With cases of antisemitism on the rise worldwide, many, including senior Australian politicians, have called for the implementation of mandatory Holocaust education. Coinciding with International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Monday, three history teachers from around the country share their experiences as participants on the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators. They speak about the lessons they took back to the classroom and the impact that is having on students.

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"But what did they do to make the Nazis hate them?"
This is a question I’ve been asked while teaching World War II and the Holocaust. For some of my students, antisemitism is actually a new term. While learning of the murder of millions, they ask the same question. Why?
With the seemingly indiscriminate rise of antisemitism around the world, this simple question needs revisiting. This was one of the reasons I decided to apply for a scholarship to study the teaching of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, in Israel. After three weeks of lectures, lessons and discussion, the group of 30 Australian teachers travelled home, back to classrooms reeling with the enormity of the task ahead.

The number of teachers completing the course now numbers over 500, and with brilliant classroom resources created, implemented, tweaked and reviewed, the foundation has been set for ongoing excellence in Holocaust teaching in Australia.

And yet, those teenagers still want a response. Why?
Often, it’s the simplest questions that require the most profound answers. How do we respond?
As a history teacher, I find myself best placed to attempt this. My love of history stems from a simple love of stories. Stories help us create meaning in our lives, help us explain the world around us and relate to those different to ourselves. As I studied history, it became clear that history is a collection of stories, a vast torrent of competing, contradictory stories both mundane and compelling, epic and insignificant. We are each the culmination of these stories, they shape us, mould us and drive us forward. Antisemitism is one such story, both dangerous and enticing, for it gives the hearer something to cling to in this messy and confusing world. A catch-all story that allows people to believe the world is simpler than it is, that creates false unity through excluding the ‘other’ and provides scapegoats to any and all ills. How do we counter a story that causes believers to concoct conspiracy out of confusion, and blind themselves to overwhelming evidence?

A silver bullet does not exist, nor does a simple formula for deradicalising these (usually) young men. There is, however, much that can be done to discourage students from falling for the story of antisemitism. An effective toolkit to give students is critical thinking. History teachers throughout Australia teach students key skills in
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critically engaging with sources and asking questions to discover the reliability and veracity of material that they read online. The Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators is a fantastic opportunity for teachers to best equip themselves to teach the Holocaust in the classroom. You must always, however, look to your own strengths. I will therefore, tell a competing story. Both in the classroom, and through videos on my YouTube channel, there are opportunities to share the truth of the Holocaust. A truth supported by overwhelming evidence, it is a signpost to those falling for this false narrative, to show the dark fruits of antisemitism, to invite us to listen to the voices of the victims and heed their warning. This story cannot leave the hearer unchanged. Instead, it demands a response, perhaps to listen to the stories of those different to ourselves in the hope that our children can one day be free to tell kinder, gentler stories to their own children.

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