

‘EDUCATION AFTER AUSCHWITZ’ FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AS WELL!

Ido Abram

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1. FOCUS ON THE HOLOCAUST

Various important reasons motivate – or should motivate – teachers and educators as well as schoolchildren and other youngsters to focus intensively on the Holocaust.

The first one is to get to know themselves, the human race. The Holocaust not only illustrates how evil “evil” can be, it shows how people can go beyond themselves by helping others. Aggression is something we all know and have within us. Our upbringing can teach us to use aggression to create and not destroy, to build rather than demolish, and to transform conflicts into dialogues. With the reservation though that some conflicts can not be solved.

Another reason is to caution people, especially youngsters, about comparable situations that still occur. As Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, put it, “It happened so it can happen again. That is the core of what we have to say.”¹

A third reason is to avoid joining the ranks of executioners or Holocaust deniers. French judge Roger Errera noted that it was their intention “to destroy our recollection, the victims’ only grave, and erase every trace of the crime itself from our memory.”²

¹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1986.

² D. Jones (ed.), *Censorship: An International Encyclopedia*. London / Chicago, in press (1998 or 1999). See under “Denial of the Holocaust”. Author: A. De Baets.

2. EDUCATION AFTER AUSCHWITZ

In 1966, philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno introduced this term in his essay *Education after Auschwitz*, noting that “The primary task of education should be to prevent another Auschwitz.”³

Education after Auschwitz means two things: teaching about the Shoah, the Final Solution, and education in general.

“Education after Auschwitz” with the emphasis on the first word: **Education**

1. Education should focus on de-barbarization. Barbarism like Auschwitz is a lack of love, an absence of warmth, it is coldness, an inability to identify with others, the incapacity to feel what other people are feeling in other situations. In short, barbarism comes from not being able to empathize.

Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* (the ability to feel what other people are feeling in other situations) and *warmth* (a climate of safety, security and openness).

2. In addition to being able to empathize with other in other situations, youngsters who are being educated also have to be able to look at themselves and their own situation. They need to be able to reflect and contemplate, to be aware of coldness referred to above, and not unthinkingly act out their hatred and aggression on other people or things. They need to make their own decisions, and not automatically go along with the crowd. This is what we call autonomy.

Education after Auschwitz means promoting *autonomy*, enhancing the ability to

- reflect and contemplate
- make one’s own decisions
- not automatically go along with the crowd.

“Education after Auschwitz” with the emphasis on the second word: **after**

3. The heinousness of Auschwitz is the heinousness of our world and the pointlessness of the atrocities of Auschwitz is the pointlessness of all atrocities. If youngsters are unaware that yesterday’s Auschwitz is part of today’s world, there is all the more chance of a repetition. The victims of a second Holocaust would not necessarily be Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, invalids, or any of the other groups the Nazis viewed as “enemies” or as “inferior.” They could be anyone who is different.

Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* with the heinousness of Auschwitz, which is the heinousness of this world. Here “empathy” means:

Allowing Auschwitz into our heart and soul and not pushing it away. It also means placing Auschwitz *inside* our world and not keeping it *outside*. It happened so it can happen again. That is the core of what we have to say.

“Education after Auschwitz” with the emphasis on the third word: **Auschwitz**

³ Theodor Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz” in *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (1970), Dutch edition 1971, p. 77.

4. Youngsters need to be able to put themselves in the place of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. In addition to the perpetrators, two other important groups played a role in the Holocaust, the victims referred to in 3, and the bystanders. In the context of National Socialism, the “bystanders” were not only the people who helped the Nazis and the people who helped the persecuted (the victims), they were also the people who collaborated and the people who refused to (the ones who offered resistance). To be able to comprehend the Holocaust, youngsters need to be able to put themselves in the place of *all* the actors: the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders. Our approach differs from Adorno’s in this sense. According to him, it is enough to be able “to put yourself in the perpetrators’ place, not the victims”⁴, to identify with the aggressors, not with the people who have been murdered. He does not make any mention of the bystanders.

Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* with the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders of the Holocaust. Since Auschwitz has become the symbol of various forms of cruelty and aggression, nowadays Education after Auschwitz also means promoting empathy (ability to put yourself in someone else’s place) with perpetrators, victims and bystanders in general. We are all familiar with all three of these roles.

5. Youngsters need to try and gain insight into the mechanisms and circumstances that turned (and can still turn) people into aggressors and murderers under National Socialism (and other ideologically motivated reigns of horror).

Education after Auschwitz means gaining insight into the mechanisms and circumstances that turn people into aggressors and murderers, insight into the *structure of destruction*.

As regards the teaching activities to be developed, this five-point program⁵ means for example that with respect to the last point, the paradigm of historian Raul Hilberg can be taken as the structure of destruction: first definition (marking), then expropriating (theft), then concentrating and then annihilation as the last step.⁶ Other paradigms can also be used.⁷

The teaching principles of the five-point programme are warmth, empathy and autonomy. The programme not only devotes attention to the victims, it also focuses on the perpetrators and bystanders. To be able to understand something of the acts, experiences and considerations of all the parties, it is important to know how they lived before the Holocaust and what life was like for the survivors afterwards. Lastly, the programme should not solely concentrate on the *negative* experiences before, during and after the Holocaust, it should also reserve space for themes like “solidarity”, “resistance to injustice” and “the preservation of human dignity under perilous and extreme conditions”. This kind of comprehensive context makes the programme “warm” instead of “cold”, in other word tolerant instead of intolerant.

⁴ Adorno, 1971, p. 78.

⁵ Ido Abram, “Erziehung und humane Orientierung.” In: Ido Abram / Matthias Heyl. *Thema Holocaust: Ein Buch für die Schule*. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1996, units 11-18. See also: Ido Abram, Monique de Jong et al., *Een van Ons* (One of Us) (A series of lessons on the Holocaust). Utrecht, 1997, teacher’s manual, pp. 7-9.

⁶ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Revised and definitive edition, New York / London, 1985, p. 54.

⁷ Abram / Heyl, 1996, units 43-47.

3. THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE CONTEXT

The general principle behind this comprehensive context is that:

- Solely discussing or illustrating human cruelty is sometimes known to activate human cruelty, at any rate it does not teach youngsters how to prevent it.

Subsequently:

- Excessive attention for extreme cruelty makes small-scale cruelty not seem that bad.

Perhaps the second principle is even more important than the first. If the extreme is elevated to a norm, there is less of a capacity for emotion and less of a sense of proportion. This holds true for schoolchildren and other youngsters, and in fact it holds true for everyone. We have to be careful not to lose our sense of proportion by measuring everything that happens against the standard of the most extreme circumstances. If the programme makes schoolchildren or other youngsters, or teachers for that matter, insensitive to small-scale suffering, the suffering not classified as extreme persecution, then the programme is not only pointless, it can even be harmful. Small-scale suffering, feeling sad or lonely, feeling despised or redundant, hungry or in pain, this suffering is also suffering. Not a little bit, but a hundred per cent. Or as well-known educationalist Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) put it, “All tears are salty. Whoever understands that can raise children, whoever does not understand that can not raise them.”⁸

We can add a third reason for a comprehensive context. If the context is not expanded in the sense referred to above, it is impossible and hypocritical to take the step from the Holocaust to contemporary, milder forms of prejudice, discrimination and racism. There would simply be too much of a distance between everyday injustice *here and now* and the Holocaust *then*. If the context is expanded and includes positive aspects, it is not too much of a step to take. Then youngsters can relate the lessons of and about the Holocaust to themselves and their own situations and what they learn can have a personal significance for them.

It is naive to think that telling and showing schoolchildren in great detail how much Holocaust victims suffered is going to make the pupils love them more. In fact the opposite tends to be the case. Most people don't like victims, and schoolchildren are no exception. Psychologists call this blaming the victim, it is the victim's own fault that he is undergoing so much pain and misery, he is responsible for it himself. There is also another reason not to dwell too long on the atrocities. They are not at all specific to the Holocaust. They are merely part of a long list of historical atrocities starting all the way back in Biblical times.⁹

⁸ Janusz Korczak, *Verleidigt die Kinder*. Gütersloh, 1981, p. 118.

⁹ Y. Bauer, “Is the Holocaust Explicable? In: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5 (1990) 2, p. 148.

4. LIFE STORIES

Holocaust victims are people with a history and a life story, with a face and a name. They are never just victims. They have got relatives, friends and enemies. They are members of clubs and all kinds of organizations. They are part of an environment that sometimes accepts them and sometimes does not. The same can be said of the perpetrators and bystanders. The perpetrators are more than just people who commit an atrocity, the bystanders are more than just people who stand by. They too are people with good sides and bad sides and ambivalence in their attitudes and behaviour. Studying the lives of perpetrators, victims and bystanders can keep youngsters from learning oversimplified, black-and-white lessons from the Holocaust, certainly if the life stories also tell them something about what happened before and after the Holocaust. Life stories demonstrate how one and the same person can play different roles at different stages of his development: at one moment he can be the perpetrator, at another the victim, and usually just a bystander.

Sometimes he can more or less alternate between these roles within one and the same period of time, as is illustrated so strikingly by the story of Oskar Schindler during World War Two.

Youngsters are often fascinated by authentic life stories. It is even more important though that the life stories provide opportunities for identification (empathy). This enables them to compare the life they are leading now with the lives other people led at the time.

5. YOUNG CHILDREN: EDUCATION AFTER AUSCHWITZ WITHOUT AUSCHWITZ

According to Adorno, Education after Auschwitz should start in early childhood, but he does not specify what it should include: “I can not presume to even roughly design a plan for this kind of education.”¹⁰ Based upon the five-point programme cited above, Abram and Mooren have arrived at three points for Education after Auschwitz for *children in the three-to-ten age group*.¹¹ What it amounts to is “Education after Auschwitz without Auschwitz”, a curriculum without any detailed descriptions of the most heinous atrocities. The first two points of the five-point programme have been preserved, the third and fifth points have been omitted, and the fourth point has been abridged. This has resulted in the following three-point programme:

1. Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* (the ability to identify with other people in other situations) and *warmth* (a climate of safety, security, and openness)
2. Education after Auschwitz means promoting *autonomy*, i.e. enhancing the ability to
 - reflect and contemplate
 - make one’s own decisions
 - not automatically go along with the crowd (non-conformity).
3. Education after Auschwitz means promoting *empathy* with the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders. Children are familiar with all three of these roles.

The teaching principles of the three-point programme for children in the three-to-ten age group are the same as the principles of the five-point programme for older schoolchildren: warmth, empathy and autonomy. Abram and Mooren demonstrate in a publication how this three-point programme can be carried out using illustrated children’s books.¹² In addition to working with illustrated children’s books, other work forms will be developed for the three-to-ten age group at the Children’s Museum that will be at a permanent location in the Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre. Not as a project solely linked to the Memorial Centre, but as a series of activities that also contains components that can be used elsewhere for this age group, i.e. at other memorial centres, at primary schools or at home. This is a joint project of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Artists’ Resistance Foundation ‘42-’45, the APS (National Centre for School Improvement) in Utrecht and the Westerbork Camp Memorial Centre.

¹⁰ Adorno, 1971, pp. 79-80.

¹¹ Ido Abram and Piet Mooren, “Prentenboeken en Holocaust [Opvoeding na Auschwitz]” (Illustrated Books for Children and the Holocaust [Education after Auschwitz]). In: Piet Mooren, *Opstellen over jeugdliteratuur en leesonderwijs* (Essays on Children’s Books and Reading Lessons). The Hague, 1998, pp. 112-125.

¹² See note 11.

SUMMARY

Why focus on the Holocaust?

Three reasons

- (1) To get to know yourself, the human race
 - (2) To warn about comparable things that are still happening
 - (3) To distance yourself from anyone who denies the Holocaust ever happened.
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“*The primary task of education should be to prevent another Auschwitz*” (Adorno).

“**Erziehung nach Auschwitz**” (Adorno) / **Education after Auschwitz**

- (1) Teaching about the Holocaust / Shoah / Final Solution
- (2) Bringing up children in general.

Five-Point Programme

Education after Auschwitz

- * Promote *empathy* and *warmth*
- * Promote *autonomy*: enhance the ability to
 - reflect
 - make one's own decisions
 - not automatically go along with the crowd (non-conformity).

Education **after** Auschwitz

- * Promote *empathy* with the horrors of Auschwitz, which are the horrors of our world.

Education after **Auschwitz**

- * Promote *empathy* with the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders in the Holocaust and other forms of cruelty and aggression. All human beings experience all three of these roles at one time or another.
- * Gain insight into the mechanisms and circumstances that turn people into aggressors and murderers, insight into the *structure of annihilation*.

The teaching principles of this five-point programme are warmth, empathy and autonomy.

The programme devotes attention to *all* the actors: the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders (the perpetrators, everyone who helped them, everyone who collaborated with the people in power, passive observers, the opposition, the active resistance, everyone who helped the victims, the victims).

How did they live before the Holocaust and what was life like for the survivors afterwards?

Attention is also focused on *positive* issues such as solidarity, resistance, and the preservation of human dignity under perilous and extreme conditions.

Comprehensive context is necessary

1. Discussing or demonstrating (solely) human cruelty sometimes activates human cruelty, and at any rate does not teach youngsters how to prevent it
 2. Excessive attention for extreme cruelty makes small-scale cruelty not seem that bad
 3. Comparing the Holocaust with other forms of prejudice, discrimination and racism
 4. Not limiting the focus to the horrors of the Holocaust
 - it does not generate sympathy for the victims
 - the horrors are not specific to the Holocaust.
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Using life stories

- before, during and after the Holocaust
 - demonstrate that everyone plays various roles in the course of a lifetime (sometimes perpetrator, sometimes victim, usually bystander)
 - sometimes more than one role at the same time (Oskar Schindler in the Holocaust)
 - youngsters are often interested in authentic life stories
 - the stories enable youngsters to identify (empathy)
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“Education after Auschwitz needs to start in early childhood” (Adorno).

Education after Auschwitz for children in the three-to-ten age group

This is “Education after Auschwitz without Auschwitz”, bringing up children and educating them without examples of extreme cruelty

Three-Point Programme

* Promote *empathy* and *warmth*

* Promote *autonomy*: Enhancing the ability to:

- reflect
- make one’s own decisions
- not automatically go along with the crowd (non-conformity)

* Promote *empathy* (the ability to identify with someone else and feel what they are feeling) with the perpetrators, the victims and the bystanders. Children experience all three of these roles at one time or another

The three-point programme and the five-point programme are both based upon the same teaching principles: warmth, empathy and autonomy.
