

The Pedagogical Approach to Teaching the Holocaust

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Teaching the subject of the Holocaust in Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies revolves around two main axes: *one is historical, the other one is educational.*

The historical axis deals with teaching about the Holocaust itself, meaning the circumstances that led to the events and the development of the anti-Jewish policy. This axis, which deals with the "what" and "how" questions, includes several main themes such as: Nazi ideology; the stages of development of the anti-Jewish policies both inside and outside of Germany; the response of the Jewish population to this policy; the establishment of ghettos; the "Final Solution" – the extermination of the Jews; rescue; the world's reaction to the Holocaust, and the return to life of the survivors.

The educational axis deals with the Jewish and universal significance that is derived from the elements of the events taught on the historical axis. The educational axis demands that the Holocaust be regarded not only as a historical narrative, but also as a human story.

Teaching on the basis of the educational axis therefore begins with questions that will allow us to focus on the lives of the Jewish victims before and during the Holocaust. Who were these Jews that were murdered? Of what did their cultural world consist? How did they try to deal with a world that became chaotic and was turned upside down during the period of the war? And from where did they draw the strength to rebuild their lives afterwards?

With respect to the educational axis, we believe that the aim of the educator must be to "see" the victim as an individual rather than as a statistic and to communicate this idea to students. Doing so allows for empathy with the victims, as they become real people with human identities and aspirations. The empathy created allows students and teachers to more meaningfully discuss the Holocaust, as students can relate more easily to human beings than to two-dimensional, black-and-white pictures or numbers in a list. Once empathy is created, educators can tailor their lessons to the emotional and cognitive level of the students.

Another issue that educators grapple with is how to teach the most difficult question: How was the Holocaust humanly possible? In order to attempt to address this question, we must profile the perpetrators and examine the challenges faced by indifferent bystanders. By the same token, we must also examine the stories of those non-Jews who decided to help the Jews, even though it meant risking their lives and getting nothing in return. Yad Vashem calls these people "Righteous Among the Nations."

These subjects, together with a discussion about the educational, historical and philosophical implications of the subject of the Holocaust, are at the heart of Yad Vashem's educational philosophy. They are discussed in brief below.

The Jewish Victim as a Human Story

When we approach the story of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, we must show our students a real person with a face and an identity, a person whose human individuality the Germans tried to erase. It is our task to restore the unique individuality of the victims: their names, faces, their families and communities - in order to rescue the individual from the anonymous masses who were victims of the Holocaust. Empathy can only be created when we see before us a human being of flesh and blood.

Our study of the human story of the Jewish victim should be divided into three topics:

1. Jewish life before the war.
2. The everyday life of Jews during the Holocaust: how did Jews live in the face of dehumanization? What were the moral dilemmas they were forced to face? What choices did they have in a world where each choice led to an untenable situation?
3. The return to life of the survivors after the war.

Jewish Life Before the Holocaust

In order to realize what was lost, we must get to know what life was like for the Jews of Germany and, more broadly, of Europe, before the Germans attempted to eradicate them. Furthermore, learning about Jewish life before the war will also help us to understand the Jews' reactions during the Holocaust. By learning about family life, culture and the spirit of the world they lived in, we can give the Jewish victim a name and a face, and turn the Jewish community into a living and breathing entity.

Many of us have the mistaken idea that the Jewish world before the Holocaust was a world of small, insular Jewish towns, called "shtetlach" in Yiddish (from the diminutive of the word "shtot" or city). In our imaginations, this Jewish world was populated exclusively by poor, religious Jews who made their living as tailors, shoemakers and artisans, who had no contact with the outside world and who communicated only in Yiddish. Towns like these did exist.

However, by the eve of the Holocaust many Jews had migrated to large cities. They were part of a diverse community that included religious Jews as well as secular Jews. There were many professionals such as lawyers and doctors. Many of the community members were leading intellectuals and academics who influenced the Western world. These Jews held many different political views and represented an entire range of political parties and opinions.

Everyday Life During the Holocaust: How Did Jews Exist in the Face of Dehumanization?

Once we have become acquainted with the lives of Jews in Europe before the war, we need to continue to understand them better during the war as well. In other words, Yad Vashem's education philosophy

ascribes to the theory that we must shift the focus on the victims from discussing their deaths to discussing their lives during the Holocaust. This discourse can then allow a discussion about the subjects of coping, the human spirit and human morality.

Discussing everyday life during the Holocaust is not an evasion of discussing death. Undoubtedly, death ever-present in the life of the Jews. The questions that relate to the educational process of teaching the subject of the Holocaust must therefore be: How did people live in the shadow of death - what choices did they make in a world that was fraught with "choiceless choices"? This expression was coined by Lawrence Langer, a foremost scholar of Holocaust literature, to describe a situation where every action had a consequence that was often life and death; where decisions had to be made between one abnormal and another in the crushing reality of life in the Holocaust.

An example of coping with reality, physically and mentally, can be seen by examining the role of mothers and their choices during the Holocaust.

One of the greatest hardships the Jews faced during the Holocaust was hunger. The severe food shortage led to an almost impossible challenge, particularly for mothers. How did mothers function in a state of starvation? Mothers had to make choices in a situation where they virtually had none. How does a mother divide food between her children? Does she divide it equally? Does she give more to a child who needs more?

In the ghettos there was never enough food distributed in order to sustain life. In certain ghettos, food distributions occurred infrequently. Often, mothers were placed in the position of being forced to hide food from their children in order to ensure that the rationed amount would last until the next rations were given out.

How does a mother who has to hide food from her children feel?

"My mother managed to save the bread by hiding it from us in her bed. We children knew where the hiding place was but she always watched it. We were afraid to take the bread because she knew that if we ate it, there wouldn't be any food afterwards. [...] Women filled a unique role in the organization and administration of the food. [...] I would say that my poor mother, who was eventually taken to Treblinka, was a genius in the way she managed to do it."

Feygl Peltel (Wladka Miedzyrzecki-Meed), born in Warsaw, Poland, 1921, Yad Vashem Archives, 3542 0.3

From these testimonies we can learn about the added meaning to the role of a mother during the Holocaust, and the choiceless choices she faced. A mother's natural role and instinct is to provide for her children and her family as abundantly as she can; yet during the struggle for survival in the ghettos, mothers were forced to make decisions that went against their instincts. This was the untenable reality that was imposed on Jewish mothers. The delicate fabric of family relationships was stretched to the breaking point; often it was torn. Yet the mother still tried to manage the household by rationing the food rations.

From an educational point of view it is important to point out that we do not use these Holocaust-era dilemmas to consider today what we would have done in place of the Jews then, but to create empathy

by relating to the attempts to deal with those dilemmas. We do not recommend role-playing. It is critical to make a distinction between discussing a dilemma and creating a simulation.

During the Holocaust many moral, ethical and educational questions were raised, and they should be brought up in class; however, we must be careful not to create simulations during class in which the students and teachers take part. The radical dilemmas required of Jews during the Holocaust era are too extreme for role playing.

The Survivors' Return to Life

We recommend starting the discussion about the return to life after liberation by pointing out that rehabilitation wasn't at all obvious.

Survivors confronted critical decisions but were at a very low point of personal emotional resources, and were often in great physical distress. They needed to find answers that would enable them to continue go on living when all was lost, but they also needed to search in order to see whether anything remained of their lives. Where should they go? Were there any survivors from their family? How can one go on living after Auschwitz? What does the word "life" encompass? What values can be trusted when your entire world has collapsed?

Rebuilding a life is not an obvious act; similarly, it is nothing short of miraculous that after the Holocaust the majority of survivors did not lose faith in life, mankind and society. After the trauma and loss they had experienced, they could have easily turned into embittered people, filled with hate and build on seeking revenge.

The educational emphasis should be on the fact that the path chosen by most survivors was constructive rather than destructive. Most channelled their energies into blazing paths of continuity, by marrying and raising families, and by finding purpose in their future. Those who immigrated to Israel also contributed to the State's birth and construction. These positive efforts were, for the great majority, the only type of "vengeance" that interested them.

However, it is important to remember that the survivors' new lives did not wipe out what happened to them during the six long years of war. Both the survivors and the new families they built continued to live under the shadow of the trauma.

These questions are significant from an educational point of view, even though they deal with the post-war era. This is the difference between the historian, who divorces that period from his study of the Holocaust, and the educator, who sees the pre-war and post-war periods as important dimensions of the discussion about human beings, necessary to give them back their names, faces and individuality.

The Bystanders

Most people during the Holocaust were indifferent bystanders. It is a natural inclination for people to protect themselves and their families, and this was also the bystander's moral justification: not to make waves, not to raise their voices even if they saw an injustice being done.

Bystanders were able to turn a blind eye so long as they didn't feel, understand or acknowledge that the people they saw being hurt, starved, deported or otherwise other were human beings like themselves. As long as the victims were an indiscriminate mass without a human face, it was possible to ignore their distress.

Among the Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem there are many who started out as indifferent bystanders, and at some point turned into rescuers. From an educational standpoint the turning point is the point that should be emphasized. Students must understand that the norm isn't something fixed and that change is possible. When does that change occur? What makes one deviate from the accepted and logical norm and choose to act differently?

The Perpetrators

The acts of the Nazis embody in many ways the ultimate evil. There are those who regard the Holocaust as a crystallization of ultimate evil that could have existed only in Germany under the rule of the Third Reich, and find it hard to believe that acts of this nature could ever happen again. Others view the Holocaust as the acts of ordinary people, and therefore, an event that could be repeated. These views present two extremes of an entire spectrum of views. On this spectrum there are variations - the reality is actually complex. In this complex reality, it is our function to educate.

We think that what happened in the Holocaust was indeed an event of unique extremity, but among the extreme elements there are also universal elements. That is to say, we cannot absolve ourselves from the search for human, universal elements within this context of evil; these elements should be discussed.

How do we deal with this complexity?

The teacher can analyze with students a few biographies and interviews with Nazi criminals, leading figures as well as minor ones, with the aim of showing that while a majority of these persons and their actions were typical of the Nazi era, there are universal elements to their behavior as well.

For example, we can find in the biographies of and interviews with the Nazi criminals various explanations as to the reasons they joined the Nazi movement. There are those who will say that they joined because of ideology, because they were drawn by Hitler's demagogical speeches, and because they believed in racist antisemitism. Others will say that they were exposed to propaganda. Still others will explain that "everyone was doing it" or that there was group pressure. The teacher should emphasize that the perpetrators always had a choice and that refusing to murder civilians was never punished.

The teacher should then point out that the reasons given point to elements of human behavior that are not only typical of Germany in the 1930s, but are universal, for example: group pressure, prejudice and others.

The educational question raised here is how it is possible to deal with these phenomena through pedagogical methods. The conclusion we must come to is that human beings are capable of committing terrible crimes. We must be aware of each instance of dehumanization and take action to stop it before it snowballs into something that cannot be controlled.

Conclusion

In sum, every teacher who wishes to teach this chapter in human history first needs to be a student, building a concrete base of knowledge. After acquiring the historical information, it is teacher's job to present the Holocaust as a human story. This will enable empathetic teaching about the Holocaust to young minds in the twenty-first century.