

## 'We must never forget'

Written by Elizabeth Barrett  
Thursday, 20 December 2012 14:36 -

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### **Holocaust information brought into classroom before GHS students read memoir**

Students in Mary Clark's junior English class are reading *Night*, a memoir by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

But before they began, former Gothenburg High School language arts, history and psychology teacher Dennis VanOverbeke shared information about Adolf Hitler and World War II to help students more deeply understand the memoir.

Wiesel states in the book, "We must never forget." That is a sentiment shared by both Clark and VanOverbeke about the dark period of history.

"Wiesel explains that only through our understanding of the horrific atrocities of the Holocaust can we speak out and work to put a stop to genocide and hate crimes in general," Clark said.

VanOverbeke, who has lectured in Clark's classroom for nine years, started researching World War II and the Holocaust, in earnest after seeing a play, *The Train*, about a couple who lived through the Holocaust and reading other books about the time.

"The point of the play is to not forget that this happened in the world in the 1930s and 1940s," he said. "It did happen and to be silent is to put your head in the sand and pretend it didn't"

The teacher points out that attempts to wipe out cultures and people still happens today—in Iran, Iraq, China, Africa and other places.

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And that the United States, as a civilized country, cannot let that happen.

"We must stand up for ourselves and stand up and be heard," VanOverbeke said.

Some of what he shares with students includes:

that the swastika, a sign originating in 3,500 B.C., was placed on doors to keep evil away, as a curative right, once used as a logo by the Boy Scouts and in other ways until it was adopted as the emblem of the National Socialist German Workers party to emphasize the mythical Aryan-German relationship.

"Hitler captured the swastika and turned it into an evil," he said.

that Hitler's rise to power came after World War I when Germany's economy had collapsed and Germans were forced to pay for the war and give up part of their land.

**7 MAJOR EXTERMINATION CAMPS**

More than 3.2 million people (90% were estimated to have been Jews) were killed at these major extermination camps. These seven camps alone accounted for half the number of Jews killed in the entire Holocaust. Virtually the entire Jewish population of Poland died in these camps. Estimated numbers of people killed there are:

|                    |             |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Auschwitz-Birkenau | 1.4 million |
| Treblinka          | 970,000     |
| Belzec             | 500,000     |
| Sobibor            | 250,000     |
| Chelmo             | 150,000     |
| Majdanek           | 70,000      |
| Maly Trostenets    | 60,000      |

Hitler also used Auschwitz-Birkenau for medical experiments that included putting people in freezing water to see how long they could live, experimenting with organ transplants to see if dogs' hearts could be replaced with human ones, slitting people alive and using the skins as lamp shades, cutting open pregnant women to see if fetus would live. Hitler liked to do experiments on people with differences like twins and dwarfs.

Others were killed in mass open air shootings, worked to death, died of killer diseases that ravaged camps and ghettos and hundreds of thousands starved.

Source: Ananets.com and information shared by Dennis VanOverbeke

"People were sick and disillusioned and it was easy for anyone who had a message to step in and say he had an answer to the problems," VanOverbeke said, noting that the Nazi party promised stability, food and jobs.

Hitler, who was from Austria, drafted a blueprint, the Final Solution, to completely annihilate German Jews and conquer the world like Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte.

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that civil rights were suspended for Jews and others and all parties were banned except the Nazi Party. This made Hitler head of state and helped him develop the Hitler Youth Corps in which members were trained to become Nazis.

VanOverbeke said he tries to relate what happened to today's world.

For example, suspension of civil rights would mean people couldn't have guns and would be prohibited from voting if they are 18 or older.

that Henrich Himmler assumed command of the concentration camps and Josef Mengele was one of the most notorious doctors who carried out experiments (see box).

In 1941-44, the Nazis had six to seven extermination camps, 17 other major camps and about 1,500 satellite camps.

Something VanOverbeke does when he meets with students is to ask how many are blond-haired and blue-eyed. He tells them that particularly those with dark hair and eyes might have found themselves on a train bound for a concentration camp since they wouldn't meet the criteria for the Aryan or master race. Aryans had certain facial features that Hitler said were superior and made them natural leaders.

"Over 11 million people were killed," he said. "Imagine the intelligence wiped out with the scientists and others Hitler killed.

Van Overbeke said it's imperative that students learn about the Holocaust because often "if you don't see it, it didn't happen."

He pointed out that most of the grandparents of teens today were not alive during World War II

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which is another reason to keep telling the stories of the Holocaust.

Students are tested over what VanOverbeke presents.

[ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com](mailto:ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com)

308-537-3636