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Age of Influence: Youth & Nazi Propaganda. Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, Vancouver, BC

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***Age of Influence: Youth & Nazi Propaganda.*** Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, Vancouver, British Columbia. Open from March 15, 2023. Curated by Tessa Coutu and Franziska Schurr, Exhibition developed by Lise Kirchner.

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FIGURE 1 *Age of Influence exhibition room view, 2023. Source: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Photograph by Rachel Topham Photography.*

*Age of Influence: Youth & Nazi Propaganda* is an exhibition mounted in March 2023 at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC) in Vancouver, BC. The VHEC is dedicated to engaging with and educating teachers, students, and the public on the history of the Holocaust to promote a world free of antisemitism, discrimination, and genocide. As part of this mission, it maintains a library, archives, museum, and testimonies collection. Archival holdings are donated by survivors, families of victims, and other eyewitnesses to the Holocaust.

The VHEC is located on the lower floor of the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver. A spiral staircase leads to a brightly lit foyer before the entrance doors to the VHEC. On a concave wall facing the entrance, a colourful mural promotes the *Age of Influence* exhibition. The mural depicts a German vacation advertisement which, like all the material in the exhibition, can be found in the VHEC archives. The mural is featured as a talking point during exhibition tours, with the intention that guests will be prompted to reflect and think about their emotional and critical responses to the painting. *Age of Influence*, installed along the right-hand wall of the VHEC exhibition space, is presented as a companion piece to the larger exhibition *In Focus: The Holocaust through the VHEC Collection*. The *Age of Influence* exhibition focuses on propaganda techniques exploited by the Nazis in targeting German children and teens. Designed as a guided tour for students between the ages of 10 and 17, *Age of Influence* uses archival material to frame discussion questions and activities and aims to inspire students to rethink their assumptions about propaganda. Video testimonies from survivors convey a respect and reverence for Jewish voices from the past and provide a lived context that grounds the archival materials, inviting the viewer to face the realities of systematic oppression.

For archivists, *Age of Influence* is an intriguing exhibition to study, as it brings up questions and concerns about managing archival collections that contain problematic and potentially harmful material. As an archivist (or curator), it can be challenging to cope with the responsibility toward both survivors and modern researchers or patrons who may be seeing the material out of context. This exhibition demonstrates how the VHEC has chosen to ethically present its holdings, using them for educational purposes while still realistically portraying the dangerous and at times horrific nature of the records.

*Age of Influence* engages with its topic by presenting modern parallels. The exhibition displays Nazi propaganda from the VHEC archives. The materials selected specifically feature messaging directed at youth. The original purpose of



FIGURE 2 Age of Influence, “A Space for Reflection,” 2023. Source: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Photograph by Rachel Topham Photography.

the material, which would have been used as a platform for Nazi ideology, is turned on its head. It is now being exhibited as a warning, an example of manipulation, and a catalyst to inspire youth to make positive changes in their society rather than perpetuating hatred. This objective is activated throughout the exhibition through exercises that pose questions and prompt critical thinking. These exercises would ideally be done collaboratively, with a class and a tour guide, but also allow individual visitors to see the material in a new light. In this way, the archivist and curators take an active role in shaping how the archives are understood, helping ensure that problematic images and concepts are not simply accepted at face value.

The opening and closing portions of the exhibition draw focus away from archival sources and ask the audience to reflect on what they have witnessed.

The opening uses a painting of a countryside (a poster used to present an ideal image of *Heimat*, or homeland) to prompt viewers to question their assumptions about what constitutes propaganda, how they expect it to appear, what purposes it may have, and to whom it is presented. The closing section (see figure 2), presents an exercise for self-critique and broader analysis, asking students how they interpret and fact-check information.

These activities bookend the bulk of the exhibition, a series of thematic collections of curated archival material. The exhibit includes sections on *Wandervogel* outdoor youth groups, youth magazines, gender roles, and mass-media promotional material (e.g., cigarette cards), among others. Each section explores a variety of propaganda techniques – including manipulation; appeals to a sense of belonging; discrimination; othering; and the use of technologies such as photography, film, and printing – in illustrating how the Nazi party positioned itself as the voice for a new generation.

The visible, tangible reality of the archival objects serves as historic grounding and signifies how relevant the issues still are in the modern day. Youth magazines that play on adolescent yearnings for adventure, belonging, and purpose are easily comparable to online communities today. Gender roles are articulated through idealized images of citizens participating in traditionally gendered careers and activities. Women are shown taking care of the home, while men are shown adventuring or boxing – outlining an individual's future just as our society continues to do, regardless of how outward expressions of gender may change. As expected, racial purity looms large in the propaganda material, which demonstrates a desire to control a pure, up-and-coming generation of Germans; the insidious roots of these concepts still exist in the form of online echo chambers and ideological stringency in the media.

Archival materials in the exhibition are presented in a way that highlights the contradictions within Nazi messaging. The Nazi obsession with health and fitness contrasts with the use of advertisements in cigarette packets to reach the masses. The focus on communal bonding contrasts with the pressure to abandon one's immediate family and community in subservience to the state. Back-to-nature idealism rings false when presented through technologically advanced methods, such as film-making or creative printing layouts in magazines, designed to appeal to kids. Imagery depicting distinct and strictly defined conservative gender roles contrasts with the undeniably homoerotic tone inherent in the boys' magazines and photographs. As a viewer begins to see these contradictions,

it becomes clear how effective the propaganda was at building a particular world that followed its own logic and standards, which created enemies who did not fit – in this case, most prominently, the Jews. This logic, however, requires blind faith and the pressure of popularity, the comfort of acceptance, to survive.

The narrative arc of *Age of Influence* wraps up poignantly by prompting students to comment on their own abilities to interpret and critically examine modern media. Lessons on media literacy and social responsibility emerge as the primary goals for the student audience of the exhibition. The archivists and curators at the VHEC have found an engaging way to frame their archival material, which in certain contexts, or exhibited without proper care, could be perceived as harmful and triggering. The records and objects are used strategically in *Age of Influence* to convey the exhibition's narrative, rather than being simply displayed to be seen and not discussed. The elements are presented subtly and purposefully, in a way that strengthens the exhibition. Throughout most of the exhibit, the viewer learns about narratives created by the Nazis for their own people, or for those they deemed to be their own people. The audience is exposed to records that show how design, advertising methodology, and physical and spiritual ideals were exploited for propaganda. If this were the totality of the exhibit, its takeaway would be a discussion on the ways that culture, language, and image can be used to influence groups to buy into ideologies despite their dangers and excesses; visitors would leave the exhibition with more skills to critically examine modern media and discover the ways that ideology is embedded everywhere.

The key turn of the exhibit, however, comes near the end, when the viewer is presented with poster displays and children's books depicting Jews as diabolical, dangerous, and greedy. These images and texts are incredibly jarring and expose the dark underbelly of the youth-centric propaganda presented to this point. Having seen more palatable archival examples of propaganda up to this point in the exhibit, viewers' resistance to and defence against hateful messaging is lowered. The sudden shift in tone shows how positive reinforcement of German youth existed side by side with hatred toward Jews and other outsiders. The holistic use of the VHEC archives effectively demonstrates the pervasive climate of antisemitism that was engendered in German children at an early age and illustrates how this would have coloured and permeated all of their activities and goals. The material seen previously now appears more sinister.

It is a risk to show material that is blatantly racist, prejudiced, and harmful. However, it is clear from seeing the whole of *Age of Influence*, as well as from



FIGURE 3 In Focus: The Holocaust through the VHEC Collection, exhibition room view, 2023. Source: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Photograph by Rachel Topham Photography.

knowing the mandate of the VHEC, that the exhibition seeks to minimize harm and promote positive change – and that a large part of achieving these goals requires archivists to cope with the hurtful material in their custody.

*Age of Influence* is an excellent example of how archives can present challenging materials to the public, to be used in practical and educational ways. The use of such materials in this exhibition provides a window into lived experiences and historical realities while helping viewers draw parallels to similar issues that exist in our own time. Media literacy is an enormous issue in education today, and it has impacts on social, economic, environmental, and political scales. The use of branding, iconography, and image ideals is more pervasive than perhaps ever before. It is vital to understand the horrendous ways that media landscapes comparable to our own have been used in the past and the responsibility for archival organizations to present this material in new ways for the future.