

Educational Philosophy in Teaching the Holocaust

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There are many steps in the ladder of education. This craft is an art, with interpretations and approval, revealed and concealed aspects all woven together. It has no concept of before and after.

Janusz Korczak

Teaching the Holocaust revolves around two main axis: one historical, the other educational. The historical axis refers to teaching the Holocaust itself. This includes teaching the development of the anti-Jewish policies and the various circumstances that led to the events. This axis, which deals with "what" and "how" questions, has several main themes: 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 more.

The educational axis deals with both the Jewish story, and the universal significance of the Holocaust. It is therefore essential to focus not only on the Holocaust as a historical event, but also as a human story. Consequently, teaching begins with questions that allow students to focus on the lives of the Jewish victims before and during the Holocaust: Who were these Jews that were murdered? What did their cultural world consist of? How did they deal with a world that became increasingly chaotic? How were they able to rebuild their lives afterwards?

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 evokes a sense of empathy with the victims, as they become real people with human identities and aspirations. The empathy created allows students and teachers to discuss the Holocaust more meaningfully 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 evoked, educators can tailor their lessons to suit the emotional and cognitive level of the students.

Educators often use photographs and films that remain from the Holocaust era as tools to teach about dehumanization and extermination. However, these materials - many of which were actually created by the Germans in order to dehumanize the Jews - tend to shock students. As such, students may feel alienated and become less able to psychologically absorb the lessons being taught. This is the opposite of the desired result.

Another issue that educators grapple with is how to teach the most difficult issue: how was the Holocaust humanly possible? We discuss this issue by profiling the perpetrators; examining the dilemmas faced by bystanders; and through analysis of the "Righteous Among the

Nations," non-Jews who decided to help the Jews, even though it meant in many cases risking their lives and getting nothing in return.

The Jewish Victim as a Human Story

When we approach the story of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, we must show students a real person with a face and an identity. It is our task to restore the unique individuality of the victims: their names, faces, their families and communities. This prevents the victim from becoming an anonymous victim of the Holocaust.

Our study of the human story of the Jewish victim should incorporate the following:

1. Jewish life before the war
2. The everyday life of Jews during the Holocaust: how did Jews live in the face of dehumanization?
3. The survivors' return to life after the war.

Jewish life before the Holocaust

In order to realize what was lost, we must become familiar with Jewish life prior to Nazi rule. This will also help us to understand the various ways that Jews responded to the increasing violence during the Holocaust. By learning about Jewish cultural, spiritual, and family life, 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. In our imaginations, the Jewish world was populated exclusively by poor, religious Jews who made their living as tailors, shoemakers and artisans. They had little to no contact with the outside world and 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 that influenced the Western world. These Jews held many different political views and represented an entire range of political parties and opinions.

Fine art, theater and music were also important elements of the Jewish social and cultural life before the Holocaust. Many Jewish artists, some of whom are universally recognized, influenced new prominent artistic trends.

In 1937, for example, about half a million people visited the Jewish theater in Warsaw – a clear expression of the significance of the theatre in the Jewish world. The theater repertoire and the subject of the works of art show how the Jews coped with society around them, the dilemmas concerning identity, and the debates within society regarding political, social and intergenerational differences.

Everyday life during the Holocaust: How did Jews exist in the face of dehumanization?

We must look for a meaning of the historical event called “the Holocaust.” Any expression of resistance – and we find from historical research that there were many of those – is beyond comprehension, and expresses something unique, which has an ultimate aspect that we cannot explain. We are confronted with cases of ordinary people who grasped the significance of the historical moment, and responded with an act of resistance to evil as an absolute confirmation of life¹.

Discussing everyday life during the Holocaust is not an evasion of discussing death. Undoubtedly, death was 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 result and another in the crushing reality of life in the Holocaust.

The role of mothers and their choices during the Holocaust is an example of attempts to cope with the reality; physically and mentally. Due to severe food shortages which in many cases led to mass starvation, mothers were faced with almost impossible challenges. They had to make choices in a situation where there were virtually 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.

Wladka Meed who was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto tells about her mother's dilemmas:

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.²

From this testimony we can learn about the role of a mother during the Holocaust, and the “choiceless choices” she faced. A mother's natural instinct is to provide for her children and her family as abundantly as she can. During the struggle for survival in the ghettos, mothers were forced to make decisions that contradicted this role and went against their instincts - mothers

¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, quoted from a lecture given at Yad Vashem.

² Feygl Peltel (Wladka Miedzyrzecki-Meed), born in Warsaw, Poland, 1921, Yad Vashem Archives, 3542 0.3.

were now compelled to withhold and to very carefully divide up the very little they had. This was the untenable reality that was imposed on Jewish mothers. The norms and role of other individuals in the family changed as well - for instance, children often became smugglers who brought bread to their families when their parents couldn't provide for them. The delicate fabric of family relationships was stretched to the breaking point and often torn. Yet the mother still tried to manage the household by rationing the food rations.

Another example of “choiceless choices” can be seen through a study of Jewish doctors during the Holocaust. In almost every ghetto there was a hospital. How did these hospitals operate without enough medicine and equipment? What decisions did the doctors running these hospitals have to face?

In the winter of 1942 in the Vilna ghetto in Lithuania, Dr. Avraham Weinreb, faced a difficult dilemma. He assembled a group of people to consider the options. He called to the meeting a fellow doctor, a member of the Jewish leadership of the ghetto, a rabbi and a judge. People in the ghetto were ill with tuberculosis and at the time the belief was that calcium was a remedy. Dr. Weinreb had only a limited amount of medicine, yet many people were suffering from the illness. Therefore, the question was how to allocate the medicine. If he distributed equal amounts of the calcium to everyone, it would run out quickly and all of the patients would deteriorate. However, if he distributed the calcium to only those who were slightly ill or had a better chance of recovery there was a greater chance that with the additional dosages of medicine they would survive until the liberation.

Those present at the meeting responded in various ways. The rabbi advised that only God may determine who should live and who should die. The judge noted that one may condemn to death only those who have committed a wrongdoing and therefore, refused to make a decision of this nature that would, in effect, result in a death sentence for those who were ill. Dr. Weinreb decided to distribute the calcium equally. Ultimately, when the calcium ran out, the entire group of sick people died. A few months later, a similar problem arose with a lack of insulin for diabetic patients. Again, Dr. Weinreb assembled the group of advisors and the same arguments were raised. This time however, he decided to give out the insulin only to those who had a better chance of recovery.

Dr. Weinreb wrote in his memoirs:

The lesson is important: those who maintained the right not to get involved won [...]. I understood then that in the conditions of the ghettos, where lives are destined to end at any moment, there is no way of achieving a positive outcome unless one withdraws from society, and then to find oneself among those who are immoral. Anyone wishing to get involved finds himself constantly between a rock and a hard place, and has no ability to choose between right and wrong. He can only choose the lesser of two evils [...] but whoever resigns from his duty because he can't conduct himself morally, sins by

*choosing to avoid responsibility in my opinion, and one does not always have the privilege to resign in order to avoid the trap and remain morally pure and unblemished.*³

From this example we can learn how, in a world in which moral questions cannot seemingly be resolved, there were still attempts to resolve dilemmas— dilemmas in which every choice challenged normal moral standards; dilemmas which, many times, were a matter of life and death.

Facing a choice between two values shows the desire to preserve human norms. Therefore, the educational aspect is in the dilemma itself, the moral question, rather than its outcome. From an educational point of view, it is important to note that we do not use these Holocaust-era dilemmas in order to consider what we would have done in that situation. Rather, these dilemmas can teach us about the complexity of life in those horrific times and of the struggle to maintain humanity in a world of dehumanizing. 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.

Simulations hold within them a number of educational dangers:

- Neither students nor teachers have the capability to grasp the magnitude of suffering the Jews in the Holocaust endured; years of fear and uncertainty, living in the shadow of death: losing friends and family. We must acknowledge that ultimately our understanding is limited
- Simulations may create the illusion that Jewish victims during the Holocaust had a real choice, when in reality they were living in a world with almost no acceptable choices. This will not only distort the historical reality in which Jews were trapped, but may also warp a student's perspective by allowing the student to believe that it was the victim's bad choices, themselves, that led to the outcome that was the victim's fate.
- Role-playing may cause anxiety and guilt feelings for students if they over-identify with the victim and the crushing reality in which the victim found himself, or if they cannot choose between the competing values reflected in the simulation. This creates a trauma for the student in the process of learning about the Holocaust, and impedes learning rather than fostering it.

The survivors' return to life

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

³ Avraham Weinreb, *The Memoirs of a Doctor in the Vilna Ghetto (Jerusalem, Yalkut Moreshet, 27, April 1979)*, p. 51 (Heb.).

enable them to continue to 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 constantly seeking revenge. The educational emphasis should be on the fact that most survivors chose a constructive path rather than a destructive one. Most channeled their energies into continuity, by marrying and raising families, and by finding purpose in their future. However, it is important to remember that the survivors' new lives did not extinguish the pain and sorrow experienced during the six long years of war. Both the survivors and the new families they built continued to live in the shadow of the trauma. These questions are significant from an educational point of view, even though they deal with the postwar era. This is the difference between the historian, who divorces that period from his study of the Holocaust, and the educator, who sees the prewar and postwar periods as important dimensions of the discussion about human beings, necessary to give them back their names, faces and individuality.

The Bystanders and the Righteous Among the Nations

Whoever saves one life is as though he has preserved the existence of the entire world.

Babylonian Talmud

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. 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 or deported 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.

Many of the Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem 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?

For the Righteous Among the Nations, as opposed to many others who chose to remain oblivious, noticing a human face marked the turning point that changed their lives as we can learn from the story of Oskar Schindler:

*...At the rear, dawdling, as a toddler, boy or girl, dressed in a small scarlet coat and cap...
As they watched, the Waffen SS man at the rear of the column would occasionally put*

out his hand and correct the drift of this scarlet node... While the scarlet child stopped in her column and turned to watch, they shot the woman beneath the windowsill in the neck, and one of them, when the boy slid down the wall whimpering, jammed a boot down on his head as if to hold it still and put the barrel against the back of the neck – the recommended SS target – and fired. Oskar looked again for the small red girl. She had stopped and turned and seen the boot descend... At last Schindler slithered from his horse, tripped, and found himself on his knees hugging the trunk of a pine tree. The urge to throw up his excellent breakfast was, he sensed, to be suppressed, for he suspected it meant that all his cunning body was doing was making room to digest the horrors of Krakusa Street. Their lack of shame... wasn't the worst aspect of what he'd seen... But, worst of all, if there was no shame, it meant there was official sanction... Oskar would lay special weight on this day. "Beyond this day," he would claim, "no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system."⁴

From an educational perspective the turning point should be emphasized. Students must understand that though people may follow a certain norm each individual has a choice that can and should be made.

The Perpetrators

At an interview with Adolf Eichmann after he was brought to trial in Israel he notes:

I wouldn't just follow orders. Had I done that – I would have been just an idiot. I thought and pondered about the nature of the orders I was given. I was an idealist."⁵

The acts of the Nazis exemplify 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 ruled by a dictator with a very racial ideology 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 many variations, and the reality is extremely complex. There is no doubt that what happened in the Holocaust was indeed an event of unique extremity, but among the extreme elements there are also human universal elements. That is to say, as educators 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, together with the students, can analyze a few biographies and interviews with Nazi criminals, of leading figures as well as minor ones. This analysis will show that while a

⁴ Keneally, Thomas. *Schindler's List*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. pp. 129-130.

⁵ "Eichmann's End" by Reymond Ley, 2010.

majority of these people and their actions were typical of the Nazi era, there are elements of human behavior that are universal. For example, we can find in biographies and interviews with the Nazi criminals various explanations as to why they joined the Nazi movement. There are those that said they joined because of ideology, because they were drawn by Hitler's demagogical speeches, and because they believed in racist anti-Semitism. Others said that they were exposed to propaganda. Yet another justification was "everyone was doing it", peer pressure, as an excuse for their acts. Hundreds of thousands of people were involved, either directly or indirectly, in implementing the "Final Solution." The core organizers and planners of the annihilation of European Jewry came from the ranks of the Nazi party and the SS, who fervently believed in Nazi ideology. Yet, it is important to emphasize that they were not the only ones who were actively involved in carrying out the "Final Solution." Soldiers from the Wehrmacht (the German regular army) and the German police forces took part in these activities, as did officials from the civil apparatus that the Germans maintained in the occupied lands, through different patterns. Additionally, many citizens from other nations contributed to the murder, whether as private individuals or as collaborators with the Nazi regime.