

Teaching the *Shoah* and training educators*

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Abstract. Educating on the history and memory of the *Shoah* is among the toughest challenges academics we face, principally because it involves disparate subjects and numerous specializations. Initially, research was limited to the War period only but, as time went by, it was gradually extended to encompass the precedent periods too. The depth of the matter, along with the establishment of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, has meant that teachers are now keenly aware of the many challenges ahead, that would be impossible to condense into refresher courses. These obstacles brought forth the classification of disciplines as well as the separation of knowledge. Contemporaneously, they indicate new methods of teaching which would have profound implications for each branch of knowledge.

Key words: Interdisciplinary Approach, Intercultural Education, Holocaust, Memory, *Shoah*.

Riassunto. La didattica intorno alla storia e alla memoria della *Shoah* è tra le sfide più complesse con cui confrontarsi perché mette in gioco competenze e specializzazioni molto diverse. Gli orizzonti della ricerca, in un primo momento fortemente limitati al periodo bellico, si sono progressivamente ampliati ed estesi ai periodi precedenti. La complessità delle questioni, con l'istituzionalizzazione del "Giorno della memoria", ha fatto emergere negli insegnanti difficoltà che non potevano essere risolte d'incanto, con uno o più corsi di aggiornamento. La sfida metteva in gioco la classificazione delle discipline e separatezza dei saperi. Allo stesso tempo indicava un modo nuovo di fare didattica che aveva implicazioni per ogni ambito disciplinare.

Parole chiave: Approccio interdisciplinare, Educazione interculturale, Memoria, Olocausto, *Shoah*.

1. A Difficult Challenge

Educating on the history and memory of the Shoah is among the toughest challenges academics face, because it involves disparate subjects and specializations: history, geography, psychology, pedagogy, cultural anthropology, philosophy, literature. Not to mention the history of science and medicine, religious symbolism, economics and history of law. Just to give an example, think of the concept of genocide introduced by Raphael Lemkin for the first time in 1944 (Lemkin, 1944) and its implications and developments in the contemporary legal debate¹.

The tragedy of the Shoah affected the whole of human civilization, not only in places where exterminations took place, but also in the lands where the fleeing people would seek refuge. The war involved the colonies and in the specific case of North Africa and the Near East, had the advance of the German Army not been halted at El Alamein, the Jewish communities of the Arab world and the Yishuv itself (the settlement of Jews which began with the Jewish national rebirth movement) would have faced a destiny not dissimilar to the one that many European Jews endured. Mobile gas

* An earlier version of this essay (Meghnagi, 2018a) has been published on the website of the Italian "Ministry of Education, University and Research" (*Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca* [MIUR]): www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/Linee+guida+nazionali+per+una+didattica+della+Shoah+a+scuola.pdf/98d90ec7-0e36-40cf-ba67-4d79836186a8?version=1.0&t=1531153062490. The Italian translation of this paper, entitled "Memoria e storia della *Shoah*. Una sfida per la didattica", is published on pp. 215-222 of this issue no. 3, 2020, Volume 8, of *Trauma and Memory* (DOI: 10.12869/TM2020-3-02).

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¹ For an introduction see Bauer (2009), Lemkin (1944), and Meghnagi (2005).

chambers, which were being tested by the *Einsatzgruppen* during the advance of the German Army on the Eastern front, were ready to be put in use - with the support and backing of the followers of the Jerusalem Mufti - from Cairo to Alexandria, from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to Baghdad, to Damascus (Meghnagi, 2010, 2018b, 2020). Nazi Germany would have lost the war all the same, but would have risked the destruction of North Africa and Near East Jewry. It is no coincidence that in the months during which British troops were faltering, Franz Werfel's novel on the extermination of the Armenians was one of the most widely read books from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Werfel, 1933; Meghnagi in Mikhaelian, 2015).

Composed in Damascus in 1929, and published four years later, through tragic epilogues Werfel's book tells the story of the Armenian people's suffering. His fictional reconstruction was also an anguished foreshadowing of the danger looming over the Jews with the rise of the Nazis in Germany. As sensed by Benjamin & Scholem (1980) in their dense and painful correspondence, Kafka's works described the danger successfully. In a letter of 1934, Scholem writes: "The world of Kafka is the world of revelation (...) in the perspective in which it is dangled to its own nothingness" (Benjamin & Scholem, 1980). Echoing him, four years later, Benjamin affirmed with lucid premonition: "The world of Kafka, often so serene and popular by angels, is the exact complement of his era, which is about to suppress large masses of the inhabitants of this planet. It is not excluded that the experience that corresponds to the private man Kafka will be made by large masses only in the occasion of their elimination" (*ibidem*). When Benjamin and Scholem, separated by seas and continents, reflected on an uncertain future full of dangers, the war had not yet broken out. Furthermore, European diplomacy with the *Munich Agreement* preferred to close its eyes to the danger².

Intertwining individual and collective destinies, against the background of massacres and deportations, Werfel gives a voice to the history of seven Armenian villages besieged on Mount Moussa Dagh, and of their tenacious resistance against the assaults of the Turks, until their eventual rescue by a French ship. In the months when German armies threatened British presence in the Near East from Cyrenaica, it was clear that a temporary withdrawal of British troops from the region in the event of a pincer attack from the Caucasus and Cyrenaica, would have risked the dream of a rebirth in the *Land of the fathers* being lost forever. The struggle would have been for a different death, exactly as happened later, in April 1943 for the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943 and the other ghettos of Eastern Europe (Krall & Edelman, 1985; Rotem, 2014; Rolli & Rotem, 2015; Meghnagi, 1985, 2005, 2014, 2016, 2019a). In those months, in the communes of the *Kibbutz*, there was discussion on how to organize the resistance - on the hills of Galilee and in the desert of the Negev where the fortress of Massada stands: a symbol of resistance from Roman destruction.

2. The Broadening of Research Horizons and the Consequences on Teaching

The horizon of research was initially limited to the war period, but as time went by it grew to encompass the period of incubation which preceded it: World War I and its devastating consequences on every aspect of private and public life. Followed by the cascade following this period that acted as a backdrop to the rise of Nazism. A concrete example of these developments are Poliakov's monumental research on antisemitism and Aryan myth (Poliakov, 1955, 1961-1996, 1976), and Mosse's research on the cultural origins of the *Third Reich* (Mosse, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1985, 1988a, 1988b, 1991). Without taking anything away from the peculiarities of each single phase, scholars

² "The Munich Agreement" or "Munich Betrayal" was an agreement concluded at Munich on 30 September 1938, by Nazi Germany, the United Kingdom, the French Third Republic, and the Kingdom of Italy. It provided "cession" to Germany of the Sudeten German territory" of Czechoslovakia. The agreement was celebrated by European diplomats as an agreement that would avoid war. Hitler announced it was his last territorial claim in Europe. In reality it was a fundamental stage of a generalized aggression by the Nazi regime against the whole of Europe. The agreement seemed to be an appeasement. See <https://www.britannica.com/event/Munich-Agreement>.

have broadened the scope of their research to incorporate themes of short and long-term cultural history: *Social Darwinism* and eugenics, colonial ideology and medical culture with its prejudices, religious antisemitism and so-called “racial” antisemitism. It is no coincidence that Italian Fascism would have justified antisemitic legislation as a metropolitan extension to what has already been implemented in colonial possessions. Not to mention the Armenian tragedy commanded by the German militia (who had accumulated vast “experience” between 1904-1907 in Africa with the Herero, starved to death and poisoned the wells), having subsequently provided support to his ally in the destruction process that was implemented by the Turkish regime (Luther, 2018b; Morgenthau, 2007; Riccardi, 2002).

Didactics must be able to consider subsequent collective representations. As part of a clash between different systems and visions of politics, including culture and society, which in turn influence historiography, social sciences, psychology, theology, art and literature from within. The tragic case of the Herero was identified as a genocide in the United Nations Whitaker Report (1985). The report explains it as one of the first attempts of genocide in Modern History, explained as the “extermination of an entire population” in the twentieth-century (https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerre_herero). As for the other European colonial powers, just to cite examples, Belgian domination in the Congo was responsible for the deaths of 10 million victims. Not to mention the Franco-Belgian co-responsibility in recent years for the Rwandan genocide. British domination in Sudan between 1882 and 1903 resulted in a population reduction from 9 million to 3 million, and in the war of aggression against Ethiopians, Italian troops made use of chemical weapons (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocidio#Asia>).

A specialist training course presents the ideologies behind this tragic chapter of twentieth-century history, through the rehashing and reenactment of the historical record, and through techniques of transmitting collective memory, including negazionism, revisionism and distortions (Meghnagi, 2012, 2014b, 2019a, 2019c).

Due to these considerations, the current developments of anti-Jewish hatred in the Islamic Arab world are not to be considered the mere product of the conflict that has tragically opposed the aspirations of the Zionist movement for decades to those of Arab nationalism. They are also, and above all, the result of a broader and more complex historical process, which has roots in Islamic religious culture, and which invests the religious and nationalist narratives from within. These narratives formed the backdrop of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the end of the Caliphate, and in the 1930's saw an organic political and ideological alliance between important sectors of Arab and Islamic nationalism and the Axis Powers (Timmermann, 2003; Herf, 2009; Meghnagi, 2018b, 2020).

The teaching on the Shoah has struggled to find a disciplinary definition in the academic sphere and only since the 1960s, with the public discussion instituted by the Eichmann process, has it gradually conquered areas that initially remained on the margins. In particular those that were limited to exceptional contributions, specifically from exiled intellectuals or camp veterans who, in contrast to the commonplaces of the first decades following the war, were able to deal with the epochal fracture that had resulted from the tragedy of extermination. To name a few that from different perspectives placed Auschwitz at the center of their reflection: Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Elie Wiesel, Vassily Grossman, for literature and witness; Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Gunther Anders e Arendt, among the German Jewish exile in the USA (Alexander, 2006; Meghnagi, 2005, 2010b).

Despite the quantity and scientific quality of specialist works about the Shoah, they have little impact on the most widely distributed works Commemorative ceremonies and solemn declarations, important and necessary to keep the attention and awareness of current dangers alive, can risk becoming empty containers over time, and if they are not officially honored by schools, universities and the media, they can also risk erasure from the critical study.

3. The Day of Remembrance: Lights and Shadows

After being *repressed* or declassified and reduced in favor of less alarming and consoling readings, which also partly involved the Jewish world, the memory of the Shoah has gradually risen to the founding myth of what Europe and the world would no longer want if history was to be repeated.

In the crisis that involved the great ideological narratives of the twentieth century, the memory of the Shoah ended up filling a void of identity and belonging, taking on the value of a paradigm. The tragedy has risen as a symbol of absolute evil and a touchstone of every event and has also become a terrain of moral and cultural confrontation, as well as political (Alexander, 2006; Meghnagi, 2005).

In the name of impossible reparations, the role of *officiants* of a ritual that society has great difficulty in accepting has been entrusted to the Jews. And as defenders of such a ritual, they are also *guardians* of a new *orthodoxy* that sets out what the ritual consists of. And so, a new, multi-faceted and complex situation has been created, where light is mixed with shadow - a situation laden with unresolved ambiguities and potential dangers. In an ISPO survey published in 2004, 36% of Europeans (and 34% of Italians) are of the opinion that the Jews should stop acting as victims and talking about the Holocaust (Manheimer and Goldstaub, 2004, p. 19; Meghnagi, 2005, pp. 137-40). But if the Jews don't participate in this ritual "or officiate" in it, the danger is that others might take it on and risk transforming it into a weapon that can be ultimately used against them.

The surreal aspect of this practice was evident in the April 25 celebrations in Rome, where those participating in a procession following the insignia of the Jewish Brigade (who participated in the liberation of our country), found themselves the victims of an attack by those carrying the insignia of movements that for ideological and political reasons sided with the Axis powers during the Second World War (just think of the organic alliance of the Mufti of Jerusalem with Fascism and Nazism). If instead the Jews perform the rite, in exchange for the 'advantages' that derive from the role of 'priests' which they are called, the rite itself risks becoming futile, ending up belonging only to them.

Western society can illusorily think of freeing from an oppressive image and take its distance from it, thereby deluding itself that a false *lost sense of peace* has been found again.

In the long run, the management of the rite risks exposing the Jews to new false accusations that have as a background the banalization, and the memory of the *Shoah*, in the name of other memories: a form of symbolic cannibalism in which the old accusations are added and enjoy an alleged position income from which other peoples, with their sufferings, would be excluded. The more the ritual is entrusted to the Jews the more the tragic memories belong to them alone. It is inconsequential if the chosen date of 27th January is a symbolic date for everyone. If they renounce this role, it might be taken on by others who might officiate against the Jews and use the idea of the Shoah to accuse them of perpetrating the same suffering on others that they themselves once unjustly underwent. "How is it that a people that went through so much suffering can treat the Palestinians in the same way the Germans treated them?": This question is usually raised after a debate or a film-showing and some poor person is put in the difficult position of having to *justify* himself or herself.

In a two-decade conference at the Roma Tre Faculty of Letters, the decision was made to ban questions that were not on the subject. As if the themes were not intertwined, and the imposed and self-imposed silence (not to mention the consequences of a debate linked to the Middle East crisis) did not in itself constitute a defeat of thought in the face of a "new" antisemitism, which projects on reality the demonic images of a state and a nation that were once addressed to Jews. The decision was a sign of unease that put the organizers in the uncomfortable position of limiting the participants right to speak. The answer should have been quite different indeed. As entwined themes, it was necessary to enter into the merits of the problems, focusing on the drifts of a debate and the sick words that were the background to the development of a "new" antisemitism, one which projects demonic images onto a nation and State that were once aimed at Jews.

"How come", I asked a member of the public who'd proposed many of the *clichés* of Middle Eastern conflict, "when it comes to Israel people tend to ask with false innocence, how did yesterday's victims turn into 'executioners', while is this question never asked for others? How come the same people who hurry for the alleged transformation of the victims into executioners, when talking about terrorism of Arab and Palestinian nationalist and Islamist origin tend to understand and reroute, or

worse to justify in the name of the injustices suffered?". "Will this not be the way to argue the spy of an unresolved ambivalence in the relationship with Judaism that transforms Jews into symbols of someone else's speech and objects of projections that deny the concrete reality of their existence? ". "If, on the one hand", I added, "the Jews are arbitrarily and falsely accused of having betrayed a story, while on the other it comes to justify terrorism in the name of the injustices suffered, this will not be a problem that lies behind the discussion and that should be investigated and dissected? Isn't that where we should start if we want to cure sick words?"

Hypocritical aestheticism may be a justification in the case of other evils done in the name of injustice and suffering undergone, but not in the case of Jews. This was the ignoble attitude seen in the case of anti-Israeli suicide bombers before European cities began to be targeted too. Will this not be a political problem as well as a moral one, which calls into question the very codes with which reality is read? In this perverse logic, the trend of the Middle Eastern crisis sets the phases, the forms and the virulence of a debate that is upstream and that with the worsening of the Middle Eastern crisis can take on a virulent character, to the point that the Jewish institutions, which prepare to send witnesses for the rite, have taken to an unhealthy habit of supporting the witness with a young man prepared to respond on these issues. The witness from hell can only talk about hell, while the political expert can instead answer all other questions and deal with the distortions produced by misinformation and unawareness.

The "ritual" is safe, but not forever. The danger has only been averted for the time being, and Jews have been placed in the uncomfortable position of having to deal with a double form of blackmail: they are obliged to remember because others forget and are accused of placing others in a position of perpetual guilt.

After Auschwitz, antisemitism may be expressed in an apparently respectable way only if Jews are targeted as a State - demonizing Israel and deforming the tragic events of a now century-long conflict in such a way as to make it unrecognizable. This new type of antisemitism comes full circle when Jews are accused of wanting to keep other countries in a state of permanent guilt in order to acquire 'privileges' for themselves and to cover up any of Israel's apparent 'faults'

Personal memory involves emotions and thoughts, consisting of recollections and familiar stories. As an event gradually fades and is drained of ritual, such as the ritual of remembering the Resistance movement in Italy, those who don't recognize themselves as sharing western cultural values, or are actually openly opposed to Western civilization, risk identifying Jews with the evils of this society. Hatred of Hollywood becomes irritation at the memory of Auschwitz. Hatred of Western civilization and US power blends into hatred of Israel, and the fact that Israel is a small country surrounded by seemingly 'unfriendly' countries, infallibly exposed to danger and destruction is often overlooked.

In the psychoanalytic field, after the pioneering research of Bettelheim (1976) and the studies on the crypt by A. Torok (1993), and in the wake of the developments of the research on testimony, there has been a recovery of interest in the issue of the transmission of trauma and of the processes of mourning that had expired in the last works of Freud. Most notably in the three tormented essays on Moses (Meghnagi, 1992, 2015). In the wake of the debate that opened with the *Eichmann Process*, there has been a recovery of interest in the theme of evil and choice within the social and philosophical sphere. More recently, historiographic approaches have placed greater emphasis on juridical and social psychological dimensions. The experimental research conducted by Milgram (1974) on the mechanisms of obedience cast a new and disturbing light on the mechanisms that can be the background for the realization of an extermination project. Shifting the reflection from the theme of aggression to that of obedience, Milgram highlighted the role that the cognitive unity of a process for awareness of the dangers has, and the role played by the delegation in the process of splitting the functions of the Super-ego with the consequent need (in terms of the prevention and defense of the democratic order) to establish rules and constraints that strengthen people's ability to resist unjust and immoral orders. Milgram's experiments, heavily criticized for the trauma caused to those who participated in them, paved the way for a more mature reflection on the dangers inherent in contemporary society. This is due to the growing fragmentation of the functions performed at work and in every professional sphere.

4. Conclusions

The sheer depth of the matter, along with the establishment of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, means that the schools and teachers faced with cumulative difficulties in teaching the history of the *Shoah*, will never be able to magically debate and subsequently resolve the issues in refresher courses. Especially since the delay involved the academic world itself. The teaching challenge, deservedly accepted by the teaching staff, had to be confronted with the need to overcome the arbitrarily established boundaries between various disciplinary fields. Indicating a new way of doing teaching that would have implications for each subject area, showing in many cases the arbitrary characteristics and functionalities of reproducing the balance of power within universities, rather than the actual progress of research and knowledge.

This was one of the reasons why in the academic year 2005-2006 the “International Masters on Holocaust Studies, Second Level” was established at Roma Tre. At the beginning, the first question we asked ourselves when trying to get an initial answer, was how overcome these false antinomies, involving scholars from different disciplines, in a shared challenge, which called into question the rigid fences that separate the individual disciplines taught at the university. By working together on an educational project, psychologists have personally touched the danger of a “purely” psychological reading of problems that also call into question the social and historical dimensions of belonging. In the same way, historians understood from the inside the one-sidedness of an approach that did not consider the social, religious and psychological dimensions of the problems as well.

In this perspective, even those enrolled in the Masters course, who in their first year were largely scholars looking for an institutional recognition of a course of study and didactic experimentation that had accompanied them for years, should have belonged to different specializations, in the belief that the different curriculum, beyond the initial difficulties and due to the lack of basic historical knowledge (to be quickly filled with the compulsory reading of some fundamental works on the subject, in particular those of Hilberg (1995), Bauer (2001) and Bauman (1992), would have added value to teachers as well as the students as a whole, with priceless repercussions on school didactics. The choice of three such different authors is not only an invitation to familiarize yourself from the beginning with a complex and diverse variety of approaches that has no equal, but also an invitation to deepen their cultural matrices and genealogies. In this perspective the different historiographic approaches, as for the other disciplines, can be studied in their own becoming, becoming themselves the subject of historiographic research (one of the proposed modules was the ‘history of the historiography of the *Shoah*’).

To give concrete examples, it is enough to think about the repercussions on teaching the history of medicine and biology in schools. The discussion could be extended to other apparently distant disciplines such as nutrition, sports and pharmaceutical disciplines. In this perspective, no disciplinary area could really be considered outside the Memorial Day commemorations. In support of this way of teaching, the students of the Masters course have been involved in training courses for schools which involved over one thousand second and third year students from the Regions of Tuscany, Lazio and Piedmont, with an entrance test and an exit for the evaluation of the skills acquired, which for the first time also involved students of Maghrebin origin and of Islamic religion in Italy, assuming a safe and positive intercultural and inter-religious value, respecting the cultures of origin and sensitivities of the students and families.

In the belief that only by taking advantage of the experience of other European countries, by avoiding repeating their mistakes, can the challenge posed by the demographic and cultural changes that have affected our country be overcome³. I still remember what it was like today, the uneasiness of the Ministerial Officials and School Directors with whom I had made the first contact, worried

³ The project "Adopt a memory" was jointly conducted and implemented with Claudia Hassan (prof. at the *University of Tor Vergata*), in the context of the University of Roma Tre in collaboration with the *Europa Ricerca Association*, with the contribution of School Directorates of the Lazio, Piedmont and Tuscany Regions and the Municipality of Rome.

about the strong "Islamic" presence in some of the selected schools. "Wouldn't it be better to start" for those schools "an intercultural project", an Official of one of the regional school directorates involved worried me? "And what could be more intercultural", I replied tactfully, and doing everything possible to diffuse a situation I envisioned escalating, "of a challenge that has as its objective the construction of a feeling of shared citizenship?" "Isn't this," I added, "one of the fundamental objectives that schools should set themselves to encourage the cultural integration of students of all creeds and backgrounds? It would be tragic that for a misunderstood concern not to touch the susceptibility of families where there is a strong presence of connected anti-Jewish prejudices of Islamic origin, we should back away on a theme that deeply involves the construction of shared citizenship values. Italy is fortunate to be able to tackle the problem, drawing on the experiences of other European countries, avoiding repeating mistakes". Not entirely convinced the Official took charge of organizing the meetings and in the end she became passionate about the project, following its stages and developments, not only for a verification of what we were doing, but also for the theme that had ended up involving her.

The project was successfully carried out involving over one thousand middle school students (second and third class) as a whole. The results of the research were presented on three occasions: at the Liceo Visconti in Rome and at the School Directorate in Florence in 2007, on the occasion of the Turin Book Fair in 2008⁴. Publicly discussed with the participation of a large audience of operators and students, these results can be considered an example of best teaching practices of the *Shoah* on an intercultural level.

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⁴ *Not to forget the Shoah ... the testimony of Liliana Segre*. Meeting with the students of the secondary schools of II degree, Book Fair of Turin, 12 May 2008. Speeches by F. De Sanctis (director of the regional school office of Piedmont), Colombo (Member of the Deputy Chamber), M. Palmizio (Senator). Presentation of the results: C. Hassan (University of "Tor Vergata"). Conclusions of D. Meghnagi (Roma Tre University).

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