

SB 297 Testimony - Wednesday Dec 11, 2024 9:30am

Hello, my name is Aly Stein. I am a Jewish American, a mother of two, and an accountant at my family owned firm here in Columbus and I have been a proud Ohioan my entire life. I want to tell you a little about how I came to live in Columbus. My grandfather was born in 1929 in Belarus. He was 11 years old, the same age as my son, when the Nazis invaded his town, turned it into a ghetto, and turned him into an orphan. Shortly after this my grandfather was able to escape into the woods and spent the rest of the Holocaust as part of the Jewish Partisans.

Three decades later my grandparents and their young daughters, my mother and aunt, fled their home country - a country still very intolerant of Jews - and were placed in Columbus as part of a refugee program. My family has always spoken glowingly of their first months in Columbus. How welcoming the community was despite the fact that they barely spoke english. My grandfather would tell me about how he finally felt free - for the first time in his life - to live the life he wanted. He would tell me about how incredible it was to finally be able to not feel afraid of getting in trouble for words he might speak.

My grandfather loved to tell me the story of how my family came to be placed in Columbus Ohio. The refugee program they were lucky enough to be a part of had placed my grandmother's mother in San Francisco several years previous and my grandfather's last surviving cousins in Toronto the same year. My grandfather loved to fish and he hoped to be placed in a city on the coast so that he could be surrounded by water. When the time came for their assignment my grandparents were given two options: Israel or Columbus. My grandfather was upset, you cannot fish in the middle of Ohio he thought! But my grandfather also knew of Israel. Several of the men he spent his time surviving in the woods in Belarus during the Holocaust went on to Occupied Palestine in the years after. They became part of the Irgun - the precursor to the IDF (Israel's army) and they went on to carry out the Nakba - the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians that was prelude to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. My grandfather, a man who as a child had watched his parents be murdered by occupiers, a man who was displaced from his home again and again, refused Israel. He could not move his family to Israel knowing this history, it would feel to him like he had moved his family back to the Minsk Ghetto. No! He would move to Columbus, he would find a place to fish and he would ensure that his family could finally be free and happy.

The proposed text of this bill says that the bill adopts the IHRA definition contemporary examples identified by the IHRA including:

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor, and
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis

I read this and I think that the state of Ohio is trying to make it illegal for me to tell the story I just told you about the things my Holocaust survivor grandfather thought and said. How does this make Jews like me safer?

I now have two young children of my own. They are active boys, 8 & 11. We love to spend time at our local community center, where you can fish in a pond by the playground. In October of this year I attended a Franklin County treasurer investment committee meeting which is open to the public. At that meeting I expressed my frustration with the fact that our county is investing millions of dollars in Israeli bonds - poorly rated bonds with low interest rates and a poor outlook from credit agencies - rather than investing that money into our community. We could be investing this money in our neighborhood in Linden where two little boys love to fish like their great grandfather and play foosball and tag with other neighborhood kids but instead we are investing in a foreign country that is credibly accused of genocide and ethnic cleansing. I fear that the passage of this law would criminalize my ability to talk about this at future public meetings about the county's investments. Will I show up to a public meeting and be arrested and charged with rioting simply for saying that I don't think that my county should be investing in a country that has been accused of genocide by Amnesty International? Will I, the Jewish granddaughter of a holocaust survivor, be charged with ethnic intimidation for publicly stating the very same sentiment expressed by the company the state hires to give investment advice - which is that Israeli bonds are a bad investment teetering on illegality per the state of Ohio's own laws?

This law claims to want to protect Jews but this Jewish Ohioan stands before you today saying that I feel scared and threatened by this law. With this law the state of Ohio threatens to take away the freedom of speech that my grandfather worked so hard to ensure for his family.