

MEMORIAL DAY MEMORIES

By Paul Cantor

On the day before Memorial Day 75 years ago the dedication ceremony for Richard Kemper Memorial Park took place at Mamaroneck High School in Mamaroneck, New York.

Richard Kemper, a former MHS student and my uncle, was killed on August 6, 1944, exactly two months after D-Day. He was killed in the Battle of the Hedgerows, the effort to drive the Germans out of France during World War II. Subsequently my grandparents, Adolph and Helen Kemper, purchased land outside the High School and turned it into a memorial where they and others might come to honor those who fought to defend our country and the enlightenment values embodied in our founding documents.

And by situating the memorial outside the high school Richard had attended they hoped it would motivate teachers and students to address questions related to how to create a just and peaceful world. Nevertheless, when Colonel Bernard Lentz, the former commander of Fort Slocum in New York, thanked them at the dedication ceremony on May 26, 1947 for ensuring “the heroes of yesterday will not be pushed out of our recollection or the recollection of the generations of boys and girls who will be receiving the blessings of liberty in the shape of an American common school education” he did not mention that he shared their hope that the sacrifices made by Richard and others who died fighting fascism would inspire educators and students to address questions related to putting an end to wars and the threat of wars.

Fortunately, however, six months later, the United Nations adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as the “common standard of achievement” they should aim for. Specifically, it stipulated that “every individual and every organ of society” should “strive by teaching and education to promote respect” for human rights and that educators should “promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

So where are we today? Today Russia’s President Vladimir Putin is threatening to use nuclear weapons in his war against the NATO supported armed forces of Ukraine and, according to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “we are facing the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945.” Clearly educators in our country and around the world have failed to do the job my grandparents and so many others who lost loved ones in wars past and present called and call on them to do. They have failed, in short, to motivate their best students to address the issue of how to create a just and peaceful world order with the same rigor they use to address issues in the hard sciences and mathematics.

“Education,” as Nelson Mandela noted, is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” We used it, for instance, to train the scientists who helped put our footprints on the moon and iPhones in our hands. We, and other countries too, used it to train scientists who put nuclear weapons in our arsenals. But we and others have yet to use it to develop the laws and enforcement mechanisms needed to eliminate the existential threat those weapons embody. In order to do that we need educators to motivate our best students to address human rights issues with the same rigor they address issues in the hard sciences.

That is something I, and I hope others, will be thinking about today as we celebrate our service women and men past and present who sacrificed their lives in defense of a world order where

everyone everywhere shares the rights enumerated in our Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights as well as the UDHR and many other related human rights documents.

Paul Cantor is the President of the Kemper Human Rights Education Foundation. This year is the 23rd year the foundation has sponsored human rights essay contests. For more information about KHREF, the question it is posing this year, and the prizes it offers go to khref.org.