

## Workshop 2: Teaching and Learning about Perpetrators within Memorial Sites

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Dealing with the perpetrators in the educational programmes of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site against the background of German landscapes of memory

In the German discourse on commemoration, places with a historical connection to the crimes of the Nazis are divided into those associated with perpetrators and those associated with victims. That distinction cannot be strictly maintained in those historical sites that are now concentration camp memorials. To commemorate the victims without reference to the perpetrators would be to de-historicise and de-contextualise the crimes of the Nazis, as if those crimes had been committed "without a perpetrator".<sup>1</sup>

Yitzchak Mais has described the various perspectives on the Shoah adopted in Germany, Israel and the United States and how they tend to be reflected in historical exhibitions:

*"The events of the Holocaust are usually divided into three dimensions, as per the historical characters: (1) perpetrators; (2) victims; (3) bystanders. The last category refers to the countries not under Nazi domination and also to the non-Jewish citizens of the Nazi-occupied nations. [...] The determining factor is [...] the degree of symmetry and proportion given to each of the historical components when the composite story line of the Holocaust is presented either in a school curriculum or in a museum exhibition. The dimension emphasized is primarily a function of where and for whom the exhibition is displayed - the 'local' interests of the visitors and the messages one wants to impart to the museums' visitors."*<sup>2</sup>

Mais says different emphases in accounts of what happened prevail in Germany, in the Jewish context, and in the United States. This is what he writes about the German perspective:

*"A Holocaust memorial museum or exhibition in **Germany** would naturally emphasize the dimension of the perpetrators, not so as to perversely glorify the murderers but rather to emphasize what is essential and germane for the visitors to the German museum to extrapolate from the events of the Holocaust. The most basic question for Germans visiting a Holocaust exhibition lies in the realm of the perpetrator: how did a nation and people with whom I share a common history, language and cultural tradition evolve into the Nazi state, with its moral transgressions and the murder of millions of innocent men, women and children?"*<sup>3</sup>

Mais writes that of course such exhibitions in Germany also include mention of the victims, since it would be absurd to create a "*Jew-free story line*".<sup>4</sup>

Germany does not have a Holocaust Museum. Nor does the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe claim to be a museum, but rather "Germany's central Holocaust memorial site, a place for remembrance and commemoration of six million victims".<sup>5</sup>

The Information Centre there does not claim to be a museum either.

*"It will provide the necessary background material on the victims commemorated here and on historic memorial sites.*

*A central function of the Information Centre is to back up the abstract form of remembrance inspired by the Memorial with concrete facts and information about the victims. This includes, for example, recording as*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Monika Richarz, Schwierigkeiten der Heimatforscher mit jüdischer Geschichte, in: Babylon 8/1991, 27-33, here: p.30

<sup>2</sup> Ytzchak Mais, Commemorating the Shoah - Are There Different Holocausts? in: The Forum, Summer/Autumn 1993, 14-16 (1993), here: pp.14f

<sup>3</sup> Mais (1993), p.15

<sup>4</sup> Mais (1993), p.15

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/>, captured on 12.01.2009

*many names of murdered Jews as possible. Personal and biographical details of individuals and families will also be presented as examples.*

*In addition, the centre focuses on the origins of the victims honoured here and aims to document the spread of this genocide across Europe. At the same time, detailed information about historical memorial sites in Germany and Europe will be provided.*

*Overall, the Information Centre will serve as a portal to the diverse landscape of memorial sites across the country that are very much a living part of German society and in Europe."<sup>6</sup>*

So the perpetrators remain invisible, although Sibylle Quack and Dagmar von Wilcken do write the following in their essay for the catalogue:

"While the exhibition is dedicated to the Jews who were murdered, it by no means fails to address the deeds and the responsibility of the Germans in the historical context. At the start of the exhibition there is a brief survey of the events between 1933 and 1945. ... The display in the foyer of the Information Centre shows the escalation of the murderous policies, explains connections, names perpetrators, and points out the effects these policies had on individual people and their families."<sup>7</sup>

In the foyer to the Information Centre there is an introductory *Chronology of Genocide*<sup>8</sup>, 131 sentences in length.<sup>9</sup>

47 of those sentences have subjects that denote perpetrators. Some are repeated more than once. In all, only the following perpetrators are mentioned:

members of an SS *Sonderkommando*; occupiers: German occupiers (3 times); German occupying power (2 times); German *Dienststellen* (authorities or government offices); German units (2 times); The German leadership (7 times); German military and police units; the German military administration; German SS and police units; the German administration; the German Army (*Wehrmacht*); *Einsatzgruppen* of the Security Police and Security Service; the Waffen SS; other police and SS units; senior ministerial officials; high-ranking party and SS functionaries; [*Reichsführer-SS*, Heinrich] Himmler (3 times); [Reinhard] Heydrich (2 times); Hitler: a commando force; those in power (2 times); one; most members of this regime; army and police; the National Socialists and their sympathisers; the National Socialist leadership; the government; the Romanian regime; Romanian soldiers; They (5 times); the SS and the army leadership.

At least the perpetrators are present. The subjects of 32 other sentences have to do with persecution or murderous operations or the places where they occurred.<sup>10</sup>

In 1995 Peter Reichel could still agree with the criticism that had been voiced of one of Berlin's other main commemorative sites, the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site. It is a place that is firmly associated with the perpetrators, not the victims:

*"One commentary stated – with some exaggeration but not incorrectly – that in the exhibition the victims remain as 'anonymous' as the perpetrators, who seem to have just shown up 'at the execution sites in eastern Europe straight from hell and then to have promptly returned to the underworld'. Another critical voice*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/dasdenkmal/ortinformation>, captured on 12.01.2009

<sup>7</sup> Sibylle Quack and Dagmar von Wilcken, *Der Mord an den Juden als Ausstellungsprojekt. Widerstreit von Thematik, Konzept und Gestaltung im Ort der Information*, in: *Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* (ed.), *Materialien zum Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*, Berlin 2005, 40-48, here: p.41.

<sup>8</sup> [Ulrich Baumann,] *Chronologie des Völkermords. Eskalation der Vernichtungspolitik*, in: *Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* (1995), as in note 7, 50-55.

<sup>9</sup> 1933-37: 9, 1938: 6, 1939: 5, 1940: 8, 1941: 44, 1942: 33, 1943: 12, 1944: 6, 1945: 8.

<sup>10</sup> The victims are the grammatical subject of 40 sentences; in 20 of them they are however the subject of passive verbs. Most of the active verbs are about the measures to which the victims were condemned: They received no food, perished, died, were victims of persecution, starved or died, were among the victims, died. In 24 sentences the victims become the grammatical object.

*complained that mass murder is presented 'without murderers' and that the Jewish victims are only shown 'the way they – the murderers – saw them'.<sup>11</sup>*

As regards concentration camp memorial sites, it is quite understandable that survivors claim for themselves the scenes of the crimes as places of remembrance; and there is something to their concern that a more detailed presentation of the perpetrators would take away (exhibition) space from the commemoration of those who were murdered.

Attentiveness, the capacity to pay attention, is a scarce resource. Given the enormity of the crimes and the way the sites have changed over time – the scenes of the crimes and the memorial sites – it is not surprising that visitors need help and orientation as they seek to grasp the complexity of the history of the places and the crimes committed there.

Educators and academics in the field of education have been discussing for many years now the importance of dealing with the perpetrators in educational programmes on the mass crimes of the Nazis.<sup>12</sup> In the 1990s the debate was influenced by a renewed interest in Theodor W. Adorno's 1966 essay *Education after Auschwitz*, in which he said he did not believe *"it would be of much use to set out the positive qualities the persecuted minorities might have"*. The roots of what happened are rather *"to be found in the persecutors, not in the victims whom one had murdered on the flimsiest of pretexts."* What is needed is *"the turn towards the subject"*.

*"One needs to understand the mechanisms that shape people in such a way that they become capable of committing such deeds; one must explain these mechanisms to them and seek to prevent them becoming like that again, by creating an awareness of those mechanisms."<sup>13</sup>*

Since the mid-1990s there has been much analysis and discussion of received ideas about how to deal in educational contexts with the history of the crimes of the Nazis, and of other possible approaches. There has been a new emphasis on multiperspectivity and a greater interest in biographical studies of perpetrators, in line with the "turn towards the subject".

In family and social narratives, the low-level common-or-garden Nazis in Germany have succeeded in making themselves disappear by various means. Accounts of what happened often employ impersonal forms, as Herbert Jochum has noted:

*"The distress about naming names and speaking clearly is equally evident in the syntactic peculiarity of the missing 'subject'. Instead, time and place are specified adverbially, the anonymous 'one' stands-in for the subject, or passive constructions are used. 'In the Nazi period one persecuted the Jews' or 'In the Nazi period the Jews were persecuted'. The dominance of the passive form results from talking about the victims. One does not know how to talk about the perpetrators."<sup>14</sup>*

Martin Broszat wrote that the West Germans treated the history of Nazism in the third person.<sup>15</sup> And in the early 1990s Monika Richarz had the impression that especially in accounts of the Nazis' crimes against the Jews the monstrous deeds often appeared as

*"crimes without perpetrators. Jews were robbed of all their property – but who robbed them and were they later called to account? Businesses and houses were sold under pressure. Who profited? Answers to these questions are rarely to be found. But for the most part the questions are not even asked."<sup>16</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung - Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die nationale Vergangenheit*, Munich and Vienna 1995, p.194.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Matthias Heyl, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz. Eine Bestandsaufnahme. Deutschland, Niederlande, USA, Israel, Hamburg 1997*, especially pp.235-239.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno (1966), *Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, in: *Stichworte - Kritische Modelle 2*, Frankfurt 1969, 85-101, here: p.87.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Jochum as quoted by Chaim Schatzker, *Die Juden in den deutschen Geschichtsbüchern - Schulbuchanalyse zur Darstellung der Juden, des Judentums und des Staates Israel*, [Schriftenreihe der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, volume 173], Bonn 1981, p.150.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Broszat as quoted by Frank van Vree, *In de schaduw van Auschwitz: Herinneringen, beelden, geschiedenis*, Groningen 1995, S. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Richarz (1991), as in note 1.

Education expert Bodo von Borries argued that it is necessary to look more closely at the perpetrators

*"not just because that is the only way to understand what happened, but because the risk of a repetition is to be found among the perpetrators, not the victims ... This has so far been neglected in education."*<sup>17</sup>

At about the same time, however, Birgit Rommelspacher warned of the danger of exculpation perpetrators in studying them: It is problematic, she argued, to develop a dichotomous model of perpetrators and bystanders and then to pick out the perpetrators, abstract them from the context of everyday life, and let *"all the other people ... disappear in the cheering crowd"*.

*"They too remain faceless. They too are not seen as individuals. That means parents or grandparents can definitely not be found among them. But where are the points of contact for one's personal coming-to-terms, for identification and distanciation?"*<sup>18</sup>

Studying the positions of the perpetrators, the scope of their actions, the choices they made, came to complement the reading of narratives about or by victims, which had been widespread since the 1980s; many found it easy to identify with the victims. Now the aim was to find out how "normal people" could become perpetrators.

Richarz also argued that accounts of Nazi mass crimes

*"should place the biographies of the perpetrators in the foreground and show that they had choices, that they could say yes or no, that they took decisions."*<sup>19</sup>

The Dutch educationalist Ido Abram went perhaps the farthest in arguing that school students should empathise with and try to *"see things from the perspective of the perpetrators of the Holocaust"* and *"to face and feel the horror of Auschwitz, as Adorno, put it"*.<sup>20</sup> Historians such as Christopher Browning have dismissed warnings that this kind of understanding will lead to moral indifference:

*"What I do not accept ... are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving."*<sup>21</sup>

## **Ravensbrück**

Ravensbrück is a place where crimes were committed and it is a place of commemoration; it has been an official site of remembrance since 1959.

The educational programmes there seek to inform visitors about the complex history of the place in ways that complement the exhibitions. That means, for the most part, guided tours for groups – designed to suit their specific requirements – and in-depth projects, mainly for school classes and to a lesser extent for groups of young people in non-school further education, as well as for groups of adults by appointment.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Helmut Schreier and Matthias Heyl (ed.), *Daß Auschwitz nicht noch einmal sei... - Zur Erziehung nach Auschwitz*, Hamburg 1995, p.368.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Rommelspacher, *Schuldlos - Schuldig? Wie sich junge Frauen mit Antisemitismus auseinandersetzen*, Hamburg 1994, p.23.

<sup>19</sup> Monika Richarz as quoted by Helmut Schreier and Matthias Heyl, *Dass Auschwitz nicht noch einmal sei...*, p. 367.

<sup>20</sup> Ido Abram, *Erziehung und humane Orientierung*, in: Ido Abram and Matthias Heyl: *Thema Holocaust – Ein Buch für die Schule*, Reinbek 1996, 11-60, here: p.16.

<sup>21</sup> Donald G. Schilling: *The Dead End of Demonizing - Dealing with the Perpetrators in Teaching the Holocaust*, in: Rochelle L. Millen (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Holocaust - A Guide for Teachers and Scholars*, New York 1996, 196-211, here: p.199.

Individual visitors, whether teenagers or adults, only have access to the exhibitions at the Memorial Site; they have so far been more or less ignored by the education department at Ravensbrück, as it acknowledges.

So as regards educational work at Ravensbrück concerning the perpetrators, I shall deal in the rest of this paper with everyday experiences guiding classes of schoolchildren.

During guided tours and projects for school classes, which last several hours, the history of the perpetrators has proved to be of particular interest to the young visitors. That was the case even before the exhibition "*Im Gefolge der SS*".

The first visual impression of the memorial site is dominated by "perpetrator buildings" – the remaining houses in the SS residential quarter in front of the prisoners' camp and commandant's office. The barracks in which the prisoners were kept can only be seen in old photographs -- the sources of which, by the way, have not always been critically analysed -- in the introductory film, in the exhibitions, and in drawings by prisoners; they are also evoked by the landscaping of the camp grounds.

An "Internationale Jugendbegegnungsstätte" – which translates as International Youth Encounter Centre – and a youth hostel are located in what used to be the living quarters of the camp guards, buildings directly associated with perpetrators. That presents us with a particular challenge, both when we talk to the groups of visitors staying there and when we take others on guided tours.

The decision to house them there is hard to understand, if not impossible to understand, and we have to provide some kind of explanation. It has proved helpful to tell them about the complex discussion of that decision and to set out the various arguments, thereby encouraging the young visitors to develop a position of their own. Their positions often turn out to be as varied as those represented in the debate that accompanied the establishment of the "Internationalen Jugendbegegnungsstätte Ravensbrück".

During the preparations for the exhibition "*Im Gefolge der SS*" there were intensive discussions between the team headed by Simone Erpel and the education department of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site about how the exhibition could be used for educational purposes. The very structure and content of the exhibition dispel the concerns initially raised that it could be misunderstood as a historical "freak show" or even play into the hands of rightwing extremists who would identify with the perpetrators.

It is extremely hard to guide groups through the exhibition because of the way it is laid out – the spaces are evocatively narrow, on purpose. For practical reasons we therefore tell the groups of young visitors before they enter about the structure of the exhibition, to give them some sense of orientation and to set out the main themes; we also suggest they focus on just one or two rooms.

Many classes visit the exhibition only or mainly in connection with reading Bernhard Schlink's "*The Reader*". That tends to narrow from the outset their focus. And the members of the education department are often confronted with notions that have precious little to do with the historical reality of what happened there.

Many youngsters are surprised to discover that most of the camp guards could read and write. It is almost impossible during such a brief educational encounter to *deconstruct* all the images and ideas that are clichéd or tend to exonerate the perpetrators. Often neither the teachers accompanying the classes nor the schoolchildren are able to grasp the critical force of the exhibition. Time and again we are confronted with the problem that teachers of German only want to book tours of the exhibition about the camp guards and ignore the overall history of the complex of camps at Ravensbrück. The exhibition is often viewed as an extra-curricular

extra to help the students understand Schlink's novel. That is not, however, the aim and purpose of the exhibition! The team at the education department therefore repeatedly have to face the challenge of presenting and explaining the exhibition in such a way that the expectations of the visitors are not too disappointed while doing some justice to the history of the Ravensbrück concentration camp complex. Some visitors thus only want to take a look at the historical exhibition at Ravensbrück in the light of their one-sided narrowly-focussed interest in the camp guards. They often implicitly and sometimes explicitly reject an encounter with other central themes. One teacher called up to book a tour and said "God forbid the children should visit the memorial site as well; they should only see the exhibition". Her reason? She did not want to overburden her pupils. There are many such teachers.

When we work with groups that want to visit the exhibition "*Im Gefolge der SS*", we often start in the empty room upstairs, so that the youngsters can gain an impression of the 'original' state of the building. Then, with the help of a sketch, we explain the layout and idea of the exhibition; we then bring up the question of what it means to be in the "perpetrators' quarters".

When it comes to tackling the historical content of the exhibition, Heid Schöllhorn, for example, talks about the daily life of the camp guards. Some schoolchildren ask straightaway how the guards got their "job". Themes are occasionally addressed here that would otherwise come up during a tour of the camp. It is evidently easier for some youngsters to face the history of the Ravensbrück camp complex in this more *abstract* situation at a *felt* distance from the actual place itself.

It is often difficult for the youngsters to grasp the various components of the exhibition and its multiperspective approach, which encompasses the biographies of both perpetrators and victims. Many watch in amazement the videos of survivors talking, or look at the photos of the camp guards in the stairwell, but the youngsters rarely attain the balanced mix of interest, knowledge and critical distance to the sources that would help them understand the complexity of the themes.

Symptomatic for this helplessness is the question once posed by a schoolgirl named Heike: "*Which ones are the Nazis and which ones are the victims?*". At least it shows she was interested. Another girl – who had already visited the "*Ort der Namen*" and seen how photos of unnamed prisoners at Ravensbrück could be assigned to the Gedenkbuch (Memorial Book) without it being possible to match faces and names – was interested in the reasons for the specific layout of the exhibition: "*Why are the pictures hanging here? And why in the Memorial Book section are there pictures of victims, whose names visitors are never told?*"

It takes considerable effort to try to make the complexity of what happened half-way comprehensible. Youngsters often find it hard to interpret the organisation chart that hangs in the first room, though they find the issue of how staff were "recruited" interesting. Oliver was amazed: "*They really signed up voluntarily?*" The school students tend to be less interested in the various trials than in the underlying question of whether the perpetrators were brought to justice at all. Viola put it succinctly: "*Hopefully they were punished?*"

The room "*After hours*" (*Nach Dienstschluss*) has proved to be an eye-catcher for youngsters: it shows the partial "normality" of the women living in such an abnormal setting; it also suggests how disturbingly weird the attempted or asserted "*normality*" in this place was – the distinction between the private and the official realms, "*work*" and leisure. A schoolgirl named Katja put it like this: "*They lived here quite normally, with their children and everything; you just can't imagine that.*"

Many youngsters and adults feel overwhelmed by the amount of text and the complexity of the material. Discussions after visits to the exhibition reveal that many school students are not capable of setting priorities or appreciating how specific texts relate to specific issues.

A full and balanced appreciation of the exhibition is scarcely possible given the small amount of time a group usually spends at Ravensbrück. The time needed to deal with the complex history is almost always underestimated. If a visit lasts four or five hours, one and a half hours are usually taken up with a tour of the memorial site, often bypassing the exhibitions in the main building. The exhibition "*Im Folge der SS*" does figure, however, in the longer programmes, which lasts a number of days. One reason is that it has to be explained why the youth hostel is housed in what used to be the living quarters of the camp guards.

Foreign groups, especially English-speaking ones, appear to find this exhibition especially interesting. We have identified three reasons for this: 1) An English translation of the texts makes this exhibition relatively accessible – unlike the other ones at Ravensbrück; 2) the subject matter itself is both fascinating and disturbing; 3) foreign visitors often want to know how German society deals with its history as perpetrator.

Not only at the exhibition, but also out in the grounds of the camp, there are clear traces of the perpetrators, traces that can help bring the history of the place home to visitors. When they see where the senior and middle-ranking SS officers lived, detached and semi-detached family homes – yes, family homes, where they lived with their wives and children – the visitors often ask how on earth that could be? The SS men must have lacked any moral decency if they could let their families live here at a concentration camp, right beside their "place of work", and if they could thus confront their wives and children with their crimes.

Most visitors cannot fathom the idea that the perpetrators did not consider that to be a problem. It is not the case that the Nazi perpetrators had no morals; they had a moral vision all their own, an exclusive one, which applied only to certain categories of humans, the rest being relegated to the realm of the subhuman. On the basis of arbitrary distinctions and definitions that classed certain people as "not worthy to live" or as subhumans, "*Untermenschen*", some of the prisoners simply fell outside the Nazis' moral universe. The spurious and hierarchical categories of "master race" and "*Untermensch*", along with the devaluation and dehumanisation of the latter, were and still are central to the rightwing extremist world view.

The Nazi concentration camps and extermination camps were the places in which this widespread and widely-accepted Nazi ideology could be implemented, acted out and executed in an extreme and thorough fashion.

The guards and the SS at Ravensbrück were convinced of their cause; and as a group they could always confirm each other's conviction that all the oppression and murder were the fulfilment of a mission on behalf of the *Führer*, the Nation and the Fatherland – and not simply mindless arbitrary murder and mayhem; in this way, they did not have to suffer any moral doubts.

To consider the places where the crimes were committed and the perpetrators of those crimes in their historical and social context involves understanding the overall situation, German society as a whole, outside and around the camps. That kind of historical analysis and contextualisation makes many people very nervous who seek to free themselves of the burden of history by visiting such places – as if the guilt and the burden of the crimes of the Nazis can be corralled in these sites and kept in check there, as if that could relieve other places of the guilt and the pain just because they were not the sites of mass murder, while people in so many places across the then German Reich agreed with those (spurious) reasons for all the murder and mayhem.