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Survivors make the best Holocaust educators

Symposium hopes to combat denial and ignorance

BY ZOSIA BIELSKI

TORONTO • Teachers from Ontario and Israel are meeting at a Toronto Catholic high school to discuss new ways of educating a generation of students about the Holocaust.

Yesterday, more than 100 survivors, Jewish and non-Jewish teachers, professors and students discussed methods to combat Holocaust denial and shared stories, best practices, modern tools like video testimonials as well as interactive research projects such as "Memories in a Box," which has students compile data on individual victims and survivors.

The two-day Holocaust Educa-

tion Symposium is the first of its kind, hosted by the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem. Located in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem is the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

Every year for three years, the Canadian Society has sent about 20 teachers from across Canada to Yad Vashem, but this is the first time educators are getting to share what they learned in Israel with fellow teachers in a large-scale setting before the start of the school year.

A major thrust of the symposium was how educators should deal with students' questions, a collectively waning historical memory and Holocaust deniers.

"[Deniers] aren't the problem. It's those questions that the younger generation know nothing about," said Ephraim Kaye, director of international seminars at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies.

"We didn't make the Jews more important. The Nazis did," said Mr. Kaye, after showing a 1998 tape of Holocaust denier Bradley Smith on the Phil Donahue show where Mr. Smith questioned the veracity of the genocide, based on the lack of standing crematoria and the fact that other minorities besides Jews were targeted.

In response, Mr. Kaye provided teachers with a catalogue of educational materials, including testimonials from Jewish, German, Polish and Soviet witnesses, blueprints of crematoria and something new: decodes of top secret German military codes that revealed operational execution reports addressed to Adolf Hitler, including dates, villages and how many Jews were killed.

Michael Xuereb, who heads up the religion department at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School, co-ordinated the symposium.

Two years ago, the school began participating in a 20-hour after-school initiative called the Asper Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. As part of the experience, 100 students have visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, where they also learned about present-day atrocities in Darfur and raised thousands of dollars for victims.

"The interesting thing about Catholic students studying the Holocaust is that they haven't grown up in an environment where [they've] learned about the Holocaust," Mr. Xuereb said, adding many of his Grade 9 students had not heard the word before.

"You have to rescue the souls out of the six million, and that's what we have to do. The students won't remember a page out of a textbook, but they will remember meeting a survivor."

Yesterday, Czechoslovakian sur-

vivor Max Eisen told his story to the crowd, some of whom wept during his testimonial. Mr. Eisen, an Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor, lost two generations of his family and now gives talks across the province. He remembered Hitler's "poison pouring out" over his family's radio in 1938, the "terrible smell in the air" at Auschwitz and being liberated by 761st Tank Battalion, made up of black American soldiers whose "eyes they were like saucers" when they entered the camp.

He recently spoke to a Grade 2 class in Sudbury, Ont., where teacher Marjorie Collins used a finger-painting collage to teach her students about the "righteous ones" who saved Jews across Europe.

"You are now educating the last generation that will be able to hear from Holocaust survivors what actually happened firsthand," Mr. Kaye said yesterday. "The responsibility that rests on our shoulders is much greater than the previous generation."

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