TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

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Introduction

Many would agree that teaching about the Holocaust is not like teaching about anything else. As Elie Wiesel (1978) put it: AHow do you teach about events that defy knowledge, experiences that go beyond imagination? How do you tell children, big and small, that society could lose its mind and start murdering its own soul and its own future? How do you unveil horrors without offering at the same time some measure of hope? Hope in what? In whom? In progress, in science and literature and God?@

The longer I teach about the Holocaust, the more questions I have about it. Should the Holocaust be viewed as a major event in Jewish history, or as one of a number of similar historical examples of genocide? Adolf Hitler was essential to the Holocaust, but he could not have done it by himself. So, who participated in the Holocaust and what was the nature of their participation? Were women's experiences of the Holocaust different from those of men? Should Holocaust denial literature be incorporated into the teaching of the Holocaust? Since the Holocaust is considered by many the ultimate manifestation of homelessness and nonbelonging (Magat, 2000) what does home mean? What can be learned from the memoralization of the Holocaust in various parts of the world? In addition to the problem of what to teach, there is always the issue of how to teach. The purpose of this article is to address these questions. Special emphasis will be placed on teaching methodologies.

Background and Experience

After many years of silence during which researchers and teachers avoided the subject of the Holocaust, the number of scholarly works and courses devoted to it have grown significantly. With the increase of racial, ethnic, political and religious hatred , the interest in the Holocaust is growing as we continue to learn from the Holocaust and other more current examples of human cruelty (Mitchell &Mitchell, 2001). This article is an addition to the growing body of work that examines the why, what and how of teaching the Holocaust. Given that my work connects interdisciplinary, international, collaborative and experiential approaches, it should be of interest to scholars and teachers in many disciplines.

One of my earliest childhood memories has to do with the Holocaust. I was convinced that if I tried hard enough, I could erase the number tattooed on my aunt=s arm. Of course that was not possible, but it gave me and my aunt the opportunity to begin talking about her experience in Auschwitz. I was eager to learn more about the Holocaust, but the educational system in Romania at the time I lived and went to school there did not provide many opportunities in this regard. After my mother and I immigrated to Israel, I learned more about the Holocaust in history classes in high school but I was surprised by the general attitude of my classmates towards this topic. Most of them seemed to disassociate themselves not only from the perpetrators and bystanders (which I would have found understandable) but also from the victims. They likened Jewish victims to Asheep led to slaughter@ and had a hard time identifying with them (Segev, 1993). This attitude changed over the years, but I did not have the opportunity to observe it first hand. My most significant learning about the Holocaust occurred in the United States. I was thrilled when

my colleague John Kordek asked me to teach collaboratively about the Holocaust. John is a former U.S. Ambassador and career foreign service officer who joined DePaul University just about the time I started teaching there.

Significance of the Work

The history of the Holocaust represents one of the most effective subjects for an examination of basic moral issues. An inquiry into the history of the event provides vital lessons for an investigation of human behavior as well. A study of the Holocaust also addresses one of the main tenets of American education, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen.

The course I teach combines a study of the Holocaust with a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the nation=s official memorial to the Holocaust. Participants tour the permanent exhibition at the Museum, visit the Wexler Learning Center which is a computer database of facts and data relating to the Holocaust, and then participate in a seminar with several Museum and Holocaust experts. At DePaul, we focus on major events leading to the Holocaust and study the groups central to any analysis of the Holocaust: perpetrators, victims, rescuers and bystanders. We also meet with a Holocaust survivors. This is extremely important to do now when there is still time to meet and to discuss the Holocaust with eyewitnesses of the events.

Our students are working adults, mostly non-Jewish and increasingly diverse from year to year. Since last year public school teachers are also attending this class. After each time we teach our course, students express interest in broadening and deepening their knowledge of the Holocaust. We have incorporated their suggestions into our class but teaching this course always raises additional issues some of which I will address below and introduce into future classes dealing with the Holocaust.

1. Is the Holocaust unique or universal?

For the purposes of the class we teach, we have used the term AHolocaust@ not as a uniquely Jewish event focusing on the attempted extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, but rather as a term of more universal application, including the losses of other groups who suffered at the hand of Nazi Germany. Although Jews were the primary victims (nearly six million Jews were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators), others groups were targeted as well (the handicapped, Gypsies, homosexuals, and various political and religious groups). There is a scholarly debate, however, over the use of the word AHolocaust@ and we need to introduce the debate into our class and examine the consequences of defining the Holocaust one way or the other or view it as both unique AND universal. (Mitchell &Mitchell, 2001; Rosenbaum, 1998).

2. How can we more realistically portray the role of perpetrators, bystanders, victims and rescuers?

These are the groups central to any analysis of the Holocaust, but I don=t think we have stressed enough the fact that although Hitler was essential to the Holocaust he certainly could not have done it by himself. He had plenty of eager collaborators in Germany and in other countries as well. To what extent then can ordinary citizens be held responsible for what happened? What about bystanders, whether they are nations or individuals? Could they have changed history? Most Historians agree that the Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust, but most see in the

attempted annihilation of all European Jews something that is different from the persecution of the other groups. (Mitchell &Mitchell, 2001). While the role of the rescuers is vital to address and in some ways a preferred category by both students and faculty because it restores hope in humanity, overemphasizing the role of rescuers could be a distortion of history. Less than one-half of one percent of the total population of non Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews. Finally, how do we introduce the multifaceted aspects of all groups? The Germans were not only perpetrators but also bystanders, and in some rare cases they were even rescuers. Under certain circumstances bystanders became collaborators or rescuers. And the Jews were not only Asheep that went to slaughter@ but also resisters (Bauer,1998; Goldhagen, 1997; Hilberg, 1993) and in some cases collaborators.

3. Were Women=s Experiences in the Holocaust Different from those of Men?

It is not at all surprising that the interest in women studies is also reflected in Holocaust studies (Mitchell &Mitchell, 2001). Each time we teach our class about the Holocaust, at least one group works on a project dealing mainly with Jewish women victims during the Holocaust. I think it will be important in future courses to study women not only as victims but also as perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers and to include both Jewish and non-Jewish women (Ofer & Lenore, 1998; Rittner &Roth, 1993).

4. Should Denial Literature Be Included in the Teaching of the Holocaust?

On one hand, it is difficult for me personally to teach something that denies that my family and friends, and my people perished in one of the worst catastrophes in history. On the other hand, not exposing students to Holocaust denial literature will leave them unprepared to meet the challenges created by Holocaust deniers (Lipstadt, 1993; Shermer & Rappoport, 2000). My only surviving aunt who started my education on the Holocaust died several years ago. A couple of years ago, a Holocaust denier put her story on his webpage and maintained that it is was all a lie. He even argued that her name was a lie. This horrible first hand experience with a Holocaust denier strengthens my resolve to deal with this issue in future classes.

5. What can we learn from the memoralization of the Holocaust in various parts of the world?

Holocaust monuments and museums in Europe, Israel, and America, show how nations remember the Holocaust according to their own worldview and experiences. Through these monuments and museums the meaning of the Holocaust is defined and redefined in Europe, Israel, and America (Young, 1994). Occasionally, the memoralization of the Holocaust can be controversial, such as Berlin's new Holocaust memorial. It will be important in future courses to study the impact of these very different memorials on Holocaust studies in general and on current relations among nations in particular.

6. What does home mean?

Few topics elicit as much intellectual and emotional debate as the subject of home. This is particularly true in an era such as ours plagued by nationalism, racism and violence (Hart & Ben-Yoseph, 2005). While these troubling trends affect all people, history makes the preoccupation of Jews with the concept of home practically unavoidable. The Holocaust was after all the ultimate manifestation of nonbelonging (Magat, 2000) and of homelessness. And women have always been most closely associated with home. *Bait ze Isha*—home is a woman—according to the Talmud. It will be important to introduce the concepts of home and homelessness into the Holocaust class

to better understand how the Holocaust may have shaped the meaning of these two concepts for Jews on both the personal and the national levels.

7. What Instructional Approaches Will Allow Students to Understand the Holocaust?

When Ambassador John Kordek and I designed this course several years ago we grappled with a major concern: how does one make the Holocaust accessible to students? Following some research and many discussions, we eventually concluded that a meaningful way to begin studying the Holocaust was to use first person accounts (memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, testimonies). In this way, students experience historical events through the personal connections they establish with the narrators we incorporated into our class. I first learned about the Holocaust in this way. My only surviving aunt told me about it when I was growing up in Romania. Even today, when I read about the Holocaust, it is my aunt=s voice I hear. Much later, when I wrote my dissertation in French literature, I focused on the relationship that first person narratives establish with their readers. Somehow, these two personal approaches came together in the design of the course on the Holocaust. We teach about the Holocaust through personal narratives.

The students relate extremely well to *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi and *Man=s Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. In addition to reading these books students are asked to reflect on questions related to these texts. For example, when reading Anne Frank's book, students respond to questions such as the following:

1. What do you know about the Anne Frank story? 2. Why do you think Anne wrote her diary?

3. Pretend you were given a diary for your birthday present. Write your first entry in it. 4. If you had to live in hiding, and could not make a sound from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00p.m. and had nothing to entertain yourself, what would you do? Make up a schedule for one of the days. 5. In one of her diary entries, Anne writes how both Peter's and her parents don't understand them. Did your parents understand you? Give an example of a time when they did or did not understand what you were feeling. 6. Towards the end of her diary, Anne writes: "I want to go on living after my death." Do you think that Anne Frank will be remembered for a long time as an example of a person who lived in the time of the Holocaust? Or will the memory of her fade as time goes on?

Videos/films/guest speakers are also vital to the course, and a priority in selecting a video, a film or a guest speaker is the generation of class discussion while furthering the understanding of the topics included in the course.

Students are also asked to maintain a journal/scrapbook. This includes but is not limited to the collection of two books/articles for each class session. One book or article must relate to the student's area of interest, i.e. bystanders and the holocaust; the other book or article must relate to more recent Holocaust-type events, such as the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. The students summarize the articles and then comment on them while relating them to the course. By the end of the quarter the students will have both increased their knowledge in the area of their interest and sharpened their awareness of the number of Holocaust type of events still going on (Bassman, 1996).

The travel portion of the course is probably the most memorable part of the course and

challenges students as they try to imagine what it might have been like to live in the Holocaust era. After taking in information about the Holocaust, students encounter the actual landscape of the Holocaust. The visit to the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington gives students the opportunity not only to visit the permanent and special exhibits but also to meet and discuss their interests with prominent scholars in the field. In 2002 the travel portion of the course took us to Anne Frank's House in Amsterdam, historic sites such as the Warsaw Ghetto, the former Jewish quarter of Krakow, one of the most sadistic concentration camps in Majdanek, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp, and in and near Berlin to the memorial of the burning of the books, the Jewish Museum, and the Wannsee Villa, site of the Wannsee Conference where Nazi leaders devised the "final solution to the Jewish question in Europe" which was the Nazis' code name for the planned destruction of all the European Jews. Students could now compare what they learned from the historical record with the places themselves. The landscape became our text and reading it was an emotional act (Charlesworth, 1996). Lectures and discussion following the visit to the sites of the Holocaust acquired an interest impossible to acquire in any classroom in the world.

Lastly, one of the most useful experiences for the students is the team project. The assignment involves working in teams of 3-4 students on the research, presentation and final paper concerning a topic of interest to the students on the team. Topics selected by students have included: Children and the Holocaust; Women and the Holocaust; The Psychology of Perpetrators/Bystanders/Rescuers; Memory and History; The Catholic Church and the Holocaust; The Role of Art during the Holocaust; Antisemitism. With the students' final presentations to the class there is an almost total shift from the instructors as the primary source for learning to the students as the primary source for learning. This leads to a sense of shared responsibility for the learning process as a whole, not only among students but also between students and instructors. It also facilitates the desired environment of a community of scholars where we all learn from each other.

Conclusions

Teaching about the Holocaust teaches us that we have not learned our lessons as well as we should have: anti-Semitism still exists in many parts of the world and those who say that the Holocaust never happened seem to persist. Genocide, and wars against innocent human beings still occur after the Holocaust. Cruelty and inhumanity towards individuals who are different form the mainstream population happen too frequently. And yet, I am hopeful. My students tell me that learning about the Holocaust is a transformative experience for them. They are determined to remember the Holocaust and stand up against racism and genocide They recognize that the Holocaust was not inevitable and understand that individuals could have made a difference in preventing the horrors that happened in Europe (Roth, 1997). They are aware of the consequences of inaction and they are determined never to stand by in the face of injustice. They seem to have internalized this saying from the Talmud: He who saves one soul, it is as if he saved the whole world."

For me, teaching this class has become a great opportunity for continued inquiry into the topic, ongoing dialogue with students, colleagues, survivors, liberators and texts, and in a small way, it

also makes it possible for me to bear witness for those who cannot speak for themselves. In the words of Elie Wiesel: Awhoever teaches in this field becomes a messenger@ (Hirshefeld, 1981).

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