

MONDAY OCTOBER 11, 1999  
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00

## **Voyages to Poland: Sensitizing Educators to Non-Verbal Elements**

*by*  
*Jackie Feldman*

Voyages to Poland have become an important element of Holocaust education, especially among Israeli and Diaspora Jewish youth. Many educators who participate in these trips are best acquainted with classroom situations, and, as a result, while in Poland, place great emphasis on the transmission of information through narrative. They often 'purchase' packaged Holocaust or heritage tours from Jewish organizations or private tour companies, imagining that they can provide the suitable content through preparatory sessions and the 'story' they tell at the site.

It is my thesis that most existing Holocaust voyages can best be understood, not as study trips, but as civil religious pilgrimages to the death sites. Sensory stimuli and emotional experiences are far more prominent than intellectual learning. The primary means of conveying the organizers' aims are the shaping of time and space through the itinerary and schedule, security considerations, meetings with others (or the lack of them), the display of symbols, mass ceremonies, rituals and the physical presence of the survivor-witness at the death sites. The narrative of the educator-guide is only a minor part of the overall experience.

The workshop I propose seeks to sensitize educators to the non-verbal elements of Holocaust voyages, and challenges them to reflect on the structure of the voyages, and begin the process of constructing a voyage that will effectively embody their primary educational objectives. The workshop will begin with a brief exposition of my analysis of Israeli youth voyages to Poland as a civil religious pilgrimage. The second part of the workshop will discuss the goals of the Poland voyages. The third part will explore which non-verbal means can be used to achieve those goals, and what aims are eliminated or marginalized by different structures of space, time and ritual on Poland voyages.

As basis for discussion, I present here a brief analysis of the youth voyages to Poland organized by the Israel Ministry of Education, which I have studied over the last eight years. Since 1988, approximately 30,000 youths (out of over 100,000 total) have traveled to Poland under the aegis of the Ministry. The Ministry's itineraries, structures and materials and guides trained by the course run by the Ministry serve as the programs of most other Israeli youth organizers as well.

### **Israel Ministry of Education Youth Voyages - Aims and Means**

The Ministry of Education describes the trip as the culmination of a three-part process, involving preparation, the voyage itself and follow-up activities. In practice,

the preparation is highly variable: some groups prepare intensively over a period of up to a year, while others meet only a few times before departure. Organized follow-up activities are practically non-existent, though most returning students do play an active role in Holocaust Memorial Day ceremonies in their schools. The heart of the voyage is the “experience” that students undergo in Poland. That is also what attracts over 15,000 Israeli students to travel there in school groups each year.

The stated aims of the Ministry (1991) are:

1. “To learn about the wealth of Jewish spiritual and cultural life in Poland.

2. “To feel and to try to comprehend the depth and breadth of the Destruction and the loss of the murdered Jews and uprooted Judaism.

3. “To feel and to try to comprehend the moral depravity and the deep level of dehumanization attained by the Nazis who devised, planned and committed the murder of the Jewish people in the ghettos, forests and concentration and death camps.

(3\* revised - 1994: “To learn the principles of Nazi ideology, to learn the principles and conditions that lead to its rise and actualization, to acts of cruelty and bestiality unprecedented in human history. To understand the foundation of a totalitarian regime in whose framework Nazi Germany declared a war of annihilation against the Jewish people and murdered a third of our people, while also committing other crimes against humanity. To derive from this both the national lesson of the need for a strong, autonomous Jewish state, as well as the universal lesson of the obligation to guard and protect democracy and to struggle against all forms of racism.”)

4. “To feel and to try to comprehend the full significance of the courageous stand and desperate struggle of the Jews who fought the enemy and his malevolent intentions.

5. “To feel and to try to comprehend the link of young Israelis to their community Jewish past, to deepen their identification with the fate of the Jewish people and increase their sense of personal commitment to the continuity of Jewish life and the sovereign existence of the State of Israel.

6. “To bring about renewed investigation of terms, assumptions and attitudes towards Jewish history, Jewish behavior during the Holocaust, the values of Zionism, the relations of Jews and non-Jews and the values of morality and humanism.

7. “To enable the youth to act in practice to renew, conserve and clean Jewish sites and remains scattered throughout Poland”.

(8\* - 1994 revision: “To learn and understand the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations throughout the common

history of the two nations, in both its positive and negative aspects, and to understand the history and heritage of the Jews of Poland also against the background of Polish history and culture".)

Most of the above-mentioned paragraphs begin with "to feel and try to understand": Feeling, emotional identification, rather than intellectual knowledge, is primary (especially in the 1991 version). It is emotion that is to serve as the basis for comprehension. Identification and empathy is seen as both possible and desirable; intellectual comprehension is desirable but often seen as unattainable.

The means used to carry out the program's aims are the guide training and student preparation programs, the tight control of time, space and ritual in Poland, the display of Israel symbols (flags, sweatshirts), and the framing of the survivor-witness. For the purposes of this workshop, I will ignore the (variable) cognitive content of the preparation program.

The voyage to Poland is not a study trip, but a rite of transformation, designed to transmit understanding, not through intellectual analysis, but through identification, embodiment and experience. As one girl reported:

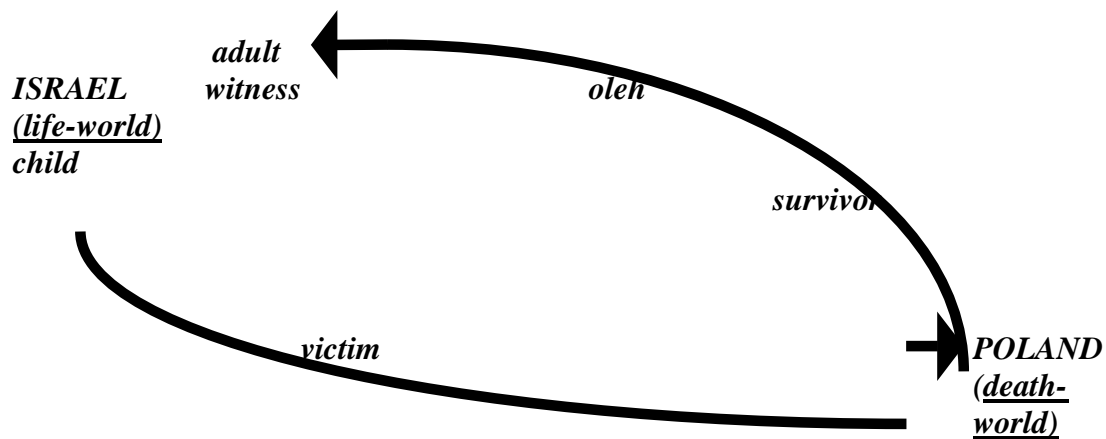
"I said we can talk until tomorrow and tell you what it was like to hold the flag, and what it was like to hear the anthem, and what it was like to hear a small child yell "Heil Hitler!" in Poland, and what it was like to be in a death camp and to see the gas chambers, but you won't understand; you have to go there in order to understand" (E., 1.10.95).

The voyage is a ritualization of space and time, a totalizing environmental experience, a pilgrimage to the sacred centers of the death-world, Auschwitz and Majdanek. Through the sense of oneness and community that is engendered, through the encounter with things sacred to his society at the sacred center, the pilgrim returns home changed, with a new status (V. Turner, 1969, 1978).

At a pivotal stage in their development, when they are most susceptible to romantic ideals, and shortly preceding their mobilization into the army, Israeli teenagers perform an intensive, week-long pilgrimage that performs the history of the Jewish people (and the paradigm of *hurban* to *geula*) as schematized in the Zionist master narrative. They leave the security of their homes and their life-world to travel to a death-world "out there", perceived as emotionally difficult and physically dangerous. The centers of this death-world are the death camps. The intense encounter with the death-world brings the students to identify Israel as the only possible place for Jewish life. The students return home to the life-world, to live in Israel, with a deeper appreciation of the previously taken-for-granted State and the nation. Through contact with the death-world, the symbols of the State become imbued with emotion.

Through its restrictive security arrangements, its totalistic construction of space and time, its framing of the role of the accompanying survivors, and the ceremonies performed at the death sites, the voyage transforms students into victims, victorious survivors and, finally, *olim* to the Land of Israel. The students leave the life-world, the

Land of Israel for Poland, the land of the Shoah, where they “witness” the destruction of the Jews of the Exile. But there, they survive to return with the survivor on his triumphant *aliya* to Israel. Students are expected to retell “what they have seen and heard” on the voyage. Through their retelling, they acquire, at least temporarily, a new status: they are no longer children, but “witnesses of the witnesses”. Insofar as they, too, become survivor-witnesses, responsible transmitters of the Shoah legacy, the pilgrimage serves as a ritual re-enactment of survival. We may diagram their trajectory as follows:



### Organization of space and time:

While in Poland, the Ministry of Education groups travel in mass delegations of 120-150 students, in convoys of 4-5 buses. Security is elevated to one of the central concerns of the voyage. There is no “free space” and very little “free time” outside the bus or hotel. All movement is restricted; to be alone is to be exposed. Only the long arm of Israel, in the form of armed security personnel, can guarantee Jewish safety in the “outside” world. The voyage’s emphasis on security conveys both the insecurity and the constricted nature Diaspora life as well as the inevitability of its destruction. Furthermore, the role of security as visible and undisputed authority on the voyage, reminds students, a year before the onset of their military service, that security forces are the highest representative of the State, and deserving of the citizen’s loyalty and obedience.

There is no contact with Diaspora Jews and no effective contact with Polish Gentiles. The emphasis on security, the manifest presence of Israeli flags and symbols and the isolation from the surrounding modern Polish environment create an environmental bubble, dividing the voyage’s constructed world into two polar categories: inside space, homologous with Israel, and outside space, homologous with Holocaust Poland.

We can summarize the polarities as follows:

INSIDE THE BUS OR HOTEL	OUTSIDE THE BUS OR HOTEL
Encompassing environmental bubble of the home-world.	Alienation of the foreign terrain.
Warm temperatures	Cold temperatures
Hebrew spoken	Foreign language spoken – Polish
Israeli snack food and music	Unfamiliar or poor quality Polish food. No music.
Security	Danger
Night	Day
Fun and socializing	Mourning, serious demeanor
Emotional “decompression” sites	Tension and sorrow
Israel	Holocaust Poland/Diaspora Jewry
Behave like teenagers	Behave like representatives of Israel
hope	Despair
present/future	Past
life	Death
“us”	“them”

The message conveyed is clear:

**we = Israel = survivor = security = Jewish strength = life/  
they = Poland = Shoah bystanders/perpetrators = dangerous  
anti-Semitism = Jewish weakness = death.**

The itinerary of the voyage, which has remained practically unchanged over the last ten years, may be charted as follows (representative sites, not the entire program):

		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
<b><u>Life World</u></b>	<b>Israel</b>	Rapaport Monument (transition)							Closing ceremony and return home
	<b>Polish life sites</b>			Wieliczka salt mines	Shopping				
	<b>past Jewish life sites</b>			Temper Kabbalah Shabbat	(Shabbat) Synagogues		Lancut Litzhansky		Warsaw Cemetery
<b><u>Death World</u></b>	<b>Jewish death sites</b>		Treblinka Lupocinowa (Tykocin) death pits			Auschwitz-Birkenau		Majdanek	

The "heavy" Holocaust days of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka-Tykocin (Days 2, 5 and 7) alternate with "lighter" days, of visits to sites of the Jewish past, (Days 6 and 8), Polish tourist sites (Day 3) or free time (Day 4).

In the course of their visit, the participants are almost never alone. They remember and commemorate together en masse, as representatives of a national group, and that group collectively identifies itself with the innocent, struggling victim-survivor. As phrased in the Ministry of Education's guidebook: "Even if there were amongst us social, ethnic and ideological differences - in Treblinka, Majdanek and Bergen-Belsen these differences disappeared... there they made us one nation - the nation that was murdered!" (Keren, in Ministry of Education 1993: 103). The isolating environment of the group and the emotional intensity of the death sites draws its participants together in a feeling of common destiny. Furthermore, the mass presence of the Israeli group, wearing their blue and white sweatshirts and raising the Israeli flag, encourages students to see themselves as victorious representatives of Israel in enemy territory.

### **THE SURVIVOR-WITNESS: MEDIATOR OF THE SHOAH "EXPERIENCE"**

Every delegation is accompanied by at least one survivor of the death-camps. When the survivor tells his story at death camps, he does so as the incarnation of the victims, as the representative of the dead. He performs the mediation that makes the *lieux de memoire* (Nora 1985), the inert ruins of the past, "come to life". The witness, the hero of the program, is a symbolic type, who testifies, not only through the content of his narrative; his bodily presence is a form of testimony: it provides the possibility for emotional identification.

The witness's significant testimony takes place at Auschwitz, where he can point to the places where he suffered and survived. The voice of the victim, supported by the total sensory environment of the original ruins, lends supreme authority to his story, and enables students to identify. The witness's narrative usually ends with his *aliya* (ascent/immigration) to Israel, often described as the culmination of a heroic struggle for survival. He grants the participants the status of heirs to Jewish heritage and history. At Auschwitz, one survivor-witness addressed the group as follows: "You who are here in this place, know that you are the correct answer to Nazism and anti-Semitism. On the one side are the ovens, in which hundreds of thousands were burnt. And now children, girls and boys, bring many new sons to the nation, so that we live forever" (G., 17.9.95).

### **CEREMONIES: RITES OF TRANSFORMATION**

A typical eight-day trip will have between two and seven group ceremonies, with two ceremonies always performed at Auschwitz - *lekhol ish yesh shem* in Block 27, and the concluding ceremony over the Birkenau crematoria, as well as a third closing ceremony at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial. The ceremonies serve as the only occasion for active commemoration and as triggers for releasing pent-up emotions. They are a means of making trip messages explicit through ritual repetition.

The sequence of ceremonies (a mourning ceremony in Auschwitz 1/ a ceremony atop the crematoria at Birkenau/ a ceremony at Warsaw Ghetto Memorial), and the choice and sequence of texts within the ceremonies (from Kaddish to Hatikvah), are designed to transform participants from high school students to passive, powerless victims (= children) to responsible, victorious Israeli witness-survivors. As one of the chief organizers of the voyages proclaimed: "As we stand by the crematoria...our heart sorrows and our eyes shed tears for the terrible destruction of European Jewry... But opposite the flag of Israel raised on high and over the death pits and ovens of destruction, we stand erect... and we swear to the millions of our murdered brethren - If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its strength!" (Israel Ministry of Education 1989:3).

The ceremonies inscribe a trajectory consisting of three stages of transformation: from spectators to victims, from victims to victorious survivors, and from victorious survivors to *olim* and witnesses-of-the-witnesses. Through their performance, the students proclaim, that they are the answer to Auschwitz. Unlike initiates in many traditional rites of passage, however, the students are not "locked" into a particular status in stages between ceremonies. As one delegation leader put it, "the coin drops for everyone at a different time".

### **Marginalized messages:**

The voyage provides a constructed narrative in which the Shoah is presented primarily as the epitome of Jewish powerlessness and vulnerability. The Diaspora is depicted as dead, and Israel is its heir. While students are moved by "the horrors" of the camps, they remain indifferent to the empty sites of past Jewry. Israel serves as an answer, an antithesis to the Shoah. The legacy of the murdered Jews of the Holocaust is invoked to reaffirm the need for dedication and sacrifice to the State.

The only witness to the Shoah that the students encounter during the voyage is the Israeli survivor, whom students identify as "one of us". There is no significant encounter with an "other" (such as a non-Jewish victim, Polish Resistance fighter or Righteous Gentile), who could serve as a subject of identification and empathy, and, thus, as an effective model and conduit for universal messages related to the Shoah or the value and vitality of Diaspora Judaism.

Although strength, pride and dedication to common goals may be values the society seeks to promote, the closed, triumphant nature of the voyage and the emphasis on the drawing of final lessons also involves a risk that the incommensurability and openness of the Shoah event be lost, and that the moral, theological and existential questions that reverberate in the void left by Auschwitz be silenced. As Saul Friedlander warned, there is a danger that "the dialogue with the mute God may... be drowned out altogether by the growing noise of the merely spectacular" (Friedlander 1992:22).