

THE TEACHING OF THE HOLOCAUST AND MY VISIT TO AUSCHWITZ JUNE 2009

In 1975 I did the working class student grand tour and the pre modern gap year, i.e. did a month on the inter rail backpacking.

My three friends and I ended up in Munich, they went to visit Daccau and I didn't. I chose not to go, felt it was rather obscene and voyeuristic. I had the Mickey taken out of me and my degree was in Twentieth Century Politics and History. The following year I studied the origins and outbreak of World War II as a final paper led by a Polish Jew.

I started teaching in Barnsley in September 1977. I taught History at Key Stage 3 and Social Studies and Economics at Key Stage 4. Key Stage 4 history was about 18th Century and 19th Century Industrial Britain.

The main RE Teacher was particularly ineffective as I remember and I have no memory of the holocaust being taught.

When the National Curriculum came in I was still teaching History at KS3 and Economics and Social Studies at KS4. I also led a core one hour per week course on the cross curricular themes of environment, citizenship, health etc and RE was not really being taught at KS4 and neither was the Holocaust.

I was made redundant in 1992 when the National Curriculum came in due to an excess of History Teachers but undoubtedly the National Curriculum in my opinion changed history for the better but without doubt the great fillip to Holocaust Studies was without doubt Schindlers List.

At this time I as doing a lot of supply teaching and receiving a lot of ideas. Secondary Schools were teaching at WWII as a strategic thing i.e. the course of war in Europe whilst at KS2 in Year 6 they learnt about WII from the home front.

Schools were now teaching more comparative religious studies and in Yr 9 schools in the summer term, post SATs, they were learning about WWII in History and the Jewish faith in RE.

Schools decided to teach the two concurrently and then showed a specially made edition of Schindler's List and this fitted in with the

wishes of the then current Education Secretary, Kenneth Clark, that all pupils should learn about the Holocaust and WWII before they have the opportunity to drop History at KS3 and before following more specialized RE courses in KS4.

When I finally got back into teaching, I was first a cover teacher in the largest school in special measures and I was Head of RE for a term but I did not encounter any teaching of the Holocaust there, the emphasis was more on Saving Private Ryan in History and to links with RE.

My next school was a Fresh Start School where I worked in a 97% Muslim School in their behaviour unit and have no recollection of the Holocaust being taught there.

I did not really start teaching RE until I became the Humanities Teacher in a Special School for Behaviour in Sheffield, similar to where I am now.

I used to teach a half term module of History, followed by a half term of Geography where I would teach a two week block in the middle of the two of RE.

When HMI came in because the School had serious weaknesses in management, I was told that I should teach each subject separately for one lesson a week in the three lesson week.

I taught about the Holocaust at the School in the way that I had seen it demonstrated. I taught about the Jewish faith and I taught that the antecedents of anti-Semitism was not a new thing and gave examples from History including from England and about ghettos etc.

I had written to parents to say that I would be showing Schindler's List, teaching about the Holocaust and showing disturbing images, this was a period where Holocaust deniers were emerging. I was moving towards the Holocaust when the Lead Inspector, who was an HMI, came in to my lesson. He said it was only satisfactory. He said that I should have started with photos of the Holocaust. He said they were 14 and were of an age to see such things. I was just getting parental confirmations back. I disagreed with him then and I disagree with him now.

I kept teaching this way until I met Garry Clarkson, Head of Humanities, in a mainstream school in September 2006 at Rossington High School Voluntary Aided Church of England.

Garry told me that he took parties of sixth formers to Auschwitz and acted as a guide there. Indeed he had just been studying in Israel that summer and given a presentation in London which included an audience of Gordon Brown, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer.

He told me that the Holocaust group were very, very positive about the Holocaust which seemed strange. They took Stalin's view, who once said that a death is a tragedy but a million is merely a statistic.

We looked at the Twentieth Century in a module of nine weeks, three weeks were spent on the causes, course and consequences of WWII, three weeks were spent on post WWII but the really innovative part was the three weeks spent on Poland.

Poland was examined for its history briefly from 13th Century but especially the vibrancy and tolerance towards Jews and their cultural influence on Poland.

We then spent a week looking at a real Jewish family and their life before WWII and then were visited by a Holocaust survivor and also the heroism of people who made a stand against the Nazis on behalf of the Jews. There were very few areas where one looked at concentration camp atrocities, it was all implicit not explicit.

I still found this a little strange as Hitler never received a mention. The School recognised Holocaust Memorial Day which is in January and is linked to the liberation of Auschwitz.

The School assembly that Garry conducted did not show pictures of camps but talked about the present here and now and such genocides like Rwanda being prevented in the future.

I saw the advert in April 2009 for teachers to visit Auschwitz under 'lessons from the Holocaust' for teachers and by this time I was in Walsall teaching as the Humanities teacher, as in my previous Special School.

It was a heavily subsidized course of £49.00 for two London seminars, a visit to Auschwitz inclusive of flights etc and resources. I was still a little ambivalent but far less so having been with Garry and wanting to know more I was accepted for the course.

The first part of the course was the Sunday before the visit in London to prepare us for some potentially shocking scenes, to orientate ourselves and also to meet a Holocaust survivor from Auschwitz.

I had met or read about or seen interviews with several Holocaust survivors and they never seem bitter about their experience even when losing groups of their families.

This man hated the Nazis but not the Germans.

He married a French girl and had a family and lived in England. He had never wanted to go back to Auschwitz or indeed Poland but his daughters persuaded him about a decade to go with them back to Poland. He said that he was glad that he went back and there were some Catholic aspects to it but he said that there was still anti-Semitism in Poland and the surviving Jews had either been driven out of his home town or killed by Poles.

The flight to Krakow was the following Wednesday at 7.00 am from Luton. This was the first time that they had taken just teachers, usually sixth formers, along with their guides.

We were also escorted by Teachers TV and the Times Educational Supplement (TES), the TES Report was published on the last Friday of the summer term. I was interviewed and explained about my original ambivalence at Daccau and how I felt less so now, it wasn't published.

The first place we went to was an ordinary cemetery in the town near the camp of Auschwitz and to demonstrate that they had had ordinary lives and had died normally before the camp.

The actual visit took us to Birkenau 1 which was originally a Polish barracks which was converted into a work camp hence the famous 'Arbeit macht frei'.

It became re designated as a death camp and we were transferred to the much larger death camp part by coach.

The size of this site is remarkable and it has been named as a site of cultural significant by UNESCO and it is virtually as it was. The major item that is missing is the crematorium chimney which the Nazis demolished before the Russians arrived to hide their culpability.

The original railway track and sleepers are still there which enable the camp controllers to take victims right into the camp. Recent evidence has emerged that Churchill wanted to bomb the railway line but was overruled by Roosevelt and the RAF as it was not a strategic objective and risky.

The visit shows the living quarters, the squat toilets and the area where they 'processed' names etc and where they were taken through to be stripped, bathed, clothes, only much later were they necessarily executed as it was a work camp.

The Jewish population of Poland in 1939 was 3.5 million and there were 6,000 Synagogues. If the Synagogues had not been destroyed then each surviving Jew could have worshipped at their own personal Synagogue.

Again life affirming aspects came through when family photographs were recently found in a trunk at Auschwitz. They are being placed on a massive wall and when relations visit, they are to name family members and help to piece together family trees, which is similar to the exercise that pupils do with Garry Clarkson and myself at School.

One photograph was of a beautiful girl of 19, it was good because she survived went to live in Sydney, Australia, became a dentist and only died in 2004.

There was a service at the end of the day outside and various teachers read poems and statements from people and the Rabbi who flew with this then spoke and consisted of a prayer and then candles were lit on the tracks.

We arrived back about 10.30 pm to Luton, the same day and people met up in London ten days later. There are opportunities to become a guide and to study in Israel.

I am glad that I went but I would not like to go back. Pupils are not allowed to go below six form level, having had intensive preparation, there were young children because all Poles all have to go as part of the School Studies and I think some parents were taking their children first with them. Like I said an amazing experience but not one I wish to repeat but the emphasis is on 'Lessons from the Holocaust', no more genocide.