

Holocaust education in dialogue

Reflecting on the “Shared Memories – Collective Action” initiative

Between the 2nd and 9th of April 2006, a delegation of 35 young men and women met in Rwanda to visit sites of the 1994 genocide, meet with survivors, and engage in a dialogue of memories. The group, sponsored by the World Jewish Congress's future generations division, was composed of Jewish young adults from Europe, US, S. Africa, Israel, Rwandan students living in Belgium and French PHD students specializing in studies of extreme violence and genocide. Among the participants were a survivor from Cambodia, Bosnia and a Holocaust survivor, John Friendsman, who was liberated from the Bergen Belsen camp when he was only 5 years old. This fact-finding mission gave the birth to a new and creative initiative called:

“Shared Memories – Collective Action: A Fact finding Mission to Rwanda”.

From the perspective of fostering young Jewish leadership, the initiative was a success at many levels. It hopefully represents the beginning of a long-term process, which will engage Jewish young adults in programs related to Holocaust education, the fight against Anti-Semitism, and genocide prevention.

Developing new approaches to Holocaust education is vitally important to keep young Jewish and non-Jewish people interested in the issue, as well as to encourage them to take real action.

The workshop:

Suggested speakers:

Four participants from the delegation that returned from Rwanda will run a workshop on the third day of the seminar during the session on "The Uniqueness of the Shoah in the Context of Genocide: the Educational Objectives". The workshop will be hosted and prepared by Dan Schreiber (Belgium), coordinator of the national Holocaust education pilot project "Schools for Democracy".

Title of workshop:

"Holocaust education in dialogue: sharing memories and fostering action."

Background:

The world today acknowledges the fact that the Holocaust was a unique event in the history of mankind, and the most horrific proof the human capabilities to exterminate other people.

As the third generation of Holocaust survivors, Jewish young adults bear the responsibility and obligation to be knowledgeable, assist and convey their experience to survivors and victims of other genocides that took place in history, some in the second half of the previous century (Rwanda, Cambodia, etc.).

Young Jews feel that in order to learn about their own history, as well as teach it to their non-Jewish peers in countries around the world, they must engage in dialogue and unite in collective action with other young people.

In order to achieve that goal, young students, educators and professionals should be knowledgeable about atrocities perpetrated against other peoples. This mutual bond encourages young people to reach out, learn together and most importantly take collective action against potential genocides.

Purpose of workshop:

To explain the mind-set of today's young Jews and non-Jews towards the classic ways of teaching the history of the Holocaust. Young Jews today often feel trapped between the importance of learning about their own history (the Holocaust) and educating their non-Jewish peers about and heighten sensitive to this issue. The Holocaust is perceived by many as a "Jewish matter" rather than a universal one. It is imperative to learn and teach about the Holocaust, but make others want to learn about it and take action against racist, xenophobic and Anti-Semitic acts that still take place around the world.

Method:

The speakers will discuss their experience as young Jews in Rwanda and describe how this experience strengthened their desire to learn more about their past. They will stress that the issue of the Holocaust was ever present in their consciousness in Rwanda.

The audience will be asked to debate the question of teaching other genocides as a means to learn more about the Holocaust. The objective will be a paper outlining what can be done to actively engage future Jewish generations in taking an active role in raising the issue of genocide prevention on the world stage.