



## A Mother's Lessons to Her Sons: The Significance of Learning About Genocide.

As a mother, I have always believed in the loving guidance of education to shape minds and hearts. Normally, parents transmit values to their children, such as honesty, integrity, respect, tolerance, discipline, and a passion for life. We also share history and stories with them. Yet, there was one subject I initially hesitated to share with my sons: genocide. Navigating this complex terrain posed a profound ethical dilemma for me, as I tried to balance honesty and transparency with protecting my children from potential emotional distress. However, as they grew older, I realized that avoidance was not an option. It was a lesson I felt compelled to impart, not only for historical understanding but also as a call to action against indifference—something sadly prevalent in our world.

As I contemplated how to approach this delicate subject, I recognized the profound responsibility I had as a parent. I understood that my sons had a role to play in society, and I believed that the values they learned at home could impact their actions in the world. Therefore, teaching them about the significance of genocide went beyond mere concepts; it was about instilling in them a sense of moral duty and empathy that would guide them throughout their lives. The journey into the realm of understanding genocide with my sons began unexpectedly, much like many meaningful quests in life. It was a path I had not initially planned to explore, but as life unfolded, its importance became increasingly apparent.

Travel back in time with me. It is a summer afternoon in 1983, in San Luis Potosi, my hometown in Mexico. I find myself in my brother's room, where a book titled "Los Hornos de Hitler" by Olga Lengyel catches my eye on his desk. I did not realize it at that moment, but that instant will mark a significant shift in my life. The woman's haunting gaze on the book's cover leaves me wondering about her distress. As I peruse the pages and absorb accounts of horrific



Upon returning home, my understanding of the Holocaust deepened through films and documentaries. Eventually, I became a professor at a continuing education program for adults. During one of our sessions, I screened a movie about the Holocaust, and to my surprise, many students had no prior knowledge of such a significant historical event. This realization made apparent the imperative necessity of educating others about the genocide that occurred during that dark period of history.

Then, in 2003, my life changed forever when I became a mother. An overwhelming sense of peace, excitement, and joy permeated every fiber of my being. Determined to give valuable life lessons to my baby, I diligently prepared myself mentally, physically, and emotionally for the extraordinary moment of childbirth. During my prenatal classes, I recall encountering a sweet quote in the waiting room: "The most beautiful baby is born in front of every mom." This sentiment resonated deeply with me, reinforcing my anticipation and eagerness to welcome my newborn into the world.

I imagined the special moment when I would see my baby for the first time, filled with dreams of the beautiful journey ahead. Upon seeing my baby boy, I made a decisive vow to myself: to introduce him to the wonders of our world, the incredible diversity of g0 ATJETtity00912 0 612 7o o

More convinced than ever of the importance of experiencing the world's wonders, I resolved to show my two boys the beauty of nature. Happily, we frequently embarked on explorations and camping adventures in a forest reserve near our city. Every Friday or Saturday, I would drive us 45 minutes away, and together, we would immerse ourselves in the natural world, discovering its vast array of sensory delights.

I still remember their amazement as they discovered the smallest worm or felt the freshness of the little river flowing quickly between rocks.

sons the value of family and the importance of sharing memories together, I was also preparing them for another endeavor that I was sure would impact on their lives forever.

Transitioning to a new chapter in our lives, on a hot afternoon of August 2015, I immigrated to the United States with my two sons. They were twelve and ten years old. We arrived with excitement and curiosity, embracing a new opportunity in our lives. I resolved that as soon as possible, I would take them to New York City. Although I had never been to a “City that never sleeps,” I dreamed of its skyscrapers, the diversity of people, and streets brimming with colors and languages from all over the world. There, my sons witnessed people conversing in many languages and encountered the gateway for immigrants like us at Ellis Island, where people arrived with dreams for a next phase in their lives. Through this experience, I shared with my children the values of freedom, opportunity, and the capacity to dream.

Continuing our exploration of history and culture, I resolved to take them to Washington DC. I planned our visit to the Smithsonian Museums, The Mall, The Lincoln Memorial, and The Martin Luther King Memorial. We paused for a moment in front of his quote, "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in."

They learned about Martin Luther King's decision in favor of a world where people were treated as equals. Lincoln's audacity to fight for the freedom of Black people in America, and the power of discovery when we visited the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Once again, they learned how humankind can go beyond frontiers to expand our sense of the universe.

On the last day of our trip, I decided to take them to visit the US Holocaust Memorial and Museum. I felt a weight on my shoulders, knowing that I was about to confront a dilemma as a

parent. While prioritizing my children's emotional well-being, I was especially aware of the possible difficulty for my younger son. This marked the first time I would expose them to the harsh realities that human beings can face: discrimination and murder. This decision posed an ethical predicament for me as a parent, balancing the educational value of exposing children to historical truths including the disturbing realities of genocide and the consequences of ignorance and prejudice, such as anti-Semitism, with the emotional impact, particularly for a sensitive child, regarding such traumatic subject matter.

Moreover, I wrestled with the possibility that they might perceive human beings and the world as inherently dangerous, despite their trust in me. Anxiously, I asked myself: Would they be afraid, confused, or disillusioned with humanity? Would they question why children were murdered? Would they feel safe now because this atrocity happened in the past, assuming everything is fine now? As I reviewed the visitor guide flyer, I noticed that one of the galleries at the museum portrayed recent genocides. How would they react when they see that this is something happening in the present? In their minds, they may perceive the perpetrators as







the Spring Survivor Series program, he volunteered and had the opportunity to meet Holocaust

before us. However, in that instance, it was he who would teach me a profound lesson. With deliberate steps, he approached the gas chamber, placing a remembrance stone as a significant acknowledgment of the beautiful lives lost.

We departed the site in solemn silence, each of us trying to cope with the weight of what we had witnessed. Once again, within the barracks, we encountered examples of bravery and the tender care of mothers who, amidst unimaginably fearful experiences, attempted to assemble a doll or a stuffed animal for their little ones. As a mother myself now, I understood more deeply than ever the fierce determination with which mothers strove to protect and provide love for their children, even in the face of unspeakable distress and pain.

During the day as we traveled by bus, I looked through the window, taking in the familiar sights of the landscape—farms, fields, and scattered houses. I could not shake the feeling of unease that gripped me. Despite the clarity of the day and the apparent tranquility of the surroundings, my perspective was completely different. I could not see the landscape through any other lens; to me, it was irrevocably intertwined with the history of genocide that had unfolded there. Every field, every farmhouse, seemed to whisper about the murders that had taken place, casting a shadow over the otherwise serene scene.

On this trip there were also twenty-six college students. During the excursion, I reflected on the parents who had supported these children in undertaking this trip. Some of the students had shared how their parents encouraged them, knowing the significance of this journey for their lives. Surrounded by trees, the

providing a dignified home for orphans, adamantly refused to let them face their fate alone.<sup>2</sup> As we arrived on that rainy morning and walked in silence, the students slowly made their way to the site, each lost in their own contemplation, and I kept thinking about their decision to visit these sites of genocide during their holidays. It struck me how far they were from their families, many experiencing a trip far from home for the first time.

As I walked back with my two sons, I could not shake the feeling that the forest itself seemed to mourn. Raindrops fell incessantly from the leaves, creating a melancholic melody that echoed the sorrow of all those who had perished.

We visited the Jedwabne Pogrom Memorial which stands as a reminder of the horrors that arise when complicity and silence prevail within a community. The Memorial recounted the tragic events that occurred in July 1941, where Jewish residents were brutally massacred by their non-Jewish neighbors, demonstrating the devastating consequences of indifference and inaction in the face of prejudice<sup>3</sup>. As we concluded our visit, a student read a poem in memory of the victims, while another participant offered a prayer. Together, we united our voices in remembrance of the victims.

Reflecting on this dark chapter in history, my sons have learned about the impact of complicity. They now better understand that the silence of the town, the willingness of individuals to ignore the suffering of others, only served to enable the atrocities that unfolded.

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the numerous opportunities in his life and the loving family he was part of. He reflected on how fortunate he was to have never experienced war or separation.

The next day we visited another terrible place: Majdanek. Majdanek was dark and somber as we walked between the barracks, facing the ominous barbed wire fence. Towering structures loomed before us, storage spaces once used for sorting and storing belongings. How ironic it seemed that possessions were meticulously preserved while lives were considered disposable and worthless. Standing beside a crematorium, the oven door stood as a haunting reminder of the mass murders committed here. Behind us lay the remnants of the now silent souls of thousands of people, their existence extinguished by pure evil.

I wondered about the countless mothers, fathers, families, neighbors, coworkers, teachers, musicians, poets, and writers who perished within these walls. How many dreams, aspirations, and innocent games of children were silenced forever? Across from the camp stood modern apartment buildings, their windows offering a direct view of the haunting landscape. I wondered: can people sleep peacefully knowing the history that lies just beyond their walls? Do they wake up each morning to the stark reality of genocide, or have they become numb to the terrible reflection of hate?

At that moment, a terrible freezing wind swept through the area, sending chills down our spines. One of the students, visibly struggling to button her jacket against the biting cold, stood shivering. Without hesitation, another student stepped forward, helping. Moved by the display of kindness, I hurried to help too, zipping up her coat to shield her from the biting wind.

In that simple act of consideration, I thought about the innate human instinct to offer support when someone is in need. Throughout the trip, I observed numerous instances when

students extended other similar gestures of kindness, whether it was sharing a bar of chocolate or offering a comforting word to a distressed peer. These moments were vivid examples of the impact of compassion, another meaningful lesson for my sons.

Another learning opportunity presented itself when, during our visit to one of the memorials commemorating the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters, students began to elaborate on the impact of solidarity and the refusal to surrender<sup>4</sup>. They discussed how these acts of defiance may have inspired other groups during the Holocaust, igniting a spirit of resistance against overwhelming odds. As they commented on the bravery and determination of those who stood up against oppression, the Mile 18 memorial came to mind. It stands as a testament to the resilience of those who chose to fight rather than submit, symbolizing a dignified struggle against indifference and oppression, even in the face of bystanders who chose only to watch taking no action. This experience served as a profound lesson for my sons, illustrating the enduring power of solidarity and nonconformity in the face of injustice.

In the final phase of our trip, we stood as a family before the remnants of the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto. Each of us shared our reflections and memories. My older son mentioned the significance of aiding others, emphasizing the important effect of individuals who helped during the Holocaust. He spoke passionately about how even the simplest acts played a crucial role in supporting Jews during that dark time. My younger son shared the inspiring story of Irena Sendler, a Polish social worker who fearlessly organized a network to save children from the

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed February 17, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw-ghetto-uprising>.





The journey of imparting the significance of learning about genocide to my sons has been an intense one. Through our experiences and reflections, I have come to realize the importance of action, the necessity of exploring the past, and the clarity that comes from knowing the facts.

I have been deeply moved by the compassion of docents who give their time to preserving history, as well as the collective effort of scholars, educators, and donors who ensure that future generations understand the importance of remembering. It is through their dedication that we can instill hope in the inherent goodness of human nature and work towards a future free from the horrors of genocide. Unlike other trips we have taken, this journey shook us to our core with a cold, undeniable truth: we are responsible for being vigilant and raising awareness when signs of discrimination and dehumanization surface. This experience served as a powerful wake-up call, reminding us that complacency is not an option when confronted with injustice.

By embracing discomfort, we open ourselves up to growth and change. The journey of navigating the challenging topic of genocide with my sons has left a permanent mark on my approach to parenting and education. From this experience, I have gleaned the deep importance of addressing difficult subjects with sensitivity, honesty, and empathy. By choosing to be direct with my children about harsh realities, I not only upheld my core values but also



