

Holocaust Education Blog

Today, a mere 64 years after the end of the Holocaust, when people who survived it themselves or had relatives who were murdered are still around to tell the tale, there are those who deny the Holocaust.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called it “A lie based on a false and mythical claim” at the UN General Assembly only last week, doubting whether the Nazi murder of Jews was a real event. In November 2008, Richard Williamson, bishop of the Society of St Pius X, [said on Swedish TV](#) “I believe that the historical evidence is strongly against six million Jews having been deliberately gassed in gas chambers as a deliberate policy of Adolf Hitler” and claimed that the number is likely to be nearer to 200,000 or 300,000 Jews and not in gas chambers, in what he referred to as the “quote unquote Holocaust”. In a standup gig last week, Irish comedian Tommy Tiernan [made a joke out of the Holocaust](#), saying “fucking six million? I would have got ten or twelve million out of that... get in there, leave us your teeth and your glasses”. And there are no shortage of [online blogs and forums](#) trivialising the Holocaust or claiming that it never happened.

Holocaust denial comes out of ignorance. Ignorance comes from a lack of education.

A large-scale [research project on Holocaust education](#) has just been finished by the Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP), outlining when, where, how and why the Holocaust is taught in secondary schools in England by means of a survey completed by 2,108 teachers and some follow-up interviews. It comes at a critical time in Holocaust education: the last survivors are dying and soon first-hand accounts of experiences will no longer be straight from the horse’s mouth but will be consigned to the history books.

I can’t remember receiving any education about the Holocaust in school. This is not to say that there wasn’t any but suggests that it was not treated with much importance. Admittedly, I did not study History for GCSE or A Level, although I studied Religious Education throughout my school career. The research report, however, shows that 76% of respondents teach about the Holocaust to students in year nine, when I was a student of History.

I’ve been racking my brains – from where have I received my Holocaust education? At school, I learnt about the war, but not about the Holocaust. At the religious seminary I attended during my gap year, I learnt about the Jewish Holocaust, but not that of the other persecuted minority groups. Is there a middle path? I hope this research from the HEDP will point us in the right direction.

As a follow-up to their research, the HEDP is working on a program of education for teachers in schools. While Holocaust education is a crucial element of history, however, it need not be confined to the classroom.

As well as fantastic museums around the globe, including Yad Vashem in Israel, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and the Holocaust exhibition at London’s Imperial War Museum, the Holocaust has seeped in to the entertainment world. In the last year only, three blockbuster films have hit the big screen: *Inglourious Basterds*, *Defiance* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Books for children, such as Judith Kerr’s ‘*When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*’, books for everyone, including ‘*The Diary of Anne Frank*’ and Elie Wiesel’s ‘*Night*’, and books for philosophers, such as Simon Wiesenthal’s ‘*The Sunflower*’, leave little excuse for unfamiliarity with the Holocaust.

Some Holocaust education projects have reached worldwide acclaim, such as the [Paperclips Project](#) which began in 1998. Students from Whitwell Middle School in Tennessee decided to collect six million paperclips – one for every Jew killed in the Holocaust – to find a way to

connect to this vast number. They received paperclips from George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, among several thousands of others. They filled an authentic German transport car with eleven million paperclips, six million for the murdered Jews and five millions for the gypsies, homosexuals and other persecuted minority groups.

This is one example of a group of people with no direct link to the Holocaust making an effort to connect with the unimaginable happenings of sixty years ago. Whitwell, as of the US Census in 2000, has 1,600 residents, 97.35% of whom are white and 0% of whom are Jewish. The Holocaust is not part of their religious or ethnic inheritance. It is part of their human inheritance.

It is not too late. Invite a Holocaust survivor to speak at your school or university while you can – I had the honour of listening to [Gena Turgel's](#) story on [Holocaust Memorial Day](#) this year. Go to Poland and visit the concentration and death camps at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Plashow – I made this difficult trip in October 2006 with a survivor whom we called Bobby. To sit in the bunker where she slept every night, listening to her story, shivering from the penetrating cold; to walk through the gas chamber where her friends and family perished and notice the scratches on the wall; to see the collection of hundreds of shoes and glasses - it is an intensely personal and emotional experience which I could not relate if I had six million words in which to do so.

Netanyahu, at the UN General Assembly last week, said “History has shows us time and time again that what starts with attacks on the Jews eventually ends up engulfing many, many others”. If the Holocaust is not given significant historical importance, its terrors and atrocities will be forgotten, and no one will be left to offer testimony to it. If people do not understand about the Holocaust, they will fail to make the link between the crimes to humanity that was then, and the crimes to humanity that are now.

Pastor Martin Niemöller's famous poem goes:

“First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a communist ...

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak out for me.”

Many say “[Never Again](#)” with regard to the Holocaust – but not enough. Hopefully with this new research from the HEDP, we will see an increase in those properly educated about the Holocaust and a decrease in those who deny its truth, before there is no one left to speak out for them.