

My Academic Journey



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About eight years ago, I started on a journey here at Vanier as I became the Coordinator of the Vanier College Symposium on the Holocaust and Genocide. Given the fact that I was fairly new to the college, I wasn't sure about taking this on. As it turns out, saying yes to the symposium has allowed me to grow as a colleague, teacher, and (as corny as that sounds) as a human being.

These experiential opportunities have helped students develop nuanced perspectives contextualized by the complexity of antisemitism experienced both during the Holocaust and in our current, contemporary context.

A couple of years ago, it was the symposium's 25th anniversary, and I knew we had to do something that represented the fact that Vanier College was the only Cegep in Quebec devoting one week to the idea of Holocaust and genocide education. I had approached the Honorable Professor Irwin Cotler (Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, an Emeritus Professor of Law at McGill University, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada and longtime Member of Parliament, and an international human rights lawyer) to be our Honorary Chairman. I then con-

tacted Dr. Charles Asher Small (a Vanier graduate) and asked him to be our Keynote speaker. Dr. Small is the Founding Director of the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP), which he began at Yale University and later, Stanford University. ISGAP's mission is to explore antisemitism within a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework from an array of approaches and

perspectives as well as global, national and regional contexts and therefore, Dr. Small's work fit very well within the mandate of the symposium. Dr. Small's credentials after leaving Vanier are impressive as he went on to graduate with a BA in Political Science from McGill University, an M.Sc. in Urban Development Planning in Economics, Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London, and a Doctorate of

Philosophy (D.Phil), St. Antony's College, Oxford University. Dr. Small accepted my invitation. The following year, he became the Honorary Chairman for the symposium. This began my journey of learning about contemporary antisemitism.

Last summer, I applied for the ISGAP-Oxford Summer Institute for Curriculum Development in Critical Studies in Contemporary Antisemitism. I was surprised and honoured to be accepted as a scholar-in-residence alongside 34 other professors from all

over the world. The participants in this two-week conference were impressive, and I was seated with highly accomplished scholars. The calibre of speakers that we heard was remarkable; we received the most up-to-date information on topics such as the Middle East and Israel, Nigeria and Boko Haram, the new Polish “Holocaust Law” and resistance to it, Russia and Ukraine, and so on. We attended classes from 9 in the morning, and sometimes we were there until 10 at night. The experience was quite intense, but the result was that all 35 of us formed a tight-knit group that got along so well! As a matter of fact, I get emails every day from at least one of the other participants. We are very active on our Facebook page, posting articles and stories that we think others might enjoy. Before getting a diploma from the summer institute, every professor had to present a course outline dealing with contemporary antisemitism from their specific domains. I presented a course outline for the course, *Integrative Project (IP)*, using the topic of antisemitism. I will be teaching this course in the Fall of 2019.

The scourge of global antisemitism is a significant threat to basic democratic values and human decency. According to a report from B’nai Brith Canada (Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, 2016), there were 1,728-recorded antisemitic acts last year in Canada, up from 1,277 in 2015. This is the highest number the group has seen since it began monitoring antisemitism in Canada in 1982. Research

suggests that all forms of hatred are on the rise in both Canada and the U.S. According to the Anti-Defamation League (2015), 3,800,000 people in Canada harbour antisemitic attitudes. According to Statistics Canada (2017), there were more hate crimes in the province of Quebec in 2015 than in 2014. Additionally, Jewish students across the U.S. and Canada are feeling increasingly unsafe due to a marked rise in the level of antisemitism on college campuses (Pollack, 2011).

The Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study (2018) found that 22% of U.S. millennials haven’t heard of or are not sure if they have heard of the Holocaust. Two-thirds of American millennials couldn’t identify what Auschwitz is. Yet 93% of these same millennials feel that more about the Holocaust should be taught. These statistics are shocking but maybe not surprising. As fewer people are learning about the Holocaust, the rate of Holocaust denial is increasing; due to the reach of communication platforms on the internet, the proliferation of such ideas is expanding (Darnell, 2010). In learning all of this, it has become increasingly important to me that I continue to draw attention to both the Holocaust and to antisemitism, more broadly.

Several years ago, I created an educational trip with Kelly Purdy called the *Moral Responsibility and Global Citizenship Trip*. In our



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first year, we went to Austria and Italy. While in Europe, students got to see remnants of the Holocaust (like Mauthausen Concentration Camp), but also, we had many visits to contextualize the information. Our visits included a reception with the Canadian Ambassador to Austria at the Ambassador's residence; a tour of Magda's Hotel (run by refugees in Austria); a meeting with Niklas Frank, son of former Nazi, Hans Frank, who was sentenced to death by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg; and a visit to the Vatican with Father Norbert Hoffmann (Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews Vatican City). The following year, we took students to Greece. A goal of this trip was to educate the students about Greece's history during the Second World War. Most students do not know this history, which is especially relevant given that 94% of Greek Jews died during the Holocaust. Greece is still considered to be one of the most antisemitic countries in the world according to the latest research conducted by the Anti-Defamation League in 2014.

These experiential opportunities have helped students develop nuanced perspectives contextualized by the complexity of antisemitism experienced both during the Holocaust and in our current, contemporary context. The educational objectives for the trip were as follows:

- 1) Become more aware of the civic and moral responsibilities we all have as members of the global community. This includes having students cultivate virtues (ethics, responsibility, tolerance, and respect for one another);
- 2) Develop stronger cognitive skills, including critical thinking and the ability to think analytically;
- 3) Develop a global perspective (intellectual and cultural experience through active engagement with historical events and how they continue to impact our modern world);
- 4) Prepare for lifelong learning.

When we started out on the trip, the students are often insecure and their knowledge quite limited, but by the end of our journey together, they were more confident in travelling and in each other, and their knowledge about the topics increased dramatically. They truly come out of their little Vanier bubble, and it was wonderful to see!

Since the summer at Oxford in 2018, I've experienced a renewed sense of purpose as an educator. As I watch antisemitism continuing to rally support, I feel that drawing attention to this cause is vitally important. We see evidence of this when we see a gunman going into a synagogue in Pittsburgh during the Sabbath, killing 11 Jewish people, and we see it again when we look at the relentless attacks on Jewish people in Europe (in France, England, and Belgium, to name a few). We even see antisemitism expressing itself at home: Robert Gosselin was recently arrested in Montreal after he posted on Le Devoir's website in October that he wanted to go into a Jewish school and kill as many Jewish children as possible.

So how do I, as a Vanier teacher, shine a spotlight on this oldest form of hatred? Firstly, the curriculum for the IP course on antisemitism that I sketched out at Oxford will be taught in the fall of 2019. It will incorporate much of the knowledge I gleaned from the Oxford University conference. Secondly, Kelly and I have written a proposal to turn our *Moral Responsibility Trip* into a universal complementary course. Thirdly, Grace Valiante and I have written a SSHRC research proposal called "Online Antisemitism: Use of Explicit and Implicit Language and its Implications on Pedagogy." This is being undertaken with partners such as the University of Postdam, the University of Haifa, the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy, Hillel Montreal, The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, and LEARN Quebec. We are working with a German linguist who has been able to isolate online antisemitism down to its language and then conduct qualitative and quantitative analysis on it. We will then develop strategies to counter online antisemitism; always, we will develop approaches to integrating this knowledge into our course design and teaching practices. A great deal of work has already been done, but this is an ongoing conversation, a conversation of the greatest importance. How do we, as educators, engage our students in ways that will help them become morally responsible citizens of the world?



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