

Holocaust Era Assets Conference, Prague, June 2009.

Contribution to the Panel *Future of Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research*.

Monique Eckmann, University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland, Geneva

## **Holocaust Education as a Human Rights Tool?**

### ***Personal introduction:***

The topic given to me was “Holocaust Education as a Human Rights Tool”, however I prefer to write it with a question mark, as there are so many open questions: Is HE presently a HR<sup>1</sup> tool? Should HE be a HR tool? Can HE be a HR tool?

As a member of the EWG of the ITF<sup>2</sup> and as its current Chair, I can attest that this question is very broadly discussed, and that the answers differ in the various national and regional contexts.

And as a member of the Swiss delegation at this Holocaust Era Assets Conference, I would like to mention three scientists and pedagogues who lived in Switzerland, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Piaget, two of them even in Geneva, the town where I live and work. Why these three scholars? Rousseau for his view on education to citizenship, Pestalozzi for his concept of learning by “*head, heart and hand*” and Piaget for his revolutionary view on the evolution of moral judgment in stages (conducted further by Kohlberg) as well as for seeing one’s peers, rather than one’s parents or teachers, as the main source of moral development. All three of these pedagogues struggled throughout their lives for humanity and citizenship.

But that was long before HE existed.

The concept of “Holocaust Education” is very ambiguous – in fact, it is an expression which I should not use, as it is so undefined: First, because the expression “Holocaust” has a theological connotation which risks contributing to mystification rather than to clarification, as it has no analytical meaning; in French the expression “Shoah” is preferred, which may not be much more analytical, but at least does not have a Christian meaning. And as for “Holocaust Education”, it does not state clearly whether it means historical learning, literature or moral learning, nor whether it means to learn about the Jews, about the Nazis, or about other victims of Nazi politics. But it is used in recognition of a field and it has an institutional dimension even if the term does not explain exactly what it deals with.

Often, in the words of politicians, education planners and ministries in charge of memorials, it seems as if it were obvious that HE should be a tool for HRE. There is a certain pressure on memorials, educational programs and memorial days, for them not to “only” be learning opportunities about the past, but to have an impact on the future, i.e. in human rights education and in education for democratic citizenship. Educators who deal with such issues on a daily basis experience day after day that students – as well as they themselves – have strong expectations in this regard; nevertheless such educators often say that it is very difficult to do both HE and HRE in one school program, during one visit, or within one project.

---

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in this text: HE for Holocaust Education; HR for Human Rights; HRE for Human Rights Education.

<sup>2</sup> Education Working Group (EWG) of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), see [www.holocausttaskforce.org](http://www.holocausttaskforce.org)

## 1. Learning about the Holocaust today

### *The difficulty of answering the question “Why teach about the Holocaust?”*

What is the situation today? Let us start by quoting some findings of a study we conducted in Western Switzerland, in which we interviewed history teachers about their experiences in teaching about the Holocaust<sup>3</sup>. Our research question was not especially linked to HRE – but rather to citizenship education, and it explored how these teachers felt, and what their experiences in teaching the topic of the Holocaust had been. They declared that for them it is one of the most important, if not *the* most important, topic to teach: “[...] *it is important to show that it is an unavoidable topic, something difficult but decisive, something that shows a turning point in the reflection of human beings and history.*” The Shoah is the culminating point of the program and for some of the teachers it was the reason for having studied history as such.

But they are also aware that precisely this strong conviction could weigh too heavily on the students: “*For me it is not a topic like the others, and that is the danger; but I am careful not to focus all of my teaching to this point.*” And they are aware of the risk of their possibly too strong identification with the victims: “*I am afraid to overdo it; in direction of the victims (...) I don’t want to depress the students, so I also show the aspect of resistance, to give some hope.*”

These and other testimonies show that for history teachers the Holocaust is a crucial topic in the curriculum. They are concerned that students might object to studying the Holocaust, even though this in fact seldom happens, and occurred overtly mostly in 2005, the year of commemoration of the 60 years of liberating Auschwitz-Birkenau, when the topic was very present in the media.

They also deal very carefully with didactic and pedagogical approaches, and think deeply about *How* to teach this topic. But although they are deeply convinced of its importance, they feel it is difficult to explain *Why* it is so important to teach about the Holocaust.

The EWG of the ITF developed guidelines – or rather recommendations – on *Why to teach about the Holocaust – What to teach about the Holocaust, and How to teach about the Holocaust*.<sup>4</sup> It appears clear – and other studies show similar results – that the most difficult thing is to articulate *Why* to teach about the Holocaust.

Teachers also find it difficult to answer questions such as, “Why are you always speaking about Jews?”, “Why not speak about Rwanda, about slavery or about the Roma?” Or, as it might occur in post-Soviet countries: “Why not speak about the Gulag?” In Western European contexts, we observed that this leads teachers to adopt new strategies. Usually in the lower grades the Holocaust is taught within the context of WWII and the rise of Nazism. But more and more educators, especially in the upper grades, tend to teach it within the context of comparing genocides, or within the context of the topic of racism, colonialism and post-colonialism.

---

<sup>3</sup> Eckmann M. & Heimberg C. (2009, in press) «Die Vermittlung der Shoah im Unterricht aus den Erfahrungen und der Sicht der Lehrpersonen». In: Hodel J & Ziegler B (Hg): *Forschungswerkstatt Geschichtsdidaktik 07. Beiträge zur Tagung "geschichtsdidaktik empirisch 07"*. Bern: hep.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/education/guidelines-for-teaching.html>

### ***Focusing on history or on memory?***

In Latin countries, the distinction between history and memory is often emphasized. Learning about the Holocaust has to focus on history, not on memory; as the first aim is knowledge, not commemoration. It might be a different thing when visiting a memorial, exploring the local area or interviewing witnesses. Of course, up to a certain extent, the teachers want to create a sense of empathy with the victims in their students – something which is a basic requirement. But mainly it is about the historical facts concerning the Holocaust, consisting of three parts which should be present in every program:

- the overall picture or historical framework
- the specific history of one's own national context
- a detailed knowledge about a place, a person, a memorial, etc. – in other words, something tangible, linked to a specific territory or to a community

But learning about the Holocaust also means dealing with the perspectives of all the other groups, the perspectives of victims, of perpetrators and of bystanders, of rescuers and of opponents – as well as with their memories. Often this means dealing with competing memories, and even denying the memory of others.

This leads to the question of memory: A community of memories keeps the memory of the own members alive, and promotes the commemoration of one's own people. However, in Europe the various national or social narratives differ, ours is a Europe of divided memories – divided along the lines of different historical experiences. Even within each national memory the narratives of specific groups may differ. To address divided memories as educators we must, however, share memories and listen to all the various stories. We have to build a complex, multi-perspective vision of the past based on a dialogue of memories, between communities of remembrance, and with a mutual recognition of victimhood and of suffering, yet always with the limit of refraining of any kind of denial – something which is not easy to handle in groups composed with a diversity of narratives.

In this context, a common misinterpretation seems important to counter: HE is not above all a duty of memory, but it is first and foremost a duty of history: the duty to transmit and to teach/learn the history (*Du devoir de mémoire au devoir d'histoire*). Too much emphasis has been put on the duty of memory and of commemoration, and some students react negatively to this. Even if one of the aims of HE is to keep alive the memory of the victims, commemoration does not have the same meaning for everyone: for some it means to keep the memory of the death, to preserve one's group identity, and for others it means taking responsibility for one's own history. My intent is not to oppose memory and history, nor to choose between them, but rather to underline the necessity of distinguishing between them, and focusing on both, according to the educational context.

But nevertheless the *history of memory* has to be studied too; it is important to understand the context and the history of the creation of a memorial, of a commemoration day. Which pressure groups created a memorial place or a commemoration date, when and for whom? What were the groups involved in memorization politics? What victims are named, who is mentioned in the official memory, and who is not comprised in it?

### ***Focusing on history or on lessons of history?***

Another misinterpretation is what is called in French «*Trop de morale, pas assez d'histoire*» - too much moralizing and not enough history – i.e. putting the *lessons* of history before the

knowledge of the history itself. Precisely because it is such a crucial topic, many teachers or educators want to draw-out moral lessons. And these lessons are not always correct.

Also, the transposition of history to the present cannot be done in a linear way: For example, in connection with teaching about Nazism and the Holocaust, students deal with nowadays stereotyping, concluding: “now I can see where stereotyping leads to”. This is too simple, because stereotyping alone does not necessarily lead to genocide; it is too rapid a conclusion to draw from personal feelings to arrive at mechanisms of state-sanctioned murder.

There is a risk in trying to draw lessons without knowing the history; to compare and conclude without precise, concrete historical elements. It is impossible of course to know everything about the Holocaust, but what is taught has to be taught precisely and based on sources wherever possible. Then you can go and compare, if you are clear about what, how and... why to compare! Comparison is per se a scientific method which requires knowledge and tools to be conducted properly. And comparing is not equating. But it is important to know *what* to compare – i.e. compare facts such as legal dispositions against the targeted group, ideological settings, ways of exclusion or identification of targeted groups etc.

## 2. What does HRE in HE mean?

Now, with this background – and keeping in mind that learning about the Holocaust is a very complex field in and of itself – we ask: can HE be HRE?

HRE is also a complex topic, which includes many different aspects such as the history of the idea of human rights and the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the more legal dimensions of the various conventions and their implementation and the institutional aspects; the philosophy and culture of human rights; as well as a pedagogical and motivational dimension such as understanding and standing-up for human rights and against their violation.

Usually scholars distinguish two main options in Human Rights Education<sup>5</sup>: *Learning about human rights* and *Learning for human rights*. Yet recently a third dimension has been added to the debate, which seems just as crucial to me: *Learning with (or within) the framework of human rights*.

### *Learning about / learning for / learning within the framework of HR*

Let's take a closer look into these three dimensions:

- **Learning about HR** refers to the cognitive dimension. It includes knowledge about the history, about the institutional dimensions of the Human Rights Council, the various conventions, the responsibility of states and the possibility of intervention by civil society, the state reports and the shadow reports of civil society, the lobbying, the media work, etc. It includes awareness of the legal and institutional system as well as of the violations of human rights. In this approach the emphasis is put on knowledge, understanding and valuing.
- **Learning for HR** includes a motivational aspect and the development of competencies to act, such as advocacy within the environment where each of us lives, in one's own community or city. *Learning for* human rights implies knowing about such rights, recognizing their violation and learning to protect and to reestablish these rights. It also means to know about one's *own* rights, as part of

---

<sup>5</sup> Lohrenscheit C. (2002) "International Approaches in Human Rights Education". In: *International Review of Education*, Vol. 48, No. 3-4.

knowing, respecting and defending the rights of others, it requires an attitude of dignity and of solidarity. Thus, the motivation to act is part of the education *for* human rights, but is not limited to the motivation, including the development of competencies to act and learning about strategies such as lobbying and advocacy. The emphasis is put on *Respect, Responsibility and Solidarity*.

- **Learning *within a framework of HR*** includes not only the content, but also the learning process and the learning conditions which have to be framed by HR considerations. The learning process has to show coherence between the content and the pedagogical methods of the process on the one hand, and the learning conditions on the other. Pedagogically, this requires active methods such as learning by experience, and peer education (here we find Piaget again.) As for the educational process, it has to guarantee the respect of HR and the rights of the child as a frame for learning, for all children or students. This includes, for example, students' and children's rights of access to all sectors of higher education, a right which is not guaranteed in the case of children of undocumented workers.

### ***Possibilities and limits for implementing these dimensions within HE***

**The first dimension, learning *about HR* in the context of HE**, certainly offers many possibilities. Here some of its aspects:

- The link between WWII and the UN decision regarding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; to learn about the Genocide convention, its history and institutional, juridical and philosophical aspects; to learn about the protection of children's rights, their violation and actions taken to protect them. The associations founded in the memory of Janus Korczak, for example, deal extensively with children in the Holocaust and with children's rights.
- The philosophical and historical dimensions, the three generations of individual, social and cultural rights.
- In the field of awareness-raising, the study of the Holocaust brings numerous example of extreme violations of HR by the Nazis, such as extreme state violence, the denial of rights, expropriation, the violation of the right for protection by or from one's own state, the denial of citizen rights and the betrayal of one's own citizens. It also includes violations by bystander countries, such as the refusal to grant asylum or protection, the lack of protection of dignity, or the denial of access to citizenship and of the right to be protected from persecution by other states.

HE can also bring up the idea of the necessity of HR as a consequence and a positive outcome of the Holocaust, together with the recognition of the necessity of HR. This linear conception can however be considered too narrow, as the debate on human rights started long time ago, and certainly includes the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* and the United States *Bill of Rights*.

We could sum up this dimension of learning *about HR* with Hannah Arendt's expression regarding the recognition of a crucial right: *the right to have rights*. Indeed the destiny of the Jews shows the extreme vulnerability of stateless persons being denied having any rights at all. Only states are able to ensure the right to have rights and to protect people, their rights and their dignity. This shows the necessity for all people to hold full citizenship.

But all these topics can only be touched upon within HE, It seems difficult to delve into them more deeply within the timeframe of teaching about the Holocaust or while visiting a memorial.

**The second dimension, learning for HR in HE**, would mean learning and exercising advocacy and intervention for the protection of HR, as well as establishing or re-establishing rights which have been denied. This requires the experience of attitudes and acting patterns, to work on precise cases, to document violations, to create networks, to learn to lobby, etc. Here we find Pestalozzi's idea of *head, heart and hands* – the idea of acting.

But this dimension of learning for the protection or the reestablishment of HR seems to me very limited and more difficult to fulfill within HE, and this for several reasons: As the worst violation of HR, the Holocaust is not merely a lesson in learning how to prevent discrimination or how to fight against HR violations or how to protect HR. Also, HE does not directly give opportunities for experimenting the various competencies required for action and intervention, such as lobbying or advocacy. Of course, examples of resistance and opposition can be studied, but they have to be put in the context of the political situation of the rise of state violence and state terror. Also, some pedagogues deal with the dilemmas of HR or situations in which HR dilemmas arise, based on events of the time of National Socialism, promoting reflections on acting for HR. Confronting different perspectives on such dilemmas – such as the perspective of perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers and resisters – is a way of dealing with moral judgment and a first step to considering action.

**The third dimension, learning within HRE in the context of HE** refers to the process, the atmosphere, the pedagogical framework – but also the legal and civic framework which has to be set in accordance with HR principles: on the one hand, children's and students' rights have to be protected, the access to education for every child has to be guaranteed, the educational system has to be constructed accordingly to HR principles and ensure equal opportunities and a democratic structure.

On the other hand, learning within a framework of HR also means ensuring HR attitudes in learning systems, active learning settings and a democratic pedagogical approach. Also, peer education is a basic tool for HRE – and as Piaget pointed out – especially for the development of moral judgment. These pedagogical approaches need to offer space for students to deal with their personal or family experiences with rights and discrimination. Building on personal experiences is a powerful instigation to learning, be it of experiences of one's own discrimination, or having witnessed discrimination against others. Such incidents and experiences often emerge in teaching the Holocaust, visiting a memorial or watching a movie about the Holocaust, and enable students to establish links between past and present kinds of discrimination.

### **3. Can HE be a tool for HRE and should it be?**

#### ***Can HE be a tool for HRE?***

My impression is that HE cannot fulfill *all the requirements* of HRE, but that it can contribute to it significantly and be a powerful mind-opener. However, HRE can be present in HE, mainly through the dimension of *learning about HR* and *learning within the frame of HR*.

HE offers opportunities and is a starting point to confront HR. But even if it seems difficult to really learn for HR in the context of HE, it is nevertheless crucial to learn a few things about HR and learn within a framework of HR. Mostly, when teaching about the Holocaust, the human rights dimensions will only be addressed marginally, and should be more closely looked at either before dealing with the Holocaust or at a later stage, in another place or at

another time. So HE constitutes a motivation and a starting point for an interest in HRE, as a tool of awareness-building; it can also include numbers of valuable elements of HRE, but it can not be considered as its true core.

Nevertheless, there are possibilities to be explored and new approaches to be experienced. Currently, several studies and projects in Europe are attempting to start initiatives and to discover more about this question; their results might bring us new insights. I'd like to mention in this regard a European study conducted by the FRA and carried out by the Living History Forum in Sweden with an international expert group on the role of Holocaust commemoration sites and memorial for HRE. There is also an action-research study led by a group of *Gedenkstättenpädagogin* in Germany which has developed new training modules for guides at memorial sites. There is also a program carried out by the Foundation EVZ which should be mentioned – a program which supports projects linking “history” and “HRE”. A first evaluation study of the projects supported by EVZ<sup>6</sup> has shown that this link is not easy to handle in an integrated way: either one or the other topic tends to dominate; often, the other topic is more a pretext than really dealt with appropriately. This shows the need for concepts, research and experimentation if we intend to link these topics in an articulated way.

### ***Should HE be a tool for HRE?***

Some people take it for granted that HE is HRE – maybe too much for granted. It is not an easy task, and it does it represent the same kind of challenge in every context. It depends on the learning context as well as on the context of national history and experience. In Switzerland some teachers link HE to citizenship education, especially when organizing memorial days. Besides the aims of HRE or citizenship education are mostly addressed by history teachers. But HRE means not dealing mainly with the past, but clearly addressing HR violations today in one's own national and social context.

However, at memorial sites this link might be more difficult to achieve: some memorial places are cemeteries, places to mourn, places of memory. We have to remember that even the best HE or HRE cannot “repair” the Holocaust, cannot undo what has happened, and cannot make alive again those who have been murdered. This may lead us to say : let us try to forge this link, but let us be modest with our ambitions for HRE.

We can consider HE and HRE as being organized within a triangle where we find again Pestalozzi's “*head, hart and hand*”;

- Learning about the history of the Holocaust (“*head*”)
- Memory and commemoration (“*heart*”)
- Human Rights Education including the dimension of acting *for* HR (“*hand*”)

These three cardinal points stand in a complex tension to each other. They can be placed on a continuum; various connections between them can be shown, depending on combinations found in learning settings. Each teaching module, each project or program dealing with the Holocaust, each memorial place or museum deals has a specific potential and deals in a specific way with a specific combination of these three dimensions: closer or more distant to history, to commemoration or to HRE, according to its specific context. However, no educational approach can fully deal with all three of them at once; choices must therefore be made.

---

<sup>6</sup> Scherr A. & Hormel U. (2008) *Evaluation des Förderprogramms “Geschichte und Menschenrechte” der Stiftung “Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft”*. Berlin: Stiftung EVZ.

#### **4. Further challenges**

Within the possibilities and limits sketched above, a number of further challenges exist and new projects and experiences should be promoted in the future.

##### ***Reinforce links to neighboring topics***

The Holocaust is an important topic in the teaching of history; as such, it is linked to the European history curriculum. But it can also be put under the umbrella of other frameworks or neighboring topics, and it would benefit both sides to build closer links. Here we dealt with Human Rights Education, but neighboring fields such as intercultural education, antiracist education, and education for democratic citizenship (or citizenship education) should also reinforce their linkages to HE. For example, antiracist education is impossible to carry out without giving space to the Holocaust; yet on the other hand, antiracist education is not limited to the topic of the Holocaust, as it includes present forms of racism. Intercultural education targets the question of the living together of diverse cultural, national or religious group, or even bigger questions which underlie relationships between minorities and majorities, as well as the protections of minority rights. Of course, this can also include the study of aspects of the processes leading to the Holocaust. Citizenship education, as it deals with the rights of every person living in a given territory, addresses the active participation of all members of the society they live and work in. These fields evolved quite separately, and to bring them together would benefit all of them.

##### ***Reaching out to new target groups:***

HE as HRE is particularly promising when addressing adult target groups in their professional training or in service training, such as policemen, social workers, medical staff etc. Also it is important not to limit it to formal or school education, but to address informal education as well, such as municipal or community initiatives, community work and neighborhood initiatives.

Yet even if we want to focus mainly on schools, we could reinforce our action by addressing not only in-service training for teachers, but by focusing on teacher training institutes, and on pre-service training, reinforcing cooperation with the pedagogues and specialists responsible for training history and citizenship teachers in universities or professional colleges.

##### ***Experimental joint projects bringing together HRE and HE***

HE and HRE are both complex fields requiring a high level of competency from educators. It is rather doubtful that one person can master both, so it is necessary to bring actors from both fields together in person in order to exchange their knowledge and their experiences. We need to experience models and methods which can bring the two topics together closer; this also means bringing together the persons as well as the organizations involved in the two fields. Concretely, we need to

- Promote collaboration by organizing conferences or joint seminars, activating networks of the two fields and building coalitions;
- Sponsor experimental projects and research studies, in order to develop new pedagogical concepts and materials, as we do not know enough about the methods and outcomes of joint learning;
- Promote experimental projects and actions in school, as well as in municipalities and neighborhood or communities.

### *To conclude*

HE as a tool for HRE offers many possibilities, but it also has some limits. It is however important to keep in mind some fundamental elements of HE and of HRE. Indeed, without these elements the basic requirements of HE and HRE cannot be met. Thus it seems crucial:

- To learn the historical facts, and to know about the process leading to the Holocaust.
- To give space not only to what happened during the time of National Socialism, but also to address what happened afterwards, to the history of memory, and to be aware of the diversity of historical narratives.
- To address current violations of HR, especially those occurring in our own society and in our own national contexts.
- To challenge and deconstruct national myths present in our own countries about this history, and to reflect on how to come to terms with each country's own past.