

# Holocaust black holes...writes Michael Kuttner

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As the number of Shoah survivors able to personally bear witness to the horrors they experienced decreases, the challenge is to ensure that future generations will be educated and informed of what happened during the years 1933 to 1945. With deniers and revisionists increasing, as time progresses it is more imperative than ever for the lessons of this unique catastrophe to be internalized. Failing to do so will result in the present generation being blissfully ignorant of what led to the murder of six million Jews plus others designated as subhuman by citizens of Europe. It will also mean that students in today's schools and institutes of higher learning will graduate totally ignorant of the subject. As these pupils are future politicians and decision makers the potential for them being infected with the same virus of Judeophobia is fairly high. Moreover as we can already see the mutation to hatred for the Jewish State is an inevitable progression

The logical antidote is obviously education preferably as soon as possible or at an age when the lessons can be understood. That is why Holocaust studies have become an essential and critical component of history and social studies subjects in many countries, especially for high school pupils. Of course in order for this subject to be taught effectively there must be educators who are knowledgeable on the subject and who can access and present the material in a manner designed to engage students.

There are therefore two critical components associated with Holocaust studies. Firstly a curriculum tailored to the needs of the pupils and secondly teachers willing and able to deal with the subject.

With the current world-wide surge in Judeophobia, educational authorities in many countries are recognizing the importance of including a study of the Holocaust in school curricula. To this end the subject has been made a compulsory part of history and related topics for senior students in high schools. In 2014 from the beginning of the school year, Australia introduced the teaching of Holocaust studies as a mandatory subject to be gradually introduced in all States for students in years 9 and 10 or ages 14 to 16. Not only do students have the opportunity to visit the Holocaust Museums in Sydney and Melbourne but they also have the opportunity to listen to the personal experiences of Holocaust survivors. These first hand occasions provide the most powerful tools for conveying the full extent of what happened during those years.

Hand in hand with survivor testimonies many educators now have the opportunity of participating in seminars in Israel arranged by Yad Vashem. These visits provide invaluable resource material as well as exposing those taking part to an historical perspective of Jewish experiences, past and present. The flow on benefits to teachers and students alike cannot be over estimated.

The New Zealand situation is different. With a smaller population and even smaller Jewish presence the opportunity for youngsters to learn from and be exposed to Holocaust

experiences is severely limited. There is an excellent Holocaust Educational Centre based at the Jewish Community building in Wellington, providing valuable information, It is staffed by volunteers and visited by pupils and adults alike.

However, critically, Holocaust studies are not a compulsory part of the NZ curriculum. The NZ curriculum guide for senior secondary schools has the following introduction:

*What is history all about? History examines the past to understand the present. Authentic understanding in history comes from developing a grasp of the key concepts and underlying key historical events, themes and issues. It must include learning contexts that have significance to New Zealanders and/or global events involving or influencing New Zealanders.*

One would have thought that teaching the events and learning the lessons of the Holocaust years would fit neatly into these requirements. Refugees fleeing racial, religious persecution and finding a safe haven in NZ, the murder of family members left behind and the personal experiences of post war refugees from Europe all dovetail neatly into the requirements of the curriculum. Bizarrely however New Zealand Governments over the years up until today have not had the urge to make the study of the Holocaust a compulsory part of high school studies. The result is that only a miniscule proportion of high school students will learn about the subject and most of them will graduate with either no knowledge or even worse a warped conception of events.

The handful of motivated teachers who have participated in the Yad Vashem programme will struggle with limited resources to educate their students about the most horrendous event of the twentieth century. A few lucky ones will make the effort to travel to Wellington and visit the Centre and perhaps hear from a survivor or see a film. The best example however of the big black hole into which Holocaust studies in NZ falls is the fact that pupils from one of Wellington's highest achieving state high schools, Wellington College (my old school) do not visit the Holocaust Centre. Pupils from further afield will have even less opportunity to visit and learn.

A dedicated NZ non-Jewish couple, Sheree and Perry Trotter have mainly at their own expense created a wonderful traveling exhibition entitled [“Shadows of the Shoah.”](#) This is taken to many parts of the country and includes survivor testimonies which people in far-flung towns can view. It also affords an opportunity for youngsters to learn about the Holocaust, its causes and devastating impact on the lives of so many. For many it is the first and possibly only chance to be exposed to the subject. Its impact is incalculable.

The bottom line however is that only the surface is being scratched. Thanks to the fact that Holocaust studies is left entirely up to the whim, interest and motivation of the teachers concerned the vast majority of graduating teenagers will be left totally underexposed to the subject.

As the years progress the unique lessons will be (are already being) diluted and disputed. The delegitimisation of the Jews of Europe, their labelling, stigmatisation and boycotting which ultimately ended in their murder by poison gas is already being trivialised. That is why you hear speakers every International Holocaust Day comparing the systematic targeting and organised murder of Jews to other events such as the International Day of non violence!!

Declaring “we are all Jews” as Obama recently did is meaningless when at the same time the Jewish State is being delegitimised, stigmatised, labeled and boycotted on a daily basis.

It is high time that the New Zealand Government followed the example of other countries and made Holocaust studies a compulsory part of the high school curriculum. I have been told that teaching about the Holocaust could be construed as a controversial subject which might upset certain sectors of society. In France for example riots have broken out in some schools when teachers have taught it. Well, New Zealand is not yet France.

Nothing will happen unless like in Australia the organized Jewish community keeps up the pressure. It is a disgrace that New Zealand in 2016 should still not see compulsory Holocaust studies as a vital part of their teenagers’ education. Without an inoculation against Judeophobia at that age the potential is high for negative and undesirable results not too far down the track.

Elie Weisel summed it up very well:

*“The Holocaust was a war against the Jews in which not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims.”*

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