

Quebec-Israel Holocaust education initiative promotes tolerance

By Dan Delmar
The Suburban

At a recent sitting of the travelling circus that is the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Reasonable Accommodation, Saguenay native Marcien Bisson called for the elimination of Kosher foods in Quebec because, he suggested, the Jewish conspiracy to drive up prices in supermarkets must come to an end. He then asked the government to recognize the "supremacy of God."

In a political climate where the most unobtrusive of accommodations is deemed unreasonable by a vocal minority of bigots, trying to teach Jewish history in the public school system may eventually raise a few eyebrows.

But Holocaust survivor Thomas Hecht and his wife Riva are nonetheless trying to bridge the gap between the Jewish community and young Quebecers by sending a handful of their teachers to study at Israel's Holocaust Centre; the Yad Vashem.

"For 'Never Again' to have any relevance, we have to teach the Holocaust so people can learn to respect each other and live in a more tranquil society than the one I came from," Thomas Hecht told *The Suburban*.

He fled his native Czechoslovakia during the war and moved around Europe before eventually settling in Quebec where he would go on to hold many leadership positions in both the Jewish and francophone communities. He's living proof that Jews in Quebec can be under-

stood and appreciated — a lesson that high school teacher Karine Lajeunesse hopes to pass along to her students.

"It's not that Quebecers are racist," Lajeunesse said. "It's just that we have a lack of knowledge about the Holocaust."

Having just returned from Israel over the summer, Lajeunesse says she's anxious to incorporate the lessons she learned at the Yad Vashem in her own classroom. She teaches French and Spanish at Rosemont High School, which features a very diverse student body.

"Greeks, Italians, Portuguese...They're always picking on each other," she said. "They say it's just a joke, but there's more to it."

The optimistic Shawinigan native hopes teaching the Holocaust and the consequences of the most brutal act of bullying in modern history will change attitudes in her classroom.

Two teachers from Westpark Elementary school in Dollard des Ormeaux who participated in the program last year see the shift in attitude in many of their students. French teacher Carole Touchette used a powerful classroom exercise to demonstrate how systematic and cruel the Nazi regime was.

"I said, 'everybody wearing glasses stand up.

Tomorrow morning, the prime minister will decide that anybody wearing glasses will be killed. That's exactly what happened to the Jewish people."

Touchette and her colleague Freda Solman described the three-week program as intense and emotionally draining. They are given history lessons for much of the day and it's no vacation, they say.

"It was calling me. I had to do this," said Solman, whose parents survived the Holocaust. "I felt like I was reliving their lives."

Solman, an English teacher, used a book called *Hannah's Suitcase* as a vehicle for teaching the plight of Jews during the war. At one point, she brought a replica of the suitcase to class and had her students cram in their most valuable possessions, just like Hannah had to do when she fled Czechoslovakia.



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"We wanted to pull it into their own lives," Solman said. But for some, the message of tolerance did not sink in and she hopes it will "hit them later on in life."

"I felt that I had failed," Solman added. "They didn't change one iota. I tell them, 'look what you're doing! Don't you remember what we studied?'"

Discouraged at first, Solman and Touchette agree, regrettably, that some students just won't embrace tolerance and that focusing her efforts on those who can will produce better results; better citizens.

"I'm not going to break my back," Touchette said. "I have to let go and aim for the ones who want to learn."

The trip to the Yad Vashem proved to not just be an opportunity for Touchette to enhance her curriculum, but was a life-changing experience for the Verdun native. It began as an initial curiosity about Jewish culture and history, prompting some family members, friends and colleagues to wonder if it was just a passing fad.

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Speaking about her fascination with the culture at a West Island coffee shop, even her friend Solman was taken aback by what Touchette was planning next.

"I'll be retiring in three years and I'd love to go back to Israel to teach French," Touchette

said. "I also want to go on the March of the Living."

The pure-laine Touchette makes for an ideal spokesperson for the Hechts' program which promotes *rapprochement*. When and if the project expands, a debate will no doubt be ignited over whether the Yad Vashem trips are a unique opportunity to enhance public school curriculum or simply dismissed as another unreasonable accommodation. ■