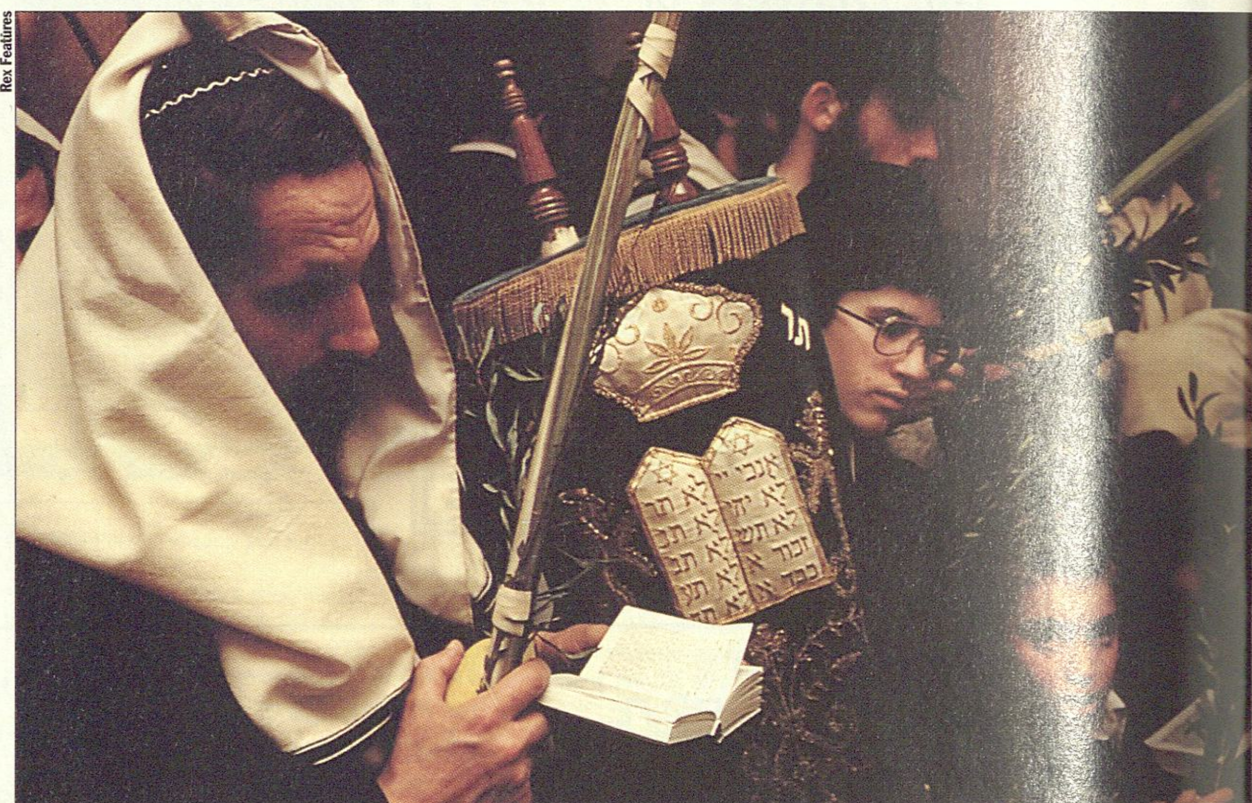
ECHOES OF THE HOLOCAUST

Racism is not just about colour. There has been a steep increase in reports of anti-semitic incidents over the past few years. Clare Roskill explains how social work training should address this



Rex Features

Anti-semitism is a particularly long-lived form of racism. Above, Hasids practice their religion in Brooklyn, New York

A few weeks before Steven Speilberg's Oscar-winning film *Schindler's List* reached cinema screens in this country, the Runnymede Trust published a report on anti-semitism, its first on a form of racial discrimination not based on colour.[1]

Schindler's List will bring only a small part of the horrors of the Holocaust to the attention of large numbers of people, some of whom will barely have thought about it. The report's authors state: 'It is valuable to distinguish between three main sets of phenomena:

- anti-Judaism – hostility to the beliefs and practices of the Jewish religion;
- anti-semitic racism – hostility to Jews on the assumption that they constitute a separate 'race'; and
- anti-Zionism – hostility towards the expression of Jewish national identity which finds its focus in the state of Israel.'

The motivations behind indulging in one or other of these may be different, but the writers believe the three are difficult to disentangle. They see the current context of anti-semitism as one in which, in Western Europe, far right groups and parties, hostile to refugees and foreigners, use coded expressions of anti-semitism. In Eastern Europe they find that since the collapse of Communism, anti-semitism is openly expressed by centrist and conservative parties in, for example, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and the former Czechoslovakia.

Anti-semitism in the UK is not comparable to that in Eastern Europe. A Gallup public opinion survey last September on attitudes towards minorities found only a small percentage of the population was highly hostile to Jews, and there was much greater hostility to other minorities. Yet Judaism's representative body, the British Board of Jewish Deputies, records an 85 per cent increase in the reporting of anti-semitic incidents between 1984 and 1992, and many probably go unreported.

So this is a particularly appropriate time to examine why social work training has generally paid scant attention to anti-semitism and why action against it should be integrated with action against other forms of racism – one of the Runnymede publication's main recommendations.

There are several reasons why social work should address anti-semitism. These are not mainly to do with ensuring Jewish clients receive appropriate services, although this may be an issue for statutory agencies in some localities. The reasons are, first, that a knowledge of historical context is needed to understand racism's many and complex forms. Anti-semitism has been particularly long-lived. Second, it is appropriate in training to affirm the identities and backgrounds of other students and colleagues since social workers often have to address identity on others' behalf, for example in relation to children living away from their birth families. If we can deal with these issues appropriately during training we are more likely to deal with them sensitively with our clients.

And, if trainers do not acknowledge the racism experienced by their students or their relatives or forebears, they stand to lose or alienate those who might otherwise be strong allies in fighting other forms of racial discrimination.

Why has social work failed to address anti-semitism? There are several reasons. First, although many Jews work in social services, many students and staff have never had a Jewish client. This is partly for demographic reasons but also because Jewish welfare organisations are very active. Those Jews who are clients of non-specialist agencies may not be obviously oppressed. Indeed, the fact that many Jews in the UK are now well established hardly leads to their association with oppression, even if elements within anti-semitism condemn Jews as 'too successful'.

Second, many social workers, both Jews and non-Jews, are either anti-Zionist or ambivalent about Zionism not least because it is associated with Palestinian dispossession. They may strongly disapprove of many of Israel's policies and actions.

Third, while some non-Jews have considerable knowledge of Jewish history or at least have studied or read about the Holocaust, others know little about Jewish suffering over the centuries. They may even believe the propaganda of revisionist historians who have denied that six million Jews died in the Holocaust.

Fourth, some Jewish social workers have kept silent because we have not wished to distract antiracism from its frequent focus on racism connected with colour. We recognise the difficulties of people from black and ethnic minority communities and empathise with the attacks and harassment they suffer. We wish to support black colleagues and clients, which may be why we are silent in our own cause. Perhaps it comes more naturally to social workers to fight for the causes of others. We have concerns, largely unvoiced, that claiming time and space within social work to consider anti-semitism will inevitably compete with time and space to discuss other forms of oppression, meaning that oppression, including racism, becomes the focus of highly undesirable competition for attention.

Last, we may even have had hopes that the Holocaust, if it had achieved nothing else, had at least blown the fuse on anti-semitism, finishing it off once and for all. So until recent years it may have seemed irrelevant to bring anti-semitism into discussions of oppression. If we ever optimistically believed this, we can do so no longer.

And each of us who is wholly or partly Jewish (some will not even regard me as Jewish as my mother converted to Christianity in the 1920s) has our own personal pain which can inhibit us from bringing anti-semitism to the attention of non-Jews. What our Jewish identity means to us, and the ways we identify with Jewishness, vary enormously. This was underlined for me some years ago when an Israeli student on a social work course on which I was teaching asked to meet the Jewish students and tutors. In the meeting we talked about our Jewish backgrounds. For each of us our Jewish identity had a very different history and meaning.

The first time I can remember being told I was Jewish was by a prefect at my school, which was run by Anglican nuns, when I was 12. It is only in the past eight years that I have studied Jewish history and met many of my Dutch cousins who survived the Holocaust. I had known since my teens that my French cousins to whom we were very close had survived the occupation in hiding, some in a monastery. I did not know what had happened to most of my much more numerous Dutch relatives. To my shame I had even answered the occasional inquiry from English friends with, 'Oh, they survived somehow'. It was not until 1990 that I learned that 217 members of our family on my maternal grandmother's side alone (my maternal grandfather was also from a Dutch Jewish family) had died in the Holocaust.

So how should social work training address anti-semitism? Trainers should ensure white students and staff have the space to discuss experiences of racial oppression they or their family have suffered, if they wish. They should then highlight similarities and differences between these experiences and the discrimination that many black colleagues and clients are suffering. A most important training principle should be that competition between different types of oppression should be avoided at all costs.

Trainers should also validate the experiences of Irish Catholics and other white minorities who have been oppressed. An atmosphere of trust is essential, and white people from oppressed minorities need to know that time spent on them will not be resented or seen as a distraction.

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While it is not appropriate to turn social work training into a history course, students who are ignorant, for example, about Irish or Jewish history, should be guided to the wealth of excellent autobiographies, histories, and films.

The cry will go up, how is the time to be found? But I do not believe this requires huge amounts of time, as trainers are well experienced in setting up small discussion groups. We cannot afford to ignore experiences that are so personal or history – like the Holocaust – that is so recent if we are to understand the racism that is increasing in Europe and the UK.

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[1] Runnymede Commission on Anti-Semitism, *A Very Light Sleeper. The Persistence and Dangers of Anti-Semitism*, Runnymede Trust, 1994

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