

Europe's changing demography – remembering and reflecting the Holocaust in a multicultural society – experiences in Germany

Astrid Messerschmidt, Prague Conference on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and research, Juni 2009

As most European societies, the German society is a migration and multicultural society. But it has taken a long time to recognize this structure as a real and normal fact. For decades migration has been displaced from the German democracy and has been considered as a temporary exception. Migrants were recognized as people who will leave the country after having earned enough money in the German industries. Until 2000 integration has not been put on the political agenda. After the reform of the immigration act the problem of integration is discussed in public. In this discussion minorities in the German society are represented as strangers. The dominant perspective is focussing the biggest migration group, the people with a Turkish background and their religion. Being a Muslim seems to be an aspect of disintegration. The differences between Muslim people, their individual approaches to religion and tradition are neglected, when they are considered as a homogenous group, which doesn't fit to the German culture.

We need to revitalize a multicultural consciousness to achieve equal participation in the process of learning from history and in the education work of remembering the Holocaust – which means to remember and reflect persecution, victims and perpetrators in a very complex correlation.

In my statement I will try to point out some aspects of education in a migration society after the Holocaust.

National self-perceptions related to the NS ideology

World views and concepts of society and community, ideologically established during National Socialism, continue to have an impact in present, Federal-German society. They are particularly apparent in the self-perception as a homogenous national community. This perception implies the impossibility of Germans being Jews, blacks or Muslims. On this basis, migration and inner heterogeneity are negated and repressed as components of German history. This has resulted in the development of an ambivalent relationship towards migrants: on the one hand, the state of 'belonging' is refused to them and, on the other hand, integration is expected of them; proof of this integration also includes a morally unambiguous position towards National Socialism. This furthermore suggests that a collective overcoming of the

ideological foundation of persecution and mass destruction already has taken place (see Messerschmidt, 2007).

The discussion so far on collective memory with regard to the Holocaust in Germany has been widely self-referential. It has been limited clearly to the own national identity, i.e. to a relationship towards history that still is described by categories of national affiliation. Adolescent migrants report of their experience of contemporary history as an exclusively German affair and of the manner in which educators communicate to them that they do not belong and presumedly are not interested. At the same time, an identification with German history is demanded, as if this were proof of national loyalty. Migrants enter a paradoxical situation which complicates their own access to reflection on history.

From the Critical Whiteness Studies we can learn something about the problem of dominant social positions: whiteness in relation to the Holocaust means a dominant perspective, which only represents the descendants of the perpetrators.

If the primary objective are the problems faced by the descendants of the perpetrators, the perspective of the descendants of the victims and the persecuted vanishes. Hardly considered is also the perspective of those who are defamed and attacked through anti-Semitic practices even today. Therein lies perhaps one of the most neglected aspects, which also touches my own involvement that originates from a limited, hegemonic non-Jewish perspective. Much reasoning within educational work on Anti-Semitism in a German context has been developed from experiences with non-Jewish participants and remains therefore, in this view, one-sided. As long as no change of perspective results through the experiences of those who are recipients of anti-Semitic discrimination and who experience the social split into Jews and non-Jews on a daily basis, the reflection on perpetration also will remain within the dominant anti-Semitic structure. Only when this disregard is considered, a critical approach towards anti-Semitism can be developed with regard to a normalcy within a society that takes for granted a Jewish non-presence. This is a problem of dominance within the society as a whole. For the future of the Holocaust Education work I plead for a reflection of dominant social positions, which are based on racism, Anti-Semitism as well as on anti-Muslim stereotypes.

Images of perpetrators – between dissociation and fascination – gender aspects in memory processes

Educational work on National Socialism has concentrated strongly to date on the relationship to the victims. Educational aims are the development of empathy towards persecuted groups and an explicit distancing from the perpetrators. However, educators increasingly report of male adolescents in particular who are fascinated by NS-perpetrators. These adolescents resist an identification with the victims that seems to display little attraction to them. Thereby, representations of masculinity play a more important role than do differences in the context of migration and ethnicity. The fixation on ethnic differences is far too one-dimensional and neglects perceptions of history that are influenced by gender stereotypes. An intersectional approach must be developed that considers diverse social positioning. An openly articulated identification with the perpetrators by male adolescents in particular serves the need for unequivocal masculine self-representation. Furthermore, it assists in distancing oneself from the educationally-desired perception of history and is an instrument of provocation towards educational programmes that have been experienced as patronising and moralising with regard to “good” victims and “bad” perpetrators.

Within the educational work associated with memorials, it is noticeable that “boys seem to react less emotionally (on the outside)” and show “more of an interest in technics, or technical details and procedures” (Frohwein/Wagner 2004, S. 16). Girls and young women show much more empathy with the victims and fulfil hereby an important concern of the memorial, i.e. that of respectful remembrance towards the victims. In contrast, the fascination of boys and young men with power, violence, SS and technical procedures is morally sanctioned, curbed and not thematised (see above). Both fundamentally fulfil gender-conform expectations within the symbolic order of both genders, but elicit different resonances. A starting point for educational work would be the introduction of gender-differentiated accesses in order to enable the reflection and the working-through of issues (gender sensitivity). Unequivocal attributions of masculinity and femininity must be questioned, in order to prevent the assignment of masculine or feminine attributes to perpetration and to enable the tracing of political and social requirements for the commitment of crimes. The aspect of gender in historical educational work points to the marked dubiousness of addressing perpetration from the standpoint of identities. Rather, social circumstances should be viewed. Educational work cannot secure a morally distinct dissociation from the perpetrators but can mediate

differentiated information on, and reflection of, the social, cultural and political-ideological initial conditions for crimes against humanity.

Education for Remembrance in historical relationships

How can varied links to remembered history be facilitated, in order to transform the social practice of collective memory into a field in which multiple social affiliations (Paul Mecheril 2004) are not regarded as a disruptive factor, but as a reason to deepen the examination of the cultural meaning of the story/stories of crimes?

Newer approaches in historical civic education regard the heterogeneity of the accesses to history and facilitate the representation of the NS-history as a European and global “relational history” (Beziehungsgeschichte, Ulla Kux, 2006). They counteract tendencies to communicate memory work as an exclusively German affair. In its effort to include multiple perspectives and controversy (Heidi Behrens, 1998), educational work is doubly challenged: on the one hand, perpetration is not to be relativised and on the other hand, the European complexity in its extent and implementation of the Holocaust is to be communicated. The aim is to allow room for heterogeneity in educational work without identifying diversity according to specific differentiating characteristics. The above-mentioned approaches facilitate varied perspectives on this historical subject matter and, in the educational processes, do not focus on the assumed cultural or national identities of participants. In light of the European extent of the national socialist context of dominance and an increasingly globalised Holocaust memory, it is important for educational memory work to make clear that this history does not simply belong to the Germans but is a history beyond national identities. It must be kept in mind that this insight also can be used elegantly to eliminate the problem of German identity if now everybody to the same extent is expected to address the history of the crime. A relativising and relieving form of multiculturalisation in the appropriation of history must be counteracted. In a migration society, memory work and the analysis of perpetration need a variety of points of access, of which national affiliations are only one aspect.

The culture of memory in a migration society has not to be regarded as a measure for integration that conforms to a specific national perception of history, but as a process of intercultural communication about a history of crime that is globally significant and is remembered in a variety of ways. An intercultural praxis of historical learning must

accommodate heterogeneity and must acknowledge the claim to social affiliations without appointing them to an identity. By doing so, views of history become more complex for all involved. Migration thereby will no longer be looked at as a special case for educational interventions, but as an integral part of one's own cultural and social history.

Postcolonial and post-national-socialist perspectives – differences and relations

The postcolonial present is a present of migration; it is the present of migrant workers and fugitives who look for a better possibility of survival in the centres of economic prosperity. They tell stories about the postcolonial experience – about attempts to step out of the neocolonial dependence and to take the promises of freedom seriously: the promise of wealth by work, the promise of equality and the announcement of having overcome racism and of only seeing it as a historical relic of a blinded age. They have to realize that these promises are not equally valid for everyone and finally that they are not as universally meant as they are propagated.

Postcolonial discourses are also discourses of remembrance and historical assessment. They add a new theme to the necessary discussion on the remembrance of the crimes against humanity, a theme that leads a shadow existence especially in the historical consciousness here – the remembrance of the crimes of the colonial age. It is not easy to combine postcolonial aspects with aspects related to the Holocaust. Both have to be reflected with a sense for differences and special historical backgrounds. For our education work we need to analyze the history of racism and the history of anti-Semitism as two different things. Both have their special historical backgrounds and both include ideologies of discrimination, which is experienced today.

For the future of Holocaust Remembrance we have to integrate education work into the context of globalization and immigration. In the traditions of “critical theory” I am looking for syntheses in “constellations” of different remembered histories. Hybridity is perhaps a key concept to use in this, not to indicate a simple diffusion of cultures and confirmation of the idea that “pure cultures” or “pure identities” are a reality, but to elucidate the necessity of a sublimation of different identities, in need of reworking of remembrances. The specific issue of remembrance can be used as a lens for understanding broader aspects of integration, globalization and community dynamics.

Recommendations for the Future of Holocaust Education – reflecting differences and relations

- Awareness of multidimensional differences like gender, ethnicity, national and cultural backgrounds
- Skills for professional educators in intercultural social spaces
- Awareness of discrimination today – social justice training
- singularity and characteristic of the Holocaust and its circumstances
- different social, cultural and national relations to the Holocaust

It seems to be inadequate to relate the Holocaust to other phenomena of mass murder – but turned around it might be an important approach for Education in plural societies to build relations to the Holocaust from different backgrounds and experiences.

References

- Behrens-Cobet, Heidi (1998): Erwachsene in Gedenkstätten – randständige Adressaten. In: dies. (Hg.): *Bilden und Gedenken. Erwachsenenbildung in Gedenkstätten und an Gedächtnisorten*. Essen, 7-21.
- Frohwein, Pia / Wagner, Leonie (2004): Geschlechterspezifische Aspekte in der Gedenkstättenpädagogik, in: *Gedenkstättenrundbrief*, Heft 8/2004, S. 14-21.
- Kux, Ulla (2006): Deutsche Geschichte und Erinnerung in der multiethnischen und –religiösen Gesellschaft. Perspektiven auf interkulturelle historisch-politische Bildung, in: Heidi Behrens/Jan Motte (Hg.): *Politische Bildung in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*, Schwalbach/Ts., S. 241-259.
- Messerschmidt, Astrid (2007): Repräsentationsverhältnisse in der postnationalsozialistischen Gesellschaft, in: Anne Broden/Paul Mecheril (IDA) (Hg.): *Re-Präsentationen. Dynamiken der Migrationsgesellschaft*, Düsseldorf, S. 47-68.