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## Connecting to History – Connecting to Ourselves. Thoughts about Holocaust Education and Relevancy

### Abstract

This article explores the question of how to teach about the Holocaust as a historical event that is relevant to the reality we face today. This article suggests some methodical principles that allow students to study the Holocaust in a personally meaningful way. In addition, it is recommended to teach about *actors* (using this term instead of the educationally misleading term *bystander*) and to analyze their attitudes towards unfolding events. The way actors (institutions as well as individuals) relate to what happens in their milieu, constitutes a strong connection between past and contemporary tragedies.

### Keywords

Holocaust Education, Relevancy, Bystanders, Context, Scope of Action.

Successful Holocaust Education must be more than the acquisition of knowledge. The authors of the widely noted UK study about students' knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust differentiate in their introduction between knowledge and the ability of the learner to interpret it in order to «arrive at secure and potentially transformative understandings».<sup>1</sup> In the following, «transformative understandings» will be described as the learner's ability to connect his or her knowledge about historical events with his or her present life, and ultimately to understand why and in what ways the Holocaust was a historical event that shaped part of the reality we face today.

In our increasingly challenging and accelerated reality, many educators find it difficult to present the Holocaust as something still relevant to their students. Some teachers try to adopt to this situation by creating bridges – pairs of events that seem to be located on the same axis.

In one example presented by participants on teacher training courses at Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Education, two iconic photographs are juxtaposed. One shows a small Jewish child in rags, starved to death on the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto (1941), the second shows a small Syrian child, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea during his attempt to escape war-torn Syria, whose lifeless body washed up on the shores of Turkey (2015).<sup>2</sup> In this didactical arrangement, the photo from 2015 is supposed to trigger an *association* of a tragedy that happened during our present time and sparked a public wave of empathy and dismay. The immediate sense of being

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<sup>1</sup> FOSTER Stuart, PETTIGREW Alice, PEARCE Andy, HALE Rebecca, BURGESS Adrian, SALMONS Paul, LENGHA Ruth-Anne, *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools*, London: Center for Holocaust Education, 2016, p. 8f.

<sup>2</sup> This project was conducted at a High School in Angola in 2016.

affected by this photo is supposed to serve as a kind of transmitter of empathy towards the topic the photo from 1941 stands for – the Holocaust. The juxtaposition of these photos suggests that, by referring to current tragedies, we support students' ability to connect empathetically with the (seemingly remote) past, thus improving their learning motivation.

The second example goes clearly beyond the «pairing strategy». It merges two different spheres, namely the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Graffiti, Amsterdam 2007<sup>3</sup>  
© Michael Lovitt.

This example testifies to the universalist trend, as described by Sznajder and Levy. The Holocaust serves as a moral master paradigm, a global symbol that expresses total evil:

«The Holocaust is now a concept that has been dislocated from space and time, resulting in its

<sup>3</sup> Available under: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mlovitt/452464811>, consulted on 13.6.2018.

inscription into other acts of injustice and other traumatic national memories across the globe.»<sup>4</sup> This might be one reason for the inflammatory use of Holocaust-related icons in many different kinds of political and social contexts. By inscribing the tragedy of the Holocaust into other, contemporary tragedies, we miss the point twice: First, we claim indirectly that the tragedies of today do not have the potential to stand alone – to be examined, studied, and taught as a matter of interest. Secondly, the Holocaust is decontextualized to a degree that its specific historical characteristics become blurred beyond all recognition. Deborah Lipstadt uses in this context the term *misappropriation*<sup>5</sup>, and she notes unmistakably that the intention to misappropriate Holocaust-related icons is not to render one event relevant through the help of another, but, rather, the political goal is to shift the status of victimhood from one group to another, and vice versa, of course, also to identify «new» perpetrators. From here to diminishing, or even denying, the Holocaust is only a small step.

For two reasons, this kind of didactical interventions is highly problematic. First, relevancy through «personal association» creates, according to Priniski et al., a «relatively superficial connection», since the transmitter between the subject matter (the Holocaust) and the learner remains external (associations with other tragedies that have unfolded in a period closer to our present time).<sup>6</sup> Secondly, from a historical point of view, it is more than doubtful that the two events can be presented in a way that adequately considers their respective contexts. Each tragedy, the past and the present ones, deserves to be studied in full and within its own, specific context. Therefore, in order

<sup>4</sup> LEVY Daniel, SZNAIDER Natan, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> From a conversation during the International Education Conference at Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum in July 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. PRINISKI Stacy J., HECHT Cameron A., HARACKIEWICZ Judith M., «Making Learning Personally Meaningful: A New Framework for Relevance Research», *The Journal of Experimental Education* 86:1, 2018, p. 11-29. In their study the authors suggest three levels of relevance: personal association: «the perception that a stimulus (...) is connected to some other object or memory (...) that is personally valued», personal usefulness: «the perception that a stimulus can be used to fulfill an important goal», and identification: «the incorporation of the stimulus in the individual's identity». It is important to note that these three types of relevance often describe overlapping areas that lack clearly distinct separation lines.

to support students to acquire more than mere knowledge, but rather «transformative understanding», as described above, it is necessary to adapt the didactical principles and methods from the very beginning to this goal.

## Historical Sources as «Open» Medium

Most European history curricula and the overwhelming majority of history textbooks follow the basic principle of chronology. This is doubtless a well-established concept, but not enough effort is being made to highlight a problematic side effect, namely, that any chronological narrative «has implicitly a retroactive determinism»<sup>7</sup>. Presenting events from the past in a successive chronological order may encourage the perception that one event resulted in the previous one, and that the results basically had no alternatives. The retroactive perspective often conceals that the course of history is one out of a myriad of possible developments. Instead of transmitting history as previously determined and with no alternatives, students should be exposed to sources that provide insights into the contemporary mindsets of those who took action. Contemporary ego-documents such as diaries, letters, and notes, mirror the state of mind as well as the contemporary context they were produced in. This influences the way history is perceived by the learner. Instead of being confronted with a seemingly prefabricated historical setting, the learner encounters an open situation, where history unfolds as a consequence of the decisions of human beings.

## Analyzing Human Decisions

Teaching history from a retroactive point of view in a result-oriented way might create

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. KÖRBER Andreas, VON BORRIES Bodo, «Historisches Denken – Zur Bestimmung allgemeiner und domänenspezifischer Kompetenzen und Standards», in MEYER Meinert A., PRENZEL Manfred, HELLEKAMPS Stephanie (eds.), *Perspektiven der Didaktik. Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, Sonderheft 9*, Berlin: Humboldt Universität, 2008, p. 301.

another problem: Students might reach the conclusion that the people living during those darkest days of European history belonged to certain categories: they acted either as perpetrators, victims, bystanders, or, a tiny minority, rescuers, many of them honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations. What remains invisible – and thus incomprehensible – is the process these people went through when deciding on their daily acts and omissions. The decision-making process should, therefore, be analyzed by students as decisive moments when people actually influenced – depending on the specific circumstances and contexts – how the story would unfold. The by far largest number of people who were present then, categorized by historians and educators mostly as «bystanders», are barely known. Who were they, this majority of Europeans who were living then among the perpetrators and victims? Is it useful to categorize them as «bystanders», thus ascribing to them a certain role in history, as we do with the other categories?<sup>8</sup> The acts and omissions of those persons who were present on the scene, but seemingly not belonging to either of these two categories (victims, perpetrators), are difficult to describe and remain, therefore, vague.

The Polish historian Jan Gross suggests in the introduction to his book *Neighbors* another term, which should play a central role in Holocaust education.

*«[...] Each episode of mass killing had its own situational dynamics. This is not a trivial point, for it means [...] that in each episode many specific individual decisions were made by different actors present on the scene, who decisively influenced outcomes. And, thus, it is at least conceivable that a number of those actors could*

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to keep in mind that all of these categories were created after the Holocaust in an attempt by historiography to systematically describe and explain what happened. Contemporary Nazis would never have called Jews «victims», but, rather, «enemies», «vermin», etc. In the context of the Holocaust, the term «bystander» simply did not exist, and the term «Righteous among the Nations» (related to the Holocaust) was coined by Yad Vashem in its early years (the program started being implemented in 1963).

*have made different choices, with the result that many more European Jews could have survived the war.»<sup>9</sup>*

Gross speaks about *actors* – pointing out that, in many cases, it was the decision of the individual that influenced the outcome of certain situations. By focusing on the individual choice of *actors*, we support a differentiated view on unfolding historical events and help students understand how people acted within the highly complex context they found themselves in, and that our conception of perpetrators (as active), victims (as passive), and bystanders (as indifferent) could be misleading.

## Individual and Context

However, we still talk about a descriptive level, and in order to present a model of «transformative learning» which goes beyond the idea of securing knowledge, we have to proceed to a second level, namely, interpreting history and assessing human behavior.

People act within certain circumstances. The context they live in creates the frame of reference<sup>10</sup> to the way they make decisions. First and foremost, a person's place in society has to be determined. A person who belonged to the national socialist in-group, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or who potentially had the option to join it (as, e.g., the non-Jewish civilians of Western European countries under NS occupation) were acting within a frame of reference fundamentally different from the frames of reference of Jews and other groups who were being persecuted at that time.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the scope of action at a person's disposal was also fundamentally different. Historically secured knowledge about the frame of reference, shaped

by institutions on various levels, is indispensable: The predominant ideology, the potential risk of actions, the potential benefits of actions, and the general level of knowledge available for different segments of the population during certain periods of time – all of these factors are created in institutional and societal processes, and without a precise description of these factors, individuals' actions cannot be interpreted.

It is important to point out the constantly accumulating restrictions of the genocidal context the Jewish victims found themselves in – restrictions that reduced their choices of actions to a minimum of «*choiceless choices*»<sup>12</sup> and which shrunk to zero at the moment of their murder. And it is just as important to clearly point out the scope of action of the other actors on the scene, who were actually responsible for the genocide, who collaborated in it, supported it, or at least tolerated it. By comparing the acts and decisions of these actors from the same frame of reference, students have the tools to interpret history. Instead of acquiring mere knowledge about historical events, they are encouraged to assess human behavior and integrate their own insight into their set of ethical values.

Coming back to the central question of relevancy, which is defined by Prinisky et al. as «a personally meaningful connection to the individual».<sup>13</sup> Instead of creating a superficial, associative connection between past and present, students should be enabled to place *themselves* in a relationship with the past. This must not be achieved with shortsighted concepts that encourage identification and make students imagine themselves in the place of historical protagonists. Holocaust education should not ask the pointless question «What would you have done?» – which virtually shifts the students to the blood-soaked reality of the Holocaust. Instead, students should analyze the decision-making processes within the historical context they were made. A decision is usually made within

<sup>9</sup> GROSS Jan Tomasz, *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> In this connection, see the concept of 'frame of reference', as developed by Welzer and Neitzel, in: NEITZEL Sönke, WELZER Harald, *Soldiers. German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying*, New York: Random House, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the study of Michael Wildt, where he elaborates on the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion as key factor in Nazi ideology: WILDT Michael, *Volk, Volksgemeinschaft, AfD*, Hamburg: Verlag des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. LANGER Laurence, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> PRINISKY et al., «Making Learning Personally Meaningful», p. 12.

a frame of norms and values, and the complicated thing when studying human decisions during the NS period is that the frame of reference back then was vested with a lot of norms and values that existed continuously from the Weimar Republic, throughout the Third Reich, and even afterwards. The proclaimed stability of norms, of course, helped to disguise the groundbreaking shift of norms, namely, the annulment of a cornerstone of democracy: equal rights and equal laws for everyone.

It remained the decision of the individual to accept or reject this seismic shift in norms. Yad Vashem's program *Righteous Among the Nations* is, in essence, a powerful reminder that there was a tiny minority of individuals back then in Europe, who rejected the change of the norm that excluded Jews from society, from the widely accepted system of norms and values, and finally from life itself.

Instead of pondering on the unproductive and certainly frustrating question of whether they would have had the courage to withstand the situation, students should be encouraged to ask themselves: How do I relate to the norms and values my society stands for? How do I relate to debates where valid norms are being discussed, and maybe eventually changed?

In his often-quoted book «Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung»<sup>14</sup>, Hartmut Rosa ascribes to «*the way we as subjects experience and relate to the world*», a vital role in the way people define their place in society and assess their life. It is exactly this relationship with the world that could serve as a connecting key element between the past and present. Meaningful learning should not emphasize the alleged similarity of past and present events, but the way in which those events are perceived by the people who witnessed them, by the contemporary actors. Instead of parallelizing events from past and present, as described above, we should compare the way the actors *related* to those events. How did the free world relate to the plight of the Jews starving in the Ghettos? How do European countries today refer to the plight of refugees from the Middle East? The tragedies are very different from each other. The contexts surrounding the Jewish boy lying on the streets of Warsaw and the Syrian boy lying on the shores of Turkey are definitely not the same. But, something can perhaps be learned from the way societies and individuals relate to these events.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. ROSA Hartmut, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016, p. 19.

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