

Profile: Alexandra Garbarini

By: Jeremy Kuperberg



Alexandra Garbarini, Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Williams College

Alexandra Garbarini's involvement with HEF began when she attended the 1999 Summer Institute as a PhD candidate in History. She calls this experience "extraordinary" for two seemingly contradictory reasons: contention and community. As Garbarini remembers, participants and instructors in that year's program were divided along disciplinary lines: "There were two contingents. There were historians, and there were people involved in what you might think of as Holocaust Studies: literature and film in particular, but also art history. It was intense to be a part of the conflicts that emerged in some conversations." While this might have been discouraging to other young scholars, Garbarini had become interested in studying the Holocaust for its very interdisciplinary tensions and potential. She recalls of that first summer: "I wanted to pull these people together." This desire has seemingly been fulfilled, as she maintains a strong network of friends, colleagues, interlocutors, and mentors from that first HEF experience.

Garbarini has since found community in nearly every aspect of the foundation's work. In 2001, she participated in an Eastern European study tour led by HEF founder Zev Weiss. Visiting every extermination camp in Poland, along with Warsaw and other relevant sites, was "unbelievable in its own way. It felt like it was the most incredible group to be going to those sites. I was able to part of a tour group where everyone had similar investments. It was very

hard – amazing, though." Garbarini has also attended numerous Lessons & Legacies conferences, co-organizing one and editing the resulting volume. Today, she serves on the HEF Academic Council, helping to formally shape the programs from which she has benefitted.

Apart from her HEF involvement, Garbarini continues to address interdisciplinary tensions as a Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Williams College. Her career-long focus on victim testimony naturally pulls together elements of both history and literature. Garbarini notes that at the time of her graduate studies at UCLA, the field of history was skeptical of first-person testimonies as primary sources due to the potential embellishment of retrospective accounts. This skepticism drove her to seek out contemporaneous first-person accounts of the Jewish Holocaust experience. In library stacks and archives, Garbarini found diaries in which real people experienced the Holocaust in real time. "That opened up the possibility of writing a history of the Holocaust that wasn't always going to be defined by what we already know" on the basis of retrospective knowledge, she said. "It made it possible in some ways to be almost a naïve reader. I felt like historians working on the perpetrators were doing that, but that there was no real attention to thinking rigorously about the victims in those same terms." The literary genre of historical testimony returns agency to Holocaust victims, she argues, allowing us to understand them as historical actors in their own right.

Garbarini's current project looks at the publication and readership of testimonies to mass violence during the World War I-era, including the Armenian Genocide and pogroms in Eastern Europe during the Russian Revolution. She explains that writers and publishers of Holocaust-related diaries used these earlier texts as literary models, despite the different contexts: "Some of that is the tropes or narrative forms that were used. Some of that is literally - how do you publish victim testimony?" Previous scholars might have used the Armenian Genocide as a comparison with the Holocaust, but this analysis of genre reveals the historical continuity in strategic action for the victim community.

Garbarini is especially focused on the impact of two trials in which assassins of alleged perpetrators were acquitted in light of widely-disseminated victim and eyewitness testimonies. These accounts became worldwide social causes through their re-publication in periodicals across not only Eastern Europe but Western Europe, parts of the former Ottoman Empire and North America. In revealing these global connections, Garbarini subverts assumptions of regional and demographic boundedness in Holocaust scholarship. "I'm seeing it as very much in conversation with Holocaust Studies," she says. "This earlier time informed quite deeply the types of assumptions that Jews were making in the 1930s and '40s about the importance of recording testimony, about its different functions and meaning, about the kind of power it could have for influencing public opinion, for potentially having different kinds of political significance, legal meanings, etc. And those assumptions motivated people to see themselves as part of that broader collective project. So yeah, that's very much what's at stake here." Whether in discipline, geography, or temporality, Garbarini seeks out connectivity in order to build a more complete image of the past.