

# ISRAEL

↓ Annika Brockschmidt (Podcast host)

↓ Yael Granot-Bein (Guest)

Welcome to the very first edition of the new podcast format histoPOD. histoPOD is one part of histoCON:LINE, which is the first digital edition of the new event series histoCON, organized by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. histoCON:LINE aims to commemorate the end of World War II from multiple and international perspectives. My name is Annika Brockschmidt. Today in our first episode, we're looking at the way remembrance culture of the Holocaust has changed in Israel over time, where it is now, and how it might change in the future. To explore this, we spoke with a wonderful guest.

So, my name is Yael Granot-Bein. I live in Israel. I work at the University of Haifa and I direct the International MA Program in Holocaust Studies here at the university, and I have established the Innovation Hub for Holocaust Commemoration and Education.

Let's start out with the situation after the end of World War II. What was it like for Holocaust survivors when they came to what would later become Israel?

When the Jews came here, most of them Holocaust survivors, I think they encountered a very, very strange reality. They came with this burden and a feeling that their stories should be heard. But they encountered people, they encountered Jews who were not really ready to hear their stories. Not because they were mean, not because they were cold-hearted, but because they were dealing with their own troubles. They wanted their own state.

Remember, at this point in time, Palestine was still occupied by the British.

They were getting prepared for war because it was very obvious that once the British move out, and the UN will award them the right to establish a state, a war with the neighboring Arab countries will begin. And into this came hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors, which didn't fit the image that the Zionists wanted. They wanted young people who could fight or could help establish a new state and they got these people who were broken. On the one hand, the Jews who lived here in Israel were very empathetic, they were shocked by the stories they heard. But on the other hand, they felt a little bit disgusted. These people seemed sometimes very primitive, like animals, like people who lived in the camps and did everything to establish families very, very fast, got married very fast, had children. So this was the first encounter.

Once the British had left, war broke out.

Holocaust survivors were recruited immediately and went into battle, which in my mind, looking back at it, is unbelievable, I think. Unbelievable, the young people that were on the verge of death, who've lost everything in Europe, just traumatized completely, were given a gun and sent off to battle. But I read some research that actually said that this was good for them. This gave them a purpose. Here you had a way, a very, very quick way to become one of the Israelis. You were part of the battle. A lot of them died in battle as well. The independence war was a very, very traumatic experience.

This was the main task the Israeli public was busy with at the time, fighting for and securing a state. But there's more to a state than laws and institutions. It also needs a story.

This state, like every other state in history, also needed a narrative. It needed to tell a story to themselves and to the outside world of what they're all about. And everybody likes the story of heroism. Nobody wants to be a victim. Nobody wants to say that the state has been built on a soft story. So within this story of heroism, and of the Israelis who were strong and courageous, the story of the Holocaust just didn't fit in.

There was also another thing that stood between Holocaust survivors and the rest of society. A suspicion, a question that was looming.

There was a question mark, how come you survived and others didn't? What did you do? There was suspicion towards them. Another thing to remember is that there were quite a few trials of Jewish collaborators in the first decade of the state of Israel. So there was proof of Jews that, and I'm not going into the reasons now, did collaborate with the Nazis and were put to trial both in the DP camps already and then in the state of Israel. There was also a divide between the survivors, the regular survivors, and the fighters, the partisans, the ones who were in the ghetto's uprising. And there was a very fixed idea on what heroism is. If you had a gun and if you fought, you're a hero, and if you didn't, you went like sheep to the slaughter, and the new country could not live with the image of going like sheep to the slaughter. So there was this need to create a myth of heroism within the Holocaust. And then with the establishment of the state of Israel.

Survivors were in a tough position. They wanted to fit in in this new country, this new society. But they also brought a lot of trauma with them, painful memories they felt people were not necessarily interested in.

So, their stories were not welcomed. And if they did tell their stories, and quite a few of them did, they felt that the stories were rejected. They were not believed, people said they were exaggerating. So a lot of survivors learned to live in two worlds at the same time. Their inner world was a world of trauma, of a very, very deep, traumatic past, of nightmares, of anxiety, of loneliness. And the outer world, the outer persona was that of very able people. They created families, they built the institutions of the new state. They served in the army. They were amazing.

And a large percentage of the population of this new state consisted of Holocaust survivors.

In the '50s, every fourth person in the state of Israel was a Holocaust survivor. This was a state built on Holocaust survivors.

But there was also another aspect when it came to dealing with the trauma of the survivors, which I think this story shows really well.

I was approached a few years ago by somebody who introduced himself as an ex-pilot in the Israeli Air Force. Now, I don't know how it is in Germany, but in Israel, the Air Force is -. I don't even have the word to tell you. If you're a pilot, or if you're married to a pilot, or if your son is a pilot, you're king. The reason is that the Israeli Air Force played a very, very important role in the Six-Day War and a group of pilots, ex-pilots, came to meet me. They were in their 80s, amazingly fit. Each one of them swam 80 pools in the morning and ran 15 kilometers afterward. And they told me that for many, many years, they worked together in the Air Force. They built the Air Force, they participated in all of the Israeli wars, and they never talked to one another about their past.

And only when they reached their 70s or 80s, when their grandchildren started asking them questions about, "What did you do during the war?" They found out that they are a group of 130 pilots and Air Force personnel that were Holocaust survivors. They flew one next to the other, they did the courses together, and they never talked about their experience. Not only they didn't talk about their experience, but they also hid it. They wanted to be Israelis. They didn't want the accent, the foreign accent, they changed their names so it would be Israeli, and they never discussed what happened to them. And I think this is a very good example of the complexity because it's not just that the young Israeli society didn't want to hear the stories about the Holocaust. It's also in many cases that survivors themselves didn't want to talk about it. They wanted to open a new page. They wanted a new persona. They wanted to be Israelis.

Another thing that held survivors back from wanting to tell their stories were the initial reactions from others that they often encountered when they told them of the horrors they had endured.

I know of survivors who decided to write down their stories and publish it as a book, and no publishing house would publish the book because they said, "Nobody's going to buy it." I heard of survivors who were in a kibbutz, and this was this evening gathering, and I'm talking about a specific woman who had the courage to tell the story. And the man that was sitting there said, "You're exaggerating. This could not have happened." And she got up and she slapped him in the face and she left, and she never told the story again.

The young state took its first steps to establish a collective remembrance culture during the 1950s.

So, in 1953, Yad Vashem was established as a law. So Israel as a state announced publicly that it would dedicate funds and an institution to commemoration and research of the Holocaust. And then in 1959, a law was passed that there would be a national memorial day for the Holocaust. So, you can see how little by little through laws, the memory of the Holocaust is becoming part of the Israeli consciousness. Still, it is not taught in school and it's not taught at universities.

In the history of the young state of Israel, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a former SS man and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, was an event of great importance. Mossad captured Eichmann in 1960, and he was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to death in 1962.

And then Eichmann is caught and brought to trial in 1961 in a very, very dramatic and publicized event. We are talking about hundreds of journalists coming into Israel from other countries. We're talking about more than 100 witnesses who testified on the stand. Eichmann was the first Nazi who was ever tried in an Israeli court for his deeds during the war.

The trial was filmed and widely publicized. It was broadcast live on a screen outside where people could gather and watch, or they could listen to it live on the radio.

People were standing in line for hours to get a ticket so they can go in and take part in the proceedings. And it was the first time that the story of the Holocaust was told in an organized way. It was in a certain way, without being critical of the trial, it was a bit of a show that was aimed at giving the Holocaust a place in the public memory. And in that sense, it did an amazing job. The feelings of empathy were rising. People asked, "Where were we? How did we not realize what these people have gone through? Why were we so insensitive in the way we accepted them into society?" It made the trauma and its profound lingering effect very clear to the Israeli public. If initially, they thought, "Oh, this will go away," they now realized this is not going anywhere. This is how they live every day.

There was also a new generation of Israelis, the grandchildren of the survivors, and they were in a very different position than their parents and grandparents had been.

There were a lot of teenagers that did not live through the Holocaust. The state was about 14, 15 years old. So these youngsters, they did not experience the anxiety around creating a state or living without a state. And suddenly they were exposed to these stories, and this had a profound impact on them and it became part of their identity. And this is where the change really began. It started with the education system, that in the '70s decided to teach the Holocaust as a mandatory topic.

This had not been the case before, but the young, the third generation, had questions. And this was reflected in what schools started to teach.

All Israeli children meet survivors, watch a lot of Holocaust films, participate in ceremonies every year around the national Memorial Day, there is a siren in Israel in April, everybody stands still and remembers the victims. And every child in the sixth grade has to write a paper, a big project that we call roots, Shorshey. And the project is to look into your family history and interview grandparents, family members, collect pictures.

So obviously in many households, you get to the story of the Holocaust. And this started this trend that the third generation, their grandchildren, in the '80s and onwards, started asking questions that the second generation was too afraid to ask.

Another thing that is a big part of Holocaust remembrance for many teenage Israelis to this day, are the trips to Poland, where they visit the death camps and other places of Jewish suffering. During the last years, these trips have been met with some criticism.

This is a rite of passage, there is an image that all the Israelis at the age of 16 and 17 are going to Poland. It's not true. Many of them do as part of their school curriculum. I will be honest and say I have three children. Two of them are now in their 20s. I did not allow them to go to Poland. I think it's not the right way to go to Poland. I don't think it's the right age to go to Poland. There was a lot of criticism that this was a death trip. There is life before the Holocaust and after the Holocaust. So, I know that the trips are now changing and there are more encounters between Polish youth and Israeli youth. There's more emphasis on Jewish life before the Holocaust so that people would not think of Poland as this Jewish graveyard.

What's your main criticism of how these trips are conducted and have you been on one yourself?

I don't think that this sort of trip, and I've done it with my students, in the context of our MA program. I think it's a very, very difficult emotional trip. It shouldn't be done with teachers. It should be done with the family. I don't think it should be done at the age of 16 or 17. I did it the first time when I was 40, and I still think it's too young, but this is a huge thing for Israelis.

In today's Israel, the status of Holocaust survivors in society could not be more different from what it had been just after World War II had ended.

**For us, today in Israeli society, Holocaust survivors are rockstars.** We see them as heroes, no matter what they've been through, we see them as heroes. They are our guiding light. We want to know what they have to say about corona, about everything. They started going with the children to the camps and telling those stories. They were invited into the schools to talk about their stories. We're looking into an era where suddenly every survivor or every victim has a name. We are now talking not about the collective memory of the Holocaust. We're now talking about the breakdown of the memory into specific people where everyone has a story. And that was the beginning of the change, which is now a whole different atmosphere.

Today, the Holocaust is present in almost all aspects of everyday life in Israel.

Israeli politicians used the memory of the Holocaust to gain a lot of political aims. And this made the Holocaust a present thing. **The Holocaust is present today in Israeli society I think much more than it was in the 1950s.** I hear children speak today and the word Holocaust just pops in their vocabulary when they want to talk about an awful day that they had, or a terrible exam that they had, "Oh, that was a Shoah, that was a Holocaust."

At this point in our conversation, Yael added something that might be helpful for those listeners who aren't Israeli.

I also want to explain something to someone who's not an Israeli. **We live in a state that is constantly being targeted and its legitimacy is constantly being questioned. I don't know any other state that lives in this constant situation.** I don't know any other state that is being called into question as to the legitimacy of its existence. Now imagine a child that is living in Israel, was born in Israel, and his entire life, this is what he hears, that maybe when he grows up, there won't be a state of Israel. The collective memory of the Holocaust is you're being constantly reminded of it. Even if you want to forget it, and so many young Israelis just don't want to hear about it anymore, "How many times can you hear about it?" But then they open the news and they see that, again, they're being threatened. Again, they're saying that their state should not have been created. This is a reality that I don't think anyone in a country that is very sure of its existence can even understand.

When we look into the future of Holocaust remembrance, not only in Israel but also across the world, as time goes on, we all have to deal with one issue that becomes more pressing with every passing day.

The main issue we're all dealing with is the disappearance of survivors. We know from research that the one profound experience when you learn about the Holocaust is meeting a survivor. So we're all dealing with what will we do? **How do we tell the story of the Holocaust when we don't have the survivors?** And this is a challenge that I think every Holocaust institution in the world is now pouring a lot of money into to come up with very, very innovative ideas and solutions to this issue. And of course, digital tools are the prevailing solution.

Some institutions are already experimenting with the possibilities of virtual reality and how it can be used to preserve the memory of the survivors once they are gone.

So, we have the Shoah Foundation in the University of South California, where they created holograms of Holocaust survivors who answer different questions. Or if you go to museums in the United States, all the death camps, the museums, Auschwitz and Majdanek, are now creating virtual reality experiences for their visitors where you can actually see what the place looked like 75 or 80 years ago. Virtual reality is a huge challenge because we ask ourselves what's ethical, what's legitimate, how will it affect the children who are watching this?

So, you have a master's program in Haifa, but there's also the Innovation Hub. Can you tell me what that's all about and why you came up with the idea?

We have students from all over the world, over 160 students have studied with us so far from over 25 countries. Some of them are very obvious: Poland, and Germany, and the United States, Canada, England, and Australia. But also from countries that I would not have guessed that we would have students from: China, and Rwanda, Cambodia, the Philippines. Some of them go on to a Ph.D., some of them work in museums, later on, some of them go into education, but a large group is very passionate about Holocaust education and commemoration. We wanted to take the tools of innovation and entrepreneurship and marry it to the world of Holocaust education and commemoration.

What was the reaction you received? It sounds like quite a controversial idea.

This was very weird, to begin with because **when we started talking about Holocaust as a product that you need to create, and you need to market, and you need to sell, a lot of brows were raised.** This was not an easy thing, but we felt that there are a lot of young people that are very creative that want to think out of the box. They will not be able to do it in the existing atmosphere, maybe because of the political atmosphere in some of the countries. Hungary, Poland, we have students from these countries, they go back home and they can't do anything with the Holocaust because these countries have an agenda now.

Holocaust revisionism has been on the rise in these countries. The Holocaust revisionist report from 2019, written by researchers of Yale University and Cornell Colleges, found that "Governments are rehabilitating World War II collaborators and war criminals while minimizing their own guilt in the attempted extermination of Jews." For example, Poland attempted to pass a law in early 2018 to make it a criminal offense to accuse Poland of complicity in Nazi war crimes, punishable by up to three years in prison.

On the other hand, in countries that do push Holocaust memory forward, this is usually done from the top down. So Yad Vashem, the museum in Washington, they're doing amazing things, but they're the ones who decide what is important to know about the Holocaust. **We think that there are things that institutions don't think about, or maybe won't even accept.** For the first cohort, we chose seven of our graduates who then came into the Innovation Hub. So this was done on top of their studies. They needed the initial knowledge about the Holocaust, but other than that, they needed to be creative, they needed to be passionate. So these were women who came from Germany, England, Australia, Holland, and Israel. They came to Haifa for four months. They had had

an initial idea of what they want to do, but for four months, they worked in a very systematic way with many experts that came from the digital world, from the business world, from the world of design, the world of education, they developed their idea into something real.

What was the most important thing for you to teach your graduates in the Innovation Hub in connection with Holocaust remembrance that they could not have learned anywhere else?

We want to provide our students with a lot of knowledge of the Holocaust, but also with practical tools of what to do with this memory. What do you do with it? You know so much, you want to make the world a better place, you want people to remember, now what do you do with it? So we taught them to write a business plan. We taught them how to do focus groups and market research. And they learned how to build a website. They learned how to do digital marketing. So these are tools, again, you don't think about it when you think about the Holocaust, this is not what they signed up for when they did an MA in Holocaust, but this is something I think everybody needs in this world we're living in now, even if you deal with something that is more value-laden like the Holocaust.

Could you give us a few examples of projects that your graduates have realized in the Innovation Hub?

So, for example, we had Esther, who's from the UK, and she is in her early 30s, has a lot of friends in the UK where they go together to the pub. And she noticed that many young people are really interested in the Holocaust, but they don't know where to begin. They're working, they're not studying anymore. They're not in any environment that would provide them with information and knowledge about the Holocaust. They're looking for something very nonacademic, easy to digest. I know these are terrible words when I use them in connection with the Holocaust, but this is exactly what the Innovation Hub is about. We want to think about transferring information about the Holocaust differently. Institutions are doing it. It's heavy. It's academic. It's really important and done very, very well, but it's not for everyone. And Esther, when she came to us, she did some market research and she started talking to many, many people in that age group and asked them, "What do you need? How do you want to talk about the Holocaust?" And she came up with the idea of a podcast that is non-academic, that is easier to digest, that would provide people the opportunity to talk about the Holocaust in the context of today's experience. Esther's podcast is the place for you to go to have this kind of conversation.

Are there any other new tools at the digital age that your graduates used in their projects?

We have a project of augmented reality. This is a German woman, who is designing an app where you can trace Jewish places that are no longer in Berlin. Just to give you an anecdote. She's doing this in the fashion district in Berlin, which she found out in her research was mostly Jewish between the two wars. And what she's doing, she's recreating all the information through photos and personas of people who lived there, designed, created the clothes, and you can see this in the app. What she found out was that the system of small, medium, and large they would buy clothes through, this was invented by a Jew in Berlin before the Second World War. I had no idea. And we have another woman who's an- She's also German, she's living in Israel now, she's creating a digital platform for dialogue between German students and Israeli students.

Where can our listeners have a look at all of the projects of your graduates, where should they check it out?

So, all you have to do, on Google, write Holocaust studies, you'll get to our program. And within the program, you'll see the Innovation Hub. We have some information on each of these girls. I didn't talk about the other project, but they're just as amazing.

Yael, thank you so much for speaking with me. Is there any message that you would like to give our listeners?

I'm in a position today where I work with a lot of young people. And I also have a daughter who's 21, she's a student, and a son who's 19, he's a soldier in the army. Because I remember that when I was their age, I was so optimistic. I felt that the world is my oyster, I am going to conquer the world. And when I look at my kids now, I think they feel differently. I think they're more anxious. They're more afraid. I feel that they're not allowing themselves to think big enough. And now this corona thing, I mean, it's very, very hard to look into the future with an optimistic viewpoint. And I just want to give this message of hope. There's so much to do in our world. So many causes. There's a need for good people. There's a need for committed people. I just feel that they need a little push. They need someone to tell them that it's going to be okay. I think we as adults fail to do that because we're also overwhelmed. We also feel that the world is kind of shaking beneath our feet. If you're listening to this podcast, it shows me that you know what is important, that you are conscientious enough, you're caring enough to go out into the world and start making small changes day after day to make this a better place.

I will leave you with this cheerful message. You can find more information about the histo podcast as well as various other offers on [www.histocon.de](http://www.histocon.de). To stay updated, feel free to check their website on a regular basis as the histoCON:LINE team plans to successively expand the offers throughout the year. If you have further questions, reach out to the team via [histocon2020@bpb.de](mailto:histocon2020@bpb.de). The music we used is sincerely by Kevin MacLeod. Take care and stay healthy.