

How to stop the spread of anti-Semitism

The best tool in the fight against growing anti-Jewish sentiment is Holocaust education



JOEL SAGET / AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The entrance to the former Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was liberated seventy-one years ago this week by Soviet troops.

By: Avi Benlolo **Published on** Sun Jan 24 2016

Seventy-one years ago this week, Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. To observe this liberation, and to recognize the incomprehensible tragedy that was the Holocaust, Jan. 27 is the date chosen by the United Nations to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. As the remaining number of survivors dwindles, it is incumbent upon leaders in civil society to take up the mantle of remembrance and education, to address growing anti-Semitism and to counter the evil ideology fuelling Holocaust denial.

In this age of social media, Holocaust denial and distortion has increased significantly. Gone are the days when a few loonies ranting about Jewish schemes and plots could be easily ignored by the sane and educated majority. Today, there is state sponsored Holocaust denial — like Iran's infamous "Holocaust Cartoon Contest" that comes with a prize of \$50,000. The internet multiplies the power of conspiracy theorists by allowing them to easily find each other and share their hatred with like-minded and susceptible souls. Questions about whether or not the Holocaust really happened, or whether the Jews have inflated the numbers of those murdered, abound. Holocaust survivors note this resurgent anti-Semitism with a mixture of disbelief, outrage, and a feeling of utter devastation.

Holocaust education today seems like a hit and miss affair; although provincial curriculum mandates some sort of teaching about the Holocaust in Grade 10 history, lessons can vary widely based on the knowledge and preferences of individual teachers, schools and boards. Student familiarity with the topic ranges from a comprehensive understanding of the sort of stereotypes and prejudices that created the fertile ground for anti-Jewish hatred to blossom, to an almost complete lack of awareness about the Holocaust and Canada's role in the Second World War. Of recent note in this regard was a Facebook posting by a federal political candidate who made reference to the phallic nature of the fencing around Auschwitz, an incident which reinforced the critical necessity of Holocaust education. It took immense strength for this candidate to join me on my annual pilgrimage to Auschwitz to become better educated.

Against this backdrop of reconciliation, of facing history and of learning from the past, a number of Ontario Catholic school boards including Halton, Niagara and Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Boards, representing thousands of Catholic students province-wide, are confronting the anti-semitic beliefs that led to the Holocaust.

Inspired by the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Nostra Aetate — a landmark document that repudiated centuries of Catholic anti-Semitism and the accusation that Jews were collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, these boards have all passed motions to recognize International Holocaust Remembrance Day, to mandate age-appropriate Holocaust education, and to ensure no student graduates without an understanding of the most meticulously planned genocide in human history.

Earlier this month the Jewish community of France observed the one-year anniversary of the murder of four Parisian Jews at a kosher supermarket. Following on the heels of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, the killing of these Jews — just because they were Jews — echoed the goal of the Nazi's Final Solution. These killings occurred against a backdrop of growing anti-Semitic threats, marches and murders in Europe, as well as the hatred sparked in the Muslim world by the annual Holocaust cartoon contest in Iran. The alarm bells the incident set off have reverberated in Jewish communities around the world.

Thus the educational push by school boards across the province takes on a double imperative, as this annual commemoration of an inconceivable genocide should never become a day to simply memorialize the dead. Instead, it should act as a catalyst to further understanding, education, tolerance and a commitment to recognize and acknowledge our common humanity.

If we want to build a society of caring and compassionate citizens, we must teach about the past. It might be cliché to say it — but unless we educate today, we are destined to repeat humanity's mistakes tomorrow.

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