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Western Washington University

Holocaust Distortion and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Honors Capstone

Advised by Babafemi Akinrinade

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Abstract:

This project will explore and seek to understand the use of Holocaust distortion in the COVID-19 pandemic. It will also aim to understand how the use of distorted information has contributed to current trends in global antisemitism. To answer these questions, this project will compare accurate information about the Holocaust with the distorted information seen in protests around the world. It will also examine current trends in antisemitism and explore any links found between Holocaust distortion during the pandemic and contemporary antisemitism. The findings of this project will be significant because they will help further understanding of how Holocaust distortion can directly contribute to antisemitic instances. With this understanding, leaders in various levels of society may be able to create solutions to combat rising levels of antisemitism.

Introduction:

The Holocaust was one of the most horrific genocides in history. It is notorious for the cruelty that it demonstrated and the scale at which it was allowed to happen. It is the subject of countless sources of media, though those sources do not always align with historical accuracy. It is essential for us, as scholars and as members of the global community, to remain committed to historical accuracy when discussing the Holocaust. Inaccuracy can pave the way to Holocaust distortion and denial, which can then lead to antisemitism. This phenomenon has been observed within responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Holocaust distortion has been used by the general populous as a tool to escalate current rises in antisemitism. It has also been used to make political statements regarding COVID-19 vaccine legislation. Both uses are unacceptable given that they reduce a harrowing instance of genocide into a cheap political tool and a way to create more hatred against the Jewish community. The way to combat these insidious distortions of truth is through education. By providing Holocaust education, we can hope to combat the use of Holocaust distortions within COVID-19 politics and provide tangible solutions in helping the Jewish community deescalate rising levels of antisemitism.

Brief Introduction to the Holocaust:

The Holocaust was the systemic genocide of the Jewish people in Europe from 1933 to 1945.¹ Importantly, genocide has been defined by the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as, “as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: (a) Killing

¹ “Introduction To The Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 5, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>.

members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”.² This definition is crucial in understanding the Holocaust because it can help frame our interpretation of the events which occurred. The Holocaust was perpetrated by the Nazi regime in Germany and resulted in the murder of six million Jewish people.³ The Nazi regime had collaborators in various countries through occupations and alliances, including Poland, Hungary, Romania, Italy, and Bulgaria.⁴ Other groups that were targeted by the Nazis include political opponents, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexual males, criminals, asocial people, Afro-Germans, disabled people, Roma people, and Soviet citizens.⁵

There are several defining stages of the Holocaust, the first being the implementation of anti-Jewish legislation. This legislation, collectively called the Nuremberg Laws, legalized the racial discrimination against Jewish people.⁶ These laws were built upon Nazi ideology of race. The Nazis legally defined someone as Jewish if they had three or more Jewish grandparents.⁷ This definition included people who did not practice religious Judaism or define themselves as Jewish.⁸ The first of these dangerous laws was the Reich Citizenship Law, which defined who

² “Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” United Nations, December 9, 1948, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf.

³ “Introduction To The Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 5, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>.

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

⁶ “Nuremberg Race Laws,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, September 11, 2019. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nuremberg-laws>.

⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws.”

⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws.”

could hold German citizenship and excluded anyone who was considered Jewish.⁹ The second law, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, criminalized marriage and intimate relationships between Germans and Jewish people.¹⁰ Later examples of the Nuremberg Laws include the prohibition of Jews in several professions, including working in the press, radio, farming, stock exchanges and brokerages, and public office.¹¹ Clearly, these laws were incredibly racist and far-reaching; they impacted Jewish people in nearly every aspect of their lives. They defined who they were, who they could marry, and what activities they could participate in. These laws separated Jewish people from their German contemporaries, othering them from a shared national identity and sense of morality.

Contributing to the separation of Jewish people from other people in occupied countries was the use of ghettos. During the Holocaust, ghettos were used in order to gather and isolate Jewish populations.¹² Jewish people were also deported from their cities and sent to ghettos in various places within Eastern Europe.¹³ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes the ghetto system by stating, “Life in the ghettos was miserable and dangerous. There was little food and limited sanitation or medical care. Hundreds of thousands of people died by starvation; rampant disease; exposure to extreme temperatures; as well as exhaustion from forced labor. Germans also murdered the imprisoned Jews through brutal beatings, torture, arbitrary shootings, and other forms of arbitrary violence”.¹⁴ Although life within in the ghettos was difficult, Jewish people organized community services, religious institutions, and resistance

⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws.”

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws.”

¹¹ “The Nuremberg Laws,” National Archives and Research Administration, December 15, 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/winter/nuremberg.html>.

¹² “Introduction To The Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 5, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>.

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

¹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

groups.¹⁵ Towards the end of the Holocaust, the ghettos were liquidated through mass shootings and deportations to killing centers.¹⁶

Another defining aspect of the Holocaust is the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”.¹⁷ The Final Solution refers to the stage in the Holocaust where Jewish people were murdered by Nazis on an unprecedented and systemic stage.¹⁸ The Nazis used several strategies in order to carry out these mass murders, including mass shootings and poisonous gas asphyxiation.¹⁹ The mass shootings took place in over 1,500 places in Eastern Europe.²⁰ During these mass shootings, the Nazis would gather the local Jewish population, force them to dig their own graves, and then shoot them into them.²¹ Additionally, the Nazis used the asphyxiation method both in mass killing centers and in mobile gassing units.²² Two million Jewish people were slaughtered using these methods.²³ It is important to understand both the severity and the scale of these genocidal actions because this understanding grants us the ability to remember the Holocaust dutifully and accurately.

The Nazis utilized several killing centers, or death camps, which were responsible for the death of 2.7 million Jewish people.²⁴ The six death camps were Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, Belzec, Majdanek, and Chelmno.²⁵ In order to gather the Jewish population at these killing centers, the Nazis would deport them to the camps in overcrowded and unsanitary

¹⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

¹⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

¹⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

¹⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

¹⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²⁵ “Killing Centers in Occupied Poland, 1942,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed February 3, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/killing-centers-in-occupied-poland-1942>.

trains.²⁶ Conditions in the trains leading to the death camps were, “horrific. German and collaborating local authorities forced Jews of all ages into overcrowded railcars. They often had to stand, sometimes for days, until the train reached its destination. The perpetrators deprived them of food, water, bathrooms, heat, and medical care. Jews frequently died en route from the inhumane conditions”.²⁷

Upon arrival at the death camps, most Jewish people were immediately sent to their deaths in the gas chambers and a select few were placed into forced labor.²⁸ The amount of Jewish people dying in the gas chambers of these killing centers was astronomical and horrific. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum remarked that at Auschwitz-Birkenau, “During the height of deportations to the camp in 1943-44, an average of 6,000 Jews were gassed there each day”.²⁹ This statistic shows the cold detached system that claimed the lives of a catastrophic amount of Jewish people.

In addition to the six death camps, the Nazis used over 44,000 incarceration sites.³⁰ These incarceration sites included concentration camps, forced-labor camps, transit camps, prisoner-of-war camps, and killing centers.³¹ In particular, concentration camps are commonly referenced within the media and popular culture, so it is important to have a firm understanding of what they were. Concentration camps often used gas chambers and euthanasia facilities to murder prisoners.³² Aspects of life within the concentration camps were described as follows:

²⁶ “Introduction To The Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 5, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>.

²⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Introduction to The Holocaust.”

²⁹ “Nazi Camps,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed February 3, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps>.

³⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Camps.”

³¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Camps.”

³² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Camps.”

“The appel, the daily lineup that took place every morning after wakeup and each evening after returning from labor, was one of the horrific aspects of the prisoners’ lives in the camps. They were forced to stand completely still, often for hours at a time, exposed to the elements in the cold, rain, or snow and to the terror of sudden violence by SS men, guards or kapos. The camp routine was composed of a long list of orders and instructions, usually given to all but sometimes aimed at individual prisoners, the majority of which were familiar yet some came unexpected. All of one’s strength had to be enlisted to overcome the daily routine: an early wakeup, arranging the bed’s straw, the lineup, marching to labor, forced labor, the waiting period for the meager daily meal, usually consisting of a watery vegetable soup and half a piece of bread which was insufficient for people working at hard labor, the return to the camp, and another lineup, before retiring to the barracks”.³³

Clearly, those living in concentration camps lived in horrible conditions and were subjected to untold horrors. It is essential to acknowledge what life was like for prisoners within these camps because it helps us understand the depth and severity of their experiences. As with every aspect of the Holocaust, it is incredibly important to recognize the scale and insidious nature of these genocidal actions. Being informed about the Holocaust can help us determine whether it is appropriate to make comparisons to it. Being informed can also help us determine the inappropriate nature of Holocaust distortion and the insidious nature of Holocaust denial.

Holocaust Distortion:

There has been increasing concern about the trivialization of the Holocaust in contemporary life and discourse. This is because some of these trivializing conversations utilize Holocaust distortion and denial, which is incredibly problematic. Holocaust denial is defined by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance as the goal “to recast history to erase the legacy and reality of the genocide of the Jews and related atrocities by the Nazis and their

³³ “Daily Life In The Camps,” Yadvashem, accessed February 3, 2022.
<https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/camps/daily-life.html>.

collaborators”.³⁴ In contrast, they define Holocaust distortion as, “rhetoric, written work, or other media that excuse, minimize, or misrepresent the known historical record. This can be intentional or unintentional. However, all distortion, whether intentional or not, feeds into antisemitic narratives, and can lead to more violent forms of antisemitism”.³⁵ Unfortunately, Holocaust distortion is a prevalent issue. In fact, a 2020 survey of Millennials and Gen Z in the US found that 49% of respondents “said they had seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts online”.³⁶ This is incredibly disturbing given that nearly half of respondents in recent generations have been exposed to distorted information.

There are several forms that Holocaust distortion can take, and it is important to recognize those forms so that one can be aware of inappropriate misinformation. One common distortion within Europe is the mantra “it was the Germans, not us”.³⁷ This is obviously problematic because it seems to absolve guilt from countries who also contributed to the horrors of the Holocaust, which is a clear distortion of the truth. Other examples include leveling the victims of the Holocaust with the victims of other tragedies, calling those who participated in the Holocaust “Patriotic Heroes”, extreme minimization in the amount of Holocaust victims, and attempts to blame the Jewish people for the Holocaust.³⁸ An example which is particularly disturbing is legislation that has been adopted to portray an idealized version of a country’s

³⁴ “What Is Holocaust Distortion and Why Is It A Problem?” International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, January 24, 2022. <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/what-holocaust-distortion-and-why-it-problem>.

³⁵ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “What is Holocaust Distortion And Why Is It A Problem?”

³⁶ “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples,” International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2021. <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/2021-11/Understanding%20Holocaust%20Distortion%20-%20Contexts%2C%20Influences%20and%20Examples%20-%20IHRA.pdf>.

³⁷ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

³⁸ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

involvement within the war, which distorts history by providing an inaccurate description of the facts.³⁹ This example stands out because it goes beyond the general populous. It is a legal step that has been put into place to protect a country's national honor, rather than protect the memory of the victims of the Holocaust.⁴⁰

Holocaust distortion varies according to the geographic location where it occurs. It is important to understand the history of Holocaust distortion in a Western context for the purposes of this paper. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance describes the history of Holocaust distortion in Western countries by stating,

“the early postwar era was characterized by broad silence on the crimes that the Nazis and their collaborators committed. This dynamic began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, when, after a few high-profile legal trials and cultural engagement with the Holocaust in various media, public debate began to focus almost exclusively on crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany as opposed to local collaborators. In time, this also changed. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, intense public and political discussions focused on criminality and guilt for the crimes of the Second World War and the Holocaust”.⁴¹

This means that prior to the 1960s and 70s, the Holocaust was not frequently in public discourse within Western countries. It makes sense that as conversations around the Holocaust increased, the amount of Holocaust distortion increased as well. Especially due to the lack of conversations about the Holocaust in the direct aftermath with survivors.

Holocaust distortions have also become highly politicized within the Western context. On the right side of the political spectrum, several patterns of Holocaust distortions have been recognized. These patterns include, “Sympathizing with the NS-regime”, “Downplaying the

³⁹ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

⁴⁰ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

⁴¹ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

Holocaust to create a positive view of history”, and “Questioning historical facts and numbers”.⁴² Holocaust distortion on the right is summarized by the following, “In any case, in these groups the distorting or denying of the Holocaust is strongly connected to antisemitism. The Holocaust has become a synonym for the persecution of the Jews therefore its distortion or denial can be used as a weapon against Jews, a tool to undermine their credibility and to fight their alleged worldwide influence”.⁴³ Additionally, there are patterns of common Holocaust distortion on the left side of the political spectrum. These patterns include “Reinforcing antisemitic stereotypes” and “Using the term ‘Holocaust’ for unrelated events”.⁴⁴ Regardless of political side, the use of Holocaust distortion in the political sphere is damaging, inappropriate, and unacceptable. Given the fact that it actively degrades the memory of the Holocaust and causes harm to the Jewish community, both in a historical and contemporary sense, Holocaust distortion is always inappropriate and unacceptable. Genocide should never be used as a bargaining chip for political actors to get their way.

Holocaust Distortion in COVID-19 Pandemic

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a rise in extremism. This rise manifested itself in bigoted actions in both physical and online public spaces. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) described this by stating, “As the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus surges globally, extremists continue to use the virus to advance their bigotry and antisemitism, while also promoting conspiracy theories and even boogaloo (the white supremacist term for civil

⁴² International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

⁴³ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

⁴⁴ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Understanding Holocaust Distortion: Contexts, Influences, and Examples.”

war)".⁴⁵ The rise in extremism built on preexisting hatreds, such as antisemitism, anti-Asian racism, and anti-immigrant ideology.⁴⁶ In this way, Holocaust distortion was just a method for extremists to express their hatred and displeasure for COVID-19 legislation. As an ADL commentary noted, "Extremists hope the virus kills Jews, but they are also using its emergence to advance their antisemitic theories that Jews are responsible for creating the virus, are spreading it to increase their control over a decimated population, or they are profiting off it. Some extremists have tied reports documenting Chinese efforts to safely dispose of victims' bodies to cast doubt on the number of Jews who died during the Holocaust".⁴⁷ This statement demonstrates the way that extremists used Holocaust distortion as a tool to express their antisemitic and anti-Asian bias. Unfortunately, Holocaust distortion has been a constant strategy used by extremists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been numerous instances of Holocaust distortion during the COVID-19 pandemic. These horrifying examples are typically found in politicized situations but are not limited to the political sphere. They are also not limited by location, with these situations occurring both within the United States and abroad. Generally, these distortions invoke specific aspects of the Holocaust to draw comparisons with contemporary policies surrounding COVID-19. Holocaust distortion in relation to COVID-19 have been described by the statement, "All around the world, opponents of COVID-19 measures invoke the genocide against the Jewish

⁴⁵ "Extremists Use Coronavirus to Advance Racist, Conspiratorial Agendas," Anti-Defamation League, March 10, 2020. <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremists-use-coronavirus-to-advance-racist-conspiratorial-agendas>.

⁴⁶ Anti-Defamation League, "Extremists Use Coronavirus to Advance Racist, Conspiratorial Agendas."

⁴⁷ Anti-Defamation League, "Extremists Use Coronavirus to Advance Racist, Conspiratorial Agendas."

people by Nazi Germany and its collaborators to paint themselves as victims, and their governments as persecutorial regimes”.⁴⁸

One common Holocaust distortion with COVID-19 has been the use of Jewish identifying badges to symbolize vaccination status. During the Holocaust, Jewish people were forced to always wear yellow star badges to symbolize their status.⁴⁹ The use of identifying badges was mandated by the Germans in September of 1939 and continued throughout the duration of the Holocaust.⁵⁰ While this policy may seem tame in comparison to the more gruesome acts of the Holocaust, it significantly contributed to the othering of the Jewish people and the trivialization of their mass-murders. The importance of this Nazi badge policy has been described in the following terms:

“The German government’s policy of forcing Jews to wear identifying badges was but one of many psychological tactics aimed at isolating and dehumanizing the Jews of Europe, directly marking them as being different (i.e., inferior) to everyone else. It allowed for the easier facilitation of their separation from society and subsequent ghettoization, which ultimately led to the deportation and murder of 6 million Jews. Those who failed or refused to wear the badge risked severe punishment, including death”.⁵¹

Clearly, this is an insidious aspect of the Holocaust which is important to accurately remember.

Yet, this specific distortion has been found across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Broad examples of this distortion have been found “In Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, France, Italy and the United States, protestors have engaged in falsifications of the history of the Holocaust, donning yellow star badges reading ‘not

⁴⁸ “Rising Threat of Holocaust Distortion Requires Urgent International Response,” UNESCO, January 11, 2022. <https://en.unesco.org/news/rising-threat-holocaust-distortion-requires-urgent-international-response>.

⁴⁹ “Holocaust Badges,” The Zekelman Holocaust Center, May 16, 2019. <https://www.holocaustcenter.org/visit/library-archive/holocaust-badges/>.

⁵⁰ The Zekelman Holocaust Center, “Holocaust Badges.”

⁵¹ The Zekelman Holocaust Center, “Holocaust Badges.”

vaccinated' at demonstrations against COVID-19 measures. Until recently, such badges could be purchased on Amazon".⁵² This quotation is important because it speaks to the wide reach and accessibility of these comparisons and the materials required to make them.

Specific instances where this distortion have occurred can help provide insight into the motivation behind this distortion. For example, at an anti-vaccine protest in Montreal, Canada, a protest leader wore a yellow star badge to symbolize his vaccination status.⁵³ When asked about his motivation for this comparison, he stated, "What they want to install from the first of September is exactly like the first of September 1941, when the Jews were supposed to wear the star," and that "The government of Quebec is following a way that resembles what Hitler was doing, dividing the society in groups".⁵⁴ After receiving media attention and callouts from the Jewish community, the leader stopped using the star in his protests, though he remained firm in his Holocaust comparison.⁵⁵ Interestingly, the Executive Director of the Montreal Holocaust Museum commented on the situation by saying that "He doesn't see it [as] a Nazi symbol," and that "He sees it [as] a symbol of the Jewish suffering, which is a big difference. In his mind, he's not wearing it because he wants to support Nazis. He's doing it because he feels like a Jewish guy during the Holocaust. ... He loves Israel, Jewish community, he loves Jewish people".⁵⁶ This opens the question- if leaders are not using this comparison out of antisemitism, are they innocent of contributing to the spread of antisemitic tropes and misinformation? Additionally, are all who use this comparison doing so without antisemitic intentions?

⁵² "Rising Threat of Holocaust Distortion Requires Urgent International Response," UNESCO, January 11, 2022. <https://en.unesco.org/news/rising-threat-holocaust-distortion-requires-urgent-international-response>.

⁵³ Ben Sales, "Montreal Anti-Vax Leader Drops Yellow Star, Stands by Holocaust Comparison," *The Times of Israel*, September 4, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/montreal-anti-vax-leader-drops-the-yellow-star-stands-by-holocaust-comparison/>.

⁵⁴ Sales, "Montreal Anti-Vax Leader Drops Yellow Star, Stands by Holocaust Comparison."

⁵⁵ Sales, "Montreal Anti-Vax Leader Drops Yellow Star, Stands by Holocaust Comparison."

⁵⁶ Sales, "Montreal Anti-Vax Leader Drops Yellow Star, Stands by Holocaust Comparison."

There are clear differences between the use of yellow star badges during the Holocaust and the use of them to make political statements on COVID-19 policies. To begin, individuals clearly have a choice on whether they want to become vaccinated; they are not forced to receive the vaccine. Jewish people during the Holocaust did not get to choose their classification and many disagreed with the identity that they were assigned. Additionally, peoples' vaccination status is not based on an inherent quality, such as race or ethnicity. Unvaccinated people do not experience racial discrimination and are not subject to the racial discrimination laws that the Jewish people were. They are not othered from society, treated as subhuman, or faced with immediate death. Unvaccinated people do not have to fear entering a lethal ghetto system or being deported to a killing center.

The recent protest in Montreal proves that unvaccinated people can flaunt their chosen status and exercise legal freedom that was completely inaccessible to Jewish people during the Holocaust. They can place their own ideology above the safety of others and feel justified in defying legislation and court rulings. If Jewish people would have attempted the same disregard for public policy, they would have faced dire and lethal consequences. The use of the yellow star badge embodies the more insidious actions of the Holocaust. By wearing one, unvaccinated people are comparing the consequences of their own choices to the horrific system of ethnically based discrimination and murder. This comparison is insulting, inaccurate, and irresponsible.

Unfortunately, beyond the general public, Holocaust distortions around COVID-19 are also often used by those in positions of political power. Politicians possess a unique position of authority over both their constituents and those outside of their jurisdiction. They are likely to be trusted on matters of importance, given that they have access to an incredible amount of information. The opinions of politicians are of particular importance because they directly affect

legislation and public policy. In this way, if their thinking is influenced by antisemitic or distorted information, they can contribute to the spread of this harmful ideology.

Examples of politicians invoking the Holocaust ranges between local, federal, and international spheres. In Washington State, Representative Jim Walsh was seen wearing a yellow star badge while speaking to a group at a church.⁵⁷ Additionally, Kentucky Representative Thomas Massie used Holocaust distortions to comment on Covid-19 policies on Twitter.⁵⁸ His tweet contained a picture of a wrist with a number tattooed on it with the words, “If you have to carry a card on you to gain access to a restaurant, venue or an event in your own country... that’s no longer a free country”.⁵⁹ This is an obvious nod to the number tattoos that some Holocaust victims received. Tattoos during the Holocaust were mainly given at Auschwitz and can be described as, “an indelible image of the Holocaust. The tattoos of the survivors have come to symbolize the utter brutality and of the concentration camps and the attempt of the Nazis to dehumanize their victims”.⁶⁰ The comparison between the dehumanization of Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the ability to eat at a restaurant because of one’s own choices is incredibly disrespectful to the memory of the Holocaust.

Another example of Holocaust distortions with COVID-19 being used in the political sphere are recent comments made by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. At an anti-vaccine rally, he “compared what he sees as threats to human life from 5G, vaccine passports and ‘low-orbit

⁵⁷ Rebecca Shabad, “Washington Lawmaker Apologizes for Wearing Yellow Star of David to Protest Covid Mandates,” *NBC News*, July 2, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/washington-lawmaker-apologizes-wearing-star-david-protest-covid-mandates-n1272962>.

⁵⁸ JTA and TOI Staff, “GOP Congressman Compares COVID Measures to Holocaust, Leading Intern to Quit,” *The Times of Israel*, August 28, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gop-congressman-compares-covid-measures-to-holocaust-leading-intern-to-quit/>.

⁵⁹ JTA and TOI Staff, “GOP Congressman Compares COVID Measures to Holocaust, Leading Intern to Quit.”

⁶⁰ George Rosenthal, “Auschwitz-Birkenau: The Evolution of Tattooing in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Complex,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-evolution-of-tattooing-in-the-auschwitz-concentration-camp-complex>.

satellites’ to the threat the Nazis posed to Jews during the Holocaust”.⁶¹ This distortion is unique in that it is trying to compare the use of the fifth-generation (5G) technology for cellular networks and vaccine documentation to the documentation requirements used in the Holocaust. These comments got a scathing response back from the Auschwitz Memorial and Museum which tweeted: “Exploiting of the tragedy of people who suffered, were humiliated, tortured & murdered by the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany – including children like Anne Frank – in a debate about vaccines & limitations during global pandemic is a sad symptom of moral & intellectual decay,”.⁶² This response shows a clear message- scholars of the Holocaust are firmly against the use of Holocaust distortions for political points with COVID-19.

It is also important to consider patterns of repeated use of Holocaust distortions with COVID-19. A perfect example of this are several comments made by Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, from Georgia. Representative Green has been repeatedly called out for inaccurate and insensitive comparisons to the Holocaust. One of her particularly problematic statements was, “You know, we can look back at a time in history where people were told to wear a gold star. And they were definitely treated like second-class citizens, so much so that they were put in trains and taken to gas chambers in Nazi Germany. And this is exactly the type of abuse that Nancy Pelosi is talking about”.⁶³ Frustratingly, “When asked to apologize by Jewish groups, Greene doubled down” and stated, “Any rational Jewish person didn’t like what happened in Nazi Germany, and any rational Jewish person doesn’t like what’s happening with overbearing

⁶¹ Shira Hanau, “RFK Jr. utilizes Holocaust analogy in speech to DC anti-vaccine rally,” *The Times of Israel*, January 24, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rfk-jr-utilizes-holocaust-analogy-in-speech-to-dc-anti-vaccine-rally/>

⁶² Shira Hanau, “RFK Jr. utilizes Holocaust analogy in speech to DC anti-vaccine rally.”

⁶³ Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country,’” *The Times of Israel*, November 3, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-blames-vaccine-nazis-for-ruining-our-country/>.

mask mandates and overbearing vaccine policies,”⁶⁴ This quotation is horrifying in that it shows her blatant disregard for the Jewish community and for accurate Holocaust education. She does not only disrespect the community’s feelings, but she also calls them irrational for disagreeing with her and siding with accurate Holocaust information. Additionally, she has tweeted that, “Vaccinated employees get a vaccination logo just like the Nazis forced Jewish people to wear a gold star”.⁶⁵

Interestingly, she did visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and issued an apology for her statements, though she continued to distort the Holocaust at her convenience.⁶⁶ A few weeks after her visit to the USHMM, she tweeted, “Biden pushing a vaccine that is NOT FDA approved shows covid is a political tool used to control people,” and “People have a choice, they don’t need your medical brown shirts showing up at their door ordering vaccinations. You can’t force people to be part of the human experiment,”.⁶⁷ Representative Greene had been educated on the Holocaust and the damage that her statements can cause, yet she continues to make them. Why does she do this? Is Holocaust education the correct tool for stopping the use of Holocaust distortions? It is disheartening to see that Holocaust education alone cannot cause someone to stop relying on Holocaust distortions, but the global community should see this as a challenge to design the tools needed to grant understanding about the Holocaust and encourage people to stop distorting the truth.

Harm Caused by Holocaust Distortion in COVID-19:

⁶⁴ Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country.’”

⁶⁵ Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country.’”

⁶⁶ Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country.’”

⁶⁷ Shira Hanau, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Blames ‘Vaccine Nazis’ for ‘Ruining Our Country.’”

Unsurprisingly, antisemitism has risen exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This rise is being seen around the globe and directly links common antisemitic tropes and the pandemic. This rise is so severe that, Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League commented that in the “annual Anti-Defamation League Audit of Antisemitic Incidents for the 2020 calendar year, released Tuesday, we found that Jews in the U.S. reported a disturbing 2,024 incidents of antisemitism last year, a rate of harassment 10 percent higher than in the year before and one of the highest overall in the last five years”.⁶⁸ He goes on to explain that many of these antisemitic instances invoke an ancient antisemitic trope of Jewish people spreading diseases.⁶⁹ Additionally, “Nazi swastikas were used in 517 acts of vandalism”, showing us that people still rely on Nazi imagery and Holocaust symbols to carry out antisemitic actions.⁷⁰

The link between the COVID-19 pandemic and Holocaust distortion has been noticed by the Jewish community within the United States and abroad. The Israeli’ governments Diaspora Affair’s Ministry spoke on this link in their report for International Holocaust Remembrance Day.⁷¹ An article summarizing this report commented on the Holocaust distortion throughout the pandemic by saying that,

“Such displays showed factual knowledge of the genocide was eroding, the report said, adding that some COVID-19 agitators have been ‘consuming and disseminating anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that Jews are responsible for the crisis and are using it for oppression, global domination, economic gain, etc. Expanding on the findings, Diaspora

⁶⁸ Jonathan Greenblatt, “Covid Quarantine Didn't Stop Antisemitic Attacks from Rising to near-Historic Highs,” *NBC News*, April 27, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-quarantine-didn-t-stop-antisemitic-attacks-rising-near-historic-ncna1265425>.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Greenblatt, “Covid Quarantine Didn't Stop Antisemitic Attacks from Rising to near-Historic Highs.”

⁷⁰ Jonathan Greenblatt, “Covid Quarantine Didn't Stop Antisemitic Attacks from Rising to near-Historic Highs,”

⁷¹ Dan Williams, “Israel Says Some Protesters against COVID Measures Are Fueling Anti-Semitism,” *Reuters*, January 27, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-sees-holocaust-tropes-covid-protests-fuelling-anti-semitism-2022-01-27/>.

Affairs Minister Nachman Shai said Holocaust distortion or trivialisation is itself anti-Semitic and can sometimes lead to actual endangerment of Jews.”⁷²

This shows us that Holocaust distortion and its relationship to COVID-19 have been noticed by the global Jewish community. Additionally, The Combat Antisemitism Movement said, “that in 2020 and 2021 it had found 63.7 million engagements - participation, sharing or ‘liking’ - during online discussions linking the pandemic to the Holocaust”.⁷³ This shows the horrifying scale that antisemitism related to the Holocaust and COVID-19 has had. Interestingly, this statistic only represents the number of interactions on this distorted information; it does not provide information on the amount of people who encounter this information without interacting with it and who may be influenced by it.

It is essential to examine specific instances of antisemitism within the COVID-19 pandemic so that we can understand the severity and depth of the problem. This antisemitism causes tangible harm to the community that goes beyond statistics. In December of 2022, antisemitic flyers linking Jewish people and COVID-19 were found in the city of Austin, Texas.⁷⁴ These flyers were in plastic bags that also contained rocks and were placed on the doorsteps of both Jewish and non-Jewish people.⁷⁵ An article describing the incident stated,

“Distributed by a group called the Goyim Defense League, the flyers state that “every single aspect of the COVID agenda is Jewish” and include a list of Jewish COVID-19 response leaders in various institutions. The nationwide antisemitic campaign has appeared on the doorsteps of communities in California, Texas, North Carolina, Maryland, and others. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the group, whose red and black logo mimics a swastika, is a “loose network of individuals connected by their virulent antisemitism” and includes five or six primary organizers, dozens of supporters, and thousands of online followers. Founded in 2020, they also operate a video platform

⁷² Dan Williams, “Israel Says Some Protesters against COVID Measures Are Fueling Anti-Semitism.”

⁷³ Dan Williams, “Israel Says Some Protesters against COVID Measures Are Fueling Anti-Semitism.”

⁷⁴ Danielle Ziri and The Media Line, “COVID-19 Unmasks American Antisemitism,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-691826>.

⁷⁵ Danielle Ziri and The Media Line, “COVID-19 Unmasks American Antisemitism.”

that streams antisemitic content. The ADL's online resources on the group also add that its "most zealous and visible actors" are in California, Colorado, Florida and New York".⁷⁶

This description is important, because it shows us that this issue can be found across the country. It also shows us that there are groups dedicated to spreading antisemitic ideology in conjunction with COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, this rise in antisemitism and its impact on the Jewish community have not just been limited to the United States. One article reports that, "The European Agency for Fundamental Rights, which collates data from civil society groups across the continent, warned that Germany and France had seen the biggest increases. Germany recorded 2,351 antisemitic 'incidents' last year, it revealed, and France 339".⁷⁷ It also noted that the "EAFR said 90 percent of Jews felt that antisemitism has increased in their country and was a serious problem and that one in three people have considered emigrating".⁷⁸ This shows us that the rise in antisemitism in relation to COVID-19 is global and that it is seriously impacting the Jewish community.

The global rise in antisemitism during the COVID-19 pandemic has been so intense that it has received responses from the United Nations on several occasions. In April of 2020 Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, commented on it by saying, "I am extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other

⁷⁶ Danielle Ziri and The Media Line, "COVID-19 Unmasks American Antisemitism."

⁷⁷ Euronews and AFP, "COVID-19 Had Led to Re-Kindling of Antisemitism across Europe, Says Rights Agency," *Euronews*, September 11, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/11/09/covid-19-has-led-to-re-kindling-of-antisemitism-across-europe-says-rights-agency>.

⁷⁸ Euronews and AFP, "COVID-19 Had Led to Re-Kindling of Antisemitism across Europe, Says Rights Agency."

minorities”.⁷⁹ He also called for the global community to “collectively reject antisemitism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination now”.⁸⁰ Additionally, “He urged States to work with Jewish communities and organizations to strengthen monitoring of hate speech or crimes, and to develop strategies to support victims of antisemitism. ‘It is imperative for the civil society organisations and faith-based actors to signal a zero-tolerance policy towards antisemitism online and offline’”.⁸¹ The response of the Special Rapporteur shows us that global bodies have noticed the increase in antisemitism, are taking its severity seriously, and are encouraging the international community to take action.

Additionally, at an event for the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, commented on Holocaust distortion in relation to the pandemic.⁸² When speaking about Holocaust denial he said, “When the truth is just one version among many, lying becomes normalized and history can be distorted and rewritten”.⁸³ Additionally, he said, “As the number of Holocaust survivors diminishes every year, we must make ever greater efforts to elevate the truth and ensure that it lives on.”⁸⁴ He also tweeted out a video which said, “Antisemitism continues to blight our world. It is sad, but not surprising that the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered yet another eruption of this poisonous ideology. We can never let down our guards”.⁸⁵ The acknowledgment of the role of Holocaust denial and distortion

⁷⁹ “Rise in Antisemitic Hatred during COVID-19 Must Be Countered with Tougher Measures, Says UN Expert”, United Nations Human Rights Officer of the High Commissioner, April 17, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>.

⁸⁰ United Nations Human Rights Officer of the High Commissioner, “Rise in Antisemitic Hatred during COVID-19 Must Be Countered with Tougher Measures, Says UN Expert.”

⁸¹ United Nations Human Rights Officer of the High Commissioner, “Rise in Antisemitic Hatred during COVID-19 Must Be Countered with Tougher Measures, Says UN Expert.”

⁸² “Rise in Antisemitism during Pandemic Shows We Can Never Let down Our Guard: UN Chief,” United Nations, January 25, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082872>.

⁸³ United Nations, “Rise in Antisemitism during Pandemic Shows We Can Never Let down Our Guard: UN Chief.”

⁸⁴ United Nations, “Rise in Antisemitism during Pandemic Shows We Can Never Let down Our Guard: UN Chief.”

⁸⁵ United Nations, “Rise in Antisemitism during Pandemic Shows We Can Never Let down Our Guard: UN Chief.”

in the recent rise of antisemitism by the UN Secretary-General is crucial. It proves the relationship between antisemitism, COVID-19, and Holocaust distortion. This knowledge gives scholars the tools necessary to construct solutions to the rise in antisemitism.

It is also essential that we listen to Holocaust survivor's perspectives on current Holocaust distortions and rises in antisemitism. One survivor, Inge Auerbacher, told the German parliament that she remembered the "terrible time of horror and hatred" and that "Unfortunately this cancer has reawakened and hatred of Jews is common place again in many countries in the world, including Germany".⁸⁶ An article describing Auerbacher's statements said that "Ms Auerbacher bravely revisited her past amid growing fears the COVID-19 pandemic has 'accelerated' hatred and Holocaust denial".⁸⁷ Auerbacher's testimony is particularly important because it shows us that the people who were the most affected by the Holocaust are concerned enough about Holocaust distortions and COVID-19 to speak up about their experiences. This is an act that requires bravery and a willingness to relive traumatic memories. It is an emotional act for both the survivors who share and the people who listen. It is heartbreaking to think that those who survived such an atrocious genocide have to endure lasting antisemitism, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These survivors and other members of their community deserve better; they are already haunted by memories of their past and should not have to live among antisemitic threats in their current lives. As a global community, we owe it to them, to the contemporary Jewish community, and to the victims of the Holocaust to find tangible solutions to current trends in antisemitism and Holocaust distortions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸⁶ Siba Jackson, "COVID-19: Antisemitism 'on the Rise' as Anti-Vaxxers Blamed for Helping to Fuel Hatred," *Sky News*, January 27, 2022. <https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-antisemitism-on-the-rise-as-anti-vaxxers-blamed-for-helping-to-fuel-hatred-12526564>.

⁸⁷ Siba Jackson, "COVID-19: Antisemitism 'on the Rise' as Anti-Vaxxers Blamed for Helping to Fuel Hatred."

Possible Solutions:

One key way that the international community can solve the rise of antisemitism and Holocaust distortions is through Holocaust education. A disturbing study of millennials and Generation Z in the United States found that, “Sixty-three percent of those surveyed did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and over half of those thought the death toll was fewer than 2 million”.⁸⁸ It also found that when asked to name a concentration camp or ghetto from the Holocaust, “nearly half of U.S. respondents could not name a single one”.⁸⁹ Other disturbing findings from this study include that, “just 90 percent of respondents said they believed that the Holocaust happened. Seven percent were not sure, and 3 percent denied that it happened. One of the most disturbing revelations, the survey noted, is that 11 percent of respondents believe Jews caused the Holocaust. The number climbs to 19 percent in New York, the state with the largest Jewish population”.⁹⁰ World renowned scholar Deborah Lipstadt commented on Holocaust education and distortions by saying, “There is no doubt that Holocaust denial is a form of anti-Semitism,”.⁹¹ She continued by stating, “And when we fail to actively remember the facts of what happened, we risk a situation where prejudice and anti-Semitism will encroach on those facts”.⁹² This quote demonstrates that without Holocaust education we risk falling into traps of antisemitism. Currently, only 23 states within the US require Holocaust education within their secondary school curriculum.⁹³ This is a disturbing

⁸⁸ Kit Ramgopal, Survey Finds 'Shocking' Lack of Holocaust Knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z,” *NBC News*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/survey-finds-shocking-lack-holocaust-knowledge-among-millennials-gen-z-n1240031>.

⁸⁹ Kit Ramgopal, Survey Finds 'Shocking' Lack of Holocaust Knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z.”

⁹⁰ Kit Ramgopal, Survey Finds 'Shocking' Lack of Holocaust Knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z.”

⁹¹ Kit Ramgopal, Survey Finds 'Shocking' Lack of Holocaust Knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z.”

⁹² Kit Ramgopal, Survey Finds 'Shocking' Lack of Holocaust Knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z.”

⁹³ “Where Holocaust Education Is Required in the US,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed February 25, 2022. <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/where-holocaust-education-is-required-in-the-us>.

statistic given that it just under half of all US states. Washington State does not require Holocaust education.⁹⁴

Holocaust education can have lasting benefits in developing accepting and productive members of society. A recent national survey of college students demonstrates these benefits within their findings. One key finding of this survey is that,

“Students with Holocaust education have more pluralistic attitudes and are more open to differing viewpoints, which includes being more comfortable with people of a different race or sexual orientation more generally. They are also significantly more likely to report willingness to challenge incorrect or biased information (28% more likely), challenge intolerant behavior in others (12% more likely), and stand up to negative stereotyping (20% more likely)”.⁹⁵

This finding is essential because it demonstrates the effectiveness of Holocaust education in teaching students how to confront bias and embrace people of other backgrounds. Additionally, this survey reported that, “Students exposed to Holocaust education demonstrate higher critical thinking skills and a greater sense of social responsibility and civic efficacy if survivor testimony was part of their experience”.⁹⁶ This finding is also important because it proves the value of hearing about the Holocaust from survivors themselves. While all findings in this study are important, there is one that I believe would limit the use of Holocaust distortions. This finding is that,

“Students also indicated that their Holocaust education (with survivor testimony and without) had helped them: make connections between the Holocaust and modern day events (48% for those exposed to survivor testimony compared to 31% for those who had no testimony); understand the importance of speaking up against any stereotyping (65% for those who had exposure, compared to 45% who did not); and understand how the

⁹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Where Holocaust Education Is Required in the US.”

⁹⁵ “Survey of U.S. College Students Shows Holocaust Education Is Effective,” Florida Atlantic University, September 11, 2020. <https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/pjhr/chhre/news/survey-shows-holocaust-education-effective/>.

⁹⁶ Florida Atlantic University, “Survey of U.S. College Students Shows Holocaust Education Is Effective.”

Holocaust happened (71% who had exposure, compared to 50% for those who had no exposure)”.⁹⁷

This finding directly speaks to the value of educating students on comparisons of the Holocaust and contemporary world events. This might look like directly combatting Holocaust distortions, including distortions in the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding also speaks to the importance of understanding how the Holocaust happened, which is also key in disproving Holocaust distortions.

Holocaust education is essential in stopping the current rise in antisemitism and in COVID-19 related Holocaust distortions. It may not be an easy thing for students to learn, but there is a clear need for Holocaust education among recent generations. I would argue that using widespread Holocaust education to teach students about the importance of combatting bias and giving them the tools to do so would decrease the current rise in antisemitism. I would also suggest that this Holocaust education contain direct testimony from survivors, as that has proven to be an effective tool. In order to incorporate direct testimony, educators could utilize video testimony or autobiographies. If the majority of people are educated on the Holocaust, they would understand the danger that Holocaust distortions can cause. If those people felt comfortable confronting these distortions, the international community might have a chance to stop them. This strategy also requires Holocaust education for people who are not students, which might be achieved through conversations between students and non-students. Holocaust education may be an imperfect solution, but I believe that it is one of the most comprehensive ways that we can decrease the use of Holocaust distortions and contemporary antisemitism.

⁹⁷ Florida Atlantic University, “Survey of U.S. College Students Shows Holocaust Education Is Effective.”

Conclusion:

The Holocaust was undoubtedly one of the most horrendous events in human history. The insidious nature of the Holocaust makes it an emotional subject, even for those who study it professionally. However, it is imperative we continue to educate ourselves and protect the historical truth of the Holocaust. Holocaust distortions have proven to only cheapen the memory of the Holocaust and incite violence against the contemporary Jewish community. We must honor the memory of the Holocaust by committing ourselves to speaking out against bias and correcting inaccurate information. We can play a direct role in reducing the current global rise in antisemitism by creating educational systems that teach about the Holocaust and emphasize the words of Holocaust survivors. Our global community is not powerless against this rising wave of hatred; we can contribute towards tangible solutions in reducing such bias. The way to reach these tangible solutions is to strive towards comprehensive Holocaust education for all.

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