

MUSEUMS AS SITES OF LEARNING AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

Nina Krieger

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Founded by Holocaust survivors who settled in Vancouver after the Second World War, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC) was envisioned as a legacy for the citizens of B.C. 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.



The VHEC's educational program aims to inspire a world free of discrimination and genocide.

*Photo credit:
Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.*



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Eveline Berger was able to bring a small selection of items from Berlin to Shanghai during her family's escape from Nazi persecution. She found this burned prayer book fragment in front of Fasanenstrasse Synagogue in Berlin, Germany on November 10, 1938, following the destruction of the building during the Kristallnacht pogrom. Eveline went on to study dressmaking in Shanghai.
 Photo credit: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

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 B.C. 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: Antisemitism and Nazism in Canada, 1930s-1940s* 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* 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 community groups affected by persecution, including survivors of Indian Residential Schools and survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

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These exchanges have illuminated the unique experiences of these groups and also the 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 B.C. 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.



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Nina Krieger is the Executive Director, and formerly the Education Director and Curator, of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. She holds an Honours degree in history from the University of British Columbia and a Master of Research degree in Humanities & Cultural Studies from the London Consortium, a multi-disciplinary graduate program of the University of London, the Architectural Association, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Tate.

Nina is a member of the Canadian delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and a Past Chair of the Memorials and Museums Working Group. She is a member of the Expert Committee on Countering Radicalization to Violence, advising the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence.

Above: Nina Krieger (right) with VHEC Founding President Dr. Robert Krell and a first edition of Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, gifted to the VHEC by Dr. Krell. Photo credit: Shula Klinger.

Below: Éloge Butera, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, frequently shares his experience with B.C. students. Photo credit: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.



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