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Remembering the Holocaust: cost of indifference is too high

New Brunswick Human Rights Commission marks International Holocaust Remembrance Day

The following statement was issued by Randy Dickinson, chair of the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Jan. 27:

First they came for the communists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

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

This famous quotation was made by Pastor Martin Niemöller shortly after the Second World War. He was

a prominent German protestant pastor who spent seven years in Nazi concentration camps.

This quotation conveys the cost of indifference to human rights, and it reminds us why we need to make the connection between the Holocaust and human rights. It is a warning that, when vulnerable minorities are attacked with impunity, human rights for everyone are threatened.

The Niemöller quotation also reminds us that democracy is no guarantee that human rights will be respected. A democracy without legally enforceable human rights for everyone, and especially for unpopular minorities, is always at the risk of the whims of the majority.

'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,' said Martin Luther King Jr.

It was against this backdrop that

the United States and Canada adopted anti-discrimination laws in the 1950s. New Brunswick adopted the Human Rights Act in 1967 and created the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission to carry out the mandates of human rights education and the enforcement of human rights.

It is fitting that one of the most important cases to come before the commission partly concerned the Holocaust. The Malcolm Ross case arose out of a complaint by a Jewish parent in Moncton that his children were discriminated against because their school employed a teacher who was well known for his off-duty anti-Semitic statements, including some that questioned the Holocaust. The case established that a teacher's freedom of speech may be limited where it impairs a school's ability to provide a discrimination-free school

environment.

The Ross case also established the important principle that schools have a legal duty to maintain a positive school environment. This principle became the legal basis for the Jubran case in 2005 that established that schools are liable under the Human Rights Act when a student is bullied by other students due to one of the personal characteristics listed in the act, such as religion, disability or sexual orientation.

In 2005, the United Nations proclaimed Jan. 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This date was selected because this was when the largest Nazi death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was liberated in 1945. New Brunswick has also proclaimed Yom Hashoah as a Holocaust Remembrance Day. Its date varies according to the Jewish calendar, and in 2012, it

will be observed on April 19.

In New Brunswick, we are fortunate to have in our midst Israel Unger, a Holocaust survivor who has eloquently told his story to many New Brunswickers over the years.

New Brunswickers have also benefited from the Holocaust education program of the Winnipeg-based Asper Foundation, which has sponsored visits by Grade 9 students to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. In 2008, the commission presented its Pioneer of Human Rights Award to the Asper Foundation for these efforts.

As George Santayana said, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' International Holocaust Remembrance Day reminds us of the tremendous price that we risk paying if we do not defend the rights of all, and especially those of vulnerable or unpopular minorities.