The Holocaust and Bullying: can they be taught together?

All of us are concerned with the issue of bullying in our schools and in our communities today, and as an oral history institute that interviewed 1,200 European Jews who survived the worst that the twentieth century could throw at them, we'd like to discuss how we use the nine examples we call bullying, understanding that what we refer to as bullying in most countries today cannot be compared to what went on in Europe *during* the Holocaust.

The nine excerpts provided here were taken from interviews conducted with elderly Jews in the Czech Republic (three), Romania (two), Lithuania (two), Austria (one) and Bulgaria (one), and they range from being yelled at on the street to being marched home by a uniformed policeman. These nine stories, told by elderly European Jews who were nine to fifteen years old when they felt the white heat of hatred upon them, remember in detail just what it was like when, for the first time, their classmates bullied them, when kids on the street taunted them, when they realized that their own government had passed laws specifically to make their young lives miserable. What made it all the worse was it became clear that well-meaning teachers, neighbors, and - worst of all - even their parents were helpless in the face of legally and socially supported acts of hatred.

To frame the issue in a timeline: once the Nazis came to power in early 1933 in Germany, their party members set about beating Jews on the street, smashing their store windows, and with the apparatus of the German state falling into their hands, began passing laws restricting the rights of Jews. That was not bullying. That was persecution.

The Nazis also proceeded to imprison their enemies throughout Germany—not only Jews but (among others) homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists and Social Democrats—and it would not be accurate to say that those who found themselves behind the locked doors of Gestapo prisons were "bullied." It was far too late for that.

In the 1930s, well before the Second World War began, in countries allied with Germany such as Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, governments began copying the Nazis' laws to curry favor with Hitler's regime. Very quickly Jews in those countries also went from having full civil rights to being thrown out of schools and jobs, and later, once the 1940s began, stripped of their bank accounts and thrown out of their homes. Most would go on to suffer unspeakable horrors after that.

What happened when governments began passing laws restricting the rights of Jews? Many people—from children to the elderly—felt they now had license to intimidate, bully, and threaten. And far too many did.

For instance, Sofi Danon-Moshe in Bulgaria recounts how she went to a high school dance in 1942, a year after laws against Jews had been passed. Her school director invited her, so Sofi felt safe. But those laws gave a local policeman the legal right to bark at this young girl, demand she leave the prom, and march her home. That incident, as Sofi recalls seven decades later, still haunts her.

Lucia Heilman was just nine-years-old when she discovered she could no longer sit on a park bench in Vienna because the state had passed laws against it. But no sooner than some non-Jewish boys realized they could chase after Jewish kids and beat them up, they did. Were they bullies? Yes, they were. But were they given protection by the government, knowing there would be no consequences? Yes again. After all, they had been watching adults do much worse.

Martin Glass, who was ten-years-old when Nazi Germany dismembered Czechoslovakia, describes how government edicts after 1939 made his life utterly miserable. In three short paragraphs, Martin tells a painful tale of how a child felt when an entire government weighed in upon him. The government—actually, it was the German occupying authority, not the Czech government—wasn't bullying him; it was restricting his movements and would eventually try to murder him, legally. What was so painful for Martin, looking back on his life, was that his playmates turned their backs on him so quickly.

Kurt Kotouc and Ruth Halova were also growing up in Czechoslovakia, yet their stories take place *before* the country was occupied and dismembered. Because Ruth and Kurt lived in cities with large ethnic German populations, those Germans (all with Czech citizenship) felt emboldened to bully their Jewish classmates, even though the Czech state rigorously defended its Jewish citizens. Unlike Martin, Kurt and Ruth were bullied, pure and simple, because those bullies knew the most powerful man in Europe, Adolf Hitler, was on their side.

Our two Lithuanian interviewees also share stories that took place well before the Germans occupied their country, when the tiny Lithuanian state was doing its best to stand up to the might of Hitler's Germany. Zalman Kaplanas and Judel Ronder were attending high school in the 1930s and they both paint pictures of how ethnic German students bullied them in class—and how a school director and a fellow student reacted and stood up to those bullies.

Dan Mizrahy of Romania wasn't bullied personally; his story took place well before the Holocaust and in a country that was never occupied by the Germans. Dan simply gives us a glimpse of how a young Jewish

boy came to suddenly realize he was living in a brutally antisemitic country. To sit ringside at a boxing match and hear grown-ups yelling antisemitic slogans must have been harrowing.

Rosa Kaiserman tells us that even while in elementary school in Romania, “I smelled something was against us.” When the head of her school—years before the Holocaust—said, “Don’t buy any pretzels from that kike,” Rosa felt the hatred that had been plaguing Romanian society for more than a century.

We want to share these nine stories because they show how deep ugly words can cut—and how long those wounds last: for as long as one lives. We can also see in these stories that there are those who, when given the chance, will turn on former friends in a flash.

The fact that some people stood up and did what was right – well, that is worth learning about, too, and that is what we explore in our next section.