

Holocaust Education: The Adelaide Experience

Peter Monteath

AS A MEMBER OF THE HISTORY DISCIPLINE AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY IN ADELAIDE I currently teach a course called 'The Holocaust'. It is offered at third-year level and typically attracts an enrolment in the range of 80 to 100 students. The challenge, then, is not so much to attract students to the course, but to teach it in such a way as to connect them with the history of an event which took place on the other side of the world several generations ago.

The nature of that challenge is well characterised by the title of Suzanne Rutland's widely-read book *Edge of the Diaspora*. Australia's enormous geographical distance from the sites of the Holocaust, along with the ever-growing temporal gap, pose particular challenges for Holocaust educators. If anything, that sense of distance is exacerbated in the case of Adelaide, where the Jewish community is relatively small in comparison with the large population centres of Sydney and Melbourne, so that the personal links with Holocaust history are few and growing more tenuous with every passing year. To teach the Holocaust thus demands making connections across time and space in ways that are not always evident to teachers and students.

Nonetheless those connections do exist in Adelaide and they can be mobilised by educators. While the clear preference among Jewish refugees in the 1930s and then Holocaust survivors in the postwar period was to settle in the eastern states,

there were some who made their way to Adelaide. In an unusual expression of cross-faith support, the Lutheran Church in Adelaide in 1938 offered its support to Jewish refugees seeking a haven in South Australia (Monteath). Records of the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation show that in the wake of the November Pogrom a Torah scroll from a Berlin synagogue reached safety in Adelaide on 3 September 1939 (Monteath 22). More recently, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Holocaust became a matter very much in the public eye in South Australia owing to the staging of committal hearings and then a full trial in relation to war crimes committed in Eastern Europe during the war. Coincidence had it that of the three cases pursued to the stage of committal proceedings (among many hundreds investigated), and the one which reached the stage of a full trial, all concerned Ukrainian-born men who happened to have settled in South Australia. In the end, no conviction was achieved, though the long period of investigations and then formal legal proceedings served to shine a spotlight on the history of the Holocaust and the prospect that Australia—and South Australia in particular—had become home not just to Holocaust survivors but to perpetrators as well (Bevan; Fraser; Lada and Monteath).

In 1996, not long after the conclusion of the war crimes trials in Adelaide (in May 1993 the trial of Ivan Polyukhovich led to his acquittal), the first course in South Australia on the history of the Holocaust was taught at the University of Adelaide. It was initiated by me, at that time a member of the Centre for European Studies, with participation from two members of the history department at the University of Adelaide, David Hart and Fredric Zuckerman. It was therefore offered to two groups of students—from European studies and history—and took on a deliberately interdisciplinary character. The first half of the thirteen-week course was primarily historical and devoted to exploring the origins and unfolding of the Holocaust. In the second half, attention shifted to the postwar period and questions of legacy, memory and representation in a range of media. Typically, in its University of Adelaide iterations the course attracted in the region of 60 to 80 upper-level students per semester.

With my move to the history department at Flinders University in 2000 the course was discontinued at the University of Adelaide and offered at Flinders University, initially also to upper-level (that is, second and third year) students, and with similar enrolment figures. As was the case at the University of Adelaide, very few of them are from the small Jewish community in Adelaide. A high proportion of them are Bachelor of Education students, many of whom anticipate teaching the Holocaust as part of their duties in teaching the National Curriculum to high-school students. The course is, however, available as an elective to students from other areas of study who have space in their degree structures and who are attracted to the course. In practice this means that although the Holocaust is now a third-year course, it is taught in such a way that it is accessible to students who

do not have a background in modern European history, even if many students do come to the course via this pathway. As in its earlier iterations at the University of Adelaide, the content remains interdisciplinary, covering conventional narrative history, extending into historiographical controversies and then into issues of media representation.

As students' perceptions of how the history of the Holocaust informs the present have changed, so the content of the course has evolved. In the mid-1990s, for example, many students were familiar with the controversy which had raged for a time around the novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, by an author who wrote under the name Helen Demidenko but was then revealed to be Helen Darville. The author, the book, and the prizes it was awarded generated heated controversy, which for a time was good fodder for class discussion but has since dissipated (see especially Riemer 1996; Manne 1996). As a result, that topic is among those that have disappeared from the course, while other areas have expanded, most notably those relating to Holocaust memory and memorialisation.

For many years Adelaide was extremely fortunate to have available a number of Holocaust survivors who were willing and able to share their experiences with school and university students and, indeed, also with the wider public. My own students over many years regarded the opportunity to meet a Holocaust survivor as a highlight of the course. On a number of occasions Fred Steiner and Maria Scheffer spoke to my students, at Adelaide and then at Flinders. For commitment over many years we were particularly privileged to be able to call on Regina Zielinski, a Polish survivor of Sobibór who had worked for some years as a guide at the Sydney Jewish Museum before moving to Adelaide for family reasons. Though quietly spoken, Regina had the capacity to gain and hold the attention of students and make an impression that was both immediate and lasting. Fortunately, Adelaide has been able to benefit from the efforts of another Holocaust survivor in Andrew Steiner, who has been the primary moving force behind efforts to establish an Adelaide Holocaust Museum and Steiner Education Centre to be established in late 2018 (<http://www.ahmsec.org.au>), which will give teachers and students in Adelaide the possibility of accessing a facility comparable with those available in Melbourne and Sydney.

It is a challenge for Holocaust educators in Australia and in other parts of the world to fill the very large gap left by the passing on of Holocaust survivors such as Regina Zielinski. To some extent, technology presents other options. Regina's son Andrew Zielinski wrote a book about his mother's experiences, extracts from which are among the readings for the course. To explore the theme of testimony and its value in engaging with the past I show students parts of Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah*. Video testimony is available in other locations also and, with the aid of modern technology, is readily accessible from students' desktops or laptops. Despite the exponentially increasing sophistication of the technology which can

deliver testimony to the classroom, ultimately the experience of an encounter with a survivor is irreplaceable; its absence represents an irremediable impoverishment of the teaching and learning experience. At the same time, the generation change we are currently experiencing is forcing another adaptation. Ultimately, this is the challenge for us, as teachers, to ensure that these new contexts do not undermine the relevance of the Holocaust for our students in the world around them.

PETER MONTEATH is Professor of History at Flinders University in Adelaide. His most recent book is *Captured Lives: Australia's Wartime Internment Camps* (Canberra: NLA Publishing, 2018).

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