



Transition Year Module in Holocaust Studies

4. Principles to Consider

The following observations from Jean-Michel Lecomte, who was commissioned by the Council of Europe to advise on teaching the Holocaust, may also be of value to teachers reflecting on the sensitivities and complexities involved.¹ In warning of the dangers posed by overly simplistic or generalised teaching approaches, he makes the following observations:

1. Today, we know what happened and are inclined to make judgements with a hindsight that the people of the time could not. Note the example cited in this excerpt from Lecomte's address:

Pupils are looking at a snapshot taken in a street of the Warsaw ghetto in the winters of 1941/2. A man is selling books from a shabby pram to the passers-by. What comments should we make about this photograph? I propose two possible alternatives. 'Those who are going to die are still interested in books!' or 'After one year of privation, ill-treatment and confinement in the ghetto, this inquiring spirit shows that we are still human beings, still living beings'. Today we know that those people are doomed, but if we regard them as such, we ourselves take part in the dehumanisation process of the Nazis. Respect bids us draw attention to the fact that the ghetto with its ill-treatment and harsh measures had failed to make the Jews inhuman or subhuman. On the one hand we could choose a formula designed to hold the attention and strike the imagination of youngsters, but they might well do no more than feel pity or conclude that the Jews were passive and preferred books to fighting back. On the other, we have an analysis which takes account of the reality of the time. These people have not lost their human dignity although they are immured. The principle to be upheld is that of empathy with the time, empathy with history.

2. We must ask ourselves the question, who would I have been in that place and at that time and what would I have done?

The author refers to Primo Levi's thoughts on 'the grey zone', where he challenges the easy assumption that people can always be classified in a binary manner as either good or bad. Students should be challenged to put themselves in the shoes of people at the time, who experienced events as they happened, understood what was happening, were influenced by events, and reacted or failed to react to them. This requires consideration of the distinctive nature of each country affected in the light of its own diversities and particularities, where some had large, well-integrated Jewish communities and/or a strident antisemitic movement whose views were shared by the general public. Similarly, neutral countries, like Ireland, can be assessed according to degrees of indifference or good will towards either camp. It thus becomes evident to students how difficult it was to be a responsible citizen or, to echo Primo Levi, a human being. These reflections can lead students to ask if it is any easier today – what do we see? What do we not see? What do we not want to see? What are we going to do about it?

3. We must avoid the twin dangers of historicisation and sanctification

The temptation to teach students proven, unquestionable facts and to keep strictly within the limits of the past holds the danger of trivialisation, where the Holocaust is presented as a series of events bound

¹ Adapted from paper given at the Council of Europe's 90th European Teachers' Seminar, Donaueschingen, Germany, 6-10 November 2000 and published in the conference report 'Teaching about the Holocaust and the history of genocide in the 21st century'. Council of Europe Publishing. Strasbourg: 2003

in time and space. This prevents the Holocaust being a focus of learning in the context of other past and indeed future episodes of genocide. Equally, there is a danger in using words like 'unspeakable', 'inconceivable' and 'unimaginable' in describing what happened – because the reality is that the Holocaust did happen. The world continued after Auschwitz and is permeated with the fact that Auschwitz existed. In short, teachers must live in the present and steer a course between trivialisation (it is over and done with and sanctification (there is no longer anything else).