

COMMENTARY | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Opinion: Images that trivialize the Holocaust insult its victims, devalue our humanity

Eli Mayerfeld

Published 6:02 a.m. ET March 30, 2023

Last week, in a tweet that generated a lot of coverage, a 1945 photo of thousands of wedding rings taken from prisoners at the Buchenwald concentration camp was treated like stock photography.

It is not. The photos taken by camp liberators record history's greatest atrocity — the annihilation of 6 million Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Each one of those wedding bands belonged to a human being. As each one was confiscated, so, too, went the promise of all that a wedding ring holds — a marriage, a home, children, a future.

When we take a photo from the Holocaust out of context and use it for a mundane purpose, we cheapen it. We insult the victims. And we devalue our collective humanity.

Words or actions that trivialize the Holocaust aren't simply social media stunts. Antisemitism is on the rise. The Anti-Defamation League recorded 3,697 cases of antisemitism across the country in 2022, a 36% increase from 2021 and a record high since it began tracking the data in 1979.

Nearly 80 years have passed since the Holocaust ended, and it can be difficult for those without a connection to World War II to fully comprehend the magnitude of the systematic dehumanization and extermination of an entire people. Photos such as this one help educational institutions such as The Zekelman Holocaust Center paint a vivid picture of the scope and scale of the destruction.

These rings are from the hands of the 250,000 individuals imprisoned in Buchenwald between 1937 and 1945, among them Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and German military deserters. These prisoners provided slave labor for the Nazis, while Nazi doctors conducted experiments on some of them. For those who survived these atrocities, and their children and grandchildren, Holocaust imagery brings up disturbing and painful events, both lived and re-experienced.

At The Zekelman Holocaust Center, our work aims to restore the humanity of each individual who was murdered. In fact, because 6 million is such a large number, we often quote the survivor Abel Herzberg: "There were not 6 million Jews murdered; there was one murder, 6 million times."

More: Michigan GOP shoots itself in the foot by linking gun control to Holocaust

More: Opinion: On Holocaust Remembrance Day, remembering a 1941 bar mitzvah in Germany

Artifacts and images help us honor the dead and relay history long after they've passed. In their capacity to restore dignity, images and artifacts of Holocaust victims demand respect, care and context.

We display a Buchenwald artifact at the center: the camp uniform of Michigan Holocaust survivor Steve Lewkowicz, who lay inert on a pile of dead bodies to evade a death march as the Allied forces neared; a few days later, he was liberated by the U.S. Army.

Visitors see the creases in the fabric; the familiarity of a wrinkle helps collapse the distance between the events of the Holocaust and the present day. In this way, the Holocaust becomes not only something that happened long ago and far away, but also a tragedy that they can relate to.

More: Michigan's Zekelman Holocaust Center shows that anti-Semitism isn't always far from home

We are in the midst of updating our core exhibit, and a few wedding rings will be on display in a gallery that explains the camp system and the Final Solution. These rings were discovered by American soldiers who liberated Dachau, outside of Munich, Germany. We do not know what happened to the people who owned them, but they are relatable objects, and they convey a great sense of loss — not only of possessions, but of a way of life, and of life itself.

What we do know is that the Holocaust continues to stand as the most extreme case ever of man's inhumanity to man. The artifacts from those atrocities demand the utmost care and respect. They belong in museums that educate, teach and inspire others; not in tweets that divide and degrade.

Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld is CEO of The Zekelman Holocaust Center. Contact the Free Press editorial page: letters@freepress.com.