

Abridged Version: The Pedagogical Axes of the International Tracing Service (ITS)

How to remember, commemorate and discuss in an extracurricular institutional learning site¹

Abstract

Having thoroughly come to know, weigh and compare with one another the educational concepts of other memorials and sites of extracurricular learning on National Socialism, the ITS decided that its educational program shall be based on the Educational Philosophy of the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem and on the Guidelines of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)². The adaptation of the program to the ITS collections made it necessary to include, next to the Holocaust which is one central focus, other mass crimes committed by Nazi Germany (the murder of Sinti and Romani, the deportation of political opponents, etc.) as well as the authentic life stories of the survivors (Displaced Persons). Seeking to cover all the different areas, the ITS developed an axial model. The various angles in it can be seen as modules which, depending on the learning group and the goal of the respective learning unit / workshop may be increased or decreased in intensity or employed variably. The ITS deems it relevant that the individuals persecuted and murdered by Nazi Germany are integrated into a greater context allowing considerations such as leeway for action, multi-perspectivity and authenticity (versus making use of fictitious stories). Aside from the absorption of historical facts and knowledge, it is vital for learners to take the second learning step of reconstructing biographies and developing narrative competence - as interim learning result that in the best case will lead them into empathy and deriving lessons from history.

For the history of the ITS and its collections, cf.:

<http://www.its-arolsen.org/en/about-its/index.html>

<http://www.its-arolsen.org/en/archives/index.html>

¹ The text was drafted by the Department for Research Projects and Education; the first version written in 2010 was changed and adapted to the experience gathered since then.

² Former name: Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF).

Target Group

Educators and staff of curricular institutions, of extracurricular learning sites and of memorials as well as other multipliers (professional groups e.g. policemen).³

Pedagogical Centrelines

Centreline 1: The victims of National Socialism were not born as victims:

Who is the subject of our educational narrative?

Unlike historiography, pedagogy brings the individual human being to the fore of its activities. Though far from cutting out the historical background while focusing on individual stories, we take the stance that the meaning of single events can neither be grasped nor be taught if learning primarily centres on numbers, statistics and chronology.

The historical ITS documents cast light on the circumstances of people's persecution and death, or survival. The survivors themselves have made their voices heard and rendered an account of their own or their next-of-kin's persecution in the DP documents and in the case correspondence files. The central significance these files have is owed to their diametrical opposition to Nazi ideology which took every effort to dehumanise people: they do abstain from tying people to their victims' roles and show, and teach their readers to conceive, them to be individual human beings.

Centreline 2: Stories of and on Human Beings: Perpetrators and Bystanders

Though primarily directing its attention to the victims, the ITS does not fail to realise that a huge part of its files owes its creation to the existence of perpetrators and most various actors backing, taking part in and profiting by the Nazi system. And in fact it was people holding diverse positions and attending varied functions who victimised other people, humiliated them, exploited their work capacity, appropriated their belongings and murdered them. It is essential not to portray all the decision-makers and other actors responsible for the Nazi crimes as a lot of monsters or sadists. De facto they were ordinary men and women coming from all social classes. As perpetrators they managed to wholly dissociate themselves from their victims and to create a distance in the light of which they saw them as mere objects or material of either no value at all or use only for labour. Caused by stereotype opinion and manifest prejudice, that distance forced the perpetrator to cut out the "other person" from his/her view of man. And this capability of "banning the other one" enabled him/her to act as ruthlessly and efficaciously as the National Socialist ideology expected him/her to. An educational assessment of historical events that pays to this circumstance the attention it deserves will not generalize from a faceless, anonymous mass

³ Though using the male grammatical form, the text addresses both genders.

of Nazi victims, but, as a counterpoint, focus on and derive pedagogic use from individual life stories.

Centreline 3: Options to act / Actors: Helpers and Rescuers

Despite the moral failure of the civil society of the “Deutsche Reich” and most civil societies in other European countries, individuals or people who were integrated into networks able and willing to rescue or help, tried to stand by the persecuted people, be it by backing resistance activities or procuring forged identity papers, be it by offering people who had fled a hiding place, or food, be it by behaving humanely towards e.g. forced labourers. The help and assistance given – also within the victims’ groups themselves – are of utmost relevance from an educational standpoint because they show: all these helpers and rescuers assumed full responsibility for their deeds and, in general, were aware of their consequences.

Learning groups working on the helpers’ and rescuers’ aspect should be sensitized to the problem and taught to consciously reflect on and question their thoughts and deeds, to check themselves for prejudice and to conceive themselves to be individuals of their own right and as such able to take decisions and be responsible for others.

Centreline 4.1.: The Allies: Pragmatism and Welfare – Repatriation and Emigration

The role the Allies had as liberators and helpers of millions of Displaced Persons (DPs), who had survived the Nazi terror in Germany and Europe, offers educators the opportunity to impart historical background knowledge from quite a different perspective. Action the Allies took as responsible bodies in the decision situations they faced at the time bore, in many a respect, the distinct marks of the social structure prevalent in their countries of origin. By helping the survivors to establish and organize a political structure in the DP Camps, the Western Allies did more than merely offering them a safe, an un-endangered life, giving them shelter, food and clothes. Acting in accordance with the typical Western life pattern, they gave them the extra of individual liberty and allowed them to have a free press, to elect a sort of camp parliament, to go to the theatre and the cinema and to frequent libraries. By contrast to the Western Allies, the Soviet Union refused to recognize the DPs’ specific political status; accordingly the country limited social DP activities in its occupation zone to fast repatriation action.

Contextual discussions may be held on questions like: How do the files reflect the relatively restrictive immigration policy the US or the UK pursued concerning the DPs in particular consideration of the political climate prior to the creation of the state of Israel? Where do traces of welfare and moral assistance become visible? Studying the DPs’ files may advance novices in self-reliant, multi-lingual, multi-perspective learning.

Centreline 4.2.: Displaced Persons: A New Beginning

The impressive individual life stories of millions of DPs give us nowadays a telling account and example of the pains they took in the midst of destroyed Europe to seek and find their way back to their homelands, or of their persistent waiting for the chance to leave Europe for starting life afresh in Israel, the US, Canada, Australia or other countries. The variety of biographies we have for millions of DPs is of considerable educational value for exploratory learning. In view of the losses, traumata and humiliation the survivors of the Holocaust, of Nazi persecution and forced labour had suffered, the path they took was amazing: somehow gathering enough courage and will to live, they shaped their new beginning, often got married while still in the DP Camps, had children and thus laid the foundation for their new lives. They resumed the professions or jobs they had taken up before persecution or had retraining, they started new careers, they attended schools and universities, they committed themselves to playing roles on the social, political and cultural planes and thus contributed in many respects to a global restructuring after National Socialism and the Second World War. And what is more: the fates of the survivors and their return home or emigration give clear evidence on two historical facts: the aftermath of the Nazi crimes affected the world as a whole and the memory of its repercussions put down roots in the families in many states throughout the world.

Centreline 5: Passing on the People's Stories as Secondary Witnesses

Autobiographies, reports written and published by the media and the legacy of the survivors of Nazi persecution and forced labour brought out on the occasion of anniversaries or meetings time and again remind us of the survivors' wish that the wrong done to them and their murdered contemporaries shall not be forgotten and that the memory of the things that had happened to the narrators shall be carried and passed on.

Dealing with individual fates and using the ITS documents to establish a connection with the statements made by the survivors themselves and their supplementation by video and audio testimonies from other archives and institutions, learners will develop a sense of responsibility for these life stories and experiences that will turn them into secondary witnesses of the stories at last.

If you have any queries, please contact: historical-research@its-arolsen.org

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