

KICKING AT THE DARKNESS

BY COLIN UPTON



VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE

COLIN UPTON '16

Canada Responds to the Holocaust, 1944-45 is an exhibition produced by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre with funding from the Government of Canada.

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Comic design by Illene Yu

THE EXHIBITION, THE ARTIST & THE COMIC

RICHARD MENKIS AND RONNIE TESSLER

The exhibition *Canada Responds to the Holocaust, 1944-1945* has a number of unique aspects. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first time the story of the earliest Canadian encounters with survivors of the Holocaust and the evidence of the devastation of European Jewish life is being told in a public forum. Much of the narrative deals with the experiences of Canadian soldiers — including chaplains, official war artists, photographers and filmmakers — and the observations of journalists and aid workers. Moreover, the exhibition challenges the viewer to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between Holocaust survivors and their “liberators.” This is accomplished by displaying within the exhibition primary sources, such as the firsthand accounts of liberators, the testimonies and diaries of survivors, and photos, films, artwork, radio broadcasts and journalism produced by Canadians in the European theatre of war during 1944 and 1945.

Another distinctive aspect of the exhibition was our interest in presenting students visiting the exhibition at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre with a companion comic, something that could be taken home and shared. We were introduced to Vancouver comic artist Colin Upton who is, as he says, a history nerd with an interest in military history. We were also interested in the participation and viewpoint of a younger cohort and Colin was open to a reciprocal relationship in developing the storyline.

Developing the comic was complicated and challenging, but ultimately successful. A compelling work of comic art arose from a series of exchanges. In order to receive the feedback of a younger audience, Colin made several visits to UBC’s HISTORY 490Q (2015-16) class on Jewish identity in graphic narratives, taught by Richard. The students came from various backgrounds in art and history. They broke into groups with assignments to represent, in images and words, segments of the story told in the exhibition. Students received feedback from Colin and they generated ideas for Colin’s comic. We thank them for their valuable input.

Once in his studio, Colin drew three versions of the comic, beginning with rough sketches that we reviewed together for accuracy. From there, he moved on to a more detailed pencil version, and after another review session, the final inked rendering of the comic. He then produced the cover and suggested a powerful title. Producing the comic was a long process, all of it hand detailed by Colin the way it would have been in 1945.

Ultimately, what Colin wrote and drew is a work of imagination based on fact. His drawings have the power to evoke both the historical facts and an emotional response. We hope that *Kicking at the Darkness* adds to your understanding of a complex moment in our nation’s history, the moment when Canadians first encountered evidence of the Nazi attempt to annihilate vulnerable minorities.

Richard Menkis and Ronnie Tessler are researcher directors and writers of *Canada Responds to the Holocaust, 1944-1945*.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

COLIN UPTON

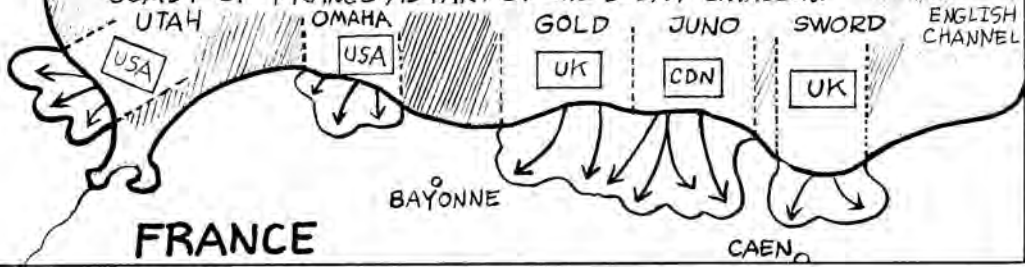
The second most frequent response I received when telling people I was working on a comic about the Holocaust was: "But you're not Jewish." (The first was: "You are going to mention the other victims of the camps, right?"). Perhaps it's hubris on my part but I never saw this as a problem. After all, most of the Canadian army in the Second World War wasn't Jewish either, and history is history.

There was a temptation from some to look at the story from the point of view of the victims, but from the beginning I saw it as the story of the Canadian army fighting its way across Europe and discovering the unimaginable darkness of the Holocaust. A story of triumph, liberation and ultimate horror. I must beg forgiveness because to tell this story in an engaging way I introduced vignettes into the narrative that are based on fact but the dialogue is invented. I have put words in the mouths of real people, such as Rabbi Cass and Aba Bayefsky. I can only hope I did not misrepresent them. Also problematic is that events sometimes had many accounts, some mutually contradictory. For example, in our research we came across around a half dozen stories of the liberation of Westerbork Camp. I incorporated three. When in doubt, as in the liberation of Vught camp, I chose the version that told the better story. Do not trust the internet blindly.

I would like to thank Ronnie Tessler and Richard Menkis. While I concentrated on getting the story of the Canadian Army right, I depended on them for material on the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a vast subject, particularly for a 24-page comic book, and while I could not hope to equal their scholarship, I could at least depend on them to tell me when I got things wrong! I would also like to thank the students of Richard's UBC course, "The Jew in the Graphic Novel," for their input. The ending was inspired by them. I'd also like to thank cartoonist Miriam Libicki, who knows a history nerd when she sees one, for suggesting me for this project.

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JUNE 6TH 1944 - THE 3RD CANADIAN DIVISION STORM JUNO BEACH ON THE NORMANDY COAST OF FRANCE AS PART OF THE D-DAY INVASION.



FOR 3 YEARS THE CANADIANS HAD PROTECTED GREAT BRITAIN FROM A GERMAN INVASION THAT NEVER CAME.



THIS WOULD BE THEIR FIRST EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE.



JUNO BEACH HAD SOME OF THE MOST FORMIDABLE DEFENCES TO SURVIVE THE ALLIED BOMBARDMENT. BUT THE CANADIANS OVERCAME THEM AND PUSHED FORWARD.



THE CANADIANS LED THE ADVANCE 7 MILES INLAND BUT FAILED TO TAKE THE STRATEGIC CROSSROADS OF CAEN.



THE CANADIANS HAD TO ENDURE FIERCE COUNTER-ATTACKS BY ELITE PANZER AND SS FORMATIONS DETERMINED TO PUSH THE ANGLO-CANADIANS BACK INTO THE SEA.



IT WILL TAKE ANOTHER BLOODY MONTH OF SAVAGE FIGHTING AGAINST THE FANATICAL TEENAGERS OF THE SS HITLER YOUTH DIVISION TO TAKE CAEN.



THE GERMANS WERE FORCED TO WEAKEN THE FRONT FACING THE AMERICANS TO THROW UNITS INTO THE MAYHEM AROUND CAEN.



THE AMERICANS POUNCED, SMASHING THROUGH GERMAN LINES AND SWEEPING BEHIND THEM.

