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# Bildner Center explores popular culture and public images of the Holocaust

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Sharp intakes of breath stirred the air of the conference room at Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life as the colorful slide flashed onto the screen.

The shocking image there was "Lego Concentration Camp," Polish artist Zbigniew Libera's 1996 evocation of the horror of the Holocaust, perversely translated into the idiom of a child's toy.

"This benign, beloved toy has within it the potential, in evil hands, to turn into something hideously evil," said Norman Kleebatt, Susan and Elihu Rose Curator of Fine Arts at the Jewish Museum in New York, as he addressed the 10 high school teachers sitting around the conference table.

"[Libera] built it, photographed it, and packaged it…to create this toy that is no longer a toy — a toy that's transformed, a toy that tells us what can happen when minds become evil," Kleebatt said. "And yet he makes it very seductive and seemingly innocent.

"How can you buy this?" he asked, confronting the question of acquiring such a work of art for his museum. "But we must have it, in terms of its teaching potential."

And that was at the heart of the teachers' interest in attending the early April workshop — exploring the teaching potential of popular culture in reaching their students with lessons about the Holocaust.

The two-part series, From Museums to Comic Books: Images of the Holocaust in the Public Sphere, was sponsored by the Bildner Center and its Herbert and Leonard Littman Families Holocaust Resource Center, with additional funding from Dr. Theodore and Eva Stahl of Highland Park.

"I think it's very important for students to know about it," Theodore Stahl said in an interview. "We're becoming one of the last generations that remembers the actual Holocaust. I think it's very important for us to help educate students about what happened and how people have responded, so this should not happen again."

In addition to Kleebatt's slide presentation on the response of contemporary artists to Nazi imagery and evil, the first workshop featured an overview of the collection at New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage by Ilana Abramovitch, manager of curriculum there.

The second workshop, in mid-April, offered two more views of popular culture vis-a-vis the Holocaust — an examination of images in comic books and graphic novels by Laurence Roth, a fellow at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and images on television by Jeffrey Shandler, assistant professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers and acting director of the Bildner Center.

“There’s been a lot of coverage recently of the Jewish connection to comic books and the connection to Holocaust survivors, like Maus,” said Karen Small, associate director of the Bildner Center, referring to Maus: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History, a history in comic-book form by Art Spiegelman.

“It just really caught my attention,” she said in an interview. “Comic books might be a way for teachers to get the attention of kids. That’s where it started — comic books and popular culture and TV, the whole idea of how teachers can use popular culture as a vehicle for bringing this topic into the classroom.”

As the workshop got under way, Shandler encouraged the teachers to become more aware of references to the Holocaust in popular culture. “What we’re going to do is to look at how the Holocaust figures in the public sphere, and how we see this all connecting with what you do in the classroom,” he said. “The Holocaust has an extensive, complicated, thought-provoking presence in public life in America that gets encountered on a regular basis.”

Abramovitch, in her slide presentation, exhibited some of the items in the collection of the Museum of Jewish Heritage that might resonate with high school students. “Every object tells a story,” she told the teachers. “Not only do you teach about the Holocaust, but you also assist students in becoming aware of how things are framed. In this way, they, too, can become more articulate about the visual culture that we’re all immersed in.”

The screen soon filled with a picture of Juden Rouse, a board game from 1938 Germany. “The aim of the game is to round up as many Jews as possible and to kick them out of town,” Abramovitch said. “Just looking at this object is a way for [students] to see how thoroughly the Nazi philosophy permeated the German society of the time.”

Another slide showed a Torah scroll that had been stolen by the Nazis for their proposed museum of the “extinct” Jewish race. “So,” said Abramovitch, “we’re very happy to have it in our museum, instead.”

Kleebatt exhibited images from the Jewish Museum’s 2002 exhibit “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery in Recent Art,” including pages from Spiegelman’s Maus, in which the Nazis are depicted as menacing felines and the Jews as rodents.

“Spiegelman’s work was a breakthrough in the way the Holocaust had been represented,” Kleebatt said. “As art related to the Holocaust, Maus crossed a sacred frontier. The world understood the irony of Jews being dealt with as rodents.”

Another item in the exhibit was “The Nazis of 1998” — a series of 164 photos of actors playing Nazi villains. “We see how many there are, and how these representations flood our lives and the lives of our children,” Kleebatt said.

And still another was Hebrew Lesson, a brief film by Boaz Arad that edits and splices documentary footage of Hitler’s public pronouncements in such a way that the sounds that come out of the Nazi leader’s mouth form the Hebrew words for “Hello, Jerusalem. I’m deeply sorry.”

“It’s repeated seven times, in almost liturgical mode,” Kleebatt said. “This is the kind of situation where the making of the art ended up as something that far exceeded the goals the artist had set for himself. How is it possible for this man to apologize? How is it possible for him to apologize in Hebrew? For a brief moment, Hebrew Lesson allows us to explore these possibilities, if only to become horrified by them.”

As the workshop ended, Jeff Kampf, a social studies teacher from Hillsborough High School, observed that today’s students are very visual, and you have to reach them at their own level — perhaps with such images as “Lego Concentration Camp.”

“That was a shocker,” said Kampf. “You didn’t know how to react to it. When students are unsure of how to react to something, when you’re able to stop students in their tracks and make them think about something, then you’re really a good teacher.

“That one slide is a visual to allow teachers to raise the bar,” he said. “You want them to think. This forces them to take the time to think. That’s my biggest challenge.”

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