When it comes to Holocaust Studies, one might suspect Jerusalem, New York, or Berlin are the most important training grounds. To those in the know, The Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies housed in the School of Arts & Humanities at The University of Texas at Dallas is a beacon in the field — and the Center’s founder, Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, a Hungarian-born Holocaust survivor, is more than an academic grand dame. UTD’s treasured “Zsuzsi” is the doyenne of Holocaust scholarship.

“Zsuzsi is a beautiful, charismatic contradiction,” says Dennis Kratz, UTD’s Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities. “How can someone so immersed in exploring the depths to which human beings can sink be so equally and successfully devoted to showing students the heights to which great literature can lift us?”

When she is asked if the prestigious and prolific Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies was her initiative, the diminutive Dr. Ozsváth raises her hands in comic protest.

“Everyone says it’s me, but I am innocent!”

She credits the university’s leadership and, particularly, UTD’s former provost and current Executive Vice President, Dr. Bryan Hobson Wildenthal, with the vision for establishing a dedicated program of Holocaust Studies.

Dr. Ozsváth’s colleague, Dr. Nils Roemer, who serves as Director of the Ackerman Center, concurs that Wildenthal is a champion of diversity and academic freedom. Roemer says that in the early 1990s, when UTD was beginning to admit undergraduates and
expand its offerings, Wildenthal spearheaded tremendous academic innovations.

“Studying the Holocaust is not just studying history,” Roemer says. “It is a way of thinking about modernity and politics. Holocaust Studies is about continuities and ruptures. This field brings students into thinking about big questions for which there is a complicated audience and Provost Wildenthal wisely recognized the match between the Dallas community and the university. He saw the potential for deep scholarship in Dallas because he understood the nuances of the community.”

Indeed, the Ackerman Center is a well-supported public institution with academic chairs endowed in the names of Hillel A. Feinberg, Leah and Paul Lewis, Stan and Barbara Rabin and Jacqueline and Michael Wald Professorship in Holocaust Studies. The Selwin Belofsky Fellowship in Holocaust Studies is a generous award to select graduate students, providing monthly stipends along with remission of all UT Dallas tuition and fees annually for up to five years, subject to satisfactory progress toward the PhD degree. The Arnold A. Jaffe Holocaust Library Collection is a distinguished book, video, and electronic materials resource for scholars of Holocaust studies and for the broader public. The Istvan and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth Research Fund is an endowment that was created in honor of the beloved Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and her late husband, Dr. Istvan Ozsváth, a founding professor of mathematics at UT Dallas. The funds will help students in perpetuity to conduct original research in archives and libraries, and to attend and present that research at conferences.

The Ackerman Center aside, it is impossible to speak of UTD without considering the Ozsváth legacy. When Erik Jonsson and other TI executives dreamed of building a local university as a magnet and training ground for world-class scientists and mathematicians, something here in the Southwest to rival Einstein’s Princeton, they recruited the mathematical physicist, Dr. Istvan Ozsváth – “Pista” to those who love him, as Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth has always been “Zsuzsi” to her colleagues, students, friends, and fans.

Holocaust Studies is about continuities and ruptures. This field brings students into thinking about big questions for which there is a complicated audience and Provost Wildenthal wisely recognized the match between the Dallas community and the university.
As newlyweds, Pista and Zsuzsi escaped Communist Hungary with false passports that got them through Vienna and into West Germany, where Pista began his career at the Hamburg Observatory. In post-war Germany, still reeling from the trauma of the Holocaust, Zsuzsi was a concert pianist who wouldn’t have imagined herself one day teaching about and leading scholarly research into the horrors she had witnessed.

Recruited from abroad by the University of Texas at Austin, the Ozsváths began a new life in America and, while her husband began his teaching career, Zsuzsi pursued advanced degrees in history and literature. It was in 1963 that Pista came to Dallas as a founding professor at the Graduate Research Center of the Southwest, the nascent UTD. The newly-arrived young couple were honored by an invitation to a luncheon hosted by the Dallas Citizens Council, the Dallas Assembly, and the Science Research Center. At noon on November 22nd, they were in the ballroom of the Dallas Trade Mart, Zsuzsi elegantly coiffed, as always, and both dressed in their finest, to meet President and Mrs. Kennedy, Vice President and Mrs. Johnson, and Governor and Mrs. Connally.

Terrorism is no longer exceptional, it is a cultural expectation.

“I remember how I felt when I learned President Kennedy was assassinated, Now, I will never forget this event. Years after, when I sit in the beautiful sanctuary at Temple Emanu-El, I look at those stained glass windows, and I wonder when they will be shattered by violence. Not if. When,” Zsuzsi says.

Zsuzsi has taught European History and Literature since the 1980s, when UTD first began offering Arts & Humanities classes. She has a fondness for and scholarly interest in Thomas Mann and Goethe, both of whom she has translated and published, together with her colleague Dr. Fred Turner.

Having experienced the Holocaust, she finds it “wonderful and interesting” that there are so many books, lectures, and films on the subject.

“Nonetheless,” she says, “When I start my class, there are very few people who understand what it was. Each time it is a huge deal for me to teach it and to see how they learn it and become aware.”

Training the educators and sensitizing the soccer fans.

If one would believe that Dallas is an unlikely hotbed of Holocaust research, Dr. Nils Roemer is perhaps the last person one would expect to be leading the charge. A German born in Hamburg as the city was reinventing itself, he came of age in the 80’s, just as political tensions between East and West Germany concluded in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Roemer was the first in his working class family to attend university, and he went far with the opportunity, completing a Master’s degree at the University of Hamburg. Early work in social service brought Roemer into contact with Holocaust survivors, an experience that inspired travel to Israel, where the budding scholar lived and worked for two years. His academic interests in history took Roemer to Columbia University, where he earned his PhD in the study of Jewish History. No irony is lost on him. He is a man on a mission. Friedrich Nietzsche famously and rhetorically considered the advantage and disadvantage of history to life, Nils Roemer has resoundingly responded.

Roemer, who is better versed in our People’s history than most members of the tribe, has authored books and many articles. He co-edited Jewish Longings and Belongings in Modern European Consumer Culture (2010), Crossing the Atlantic: Travel and Travel Writing in Modern Times (2011) and German Jewry Between Hope and Despair, 1871-1933 (2013). He is currently finishing a book-length study on Central European Jewish travel—writing in the twentieth century.

He laughs when he recalls his interview for a faculty position teaching Jewish History and the Holocaust at UTD. “They were so warm to me - and Zsuzsi! - I called home and said ‘Surely, they have already decided to hire another candidate and they are just being kind to me.”

The truth, as Dean Dennis Kratz tells it, is that Nils Roemer was a prize catch for UTD’s School of Arts & Humanities. Kratz says:

“Nils has long been that faculty member that administrators hopes for: always positive, filled with ideas, a thoughtful scholar and inspiring teacher. As Director of the Ackerman Center, he has quickly become that administrator that faculty members hope for: positive, filled with ideas, and focused on fostering the success of others.”

If Zsuzsi Ozsváth is a walking testament to the Shoah, Nils Roemer embodies the relevance of the Holocaust to everyone, regardless of religion, race, age, or political philosophy.

“We are widening the scholarly community by looking at the Holocaust from different angles and studying it in its cultural context,” Roemer says. “By reading and listening to the voices before the war, investigating the ways the public reacted, and looking at the Holocaust from the perspective of the church, the South Americans, the Chinese and others, students get a very broad, almost visceral experience.”

Roemer describes how the Ackerman Center leads the university in an annual observance of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day) by studying a Holocaust poem and preparing translations to share. Last year, the UTD community read Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge” (“[The] Death Fugue”) and departments across the entire university honored Yom HaShoah.

Roemer shares this as an example of both his department’s diversity (“The Ackerman Center is the most diverse part of the School of Arts & Humanities,” he proudly boasts.) and as an illustration of how the Center brings the larger university and the North Texas community into considerations of the Holocaust.

He describes screening the film A Life for Football with FC Bayern Munich, which tells the story of Kurt Landauer, the pre-WWII Jewish president of the Bayern Munich Football Club, who returned after the Holocaust to rebuild the soccer team — and his life.

“The film was presented in conjunction with AJC Dallas, the German Consulate,
the Goethe Society, and the American Council on Germany. More than that though. We publicized this Holocaust film to sports fans. If soccer is the pathway for someone to think about this, we will find a way to bring them there.”

The Ackerman Center has partnered more than once with UTD’s Confucius Institute on programs about the Chinese response to the Holocaust. In 2016, the departments cooperated on a lecture series and major art exhibit about China’s rescue efforts, providing refuge in Shanghai to tens of thousands of European Jews. The Center also frequently collaborates with the Center for US-Latin America Initiatives (CUSLAI), with whom that recently hosted a lecture by Dr. Daniela Gleizer about Jewish refugees in Mexico. They have also worked other academic schools within UT Dallas, including Naveen Jindal School of Management to explore various angles of the Holocaust. Later this month, the Ackerman Center will present its annual Einspruch Lecture Series with talks on “Why? Explaining the Holocaust” and a second lecture on Germany’s corporate responses and practices during the Holocaust. In 2019, the Center will host the 49th Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches.

“This is a public university,” Roemer says. “We have a responsibility to connect with all communities.”

**Will this be on the test?**

At a recent class that Professors Ozsváth and Roemer team taught on the Weimar Republic, they used a novel by Heinrich Mann to inspire a roomful of undergraduates with no previous knowledge of the lead-up to war to consider when and how the seeds of the Holocaust took root. The professors deftly raised more questions for the students than they answered. What caused the loyal subjects of a previously respectable Kaiser to become numb? To morally deteriorate? How could the most civilized, cultured people in modern time—who lived in a city that very closely resembled Chicago—who consumed some of the same products familiar to Americans—become the perpetrators of, bystanders to, and victims of such inhumanity and horror?

There were no answers at 9:30 that Wednesday night as several dozen solemn students filed out of the lecture hall. It is doubtful they will recall anything of the novel they were supposed to have read, but they will never forget the questions implanted in their psyches. Questions that will be on the most important test of all: history.

“We are all getting closer to understanding that the Holocaust, a very specific experience, matters to communities in different ways,” Roemer says.

Zsuzsi Ozsváth — who despite her belief that American Jews are as vulnerable as her secularly-mined, assimilated, well-educated, middle class Hungarian parents were in 1939 — is rarely without a smile. When she speaks about her late husband, her children and grandchildren, her work, her students, and her colleagues, she is all smiles.

When she speaks about “the Center,” she positively beams.

“It is,” she pronounces UTD’s Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, “a miracle.”

ENDOWMENT OPPORTUNITIES are a magnificent tribute to the survivors, liberators, and the millions of people who perished in the Shoah.

Please contact Nils Roemer at 972-883-2769
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**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**Burton C. Einspruch Holocaust Lecture Series**

Dr. Peter Hayes, the emeritus Theodore Zev Weiss Holocaust Educational Foundation Professor of Holocaust Studies at Northwestern University, will present two lectures:

**Sunday, October 28th – 4pm**

Davidson-Gundy Alumni Center

“Why? Explaining the Holocaust”

Davidson-Gundy Alumni Center

Prof. Hayes will discuss the findings of his newest book via an exploration of two fundamental questions raised by the Holocaust: Why were Jews killed? Why didn’t anyone stop the murder?

**Monday, October 29th – 9am**

[Davidson Auditorium (Jindal School of Management Building)]

“German Corporate Complicity in the Holocaust”

Prof. Hayes will outline the surprisingly contemporary motivations that induced most large German firms to cooperate with the Nazi government of Germany, detail the ways in which these enterprises became deeply complicit in many of that regime’s worst crimes, and explain how the nation’s largest businesses managed to evade responsibility for their deeds until the 1990s.

**Confronting Our Past**

**Sunday, November 11th – 2pm**

Jonsson Performance Hall

This interdisciplinary and multi-media performance and accompanying exhibit involving students and faculty from across the School of Arts and Humanities will address the darker parts of Dallas-Ft. Worth’s history.

For more information on these events and other opportunities to visit or contribute to the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, please visit www.utdallas.edu/ackerman

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