

H.B. 4493 Testimony – Genocide Education

Testimony of Frank Dame

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Chairwoman, representatives, thank you for this opportunity to speak. My name is Frankie Dame and I am a third year law student at Michigan State University College of Law.

On April 11, 1945 the US Third Army rolled over the front gates of the Buchenwald concentration camp. With the Third Army was my great-grandfather, Surgeon and Army Major William Birch, a field hospital surgeon. His General asked him to write a narrative detailing the camp's horrors; that manuscript is now in the National Holocaust Museum. In this narrative, entitled "In Through the Gate and Out Through the Chimney," he wrote this regarding the post-war German reeducation: "[The Germans] have now tried again [to take over the world] and almost succeeded. Those that are left are not convinced even yet that it can't be done. Nor will they ever be. We can educate the smaller children, but we can never trust the older ones. We are confronted with the necessity of changing the basic philosophy of an entire nation—a monumental task. Until it is completely and thoroughly done and those who are so educated are old enough to run the government, common sense gives us but one course to pursue."

My great grandfather's quotation is a lasting tribute to the power of education to instill hatred and bigotry, or knowledge and a true understanding of the good. He was not alone in his assertion that lessons in history act as a check on future insanity. In Germany today, any German younger than 65 can sum up his or her high school history class with the words, "Never again." Indeed, after the Holocaust, the whole world said "Never again."

But since, genocide has happened—again and again: Rwanda, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia. Millions upon millions have died in the most gut wrenchingly brutal ways, and yet my peers would be hard pressed to find these countries on a map, or name the motivations for these atrocities. Merely reciting names like the Armenians, the Tutsis, and the Khmer Rouge or numbers like 6 million Jews, one million Rwandans, and two million Cambodian does not resonate with people, especially young people. My time as a judicial clerk for the ICTY showed me that attempting to condense stories so emotionally charged and complex into facts in a textbook sidebar is impossible. People do not learn about genocide from statistics and dates, but from internalizing and dwelling on individuals and their stories.

Thus, a broad, intentional discussion about the causes of genocide is so important: How a people fell so far so fast and how we can avoid that fall. Of course, as all of you would agree, nothing like the Holocaust seems imminent. 1932 Germany would never have guessed what hell lay just around the corner. As Ronald Reagan said, our liberties—and here our standards of humanity—are never more than one generation away from extinction. Thus, it is critical that our youth not just learn, but understand this past for, in the words of George Santayana, "Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it."

Thank you for your time.

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