Philosophical, Historical, Sociological and Theological Implications of the Holocaust

by

Naomi Kramer Canada

Goals

The workshop will present an interdisciplinary pedagogical program, which incorporates a recently published text, five video segments and an accompanying teacher's guide. The goal of this study is to demonstrate how interpretation and reality are irrevocably inter-woven. It examines the representation of the past through the evolution of the language of destruction and demands a critical attention.

Methodology

Within the academic community a discourse among historians, scholars of literature and philosophy on the relationship between memory and history and the Shoah has emerged over the last two decades. Within this discourse the questions arose as to whether there can be a literary representation of the Shoah and the role of testimony in historical writing.

The idea of race and the mistaken theory of racial superiority led to the act of genocide. This study addresses this ideology both through the individual and history. Through survivor memory—the way in which the mind represents experience to itself—we are led to the collective memory as recorded in historical accounts and social documentation. The material discussed in the program views the intersection of the past with the present through the survivor as well as the institutionalization of public memory as evidenced in monuments. The absence and transformation of tangible evidence of lost communities is also presented through the perspective of the past (survivor). The past weighs continuously on the present and as such, moral discourse on the Shoah must examine the ways in which the events are transmitted.

Writing about the Shoah is emerging as a discipline in its own right. By its very nature, the study of the Shoah is interdisciplinary. While the origins of the Shoah are deeply rooted in time, the perimeters of reference within the context of this study have established 1933 as the terminus post quem and 1945 as the terminus ante quem. Much of the dialogue has taken on the characteristics of a debate in which the proponents of literary and artistic representation are polarized against historical interpretation. No amount of empirical documentation can either quantify or qualify the suffering and the uncertainties of this time. To date, much of the literature has not addressed the expanse that distances reader, writer, and event. The language of destruction has not been confronted and thus not become an integral part of popular
parlance. Survivor testimony affords a rare window of opportunity of access to primary sources. With the passage of time this is an increasingly elusive opportunity for a scholarship which benefits from both historical analysis and witness accounts. The use of metaphor is not inappropriate. In many ways reconstructing these events can only be through the voice of the survivor. Owing to the enormity and the complex nature of the Shoah, all too often the reader of survivor testimony is left disturbed by a fragmented reality that defies comprehension. Historical accounts leave major gaps in understanding, not addressing the topic of the consequence of genocide or the nature of humanity. To date attempts to address moral implications of the Shoah have remained almost exclusively in the domain of literary interpretation.

The material includes a detailed analysis of one man’s experience under Nazi rule. It also includes the historical context upon which these experiences are placed in the form of a succinct historical synopsis. There is a stratigraphy of contemporary interpretation of the past through iconographic and textual documentation. This includes historical evidence of the past through unpublished documents, such as execution orders, and documents detailing the processing of several prisoners through the Nazi killing machine in juxtaposition with family correspondence inquiring after their well-being.

Over ten years of research and documentation have gone into the making of this educational program. This included visits to 20 primary sites in Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Poland, Slovakia, Switzerland, and Ukraine and included 400 oral histories and interviews with bystanders, liberators, Righteous Gentiles and survivors and an extensive search of the largely uncatalogued microfilm of the military trials in Dachau located in the United States Military Archives in Maryland. All survivor testimony has been verified through the archives in the museum and memorial sites of Auschwitz, Dachau, Flossenburg, and Gross-Rosen. Seventy-five key documents from the Flossenburg and Gross-Rosen concentration camps not previously available to the public have informed this study.

Dealing with people collectively and individually provides insight into the perpetrators’ process of murder and metaphorically bestows the background of speech upon which the silence of the survivor can be heard. This program shows that the existence of survivors is the very metaphor of the Shoah itself.

As the third generation grapples to find meaning in the historical event of the Shoah motives for remembering change from generation to generation. As educators we are faced with the need to examine the existential consequences of the Shoah.

The following issues are addressed: How much emphasis to the events of today do we place in our teaching efforts? Do we focus on more contemporary examples of discrimination, xenophobia, and genocide in an attempt to make relevant the past to the youth of today? Is anti-Semitism the sole model for the effects of discrimination? Educators respond to evolving societal and cultural needs by culling knowledge from the past and in doing so make relevant the past to today’s youth.
The components of the program are the recently published book, The Fallacy of Race and the Shoah, the educational video, Visualizing Memory, a last detail and an accompanying teacher’s guide. The video and text were designed to compliment one another. The Fallacy of Race and the Shoah has recently been nominated by the University of Toronto Press for the 1999 PIOOM Award for best book related to human rights violations and prevention strategies by governments and agencies.

The tools of this workshop have been used in high schools, colleges, universities, military and police academies, and museums. The diversity of locations reflects its interdisciplinary approach. Issues of contemporary war crimes, sensitization to Judaism, history, and hermeneutics were among the particular agendas the material addressed.

While this workshop attempts to examine a variety of ethical, historical, and sociological issues it is self-evident that a topic of such complexity must be studied using a variety of primary, secondary, and witness resources.

Program Components

Text

Video

1. TEXT: THE FALLACY OF RACE AND THE SHOAH

is organized in two sections. The first involves interpretation and reflections on one individual’s experiences during the Shoah. The second sets forth the historical context in which these experiences occurred.

ONE

Peter Kleinmann, a Czechoslovak Jew, was deported to Auschwitz, from Munkacs in April 1944. He was separated from his family and sent to the forced labour camp, Gross-Rosen. From there he survived a death march to Flossenburg only to be selected to die—labelled by the Nazis as a Muselmann. Peter’s brother Al, was the clerk recording the numbers of the Muselmanner who were about to be murdered. He had been sent to the Hungarian labor battalion five years earlier, captured by the Germans in 1944, and sent to Flossenburg, the same camp in which Peter was interned.

It was by chance, that his brother, Al whom he had not seen in five years, miraculously intervened to save his life. The fact that two brothers’ fates were at polar ends of the implementation of the "Final Solution”—one on his way to death and the other processing him—poignantly illustrates the senselessness and banality of the Nazi killing machine.

Mr. Kleinmann's life is exemplary of a so-called lesson of the Shoah, that chance had been
more often than not the decisive factor in determining who would live and who would die. The model of the Jew, as helpless is meaningless when we are aware of survivors, such as Mr. Kleinmann who after the war, lived meaningful and fruitful lives.

MILLIONS

This section represents a succinct synopsis of existing secondary literature and primary sources. An overview of Jewish life in Europe is presented, followed by a more detailed examination of the Nazis’ process, attempting to annihilate European Jewry. In order to contextualize individual experiences of European Jews, the historical section also includes a description of Jewish life in the Carpathian region of Czechoslovakia and the events of the Shoah as they occurred in this region.

Presentation of the historical context in which the individual’s experiences occurred is critical for students to understand the complexity of antecedents that allowed the occurrence of the Shoah. With the example of the individual and accompanying descriptive details of the Shoah which enable students to identify with these events, one is able to effectively convey the universal issues that inevitably arise in teaching the Shoah—evil, courage to care, human dignity, and moral responsibility.

The inclusion of several original documents from the concentration camps Flossenbürg and Gross-Rosen further distinguish this book. Amongst the records are orders from offices in Germany sent to camps in Poland listing the names of prisoners to be executed and detailing the times of execution—every five minutes—alongside their birth dates.

For the reader—layman, student, and teacher a bibliography, a detailed index, and an extensive glossary of terms relating to both Jewish life and the Shoah are included.

2. VIDEO: VISUALIZING MEMORY...A LAST DETAIL

is composed of five ten-minute vignettes: The Fallacy of Race Appropriate Memorials? Liberation? Moral Responsibility, Thinking Critically. The independent sections provides the educator with the opportunity to use sections appropriate to their course curricula. Following the description of each vignette is a small selection of questions excerpted from the teaching guide. The video is distributed by Ergo Productions in New Jersey.

The Fallacy of Race

This video segment gives a brief overview as seen through the experiences of one Hungarian survivor. Touching upon a number of historical antecedents such as eugenics, propaganda and government-legislated racism which led to the identification, isolation, ghettoization, deportation, and murder of Jews the film allows for a broad range of approaches to the study of both the Holocaust and contemporary genocide. In defining the red flags, which are
indicative of possible genocide, students and educators are able to broach other related injustices. In focusing on Peter Kleinmann’s experiences we are able to glimpse at the experience of millions.

- Why do you think the archival footage of the Muselmanner was shot? What does this tell you about the Nazis?

- Reflect on the meaning of and reason for Peter Kleinmann’s different identities; Dovid Wolfe, Dudi, Dezider, 83150, and Peter.

- What identity is human rights dependant on?

- Encourage students to examine the role of mythology in encouraging racist beliefs.

- Why is it important for Peter to remember?

**Appropriate Memorials?**

- This segment of the video uses contemporary signs and images of historic locations to illustrate how signs, symbols, and memorials influence understanding of the past. With a variety of juxtapositions including Treblinka the museum and train stop, a caption in a Madjanek barrack titled “living conditions,” and Peter’s former cheder today a Ukrainian military warehouse the viewer contemplates the transformation of former killing centers into placid, serene places of “education.”

- If we present the past of eleven million innocent men, women, and children are Jews at risk of remaining invisible? If not are they at risk of being accused of ownership?

- Use contemporary examples of monuments which have different functions but commemorate the same event?

- Give examples of the politics of memory as illustrated in the video?

**Liberation?**

Using the term liberation this segments of the video illuminates the determinant that language has on shaping and comprehension of reality. For example liberation usually understood as a uniquely joyous event, for many Holocaust survivors meant freedom from one form of slavery to another of memory. Educators are reminded of the difficulties in communicating the details of the Shoah using commonplace language and terminology which have a different valence when applied to the Shoah; extermination, ghetto, hunger, cattle car, camp, selection, and deportation. The language of destruction crematoria, liquidation, action, death march, resettlement, and killing centre are being incorporated into contemporary usage.
“There are no facts in themselves. For a fact to exist, we must first introduce meaning.” (Friederich Nietzsche) How does this statement relate to the evolution of the language of destruction?

Moral Responsibility

Many issues of responsibility are addressed in this section of the video including individual and national. It leads the viewer to posit the unprecedented circumstances which led to choices and decisions that we cannot today fairly evaluate or understand such as Al Kleinmann’s decision to save his bother by substituting Peter’s number for that of another thus ensuring Peter’s survival. Inter-generational acknowledgment and evasion of responsibility are also addressed.

- How can we encourage our government to act responsibly to people in whose countries genocide is currently occurring.

- How can one person make a difference? Refer to Mahatama Ghandi, Bob Geldoff, Nelson Mandela, Indira Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists in the fight against discrimination.

Critical Thinking

The paradox of teaching the Holocaust is that it can be used as a paradigm for critical thinking while critical thinking is a necessity for understanding the Shoah. This section of the video brings to light the changes in conceptual thinking since the Shoah. In particular the notion of “action through inaction,” or that of “none is too many”, and the idea of the existence of the unimaginable are becoming part of our collective understanding of contemporary experience.

- When we speak of tolerance in multicultural societies is this what we really mean?

- Does tolerance not have a negative connotation that of an implicit ranking of different ethnic groups which in fact means only to endure the other?