

It was a simple bus trip, one she had taken hundreds of times but, because her bus was late, on this day in 1986, Irmela Mensah-Schramm had a little more time to look around. She read the graffiti on the Wannsee Germany station walls. One piece read, 'Freedom to Rudolf Höss.' As most of us know, Höss was Hitler's deputy and third in command of the Nazi party. In 1986 he was housed in Spandau prison not far away from the station in which Mensah-Schramm stood. Calling for his freedom was an overtly an anti-semitic statement which is and was at that time outlawed.

When the bus finally arrived, Irmelda got on but was haunted by that piece of graffiti. 'All day I kept asking myself: Why didn't you do anything about it? I thought about all the people passing by that writing and moving on, and I knew I couldn't be like them.'

And so 10 hours later when she arrived back at the station, she decided to remove it. Since then she has literally devoted her life to this practice. That happened 24 years ago and today at 64, Mensah-Schramm is retired from her teaching job and lives in Berlin. She goes out every day to a different neighborhood and removes the anti-semitic graffiti she finds. She often chooses which neighborhood she will visit based on where the neo-nazis partied the night before. Even though they have send her death threats, she continues doing her work.

Because of the death threats, we might think that she would try to be cautious while she does her work, not wanting to provoke any more attention than she has to. But we would be wrong. She goes through each neighborhood with a pin on her coat reading 'Anti-Nazi.'

She is extremely critical of the German government. 'Our politicians keep talking about an end to racism and promoting tolerance and multi-culturalism but I see what happens in practice and on the ground on a daily basis. When I inform the police about swastikas I spot during a tour, I sometimes have to wait a week, two weeks, six weeks – and the authorities here do nothing. In the end I clean it up myself.'

To make things even worse, as she goes about her work, people on the street don't even seem to pay much attention to what she's doing.

She has kept records of many of the images she has removed. She has 12,000 photos of graffiti, many of them chilling in their expression of hatred. But that 12,000 is not even close to all the images she's seen. She estimates that she has removed approximately 80,000 different Neo-Nazi graffiti across Germany, in Poland, France, Luxemburg and Belgium. Even on a vacation in Madagascar, where she goes to find calm, she discovered Neo-Nazi writing in the airport. She, of course, removed it also.

She has asked the government for the money for her supplies, spray paint, acetone for erasing writings, money for transportation. She pays for those things herself from her pension. But they have refused to reimburse her. Ironically in 2006 she received a governmental award for her 'activity for democracy and

tolerance.' The year before she received the Erich-Kästner Prize for 'her civilian courage.'

She does not keep this work to herself. She teaches students about the images she erases and helps them see them as signs of intolerance. She has a special exhibit at the church next to the Dachau concentration camp. 'My goal is for people to not just click their tongues when they visit the camps and say what happened was simply horrible, but to show people that here, this is what is happening today next to your house. Fascism and racism continues, and we must not let what happened here repeat itself under any circumstances.'

This is such courageous work. And it is even more courageous because Mensah-Schramm is not Jewish. She just understands the damage that anti-semitic graffiti does to people who see it day after day. How it dulls our senses and allows us to accept anti-semitic actions.

She doesn't have the illusion that she can single handedly stop it. But she does know that erasing it will keep more people from seeing it. She also knows that as she educates people in schools and those who visit Dachau, the next generation of adults may be the ones that will put a stop to it.

This kind of work is inspiring. It helps us to see that it's the little actions for justice that make a huge amount of difference in our world. Let's hope that each of us remembers this lesson as we walk through our own daily routine. Our consciousness and small actions can change the larger way people understand and act in our world.

Shabbat Shalom.