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## Discover the Past for the Future

A study on the role of historical sites and museums in Holocaust education and human rights education in the EU

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## Focus Report

January 2010



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Focus Report



## A visit to a Holocaust-related site should raise questions and not provide ready-made answers<sup>1</sup>

What is the role of Holocaust-related sites and exhibitions today? What do they offer to young people? What are problems they are confronted with? How can teachers make best use of them when planning to go there with their school classes? Have the sites adapted to the demands of increasingly diverse societies and the challenge of the growing distance between new generations and the events of the past? Have they developed approaches that link the particular event of the Holocaust with universal human rights questions? Who could and who should support the sites in their attempt to remain meaningful places for future generations?

‘It is really too long ago. I do not care about history that much. It does not interest me at all’ (Student focus group, Netherlands)

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted in 2009 the first EU-wide study examining the contribution of memorial sites to Holocaust education and Human Rights education in the EU. Students, teachers, and staff of memorial sites were interviewed to find out about factors that decide upon the success or failure of education programmes at sites.

The aim of this project is to strengthen the link between reflection about historical events, like the Holocaust, and reflection about the history of human rights and contemporary human rights issues. Moreover, this project aims to discuss problem areas historical sites are confronted with; to share good practice activities between sites; and to give practical guidance to teachers on how to best use historical sites for education about the Holocaust and about human rights.

The study involved:

- an examination of the literature on Holocaust education and human rights education at Holocaust sites and museums
- a survey among ministries of all EU Member States
- a survey among 22 memorial sites and museums dealing with the Holocaust
- focus group discussions with teachers and students in 9 EU Member States
- on-site research at 14 memorial sites and historical museums and interviews with pedagogical experts and curators of these sites

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<sup>1</sup> This is a quote from a workshop on “Memory, History and Human Rights Education” that was held in December 2009 at the FRA. The statement was made by an educator of the Monte Sole Peace School in Italy.

The study was carried out by the Living History Forum in Sweden, with the assistance of academics and practitioners from memorial sites, museums and universities. The experts came from Poland, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Switzerland. They were historians, social psychologists and educators. Though most had a background in Holocaust education, several had a background in human rights, anti-racist and intercultural education.

This Focus Report provides selected findings, discussion points and recommendations derived from the research study. The full study is published in the Main Results Report.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of the findings of this project the FRA has also developed

- a handbook for teachers providing information on how to make best use of visits to Holocaust-related sites and exhibitions for teaching about the Holocaust and about human rights
- a discussion book addressing issues relevant for Holocaust-related sites and museums and providing case studies of educational approaches that seek to link education about the Holocaust with education about human rights.

## Developing a culture of self-critical historical reflection

During the past decades the historical event of the Holocaust has become, over most of Europe and also in other parts of the world, a central part of the culture of memory. In this context, the question is raised today as to whether and how the Holocaust should be explicitly integrated into a broader human rights perspective that includes tracing the past and discussing contemporary human rights issues.

‘We have never had a lesson in human rights. Human rights aren’t a subject in lessons; at most in theory, but not in practice’  
(Student focus group, Berlin)

In many countries, memorial sites to the victims of Nazism, and also museums and exhibitions, have assumed an important role in transmitting historical facts and moral values, both in addition to and in conjunction with the work carried out by schools. Each year, millions of people throughout Europe visit memorial sites at places associated with Nazi crimes, as well as museums and exhibitions on the Holocaust. A large number of these visitors are young people taking part in curriculum-based visits, study trips, educational programmes or class trips.

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<sup>2</sup> The report is available on the FRA website: <http://fra.europa.eu/>

The significance of memorial sites to the victims of Nazism at historic locations, as well as the smaller number of museums and Holocaust exhibitions not associated with a specific place, lies above all in the fact that they bear witness to National Socialist crimes which, with the dwindling of the wartime generation, it will soon be impossible to document through direct communication with survivors. Through their topographical and material existence, which creates spatial continuity between past and present, the memorial sites at former concentration camps highlight the impact of these crimes on people's lives and seek to promote a confrontation with history.

Most memorial sites did not initially serve as museums and did not have exhibitions or additional educational resources. These sites are thus faced with a new challenge in having to address both past and present. As a result of greater temporal distance from the Nazi past, along with demographic changes and the increasingly academically-oriented presentation of historical events, it no longer seems sufficient for a memorial site visit to simply provoke the moral rejection of Nazism.

## Clarification of terms and concepts

This study examined the role the sites attribute to themselves as educational facilities in contemporary societies and the role that is attributed to them by ministries, teachers and students. The study was based on two key terms, Holocaust education and human rights education:

In the framework of this study, **Holocaust education** is understood as

*education that takes the discrimination, persecution and extermination of the Jews by the National Socialist regime as its focus, but also includes Nazi crimes against other victim groups, both for the purpose of deeper understanding and contextualisation of the Holocaust and out of a desire to acknowledge and commemorate the suffering of numerous non-Jewish victims of the Nazi era.*

'If a teacher teaches the Holocaust without enthusiasm, that's – that's almost a crime actually' (Student focus group, London)

**Human rights education (HRE)** is defined as

*education, training and information aimed at building a universal culture of human rights, which not only provides knowledge about human rights and the mechanisms that protect them but also imparts the skills needed to promote, defend and apply human rights in daily life. (UNESCO)*

‘The criteria for whether the teaching is successful is purely whether the students have understood the human aspect of the Holocaust and not simply associated it with dry facts and figures’ (Teacher focus group, Copenhagen)

While Holocaust education is understood as the transmission of historical knowledge, the UNESCO definition of human rights education also includes an action-oriented component, to promote defend and apply human rights in daily life. The link between Holocaust education and human rights education can therefore best be described with the question of how knowledge about the past can be used for mastering the present and for ensuring that present societies are based on human rights that ensure equality, security and non-discrimination.

## Findings and conclusions

### How important are memorial sites and historical museums today?

All EU Member States confirm the importance of Holocaust education, democracy education and human rights education (HRE). The interviewed students pointed to the impact that confrontation with the Holocaust has had on their personal lives, particularly with regard to visits to memorial sites. Students see memorial sites as places that can have a lasting impression on them and they perceive ‘authentic’ historical sites as more powerful than museums. Meeting with survivors was emphasised by the students as having had a particular impact on them.

‘The site allows you to really feel the atmosphere, which is essential for the learning process. If you feel something, it sticks’ (Teacher focus group, Amsterdam)

### What is the special aura of sites of crime?

The authenticity of sites can represent both an asset and a burden for educational activities. Authenticity can create an atmosphere of emotional attachment that triggers reflection, and makes visitors open for new information and for articulating their thoughts. Emotional overload and/or expectations regarding specific rules of behaviour at memorial sites can, however, also block articulation and reflection.

‘Authentic sites are crucial in teaching the Holocaust, even more when they show empty spaces, when they physically evoke in the students what happened, e.g. cold weather and snow during winter, when they prove what non-life is’ (Teacher focus group, Milan)

## What should be taught at memorial sites and museums?

All interviewees considered Holocaust education to comprise more than confrontation with the past alone. Confrontation with the Holocaust also always touches on contemporary issues. Some of the memorial sites and museums surveyed and visited do follow concepts that are designed to stimulate action among their visitors. However, while many sites have installed education programmes, there is no clear focus of such programmes on human rights-related education. Only one of the surveyed sites regards raising awareness about human rights as its most important objective, all other institutions focus on the transmission of historical knowledge.

‘At a time when the media is so powerful and when people are prone to be passive spectators, it is important to teach students to doubt, to turn everything into a problem to be investigated. The important thing is not to have an unambiguous reaction, but to have any reaction’ (Teacher focus group, Milan)

## What contributes to successful teaching at sites?

According to the surveyed sites, factors for the success of educational activities at sites are:

- high quality of the educational programmes and activities
- pedagogical methods that activate and empower students
- positive attitudes of students and teachers and good preparation of visits to memorial sites
- educational skills and motivation of the employees at the sites
- sufficient funding of sites and visits to sites by official authorities

‘Holocaust education should focus on biographies of victims, making the students familiar with the personality of the victims and avoiding mentioning only their suffering’ (Teacher focus group, Linz)

## What are obstacles to successful teaching at sites?

According to students, teachers, and staff employed at sites, the following obstacles are preventing a better use of sites:

- lack of skilled and well-trained staff
- inadequate funding of sites and lack of funding of visits to sites (teachers pointed out the difficulty of financing visits to memorial sites and museums)
- lack of seminar rooms and space for educational activities
- lack of time for the education activities on the site
- poorly prepared groups
- inadequate teaching materials related to the Holocaust, HRE and visits to Holocaust sites
- that students' participation in activities is not voluntary
- lack of cooperation between teachers on education about the Holocaust
- too little interaction and not enough independent activity of students at sites
- lack of connection of educational activities at sites to the present

'Teachers are not prepared for dealing with that topic, they are afraid of this topic, trying to avoid Holocaust topics'  
(Teacher focus group, Cracow)

## Which pedagogical approaches fit best?

Most teachers stated that they were against a "top-down" teaching approach. In their view, and also in the students' view, students should participate voluntarily in visits to sites. Students should form their own opinions through active, exploratory, research-based and project-oriented learning. Teachers and students emphasise the importance of work with biographies of victims and perpetrators. Emotions are seen as important for learning processes, but there is the danger of emotional overload or emotional resistance.

'The students get the most out of it themselves, which is much more powerful because they draw their own conclusions; all we do is show them the way' (Teacher focus group, Prague)

## How to ensure that a visit to a site has a lasting impact?

A visit to a historical site can cause a strong impression on the side of the young visitors, but the few hours available at the site are usually not enough to translate this impression into processes of reflection. Students and teachers therefore affirm the importance of preparation and, even more, follow-up activities. Also, in terms of linking human rights education and Holocaust education, pre-visit preparation and post-visit evaluation could play an important role.

'It is not productive to provoke an emotive response while visiting authentic sites; this can produce a negative side-effect. On the contrary, it should be the premise to activate an emotional intelligence, which is much more complex and deep' (Teacher focus group, Milan)

## How to ensure that education programmes meet the interests of the visitors?

Overall, institutions tend to have too little knowledge of the interests of the young people that visit them. When asked the main reasons why people go to these sites, the museum and memorial site staff frequently confused the visitors' possible motivation with their own pedagogical objectives. A successful strategy would be to arrange discussions with teachers or school groups prior to the visit.

## What is the role of educators at sites?

Substantial importance is attributed to the personality and qualifications of both teachers and guides when dealing with the subject of the Holocaust. Teachers are seen as key figures in terms of the students' interest in the subject. Guides are regarded as key figures for the success of visits to memorial sites. Often, there is insufficient integration of part-time guides into the educational departments at the sites. In-depth knowledge of and training about human rights and HRE is rare among staff at Holocaust related institutions.

'The quality of excursions is highly dependent on the professionalism of guides, how they are able to involve the students and to provoke interest in the topic.' (Teacher focus group, Vilnius)

## How well established is the field of human rights education?

Teachers and students make few connections between visits to memorial sites and HRE. Statements by teachers and students also point to a weak link between Holocaust education and HRE at school level. Discussions revealed that there is a lack of knowledge about the history and scope of human rights – this contradicts responses by the ministries in EU Member States stating that HRE is a priority area. All in all, HRE is not a well established concept, neither at the level of memorial sites nor at school level. Even in the literature there is very little discussion of HRE in the context of memorial sites.

‘It can happen that in the whole school experience a student does not learn about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or even about the Italian Constitution. It all depends on the will of single teachers or professors’ (Student focus group, Milan)

## How developed are the links between Holocaust education and human rights education?

At present, there are only a few developed or tested pedagogical concepts and methodologies that bring together the history of the Holocaust and contemporary issues, not to mention to implement and evaluate them on a regular basis. Developing such concepts and methodologies would help educators at memorial sites and museums, as well as teachers, to gain a better understanding of what human rights education is and how it can be linked to teaching about the Holocaust. One way to achieve this is through including both learning about the Holocaust and learning about the history and present role of human rights in teacher education and training. In addition to this, international and national seminars, meetings and conferences where an exchange of ideas, methodology and concepts can take place, could foster understanding. National governments and ministries should actively organise such activities and promote participation in them.

‘Teaching about breaches of human rights must be included in the curriculum in order to prevent anything similar happening in the future, to enable students to learn about the mistakes made in the past’ (Student focus group, Copenhagen)

This study makes it clear that attempts to expand knowledge of human rights and make connections between Holocaust education and HRE need a broader focus than the memorial sites or museums can offer. Much of the work on linking Holocaust education and HRE needs to be done in schools. Visits to memorial sites and museums can stimulate, support and supplement such work.

'It is not enough to listen to a witness who is over 80 years old if you do not connect his/her experience to the present time, if you don't recognise there is still a deficit in human rights today.'  
(Teacher focus group, Milan)



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European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

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