

German children and their knowledge of Judaism and the Holocaust

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Stephen G. Parker, Rob Freathy
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ELISABETH NAURATH

German Children and their Knowledge of Judaism and the Holocaust

Abstract

The text at hand focuses on the question at what point in a person's life one should be confronted with the annihilation of Jews in the Third Reich – or more precisely: Should such cruel truths be kept away from young children or is it, in contrast, even necessary to raise an awareness at an early stage of an individual biography? It is undoubted that the knowledge of persecution during the Third Reich is a core issue of education in order to develop a corresponding sense of responsibility and hence specific preventive models. But still it is also fact that in Germany there seems to be a lack of an obvious culture of remembrance among young people, which could be due to the rather late confrontation with the Third Reich in school. The text below documents projects in primary schools that confront nine- to ten-year-old children with the Holocaust in the context of general information about Judaism. It focuses on general pedagogical and didactic issues as well as on specific methodological ones. In addition a specific phase model is being developed.

The importance of a Holocaust remembrance culture

My thoughts below, concerning the Holocaust remembrance culture in Germany, centre on the following question: At what point in a person's life should he or she start to become aware of, and reflect upon, the annihilation

of Jewish life in the Third Reich? Ought we to protect children from these terrible truths? Alternatively, is it never too early to start tackling the roots of anti-Semitism in order to make it a primary and fundamental aim of education, as Theodor Adorno did when he insisted that there must never be another Auschwitz? My thoughts on the subject have been influenced by impressions gleaned from a ten-day course in Yad-Vashem, the International School for Holocaust Studies. This spring, teachers, university lecturers and employees from the *Osnabrücker Gedenkstätten für die Verfolgung von Juden zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* [Osnabrück Memorials to Jewish Persecution under National Socialism] attended a seminar on Educational Work after the Shoah. We presented German and Israeli ideas to one another, drew up age-specific models for a culture of remembrance in the context of peace education and spoke to witnesses from the period – namely Jewish survivors of the persecution in the Third Reich. The training days in Israel and in Yad Vashem were very moving. One of the photos taken from the exhibition of the Holocaust Remembrance Day 2012, showing a slice of a tree with a deep cut into the middle of that slice, is in my opinion a good illustration for me of the following: Remembering the German-led persecution and annihilation of the Jews is not something on the periphery of history, identity negotiation or pedagogy but is a core issue. For me, as a German theologian, all ideas and efforts in the interests of peace education revolve around the question not of what have we learnt *about*, but also what have we learnt *from*, the Holocaust? This is because in my opinion, to ignore or marginalize the Holocaust is in some ways to carry on this inhuman attitude. In a country like Germany where young people – so called neo-Nazis – are once again taking to the streets sporting combat boots and a racist and nationalistic mentality, insufficient attention has been given to the task of anti-Fascist education.

How else can we explain the fact that, according to a recent survey for *Stern* magazine by the Forsa Institute, 21 per cent of eighteen- to thirty-year-olds did not know what Auschwitz was (Rehberg, 2012)? How else can we explain that one in five young adult Germans know nothing about the

biggest extermination camp? How can it be, in the face of figures such as these, that discussions are repeatedly held in the public arena as to whether one should finally stop talking about this difficult and depressing topic? There seems to be a shift taking place, if in 1994 the majority of those surveyed (exactly 53 per cent) were in favour of that opinion, but this number has now dropped to 40 per cent. By the way, it appears that 65 per cent of German citizens do not think that Germans have any particular responsibility toward other peoples on account of their history. From my point of view there is no way to establish a 'healthy' national identity – including social affiliation or even national pride – without keeping the history of a country and its people alive. If people do not work through and reflect upon their own history, they do not know where they come from and who they are. For Germans, this means that after Auschwitz there can be no national identity while neglecting the existence of Auschwitz as a fundamental point of German and European history. It simply cannot be denied that the development of German identity is linked to a particular responsibility for peoples. The reason is obviously: What the German people did in engineering the systematic murder of human beings was utterly deplorable. It is a hard awareness to realize this in its meaning for the collective and the individual history of being part of German people. The conscience is the reason for the feeling of responsibility for peace (education). This responsibility, however, is one that must be borne by everyone and every individual as a constituent part of a whole. I therefore regard the development of a national identity as a life-long process of education that, realistically, should be started early. In the text that follows, starting with the question of what German primary school children know about Judaism, the Jewish religion and the Holocaust, I would like to emphasize the relevance of this issue to modern-day Religious Education teaching. In this particular case I will focus on Religious Education undertaken as a discrete curriculum subject within German primary schools. I would also like to discuss specific ways of teaching, in a sensitive way, the topic of 'Learning from and about the Holocaust' in primary schools, with concrete examples.

What German children know about Judaism and the Holocaust

Learning about the Jewish religion is usually a theme for Religious Education in primary schools in Germany but very often it remains segregated from everyday life with the result that the content will easily be forgotten. In Osnabrück (Lower Saxony) we embarked on a project in which the university, teachers of Religious Education and the Christian-Jewish Association cooperated under the title 'Comprehending Judaism'. This practical project in the context of Religious Education in selected primary schools offers the chance for interreligious dialogue because of direct cooperation between Christian and Jewish people: In face-to-face encounters, pupils can realize that faith is affected by individual life stories, regional influences or the situations in which people find themselves. Everyday Jewish objects presented on a large table – in particular Jewish festival symbols – are shown and explained to the children. Since the pupils know nothing about Judaism or Jewish rituals, whether everyday ones or those from festivals, they are very interested in touching the objects and asking specific questions about what they are used for and how they are important for the Jewish faith. After this presentation, which is taking place as part of one morning's project-based lesson with all Year 4 classes (in general nine- to ten-year-old students) from a primary school, the children are given the possibility of adding to their impressions in workshops. They design a picture with a menorah and get to write their name next to it in the Hebrew alphabet, they learn Yiddish music and dances, and play the Dreidl game.

The project 'Understanding Judaism' is now a very popular one in Religious Education lessons in Lower Saxony, both in primary and secondary schools, since it comes to live through an interreligious dialogue. At many schools this project enables pupils and teachers to meet and talk to Jewish people from the region for the first time – for it is matter of fact that Jewish life and tradition can hardly be observed in German everyday life, due to the small number of German Jews or the fact that Jewish religious life is not very explicit in public life. The outcome of the described school project is that contacts are forged, mutual invitations are given and networks

formed. However, as this project progressed one question became evident rather soon: Can you – especially in Germany – speak about the Jewish faith and life without broaching the issue of the Holocaust? Is it educationally sound to protect children being informed about the horrors perpetrated against Jewish people during the National Socialist period? Instead, should we not deal openly with such topics? Anti-Semitism research projects do not just hint at the necessity to start teaching historical content at an early age for it has proven to be a good method of prevention of racism. What is the right age at which background stories of history and actual reality of anti-Semitism can be understood?

In several versions of the lesson, we then broadened the project and made use of the opportunity of working together with Erna de Vries. This eighty-nine-year-old woman survived the Holocaust because as a 'half-Jew' she was, at the last moment, taken out of the death chamber in Auschwitz. Her mother, who was murdered in the gas chamber, had given her the task of talking about these horrors. For some years, Erna de Vries has been very much involved in going into schools and telling about the Holocaust through the eyes of someone who was there. In a group with university students we filmed the conversations with the primary school children and analysed them, then in other Year 4 classes (nine- to ten-year-olds) we found out the level of knowledge by means of a survey: What did the Year 4s know about the Holocaust? The results of our investigation are sobering: Nearly all of the children have heard the name 'Hitler', more than 80 per cent know in which period of history he lived, but the children do not know who Hitler was and what happened in Germany during the National Socialist period. It quickly becomes clear that the children do not have any more than a very fragmentary 'semi-knowledge'. One example of this is that they connect the Jews and Hitler in such a way that the opinion is voiced that Hitler must have been a Jew. The sources of this 'hearsay' are primarily the media (chiefly television), but also individual statements made by parents or grandparents that they more or less put together incorrectly; only very few have talked about the era of National Socialism at home in such a way as to have a rough idea. None of the nine- to ten-year-olds knew the term 'Holocaust', but it was noticeable that comments were made suddenly such as 'Hitler gassed the Jews didn't he', even if they did

not know any more details about this. When Erna de Vries talked about her experiences of discrimination as a Jew and then deportation into an extermination camp, the children were astonished, shocked and in some cases horrified since they had never heard anything about it. One girl said at the end of the conversation to Erna de Vries: 'What a good thing that you at least survived and can tell us about it.'

Why do the children know so little? Whilst children in Israel learn from an early age that on Holocaust Remembrance day the sirens in the country sound for three minutes and remind people of the unforgettable events, there is no obvious culture of remembrance in Germany for young people. The primary school curriculum for Religious Education contains the topic of 'Judaism', but this is taught *without* reference to the persecution of the Jews. Both are important: On one hand we need to teach Judaism as a living and thriving faith today and on the other hand we must not eliminate the history of anti-Semitism against the Jewish people.

Because primary school teachers have no training in how to teach about the Holocaust, they shy away from this topic, which is deemed a difficult one. Even in Social Studies and Science lessons, which make references to local history to give children an understanding of history and time, no references are made to the persecution of the Jews. This would be easy to do, however, since there are traces everywhere, such as memorial stones for synagogues that have been burnt, or the 'stumbling blocks' in the pavement that remind us of Jewish men and women who lived at the location until they were deported. History teaching begins in Year 5 with the Stone Age and not until Year 9 (thirteen- to fourteen-year-old students) is National Socialism addressed. I am firmly of the opinion that this is much too late because of the fact that anti-Semitism is evidently alive in the opinions of the young people!

The 'Anti-Semitism-Report' submitted for Germany by the Federal Government concludes that the propagation of anti-Semitic attitudes is consistently at a level of 20 per cent in the general public opinion of the German people according to opinion surveys. Quote: 'We can be sure that anti-Semitic stereotypes and perceptions are firmly rooted in everyday culture' (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2011, 174) – which is even more surprising if you take into consideration that only very few Germans have ever met only one Jewish person in their lives. It is also shocking that 'you

Jew' is a common insult in secondary school playgrounds, alongside 'you gay'. It would appear that a stereotype is being passed on within people's collective memory, one that is devoid of meaning for the individual because of the lack of relevant experience, but in the context of social discrimination has major significance.

How to teach 'Learning from and about the Holocaust' in primary schools

Life-long process of education

More recent findings from research into prejudices (Küpper & Zick, 2009) indicate that educational work taking place at an early stage in a person's life can combat the development of prejudices. With this in mind, it makes sense, in order to prevent anti-Semitic attitudes, to teach about 'being Jewish' and Judaism in primary school. A dialogue-based approach increases motivation toward the mutual breaking down of prejudices and permits understanding and tolerance to develop. Feelings of foreignness and distance can be prevented more easily through an encounter. Anti-Semitic attitudes are rather based upon emotions than cognitive knowledge and generally they are unconscious. Educational theory therefore suggests that to address the topic as early as possible for the emotional aspect of learning is particularly important in the context of preventing prejudice. Since it has already been proven that primary school children are capable of showing high levels of compassion, taking a sensitive look at the topic of the Holocaust seems very suitable in the context of peace education.

Phase model

This means that when it comes to teaching in primary schools in a way that shows sensitivity to the Holocaust, several criteria must be fulfilled:

These should be based on children's ages and the associated developmental psychology factors.

First, depictions of violence in relation to the persecution and/or extermination of Jews must be avoided on all accounts. The aim is not to shock children with gruesome pictures, nor is it to feed a fascination with images of horror. Neither films nor photographs of piles of bodies belong in primary school, first because we should protect the children, but second out of respect for the victims. Much more suitable, for example, would be drawings of the experiences as a child in a concentration camp (e.g. Helga Weissová), which would allow for freer interpretations, promote sensitivity toward victims and encourage compassionate reactions.

Second, not only must the children be introduced sensitively to the topic of the Holocaust, but they must also be moved on from it again. This means that it is necessary to create possibilities for distancing that allow the child – at any point – the space to process what he or she has seen and heard. A pupil-centred approach acknowledges the needs of the individuals and ensures alternative tasks and the freedom to move away from the topic. The same applies when it comes to distancing pupils from the lesson or sequence of lessons concerned. No child should be allowed to leave the lessons without a way out or the possibility of discussing what is a heavy teaching topic.

Third, since, in terms of developmental psychology, people feel an affinity with a narrative, a teaching method is indicated that uses life histories to bring about an understanding of the topic. Discussions with witnesses from the time in particular benefit from authenticity and the possibility of dialogue. It is important that children can ask any questions they may have. In our lesson project, with witness Erna de Vries, it became apparent that the children wanted to be able to imagine precisely what life was like, how it felt, etc. They asked about minor details to help them form an image they, as children, could relate to. This is enabled by the approach known as '*Forschendes Lernen*' [Learning through Research] and/or '*Forschendes Lehren*' [Teaching through Research]. In a constructivist way, each child develops his or her possibilities for understanding by

getting the freedom to ask and interpret. For the teacher it means that he or she can ascertain the level of the children's learning and have a better understanding of how different age groups access the topic.

Fourth, concluding, it is trust in goodness that must be preserved at any cost for peace education can only be successful if this conviction is not being relinquished at any point. So it should be emphasized that intentions for peace education can only be implemented successfully with an attitude that has at its core that belief in goodness must not be lost (Volkman, 1998, 203f). It should therefore be ensured that in view of the extent of inhuman horror, any feelings of powerlessness on the part of the children should not be allowed to get out of hand. Rather, one must ensure that signs of hope and evidence of compassion and humanity should prevail. Suitable examples here might be statements by Holocaust survivors who express their commitment to a forward-looking culture of remembrance in the form of a personal goal for reconciliation and peace.

Lastly, I would like to reinforce my plea for teaching the topic 'Learning from and about the Holocaust' in primary schools by saying that I think it is worthwhile to fundamentally broaden the education and training of teachers of Religious Education. It is less the curriculum than the training and personal development of the staff that are the pre-requisites for authentic and lively teaching – teaching that takes seriously the culture of remembrance as a life-long educative process.

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THOMAS SCHLAG

3 Holocaust Remembrance and Human Rights Education: A Task for Religious and Interreligious Education in Switzerland

Abstract

What do young people in Switzerland know about the Holocaust, from whence do they acquire their knowledge, how is this knowledge connected with their understanding of human rights and what implications should this have for religious and interreligious education? This chapter includes an overview of Swiss educational policies in this field based on the current political situation of activities related to Holocaust remembrance, displays data of a current survey on Holocaust remembrance and the understanding of human rights, and considers possible consequences and tasks for Religious Education as interreligious education. It will finally draw some lines on the possible cooperation between human rights education and (inter-)religious education.

Background of Swiss history and current political situation

Reflections on Holocaust remembrance in the sense of a specific form of formal and personality-oriented education must consider the historical and actual context within which Holocaust Education and education for democratic citizenship take place, including the organizational framework and political institutions that provide such educational work. Therefore, we begin with some general remarks on this political setting.