

# Teaching the Holocaust in the Rural South

## Challenges, Successes, Surprises

by

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### I. Introduction

Zohara Boyd and I (Rennie Brantz) tread very different paths on our way to team teaching the Holocaust. Neither of us received scholarly training in the field or were influenced by new educational theories.<sup>1</sup> In my case, a phone call in 1996 from Holocaust survivor Theodore Weiss, President of the Holocaust Educational Foundation in Chicago, opened the possibility of support for a course on the Holocaust. Until that phone call, I had been reluctant to focus on this topic because of a warning early in my career that teaching the Holocaust could depress students to the point that some might become suicidal. That warning stayed with me for two decades as I taught courses on modern Germany, twentieth-century Europe, and World Civilization. With Weiss's support, I learned just how important and powerful a college course on the Holocaust could be.

Zohara Boyd's road to Holocaust teaching started much earlier. A "Hidden Child" in Poland during World War II, Zohara came to the United States in 1954 with her

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fallace, "The Origins of Holocaust Education in American Public Schools," in *Journal of Genocide and Holocaust Studies* (Spring, 2006) 20: pp. 80-102.

survivor parents. After earning a Ph.D. in early American literature, she moved to Appalachian in 1977 to teach English and American literature. In the 1980s, Dr. Boyd taught courses on Holocaust literature several times, but found the task too stressful to continue.

In the spring of 1997, coming from two very different backgrounds and disciplines, Zohara and I met fortuitously outside our student union and quickly decided to propose a team-taught honors course on the Holocaust, the course we have taught each fall semester for the last eight years. I brought the historical context and Zohara the personal experience and extensive knowledge of Holocaust literature. Team teaching has enabled us to rely on each other, through illness and depression, and to learn a great deal from each other. Our honors Holocaust course is the most successful honors course at our school, the cornerstone of our Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies, and the most important and powerful course we teach.

## II. Challenges/Obstacles

Teaching the Holocaust poses more challenges than we originally anticipated while standing outside the student union in 1997. Our rural location in Boone, North Carolina, along the Blue Ridge mountains in the northwestern corner of the state presents unique problems. Two hours by car from the nearest urban centers of Winston-Salem and Charlotte, Appalachian State University enrolls 13,500 students at the undergraduate and master's level. The University is easily accessible by improved highways and modern communications, but is still haunted by its post-Civil War label: "Lost

Provinces,” a reference to geographic isolation and political neglect.<sup>2</sup> As a result, people in this area tend to look inward rather than outward. Local, small town issues claim more attention than global issues past or present. People from urban areas, Christian or Jewish, remain outsiders.

Another challenge arises from the absence of Jews in the small rural communities of North Carolina. Many of our students have never met a Jewish person, attended a Jewish event, or explored the nature of anti-Semitism. Even Appalachian State students from North Carolina’s piedmont cities like Charlotte, Raleigh, or Winston-Salem, cities with thriving Jewish communities, report little contact with Jews or Judaism. Appalachian’s student body mirrors this lack of diversity with fewer than one hundred Jewish students and a minority enrollment under 8%. Public school teachers attending our annual Summer Symposium on the Holocaust also report never having encountered a Jew, attended a Jewish religious function, or learned anything about recent Jewish history or culture. This lack of personal contact with Jews frequently opens the door to stereotyping, misconceptions, and suspicion.

In addition, North Carolina sits in the middle of the southern Bible Belt where a fundamentalist, evangelical Protestant Christianity prevails. This narrow, uncompromising Christianity manifested through numerous rural Baptist denominations and the thirty-million member Southern Baptist Convention dominates rural North Carolina more than any other cultural force. It still views Jews as “Christ Killers” and Judaism as superseded by New Testament Christianity. Most members still agree with the 1980 pronouncement of Rev. Bailey Smith, President of the Southern Baptist

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth D. Currie, “Appalachian State University: The First Hundred Years,” in *New Connections: A Handbook for Freshman Seminar*, comp. by Rennie Brantz, Dan Friedman, and Beth Glass (Debuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 2004).

Convention , that “God does not hear the prayers of Jews.”<sup>3</sup> Radio and television evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Fallwell reinforce this religious anti-Semitism even as they seek to impose their views on government and society. Their thoughtless statements, efforts to convert Jews, and mission relief work denigrate not only Judaism and Jews but every other religious belief that deviates from their doctrine. Students raised on fundamentalist Christianity like this often find it difficult to understand, appreciate, and respect the historical experience, cultural contributions, and human dignity of Jews who perished in the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

Southern history complicates the teaching of the Holocaust. History courses in many southern public schools, for example, keep memories of the Old South, racism, and the Civil War alive. The resulting myths and memories embodied in Confederate flag displays, Civil War monuments, and the singing of “Dixie” at public events cloud historical understanding and nurture racial, social, and historical stereotyping. Even today assertions about ill-mannered “Yankees” still punctuate student conversations. In this context Jews are all too frequently associated with outsiders and northerners who don’t belong to the real South.

Southern history also struggles with a long standing, complicated tradition of racism. From slavery through the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, racism has and continues to influence the rural southern experience. Like African-Americans, Jews were and are often viewed as outsiders, people connected somehow to the ills of both the past and modern society. The Ku Klux Klan, demagogic politicians,

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Foxman, *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper, 2003), p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Ariel Yaakov, “Protestant Attitudes to Jews and Judaism During the Last Fifty Years,” in *Terms of Survival: The Jewish World Since 1945*, ed. By Robert S. Wistrich (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 332-348.

and fundamentalist preachers may have aimed their hatred primarily at African Americans, but they regularly included Jews and Catholics in their diatribes. The fact that a number of Jews played a prominent role in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s reinforced rural stereotypes of Jews as outsiders in league with blacks and liberals. Thus Jews were and are viewed as more liberal, progressive, and out of tune with southern traditions and values. Remnants of this racial anti-Semitism survive in the rural South even though many of the hate organizations and motivations have disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

Military defeat in the Civil War produced an inordinate emphasis on militarism in the South. This is reflected in the large number of military academies, Confederate monuments, reenactment societies, gun clubs, military bases, and disproportionate number of southern officers in the US Army. Southern militarism shapes regional culture and finds an interesting expression in a fascination with Germany's military might and defeat in World War II. Southerners hooked on militarism seem more sympathetic with defeated Germany than victims of the Holocaust.

Inadequate teacher education offers one final obstacle to the teaching of the Holocaust. At Appalachian State University, for example, a leading teacher education institution in North Carolina, public school teachers rarely encounter the Holocaust in required history courses. The topic is not mandated in the obligatory World Civilization courses, and history courses on Modern Germany and Twentieth-Century Europe enroll few prospective teachers. Without an adequate academic introduction, interested teachers must develop Holocaust units on their own, wading through the mountains of available material with little or no guidance. Most teachers recognize the power of books like Eli

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Shapiro, "Anti-Semitism Mississippi Style," in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. By David A. Gerber. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 129-151.

Wiesel's *Night* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but they have little historical context within which to locate these powerful readings. Consequently, high school graduates enter college with vivid memories of these widely used memoirs but little understanding of the origins, character, or consequences of the Holocaust.

Thus teaching the Holocaust in the rural South faces a variety of unique challenges. Psychological and geographic localism, the absence of Jews, a unique southern historical experience, lingering racism, and limited attention to the Holocaust in teacher training makes the Holocaust difficult to teach in this region of the United States.

### **III. Appalachian's Holocaust Program**

Teaching the Holocaust at Appalachian State University involves more than organizing a classroom course. Important as our Holocaust course is, it is only one cornerstone of a larger program. Our newly recognized Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies aims to provide public education in a wide range of related activities. Our Center grew out of our desire to improve the teaching of the Holocaust throughout our University's service area. Our first step came in 2002, when we (Boyd and Brantz) decided to offer a summer symposium on teaching the Holocaust for public school teachers. Support from Appalachian's Chancellor and friends of the University made possible the first symposium in 2002. Visitors at the first symposium initiated discussions later that year that broadened our vision to include Judaic and Peace Studies, and established a core group of private supporters, the "Friends of the Center."

The summer symposium "Remembering the Holocaust" serves as the centerpiece for our program. Each June thirty-five public school teachers from North Carolina and the Southeast are invited to spend a week in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains learning

new strategies for teaching the Holocaust. Internationally recognized scholars like Prof. Michael Berenbaum, Stephen Feinstein, Robert Jan van Pelt, and Holocaust educator Miriam Klein Kassenoff introduce participants to the latest scholarship on the Holocaust and methodologies for presenting it effectively in the classroom. Over 150 teachers have experienced a week of learning, reflection, networking, and exploring.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the summer symposium, the Center also sponsors undergraduate courses on the Holocaust, Judaism, Peace Studies, and Genocide; a summer study abroad program on the Holocaust, a fall film series on the Holocaust, outreach programs to public schools and civic organizations, a library acquisition program, a teachers' resource center, and public lectures on campus. In the next year, the Center will develop an undergraduate minor in Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies, a study abroad program to Israel (2007); and art exhibits on the Holocaust. Future plans call for an endowed chair of Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies, a new facility, and symposiums on Judaic Studies and Peace Studies. Center programs have been funded primarily through private donations, grants (Claims Conference, Levine Foundation, American Library Foundation), and modest contributions from Appalachian State University and the North Carolina Governor's Council on the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

#### **IV. How do We Teach the Holocaust in the Rural South?**

In both our Holocaust classes and our summer symposium we try to engage students and teachers in reflection, activities, and discussions that illuminate key issues. We start where the students and teachers are and bring them along through lectures,

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<sup>6</sup> For information about the 2006 Martin and Doris Rosen Symposium "Remembering the Holocaust," see our website: [holocaust.appstate.edu](http://holocaust.appstate.edu).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrations, and hands on activities. How do we accomplish our goals and overcome the obstacles and challenges described above.

**A. Understanding Judaism.** Our first goal is to introduce students, teachers, and the interested local community to Judaism. No one can understand the Holocaust without knowing the six million Jews who perished at the hands of the Nazis. To do this, we are convinced, we must understand the fundamentals of Judaism because it identifies and defines most of Holocaust's principal victims. Studying Judaism exposes the shared traditions and common ground occupied by Christians and Jews alike. Understanding Judaism helps to explain Jewish reactions to the Nazis and the Holocaust. Because this knowledge is so important, we weave information about Judaism throughout the course. First, we ask students to read a general introduction to Judaism. Then Dr. Boyd reviews the basics of Judaism, using religious artifacts, dates, and symbols to make her points. Class discussions compare how Judaism and Christianity fit together and differ. Later in the semester the class attends Rosh Shana or Yom Kippur services sponsored by the small Boone Jewish Community. We also share Jewish foods throughout the semester, including latkes during our final exam period. Food always goes over well with students. Our purpose is to introduce and explain Judaism in a way that students and teachers can not only comprehend and but also explain to others. We think that knowledge, experience, and comparisons help to break down fundamentalist intolerance toward Jews and Judaism.

**B. Raising Life Questions.** Studying the Holocaust involves more than a historical journey into the darkest period in human history. Our approach to Holocaust education also encourages students to identify and evaluate their own values and beliefs.

We begin this process with our first class essay: “The Bias Paper.” Through it students examine their own biases, whether social, religious, economic, or political.

Acknowledging our own biases and prejudices helps us understand intolerance, indifference, and prejudice in others. It exposes religious narrowness, ugly racisms, cultural prejudices, moral indifference, and stereotyping. Students tell us regularly that this is the most difficult paper they have to write in our class because it forces them to confront and explain their own identity.

Midway through the semester, we also ask students to write a “Participant Paper.” Topics are randomly assigned and include victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and world leaders. The format is open, leaving room for poems, short stories, diaries, musical compositions, and other creative approaches students want to use. We want students to put themselves in someone else’s shoes for a moment and try to understand why individuals made the choices they did during the Holocaust. This paper bridges the gap between the personal and the historical by asking students to connect their lives to those touched by the Holocaust. They are confronted with the task of explaining why people in this terrible time behaved as they did and how they (the students) might have acted and thought if faced with similar circumstances. In raising life questions, we cut through the stereotypes, myths, indifference, historical distance, and prejudices that shield us from the reality of the past and our own lives. At this level of discourse there is no place for sham, pretense, or make believe. Straight forward honest prevails.

**C. The Power of One.** At the end of the semester, we ask each student to write a final paper, an essay we call the “Dollar Paper.” Based on a practice pioneered by New York Rabbi Schneerson and refined by Dr. Boyd, students are given one dollar and asked

to find and research one organization, individual, or group that they believe can best prevent future Holocausts or Genocides. They investigate the selected group, explain why it is best suited to prevent future horrors, and then send their paper and the dollar to the agency with a cover note. Students report orally on their selection at our final exam period. As a result, students leave class knowing more about how to make a difference and how to counter violence and inhumanity. This assignment moves students from the past to the present, from reflection to action, and from grim horror to hope for the future. On this idealistic note we end the class.

**D. Making Connections.** We engage students in our Holocaust classes in other ways as well. **(1) Daily Clippings.** Each class day, Dr. Boyd brings in copies of newspaper clippings related to anti-Semitism, racial intolerance, and genocide to remind students that the same intolerance and prejudices that led to the Holocaust continue to plague our society and world. Daily clippings sensitize students to the importance of reliable information about the wider world outside the rural South. **(2) Washington Trip.** Important also to the success of our class is a trip to Washington, D.C.'s US Holocaust Memorial Museum. We schedule the trip for mid-semester when students are beginning to recognize the crucial questions but not yet certain about the answers. What they discover, not surprisingly, is more questions rather than clear answers. Confronting the objects and photos of the Holocaust injects a new realism and stronger personal connections with the Holocaust into our discussions. After processing the experience, we encourage students to spend the next day enjoying Washington, noting that their fun amounts to a celebration of life that Holocaust victims never experienced.

**(3) Internet Informational Searches.** Another tool we use in both our honors Holocaust class and summer symposium for teachers is an internet informational project. Each person undertakes an internet research project on one assigned term connected to the Holocaust. Their findings are reported to the class in brief three-minute presentations. In the process, with guidance from the instructors, students and teachers learn new analytical skills, identify valuable websites, learn how to detect hate websites, and strengthen presentation skills. Carefully used, the Internet helps to break the chains of rural isolation, social myths, and historical stereotypes. **(4) Service Projects.** Over the past five years we have found more and more interest among honors students and teachers attending our summer symposium in service projects. These activities enable students and teachers to make a difference in small ways within their local communities. The range of projects extends from residence hall commemorations or informational sessions, to collecting toys for orphaned Rumanian children. In the latter case, students from the fall 2005 collected over 170 pounds of toys and shipped them to Rumania. Service projects empower, define, and activate persons determined to make a difference.

## **V. Successes**

We have been pleased with the outcomes of our honors Holocaust classes, summer symposiums, and other programs. Why? First, most participants have left our programs knowing that they can make a difference. They are better equipped, more knowledgeable, and more determined than any other students or adults we teach. Their commitment to action empowers them, transforms them, ennobles them. We see this in the students who change majors, alter career tracks, take time out to engage in service

projects. One graduating Biology major will enter graduate school in Holocaust studies next fall.

The University has recognized our programs and continues to support our efforts, in the classroom and outside. The Honors Program has asked us to continue teaching our Holocaust course and add a second course on the Holocaust and Genocide. The College of Arts and Sciences continues to provide space, released time, and modest support for our programs. The Provost, Chancellor, and Board of Trustees have recognized our new Center as an important part of Appalachian's educational and service mission. Equally important, Appalachian faculty have stepped forward to volunteer their time, expertise, and experience.

Our program has been generously supported by the local community. The enthusiastic backing of our "Friends of the Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies" has enabled us to expand to a year-round program. This is particularly gratifying because it means that we are reaching not only students and teachers but also a larger community of interested citizens.

## **VI. Surprises**

We have been surprised by a number of things over the past four years. First, the overwhelmingly positive response of our students each semester surprises us as much as our students' willingness to put aside traditional stereotypes and biases in order to explore new areas of human diversity and experience. The extent and enthusiasm of University and private support has allowed us to expand our programs far beyond our original plan. The ongoing infusion of new ideas from University faculty and

administrators as well as community friends has continually refreshed and broadened our vision of what can and must be done. New connections at the national and international level have opened new doors for faculty and students at every turn. The genuine and continuing interest of students, teachers, and the public has surprised humbled us.

## **VII. Conclusions**

Why do we teach the Holocaust in the face of so many challenges?

It makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of our students and those around us. In so doing, we may not change the world, but we can prepare future generations of North Carolina students to ask the right questions, to understand tolerance and peace, and to respect the wonderful diversity and creativity of humanity.