Sara R. Horowitz and Anna Veprinska

Learning from the Past, Teaching for the Future: A Forum

Abstract

The Mark and Gail Appel Program in Holocaust and Antiracism Education: "Learning from the Past, Teaching for the Future" (TFTF) is a tri-national program that brings students from Canada, Germany, and Poland to sites of Holocaust memory to focus on the history, experience, representation, and memorialization of the Holocaust and its implications for other instances of atrocity, racism, and genocide. This forum gathers five voices from the 2013–2014 cohort of TFTF in order to reflect, a decade after the program, on the program's challenges, opportunities, and lasting impacts. The forum documents the various ways TFTF has influenced the lives and career trajectories of each of the forum participants. The forum is bookended by reflections from its editors—a program organizer and a program participant—on the potentials of experiential learning, the promise of an international network of educators, and the processing that a program like TFTF continues to demand.

Résume

Le programme Mark et Gail Appel sur l'éducation à l'Holocauste et à l'antiracisme : « Learning from the Past, Teaching for the Future [Apprendre du passé, enseigner pour l'avenir] » (TFTF) est un programme trinational qui amène des étudiants du Canada, d'Allemagne et de Pologne sur des lieux de mémoire de l'Holocauste pour se concentrer sur l'histoire, l'expérience, la représentation et la mémorialisation de l'Holocauste et ses implications pour d'autres cas d'atrocités, de racisme et de génocide. Ce forum rassemble cinq voix de la cohorte 2013–2014 du TFTF afin de réfléchir, une décennie plus tard, sur les défis, les opportunités et les impacts durables du programme. Le forum documente les différentes manières dont TFTF a influencé la vie et les trajectoires professionnelles de chacun des participants au forum. Le forum est entouré des réflexions de ses rédacteurs—un organisateur du programme et un participant au programme—sur les potentiels de l'apprentissage expérientiel, la promesse d'un réseau international d'éducateurs et le traitement qu'un programme comme TFTF continue d'exiger.

The Program, the Participants, the Forum

Sara Horowitz

What happens when we leave the conventional classroom and travel far from the familiar? Most universities today offer students the opportunity to participate in "study abroad" courses. Some people think of travel courses as university-light: a bit educational, a bit party. But travel courses have the potential to intensify learning of difficult material and make it personal, even transformative. The program

"Learning from the Past, Teaching for the Future" (TFTF) brings students to sites of memory to focus on the history, experience, representation, and memorialization of the Holocaust and its implications for other instances of atrocity, racism, and genocide. For a subject that brings enormous intellectual and psychological challenges, something happens when you move away from the familiar into a set of unknown and shadowed landscapes. We are immediately disoriented by being out of place, being thrust together with strangers, and moving locale so often. Barriers break down—barriers between people, and interior barriers. Although we experience things differently internally, as individuals, we also experience them together. We let go of what we think we know, what we think we think, and open ourselves to what places tell us, to what others tell us, to what our responses tell us. We process things both cognitively and emotionally, the one mode fueling the other.

TFTF—The Mark and Gail Appel Program in Holocaust and Antiracism Education—is an initiative of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies at York University that began in 2001. A joint undertaking of York and partner institutions in Germany and Poland, the project fosters a transatlantic network of teachers and researchers who develop and increase knowledge about racism and antisemitism in a multicultural world. TFTF has been bringing together Canadian university students and fellow students from Germany and Poland to explore how best to counter racism—including antisemitism—through teaching about the Holocaust. It also engages with experts and members of the broader public in all three countries.

At the heart of the project are two periods of intensive collaborative work and exploration. The first is a field study in Germany and Poland that takes place for roughly a month during the summer. The second, a ten-day follow-up symposium in Toronto during the winter, reunites participants, who present and discuss the research and pedagogy projects they have worked on over the past half-year. The symposium integrates Canadian contexts, and includes encounters with different religious, ethnic, and cultural communities in the Greater Toronto Area.

TFTF was the dream child of two York University professors: Michael Brown, a Jewish historian, and Mark Weber, a scholar of German literature. They invited Sara Horowitz, a York colleague specializing in Holocaust literature, to join them in leading TFTF and developing it further. Most recently, Randal Schnoor, a sociologist whose work focuses on Jewish life in contemporary Canada, joined the York faculty team, providing assistance from Canada while the group traveled in Europe, and joining the group during the Canadian component.

While many North American universities offer courses on the Holocaust that involve travel to sites of memory, what distinguishes TFTF is its international vision. From the beginning, its creators envisioned TFTF as bringing together Canadian participants—York students—with their counterparts in Poland and Germany. The

sharing—and often fraught negotiation—of vastly different sets of personal and national memory gives the program its dynamism.

In addition to the York faculty members, each TFTF group includes faculty members from Germany and Poland. In the months before each TFTF program, faculty members meet individually and also as a group with the students from their country, and the York faculty meet with participants from all three countries. Students prepare for the program by reading and discussing articles and books that explore aspects of the history and memorialization of the Holocaust. Each program begins with a three-day retreat in Germany, featuring classroom seminars and workshops led by the international group of faculty members, and some unstructured time so that participants can begin to feel comfortable with one another.

For the following several weeks, participants visit sites of former Jewish life, as well as more somber sites—concentration camps, and killing centres—along with memorial and documentation centres, and museums. Many of our encounters are at places or with people not open or available to tourists or even other travel courses. We meet with local memory groups, educators, government representatives, archivists, archaeologists, curators, and directors of museums and memory sites. In order that Jews not be perceived only through their victimization and death, we visit Jewish community centres, attend synagogue services, and have Shabbat dinners with local Jewish students. At the end of each day, we gather as a group to think about and respond to what we have seen and heard, or just to sit silently together. Initially, students tend to socialize with others from their own country. But soon those national clusters begin to break up. A sense of shared experience develops among the broader cohort, and friendships develop across national lines.

Although there are no formal academic assignments during our time in Germany and Poland, we ask that all participants keep a journal. The journal is intended as a private record that can serve as a space for immediate and later reflection. Some students choose to share parts of their journal with others; some keep the journals private. The journals also serve as a resource for participants as they plan a project, to be developed in the months between the European and the Canadian components of TFTF. Either research or pedagogy based—or a combination of the two—the projects may be individual, but students are encouraged to work together with others on group projects. Each summer program closes with a three-day retreat, allowing participants to begin to process their intense experiences, begin to plan their research projects, and move emotionally from a dark past into the present.

At the winter symposium in Toronto, participants explore the diverse and complicated composition of Canada. In addition to formal seminars featuring invited speakers and project presentations, students visit different community groups and places of worship. They engage with Indigenous elders, imams, priests, rabbis, and

others. The symposium takes place north of the city, so that participants can experience the Canadian winterscape and a taste of the True North.

During both the summer and winter segments of the program, we stay in dormitories, hostels, and modest hotels. Depending on the venue, two to four students share a room. Room assignments intentionally designate students from different countries as roommates. We take most meals together. The combination of travel, accommodation, food, guides, and admission fees makes this an expensive program. From the outset, the faculty were determined that financial circumstances should not be a bar to student participation in TFTF. We are most grateful to Mark and Gail Appel, who shared our vision for this program and contributed generously to it. The program also benefited from grant funding and other forms of support from institutions in all three countries.

The powerful ripple effect of TFTF emerges from its commitment to draw in future educators, broadly defined. A crucial goal for the project as a whole has been to establish and nourish an international network of educators—classroom teachers, professors, adult education specialists, journalists, memorial site specialists, and other professionals—who have the knowledge, skills, experience, and motivation to teach against antisemitism and other forms of racism. Teaching at various levels and in various contexts in Europe and Canada, these educators can call upon resources in their own countries, internationally, and within our extended group.

Because COVID reduced the possibility of travel courses for several years, TFTF has been on hiatus. It will resume in the 2025–2026 academic year. As a way to think concretely about the value of the program and how to develop it further, we invited several participants from the 2013–2014 TFTF cohort group to participate in this forum. We asked them, a decade later, to reflect on aspects of their experiences during the program, and its effect on them. Each of these participants was welcome to answer any of the questions that resonated for them. They had the opportunity to add to their responses after reading what their cohorts had to say.

In thinking about how to conceptualize and conduct this forum, I invited Anna Veprinska to join me. Once a graduate student participant in TFTF, and now a valued colleague, Anna brought to the forum a different and complementary perspective. Together we honed a set of questions that would act as thinking prompts for participants a decade after their engagement with the program.

We designed the forum to think about the learning experience in a rigorous travel course on the Holocaust, antisemitism, racism, and genocide. We were particularly interested in the lasting impact of a program like TFTF. How does the experience sit in memory after a passage of time? How have participants worked through any challenges or questions they may have encountered during our time together? How

do participants reflect upon the program's influence in shaping values, life choices, and ongoing perceptions? The following responses tackle these and other issues.

We dedicate this forum to the memory of Michael Brown (1938–2023) z.l., (1938–2023), whose wisdom, teaching, and generous mentorship continue to inspire us.

Sara R. Horowitz is professor of comparative literature and humanities and former director of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto. She is the author, editor, or coeditor of many books, journals, and essays, including *Shadows in the City of Light: Paris in Post-War French Jewish Writing* (2021); *Günther Adler: Life, Literature, Legacy* (2016); and *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (1997). In 2022 she received the Distinguished Achievement Award in Holocaust Studies, bestowed by the Holocaust Education Foundation at Northwestern University (HEF). In 2023 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

At Grafeneck, the T-4 "euthanasia" murder site. Photograph by Sara R. Horowitz, by permission.

Forum Participants

Anna Fleige, 35, studied German, English and History and works as a teacher at a High School in Berlin. In 2014 she founded a small NGO, "Projekt Seehilfe," which supports refugees in Sicily.

David Gort was born and raised in Toronto, Canada, where he still lives today. He graduated from Trent University in 1995, and after nearly seventeen years of a successful career in finance, he returned to school to pursue a career in teaching, his true passion. While earning his bachelor of education at York University, he participated in the TFTF program. Since graduating with his B.Ed., he has been an elementary teacher at the Toronto District School Board.

Marika Pietsch was born and raised in northern Germany. She has since immigrated to London, England, where she lives today. She holds a master's degree in secondary school education for history and English at the University of Kiel, Germany. Following her experience with TFTF in 2013–14, she decided to work with conflict and post-conflict societies to break cycles of violence and human rights abuses. She was deployed as a humanitarian project manager in Mosul, in northern Iraq, from 2018–2020, and Aleppo, Syria, in 2023, and completed a master's in peacebuilding and reconciliation at the University of Winchester, UK, in 2022. She recently joined a small peacebuilding organization called Cord as the program quality lead, working with civil society organizations and human rights defenders in Africa and Southeast Asia.

Maxa Sawyer uses the methodology and experiential education she experienced during the TFTF field studies to create inclusive communal Jewish spaces. Maxa worked on The BC Jewish Queer and Trans Oral History Project of JQT (Jewish Queer and Trans non-profit): a project she is expanding to the Prairie provinces as a curator and ethnographer with the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada. Maxa lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and is developing and implementing Truth and Reconciliation and DEI policy and training for the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg. Her writing has been featured in *Kveller* and *Hey Alma*.

Anna Veprinska is an assistant professor at the University of Calgary. She is the author of the monograph *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), which received an honourable mention for the Memory Studies Association First Book Award, as well as the poetry collection *Sew with Butterflies* (Steel Bananas, 2014), and the chapbooks *Stone Blossom* (Anstruther Press, 2022) and *Spirit-clenched* (Gap Riot Press, 2020). She has a collection of poems forthcoming with the University of Calgary Press. Both her academic and creative work are deeply influenced by the TFTF program.

What place(s), activity/ies, or events had the strongest impact on you? Why? Was there a moment that you consider a turning point for your understanding of and relationship to the past?

David Gort: A memory for me that stands out was learning how the Jewish people integrated differently into both German and Polish societies. I was surprised to learn that Jewish people in German society were much more integrated, whereas in Poland they lived more segregated lifestyles. Based on the integration of the Jewish people and the low percentage of the Jewish population, investigating and exploring how they were portrayed to be the enemy and downfall of Germany was an important lesson in the power of isolation, the creation of an enemy, and political distraction. From my learnings from TFTF, I can now look at current day attacks, for example on the LGBTQ+ community, especially the trans community, and how they have been isolated and attacked within political arenas.

Certainly for me, some of the most powerful memories came from learning and exploring individual and personal stories of victims and survivors of the Shoah. Often these learnings came from our daily required readings, from sites we visited, or from curators.

Another important aspect of the TFTF experience was what happened after the war and the memorials that were established in memory and honour of all the victims who suffered and were murdered by the Nazis. The vast majority of memorials honoured the Jewish people, but we also explored memorials of victims of the T4 program, homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, and Sinti and Roma.[1]

Last, another important piece of this experience for me was learning the beauty of the Jewish culture. Through observations and learning about the Jewish religion through lectures and visits to synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and the Jewish museums in Berlin and Warsaw, I learned a tremendous amount about the Jewish culture. These lectures and visits were very much a highlight for me. Unfortunately, it seemed to me that a part of being Jewish is also about overcoming tremendous historical oppression, murder, and modern-day antisemitism.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): This is a very difficult question to answer, because many of the places had a strong impact on me, but in very different ways. Being in a monastery for the retreat at the beginning of the program was a special experience for me because I come from a very atheistic background and have never spent any time in "spiritual" places before. The calm and focus the place offered was a revelation.

What I loved as well was the visit to the site of the POLIN museum in Warsaw (which had not yet opened) and the meeting with the director, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. She was a very inspiring person. Just last week I finally visited the museum, after planning to for years.

Meeting with representatives of communities was also very meaningful, but I'll write about that below. And speaking of people, meeting Michael Brown was a turning point. Being so knowledgeable about the topic, so compassionate, always seeing more than one side to a story left a mark on me, and I am very grateful for having had that chance.

And then there were the sites of former concentration and extermination camps. It wasn't my first time visiting sites of memory. I had been to Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and Sachsenhausen before and spent half a year in Lithuania, where mass shootings during the Nazi time and ghettos like Kaunas were a topic. Yet I was overwhelmed by places like Treblinka, maybe because they were so unlike places like Auschwitz with their museums and things to see. In museums I know how to behave and what to do. What overwhelmed me in Treblinka was that there was so much "free space" (I lack another word for the feeling I had). There were almost no ruins to see and yet so much had happened. The peace of the woods felt humbling and the stark contrast between the atrocities, the many people that were murdered, and the beauty of the forest intensified the impact the place had on me. Having time to wander around and feel that space, that loss of so much and so many, left me thinking for a long time.

Steps into the woods at Treblinka. Photograph by Sara R. Horowitz, by permission.

Marika Pietsch: One moment that stood out for me was the visit to the mobile death camp in Chelmno, as the place was so ordinary, but I was physically sick entering the grounds. I never quite understood why it hit me on such a physical level. The ordinariness of the place, the deep commitment of the guide—who was also one of the archaeologists who uncovered the site—the factual way he described how three thousand people were killed and buried there, the involvement of the chapel building next door as a *waiting hall*... It was a turning point on the trip where I felt the darkness truly touched my soul, whereas I previously was able not to get too emotionally involved in it. I remember that later David Gort, one of the Canadian participants, told me that he could tell something happened that day as "the light had left my eyes." When speaking with him about that, we reflected that almost everyone in the group could pinpoint the exact moment 'the darkness touched their eyes'—mine was Chelmno.

The Museum of the Warsaw Rising (1944) that we visited in Warsaw also stood out to me, as the "heartbeat of the Polish people" artifact in the entry area already made it a deeply patriotic place. Throughout the exhibition, the English captions didn't differentiate between Nazis and Germans but just generically said, "This is what the Germans did...." There was something about the atmosphere of the place that deeply triggered my "German guilt" and responsibility and also discomfort with it, as it felt unfair. I love museums and usually can't spend enough time in them—I walked out of that one early, as I needed air. Talking afterwards to some of the Polish participants, who mainly didn't understand my discomfort, was revealing, but there was also a glimpse of understanding of some of the current discourses between both nations, as I realized how much the way something is taught frames the whole national conversation.

The beauty and peacefulness of the former site of Treblinka also stood out as its natural beauty was in such contrast to the knowledge of what had taken place there, and the dissonance left a deep impression. Some people in the group witnessed a father smacking his young boy, who had raced ahead on his bike. It appeared the family was local and the memorial space was used for recreational purposes rather than remembrance. As we'd come in a particular mental space, witnessing something so ordinary, but also so violent, triggered another moment of learning, and Professor Brown was able to turn it into a valuable reflection on perspective.

Maxa Sawyer: One person told us that while living in East Germany, she had the watchtower of a famous concentration camp in her daily sight lines. I wonder how old she was when she realized what it represented. Now I live in Winnipeg, a graveyard of First Nations memory. I often drive on Bishop Grandin. I had never realized it was the name of a person and thought it was pronounced as one word that I did not know the meaning of: Bishopgrandin. I asked my partner if he knew who Bishop Grandin was.[2] He responded that he was a great guy, someone who had autism, who

revolutionized the way we thought about people with autism.[3] I did not know who he was talking about, so I looked up the name. The first line of the Wikipedia page said that he was the architect of residential schools. I realized what type of road I was driving down for the first time when I was almost forty.

How did the program's experiential aspect—being physically present at the sites of memory—impact your learning?

Marika Pietsch: Being physically present had a massive impact on the depth of learning and understanding. Hearing and reading about places are, and were, one thing; being present and experiencing the bodily discomfort of travelling long distances, or the heat in Auschwitz, and seeing the surroundings and topography of places—like the village on the other side of a lake in Ravensbrück concentration camp—triggered so many more questions and reframed several explanations I'd read about before.

The exhaustion of constant travel and movement was a lot, and yet it glued the group together and put everything in a haze in which we all became more and more open *and* irritated by some behaviours! So many of the places and the learning we received could be reflected on and discussed in the rooms at night, during the long bus rides, or during the short breaks. To eat wonderful food after a day in Auschwitz, celebrating the Sabbath, and seeing the beauty of life after a day of reflection on despair, were healing moments, and the contrast itself had a deep impact on my learning.

David Gort: For almost every day during this course, we would as a group visit many sites that included museums, concentration or death camps, and memorials that were erected as a reminder of the atrocities that occurred at these places during the Holocaust. A location that I always wanted to visit prior to this course was Auschwitz and after spending two afternoons at Auschwitz and upon reflection, I asked myself why it was important for me to come to this place. What have I learned from this visit? Now that I have been here, how have my thoughts changed about this place? And, most importantly, how is visiting this site in-person different from the images I perceived through movies, documentaries, and books? In other words, is there a difference between physically being at these places versus learning about them through forms of media? The simple answer is undeniably yes. The emotions that were evoked by visiting these sites, witnessing the physical layout, and knowing that you are standing next to or in a gas chamber where possibly millions of people were murdered and then cremated is a sickening feeling. It evoked an undeniable grief, raw emotions of sadness and anger in trying to understand how this happened, and a relentless gut-wrenching feeling that stayed with me throughout the trip.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): As you can see from the experiences I just described, in responding to the previous question, the experiential aspect had

a huge impact. It wasn't only the moment of being present, but also the processing of the experiences right after that deepened understanding. I remember visiting the old town of Kraków after our visit to Auschwitz and finding little penny boxes with figures that were to symbolize Jews. There were many different figurines, in different sizes and colours. But if I remember correctly, all of them depicted a man in black clothes, with sidelocks and a kippah on his head. His face showed a big grin and somewhere on his body was a slit to insert the coins: in his mouth, his bottom, or in the big sack he was holding in front of him. They were supposed to look like cheerful, happy little money collectors that reproduced a stereotype in such a normalizing way that I could easily imagine people buying these figurines as presents for their kids. I have to admit that it was especially the outrage and frustration of Jewish participants of our group that showed me the impact of the figurines.

In retrospect, I think that at the time I viewed the experiences in Kraków like points on a scale of violence, with the obscenity of the figurines and the seemingly "harmless" reproduction of stereotypes on one end, and Auschwitz as a possible outcome of "stereotypization" on the other. But it became very clear to me that this scale was and is not in the past, but reaches our present, and that the whole scale is violent, not just one end.

Jewish figurines for sale at the central square marketplace in Kraków. Some have slots for coins. Photograph by Sara R. Horowitz, by permission.

Maxa Sawyer: I think we were in Chelmno, or was it Treblinka? The site of memory where there were memorial rocks in the place that was once a crematorium, and around this memorial was a park where families went on walks. We learned that despite history, life goes on. People still live. And perhaps beauty can be restored.

Stones at the site of Treblinka. Photograph by Anna Veprinska, by permission.

I am also remembering Ravensbrück. The women's concentration camp. I remember hearing about women giving birth and their inmates helping to hide the pregnancy. I remember the red button that contemporary researchers at the site used to press down on when they made gendered assumptions. And for some reason I remember a canoe and a lake.

Anna Veprinska: I remember feeling physically ill and needing to walk away from a particularly detailed account of horrors at the Chelmno death camp. I remember my arm going numb for hours after visiting Auschwitz. These physical responses in my body felt related to my body's location in places of past horrors. I felt the history in a way I didn't expect to, in a way that reading history books and literature has seldom resulted in. Being physically in the places we visited allowed me to feel their emptiness and hauntedness; the program created learning based both in the mind and the body.

Site of the killing grounds of Chelmno. Photograph by Sara R. Horowitz, by permission.

Immersing in "the ruins of memory," to use Ida Fink's evocative phrase, is difficult. What were some of the most powerful challenges for you? How did you deal with them?

Maxa Sawyer: Immersion in "the ruins of memory" was difficult for me. It felt as if there was no time to breathe. No time to shut off. I remember the feeling of always having to be a performer. To be a learner. To be a "good student." At the same time, immersion in "the ruins of memory" was healing for me. The ghost of the Holocaust was taken off my back. By going to the ruins, I was able to see that the danger of the Holocaust was destroyed. I was able to see that my fear of dying in Auschwitz could not happen in that present, because in the past–present, Auschwitz no longer existed in a way that could harm me.

One day, a little over two years ago, I was with my two–year–old daughter on Centre Island in Toronto. We were leaving my son and partner behind at the amusement park so that I could rush home and put her down for a nap. We were in the middle of COVID, at a time when we were comfortable being with people outside, and not used to crowds. To get off the island I took a ferry. For some reason the line to the ferry started in a wire cage that I remember being closed, and I was closer to strangers than I had been in a long time. I stood there with my daughter utterly trapped.

Panicked. I knew I could live through what was going to come next. I looked around frantically wondering who I could throw my daughter to so that she would be saved. Then I was snapped back to reality. I wondered if normal people went to that place. I am reminded of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," the story by Nathan Englander. Last week when I kept my children home for the "Day of Hate," the night before I lay in bed wondering if my house was even safe. In my mind I heard my back door being slid open as the glass on my very Jewish street was broken. I was convinced that the school and synagogue files were hacked. They knew where the Jews lived, and I wondered if there was any place that was safe. I felt stupid for sending my children to Jewish school systems and making them vulnerable. Perhaps I have not healed.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): In a previous question, I tried to describe the emotional challenges I faced in Treblinka. I think I faced them by talking to the other participants, but I am not aware of any other strategies. I'm a "thinker," so I deal with challenges by thinking about them. And so I did, for months and years afterwards.

In the museum for the Warsaw Rising, I felt extremely guilty, which I struggled with. I had been there before, so I knew what to expect. Visiting it in a group certainly made it easier, as did reflecting on the design of the museum. When visiting for the first time, I did note that perspective. But still, I think writing my master's thesis about Holocaust literature and allowing the topic more time was probably a way to digest what we had seen.

What was also challenging was the number of sights we visited and the many different ways of execution in the Shoah that they represented. In retrospect I am very glad about that learning experience as well, because it provided a much more nuanced picture that also helps me to understand post-war "perpetrator societies" better. But I remember a moment when I thought, "Oh no, not another kind of cruelty, that too?! It's too much."

Anna Veprinska: During and after the program I struggled to carry both the present and past simultaneously. How could I continue eating and laughing without recalling the starving cries of victims? How could I complain of feeling tired when I had never known the exhaustion of forced labour? Charlotte Delbo, who survived Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, wrote of the distance in language between those who experienced the camps and those who didn't: the way thirst, hunger, and exhaustion mean something different for those imprisoned in the camps. I wondered how I could integrate what I had learned into my everyday life without it eating up my everyday life, without it drowning me in grief. I had to learn that it was not a betrayal of the past to feel joy in the present.

The incident with the father beating the boy in Treblinka—an accident of being in that space at that time—was an unexpected emotional challenge for me, because it wasn't about memory but about the present moment. It broke my heart to witness cruelty in a place that had held so much cruelty. I remember running to the forest with another participant, because we had heard the sound of the father hitting the boy. We were both crying. The other participant spoke Polish, and she started yelling at the father as he emerged from the forest. She later told me he said something cruel to her in Polish. Then he and his family walked away. As difficult as "the ruins of memory" were to encounter, perhaps there were ways to anticipate many of the challenges on the program—through readings, discussions, site preparations—but I didn't anticipate this. I think about that day a lot. I think I am still trying to deal with it.

Detail, memorial at Treblinka. Photograph by Anna Veprinska, by permission.

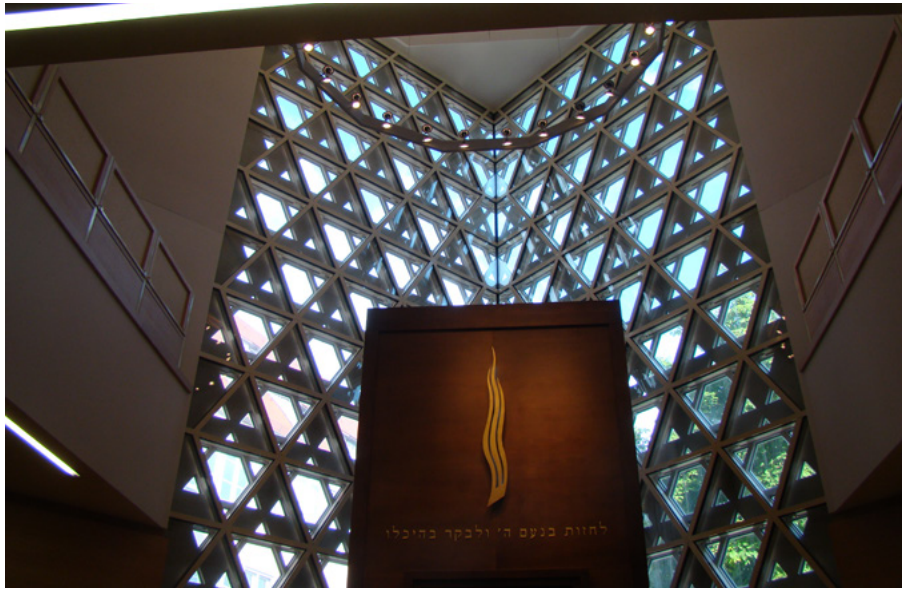
Marika Pietsch: I remember that during our stay at the resort in Canada, Anna and I asked Sara [Horowitz] a question about how she could continue to "dwell" in Holocaust literature and still live a full and joyful life, as the shadow of TFTF had a profound impact on my every day for about a year and a half after we'd returned. Sara answered something along the lines of, "You do it in short intervals and don't let it consume you." In the years since TFTF, this simple piece of advice has stayed with me, especially during my work and stay in Mosul after the liberation of ISIS (I worked for a humanitarian organization at that point). I followed Sara's advice and

dealt with the darkness in short intervals and still allowed joy and silliness. (I built a chicken coop in the compound and raised chickens—just because they are ridiculously silly and fun animals and interrupted any serious conversation in the garden, making it a place of retreat.)

I tried journaling after TFTF to process some of the more challenging memories and questions coming out of TFTF, but that didn't particularly work. I benefited massively from writing letters with two other participants who processed it all similarly to me but were an ocean away. And I prayed, and prayer helped to sort through some of the unanswerable questions. Those two things—prayer and joint reflections through letters—were probably the most helpful things to process "the ruins of memory."

In addition to sites of memory, the program included a range of encounters with the present – meeting with representatives of memory groups, community organizations, directors and curators of museums and memorial sites, educators, etc. How did this shape your thinking?

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): Especially meeting representatives of Jewish communities was a treasure for me. As I said, I come from an atheistic background—the area of the former GDR—and it was a completely new experience to meet young people that believe and engage in religious communities. Also, I'm ashamed to admit that I had barely any contact with Jewish people before the program. So, to see different communities and learn about how they work made me realize that there is Jewish culture in Germany, in Europe, that I was completely unaware of. And at the same time, it made me realize the immense loss.



Inside the Munich synagogue. Photograph by Anna Veprinska, by permission.

David Gort: Over the three and a half weeks of travel on this course, the group partook in activities that included visiting many memorials and museums; observing photographs, documents, and testimonials; and attending guided tours. In many ways even the countries we visited were living museums. With all of these activities and experiences, it was important for me to reflect upon what I was seeing, and in what context and framework. Although not represented in this question, the required workshops and readings were critical in forming and processing the importance of the sites we visited In the early stages of our trip there were several workshops in particular that I found important in setting out what I was seeing and how it could be interpreted: specifically, "History and Memory," "Some Considerations for Looking At, Understanding, and Assessing Memorial Sites," and the interpretation of photographs from the Topography of Terror exhibit. These early lessons of our trip were essential in changing my perspective on the importance of understanding and processing information not only on this trip but moving forward even to this day. That said, if I were to answer the question above in a couple of sentences, I would say that the people who provided us with information along our journey were experts in their fields. As receivers of their information, perspective, or even experience, it was our job as critical thinkers to process, evaluate, ask questions, and reflect, to determine how what we learned—almost as if it were a piece of a puzzle—fits into the larger picture of what we were learning about the Shoah.

Marika Pietsch: Those were memorable encounters. Some of the ones on the Canadian side stood out for me: the Indigenous woman at the community centre telling us she had little hope that things would change in her time but maybe things will be better for her daughter, and then a little better again for her daughter's daughter.... Even remembering the deep wisdom in her words brings tears to my eyes. In the recent MA degree I did on peacebuilding and reconciliation, it's often been these moments of encounter and sharing—not only what formed someone's present but also the hope one has that goes beyond the past and present—that stand out for me when thinking about the long shadow genocide and violence cast across generations.

Janusz, the guide we had in Auschwitz, shared in a side conversation the difficulty that the Auschwitz Museum has with the preservation of the site, as a persistent rumour—that the buildings and remains aren't authentic—is fanned into flame online, every time they need to replace a bit of wire or re-shingle the roof of a building. I hadn't quite grasped what it would mean to preserve a contested memorial like Auschwitz, in the present day, before Janusz shared the bitter reality of being called a liar who "built the fence himself," and how delicate it is not only to share what this space has to share, but also to preserve it for generations to come. Working in post-conflict societies now, I am more familiar and attuned to the contestation of memories, but it was that conversation that stuck with me, because it was when I first realized the effort it takes to simply preserve what many want to forget.

Maxa Sawyer: I remember asking a really stupid question to the speaker who was First Nations. I do not remember what it was, but I remember asking it, not realizing it was racist. The woman responded accordingly and called out my racism. I needed to be called out. I needed to be humbled.

An important component of the program is its international character—bringing together participants from different countries, with different sets of experiences and relationships to the Holocaust past. How did this international aspect affect your experiences?

Marika Pietsch: Oh gosh, there were quite a few deep-learning moments linked to it. On one of the first days, I remember over-hearing an outburst from one of the Jewish-Canadians about how she felt "like a museum piece," observed and appraised by the Polish students "as if they had never met a Jew before in their lives!" I kept silent because I had equally never (knowingly) met a Jewish person before—only those witnessed in the documentaries and American movies. I felt too shy in that moment to speak up on behalf of the curious Polish students and just tried not to be too obvious myself in my observations. Seeing Jewish culture in places I've been to before (like Berlin and Stuttgart) was as eye-opening as the casualness of the Canadian students about it and my fear to do something wrong and offend.

Often, after visiting sites, it was interesting to "check in" with participants from other cultures to see if they perceived the sites similarly or differently. Most of the time it was differently, and that opened conversations about interesting topics and reflections. I was slightly bothered by all the flags/signs of nationalism at one of the Polish cemeteries and checked my discomfort with David Gort, one of the Canadian students who hadn't even noticed them. As a German, for me and the other German participants, the display of patriotism has clear negative connotations and is rare. Before that moment I'd never realized how this impacts my experience of spaces and how it differs from a large proportion of the planet for whom patriotism has positive connotations.

Another significant moment was after returning from the first leg of TFTF and suddenly noticing so many more of the memorials/little reminders of the Holocaust in my own city: like the menorah on a memorial for the burnt down synagogue on my daily cycle to university that I'd never noticed before. I mentioned it in a letter to one of my Canadian friends, as I found it hard not to think constantly about TFTF while being constantly reminded of it. He found that fascinating, as the experience for him was literally an ocean away and quite separate from his day-to-day life. He compared living in Germany to living in a museum, which left quite an impression, as I'd never reflected on this overlap of spaces before.

Maxa Sawyer: The international component was incredible. I was able to see the world through so many different countries. I was fascinated by how different coun-

tries learn what seems to be the same history taught in such different ways. I was confronted by my bias. On days off I had a local tour guide who was able to show me their country through their eyes.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): For me the international aspect was at the core of my learning experience. Even though I was intimidated by the experiences and knowledge other participants brought to the table, I felt the group members opened up to each other, and encouraged each other to participate in a way they felt comfortable. Furthermore, the international experience made me see some things in another light. I quickly became aware that I acted as part of "the German group" and had the urge to act appropriately. Consequently, I had strong feelings about others in "my" group that did not act as I would have expected or wished. Reflecting on feelings about nationality affected me deeply.

David Gort: A unique aspect to this course was the opportunity to learn about the Holocaust while traveling as part of a multinational group. Travelling together as a group gave us the opportunity to have discussions and reflections about the places we visited, as well as the course readings and films in informal settings or workshops, while being able to bring our unique perspectives from our cultural and historical backgrounds, and benefit from the perspectives of the other students. Had this course only included a group of Canadians it would still have been a very good course, although it would have been more of a one-dimensional experience without the benefit of the other cultural and historical perspectives. Having experienced this course with German and Polish students deepened the experience and contributed to a much more well-rounded, powerful, and diverse experience.

Anna Veprinska: The international aspect of the program was irreplaceable, both in the histories it revealed and in the friendships it forged. Learning how distinctly the Holocaust was taught and perceived in three different national contexts was fascinating, and critical to thinking about how history is molded around political and social values. The program's international character also allowed for international friendships. One of my enduring friendships from the program is with a participant from Germany, who currently lives in England: we wrote letters to each other for years after the program and currently exchange voice notes. In most of our exchanges, we continue discussing and processing the program.

How did the Canadian portion of the program compliment or further enhance the program?

Anna Veprinska: The Canadian portion of the program, which took place about six months after the initial part of the program, allowed distance to process the program and create a final project in response to what we had witnessed, experienced, learned, and felt. It also offered the opportunity to witness how others on the program had processed it, how it affected each of us in profound ways. Significantly, the Cana-

dian portion of the program consisted of talks by, and discussions with, Indigenous speakers who bridged the history of the Holocaust with the genocide of Indigenous people in Canada. Grasping the ways in which genocide is occurring in my current national context is critical for thinking about how the lessons of the past are relevant to the present.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): What further enhanced the program was the project we worked on, because it deepened dealing with the topic over a longer period. Travelling to Canada helped me broaden the perspective on other forms of injustice that modern societies have to deal with. I had no prior knowledge about Canadian First Nations, and I have benefited from what I learned about these communities ever since. It helped me better understand the struggle of Indigenous people, not only in Canada but elsewhere as well.

Regarding the group, the Canadian portion of the program deepened the bonds between participants. Being in a "neutral field" and having had some time to process the summer in Europe, it was a chance to catch up and talk about the experiences again.

Marika Pietsch: Looking back, I think the Canadian portion had a bigger impact on the last ten years and my choice of career than the European portion. It was looking away from "my nation's darkest mark" to seeing something of the universality in post-conflict/post-genocidal societies, and in that respect, it was eye-opening. One of the Canadian students had often pointed out in Europe how she didn't understand why "us Germans or Polish students" got defensive sometimes when talking about the past of our country. Interestingly enough, she was one of the first to get defensive when some of the darker chapters of the Canadian past were discussed, and her impatient question about "why are we still talking about reparations to the First Nations?" was an interesting contrast to her previous questioning of the European reaction toward the past.

During the Canadian portion, I had a long conversation with Professor [Randal] Schnoor about his wife's work in approaching individual tribes and families about their personal need that the state not generalize the government's offering of reparations. This was the first time I came across someone actively working on reconciliation: the work I've since chosen to dedicate my career to. Seeing and hearing that there was something unique about my upbringing and my family's past and that I have something to offer in understanding and dealing with my country's past has been an encouragement and driving force for many of the recent assignments I've taken. That seed was planted and watered during the second part of the program after things could settle a little and then be fertilized again during mature discussions in a different environment.

A taste of the True North. Left to right: Anna Veprinska, Marika Pietsch, Anna Fleige.
Photograph by Anna Veprinska, by permission.

Sadly, genocide, racism, and oppression are still with us. What makes a program like TFTF, with its focus on the Shoah and the shaping of memory, important?

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): Before October 7, 2023, I would have mentioned the responsibility that people have to ensure that "Never again" is our reality and not just wishful thinking.[4] Meeting people from so many different backgrounds and spending three weeks on mutual exchange about the Shoah, learning from each other and sharing such intense experiences shapes the participants, and I am convinced that it makes them more empathetic, more thoughtful.

After the last weeks, I have to add another reason why it is important: it has become obvious that antisemitism is much more present in European societies (and in German society!) than I would have thought. When there is a Molotov cocktail thrown at a synagogue in Berlin and Stars of David drawn on doors, it horrifies me. I believe that it is programs like TFTF that encourage understanding, exchange, respect, and compassion toward each other that can prevent people from being bystanders. Learning about the Shoah on the basis of facts and scientific research, while reflecting on its present meaning and relevance, is of crucial importance to fill a phrase like "Never again," heard during so many protests these days, with meaning. And this meaning is needed for educators (but not only!) to have the backbone to stand against misinformation, hatred, and ignorance.

Marika Pietsch: In 2018, working in Mosul's destroyed western banks, one of my Iraqi staff once asked me why we were "wasting" the limited resources we had in humanitarian funding on the neighbourhoods and families ISIS had originated from and not only on their victims. "We should only help those who are deserving." Something [in that reply underscored] one of the questions that had lingered with me after TFTF: why Germany today was "allowed to prosper again" when it was not "deserving" of that from a justice point of view. It felt unjust to me. Now I heard an echo of that sentiment in my Iraqi staff's comment … and it was an echo of the Canadian student's question of when enough is enough. I've since found an answer in faith, that this is what grace is, and that forgiveness and reconciliation only happen when one side shows mercy and gives the perpetrators not what they deserve, but what they need. So in a weird and very wide circle, a German PM [program manager], with Yezidi staff serving life-preserving assistance to Sunni families that birthed ISIS, was one of those moments that restored hope that cycles of violence can be overcome. And for me, this goes back to some of the side conversations off the back of TFTF.

Looking back after several years have passed, what is the impact of the program on you, your life, your choices?

Anna Veprinska: I think about the program so often. For a long time after the program ended, I could not talk to anyone about it except others who had experienced it alongside me. We had confronted a horrific history together, shared something painful—something that shifted my view of the world. It took time to learn to communicate that to others. Before the program, I was already interested in the Holocaust and events at the limits of empathy. After the program, I became deeply invested in these topics. I wrote my PhD dissertation, later published as the monograph *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*, on poetry after the Holocaust and other events that challenged our understandings of empathy. I continued researching the Holocaust in my postdoctoral work, which shifted to examining testimonies by Holocaust survivors. I have written a book chapter about the program and poem after poem about the program, and I can't seem to exhaust its influence on my life; it has become an integral part of who I am and how I encounter the world.

Marika Pietsch: TFTF has had a significant impact on my life and life choices as it altered my career path completely. I still remember the pivotal moment during the preparation of the individual learning module, before heading out to Toronto for part two of the program, when I suddenly thought that only teaching history and the past wasn't enough. I wanted to get actively involved in shaping post-genocidal/conflict contexts as we'd studied so in depth during TFTF. I was about to finish my MA in secondary school education for history and English, in Germany, at the time of TFTF. I completed the degree but over the last ten years have transitioned out of education and into working in London in international development/peacebuilding and reconciliation with a global scope, with several years spent in the Middle East.

TFTF has been the experience that has triggered the radical change in direction that my life and career have taken.

Anna Fleige (previously Zimmermann): The program has had a huge impact on my life, not only on the choices I have made, but also on my perspective on many things. As a German student with an interest in history, I had naturally come across the topic of the Holocaust before, had read books and watched documentaries on the topic. Only during the program, I noticed how much I had looked—and had learned to look—at the Holocaust from the perpetrators' perspective. During the program I learned my limitations. When I participated in the program, I was just about to start studying history in addition to my regular studies (German and English, to become a teacher). After the program, I took courses on the history of National Socialism, took a course in Buchenwald for a semester, and had the honour to participate in the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald by working with survivors who came for the event. I wrote my master's thesis—or the equivalent of it—on Holocaust literature as a subject in schools.

For eight years now I have been working as a teacher, and thanks to TFTF I am confident in making remembrance part of the school's life. I think I was aware of the necessity to remember and speak about the past before. What I learned during the program was to be empathetic with the victims and make that a starting point of dealing with history. The impact on the lives of the victims and their families for generations, forever, was something I only got a glimpse of—but will certainly never fully be able to grasp—during the program. I feel like I became a more compassionate person during the program. One year after the program, three friends and I founded a small NGO that has been supporting refugees at the European border in Sicily ever since. I believe TFTF somehow encouraged me to do that.

David Gort: A final expectation of this course following the completion of travelling in Europe was to create an individual project relating to what we had learned. My project was a personal story of my grandparents, who lived in the Netherlands and resisted the Nazi occupiers by successfully hiding Jewish people in their home throughout the war. This project for me has been an opportunity to regularly revisit my experience of TFTF and use it as a tool to educate people about the Shoah through a personal story. Every year following the course, until the pandemic, I had the honour to present my project to York University students as a guest speaker to a Holocaust-themed course. Additionally, I have also presented this project as a guest in high schools, and as an elementary student teacher I have modified the project to be appropriate for grades 5 and 6.

Being an elementary teacher and taking my learnings from TFTF, social justice is an important aspect of my teaching. Social justice can be incorporated into any subject, almost any assignment, and for any grade including kindergarten. Incorporating so-

cial justice into lesson plans may include racial, cultural, social economic, gender identity, LGBTQ+, and for me often a focus on First Nations. My hope is that through these lessons students will learn to accept all people who are different from themselves and feel empowered to stand up against injustice.

I have also been a volunteer and involved with KAIROS, a social justice group whose goal is connected to truth, healing, and reconciliation for First Nations. KAIROS is the creator of the "Blanket Exercise," which is a highly effective and powerful interactive method that can teach the struggle and plight of Canada's First Nations people.[5] As a volunteer working with KAIROS, I regularly participated in teaching middle school to high school students the importance of understanding the impact of colonization of the First Nations people in order to move forward with healing and reconciliation.

Afterword

Anna Veprinska

When Sara approached me about jointly editing this forum, I agreed enthusiastically and immediately. I did so not only because I cannot imagine saying no to Sara—who has been a generous and irreplaceable mentor in my life, from TFTF to my PhD dissertation—but also because TFTF has shaped the educator, scholar, and person I am today. The opportunity to look back at the program, and to do so alongside other participants, has been a way of continuing to process the program's influence on each of our lives.

Something more than friendship is forged when, day in and day out for nearly a month, one plunges into history's darkest recesses with a group of initial strangers. Today, I am proud to call each of the participants in this forum friends. We live across continental, national, and provincial divides, but when we meet after years of distance—something I have been lucky enough to do with most of the participants in the forum—we are bonded through TFTF. Perhaps that is an unintended aspect of a program like TFTF, although I would not describe our group as consistently cohesive. A group of twenty-four inevitably has conflicting personalities, expectations, and needs. Yet one of the undoubtable outcomes of this program is friendship. So the forum served as another means of processing the program, and it also created an opportunity for friends to share a textual space in which to explore an experience that continues to impact each of us.

It surprised me—though it probably should not have—how deeply TFTF has influenced the life trajectories of each of the forum participants: from career direction shifts to haunting memories. As I write in the forum responses, TFTF has had a profound impact on my career and life as well. The forum gave an opportunity for the resonance of that experience, not only for the five of us in the forum, but also for the other TFTF participants whose voices are not present here, several of whom have previously shared

with me TFTF's enduring impact on them. One of the things a forum like this demonstrates is that reflecting on an experience may be as meaningful as the experience itself.

As an educator and assistant professor I am pedagogically invested in critical empathy and human rights. TFTF instructed me—sometimes explicitly, often through lived experience—in the ways empathy, care, and emotional processing might look different for each of us, as well as the ways empathy does and does not serve us as human beings. When we are tired and overwhelmed, for example, to continue to empathize may hurt us. Experiential education, which is at the heart of this program, allows us to embody our learning: to learn with the whole body. Perhaps that is part of the reason it is hard to forget a program like TFTF. Experiential education is also unruly. Educators do not fully know how it will play out: the dynamic of the group; the long hours; the physical, emotional, and mental limitations of each human body. And, in this way, experiential learning is education at its best: unpredictable, full of new awakenings.

So, who is this forum for? For educators interested in experiential learning, who may be considering implementing or have already implemented a program like TFTF. By offering an inside look into some of the most personally challenging and rewarding aspects of TFTF, this forum may give educators tools to foresee and tackle areas of interest and potential concern. The forum is also for future participants of immersive programs like TFTF, including future iterations of TFTF. By reading the experiences shared in this forum, future participants may be better able to foresee some of the challenges of programs such as this. Although the organizers of TFTF astutely integrated preparatory talks prior to many of the site visits, there were events and spaces that we could not prepare for: for example, the barrenness of places such as Treblinka and Chelmno. Preparation for these and other sites may be, to some extent, impossible, for preparation cannot take into account unexpected occurrences and idiosyncratic responses, but at the very least this forum can serve as a resource. Finally, this forum is for our TFTF cohort, to witness and revisit our collective and individual memories; to continue to process what needs to be processed; to look back in order to keep looking toward the future, to keep looking the present in the eyes.

1
The T4 Program was instituted in 1939 as part of the Nazi effort to develop a "pure" superior race. Under T4, the medical establishment cooperated in killing physically, cognitively, and psychologically disabled Germans, along with the ill and the elderly.

2
Vital-Justin Grandin (1829-1902) was a Roman Catholic bishop who played a central role in establishing the Canadian Indian Residential School System. For an overview of his career, see Raymond Huel, "Grandin, Vital-Justin," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13 (University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003), accessed March 14, 2024, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/grandin_vital_justin_13E.html.

3
Mary Temple Grandin (b. 1947) is a well-known researcher, author, and activist who has published prolifically in both scientific and popular publications on her personal experiences with autism, on animal behaviourism, and on animal rights. See, for example, her *Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010); *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); and *Humane Livestock Handling*, (North Adams, MA: Storey Pub., 2008). She is also the subject of a 2010 biopic, *Temple Grandin*.

4
On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a multi-pronged attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip, firing over three thousand missiles into neighboring Israeli communities. Approximately fifteen hundred armed terrorists crossed the border into Israel, deliberately targeting civilians. brutalizing and massacring over thirteen hundred Israeli civilians and foreigners, and kidnapping over two hundred, including infants, children and the elderly, according to Israeli Defense Force (IDF) figures. In an audiotape released by IDF, one of the Hamas terrorists exults to his parents that he has killed "Jews." Professor Ilan Troen, a professor of Israel studies, whose daughter and son-in-law were killed in their home in Kibbutz Holit near the border with Gaza, while protecting their teenage son with their bodies, referred to the Hamas attack as a "pogrom." See https://www.idf.il/en/; "IDF publishes audio of Hamas terrorist calling family to brag about killing Jews," October 25, 2023, *Times of Israel*, accessed March 15, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-publishes-audio-of-hamas-terrorist-calling-family-to-brag-of-killing-jews/; see also, https://youtu.be/UWuDLI50pvM.

5
The KAIROS Blanket Exercise (KBE) is an experiential pedagogic program developed by KAIROS Canada, an organization that advocates for Aboriginal and human rights. See KAIROS, "The Blanket Excercise - Fourth Edition," accessed March 14, 2024, https://ied.sd61.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/112/2019/02/Blanket_Exercise_Standard_Edition.pdf.