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History, eye witness accounts and memory: Fact or fiction? Who owns the right to report on the Holocaust?

Introduction

This year, the year 2005, marks 72 years since Hitler's ascent to power and 60 years since the end of World War II and the end of the Holocaust. There are thousands of accounts of Holocaust survivors, written and videotaped, translated into many languages, some having attained the status of classics; more are being published daily.

Historians of the Holocaust have been engaged in analyses and speculations about the changes that will take place in the treatment of the Holocaust in history, in literature, and in society once the witnesses who survived it have passed away.

There is no doubt that the Holocaust should be remembered by future generations, that memorials and museums should instruct the general public and that schools and universities should teach successor generations what happened. Like a mantra, the justification for this is generally the pious hope that it will "never happen again."

There is no shortage of survey information available that shows that, over all, we have only been moderately successful in informing young people about the Holocaust. For example, according to a recent American Jewish Committee survey, only a third of Americans know the approximate number of Jews that were murdered in the Holocaust and even fewer are familiar with the names of the concentration and extermination camps. In the same survey, Europeans were significantly better informed. (See Note 1.)

As far as preventing subsequent genocides is concerned, the record is shocking. The appended table compiled by Genocide Watch, the Coordinator for the International Campaign to End Genocide, lists more than 70 occurrences of genocide that have taken place between 1945 and 2002.

It is the aim of this paper to take a brief look at the contents of some typical courses on remembering the Holocaust the way they are presently taught and to suggest some specific topics that might be added in order to achieve a better understanding of remembrance and the ultimate aim - that such bestiality not happen again.

Sample Holocaust Course Contents

Among the texts developed for the purpose of teaching students about the Holocaust are

works encompassing critical analyses of ways of remembering, such as "Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust," (M. Hirsch and I. Kacandes, 2004). The thirty-eight contributors from a variety of disciplines present remarkable, pertinent approaches and address a wide diversity of aspects.

Eric Weisz, for example, speaks of teaching the History of Nazi Germany, not the Holocaust alone, and of teaching about nation building, nationalism and genocide, whose corrupting character travels deep into a population (p.135ff). Froma Zeitlin, in "Teaching about Perpetrators" (p.68ff.), quotes Heinrich Himmler's speech in Poland from Nazi documents. Referring to hundreds of Jewish corpses lying side-by-side in 1943 he says, "To have stuck it out and at the same time...to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written..." (p.71). Sidra DeKoven Ezrahl addresses the persistent debate concerning authenticity (p.52ff). He writes "...since those who died in the gas chambers cannot speak, every voice is a presumption, and approximation, of the speech that could not issue from the ultimate place" (p.53). As a matter of fact, along with this argument, the question is often raised - the implication suggested - that the survivors, by the very fact that they survived, are guilty of betrayal of those who perished. Amy Hungerford addresses the role of fiction in "Teaching Fiction, Teaching the Holocaust" (p.180ff.) and cites author and Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld whose views will be explored a little later below.

Another text, more geared to serious scholars, encompasses short excerpts from classical and theoretical texts that are analyzed and explicated by the editors ("The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings," N. Levi and M. Rothberg , 2003). The editors suggest that "readers...will find the most important theoretical reflections on the Nazi genocide collected in one source for the first time" (p. xix).

Though very different in approach and scope, there is much overlapping in the two volumes examined here. Both books dedicate sections of text to exploring anti-Semitism, both books feature texts by such writers as Elie Wiesel, Ruth Klueger, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi and Claude Lanzmann. James Young, himself the author of books on remembrance of the Holocaust (e.g. "Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust," 1990) is a contributing author to both volumes. His work encompasses critical analyses of "Holocaust Documentary Fiction" (p.51ff) as well as "Holocaust Memorials and Meaning" (p.172ff). In examining Holocaust memorials all over the world, Young writes "if the raison d'etre for Holocaust monuments is 'never to forget,' this chapter asks precisely what is not forgotten..." (p.173). In an insightful analysis he relates Holocaust memorials of all types to the political climate in which they were conceived and executed.

The material briefly mentioned above, so thoughtfully compiled, is only a small sample of the literature available, yet it is so voluminous and complex that it challenges those who

wish to preserve and communicate the memory of the Holocaust in our culture. But as mentioned at the outset, the passage of time, the dying out of the survivor generation, the generally relatively inadequate knowledge of the historical events of the Holocaust, the violent events that are happening in the world today all suggest that we consider additional topics that may be relevant to an understanding of the Holocaust today.

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History, eye witness accounts, and memory - fact or fiction? Who owns the right to report on the Holocaust?

Law students learn early about the fallibility of eye witness accounts, which depend at the very least on the witness actually seeing the event to be reported. If the observer's attention is diverted, another event might be reported and be next in line to become "history." Yet history is often treated as if it were some external truth, ignoring the role of psychological factors, of ideology and of coincidence which - even if we were to assume the best of intentions on the part of the observer - determine what is reported as history.

In addition, memory is selective. When people reach back across their lifetimes, memory becomes a redactor, editing images so they cohere with the person's current understanding of self. People reshape, reinterpret, and distort their pasts in light of their present interests and priorities.

Aharon Appelfeld, mentioned above, one of the most important writers in the state of Israel, is himself a Holocaust survivor (see Note 2). In a recently published book ("Polin, eretz yeruka," "Poland, a Green Land" published in January 2005 in Hebrew by Keter Books) Appelfeld writes:

After the death of the last witnesses, the remembrance of the Holocaust must not be entrusted to the historians alone. Now comes the hour of artistic creation

By Aharon Appelfeld

Sixty years have passed since the end of World War II, and now, it seems to me, we are entering a new period in our relationship with the Holocaust. At present I find it difficult to define this change precisely..... The survivors were the fear of everyone who writes about the Holocaust, whether journalist, chronicler, historian or writer. The survivors were vigilant in ensuring that the events be related in the right order, that the names of people and places not be omitted, that details not be distorted.

....

I have often been scolded for not being accurate about details and for describing .... in a manner that was critical of the victims. For the survivor, the chronological memory was an anchor to which he clung with all his might. Remembrance and commemoration were the survivors' driving force. The vow to tell every last thing,.... taken by the survivor in the midst of the inferno, validated his labor....,.

Now we are nearing the brink of a period in which the Holocaust will have to stand on its own without the survivors...... As long as survivors walked among us, the Holocaust was palpably present. The Holocaust had a first name, a surname, a city, town and village..... The continued presence of the survivors among us removed the Holocaust from the region of the unbelievable into the light and into consciousness. If you had doubts about what man is capable of doing to his fellow man, ...the survivors came and told you.

They were the Warsaw Ghetto, the Vilna Ghetto, the camps and the liberation camps. They did not stand on the street corner preaching morality. On the contrary: Their silence was louder than any speech. Now the survivors are passing away and a certain anxiety is perceptible: How will the memory of the Holocaust be conducted without them?...

Let us not forget: Every memoir or history that was published was accompanied by survivors..... It is clear now that historiography alone will not be able to accomplish this difficult task of preserving the memory and transmitting it to the coming generations. Additional insights are necessary in order to hoist this highly charged burden..... . We owe the survivors a great debt for not being silent.... Now, it seems to me, the time has come to build on their foundation.....

To add to the historical question of what happened and how it happened, a question with a different thrust: how it must have been.

....

How it must have been? That is the eternal thrust of art. History by its nature inclines toward recounting the events through the prism of social and political factors. Art since earliest times has sought the individual, his interior being, and from within it tries to understand the world. The survivors of the Holocaust were at great pains to document the horror orally and by the written word. Remember, they inscribed on every threshold and door. Their devotion and the essence of their life must on no account become a closed repository.

Now the time has come to forge an opening to feeling, to tumultuous emotion and to imagination, and to channel them into the world of creativity..... The years of the Holocaust were years of horror, but also years of observing, absorbing and assimilating. Many years were needed to digest what the horrors wrought. Only now is the soul beginning to assimilate it. Now we must remove the horror from the general and the abstract, into the inner and the meaningful.

The Holocaust must not be left in the realm of large numbers and generalizations. The witnesses and the historians laid the foundation and the framework, and now the time has come for creativity. Now the time has come to disintegrate the horror into images and words.

What was the effect of the Holocaust on those who lived through it and on their families?

Communication between generations within families.

What effect has the Holocaust had on those who survived it - and on the generations that followed? Even though the number of survivors among the victims of the Holocaust as well as among the perpetrators has been decreasing steadily, at this time of increasing longevity we should realize that the student generation we are teaching about the Holocaust is likely to have grandparents who experienced the Nazi period and the War years during their childhood - as spectators in the United States, in Germany among the generation of the perpetrators, in the diaspora among the generation of the victims (see Table below). Even if this is only a rough approximation, it will make us realize that the Holocaust - and knowledge about it among parents and teachers - and other adults - is, for many, not solely accessible through history books.

Grandparents	**Nazi- and War years 1933-1945**	**Currently**
Grandparents born 1915 Grandchild born about 1970	Grandparents aged 18-30	Now about 90 Grandchild now about 35
Grandparents born around 1927 Grandchild born about 1982	Grandparents aged 6-18	Now in their late 70s Grandchild now about 23
Grandparents born about 1940 Grandchild born about 2000	Grandparents aged about 5 at the end of the war	Now about 65 years old Grandchild now about 5

What did the victims of the Holocaust tell their children, what did the perpetrators tell theirs? What knowledge had the second generation to pass on to the third, and how willing were they to do so? Was this transmission of information different in Austria from that in the Federal Republic of Germany? From that in the German Democratic Republic, as the East German State was then called? Did the grandparents' experiences have an effect on the next generation's child rearing practices among emigrants in the Kibbutzim of Israel? In the German schools?

A great deal of painstaking research has been carried out to answer these questions. In "The Holocaust in Three Generations," (published in German in 1995, English edition 1998), Gabriele Rosenthal and her fellow researchers have brought together the work of researchers who report on the dialogue about the Holocaust within families of survivors and within families of perpetrators in Israel and in West and East Germany. Rosenthal explains her method:

“In general, we do this by pursuing an interactive-intergenerational concept which does not view the second and third generations as passive recipients of the past, but rather as active agents in the way they deal with their parents and grandparents and their pasts. Our experience has shown accordingly that the way the first generation interacts with the second and third generation can change their own perspective on the past” (Rosenthal, p.2).

Surprisingly, similarities emerge in a comparison of how Jewish families in which the grandparents survived the Shoah, deal with their traumatic past under National Socialism and how families in which the grandparents were either Nazi perpetrators or active National Socialists deal with their past. A silence surrounding the past ... has institutionalized itself within both... (Rosenthal, p.8 and Danieli, 1982)

It is logical that, in survivor families, the silence of the grandparents about their experiences is connected to problems and motives which are completely different from those connected to the silence of grandparents who were implicated in Nazi crimes. In one case, the grandparents or parents attempt to protect children and grandchildren from the fantasies and nightmares that haunt the survivors. By contrast, grandparents or parents who were implicated in Nazi crimes primarily keep silent and deny the past to protect themselves from accusation or loss of affection

However, both the families of victims and the families of perpetrators exhibit the following symptoms:

> blocking out of information about the family past, fear of extermination, separation anxiety, guilt feelings, impeded separation-individuation process, and acting out the past in fantasies and psychosomatic symptoms.

In both kinds families, one may observe the tremendous impact of family secrets as well as the process of family members obstructing each other in any attempt to address themes relating to the past, accusations that render family dialog impossible, an institutionalization of family myths to circumvent conflict within the family.

In spite of the great variety of family constellations and reactions, Rosenthal’s patient, knowledgeable method uncovers significant patterns that shape a view of the world, not only of the generations who experienced the Hitler years but also of their progeny; and this view is only to a limited degree the product of the school history curriculum.

A similar and equally important research report is to date unfortunately only available in German (Harald Welzer et al., “Opa war kein Nazi” [“Grandpa wasn’t a Nazi!”] 2002). This project presents the results of examining the ways in which personal knowledge and information about National Socialism and the Holocaust are passed on in German families from one generation to the other, through conversations that take place among family

members of three generations. In family talks organized among the members of forty volunteer families, augmented by 40 inter-generational conversations and 142 individual interviews, the researchers have collected and analyzed 2535 stories. The themes of the national socialist past and the Holocaust were made the central and conscious subject of the discussions and thirteen film sequences were shown as a starting point for conversation.

Here, too, the authors found that the family leaves a deep mark on the historical consciousness of young people. The central insight gained from the study is that every family member participates in the (re)construction of the stories about the past, following specific patterns and using specific tools. The third generation, the grandchildren, showed a distinct tendency to turn their grandparents into everyday heroes of this time period, fulfilling an obvious need to dissociate their grandparents from the "bad Nazis" they know so much about. Realizing the importance of the family talks, the authors offer a detailed analysis of such conversations.

They delineate the processes through which stories are changed when they are handed down from one generation to the other. These processes are made possible by a particular pattern of story-telling. Even when the contemporary witnesses talk openly about this time period, they narrate events in an abstract way, with nebulous, fragmented and often contradictory stories. Children and grandchildren "fill in" gaps in the grandparents' stories, making them clearer and more detailed - but essentially constructing their own versions. The authors note that this historical model still has a dominant place in Germany, despite what they consider the successful work done in history classes, political education and memorials. The more the following generations know about the period of the Third Reich and its criminal character, the stronger the need to construct a story that combines the crimes of the Nazis with a kind of moral integrity for their relatives in the same narrative. Along with heroization, the second tendency is to turn the relatives into victims. In more than half of the 1130 stories, relatives are pictured as victims of poverty, rape and violence from Russian soldiers; as refugees; and as victims of the war on the home front because of the bombing of German cities. The profusion of images of the Third Reich and Holocaust in documentaries and films not only gives children and grandchildren a "retroactive script" to fill gaps in the nebulous stories they are told, contemporary witnesses also use such images, mixing them with their own fading experiences and memories. Movie images are used as historical proof for how the past really was.

A recurrent and alarming phenomenon the authors call “Wechselrahmung” (p.81ff) is the use of interchangeable frames of reference - a process where scenes from the relatives' past are constructed by using elements borrowed from events that actually report on the persecution and extermination of Jews, frequently made vivid in films dealing with the Holocaust.

Among the narrative components of the family discourse one finds many anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes concerning the Russians and the Jews - frightening and depressing legacies of National Socialism.

(In part quoted from an H-NET Book Review - "Opa war kein Nazi!" by Charlotte Opfermann.)

Both studies should make us aware of the fallibility of memory, of the strong need for people to think well of people they love, and of the limited value of relying largely on textbooks and the media.

Secondary effects of National Socialism and the Holocaust - What can be learned from them?

Many of the survivors of the Holocaust who made their way to Palestine and helped found the State of Israel in 1948 resolved to make changes in the way their children would be raised. The opinion was widespread among these refugees, mostly of Eastern Europe, that their child rearing practices made their children too dependent on the parents, insufficiently self-reliant, and physically not tough and resilient enough. In consequence, they decided on a new, different style of child rearing in the kibbutzim that were created. There, the children lived apart from the parents, in children's houses, reared by professional caretakers. Some after-work hours were set aside for parents and their children to socialize. The rest of the time, the children spent with each other in small groups, learning to be hardy and cooperative (see, among other literature on the kibbutzim, Bruno Bettelheim, "The Children of the Dream" 1967).

The structure described above did not last. Living in kibbutzim declined in Israel and in the remaining ones, the proximity of parents and children increased substantially. Still, the values emphasized in the educational system in Israel still reflect the concerns of the first post-Holocaust generation.

In the same time period, about two decades after the end of World War Two, intellectuals in several professions in the Federal Republic of Germany were occupied in trying to determine how Hitler's staggering influence, the war of aggression, and the Holocaust could have come to pass (Theodor Adorno et al., "The Authoritariam Personality," 1950; Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, "The Inability to Mourn," 1967) and what changes to child rearing practices and education were necessary as a preventative in the future. These considerations ushered in the period of anti-authoritarian education, where even the youngest children were allowed free reign. "Frontal teaching" was taboo and school children were not to be required to listen silently to their instructors. The first post-war generation

was filling the universities. Known as the 68ers, they protested a world in which their parents were busy rebuilding the country they had made the symbol of evil. There was no similar, simultaneous and parallel development in Austria and in East Germany. Both these states were given the opportunity not to shoulder the guilt they shared. Austria had been officially declared a victim of National Socialism and in the German Democratic Republic a new authoritarian regime supplanted the old and attributed the guilt to "the others".

As in Israel, the system in Germany that was a consequence of the Holocaust did not last. The extremes of the anti-authoritarian education were untenable and the 68ers got older, left the universities and entered the professions. But the school system and the underlying pedagogy never reverted to the authoritarian values widespread before and during national socialism.

The devastation of the German cities during the last years of the Second World War and the horrors involved in that devastation are almost unimaginable and have only to a very limited degree been the subject of literature. W.G. Sebald attributes this to "the sense of unparalleled national humiliation felt by millions... so that they neither shared it with others nor passed it on to the next generation." (p.viii, W.G. Sebald, "On the Natural History of Destruction," 1999/2003).

"**Never Again!"**

As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons given for keeping alive the memory of the Holocaust is to prevent such horrors from happening again. Teaching and learning about this genocide has not prevented almost endless recurrences of mass killings. If it is indeed possible to prevent such catastrophes, the key is probably to study such works as Ervin Staub's "The Roots of Evil" in which the author analyzes the psychological and cultural bases of genocide on hand of a number of different occurrences. Examining the preconditions as well as the steps along the continuum of destruction, Staub helps us take a close look, not only at victims and perpetrators but also at bystanders.

This brings us to the awareness that we, too, are bystanders, if not even perpetrators, in the catastrophes taking place in the world today, with the responsibility of helping to avert disaster. If courses on the remembrance of the Holocaust could bring us closer to this goal, a great deal would be accomplished.

Four years ago, Ervin Staub, then president of the ISPP and himself a Holocaust survivor, urged political psychologists to become more involved in working to solve conflicts in the real world. Given recent history, it is even more imperative to heed Ervin Staub's advice and reinvigorate our efforts to engage in practical applications of our knowledge.

Note 1.

In March and April 2005, the American Jewish Committee sponsored a twelve-question survey concerning knowledge and remembrance of the Holocaust in the US, UK, Germany, France, Austria, Poland, and Sweden. In each country, approximately 1,000 individuals aged 18 and older were interviewed. Some results are shown below: The Germans and French are more knowledgeable about the Holocaust, and are as likely to believe that (1) it's important to know about and understand the Nazi extermination of the Jews, (2) memory of the Holocaust should be kept alive, (3) teaching about the Holocaust should be taught in their schools, (4) Israel is needed as a place of refuge for Jews during times of persecution, and (5) it is *not* true that Jews exert too much influence on world events.

∑ The Germans and French are less likely to believe that another attempt to exterminate Jews will occur sometime in the future, and, in a seeming contradiction, more likely to believe that anti-Semitism is a serious problem in their country.

∑ The personal feelings of the French and, especially, the Germans toward Jews and Israel are considerably less sympathetic.

In summary form, these are the survey's results:

∑ When asked "what were Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka," a substantially higher percentage of the Germans (77%) and French (78%) than of the Americans (44%) and British (53%) correctly identified them as concentration/extermination camps.

∑ The Germans and French were also more knowledgeable regarding the estimated number (6 million) of Jews killed by the Nazis. In response th the question "approximately how many Jews . . . were killed," 49% of both the Germans and the French chose 6 million, compared to 33% of the Americans and 39% of the British subjects.

Note 2.

Aharon Appelfeld, a recipient of the Israel Prize for literature, has written feelingly of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. He was born in 1932 into an assimilated Jewish family in Bukovnia, then part of Poland but later annexed to the U.S.S.R. (now Russia). His mother was killed during the Nazi occupation of Poland, and he was deported to a concentration camp. He managed to escape and joined the bands of children wandering in the forests of Poland. After three years he was picked up by the Soviet army in 1944 and worked in the kitchens in the Ukraine until the end of the war. After 1945 Appelfeld traveled to Italy and in 1946 finally went to settle in what is now Israel. Until then his main education had been in the concentration camp at Transniestra, and he did not go back to school, even in Israel. He studied Hebrew and Yiddish at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

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