Holocaust Studies Gaining in Schools

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

How can the memory and significance of the Nazi Holocaust — the organized massacre of six million Jews — be passed on to future generations?

In an effort to answer this question, Holocaust studies are being introduced into high-school curricula in several cities, and research centers are being established at several institutions of higher education.

For years, Holocaust studies were considered the purview of specialists in such fields as history and theology. There was a feeling of apathy, or deliberate ignorance of the subject, on the part of many people in the general public. And Holocaust specialists were arguing among themselves on such basic issues as whether the event could be understood at all.

In recent years, however, the realization has spread that a determined effort must be made to properly explain and teach the Holocaust to new generations of young people so that it can be prevented from recurring.

A pioneering step in the field was taken by the Philadelphia School District, which developed a teacher's guide for Holocaust studies early in 1977 and introduced it on an experimental basis in several public high schools. The program is now being used as part of a required world history course in several junior and senior high schools.

The Philadelphia teacher's guide was prepared in consultation with scholars from the Jewish-Catholic Institute at St. Joseph's College and the National Institute on the Holocaust at Temple University.

It was reviewed by such agencies as the Commission on Human Relations of the Philadelphia Catholic Archdiocese, the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith in Philadelphia.

There are six sections — Stereotypes, Prejudice and Violence; Antecedents of the Holocaust; Anti-Semitism Through the Ages; The Holocaust; World Reactions to the Holocaust; Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust; and Consequences of the Holocaust. The guide also has a bibliography and list of audio-visual resources.

The New York City Board of Education began distributing a new curriculum on the Holocaust to high schools as a pilot project this school year. The 461-page New York curriculum, entitled The Holocaust, a Study of Genocide, contains excerpts from such works as Hitler's Mein Kampf, pictures and descriptions of concentration camps, poems, plays and programs for class discussion.

While such study programs have been welcomed by religious groups they have met resistance from some German-American agencies who charge that they will foster anti-German sentiments similar to those which were widespread in America during World War I. These criticisms have been taken seriously by promoters of Holocaust studies.

Dr. I. Ezra Staples, deputy superintendent for instructional services of the Philadelphia School District, recently related that when the district introduced a Holocaust curriculum, "we did receive some constructive criticism from German-Americans who feared that the crimes of the past would lead to bigotry against German-Americans today."

As a result, he said, the district is "taking steps to make certain no group is treated as a monolith."

While taking note of this point, educators in the field stress that Holocaust studies do not fall into the restricted area of "Jewish studies" but are actually as broad in scope as the nature of humanity.

Concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel, now professor of humanities at Boston University, has declared that an understanding of the Nazi era is "a matter of survival, not just for Jews, but for all people." Teachers, he says, "must teach how society could lose its mind."

The National Center for Holocaust Studies at Temple University notes that some of the study areas that can be illuminated by reference to the Holocaust include genocide, church struggle with totalitarian ideologies and systems, anti-Semitism, the use and abuse of police power, vocational ethics and Christian-Jewish relations.

The center was founded by Dr. Franklin Littell of Temple's religion department and is a major source of information and materials for educators developing public school curricula. It also established the first doctoral program in America in Holocaust studies.

There is evidence of increasing interest in the teaching about the Holocaust in other parts of the country. The National Conference of Christians and Jews — which in 1975 took the leadership in mounting the first conference on the Holocaust ever to be held on German soil, in Hamburg — cooperated with Dr. Littell's center in holding a national conference for educators on the subject.

A recent NCCJ-sponsored Holocaust workshop held in conjunction with the meeting in St. Louis of the National Council on Religion and Public Education, and the Religious Education Association, attracted an unexpectedly large number of participants. And state-level conferences on some aspects of teaching of the Holocaust have been held in Maryland and Connecticut and are planned in the Spring in California, Kansas and Arizona, according to Donald W. McEvoy, NCCJ senior vice-president for program development.

Dr. Thomas Minter, deputy commissioner of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, has pledged increased federal funds to expand teaching about the Holocaust in public schools.

He recently told a conference on teaching the Holocaust that there must be "a systematic, careful, non-propagandized approach" to achieving inter-group understanding in a pluralistic society before a new generation of Americans can assume "responsible and humanistic behavior in a world of nations."

In promoting Holocaust studies, religious leaders and educators have had to deal with a reluctance on the part of many adults to face up to the implications of the event.

Father John Pawlikowski, OSM, professor of ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, says there has been a "deep and disturbing reluctance on the part of people connected with the liberal/left circle of Catholicism (in which the liberation theologies have taken their strongest foothold) to deal with an event like the Holocaust.' "

According to the moral theologian, such people "tend to view it as past history and hence dismiss it as not terribly relevant for present discussions, But in so doing, they ignore the opportunity to come to grips with the tremendous potential for human destructiveness as the backside of human freedom that the Holocaust revealed."

Rabbi Nathan Peter Levinson, president of the International Conference of Christians and Jews, says that the new generation in West Germany does not have knowledge or understanding of the Holocaust and feels that this is a greater problem than anti-Semitic movements in the country today.

The rabbi, German-born and American-educated, is himself a Holocaust survivor. He serves several congregations in the Hamburg area. He says the reluctance to face the past is a factor in the rise of the anti-Semitic movements that do exist in West Germany today.

Referring to the Holocaust, he recently asserted that "this to them is something which they cannot accept, so they just deny it."

At the same time, some opportunities for increasing lay understanding of the Holocaust have met with success. A 14-week lecture series on public policy implications of the Holocaust, held at the University of Bridgeport, Conn., last spring, proved to be a sell-out success.

Prof. Fred Lapides of the university's English department, who directed the series, said the idea came from a student research paper comparing the bureaucracy of Nazi Germany with modern bureaucracies.

"We sit around and tend to take things and say, 'It can't happen here,' " he observed. "But like Watergate and Vietnam, government policy enabled them to start. Was the public intimidated by its own government, or did the people through lack of interest set government policy?"

Similarly, Dr. George French, Jr., director of the social studies division of the Philadelphia school district, has cited three reasons for teaching the Holocaust on a system-wide basis — teaching youth that power can be abused and therefore must be limited, that social institutions can be debased and criminalized and that anti-Semitism and racism represent "two malignant forces in any society."

Holocaust scholars have also noted that the subject should be discussed among church members in religious contexts, as well as in secular educational settings. Dr. Zalman Schachter, a Temple religion professor, has urged Christian communions to give recognition to their brethren who died trying to help Jews during the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is not a pleasant topic of study, and teaching it to students in high schools poses problems not found in other educational situations. But it is being faced — and taught — as part of the purpose of education, itself, to understand the nature of humanity.

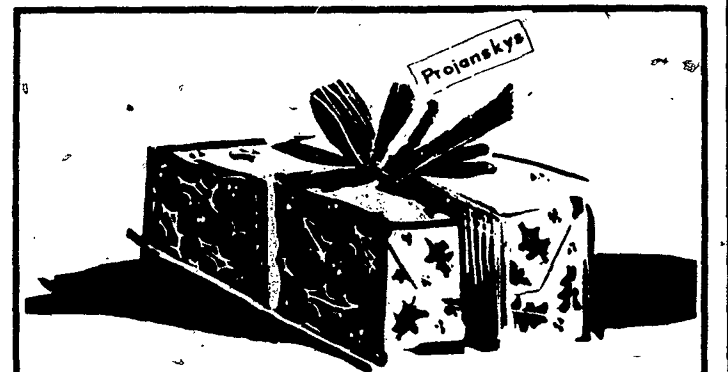
Dr. Arnold Webb, executive director of the New York City Board of Education's division of planning and support, acknowledges that "the Holocaust in Europe is a painful subject for young people and their teachers."

But, he adds, "the horror of genocide in the 20th Century must be faced and the story must be told so that students of all races and religions in our public schools can understand the danger confronting all peoples when human rights are denied to any one people."

Morality in Media Salutes Achievers

New York (RNS) — Patrick J. Buchanan, a columnist for the New York Times and TV Guide, and Larry Parrish, known for his prosecution of obscenity cases in Memphis, received awards here from Morality in Media, a national organization which campaigns against obscenity. Thomas A. Murphy, General Motors board chairman and a member of the Morality in Media planning board, was cited for corporate ethics.

Morality in Media was begun as a neighborhood effort in New York City's East side by Father Morton A. Hill, SJ, and Rabbi Julius G. Neumann after the priest had found pornographic material in the hands of some fifth graders.



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