in the United States. Eventually, he retired and encountered financial problems.

Upon reading this story, I remembered, vaguely, Amos Rubin's response to my question about surviving Jewish youth from Munkács, asked back in 1968. Zoltan Matyash was the youth of unusual height who survived initial selection at Auschwitz. My wife and I decided to send a donation to cover the cost of one year of rent for the Matyash family.

In 2018, I self-published an autobiography: *My Life: A Journey from Mukacevo to Vancouver*. In it I write that only three people under the age of 16 who lived in Mukacevo at the time of the deportations survived. I am very pleased and most thankful to write that this statement has been proven wrong. The five known surviving Jewish youth from the Munkács region are: Zoltan Matyash, Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, Amos Rubin, my brother Paul and myself. It is as much of a miracle as one may expect in these troubled times. ■

Dr. Robert Mermelstein is a child survivor who came to Canada in July 1951. He earned a PhD in chemistry from the University of Alberta and worked for the Xerox Corporation in Rochester, NY, for 28 years. Currently he is a retired scientist with diverse interests. Mermelstein is the author of *My Life: A Journey from Mukacevo to Vancouver – Prevailing Over Adversity and Challenges* (<https://collections.vhcc.org/Detail/objects/4989>).

# Isolation: Reflections on Catastrophe and Survival

BY ROBERT KRELL

Crisis, catastrophe, panic: words that come to mind in the midst of a global assault by an uncontrollable virus. Personal isolation and a rupture of social contacts is just one important response required to defeat this silent threat. Not since the Second World War, 75 years ago, has there been an event affecting nearly all nations at the same time. In 1945, the conclusion of the war led to an outpouring of revulsion upon the revelation of what had transpired, not only with respect to the horrors of war itself, but also the Nazi war within the war, enacted upon the largely helpless Jews of Europe.

A new vocabulary emerged from the ashes, the language of atrocity. Over time, the words “concentration camp” took on new meaning, and when that was insufficient, an even worse phrase was introduced, “extermination camp.” The world came to know “the Final Solution,” eventually encompassed in the words “Holocaust” in English, and “Shoah” in Hebrew. The concept of genocide entered the public awareness. Some responses were the founding of the United Nations, Nazi war crimes trials, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The reverberations of the gratuitous, brutal slaughter of innocents are with us still. It was humanity at its peak of inhumanity. No Jewish baby, elderly man or woman, or expectant mother, was spared. All Jews were condemned to die—even, had they been caught, Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud.

While my wife and I were in quarantine for 14 days, a friend asked what it was like for me to be confined to my home. She knew my background. It was a good question, for I was confined to “home” for nearly three years, with a Christian family in The Hague, Holland, from 1942 to 1945. As a Jewish baby, I was meant to die. Of the 108,000 Dutch Jews deported, mostly to Auschwitz and Sobibor, about 5,000 returned. Of

over 20,000 Jewish children hiding throughout the Netherlands, over half were betrayed, as was Anne Frank and her family.

During my period of hiding, from age two through five, I do not recall complaining or reporting an illness, and I did not cry. Seventy-five years later I do not complain, ignore illness (at my peril), and cry only where I cannot be seen. The first time I remember crying was in protest of having to go to bed when others were out in the street celebrating the end of the war.

I remember hunger. All of Holland was starving during the “hunger winter” of 1944–45. I can still capture the mealy taste of tulip bulbs on my tongue, but I do not recall the taste of rabbits, occasionally brought home and slaughtered and skinned by my Vader.



The only photo of a young Robert Krell while hiding from the Nazis with the Munniks. Courtesy of Dr. Robert Krell.

Today's confinement is vastly different, and definitely an improvement. Being pursued by a coronavirus is not personal. We are housebound in comfortable surroundings with a stocked fridge (so far) and televisions that work (so far). But my imagination runs wild. What if we lose electricity? What if we can not reach our children and grandchildren? What if we fall ill for any reason and have to go to the hospital? What if there is a food shortage?

There is another psychological complication. Having first suffered the separation from my parents, with whom I was miraculously reunited, I experienced a second separation after the war, from the family I had come to think of as mine. I had become "Robbie Munnik." Some of my anxieties were alleviated by a family friendship between the Munniks and the Krells. But my heart bleeds for children who, for any reason, are in situations which remind me of forced separations. As a doctor who specialized in child and family psychiatry, it is particularly painful for me to witness the virus separating families from loved ones in care homes, who they are unable to visit. Or the families of first responders, many of whom must leave home to be close

to their vital work. These are painful times for so many. The enormous psychological pressures and psychiatric consequences of being in the trenches has not been seen in such massive numbers for generations. And while many of us must hunker down, millions remain at work delivering mail and food, newspapers and special services of all kinds.

I can still feel the inner engine running as if I were that 25-year-old intern in the emergency room of the Philadelphia General Hospital. We young doctors felt invincible, or were too naive to grasp the potential dangers of infections and violence. We worked in a danger zone, with police close by. There were 90 interns and 270 residents training in our large inner-city hospital, and our patients coughed and bled all over us. Yet I recall no serious illnesses amongst me or my colleagues.

Now 80, I suddenly belong to the most vulnerable group, the elderly with preconditions who are unlikely to withstand a coronavirus infection. This has me reflecting on survival. As a child of the Holocaust (1.5 million of us were murdered), I carried with me the hope that we would leave a better world than the one



Left: Robert Krell with his parents, Leo and Emmy Krell, in the backyard of their home in The Hague, circa 1940s. Right: A portrait of Albert and Violette Munnik, circa 1950s. Courtesy of Dr. Robert Krell.



Dr. Krell sheltering in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photograph by Shyla Seller.

I endured. But instead, I see a spate of genocides in all corners of the globe, the resurgence of antisemitism on a massive scale, and an ominous breakdown of conventionally moral and kind behavior. The virus has forced us to see what is happening to our neighbours in cities, provinces, states and nations. Endless news reports with statistics and images flow through our lives, raising both awareness and anxiety.

Is it too much to hope that we will learn from what we see? Is this the catastrophe that will inform the generations who have largely escaped tragedy on a global scale? Will journalists and politicians impress upon us all what might be a response to this tragedy? I like to think that had there been daily press coverage on what was known, or even rumoured, about the brutality of Auschwitz, that it might not have been able to function so efficiently.

Holocaust education aims to derive lessons from tragedy that inform us how to do better. One such lesson concerns the degree to which so many otherwise good people stood by and did nothing. Almost every survivor can point to one small act by a non-Jewish person that inspired a spark of hope and provided them strength to go on. In this time of catastrophe, wrought by nature rather than people, small acts of kindness can inspire those who fall ill and those who treat them.

Many have responded heroically to the challenges posed by this virus. But some behave as if they are immune. They are not, nor are their families. These bystanders do not consider the effects of their behavior on the health of others, nor do they pose the question, "Is there something more that I can do?"

This moment in time demands a constructive and collective response to that question. ■

**Dr. Robert Krell is Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychiatry, UBC, distinguished life fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and founding president of the VHEC. This article first appeared in volume 28 of *The Hidden Child*, published by the Hidden Child Foundation, Anti-Defamation League <https://www.adl.org/holocaust-education/hidden-child-foundation>.**

# More than Just a Question on a Test: My Reflections on Holocaust Education

BY AVREL FESTINGER

All four of my grandparents survived the Holocaust. I knew the horrors, I read the stories and I understood the concepts surrounding this tragic event. I grew up in a community where the Holocaust felt almost normal. There is a certain level of detachment that occurs when you have heard about something your entire life. I knew my grandparents' survival was a miracle, but it didn't feel miraculous.

After spending 12 years in the Jewish day school/high school system I ended up transferring to a non-Jewish school. This is where I learned that to many, the Holocaust is just another subject to study. You learn it, memorize the facts and then take a test. Once the exam is over, most will proceed to forget everything they have 'learned.' This is not necessarily anyone's fault—teacher nor student—rather, it is a desensitization that sometimes comes with learning history. For example, at one point in time I needed to know all of the First World War battle names, but alas, if you asked me now, I would not be able to recall a single one.

One day, in my grade 10 socials class, my teacher asked the students to raise their hand if they knew about Auschwitz. I remember watching as half the class raised their hands and half the class didn't. It seemed strange to me that there was a handful of 16-year-olds who didn't know the stories I knew. Something that was common knowledge to me was completely unknown to them. While I'm 15 minutes away from a firsthand account of the Holocaust, some people don't even know what Auschwitz is. It was around this time that I realized being detached from Holocaust education is simply not an option for me

With help from the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, we ended up inviting Lillian Boraks-Nemetz to share her story with my class. After the presentation, I remember watching one of my friends cry, and in a strange way feeling grateful for her tears: she was empathetic, she understood a little more about this tragedy and a little more about the world I had been living in for my entire life.

I grew up immersed in the stories of my Baba, Zaida, Grandpa and Grandma. I have the blessing of still hearing my Baba's story whenever I want. I always knew that it was rare to have the luxury of hearing a story firsthand, but I never fully understood it. There are only so many Holocaust survivors still alive, and for many, sharing their story is too painful. For me to have the chance, almost any day, to drive 15 minutes to my Baba's home and hear her story is incredible. However, hearing her story was only 15 minutes away. This short



Left: Festinger's Baba, Sally and Zaida, Henry<sup>21</sup> Zimmerman. Right: Festinger's Grandma, Lucia<sup>21</sup> and Grandpa, Jakob<sup>21</sup> Festinger. Courtesy of Avrel Festinger.

distance, coupled with frequency and repetition, contributed to the feeling of normalcy. Before that day in class, Holocaust education was part of my life so much so that I felt separate from it. Nonetheless, it was part of me.

In developmental psychology there is a concept called egocentrism. If you call a five-year-old on the phone and ask them, “do you like ice cream?” they might nod. Even though you can’t see them nod, the child believes you can; they cannot take on another perspective. Further, they are not able to understand that you need to hear a verbalized response. In a way, before that day in my grade 10 socials class, I was being egocentric—and while a child is a child and will grow out of it—I was 16. I had to unlearn the idea that people have the same knowledge as me. I had to recognize that I took my Holocaust education for granted. I also had to realize that there is always more to learn.

This summer I have had the privilege of volunteering at the VHEC. More specifically, I have had the opportunity to take what I already know about the Holocaust and add onto it. I have read and watched survivor testimonies and gotten a glimpse into all that the Centre does. As a third-generation Jewish teen, I know that my Holocaust education is a gift as well as something I must add onto.

That day in my social studies class, as I watched some hands fly into the air and some sit firmly in laps, I



Festinger with her Baba at a birthday celebration, 2012. Courtesy of Avrel Festinger.

realized that my peers and I were two sides of the same coin. I was detached from the Holocaust because of my exposure to it, and they were detached because their education was limited. Although we were both disconnected, I was the one with the tools to act on the situation. I couldn’t shake my head and declare, “it’s their problem,” because it’s not—it’s mine too. This is not just because I am Jewish. It was my problem because I had the ability to educate.

I believe that we are all given opportunities to change things for the better. That is why there is no space in this world for detachment. We have the tools—so let’s start chipping away at what is broken. ■

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Avrel Festinger is a volunteer with the VHEC and starts her first year of university this fall.

# A Tale of Two Fathers

BY YVONNE (ULLMAN) ROSENBERG

Three key events inspired me to write this article. Firstly, I along with my two cousins, Roby Ullmann from Argentina, and his sister Miriam (Ullmann) Rashensky from Israel, were invited to the University of Aachen in Germany in 2018, where a student had prepared a history of my father, Ernst Ullman, and his family. My cousins and I met in Amsterdam for the occasion, and I decided to visit the street in Oud-Beijerland, 20 kilometres south of Rotterdam, named after my father. This visit provided astonishing details of my father's life as a German refugee in Holland prior to his deportation to Auschwitz. My father's first wife and children were murdered by the Nazis on October 8 and 9, 1944. We visited Oud-Beijerland exactly 74 years later, on October 8, 2018. The Halle synagogue in Germany was attacked on Yom Kippur, October 9, 2019. This incident, and other recent instances of antisemitic violence, motivated me to describe the acts of courage by non-Jewish neighbours toward Jewish refugees from Germany in Oud-Beijerland. These brave acts were performed at great personal risk to the citizens of this town. The community has memorialized the Jewish families from their village who perished in the Holocaust.

A portion of this article is summarized from a translation of an article in the April 2011 issue of *Beijerlandse Berichten*, by Wendy Riedijk and Alie van den Berg, about the 150-year history of the Jewish Community of Oud-Beijerland.<sup>1</sup> This article includes a story from Leny Weeda, who lived at the Havendam (harbour) in Oud-Beijerland. Weeda, who was eight when the war began, recalls the attempted rescue of my father, Ernst Ullman, by her father, Gerrit Weeda.

With the assistance of Raphael Evers, the orthodox rabbi of Rotterdam, I contacted the article's authors to learn more. On Oct 8, 2018, we found our way to a small church in Oud-Beijerland. As we walked through the sanctuary to the rear reception hall, we were greeted by

Leny Weeda, now a sprightly 86-year-old grandmother, and her daughter, who acted as translator. Immediately, the grandmother presented us with a photograph album of my father, his first wife and children (my half-sister and half-brother). To say I was overcome by emotion would be an understatement.

My father, Ernst Ullman (born in Duren, Germany, in 1904) was one of a number of Jewish fugitives from Germany who were admitted to Holland. He arrived in Oud-Beijerland in 1936, via Utrecht, where he worked in



Leny Weeda in front of her childhood home at the harbour in Oud-Beijerland. Photograph by George Rosenberg.

<sup>1</sup> Published in the 14th annual *Beijerlandse Berichten*, volume 41, April 2011. <https://www.hvobl.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/BB-April-2011-.pdf>

a flour mill. In 1938, he married Edith Fleischmann (born in Ebelsbach, Germany, in 1912). They had one daughter, Ellen Wilhelmina, born in Oud-Beijerland in 1939.

Leny's father, Gerrit Weeda, was a market boat skipper with his own boat, the *Johanna*. He also worked in the office of the flour mill with my father and befriended the entire Ullman family. Under the German occupation, the Jews of Oud-Beijerland were forced to move to Amsterdam, and from there, they were transported to the death camps of Auschwitz and Sobibor. Gerrit Weeda decided to help his Jewish friends.

Ernst and Edith Ullman were hidden by the Weedas, and their three-year-old daughter, Ellen, was hidden with a different Dutch family in Oud-Beijerland, since it was too dangerous to hide her with her parents. By separating the family, Ellen had a better chance of survival.

When the next deportation of Jews was imminent, Gerrit agreed to take Ernst and Edith Ullman on his boat to Antwerp, Belgium. He brought a couple of bikes with them, for the couple to use to try to escape to England. En route, the boat was searched by the Germans. Gerrit had hidden the couple in the mast-hole, where the mast is stored when down. Fortunately, the Germans did not find them, and they arrived safely in Antwerp. Gerrit returned

to Oud-Beijerland. However, the Ullmans were overcome with remorse at leaving Ellen behind and cycled back to Oud-Beijerland to reunite with their daughter. Upon their return, they were arrested and transported to Westerbork, where their second child, a son, Rolf Dirk, was born in 1943.

Of the 38 Jews who were deported from Oud-Beijerland, 31 were killed. Only my father, Ernst Ullman, miraculously survived. Another seven Jews, holders of false baptism certificates, were hidden by Dutch families until the end of the war. The town's synagogue was plundered by the Germans and used as a storage room. Following the atrocities of the Shoah, Jewish life never returned to Oud-Beijerland.

As we walked through this picturesque village, our guides showed us the house where Ernst and his family had lived, close to the church. They told us that in 1986, the local council of Oud-Beijerland decided that several streets in the Spuioever quarter would be named after Jewish persons and families who had lived in Oud-Beijerland before the Second World War. In doing so, the municipality wished to keep alive the memory of the important roles Jews had played in this village. Among the streets named was Ullmanstraat, after members of my family.



Left: Ernst and Edith Ullman with their daughter, Ellen. Center: Gerrit Weeda, 1893–1944. Right: Gerrit Weeda's boat, *Johanna*. Photographs courtesy of Leny Weeda.



Left: The Holocaust monument in Oud-Beijerland. Top Right: Names of the victims of the Holocaust from Oud-Beijerland. Bottom Right: Ullmanstraat street sign, named after the Ullman family. Photographs by George Rosenberg.

On October 29, 1987, a monument designed by Marga Vogel-Granada was unveiled at the Havendam, near the Oud-Beijerland harbour. The monument consists of a copper hand holding a Magen David, placed on a pedestal bearing a plaque with a verse from Isaiah: “To bind up the brokenhearted” (כל ירשנל שבחל) and the words: “The people of Israel live” (יח לארשי סע).

Among the victims were: Edith Ullman-Fleischmann, 31 years old; Birkenau, October 9, 1944. Ellen Ullman, five years old; Auschwitz, October 8, 1944. Rolf Dirk Ullman, one year old; Auschwitz, October 8, 1944. Each year, on the fourth of May, a ceremony is held at the monument where the community remembers the Jewish inhabitants of Oud-Beijerland who were deported and massacred by the Nazis.

My father married Friedel Salomon, a survivor of Theresienstadt, in Holland in 1946. In 1948, with their daughter, Evelyn, the family immigrated to Vancouver where they had two other daughters, myself (born 1949),

and Dorothy (born 1955), and built a new life for their family in this adopted country. For many years, Ernst Ullman operated a successful mattress manufacturing business. He died in March 1987.

While I was aware that my father had lost his family in the Holocaust, I had never been told the details. Meeting Leny, the daughter of the man who tried to rescue my father and his family, demonstrated a bond of friendship forged between our fathers during this horrific period. The intimate details and photographs that she shared of my Dad and his first family created an emotional connection to my half-sister and half-brother that I had never felt before. This encounter provides a vital chapter of remembrance to pass on to future generations. It offers a positive example to counter the events of discrimination and prejudice that seem to be overwhelming our society today. ■

**Yvonne (Ullman) Rosenberg** is a retired Vancouver primary school teacher. She volunteers for various Jewish organizations.

## Two Poems

BY LILLIAN BORAKS-NEMETZ

As witnesses to the destruction of their families and communities, child survivors of the Holocaust carry with them a burden of memory and a gift of insight. In her new work, poet Lillian Boraks-Nemetz confronts antisemitism, racism and the global pandemic. Drawing on the lessons of the past, she shines a light on the present and envisions a more just future.

### The Awakening

We are alone  
each of us recedes into the  
darkness of our interior home  
so perfectly arranged for so long

today it feels confining  
uncomfortable – useless in its staging  
lacking light  
the light of vision  
If only we could emerge  
from our dark unknowing

to illuminate  
that which we cannot see

to emerge  
From the murky depths  
Of our subconscious  
Into the brilliance of awareness  
The awareness of hope in human good  
the truth in its survival

for we are the  
universe of hell and  
the universe of heaven

for we are the  
plundered earth  
and the garden of Eden

### The Arm

Today I am George Floyd  
I am a Jew

So I know how it feels  
To be stifled  
By the arm of hate  
That extends toward anyone  
Who is different  
In colour, culture or creed  
Visible and at times invisible  
It reaches toward your neck  
To strangle  
It reaches your brain  
To smother it with an imprint  
Of fear, injustice and grief  
It can end your life  
In its predatory sweep  
To grab what it wants to destroy  
The vile arm multiplies  
Like a viral cell  
And soon reaches the creed  
Of violence and destruction

As the world burns  
From loss, guilt, and disgust  
May the good people of this Earth  
Rise and open their arms  
Far and wide to release  
Love, kindness, and justice for all  
Because today each one of us  
Is George Floyd

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz is a VHEC outreach speaker, an award-winning author, an instructor at UBC's Writing Centre and the editor of *Zachor's* "No Longer Alone."

PLEASE JOIN US FOR A VIRTUAL

# KRISTALLNACHT COMMEMORATION

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2020 | 7 PM**

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**FEATURING KEYNOTE SPEAKER DR. CHRIS FRIEDRICH**

*How to Steal from Jews: A Story from Nazi Germany and What It Teaches Us*

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The Nazi regime not only murdered millions of Jews, it also relentlessly confiscated Jewish property from owners later sent to their deaths. This illustrated lecture will describe the step-by-step process by which two elderly Jews in wartime Berlin were stripped of all their assets before they were deported to the death camps—and shows how Nazi officials then fought with each other about what to do with the stolen property.

Chris Friedrichs is Professor Emeritus of History at UBC, where he taught for 45 years before his retirement in 2018. He is a specialist in German history and has been active for many years in Holocaust awareness education.

*Kristallnacht*—the “Night of Broken Glass”—took place throughout Germany and Austria on the night of November 9–10, 1938. In the course of just a few hours, hundreds of synagogues were burned, thousands of Jewish-owned places of business were destroyed, almost 100 Jews were killed, and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The shards of broken window glass seen in front of Jewish owned stores all over Germany the next morning gave this event its name.

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*Kristallnacht commemoration is presented by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre in partnership with Congregation Beth Israel with support from the Robert and Marilyn Krell Endowment Fund of the VHEC. This program is funded through our community's generous contributions to the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver Annual Campaign.*



PLEASE VISIT **WWW.VHEC.ORG** TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO ATTEND THIS VIRTUAL PROGRAM

# THANK YOU TO OUR DEVOTED VHEC VOLUNTEERS!

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## TEACHER ADVISORY

Ryan Chapman, Eyal Daniel, Mark Figuera, Stephanie Henderson, Kit Krieger, Andrea Webb, Anna-Mae Wiesenthal, Emily Winckler.

## SPECIAL PROJECTS

Alex Buckman, Patrick Douglas, Noah Duranseaude, Bonnie Elster, Avrel Festinger, Chris Friedrichs, Debby Freiman, Norman Gladstone, Helen Heacock-Rivers, Ethel Kofsky, Kit Krieger, Rachel Lando, Ella Levitt, Herb Mills, Helen Mintz, Ed Rozenberg, Agnieszka Stadnik, Ronen Tanne, Stan Taviss, Lauren Thompson, Peter Zetler.  
Student intern: Haydn Lloyd, Library & Information Technology Program, Langara College.

## OUTREACH SPEAKERS

Janos Benisz, Amalia Boe-Fishman, Lillian Boraks-Nemetz, Alex Buckman, Mariette Doduck, David Ehrlich, René Goldman, Serge Haber, Robert Krell, Claude Romney, Louise Sorensen, Peter Suedfeld, Tom Szekeley, Robbie Waisman; Coordinator: Rita Akselrod.

## DOCENTS

Reva Dexter, Sylvie Epstein, Kieran Forry, Belinda Gutman, Helen Heacock-Rivers, Gloria Joachim, Dodie Katzenstein, Vivian Kerenyi, Lise Kirchner, Ethel Kofsky, Uma Kumar, Lucien Lieberman, Ellen Millman, Herb Mills, Gita Silver, Lottie Smith, Rina Vizer, Anita Willson.

*OUR SINCERE APOLOGIES FOR ANY ERRORS OR OMISSIONS*

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WE COULDN'T  
DO IT  
WITHOUT YOU!

## Thank You VHEC Fundraiser Supporters!

Thanks to your generous contributions to our successful **2020 Annual Fundraiser** and the matching funds from **Summit Ice Apparel\*** we are better poised to meet the increasing and complex needs of teachers and students. We are developing new and timely initiatives for both in-classroom and virtual learning that highlight the consequences of antisemitism, racism, and prejudice of all kinds —lessons that prompt young people to recognize and stand up against injustice.

**Summit Ice Apparel\*** was so pleased with the response from our community. They are delighted that the match generated interest in and support for the important work of the VHEC.

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*\*To support **Summit Ice Apparel\*** and Holocaust education please visit [summiticeapparel.com](https://summiticeapparel.com)*

# SUPPORT THE VHEC

The Holocaust survivors who founded the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre believe that learning about the past is the surest path to a better future. That is why the Centre is dedicated to education about and remembrance of the Holocaust in service of social justice and human rights for all.

These are some of the ways that you can support the VHEC in educating students about the consequences of antisemitism, racism, and prejudice of all kinds—lessons that prompt young people to recognize and stand up against injustice.



## TRIBUTE CARDS

A tribute card is a meaningful way to mark special occasions, send best wishes or condolences or send Rosh Hashana greetings to friends and family. The card acknowledges that a donation has been made to the VHEC and can be personalized with your chosen message. The minimum donation to send a card is \$18 and includes postage.

## PLANNED GIVING

Planned giving is a way to support the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre now or in the future. Planned giving can include gifts such as cash or other assets including life insurance, annuities, real estate, public company shares or charitable remainder trusts. Many of you have the support of a qualified life insurance consultant, family accountant or lawyer who can advise you in the area of planned giving. If not, we can suggest a professional to you for a personal consultation.

## ENDOWMENT FUNDS

Named endowment funds recognize committed donors who contribute \$18,000 or more to the VHEC to be held and invested by the organization in order to provide funding to the VHEC in perpetuity. These funds can be named to honour family members and loved ones. Those who create endowment funds inspire others through their generosity and play a key role in supporting the VHEC to educate about the important, enduring and relevant lessons of the Shoah.



FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CALL THE VHEC  
AT 604-264-0499 OR EMAIL [info@vhed.org](mailto:info@vhed.org)

VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST CENTRE SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION & REMEMBRANCE

**SAVE  
THE  
DATE**

**VIRTUAL ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**  
**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14TH** NOTICE & REGISTRATION DETAILS TO FOLLOW

VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE  
50-950 West 41st Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5Z 2N7 Canada

