

Holocaust education is an opportunity to discuss fundamental values

***Ghetto in Literature* is a new project of the WGM implemented according to the idea and script of Dr Wiesława Młynarczyk from the Education Department – with whom we are talking – and with the participation of director Paweł Passini and young people from the “U Machulskich” Theatre Club. The aim of the project is to depict the ghetto from three perspectives: of a victim, an executioner and a witness – either involved or indifferent**

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Why did you decide to implement such a series – where did you get the inspiration from and why do you think that such a series is needed?

I have been involved in Holocaust education for many years and I also taught Polish in the 81st A. Fredro Secondary School at ul. Miła in Warsaw – a school which is located in a unique place, in the centre of the former Warsaw Ghetto. I saw how difficult it is for students to “face” the Holocaust, including the topic of the Warsaw Ghetto. The series was supposed to outline image of the ghetto through documentaries created on the basis of belles-lettres and literature of fact which currently form part of the curriculum in secondary school. A documentary based on the literature of a personal document – memories of Izaak Waclaw Kornblum, was to be a supplement to that. Another important objective was to show the ghetto from three perspectives: of the victims, witnesses, and perpetrators, in accordance with the so-called triad of the outstanding historian Raul Hilberg. Hence this choice of texts. It was also important to introduce the historical contexts and place the events in the city space. Another important goal was to show the students how their peers – young people – understand these texts, how they transform them into the language of the theater, what it means to them, and, using a quote

from Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's book "The Umschlagplatz": "What does it matter that they live around the place of their death"?

Is it difficult to discuss literature on the Holocaust with young people?

It is very difficult for several reasons. First of all – it is not their experience – it is an unimaginable experience also for us. Secondly, there is always the question of what should be the language of discussion or the language of narration; how to convey this so as not to trivialise but at the same time not to overly shock with the images of death? Won't we cause too much trauma to the students? Discussing Holocaust literature is also difficult because it is necessary to know historical contexts and the course of teaching history at school does not always correlate with the course of teaching Polish.

How many texts on the Holocaust are usually used by teachers to best educate young people about the Holocaust?

In the current core curriculum of secondary schools, compulsory literature includes two short stories by Tadeusz Borowski: "Ludzie, którzy szli" ("The People Who Walked On") and "Proszę państwa do gazu" ("This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen"), as well as Hanna Krall's reportage "Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem" ("To Outwit God"). I also suggest the poetry of Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, and Miron Białoszewski, from which you can choose texts about the Holocaust. Supplementary literature suggests the analysis of fragments of "Rozmowy z katem" ("Conversations with an Executioner") by Kazimierz Moczarski and a short story by Zofia Nałkowska entitled "Przy torze kolejowym" ("By the Railway Track"). Therefore, the selection of texts I proposed is part of the current curriculum. During Polish lessons, teachers most often educate about the Holocaust on the basis of Hanna Krall's text, Borowski's short stories and Miłosz's poem "Campo di Fiori".

What other teaching materials, apart from literary texts, do they also need to teach about the Holocaust?

Usually, teachers in secondary school have very little time to discuss the topic of the Holocaust. The least time is devoted to it in history lessons and, paradoxically, much more in Polish lessons, due to the higher number of teaching hours in this subject. In my opinion, we need short footage showing the historical context and exercises/scripts that can be used during a 45-minute lesson.

What should be avoided in such education?

Holocaust education is not only about learning history; it is also an opportunity to discuss social attitudes in extreme/critical situations, an opportunity to discuss basic values and human relations. It is about teaching in the context of counteracting intolerance, overcoming cultural, ethnic or social stereotypes and prejudices, and, most obviously, counteracting anti-Semitism and racism. This is a very difficult and responsible task. The narrative should be adapted to the level of the group, to its sensitivity. The students should be properly prepared for it. Both historically and emotionally. However, at the same time, trivialisation should be avoided, both in conversations and translation of texts into the language of the theater. We tried to do all this with director Paweł Passini while working on the documentaries.

How do you evaluate the preparation and involvement of young people from the “U Machulskich” theater club?

They are very sensitive young people. Exceptional! Brilliantly prepared for acting tasks. But facing such a traumatic subject was a huge challenge for them – both in theatrical and emotional terms. Besides, it was a challenge for all those who worked on this project. I would like to thank everyone very much for their participation and commitment.

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