

On behalf of “Police, Administration and Responsibility”
Memorials of concentration camps and a “scene of crime desk” in the midst of
Germany: Prevention through keeping alive the memory of the past? Impact
assessment and discussions on values

Memories also of the Perpetrators?

Holocaust as a process based on job-sharing: research and learning in a
typical German authority

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Germany

„All this, all this cruelty, senselessness and inhumanity, is part of the German history, our history. While “history” means past, this distance in terms of time must not result in the agony of the victims and the crimes of the perpetrators being forgotten or in the past being remembered in a way which is meaningless for the presence. This means for everyone of us: open your mouth and object whenever somebody tells a joke involving Jews or grumbles about the Islam, about Turks, Poles, Russians, Italians or Blacks. Do not keep mum when someone pleads in favour of Hitler, explain when someone fails to understand where the hatred for strange civilizations may lead to. These are the ideas we have to pass on, or else the day will come that we are this strange and menacing people which has to be fought against.“

This plea was pronounced by a young German girl, age 17, summarizing her ideas after a visit to Bergen-Belsen, the memorial on the site of the former POW and concentration camp in north-west Germany. The young girl is one of nearly 2000 students who went to see concentration camp memorials in Germany and abroad as part of the seminar project “Learning from history?!” This innovative offer aims at pointing out different ways of education, departing from the traditional concepts of education based on shock or reformation. It is co-organized by the municipal *Geschichtsort* (historic place) *Villa ten Hompel* and the *Katholisch-Soziale Akademie Franz-Hitze-Haus* and the *Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft* (German-Israeli Association) in Münster.

Depending on the time available and the arrangement which the participating classes and course members wish for their program, the extracurricular teaching units are linked with e.g. a trip to Bergen-Belsen or an excursion to Buchenwald. In addition, research and work is done in the permanent exhibition of the Villa ten Hompel under the heading “By proxy. Police, Administration and Responsibility”. During World War II the Villa ten Hompel was a German administrative agency and as such accommodated Nazi “*Schreibtischtäter*” (the German term for the masterminds behind the crimes) from the ranks of the police. They made, among other things, the arrangements for deportations and so-called “*weltanschauliche Schulungen*” (ideological training courses), established police battalions. Thus, they provided the personnel and logistics for the cruel events of mass murder and prosecution behind the lines.

With the sources as to these aspects of the tyranny and occupation regime the project provides the first means of access to the historical events. The target group are students from about 15 years of age upward. This cooperation project, which is unique in Germany, is continually incorporating experience from the seminar work with professional groups. E.g. the fiscal authorities (Oberfinanzdirektionen) or the police in the largest German Land Northrhine-Westfalia uses the Villa ten Hompel as an authentic teaching and historical place for “theme days”, i.e. for specific access to the history of their own institution. The workshop will also deal with this segment of historical and political education against oblivion, against violence and xenophobia.

In Germany both the social and the specific didactical and educational debate about projects such as “Learning from history?!” moves at present between two poles which are far away from each other. Either high expectations and noble educational demands, which in practise can scarcely be fulfilled, seem to be linked to educational offers including a visit to a Nazi memorial. Or people question the sense and the value of such seminar projects in principle, e.g. when teachers or political decision-makers make comments suggesting something like “Has there not been enough talk about it?”

Feed-back to and scientific evaluation of the project show that both positions – educational overload and alleged satiation of young people with the subject of national socialism – do not seem to be correct nor to conform with the reality of a target and age group-oriented method of conveying history. Part of the results will be put on the agenda of the workshop for discussion. In this respect a set of methods, tips, ideas and impulses will be of particular importance for the educational practice; in addition there will be an exchange of opinions and experience in respect of the following questions and issues:

- Arguments concerning the question whether and, if so, how racist, anti-semitic and extremist attitudes or of the readiness to resort to violence, existing in parts of society, can be prevented by remembering the mass crimes and human rights violations occurred in the “century of extremes”. What possibilities exist and where are the limitations?
- As to the imperative of incorporation and consideration of the most recent research: The focus is deliberately put on the activities of police and administration under the Hitler regime. For example concentration camps must not be depicted as “isolated islands of crime”. It must rather be shown the extent to which the holocaust was a process based on cooperation, supported and accelerated by a number of agencies and authorities in Germany and in the occupied areas. In this context highly explosive issues are the analysis of responsibilities and powers of discretion, the question of the relationship between the masterminds behind the crimes and the immediate perpetrators and the “totally normal men” at the front and in the rear military area. Is this perspective, the look at motivations and mentalities of the perpetrators, a taboo or else a significant subject, which should be paid more attention in the field of historical and political education?
- “Before the past vanishes....”As to the problem of the historicist approach in the 3rd, 4th and the following generations or the authenticity of many former camp sites. In some parts there is a lack of visibility. An example is Bergen-Belsen; the concentration camp

memorial is being restructured, a process which is scheduled to be finished by 2006.

- As to the claim of conveying knowledge about everyday life in the camp and the hierarchy within the concentration camp in accordance with the present state of knowledge. Up-to-date studies and findings relating to the internal structure of the concentration camps normally give a most ambivalent picture (not only *active* perpetrators and *passive* victims, on the contrary also self-assertion, solidarity, opposition within the groups of prisoners, on the other hand collaboration, terrorism, oppression within the so-called *Kapo* (overseers) system).
- As to the special challenges in view of demographical change: How do people related to a background of migration approach the western or the specific German way to cultivate the memory of the past? Is the brown regime of violence even a historical burden for the entire “House of Europe”? How do the generations of today in the enlarged European Union deal with the past and with genocide? Do the NS memorials change into “horrible museums”?