

# What did Americans know as the Holocaust unfolded?

BY TARA BAHRAMPOUR  
THE WASHINGTON POST

Growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1950s and '60s, Andrea Hoffman learned about the Holocaust at Hebrew school and later married into a family that included Holocaust survivors. Along the way, certain questions haunted her.

"I've always wondered what people knew, when did they know it, how did they know it?" Hoffman, 65, said. Her mother had been a teenager in Boston during the war but had not paid much attention to the persecution of Jews in Europe at the time, and Hoffman was curious to know how aware her mother and others in the United States would have been.

So a couple of months ago, when she saw a newspaper ad about a new project encouraging "citizen historians" to investigate American newspapers' accounts of Holocaust, she dove in.

The project, History Unfolded in.d., is an initiative of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is using crowdsourcing to scour newspapers across the country for articles that ran between 1933 and 1945 on the plight of Europe's Jews.

As it turns out, there were a lot of them. Since the project was launched in full in February, the museum has received 1,030 submissions from articles published in 46 states and the District of Columbia. So far, 610 people have signed up, including 32 teachers working on the project with their students. ã

Although historians have studied the U.S. media's take on the Holocaust, much of the investigation was done before the internet and crowdsourcing widened the range of what was possible.

"Nobody has done this research, looking at so many papers in the 1930s and '40s and seeing what the average American citizen would have been

reading," Elissa Frankle, the museum's digital projects coordinator, said. "If you live in that town it's going to be a lot easier for you to see than for us, and to engage with primary sources."

The museum selected 20 events related to the Holocaust in general or in relation to the United States' involvement; for example, the opening of the Dachau concentration camp in 1933, the failure of a child refugee bill in the U.S. Congress in 1939, and Charles Lindbergh's 1941 speech accusing Roosevelt, the British and Jews of pushing the country toward war.

An exhibit planned for spring 2018 will incorporate the project's findings, which will remain available online for researchers. By then the museum hopes to have material from 50 percent of the newspapers that were in circulation in 1940, and engage a fifth of the nation's high school history classes — around 240,000 students. "It helps teach young people that history is not just memorizing facts and dates," Aleisa Fishman, a historian at the museum, said. "It's sort of a mystery that you have to solve, and you have to go looking for stuff."

Jennifer Goss, a high school history teacher in Staunton, Virginia, said her students immediately took to the quaint format. "They thought it was so neat to go to the library and use microfilm."

They also were excited to see their own community against the backdrop of major historical events. Their local paper, The Staunton News Leader, had reported on nearby German POW camps, and the students spoke with people who remembered seeing German officers doing work around town.

"They don't feel like Staunton's a hub of world affairs, so they thought it was interesting that the government would have chosen to put those camps there," Goss said.



HANNIBAL HANSCHKE | REUTERS  
Holocaust survivor and former prisoner at Auschwitz death camp Leon Schwarzbaum presents a newspaper with pictures of the former SS guard at the Auschwitz death camp Reinhold Hanning during an interview in Berlin, Germany, recently.

Perhaps because they live in an age of unremitting information, her students overestimated how much material would be available. "Looking at it from present day lens, they're like, 'Oh, this is so important,'" she said. "Some of them were kind of frustrated that there wasn't more."

But others were shocked to see how much news had been printed on the Holocaust.

"My prevailing notion about this period in time was that a lot of what had happened with the Nazis during the '30s and '40s was not that well-known," said Sandi Auerbach, 62, a retired IBM financial manager in Somers, New York, who is a member of the museum and has contributed more than two dozen articles to the project.

"I am amazed, quite frankly, at the coverage that there was in a lot of different papers. For example, in 1933 there was a huge rally in Madison Square Garden with 20,000 people in attendance to protest the persecution of Jews in Germany. ... The sad thing is that, given all that publicity, still the Holocaust happened."

Tayte Patton, 17, whose English class in Lexington, Kentucky, is participating, said he was shocked at the U.S.'s inaction. "I never knew that we didn't want to let Jews into the country. I always thought that we would let anyone in, that we would be a refuge for the Jews."

The research includes dailies and weeklies, African-American newspapers, college papers, and U.S. papers in Yiddish, Spanish and other languages. Holocaust-related news sometimes made the front page, but small publications often buried it inside the paper.

However, a local connection might cause a paper to run a story more prominently. For example, when the S.S. Quanza, carrying hundreds of Jewish refugees from Portugal, was denied entry to Mexico in 1940 and docked in Norfolk, Virginia, for supplies, the Virginian-Pilot covered it — the stranded travelers were eventually issued U.S. visas after Eleanor Roosevelt intervened on their behalf.

Contributors say they have been struck by detailed accounts of the Nazis' persecution and

slaughter of Jews, along with a wide range of American opinions on whether or not to act on it.

But not all Americans actually got a chance to read what was in the papers, Frankle said. Speaking to people who were alive at the time, "They were saying, 'Who had the ability to buy a paper? We were just trying to buy bread.'"

Even circulation figures do not tell the whole story, as family members and neighbors might pass a single newspaper around.

Alex Adams, 72, a retired computer software developer in Marlton, New Jersey, who volunteers once a month at the museum, has focused on small papers from Montana, where he grew up in a town called Big Timber.

"There are dozens that don't have anything," he said, noting that front-page stories tended to focus on "wheat prices and fights over right of way on their property and Fourth of July picnics and such." But in three papers so far he has found stories on subjects such as boycotts of Jewish businesses and discussions about

what to do with the Jews.

Even coming up empty-handed is a contribution, showing that readers of that paper would have had less exposure to what was happening, said David Klevan, the museum's educational outreach specialist. "We're asking folks to do real research, and a big part of real research is finding nothing."

Deborah Lipstadt, an Emory University history professor and museum board member who wrote "Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933-1945," applauded the idea of engaging nonspecialists to do history.

"What could be better for a high school student than saying, 'I'm not just doing a research project; what I'm finding could have implications [for] what's being presented at the Holocaust Museum,'" she said. "The question is if they come up with conclusions that are different from what the historians have always believed, that will be a moment of crisis [as to] how we're going to work that out."

Several contributors noted a clear connection between the events of the 1930s and '40s and current affairs.

"These things that we're hearing, with people against immigration and Congressmen standing up and speaking against it, it's exactly the arguments that we're hearing now, and that's been astonishing to read," said Hoffman, who is also a volunteer at the museum and who has been focusing on The Free Lance-Star in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Goss said her students echoed that thought.

"Especially since we got to this project right around the time of the Syrian refugee crisis, they drew tremendous connections," she said. "One student said today human rights violations and refugees are in her opinion much more in the news and that today no one has an excuse not to know."

## US helping to defuse dioxin hot spots

BY DANIEL MALLOY  
THE WASHINGTON POST

CAM LO, Vietnam — When Le Thi Mit is awakened at night by the moans of her 34-year-old son, she thinks back half a century, grappling with the vivid memories of American planes flying overhead to coat her village with toxic chemicals.

Three of her four children were born severely disabled. One died young. Truong, 28, who crawls because his stick-like legs cannot support him, cannot speak, bathe himself or eat on his own. Lanh, the 34-year-old, is confined to a bed of wooden slats by his gnarled back.

Mit's wish is that her children die first. There is no one else to care for them.

As President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit in May amid warming relations between the former foes, the United States has increased its commitment to heal lingering wounds from Agent Orange and other jungle-clearing defoliants it deployed during the Vietnam War.

For decades, American officials minimized or dismissed Vietnam's health problems. Vietnamese officials also skirted the issue at times out of concern for the image of the country's agricultural exports.

But the United States is gradually increasing its victim funding, and both governments now willingly speak about Agent Orange. Congress allocated \$7 million this year to health and disability programs in Vietnam, much of it targeting presumed Agent Orange victims.

"We are not aware of any widely accepted scientific study that conclusively establishes a connection between dioxin and these types of physical or psychological disabilities," said Tim Rieser, a longtime for-

**U.S. forces sprayed 21 million gallons of defoliants on southern Vietnam from 1961 to 1971, including 12 million gallons of Agent Orange, to deny its enemies cover and kill food crops**

ign policy aide to Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, who has led the charge to appropriate money for Agent Orange. But "the United States is essentially acknowledging by our actions that there is likely a causal effect, and Sen. Leahy believes we have a responsibility to help address it."

In places such as Cam Lo, a heavily sprayed area near the demilitarized zone where birth defects surged after the war, nongovernmental organizations and foreign governments have stepped in to ease the burden on Agent Orange families, who also get small payments from the Vietnamese government.

Many activists contend the United States is shirking true responsibility. "The U.S. government is never going to step up on Agent Orange," said Suel Jones of Veterans for Peace. Jones fought in Vietnam as a Marine, then returned to work with war victims. "It opens them up to a moral responsibility. Say what we want to say, but we sprayed poison on this damned country."

U.S. forces sprayed 21 million gallons of defoliants on southern Vietnam from 1961 to 1971, including 12 million gallons of Agent Orange, to deny its enemies cover and kill food crops. Though service members and the public were told the chemicals were harmless to humans, Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin, a highly toxic chemical.

Through direct contact, or from eating food raised or grown in contaminated areas, thousands of Americans and millions of Viet-

namese were exposed to dioxin. There is no treatment for it.

As a result of a 1991 law, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides benefits to service members who came in contact with Agent Orange and now suffer from cancer, diabetes or other ailments.

Vietnamese do not get the same compensation. Vietnamese victims sued the chemical companies that manufactured the herbicides, but the case was dismissed in U.S. courts. Another suit is pending in France.

Scientific proof of physical impairments linked to the American spraying — which could lead to legal liability — would be difficult and expensive to come by in a developing nation where other environmental factors could contribute to dioxin poisoning. Doctors here do not tend to diagnose specific birth defects such as spina bifida or cerebral palsy, often just assuming disabled children in certain areas are Agent Orange victims. Vietnamese advocacy groups estimate that 3 million people suffer from health problems related to Agent Orange.

While most dioxin has dissipated over the years, a Canadian research firm identified three major hot spots where Agent Orange was stored and contamination lingers. Another two dozen potential hot spots dot the country.

The Da Nang air base is the first to be cleaned up, under a joint venture launched in 2012 by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Vietnamese government.

As jets from the adjacent commercial airport take off overhead, men in hazmat suits carefully haul contaminated soil into a large heating structure. Once a load has 45,000 cubic meters of dirt — a football field filled two stories high — the "oven" is enclosed with concrete blocks.

Then they turn up the heat. Over months, the soil is heated to a minimum of 635 degrees throughout the pile. The extreme heat neutralizes nearly all the contaminants in the soil, which will be used to build a new runway for private jets.

The project was intended to cost \$43 million and finish this year, but breakdowns and delays have pushed the cost to upward of \$100 million and the end date to 2018.

USAID and project managers say the first two rounds of heating successfully treated the dioxin. The next step is the biggest Agent Orange storage site, the Bien Hoa air base near Ho Chi Minh City, where cleanup could cost \$250 million and take more than a decade.

The human toll is harder to quantify.

In Da Nang, residents were still fishing out of a contaminated lake as recently as 2012 when the airport cleanup began, and there are thousands of assumed victims in the area.

On the edge of town at a victims center funded by foreign donors, children and adults with limited mental capacity play in classrooms, while those with more severe disabilities lie in a hospital ward. In many cases the contamination began with their grandparents.

"A nuclear bomb that is dropped, it kills a person. They die. It's finished," said Nguyen Thi Hien, who runs the center. "But this is lasting over three or four generations."

## Retired CEO donates \$1M to historical society

BY BETH BROGAN  
BDN STAFF

FREEPORT — About 50 people at the Freeport Historical Society's annual meeting initially sat in stunned silence Sunday evening after retired Cole Haan CEO George Denney announced he would donate \$1 million to the organization.

Then they "erupted into applause," Jim Cram, the society's executive director, said Tuesday.

Denney of Freeport is a past board member who is "very active" with the historical society, according to Cram, and was primarily responsible for the iron fence that lines the society's headquarters, the Harrington House, on Main Street.

He declined, through

Cram, to speak to the Bangor Daily News.

The donation comes at a critical time for the organization, as board members work to address structural issues at the Harrington House. Cram said the board was about to begin a capital campaign to raise about \$900,000 to fix the building's roof, which sports tarps in several places, and to build a new archival vault for a collection that includes original deeds, daybooks from doctors' offices and ship captains' logs dating to the early 1700s.

"The vault has been studied for 25 years," Cram said. "We need a true archival vault that is fireproof and has HVAC, to protect our documents from fire and humidity."

## Cape Elizabeth teen dies after weekend crash

CBS 13

CAPE ELIZABETH — A Cape Elizabeth teen has died from injuries suffered during a car crash Saturday morning.

The school district sent a letter home to families Monday, notifying them of 17-year-old Cole Amorello's death.

"Cole was a bright and spirited young man," Principal Jeffrey Shedd said. Amorello crashed around

5 a.m. Saturday, after his car went off the road and into trees at the intersection of Old Ocean House Road and Pebbles Cove Road.

The crash remains under investigation, but police say speed appears to be a factor. Police also say Amorello was at a gathering where alcohol was present and alcohol may have been a factor in the crash, but they are waiting for test results.

## Inmate dies at Cumberland Jail

BY BETH BROGAN  
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — A 24-year-old male inmate died at Cumberland County Jail on Monday morning, according to jail officials.

Nikco Bashari Walton, 24, was found unresponsive in his cell at 6:40 a.m., according

to a release from the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office.

Correction officers gave first aid and CPR to Walton, and Portland MEDCU personnel also rendered aid until Walton died.

The sheriff's Criminal Investigation Division and Portland police are investigating the death.