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FIRST CLASSROOM HOLOCAUST MUSEUM IN CROATIA

The idea of using paper clips in the design of museums is not new. Eleven years ago students and teachers of the *U.S. Whitwell Middle School* began their school Paperclip project. They wanted to educate stu-



dents to make a difference in the world of human rights; they used the Holocaust as the theme for their lesson. In the Holocaust people were murdered because they were different from those in power. The project grew and now the whole Whitwell community now has a museum in a railway car that once transported victims to their death. The predominantly white Christian community in Whitwell Middle School had the opportunity to learn about the Holocaust from survivors, to hear their testimony, and to learn lessons from them for the next generation. *Wayne MacIntyre* made a similar project two years ago in *Herring Cove Junior High School in Halifax*. His idea was to find a symbolic way to talk about this horrible event. His environment was also like Whitwell – a white, predominantly Christian community with few links to the Jews or the Holocaust. He expanded upon the Whit-

well model. He created a Holocaust museum in his own classroom. There were displays on all four walls and outside in the hallway. The central display was the 100 000 paper clips suspended in chains from the ceiling; each paper clip represented one person from the Holocaust. In this way, he helped his students understand the magnitude of the loss of life.

Our Croatian story is a little bit different. While North America participated in the Second World War by sending its soldiers to war, our region directly participated in the war and in the Holocaust.

Last summer I was a scholar of the Croatian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. For two weeks I participated in the International Institute for Holocaust Studies at **Yad Vashem** in Jerusalem. I selected a lecture by Mr. MacIntyre because I was interested in creative applications of knowledge about the Holocaust in teaching history. I immediately promised that I would bring this project to Croatia.

There were many steps involved in making the project a reality. I had to design the project in which I included the specifics of Croatian history, the Holocaust and some current world problems. So, I offered the project "*Study on Human Rights based on the Holocaust*" to school administration and students. It was quite easy to animate Students because

they are interested in topics that offer a shift away from traditional, daily school activities. On the other side, for school administration it was important not to have additional costs.

The general plan was to work with students on the topic of human rights, to use the Holocaust as an example of an extreme event that negated human rights, and then to bring more attention to current problems such as hunger, child labor and the use of child soldiers. We started the project in September last year and we set the goal to open the museum with the presentation of our work on International Holocaust Remembrance Day on the 27th of January 2009. The main part of the museum was 100,000 paperclips that represented the victims of the Holocaust. For our ambitious goal, we had less than five months time and had to work very hard.



We began to collect paperclips at the end of September. To attract more attention to our action we started a weblog, and Facebook group and we began to issue (photocopy) our fanzine (news letter like this one). Students were interested in the project, and especially delighted when they started to receive the first envelopes with let-



dents becoming teachers on this topic, because most children learn best from peers. Cabinets with photos and text were divided into the pre-war period, anti-Semitism,

These objects included an old camera, a phone, broken glass as a symbol of Kristallnacht, a travel bag, a bunch of shoes, stars of David, a rice bowl as a symbol of the daily allowable amount of food, a model of the concentration camp Auschwitz, etc.

On the day of opening we hosted many people including the Israeli Ambassador *Shmuel Meïrom*, and as a special guest, *Oto Konstein*. He held a special lecture with students involved in the project in which he described his fate in the Holocaust. He then took time to answer their questions. His testimony was recorded and was distributed on DVD to all of the teachers (30 of them) in our Medjmurje County.

ters and paperclips. We were always looking for at least one box of paperclips as a sign of support. I have to admit that public interest was not too big but the media gave us more attention only after we collected over the desired number of paperclips. I have to emphasize that we were extremely pleased to receive a letter of support from Croatian President, *Stjepan Mešić*.

In November we started corresponding with *Oto Konstein* who lost

concentration camps and ghettos, the Independent State of Croatia, Hope (Righteous among the Nations and the creation of Israel), Ecumenism, today's Issues on Human Rights and children, the Diary of our project, and of course some of the letters of support, leaving space for comments.

By the opening of the museum we were able to collect **153,000 paperclips**. They were connected to form chains in such a way that the part of the story of the Holocaust had only plain, gray paperclips. In the other areas we had colorful chains that represented the diversity of normal life.

During February the Museum was visited by groups of students from various schools and they pointed out their desire to work on similar projects in their schools. Currently I am working with students to convert the museum into a mobile exhibit. We are planning to show the exhibition in late May in the museum of the concentration camp, Jasenovac. The exhibition will be bilingual so we will be able to present our work to visitors who do not speak Croatian. **Since the project is still in progress I cannot give any final comment or conclusion.**

Here we do not have enough space for explaining of the exhibition. I need to point out a few details. For example, the difference from the pre-war stories

Sadly I have to admit that we have a number of people that are Holocaust deniers and some even attacked me in online articles. In any case, I believe that the work on the project was instructive for me as a teacher, as well as for students who participated.

Send your comments to our web page www.classroom-holocaust-museum.com or e-mails to *Miljenko Hajdarović* at urednik@povijest.net

his father, mother and sister in Auschwitz. It was interesting to observe the development of students' ideas about how to edit our museum using the small free space available in the school. We had a small room with a dozen cabinets used as storage for old books and teaching materials. During the autumn months we decided to use the cabinets so that each of them could be dedicated to telling one story. Twenty-five students were divided into teams to work on their stories. With the help of available literature and the Internet, each team worked on its story and relayed their experience to other teams. Already at that level I noticed a great potential when students were working as teachers as they spread the knowledge about certain topics. This was also the pedagogical goal - stu-

and the Holocaust was that in the first pictures we can see the family before the war and isolated children without parents in the Holocaust. We placed some photos of camp inmates into paperclips chains. In one part there were special triangle labels for types of camp inmates. In each cabinet students placed an object that was associated with the event portrayed in that cabinet.



Written by Miljenko Hajdarovic