

Teaching the Holocaust: Text and Context

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The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”

“There has been, of late, a tendency to **prefer** dealing with the more **remote contexts**, instead of looking first of all at the **Holocaust itself**, that is – at the core.

It is my view, to the contrary, that one must deal with the **core first**. [..] or if you like: The **text**, not the **context**.”

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”

“If you really want to deal with the Holocaust, **you first [...] have to learn what actually happened and why. [...]** For teachers especially this methodological approach would seem to be **crucial.**”

- Professor *Yehuda Bauer*

The priority
of the
Text

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”

"There is a tendency among educators to first deal with the context."

Example: Interpretation of Photographs

Teaching of images

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”



Common practice:

The teacher presents the photograph



Many times without mentioning where and when it was taken.



The teacher then asks for the students' interpretation and/or understanding.

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”



Optional teacher’s questions:

- Why are these children sitting on the sidewalk?
- What can you say about these children?

Possible Answers:

Gang children, vagrants, children neglected by their parents, a variety of classes in the street, etc.

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”



Optional teacher’s questions:

- Why is the woman holding a bag, ignoring the beggar?
- What can you say about the beggar?

Possible Answers:

Apathy to human suffering, the beggar as an invisible person, different classes in the street, etc.



The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”

Educational principle:

Before discussing the meaning (the context), we have to teach the facts (the text).

The Importance of Engagement with the “Text”



Giving an Educational Meaning to a Historical Text

The fate of Jewish children in German schools in the 30's

Thus 85% of Jewish children attended non-Jewish schools...

“The authorities pressured teachers not to give Jews and ‘non-Aryans’ the best grades. If teachers insisted, the grades were no longer announced in class. Fifty Jews were also denied sports awards...”

Marion A. Kaplan, *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618–1945*, p. 297.

Giving an Educational Meaning to a Historical Text

“I had a math teacher, and he **failed me** for being Jewish. I did all the work, but he would always **grade me lower** than other people who did the same work.”

Eric (age 12), Germany

“Annelise told me: ‘...I had a friend in that class who was also Jewish. **She and I were the best in the gym class.** And the **teacher** was always **yelling** at the rest of the class saying, You lazy girls! **How can you let these two Jewish girls be better than you?**’”

Catherine (fled Germany in 1938)

Giving an Educational Meaning to a Historical Text

“I know that I will find no one there. However, I go to the school anyway... I approach the school. The school is sealed up.”

“When I think of how I used to go school I feel like bursting into tears; and today I must stay home and can't go anywhere.”

Giving an Educational Meaning to a Historical Text

Example: The educational context:

- What is the place of a school in the child life?
- What is the responsibility of the teacher?
- What is the “pact” between teachers and pupils?

The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

“The Holocaust was the most extreme form of genocide to date[...].

It was not unique, because if that had been so, we would not have to bother about it, as it would have been a singular case never to be repeated. But everything that humans do can be repeated, though never in exactly the same way; It was unprecedented, not unique, which means ***it can be repeated in some way.***”

- Professor ***Yehuda Bauer***



The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

All other genocides share *aspects* of the **paradigmatic genocide** and it is in this understanding that we come to appreciate the singular nature – not only of the Shoah – but also the unique characteristics of other genocides.

- Prof. Michael Berenbaum

The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

Stages of Genocide

Scholar Gregory H. Stanton argues that genocide is a **process** that **develops** in **stages** that are *predictable* and may be *influenced*.

1. Classification
2. Symbolization
3. Dehumanization
4. Organization

5. Polarization
6. Identification
7. Extermination
8. Denial

The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

Example: Dehumanization in Rwanda

“How to distinguish between an insect [Tutsi] and a Hutu? You have a number of guidelines:

- *The females of the insect have stripes on their legs, near the buttocks.*
- *The insect has a thin nose.*
- *The hairs of an insect are less curly.*
- *The skull of an insect is especially elongated at the rear, and its forehead is slanted.*
- *The insect is large, with an arrogant glance.*
- *The Tutsi male has a prominent Adam’s apple.*
- *Every Hutu family and every Hutu is today obligated to their country, and the obligation is simple: **destroy the snake insect.**”*

Yolande Mukagasana, *Death Does Not Want Me*

The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

Example: Polarization in Rwanda

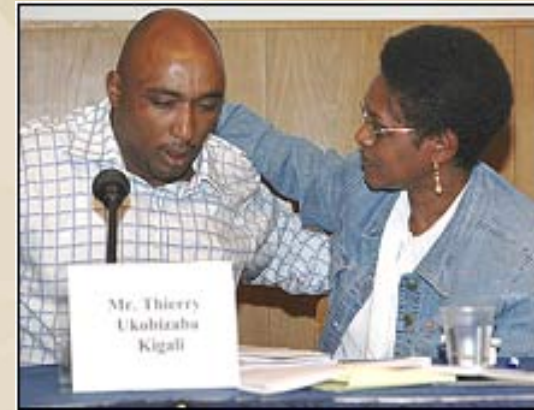
“Until the age of twelve, my children did not even know they were Tutsi! They found out the day **the Minister decided to place Hutus and Tutsis in separate schools...** In the classroom, my daughter was constantly humiliated for being a Tutsi. I also endured humiliation throughout all my years at school, and have since discovered that headmistresses that supported the Hutu cause would lower my grades without the teacher’s knowledge.”

Yolande Mukagasana, “*Death Does Not Want Me*”
director of the Tutsi Organization *Nyamirambo*, and one of the first survivors of the Rwandan genocide to document the mass murder.

The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

Education, Commemoration, Memorialization

The way in which the Holocaust has been dealt with since the event, particularly in the educational and commemorative realms, has become a model for victims of other atrocities the world over.



Reactions from the Rwanda conference at Yad Vashem, November 1-7, 2005

“You suffered before we did, and you have important lessons to teach us,” said Yolande Mukagasana.



The Holocaust as Paradigm: The Holocaust and its Relationship to other Genocides

Reactions from the Rwanda conference at Yad Vashem, November 1-7, 2005

“The meeting with **Holocaust survivors** helped me more than anything to **cope with the trauma I experienced**,” Mukagasana continued. “Other people, even psychologists, know how to pity. These meetings helped me understand **what I really feel**. [...] I wanted to do something for **my children’s memory**, but also for all the children of Rwanda who were killed, [...]”

when I saw the memorial here, I felt like **my children were calling to me**.

