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**Engaging with Holocaust Education
in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

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Engaging with Holocaust Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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This paper will examine the history of, and rationale for, the integration of Holocaust History into the national South African school curriculum and the challenges and opportunities which the inclusion has presented in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. It will interrogate the question of how it came about that the study of the Holocaust was included in the National South African Schools Curriculum. In what way has this served as a catalyst for engaging in South Africa's own history of a racial state? These questions will be explored in the course of this article.

Establishment of a Holocaust Centre in Africa

On the eve of the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the Anne Frank Centre (Amsterdam), breaking its boycott of South Africa during the apartheid years, accepted an invitation to send the exhibition *Anne Frank in the World* to South Africa. The exhibition toured eight major cities and was seen by thousands of South Africans from all backgrounds and strata. To underscore the message of the exhibition and its plea for greater understanding and acceptance of differences, a smaller ancillary exhibition *Apartheid and Resistance* was devised by the Mayibuye Centre of the University of the Western Cape. This exhibition helped to contextualize the story of Anne Frank in South Africa's own history of racial discrimination and oppression.

The impact of the eighteen month-long travelling exhibition was profound. It appeared to open a new discussion around racism. For the first time most South Africans who saw the exhibition were exposed to the concept that racism is not a black/white issue alone but is rooted in prejudices experienced across the globe. A teacher who brought a busload of school children to visit the exhibition in Cape Town made the following tell-tale remark:

You have no idea how important this experience has been for the self-esteem of my students. You see, this is the first time that my students have understood that a person can be discriminated against even if he does not have a black skin.¹

¹ In a comment to Myra Osrin, Founder of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, when the exhibition was shown at the Iziko South African National Art Gallery.

Such visitor feedback clearly demonstrated the potential for Holocaust education in the new South Africa to challenge conceptions of racial prejudice, and the abuses of extreme power. This provided a context for fulfilling the vision of the founding committee of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre: the creation of a powerful tool for social transformation.² The study of Holocaust history provides a prism through which South Africans are able to engage with human rights violations. The study of the past provides a framework for confronting the many forms of prejudice which, even today, remain latent challenges within South African society.

Dealing with prejudice in the context of South African history remains difficult because of its immediacy and legacy in both time and space. However, the history of the Holocaust, so removed from the South African experience, helps people gain distance from their own predicament. This helps them to engage not only with the past but also the pressing needs of a still deeply wounded society.³ The South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation (SAHGF) exhibition reflects these connections but also complicates them. Thus, the first panel of the Holocaust Centre exhibitions in South Africa reflects the legacy of racial theory with particular reference to the apartheid experience. The use of visual cues through artefacts and photographs in the exhibition establishes strong parallels to the latter panels in the exhibition that directly deal with Nazi Germany. This may be seen through the reference to identity documents which black South Africans were forced to carry, photographs reflecting the separate amenities of benches, and the inclusion of legislation that served as the building blocks of apartheid laws, which were reminiscent of the Nuremberg Laws. For any South African with knowledge or memory of their national history, the exhibition experience therefore becomes profoundly personal. However, the exhibition makes explicit the disconnection between the two histories and in so doing retains the historical integrity of both.

Engaging with the Formal Education Structures

From the outset the Cape Town Holocaust Centre's education team worked hand in hand with the Western Cape Regional Department of Education to develop a Holocaust education programme for schools, classroom support materials and how to use the exhibition as a

² L. Pollack, *A Place of Memory, a Place of Learning: The First 10 years of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre*. 2009.

³ Nates, T, *Teaching the Holocaust in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Issues and Challenges*. UNESCO Conference, May 2009. Combating Intolerance, Exclusion and Violence through Holocaust Education.

teaching tool.⁴ This was a crucial decision which reflected the understanding that the Centre could serve not only as a memorial, but that it also had to be a place of learning. There is no doubt that the existence and impact of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre profoundly influenced the decision of the national school curriculum designers to include the study of the Holocaust.⁵

The manipulation of the education system had been a key component in the apartheid regime's process of creating a racial state. Schools reflected the broader South African society in that they were divided along racial lines defined in terms of colour into four separate Departments of Education. Whichever group you were defined as belonging to by the apartheid state impacted upon the quality of the education you received and the resources which the state allotted to your education. The majority of the population – those classified as black – received totally inadequate and inferior facilities in overcrowded conditions, taught by under-qualified and poorly trained teachers. It is clear that the content of the curriculum, which differed according to the racial classification, was carefully designed to perpetuate the divisions in society and the expectations and aspirations of pupils.

It is no wonder therefore that one of the key tasks confronting the first democratically elected South African government in 1994 was to dismantle both nearly 50 years of apartheid education and the nearly 300 years of colonial education which had preceded it. South Africa's Constitution and Bill of Rights informs and underpins the new curriculum.

The School Curriculum

The curriculum designers felt that the inclusion of the Holocaust as a case study of human rights abuse was very important, given that the curriculum was to be based on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. This in turn was directly influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which had arisen out of World War II and the knowledge of the Holocaust. The protection and enhancement of human rights informs the central philosophy of the Constitution, to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights”.⁶

⁴ The development of education resources is an ongoing project presently comprising a DVD with historical overview and survivor testimonies; learner's resource book; teacher's manual and a poster set. See M. Silbert and D. Wray, *The Holocaust: Lessons for Humanity, Learners Interactive Resource Book*, 2010, 2nd ed.

⁵ Interview with Gail Weldon, former Chief Curriculum Advisor (History) WCED (19 April 2012).

⁶ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Preamble, 1.

The resultant curriculum is one which has human rights at its core, “ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of our population” and, “Human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice; infusing the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.”⁷

The commitment of the South African post-apartheid government to Holocaust Education is evinced by the fact that it is included in the Grade 9 curriculum. Grade 9 is the last year of compulsory schooling and the last where the study of history is compulsory. From 2007 every high school learner in South Africa will have had to be taught about the Holocaust. The importance of the study of Holocaust accorded by the National Department of Education is further indicated in the 15 hours allocated to its study. This is second only to the amount of time given to the study of apartheid.⁸

The Challenges in the National Education Arena

There are some anomalies in the South African political and educational arena which pose particular challenges to the teaching of the Holocaust in the South African context. When the subject was first introduced into the curriculum, teachers had little or no knowledge of the Holocaust. For many South Africans, any European history is approached with a degree of scepticism as it is often viewed with the devastating impact of colonialism in mind.

Other hindrances towards effective implementation of a Holocaust history syllabus are the enduring effects of apartheid inequalities which are to be found in education, including inadequate infrastructure and amenities, especially in poor communities, inadequate training for teachers, high levels of poverty and unemployment, and the debilitating effects of illness and premature death (especially as a result of HIV and AIDS). The SAHGF, as the major service provider of teacher training in the country, has had to find ways to work, even in the most affected rural communities.

South Africa has eleven official languages. The language of instruction, English, is often the second or third language for teachers and learners. Workshops for teachers and learners are usually conducted in English but, where possible, the SAHGF makes use of mother tongue speakers to augment the discussion. The SAHGF’s education team now

⁷ National Curriculum Statement and Assessment Policy Statement for Social Sciences (January 2011), 3.

⁸ See National Department of Education, C2005 Revised National Curriculum Statement, and Department of Basic Education Republic of South Africa, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), 2010.

includes facilitators who are proficient in, or are mother tongue speakers, of English, IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and Zulu.

Holocaust Education in South Africa

In accordance with the guidelines of the National Department of Education, the SAHGF's approach to teacher education is based on the notion that while content knowledge of the Holocaust is vital, providing educators and learners with content alone is not enough. Workshops run by SAHGF teachers reflect upon the creation of identity, assessing societal influences on the individual that sow the seeds of prejudice, ignorance and racism. The programmes encourage social awareness and activism and an awareness of the choices which people have and the consequences of those choices.

The curriculum underlines the choices and responsibilities faced by everyone in their personal capacity, and looks at a spectrum of human behaviour as envisaged through Holocaust history; this includes the perpetrators, bystanders or resisters and elicits an appreciation that this is not predetermined, and that choices are always available to the individual. It is hoped in this way to create an understanding that participants do have the power to make an impact on their world and that "they have a moral and ethical responsibility to act in order to protect and promote Human Rights".⁹

The SAHGF is viewed as a major resource in the country for teacher training and classroom materials, but it is not the only source and neither should it be. However, there has been a frenzy of textbook writing and all of those devoted to Social Sciences and History cover the Holocaust. These vary in both the range of material covered, and the levels of accuracy. Where some provide merely a footnote to World War II, as it was in the old curriculum, others have gone into more detail. However, there is little or no control over the accuracy of information or degree of trivialisation of the historical specificities which appear in the textbooks. Ultimately, the creators of educational resources material have minimal influence over the decision of an individual teacher to use inappropriate material in the classroom.

At the core of the SAHGF's classroom support material is the examination of the Holocaust in order to confront issues facing contemporary society. For example, in the pages

⁹ Tracey Petersen, "Holocaust education in post-apartheid South Africa-impetus for social activism or a short-lived catharsis?" Paper presented at the inaugural conference of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, Liverpool, 2010, 1, 2.

which document the flight of Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s, the questions directed at the learners include the following: “Should governments help refugees from countries where there are severe human rights violations? And how are refugees in South Africa viewed and treated?”

Unfortunately, questions like these do not in themselves lead to changes in attitude. This largely depends on the effective facilitation of the educator in the classroom. The challenge is that teachers themselves have to address their own attitudes before they are able to bring awareness to the learners.

The Holocaust, as a case study of human rights abuse, and because it is so removed from the experience of both teacher and learner, has the potential to draw out personal attitudes and prejudices such as xenophobia which otherwise remain repressed. Only when these issues are exposed can they begin to be addressed and overcome.

There are many unresolved issues in South African society and a great need for healing. This was revealed in a recent independent external evaluation of the SAHGF’s teacher training programme.¹⁰ The study also demonstrated that the emotional preparation of educators is central to Holocaust Education. It would appear that learning about the Holocaust “created the emotional space for educators to speak frankly about their own experiences.”¹¹ Thus in engaging first in the history of the Holocaust they were more prepared to begin examining their own painful history. The SAHGF programme, because it engages with contemporary issues of prejudice and racism, invariably evokes a response from educators in which they relate their own stories of prejudice and discrimination experienced during the Apartheid era. In this sense, the encounter with Holocaust history has given permission for this frank self-examination and revelation.

There were never a great number of Holocaust survivors who made South Africa their home after the war and thus Holocaust education in South Africa has not depended on personal interaction with this community. The successful inclusion of the Holocaust into the curriculum has been dependent on the commitment of government through the National Department of Education to the inclusion of the subject into the national curriculum in a substantial and significant way: increasing access to materials designed specifically for the

¹⁰ An Evaluation of the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation’s Teacher training program from 2007 to 2011. Final Report April 2012. Mthente Research and Consulting Services.

¹¹ Petersen, Tracey “Holocaust education in post-apartheid South Africa-impetus for social activism or a short-lived catharsis?” Paper presented at the inaugural conference of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, Liverpool, 2010, 3.

South African context and endorsing effective teacher training programmes,¹² facilitated largely by the SAHGF.

The Road Ahead

Much investigative work still needs to be done on the impact of the introduction of Holocaust education into schools and whether there has been a measurable change in the ethos of the schools where the subject has been taught successfully. It remains the goal of the SAHGF to utilize the study of Holocaust History to produce learners who are motivated and empowered to recognize their potential to be effective agents of positive change, and will choose not to be bystanders in the face of injustice.

Whilst the inclusion of Holocaust History has presented enormous challenges, it is clear that through effective teacher training and classroom teaching, the study in South African schools of this particular area of history has the very real possibility of catalyzing our emergent democracy into becoming a more caring and just society, respecting diversity and healing the injustices of our past. Now, more than ever, the value of the inclusion of the study of the Holocaust into South Africa's school curriculum has assumed a new urgency and relevance.¹³

¹² See National Department of Education, *The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa*, 2006. See also M. Sigabe and E. Mphithi, JET Education Services, *The President's Education Initiative Research Project, A descriptive study of the nature and effectiveness of in-service teacher training and support in the implementation of OBE* (University of the Witwatersrand, 1999).

¹³ See R Freedman, "Teaching the Holocaust to Non-Traditional Audiences: The South African Experience." Paper delivered at the *Association of Holocaust Organisations Conference, Yad Vashem, Teaching the Holocaust to Non-Traditional Audiences: Results and Applications: July 2008*. Mthente Research and Consulting Services, *An Evaluation of the South African Holocaust and Genocide Foundation's Teacher Training Programme from 2007 to 2011*. (Final Report April 2012).



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