
FIHRM Conference 2010, International Slavery Museum, Liverpool UK

At a recent event held to mark International Museums day in Cape Town Wandile Goozen Kasibe made the following observations,

“In post conflict societies such as South Africa museums are beginning to grasp the urgency of assuming responsibilities as catalysts of socio-culture change and inclusivity.

Fostering social cohesion is a founding principle of South Africa’s new democratic dispensation.

We must heed Paulo Freire’s comment, ‘We must never provide the people with programmes which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations…’ This question could not have come at any better time, than when the citizens of South Africa’s fledgling democracy and its institutions are collectively seeking ways of fostering an inclusive society, where people can no longer fear the nature of their differences. South African museums have begun to assume a leading role in opening a space for this dialogue through education and public programmes.

Museums as an evolving concept: a space for development, critical enquiry on contemporary issues and ultimately societal change.’

The South African Holocaust Foundation with its three Holocaust Centres is uniquely positioned to respond to this zeitgeist.

However in 2006 Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Laureate Eli Wiesel asked the following question and one which we all have to ask ourselves:

"Is it perhaps our fault that the world remains unchanged? If two or three generations have ignored or rejected our message, could it be that it was poorly and inadequately handed down? Should we have chosen other words, another language to speak the unspeakable? (Wiesel, 2006:)

In this paper I will track the journey of the South African Holocaust Foundation and hopefully address in some way Wiesel’s probing question.

In 1994, with the end of apartheid in sight, the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam agreed to bring to South Africa an exhibition entitled ‘Anne Frank in the World’ which toured South Africa and Namibia over an 18-month period. With the cooperation of the Mayebuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, panels about South Africa’s struggle against gross human rights abuses during the apartheid years were developed to accompany the exhibition. The response to the exhibition was overwhelming. Time and again South Africans expressed how relevant the study of the Holocaust was for the emerging new South Africa and how they had not realized that racism and prejudice went beyond the black/white divide but was essentially a problem confronting all humanity.
This prompted the coordinator of the exhibition, Myra Osrin, to investigate the possibility of establishing a permanent Holocaust exhibition in Cape Town. Inspired by the Holocaust Centre at Beth Shalom in the UK the Cape Town Holocaust Centre opened in 1999. In the past 11 years the Centre has been recognized nationally and internationally as an important educational and Human Rights institution and has led to its Trustees forming the South African Holocaust Foundation with additional centres in Durban and one in Johannesburg known as the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre.

The designers of the Centre’s permanent exhibition felt that they could not create an exhibition on the Holocaust without acknowledging South Africa’s recent emergence from a racial state and its own history of human rights abuses. Thus the exhibition examines the history of racism and antisemitism and makes direct reference both textually and visually to South Africa’s own history. Both the ideologies of Nazism and apartheid are based on policies of prejudice, racism, exclusion of ‘others’ and when these policies remain unquestioned, unchallenged, extreme practices such as the historical Holocaust might happen.

The manipulation of the education system was a key component in the apartheid regime’s process of creating a racial state. The content of the curriculum, which differed according to the racial classification, was carefully designed to perpetuate the divisions in society and the expectations and aspirations of pupils.

It is no wonder therefore that one of the key tasks confronting the first democratically elected South African government in 1994 was to dismantle both nearly 50 years of apartheid education and the nearly 300 years of colonial education which had gone before it. This was an enormous challenge which was informed and underpinned by the new South Africa’s constitution and Bill of Rights. The resultant curriculum is one which has human rights at its core.

The kind of learner that is envisaged is one who will be imbued with the values and act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity and social justice as promoted in the Constitution.’

Given that the new constitution was based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which emerged from knowledge of the Holocaust, the curriculum designers felt that the inclusion of the Holocaust as a case study of Human Rights abuse was essential and thus from 2007 it became compulsory for grade 9 learners in every school in the country to study the Holocaust and apartheid in their Social Studies History lessons as case studies of gross human rights abuse.

Building on the work of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, the South African Holocaust Foundation has been responsible for nationwide teacher training in support of the national curriculum.

The SAHF’s approach is based on the notion that while content knowledge of the Holocaust is vital, 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.
Why people are prejudiced, ignorant and/or racist is part of what is unpacked in the workshops. However, the focus is really on understanding why people choose to act out their prejudice. What conditions encourage such behaviour? What are the consequences of these choices? This approach to Holocaust Education operates from the belief that exploring these questions is essential in helping participants see themselves as agents and shapers of their world, capable of making a difference.

The programmes also aim to alert individuals to the choice everyone has in terms of their personal identity as a perpetrator, bystander or resistor and an appreciation that this is not always fixed. We hope in this way to create an understanding that participants do not only have agency, but that they have a moral responsibility to act in order to protect and enhance Human Rights. It is perhaps for this reason that our work with the South African Police Services, Correctional Services, university students and others is regarded as being so effective.

Most of the currently serving teachers received their professional education and entered teaching when education was an integral part of the apartheid project and organised in racially and ethnically divided sub-systems. The current generation of teachers is the first to experience the new non-racial, democratic transformation of the education system. It is safe to say that the majority who are teaching are of a generation which brings with it the baggage of apartheid.

From comments made by educators, it would appear that learning about the Holocaust created the emotional space for educators to speak frankly about their own 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. The SAHF programme, because it engages with contemporary issues of prejudice and racism, invariably evokes a response from educators in which they relate their own stories of prejudice and discrimination experienced during the apartheid era. It is as if the encounter with Holocaust History has given permission for this frank self-examination and revelation. There are many unresolved issues in our society and a great need for healing.

The impact of the programmes and materials developed by the education team at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre had played an important role in the decision of the national curriculum designers. The National Education Department, whilst not funding our programmes, has endorsed them and has recognized the SAHF as the provider of choice. There are a number of challenges which this has posed: teachers on the whole do not have any content knowledge or an understanding of the rationale for the inclusion of an area of study which for most happened to a group of people distanced from them both in time and in space. The skills and methodology for teaching this complex history have also had to be transferred to South Africa’s teachers.

For the majority of South Africans, any European history is approached with a degree of scepticism as it is often viewed through the devastating impact of colonialism. (We remember how in apartheid South Africa whites were described as Europeans and everyone else as non-white).

In addition, given the small Jewish population in South Africa, few South Africans have had any contact with Jewish people. But I would suggest that it is precisely this distance
from the South African experience which makes the study of the Holocaust such a powerful platform - one which enables South Africans to engage in their own history of living in a racial state, as well as urging them to confront the racism and prejudice which is sadly still so much part of our society. It has the possibility of bringing to the surface personal attitudes and prejudices such as xenophobia which otherwise remain repressed. Only when these issues are exposed can they begin to be addressed.

Over the last 11 years the Centre has attracted well over a quarter of a million visitors from more than 80 countries to its permanent and travelling exhibitions. Close to 4,000 teachers have been through our training programmes and over 70,000 high school learners have spent an intensive day with us examining the lessons which they take from Holocaust history for themselves, and for the societies in which they live.

Through our programmes, we hope that we have been and will continue to be, a living memorial to the six million and the other victims of Nazism. We hope too that we have served the survivor community in taking from their tragic and courageous history the lessons for humanity which will address our vision of creating a society which is more caring and in which diversity and the human rights of all are valued and respected.

We feel that those who study Holocaust History may be motivated and empowered to recognize their potential to be effective agents of positive change and will choose not to be bystanders in the face of injustice. We believe that we only show our humanity through our actions and interactions with others. The isiXhosa saying, ‘Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’; when directly translated it reads; ‘A person (human being) is a person through others (other persons)’. This basically means that one can only come to the full realisation through the help of others. Ubuntu:

Whilst the inclusion of Holocaust History has presented enormous challenges, it is clear that through effective teacher training and classroom teaching the study in South African schools of this particular area of history has the very real possibility of helping our emergent democracy to becoming a more caring and just society, respecting diversity and healing the injustices of our past. Now, more than ever, the value of the inclusion of the study of the Holocaust into South Africa’s schools curriculum has assumed an urgency and relevance.

In response to Eli Wiesel’s question I would like to conclude with the words of a high school learner who recently attended one of our programmes:

I was extremely moved by the whole programme, almost to tears at one point. It is hard to imagine the horrors that were committed, but as I walked through the exhibition, I saw parts of myself in the pictures on the walls – meekly standing by as atrocities are committed – and have decided to make a change in my life by acting against racism and intolerance and stamping out the last bits of prejudice that years of ‘propaganda’ have imprinted on me.

Richard Freedman,
Director
South African Holocaust Foundation
Cape Town Holocaust Centre
2010