

Profile: Sara Horowitz

By: Jeremy Kuperberg



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Sara Horowitz is one of the most prominent voices in Holocaust scholarship today. In addition to her role as Professor of Comparative Literature and Jewish Studies at York University in Toronto, Horowitz sits on advisory councils for both the Holocaust Educational Foundation and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, has served as president of the Association for Jewish Studies, has co-edited numerous journals, and authored and edited volumes. However, such status was far from pre-ordained. In many ways, the arc of Horowitz's career has followed Holocaust Studies' evolution from a subtopic of history to an interdisciplinary field with varied methodological approaches.

Horowitz recalls initially feeling like a "fish out of water" in Holocaust Studies due to her presence as a literary scholar of gender. When attending her first Lessons & Legacies conference as a junior professor, Horowitz recollects feeling slightly disappointed in how few literary scholars were present, and sensing that some historians did not recognize the value of literature in understanding the Holocaust. "I remember actually being young enough and naïve enough to be a little puzzled by that. I thought - 'Don't they realize that we're thinking about things that they're interested in, too?'" Not only the methodologies of literary studies, but the very materials that literary scholars analyzed were regarded as peripheral to the field of Holocaust studies. Intent on establishing the facts, many historians saw fiction and poems about the Holocaust as irrelevant, or even dangerous in its interplay of imagination and history. Even primary sources by Holocaust survivors and other eyewitnesses were treated reluctantly

and with suspicion. "There was a period of time when historians were really reluctant to incorporate such things as memoirs and personal reflections." Approaching the Holocaust from her training in literary studies, Horowitz was a staunch advocate for the value of such materials and methods in attaining a more comprehensive understanding of history. While historians did "stunningly important work" in developing the field, Horowitz noted, "the field was also impoverished by what was considered legitimate study. There are a lot of reflections beyond, let's say, the viewpoints of the perpetrator culture, and certain kinds of documentary evidence that were really hard to grasp if you didn't allow for other kinds of things."

While these early experiences could have been discouraging, they also presented an opportunity to influence the field by filling once-vacant roles. At the aforementioned conference, Horowitz was invited by HEF founder Zev Weiss to teach literature at HEF's Summer Institute. "Here I was at this conference, thinking, 'Do people actually realize that literature does anything important?'" Zev's invitation was a way of saying yes, literature has to be part of the conversation." She has gone on to teach at many ensuing Summer Institutes, providing her expertise on both literature and gender to young scholars. "I always felt that teaching at the Summer Institute kept me fresh," Horowitz explains. "It was also a way to help nourish the field, to help shape it, just as the L&L Conference helps shape it." Horowitz is glad to serve as a mentor to a more varied community of Holocaust scholars. She uses this role to encourage critical reflection of voice and perspective in shaping the narratives produced and consumed by Holocaust scholars.

Substantively, Horowitz's work primarily focuses on issues of gender as they pertain to narratives of the Holocaust. This interest not only accounts for the effect of identity on the experiences of survivors and witnesses, but also probes the ways in which authors, scholars, and witnesses alike make use of gender. She asks, "How do people employ or deploy images of gender? When men talk about men or about women, or women talk about women or about men, what can we learn from the ways in which narratives unfold around ideas about gender?"

Most recently, Horowitz has focused on memories of sexual abuse and infanticide in the Holocaust. While these topics had been explored in perpetrator culture, she explains, they long went unspoken in victim communities. "It wouldn't be far off to call them taboo subjects," she says. The relative scarcity of first-hand accounts dealing with these issues made it difficult to get an idea of scope and to probe them. "But in the past decade or so there has been a shift. People feel a sense of urgency -- that it is really important to leave behind some record of what they know, what they did, what they witnessed. A sense that the time is running out, and so it's now or never." In shining a light on these deferred memories of trauma, Horowitz continues to use first-person testimony to produce a fuller picture of Holocaust victimhood and survival.

Just as she has worked to integrate more perspectives into Holocaust Studies scholarship, Horowitz has been tasked as an instructor with making the Holocaust matter to more varied student perspectives. York University's student body mirrors the diverse demographics of Toronto. Horowitz's classes hold interest for students from numerous cultural and national backgrounds, many with limited connections to the Holocaust or modern Europe.

Indigenous people, Rwandan, and Southeast Asian students, for example, have brought their own perspectives on genocide and atrocity to these classes, giving Holocaust Studies broader resonance. "So on the one hand," she explains, "I need to help embed the Holocaust in a broader historical, cultural, literary, and philosophical context. On the other hand, I open it up to their reflections. And I hear how it helps them think about their own cultural memory, their own cultural baggage."

For Horowitz, this experience has helped refute the concern that Holocaust Studies will lose its power as the Holocaust and its survivors recede into distant memory. "I don't think it diminishes at all the importance of the Holocaust," she responds. "It changes the nature of how we teach. And I would say in some ways it enriches it. It makes clear that the Holocaust is not a parochial issue, and it makes for really interesting, robust, and valuable cross-cultural conversations."