

Teaching the Holocaust in The Republic of Germany

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International Perspectives

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Introduction

This research paper is intended to provide insight on how the Federal Republic of Germany educators are teaching the Holocaust with the use of traditional and non-traditional pedagogical learning methods that contribute to the education of their learners. The paper will discuss how educator's present information to learners on how the past can impact present human rights, if continued hatred amongst human beings and lack of knowledge in the political system is taken for granted and not challenged. For this purpose the organization Facing History and Ourselves " has engaged teachers and students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of collective violence, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives"

(<http://www2.facinghistory.org/Campus/memorials.nsf/Home?OpenFrameSet>).

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to observe the approaches used by educators to facilitate learning about the Holocaust. The examples provided in this paper are one of various approaches that are used by educators; teaching in the Federal Republic of Germany approaches will be different from country to country, from school to school, and from educator to educator.

The author intends to share with the reader the methods that are being used by the educators of The Federal Republic of Germany to promote the importance of learning and teaching the Holocaust with the use of the arts, literature, music, poetry, history and interviews. This paper will attempt to show, the importance of stressing the need for self-evaluation of teaching efforts by all educators.

The paper shares with the reader how the role and responsibility of the educator is to teach the learners thru various methods how to reflect upon and raise questions as to why the Holocaust occurred and how learning about these events could affect the direction of their lives and society. The roles and responsibility of the learners will be discussed to show how the use of reflection and critical thinking about the events can raise questions and provoke discussions on how they may apply the knowledge to the world today in order to prevent a reoccurrence of history.

Each topic will attempt to address how learning is facilitated with the use of art, music, literature, history, Politics and Education and using the knowledge of the events that occurred in the Holocaust with the use of interviews of the victims/survivors who own it.

“The story of the Holocaust is first and foremost a human story. Any discussion of its victims, its perpetrators or those who stood by and watched must attempt to understand the human being involved.

“The encounter between students and the “simple” people who were present in the events of the Holocaust – their daily lives and reality – must serve as the foundation for meaningful educational work”

(www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/school/pedagogical_philosophy.asp).

Teaching the Holocaust With Art

Creativity is one of the most important characteristics that a human being possesses and that an educator can help to nurture and develop. Adult learners can be taught to think creatively and critically about situations and experiences. The use of creative thinking and learning allows the learner of all ages to reflect on circumstances in a different light other than the way it maybe initially presented.

The prisoners and survivors of the Holocaust used their imaginations to write creative poetry, compose music and paint pictures during the time they were awaiting their fate. Many children and adults expressed their feelings by describing events that would reach out with an attempt to create the same feelings of pain and sorrow in the person reading or viewing their work.

Educators teach the lesson of the Holocaust through art by integrating the works of the survivors into their lesson plans, in order to engage the learner in the actual events. “Educators often approach Holocaust study from a historical point of view, deepening their students’ knowledge and understanding through the use of survivor testimony, classroom discussions, films, books and other disciplines”

(<http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/education/guidelines-for-teaching/how-to-teach-about-the-holocaust.html>).

The educator presents the artwork of survivors to be viewed by the student prior to beginning the lesson; this allows the learner to visualize what the artist is describing and feeling in the artwork. The use of colors by the artist identifies their feelings, being aware of this allows an opportunity for the learner to raise questions and to discuss what the artist is trying to express. The teacher selects a survivor of the Holocaust and their painting to present to the class for an assignment that focuses on a particular situation that pertains to the individual's experiences during the Holocaust. As a resource to learning the educator uses the following technique in the classroom instruction.

“The students will be introduced to the work and life story of the artist and Holocaust survivor, Chava Wolf. They will discuss examples of her paintings and learn about her personal and highly unique use of color, symbolism and composition. They will also hear samples of Chava's poetry, focusing on her ordeal in Transnistria. Students who are not familiar with art-related terminology, (image, symbol, and theme) will gain understanding of how these concepts are used in approaching an artwork. In the second part of the lesson, students will try to use their own personal language of symbols, colors, forms and composition to design their own creations”
(http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/chava_wolf.asp).

Lessons attempt to develop the learners understanding of the feelings of the artist during the time of the Holocaust and will allow the learner to reflect deep within themselves and release their emotions to create artwork that expresses their feelings. This exercise attempts to teach the learner how to view and listen to art through emotions and feelings not only esthetics.

Artworks hanging in the Yad Vashem's museum are memories of Holocaust survivors that wanted to leave a legacy for the world not to forget the faces of those

tormented and the horror in which they were subjected to during the times spent at the concentration camps. The artwork captures the victim's heart and soul and the personal

grief and sorrow that penetrated within them. Students will be able to examine and question the reasons behind this monstrosity and express their different opinions of what they think the artist was feeling during the time they were creating their paintings.

Students visit these sites as a part of the curriculum of learning about the Holocaust.

“Study trips to Holocaust-related sites – both to the authentic places and to the memorial sites and museums - require serious preparation, active participation, and follow-up activities. These activities should have a clear emphasis on learning the history of the Holocaust, but can be enriched by inter-disciplinary approaches. Educators should consider how study trips are integrated in the broader scheme of classroom work – a visit to these places cannot stand-alone”

(<http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/education/guidelines-for-teaching/how-to-teach-about-the-holocaust.html>).

Teaching the Holocaust With Literature

Literature written by survivors provides insight into the lives of individual families that were confronted with these iniquities brought on by pure hatred and evil. The literature is presented to learners for discussion in addition to providing a deeper insight into the journeys these individuals made and how the unthinkable became a reality.

The book *Night* written by Nobel Peace Prize Winner and Auschwitz survivor Professor Elie Wiesel and translated from French by Marion Wiesel was one of Professor Wiesel's first books about his journey. Since 1976, Elie Wiesel has been Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University.

“The secure world of Wiesel's childhood ended abruptly with the arrival of the Nazis in Sighet in 1944. The Jewish inhabitants of the village were deported in masse to concentration camps in Poland. The 15-year-old boy was separated from his mother and sister immediately on arrival in Auschwitz. He never saw them again. He managed to remain with his father for the next year as they were worked almost to death, starved, beaten, and shuttled from camp to camp on foot, or in open cattle cars, in driving snow, without food, proper shoes, or clothing. In the last months of the war, Wiesel's father succumbed to dysentery, starvation, exhaustion and exposure” (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/wie0bio-1>).

Elie Wiesel survived these terrible times in his life, he lives his life trying to educate others about what happened and to provide a door for people to ask questions and identify circumstances in society that may lead to this again. Lest we forget reoccurrence is possible. The literature *Night* was written in Yiddish. The end of the book reflects on the present. An excerpt from Elie Wiesel's, book *Night* provides insight on how fast people forget.

“ And now, scarcely ten years after Buchenwald, I realize that the world forgets quickly. Today, Germany is a sovereign state. The German Army has been resuscitated. Ilse Koch, notorious sadistic monster of Buchewald, was allowed to have children and live happily ever after... War criminals stroll through the streets of Hamburg and Munich. The past seems to have been erased, relegated to oblivion” (Wiesel, p.xii).

Controversial literature that is presented and discussed in a classroom setting provides an opportunity for the student to critically think and raise questions about the roles of the German Army and various war criminals and the rationale used to defend their actions.

The former professor of Government and Social Studies and an affiliate of Harvard's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies Daniel Goldhagen "wrote his doctoral dissertation, on which *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was based, was awarded the American Political Science Association's Gabriel A. Almond award for the best dissertation in comparative politics (1994)" (<http://goldhagen.com/biography>).

"In his book, Goldhagen has traced the background of genocidal thinking in Germany and he has proven how many of ordinary Germans had no problems with their role as perpetrators, because their world-view during the war had developed into a profound genocidal mentality. Goldhagen lacks, however, a convincing analysis of the process of how genocidal thinking was turned into genocidal mentality in the individual perpetrator, i.e. the process of how the last psychological obstacles of human empathy were broken down and replaced by a willingness to kill " (p.18-21).

This synopsis provides an open door for an in-depth discussion on why the Nazis viewed the Holocaust as an abstract exercise for engineering the extermination of a large group of people that meant nothing to them. The students are encouraged to tell exactly what they understood the author to describe. In order for the adult educator to teach literature it is important for them to understand the subject and speak realistically to the learner and approach the subject with enthusiasm by personalizing it.

Teaching the Holocaust With Music

Teaching the Holocaust through music is a very important way to approach the emotions and inner spirit of the learner. Music has a way of bringing people together and also has a way of capturing the emotions of an individual. Jews that

were in the concentration camps and ghettos were able to keep their faith, and strength through the use of song.

“The songs of the ghettos and concentration camps when presented to students of high school and/or college age can be a powerful tool, not only for creating the atmosphere of those days of oppression but also for breaking the stereotype of the helpless, obedient Jews who went to their deaths without resisting” (Ludmilla Leibman, 1999).

Music and song gave prisoners a way to release anxieties and uplift their spirits. The use of music helped to keep the hope of the goodness of mankind while being surrounded by death and destruction. The prisoners realized that their lives could be taken but the strength of their spirit could not be broken. Music and song were used as supplements to strengthen their deep faith.

The workshop Teaching the Holocaust through Music is a method that can be integrated into other interdisciplinary curriculums such as art, and history.

“ Main focus of this workshop is on musical compositions, which commemorate the Holocaust in Holocaust teaching. The interdisciplinary approach to Holocaust teaching, which is now seen as the most effective one, allows the teachers of English, history, art, or general music education to use musical compositions, together with other arts, in order to enrich the content of the Holocaust unit of their curriculum” (Ludmilla Leibman, 1999).

The workshops intention is to gain knowledge about the life of the composers of compositions written during the Holocaust and the thoughts behind the music. It also gives the learner a chance to interpret and critically think about what transpired during the time the composition was written.

“Including music in the teaching of the Holocaust will help to highlight the most important message against hatred, injustice and intolerance. Learning about the composers’ lives and the circumstances that brought them to write their Holocaust compositions, as personal as they are, help to serve this goal. While knowing that education cannot change the past, we must believe it can help to make a better future” (Ludmilla, Leibman, 1999).

Teaching the Holocaust With Poetry

Teaching the Holocaust through poetry releases the creative thinking of the learner and allows them to tell their stories by liberating themselves of feelings, ideas, or dreams that they wish to express through poetry. Writing poetry is also used as a form of therapeutic emotional uplift and healing that allowed the prisoner to expose their feelings of hope, sorrow, and spiritual connection with the use of words. The words were written on walls, diaries anywhere they could write. Writing poetry was a way of ensuring that what was said could be seen as an expression of who they are and seen as a lasting record of their unique perspective on life. Writing poetry was seen, as words written that will always be seen as a personal secret of beauty that they could always say it is theirs. Because all possessions of the victims were taken away from them this would be the only way that they could possess something that was close to them that could not be taken away but given away by their own will. If others have the chance to read their poetry then they have been given one of the greatest gifts a human can give; An honest, personal, special piece of themselves.

“ The educators use of poetry in the study of the Holocaust is based on the belief that a personal statement, as most Holocaust poetry is, will more effectively trigger initial interest in the subject at hand than the historical treatment of the same subject. Poems allow a personal inside view in contrast to the more distanced

historian's account. The human dimension, which is often the focus in poetry, will more easily generate attention than the impersonal of the historical portrayal"

The aims of this type of instruction are to:

- Analyze poems and paintings by exploring the connections between literary and artistic interpretation
- Probe the question of Jewish identity after the Holocaust
- Discuss universal lessons to be learned from the Holocaust
- Delve deeper into the study of the Holocaust through poetry
- Engage pupils in creating their own art

(www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/poems_paintings.asp).

Why the Preservation of History and the use of Interviews are Important

Preserving history is a way of looking back and analyzing the ways of past experiences and utilizing the positive while identifying the reasons why certain events occurred. History preservation can in some way strengthen bonds and character of people. The past has a way of bringing back hurt and pain for generations but it can also be used as an educational tool for a way to start healing and understanding.

Mark Weitzman, Director of the Educational Outreach in the Simon-Wesenthal Centers in New York, addressed a group of German educators quoted from the book *Heyl* by Heyl Schreier written in 1997,

“ If the Holocaust is the text of what we are studying, then the context exists in each country in each family. The context is different, and must be approached differently. We can offer models and suggestions and offer assistance. You have the responsibility of

instilling the subject into the curriculum, and not just in a formal sense. It also requires absolute honesty between teacher and students. It is not a normal subject that can be approached simply, academically as a list of facts and figures. Open up, be ready to challenge rigid roles, dialogue, debate, discuss. But be honest, both teachers and students. If it breaks the balance of tradition, maybe that is not a bad idea. What is preserved in a society, in museums, in curricula, in books what is preserved and to the next generation, indicates what a society finds valuable. What is not preserved taught equally makes a judgment upon the values of that society. Think about what is going on in your situation and understand what is said about your societies”(Schreier, Heyl,1997, p372).

What better way of beginning this effort than with the use of interviews of survivors of various communities. The classroom is made up of a diverse group of students that may have ancestral history from both sides it is important for educators to implement an atmosphere and a nontraditional curriculum that will allow students to express themselves and thoughts in a nonviolent way and without building walls but helping to bridge together a broken society. Educators realize that it is important to make history real to the student that will enrich their understanding. Teachers are taught how to teach the Holocaust in schools. The Taskforce for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education provides guidelines to prepare teachers on different teaching methods that will engage the student.

“Many countries still have Holocaust survivors living within their communities. If you are able to make contact with these survivors and invite them into your classroom, you have the opportunity to provide your students with a special and powerful educational experience. Being in the presence of someone who experienced the unimaginable can create genuine empathy in the classroom. A number of organizations

can assist you in arranging for a survivor to speak at your school. Other individuals

who were directly involved in the Holocaust or who witnessed events firsthand also have powerful testimonies to give. If you are able to invite rescuers, liberators, and others into your classroom, then their personal stories will also greatly enrich your students understanding of the Holocaust”

(<http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/education/guidelines>).

Many interviewees expressed their reasons behind keeping the memory alive. An excerpt of two interviews found in the newsletter Teaching the Legacy, 2008. The first interview is from Holocaust survivor Professor Zwi Bacharach born in Hanau, Germany in 1928 and a Professor Emeritus of General History at Bar-Ilan University.

"I can't lecture my sons and my children. They don't want to be lectured. The fact is they know I went through hell. They know that I lost my parents. They never ask me. [...] Before I went to the States my son stopped me in the kitchen and asked me, [...] "Who are you?" I was shocked. [...] Ever heard a son who asks his father, "Who are you?" [...] So that was the reason why I wrote from there, to tell them what I went through” (Teaching the Legacy, 2008).

The second interview with survivor Ehud Loeb, who was born in southwest Germany and was deported from there in 1940 with his family to a camp in southern France and then deported to Auschwitz in 1942 with his family. He now lives in Jerusalem.

"I became or I tried to become a member of Israeli society... speaking the language at the beginning with mistakes and maybe a bad accent, but here again I went into hiding, because living in Israel and being part of Israeli society, I had had my real life up to then or during the years of the Holocaust hidden purposely because it wasn't

fashionable to speak about it, so my past was entirely hidden and again I lived in a new society...with an entirely new identity " (Teaching the Legacy, 2008).

These interviews are powerful messages that would provoke discussion and reflection for the learner.

Holocaust Education and Politics

Education after the Holocaust was a necessary starting point for healing and understanding of how and why these events occurred. Although educating people about the victims, survivors and political agenda of Hitler this would be like opening up a sore that has not healed between families and countrymen.

A question asked by Schweitzer, Friedrich, Professor of Religious Education at Universidad Tubingen in Germany, "(How does education in the country from which the Shoah originated and whose citizens, for the most part, are the children and grandchildren of the inhabitants of the National Socialist state, relate to this topic" (Schweitzer, Friedrich, Religious Education, Fall 2000)?

This question would be a challenge to answer because of the feelings and animosity felt by the survivors and their families against the torment that happened during the Holocaust at Auschwitz. According to Friedrich Schweitzer educators need to be well aware of the history of the Holocaust if they are going to be subjected to political, moral, religious and ethical topics pertaining to this era.

"In the background, another unresolved issue-the theological and religious relationship between Judaism and Christianity-also plays its role. So whoever wants to take up this topic naively, just because it seems so important, would soon learn that there is a negative reciprocity between the topic's educational weight and the feasibility of an "education after Auschwitz" (Schweitzer, Friedrich, Religious Education, Fall 2000).

The government in every country seems to play a large part on the direction of the educational system, it seems as though the German government may not be quick to educating its citizens on a subject that could begin an upheaval.

“It has always been obvious in Germany that conservative politics stood against openly addressing the mass murder of Jews committed by Germans during the Third Reich. Most likely, there is fear that this kind of critical memory might threaten the stability of the political order. So, in some way, the close relationship between "education after Auschwitz" and political outlooks has been known all along” (Schweitzer, Friedrich, Religious Education, Fall 2000).

Thirty years ago on November 9th, the wall that separated the country in half came down in Germany. This separation seems to have stood for a new day and a fresh start to building a country that would promote the development of humanity. The devastation and torture should not be forgotten, but is being used as a learning tool for educators to use as a method of teaching learners how hatred and lack of education in the area of politics and human rights can destroy a country.

Conclusion

Lest we forget these events can reoccur. The importance of remembering the past will determine the direction of the future society. “The generation that lived through the Holocaust is dwindling. The presence of witnesses - the remnant who survived - ensured a certain moral strength; their absence creates a moral, cultural and educational vacuum. What will be the fate of Holocaust commemoration among members of the fourth generation, both Jewish and non-Jewish? What place will it occupy in the midst of the

currents that are sweeping us along towards the onset of the third millennium? Will remembrance be meaningful in the context of contemporary events? How should we prepare ourselves at this historic juncture? By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of collective violence, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives” (www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education).

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