

## Written Testimony

### House Bill 638-Education-Holocaust Education

### Assistance Grant Program-Established Ways and Means

### Committee-March 1, 2023 Support

My name is Eliyah Burg. I am seventeen years old, a senior in the Baltimore City Public School System, and I am Jewish. When I started high school, having come from a private Jewish education, I noticed that the biggest reaction of my peers to my religion was simultaneous ignorance and disinterest. People were sorely uneducated about my people, my culture, and my history, while having little to no desire to learn or the resources to do so.

The first time the Holocaust was even mentioned in my memory was my junior year, when we reached our WWII unit in Honors US History, but even then, the focus remained on the non-Jews. We learned about Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into the war. We discussed the effect the war had on US citizens back home and spent several days on the horror of the Japanese internment camps, but the word "Jew" was rarely spoken. I passed it off as the result of studying the events in an American history course. I told myself, "of course we wouldn't talk about the Holocaust, the "Jewish parts" took place in Europe." Besides, I was sure that my peers had studied it before. No one, including myself, could go until eleventh grade without understanding one of the most pivotal moments in modern human history, right?

It wasn't until this year, when I watched the Ken Burns documentary on the U.S. and the Holocaust, that I learned the truth. Six hours of footage proved more educational than twelve years of schooling, the four most recent of which I spent in public school here in Maryland. The terrors and the triumphs were left equally unexplored by my honors history courses, the gaps in

my knowledge needing to be filled in what little free time I had, huddled on a couch with my family, all of us shaking with tears at the fate of my people and the fact that so much of my history had been lost or erased, hidden behind a singular book or a fifteen minute “crash course” video.

It wasn't enough, and never would be.

This year, the effects of this lack of education made themselves known when a swastika appeared on the wall of my public school's bathroom, drawn largely and crudely in thick black sharpie. It was likely not the first nor the last (a terrifying thought to say the least), but this one was made public in the form of a photograph that sparked rumors throughout the building. I am proud to say that the vast majority of my peers responded with appropriate support and outrage, but it didn't erase the fact that the symbol used by the perpetrators of genocide against my people was in my *school*. Someone who didn't understand the awful history of those four bent lines made me fear the place where I was supposed to get to be a teenager, supposed to learn and grow and play.

But along with the results of the missing pieces of the curriculum came clear evidence of what good Holocaust education could do. After years of trying that were continually interrupted by a global pandemic, the Baltimore School for the Arts Jewish Student Group (JSG) succeeded in bringing a Holocaust survivor in to speak to the school. For many students it was their first interaction with a survivor. As founder and head of JSG, I witnessed the profound impact our speaker, Ms. Herta Baitch, had on the community. Four hundred and fifty unapologetically loud and outspoken students and teachers packed into the ballroom and yet you could have heard a pin drop. There were eyes painted in shock and horror and tears throughout the room as my peers finally began to understand the terrible reality of the Holocaust. Once Ms. Baitch had finished

speaking, a crowd gathered around her, filled with students who wanted to thank her for her bravery, ask her questions, or simply let her hold them as they cried.

In the weeks that followed, I was approached by kids who were so grateful that they had been given the opportunity to bear witness to Herta's story. They were so strongly impacted by one new story, by one voice they had not yet heard, that they wanted to learn more, to preserve the history of the Holocaust through their own education. And in turn, I, a young Jewish girl in public school, felt safe and supported for the first time in a long time.

That is what this bill can do. It can simultaneously create an environment where Jewish students and anyone whose identity is invalidated or targeted by Nazi ideology can feel welcome and wanted, *and* fulfill the intended purpose of a school system: educating the next generation so we can learn from our past and look towards a brighter future.

With this in mind, I urge a favorable report of HB638.