

## INTERNATIONAL Holocaust Remembrance Day



# TAKING THE LESSONS OF THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

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.

## SCOTT WIMBLE

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Sydney, New South Wales

“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 trav-

elled 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



The Hall of Names, Yad Vashem.  
Photo: Igor Abramovych/Dreamstime.com



Scott Wimble.

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.

## NICOLE SCOTT

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RECENTLY saw an image which sums up my feelings. It depicted five Labrador dogs of various colours. The caption read: "We are the same animal. Racism is stupid."

This is my dilemma – not only teaching this message to students, but getting them to apply the knowledge that they learn.

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential in our multicultural society. Students learn about what happens when we do not stand up for what we know is morally right, even if it is a small incident, because every incident matters and adds up just like it did during the Holocaust.

After my amazing study scholarship to Yad Vashem in 2013 participating in the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators, I decided to aim the curriculum that I created toward VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) students at Alkira College, as there was increased time and scope for students to study the Holocaust.

Students now investigate leadership through the example of Oskar Schindler and other members of the Righteous Among the Nations and compare their leadership examples to that of more current heroes. At the end of their studies, VCAL students organise a Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony. This includes organising invitations, setting up the event, creating the program, hosting the event, packing up at the end, and writing articles for the school newsletter and local papers. For the last five ceremonies, students from Mount Scopus Memorial College have been invited to participate in the ceremony and afterwards there is time left for the guests to interact with each other. Student involvement in the ceremony allows them to take action and make a stand against what they feel is wrong in the world – antisemitism, racism, discrimination and intolerance. Applying this knowledge empowers students who then remember the ceremony and their action long after they have left school.

Following the ceremony, students organise activities for Harmony Day and tolerance activities with year 4 students at a local primary school. When interviewed at the end of the VCAL program, the students remember both the ceremony and working with primary students as highlights that they want included for future students.

Once this ceremony has run, it can become a part of the school culture, as it has done at Alkira for the past seven years.

From these ceremonies, students leaders, school captains and others emerge, prepared to take a stand against what they see as wrong in the school, local and wider community. The Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony leaves a powerful message to the students and the wider community, as those who attend make a pledge to take action and not be bystanders. Even when the ceremony runs after the final school bell, the student audience does not attempt to leave. I asked one student why he stayed, after he later said that he got into trouble for being late for his next class.

He said that it was too important to leave early.



Nicole Scott (right) pictured with fellow teacher Kristine Wolfe (left), Gandel Philanthropy's Nicole Brittain (centre) and Alkira students Ben, Danielle and Aleks.



Adam Pedrotti in Jerusalem.

## ADAM PEDROTTI

Ballajura Community College | Ballajura, Western Australia

RACISM, prejudice, stereotyping and bullying are ongoing concerns for me as a high school teacher and more broadly in light of alarming instances of antisemitism in Australia and around the world. I am happy to admit that I have not encountered overt antisemitism in the classroom, however, while my school and its community are very diverse, most students know very little about the Holocaust, Judaism and the Jewish people. Because of this lack of knowledge, they do, at times, make assumptions based on negative, antisemitic stereotypes and repeat inappropriate comments without understanding their significance. I treat these moments as opportunities to expose and unpack negative assumptions and stereotypes with students and use the Holocaust to prompt them to think more critically about the way they talk and treat others and the way hatefulness can be perpetuated.

As a history teacher, I began the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program already believing in the significance of Holocaust education; however, the program has reinforced this. It was life changing on a personal and professional level – and it was particularly humbling to know how appreciative Jewish people, Holocaust survivors and their families were, both in Israel and Australia, that we were taking the time to participate in the program.

One of the greatest challenges of Holocaust education for me is balancing the uniqueness and the universality of the lessons of it. It was impressed on us during the Gandel program that the Jews were the primary targets of the Holocaust and we need to keep this in mind when teaching some of the universal aspects of the period. However, so many of the lessons of the Holocaust are ones we want our students to apply to their own lives and contexts. For me a significant example is helping students to understand what it takes to be an upstander rather than a bystander, and to have the courage to call out racism and bullying wherever it occurs.

To combat antisemitism and to teach the Holocaust more effectively since taking part in the program, I use Yad Vashem's pedagogical approach as my principal guide when teaching about the Holocaust. This approach requires students to develop an understanding of the events and circumstances that led to this period, including the rise of Nazism and the development of anti-Jewish policies; however, it focuses on helping students to see Jewish victims as individuals rather than as 'statistics' and on 'rescuing the individual from anonymity'. The aim being to help students develop empathy and to view Jewish victims as people 'whose human individuality the Germans tried to erase'. I do this by teaching students about Jewish life prior to the war, their everyday life and experiences during the Holocaust and their return to life after. Whether I have an hour, a week or a month to teach the Holocaust, humanising the victims helps to give meaning to any study of the Holocaust as students are encouraged to view the Jewish people as they were and are: a diverse, vibrant and dynamic group of people.

I believe students need a broad education. They should study English and maths, science and geography, they should be physically active and study drama and the arts. However, all of this pales in comparison to the value and importance of history and Holocaust education. My outgoing head of department often said that our role as educators is to prepare students for a society, not just an economy. Students must study the Holocaust as one of the most significant events in human history. But Holocaust education is also a vehicle that can enable us as educators to ensure students enter society with empathy, as critical thinkers and as citizens willing and able to demonstrate the everyday courage necessary to ensure that Never Again is more than just a slogan. I believe students today are compassionate, empathetic and receptive. We just need to guide them.