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## **Understanding the Holocaust**

By Gregory Trotter

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Lessons from history's pages can fade and yellow with time.

But if those lessons become living metaphors by which we measure ourselves—they will never lose relevance.

That is just part of what two southwest Missouri teachers learned last summer at a seminar in New York on understanding, writing and teaching about the Holocaust.

Thomas Maerke, an eighth-grade teacher at Pleasant View Middle School, and Larry Neuburger, an English teacher at Miller High School, were among 20 teachers selected nationally to participate. For two weeks, they engaged in writing exercises, listened to concentration camp survivors describe their experiences and learned more about Jewish heritage.

Next month, Neuburger and Maerke will host a workshop for area teachers to share what they learned and have implemented into their classrooms. The workshop will mostly draw teachers affiliated with the Ozark Writing Project, an extension of the National Writing Project.

The point?

“To take an event from history and help the students internalize that,” Neuburger said. “To get them to look beyond their selves.”

It's no easy task to get teens to internalize a horrendous event, and to understand and accept the differences of others, Neuburger said. The seminar—hosted by the Holocaust Education Network in collaboration with the National Writing Project—gave them some tools to help.

### **Student research**

After lunch Friday, about 20 boisterous eighth-grade boys and girls piled into Maerke's classroom for an exploratory class on the Holocaust and World War II. He put them to work researching specific topics such as the Chelmno camp, Kristallnacht and the Manhattan Project.

Maerke's plan is for the students to research general context and then, gradually, in his words—“put some skin on it.”

In a couple of weeks, they will be assigned an identity—provided by the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum—of a real child who lived in the Holocaust years. They will first get to know their identity before the war, when they were normal children living normal lives. Based on research, each student will assume the identity and journal as if living in Germany in the 1930s.

“You have to make it personal,” Maerke said. “Facts, maps, numbers—they’ll forget all that.”

Toward the end of the unit, it will be revealed to each student what happened to their identity.

Maerke will then draw parallels between the Holocaust and atrocities of more recent times, such as Darfur, Rwanda and Bosnia.

This can be difficult given the various maturity levels of a group of eighth-graders, Maerke admitted. Many of the boys are drawn to the more glorified aspects of war, like battles and military technology.

A few of them seemed to be ahead of the lesson plan, though. Zach Marlar, 14, took note that Hitler employed 14-year-old boys in his army.

“They would take them from their families,” he said, eyes wide, “and they would never see them again.”

One of Marlar’s peers drew a parallel close to home—the Japanese-American internment camps of the 1940s.

“It’s all about blaming someone who’s different than you for your problems,” said Aaron Collier, 14.

The girls in Maerke’s classroom seemed more interested in what happened in the concentration camps and why.

“The basic goal is for them to understand that the identities of others are equally important to their own,” Maerke said.

### **Different worlds**

Though both fairly new to teaching, Maerke and Neuburger come from different worlds.

Reared in New Orleans, the 27-year-old Maerke is accustomed to ethnic diversity. He studied Greek and Hebrew at Evangel University and is working on his thesis for a master’s degree in education.

Through Holocaust studies, Maerke hopes to bring cultural understanding to Pleasant View’s mostly white student population.

Neuburger, a 54-year-old Springfield native, worked at a bearing factory in Joplin and other odd jobs until his two children were older. He went back to school in 2002 to get a degree in manufacturing technology. In 2005, he took his education a step further by getting his master’s degree in education from Missouri State.

He had always admired teachers, and now he finally was one.

In stark contrast to Maerke, Neuburger said he had never met a Jewish person until the seminar in New York and had struggled with his own German ancestry.

His grandparents came from Germany in 1917, and his grandfather was born on the same day as Hitler in a town just 48 miles away.

"I never understood how people, with the same blood that runs through me, could perpetuate such horrendous acts," Neuburger said.

### **Blog Interaction**

Since returning from the seminar, Neuburger has created a blog for his students to interact with students in McCool Junction, Neb. Both classes will read "Night" by Elie Wiesel and respond to their reading on the blog. By interacting with students they don't know, he said, they will be writing and thinking out of their comfort zone.

"I want them to understand that the world is much bigger than Miller, Missouri," Neuburger said.

He can dig a little deeper with older students. He poses difficult questions of moral culpability: Were the train conductors who drove the Jews to concentration camps responsible for their deaths? What about the people living in nearby town who did nothing?

These moral dilemmas persist in our everyday lives, he said.

"Good and evil is not always so cut and dry," Neuburger said. "I want my students to think for themselves, determine what is right and be able to make a stand."

### **Want to go?**

The Workshop on Holocaust teaching and writing will be 9 a.m. to noon Oct. 25 at Pummill Hall at Missouri State University.

For more information, contact Keri Franklin, director of the Ozarks Writing Project, by phone at 836-3732 or by email at [owp@missouristate.edu](mailto:owp@missouristate.edu).

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- Larry Neuburger, Miller High English teacher whose grandparents immigrated from Germany in 1917