

Workshop 1: Teaching and Learning about Perpetrators in Schools and Non-Formal Education

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Today, there is much we understand about the Holocaust, the Nazi genocide of European Jewry. Though much work remains to be done and new questions, perspectives and results are constantly revealed, historical research and analysis has achieved impressive levels in understanding central issues; that is, the *who*, *where*, *when*, *how* and *with what* of the event. Far less progress, however, has been realized in understanding The most important question of all—*WHY*. In spite of the mountains of data and years of analysis, scholars of the event have so far been unable to provide a sufficiently global answer to this most existentially important question. As a historian of the event, I know that filling this gap in our understanding remains a priority, for the mediation of research results to society-at-large is also central to the role of Holocaust scholars. The continuing failure to fully understand “why” is something of cardinal importance for those who teach about the genocide.

As both an historian and teacher of Holocaust history and memory for some two decades, I know that if the goals of Holocaust education are ever really to be reached, understanding the dauntingly complicated mix of motivations, actions, feelings, fears and *post-facto* feelings (or lack thereof) of those who perpetrated the Holocaust remains a critical pedagogic challenge. Indeed, as noted by Germaine Tillion in the prospectus to this conference, one of the great mysteries about the Holocaust—and of course other if not all genocides—is explaining, “the ‘tragic ease’ with which people become murderers or mass murderers.”

This presentation is based on some two decades of teaching Holocaust history and memory at the university level in two countries, and teaching teachers (continuing education) in several countries. This experience has confirmed time and again that moving towards an understanding of this central mystery is an issue which lies at the very heart of the many pedagogic challenges of those whose task it is to mediate knowledge about the event from the halls of academia to the classrooms of our

nations. The ideas, analysis and proposals raised in this presentation should be understood largely, although not exclusively, as having these two “target” groups in mind.

Though research about the perpetrators comprises the primary theme of this conference, I have long been of the view that much research is pointless if its results are not made known—and comprehensible—to society, through the conduit of the classroom. Though this is undoubtedly true for all historical subjects, I need not convince this audience of the social and moral importance of making the oft-spoken about “lessons” of the Holocaust used, and usable, in society’s daily life.

Anachronistic as they may at times seem, Holocaust pedagogy is still dominated by teaching based upon the three central groups of historical “actors” within Holocaust history—the *perpetrators, victims and bystanders*. After several decades in which the event has been actively, if not universally taught in classrooms in the West, it seems fair to conclude that the dominating themes of Holocaust pedagogy, formulated largely if not exclusively by scholars and teachers in Israel and the United States, have been and remains on illuminating the plight, experiences and fates of the victims. However, it seems to me that any movement towards achieving the desired level of understanding about the motivations and actions of the perpetrators has been made more difficult because of the relative dominance of another perspective—that is, the perspective of the victims.

Morally of course, this “dominance” is both understandable and laudable, and there clearly are emotional reasons for such an emphasis. Yet there is reason to question if this is the most useful pedagogic perspective in promoting a deeper understanding of the event for students and teachers. My experience indicates strongly that an exclusive focus on the perspective of the victim is not the only way forward, nor is it the only perspective which students seek to learn about. Moreover, an exclusive focus on the plight and perspective of the victims promotes, however sadly, the troubling phenomenon of “Holocaust fatigue”—an issue that will be discussed in my fuller presentation.

The pedagogic importance of teaching about the perpetrators lies not least within the fact that within the motivations and situations of the perpetrators, there was almost if not invariably a moment of choice. This applies both for the years of persecution as well as those of the systematic murder of the Jews. Even for the low-level foot soldiers, German and otherwise, who pulled the triggers and packed the helpless victims into the gas chambers, there were choices available to them. This seems to me to be one of the most important lessons of the Holocaust, and an over-emphasis on teaching the stories of the victims hampers any understanding of this. The vast majority of the victims simply did not understand what was happening or, really, why—apart of course from the central salient point that they were Jews—the primary targets of the Nazis and their collaborators. The perpetrators, to a much greater degree, understood why things were happening as they were, and it is their thinking, their motivations and their goals that must be explored if we are ever to gain ground in helping our students, and ourselves, to understand *WHY*.

However, since few of us, teachers or students, are trained psychologists, a considered exploration of the psychology of men long dead is not a viable methodological approach for understanding the perpetrator. Rather, a close, critical analysis of (translated) contemporary documents is an invaluable tool for exploring what was thought, felt and done THEN by those who committed the crimes. This presentation will provide examples of particularly useful documents, and how these documents can be used in the classroom.

Some teachers avoid teaching the perspective of the perpetrators because they fear that it will be distressing for their students (and, indeed, for themselves). The immoral and disgusting actions of the perpetrators might well be thought to be “off-putting” to students—and they are undeniably so. Nonetheless, in my experience it is this “universe” of murderous behaviour, often accompanied by the humiliating treatment of the victims, which seems to interest students most. Exactly why this is I don’t fully understand, but I’ve no doubt that this is the case.

It may be because, as historian Saul Friedländer has written, “...the centrality of these events in present-day historical consciousness seems much greater today than it was some decades ago...It could be that in [the 20th century...a] century of genocide

and mass criminality, the extermination of the Jews is perceived by many as the ultimate standard of evil, against which all degrees of evil may be measured.”¹

Is evil more fascinating than victimhood? I don't really know, but I do know how fascinating and moving an exploration of the details of evil is to students. I have never experienced anyone unmoved, for instance, by hearing of the documented details of the slaughter of the 90 children of Byelaya Tzerkov, murdered in a systematic way some days after their parents were murdered in August 1941 in Ukraine. But I have heard students talk, even laugh or giggle during “solemn” commemoration events which focused solely on the fate of the victims. This fascinating if painful dilemma will also be discussed.

Another important aspect of the issues raised in this presentation will be to discuss the often sensitive yet important matter of whether or not most of those who teach Holocaust history and memory in secondary schools (and at the university level for that matter) are in fact qualified and sufficiently trained to do so? There are, in fact, “bad” ways of teaching the event and its lessons, and the noble cause of Holocaust education can and has been damaged by teachers lacking empirical knowledge and progressive pedagogic methodology.

Finally, this presentation will explore issues concerning the goals of Holocaust education. If in Germany the term is labelled “civic education”, in the Swedish context, this discussion and concept has been labelled “*värdegrund*” (foundational values). It is these fundamental, core civic values of (ethnic) tolerance, and democratic thinking upon which rest the goals of Holocaust education in Sweden and for Swedish schools.

¹ S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, The Years of Persecution, 1933- 1945*, (London, 1997), p. 1.