



DENYING HISTORY

Holocaust “revisionists” target campuses nationwide

By Gayle Forman

Andrew Wallenstein’s great-grandparents were murdered, victims of a Nazi extermination campaign that Bradley Smith says never existed. A half-century after the horrors of the Holocaust, on a January day in 1994, a little pink envelope delivered to a newsroom in New York brought Andrew together with Smith, a man who seeks to annihilate the past. The envelope and its contents—a camera-ready advertisement and a \$288 check—were waiting for the 20-year-old editor of Queens College’s weekly newspaper, the *Quad*, in the mountain of mail that had accumulated during the month-long winter vacation.

The ad, designed to look like a newspaper story with two columns, a headline and lots of copy, bore the title “A Revisionist Challenge To The US Holocaust Memorial Museum, by Bradley R. Smith”:

This ad does not claim “the Holocaust never happened.” This is what the ad does claim: The US Holocaust Memorial Museum displays no convincing proof whatever of homicidal gassing chambers, and no proof that even one individual was “gassed” in a German program of “genocide.”

... Were the [Jewish] prisoners killed or did they die of typhus or some other disease during the last terrible weeks of the war?

... Special pleaders imply that to investigate the gas chamber stories will be harmful to Jews. I challenge that bigoted insinuation. Free inquiry will benefit Jews.

... We are the only ones pointing out the falsehoods. Every intellectual who visits the Museum, and particularly historians, should point out these facts to you—yet none dare. Only CODOH [the Committee for Open Debate On the Holocaust] dares to challenge the taboo against challenging the Museum.

Photos courtesy of the
US Holocaust Memorial Museum

“People don’t realize that I’m really a sweet guy.” Bradley Smith

Andrew recognized the ad as cleverly packaged propaganda, and he knew that Smith’s claim that no one had been gassed was preposterous. To print this ad, to even discuss printing it, was going to anger plenty of people on a campus where a third of the 18,000 students were Jewish. And yet the issue was too important—perhaps too close to home—to ignore. Andrew called the Dean of Students, who left the decision in Andrew’s hands. “Print it if you want,” he said.

Over the next week Andrew spent hours in the library investigating Bradley Smith and the Holocaust denial movement. He met with historians, school administrators and his own editorial board in an effort to decide whether to print the ad or simply to ignore it.

The *Quad* is one of hundreds of university newspapers forced to grapple with this issue within the last few years because of Bradley Smith’s advertisements. Smith, armed with a computer, a telephone and donations, is bringing his own version of the Holocaust to college campuses and asking students to rethink what their history books have told them.

A former construction worker and 65-year-old Santa Claus look-alike, Smith runs the Committee for Open Debate On the Holocaust out of a crowded corner of his family’s living room in the small farming community of Visalia, California. While his young children scurry around him, chasing his dogs who are chasing his cats, Smith is hard at work sending off advertisements and videotapes to college papers, disputing the Holocaust.

Although in his advertisement Smith writes that he does not deny the Holocaust, he writes in one of his brochures that he “denies that the German State had a policy to exterminate the Jewish people (or anyone else) by putting them to death in gas chambers or by killing them through abuse or neglect.” Despite the inconsistency of Smith’s pronouncements, it became clear to Andrew Wallenstein that denying the Holocaust—the Nazis’ extermination of six million Jews and millions of others—was Smith’s motive.

Lately Andrew had noticed increased momentum in the denial movement—revisionist handbills posted around his neighborhood, an article in *Time* magazine. The more information he dug up on

Smith and his cohorts, the more he realized that it was no longer just the extremists who were spewing hateful rhetoric. Pseudo-academics like Bradley Smith were spreading revisionist gospel to mainstream audiences.

Smith’s messages have been published either as advertisements or opinion pieces in more than 60 college newspapers across the country including the *Duke Chronicle* and the *Cornell Daily Sun*. Someone, Andrew realized, is taking this guy seriously. Historians and scholars, however, are not. After all, the Holocaust—including the existence of the gas chambers—is one of the most well-documented events in Western history. Generally, scholars refuse to even engage Smith in debate, for they fear that it could help legitimize his stance by creating two sides to an issue of which there is no other side.

Smith alleges that there is a powerful “Holocaust lobby,” a group of historians, academics, Zionists and Jewish organizations who want to protect a certain historical perspective because they are “worried that the moral legitimacy of Israel will be diminished as the Holocaust story falls through.” He points to the unwillingness of historians to respond as proof that they have something to protect, something to hide. But scholars have written him off simply because they see him, and most



people who make it their life’s work to deny the Holocaust, as an anti-Semite. That, Smith says, is a misconception: “People don’t realize that I’m really a sweet guy.” His interest in the Holocaust has nothing at all to do with the Jews. “I am only interested in the taboo.”

In fact, Bradley Smith had never really given the Holocaust much thought until someone at a Libertarian Party convention gave him some revisionist literature. He found it so intriguing that at the age of 50, he became a born-again revisionist. Now after 15 years of involvement, Smith insists that the Holocaust itself still doesn’t interest him. “What do I care?” he asks. “I’m not a German, I’m not a Jew, I’m not a European, I’m not a communist, I’m not a fascist. It doesn’t matter to me. It gets complicated because people who are anti-Semitic and racist love revisionist theory because they can beat up on Jews with it. I have a different point of view. Because bad guys use revisionist theory for their own purpose, the lobby and the academics want to censor it.”

Perhaps people lump Smith together with “bad guy” anti-Semites because he keeps company with them. Mark Weber, who co-founded CODOH with Smith, has been identified by the Anti-Defamation League as a “long-time professional anti-Semite.” A 15-year member of the neo-Nazi extremist group National Alliance, Weber now heads up the Institute for Historical Review (IHR), an organization that deals mostly with Holocaust denial. IHR’s publishing house, the Noontide Press, disseminates a plethora of texts that glorify Nazi heroes as well as a number of books attacking Israel and Judaism.

IHR and the Noontide Press were created by Willis Carto, who is a self-proclaimed “anti-Zionist,” the founder of both the National Alliance of White People and the ultra-conservative Liberty Lobby, and a mentor to David Duke, the Louisiana politician and ex-Ku Klux Klansman. Carto once wrote of the Jews in his newsletter, *Right*: “They remain public enemy number one. In fact, no objective scholar can deny today that the world would be a better place to live if Germany had won, even if it had meant the defeat of American arms.” Smith has worked with Carto and IHR since 1984 and now maintains a

position with IHR as media spokesman. And although Smith denies it, Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt asserts in her book *Denying the Holocaust* that it was Carto’s cash that initially helped Smith launch CODOH (IHR and Smith have since severed ties with Carto).

It has been only within the last 15 years that Holocaust denial has come off the streets, away from the skin-heads and neo-Nazis and into offices, institutes and committees where it now exists as a formal movement cloaked in the garb of academia and scholarship. A broad international enterprise, it has contingents throughout Europe, Russia, South America, Japan, the Middle East and Australia as well as the United States and Canada.

Holocaust denial, however, began before World War II had even ended. Aware of their imminent defeat and realizing that their atrocities would soon become public, the Nazis began destroying the records of camp inmates and even attempted to demolish camp buildings. These last-ditch efforts did not begin to eradicate the overwhelming evidence, however. Others would try to succeed where the Nazis had failed, and Holocaust denial has been a steady movement in Europe since the 1950s. In the 1970s, it caught on in North America, and during the next decade its advocates worked to legitimize what they now called “revisionist theory.” It was during that time that someone handed Bradley Smith some revisionist writings.

Over the next decade, Smith’s involvement grew. While he kept busy reading up on Holocaust conspiracy theories, a generation of young people was coming of age, the first generation with few direct links—mother, father, brother, sister—to the Holocaust. In the late ’80s, it dawned on Smith that college students were the perfect audience for his message. Middle-aged folks whom he calls “professionally and umbilically tied to the Holocaust story” would never accept his ideas. But students? “It is always the students who have the courage to go with the controversy,” Smith says, because students possess “professional idealism.” In 1989 Smith started placing one-inch classified ads offering revisionist materials in college papers. Professional idealism or not, most



student editors eventually nixed them after being informed just what “Holocaust revisionism” meant. Smith bounced back with a full-page ad titled “The Holocaust Controversy: The Case for Open Debate,” followed by “A Revisionist Challenge to the US Holocaust Museum,” another full-pager.

Smith was partially right about college students. Few student editors gave much credence to his theories; in fact, most found the content of the full-page ads to be despicable. Still, that didn’t stop many editors from publishing them, a decision that pitted students against faculty members and other scholars. A generation gap emerged, one of ideals and memories as well as years, separating students from their professors.

University of Oregon history professor Susan Crane finds herself distanced from her students in this ideological debate. She teaches several courses about the Holocaust and discusses Bradley Smith and his ads. She sees why many students are more apt to take Smith seriously than members of other generations. “Students

are willing to question things,” Crane says. “They’re encouraged to question things.” Curiosity is good, but today’s young scholars are also ignorant—a 1992 Roper Organization poll of high school students found that 39 percent didn’t know what “the Holocaust” referred to.

Today’s students are also cynical about the media, about history. “Students are willing to believe the Holocaust is a huge hoax,” Crane says. “They’re intrigued by conspiracy theories.” This cynicism, combined with ignorance, is a powerful weapon for those seeking to distort the truth. And that worries people like Crane who don’t want Smith or his ads to be given a forum.

At first glance, the Museum ad hardly seems anti-Semitic; it scarcely mentions the word “Jew.” Indeed, Smith paints himself as a renegade historian digging for truth with no racist motives whatever. But historians warn that the ad’s innocuous veneer is intentionally misleading, and the message—though disguised—is anti-Semitic propaganda. “This ad has a hidden agenda,” says Professor Crane. “This ad is not about opening up a scholarly or public discussion about the Holocaust. There is an anti-Semitic agenda and a neo-conservative and conservative agenda that has to do with revising and reinterpreting the entire history of World War II—the responsibility and culpability of people involved in it. But the ad doesn’t say anything about that, so it’s being disingenuous and misleading.”

Because the ads contained no blatantly racist language, many editors decided that Bradley Smith should be free to speak his mind. “First Amendment right to free expression must be extended to those with unpopular or offensive views,” said the editor-in-chief of the *Cornell Daily Sun*. Other editors decided to print Smith’s ads because *refusing* to print them, they believed, was dangerous. Washington University’s *Student Life* ran the Holocaust Controversy ad because, in the words of its opinion editor, “The abridgment to Mr. Smith’s rights endangers our own.” But plenty of editors scoffed at the idea that these ads were protected by the First Amendment and rejected them on the basis of their disregard for the truth. The editors of the *Harvard Crimson* rejected the Holocaust Controversy ad because it was

“Students are willing to believe the Holocaust is a huge hoax.”

Susan Crane

“Don’t we have to dignify him to condemn him?”

“vicious propaganda based on utter bullshit that has been discredited time and time again.”

In the newsroom at Queens College, no one was worrying about the First Amendment. The nine members of the editorial board met for their first weekly conference to debate the ad. The members, more than half of whom are Jewish, agreed that printing or not printing the ad had nothing to do with the First Amendment because as a private newspaper, the *Quad* had no legal obligation to print anything.

Andrew led the meeting as the board members huddled around him, arguing the pros and cons of publishing the ad. Do we expose him? Do we show people what’s out there? If we print it, even with refutations, aren’t we dignifying him? Don’t we have to dignify him to condemn him? The board ended the meeting without reaching a decision. Over the next week, as a turbulent snowstorm hammered New York City, the *Quad* staff kicked their consciences around.

Meanwhile, another storm was about to hit. The local media, including the major New York daily papers, had smelled the story brewing on campus. The *Quad* staff had hoped to keep the whole mess quiet, but someone had leaked the story to *60 Minutes*, and the leak soon grew into a flood. Representatives from *60 Minutes*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post* and *Newsday* were among the throngs of reporters shoving their tape recorders into Andrew’s face. The Museum ad was all over the news, giving Smith and his campaign more publicity than a \$288 advertisement ever could have. “It’s successful if I get a lot of press,” Smith says. “Nobody heard of revisionism before. I have been largely responsible in bringing the fact of the existence of revisionist scholarship to the media and to the print press.” Whether a school publishes the ad or not, Smith gets his name printed and his face

on TV. He doesn’t mind as long as the cameras keep rolling.


Smith seems to have a knack for getting the cameras and the controversies to follow him. When editorial boards of student newspapers at the University of Washington, Ohio State and Brandeis University were wrestling with the decision of whether to print one of the ads, the media picked up the story, magnifying a boardroom decision into national news. Last April, Smith scored major media points when a businessman revoked a \$2 million pledge to the University of Miami after the school’s paper published the Museum ad.



Last November Smith sent out a free videotape to be reviewed by some 450 college newspapers that had never received any of his print ads. The video was a coming attraction to yet another tape that he and Jewish atheist David Cole planned to put out this spring. But the second tape will not be released, Smith now says, because Cole has decided that debating the gas chambers is too big a task to be done in a video, so he’s writing a book about it instead. In the meantime, Smith is sending out the Museum ad to an additional 25 colleges.

The *Quad* board reconvened one week after its first conference. Andrew announced that he wanted to print the ad. With Queens College’s multicultural mix—120 nationalities and 66 languages—publishing it was an educational opportunity he did not want to miss. “We should let people know what’s out there,” he told the board. “They should hear it from us. People should hear what a bunch of lies this is, no matter how clever it seems.” Seven to two, they voted to print the ad, without Smith’s address and telephone number and surrounded by opposing editorials. They would also return Smith’s payment. Newspapers bashed the decision; one wrote that Andrew needed to be spanked. Respected Holocaust scholars cursed *Quad* editors. Andrew was called a “Jewish Benedict Arnold.” But a surprising majority of people, including Holocaust survivors, applauded the paper.

Professor Crane, however, is among the scholars who want to keep Smith’s message out of the media. “There are people who have a legitimate argument for saying we need to know what’s out there,” she says. “[But] by giving deniers a legitimate place in your media, by reproducing their arguments, you are supporting them. If enough people don’t run the ad, Smith won’t have any support. Any time the ad is run, it’s an infection. We spend too much energy on this issue; we should spend the energy to educate.”

But you must educate people about Holocaust denial if you want to educate them about the Holocaust, Andrew says. And he feels that he and the *Quad* staff taught the 18,000 students of Queens College a history lesson. “A great byproduct from all of this is that a lot of people really opened their eyes to what the Holocaust is all about,” Andrew says. This includes facing up to the reality that there are people out there seeking to deny one of the ugliest periods in history. “Holocaust revisionism has been around for 50 years,” Andrew says. “It’s not going anywhere; it’s got to be confronted.” 



LISTEN

You can hear them: the voices of the world, resonating, rising. The sounds pour into our corner of the Earth, spilling stories, breaking silences, speaking. They come from all over, each voice with its own message.

They speak of anguish, of the bloody genocide that forced the Rwandan people from their homes and families. They speak of alienation: Asian American students, divided by two cultures, search for their identities. They speak of revival: A Mongolian musician resurrects cultural pride by transporting the tones and rhythms of his ancestors into the present. They speak of resilience: After growing up in a land gutted by war, a young man still cherishes the country of his childhood and longs to return. They speak of hope: His Holiness the Dalai Lama shares his concern for the Earth and urges all people to find contentment in the spiritual rather than the material realm.

For a moment, captured in these pages, these disparate voices come together to speak of cultural pride, of identity, of alienation tinged with hope. Listen, for they tell us about our world, about ourselves.