

Lessons of Holocaust have uneasy echoes

As a forum for discussing reasonable accommodation, the Montefiore Club beats the heck out a meeting room in Quebec City.

Oak-panelled walls, oil paintings and a nice lunch of poached salmon are trappings that foster calm, reasoned analysis of societal issues. I arrived Thursday just in time for chewing over the Saku Koivu flap.

Neither hockey nor language had been on the menu. The diners – three teachers, five school board officials and two Web page designers – were lunch guests of Riva and Tom Hecht, who have created an endowment that funds Holocaust education for educators.

Evelyn Howard, who teaches at Thorndale School in Pierrefonds; Adrienne Scholberg, a former Pierrefonds Comprehensive teacher who's pursuing a master's degree at Concordia University, and Karine Lajeunesse, who teaches at Rosemount High School, spent three weeks in Israel last summer. Through the auspices of the Hecht program, the Montreal educators attended seminars run by the Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies.

The experience was an eye-opener for Lajeunesse. She's a 27-year-old native of the Mauricie region who's just begun her third year of teaching French and Spanish at Rosemount.

Lajeunesse attended Bishop's University for three years to learn English, then completed her degree at Laval. Growing up in Grand Mère, she knew little of the Holocaust.

"I learned nothing at all about it, really," she said. "My students would read stories in the paper and ask me questions I couldn't



MIKE BOONE
on teachers who learn

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answer about the Holocaust.

"I had some general knowledge of World War II. But I didn't know details."

See, this is the problem. If you've never heard of the Nuremberg Laws or the Wannsee conference, Bill 195 can seem downright ... reasonable.

But not to Lajeunesse. During our conversation she was at pains to distance herself – and the Quebecers of her acquaintance – from the insularity of Hérouxville and the idiocies of Guy Bertrand. You don't need three weeks at Yad Vashem to become uneasy about ethnic nationalism, but it helps.

The Hecht programs requires teachers to apply what they learned about the Holocaust to lesson preparation. Lajeunesse is doing a unit that will look at Nazi racial policies and the tribal genocide in Rwanda.

Her senior students will be teaching the first-years in French. This will make them somewhat unusual in Quebec. Holocaust study is not part of

the basic curriculum.

The Hechts are trying to rectify that situation, to the extent that two private citizens can. For each teacher who attends the Yad Vashem seminar, the endowment ponies up \$5,000, covering return air fare, tuition and room and board in Jerusalem.

The program was launched in 2005, Riva Hecht said, "to bring issues about the Holocaust into the classroom."

Lessons began early for Tom Hecht. A native of Bratislava, Hecht, his sister and their parents fled Czechoslovakia when the Second World War began. Their escape odyssey led from Paris to Nice to Lisbon to Montreal, where 12-year-old Thomas Otto and his family disembarked from a train at Bonaventure Station in 1941.

The Hechts had been in pharmaceuticals. With limited resources, Eugene Hecht rebuilt the family business. Tom, his son, became an influential entrepreneur.

Tom Hecht is worldly, urbane.

He doesn't like what he sees in Quebec. Parallels to Germany, circa 1932, are inexact; but these are uneasy times for Quebecers who trace their roots to locales other than Nouvelle France.

Hecht knows from bitter experience – and the alumni of his Holocaust study program are learning – that xenophobia and ethnic hatred can get out of hand.

"The Holocaust cannot only be characterized by gas chambers," Tom Hecht said. "Before gas chambers, there were words."

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