

Public school teachers study at Yad Vashem on Hecht scholarships

JANICE ARNOLD
jarnold@cjnews.ca

Richard Owendyk teaches 20th-century history and current events combined in one senior high school course called Contemporary World.

That's a lot of material to cover in one year, and especially challenging at a school like Marymount Academy with its multicultural student population and the other demands of an international baccalaureate program.

Yet, Owendyk, at his own initiative, has ensured that his students learn about the Holocaust. Neither the education ministry nor the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) requires that it be included.

Owendyk is one of three Quebec teachers this year who have been awarded a scholarship from Riva and Thomas Hecht that will enable him to attend the annual three-week seminar for educators from abroad at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust authority in Jerusalem, this month.

The Hechts established the scholarship program in 2005 to encourage and improve Holocaust teaching in the public school system, which they believe is inadequate due primarily to the little time allotted to world history under the province's compulsory curriculum.

One of the dominant themes of Owendyk's Contemporary World class is tension and conflict.

"If my students are to understand the dynamics of geopolitics in the Middle East, it is essential that they understand the history of the modern state of Israel," he said. "Obviously, an enormous factor in the creation of Israel was the response of the victors of World War II to the horrors of the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany."

"Rather than simply discussing the headlines of the last few years, I am careful to foster an understanding of the historical context of the continuing conflicts for my students."

His aim is to get students to understand the positions of all nations involved in the Middle East conflict.

He often uses movies or documentaries related to the Holocaust as a starting point for discussion. They never fail to strike a profound emotional chord.

"There seems to be no other historical event that reaches them as deeply," he said. "It makes young people feel very differently about issues like bullying after they have seen the degradation that one

group of human beings can inflict on another, especially when they realize that groups are made up of individuals."

Among the films he has shown are segments from the trial of Adolf Eichmann which "exposes them to the fallacy that following orders is a legitimate excuse to harm another human being."

Owendyk also teaches the history of Quebec and Canada, and there, too, the Holocaust is included, by talking about this country's dismal record in accepting desperate Jewish refugees. (Czech-born Thomas Hecht and his family were among the very few admitted during the war.)

"In a population of students like we have at Marymount, the vast majority of whom are either first- or second-generation immigrants, we need to understand that it is the citizens of a country that create the atmosphere of inclusion," Owendyk said.

"By examining the darker chapters of Canada's past, such as the turning away of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany aboard the SS St. Louis, we can hope that they will act and think in a way that weakens xenophobia in the future."

He believes his time at Yad Vashem will provide him with the tools to enhance his teaching in this area. Surprisingly, Owendyk has developed his own pedagogical materials, unaware of what organizations like the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre and the Azrieli Foundation have to offer.

Owendyk is the first Marymount teacher to receive a Hecht scholarship and, in fact, was the first to apply, said Riva Hecht, who was a Concordia University professor of education.

Located on Côte St. Luc Road in Snowdon, the school has 444 students.

The other recipients this year are Jeff Pinsky of the Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB), who is head of the drama department at Beaconsfield High School and has taught English, and Pierre Picard of Collège Laflèche in Trois-Rivières, who teaches French language and literature.

Since its inception, the Hecht program has awarded scholarships to 30 teachers, all from either the LBPSB or EMSB, with the exception of Laflèche, a private CE-GEP where one other teacher in the past was chosen.

The scholarship covers airfare, tuition and room and board.

As this year's recipients reflect, the teachers teach diverse subjects; in the past, they have also included geography, music, art, media and English or French



Thomas and Riva Hecht, left, present a scholarship to Yad Vashem's professional development seminar for overseas educators to Marymount Academy teacher Richard Owendyk, as English Montreal School Board commissioner Ellie Israel looks on. JANICE ARNOLD PHOTO

as a second language.

Riva Hecht said the teachers are chosen on the basis of their ingenuity in integrating the Holocaust into the already demanding *Régime pédagogique*. One especially creative educator and past recipient, she said, is Mary Rutherford, an LBPSB spiritual and community animator responsible for several elementary schools who has managed to introduce the Holocaust through anti-violence, anti-bullying and intercultural programming.

The Hechts are heartened that there are always more applications than resources

allow to be chosen each year. They only wish that school boards showed more willingness to teach the Holocaust.

She pointed out that for every teacher who goes to Yad Vashem, there is a ripple effect.

"When these teachers return from Israel, they create teaching modules that they share with their colleagues, make presentations to study groups, present at teachers' conventions, hold workshops in their schools and at the board level, and add to the profession in very significant ways," she said. ■



Five generations of girls

Maimonides Geriatric Centre resident Rosette Weiswein, 98, holds her eight-week-old great-great-granddaughter Riley Peyton Cox, surrounded by, from left, aunt Amanda Gaber, great-grandmother Monique Rosenberg, grandmother Estee Gaber and mother Samantha Cox.