

**THURSDAY OCTOBER 14,1999  
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:00**

## **Holocaust Education and the Israeli Defense Forces**

*by  
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### **I. Introduction: Activities of the Yad Vashem Center for Teaching the Holocaust in Giv'atayim**

The Yad Vashem Center for Teaching the Holocaust in Giv'atayim, in operation since 1975, is one of the oldest and most active educational centers in Israel that teaches about the Holocaust. Since its inception, more than 300,000 people have taken part in its educational activities

The center's teaching and guidance staff is made up of university lecturers and high-school teachers who have majored in the area of Holocaust research and education, and are teaching at Israeli and foreign universities. . In addition, the center has dozens of Holocaust survivors who speak regularly to audiences in all of its routine educational activities, telling them what they went through during the Holocaust. They have helped the center with its educational work for more than 20 years.

The participants in the center's educational activities are students from high schools and junior high schools (ninth grade only), soldiers, teachers, and others from Israel and abroad. In the 1998/99 academic year, over 20,000 people—7,000 of them military personnel—visited the center.

Among the center's educational activities are seminars devoted to teaching about the Holocaust to IDF officers, cadets, and soldiers. Over 33,000 cadets have taken part in the educational activities since 1985. This program was the brainchild of the director of the center, Mr. Avigdor Efron, and has the full cooperation of Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, the incumbent chief of General Staff (formerly commander of the officer-candidate school). It is a unique educational achievement on a national scale, especially considering that the center has a small staff and no museum.

The center devotes special attention to the cadets in the officer-candidate school—the future generation of IDF commanders and decision-makers—in an effort to increase awareness of the Holocaust among their subordinates and in the IDF as a whole. Therefore, the staff of the center, in cooperation with the educational staff of the officer-candidate school, invests extensive efforts and devotes thought and joint discussions to setting the goals and deciding on the material to be covered in the seminars. These seminars are part of the cadets' training, the first part of their educational series on Jewish and Zionist identity.

## II. The Objectives and Didactic Goals of the Seminars

### 1. *The educational goals of the center*

- a. To impart Holocaust consciousness, as one of the goals of teaching the Holocaust, by enhancing knowledge and understanding
- b. To emphasize the uniqueness and historical significance of the Holocaust on the national and human level
- c. To convey identification with the fate of the Jewish people around the world
- d. To educate for democracy, humanism, human dignity, and the fellowship of humankind as pan-human objectives
- e. To teach Zionism as a national-political liberation and revival movement of the Jewish people
- f. To emphasize the importance of the creation and existence of the State of Israel to the entire Jewish people

It should be stressed that the center refrains from dealing with the Holocaust in any way that might lead to political, religious, and social conclusions and viewpoints liable to provoke arguments, disputes, and digression from the subject of the Holocaust.

### 2. *General goals of the cadets' seminars*

- a. To enable the cadet to enter the historical reality of the Holocaust period "as if he had been there in those years" (Haim Gouri)
- b. To understand the helplessness and powerlessness in which the Jews were trapped during the Holocaust
- c. To understand the behavioral patterns of trapped and helpless people
- d. To understand and assess the various manifestations of Jewish steadfastness in the context of the helplessness and entrapment of the Jewish population
- e. To give cadets the ability to cope with models of fighting and heroism in existential circumstances imposed from the outside
- f. To develop a historical consciousness and identity concerning the fate of the Jewish people during the Holocaust
- g. To understand the connection between the IDF and the Holocaust and the cadet's role not only as a soldier but as an Israeli, a Jew, and a human being

### 3. *Unique goals of the cadets' seminars*

- a. To address the value of life in extreme situations and severe, unprecedented existential, human, and moral dilemmas
- b. To address the dilemmas involved in relations between the community and the individual, between the individual and the family, and between different individuals
- c. To address how decisions are made in extreme situations (both by the Jews and by the Germans and their allies)
- d. To address the values that impelled Jews to fight during the Holocaust
- e. To address the price of personal and group sacrifice

## III. Schedule and Objectives of the Cadets' Seminar

### Part 1:

1. Opening (15 minutes)
2. Guided viewing of a film clip from *The Eternal Jew*—Mr. Motti Shefer (35 minutes)
3. Lecture: "The Uniqueness and Historical Significance of the Holocaust"—Mr. Avigdor Efron (80 minutes)

Break (20 minutes)

Part 2: Testimony of a Holocaust survivor (90 minutes)

Lunch break (30 minutes)

Part 3: Lecture accompanied by films: “Difficulties in Creating a Fighting Consciousness in the Polish Ghettos”—Ms. Frumi Shchori (120 minutes, including breaks)

Break (10 minutes)

Part 4:

1. Viewing the film *In the Name of Later Generations* (50 minutes)
2. Discussion led by company commanders: The connection between the IDF and the Holocaust (45 minutes)
3. Summary and feedback (20 minutes)

## **Part 1**

### **1. *The Opening***

The seminar begins with an explanation to the cadets of the Yad Vashem educational center in Giv’atayim and the memorial site of Beit Wohlin.

The cadets are given an overview of the scope and nature of activity at the center and an explanation of the objectives of the seminar and the technical, intellectual, and emotional difficulties that they will face in the course of the day:

- a. The length of the day (about nine hours);
- b. The intellectual and emotional burden, which involves passive and active participation in lectures, testimony, and discussions that the participants did not experience during their studies and/or military service;
- c. The difficulty that young people—who are mentally, geographically, and chronologically far from the Holocaust—have at this seminar when they attempt to “touch the Holocaust,” to cope with problems of loss, death, and memory, and to touch the ultimate tragedy, “the sorrow of the severed roots.”

The explanation of the center as a memorial site is an opportunity for the cadets to address the subject of the memorialization of the communities and the individual victims. The center’s architecturally unique coffin-shaped building, the wall of the communities, the memorial rooms for the communities, the exhibition, the memorial plaques to the victims in general and to the partisans in particular, the monument to the female fighters outside the building are all manifestations of the attempt to perpetuate the memory of the Jews of Volhynia (now in western Ukraine) and their communities in the general consciousness. Thus the Volhynia region sets an example for the memorialization of the Jewish world destroyed in the Holocaust and a means of establishing a memorial to the victims “who, by their death, commanded that we remember.”

### **2. *Guided viewing of a film clip from The Eternal Jew (1940)***

The purpose of the guided viewing is to impart information and basic tools for thought and analysis in order to familiarize the participants with the world of the murderers (“the evil kingdom”). This guided viewing provides access to the Nazi ideology and its depictions of the Jews as the enemies of humanity responsible for destroying the world; as a result the only solution was to annihilate them. Nazi cinema, mobilized for propaganda purposes, became a tool calling for annihilation and an instrument of genocide. This viewing prepares the participants for the next lecture.

### 3. *Lecture: “The Uniqueness and Historical Significance of the Holocaust”*

*The objectives and basic assumptions of the lecture:*

- a. The Holocaust was an event like no other. Therefore, it cannot be compared to past catastrophes, not even the most shocking, and certainly not to horrors taking place in the present. Such a comparison minimizes and denies the Holocaust. The subject is therefore an aspect of the fight against Holocaust denial.
- b. Intensification of knowledge about the Holocaust: In order to prove the uniqueness of the Holocaust, historical facts are presented and processes that took place during the Holocaust are explained.
- c. Imparting basic understandings of the Holocaust: The explanation for the Holocaust is primarily ideological; this is what made it unique and it is why, from the Nazi perspective, it applied to the entire Jewish people, wherever they might be. In other words, it explains the Nazi aspiration for total annihilation and the portrayal of the genocide as an existential need of the Aryan-Nordic race. The antisemitic Nazi ideology is essentially a new religion with Christian and pagan elements, which regards murder as something positive and extremely lofty. Thus, the Nazi ideology constitutes a religion of murder, and its practice is a ritual of annihilation.
- d. Understanding the scope of annihilation—90 percent or more in Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Greece; altogether, more than 30 percent of the Jewish people, more than 60 percent of European Jewry, and more than 75 percent of eastern European Jewry.
- e. Understanding the implementation of the genocide—using organizational-administrative, economic, technological, and even “medical” methods very efficiently. In addition to all these factors are the typical German characteristics: diligence, precision, excellence, efficiency, love of order, extremism, etc.
- f. *Conclusions:*
  1. The Germans utilized modern means for deliberate annihilation.
  2. Shattering the myth that more education will produce more enlightened and humane people. The exact opposite is the case: professors were murderers, while many illiterate ignoramuses were among the Righteous among the Nations. Consequently, education for simple, humane values may be the only way to prevent murder.
- g. *The significance of the Holocaust:*
  1. Critical harm to the biological future of the Jewish people—the annihilation of 1.5 million children; the destruction of the eastern European Jewish biological pool, which had the highest rate of natural increase among the Jewish people. At the end of the Holocaust the rate of Jewish natural increase dropped, undoubtedly due to the trauma of the Holocaust.
  2. The annihilation of a culture and way of life that had developed over centuries and had been the foundation of Jewish national existence.

## **Part 2: Testimony**

The witnesses who speak to the cadets give vivid descriptions in the first person of their lives under the German occupation, in the ghettos and/or camps, and in the forests. They also describe their time in displaced-persons camps, their immigration to Palestine/Israel, and their involvement in building the country.

The cadets’ encounter with the Holocaust survivors is a dramatic and emotional one that elicits empathy from the listeners for the fate of individuals and the collective during the Holocaust. It should be kept in mind that many of the cadets are the grandchildren of

survivors, and this fact has a major impact on the nature of the encounter with the Holocaust survivors.

The Holocaust survivors' testimony to the cadets and the questions and answers that follow also achieve the objectives of education for Zionism, for the importance of the State of Israel to the entire Jewish people, and for humanism and the fellowship of humankind. The witness symbolizes heroism and the ability of the individual to survive the Holocaust and represents the way the survivors rebuilt their lives after the Holocaust.

### **Part 3: Lecture: "Difficulties in Creating a Fighting Consciousness in the Polish Ghettos"**

1. The lecture seeks to deal with four problematic concepts: "like sheep to the slaughter," "heroism," "choice" (of the victims), and "responsibility" (of the individual and the collective). By means of these concepts, the lecture addresses the collective accusations made in Israel after the Holocaust. It focuses on ghettoization, starvation, the isolation of the ghettos, German punishments, the camouflaging of the murders, and the dilemmas of the biological and "ideological" family.
2. With respect to *living conditions in the ghetto*, the lecture emphasizes the crowding, the location of the ghetto in the poor section of the city, and hygiene problems (lack of running water, lack of sewage, high morbidity) as factors that made it difficult to form an underground organization and to carry out underground activity.
3. With respect to *starvation*, the lecture explains the Germans' objectives (causing mortality, preventing uprisings, and creating anarchy and fighting between individuals over the meager food sources). The starvation highlights an interesting fact about people in general: in states of oppression, degradation, terror, and starvation, the inclination to rebel decreases and remains the desire of just a few individuals. This explains why military resistance in the ghettos was so rare and so late and underscores the other methods Jewish society used to cope with the conditions of ghettoization. The value of the "sanctification of life," which became a basis and stimulus for physical and spiritual survival, the smuggling of food (and especially the heroism of the children), and the negligibility of cannibalism in the ghettos attest to the preservation of the human image and the image of the Jews under conditions of annihilation.
4. With respect to the *isolation of the ghettos*, the lecture explains that this isolation existed between ghettos, between the ghetto and the Aryan side, and within the ghetto itself (in the stages of liquidation). The isolation introduces an explanation of the heroism of the couriers (mainly women) who broke the strangulation, the encirclement, and the sense of doom. It also highlights the impact of the isolation on the fighting from the Polish perspective (apathy and lack of interest in what was happening in the ghetto and in the liquidation of its inhabitants), from the German perspective (maximum control and liquidation), and from the Jewish perspective (militarily, difficulties in obtaining intelligence information, arms, and fresh fighters, difficulties in escaping and creating uniformity in the fighting; economically, the slow death of the ghetto; psychologically, the creation of a state of suffocation and total helplessness).
5. With respect to *German punishments*, the lecture seeks to stress not only the methods (for actions and intentions, known and guessed), but primarily the ramifications for the personal and collective responsibility of the individual and the establishment, and hence as a factor militating against uprisings.
6. With respect to the *camouflaging of the murders*, the lecture explains the methods of deception and camouflage used by the Germans, the Jewish interpretation of the murders

(in the USSR the activity was carried out against Jews suspected of being Communists; in Chelmno, sporadic activity; and in the ghettos, against refugees and people with no means of support), and the factors of skepticism (the murder of innocent people is illogical, goes against the criteria of morality, and is not the behavior one would expect of a civilized state and an enlightened world in the twentieth century; the disparity between information and awareness). Contending with the information underscores the dilemma of solidarity and shared fate in the biological family, and this involves a tragic choice: to accompany the family to the end or to leave it, to abandon it. The question of responsibility and commitment to the families and the public also influenced the decisions of the “ideological family” (youth movements and undergrounds) and impacted on the behavior of the individuals within it. The lecture places special emphasis on the behavior of women, and particularly mothers, in the face of annihilation.

7. *Conclusions:* The collective blame laid by Israelis on the victims as people who went “like sheep to the slaughter” was due to ignorance of the circumstances of the Holocaust and the ways in which it took place. This attitude should be viewed in the context of an emerging society that had established itself and fought for its survival. This new society, which regarded fighting as an existential need, was inclined to avoid forms of coping with the Holocaust that did not entail actual fighting. This accusation ignored the total helplessness and powerlessness of the Jewish population, general human behavior under oppression, the genuine day-to-day heroism, the desire to survive while preserving a moral code, and manifestations of resistance in ghettos, camps, and forests where people did rebel, unlike other places, where they did not rebel at all or rebelled later. The allegation also ignores the sources of strength displayed by the survivors after the liberation, when they rebuilt their lives and built up their homeland, fought in Israeli wars, were among the recipients of awards for heroism and excellence for their actions, and served as commanders in the IDF. We can understand the blaming of the victims against the backdrop of the personal and national frustration caused by the loss of one-third of the nation.

#### **Part 4: The Connection between the IDF and the Holocaust**

1. *Viewing the film In the Name of the Later Generations (IDF Spokesman’s Office, 1994)*

This film documents a visit by cadets, trainee airmen, and sailors to the extermination sites and the remains of the “world that was destroyed” in Poland. It is an emotional encounter of the present with the past, of free people in IDF uniforms—future officers—with the Holocaust. It is a film that emphasizes the strength of the State of Israel and of the IDF as factors that may prevent the recurrence of the Holocaust.

2. *Discussion led by company commanders*

This discussion was arranged at the behest and on the responsibility of the education officers and command staff of the officer-candidate school. Its goals are recognition of the importance of addressing the subject of the Holocaust in the IDF and the relationship between the Holocaust and the cadets’ service as IDF officers. It is intended to examine the feelings that the cadets are assumed to have and the conclusions that emerge from the discussion.

*Assumed feelings:*

- a. Anger at the Germans (for murdering the Jewish people and for crimes against humanity), at the world (for its silence), and at the Jewish people (for going “like sheep to the slaughter”)
- b. A desire for political and personal revenge, as manifested in the capture and prosecution of criminals and a boycott of German goods
- c. A sense of pride in being part of the Jewish people, which survived despite it all, founded the State of Israel, developed and settled the country, is developing Jewish and Zionist culture, and is preserving the nation’s heritage.
- d. A sense of public and personal mission, manifested in focusing on research into the Holocaust, memorializing the Holocaust, and shaping it in the collective memory, taking part in humanitarian missions worldwide on behalf of the State of Israel and the army in particular (Kosovar refugees), and willingness to serve as an officer in the IDF

*Conclusions of the discussion*

- a. Feelings of anger, fear, and indignity can be resolved in the strong need for a safe refuge for the Jewish people. Therefore Israel must be strong. The physical strength of the State of Israel is dependent on its army.
- b. The IDF depends on its commanders. They are the force that impels it to be a strong army that achieves its objectives: enabling Israelis to lead normal lives and protecting the lives of Jews around the world (Entebbe, Ethiopian immigrants).
- c. The IDF fights for the existence of the Jewish people against all enemies, despite its small size. It wins its battles because it is motivated by unique factors, such as motivation, mission, and faith.
- d. Because the IDF is a unique army, its officers are unique, too. All the commanders should feel a sense of mission and should be motivated by the knowledge that their military service, officers’ training, and service in the regular army are enabling their nation to survive.
- e. The cadets—future officers—will be involved in important junctures of education in a variety of fields, including the Holocaust. By means of Holocaust education, the officers will be able to foster in their soldiers a sense of identification with and belonging to the nation and state and to understand the mission entailed by their IDF service.

**3. Summary and feedback**

The conclusion of the day presents the message “to remember and never forget” as motivation for continued interest in the Holocaust and related activity by IDF units.

Feedback from the day is obtained not only from the impressions of the lecturers, facilitators, and seminar participants and from letters of thanks from the cadets and the command staff that the department receives after the seminar; there is also written feedback, which covers several main topics:

- a. The cadets’ appreciation of the importance of focusing on the Holocaust in their officer training, and their pride in serving in the IDF and being citizens of a Jewish and democratic state;
- b. An understanding of the problematic nature of the condition of the Jewish people in the Holocaust and pride in the Jews and their steadfastness at times of degradation and annihilation;

- c. Appreciation of the center's work and its dedication to teaching cadets, officers, and soldiers about the Holocaust.