

## Gala marks 10th anniversary of Hecht Holocaust education scholarship



From left, Concordia professor Frank Chalk, Thomas and Riva Hecht, and scholarship winners Lev Berner and Nechama Surik.

By Joel Goldenberg  
The Suburban

A gala event was held last Wednesday at the Gelber Centre to mark the 10th anniversary of a program that sends Quebec educators to Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, to train them to teach local students about the Holocaust.

The Teaching of the Holocaust for Educators is made possible by the Riva and Thomas O. Hecht Scholarship Program. During the evening, scholarships were awarded to teachers for the upcoming trip to Yad Vashem, where they will undergo training for three weeks.

"You're doing something for humanity, which will prevent what has happened in the past," Thomas Hecht, a child survivor of the Holocaust, told the teachers who have gone and are going to Yad Vashem. "You will be responsible for having taught that lesson to the future generations. Riva and I wish to thank you for the attention you are paying, for the goodness of humankind."

Hecht told *The Suburban* that the program has been exceptionally successful.

"The experiences they came back with from Israel, which they share with their fellow educators, has improved the knowledge of what the Holocaust was all about, both in the student population and among their colleagues," he said. "I wanted to do something after I learned there was such little historical knowledge in the school system of not only the Holocaust, but of events in general. I felt it was essential that for 'never again' to be 'never again,' people should know what happened."

Teachers who take part in the program include those from the English Montreal School Board and the Lester B. Pearson School Board, which collaborate in inviting teachers to submit applications for the program.

"The teachers come back and integrate what they learned at Yad Vashem into the actual curriculums," said EMSB spokesman Mike Cohen. "The success stories have been numerous because we have schools, particularly in the East End where there's no Jewish kids, and they're being taught about the Holocaust, Israel and racism."

One of the new scholarship winners, science and ethics teacher Lev Berner of Vincent Massey Collegiate, said he applied because of the importance of Holocaust education.

"There are very few Jews in Canada who don't have a large chunk of their family tree completely destroyed because of the Holocaust," he told *The Suburban*. "I've had the opportunity to hear the testimony of survivors, but unfortunately, as the years go on, first-hand testimony is becoming more rare. As curriculums are going to larger themes and less specifics, Holocaust education is becoming less and less prevalent in Quebec schools. If I can be somebody who becomes more educated and a second-hand purveyor of information, we can do our best to make sure what happened in the Holocaust, the reasons behind it and the ways to prevent it, can still be taught."

Other scholarship winners this year are Marie Francis of John Grant High School and Nechama Surik of Shadd Health and Business Centre. Past scholarship recipients Anne Edgar and Gina Lavine told of their experiences in the program.

Riva Hecht told those attending that plans call for an expansion of the program, including the acceptance of applications from CEGEP and university teachers.

Yaron Ashkenazi, executive director of the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem, thanked the Hechts for the program.

"What we see here is something you should be very proud of, and this is a closing of the circle in the belief and understanding that you have to give back to the community and you have a mission to send educators, most of whom are not Jewish, so they better understand what happened in that period, and how it's important to educate the present and future generations."

Guest speaker and Concordia history professor Frank Chalk, an expert on genocides, praised the scholarship program and spoke about past, lesser known, genocides.

"Today, ISIS and al-Qaeda not only pose threats to cultures and the destruction of cultural treasures of the past, but they also threaten the resumption of genocide against minorities in the Middle East. I say to those of you who are teachers learning about the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, Holocaust education has a vital role to play in preventing future genocides."

"You are, and will be in the future, agents of change and the force for good in realizing the potential of 'never again' for all of humanity. Let's go forward together to reach that goal." ■

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