

## **Holocaust Remembrance Day**

**By**

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The Holocaust stands as one of the most devastating genocides in human history, marking a deliberate, bureaucratically organized campaign by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945 to annihilate Jewish people and millions of others deemed undesirable including Roma, disabled persons, Slavic peoples, Soviet POWs, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others. In the decades following World War II, survivors, their descendants, scholars, civic leaders, and governments around the world recognized that memory of such atrocities was not only a tribute to victims but a moral obligation: to educate, to commemorate, to warn future generations of the fragility of human rights under totalitarianism. In the United States, remembrance evolved through a layered architecture: federal institution-building and legislation; in California, state-level policies, and educational mandates; and county- and community-level efforts the last of which remain especially important in embedding Holocaust memory into the everyday lives of citizens. In Santa Clara County, California, and more locally in South-County communities such as Morgan Hill and Gilroy, this network of remembrance continues to adapt to contemporary challenges, responding to resurgent antisemitism, engaging in interfaith dialogue, and fostering civic responsibility.

The institutional foundation of federal remembrance came in 1978–1980, catalyzed by President Jimmy Carter. In 1978, Carter established the President's Commission on the Holocaust, chaired by Elie Wiesel. The Commission produced a landmark report calling for a national memorial museum, an annual nationwide remembrance period, and an educational foundation dedicated to Holocaust scholarship and genocide prevention.

The formal federal foundation for Holocaust remembrance in the United States began with the enactment of Public Law 96-388 on October 7, 1980. This law established the United States Holocaust Memorial Council (the "Council") with three core mandates: to sponsor an annual national civic commemoration known as the Days of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust (DRVH); to plan, build, and oversee a permanent living memorial museum to the victims of the Holocaust; and to implement recommendations made by the earlier President's Commission on the Holocaust. Under the statute, the Council was authorized to cooperate with federal agencies such as the Department of the Interior, the Smithsonian, and the Library of Congress to acquire appropriate property in the District of Columbia suitable for a national memorial site.

The federal observance was further shaped by subsequent administrations. President Ronald Reagan supported the development of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum during the 1980s and affirmed the symbolic importance of federal remembrance, though his 1985 visit to the Bitburg cemetery in Germany—where Waffen-SS soldiers were buried triggered public controversy and strengthened national debate about historical responsibility. President George H. W. Bush oversaw the groundbreaking of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1988, noting that its construction symbolized America’s commitment to “remembering the past and safeguarding the future.” The museum opened in 1993 under President Bill Clinton, becoming one of the world’s leading institutions for Holocaust education, survivor testimony, and archival preservation. Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden have each issued annual proclamations reaffirming the federal commitment to Days of Remembrance.

By 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) opened in Washington, D.C., on land near the National Mall, fulfilling Congress’s vision of a “living memorial museum” to preserve artifacts, documentation, survivor testimonies, and serve as a center for public education and research. Once operational, USHMM assumed responsibility for hosting annual commemorations, curating exhibitions, preserving archives, and distributing educational materials nationwide. Through DRVH and related initiatives, federal agencies, the U.S. military, schools, and civic institutions across the nation began to observe annual Holocaust memorial activities, embedding remembrance into public life.

While the United States provided a domestic institutional anchor for Holocaust memory, the global community also advanced formal international commemoration. On November 1, 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/7, establishing January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day marking the anniversary of the 1945 liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp by Soviet forces. Member states, including the United States, participated in observances and encouraged integration of Holocaust education and awareness into their national curricula and commemorative practices. This global dimension reinforced the United States’ own civic remembrances, giving them international resonance and ethical weight.

In California, the state’s role in Holocaust remembrance grew early, rooted in its postwar wave of Jewish refugee resettlement and its growing commitment to civil rights, multiculturalism, and public education. By the early 1980s, California governors began issuing annual proclamations honoring Holocaust Remembrance Week or Days of Remembrance, drawing attention to the history of genocide, the legacy of survivors and liberators, and the broader implications for civil liberties and human dignity. These

proclamations echoed the federal mandate and served to emphasize the statewide importance of Holocaust memory. Over subsequent decades, successive governors including those from the 1980s through the present maintained these proclamations in recognition of Yom HaShoah and the international observance on January 27, demonstrating continuity in the state's commitment. Integral to California's remembrance efforts has been education. As early as 1985, the state's History–Social Science Framework for public schools incorporated Holocaust history into middle and high school curricula. Public schools across California, including districts in Santa Clara County, integrated lessons on the Holocaust, genocide, human rights, and the consequences of hatred and totalitarianism. Over time, these curricular commitments have expanded: in the early 2000s and 2010s, California schools began to employ primary sources, survivor testimonies, multimedia archives, and collaborate with institutions such as USHMM to offer deeper historical understanding. As of the 2020s, statewide policies and educational guidance continue to encourage Holocaust and genocide studies as part of social science and ethnic studies courses ensuring that younger generations graduate with knowledge of Holocaust history, an understanding of the mechanisms of mass atrocity, and a commitment to human rights and democratic values.

Within California's larger civic and educational landscape, a network of regional Holocaust museums, memorial centers, and educational institutions developed to support public memory. Among them are the widely known museums in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, institutions that host exhibitions, educational programming, traveling shows, and public commemorations. These museums, along with regionally active Jewish community organizations, helped foster localized remembrance an approach that brought memory out of national capitals and big cities into neighborhoods, suburbs, and counties statewide.

The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (founded 1961), the Museum of Tolerance (opened 1993), and Holocaust museums in San Francisco, Oakland, and other cities form a statewide educational network. These institutions collaborate with schools, civic groups, law enforcement agencies, and local governments to host annual remembrance events, traveling exhibits, and survivor lecture series. University campuses including UCLA, USC, Stanford, UC Berkeley, and San José State University house archives, sponsor annual symposiums, and maintain research centers that examine Holocaust history, genocide studies, and contemporary antisemitism. The Holocaust museums and centers in California share the core mission of ensuring the history and lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten. Their mission is achieved primarily through commemoration, education, and inspiration for action against prejudice. Museums like Holocaust Museum Los Angeles and the JFCS Holocaust Center collect and display

authentic artifacts, documents, and, most powerfully, the personal testimonies of survivors to humanize the history and provide irrefutable evidence against denial. These institutions serve as vital educational resources, offering tailored programs for students, professional development for educators, and public events to foster critical thinking, empathy, and moral courage in the face of antisemitism and all forms of hatred and discrimination. The goal is to empower visitors to become "upstanders" and advocate for human dignity and social justice in their own communities.

In Santa Clara County, Holocaust remembrance has matured into a robust local culture, sustained by faith communities, civic institutions, social-service organizations, schools, and interfaith coalitions. Jewish settlement in the Santa Clara Valley was established early, with Congregation Emanu-El (San José) founded in 1861, making it one of the oldest Jewish congregations west of the Mississippi River. Over the twentieth century, waves of European Jewish immigrants and refugees including Holocaust survivors made their homes in San José, Morgan Hill, Gilroy, and other parts of the county. As a result, the postwar decades saw South-County transform from agricultural towns to suburban and semi-rural communities that included families carrying survivor legacies.

Beginning in the late 1970s, county-level civic institutions took on responsibility for promoting tolerance, diversity, and remembrance. The Santa Clara County Human Relations Commission emerged as a key body advocating against discrimination, guarding civil rights, and supporting community cohesion. The Commission supported Holocaust remembrance events particularly around Yom HaShoah and worked with religious and civic groups to sponsor vigils, educational programs, and intergroup dialogue. During the 1980s and 1990s, the county's governing body, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, issued annual proclamations recognizing Holocaust Remembrance Week or Days of Remembrance. Supervisors such as Dianne McKenna, Ron Gonzales, Blanca Alvarado, Ken Yeager, Mike Wasserman, Susan Ellenberg, amidst others over different decades, participated in reading proclamations during public meetings. These proclamations acknowledged the historical tragedy of the Holocaust, honored victims and survivors, condemned antisemitism and racism, and called for public education as a defense against future atrocities. The proclamations often included invitations to local synagogues, civic groups, schools, and human-rights organizations to host commemorative events.

The civic infrastructure for local remembrance has been bolstered by community organizations dedicated to supporting survivors and educating the public. Chief among these is Jewish Family and Children's Services of Silicon Valley (JFS SV), which since the 1970s has provided services to Holocaust survivors who settled in the South Bay and surrounding regions. JFS SV offers support including case management, home care, social

services, and community programs designed to address the long-term needs of survivors and their descendants. In addition to social services, JFS SV in partnership with regional and national Jewish networks has contributed to Holocaust education, outreach, and interfaith dialogue within the county.

Local synagogues and congregations likewise play central roles. Congregations such as Congregation Emanu-El, Congregation Emeth (serving South County), Congregation Sinai, and others host annual observances of Yom HaShoah and International Holocaust Remembrance Day. These observances often include candle-lighting vigils, recitation of Kaddish, reading of names, survivor testimonies, prayers, and interfaith solidarity. Community members Jewish and non-Jewish alike gather in synagogues, community centers, and civic halls to honor victims, reflect on history, and reaffirm commitments to human dignity.

Beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, educational institutions in Santa Clara County, most notably San José State University (SJSU), expanded their role in Holocaust and genocide studies. SJSU has offered coursework in Jewish history, Holocaust studies, genocide prevention, political science, and human rights. The university has hosted public lectures, film screenings, symposia, and seminars featuring scholars, survivors, and human rights advocates. In the early 2010s, SJSU became a regional access point for the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive—making tens of thousands of survivor testimonies digitally available to students, faculty, and community researchers. This access has enabled generations of students in Santa Clara County to engage directly with firsthand historical narrative, giving them personal connection to global history.

In May 2025, Congregation Emeth in partnership with the Jewish Community Relations Council Bay Area (JCRC Bay Area) and Advent Lutheran Church organized an interactive workshop titled “HERE I AM: Understanding Jewish Identity and Antisemitism.” The event, held at the Morgan Hill Community and Cultural Center, was officially announced and offered free registration. Its stated intent was to help participants understand Jewish identity, modern manifestations of antisemitism, and practical tools to address bigotry thereby promoting awareness, understanding, and solidarity. Local religious leaders and community organizers emphasized that education is not silent and must be the response to hate. As one leader explained, the Hebrew word “hineni,” meaning “Here I am,” signified readiness and willingness to stand against hatred, to speak truth, and to build compassionate community.

The “HERE I AM” workshop highlights a critical lesson of contemporary Holocaust remembrance: that memory is not passive, but active; that commemoration must adapt to

changing social climates; that interfaith cooperation and civic engagement remain vital in preserving historical truth and countering hate. Through this response, Gilroy, and Morgan Hill towns historically peripheral to major Holocaust institutions demonstrated their capacity to turn symbolic threat into educational opportunity. These South-County efforts build on decades of institutional groundwork. For example, in the 1990s and 2000s, JFS SV transformed its services for Holocaust survivors into a broader community support network, accommodating aging survivors, their families, and descendants. Through “Café Europa” gatherings, the agency fostered social connection, communal memory, and cultural continuity. Similarly, during the early 2000s, San José schools and other district public schools began hosting Holocaust literature curricula, survivor-testimony sessions, film screenings, and interfaith student discussions. In some years, traveling exhibits from regional Holocaust museums were displayed in schools, city halls, and library branches throughout Santa Clara County. These partnerships allowed residents even in areas without a dedicated local Holocaust Museum to examine artifacts, photographs, documents, and stories of survivors and victims.

The layered structure of Holocaust remembrance in America federal, in California, county, and community demonstrates both the breadth and the depth of civic memory. The federal government, through statute and institution (USHMM), ensures a national anchor for memory and historical documentation. California’s government, through proclamations and education policies, embeds Holocaust history into public schooling and statewide civic identity. County governments and local civic bodies transform national and state-level mandates into tangible community action, facilitating local events, interfaith services, and support for survivors and their families. In parts of Santa Clara County, including Gilroy, these efforts manifest in community vigilance, reactive educational initiatives, and grassroots activism proving that Holocaust memory remains alive not merely as history, but as moral engagement.

This multi-level strategy of remembrance remains critically important in the twenty-first century. As survivors age and firsthand witnesses pass away, their stories risk fading unless preserved through documentation, social service, education, and civic commitment. Digital archives like the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive offer essential preservation of testimony. But local communities especially those far from national museums bear the responsibility of ensuring that the lessons of the Holocaust continue to inform civic consciousness. South-County California’s response to a hateful incident in 2025 reflects this responsibility: transforming a symbol of hate into an opportunity for education; turning fear into civic solidarity.

Holocaust remembrance is not static, nor ceremonial only. It evolves. It requires constant renewal through legal recognition, educational curricula, archival preservation, community engagement, interfaith dialogue, and public vigilance against antisemitism and hate. In Santa Clara County and in Gilroy, today's memorials may not always be walls of stone, but gatherings in cultural centers and synagogues; workshops in response to hate; candle-light vigils; school curricula; public proclamations; and acts of solidarity across religious and community lines. These may appear modest in scale compared to national monuments, but collectively they form a resilient, living network of memory and moral responsibility. In a rapidly changing world one where hatred can spread quickly through digital means and extremist ideologies may find new expression—the lesson of the Holocaust remains urgent. Remembering is not enough. We must translate remembrance into education, into vigilance, into compassion, into action. The federal commitment embodied in USHMM and DRVH provides a foundation; California's educational and civic policies reinforce it; Santa Clara County's diverse and engaged communities from San José to Gilroy demonstrate how remembrance can thrive through local initiative. Through this web of institutions, communities, and individuals, we honor victims and survivors, preserve historical truth, and uphold human dignity. The living promise of “never again” depends on us today.