

## Kids teach us a lesson in Holocaust remembrance



**BARB GUY**

The first I heard of the Holocaust was in 1971 on one of the last days of my fifth-grade year. We kids wore our dads' old button-down shirts over our clothes to be autographed by classmates. One girl, beautiful and well-liked, came to school with some designs on her shirt, including a swastika, whatever that was.

Our teacher went ballistic. The more accusatory she got - "Why is this on your shirt? What do you think it means?" - the more sullen the girl became. The teacher, who would have been in her 20s during World War II, banished the girl into the hall with some markers to obliterate the symbol while we sat silently.

What followed was an impromptu lesson about the Holocaust. We were supposed to be doing something joyous right then, so there was little time or mood for this detour.

Classmates glared accusingly at the swastika girl as the teacher struggled to tell an impossible story.

I was left with the impression that the Holocaust must have been truly horrible if it could strike down someone so golden as this popular girl.

Now imagine a present-day classroom of Tennessee eighth-graders. Each kid is white and they share the same religious roots. There's not a Muslim, Catholic or Jewish kid in the group. They're a loaf of Wonder Bread, like my fifth-grade class. Someone decides the kids should learn about the Holocaust, but the teacher is an adult product of this same classroom. What can one slice of Wonder Bread teach the next?

Amazingly, these eighth-graders were made to truly know the Holocaust. Through their teacher's imagination and in turn their own, the students felt the devastation, they saw families torn apart, they learned the names and the stench of Treblinka, Sobibor, Dachau, Auschwitz and the others. They grew brave enough to hear terrible things. With support from their teacher, they bore their own breaking hearts.

The students' lives quite literally changed forever. That's an extraordinary accomplishment

for any teacher, but this woman and her students also went on to inspire and teach many thousands of people outside their classroom, people they will never meet. Including me.

And in honor of Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day, which is today, I am inspired to share their story.

When their teacher said that the Nazis murdered six million Jewish people, the students fell silent. Finally, one said, "This sounds really awful, but what on earth is six million?" The kids couldn't grasp the depth of the tragedy until they could fathom the number. They talked about how to make it real, eventually settling on collecting six million of something.

Their story is told in the unforgettable film documentary, "Paper Clips," which opens Friday for a brief run at the Broadway Theater in Salt Lake City.

The kids' effort to collect six million paper clips and their thirst for knowledge about the Holocaust gather momentum simultaneously. As they and their teacher learn more, they are shocked and horrified to find out about other, less-well-known Holocaust victims: gay and lesbian people, the disabled, Gypsies, Serbs, the Polish

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intelligentsia, resistance fighters from all nations, Germans opposed to Nazism, Jehovah's Witnesses and the homeless.

Experts at The Simon Wiesenthal Center put the number of non-Jewish Holocaust victims at five million. That's 11 million paper clips.

The students' stewardship of the project brings them powerful lessons. They meet families who lost people to the Holocaust, they acquire artifacts, they touch with their own hands a rail car used to transport people to their deaths, they hug and cry with actual Holocaust survivors, and they become stars of a documentary film.

To write a Holocaust remembrance piece is to want to tie a bow at the end and proclaim, "Never again." But almost since its creation, this hopeful mantra has been spat upon by nations, groups and individuals who draw inspiration rather than indignation from Adolf Hitler. At this moment something very much like a holocaust is under way in Darfur, Sudan, and it follows Rwanda, Bosnia, Romania and Cambodia, all coming about after "Never again" was first shouted in agony or whispered as a prayer.

Holocaust remembrance is a project for all of us. We can do our part by visiting a Holocaust education Web site, by reading a memoir from someone who was there, and by seeing films like "Paper Clips."

We can't know what abomination will hatch next in the world, but I feel sure that no paper-clip kid would stand idly by, let alone participate. Maybe the best thing we can do is make more kids into kids like them.

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