

## Laudatio Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award 2022

### Debórah Dwork

Excellencies, honored guests, students, ladies and gentleman,

It is my privilege today to present this laudatio in honor of this year's laureate, Professor Deborah Dwork, whose pioneering work on and in the field of Holocaust Studies has shaped new generations of scholars, teachers, activists, museum curators, and policy-makers. Not only did Deborah Dwork's work contribute to advancing scholarship, it also served as a homage to the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Her prize-winning 1991 book, *Children with a Star*, drew on hundreds of experiences and memories of adults who had been children during the Holocaust. Through letters, diaries, photos, drawings, and most importantly, oral histories, Deborah Dwork meticulously recorded and analyzed the recollections of this cohort, and amassed what was at that time the largest collection of child survivor testimonies in the world. The Nazis had viewed this group as objects, Deborah's work contributed to making them subjects; Deborah brought recognition to this demographic before they were viewed in the public or scholarly realm as "real" survivors, or historical subjects meriting attention. Deborah's work with this cohort was path-breaking. Her interviews, which allowed these survivors to tell their stories, gave them back the agency of which the Nazis had robbed them. I will return to Deborah as an interviewer in just a bit.

Working through the lens of individual memories, Deborah distinguished herself as a preeminent oral historian, and at the same time contributed to the validation of oral history as a scholarly source. *Children with a Star* was translated into many languages and made into a documentary; Deborah went on to write eight books and numerous scholarly articles. Among these writings were three works co-authored with Robert Jan van Pelt: *Flight from the Reich*, which focused on the experiences of refugee Jews from 1933 into the postwar era; *Auschwitz*, which drew the important connection between industrial killing and social perceptions; and *Holocaust: A History*, which was to become a standard work in university curricula.

But Deborah Dwork's contribution to the study and understanding of the Holocaust was much broader and deeper than authoring seminal publications. Since her first professorship at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in the 1980s, where she was teaching some courses on the history of the Holocaust, Deborah tirelessly campaigned for more academic study and inclusion of the Holocaust in curricula. Then, in 1993, now as a professor at Yale University, she was in Poland for a conference of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. On a bus trip from Warsaw to Auschwitz, Deborah serendipitously sat next to David Strassler, Board Member of the Foundation, and Chair of the Clark University Board of Trustees. He asked her where one would go if they wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in Holocaust studies. Deborah answered that there was no institution with a degree specializing in Holocaust history. From that conversation eventually emerged the first fully endowed Chair in Holocaust history in the United States. The professorship was facilitated by a chair in Jewish Studies that was being established at the time at Clark to honor family members murdered in Poland during the war. Its funders, Sidney and Ralph Rose, readily agreed to combine the two mandates.

In 1998, the Strassler Center for Holocaust Studies opened its doors. Its purpose was to enshrine the Holocaust in academia; Deborah Dwork was at the helm. She has rightfully been termed its chief architect, its leader, its face, and its soul. It attracted world renowned scholars, like Yehuda Bauer, and laid the seeds for the creation of a new generation to follow in their footsteps.

In the meantime, even as the field of Holocaust Studies and scholarly expertise grew, genocide became a word of our time. In 2001, Deborah welcomed to the Strassler Center a Chair in Armenian Genocide Studies. Now, graduate students could also earn a Ph.D. in Genocide Studies, and the Strassler Center soon adapted its name and scope to reflect this area of expertise, now as a center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. None other than the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, friend and mentor of Deborah, sent her a note to hail this expansion. On it was written just one word: "Bravo". For her work as Founding Director of the Strassler Center and unprecedented contribution to the field of Genocide Studies, Deborah Dwork was recipient of the International Network of Genocide Scholars' 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award.

So that is what the professionals think of Deborah's work, but what about her students? Throughout the years, some of our graduates in Holocaust and Genocide Studies were able to garner a coveted spot in Clark's doctoral program, and some of their students came to us as fellows, with topics ranging from the genocide in Rwanda, to the memory of Holocaust rescue in Poland, to the persecution of Dutch Jews. I asked Daan, one of NIOD's own, who is getting his doctorate at the Strassler Center, if he could characterize Deborah as a mentor. This is what he told me, and I quote, "all of the doctoral candidates Deborah supervised over the years are simply lyrical about her, as am I. As an advisor, Deborah is enormously devoted to her graduate students, ...always there for them. She gives them confidence in their own abilities. She comments and improves the texts of her mentees right up to the comma, combing through each revised version until it is just right. Deborah is highly dedicated to her doctoral candidates and their research, and expects no less dedication from them. And indeed they are very motivated, especially because they consider working with her to be such a privilege." He went on to say that even after Deborah moved on to the Graduate School in New York, she was so committed to her remaining dissertation writers, that she maintained her affiliation with Clark so that she could continue to shepherd them until they graduated. Daan summed it up thus: "I have nothing but praise for Deborah, and am so grateful that she is my Doktormutter." Another of her doctoral candidates, Alicja, responded, "Deborah's championship of my project was constant, her patience endless. I'm in awe of her knowledge, professionalism, and commitment to teaching, mentoring, and public service. I consider her engagement with my writing ... one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. As Deborah has always led by example, I hope I can honor her by following it."

And now to Deborah in the public space. She has been on the international forefront of developing approaches to antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia through her work in the United States delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, where Deborah served as Chair of the Academic Working Group. Back at home, she not only prepared scholars to deal with such pressing issues, but also spearheaded activities to raise public awareness about the creeping rise of these phenomena. Now, as the Founding Director of the Center for the Holocaust, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity in New York, Deborah followed, but also led the agenda in organizing public events that draw attention to the relevance of the Holocaust and genocide to our times. One such was a discussion last month with Ukrainian scholars. One

of the speakers, a Ukrainian historian of the Holocaust, actually had to retreat to a bomb shelter during the event, but he returned to the screen and continued to share with the audience his concerns regarding the killing by Russia of the memory of Jews in Ukraine. Other topics Deborah has made central to her Center's programming are refugee resettlement, Holocaust survival and return, and Jewish refugees in modern times.

Now returning to that precipitous bus trip wherein David Strassler inquired as to where one would go to pursue a doctorate in the field. Deborah responded, "I've been waiting my whole life for someone to ask me that question". Deborah's drive and impact on the field of Holocaust Studies is in her DNA. In her research and public-debate agenda, Deborah continues to remind us of what is related to what, of where to look for warning signs, and of the long after-effects of victimization. Some of that awareness emerged, no doubt, from her interview experiences. Deborah had the humbling privilege of conducting oral histories with Holocaust survivors. Anyone who has done interviews knows how instrumental these extraordinary testimonies are to our understanding of the victim's experience, and of how events were causally linked to one another. I can add, though, based on my professional and personal exchanges with Deborah, that the interviewees were also fortunate to be interviewed by her. Deborah is a compassionate, astute listener who at the same time as she is reconstructing, even co-constructing, the micro-story of what happened, is also considering in her mind the macro question of what was predictable and unpredictable about the sequence of events being described. These profound questions Deborah addresses and analyzes in her research can contribute significantly to understanding the dynamics of repression and persecution. This understanding, in its turn, may someday facilitate prevention strategies. I'm sure, as we witness the horrors of the war in Ukraine, we all wish that day were today.

But for now, I would like to acknowledge our debt to Deborah Dwork for combining erudition with a strong moral fiber, and advancing research, remembrance, advocacy, and public education on the Holocaust and Genocide Studies for decades and generations to come. Thank you, Deborah, for envisioning and then forging a fundamental road that did not exist -- and now does -- because of you.

(Nanci Adler, April 20, 2022)