

A call to action in perilous times

‘Civic leaders from all walks of life must speak clearly and forcefully against a growing tide of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.’



Holocaust survivor Max Eisen stands near the gates of Birkenau, where his mother and younger siblings were murdered. (CATHERINE PORTER/TORONTO STAR)

By AVI BENLOLO

Wed., Jan. 25, 2017

I have had the privilege of chairing seven educational missions to the Auschwitz concentration camp alongside my friend and Holocaust survivor, Max Eisen. Although each journey over the last seven years has been unique, the one constant is a question that emerges from each group of participants: Why? Why did the Nazis and their co-conspirators murder six million Jewish and millions more non-Jewish women, men and children?

As each group studies the Holocaust and begins peeling away layer after layer in an effort to understand, they inevitably arrive at a single answer that is nearly as old as recorded history: Anti-Semitism.

In the postwar period, when the world learned the true extent of the Holocaust and the unspeakable horrors committed in the name of Aryan purity, the Jewish people enjoyed a brief golden period of peace and acceptance. Those who harboured anti-Semitic opinions kept their racism to themselves and Jewish communities in western democracies flourished.

It now seems that short-lived period is coming to an end, as Jews the world over face a degree of hatred and intimidation not seen since the Second World War. The intensity of European anti-Semitism seems to be growing exponentially: Just last weekend the Jewish community of London, England, was the target of a spate of anti-Semitic attacks as individuals had eggs thrown at them and bricks with anti-Semitic messages hurled through their windows.

Social media has made it so easy for bigots and anti-Semites to find and draw strength from one another, and they are now crawling out of the shadows where they once huddled in fear of social censure and condemnation.

Canada is not immune. Hate crime statistics show that Jews have remained the greatest target of faith-based hate crimes across the country for more than a decade. From Holocaust-denying politicians and academics who believe the Holocaust is a topic of legitimate question and debate, to the rise of white supremacists liberally spray-painting swastikas in public spaces, to university students fearful of wearing outward signs of their faith on campuses across the country, Jewish Canadians are once again targeted and threatened.

How, then, to best address such blind ignorance and hatred? The Holocaust is, after all, the most well-documented genocide that has ever occurred. The Germans were as meticulous in their record-keeping as they were enthusiastic about achieving the merciless goals of the Final Solution.

A good place to start would be with more robust and public commemorations of International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Jan. 27, a date proclaimed by the United Nations in 2005 to observe the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Soviet troops in 1945. As anti-Semitism, briefly unacceptable in polite society, loses its stigma of shame, it is more important than at any time since the end of the war to confront and condemn Holocaust denial and distortion. The social disgrace of anti-Semitism and, indeed, any form of racism, must be reinforced.

It is also critical to work from the ground up, and it is in this sphere I believe we are making positive inroads: to date 22 school boards in both the public and Catholic school systems across Ontario have signed on to our initiative to recognize Jan. 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

[A teacher's guide](#), with suggestions on how to implement age-appropriate activities with the more than a million students attending the schools within these boards is provided to educators, as is a link to the website www.neverforgetme.ca, which includes first-hand accounts from Holocaust survivors. Their testimony is powerful, compelling and above all honest; it is difficult for all but the most deluded or hateful to discount survivor's stories and to ignore the pain they still carry with them after more than 70 years.

Civic leaders from all walks of life must also speak clearly and forcefully against a growing tide of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial; the time for mere lip service and pretty speeches has ended. Furthermore, police forces and attorneys-general must be more willing to prosecute hate speech than they have been in the past.

We are living in perilous times and can no longer afford to ignore the hatred that once set the world aflame.

Avi Benlolo is president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, which created the Jan. 27 International Holocaust Remembrance Day education initiative.