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Why to Teach About Holocaust

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When the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson opened the Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust, his presentation started with a short documentary film. The film showed members of the extreme right, skinheads, attacking people whom for some reason they did not like. It showed pure violence motivated by hatred for all human beings, violence which serves as an outlet for the attacker's frustration and gives him the reassuring feeling of superiority. There could not be a better and more effective way of demonstrating why it is necessary to teach about what happened to the Jews but also other groups of European population during World War II. It is necessary because of today's social problems, because of the present and future danger that the same terrors could be repeated.

As Professor Y. Bauer said at a recent conference in Washington, Holocaust is a human invention, it is a project of the present technical civilization and as such it is repeatable. It is ever more repeatable because it is apparent that humanity as such is unable to learn their lesson from these tragic events and there is only one way of standing up to this danger. To prepare ordinary people for such danger purposefully. As it is ordinary people that have to either prevent such terrors in a crucial moment or to go through them.

Because, as Professor Bauer also said, Holocaust was an extreme situation within which no one could stand totally aside. Besides murderers and their victims there was a group of those who stood idly by. Such mass murders would have been impossible without their passivity, fear or indifference. The only group that brings a beam of light into the dark history are those who did not hesitate in the crucial moment, who made up their minds and despite

great danger and often sacrificing their own lives, provided assistance to the threatened. It is a counterbalance to the huge guilt of the murderers and partially also of those who stood by.

The awareness of such need led the President Václav Havel to the establishment of a special project in the second half of the 1990's. Its name was "Phenomenon Holocaust" and its aim was to fill in blank spaces in the historical consciousness of Czech citizens, particularly concerning the history of World War II and the genocide of Jews and Romanies. In 1999, an International Scientific Conference Phenomenon Holocaust took place in Prague and Terezín and since then, cooperation was established between the Czech Republic and the International Task Force for Coordination on Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance. Within this cooperation, a project was worked out on further education of teachers of Czech schools, which in its first phase, on an elementary level, provides knowledge of relevant topics within three-day seminars. Teachers will get acquainted with the history of Jewish and Romany settlements in the Czech lands, history of antisemitism and other racial excesses as well as with elementary information of Jewish culture, religion, Romany culture etc. The main topic is the genocide of the Jewish and Romany population.

In the second phase, those who completed these seminars have an opportunity to attend a four-day seminar. Experts from partner countries are regularly invited to participate in these four-day seminars. Their aim is to provide practical knowledge to our teachers and to inform them of pedagogical practices in other countries. Besides, lectures by a number of foreign lecturers deepen the knowledge gained up to now. Attention is also paid to one's own creative work in preparation of model lessons focusing on various possibilities of using the theme in school teaching. We already have a whole collection of such works and we are thinking of publishing them.

Last year, the third seminar, on the advanced level, took place. It was prepared in cooperation with the colleagues of the Polish State Museum in Oswiecim. The seminar was a great success, highly praised by the teachers. This year, we are preparing another seminar of this kind, to be held in Dachau, Germany. It will be attended by teachers who completed seminars on the elementary and inter-mediate levels. We would like to organize a seminar in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, possibly also a seminar in London, where two groups of our teachers have already participated.

Since the beginning of these activities, teachers enrolled in our education programmes had made up their own minds, considering our offer, whether they needed such knowledge and wanted to attend. The biggest problem is the flow of information, i.e. the efforts aimed at teachers gaining the information on such programs. Therefore information papers have been published to be distributed in all elementary and secondary schools.

Despite great success, there are still existing problems which need attention. It is in particular education of apprentices where nationalism, intolerance and liking to various extreme groups still pose serious problems. In future, it will be necessary to focus on this group of young people.