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Reflections on Widen The Circle Fellowship

It has been several weeks since I have returned from my experience as a participant of the [Berlin Fellowship Program](#), sponsored by [Widen the Circle](#) and I am continuing to process the impact of the time I spent in Germany. This immersive trip to Berlin and surrounding cities brought together 16 leaders from the US and from Germany who are engaged in "memory work"; efforts to promote learning from the history of both countries, so as to not repeat the climate of hate, racism, antisemitism, brutality and murder.

To refer to the trip as "intense and immersive" is an understatement. For me, this was my first time in Germany. Germany is a country that was never on my personal "bucket list." As someone who has worked for decades with Holocaust survivors, and with professionals who support Holocaust survivors, and as someone who grew up with the stories of my own grandmother's heroic escape from Nazi occupied Europe, my inclination was to stay away, far away.

What I saw in Germany though were countless memorials designed to educate the residents of today's Germany about their country's past. The memorials do not shy away from the role that German government officials and everyday Germans played in supporting the Nazi movement and advancing its ideologies of hate. In our discussions, we learned that much of the funding for the memorials comes directly from today's German government. Indeed, this is the same government that continues to support the delivery of homecare and other supportive social services for aging Holocaust Survivors around the globe, providing millions of dollars annually to the Claims Conference, which then allocates that funding to social service agencies around the globe, included among them are hundreds of Network member agencies.

I also learned, from US colleagues on the trip, that the level of government funding in the US to support "memory work" pales in comparison to the level provided by the German government. I learned that efforts in the US to document the country's history of racism have been slow, taking generations post the US slavery period, and are ongoing and often plagued by local resistance.

With the many learnings I took from the trip, for me the most painstaking came from the realization that the culture of antisemitism, which was ingrained in the fabric of everyday German life, very quickly spiraled to the Final Solution, the Nazi plan to wipe the Jewish race off of the face of Europe. Coming from the US, where the recent rise in antisemitism has been dramatic and very quick, the parallels gave me great pause.



The Empty Library (1995) by Micha Ullman

There are two memorials in Germany that added to my sense that the parallels of today are alarming:

- In Berlin, there is a dramatic memorial to a book burning that took place in front of what is today the Humbolt University. Known as The Empty Library, the memorial was designed by the Israeli sculptor, Micha Ullman, and is dedicated to the Nazi book burnings that took place in Berlin in 1933. The memorial is set into the cobblestones of the plaza in front of the University and contains a collection of empty subterranean bookcases. The memorial is lit at night and is quite impactful.
- Also in Berlin, there is a neighborhood that chose to remember the impact of the Nuremberg Laws, 2,000 laws that were established to ban and/or restrict Jewish engagement in civic life. This memorial is represented by a series of plaques that are hung on lampposts. Bolted to lampposts in 1993, seemingly overnight, each plaque lists a different law. When the plaques were installed, there was no reference to them serving as a memorial and complaints led to the placement of an additional, much smaller sign, that references the plaque as a memorial.

My visit to The Empty Library memorial immediately made me think of the growing list of US States that have now instituted book bans, including several that have banned *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

And to walk throughout the Berlin neighborhood that displayed a series of Nuremberg laws, it was impossible for me to not think about my own neighborhood at home that has found itself to be the site of too many antisemitic rallies following October 7th, the Hamas attack on Israel.



*Sign which reads: "Jews have to hand over their electrical and optical devices, bicycles, typewriters and records."
The law was set in place June 12, 1942.*

I am still processing the impact of the sites we visited in Germany. It is humbling to have experienced the visit amidst a global rise in antisemitism and growing movements of right wing isolationism. The mandate of Widen the Circle is to remind us that "combatting hate starts with a shared understanding of the past." It is impossible to separate today's rise in hate from the memory of that which took place during the years of the Nazi occupation.

My work today focuses on strengthening the impact of a network of social service agencies that provide services to strengthen and to sustain those who are marginalized in today's society. The agencies that today constitute the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies support Holocaust survivors, individuals with disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, those living with mental illness, refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers and those living with financial insecurity and so many more. During World War II, these communities and others were the focus of extreme hate, violence and murder.

Today, the work of Network member agencies carries with it a compelling obligation; to be effective with providing support to those who experience a sense of marginalization, we must remember and understand the impact of the past. There is a well-known expression, "history repeats itself." We are compelled to not let the history of Nazi occupation repeat itself and instead must work together to build a society that embraces diversity and inclusion of all, celebrating the unique contributions that all bring to today's culture, and always remembering how quickly those very contributions can lead some to hate, violence, pain and tragic loss.

May the memories of those who lost their lives during the Holocaust compel us to do better as a global society, and may history be our guiding inspiration to inform lives inspired by moral clarity and safety for all.

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**Amplifying Our
Impact Together.**

