

The New York Times

German Students Confront the Holocaust

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Published: February 10, 2008

In the Region

Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey

G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

WITNESS Selmar Hubert discusses being a Jewish boy in '30s Germany.

THERE are probably few places in this country where lessons on the Holocaust touch as exposed a nerve as they do at the German School here.

Not many people in its Westchester backyard know about the German School, which serves children of Germans and other German speakers posted in this country by companies like Lufthansa or Mercedes-Benz.

Most of the 375 students know in their marrow that grandparents and great-grandparents were German citizens when six million Jews were murdered. But they do not want to go through life ashamed of being German.

“It’s something we always have to deal with, that our country did something like that,” said Julia Vogt, a 10th grader. “I feel proud to be German, but we can’t say it that way because of what happened.”

So the arrival last month of a traveling exhibit on Anne Frank’s life and accompanying programs, all sponsored by the school and by Westchester’s Holocaust and Human Rights Education Center, in Purchase, was a moment that required finesse on everybody’s part.

“The kids are not responsible, but it’s their legacy, so how to do it in a way that it’s not shoved down their throats so they don’t feel guilty,” is the way the challenge was stated by Donna Cohen, the center’s executive director.

German School students and visitors like those from Rye Country Day School were touched by photographs of Frank before she went into hiding, including one of her poised on a beach with her sister Margot. Such commonplace experiences made it all the more shattering for the students to learn she died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen when she was 15.

The students were also spellbound by a talk given by Selmar Hubert, 82, of Rye Brook, who described the brutality he experienced growing up in the 1930s in the Bavarian village of Cronheim. He told of the day his schoolmates pounced on him and his sister, cursing and spitting at them, while the teacher, a Nazi, egged them on. The school forced him to shout slogans like “Kill all Jews.”

“Imagine what it feels like to shout ‘Kill all Jews’ when you’re Jewish,” Mr. Hubert said.

Mr. Hubert held the students riveted, like a counselor telling a ghost story around a campfire. On Kristallnacht in 1938, Nazi vandals ransacked his home; his father was taken to Dachau, then released as inexplicably as he had been arrested. Finally, his father put the boy – just 13 – on a train that would take him to England in the Kindertransport program that saved 10,000 Jewish children.

“I looked in his eye and he looked in mine and we both knew we would never see each other again,” Mr. Hubert said. In fact, they did not.

But Mr. Hubert also wanted students to know about the English people who safeguarded him and his sister and about his return seven years ago to Cronheim, where he was warmly greeted by children from the very village that had once scorned him.

He echoed Anne Frank.

“You have to have faith in the goodness of people,” Mr. Hubert said. “I would not be sitting here if not for that.”

The program set off a tumult of feelings in the students. They told of American youngsters who ask them, when they identify themselves as German, “Isn’t that the country Hitler was from?”

“I had nothing to do with it, my parents had nothing to do with it, so it’s unfair that we have to hear these remarks,” said Hanna Streck.

But Julia Litzkow countered: “It’s not a burden. It’s a responsibility. We can’t deny it happened. But we have to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Udo Bochinger, the headmaster, said that some restless students have complained, “Why can’t we stop talking about the Holocaust?” His response is to find more-arresting ways of imparting the story, including discussions of contemporary failures to stop genocide in Rwanda and Darfur. It is important to note, he suggests, that even today, people are acquiescing to mass slaughter.

Still, Günter Zloch, a history teacher, pointed out that Germany’s genocide was unique in its bureaucratic, industrial thoroughness. “Everyone has the potential to become this evil, so it’s not history for me,” Mr. Zloch said.

That’s why Lukas Litzkow, Julia’s twin, was pleased that the exhibit highlighted the story of Mies Giep, a Gentile who helped hide the Franks while they were in hiding in Amsterdam.

“It shows that not all people were Nazis, that there were people who stood up and said this was wrong,” he said.

Mr. Hubert like to tells young Germans troubled by guilt over atrocities they did not perpetrate that he suffers from survivors’ guilt. “Neither your feelings nor my feelings make any sense,” he will say. “How can we overcome that guilt? That’s one of the things we do here – help each other.”

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