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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

The 'special framing of hindsight': teaching the unthinkable in HRE

Polgar, M. (2018). *Holocaust and human rights education: Good choices and sociological perspectives*. UK, North America, Japan, India, Malaysia, China: Emerald Publishing. 145pp., €78.99 (print – hardcover) ISBN 978-1-78754-499-4; (online) ISBN 978-1-78754-498-7; (Epub) ISBN 978-1-978-1-78756000-0.

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Among the many reasons for teaching the Holocaust as part of human rights education, three aspects are uniquely compelling. Firstly, the Holocaust was a spectacularly evil dereliction of human rights, the scale of the slaughter far in excess of any comparable genocide. Secondly, the consequences were far-reaching, both geographically and historically. Thirdly, the Nazis systematically orchestrated their mission to eliminate all the Jews of Europe, along with others they considered undesirable. It is this last aspect that provides such a horrifying model of the consequences for people whose human rights are eroded and then stripped away. In this book, Michael Polgar sets out the incremental steps the Nazis followed:

Denial of rights was the first of four stages in the Nazi war against Jewish Europeans. Once identified (on documents and clothing), Jews were banned from government service and professional life. A racialized definition of Jewish identity, based on genealogy and not religious faith or practice, was legally established to ensure administrative distinctions were possible. Inter-marriages were forbidden in 1935. As German power and jurisdiction expanded, so too did the scale of human rights abuses. (p. 4)

Thus did the Nazis reduce their chosen targets to vermin, unworthy of life: Jews; Roma and Sinti; Jehovah's Witnesses; LGBT people; individuals considered physically or mentally impaired. All became helpless and defenceless, but also beyond or undeserving of the help or protection of others.

Why then does Dr Polgar spend a good part of the book arguing why we should teach the Holocaust in HRE? Is it because in his extensive references, he has found only one study (Bromley and Russell, 2010) whose title directly links the two (although many flag up citizenship and global education)? Or has being the self-declared son and grandson of Holocaust survivors made him unnecessarily defensive? He himself says that hindsight has given him a 'special framing... we have learned to see our family's grim experience as part of history' (p. xi), and that his reasons for teaching the Holocaust are 'prevention' and 'reparation.' Many survivors tell remarkably similar stories about quickly discovering that no one wanted to hear about their experiences, and consequently remaining silent for decades afterwards.

Polgar notes that it was only in 1972 that the Holocaust first appeared on a school curriculum – predictably in Germany, where it is still mandatory.

Once Polgar moves on to what to teach about and how to teach it, his humanity and insight illuminate the book. Chapter 3 offers five modes or perspectives for how to teach what he calls this ‘industrialized violence’: Learning about the Holocaust; Learning from the Holocaust; Education about the Holocaust; Education for human rights; and Education about human rights. He then combines two of his educational modes, suggesting that ‘history is more “real” when we see or visit Holocaust settings’ (p. 38).

Chapter 4 is concerned with humanising the victims of the killings. Polgar urges that their lives, cultures and contributions as German citizens should be taught about in Holocaust education, that the teaching be contextualized and age-appropriate. Students should first see the Jews as they had been: part of the fabric of life in Germany, living in the community and following many professions and occupations. Interestingly, Polgar identifies the Holocaust as the driver for the international laws that were passed in the 1940s to define genocide as a crime.

The chapter positioning Holocaust education in the context of multicultural education and cultural studies asks many questions about getting Holocaust education onto the US curriculum. For example: ‘Can we expand our curricula without sparking less constructive arguments, especially over migration and national inclusion, which irritate many pundits and aggravate mean-spirited public debates?’ (p. 79). More questions follow, but they remain unanswered. I began to wonder whether Polgar sees the subject of the Holocaust as having to compete for space in the curriculum with other topics of inclusion and social justice. He even discusses the possibility of teaching through Nazi propaganda. He is on safer ground when warning about the cultural misrepresentation that is caused by Holocaust denial – importantly, as denial is not yet a criminal offence in the US, as it is in 15 European countries.

The author returns in Chapter 6 to the how of teaching through the perspectives of those who were victimised, even though their voices are painful to hear, and discusses the significant roles played by bystanders, and by the upstanders – the righteous. This section, as well as the preface and the closing chapter, is among the strongest in the book.

In the last chapter Polgar reviews many teaching resources – literature, museums and websites – that are now available ‘where once there was only anguished silence’ (p.112). He usefully evaluates UNESCO’s Global and Comparative Studies, several museums in the US, and others in Europe that are accessible online, such as the ‘location museums’ sited near death camps. He tries to look beyond the US, citing Cesarani, Cowan, Gilbert and Kushner, but I searched in vain for Trudi Levi, Eva Schloss or any other British survivors who not only published their stories but continued giving talks in schools and colleges well into their eighties. It is fitting, however, that one of the last resources Polgar features is that provided by the Descendants of Survivors group, whose members are, like the author himself, taking up the baton. Michael Polgar is extremely well informed, but he can stray from his immediate point, despite all his structuring and sub-headings; and the index is not always helpful.

His sensitivity is admirable but there is a tentativeness that is not apparent in the school presentations or publications of the survivors I know. For readers looking for further guidance on teaching about the Holocaust, I would propose

Supple's (1998) *From Prejudice to Genocide: Learning about the Holocaust*, a resource that is adept in avoiding the pitfalls Polgar warns against. The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam also suggests ways in which learning about the Holocaust can be linked constructively to contemporary questions, including antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, homophobia and inclusive citizenship (<https://www.annefrank.org/en/education/>). Perhaps, as we move further from the Nazi era and therefore need to learn about the Holocaust in the context of present-day injustices, this is the way we can expect it to be taught as part of human rights education in the twenty-first century.

References

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