

## **Holocaust education. Experiences gained and challenges ahead**

**Wolf Kaiser**

The genocide of the European Jews was committed during a war which tore the European continent apart like no other military conflict since the Thirty-Years' War and evolved into a World War. The Holocaust, however, caused an even deeper abyss, different in its implications from the antagonisms that emerged from Germany's aggression against other countries. The common ground between the nation whose government organized the industrial mass killing of men, women and children and its allies on the one hand and those who fell victim to the Holocaust as well as the anti-Hitler-coalition on the other seemed to be destroyed for an incalculable period of time if not for ever. Who could have imagined that half a century later scholars and educators from countries with antagonistic positions in World War II and the Holocaust would work together on concepts of Holocaust education? And that this effort would become a long-term cooperation? We had the privilege of participating in this very astonishing development. When I joined the International Task Force eight years ago I did not take it for granted that this would be possible. And I think it is worthwhile to analyze on which basis our close cooperation and international network could emerge.

The history of the Holocaust cannot be dealt with as a history of winners. The voices of the victims must be heard in the first place. And it is equally essential to analyze the motivations and the behavior of perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders. Here, a self-reflective

and self-critical approach is a precondition for every attempt of coming to terms with the past. It is worth remarking that even in countries whose armies liberated the Nazi camps, the Holocaust related discourse is not focused on victory and liberation, but on the question why victims of persecution were denied refuge and why an early intervention against the Holocaust was not launched and if it had been possible. The Holocaust discourse is part of a cathartic approach to history; it cannot be based in a concept of history serving national pride. This has enormous implications for education.

Holocaust education is paradigmatic for teaching history with the aim to question national myths. But when we try to explore why the Holocaust happened, we must transcend the boundaries of national history. Antisemitism and the ideology asserting an alleged “inequality of the human races” found their most extreme and destructive expression in the Nazi’s idea of a master-race and supremacy according to race and nation, based on terrorist repression and military power. But these ideologies did not only exist in Germany; they were deeply rooted in Western culture. We can define our educational goals as the very antithesis of these traditions. In general, there is no doubt about the lesson to be learnt: Who could deny when analyzing the Holocaust and the other Nazi crimes that we desperately need a political culture and social relations based on respect for the dignity of every human being? However, Holocaust education should not be misunderstood and misused for preachy teaching, oversimplifying history in order to better serve moral

lessons. The history of the Holocaust must be taught with all dilemmas and contradictions.

If we understand historical learning primarily as a process of reflection and self-reflection, it cannot be organised in the traditional way of teaching: the teacher simply conveying historical knowledge to the students. The students must have an active role in the process. They should be given the opportunity to take a multiperspective approach, critically analysing intentions and actions of perpetrators and collaborators, exploring the contribution of bystanders allowing the crimes to be committed and confronting their attitude with that of rescuers, and – last not least - comprehending the behaviour of the victims.

For conceiving such a multiperspective approach educators can gain a lot from international cooperation, because Holocaust related discourses differ from one country to another and they change over time with changing societies. Therefore a great variety of concepts for dealing with the Holocaust exists. For good reasons public arguments, but also scholars and educators focus on different aspects of the Holocaust and practice different approaches. Just to mention two examples: Not by chance, research on perpetrators found great interest in Germany in the last decades, whereas in Israel more attention was given to the victims' side. Broadening perspectives, not levelling the differences should be the aim of international cooperation.

The chances for giving broad and balanced coverage to Holocaust history were considerably improved by the following developments:

- numerous diaries of Holocaust victims and testimonies of survivors were published;
- archives were established collecting tenth of thousands of video testimonies;
- audio and video testimonies were made accessible by transcriptions and annotations and concepts for educational use are currently developed;
- historical research provides biographical data of perpetrators on all levels of the Nazi hierarchy and in many spheres of their direct activity, in various cases associated with a sophisticated analysis of their ideology, their motivations and their scope of action;
- endeavours to explain the behaviour of bystanders were made,
- biographies and actions of helpers and rescuers were documented.

Historians, psychologists, archivists and pedagogues from many countries participated in these efforts. Based on the results of their work, Holocaust education can and should address victims and perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers and liberators.

During the last decade, international cooperation in Holocaust education was developed in several forms.

a) The Education Working Group of the International Task Force has agreed upon a set of recommendations under the headlines:

Why teach about the Holocaust?

What to teach?

How to teach about the Holocaust?

Furthermore, recommendations for study tours to Holocaust related sites were formulated as well as suggestions for preparing Holocaust remembrance days.

These guidelines are not meant as directives. The authors were aware that the historical and actual context of Holocaust education is not the same in all countries and that there are great differences concerning the predominant teaching and learning styles. The guidelines on “How to teach about the Holocaust” explicitly refer to this fact stating:

“There can be no single “correct” way of teaching any subject, no ideal methodology that is appropriate for all teachers and students.

What is offered here are guidelines and advice that might prove useful to schoolteachers in constructing their own schemes of work, taking into account the learning needs of individual students.”

b) Experts in Holocaust education were invited to conferences and teacher training courses in many countries. Thus participants became acquainted with different approaches and didactical concepts. And experts could learn from each other by attending workshops and lectures of their colleagues. Not only the International Task Force, but also the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Association of Holocaust Organizations, the Claims Conference, and other organizations have contributed to this endeavour.

c) Exchange programs for teachers, but also for students offered them opportunities to challenge what seemed to be self-evident and to develop new ideas when they were confronted with questions they had

not raised before. By addressing and explaining differences and looking for similarities and consensus, participants in these programs amplified their perception of the Holocaust and took part in intercultural education at the same time.

Which are the main challenges ahead?

In spite of all what has been achieved, there are quite a few. They imply difficulties that cannot easily be managed.

To start with a simple one nevertheless demanding considerable resources: Materials needed for a multiperspective approach must be made accessible in many languages. Even if a teacher in a non-English speaking country reads English fluently, he or she cannot use material in the classroom if it exists only in English or in another language not understood by the students. And we should not expect teachers to have time for translating the material themselves. International cooperation is very helpful for exploring which materials used by colleagues in various countries are the most appropriate ones and educationally most effective. But translation must be organized and funded on a national level.

Challenge No. 2: Making use of all the brilliant educational ideas and excellent materials that are available needs time. Given the dense curricula of history lessons and other subjects where the Holocaust can be studied, it will not be easy to make sure that the Holocaust is

taught in an appropriate time-frame. Decision makers will have to cope with this task on a national level, too. But they should be made aware of international standards.

No. 3: Ties between education at school and education at memorial sites and museums should be strengthened. More reflection on the specific tasks at these different sites of learning and better cooperation between the actors at school and at the sites visited by school groups are urgently needed.

No. 4: If a self-reflective attitude towards our own history is the basis of Holocaust education as I argued in the beginning, promoting a critical and self-critical approach cannot be limited to children and youths as target-groups. Adults should also be given the opportunity to deal in depth with Holocaust history based on most advanced historical research. This may have consequences for their perception of actual tasks and problems and their response. Moreover, it could have repercussions for the education of students, too, since adults influence youths in many ways, not the least by deciding about the framework and conditions of education.

Let me finally mention what I consider to be the most demanding challenge. We are used to assume that Holocaust education does not only mean historical learning, but has the potential of contributing considerably to human rights education. But what does this exactly mean and how can we make sure that it really happens? Human rights education does not only mean education *about* human rights, but also

education *for* human rights. When studying how Jews were deprived of their rights as citizens and as human beings which ultimately culminated in their physical destruction, we implicitly or explicitly refer to human rights by emphasizing the outrageous injustice and brutality of the measures taken by the Nazis and their collaborators against the Jews. And obviously the emergence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the crucial role of the Holocaust for this endeavour could (and I think: should) be part of a Holocaust curriculum. But does this automatically contribute to education *for* human rights? Or do we need specific didactics and particular methods enabling our students to actively participate in defending human rights or striving for the implementation of regulations allowing people in the first place to assume human rights? Should this be integrated into Holocaust education? Or should we consider Holocaust education and human rights education as two important fields of education which should exist separately, but be co-ordinated in this way or the other? These are still open questions which need to be discussed as well among experts in Holocaust education as among specialists in human rights education. A common effort seems to me the most promising way to achieve progress in this respect.