



Sarah Littman

3 lessons for us all

Last month, I was a docent at the "Anne Frank — A History for our Time" exhibit at Greenwich High School. With 200 other volunteers, I guided middle- and high-school students from towns in Westchester and Fairfield counties. During October, 5,500 students and 600 teachers viewed the exhibit, with members of the public bringing total attendance to more than 7,000 people.

I'm a better writer than public speaker. Before my first tour, I felt queasy. The first group of students didn't help. Although some had read the book and were interested, others were frighteningly ignorant and rude. "Was Anne Frank the first Jew?" one smart-aleck asked minutes into the tour.

I'm not sure if it's because of my age (40), because I'm Jewish or because my family was directly touched by it, but the Holocaust has always had a dominant place in my consciousness. It's never been a laughing matter. It came as a shock to hear this teenager making a joke about something so serious and to me so real, though it happened more than 20 years before I was born. Fortunately, the presence of Holocaust survivors, who bravely spoke about painful, traumatic memories at the end of each tour, made it real for them. You could hear a pin drop when the survivors told their stories.

Almost as frightening was how little most kids knew about what happened, not just 60 years ago during the Holocaust, but even a decade ago. By the second tour I was a woman with a mission. In the brief time I had with these young minds, I hoped to impress upon them three things.

First, history is not a boring subject. It provides the foundation for everything we do today. As George Santayana said, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." I told them that World War II didn't start on Sept. 3, 1939. It began 20 years earlier in June 1919, with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The harsh punitive terms of the treaty wrought havoc with the German economy, giving Hitler the political ammunition he needed to gain power.

Trying to link history with the present, I asked if they could think of a current situation where the lesson of winning the war yet losing the peace could be applied. A few kids were clued in enough to think of Iraq. Makes you wonder how President Bush did in history, doesn't it?

The second lesson I hoped the kids would take away from the exhibition was that we need to fight racism, prejudice and persecution wherever and whenever we encounter it. They viewed with horror and disbelief the pictures of skeletal victims of Dr. Josef Mengele's twins experiments and the pits of bodies discovered by the British at Bergen-Belsen. Reportedly, some even fainted. As docents, we tried to impress on them that Hitler didn't come into power and create the death camps straight away. The road to Auschwitz was gradual and insidious. He started off targeting the weakest in society, for example, by sterilizing the mentally and physically disabled. When this met with no protest, it became easier to move on to the next step, killing them. The rest, as they say, is history — unfortunately, a history that goes on repeating itself.

That leads to the third and perhaps most important lesson: None of us can afford to be bystanders. As Albert Einstein said, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing." Be it seeing someone being bullied in the hallway at school or watching Muslims being incarcerated without due process, we have a responsibility to stand up and be counted. Otherwise we share culpability with the perpetrators.

By the time you read this, I'll be in Vilnius, Lithuania, on a mission to help children at a Jewish school there, kids who come from homes that lack emotional support as well as material requirements. That there are Jews in Vilnius (once known as "The Jerusalem of Lithuania") at all is a miracle; the Nazis murdered 90 percent of the nation's Jewish population during World War II.

We owe it to their memory, and that of those killed in more recent examples of genocide, to teach our children the lessons of history.

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