

“As a publisher, I am here to safeguard the historical record.”

Correcting the Distortion of History

A publisher examines the disturbing connection between banned books and antisemitism

BY ANGELA ENGEL

Last September, we at The Collective Book Studio commemorated Banned Books Week by sharing a list of our favorite banned books. But we need to think beyond that tongue-in-cheek reaction. The recent banning of *Maus* in a Tennessee school district is an alarming example of how banning books is rooted in the suppression and distortion of history.

As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, this issue is particularly relevant for me. My roots in publishing and in the Jewish community mean that this is not just a controversy, it is a devastating setback. Holocaust commemoration and education is a global imperative, and books are a way to preserve memories and histories.

I am a daughter of an immigrant. My Palestinian-born mother came here in the 1950s. Her mom, my grandmother, had fled Germany for Palestine, where she met my grandfather, who had arrived there in the early 1930s after stabbing an SS officer in self-defense. Grandpa Rudy lost almost his entire family in concentration camps, with only my great-grandmother surviving.

During a recent conversation about banned books on *The View*, Whoopi Goldberg said, “Let’s be truthful about this, because the Holocaust isn’t about race.... It’s not about race... it’s about man’s inhumanity to man.”

Antisemitism is insidious. People like Goldberg may think they are still respectfully acknowledging the “truth,” but they are in fact dismissing it. While she acknowledged the brutality of the Holocaust, her sweeping comment about “man’s inhumanity to man” ignores the systematic and systemic marginalization of Jews on the basis of race. With only a quick search on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website, readers will find that in September 1935, the German parliament passed the Nuremberg Race Laws, effectively institutionalizing the persecution of Jews on the basis of inherited race. In fact, Nazi ideology specifically hinged on the racialization of Jews, and the Nazi’s tyranny was orchestrated through these laws and widespread propaganda, such as Aryan eugenics posters.

How does this all tie back to banning books? Reading is education, and access to books and source material allows us to crystallize our histories in our consciousness, and in our children’s, so that we do not repeat the past. In May 1933, Nazis burned books, largely those by Jewish intellectuals, that contained “un-German spirit.” This burning took place at universities—similar



to how current U.S. book bannings are taking place at schools. As literature about the Holocaust continues to be challenged, people lose access to the voices of the oppressed, allowing misrepresentations to seep into popular culture.

I often speak about being the publisher of a woman-owned independent press, but the bigger picture is that my business is not just woman owned, it is Jewish woman owned. I never thought I would be intimidated to identify this way, but to step into my own power and family history means that I also need to be aware of the stereotypes associated with Jews.

It is a risk to broadcast the fact that one operates a Jewish business, and a risk that I am keenly aware of based on my family’s history of being targeted, and having businesses burned down, for this reason. That said, I am willing to accept the risk when it means I can create a safe space for Jewish voices. Many of my authors are Jewish, and several of them address Jewish issues and themes in their books; *52 Shabbats*, for instance, uses food as a lens to examine diversity in the Jewish community.

No suffering happens in isolation; when one community suffers, there are ripple effects for other communities. The environment that allows one community to be disenfranchised, or oppressed, is the infrastructure that will allow other communities to be disenfranchised and oppressed. It is so crucial that our communities unite to uplift our voices in spaces like book publishing, for the good of all oppressed groups.

Now we have *Maus* appearing on bookstore bestseller lists, as people are flocking to add this onto their bookshelves, but are they really doing anything to break down the stereotypes? Forty-eight percent of the world’s Jewish population currently resides in the U.S., yet we continue to have security officers stationed outside of our synagogues, and on our holiest holidays we fear for our safety. We worry about our children being targets in schools. We do not know our own family history, as many of our families have huge gaps in their lineage.

Banning books like *Maus* erases my Jewish experience, minimizes the violence of the Holocaust, and ultimately validates Holocaust-denial rhetoric. Uncomfortable books are necessary because they preserve memories like those I’ve shared about my own family, and as a publisher, I am here to safeguard the historical record and challenge the distortion of history often expressed in contemporary antisemitism. ■

Angela Engel is publisher and founder of The Collective Book Studio.