

Gratitude for MCHEKC, Cadre & HEDY Award

Penny Selle - Speech given at awards ceremony 5/7/24

Thank you so much, Jessica, for your kind introduction. I am humbled and honored to be standing up here this evening, as the second recipient of this nearly new award! I remember sitting in the audience last year as Angela gave her talk for being the initial winner, and I was in awe. She had accomplished so much more than I even dreamed of in her high school Holocaust course. I felt truly humbled and inspired, as I do now, by these great student presentations on what I consider to be one of the toughest topics in years for a White Rose reflection.

My gratitude goes out to the other nominees and the people who nominated & supported me, many of whom are in this room - Annie Riggs, Marvin Szneler and Maggie Adler, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, from our Mission Committee at Notre Dame de Sion. I know the Sisters of Sion, while no longer present on either of our campuses, are so proud of Annie's work to honor their unique, three-fold commitment: to the Church, to the Jewish people, and to helping create a world of peace, justice and love. I remember asking one of the Congregational leaders several years ago about how many groups of modern day vowed-religious have similar charisms, or callings, gifts from the Divine to live out in the world - where they are committed to the Jewish people and she said "only about a handful, maybe five." When I was explaining Sion's history to the Midwest Center's educator, Laura Patton, she encouraged me to add some of this background to my talk this evening. So here

goes and my apologies . . . you can take the teacher out of the classroom . . . but . . . Nutshelling it, Notre Dame de Sion was founded by Theodore Ratisbonne during the middle of the 19th Century. Born into a secular Jewish family in Strasbourg, France, Theodore's parents sent him to Paris to study. He tried both law and medicine and finally landed in philosophy thanks to a remarkable mentor, Louise Humann who encouraged him to center his life and study on the Word of God in Holy Scripture. Eventually he would ask to be baptized a Christian and find himself in charge of schools as a part of his daily vocation with the Brothers of the Order of St. Louis.

In 1842, Theodore's younger brother, Alphonse, came to visit him in Rome. While Theodore was meeting with another priest, the young, Jewish Alphonse waited near the altar of the St. Andrea Della Fratte Chapel where Mary, the Mother of Jesus, appeared to him in a vision, an event which had a profound influence on both of the Ratisbonne brothers. They would go on to found a religious Order of their own, The Congregation of Our Lady of Sion and would acquire property in Jerusalem, Zion, the Holy Land. Sion is the French translation of Zion, Jerusalem, the Holy City. Notre Dame (Our Lady) de Sion (of Zion)! There the Ratisbonnes would build the equivalent of a Mother House, Ecce Homo, where they would cultivate a community of love, respect and greater understanding between and among people of differing faiths. Theodore and Alphonse also continued their management of several schools devoted to this same mission, creating community among people of varying faiths. So sorry, this is a bit more than a nutshell - it's complicated - a

veritable coconut!! By the late 1800's there would be over 80 Zion schools throughout Europe and the Middle East with this same unique mission. Kansas City's Notre Dame de Zion was founded, near its current Midtown location at 38th and Locust, in 1912.

Long before Vatican II in 1965, the Sisters of the Ratisbonne's Congregation were rock stars for social justice, particularly INTERfaith work. They have created international Centers for Jewish Christian Dialogue, published academic research on Rabbinical studies, taught Holocaust History courses in universities and worked all over the world from the UN to Europe; the Philippines to Egypt; Winnipeg to Harare; Turkey to Costa Rica - championing causes & amplifying voices of concern about issues relating to our shared humanity such as accessibility to clean water, human trafficking, rights for First Nations and indigenous peoples. The list goes on and on for a small but mighty group of women.

And of course, they have weaved their unique charism in and out of decades, all over the world, through their Zion Schools. Today, in addition to our metro's 2 Notre Dame de Sions, there are 5 Zion schools in Brazil, one in Istanbul, Australia, and Canada and several in France, with heritage schools throughout the world. Sisters of Zion have been tortured and perished in camps under the Nazi regime AND have been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, honored for rescuing Jews during the Shoah. As a non-vowed Associate in their Congregation, I am grateful for all I have learned from the many Sisters of Zion.

I feel extremely fortunate to have had the honor of experiencing dozens of great sessions and lessons from the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education. There is no way I would be standing up here this evening without having been previously seated at tables across the hall & upstairs for years, actively listening, taking notes & working in small groups as a part of the Isak Federman Holocaust Teaching Cadre. Before becoming a cadre member over 15 years ago, I had no idea about so many aspects of what should be a part of teaching Holocaust & Genocide Studies. I had never heard of the hoax document, the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion - a copy of which I can order off my phone, from Wal-mart, right now, sadly - for just under \$13.00. This ridiculous Antisemitic screed is still being printed and read in a number of different languages, though it is almost 120 years old.

I was over 40 before I had ever heard the terms Christ-Killer and blood libel or seen depictions of the contrasting, carved female figures on the facades of European cathedrals: Triumphant Ecclesia next to downtrodden Synagoga, often blinded by a snake.

I love learning about inspiring modern day movements to combat ignorance and hatred, like *Love Has No Labels*, and *Not in Our Town* which started when a single brick was thrown through the window of a six year old boy's bedroom in Billings, Montana. His parents had placed a menorah in that window for Hannakuah. In the week that followed, over 10,000 homes and businesses in Billings had menorahs hanging in their windows thanks to the local newspaper which devoted a full page to printing a picture of a

menorah someone had graphically generated. This show of solidarity for shared humanity planted the seeds for grass roots action against hate groups in other communities across the country who were tired of experiencing acts of antisemitism, Xenophobia, Islamophobia and violence against marginalized, ostracized groups and individuals - Not in OUR town!!

As primarily an art and visual thinking educator, I am so grateful to have learned, through the Cadre, about the paintings of Samuel Bak, who still identifies with “the Warsaw Boy” from the iconic black & white photographs of that ghetto: the small cap-wearing child being marched, at gunpoint, by the Nazis with his surrendering hands held up! I have been inspired by the artwork of Holocaust survivor, Alice Lok Cahana, one of the five Hungarians featured in Spielberg's epic documentary film *The Last Days*. Her amazing mixed media pieces often combine Hebrew letters with ephemera and painted images related to her personal experiences in the camps.

Both of these individuals are included in our Friday Reflections. We have a weekly routine of analyzing pieces of art relating to many aspects of the Holocaust and genocide. First, we list every detail of what we can see; then what this reminds us of in our world; followed by what it makes us feel, think or wonder about and finally, we engage in a short creative writing piece related to the artist. An informal classroom discussion follows until we have all collectively “discovered” what concerns the artist and what kind of connections we can make between their work and our world today.

I also use both Bak and Lok Cahana along with many other artmakers in what I affectionately call my BIN activities, designed for students to choose - from a number of folders relating to many aspects of visual expression including photographs, sketches and drawings, paintings, propaganda posters, exhibition catalogs, graphic novels and such. Did you know there is an artist who designed "Lego sets" relating to Nazis, camps and victims? It is true. I learned about it from Jessica Rockhold so it MUST be true!!! It is entitled "Correcting Device: Lego Concentration Camp" and box 6773 is called "Crematorium and Guard Tower." Mr. Libera designed it in 1996 for a museum exhibition. He had the "cooperation of" - NOT endorsement or subsidizing from - the Lego Corporation of Denmark. There's a Bin activity for it! I encourage student choice relating to research through these bin topics and use primary source materials, like first person testimony, where possible. In Sion's one-semester course on Holocaust & Genocide Studies, we also cover liberation, life after the Holocaust including DP camps; second generation responses and experiences; and modern day genocides as well potential genocide hot spots.

I start each semester telling my students that I came by my interest in Holocaust Studies quite naturally. A journalism major after returning from World War II, my father read everything he could get his hands on about the Holocaust. Though he was stationed in the Pacific, his brother, my uncle Tom, was a paratrooper in Europe. When young Tom came home and recounted the stories he had heard from soldiers during liberation of the camps, the people in their small home town of Beloit, in north central Kansas, could not

believe what they were hearing. How could such atrocities happen? It wasn't until I got to undergrad that I learned not EVERYONE talks about Himmler, Goebbels & Hitler - Buchenwald, Bergen Belsen and Dachau - at the dinner table! Who knew?

Thank you, once again, to all the other nominees; my nominators; to my family; to the Sisters of Zion; and especially to all the good people at the MCHC whom I admire so much and who have educated and inspired me: Jessica Rockhold, Dr. Shelly Cline, Fran Sternberg, Jean Zeldin and Laura Patton, a Cadre colleague. Thank you for your kind words this evening, Jessica. I am also grateful to Isak Federman and Jack Mendelbaum (both of Blessed Memory) for their foresight, vision and generosity in establishing the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education. I am *particularly* grateful to my students for their constant curiosity, conviction and caring - who keep asking the important questions: What's the difference between genocide, war and war crimes? What responsibilities do other countries have when genocide is happening? How could the Shoah have happened? And most importantly, what can I do to make sure I am not a bystander? That nothing like the Holocaust ever happens again . . . ? ? ? Thank you.