

3GNY Group Discussion: Defining the Legacy April 26, 2006

3GNY's discussion, "Defining the Legacy," followed Makor's "Asking the Survivors" program. Makor's program was a panel discussion led by two journalists (Liel Liebowitz with the Jewish Week and Gabrielle Birkner with the New York Sun) who interviewed two survivors who have recently written their memoirs: Aharon Golub, author of the memoir "Kaddishel: A Life Reborn"; Fanya Gottesfeld Heller, author of "Love in a World of Sorrow: A Teenage Girl's Holocaust Memoirs."

After the program ended, we moved to Makor's reading room to discuss the program we had just seen, as well as a range of other issues dealing with the legacy, such as:

1. Leading a Jewish life
2. Educating others about the Holocaust
3. Reconciliation and
4. Fighting Hate

1. We started by touching on the importance of passing on our Jewish heritage. This aspect of the legacy was stressed by both Aharon and Fanya in the earlier discussion. We acknowledged that the most fundamental way we can pass on our grandparents' legacy is for us to maintain a Jewish life - which is what others died for. Our Jewish identity can be a very personal thing, but no matter how observant we choose to be, we should understand, and pass on our Jewish heritage - the history, culture and traditions. The importance of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) was also discussed.

2. We discussed the role of education in the legacy. We felt that, if we're to educate others about the Holocaust, it's important to provide a clear picture of Jewish life before the Holocaust - to show not only how Europe's Jews died, but also how they lived. It's vital to provide context to the Holocaust by describing the marginalization of Jews throughout Europe and how treatment of Jews varied from nation to nation. In general, we need to explain how the Holocaust was the culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism directed against Europe's Jews.

So that we'll be better able to educate others on the myriad facets of the Holocaust, we have to educate ourselves first. We discussed several ways we can do this: books, documentaries, local museums, online research and Holocaust Certification courses offered locally. We agreed that we shouldn't take for granted that we know enough about the Holocaust.

3. The issue of reconciliation was brought up by Isaac, a survivor from Latvia, who was kind enough to join our discussion. Moving to Germany after the war, he had a positive experience and now stresses the importance of not generalizing the German people. He observed that Israeli Jews have a more positive view of Germans than do American Jews.

It was noted that Germany is a close ally of Israel, still pays reparations and Germans are educated and reflective of the Holocaust. However, it was also mentioned that Germans could be doing much more in leading the effort to combat European anti-Semitism, especially at the grass-roots level.

4. The need to stop the genocide in Darfur only underscores the importance of our telling the story of the Holocaust. By learning what happened to the Jews 60 years ago, we can watch out for some of the same warning signs - political, ideological, and economic - in other places. When educating young people today about the Holocaust, we should be sure to discuss how and where genocide has occurred in the decades since, and make sure to discuss the crisis in Darfur.

The concept of future generations taking action was echoed in the panel discussion earlier. In response to a question about one of the lessons she would like to impart to our generation, Fanya Gottesfeld Heller said it's important that we do not become perpetrators or victims, but just as important, we should never become bystanders.