

**Testimony of Dr. Edna Friedberg, US Holocaust Memorial Museum  
House Oversight Committee, January 29, 2020**

Thank you for inviting me here today. When I became a Holocaust historian, I thought I was dealing only with the past. I was so naive. Over the course of my career, I have seen the veracity of the Holocaust questioned. I have seen the language and symbols of the Nazis resurrected as weapons in new racist attacks. As other witnesses will testify today, we are experiencing a resurgence in antisemitic violence and speech. Racists of all types feel emboldened. You don't need to be Jewish to be seriously alarmed by this dangerous trend. As a historian, I can testify unequivocally that whenever antisemitism is expressed publicly and without shame, an entire society is at risk.

The Holocaust did not begin with gas chambers--it started with words. With racist cartoons. With children's books that taught girls and boys to be afraid of their Jewish neighbors. Posters portrayed Jewish men as leering rapists, threatening pure blond girls. Hitler was obsessed with race long before becoming Chancellor of Germany. His speeches and writings spread his belief that the world was engaged in an endless racial struggle. White Nordic people topped the racial hierarchy; Slavs, Blacks, and Arabs were lower, and Jews, who were believed to be an existential threat to the "Aryan master race," were at the very bottom. When the Nazis came to power, these beliefs became government ideology and were spread in posters, radio, movies, classrooms, and newspapers. They also served as a basis for a campaign to reorder German society, first through the exclusion of Jews from public life, then the systematic murder of Germans with mental and physical disabilities. And let's remember that the Nazis did not seize power through a military coup or revolution--they rose as part of a power sharing agreement in a fledgling democracy.

In order to make Jewish persecution palatable, Nazi propagandists branded Jews as a biological threat. Government-sponsored racist propaganda denounced Jews as "aliens," and "parasites," and responsible for Germany's cultural, political, and economic "degeneration." These words had an enormous effect, creating an environment in which persecution and violence were not only acceptable, but an imperative.

Nazi propagandists built on existing stereotypes to directly link Jews to the spread of disease, like vermin. As part of their racial campaign to “cleanse” society, Nazi leaders implemented so-called “racial hygiene” policies to “protect” non-Jews. For example, in occupied Poland, Nazi Germany reinforced its policy of confining Jews to urban prison zones known as ghettos by portraying Jews as a health threat, requiring quarantine. This approach was a self-fulfilling prophecy: by depriving the hundreds of thousands of human beings imprisoned in these ghettos of food, water, sanitation, and medical care, the Nazis created a diseased population. German propaganda films shown to school children characterized the sinister “Jew” as a carrier of lice and typhus, like rats.

On a side note, even seemingly admiring or positive stereotypes about Jews--that they are smarter than other people, good with money, well connected or powerful--draw on much older antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jewish global domination. The Nazis invoked links between Jews and Communism to allege that Jews were war mongers. Similar accusations are currently leveled regularly against prominent Jews around the world. In our own country during the Nazi era, celebrated Americans like Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh spread anti-Jewish propaganda and characterized Jews as an enemy element that threatened the United States’ interests.

In August 2017, self-proclaimed white nationalists carried torches through Charlottesville, Virginia, to invoke the racist legacy of Nazi Germany. Fire is more than a dramatic flare. In a charged context, it signals violence and destruction. The Nazi regime began by carrying torches at parades and rallies and, by 1938, burning buildings and Torah scrolls. It eventually burnt the bodies of millions of human beings. The very word Holocaust derives from the Greek, meaning sacrifice by fire.

Marching with torches in the American South has an additional, more specific resonance—nights of fire bombs and lynchings. In the 1920s and ‘30s, members of the Ku Klux Klan marched in torchlight parades, harnessing the theater of terror. White hoods and flame were their stagecraft. For the Nazis, it was the swastika, the

jackboot, and fire. On January 30, 1933, torchlight parades announced the onset of the Nazi regime as Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.

These two movements shared more than rituals; they both insisted on venerating an idealized, imagined past of racial purity. On May 10, 1933, in a symbolic act, university students across Germany burned 25,000 books in public bonfires, signaling an era of state censorship and control of culture. In university towns not unlike Charlottesville, right-wing students marched “against the un-German spirit” in torchlight parades. Students then threw “degenerate” books onto the fires and proclaimed so-called fire oaths, reading from carefully worded scripts. One such oath was, “*Against* the falsification of our history and disparagement of its great figures. *For* reverence for our past.”

The Nazis were masters of propaganda who regularly used torchlight spectacles to create drama and show force. Perhaps the best known scene from Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will* features dramatic footage of torch bearers at a 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg marching in choreographed formation to form a massive human swastika. In a similar vein, Hitler himself made repeated references to torches as symbols of national and racial revolution in his book *Mein Kampf*.

Few people today realize that the most famous contemporary torch—the Olympic torch relay used to literally spark the Opening Games—was a modern reinvention from the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. During the so-called Nazi Olympics, athletic imagery drew a direct link between the Third Reich and ancient Greece. These portrayals embodied the racial myth that a superior German civilization was the rightful heir of an “Aryan” culture of classical antiquity. By reviving the long dormant Olympic torch relay, Nazi propagandists used flame in a calculated strategy to legitimize their mythology, similar to their adoption of the ancient symbol of the swastika. And that torch’s drama endures to this day, embraced by every country which hosts the Olympic Games.

The synagogue in Charlottesville was explicitly threatened with burning by neo-Nazis, and, as a precaution, the congregation made the painful and unprecedented decision to move its Torah scrolls off site. Among them was a Torah salvaged from a European Jewish community destroyed during the Holocaust. Many American

synagogues today are stewards of “rescued” Torah scrolls, tangible manifestations of the millions of Jewish lives and centuries of religious tradition that were lost. These salvaged scrolls have also come to symbolize the values of a pluralistic America—and to celebrate the security and openness that American Jews have felt in the postwar period.

Yet in Charlottesville, according to the rabbi, his congregants were forced to leave in fear through a back door as three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood nearby. The rabbi reported that, “Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, ‘There’s the synagogue!’ followed by chants of ‘Sieg Heil’ and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.”

Unlike in Germany in 1933, American democracy has checks and balances to prevent racist violence from dominating our streets or laws; but those checks did little to restrain the lynch mobs of the Jim Crow South. The torches carried during a nighttime march in a university town—this time in the United States—deliberately echo the smoke of these earlier, racist, and murderous eras.

Hate speech and violence against Jews are canaries in the coal mine for the health of democracy and civil society. A government that does not confront them does so at its own peril. My bored and exasperated teenage nephew once asked me, “Why do Jews never stop talking about the Holocaust?” I took a deep breath before answering. Why do we study the Holocaust? Because we can. Because it is the best documented crime in human history, one driven by genocidal racism. Let’s heed its warning signs.