1. Why Did People Act as They Did?

Genocide and education, do these two go together? In other words, can pupils be educated about genocide? Although asking the question is valid, trying to find an answer is a waste of time. Why? Because teaching about genocide is a must!

If we as an international community have deemed it important to draft a Genocide Convention to try to prevent genocides, then education is a matter of course. The contemplation of people and the world, which is the basis of this Convention, is the same as the essence of education—history teaching. For, the most essential question one can ask about the past is: Why did people act as they did? And if this question to the past can be asked at all, it is certainly the case regarding genocide.

Thus, we can leave the why-question, and direct all attention to the question how and in which way this education could or should take form.

The starting point of my contribution is the presence of authentic places of persecution, especially those of the Holocaust. But in principle the educational story about other genocides is not a different one.

2. A Limit to Age?

Before going further into this matter, I wish to make a few observations on the public about whom we must speak. These comments relate to the ages of the public and the place of performing the educational activities.

Education is often defined as the activities developed and executed on behalf of the regular education, for children and adolescents of school-age. However, in my vision, education has to be put in a broader perspective; it should also be aimed at adults, individuals and also groups like military personnel, doctors, teachers or policemen. In other words, there is no upper limit to age as regards education.

However, and this is my second age-related point, one should place a question-mark regarding an under-age limit. I am of the opinion that we, as professionals in Holocaust and Genocide-education, lie down much too easy for an under-age limit. Simply the fact that this age can differ in several countries indicates that there is no...
consensus to be found. In some countries, an organized school-visit to a museum or memorial, related to the Holocaust, is not done under the age of fourteen years, whilst in the Netherlands in general an age-limit of ten years is observed. But even for me this age is not absolute.

In the Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre, we have in recent years designed projects for children in the age-group between six and ten years. It has been proven that this is possible, only the level of treatment of the subject and the form in which this is done, is, of course, different from that for a twelve-year-old child.

3. Performing Places

The place where educational programs are performed, are often seen as taking place within the walls of a museum or a memorial or on the authentic place of persecution. I will address the first as a matter of course and the second as an exception.

My first point here is that it is far too often taken for granted that education has to take place in a museum building. Educators should wonder rather how the visit to the authentic place of persecution could be placed in the centre. And by this, I do not mean this should be in the usually form of a one hour or more tour, with only a transmission of facts and figures, or horrible stories.

Far too much meaning is given to this in all countries employing this much used method, while the value of a lasting transmission of information is very doubtful. I shall come back to the educational use of the authentic place later on.

A second remark in this respect is that education should not be restricted to the museum or memorial building and the present place of persecution itself. The education should be extramural and in a broader context. Educational Holocaust and Genocide programs, especially those designed for pupils, should also include components that can be performed in schools, to prepare for a visit to a memorial and/or an authentic place, to working up to a visit, and to serve as implementation for this visit. Thus, these programs follow the generally accepted teaching-principle: introduction – gist – working up.

Finally, museums and memorials also have the educational task to develop programs and projects that can be used in schools, without the pupils paying a visit to a place of persecution.

4. Educational Objectives

Now, I come to the educational objectives and didactic methods.

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1 Camp Westerbork was a concentration camp in the Netherlands during World War II. The Nazi occupying forces deported 102,000 Jews via this transit camp. The camp was originally built in 1939 by the Dutch government as a Central Refugee Camp for Jews fleeing Germany. In 1942, it became a transit camp headed by the SS. From July of that year, the Dutch Jews, German refugees, 245 Sinti and Roma and dozens of resistance fighters were deported from this ‘hell’s gate’ to death camps such as Auschwitz and Sobibor. Only 5,000 of those deported returned alive.