

## How we memorialize the past

The most recent racist conflagration in the United States was ignited, ostensibly, by the removal (or threatened removal) of Confederate commemorative statues and plaques. We say ostensibly because it seemed some people were just itching for a fight and this issue popped up.

Each community, or each society, must determine who and what it commemorates. It is understandable that African-Americans, among others, would be offended by statues and other historical monuments that adulate those who defended slavery in the U.S. Civil War. Those who decry their removal as an “erasing of history” seem to be unfamiliar with the concept of libraries and museums, which are among the foremost repositories of history. Remembering history is different from venerating it. For example, a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in front of a courthouse is an affront to equality before the law. The same statue in a museum could provide an opportunity for reflection and discussion.

Outside Budapest is a curious outdoor museum featuring dozens of statues and monuments from the communist era. It is a kitschy museum but it invites guests to ponder the propaganda of earlier eras, even admire some of it from a perspective of artwork, but it is decidedly not a place of veneration. It is a clear statement that such works, if they are to be publicly displayed, should be positioned in a way that does not esteem the ideas that inspired them, but instead invites observers to reflect on their meanings and the often catastrophic outcomes of their ideologies.

Similarly, the preservation of Auschwitz and other places of Nazi terror was not done in honour of that terrible time and the evil that defined it, but for the opposite reason: to ensure that future generations face the reality of that history and to inspire people to seek a better future. Context is crucial.

While Americans battle their demons, some Canadians have taken issue with our history and how it is commemorated. The government of Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada’s first prime minister, was responsible for implementing the residential schools system, a past with which most Canadians are only now beginning to grapple. Last month, the Ontario elementary teachers’ union said MacDonald’s name should be stripped from the nine schools in that province that are named for him. By that logic, we would eliminate his visage from our \$10 bills and remove his statues and other likenesses from our public spaces.

### Antisemitism among anti-racist ralliers

Editor:

I attended the rally to protest WCAI [Worldwide Coalition Against Islam] as did hundreds of others, and was glad the white supremacists were outnumbered and drowned out by the love-in crowds. At the same time, I remarked the presence of antisemitism among some leftist groups in the crowd, and how this form of racism is generally tolerated on the left.

One group held up a sign with the words “End the Occupation!” Recognizing these as watchwords of the anti-Israel left, my daughter and I approached them. We asked them how they could support Hamas, which calls for the destruction of the Jewish state and commits acts of terrorism, and be against racism.

One guy started a rapid-fire rant, calling out Zionism for committing genocide against Palestinians. When I said that there is no Palestinian genocide (check your definitions and facts), a woman next to him said, “Zionism is racism.” This, of course, is a standard line that has been accepted widely on the left. Anti-Zionism has become the new form of antisemitism.

I left the rally wondering how many of the good people in attendance would actually defend us Jews against the antisemitic tropes pondered on the left today. Certain types of racism go unchallenged on the left, either by ignorance or fear of going against the stream.

Yet the challenges we face as Jews and progressives will not be quieted by last month’s one-day victory over white supremacy. In my opinion, those who denounce racism and Islamophobia, on the one hand, yet support organized antisemitism on the other, are as dangerous as the alt-right and we must be outspoken and vigilant.

Should we? Well, if Canadians had a thoroughgoing national discussion on the subject and a consensus clearly emerged that what was bad about MacDonald outweighs that which was good, then yes. But we should not jump in willy-nilly, thoughtlessly applying the values of today upon people of the past. To be clear: the residential schools system was an atrocity and a national disgrace; we know this now. How we attempt to rehabilitate our country and make amends for this awful history is a discussion in which we are immersed. The veneration of figures who were party to that history invites a legitimate and thoughtful reconsideration – neither those whose knee-jerk reaction is to tear down statues, nor those who reflexively balk at the very idea, are exhibiting the sort of approach we need. Ontario’s elementary school teachers, for example, may have missed the mark. If ever there were a teaching opportunity, it would be to engage young Canadians in critical thinking about why their school is named for the first prime minister, why some people think that’s problematic, and how empathy toward minorities is key to a better future.

But we should be careful in determining the measuring stick we apply. In considering the legacies of any public figure who lived more than a couple of decades ago, we would be hard-pressed to find one who would measure up to today’s standards on the rights and roles of Canadian indigenous peoples, Jews, women, gay people, or really any minorities. One might even argue: Who are we to judge? Are we assuming this generation has reached the moral summit of civilization? The state of the world today suggests we have much left to do to advance *tikkun olam*. Future generations will not likely give us any great kudos for perfecting humanity.

In the end, we cannot fathom how our descendants will view us and our behaviours. If, as now seems tragically inevitable, human-created climate change wreaks havoc on our world, future generations may look at our car driving, energy consumption and jet vacations as the direct cause and remove the names and likenesses of even the best of our generation from their schools and public squares.

By all means, we should consciously consider representations of our past and whether they are appropriate or inappropriate for our times. It is a discussion worth having, but we should have that discussion before we go racing around tearing down monuments and renaming schools. ■

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could get around this was to locate the heart, that something that we can all relate to.

“Luckily, this was almost instantaneous. While going through the archives, I found a superb article in the *Jewish Western Bulletin* ... written by Harry Wolfe in 1948. ... It perfectly encapsulated the trials and tribulations of the school and how the success or failure of the institution was, and still is, solely on the backs of the community. It also stated that, despite major setbacks, there have always been those willing to put their tushes on the line for VTT.

“The reasons they did this were numerous and we explore some of them in the movie,” he said. “But, even when I went to VTT, there was a love that pervaded the halls of the school. No matter where you fell on the religious, financial or political spectrum, there was a place for you. That’s an institution worth talking about and one worth fighting for.

“That’s not to say that it’s perfect. Nothing is, and the movie doesn’t shy away from that, which, aside from being a vital part of storytelling, is part of the fun of it. But, hopefully, the film helps to keep the school (and the community) on the right track.”

It certainly kept Adam on track, making “sifting through hundreds of hours of footage far easier. If it didn’t fall under the umbrella idea, it got cut.”

The film project was funded, said Adam, “by the generosity of Syd Belzberg and by multiple donations made to the VTT Alumni Fund.” It took more than three years to complete – and that was after years of discussing the idea of a documentary. It was a concept for which his father, David Bogoch, in his capacity as alumni chair, advocated “with many different boards.”

“Frankly, it took awhile for excitement to build,” said Adam. “At first, only my dad, who’s a wealth of information on the topic, truly saw a story worth telling. By the time we knew the school would be celebrating its 100th anniversary, things really began to take shape. Past board members and individuals in the administration embraced my dad’s ideas and he convinced me to helm the project.”

In addition to funding the documentary, the VTT Alumni Fund has been financing the digitization of the archives, said Adam.

“I spent the first two years of this project doing research. This included the expansive VTT archives, the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, the Jewish Museum and Archives of B.C. and Rozanne Feldman Kent’s book *The Vancouver Talmud Torah: 1913-1959 and Beyond*.”

While he did most of the legwork himself, he received “some significant assists” from his dad. “As well,” he said, “I was lucky enough to work with a small crew on certain days. So much visual content came from [VTT’s] Jennifer Shecter-Balin, and she simply must be praised.” He gave a lion’s share of the credit to film editor Thomas Affolter. “The broad strokes of the project may have been due to my experience as a writer,” said Adam, “but he has a director’s mind that added a real sense of

professionalism and cleanliness that is immediately evident on screen.”

The decision of who to interview was a collaboration between Adam and his dad. “We had suggestions given to us by [VTT head of school] Cathy Lowenstein, as well as by staff members, but most of the 46 faces featured were our decision,” said Adam.

In his 1948 article, Wolfe wrote, “We have attempted to give credit where it is due, but many will have to remain unmentioned because of modesty or because research could not uncover names.” Adam said he faced the same challenge and is expecting to receive “a few remarks on missing faces. But, it’s important to note that some people were unavailable or had no interest in being

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– Adam Bogoch

on camera. The movie also couldn’t be unbearably long, so we had to cap at a certain number of individuals. But, we have an all-star lineup of community members of all different ages, occupations, experiences and perspectives. It’s like the *Ocean’s Eleven* of the Jewish community.”

This is Adam’s favourite aspect of the documentary, “that it provides voices from all corners of the community. Sure, we could have always featured more. There will always be factions that we didn’t include. However, we have 46 featured faces. Each with their own perspective. Some of which are in conflict with one another. But all of them are shooting for the same goal – a prosperous Jewish day school that welcomes everyone.”

Adam gave the school credit for its hands-off approach to the content. “Some of these opinions [in the film] are not what the school endorses. But they understand that they are just opinions. Informed discussion is vital for growth, and we can’t shy away from it. At the end of the day, we had very little interference from the school; and what little we did have made the project stronger, kinder and still just as honest.”

He added, “The board and admin have been so supportive of this journey, and they must be acknowledged for their bravery in embracing something that wasn’t completely shiny and beautiful. That tells me that they’re confident in the quality of their school.”

“Another thing that interested me about *VTT Onward*,” he said, “was that I was honouring my family roots. My grandfather, Dr. Abraham (Al) Bogoch was a giant in the community, especially when it came to VTT. My dad has followed in his footsteps in a way that I think exceeds my grandfather’s influence. My connection is different, but this is one way that I can contribute to something that’s been integral to the Bogoch family.”

Adam himself is a VTT alumnus –