

## International Cooperation in Education on the Holocaust and on Antisemitism

Karen Polak

OSCE conference on antisemitism, Cordoba 2005

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to speak to you on the educational challenges that we face in teaching about the Holocaust and teaching against antisemitism. It is in the classrooms, where teachers are in daily contact with their students, that a difference can be made. I work at an institution, the Anne Frank House, where hundreds of school groups come each year and where we are in continual contact with teachers. In recent years I have had many personal encounters and organized meetings with teachers – in the Netherlands, but also across Europe, in which they brought forward their experiences, their request for help and their own strategies in dealing with many different forms of antisemitism. It is from this perspective, of the ordinary teacher in an arbitrary town in Europe, teaching your average 14 to 16 year old, that I will speak. That will, I hope, inspire all present to take action to ensure the implementation of the commitments made by the OSCE at previous conferences.

Is antisemitism common among young people in Europe? Most teachers would say it isn't and they are probably right. Nevertheless the media regularly show images which are a cause for concern and many teachers *are* faced with antisemitic remarks in the classroom. These remarks are often made in relation to lessons about the Holocaust. Anti-Jewish comments are also frequent in response to the conflict in the Middle East. Some teachers avoid difficult situations with their students and don't teach about the Holocaust or spend as little time as possible on it. They justify this by either saying that it is simply impossible to teach this subject, or by diminishing the importance of the Holocaust, by trivializing it as 'just one chapter in history'.

These teachers are not being fair to their students. Students have the right to learn, and they have the right to be corrected if they are in the wrong. There are many examples of teachers working in difficult circumstances that have overcome their reluctance to teach about the Holocaust or about antisemitism and that have been rewarded by their student's unexpected interest and changed perspectives. This is not to say that it is always easy – we must invest in the

exchange of best practices and find ways to support teachers that feel insecure in what they should teach and how they should teach these themes.

I want to stress how important it is that all students in Europe learn about the Holocaust. It is a watershed event in history and without knowledge and some understanding of what happened you cannot comprehend the world as it is today. The Holocaust took place in Europe but it had, and has, an importance beyond all national boundaries. The concepts of genocide and of universal human rights are just two issues that evolved from the Holocaust.

Remembering the Holocaust is a complex matter. It has a special meaning for me to speak on these subjects here in Spain. I grew up with my father's war time stories in which Spain played a prominent role. My father left the Netherlands as a nineteen year old in the autumn of 1943. His mother had been imprisoned on account of anti-German comments, his father, a Jew, was at that time still in hiding. My father was involved as a student in different pockets of resistance and feared for his safety, so he decided to make his way to England. Traveling for many months through Belgium and France under a false name, he made his way over the snowbound Pyrenees in the winter of 1943 and arrived in the safe haven Spain. Although he was safe, he was also frustrated, mainly on the account of the inactivity of the Dutch diplomats that were not helping him to move on to England. For me hearing these stories as a teenager in the nineteen seventies it was confusing that Spain under Franco had been prepared to let refugees into the country whilst its own record of liberty and democratic rights was so tarnished. My father's experiences brought forward how not just Spain, but every country, and in a way every town, village and many families, have their own history of both complicity, inactivity and of opposition to persecution.

This story is just an arbitrary illustration of the complexity of history that students need to be able to wrestle with. Now, just as I did then.

Teaching the Holocaust is of necessity also a complex matter. Today, the Netherlands, like Spain and so many countries in Europe, is a multicultural country. Two thirds of the young children in our main cities have a non-Dutch family background. This makes it all the more important to bring across the relevance of the Holocaust for all of humanity.

An interesting example of how teachers in the Netherlands engage their students with a Moroccan background in the history of the Holocaust is by bringing forward the important role that Moroccan soldiers, fighting in the French army, played in the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. Again, the complexity of history demands that the students learn about the position of the Moroccan Sultan, Mohammed V, within the French protectorate. Inspiring is also the way, in which Mohammed V personally protected the Jews of Morocco, refusing to

deliver them into the hands of Vichy France that would have had the Jews deported. But Jews were safe in Morocco during the Second World War.

I have encountered similar approaches in teaching practice in Germany, where relevant historical facts from the history of Turkey were included in the lessons on the Holocaust and the Second World War.

The *Task Force on International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research* (known as the ITF) was set up in 1998 to support initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe and to offer assistance from countries and institutions with experience in this field. The history of each country is very different and it demands mutual understanding to be able to work together in this field. When the ITF was just starting out, the first ten member countries sent educational experts to participate in the Educational Working Group. As a member of this group I was engaged in the process of writing guidelines for Holocaust Education that would serve governments and NGO's in all the member countries – now counting twenty. The discussions on *Why* we must teach the Holocaust, *What* we must teach and *How* this can be taught were inspirational and have led to very useful guidelines, that the Polish Chair of the ITF has made available here in a booklet. And more importantly these texts are also available to educators everywhere on the internet and are in the process of being translated into many languages.

The ITF has in the past three years funded 66 projects of which 35 were teacher training seminars, mostly in Eastern European countries. Maybe investing in the teacher's expertise through seminars is the important way to support Holocaust Education.

The ITF member countries have this last year each made a report on the status and practice of Holocaust Education and indeed the ITF and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights have worked together to make the report that is now available on *Education on the Holocaust and on antisemitism* in all the OSCE participating States.

These country reports are a good starting point for more in-depth reflection on how we are teaching the Holocaust and what we are doing to combat antisemitism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination. The reports have shown that in many countries in fact very little is known about how the Holocaust is taught. More time must be invested in finding out what is taught in classes. In some countries there are indications that there is resistance to teaching and learning about the Holocaust. To understand better why teachers are sometimes reluctant to give lessons about the Holocaust a survey will be undertaken among history teachers.

It is essential for all students to learn about the Holocaust in school – however, this is not THE way, and certainly not the only way in which to respond to

forms of antisemitism in our cultures today. Antisemitism is not a problem among the youth alone. This needs to be recognized and confronted.

Antisemitism is also not an isolated phenomenon in our schools. Many teachers point out that it is part of a wider pattern of intolerance amongst students. The increase in xenophobic, anti-Muslim, anti-Western homophobic and antisemitic incidents needs to be addressed. Although all forms of discrimination, racism and intolerance should be forcefully opposed in any educational setting, it is also necessary to speak out against antisemitism directly.

In my meetings with teachers the lack of adequate teaching materials that deal with antisemitism in both its historical and current forms is a major problem. Antisemitism is a complex phenomenon. A book recently published by the Anne Frank House, '*50 Questions on Antisemitism*', covers *just* 50 questions and in this way aims to give teachers and a general public a better understanding of what antisemitism is. But such books is not teaching material. What is needed are materials that focus not only on antisemitism, but also on Jewish history and its contribution to European societies. And materials not focusing solely on antisemitism, but on the role that stereotypes and prejudices play in societies: the function and consequences of prejudices about Muslims, Jews, homosexuals, Sinti and Roma and other minorities.

The Tolerance and Non-Discrimination programme of ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) and the Anne Frank House will work together to develop such teaching materials, that will be piloted in several OSCE participating States. It is important that a diversity of materials are developed as each teaching environment is different –depending on the subject that is being taught, on the background of the students and on the teacher. Some students will need to discuss their own experiences with discrimination before focusing on antisemitism in society today. Some teachers will want to teach about the history of antisemitism before looking at its current forms. And for some it will be more relevant to take the present as the starting point, before going into the historical roots of antisemitism.

Antisemitism should be understood as a human rights abuse, and it should be seen as a threat not only to Jews, but also to society as a whole. Combating antisemitism is a task for all democratic forces in society.

I will conclude with three short recommendations:

- Dialogue should be encouraged as an important requisite to successful educational programs. Especially the dialogue between groups in our societies that are confronted with different forms of intolerance and discrimination and that can benefit from working together in education.
- Teachers need to be given the opportunity to discuss the problems they face in teaching about the Holocaust and in teaching about antisemitism. This means that at a national and international level it is important to

make teachers conferences possible. The exchange of best practices should form a central element in these conferences, as it is an effective way to contribute to successful teaching methods.

- NGO's and educational authorities should work together in making teaching materials that are easily available to teachers and appropriate for teaching at all levels. Again, it is important for there to be an international exchange of successful programs.

I am hopeful that the increased international cooperation will contribute to new initiatives and the expansion of successful projects in many countries.