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COMBATting AFROPHOBIA AND TEACHING ABOUT MORAL CHOICES. USING TESTIMONIES IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

There are three South African centres that teach about the Holocaust: the *Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC)* and the two Holocaust centres in Cape Town and Durban together form the *South African Holocaust & Genocide Foundation (SAHGF)*. However, the JHGC also uses testimonies to teach about the genocide in Rwanda, an integral part of the mission and vision of the centre.

The SAHGF is dedicated to creating a more caring and just society in which human rights and diversity are respected and valued.

Its mission is:

- To serve as a memorial to the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust and all victims of Nazi Germany.
- To raise awareness of genocide, with particular reference to Rwanda.
- To teach about the consequences of prejudice, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia and homophobia, and the dangers of indifference, apathy and silence. |¹

In 2007 the study of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust was included in the new national social sciences and history curriculum for Grade 9 and 11 in South Africa (15 and 17 years old), the only African country at that time that included it. |² The director of the JHGC, Tali Nates, explains:

“The national Department of Education decided to implement a curriculum that emphasises the theme of human rights based on the constitution and bill of rights of South Africa. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) directly influenced these documents. One of the aims of this curriculum is that students will learn about values, equality, human dignity and social justice and act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy.” (2010: 17–26)

The JHGC has a permanent exhibition that includes the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which targeted the Tutsi. In addition, our core exhibition also includes other genocides in the 20th century, starting in 1904 with the Herero and Nama genocide in Namibia and the 1915 Armenian genocide. The fundamental work of the centre is in the field of memory, education and lessons for humanity.

Displayed prominently at the entrance of the landmark building of the JHGC are the words of the writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi: “It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say” (1986). In order to ensure that genocide does not happen again we have a challenge to educate students and the public at large and equip them with content and lessons to ensure that indeed this “does not happen again”. In so doing, we have an additional challenge of teaching about the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide to young students who live in a new democracy, in a country still struggling to come to terms with the legacy of apartheid. South Africa is dealing with a legacy of trauma, division, racism and past and present abuse of human rights.

Why Educate about the Holocaust and Rwandan Genocide with testimonies?

In April 1994 South Africa held its first democratic elections. While the local population was consumed with the electoral process, scant attention was being paid to the Rwandan genocide unfolding on the same continent, only a few thousand kilometers away. The transition to democracy in South Africa was hailed by all as a remarkable success. The country was regarded

internationally as a beacon of hope and a model of reconciliation to all nations. However, the years of brutal discrimination, violence, racism and human rights abuse have left their mark on South African society. Despite the success of the first multiracial elections in 1994, the reality for many South Africans remains one of poverty and an inability to transcend many of the unfavourable legacies of the apartheid era. With racial tensions simmering below the surface, the avenues for the necessary dialogue to confront our past and redress the pain and suffering are often challenging and difficult. The legacy of apartheid has left many scars and wounds that are still fresh and painful. Instead of confronting these atrocities head on, it is often easier to look at human rights issues in a more unobtrusive and discreet manner. By learning about the history of the Holocaust as well as the genocide in Rwanda, opportunities are created to examine human rights violations. These two histories are removed in time and place from our own country's history. Educators and students are less invested in these case studies, as opposed to their often emotionally charged attitudes towards the current South African state of affairs. Learning about your own belief systems, values and attitudes from case studies that have parallels to your own country's difficult past can be less threatening and intimidating. In so doing, opportunities are created to examine personal biases and prejudices that may otherwise remain inaccessible. Because of South Africa's past apartheid experiences, racism usually has the connotation of a white on black form of bias and discrimination. It is often an eye-opener to our students to discover that during the Holocaust whites murdered whites and in Rwanda Blacks killed Blacks. In South Africa, story telling has been used in an effective manner for generations by the local population – a cultural tool that has passed on folklore, traditions, customs, morals and values for centuries. Initially, most of the population was illiterate so the history of the indigenous people was transmitted orally. This oral tradition forms a rich part of our South African heritage. This heritage resonates with the JHGC education programmes that work with orally transmitted and videotaped testimonies.

Approaches and Challenges when Educating Using Testimonies and Film

When looking at the case studies of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda, it is often difficult to comprehend that the huge numbers of victims were not simply anonymous statistics. In discussing the incomprehensible murder of the six million Jews and approximately one million Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu during the two genocides we often lose sight of the individual stories. Using film of survivors' testimonies is extremely helpful in sensitising students to the fact that these nameless victims were more than just statistics: they were precious to their families and friends. What was life like for these victims? Did they come from close-knit families? Were they rich or poor, educated or illiterate, religious or non-believers? Hearing accounts of the life that existed prior to the genocides often allows students to reflect on what was lost and all the potential these individuals had and the contribution they might have made in their communities and the wider world. Those film testimonies personalise the stories. Students have the opportunity to attach a name, a life story to the genocide, thus enabling them to make a personal connection in a sympathetic and empathetic manner to the history. Learning about the ghettos, students can reflect on the difficult circumstances of children who survived but had to grow up overnight and in so doing, lost their childhood. For example, the Holocaust survivor Irene Klass recounts how she attended clandestine school classes in the Warsaw ghetto:

"My mother managed to arrange with a teacher in the ghetto for me to have lessons. There were about five or six children in the group [...] and we used to go every morning to a certain flat and be taught the basics. We were told, if there is a knock on the door, or if we heard somebody coming, we must quickly hide the books and put them under the bed, because Jewish children are not allowed to learn." (Testimony Klass 2009)

Students reflect on the value of education in the most difficult circumstances. The heartfelt testimony of Pinchas Gutter, about his experiences in the Warsaw ghetto and the Majdanek concentration camp, reinforces this notion and his recollections always provoke a deep discussion.

“The adults were very very depressed [...] my mother became depressed as soon as the Germans came [...] She became more depressed as time went along and her depression never left her. I don’t remember my mother smiling in the whole time from the beginning of the war to the end in Majdanek.” (Testimony Gutter 1999)

Very few Holocaust survivors and rescuers settled in South Africa compared with other countries. For many years survivors and rescuers used to go into classrooms and share their testimonies with students and teachers. However, many of them have passed on and the remaining survivors are aging. Many are no longer physically or emotionally able to relate their stories. To overcome this, the SAHGF has produced a special documentary entitled *Testimony*, which is used solely for education purposes. In it, five Holocaust survivors who lived in Cape Town talk about what happened to them. Hearing these first-hand experiences from survivors has proven to be very effective in learning about the Holocaust. This film forms part of a resource pack provided to educators who go through the SAHGF training. To support the national curriculum, the SAHGF provides Holocaust training for educators countrywide. To date, more than 6,000 teachers have been trained nationally and they have all received education materials including an educators’ resource manual, student workbooks and a DVD. The DVD includes a historical documentary on the Holocaust as well as the film, *Testimony* and makes it possible for students in remote areas to hear personal accounts of survivors’ experiences.

The Interviews

The JHGC has also produced 22 additional films for use in our permanent exhibition space and educational activities. In both the exhibition section about the Holocaust and the section about the genocide in Rwanda the films are displayed in an intimate manner on smaller screens and with local sound – drawing visitors closer, to stand or sit and listen to the voices and stories. Most of these films consist of testimonies from survivors, bystanders and perpetrators. These films are being very effectively used in our diverse

education programmes. Many incorporate personal testimonies from the various role players in the Holocaust and the Rwanda genocide. More than 30 testimonies were filmed in South Africa and Rwanda from as early as 1999 until 2014 for use in Africa's first Holocaust centre, the *Cape Town Holocaust Centre (CTHC)*, which opened in 1999. The production team included filmmakers from South Africa and the United States. The interviewers were CTHC and SAHGF staff members. At the moment, the films are only available at the JHGC, but there are plans to make them available on the internet in the future. The use of personal testimonies as a teaching methodology has had an enormous impact on participants in our programmes and remarks on the effectiveness of using film testimonies are often noted in our post-course evaluation and feedback sessions. One student said:

"Hearing the testimonies of the survivors was very emotional. When I heard about a bystander, it really opened my eyes on how many of us are being bystanders now; particularly with the Syrian refugee crisis. It inspired me to want to become more aware and be an upstander." (JHGC evaluation forms from students from various schools)

We offer many different programmes at the JHGC, ranging from specific programmes on the Holocaust and genocide in Rwanda to more general ones around human rights issues. This paper will look at two specific case studies, teaching about combatting Afrophobia and teaching about moral choices, where we have used testimonies in our teaching.

Teaching about Combatting Afrophobia

In recent years there has been a wave of xenophobic attacks against foreigners in South Africa, which has often resulted in people being displaced, violent destruction of property and even fatalities. Perhaps xenophobia is too general a term and the attacks would be better described as afrophobia, as the discrimination displayed has not been against European foreigners but rather groups from the African diaspora. Afrophobia is a term used to refer to a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards Black people or people of

African descent around the world. Definitions refer to “irrational fear, with the implication of antipathy, contempt and aversion”(RED Network 2017). Broadly speaking the causes of Afrophobia are thought to be the idea of South African superiority, the concept of an elite citizenship, a nationalism that excludes outsiders, and the powerful competition for jobs, housing and access to basic commodities.

We at the JHGC have developed a programme aimed at high school students, which creates an awareness of the issues associated with xenophobia and how to combat it successfully. Our entry point in the programme is through the testimony of one of the Holocaust survivors who lived in Johannesburg, Gita Zallman Rossi. Gita tells of leaving her parents in Germany and travelling with her little brother, Hans, on the Kindertransport to England. She heard from her parents for the last time when they were deported to Theresienstadt. Only after the war did she receive the devastating news that her parents were murdered in Auschwitz. Her testimony is used as a trigger to discuss what it means to be a refugee and all the hardships entailed in fleeing a country in the search of a safer future. Her testimony allows students to reflect on the fear, the uncertainty and the difficulty in adjusting to a new life in a foreign country. Gita recounts the story of how a church minister gave her a doll upon her arrival in London. This random act of kindness left a lasting impression on her and this example is used to begin a discussion, where students think about the difficulties encountered by refugees; the difficulty in having to leave all their possessions behind; and allow them to contemplate the pain and suffering of refugees who are separated from their loved ones. Gita’s testimony opens the door to students confronting their own attitudes towards “foreigners” in a non-threatening manner. This introspection encourages a shift from bias towards the “other” and a more inclusive acceptance of those who have been forced to leave their countries of origin. During this programme students are enabled to confront the current wave of afrophobia being experienced in South Africa and to consider the crisis faced by refugees on a global scale. Through the use of poetry, interactive group exercises, puzzles and drama activities we aim to shift students’ thinking

from suspicion of the “other” to become more inclusive, accepting people for differences and encouraging diversity. We conclude our programme with an exercise around *Ubuntu* – an African word meaning “humanity to others”. It also means “I am what I am because of who we all are”.

Teaching about Moral Choices

One of our most popular programmes that also facilitates critical thinking examines a range of moral choices made by ordinary people during the Holocaust or during the Rwandan genocide. We look at the choices made by various role players – perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators or “upstanders” – someone brave enough to stand up against injustices. When looking at the role of the upstander, we teach about people who rescued Jews as well as those who resisted the Nazi regime. Through stories of individuals, communities and governments, we teach about moral choices and their consequences. Recounting survivors’ stories of life before the Holocaust and of life before the Rwandan genocide is extremely important. These testimonies show how these survivors lived ordinary lives before they were targeted and victimised. The testimonies we use in both case studies illustrate the day-to-day living of the survivors, recounting their experiences of family life, their schooling, leisure activities and vacations, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. Hearing these personal accounts, students are given a glimpse into the survivors’ lives and become aware of the helplessness felt by these victims and the brutal atrocities they encountered. Students are also able to hear accounts of Holocaust survivors’ experiences of being targeted because of National Socialist antisemitic ideology and terror, as well as the harrowing stories of experiences in the ghettos, deportation, life in the camps, the “death marches”, liberation and having to rebuild their lives. When reflecting on what liberation meant to survivors the poignant words quoted below of Henia Bryer (1999), a survivor of Radom ghetto, Majdanek, Płaszów, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, have an enormous effect on our students:

“Obviously I was happy that this horrible war was behind us, but then the realisation dawned on you, where are you now? You’ve lost everything [...] I didn’t know if any of my family members had survived there. I am in Bergen-Belsen, sick, weak, alone and sort of ‘why me? What am I going to do now?’”

In teaching about the Rwandan genocide, we use film testimony from four Hutu perpetrators, voices seldom heard. These testimonies are extremely powerful in illustrating how individuals can become swept up in a culture of hatred and bigotry – in which neighbours turn on neighbours, friends and family turn on each other. The students begin to reflect on the testimonies of these perpetrators and see them not as monsters but rather as ordinary people who made choices. They can reflect on what happens when people “cross a line”, what enables them to behave in an immoral and unethical way. After viewing these testimonies, students are encouraged to review the crimes perpetrated, as well as to critically examine the remorse or lack of remorse shown by the perpetrators. The students are encouraged to engage in group discussions and to examine how much responsibility a perpetrator takes for the crimes he committed. Debates are held about the justice of the punishment meted out to the perpetrator. An example of a perpetrator’s testimony used for this purpose is that of Gregoire (2009) 13, currently serving a life sentence in Kigali Central Prison, Rwanda:

“Maybe some people blame it on the government, but the government is not in our hearts. I was one of the lower level government officials in the capital Kigali. I brainwashed people to kill the Tutsi during the genocide in 1994. I presume that among the 12,000 Tutsi in my district 8,000 were killed [...] If I’d wanted to stop it then nothing would have happened. I did everything knowingly, so I should accept my punishment.”

When teaching about moral choices, we make use of film testimonies of witnesses to the atrocities of the Einsatzgruppen (Nazi mobile killing units). These harrowing accounts and the obvious pain of the witnesses years after the events, often being told for the first time, are extremely powerful in

teaching about bystander behaviour. More than seventy years after the event, the trauma, guilt and helplessness these bystanders feel about the choices they made is apparent. Students learn that in making the choice to be a bystander, they always aid the perpetrator and enable him or her to continue to target the victims. In teaching about the moral choices made by people during this period, we also teach about the limited choices available to victims and we refer to these choices as “choiceless choices” (Langer 1982: 72). The testimonies of survivors certainly illustrate the precarious situations they found themselves in and how often they were restricted and frustrated by their helplessness and inability to escape the crimes being carried out.

The programmes at our centre encourage students to reference specific circumstances when they have enacted certain choices in their own lives. Through group discussions they reflect on times when they have chosen to be a bystander or an upstander at a particular moment. We emphasise that all choices have consequences. The understanding that we can all move from being passive bystanders to being able to make a difference in our schools, families, personal lives and communities, can be profoundly impactful. We encourage the learners to have the courage to move from bystander behaviour to becoming accountable members of society, young citizens who take an active stand when confronted with injustices. In so doing, we aim to create a more caring and just society in which human rights and diversity are respected and valued throughout South Africa.

In the words of one of one of the patrons of the SAHGF, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu:

“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.” (2004: 64)

In extending the learning of the Holocaust to the Rwanda genocide of 1994

and by creating a platform to have a dialogue about South Africa's difficult past and current challenges, it is our belief that we can develop critical thinking among our students to ensure that indeed, as Archbishop Tutu concludes, "such atrocities will never happen again and the world will be a more humane place" (Ibid.).

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- 1 To read more about the SAHGF, see <http://www.holocaust.org.za>, accessed 17 September 2017.
- 2 see www.education.gov.za. For further detail see Department of Basic Education (2011). National Curriculum Statement: http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20caps_gr_7-9.pdf for Grade 9 and http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/file%20uploads%20caps_fet.pdf for Grade 11, accessed 9 October 2017.
- 3 Surname is withheld for privacy reasons. JHGC made films specially for the permanent exhibition.