

## ***An Appreciative Teacher***

Recently, I assumed the role of a reluctant teacher. I am involved in an organization called Days of Remembrance. This marvelous group was started by some retired non-Jewish history teachers who were amazed that their students knew little or nothing about the Holocaust. The organization has grown and sponsor an essay contest for middle and high schoolers throughout North Central Pennsylvania with respect to the Holocaust. I have worked to keep the organization focused on the fact that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish experience, even though there are many other people in the world who have and continue to suffer from attempts at annihilation.

One of the teachers, whose students submitted many excellent essays, teaches in the Montoursville School District outside of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. This small community is known to most people as the place where many students were from who died on Flight 800 on a high school trip to France.

The teacher at Montoursville Middle School, whose students showed great interest in Holocaust studies, told me of his difficulty in finding survivors to talk to the students. They are either dead or sufficiently elderly that a trip to North Central Pennsylvania would be difficult. Some of the survivors can be accessed thanks to Zoom.

This teacher had a different idea. He wanted the next generation to come in and talk about the survivors and victims in their own families. This would enable the students to relate to a real living person, but still hear and hopefully understand the genocide practiced against the Jewish people.

I was very reluctant to become involved in this enterprise. I thought that I would not ever be able to reach any of these middle schoolers, that they really would not care a whit about this issue and that they might even be disrespectful. I agreed because of duty, perhaps due to the good work of Days of Remembrance and a personal appreciation for this middle school history teacher who is trying so hard.

I spoke to over 100 kids, I really have no idea how many, over the course of several hours, spending approximately an hour with each group.

The experience was remarkable, heartwarming and extremely rewarding. I could not help but think that the exercise in talking about my family history may have been just as important for me to relate as for the students to hear.

I began by explaining my own roots as an American born and raised in the New York Metropolitan area. I have spent now the majority of my life in and around Williamsport where I have practiced law. My wife is a farmgirl, and my mother spent part of her youth on a dairy farm. It was an intermarriage between city and country.

My grandmother and her husband were the lucky ones. They left Poland before World War II because Gramma's father remarried after the death of his first wife. The

new wife was not interested in having the children from the first marriage around. Such was often the case in the culture of the time.

Pauline, Pesal in Yiddish, grew up on a farm and my Grandfather, Yehezkel, Charles, was a silversmith. They were simple hardworking people who made a new life for themselves in the United States.

World War II decimated the Schneps family. My grandmother's brother Abraham was the only survivor from her generation. This was a large family, which at times may have had 8-10 kids per family. Abraham also had a large family and two of his sons survived; Shia who came to the United States, and Joseph who traveled with his father Abraham and Abraham's second wife, Rachel, to the land of Israel. I explained to the students that when my mother tried to bring Abraham and Joseph's family to the United States, like she had with Shia Schneps and his family, Abraham and Joseph refused. They would not take the money and they made it clear that they had survived Hitler, may his name be erased, Stalin and internment camps. They would live or die in the land of Israel.

I am sure it was a surprise to the Montoursville students to learn that half the Jewish world is of European ancestry, but the other half is from North Africa, Ethiopia, the Middle East and beyond. In 1948, three years after the Holocaust in Europe, all of those Sephardic Jews had to face expulsion or personal danger. Though the Jews of North Africa often times lived in poverty and in ghettos, they could live so long as they were willing to be subservient to Islam.

Abraham became religious and settled in the Holy City of Sfat. I showed the middle schoolers pictures of me with Uncle Abraham when I was 19 years of age. Joseph and his family lived in Hadera. When they first arrived in Israel, they lived in a tent city. I explained to my audience that the United States and other countries turned away the Jews. Israel was blockaded, preventing immigrants from entering. Even during 1948, while Israel's war for independence was raging, Western nations including the United States imposed a military embargo against Israel. It was at that time that Israel lost half its physical mandate to the Holy Land.

In our discussion we touched upon not only the history of World War II, but also current events. My essential message was the importance of making moral decisions. One of the most interesting components of World War II was that in some countries like Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy and one island in Greece, the Jews for the most part survived the death camps in Germany and Poland simply because the local populous or an important leader was uncooperative with the Germans. That was not the case in neighboring countries like Poland and Ukraine which eagerly joined in the annihilation of the Jewish people. Why did some people fail to cooperate with the Germans and why were others so eager to cooperate?

I could not answer the question for the students, but I could reinforce with them the importance of moral decisions. Sometimes a moral decision is simply a failure to join a lynch mob. Many of the people who aided the Jews or refused to participate in the Holocaust, had no power, money or arms. What they had was the ability to be uncooperative with those who sought to spill the blood of Jews remaining in Europe. It is

important to keep in mind that by 1492 Jews had been murdered or expelled from all of Western Europe starting with England, France, and Spain. The Holocaust perpetrated by the Germans effectively starting in 1938 was simply the rest of the story, whereby the “final” solution would be effectuated. That would be the complete and utter destruction of Jews in Europe, both eastern and western Europe.

Most enjoyable about the experience of teaching the middle schoolers and showing the PowerPoint, was how interested all the students appeared. They paid attention, asked good questions and showed an amazing knowledge of history. I am delighted to have met all these young people and their teacher. There indeed is hope for the next generation.

In the last few days, I received a batch of letters from their teacher and the students. They were heartwarming beyond measure. One of them reminded me of my statement that, “guns kill but moral decisions save lives.”

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire  
Rieders, Travis, Dohrmann, Mowrey  
Humphrey & Waters  
161 West Third Street  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)  
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

*Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.*