

OREGON JEWISH MUSEUM AND CENTER FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

Testimony of Judy Margles, Director of the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education in support of SB 664, February 20, 2019

I first want to thank Chair Wagner for all his work in sponsoring this bill. It has meant a great deal to our community and we are heartened by the many co-sponsors who have signed on.

OJMCHC is a non-profit museum and educational institution. Our mission is to explore the legacy of the Jewish experience in Oregon and to teach the universal lessons of the Holocaust. Through exhibitions, programs, educational resources, and opportunities for intercultural conversation, we challenge our audiences to resist indifference and discrimination and to envision a just and inclusive world.

In addition to our Museum in downtown Portland, the Museum is also the steward of the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Portland's Washington Park. Last year, approximately 12,000 such students – and over 18,000 adults – visited our facilities. For some of these young Oregonians, visiting the Museum, the Memorial or attending a program has been their first encounter with the history of the Holocaust.

With so many Americans who now either do not know or remember many of the details of the Holocaust or who deny its reality, teaching the lessons of the Holocaust and other genocides is critical. Our Museum educators have been responding to an increase in the number of complex requests for assistance from teachers, who in their classrooms and schools, are experiencing incidents of racism and vandalism involving anti-Jewish and racist symbols and rhetoric. We hear about swastikas, cartoons of Nazis throwing Jews into ovens, and other racist graffiti. We also hear about bullying and harassment of students of color, immigrant students, and students who are LGBTQ. Jewish history involves critical consideration of the ways in which oppression has manifested throughout history. We believe that responsible stewardship of this history means working against the manifestation of oppression in today's world. While Holocaust history speaks to a specifically Jewish experience, it also simultaneously addresses broader, universal issues of injustice and the dangers of denying diversity. Furthermore, we know the Holocaust was not an isolated event, but rather one of many genocides that continue to happen to the present day. The history of each of these acts of genocide also offers the opportunity to explore the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent to the oppression of others, and to think about the use and abuse of power as well as the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations when confronted with civil rights violations and/or policies of hate and exclusion.

At today's hearing you will hear testimony from Eva Aigner, a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust. Eva and her husband Les, also a survivor, are representative of the extraordinary individuals who participate in the Museum's Holocaust Speakers' Bureau. I would also like to acknowledge other survivors here today who are members of our Speaker's Bureau: Evelyn Banko and Ruth Bolliger, and also pay homage to the memory of Miriam Greenstein and other survivors who are no longer alive. Together these individuals – and many others – have spent thousands of hours speaking to school groups throughout Oregon.

Members of the Holocaust Speakers' Bureau regularly speak in schools throughout the Pacific Northwest region about their stories. Originally the Bureau was composed of survivors of the Holocaust; today for obvious reasons, it is largely their descendants and other interested individuals who are participating. This bill arrives at an opportune time as we will soon be at a time when witnesses will no longer be available to speak students. And more critical to the need for this bill, neither the Museum nor schools have the resources to accommodate a program for every Oregon student.

Elie Wiesel coined the phrase Never Again as a way to mobilize people to turn away from hatred and prevent suffering as horrific as the Holocaust. When you think about it, however, the phrase today rings hollow. Hatred has never gone away and genocide continues elsewhere in the world to the present day. So why must every student in Oregon learn about the Holocaust and other genocides? At the museum we say this: we study the Holocaust to study ourselves: to examine our responsibility in an interconnected world where injustice persists on a grand scale. We study the Holocaust to examine our connections to each other.

A curriculum that addresses the Holocaust and other genocides will help students to wrestle with the major dilemmas of our time, better understand how the current connects to the past and provide hope for a future in which human dignity can play a greater role than ever. Yale professor and Holocaust historian Timothy Snyder reminds us that authoritarianism always begins with the advance obedience of the thoughtless and the disorientation of the thoughtful. A curriculum that reaches all students throughout Oregon can empower them to avoid such thoughtlessness and to think critically about how genocides occur and how to take actions to prevent them.

This bill has the ability to change lives. I want to again thank Senator Wagner and all the many co-sponsors for bringing this bill forward and on behalf of the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, I encourage you to pass SB 664.

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