

Andrea Benatar  
Hajira Qazi  
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### History: A Family Affair

There is no singular, objective account of history. This should not come as a surprise to us. In the same way that a story changes depending on who's telling it, history (and the way we learn and engage with it) is no different. While oral history traditions have embraced this fact for centuries, not claiming one "truth", most textbooks, on the other hand, aim to delineate history as a single irrefutable account.

I set out to explore this notion further, by way of analyzing history through the lens of three generations in my own family. Spanning four countries and a wide array of formal and informal education, I was interested in the inevitable differences in interpretation and understanding of history across family members. In particular, I wanted to hone in on how we learn about the Holocaust, since it is a moment in history that not only has a huge personal significance for my family, but also one that has greatly changed in discourse across both time and place. To summarize some of my findings with this research, I designed an exploratory print piece that begins forming connections and differences in understanding and perception across the three generations.

#### **Secondary Research:**

In tangent to interviewing my family members, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the creation and evolution of historical myths over time (and how this has served to politicize and colonize history in formal education), comparisons of history teachings across different countries, and lastly, how the Holocaust and antisemitism might be seen as a product of hegemony and coloniality, though not a product of colonization itself.

#### I. Creation/evolution of historical myths

A key idea that came up several times when exploring the creation and evolution of historical myths, in and out of formal education, was that of collective memory. As Duncan Bell describes, collective memory can serve to validate, propagate, and transform historical interpretations on the basis of a collective (often national) identity. He writes, "The notion of shared ideas, values and interpretations concerning either real events (slavery, the First World War, the Holocaust)... locates the collectivity inside a shared history, a history constantly reaffirmed and reproduced through

resonant rituals and symbols. This memory acts as a powerful cohesive force, binding the disparate members of a nation together: it demarcates the boundary between Them and Us, delineating the national self from the foreign, alien Other.” (Bell 69). Bell primarily relates collective memory to the formation of nationalism and national identity, which makes me wonder: what happens when that memory is being passed on across different nations and the historical event being analyzed gets further away from its place of origin? For example, the Holocaust might’ve been critical to shaping the national identity of Western European countries, but less so that of America, so what happens to the collective memory of my family after being translated into such a different context? Does it become obsolete?

Expanding upon the role of memory in history, in the introduction to the book, *Between Memory and History*, Nathan Wachtel analyzes and challenges the scientific argument that memory and oral tradition is ‘unreliable’, and seen as separate from ‘official history’ (3). While historians currently do utilize oral accounts as a particular source for filling in gaps, Wachtel reframes the role of memory in history as a fluid tool for relating history to the “present reality” by focusing on the recollection’s “developmental process” rather than its “content (the factual data)” (4). He poses the question, “[i]s not history by definition memory, since it preserves the past? But *which* past remains to be seen”, which I found particularly interesting to continue pondering and exploring (Wachtel 11).

Taking into account how memory and myth shape our historical understandings, it is not surprising then that the history that most of us encounter in schools is the product of Western, hegemonic accounts, with little to no room for divergence. There are infinite examples of mis-told and untold bits of history, as called out across books such as *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* by Robert Young, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen. Another interesting and prevalent (albeit common) case study might be to look at the politicized nature of history classes in America, and the occlusion/ manipulation of historical events to diffuse responsibility and propel forward a savior narrative, maybe most evidently seen in the picture of slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation that is painted in American schools (Waxman).

## II. How history is taught in different countries

Because my analysis is cross-contextual and cross-generational, it is important to gain a bit of understanding into how history curricula differ in educational settings in different countries. For example, a study by the Learning and Instruction Journal directly compares how Mexican and Spanish students learn about Christopher Columbus in school. One of the findings that confirms these critical cross-contextual differences has to do with the rhetoric utilized in textbooks, such as the use of “discovery” (Spain) versus “encounter” (Mexico) to describe the colonization of the Americas, and personal descriptors of Columbus as a “hero” versus no value descriptors at all (Carretero 652). Similarly, the study found that Spanish textbooks also seem to project a sense of

pride in these accounts, which contributes to the sensationalism of history teachings in the West (660). The creation of 'official' and 'unofficial' histories also poses another interesting rhetoric commonly utilized to ensure that Eurocentric depictions of history remain the most widespread 'truth' that is taught in schools, while views from the subaltern are disregarded as 'unofficial' (652).

Shifting towards how the Holocaust specifically is formally taught across different countries (as background knowledge for my family member interviews), a 2015 UNESCO report mapping Holocaust teachings and curricula revealed some interesting direct comparisons between the United States and several European countries such as France. For example, the study describes the US textbook approach as follows: "[t]he largely thematic, rather than historical, approaches tend to dehistoricize and decontextualize the Holocaust... and instead provide primarily psychological explanations of the event with reference to the motivations of perpetrators, and with reference to racism and personal qualities which are defined as 'evil' (T2), 'dangerous' (T3) and 'vicious' (T5)." (Carrier 153). On the other hand, the studies conducted on French textbooks appear to highlight a greater emphasis on "'what' and 'how' rather than 'why' questions, which creates a clear distinction between the more sensational, emotive approach to history in America and the more direct, quantitative approach in France (104). As seen throughout prior research, there is again a reoccurring lack of accountability (assumably in favor of preserving a patriotic image) and a lack of connection formed between the Holocaust and the events that preceded/ proceeded in both the US and Spain, such as the Spanish Civil War and in certain American textbooks, the failure to accept Jewish refugees in several cases (144, 153). Across all of the Spanish textbooks analyzed, there was also no mention of Jewish history prior to the war, which is interesting when considering the lasting effects of the Spanish expulsion of Jews in the late fifteenth century (142). This also goes to show how we tend to learn history as isolated bits, rather than a connected whole.

Another commonality across Holocaust education in various countries seems to be the lack of mention or elaboration on the non-Jewish victims of the mass genocide. A report released by The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education analyzed the understanding of non-Jewish Holocaust victims across British middle school and high school students. Unsurprisingly, the study found significant gaps in students' ability to identify all of the targeted groups of people, but more importantly, in the ability to distinguish between and describe the *experiences* of the different groups. This means that most students tended to homogenize and group together the experiences of non-Jewish victims based on what they did know about Jewish victims. ("Non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and murder"). Having drawn similar findings in my subsequent interviews with family members, it is evident that this knowledge gap reveals a pattern in how the Holocaust has been, and continues to be, taught, and which information gets lost in that teaching.

### III. The Holocaust and antisemitism as a consequence of hegemony

There is somewhat extensive academic discourse surrounding the Holocaust as a product or consequence of hegemony. In his paper, Jürgen Zimmerer argues that while we tend to learn about colonialism and the Holocaust in very different contexts and at different points in history, Nazism was really colonial in nature and would not have been possible without European hegemony established in through colonialism. Understanding these connections also helps us understand how “ordinary” German citizens partook in and justified Nazi policy. (Zimmerer).

When looking at the Holocaust and its ties to hegemony, I also found it important to look more into the history and formation of antisemitism. There’s a really interesting paper that analyzes the entanglement and colonial roots of both antisemitism and islamophobia (Katz). Katz ties both back to colonialism when she says, “Post Enlightenment liberal and nationalist thinkers and policymakers both sought to flatten public differences and made distinctions according to ethnic origin, religion, class, and gender... In lands where Jews and Muslims had cohabited for centuries, the very articulation and hardening of such categories entailed the creation of sharper stereotypes and distinct policies regarding both groups. These stereotypes and policies relied on comparing Jews and Muslims to one another and to the “Europeans” of the mainland and the settler classes.” (1193). As Katz explains, this form of othering served different purposes for Jews and Muslims, resulting in very different evolutions and manifestations of antisemitism and islamophobia, but nonetheless served to paint the two groups as inherently different from each other, and inherently different from the hegemon (the European).

Lastly, the creation of an ‘objective’ version of history, a history synonymous with ‘truth’, in it of itself has served as a way for European hegemony to continue spreading and dominating our education systems. I argue, as many others before me have, not in favor of finding the ultimate, true version of history, but in favor of addressing history as the complex product of narrative, myth, and memory, reconciling both formal and informal accounts. Thus, in this project, I set out to explore what this meant in the context of my own family and a historic event that has greatly shaped the last three generations.

## **Primary Research:**

### I. Family Background

For the next component of my research project, I interviewed my grandparents (paternal), my parents, and conducted a self-interview surrounding historical teachings and understanding of the Holocaust. For a bit of context, the family members that I chose to interview span four different countries and three different generations. Because my family is half Ashkenazi and half Sephardic on both sides of the family, there are actually very interesting parallels between both sets of

grandparents, though for the sake of simplicity, I chose to focus on my father's side of the family. My paternal grandmother grew up in Spain after her parents escaped the Holocaust in Hungary, due to a Spanish diplomat named Angel Sans Briz who provided refuge to thousands of Hungarian Jews before being deported to Auschwitz. My paternal grandfather, on the other hand, grew up in Spanish-occupied territory of Morocco and his family never had to flee. Lastly, my parents both grew up in Caracas, before they immigrated to the United States and had me. It is also worth noting that across these three generations, none are particularly religious, but most still follow some of the major traditions.

## II. Interviews

I came up with the following set of questions to roughly guide my family interviews:

- What do you remember about what you were taught about the holocaust in school? Was it a large portion of the curriculum? What media/modes were used to teach (i.e textbooks, images, videos, etc)? List some key points and key descriptors
- ^ What about what you were taught at home? Which do you think was more important/resonant with you in your understanding of the Holocaust?
- Is there anything you didn't learn in school that was surprising to you? Where did you learn it and why do you think it was occluded in schools?
- How much did you learn about non Jewish Holocaust victims?
- To what extent, would you say your understanding of the Holocaust has shaped your identity as a Jew today?

Some interesting findings from these interviews included the role of formal versus informal education in the formation of both Jewish identity and historical understanding, the primary mediums and sources of learning, the role of surrounding communities, and the development of a certain generational trauma.

For my grandparents, I was surprised (though primarily due to my own ignorance) to learn that the war and the Holocaust were not brought up in the slightest, at school nor at home. In the case of my paternal grandmother, who went to school in Spain directly after her parents had fled the Holocaust, there were no mentions of it in classrooms due to the influence of Franco's dictatorship on education, and the fact that Spain did not participate directly in the war and was still somewhat on the margin. In fact, I learned that Spain did not incorporate the Holocaust into school curricula at all until around 20 years ago. At home, she mentioned, it was more of a matter of her parents simply wanting to forget the war and not pass along their trauma to their children. My grandfather had similar experiences going to school in Morocco, though there was less aversion to discussing the Holocaust at home, since his family was not directly impacted. Thus, what was very interesting from my grandparents perspective is how much of their

understanding of the Holocaust came later in life, through self education (via literature, journalism, movies, and emerging media), as well as through the Jewish communities they formed a part of. In particular, they mentioned that the annual Day of Remembrance and hearing first hand testimonies from survivors were some of the most influential and powerful sources for their own learning and understanding. My grandfather mentioned that we're now inundated with data surrounding the Holocaust, but we've lost touch with the human aspect of it, which is where memory comes in. He says that memory "has to be intense, it has to be amplified, and it cannot cease to exist."

My parents, on the other hand, had a very in depth Holocaust education, both in school (at their Jewish school in Caracas) and at home or through the community. What stood out to me most from interviewing them was how interconnected those different entities were in their education; school, home, and the Jewish community of Caracas were almost inseparable for them, whereas in my experience growing up, those were much more compartmentalized. As my mom recounted, she'll "never forget" the first day that they learned about the Holocaust in depth in sixth grade. She described it as "traumatic", "shocking", and "jarring", as they were shown videos, photos, testimonies, books, and so on in a very uncensored manner. At the end of this year, they had to present a project called "Finding My Roots," (an annual tradition at their school) in which students researched and found their own family archives and heirlooms from their family in the Holocaust to be presented at the local synagogue. Something else I found interesting about the way my parents learned about the Holocaust is how it wasn't taught as an isolated event but rather in the context of a long history of antisemitism. That being said, it is worth mentioning that students at non-Jewish schools in Venezuela had very little to no understanding of the Holocaust at the time, which my parents detailed through encounters with students at their respective (secular) universities later on. When we discussed Holocaust education at home, the collective memory that Bell describes appears to become more prevalent. Both of my parents talked about the role of storytelling both at home and in the community as a fundamental part of their own understanding of the Holocaust.

Contrary to my parents, I recall learning about the Holocaust in a fairly detached way in school. It was a subsection of the WWII unit, but I don't think it was ever really connected to other points in history, motivations, contemporary history, etc. I learned the Holocaust in the same way I learned about most other significant historical events: more or less as isolated incidents. While I learned "facts" at school, I felt very little connection to the subject matter, and looking back on my formal education as a whole, I find that I adopted a relatively distant and simplistic view on history. It is worth mentioning that by the time I was learning about the Holocaust in school, I had already learned about it in some depth at home; it was brought up in passing at the dinner table and during the High Holidays at synagogue, though I rarely heard the more emotional stories that my parents and grandparents heard. Only really seeing my grandparents once a year, some of those firsthand accounts, that collective memory of the Holocaust, didn't quite reach me growing up. Thus, I would argue that because I encountered the Holocaust so frequently from an academic

perspective (learning the chronology, the statistics, and so on), rather than a personal one, I became very desensitized to it, viewing the genocide as one of many atrocities that occurred throughout Europe's history. History was always presented to me exclusively as a part of the past, not the present, which meant that when I was younger, I didn't form too many connections between the histories I was learning in school and my current position/ posture in society. As a consequence of this disconnect, unlike the prior generations of my family, I wouldn't say that my understanding of the Holocaust has greatly impacted my identity as a Jewish American, nor do I view being Jewish as a particularly large part of my identity to begin with.

Several questions arose for me from conducting these interviews and upon my own reflection. These are not really questions to answer, but more so questions for me to consider as I explore this topic in the future. Is it a bad thing that I feel more detached from the Holocaust? Is this detachment inherent with the time that has passed? Furthermore, collective memory strengthens a sense of belonging and community for many, but also transmits trauma from one generation to the next. Is one more important than the other? Can we have memory without trauma?

### **Takeaways**

Realistically, a cross-contextual, cross-generational analysis of historical teachings is an endeavor that could take years, if not decades, to develop in full and to yield succinct findings. That being said, just through the short sprint of secondary research and interviews with family members, I was already able to note several interesting patterns and takeaways emerging. It is also worth noting that while my analysis was specific to learning about the Holocaust, I would suspect that many of the recurring themes would be applicable to much of history.

#### I. Collective memory directly impacts our historical understandings

Through this research, the significance and prevalence of collective memory really came to the forefront for me and challenged the way I've approached history in the past. As the book *Between Memory and History* alludes to, history is not a matter of the past but of the present, and the way we learn history is bound to change as people's recollections of history change, and as the people change themselves. While this may seem like a relatively obvious or redundant point, it requires a significant reframing in the context of most people's (formal) education.

#### II. Formal and informal education are inseparable

We tend to limit the term 'education' to what occurs within class walls, compartmentalizing school and home, work and play, so on and so forth. However, if nothing else, this analysis revealed to me how inseparable the two truly are. It is impossible to understand what we learn (or more importantly, retain) from school without taking into account what we brought into the classroom

from home. Treating formal and informal education as isolated entities serves to further discredit and devalue oral histories, lived experience, and identity as valid, profound forms of learning.

### III. Historical narratives shape identity

The way we engage with history, whether at school, at home, or anywhere else, can greatly shape/affirm/challenge our identities. In the case of my family, we can see three very different experiences learning about the Holocaust resulting in three very different relationships between identity and Judaism.

I chose to create a booklet (below) to visually transcribe and delineate some of these findings, not as a definitive analysis, but rather as a provocation and an exploration. Throughout the book, I moved through each generation from my grandparents to myself, utilizing cut outs to show the bits of information that permeated over time, and others that were left out. My hope is this book can serve as a starting point for me to delve deeper into this study moving forward.





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