

MOVIE

on the

Story by
Mike Latona

Photo by
Andrea Dixon



Students from Pat Connelly's New Testament sophomore theology class are corresponding with students in Israel, via e-mail, as part of their year-long study of the Holocaust. Front row, from left: Rebecca Ward, Joe Tran, Kristen Buczynski. Second row: Adam Farnung, Sean Wegman, Joe DeBellis, Tom Marcucci, Natalie Pierre-Philippe, Colleen Magill. Third row: Mary Davis, Michelle Ballerstein, Josh Keegan, Jennifer Anderson, Christina Dambra, Frances Cullen, Betsy Newell. Fourth row: Brandon Gotham, Brandon Setegn, Richie Bomba, Larry Donahue, C.J. Gremke, Bill Stokes, Aileen Pawloski, Kaitlin Thaney.

I think that every person who lived in this time didn't think what we know today - that people can turn so evil to make the dreadful thing the Nazis made in(to) the Holocaust.

—Alon Adler

I tried to understand what they felt inside and all the grief that they were going through. I hope that you can relate to my thoughts. Write me back.

—Maayan

These messages were sent by students at Ort Kiryat Motzkin, a high school in Israel. The recipients were sophomore theology students at Aquinas Institute.

Over the past few months, these youths have exchanged e-mails as part of a book-sharing project - an experience that has been both enlightening and painful.

The featured book is *Night*, author Elie Wiesel's graphic, autobiographical look at the horrors of European concentration camps during World War II. Reading the 1958 book is a difficult task for the Jewish students, said AQ instructor Patrick Connelly, who noted that a great majority of them likely had family members who perished in the Holocaust.

"They all had some sort of connection," he said.

Based on these links to the past, consider how the Jewish students must have reacted to Wiesel's tales of children who beat their parents in a desperate struggle for a few morsels of food. Or about the tremendous effort Wiesel and his father made to stick together, only for the then-teenaged boy to watch his exhausted, undernourished dad wither away and die. Or about a young boy who was hanged by Nazi soldiers but did not die instantly. Instead, Wiesel wrote, "For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes."

Connelly said that some of the Jewish youths apparently were unable to finish reading the 109-page book. They were also hesitant to share grim details about their family history, as evidenced by an e-mail message AQ's Tom Marcucci received:

Last year I visited Poland. It was a really hard experience, but I didn't have the power to write about it. When the time comes and you really want to know I will tell you.

—Tali Koren

During the book-sharing project, students at Aquinas and in Israel shared information about their musical tastes and social activities, and in many cases found common bonds. But AQ's Kaitlin Thaney said she realizes now, more than ever, how different their family backgrounds are.

"Some of them lost all their family. I have a great family and I should be thankful for it," said Kaitlin, 15, a parishioner at St. Pius Tenth Church in Chili.

Betsy Newell said her awareness also was raised by reading *Night*.

"I knew that six million people died in the Holocaust, but when you read a single person's account it's much more powerful. You think how each of the six million people had their own story, their own family," said Betsy, 15, a member of Holy Cross Parish in Rochester.

Tom said the horrors were so extreme that he doesn't think they could be repeated on the same level.

"I don't think any group will be discriminated against like that again," said Tom, 15, a parishioner at St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece. Yet, whereas the Holocaust was conducted over a period of several years, Kaitlin warned that we now have the technology to kill large groups of people in an instant.

The book-sharing project, which began in January, is part of an intensive year-long effort at Aquinas. Students read books about the Holocaust and wrote reports on them during the fall. They also visited Temple Beth El in Brighton.

Connelly's class is due to make a presentation about its experiences at Brighton's Jewish Community Center on May 2. Then, as an extra-added bonus, the students will attend a lecture by Wiesel, author of *Night*, when he lectures at Smith Opera House in Geneva on May 16.

Connelly said that although Aquinas

A unique Holocaust lesson

has offered strong Holocaust-awareness curricula in the past, he decided to take it to a new level after visiting the Holy Land last summer and learning about book-sharing programs.

"I kept thinking out loud, 'This would be so good to do at Aquinas,'" Connelly said.

The response of his students has confirmed his feeling, Connelly said. "It just shows up in the quality of their work," he remarked.

Connelly is part of a Rochester interfaith team that visits Catholic parishes throughout the year, promoting Jewish-Christian dialogue. The teacher is also designing for next year a senior-level course called "Confronting Hate," which will deal with lessons learned from the Holocaust.

Connelly, who has made three trips to the Holy Land, said bringing Holocaust awareness to the Aquinas students has been tremendously inspiring for him.

"I think it's been the most important educational experience I've ever been a part of," he said.

COMING NEXT WEEK:
Holy Week trip to Europe