

Graphic novel tells Columbia couple's Holocaust story. Some local schools won't use it

EDUCATION

Graphic novel tells Columbia couple's Holocaust story. Some local schools won't use it

BY BRISTOW MARCHANT UPDATED AUGUST 30, 2024 8:21 AM

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Frank Baker wanted to honor his friends and spread awareness of one of the 20th century's greatest tragedies when he wrote the graphic novel "We Survived the Holocaust." He hoped telling the story of Columbia Holocaust survivors Bluma and Felix Goldberg in this format – a combination of words and illustrations that resembles a longer, bound comic book – would engage young people he fears are unaware of the specifics or the scale of the Nazis' murder of 6 million Jews during World War II.

But those graphic details have led the Columbia-based author's book to be blocked from some classrooms in one Midlands school district. Baker said he was told Lexington 1 would not provide copies of the book to its middle schools, and asked the author not to fulfill any requests for the book from teachers below the high school level, something that left the author confused. "The Holocaust involved much more graphic images and photographs than what we've illustrated in our book," Baker said.

Lexington 1 said in a statement that the book will not be used as supplemental material in fifth and sixth grade classes this school year, in line with recently passed State Board of

Education guidelines for evaluating material for classroom instruction and using guidance from Holocaust educator organizations. South Carolina education standards begin teaching the Holocaust in fifth grade. The book will remain available in school libraries, the district said, and district officials would support its use in eighth grade classes.

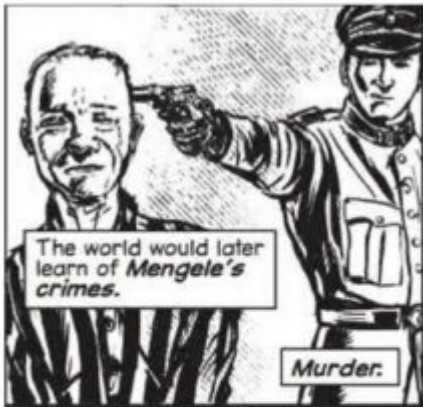
Baker got the idea years ago when Felix Goldberg gave a talk at Tree of Life synagogue on Yom HaShoah, the annual remembrance of the Holocaust, about his experiences during the war. After the emotional presentation, Goldberg walked up to Baker, who he knew had a background in education. "And he hands me the speech and says in his Polish accent, 'Frankie, do something with this,'" Baker said. That "something" became the 156-page novel published by Imagine and Wonder, which Baker has since worked to get into as many schools as he can, in South Carolina and beyond.

"The evidence is clear that many young people are ignorant of the Holocaust," he said. Social studies teachers have told him they don't have time to adequately cover the event in class. Instead, he fears young people will get their information from a social media environment where antisemitism and Holocaust denial often go unchallenged – and they won't know enough about the subject to see why such misinformation is wrong. "I know a university professor who wrote their own graphic novel, and they said, 'I think this would make a great story,'" Baker said. "I was offered a contract, got it illustrated, and now there's a book, there's a website."

He went to the state conference of school librarians starting in 2022, offering the book for school shelves and telling educators how it could fit into their lesson plans.

One of the school districts that reached out about Baker's book was Lexington 1. Social studies coordinator Elizabeth King contacted Baker about reviewing his books for use in the central Lexington County district. But the school district came back with some concerns about which students should be reading the Goldbergs' story. "Upon review of the text, we feel the book would be appropriate for high school learners

because of some of the more graphic images (i.e. firearm pointed at a person's head)," King wrote in an email to Baker. "If you receive any requests from Lexington One teachers who teach grade levels that are not at the high school level, please disregard their request."



An image from the graphic novel "We Survived the Holocaust," which has been restricted from being used in certain classrooms in the Lexington 1 school district. *drawn by Tim Oglive/Imagine and Wonder*

Baker said it was the first time he had received pushback from a South Carolina school about using the book at any grade level. He was particularly concerned because he knew teachers and librarians at Lexington 1 schools had gotten copies of the book previously, and worried they would no longer be allowed to make them available to students. "I was shocked that she would say this book about the Holocaust has graphic images," he said. "I think the themes are extremely relevant to a middle school student. ... As someone said to me, they're seeing worse things in the video games they play."

'TEACHERS ARE NOW MORE SELECTIVE' What materials teachers use in classrooms or make available in school libraries has become a political lightning rod in recent years as some parents have objected to books about racial or sexual identity. In 2022, Lexington 1 was sued by the conservative S.C. House Freedom Caucus over allegations it was teaching "critical race theory-derived ideas" in violation of a state law broadly prohibiting such concepts in public schools. The school district

ultimately settled the suit after it cost local taxpayers \$60,000. “Teachers are now more selective about the resources they choose to use, as are school districts, that are potentially in school libraries,” said Scott Auspelmyer, executive director of the nonprofit S.C. Council on the Holocaust, which provides resources to educators. “All of this is a part of a new reality compared to 10, 15, 20 years ago.” Lexington 1 cited the guidance issued by the S.C. Council on the Holocaust in making its evaluation of “We Survived the Holocaust.” Auspelmyer’s group was founded in part because the Holocaust is a part of the state standard for South Carolina students. But he knows the material used for such a sensitive topic and the age at which students are introduced to it can produce a minefield, and there are often debates about how best to approach it, even among educators. “There are a host of factors that go into what books are appropriate for certain grade levels,” Auspelmyer said. “Teachers come to me and say, ‘Is this a good book? Is it a good one for this grade level?’ and then they might go to their school to get approval. And then other schools say, ‘No, we have this whole process to evaluate books and determine whether they’re a good fit.’ It can vary widely by district and even between schools within a district.”



An image from the graphic novel “We Survived the Holocaust,” which has been restricted from being used in certain classrooms in the Lexington 1 school district. *drawn by Tim O’Gline/Imagine and Wonder*

The story in Baker's book is personal for Henry Goldberg, one of three Goldberg children who grew up hearing about their parents' Holocaust experience. He said the family was always supportive of Baker's efforts, even if his parents didn't live to see the book come out, particularly because he knew they wanted future generations to remember their story. "I think it's appropriate," Goldberg, of Columbia, said of the book. "We coddle our kids too much. There's too much ignorance about World War II and the Holocaust, because it's passed over too lightly and not mentioned enough. By middle school, I think they're old enough to comprehend it." When he was growing up, Goldberg didn't have the option to be shielded from the effects of the Holocaust. "I heard my dad screaming at night from the nightmares," he said. "I remember knowing about this when I was much younger (than middle school), and I made it without permanent scarring." He remembers his parents as always being willing to share what had happened to them, even when their children were younger. "At a young age, they answered every question we had," Goldberg said. "And we didn't have too many. I knew my dad had a tattoo and that terrible things happened. Until (the movie) Schindler's List, then it's like it was OK to talk about it."

CAUTION OVER BEING TOO GRAPHIC Aupselmyer, of the S.C. Council on the Holocaust, said there has been a change over the years in how graphic educators feel they should be in what they show students about the Holocaust. "In the '90s, after Schindler's List, it was much more common to turn out images that would shock students," he said. "Now it's not appropriate to go that route, just because being so graphically disturbing may actually traumatize some students." Henry Goldberg can understand being reluctant to discuss something so painful. He remembers an aunt who was never as forthcoming about her own Holocaust experience with her own children. "She wouldn't talk about it at all," he said. "She worried her children would think she did something wrong to become a prisoner." While Baker said he wouldn't provide books to any Lexington 1 schools that the district didn't want him to, he still believes the book will be a useful tool for the teachers and

students who do use it. He hears as much from the teachers at the conferences he attends with copies of the book. "They teach Anne Frank, but a lot of them are seeking something different, and this is local," he said. "It's a South Carolina couple." "We Survived the Holocaust" is available at both online and retail booksellers.

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