

In & Around Montreal

Teachers to learn about Holocaust education at Yad Vashem

By JANICE ARNOLD
Staff Reporter

While travelling in Europe after graduating from university, Quebecer Elise Pedneault happened to visit the Wannsee Villa, where the Nazi leadership convened on Jan. 20, 1942, to plot the Final Solution. She then visited the former Auschwitz death camp in Poland.

The experience had such an impact on her, that when she began her teaching career, she was determined that the Holocaust should be taught in the classroom, even though this was rare at French schools in Quebec.

She is doing just that today at the Lycée de Saguenay in Chicoutimi, a private high school of 400 students.

Pedneault is one of four Quebec teachers leaving June 29 for Israel to attend an intensive 18-day seminar at Yad Vashem on teaching the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, designed for non-Jewish middle and high schools. Since 1981, thousands of educators from around the world have completed the seminars, held biannually at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies.

This is the first time that Quebec teachers have participated in the seminar, thanks to sponsorship by philanthro-

pists in the Jewish community.

Pedneault and Annie Girard of the École Internationale de Montréal, a public elementary school under the Commission Scolaire de Montréal, are going with the financial support of the Tauben Family Foundation.

Two Grade 6 teachers from Westpark Elementary School in Dollard des Ormeaux, Freda Solman and Carole Touchette, were selected as the inaugural recipients of scholarships from an endowment created by Thomas Hecht, a child survivor of the Holocaust, and his wife, Riva, a former professor in Concordia University's continuing education department.

They will be joining nine other Canadian teachers, from Vancouver to Newfoundland.

This is the third year the Toronto-based Canadian Society for Yad Vashem has organized a Canadian contingent for the seminar, said executive director Hannah Mestel. The group will gather at Pearson International Airport on the day



Thomas and Riva Hecht

of their departure for a three-hour orientation.

The other teachers are being sponsored by the Robert Rogow Memorial Scholarship, the Shafran family and Rabbi Yosef Wosk, all based in Vancouver, or directly by the Canadian Society.

The hope is that these teachers will be able to incorporate what they learn at Yad Vashem into their curricula upon their return. "The International School for Holocaust Studies is the only school in the world that is strictly devoted to Holocaust education," said Hank Rosenbaum, the Canadian Society's national chair. "It is our hope that this initiative will help stem the virulent anti-Semitism and racism that we are facing today."

The Hechts selected the recipients of their scholarships through an open competition at the Lester B. Pearson School Board, the second-largest anglophone board in the province, for teachers in Grade 5 and up. They began there because of Riva Hecht's professional association with its director-general, Robert Mills, who she says was imme-

diately receptive to the idea.

The Hechts are also stipulating that the recipients commit to spreading the word about Holocaust education among other teachers within their school and beyond.

There were only six applications, and Solman and Touchette were the clear choices because they are already teaching about the Holocaust and work as a team.

Solman, who is the daughter of survivors, said she has brought the Holocaust into her classes since she began teaching at Westpark nine years ago. With no ready teaching materials, she has dealt with the subject in different ways over the years. About half the students at the school are Jewish, she said.

This year, she and the francophone Catholic Touchette, who teaches French, piloted an educational package called Hana's Suitcase, for the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. The kit is inspired by the true story of how the suitcase of Hana Brady, who died at Auschwitz, ended up at the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Centre. Hana's story was originally told in a CBC Radio documentary by Karen Levine.

The kit includes a replica of the suitcase and a book that

bring to life to Canadian children today the fate of a child not so different from them. Solman also showed the films *Paper Clips*, about a group of middle school students in Whitwell, Tenn., who created a memorial to the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, and *Anne Frank* this year.

In total, she devoted about one to two hours a day for four weeks to the Holocaust or related subjects such as racism and intolerance, which she noted

is not typical of the school. "I still feel I could do a lot more," she added.

The province's Régime pédagogique does not include the Holocaust, and most school boards leave the question of whether and how to teach the subject to teachers.

Solman and Touchette plan to develop a bilingual audiovisual presentation based on what they learn at Yad Vashem, which they will present to other teachers. They are already booked to speak at three schools under the Pearson board and at the conventions of Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers, the English teachers' union, and the Federation of Teachers of Jewish Schools, both in November.

Thomas Hecht said the interest on the part of today's teachers is "very meaningful because the Holocaust is not only a Jewish tragedy, it's a human tragedy." His wife added that she hopes those returning from the seminar will "create a ripple effect" within their profession that will lead to a greater understanding of the importance of teaching the Holocaust.

The couple's intention is to send at least two or three and possibly as many as six deserving Quebec teachers, from any school, to the Yad Vashem seminar each year. Over the longer term, they would like to partner with an interested organization to send even more teachers.

The teachers have been warned that the seminar is both physically and emotionally taxing, with sessions running from Sunday to Thursday, from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Friday until 2 p.m. A typical day's activities includes lectures, pedagogic workshops, group discussions, survivor testimonies and films. There are also field trips, such as to the Ghetto Fighters' Museum in northern Israel and the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv. They are expected to prepare themselves by reading as much background material as possible.



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