

Good morning, Chairman Heinert, and honorable members of the House Education Committee.

My name is Ruth Jorritsma, and I am a citizen of North Dakota from District 7. I come before you today to request that you render a “Do Pass” on House Bill 1527, requiring Holocaust Education in our schools.

My family has a very personal connection with the Holocaust. During WW2, my mother’s family lived near Amsterdam in The Netherlands. My family had strong beliefs in God. As the Jewish people began to be taken away to camps, my great-grandfather and his family decided that they could not stand idly by. They acted on their faith by creating hiding places on their farm. They then became part of the Dutch underground, helping Jewish refugees attempting to flee the country. They would even drive to Amsterdam to pick up orphaned Jewish children to rescue. The reports vary, but we know that they were able to help over 300 refugees before they were caught.

Many of my family members were taken into custody. Some were released, but we know that at least three of my family members died in concentration camps, including my great-grandfather. A doctor who visited the camp wrote several letters to my grandmother in America. You might expect the letters to be filled with hate, but they were not. My great-grandfather held firmly to his beliefs through his entire time at the camp. He lost his life at the hands of a firing squad. Our story is one of many stories that need to be told to the generations that follow behind us.

The Holocaust was a horrific tragedy. It shows what can happen when one nationality or people group is marginalized and proclaimed to be “less than” and therefore not worthy of the dignity and respect that is due us as humans. Personally, I hold to the Bible’s statements that humans are created in the image of God. I agree with our founding fathers when they said that “*all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*”¹ When those in leadership persuade their citizens that these fundamental beliefs are not true, then abuse, torture, killing, and more become acceptable behaviors.

The Holocaust took the lives of more than 11 million victims. Six million of those victims were Jewish and 5 million were, like my family, non-Jewish victims.² The sheer magnitude of this loss must be remembered and guarded against lest history be repeated. Future generations need to understand what happened and how it happened. The loss extends beyond the current generation. Remember that not only did these people die, but their future generations were lost from this earth as well. That can never be regained.

Students need to learn about these monumental events, so they are equipped to understand how the Holocaust shaped our world, our lives, and our culture. There are many lessons to be learned from this time in history. One concept to teach is compassion. History is not just a series of names

¹ Declaration of Independence, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

² <https://www.iholocaustmuseum.org/holocaust-misconceptions/>

and facts and dates. This is about real people like you and me. Compassion was one of the motivators that kept the family pressing on, even after the farm was inspected by Nazi soldiers several times. In fact, it wasn't till the soldiers came back with dogs that the hiding places were uncovered. Without compassion, why would you risk your entire family to save strangers?

My mother recalled and shared with me that she watched her mother weep over the letters received from the camp doctor. Not a tear or two but weeping over her father's current state. It is hard to relate the feelings of history to students without intentional care to do so.

The story is also an opportunity to teach faith. The letters from the doctor indicate that my great-grandfather was a spiritual leader in the camp. When he weakened and got sick, they placed him in the infirmary. Even there, he ministered to others. He was in his late 70s when he was placed in the camp, but his faith sustained him. At his trial, he challenged his captors to think about what they were doing. He encouraged them to repent. They considered releasing him, but he refused to promise not to go back to helping the Jewish people around him.

The story is also an opportunity to teach courage. The day of the final raid, the soldiers descended upon the farm and systematically went through and uncovered the hiding places. One of the farm hands, held off the advance of the Nazi soldiers with his own gun while a few of the Jews were able to flee into the woods to escape. He died where he stood from his gunshot wounds. He had the courage to stand for what was right, despite the cost. That is a rare courage to find.

History is a series of stories. I have always said that if history seems boring, it is because someone isn't telling it right. We need to know our stories, good and not so good. We need to learn from history and grow from its lessons. We need to teach an unselfish love that is willing to weigh the cost and stand for those who cannot stand for themselves. Please encourage the future generations of North Dakota's citizens to learn, to grow and to stand.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions.