

SASHT CONFERENCE 2010

THE HOLOCAUST: Lessons for humanity.

Teaching the Holocaust in Post – Apartheid South Africa.

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Remembrance is a vital human activity that shapes our links with the past and the **way** we remember defines us in the present. We need the past to construct our identities, reconsider our values, our hopes and our fears, and determine the kind of society we choose to create.

As learners gain insight into the many historical, social, political and economic factors which cumulatively resulted in the Holocaust, they will gain a perspective on how history happens and how a convergence of factors can contribute to the disintegration of civilized values. We need to ensure that in our country and especially in the education of our learners, the story of the virtual annihilation of a people solely because they were believed to constitute a racial problem is never forgotten and will serve to inspire a commitment to strive towards the creation of a society in which racism will not be tolerated and human rights will be guarded.

When we teach Holocaust history, we should focus not only on issues relating to ‘what happened’, ‘where it happened’, and ‘when it happened’, but very importantly ‘why it happened’. This will enable educators to include goals and objectives, as well as transmit historical content.

Although the Holocaust took place at the instigation of the government of Nazi Germany, and the main victims were the Jews, this history is not only about Germans and Jews – it is about humanity and man’s inhumanity to man. The lessons that arise from the history of the Holocaust are of universal significance. They transcend all lines of race, religion, nationality and ethnicity and they are relevant to everyone the world over - particularly South Africans who have so recently emerged from the era of apartheid, but still have much to learn about the ramifications of racism, prejudice, stereotyping, and respect for dignity and diversity. These are the primary reasons why the National Department of Education decided to introduce Holocaust history into the revised National Curriculum.

The focus of my address will be on the lessons that arise from the history of the Holocaust. However, we cannot learn lessons from history without knowing about the history. As many educators may not have studied this subject because it has been included only recently in the Grade 9 SS (History) and the

Grade 11 History curricula, I will commence by screening a 20 min. documentary produced by the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. This will provide a brief overview of the Holocaust. Thereafter, I will discuss the lessons that arise from the history.

[Documentary DVD]

Fighting racism and discrimination is everyone's responsibility, but how do we combat racism when patterns of paternalism, prejudgements, and racist ideas, are so deeply embedded in the collective mentalities of so many South Africans, for whom notions of the superiority of 'white' people exist as more or less conscious habits of mind? Beliefs and traditions in which the ideal of human difference has been accepted as natural and incontestable must be challenged. Through studying Holocaust history our learners will gain greater understanding of these concepts and be alerted to the ultimate consequences of prejudice and racism.

Hitler was a fervent racist and was profoundly influenced by the 19th century theories of race that postulated the following ideas:

- There is a hierarchy of races – the whiter your skin the more superior you are, and the colour of your skin is determined by the genes in your blood.
- The second theory relates to the size of your head! The larger your head, the bigger your brain and the cleverer you are.
- Therefore, the way you look on the outside is an indication of your ability, potential, morality and worth.

These 19th century theories of race were widely accepted across the world but the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis that emanated from their obsession with race, tended to disguise the extent to which similar racial ideas were current in other countries - particularly in South Africa.

However, after the shocking experience of the Holocaust people were alerted to the terrifying consequences of racial ideology and geneticists investigated the scientific validity of the racial theories. Their findings revealed that these presumptuous theories were social constructs and have no scientific validity. **There is only one race, and that is the human race.** Gradually there has been a shift in perceptions about the racial theories, but sadly it is taking a long time to alert people to the fact that skin pigmentation is no indication of a person's ability or worth.

Germany was one of the most sophisticated nations in the western world - intellectually renowned, culturally sophisticated, scientifically advanced, technologically proficient, and God-fearing. Yet it was the government of this country that decided to murder a small ethnic minority in its midst because it perceived them to be a racial problem.

While the ultimate consequence of racism is one of the most important lessons we need to learn from the history of the Holocaust, there are a number of other significant lessons that should be addressed.

- The danger of **propaganda**: The sophisticated Nazi propaganda machine effectively brainwashed the majority of people – including highly educated, intellectual members of society. People are so easily deceived. We need to encourage our learners to become critical thinkers and question the authenticity of what they read, see, or hear. They need to ask, ‘What is the message?’ ‘Who is sending the message?’ ‘Why is the message being sent?’ and ‘what are the possible consequences?’

The history of the Holocaust also raises daunting questions about the **use and abuse of knowledge**.

- Judges who were part of one of the finest legal systems in the western world turned that system of justice on its head and made forced sterilization, flogging, shooting and gassing, permissible under the law.
- Doctors who were trained to heal became part of a killing process and conducted the most bizarre and horrendous medical experiments on victims.
- Engineers and architects used their skills to construct giant crematoria and gas chambers.
- Educators indoctrinated their students with lies and propaganda.
- Poets and writers who wrote poetry of love, abused, tortured and killed innocent victims.
- Fathers and grandfathers who loved their own children, killed the children of others.

How could these people have done what they did? Is lust for power, opportunism, and self interest more important than safeguarding the life of a fellow human being?

- While human beings are capable of perpetrating heinous atrocities, the Holocaust also teaches us that we all have the capacity for love, care, compassion and courage. There were thousands of people who put their lives at risk to save Jews and other victims of Nazism, but sadly, too few.

- The vast majority of people stood by and did nothing when injustice was perpetrated. Therefore, another important lesson we should learn from the Holocaust is the consequence of **apathy, silence and indifference of ‘the bystanders’**. The bystanders did not think beyond their own interests, benefits, actions or tasks. Nor did they consider the consequences of their **inaction**. Surely they too must share the responsibility for what happened? The genocide in Europe succeeded **not only because of a culture of hatred, discrimination, advanced technology, abuse of knowledge, greed and a lust for power**, but because of **indifference and conspiracies of silence**. It is our responsibility to encourage learners to break down walls of indifference, shatter conspiracies of silence, and strive to become social activists - intervene when others are unfairly treated. We need to stand up and be counted and not look around to see who else is standing up before we make a decision to respond. Indifference in the face of evil is complicity with evil. (Edmund Burke, the 19th century essayist and philosopher, stated, *‘For the triumph of evil, it is enough that good men do nothing’*).
- The Holocaust reminds us of the **responsibilities of individuals and citizens in a democracy**. Democracy is fragile. We need to guard our democracy carefully. Hitler was elected democratically and he used democracy to destroy democracy. The fact that the Holocaust was possible in a country as sophisticated and advanced as Germany, shows that we can never take for granted an enlightened, free, and democratic society. Our Constitution and Bill of Rights are not abstract ideas but a legacy that must be protected to ensure that democracy never becomes the tyranny of a majority. We have to guard our freedom and our human rights, and never forget that our freedom is inextricably bound up with the freedom of others.

The enduring lesson of the Holocaust and the genocides that have followed is that that they never **begin with killing, they end with killing. It begins with words – with the teaching of contempt and the denigration of ‘the other’**. This is the chilling fact of history.

Germany made a supreme, but fatal attempt to create a nation-state without ethnic or racial diversity based on notions of superiority and inferiority. We should never forget the price that is paid when some people think they are better than others.

The burden of striving towards social justice and recognizing individual responsibility has been placed largely on the shoulders of educators. If we do not rise to the challenge there is a real danger that we will perpetuate the mistakes made in the past and lose the opportunity of creating a society in which human rights are carefully guarded, dignity is respected and diversity is valued. Although our emphasis is on educating the youth, we also need to look deeply into our own attitudes, prejudices, and assumptions. As Nelson Mandela said, *'You cannot change the world until you have changed yourself'*.

In teaching this history, we should reaffirm that never again will we be indifferent to racism; never again will we be silent in the face of evil; never again will we ignore the plight of the vulnerable. We will speak out against racism, against hate, and against injustice.

Perhaps Haim Ginott, in his open letter to teachers, said it best:

Dear teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness.

Gas chambers built by learned engineers,

Children poisoned by educated physicians,

Infants killed by trained nurses,

Women and babies shot by high school college graduates

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is:

Help your students to become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, and skilled psychopaths.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

Ladies and gentlemen, before taking questions, I would like to introduce an activity that you may be able to use in the classroom. The creation of a 'master race of pure Germans' necessitated identifying and classifying people. Race classification was also fundamental to the ideology of apartheid. This activity relates to the issue of identity and its ramifications.

[Identity exercise: Hand activity, potato activity, Oswald Mtshali poem]

While identity is crucial to our being we are all part of a common humanity with common interests and a common destiny. In the midst of the pride each of us has in our identity and our culture we need to respect people who are different from ourselves. They may be different but that does not mean they are inferior.

QUESTIONS?

Teaching Holocaust history is difficult and can be risky. But it is a risk worth taking. It also provides a unique opportunity for cross curricula teaching. So much more could be achieved if history educators would do some lesson planning with educators from other learning disciplines, particularly Life Orientation (Commitment to constitutional rights and responsibilities); Language (Literature on Holocaust – Anne Frank, Eli Wiesel,) Art and Culture (propaganda – non verbal communication); Science and Technology (interrelationships between science, technology, and society).

CONCLUSION

As long as we continue to inquire about the value of human life and the ideals of equality and justice that became so perverted in Nazi Germany, and as long as we examine those values in relation to the realities of life in our own society today, we will take small but positive steps towards the creation of a decent democratic society in which prejudice, racism, discrimination and injustice will not be tolerated.

I would like to conclude with a statement made last year by the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon on the occasion of International Holocaust Memorial Day.

‘New initiatives in Holocaust remembrance and education have given us an authentic basis for hope. But we can and must do more if we are to make that hope a reality. We must continue to teach our children the lessons of history’s darkest chapters. That will help them do a better job than their elders in building a world of peaceful coexistence’.