

Introducer, Working Session 3: The Role of Education

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Whoever is preparing to combat anti-Semitism by means of education, is faced with two apparently contradictory currents. I will present them using Poland as an example.

On one hand there is a remarkable increase of interest in Jewish history, religion, ethnography, literature, music etc. among the young Polish generation. Never before had there been such a rich presence of Jewish subjects on the book market, or on the lists of masters` and doctoral dissertations. Many school teachers took courses offered by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and hundreds of their pupils wrote essays about the Jewish communities that had once flourished in their towns. There are numerous local initiatives aimed at unearthing of scarce traces of vibrant Jewish presence before the *Endlösung*. The Cracow festival of Jewish culture attracts every year thousands of young people from all over the country and abroad who take part in various workshops and lectures, sing and dance in the streets. Warsaw film festival "Jewish motives" was also a success. Many volunteers participate in actions against prejudice and hate, for example erasing anti-Semitic graffiti.

On the other hand, graffiti would soon reappear after each cleaning. The name "Jews" still serves as an insult against a competing football team, or just against anybody in any game. This is a kind of anti-Semitism without a real target, because anybody, politicians in the first place, can be nominated a Jew. However, some nationalist journalists, priests, or party leaders will eagerly tell those poor and ignorant hooligans where they should look for an eternal enemy conspiring always to

the detriment of their country. Violent incidents motivated by anti-Semite prejudice are still rare in that part of Europe, but hate speech is abundant and the laws forbidding it are seldom if ever applied. Conscious anti-Semitism is now usually linked with resistance to the European integration, and this anti-liberal mixture seems attractive to some segments of the society. Since, however, the Jewish communities in today Poland are hardly visible, many young people who have learned the vocabulary of prejudice have never had any touch with things Jewish. Besides, the authors of books or editors of journals that are full of slander and defamation would use a cryptic language of the type "I am not an anti-Semite, but..." Thus, the analysts who wrote a report for the Council of Europe, gave it an ironic title "Anti-Semitism without Jews and without anti-Semites". Whatever its disguise, this populist variety may become dangerous, as it encourages juvenile squads with Nazi emblems to dare to emerge from the underground.

There is a huge gap between these two opposite currents and one may reasonably ask whom the education programmes should be addressed to? The convinced anti-Semites are rather impervious to rational arguments and knowledge. So the main target of education should be the large majority of young people who have no definite views in this respect, yet are not always immune to prejudice that is deeply rooted in traditional European cultures. This majority in Poland knows very little about the history and destinies of the once largest Jewish community in the world. History textbooks usually devoted page or two to its annihilation by the Nazis and the heroic Warsaw Ghetto uprising, weaved into a broader narrative of the cruel German occupation and the valiant resistance offered by the Polish underground. A couple of short stories about the fate of Jews were on the reading list for secondary

school students, but all this was clearly not enough to arouse sympathy for and solidarity with the murdered nation that seemed exotic and alien.

X The teachers and authors of school curricula had to answer to themselves the question how to teach history of Jews so as to bring home its importance to students. The debates led to the conclusion that teaching about the Shoah alone, as if it were an isolated historical event, is not productive. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before its partitions in the eighteenth century, and then Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian and Ukrainian lands were a home for a particular culture of Ashkenazi Jews, with their beliefs, sacred rituals, a specific style of life, distinct everyday language, and in the twentieth century, with rich literature, theatre, press and a variety of political movements. Yet until recently even university courses in history, literature or arts hardly gave any substantial information about that lost and largely forgotten world. This has started to change in the last decade. Many efforts were made to teach the teachers, to provide historical data and to overcome traditional, narrowly national approach to cultural history. In the best new school textbooks one can find presentation of Poland-Lithuania as a huge multicultural state in which Polish, German, Ukrainian and Jewish idioms coexisted side by side.

At that point, however, another strategic problem appears: whether to stress affinity of sentiments and mutual cultural influences, or rather to regard minority cultures as separate and independent entities. This is by no means a trivial question, since for the whole twentieth century the writers and historians who wanted to oppose anti-Semitic arguments by arousing feelings of empathy were eager to show that Jews were good patriots and loyal citizens of the country they loved, and gave Poland so many creative minds and talents. Hardly anybody realized at that time that there was a shade of a patronizing attitude in such approach. However, the opposite

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habit of teaching history of the Diaspora with no regard to the societies in the midst of which the Jews settled and prospered for a long time seems by no means a better solution. We believe that the two approaches should be balanced.

They are indeed combined in a recently published book by Robert Szuchta and Piotr Trojanski, under the title *The Holocaust: Understand Why* – destined to serve as an auxiliary handbook for Polish secondary schools. In spite of what the title may suggest the narrative starts with the complex dilemma of Jewish identity, then gives a brief outline of history of European Jews and their heritage, and of the parallel history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, with special regard to Germany. Consequently, the Holocaust appears as a final stage of the perennial politics of hatred and humiliation, and the authors do not leave out the shameful pages of the history of their own nation in this respect. A student who will go through this clear and sincere narrative, based upon a wealth of Polish and foreign research, should understand that Shoah was a terrible crime against humanity, but also that it was an annihilation of a grand tradition and vivid culture, distinct and close to ours at the same time. In this way the student should learn to transcend the wall of indifference that may still be in his or her mind, but not to efface real cultural differences that once made the country so diverse.

An international exchange of educational experience, a forum for comparison of curricula and textbooks would be very useful. Voluntary associations have a role to play in such an exchange. Central European ministries of education are not lacking in good will and expertise, yet bureaucratic routine slows down the implementation of new ideas. NGOs, having very modest means at their disposal, cannot of course replace public institutions, but should inspire and stimulate them, and evaluate the results of governmental education policies.