

Dr. Paul A. Levine
Director of Education
The Uppsala Programme for Holocaust and
Genocide Studies
Uppsala University
Uppsala, Sweden
paul.levine@hgs.uu.se

Teaching about “The Perpetrator” in a Global Context

There is today much we understand about the Holocaust, the 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 about the genocide conducted by Nazi Germany and its allies between 1941-1945. That is, much is known about the **who, where, when, how** and **with what** of the event. Far less progress, however, has been achieved 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 existentially most important question.

This continuing failure to fully understand “why” remains a central dilemma for those who teach about the genocide. Though research about the perpetrators has advanced considerably, not least since 1989, I have long been of the view that much of this research is socially pointless if its results are not made known – and comprehensible – through the conduit of the classroom into society. Though this is undoubtedly true for all historical subjects, the central necessity of making the often invoked “lessons” of the Holocaust part of society’s daily life makes this issue even more important for this subject.

Importantly, there are few today who remain unconvinced that Holocaust education should be placed at the centre of civic and humanistic education. Indeed, the further we come from those years, the larger place teaching about them occupies in civic education. This has come about because in many ways, Europe has re-claimed significant elements of Holocaust memory, and those who resist this process have largely been

marginalised. This of course is a most welcome development.

This article seeks to present in abbreviated form some ideas for teaching Holocaust history and memory which is based on over two decades of teaching at both the university level in two countries, and “teaching teachers” (continuing education) in several countries. This experience has confirmed time and again that movement towards an understanding of the central mystery of “why” is an issue which lies at the very heart of the many pedagogic challenges of those who are teaching about the genocide of European Jewry. The ideas, analysis and proposals raised here should be understood largely, although not exclusively, as having these two “target” groups in mind.

Holocaust pedagogy has long been dominated by teaching based upon the three central groups of historical “actors” within Holocaust history – **the perpetrators, victims and bystanders**. Yet after several decades in which the event has been actively taught in classrooms in the West, there seems little doubt that the “category” and “method” which dominates Holocaust pedagogy remains an illumination of the plight, experiences and fates 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. Indeed, if any movement towards achieving the desired level of understanding about the motivations and actions of the perpetrators is to be achieved, then this approach is increasingly problematic.

This is because if the goals of Holocaust education are to be fulfilled, then a deeper

understanding of 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 and dilemma. Indeed, one of the great mysteries about the Holocaust – and of course other genocides – is explaining the “tragic ease” by which quite normal individuals become mass murderers for ostensibly political reasons. For this and other reasons, it is vital to illuminate the actions and choices of the perpetrators.

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. Perhaps most problematically, a dominant focus on the plight and perspective of the victims promotes, it seems clear, the very troubling phenomenon of “Holocaust fatigue”. This lamentable reaction to attempts to teach Holocaust history may be summarised as that which happens when students, and even sometimes teachers, throw up their hands in protest at the prospect of “more Holocaust stories”, or “more about the poor Jews”.

Though there is little question that those most “tired” of the event know the least about it, “Holocaust fatigue” is something which needs to be recognised and combated – it simply prevents any learning from occurring. (There is a related issue connected to the reactions of Muslim and other immigrant students to Holocaust education which cannot be addressed here). Experience indicates strongly that this phenomenon can be successfully challenged, and some of the goals of Holocaust education achieved, when a shift of emphasis takes place in the classroom.

Though the central question of “why” remains unanswered, we do know much more about “who did what, and when”. There is, however, no historical evidence to suggest that the Holocaust was inevitable. And if we accept this reasoning, it must also be accepted that it happened because people just like us, although of an earlier generation, **chose** to make it happen. It must be recognised that even within the gigantic context of

Europe’s war between 1939-1945, the extermination of Europe’s Jewish population **did not have to happen**. But it did happen because of choices made by thousands of “ordinary” Europeans, most of whom were born and educated during the early 20th century.

And for pedagogues today, it must be emphasised that those critical choices were made not by the victims, but by the perpetrators. Those who pulled the triggers of rifles, who humiliated individuals face-to-face, ordered ghettos built, organised deportations, built gas chambers, etc, made conscious choices. For one reason or another, they were motivated to make those choices, and the consequences were millions of dead, and wholly innocent, people. This group includes, of course, close to 1.5 million children.

The pedagogic importance of teaching about the perpetrators lies centrally in focusing upon the motivations and situations through which those choices were made. This applies both for the years of persecution after 1933 as well as during the years of systematic plunder, shootings and gassings. Even during the years of genocide, we know that there were choices available for those, German or otherwise, who pulled the triggers and packed the helpless victims into the gas chambers. This seems to me to be one of the most important lessons of the Holocaust, and an over-emphasis on teaching only the stories of the victims hampers any real understanding of this. Contrary to the perpetrators, the vast majority of the victims simply did not understand what was happening or, really, why they had become the primary targets of the Nazis and their collaborators – apart of course from the central salient point that they were Jews. The perpetrators, at all levels, understood mostly why things were happening as they were. Because of this, it is their thinking, their motivations and their actions which must be explored with students if we are ever to gain ground in helping them, and society, in understanding *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. What is possible, and indeed pedagogically advisable, is extensive use of contemporary documents left behind by them. Translations from German and other languages are available in great quantities, and can be found in any public library as well as on the internet. By subjecting these original source documents to critical analysis in discussions with students, they become an invaluable tool for exploring what was thought, felt and done **THEN**, by those who committed the crimes.

Of course these documents must be properly contextualised, and here we approach the sensitive question of whether most teachers who teach Holocaust history are properly prepared to use such documents effectively in the classroom. There remains throughout Europe a severe lack of proper “teacher-training” at the university level for either teachers in training, or who are active. This problem is complicated by the reality that there are, in fact, ineffective ways of teaching the event and its lessons. There seems little question that the noble cause of Holocaust education can and has been damaged by teachers lacking empirical knowledge and progressive pedagogic methodology, and that this lack of training contributes to “Holocaust fatigue”.

Furthermore, some teachers avoid utilising a perpetrator perspective because they fear that it will be distressing for their students (and, indeed, for themselves). Indeed, at secondary and middle educational levels, there is a tendency, even an emotional urge, for teachers to illuminate those aspects of Holocaust history which are generally considered to be more “uplifting” and “positive”. They would rather give examples from Holocaust history which seem to provide hope for the future of humankind rather than concentrating on the dismaying and often depressing realities of the persecution, humiliation, and radical violence which constitutes the Holocaust. Though perhaps understandable, such a technique constitutes a genuine, and genuinely problematic, historical distortion of what the Holocaust actually was. It is however, at least as a primary pedagogic technique, unacceptable today for teachers of

Holocaust history to focus primarily on the victims for this focus explains little.

Moreover, when the perpetrators are taught, there is a tendency to do so from an almost exclusively “Hitler-centric” perspective, with the added fillip that antisemitism explains everything else. Paradoxically, though the Holocaust has become in some ways ubiquitous in the media and education, it is far more common for students to begin my course, and for teachers to teach the event, as if it was “merely” the individual Adolf Hitler who killed six million Jews. Rather than illuminating and understanding the actions and choices of literally tens of thousands of Germans, Austrians, Romanians, French, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Latvians, Norwegians, etc. who did the actual killing, or facilitated it, the concentration remains on one or several individuals. While it is undoubtedly true that “no Hitler, no Holocaust”, it is equally true that virtually everything would have been different had not this multitude of Europeans made the choices they did. Again, the central perspective of choice made by those thousands of “ordinary” Europeans must be central to contemporary teaching of the Holocaust.

On the contrary, the immoral and disgusting actions of the perpetrators which might be thought to be “off-putting” to students – and they are undeniably so – seems to interest students most. Exactly why this is I don’t fully understand, but there seems no question that this is what happens in the classroom. Using the perpetrators own words as preserved in documents is indispensable if Holocaust pedagogy is going to make a difference in how students think – about Holocaust history, themselves, and the world around them. For even if these choices made by the perpetrators cannot be fully understood, they can and should be illuminated.

Their evident interest in studying the perpetrators might be because, for some reason, evil is more fascinating than victimhood, although this is a discussion requiring more space. I can only speculate on why students react so strongly to descriptions of perpetrator behaviour, but there is

no question that they are moved – and disturbed – by explorations of the details of evil during the Holocaust. To take but one example, I have never experienced anyone unmoved, for instance, by hearing of the documented details of the slaughter of the 90 children of Byelaya Tzerkov, in Ukraine, who were murdered days after their parents were murdered in August 1941. But I have heard students talk and even laugh during “solemn” commemoration events which focused solely on the fate of the victims. This fascinating if painful dilemma is a fact within Holocaust pedagogy, it is part of the phenomenon of “fatigue” noted above, and it must be faced.

Experience also demonstrates that learning about the disgusting details of perpetrator behaviour motivates them to learn even more about the event, and to try to make a difference in their own lives, and that of the society they live in. It is an odd but consistent experience that teaching this terrible event is, for the effective teacher, emotionally rewarding. I have been fortunate enough to experience a profoundly positive reaction from students and teachers after they have learned about horribly negative things. One particularly moving reaction which illustrates several of my arguments comes from a young woman who took my course in Holocaust history.

Although I feel the Holocaust has great meaning in our world today, I still feel it isn't enough. I find it quite surprising and unfortunate that there are still so many people who really haven't grasped what the Holocaust has done to us. Many others don't even know what the hell it really encompassed, it's not just gas chambers and crematoria. But my friends and so many others only know about Hitler ... I taught my roommates [and friends] all I could about the Holocaust, because to me, it has become one of the most meaningful things in my life ...

I needed this course [because] it gave me more than stress and bullshit. It taught me so much about the meaning of life and death. Everyday I left class sullen [and sad], but as I

walked further I would realise I'm alive and that I can't give up on life.

It is relevant, I think, to point out that this particular student's reaction became known to me almost 15 years ago, and strikingly similar reactions have been frequently received ever since. from students, teachers and “common” citizens alike.

What then is the social value(s) of teaching the Holocaust, and particularly about the motivations and actions of the perpetrators? In a word: democracy. The perpetrators made a series of profoundly anti-democratic choices, and it is in contrast to these that students are motivated to understand and appreciate the necessity and humanity of democracy. When citizens of our current democracies are exposed to the radically illiberal thinking and choices which caused the complete collapse of Europe's humanist traditions during the Holocaust, they are then compelled to imagine what the results might be if such failures are repeated. All experience suggests that when presented with the details of the genocide, students and teachers reflect upon the cardinal importance of democracy for our future. One persuasive articulation of this argument comes from Dr. William Fernekes, an experienced pedagogue. He argues, again from experience, that by teaching the history of the Holocaust in a modern, progressive fashion, democratic nations can “produce” citizens who reflect on their lives and the political system in which they live.

I argue that Holocaust education should be integrated within the broader rationale of educating young people for a reflective global citizenship. I assert that Holocaust education can serve a very important purpose by helping young people to reflect upon issues that have direct relationships to

- 1 the development of civic values, and
- 2 the fostering of behaviours emphasising social responsibility.

In short, Holocaust education can be a critical component in developing a citizenry who are capable of addressing global problems such as

human rights violations and genocide by employing a reflective understanding of history and its relationships to present and future policies and practices, irrespective of national boundaries.¹

It has been said that democracy is more than a form of government – it is also a form of character. This seems truer today than ever before.

Note

1. W. Fernekes, “Developing Reflective Citizens: The Role of Holocaust Education”, paper given at the *Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, Commemoration & Research, Workshop #1, “Pedagogy: Theories, Tools & Results”*, 27 January 2000.

L'enseignement sur les « auteurs de crime » dans un contexte global

Dr Paul A. Levine
Maître de conférences sur l'histoire de l'Holocauste
Directeur d'éducation
Programme d'études sur l'Holocauste et les génocides
Université d'Uppsala
Uppsala, Suède
paul.levine@hgs.uu.se

Nous avons compris beaucoup de choses sur l'Holocauste, le génocide des juifs européens. Pour autant, beaucoup de travail reste à faire et, en permanence, de nouvelles questions, perspectives et conséquences voient le jour. L'analyse et la recherche historiques ont énormément progressé dans la compréhension de questions centrales concernant le génocide commis par les nazis allemands et leurs alliés entre 1941 et 1945. Autrement dit, nous en savons beaucoup sur qui, où, quand, comment et avec quoi. Toutefois, nous avons nettement moins avancé sur LA question fondamentale, autrement dit POURQUOI. Malgré les montagnes de données et les années d'analyse, les experts ont jusqu'à présent été incapables d'apporter une réponse suffisamment globale à cette question existentielle capitale.

Le présent article propose de façon concise quelques idées sur l'enseignement et la mémoire de l'histoire de l'Holocauste, qui reposent sur plus de deux décennies non seulement d'enseignement au niveau universitaire dans deux pays mais aussi de formation des enseignants (éducation continue) dans plusieurs pays.

Cette expérience n'a cessé de confirmer l'évolution vers une compréhension du mystère central, le « pourquoi », qui est au cœur du défi pédagogique lancé à tous ceux qui enseignent l'histoire du génocide des juifs européens. Dans une grande mesure, mais pas exclusivement, les idées, analyses et propositions présentées concernent précisément ces deux « groupes cibles ».

Unterricht über „den Täter“ in einem globalen Zusammenhang

Dr. Paul A. Levine

Leitender Dozent zur Geschichte des Holocaust

Direktor

Uppsala-Programm für Holocaust- und Völkermordstudien

Universität Uppsala

Uppsala, Schweden

paul.levine@hgs.uu.se

Es gibt heute vieles, was wir im Zusammenhang mit dem Holocaust, dem Völkermord an den europäischen Juden, verstehen. Obwohl noch viel Arbeit zu leisten ist und ständig neue Fragen, Perspektiven und Ergebnisse auftauchen, hat die historische Forschung und Analyse beim Verständnis zentraler Fragen im Zusammenhang mit dem von Nazi-Deutschland und dessen Alliierten zwischen 1941 und 1945 verübten Völkermord ein beeindruckendes Niveau erreicht. Das heißt, dass wir viel über das Wer, das Wo, das Wann, Wie und die Mittel bei diesen Vorgängen wissen. Es wurden jedoch wesentlich geringerer Fortschritte im Verständnis DER wichtigsten Frage von allen erreicht – dem WARUM. Trotz der Berge von Daten und Jahren der Analyse waren die Historiker dieser Vorgänge bisher nicht in der Lage, eine ausreichend allgemeingültige Antwort auf diese existenzielle und wichtigste Frage zu finden.

Dieser Artikel will in verkürzter Form einige Ideen zum Unterricht zur Holocaust-Geschichte und Holocaust-Gedenken vorstellen, die auf mehr als zwei Jahrzehnten der Lehre beider Themen auf Universitärebene in zwei Ländern, und der „Lehrerbildung“ (Weiterbildung) in mehreren Ländern aufbauen.

Diese Erfahrung hat immer wieder bestätigt, dass Schritte hin zu einem Verständnis des zentralen Geheimnisses des „Warum“ eine Frage sind, die für diejenigen, die über den Völkermord an den europäischen Juden unterrichten, das Herzstück der vielen pädagogischen Herausforderungen bildet. Die hier vorgestellten Ideen, Analysen und Vorschläge sollten weitestgehend, wenn auch nicht ausschließlich, als für diese zwei „Zielgruppen“ bestimmt betrachtet werden.