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Садржај

Ријеч редакције	9
Историјска истраживања	
Тања Тулековић: „Село Доња Градина“	13
Студије о рату и геноциду	
Dejan Motl: „Kraj logora III — Ciglana“	31
Milan Radanović: „Glas Koncila — nastavak relativizacije i prikrivanja ustaških zločina na primeru feljtona Igora Vukića“	52
Марина Љубичић: „Покољ у селима Паланчиште и Јеловац кроз документа и свједочења преживјелих“	88
Salamon Jazbec: „Wikijasenovac: prikaz ustaškog logora smrti na internetskoj enciklopediji“	100
Бојан Ђокић: „Косово и Метохија и Јасеновац: пострадање птице коса у јасеновом дрвећу“	114
Дарко Жарић: „Концентрациони логори у Норвешкој и Аустрији у Другом светском рату (са освртом на интерниране Топличане)“	132
Документи и сјећања	
Vladan Vukliš, Dragan Trkulja: „Izvjestaji Sreskog komiteta KP BiH Bosanska Dubica iz 1945. godine“	159
Милош Дамјановић, Славиша Бишевац: „Сведочење двојице јеврејских заточеника логора Јасеновац о страдању Срба“	197
Svetozar Livada, sjećanje: „Doživotni sam pacijent genocida“	212

Ставови

Josip Jagić: „Тко је устао 27. јула и против кога?“ 217

Прилози

Chava Baruch: „The Educational Philosophy of Yad Vashem“ 227

Милорад Буква: „Изложба ЈУ Спомен-подручје Доња Градина
Економије јасеновачког логора“ 237

Упутство сарадницима / Instructions for authors 240

Contents

Editorial	9
Historical Researches	
Tanja Tuleković: "Village of Donja Gradina"	13
Studies of War and Genocide	
Dejan Motl: "The Demise of Camp III - Brickyard"	31
Milan Radanović: " <i>Glas Koncila</i> - Continuing Relativization and Concealment of Ustašas' Crimes in the Texts of Igor Vukić (2013)"	52
Marina Ljubičić: "The Slaughter in the villages of Palančište and Gornji Jelovac through Documents and Testimonies of Survivors"	88
Salamon Jazbec: "Wikijasenovac: Ustašas' Death Camp Jasenovac in the Free Encyclopedia"	100
Bojan Đokić: "Kosovo and Metohija and Jasenovac: Death of Blackbirds in the Ash Trees"	114
Darko Žarić: "Concentration Camps in Austria and Norway in World War Two (with Additional Information on Prisoners from the Region of Toplica)"	132
Documents and Testimonies	
Vladan Vukliš, Dragan Trkulja: "Reports of the District Committee of the Communist Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Bosanska Dubica from 1945"	159

Miloš Damjanović, Slaviša Biševac: “Testimonies of two Jewish Prisoners in Jasenovac about the Executions of Serbs”	197
Svetozar Livada (testimony): “I am a Lifelong Patient of Genocide”	212

Perspectives

Josip Jagić: “Who Rebeled against Whom on July 27th 1941?”	217
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Contributions

Chava Baruch: “The Educational Philosophy of Yad Vashem”	227
Milorad Bukva: “Exhibition of Memorial Zone Donja Gradina - the Economies of the Camp Jasenovac”	237
Instructions for authors / Упутство сарадницима	240

The Educational Philosophy of Yad Vashem

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The Holocaust is usually presented by the traditional way of historical research, analyzing different kinds of written documents, testimonies and pictures, in order to have a better understanding of the historical process of the “Final Solution”.

This kind of presentation gives a comprehensible picture of political decisions, which were made by the perpetrators, but the image of the Jewish victim remain unclear in the shadow of the ashes of the gas chambers. The Jew has no face, no past, no family, he is no more than a helpless subject of the Nazi policy, part of a huge mountain of burned skeletons, a mathematical sum up of 6 million losses. This way of presentation strengthens the Nazis’ perception of the Jews, which smashes not only his body but his memory too, since nobody can feel a real empathy for numbers. The immediate reaction to those traumatic horrible pictures is rejection or denial. This point of view leads to a claim of inability to understand the Holocaust as part of the historical phenomena, and to describe Hitler as an insane, a sick one! This approach is especially dangerous, since it liberates the perpetrators from responsibility.

For this reason we have to distinguish between the role of historians and the role of educators. History narrates the tale, while education gives it a meaning. The topic of the Holocaust is part of the curriculum we teach in High School and it is an important part of final examines for History. But learning the facts by heart doesn't mean real understanding of the moral importance and consequence of this issue.

According to our pedagogical experience of more the 50 years in Israel, we came to the conclusion that we need a much more sensitive and effective way to teach about the Holocaust. This philosophy was created at Yad Vashem,¹ the biggest Holocaust Educational Center in Israel. This idea is based on the fact that the Holocaust is an essential part of human history, since human beings exterminated human beings because of an inhuman killing ideology which was made up by people, who then became inhumane perpetrators and murderers.

In addition we have an obligation to save the image of the Jewish victim from faceless vanishing behind the numbers. According to this approach we as educators have to teach the Holocaust through a human perception, by dealing with the moral dilemmas that people had to face during the Holocaust. We seek to understand those terrible dilemmas they had to face, which we call “Choose less chooses” they had to choose day by day. Teaching the Holocaust means to learn about the victims, about the perpetrators, the bystanders, and about the rescuers from a personal point of view.

— The Pedagogical Approach

The Jewish Victim

According to our pedagogical philosophy one has to start teaching about the Holocaust by teaching about Jewish life before the “Final Solution”. Nazi-Antisemitic propaganda presents the “Jew” as the worst enemy of human kind, using generalizations for total dehumanization and depersonalization of the Jewish people. Actually most of the non-Jews have a very vague idea about Jews and about Jewish life in modern times. The image of the Jew is an image of an ancient religion, people of the Bible, the Old Testament, the “Chosen people” who refused to accept Jesus (a Jew himself) Evangeline. From that point, they are learning about the extermination of the Jews in the 20 century, without noticing the big gap between historical periods, such as the period between ancient times and modern times, which had an enormous impact on Jewish and non-Jewish life. The Jews are still presented as a Theological challenge and not as living people who have a

¹ This Educational philosophy was implemented by Shulamit Imber, Pedagogical Director of The International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem Jerusalem.

history and a culture of their own.² Historians and teachers are still talking about “The Jewish question”, thus adapting the Anti-Semitic perception of the Jews, and ignoring the Jewish people as a nation and as individuals.

Jewish life before the Holocaust

For this reason we begin describing Jewish life before the Holocaust, before dealing with the process of their attempted extermination. By interviewing their own family, our pupils discover how their ancestors lived in different parts of the world, what kind of languages they spoke, and how they practiced Jewish tradition side by side with the local national culture. They are learning about Jewish political parties in Poland, like the “Bund” which had over 1 million members, Jewish workers who fought for their social rights, spoke Yiddish, and preferred local Jewish cultural autonomy, unlike the Zionist movement, which claimed the land of Israel as a Jewish national state. Our students are facing their ancestors’ aspirations and hopes which they had for the future, are discovering the large scale of Jewish civilization including poets, musicians, rabbis, doctors, traders and teachers who tried to combine modernity with tradition.

Following the life of a certain Jewish community in Constanta, in Saloniky, in Warsaw or in Budapest reveals colorful Jewish activity in schools, sport leagues, social organizations, theaters, and journals, which are the core of a living civilization.

They realize the complexity of life for a minority living among different kinds of national majorities. The difficulty of this “double connection” to Jewish identity and local culture on the one hand, and on the other hand, this was frequently misunderstood by the local authorities and population and was perceived as lack of loyalty to the State.

Talking about Jewish life before the Holocaust is important especially for our next generation, for perceiving their ancestors not only as a helpless humiliated victim of the Nazis and their collaborators, but as autonomous human being who were part of a large civilization, which was destroyed. This is important to the non-Jewish youngsters too, since they can understand that Jews were not merely numbers but real individuals who had families and names, who liked life, music and had their own beliefs. They

² James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p. 166; in Zwi Bachrach, *From Historical Experience to Historical Research*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008, p. 70.

were flesh and blood, and not a “question” or a “problem” that had to be solved by a “Final Solution”.

In this way, one can follow how Jewish people faced their persecution, how they tried to keep their family, their tradition, their life and their moral values, which they had before the Holocaust.

Daily Life During the Holocaust

Many good educators are teaching about the Holocaust by showing terrible pictures of ashes from the gas chambers, believing that shocking will teach students to avoid these kind of terrible actions in the future.

According to our experiences, shocking can be sometimes part of education, but it cannot replace education as a long pedagogical process.

Instead of dealing with details of death, we have to study daily life during the Holocaust, analyze testimonies with our students to develop an understanding of what life was like in an inhuman world, what happened to dignity, hope, tradition, faith and identity.

“The war changed Jewish life...
very quickly.
One day was nothing like the next,
Scenes changed with the speed
of a movie... Each month brought
profound changes that changed
the very foundation of Jewish life.”³

Students will learn about terrible dilemmas which faced by the Jews: do they have to send their children away to save their life, how could they survive starvation in the ghetto, is it moral to steal food? How could they keep their family, what happened to Jewish children when their parents became helpless, or were killed. Does a young mother have the right to run away and save her own life or should she go to die with her baby? What kind of questions did religious Jews ask their Rabbis in an attempt to keep their religious identity?

³ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Last Writings*, p. 11. Ringelblum was a Jewish Historian who established a research committee named “Oneg Shabbat” in the ghetto, for documenting the agony of Jewish life in Warsaw ghetto. Although he was killed, part of the documents of his archive was found after the war, and became one of the most important resource of Holocaust research.

What kind of dilemmas were faced by Jewish doctors who had to decide whom to give the small amount of medicine they had, if any at all. What kind of decisions were made by Jewish leaders who were forced by the Nazis to deliver large groups of their fellow Jews to deportations? Could they save themselves by working for the Nazis?⁴

What was the role of Jewish youth movements in education and in uprising in the ghettos, since youngsters became an alternative leadership in the Eastern European ghettos?

We are not judging them; we are following their way of making decisions and their efforts to keep morality in this immoral reality. The discussion with students will be about questions like - was this a kind of Jewish resistance to Nazi persecution?

The Perpetrator

Up until the late sixties, the terminology that was used to describe the Nazi perpetrators was usually related to demonization. The image of the perpetrator was that of an insane monster, which no human being can understand. The operation of sundering the Jews from everzone else and bringing them to the murder facilities was complex, lengthy, and full of small details which had large effects on the outcome. The decision to become murderers was not on time matter, (not sure what this means) as has been assumed by historians who search for a date on which the decision was made by Hitler or his officials. It was a long steep climb, lined with red lights and black flags.⁵

The question of “how was it humanly possible?” is still the leading question which derives from the inability to accept their behavior and their acts.

However, since Christopher R. Browning published his research, we know that the perpetrators were ordinary men.⁶ Did they kill out of ideology, did they just follow the orders as obedient soldiers and faithful citi-

⁴ There are at least two examples of those decisions, one of Adam Cherniakov, head of the Jewish leadership in Warsaw ghetto, who committed suicide when he realized the destiny of the deportations, and of Chaim Romkowsky Head of the Jewish Council of Lodz ghetto, who tried to save Jewish children and youngsters by working for the Nazis. In any case he had to decide who will be deported, and who will stay to work. He was killed at Auschwitz.

⁵ Jaacov Lazovic, *Hitler's Bureaucrats - The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*.

⁶ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, Harper Collins, 1992, 1998.

zens? Was it an outcome of group pressure, when they preferred to kill, not to be seen as a “chicken” in face of their comrades? Browning pointed out that all were able to choose, mainly due to the lack of personal responsibility which made the persecution and the killing possible. The study of history is at all times a study of human actions and of the human spirit, even when that spirit has been subverted and has become ineffably corrupt. Moreover, the moral warning signs that the Holocaust must raise is to oblige us to attempt to understand how human beings can reach such a point.

Yet, there is a profound danger in such an effort to understand the darkest recesses of the human spirit. It should be stressed at all times that understanding is by no means equivalent to acceptance, empathy or forgiveness. One should always remember that murderers remains murderers even when we acquire a better understanding of what might have led the killing. Focusing on the perpetrators' background and circumstances that turned them into murderers may at times create the impression that this was a deterministic process in which everything led towards this ultimate end, that individuals had no room for choice and no alternative but to become murderers. The focus on choices and alternatives means an attempt to explore the wide spectrum of behavior, beginning with ideologically committed murderers, through shades of acquiescence and indifference, to those few who took action to oppose the murder. There is an important educational message in pointing out the blurred lines dividing one supposed category from another, and to the choices involved in crossing those invisible lines.⁷

While analyzing documents that were written by the perpetrators, the student realizes the mechanical point of view of the persecutor who “did his job” as good as he could, totally ignoring the human face of the victim.

Bystanders and the Rescuers

Although rescuers were a very small minority and do not represent the attitudes and responses of most of the people of the Nazi-occupied Europe, is of tremendous importance. The rescuers highlight the issue of choice.

⁷ Irena Steinfeldt, *How was it Humanly possible? A study of perpetrators and bystanders during the Holocaust*, Pedagogical guidebook, Yad Vashem (ISHS 2002), pp 3-5.

We are dealing with the juncture between perpetrators and bystanders in an attempt to identify the points of choice at which bystanders chose to join the perpetrators, or the rescuers. As with the perpetrators, these were not one time choices, but each case a series of decisions. If we wish to examine the line between bystanders and rescuers, we must show the rescuers as human beings – their everyday lives, the hardship they endured, the misgivings they might have had and the series of choices they made at different points. Their story is never simple, the tale is never of a single noble act of letting a Jew into their home, but of repeated choices and of continuous struggle against enormous odds in order to save the person.

The story of the rescuers permits an examination of the bystanders as well, and the very meaning of the term “bystander”. Given that rescue necessitated making a choice, and given that that choice was an option, this raises the question of which choice was also involved in choosing not to act? In dealing with these issues, it is very important that students do not adopt a facile attitude of self-righteousness that condemns all bystanders without presenting them in the context in which they lived or acted.

It might be observed that the difficulty of understanding the steps taken by the rescuers in risking their lives is almost as difficult as understanding the humanity of the perpetrators.⁸

— Age-appropriate approach of teaching about the Holocaust

One of the most difficult questions in Holocaust education is the age of the students. Usually the topic of the Holocaust is part of the curriculum of History in high school. In this case, textbooks include historical information, dates, and orders of policy makers. We believe that for better understanding, we have to start to teach about the Holocaust earlier, according to the age of the student.

For very young students we present a personal story for their age.⁹ First we deal with the individual, then with the family and community, and only in high school we can teach the Historical context as a whole.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29

⁹ In Israel we begin to talk about the Holocaust in elementary school, mostly in Commemoration day, but it is up to the teacher to decide how and in which class he will present this issue.

A young child can understand the story of Hanale who lived in the ghetto with her parents, and couldn't go to a regular school since it was forbidden to Jews.

A 13 to 14 year old pupil can understand the difficulties of a Jewish community facing isolation and restrictions. We are dealing with the topic of concentration and death camps only at the ages of 16 to 18, concentrating on struggle to live even in the camps.

The Role of the Educator

It is the responsibility of the educator to guide the pupil through this traumatic issue, without competing with the media, which is full of shocking materials. The educator's role is to teach the student how to understand the information, and to give to it actual meaning in one's life.

Interdisciplinary education

In these efforts to gain some insight, we use an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical documents with art and literature as a means of shedding light on aspects of the human being, which the historical documents alone cannot address.

"There is a need for other means", Israeli author and Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld says, "to lift this heavy burden ... Since early times, art has sought out the individual and his inner world. And it is from that place that art seeks to understand the world ... Art, and perhaps art alone, can serve as a shield against banal, the routine and irrelevant and ... oversimplification."¹⁰

¹⁰ **Aharon Appelfeld** (Hebrew: אהרון אפלפלד) (born February 16, 1932 in the village Zhadova near to Czernowitz, Romania, now Ukraine) is an Israeli novelist. In 1940, when Appelfeld was eight years old, the Nazis invaded his hometown and his mother was killed. Appelfeld was deported with his father to a concentration camp in Ukraine. He escaped and hid for three years before joining the Soviet Army as a cook. After World War II, Appelfeld spent several months in a displaced persons camp in Italy before immigrating to Palestine in 1946, two years before Israel's independence. He was reunited with his father after finding his name on a Jewish Agency list. The father had been sent to a *ma'abara* (refugee camp) in Be'er Tuvia. The reunion was so emotional that Appelfeld has never been able to write about it. In Israel, Appelfeld made up for his lack of formal schooling and learned Hebrew, the language in which he began to write. His first literary efforts were short stories, but gradually he progressed to novels. He completed his studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Today,

Return to life

Unlike historians who are dealing with the Holocaust as a historical process between 1933 and 1945, we begin to teach about Jewish life before the Holocaust, and after we study the fate of the survivors after the War.

People usually perceive 1945 as the end of the war, and they are surprised to discover that it was not a happy ending for the survivors.

Liberation

The agony of the survivors began (continued) right after the liberation, when they realized that they lost their family, their home, their homeland, and they would have to start their new life from the beginning. Most of the survivors talk about the only hope they had during the Holocaust which motivated them to struggle for live, was to meet their loved ones, their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, children or wives.

Not all the survivors were capable of starting a new life, as a lot of them felt a great deal of guilt for surviving while their family perished.

Loneliness

Statistically we are talking about 6 million Jews that were exterminated by the Nazis and their collaborators. However, this number can't really describe the meaning of loneliness of the survivor, who had nobody to share pain or happiness with.

Statistic can't tell the story of all the Jewish orphan children who were wondering around the world trying to find love and care.

Searching

As Holocaust survivors returned to the places where they lived before, they discovered soon that their homes were taken by their neighbors. Some of them were surprised and angry that the "Jews came back",¹¹ a few of them helped the survivors and gave them back some of their property they left behind in the beginning of the war. Most of the survivors searched for a new place to live far away from those terrible memories.

Appelfeld lives in Mevaseret Zion and teaches literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. (Source: Wikipedia)

¹¹ There were several cases of pogroms and atrocities against the returning Jews, in Poland at Kielce in 1947, and in North Hungary.

They moved from Europe, crossing the Alps by foot, relocating to Australia, Israel, and the U.S.A.

Some of them remained in the countries in which they were born, but in any case they had to face tremendous changes in their new way of life that was totally different from their life before the war.

Revenge

Some of the young Jewish survivors who joined the partisans or the Red army, with weapons in their hand were eager to take revenge, and probably were able to.

Yet, most of the survivors preferred to marry, to have children, to build a new home for their new family. They established new schools, learned and worked. This was their way to take revenge although the shadow of the Holocaust was present in every moment of their life. They were silent in front of their children, in order raising them happily, but their children were aware of the great secret of their parents.

Commemoration

We can deal with the Holocaust through different kinds of languages: the language of historical research, the language of commemoration, and by the language of teaching which includes both. Commemoration is the first step of remembering, and leads to a deeper understanding only by a systematic pedagogical process.