

OPINION

Holocaust remembrance critical to confront a lingering hatred

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International Holocaust Remembrance Day takes place on January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Pictured here, child survivors of Auschwitz, wearing adult-size prisoner jackets, stand behind a barbed wire fence. Photograph courtesy of Belarusian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography by Alexander Voronzow.

By AVI BENLOLO / PUBLISHED : Thursday, Jan. 26, 2017 4:30 PM

As governments, communities, and individuals commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Jan. 27, we do so with the understanding that our efforts must achieve much more than simply honouring those who were murdered in the world's most meticulously planned and executed genocide. In an era of growing Holocaust denial and outrageous cries that the 'Holohoax' is a Zionist plot, the act of commemoration—on the date Soviet troops liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945—has become critically important.

For those who cannot understand why we continue to study the Holocaust, or grasp its continued relevance, I would point out the lessons learned in the aftermath of this inconceivable and prolonged mass murder shape the underpinnings of our contemporary understanding of human rights. These lessons have informed the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court, and led to the creation of Human Rights Tribunals in Western democracies around the world.

And yet, despite these advances, the hatred that resulted in the Holocaust has not been defeated but is, in fact, growing at alarming levels not seen since WWII. Canadian hate crime statistics show that Jews have remained the most targeted group of faith-based hate crimes for more than a decade. In the United States Jews accounted for close to 60 per cent of all religious-based hate crime in 2014, while studies show European Jews, targeted by rising antisemitic hatred, are emigrating in unprecedented numbers.

Jewish communities today are being attacked from two sides: many left wing anti-Israel activists project their anger onto all Jewish people, while right wing supremacists adhere to a sadistic and well-known script. Holocaust denial is the newest weapon shared by both groups to express their venomous hatred. A mere 72 years since the Holocaust ended, this resurgent antisemitism is deeply unsettling, and profoundly sad.

To counter this revisionist trend, to re-assert the primacy of historical fact, and to develop a compassionate appreciation for human rights, Holocaust commemoration has taken on greater significance than ever before. Education is vital in the effort to confront antisemitism and Holocaust denial, and it is in the field of education that current initiatives, including [Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center's January 27th project](#), may find their greatest success.

In just two years since the project began, 22 Ontario school boards have signed on to the initiative to recognize this date as International Holocaust Remembrance Day at all schools in their boards. This means more than one million Ontario students in both the public and Catholic school boards will be armed with facts about the Holocaust, before they are confronted with lies and half-truths posted by anti Semites lurking on social media. The project's web page includes a [Teacher's Resource Guide](#) with age-appropriate activities for students at all levels. The growing number of boards signing on to this initiative every year demonstrates the significant need for this education.

Also included is a link to the site www.neverforgetme.ca, which documents the testimony of survivors sharing their experiences living through the nightmare that was the Holocaust. And, in recognition of the gravity of today's commemoration, "[Reflections on Antisemitism and the Holocaust](#)," a compilation of essays by 22 Canadians in the fields of politics, religion, journalism, entertainment and literature, was launched to further confront revisionist ideology.

I am hopeful these initiatives will be successful. I am heartened by the words of Martha, a particularly perceptive Grade 11 student in the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board (a participant in the January 27th initiative). Following a visit to a Holocaust museum, Martha wrote "The tragedy of the Jews was not the plight of six million people; it was the plight of one person multiplied six million times. . . . These were actual people who suffered and perished by German hand."

This is the level of understanding and empathy to which all Canadians must aspire if we are to turn the tide of anti-Semitism, and truly honour the millions of Jews (and non-Jews) lost to a hatred that lingers still.

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