

This paper is based on remarks delivered at the United Nations Civil Society Briefing on “The Future of Holocaust Education”, held at United Nations Headquarter on 28 January 2016.

## **The Future of Holocaust Education: The Role of Global Citizenship and Human Rights Literacy**

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The unanimous adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of Holocaust Remembrance resolution 60/7 in 2005 and the establishment of a robust Holocaust remembrance and education programme signalled a commitment by the United Nations to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust would be passed on to future generations. The United Nations also recognized its responsibility to highlight the vital educational issues of global citizenship and human rights, which today are as pressing as ever, if not more so. It acknowledges the need to develop a new cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust that transcends ethnic and national boundaries - a memory that is not only connected to the past but also to a common future. A murky wave of xenophobia, racism and hatred is flooding the world, and educators must mobilize to resist it.

### **Tikun Olam (Repairing the World)**

The future of Holocaust memory and education lies in its ability to be relevant to the students of coming generations. While study about the Holocaust is important in and of itself, it is even more important to learn from the Holocaust in terms of promoting global citizenship, human rights, religious tolerance and multiculturalism to ensure that such evil does not occur again.

In many locations worldwide, the Holocaust has become a universal symbol of evil. Just as the story of the Exodus from Egypt from the Bible, and the catch cry “Let my people go” epitomises moving from slavery towards freedom, the Holocaust is now the defining symbol of the most terrible denial of basic human rights - an evil that we struggle to comprehend.

Paradoxically, we can transform teaching about the Holocaust from a subject of despair to a subject of hope. We can convey to our students the message that the option of preventing the next Holocaust is in **our own hands**. Our students can take specific steps to counter racism and hatred on a local, granular level and this will impact at the universal, international level.

**In this way, adolescents can become agents of change. The most important educational message of *tikun olam*, repairing the world, is that we must not be indifferent, we must not be bystanders, because indifference is lethal.** We have to act! We must be agents and facilitators against the evils of discrimination, prejudice, hatred and violence. All teachers need to equip their students with the intellectual and practical tools to deal with complex historical situations.

Thus Holocaust Education should be constructed in such a way that the world can counter hatred - whether based on race, ethnic background, colour, gender or religion.

## **Cosmopolitanism, Global Citizenship and Human Rights Literacy**

The growing strength of populist and far right groups in Europe must concern us all. The worldwide wave of antisemitism in which innocent Jews are attacked solely for being Jewish while walking the streets of Sydney, Melbourne, Brussels, Paris and Rome has to worry us. The decapitation ceremonies by the Islamic State should cause us sleepless nights. It's not enough to make general statements of a universal nature about unavoidable, banal evil. We need to act.

Over the past two decades, Holocaust awareness globally has become a new form of collective remembrance. While events have faded, remembrance of the Holocaust has intensified. Faced with subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holocaust has become a paradigm for genocide and Holocaust education has gained relevance.

Holocaust education enables exploration of human rights literacy in different social contexts from cognitive, social and practical perspectives. It acknowledges the need to develop a new cosmopolitan consciousness transcending national boundaries: a memory connected not only to the past but also to the belief in a common future. The cosmopolitanization of Holocaust awareness and the need to avoid such a tragedy occurring again is connected to post-national processes. Thus, educating about the dangers of racism and extreme nationalism can become an icon for a new cosmopolitan future.

At the same time we must be careful. There can be no doubt that the transformation of the Holocaust into a universal symbol of evil has made it possible to address it in different cultural contexts. But there is a substantial, inherent risk that this approach can "normalise" the Holocaust and thus diminish it. Normalisation can lead to "soft" Holocaust denial. Not aggressive, explicit denial, but denial of its core Jewish elements. In addition, there is a tendency to describe some racial tensions and conflicts as a "Holocaust" when such a comparison is inappropriate. The overuse of the term can thus cheapen it.

We need to integrate the universal message with the particular Jewish story to facilitate moral activism, reflection and comparability. In this way we can foster the Culture of Remembrance by engaging with the past to develop a commitment to a better future (Gross 2008). Remembrance isn't a static picture of the past; it's also a dynamic task for the future, which poses major challenges for the entire civilized world. The notion of a culture of remembrance is inspired by the United Nations definition of a culture of peace. The United Nations (1998, 1999) defined a culture of peace as a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes in order to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations. A culture of remembrance is a hermeneutic process that involves continual adaptation, criticism and reflection. The future of the remembrance is dependent on education.

### **The Role of Education**

We need to use these discussions to say to the world: DON'T EVER FORGET, LEST IT HAPPENS AGAIN. Humanity has to stay vigilant and Holocaust education is one of those awakenings, one of the tools we need to ensure that we do remember and are able to provide a brighter future for our children and grandchildren.

With the enormous challenges facing us, we need to work together to pool personal, professional and economic resources and make it loud and clear that racism and hatred only lead to violence where the innocent suffer! We need to keep this discourse burning to awaken current and future generations.

My personal history makes me only too aware of this imperative. This is why I am deeply involved in peace education and for twenty years I have been a facilitator of a conflict resolution course. This is also

why I decided to dedicate myself to understanding and strengthening the role of Holocaust education for future generations.

I was named Zehavit - for Zlata - my great-grandmother. Zlata means gold in Polish and this is the meaning of my Hebrew name - Zehavit. I don't have a photograph of my great-grandmother but I remember that my grandmother would often tell me how much I resembled her mother. I have tried to imagine Zlata's last journey to the gas chamber. How she stood in line, not knowing what fate awaited her. I thought that if an angel would come from heaven and tell her "nothing can be done, your fate is sealed, but you should know you will have a great-granddaughter who will be privileged to live in the Land of Israel and be invited to the United Nations to discuss the future of Holocaust education", she would not have believed it. She would certainly have looked heavenwards and said: "That will only happen when the Messiah comes".

We are honoured to live in one of the most splendid periods in human history. We live in a world of advanced technology, knowledge, and material richness and the question is what are we doing with it? Have we learnt to live in peace with each other? Have we learnt to respect difference and the human rights of others? If we look around the world today, we can see huge challenges. With all our technology we have not learnt to overcome evil. Yet, it is our responsibility to work for a better world. And the Holocaust must, through education, become a powerful tool against racism, helping to educate towards a better, more just, cosmopolitan future for the benefit of all humanity.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does the author think that education about the Holocaust is important?
2. What is *tikkun olam* and why is it significant to youth?
3. Explain why the author thinks that there are both advantages and risks in the transformation of the Holocaust as a universal symbol of evil?
4. Zehavit's great grandmother perished in the Holocaust, yet she remains hopeful for a better world. What role does education have to play in this?

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The discussion papers series provides a forum for individual scholars on the Holocaust and the averting of genocide to raise issues for debate and further study. These writers, representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds, have been asked to draft papers based on their own perspective and particular experiences.

The views expressed by the individual scholars do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.