

### 3. Holocaust Education in South Africa



Students visit an exhibition on Anne Frank in South Africa.

Photo Credit: Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre



Tali Nates

**Tali Nates** (South Africa), Director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, has lectured internationally about Holocaust education, genocide prevention, reconciliation and human rights. She has presented at numerous conferences, published many articles and was involved in documentary films made for South African Television. In 2010, Ms. Nates was chosen as one of the top 100 newsworthy and noteworthy women in South Africa, published in the *Mail & Guardian Book of South African Women*. Ms. Nates acts as a scholar and leader of many Holocaust education missions to Eastern Europe as well as educational missions in South Africa and Rwanda. She is also one of the founders of "Holocaust Survivors Services" in Johannesburg, an organisation that offers social, educational and psychological services for survivors and their families. She comes from a family of Holocaust survivors — her father and uncle were both saved by Oskar Schindler, but the rest of the family perished.

# Holocaust Education in South Africa

by Tali Nates

Director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre,  
the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation

Teaching about the Holocaust in South Africa is a complicated affair. How do you teach about atrocities and pain in a country that has its own heavy burden of immense man-made suffering? The German politician and writer Richard von Weizacker wrote:

*It is not a matter of overcoming the past. One can do no such thing. The past does not allow itself to be retrospectively altered or undone. But whoever closes his eyes to the past becomes blind to the present. Whoever does not wish to remember inhumanity becomes susceptible to the dangers of new infection.*

He spoke, of course, about Germany as a nation and how “their forefathers have bequeathed them a heavy legacy”.<sup>1</sup>

December 1948 saw the birth of two momentous United Nations agreements on human rights: the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Earlier that year Apartheid (“separateness” in Afrikaans) was officially institutionalised in South Africa. The country also bears a heavy legacy. 2011 marks 17 years since the end of the Apartheid regime and the celebration of South Africa’s new

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know* (New York: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 196.

democracy. The country's painful past is always under the surface and to a large extent it determines much of how the present and future are shaped. Suffering during Apartheid does not necessarily mean that South Africans are now immune to becoming "susceptible to the dangers of new infection"; the murderous xenophobic attacks of May 2008 were proof of that.

In 2007 the Holocaust was included as part of the new national history curriculum of South Africa. It is the only country in Africa that includes this module in its curriculum, and this allows for many opportunities that teaching the Holocaust can bring to the country. When the new curriculum was decided upon, the Holocaust was included in both the Grade nine and 11 social sciences and history curriculum. The National Department of Education decided to implement a curriculum that emphasises the theme of human rights and is based on the Constitution and Bill of Rights of South Africa. These documents were directly influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in turn came as a result of the Second World War and the Holocaust. While serving on the South African Human Rights commission, Andre Keet said:

*It is widely accepted that the events of the Holocaust represented one of the most extreme human rights violations in the history of humankind. The lessons drawn from this crime against humanity played a defining role in the construction and development of contemporary human rights. Therefore and alongside the many historical and present-day human rights atrocities across the world and our continent, the inclusion of the Holocaust in the curriculum was never disputed.<sup>2</sup>*

South Africa's high school education system is five years long, from Grade eight to 12. Learners are allowed to leave the education system at the end of Grade nine by law. Up until the end of Grade nine, the teaching of history is compulsory for all learners. From Grade 10

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Freedman, *Teaching the Holocaust to Non-Traditional Audiences: The South African Experience* (2008).

on, learners are required to select six or seven focused subject choices and there are many who don't choose History. The curriculum designers purposefully included the study of the Holocaust in Grade nine, as their aim was that all learners would have the opportunity to learn this important section of history. Following the decision, teachers were required to teach the Holocaust in all schools across the country. The Holocaust is taught for a recommended 12-15 hours and is the first part of the module "human rights issues during and after World War Two". In the second term, this is followed by the study of Apartheid. Through learning about the Holocaust first and then Apartheid, learners are better equipped to make connections to issues of our time such as the genocide in Rwanda and xenophobia in South Africa (also included in the grade's curriculum).

The first Holocaust Centre in South Africa was established in Cape Town in 1999. Its establishment was prompted by an 18-month tour of South Africa and Namibia of the "Anne Frank in Our World" exhibition in 1993-1994. For the first time in the country's history, a number of special panels about South Africa's own history of human rights abuse were developed as part of the exhibition. The exhibition was viewed by thousands of South Africans of all ages, especially by high school learners and their educators. This presented teachers with the opportunity to learn about anti-Semitism. This knowledge gave them a perspective that racism "was not only dependent on skin colour and that even 'white' people could be victims of stereotyping, discrimination and persecution".<sup>3</sup> The response of the educators was extraordinary. The Anne Frank exhibition showed the role Holocaust education could play in post-Apartheid South Africa in raising the issue of prejudice and abuse of power. In the context of the painful history of racism in South

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Africa, the realisation that people classified as “white” could also suffer, and at the hand of other “whites” no-less — allowed for new learning processes and continues to do so. South Africans tend to see all human rights violations through the prism of “white vs. black”. Learning about the Holocaust, where using the same lens “whites killed whites” and Rwanda where “blacks murdered blacks” is hugely important.

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In 2008 two new Holocaust Centres were established in South Africa: one in Durban and one in Johannesburg.<sup>4</sup> The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre will house a permanent exhibition with a focus on the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. A national umbrella body, “the South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation” (SAHGF), was also established in 2008 to create better coordination and cohesion nationally in the field of Holocaust and genocide education.

The SAHGF’s approach to Holocaust education and educator training is based on the belief that while content knowledge of the Holocaust is extremely important, “providing educators and learners with content alone is not enough. Informing both school and educator programmes is the idea that the history of the Holocaust provides a powerful case study for examining the dangers of prejudice and discrimination and the moral imperative for individuals to make responsible choices and defend human rights”.<sup>5</sup>

To help the learners expand their own moral compasses the educator has to develop the ability to stay neutral in the classroom.

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<sup>4</sup> The Durban Holocaust Centre was opened in March 2008. The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre was established in January 2008 and is currently operating in a temporary location. It will open officially in 2012, upon the completion of its new premises.

<sup>5</sup> Tracey Petersen, *The Holocaust: Learner’s Interactive Resource Book, Lessons for Humanity* (Cape Town, 2004), p. 11.

Through educators' responses, it seems that this is proving to be a difficult and emotional task when teaching about the painful history of Apartheid. Many educators cannot divorce their own personal history from that of the required curriculum and find it increasingly difficult to teach about the Apartheid period. For that reason, teaching the Holocaust as a case study of human rights abuse serves as an excellent entry point for both educators and learners; this history is removed from the local experience as it happened in another country and continent more than 65 years ago and is less emotionally charged for South Africans. For these reasons it has the potential of bringing to the surface personal attitudes and prejudices such as racism and xenophobia which otherwise remain hidden. Only when these issues are exposed can they begin to be addressed. Our findings show that it is easier to learn values and moral lessons from a history removed from one's own experience yet have some parallels to the country's narrative. From comments made by educators, it would appear that "learning about the Holocaust created the emotional space for educators to speak frankly about their experiences". Thus in moving first into the extreme history of the Holocaust they were more ready and able to begin examining their own painful history.

South Africa has great oral tradition and the use of story-telling to acquire knowledge, values, ethics and morals presents itself naturally. Using oral history, testimonies of survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, resisters or rescuers has the potential to bring both the content of the Holocaust as well as its lessons to life. In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims is hard to grasp. Sharing with learners testimonies of survivors can remind them that people like themselves, with parents, siblings, friends and grandparents are behind the numbers. Listening and learning from testimonies of survivors help learners to look more closely at the issue of choices and connect to the lessons they can learn from this history. The curriculum also asks for the use of oral history in the classroom – learners are encouraged to interview, for example, people in their communities and make connections to their own lives. Personal

history is an important tool to empower learners to have a look at their own lives and to draw lessons from their own stories. In South Africa there are very few survivors or rescuers and the remaining witnesses to this history are aging. Film can be used very successfully to make up for this. The SAHGF created the film *Testimony*, in which five Holocaust survivors who settled in South Africa share their Holocaust testimony. The film has proven to be a very powerful educational resource. The SAHGF produced another short film during a visit to South Africa of survivor Hannah Pick-Goslar, who tells the story of the Holocaust through the reflections on her friendship with Anne Frank. Literature can also be used successfully to find the voices of the witnesses. Using diary entries or excerpts from memoirs such as the *Diary of Anne Frank*, the works of Elie Wiesel (*Night* for instance) or Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, could be used as primary sources and tools to enhance the traditions of storytelling.

Holocaust education makes it possible for learners to make the connection between the past and the present and translate it into social activism. Teaching the history of the Holocaust creates opportunity for learners to reflect on the consequences of the choices they might face in their daily lives, by examining the consequences of choices made by people during the Holocaust. The case study of the Holocaust helps young people to respond more effectively to their present realities. The hope is that learners will be able to move from knowing what they “should do”, to actually doing it. There are very few other opportunities in the curriculum where learners can strengthen their convictions and learn how to take action by understanding the factors that can hold them back from action.

Understanding the role of bystanders and choosing to take action is extremely important, especially in a young democracy such as South Africa. Jaap van Proosdij, a Dutch rescuer (recognised by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as a Righteous among the Nations) who saved the lives of dozens of Jews in the Netherlands during the Holocaust, lived in Pretoria, South Africa until his death in January 2011. When asked: “Why did you do it?” he answered with a question



of his own: “If you see a drowning man, won’t you save him?”<sup>6</sup> For him, it was a rhetorical question. But sadly for many, the answer is not so clear cut. Most people would not save the drowning man, be it out of fear for their own lives or just the thought that someone else swims better and so should or would do it.

Stories such as that of Jaap van Proosdij’s encourage learners to use critical thinking and develop tools for dealing with these difficult dilemmas. Again, processing the issue of choices can be empowering for the learners and it is done through learning about the roles of bystanders and rescuers and resisters (“upstanders”).<sup>7</sup> It is vital that learners come to understand that they can choose to behave as bystanders or not. Realising that there is a choice is critical. This was the case during the Holocaust and this is still true today. Primo Levi said, “In spite of the varied possibilities for information, most Germans did not know because they did not want to know. Because, indeed, they wanted not to know,”<sup>8</sup> In fact, bystanders always aid the perpetrators just by keeping silent. Time and again the learners, like the rest of us, find themselves in the position of bystanders, standing near, but not taking part when something happens, paralysed by fear or a sense of powerlessness. Learning from the bystanders of the Holocaust, the learners realise that bystander behaviour is a choice not to get involved, to stand on the side and look. This kind of behaviour has the same consequence in the case of bullying at school or a fight.

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<sup>6</sup> A conversation between Jaap van Proosdij and Tali Nates in 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Upstanders is a new word coined by *Facing History and Ourselves* to describe people who choose action over inaction.

<sup>8</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and the Reawakening: Two Memoirs* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 381.

Learners can begin to link this understanding to the broader stage of the country's history during Apartheid. During the xenophobia related riots in May 2008, one of the educators who went through extensive Holocaust training, when teaching about the Holocaust, created an opportunity for the learners to make posters and banners and to demonstrate outside the school against those attacks. The learners translated the lessons of the Holocaust to actively becoming upstanders themselves.

Another opportunity teaching the Holocaust brings is to highlight the linkage between different cases of genocide, human rights abuses or prejudice. In April 1994, when South Africans were celebrating their freedom from Apartheid and people were standing proudly in queues for hours to vote, only a mere three-and-a half hours flight away, in the same continent and time, in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and some politically moderate Hutus were murdered in a period of three months. Yet most educators and learners do not consider these two parallel events and don't make the connections. Introducing the Holocaust and its lessons create opportunities for that leap to be made.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu who is one of the patrons of the SAHGF summed up the opportunities teaching the Holocaust in South Africa presents when he said:

*We learn about the Holocaust so that we can become more human, more gentle, more caring, more compassionate, valuing every person as being of infinite worth, so precious that we know such atrocities will never happen again and the world will be a more humane place.<sup>9</sup>*

Please see page 34 for discussion questions

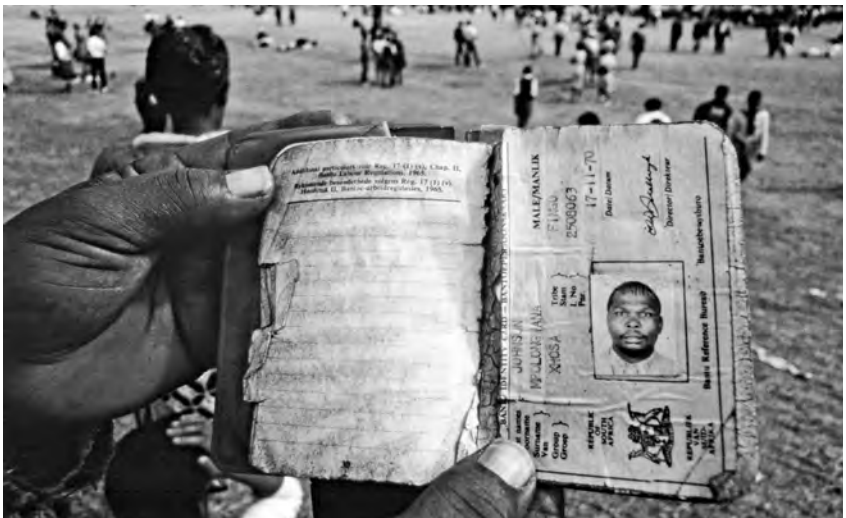
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<sup>9</sup> *The Holocaust: Learner's Interactive Resource Book, Lessons for Humanity.* (Cape Town, 2004) p. 64.



High School students view a portable exhibition “The Holocaust: Lessons for Humanity” in South Africa.

Photo Credit: Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre



Passbook that South African Blacks were required to carry during Apartheid, January 1985.

Photo Credit: UN Photo

## Holocaust Education in South Africa

### Discussion questions

1. Why were the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* adopted in 1948?
2. What connections might students make between the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda and Apartheid in South Africa?
3. Discuss why the Holocaust became part of the history curriculum in South Africa. Can Holocaust education help to teach South African history? If so, in what way?
4. How might Holocaust education facilitate promoting tolerance in contemporary South African society?
5. Do you think that teaching stories from the Holocaust, especially about the role of rescuers and bystanders, can help younger generations to understand better the consequences of their actions? If so, how?