

## Letters

### On Yehuda Bauer's "Creating a 'Usable' Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion"

Sir,

I read with great interest the powerful text "Creating a 'Usable' Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion" by Prof. Yehuda Bauer. At the outset, permit me to say that Yehuda Bauer is one of the key scholars and thinkers who have inspired me (and many others) to become the person I am today. I began my career as an activist with the Antifascist Democratic Alliance and Moldovan periodical *Nu voi uita* devoted to the history and memory of the Holocaust, and our group included several survivors. Later, I became actively involved in the work of the NEVER AGAIN Association in Poland, and the subject of my doctoral thesis, on which I am currently working, concerns the memory of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe. I have also worked as an education specialist at Warsaw's Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews and more recently with genocide museums in Southeast Asia.

Prof. Bauer's article sums up the state of contemporary challenges around Holocaust denial and distortion in the world—and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In that region, including Poland, overt Holocaust denial is rare, but various forms of Holocaust distortion are linked to a particular model of fragile identity that excludes minority narratives and serves an ethno-nationalist political project. It rejects the critical approach to one's own nation, which would require an acceptance of difficult knowledge, and instead promotes simplistic, selective narratives based upon self-pride, positive self-presentation, and over-generalization. This is what I have observed and have been dealing with on the ground, working with Polish and other visitors to the Polin museum.

The challenge has always been how to transmit this difficult knowledge in an effective way, and how to deconstruct the arguments of distorters. The Holocaust happened here, in Europe. Poland—home to Europe's largest prewar Jewish community, and where the Nazi Germans built the death camps—was its epicenter. Locals displayed various attitudes toward this act of genocide. Some were perpetrators; others were

bystanders, while still others were upstanders or rescuers. Therefore, all of us living here are responsible for preserving and passing on the memory of the Holocaust—in all its horror and complexity—to future generations. That memory must not be trivialized or distorted.

Despite its uniqueness, the Holocaust has universal meaning, and its distortion is a universal challenge. For example, how can we apply the lessons of the destruction of European Jewry in non-European contexts, where there is a paucity of knowledge on the Holocaust and Jewish history more broadly? Our innovative project “Countering Holocaust Distortion: Lessons for Southeast Asia” was developed by the NEVER AGAIN Association and supported by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) this year. Southeast Asia is a region with a rapidly growing population. It has its own tragic experiences of World War II as well as other conflicts and even genocide, but awareness of the Holocaust is scarce, and this provides fertile ground for distortion and even denial. Nazi imagery is often present in popular culture, “normalizing” the image of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Conspiracy theories scapegoating minorities and blaming the victims (including Jews) for past crimes and historical conflicts are commonplace in the media and online. There is also a dangerous phenomenon of the globalization of Holocaust denial and its arguments in denying local crimes and instances of genocide e.g., the case of the Khmer Rouge.

This is the context in which we, Central and Eastern Europeans, can make a meaningful contribution. We can share our knowledge of the Holocaust and our experience with tough debates about a difficult past—such as the one precipitated by the publication of *Neighbours* by Jan Tomasz Gross. This issue is relevant to ongoing atrocities and human rights violations. In this way, our project addresses not only the Holocaust, but also promotes a culture of human rights and genocide prevention.

We appreciate the cooperation with IHRA in our work in both Central and Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Bauer for his inspiration; his lectures and writings are priceless sources of knowledge, guidance, and encouragement.

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