HANDOUT 3.4.3

Teaching the Holocaust at Buchenwald

AN INTERVIEW WITH EDUCATION DIRECTOR DANIEL GAEDE

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In 1937, the National Socialists set up a forced labor camp in Buchenwald, Germany at which more than 250,000 people would be detained by the end of the World War II. Targeted groups included Jews, Sinti, Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses, Polish nationals, convicts, homosexuals, and political dissidents. According to Daniel Gaede, director of the education department at Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, the camp claimed the lives of 56,000 people. The following conversation with Gaede explores the interplay of past, present, and future in the effort to achieve tolerance.

Can you give a quick overview of your background? How and why did you get involved in human rights and Holocaust education?

I was born in 1956. This was the time when the West German army was established. I was raised beside a military barracks, became a conscientious objector, and as a leftist person in West Germany, I was always told to go over to the East.

Now I have been living in the East, in Weimar, since 1995, and that which was called "the East" doesn't exist anymore. There is a unified Germany today and based on work opportunities, I decided to move over here and work at a memorial site that deals with the history of the concentration camps, especially Buchenwald, but also linked with other historical sites.

The question of how we should teach what happened here and why leads directly to the question of human rights. One major difference between the time of the Nazis and today is that human rights are accepted. The Nazi ideology was mainly based on racism and the idea of inequality of people. This difference is essential still today because if rightwing people come to us, they will not refer to the human rights issue, they will say there are people's rights, and if Turkish people want to live like Turkish people they should leave Germany and do it in their own country. But it is not a question of the past, it is not a question of German history alone, but specifically to deal with the history of a site like Buchenwald, where more than 56,000 people were killed. It gives us a chance to refer in detail to the biographies, to the fate of people, and also to find out what it means if inequality is accepted as a state policy. So human rights issues, Holocaust education, and dealing with Nazism are somehow linked. And if somebody would ask me what the foundation of my educational work is, I would say: "We want to strengthen people, so they can determine their own lifestyle and development, not at the cost of other people, neither physically nor materially." So this is the great schism between the Nazi ideology—which stated, "We are the ones who have the right to decide about life and death"—and what we want to offer.

This is not linked to German history alone, but it is the foundation, the starting point. I say that because we also have a lot of visitors from other countries or people living in Germany with different backgrounds—coming from other states or countries as refugees, for example. And the issues they bring up—the issues of equality, respect, and dignity—are somehow the bridge to talk about the fate of people in the Nazi period in Germany and in the occupied countries and also about the fate of people who are persecuted today for different reasons.

I'm not saying they are like the Nazis—whomever you want to fill in for ["they"]—but the question of how people are still discriminated against today because their dignity is not accepted is unfortunately not only an issue in Germany.

It doesn't matter if I deal with teachers from Chile, for example, or with human rights activists from Central America, or with students living here in Weimar, all these same issues come up. And it's not my task to say look at your country, at how your government is behaving in a terrible way. That's not my job, but if I talk about mechanisms and how and why in the Nazi period concentration camps became an integral part of that type of society, it also becomes possible to talk about other social situations of exclusion. So that's just the bridge. I'm not other people's teacher, but somehow this place works as a catalyst for talking about topics that are essential for all of us. That's somehow the connection.

Please briefly describe your work at Buchenwald.

I'm responsible for the educational work. That includes all programs dealing with visitors—starting with school classes, age 15 and older, with students, with handicapped people, etc. So if I look back at recent days, I had one program with blind and sight-impaired students. Tomorrow I will work with students from the University of Jena and the day after that with young boys who are living in special homes with social workers because they have great difficulties in completing their terms in school.

This means I am always adapting the programs. I have to make sure that everyone who's coming to us gets a program that fits first to him or to her and then refers to this place, not vice versa. I say that very clearly because some people believe that there is a clear message from the Holocaust or the Nazi period, like, "never again." But what does it mean for different people with different responsibilities? So if I want to answer this question, I need to refer to the area where a person is living and to his or her responsibilities, and then I can think about the connection to the past that is established through our work. The aim in the end is to be careful about actual discrimination and also to engage and help people to work against discrimination. So dealing with the past only makes sense if you have your eye on the future.

Can you briefly describe the development of human rights and Holocaust education in Germany? What have been the major changes over time?

For a long time, especially in East Germany, it was clear that talking about the Nazi period meant telling young people about the legacy of the communist resistance movement against the Nazis and about the legacy of fighting imperialism, fascism, and capitalism. For this reason, Buchenwald was set up as a huge memorial with lots of exhibits to educate young people in exactly this way.

In 1989-1990, it was clear that this couldn't be continued for various reasons and also that the educational work had to find a new path. So it became clear that it was necessary to refer to the visitors and to their backgrounds. This was the first important change we made, and it also influenced the ways in which memorial sites work in West Germany.

So there is not a single message to be transmitted to everyone. It's a dialogue, and it is necessary to have historians around to be specific about who causes the consequences and the facts. Holocaust education came more into focus during the huge conference in Stockholm.[1] There's now a whole framework of institutions that are working together in Europe, also including institutions from the United States, to spread knowledge, to develop methods, and to refer to the Holocaust as one resource to think about extinction, discrimination, and all these issues.

Some people believe that it is necessary to talk about that, to find out about human rights. Well, we don't need a holocaust to know that human rights are important. If you talk about the Nazi period, you need to refer to human rights; that's my position. There might be other orientations such as religion or political ideologies as well, but as far as I see it human rights are a good measure to test different types of societies in terms of discrimination and so on. So it's a more open-minded approach than referring to one ideology as the communist party did. On the other hand, we don't need to tell people who are discriminated against themselves about the Holocaust in order to make them sensitive to these issues.

The history of human rights education, of basic rights, etc., has had a different path in Germany. Especially in West Germany, people would say, "I don't need to think about this—we have these rights." And a lot of people don't know exactly what those 30 articles [in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights] are all about. This was different in East Germany because a lot of people only had limited access to their rights. And so again: Human rights issues do not necessarily need to refer to the Nazi period, even if there are direct connections.

One of the survivors of Buchenwald, Stephan Wiesel, now living in Paris, later became a French diplomat and was in the group with Eleanor Roosevelt that wrote the 30 articles of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration. As a prisoner at Buchenwald, he never could say, "I was arrested for the wrong reasons. I will call a lawyer and he will get me out." No such chance for him. So human rights are an argument to protect individuals even against the state and its abuse of power. When people argue that this is another subject, that we are dealing with the past and the question of human rights is a business for someone else, it's hard for me to understand that argument.

So far you have mostly described the East German approach to Holocaust remembrance and education, but how did these things develop in West Germany beyond memorial sites—more generally and in the school context?

First there was the question of different generations. Persons who would refer to the Nazi period in a critical way and who would not say, "That's the past, and let's forget about it and establish a new country" were always a minority.

Some would try to find out how old Nazis made new careers in West German society, in business and also in political parties. This is one reason why at the end of the 60s there was so much protest against the generation of the parents and the teachers and the professors who would silently or even obviously refer to the Nazi period and say that there were some good aspects to it, too—law and order, and things like that. Protest and reference to the Nazi period were also part of a generational question. Several initiatives to find out what happened in our city or our village were started during that time because the people who knew what happened normally wouldn't talk about it.

For example, I received the first information about my own town and the Jewish community there when I was working at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. I didn't hear it from my teachers in school. The elders would refer to the wartime and say it was terrible, or they would tell anecdotes, but they wouldn't offer any systematic reflections. The younger ones would refer to a theoretical level of fascism and imperialism and power and violence, but they would, of course, not

1 The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, a conference on education, remembrance, and research held January 26-28, 2000.

refer to personal experience. There was a big gap between these different positions, and none of these teachers would refer to the local history—that was totally left out.

So in West Germany we have a development of general protest—I described that—local research, and also the establishment of new memorial sites at places where concentration camps existed. Some of them had been known since the 50s and 60s. Others were rediscovered many years later, depending on actions taken by individuals on a local level.

After 1989, the state-run memorial policy in East Germany and the more civically based activities in West Germany were linked. Since that time the national government has also given money to different memorial sites to support research and education programs. This is something new. It is also connected to the federal system, which is normally described as a system where education and culture are the responsibility of the different states and not of the national government. So Dachau, for instance, never received money from the federal government of West Germany and even had difficulties in getting money from the state of Bavaria. That was changed after 1989, and therefore nowadays Buchenwald and other institutions receive half of their budgets from the national government. This makes it even more important for us to offer good educational programs.

How would you describe Holocaust education today? You said that in the past, the older generation would often only relate personal stories, and that the younger generations were very theoretical. Are these two approaches somehow linked together nowadays?

There is much more linkage today and there is also much more information. It's actually hard to find a day when you won't find a reference to the Nazi period in newspapers or books or in TV programs. So it is really present. And as a consequence some younger people say, "It's overwhelming—we are fed up with it." However, my impression is they are not fed up with the topic, but with the way it is presented to them. So if we find a good way to say, "Look, there's an essential question and you can deal with it," they will be very interested.

One difficulty for me is that Holocaust education often gives the impression that the Nazi period is only important with the respect to the fate of the Jews. But we know that there were many more people persecuted in the Nazi period and the first "enemies" of the Nazis were communists, social democrats, later for social reasons, homosexuals and so on. So racism is just one part of this ideology.

When, for example, Israeli groups come to Buchenwald, they are surprised to hear that Jewish prisoners were just the minority within the whole society of the prisons. So we try to refer to the background of the Israeli groups and tell them: "Yes, there were Jewish prisoners, but there were also times when prisoners would say to each other, 'If you want to get out of Buchenwald you need to be dead or Jewish.'" When that happened it was during the weeks after the pogrom of November 1938. In Buchenwald there were about 9,000 men arrested as Jews. They were labeled as Jews by the Nazis according to the Nazi ideology. Many of them would say, "Why do you call me a Jew? I never go to synagogue, I fought as a German soldier in the First World War, and I do belong to this society. Why do you exclude me?" They could not understand what had happened to them. And they were told: "If you give up your property"—and they especially arrested people who had property—"and if you leave the country, you can get out of here." So out of 9,000 about 8,000 had the chance to escape—not to be free again in Germany, but to escape to China and to other countries that would accept them as refugees.

This is somehow surprising that Jews were able to leave the camp and others had no chance. So therefore we need to refer to the knowledge about the Jewish fate and then add the information about other groups.

I will give another example. I was asked to guide a group of people from Northern Ireland, Egypt, Israel, and Germany in English. I was wondering, "Why they would come in this combination? What did they have in common?" And it came out that they were running a program on the situation of political and religious minorities in different countries. So all of the persons from Northern Ireland actually had Dutch passports. They were working at that time in a reconciliation program between Protestants and Catholics. None of the Egyptian participants were Muslim; they all belonged to the Coptic Christian group. One of the nuns was blind, so I couldn't just say, "Look here, look there." I had to find another way to explain. And some of the Israelis were conscientious objectors. So the common point was looking for minorities who also suffered in the Nazi period. So I did not only speak about Jews and homosexuals, but also about Jehovah's Witnesses who were arrested because they would not serve in the army. And in fact they were the only ones who could theoretically leave any day. They "only" had to sign a paper saying, "Now I'm ready to serve in the army." But according to their beliefs they wouldn't do that. This was important for that specific group. It's not necessarily important for another group.

So again, there are different approaches for different groups and different stories to tell. And only referring to the Holocaust alone would minimize the dimension of the crimes of the Nazis and also minimize the opportunities to find access to the different aspects of that time.

Do the Holocaust and the Nazi period continue to impact young Germans?

Yes, of course, in many different ways. This is something they need to refer to if they live in this society. This also includes people from

other countries, immigrants, because it's still so present in arguments and visible in the cities in the form of memorial sites, for example. And it also includes language; there are some words that you should not use.

Therefore it is enriching to refer to that time. It sounds very strange to say "enriching," but I say it because we are not living under a dictatorship anymore. We can refer to that time and the mechanisms of discrimination without suffering from them. So we can refer to them and we can think about what it means for the present. And this is important because one of the pillars of dictatorships is fear, and if people are fearful of whatever it is, they are easily subject to panic and abuse …. There are many conflicts between different cultures, it is true, but fear is a very bad way to cope with it. Knowledge can help a little bit with it, but it's not enough. Compassion and empathy are other tools to get access to other cultures that are sometimes strange.

Would you agree that the stigma of 1933–1945 is still attached to Germany and the Germans?

Whether you want it or not, people have different conceptions about that time. And it is quite helpful to know as much as possible and then to answer these issues. As I said before, it is also enriching. If it felt like a heavy burden on the shoulders of young people, of course they would try to get rid of it and I would totally accept that reaction. And therefore I try to say, "Thank God it's over." When we have a tour with young students I don't place blame on them. I do not speak about THE Germans who did this and that. I do speak about the SS.[2] I do speak about the different groups of prisoners, also because the Germans were the first prisoners. Everyone in the camp in 1937 had a German passport. So it was a fight among the German people, it was not Germans against others. Only later did it become a camp with 90% prisoners from other countries. But in the beginning, it was an internal issue concerning German people. And so therefore it is also not enough to speak about Germans and others. It's about people living in a society where one group decides who is accepted and who will be excluded.

Do you think that the stigma—the black mark—will ever fully disappear?

I'm not sure if it would be good to get away from the stigma. The question is how that sign is read. If you go back into the old part of the Bible, there's the first story about murder between brothers. It's the story about Cain and Abel. And the interesting thing is that after the killing of his brother, Cain was not executed. There was no death penalty for him. He received a sign, a mark on his forehead that this act was not forgotten, but that he shall live in that society. So a stigma is not necessarily something completely bad. The question is how we refer to that. I understand that story from the Bible as a suggestion that the capacity for brutality is in everyone. That was also how Barack Obama referred to it during his visit to Buchenwald—that it's not the wrongdoing of THE Germans and we, the others, are incapable of those eventualities. It's also possible that we are moving into similar positions.

So, therefore, a stigma is a chance to refer to your own history and to reflect on it carefully. This can open up a lot of talks with other people from other societies. That's also my experience from my time in Israel. If I would have tried to say, "I'm from Europe, but don't ask me specifically for the country," or if I tried to avoid a German accent in my speech, it would have forced me to hide all the time and people would have become suspicious: "What does he try to hide? What is he trying to cover up?" And exactly the opposite happens if I say, "Yes, I understand that when they hear German words, all the people will automatically have their bad memories from the Holocaust in their minds again." If I accept that, then we are both free to move on and are able to speak about difficult things. And so it makes sense to look deeper for the meaning of the stigma.

Based on what you've just said, I would conclude that you think it is necessary or even good to continue to deal with this past in the future?

Yes. And then it comes to a crucial, a difficult point. What does that mean: "the past"? That's a lot, a lot of stories. If you, for example, refer to the question of how people at the end of 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s in Germany would have realized that there was a danger approaching—I mean the Nazi movement—and what they would have done against it, and which signs would have been important to them, that's a question that is very relevant for us today, too.

So living in Weimar today, what shall I use my energy for? For ecological questions, against racism, or working against those small groups of Neo-Nazi youngsters, which we also have here, or something else? So there are many, many developments that came up after 1945 that are very dangerous for this planet and that were not part of the Nazi program …. There are many other questions coming up, and I would not agree if people said, "Let's join Greenpeace and Amnesty International and whatever other organization is around today and not think about the past anymore." Because then we give up a very important resource for speaking about existential questions.

But on the other hand, there is the danger that people only refer to the past and that we miss the point of action today. And somehow the Nazis make it easy for us because they never promised the Jewish people anything good. They never said, "We are the masters who will save the whole of humanity." They would say, "Only for our Aryan"—whatever that is—"people." So it is obvious that they did

2 Abbreviation of the German word *Schutzstaffel*, which translates literally as "protection echelon." This unit of the National Socialist army was originally created to protect Hitler's person. Eventually, the SS composed the police, intelligence and security forces. It was also responsible for the systematic extermination of people who had been singled out by Nazi ideology.

not accept equality. So, yes, this makes it easier to choose the right side. If people refer to the Nazi period, I sometimes have the impression they are afraid of making the wrong choice today and of being blamed for decisions years later.

To make it very specific, I don't know what my kids, three of them, will say to me in 10, 15 years. It might be the case that they say, "With all your energy, why didn't you stay with Greenpeace? Why did you refer to the Nazi past all the time? It would have been much better for us if you would have taken all your energy for issues and topics that are influencing our life now."

If you can make that clear and understandable and say it is not a reason to be fearful—it is worthwhile to take a risk, then hopefully people are so strong that they can even take the risk that they might make a mistake.

How do you view the future development of Holocaust and human rights education in Germany?

Here in Germany, for example, we have a German institute for human rights education that also observes the conditions of human rights in this country. You might think everyone can enjoy his rights, but they said, for example, that people who are living in homes for the elderly are often woken up at 4:30 in the morning because there is only one person to wash them all. Their dignity is not respected. And they report about things like this.

We have a collaborative program in which institutions and several memorial sites, including us, also offer programs to people in different foreign countries, including Russia, Poland, etc., for setting up projects where these questions about how the past is described, and how we live today, and what is the perspective for the future are all linked together. So I hope that more and more we have people who, in a very pragmatic way, connect that and say, "Human rights are a good test for societies and are also a good test of how we deal with the past."

If the fate of some groups is covered with silence, something is wrong, and that still happens in many societies today. So on the one hand, memorial sites have much more money than they did 10, 15 years ago, but politicians also have an interest in using it for their own purpose. And additionally, there's also the danger that new generations will say, "We have no connection to that time." It is not important how big of a mistake it is—it's a question of how we develop our educational program to make it visible and clear that this it not just pushing people back to things they don't want to talk about, but that it is a tool for our present and future questions. That's also the task on our site.

I do not blame society for not referring to the Nazi period more deeply. I think it's a question of how we develop methods to increase the interest in it.

The memorial site in Buchenwald has a youth meeting center, a place where groups can stay overnight, and there are so many teachers who will say after a guided tour, "Ah, there are more opportunities. Next time we will stay a full day." And then they come for three days. It's one of the institutions for political and historical education that we do not have to make any advertisements for. The two buildings with the 70 beds are booked out for the whole year in advance. So that's also one indication that these types of educational topics do function, including also programs for volunteers. We have volunteers from the United States working with us and from other countries, too, like Chile and even Japan. Two women from Japan came to me and said, "How is it possible in your society to speak about crimes and not to describe yourself only as a victim, like we experience in Japan? It is easy to talk about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it is very difficult to speak about the Japanese occupation in Korea and China. How do you do that?" Well, they stayed with us for one year.

There are no easy answers. That is also an issue: The question of how to deal with crimes of the past will be discussed on a global level. The access and the techniques for that exist.

I never thought that I would go to Central America and to Chile, and to Lithuania, and to the States, and to Israel for this program, but that has all happened. And we also have in our international work camps, at the same work camp, people from Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and the People's Republic of China and they had to deal with each other and they were able to. That's also a very important point. It shows that places like a memorial site can be a good catalyst.