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STUDENTS GAIN UNDERSTANDING OF HOLOCAUST TO BETTER CARE FOR SURVIVOR PATIENTS

By Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter - November 24, 2015

Nechama Surik, centre, shows the accordion a survivor entrusted to her, to Shadd principal Roma Medwid and Thomas Hecht JANICE ARNOLD PHOTO

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http://www.cjnews.com/living-jewish/health/students-gain-understanding-of-holocaust-to-better-care-for-survivor-patients
Nursing training and Holocaust education just don’t seem to go together, and that was Yad Vashem’s initial reaction when Nechama Surik applied to attend its annual seminar for overseas educators this summer.

But Yad Vashem, the renowned Holocaust institute in Jerusalem, didn’t realize how determined this Montrealer, a practical nurse who teaches at an adult vocational centre, could be.

Fortunately, Thomas and Riva Hecht understood. The couple – he a child survivor – have for the past decade provided full scholarships every year to local deserving educators who want to initiate or improve their teaching of the Holocaust. Most come from regular public schools.

Surik saw the pressing need to give her students in the health-care assistants program at Shadd Health and Business Centre, an English Montreal School Board (EMSB) institution, an understanding of the Holocaust in order to better care for their Jewish clients who are survivors.

These elderly people, especially when suffering from dementia, often behave in ways that perplex health care workers, she said. Everyday events can trigger frightening memories, and they may refuse to take a shower, or they’ll hoard food or fear authority figures. Without knowing why they act this way, workers have difficulty handling the situation, she said.

Surik, an Israeli who has been living in Montreal for about 20 years, is familiar with these long-term effects. She comes from a family of survivors, and the Holocaust was central in her schooling. Nevertheless, she realized that this background did not equip her to teach the subject to her multicultural students.

Her three weeks of intensive study at Yad Vashem did. In fact, she said it “changed my life.”

On Nov. 4, with the wholehearted support of Shadd and EMSB officials, Surik gave the first lesson of the teaching unit she has developed on the Holocaust, the first of its kind in any vocational school program in the province.

A roomful of women and men in scrubs listened attentively, hoping to gain information they will need working in hospitals and nursing homes.

They are training to be PABs (préposés aux bénéficiaires), the official job title of nursing aides in Quebec, in a 750-hour program. Many will do their internship at the Jewish General Hospital, Maimonides Geriatric Centre or Jewish Eldercare Centre.
Surik plans to devote six hours of classroom time to the topic, with additional instruction during fieldwork. She has had to start from the basics of World War II, working up to describing a post-traumatic disorder of a very particular sort.

It’s not all theory. Surik will also provide her students with practical ways of caring for survivors and interacting with their families.

“It’s a challenge to introduce this to a very diverse class of adults, but at Yad Vashem, I got the tools and confidence I needed to do the work,” she said. “If my students are not aware of the horrors that many of our clients went through, how will they be able to care for this person and deal with the issue compassionately?”

An enthusiastic educator, Surik departed from her overhead projection to unexpectedly pull out an old accordion and play a few bars.

Although she lost her hearing as a child, Surik never gave up her love of the squeeze-box. The instrument is meaningful to her, not only because those of its vintage have a sound that newer ones can’t equal, but for the reason she came to own it.

The accordion belonged to a survivor, living in a home. “She said to me, take care of it. She thinks that she and her family survived, because she entertained the Nazis playing it,” Surik said.

The students also heard from Hecht, 86, who gave a brief account of his life on the run after the Nazis invaded his native Czechoslovakia. He was expelled from school and his family lost their property.

“The Holocaust was unique form of genocide because the Germans wanted to eliminate a part of the human race, namely the Jews, wherever they were,” he said.

Their flight took them from Budapest to Paris and then Portugal, before the family managed to get a visa to Canada, arriving in Montreal on Dec. 31, 1941.

Surik’s initiative was praised by Roma Medwid, principal of Shadd, which has about 560 students.

She said it would sensitize future health care workers to the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust and its survivors, and allow them to better serve their clients.
EMSB chair Angela Mancini could testify to that. A health-care professional, she used to work at CLSC René-Cassin in Côte St. Luc, which had many Jewish clients. “During the ice storm of many years ago [1998], we went into the homes of the elderly with uniformed police officers. It’s a mistake we should never have made,” she said.

The uniforms frightened some of them, for reasons the CLSC staff did not understand. “You cannot help anyone,” Mancini told the students, “unless you understand their culture and background.”

A special guest was Israeli Consul General Ziv Nevo Kulman, introduced by EMSB spokesperson Michael Cohen as the first envoy from that country to visit an EMSB school.

Nevo Kulman said he was intrigued by the idea of Holocaust education for nursing assistants, and now sees that the connection makes a lot of sense. He has a “soft spot” for nurses, because both his grandmothers were nurses, and he is the son of a Holocaust survivor.

The Holocaust, he admits, was a subject he was reluctant to hear about in his youth, despite that heritage.

With Montreal home to the third-largest survivor community in the world, after New York and Tel Aviv, such a course is vital, he indicated.

Shadd assistant principal Maria Caldarella believes Surik’s course will benefit not only her class, but all students and staff at Shadd – and, indeed, the broader community.

Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter