

Holocaust scholar uses Shoah to shed light on plight of modern refugees

By **DEBRA RUBIN**

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Holocaust expert Deborah Dwork, visiting scholar at Rutgers University's Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, said, "The past can offer us a compass to guide us to where we want to go as a society."

For Holocaust scholar Deborah Dwork, studying the fate of desperate Jews seeking safe refuge during World War II has modern relevance to Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar and Uighurs forced into Chinese "re-education" camps.

"Knowledge we have gained from the Holocaust helps us understand these mass human rights violations," said Dwork. "We have the language, the analytics to express and think about what is occurring on the ground."

Dwork is a visiting scholar this semester at Rutgers University's Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

She said she is troubled by human rights abuses being inflicted worldwide on refugees and includes U.S. policies in her criticisms. "When our own government is doing it, it is so painful," Dwork said.

She called the Trump administration's redefinition of refugees "just unbelievable." The Supreme Court upheld on Sept. 11 restrictions on asylum seekers.

While their plight is "not exactly the same" as the Jews during wartime, Dwork said "the phenomena of asylum seekers today has resonance with that of Jewish asylum seekers in the 1930s and 40s."

During her stay at Bildner, Dwork's primary focus will be conducting a free weekly mini-course from Sept. 26-Oct. 24 for middle and high school teachers. The course will concentrate on how U.S. government policy and public opinion affected the lives of asylum seekers in the Nazi era, to provide a framework for understanding today's immigration and refugee situation.

"While the past is not a blueprint for the present, the past can offer us a compass to guide us to where we want to go as a society," said Dwork.

The course is being offered through the Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center.

"Deborah Dwork's record of scholarship and pedagogical engagement in the field of Holocaust studies will be an extraordinary asset to the Bildner Center this year," said its academic director, Nancy Sinkoff. "We are thrilled to host her as the Bildner visiting scholar."

Dwork will also confer with students and faculty involved in Holocaust research and participate in or consult for various lectures, workshops, and symposia, including future Bildner educational programs for teachers.

For Dwork the words of "The New Colossus," by Jewish-American poet Emma Lazarus inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty, have never had more meaning. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

"It is a symbol, an icon of what we believe and the American values we will fight for," she said.

"That is why I look to civil society," said Dwork. "We can raise our voices, which is quintessentially important. Just think in the Nazi era before the war if people had raised their voices and there had been significant pushback the government would not have been able to proceed as it did. The Nazi regime was empowered by the public's silence."

The first session of her educators' course will focus on Jewish flight from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. "At its core we are talking about the desperation of people at risk who seek asylum anywhere," she said.

The second session will focus on misconceptions surrounding the belief that Jews were trapped and gave up any hope of escaping.

"For the most part it was absolutely true" that Jews were unable to escape the Germans' net, "but at no time were Jews passive; they did not sit around waiting for the worst to happen," Dwork said.

She noted Jews were constantly "looking for that small opening where they could squeeze through to safety even in the midst of the Holocaust," scaling the Alps into Switzerland, the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain, or fleeing deep into the Soviet Union.

The course will next explore what life was like for refugees who managed to escape to a safe place but were considered undocumented.

"For the most part [they] barely had permission to stay, and surely had no permission to work. How were they to survive without work, resources, or family networks?"

The last session will feature Tracey Petersen, manager of the United Nations' Holocaust Education Outreach Programme, presenting an overview of the current refugee crisis and the UN's involvement.

Dwork is founding director of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the inaugural Rose Professor of Holocaust History at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. She recently served as the Shapiro Senior Scholar-in-Residence at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

A groundbreaking early proponent of the oral recording of the Holocaust survivors, Dwork's books include "Children With a Star," which introduced a child-centered approach to historical investigation; "Flight from the Reich," which

focused on the refugee experience; and “Auschwitz,” which drew a connection between industrial killing and a society that believed it was involved in constructive activity. She is currently working on a book titled “Saints and Liars: American Relief and Rescue Workers during the Nazi Era.”

Teachers can register for the mini-course, which runs on consecutive Thursdays from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m., at bildner.rutgers.edu.

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