SURVEYING TEACHER'S EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS IN RELATIONS TO HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

From 1999 to 2006, **Eva Fried** worked within the Prime Minister's Offices. She was part of the teams that planned and conducted the four conferences that comprised "The Stockholm International Forum Conferences". Within the Ministry of Culture she also participated in the preparation of the establishment of the government authority the Living History Forum, which was established in 2003. Eva Fried is also the editor of the book *Beyond the 'Never Agains'*, published in 2005.

ABSTRACT

The Living History Forum is a government agency commissioned with the task of promoting issues relating to tolerance, democracy and human rights. Taking the Holocaust as its point of departure, it was established with the objective of initiating and promoting studies of tolerance and human rights. It works under the Ministry of Culture. The basic aim of the agency is to encourage people's readiness to work for the equal value of all human beings.

In 2007, the Living History Forum performed a survey of teachers in order to assess their attitudes towards work related to the history of the Holocaust, and their views on the prospects of accomplishing such work successfully. When the results of this survey were presented, a number of important issues emerged, many of which will be used as guidelines for ongoing work at the Living History Forum. However, when the results were communicated, one specific topic was the focus of attention from the media; in the questionnaire, a number of items were included that were specifically aimed at probing the level of knowledge of the history of the Holocaust among the teachers. Many teachers, led by the Association of History Teachers, felt that through the Living History Forum's survey, they had been identified as ignorant regarding the subject of History in general, and the history of the Holocaust in particular.

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to clarify whether the attitudes of different actors gener-ate reluctance to teaching and learning about the Holocaust, which impairs the efforts put into Holocaust education and jeopardizes the importance of such edu-cation. A discussion about why knowledge issues were given significance in a survey about teachers' attitudes to teaching the Holocaust is presented below.

THE SWEDISH TEACHERS' SURVEY

The survey's principal objective was that of charting whether, and to what extent, the attitudes of different actors in schools—teachers, school management, students and parents—create and maintain opposition to teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

The questionnaire was also intended to measure other relevant factors, such as the time spent on teaching about the Holocaust, training provided for the teachers, the availability of teaching material, and the teacher's own knowledge about the subject.

The questionnaire includes the following themes:

- the training teachers have for the teaching of the subject;
- their own attitude towards the subject;
- how important and interesting they consider the subject to be;
- the time dedicated to Holocaust education;
- the teacher's own level of knowledge;
- the attitudes teachers perceive among students and their parents, among colleagues and school management, and with regard to the subject;
- influences from external factors, such as guilt issues, competing subjects, etc.

In 2004, a proposal was submitted to the ITF (International Taskforce for Co-operation in Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance) for an investigation into how the presence of Muslim students in a class influences teaching about the Holocaust. This idea was regarded as being more than a little prejudiced by most of the experts at the ITF. However, the proposal led to a discussion about the need for a broader study of how the different member countries teach the Holocaust, as well as the aims of and the obstacles to implementing Holocaust education in the various educational environments within the ITF.

Sweden came to take a leading role in the planning of a project that aimed at getting as many member countries as possible to carry out a survey within their school systems. A dedicated working group was established, which consisted of historians, sociologists and educational experts. When the Swedish study began, in 2007, the thesis was that a declining interest in the Holocaust existed, and that Holocaust fatigue was being experienced and expressed by students, teachers and parents. When the study was complete it was apparent that none of this was correct. Instead, there is a fairly positive picture of this area of teaching.

The data on which the report is based was collected in 2007. The gross sample consisted of 10,000 teachers from different stages of the Swedish school system, beginning with 4th to 6th grade in comprehensive school up to upper secondary school. The survey was conducted by Anders Lange, Professor Em. Stockholm University, and carried out by Statistics Sweden (SCB). The response rate was a rather low one, 51.5% (point) and generated 5081 respondents. The questionnaire was finalized by Anders Lange in co-operation with Christer Mattsson, Project Manager at the Living History Forum, responsible for international contacts in the field of Holocaust education and a member of the Education Working Group within the ITF.

EDUCATION THAT AIMS TO MAKE AN IMPACT

History can provide explanations for the present day and perspectives on the future. Society doesn't exist at the end of history and our time has not achieved perfection. There is no such thing as a value neutral society. Our experience of present society and our time's notions of the future have a significant effect on how we depict our history. In addition, a vision of a future ideal society has the potential to transform people's ideas of equal value into concrete action.

As we all know, the Holocaust, as a historical phenomenon, touches upon a number of deep-seated questions relating to, amongst other things, morality, ethics, guilt, collective and individual responsibility, "human nature" and social conditions that facilitate—or obstruct—systematic mass murder and other crimes against humanity.

It is against this background that we should understand the Living History Forum (FLH) and this authority's commission. As a government authority, like other public authorities in Sweden—including Swedish universities, colleges and most of the Swedish school system—we have a political commission to accomplish. This is clearly defined in the constitution, which states: "The public institutions shall promote the ideals of democracy as guidelines in all sectors of society…". Every year, this is expressed in the appropriation direction that the government, via the Ministry of Culture, sends to our authority.

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Our commission, based on the history of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity, is to reinforce belief in the equal value of all people. This commission's logic rests on the knowledge that Nazi Germany, the Second World War and the Holocaust have manifestly changed the

conditions for public discussion of racism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, democracy and genocide.

Like many institutions in Europe and other places around the world, the Living History Forum embraces the notion that all those who study this period of history will draw conclusions that influence their personal actions in a way that benefits a tolerant humanism. Two different perspectives can be discerned in this shared fundamental thesis. One aims to try to influence by exposing the recipient to a fairly brutal but short-term depiction of parts of history; this depiction is intended to make a strong impact and provide something of a shock effect. It should show the extreme consequences of an intolerant society. This perspective rests on the belief that the powerful experience to which the student should act as a vaccination against values that are undesirable. The other perspective is focused on arousing the students' interest in more in-depth historical studies. This way of working with Holocaust history places more faith in the individual's ability to see the context, make an analysis and draw his or her own conclusions.

This latter perspective is undoubtedly the one most closely linked to FLH, though a working method that is based on this perspective presupposes that those working with history are motivated, knowledgeable and working in an environment that provides the necessary resources in the shape of time and other framing factors. This understanding is something that we share with many colleagues from institutions in countries represented in the ITF. Education should be given space that allows the individual student's own analysis of the various processes and the course of events. Our outlook is that this is the only way in which the history of the Holocaust can also serve an instrumental purpose and lead to a deeper understanding of democracy, personal responsibility and, to some extent, general insights as well.

SURVEY DESIGN

When planning the study we assessed that it was essential that it would target more teachers than those teaching History. There were two reasons for this: partly, there was reason to believe that it is not only History teachers who teach the Holocaust, and partly, it was interesting to know what other teachers thought about this subject in order to provide an idea of how the subject is generally perceived by teachers. Additionally, we chose to measure other indirectly influential factors, such as job satisfaction and attitudes to a number of social phenomena. We also chose to measure the teachers' level of knowledge as regards the history of the Holocaust.

Because the FLH emphasises the importance of more in-depth historical expertise in order to be able to undertake meaningful teaching about the Holocaust, we were also interested in the connection between how teachers defined their aims regarding their teaching and the depth of their knowledge. Also of interest was the connection between level of knowledge and motivation, education, continuing education and time allocation.

The study indicates that teachers in general, and History teachers in particular, embrace the thesis that knowledge of the history of the Holocaust can increase understanding of democracy, personal responsibility and, to some extent, offer general insight. However, our opinion is that one condition for achieving this effect is that the teacher has a fundamental understanding of how a terror regime, such as the Nazi regime, can come to power, and the influence and responsibility borne by the individual. On the basis of this approach, a number of questions were formulated with the aim of measuring teachers' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust's processes and effects.

As the survey was sent directly to the teachers, we ensured that the questions in our study were not readily answerable using reference material. The questions were deliberately designed to be relatively difficult in order to provide a basis for a nuanced analysis. Naturally, simple questions that anyone could answer would not fulfill any function as there would be no difference between the answers from a history professor or a member of the public. This meant the questions had to be designed to show a bedifference, which is fully comprehensible to anyone who has ever graded examinations.

One difficulty in designing knowledge questions is ensuring that the questions are relevant. In this context, relevant means that they should be relevant as regards the history of the Holocaust. But, bearing in mind our approach to this history study and its opportunity for an instrumental purpose, they should also be relevant to the commission to allow history to provide perspectives on general issues, as well as those that can result in conclusions about the processes behind the Holocaust.

ASSESSMENT OF THE KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

One question in the survey was about the degree of non-compulsion in the soldiers that took part in the mass killings. The question was: "Many Germans took part in the German forces' killing of civilian Jews during the Holocaust. If someone were to refuse to take part in the executions, according to what you know, what would have happened to that person?"

If one believes that a person would, in any circumstances, be executed (which half of the teachers did) one can hardly hold a discussion about this person's moral responsibility. But the reality is that we now know that, in general, nothing particular happened to those who refused to take part in the killing (four percent knew this). The fact that genocide in general, and the Holocaust in particular,

requires voluntary participation from the level of the highest command down to the individual killers, should be considered a basic piece of historical knowledge if the mediation of history is to function in the way we wish.

When designing this type of question for the survey, there was the reasoning that this type of knowledge is something one either possesses or one does not. It is possible to forget or mix facts, without being able to maintain that there is a serious lack of knowledge, but it indicates a lack of insight if one mixes up important causal connections within historiography.

The question referred to above is naturally more important than whether the teacher believes that Bergen-Belsen was a death camp instead of a concentration camp. Thus, in evaluating the answers, we have given the different questions different weightings. The assessment of wrong answers is thus valued differently depending on the nature of the question and its relevance to the teacher's insight in the course of events that comprise the history of the Holocaust. Therefore, we gave a wrong answer to the Bergen-Belsen question a low weighting.

Another question in the survey that gave rise to some discussion when the questionnaire was discussed, particularly from the teachers, was the proportion of Jewish children that were murdered during the Holocaust. The correct figure is 91% to 93%. We believe that it is unimportant to know this exact figure off by heart, as it is easy to look up the figure and get updated before teaching a class. We therefore had broad answer alternatives (0-20%, 21-40%, 41-60%, 61- 80% and 81-100%) and the right alternative would, according to our perspective, provide a good indication of whether someone had adequate understanding of that fact.

The reason that, in most places in Europe, Jewish culture has disappeared is naturally due to the systematic killing of children. If half of the children had survived, the result of this genocide would have had a different historical significance compared with what it is now. This knowledge is thus not marginal, but absolutely fundamental to understanding the extent of the Holocaust.

Another question that was discussed is about which year the first mass arrests of Jews took place; the right answer is 1938 (Krystalnacht). Several critics have protested that it is not important to memorise all the years, as one can look them up before a class. It is true that one updates details before a class, but we can assume that most people are aware that Hitler came to power in 1933, or at the beginning of the 1930s. If one believes that the mass arrests of Jews began then, one doesn't have enough insight into how the Nazis proceeded to change Germany from a democracy to a dictatorship. There were a number of groups who were subject to mass arrest by the Nazis before the Jews, which was a precondition for the Holocaust being able to take place. Even though it is desirable that a teacher is able to answer 1938 without hesitating, as a History teacher one should at least understand that it was at the end of the 1930s and not at the beginning. We have therefore weighted an answer of 1939 as a lesser mistake than answering 1933.

"Many Germans took part in the German forces."

We have weighted a question's importance with the degree of error to a total index of 1-5, where the figures 1 and 2 presume a very wrong answer to several questions and not just mixing up a year or two.

One important experience provided by the study is that teachers are not only absorbed in the history of the Holocaust as a subject, but they express that there exists a neglected need for skills development in this subject. What we can prove is that there is an apparent link between access to education, both basic and further education, and the individual teacher's level of knowledge. This knowledge is not targeting teachers, but instead supports them in their demands for qualitative continuing education in the subject.

SOME IMPORTANT RESULTS

Perhaps the most important thing indicated by this survey is the fact that, in general, teachers believe that education about the Holocaust is very important.

The teachers were asked whether they believe that teaching the Holocaust is different in some regard from areas in subjects such as History and Social Studies. The answers show that half the teachers consider this work to be as important as other areas; 47.2 percent think it is more important.

We have also discovered that most teachers in Sweden believe that teaching the Holocaust functions as an opener for discussions and teaching that touches on broader ethical and moral issues.

A huge majority of the teachers—83.7 percent—believe that teaching the Holocaust arouses more moral and ethical questions than other areas.

Another important lesson—at which we had guessed, but of which we now received clear indications, is that there is a strong connection between knowledge of the Holocaust and how much education on the subject one received at teacher training college.

The survey also shows that students are quite motivated in learning about the Holocaust. More than half the teachers (52.7 percent) report that the students' motivation is high. More than a third state that it is average and only 4.5 percent believe that it is low. 78.8 percent of the respondents have not noticed "Holocaust fatigue" in their students.

As regards the Living History Forum's commission, it is significant that the study indicates that teachers in general, and History teachers in particular, embrace the thesis that knowledge of the history of the Holocaust can increase our understanding of democracy, personal responsibility and, to some extent, general insight. Our conviction that one condition for achieving this effect is that the teacher has a fundamental understanding of the scope of the Holocaust, its effects, and the preconditions which allowed it to take place. The teacher must also have his or her own understanding of how a terror regime, like the Nazi regime, can come to power, as well as the influence and responsibility of the individual. The results of the survey have in no way given cause to reassess this point of view.

One lesson learned from the survey responses is that there is reason for the Living History Forum to increase work targeted at teacher training courses, in order to encourage them to invest more in the area of Holocaust education.

NOTES

This text is based on an article by Eskil Franck, Executive Director of the Living History Forum, and Christer Mattsson. Adapted and edited by Eva Fried, International Relations Co-ordinator at the Living History Forum.

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