

Carla Wittes has courageously explored the topic of the Holocaust - which touched her family - and then reached out to other families of all races and backgrounds to begin the healing

*Most people approach the Holocaust with a sense of trepidation. When I met Carla Wittes I was relieved to discover that she had the exact personality I needed to guide me through this treacherous spiritual territory. She is at once both bubbly and deeply soulful. The effervescent surface of her character is stirred by a strong undertow of trans-generational pain, common in many family members of survivors. As she started to recount some of the stories she had collected, she was like a candle flickering defiantly against the cold wind of history; she ranged from glowing and ebullient to teary-eyed and lump-throated, often within the same sentence.*



Participants in the 2009 March of Remembrance and Hope

Carla states emphatically, "The Holocaust is not an event in history isolated to the '30s and '40s, but an incident of a larger phenomenon which runs through history." Carla is Vice President of Programs of the Canadian Centre for Diversity, which runs the March of Remembrance and Hope (MRH) and sponsors students of many ethnicities and backgrounds on a study mission of the horrors of the Holocaust. She told me of the poignancy of "watching a 20-year-old Rwandan MRH participant meet with an 80-year-old Holocaust survivor, both of whom had witnessed their fathers murdered almost before their very eyes." The Holocaust is not merely a tragic page of history, but a massive earthquake with fault lines continuing straight through the human spirit. The tectonic stresses of distrust and hate continue to chide against and often overwhelm understanding and compassion. "Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur are only some recent examples of the continuing hatred that plagues us all."

Carla began her work when she discovered an emotional final letter from her grandmother, who perished in the Holocaust, written to her mother. Carla did some further research and found out that her grandmother met her end stripped naked, shot into an open pit. "I couldn't live with that ending for someone who had obviously been such a dynamic person." She set out to restore her grandmother's presence, at least in some way, by collecting and documenting the final letters of not only her grandmother but of countless others as well. The stories she shared were as tangential and intertwined as the branches of the family trees she was trying to reconstruct.

The Holocaust made writing-paper a rare commodity; thus the letters Carla collects she describes as "small scraps with huge meaning." The writing on some of the scraps is so small it is akin to a student's crib notes for a final exam, except the writing is even smaller, trying to convey a lifetime of information in the face of the final solution. The letters bear some common themes: most expound the importance of being good and loving people, also calling for the preservation of traditions. But virtually all of them demand that the tragedy be recorded and reported to the rest of the world.

Carla courageously attacks an issue most of us choose to address only after it is too late: the human potential for hatred. She jumps headfirst into this dark abyss, collecting scraps of the final missives of victims of the darkest episodes in history. Carla has stitched together these scraps into a map of humanity which can guide through the darkness of hatred back into the light of compassion and understanding. Carla's success in this regard is best shown in the words of an alumna of the MRH:

*"And there was a small mountain of human ash  
infused with human souls  
where young blades of grass peeked through,  
Green with idealism and hope,  
Searching for light  
And nourished by darkness."*

–Kari May Grain (MRH 2007)

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