

CHAPTER SIX

EDUCATION AT THE JHC¹

Introduction

Memorial Museums exist to inform, and they are, by extension, inherently pedagogical, whatever the accompanying methodology.²

A slight change of opinion, a small shift in world view, a tiny change in mindset in the presence of the exhibition artefact are not easily measured. The potential for these changes dwells within the individual, based on personal experience, as triggered (or not) by the material we present. The producers of exhibitions can only be mindful that some of these outcomes are possible.³

Education was at the heart of the Jewish Holocaust Centre's mission from its inception. In a context of increasing fears of antisemitism and Holocaust denial both in Australia and overseas, the JHC would be a place where the horror of the Holocaust could be communicated, but for particular purposes: not only in commemorating the attempted destruction of European Jewry and sharing the stories of those who survived, but also to combat racism and revisionism within contemporary society.

Judith Berman's argument that Holocaust remembrance in Australia is particularistic may be true, however, within formal commemorations at the JHC, remembrance was instrumentalised from the very start, with a civic purpose beyond commemoration. As Avril Alba has persuasively argued, the injunction to *zachor* (in

Hebrew literally 'to remember') is both to remember and to *act*.⁴ Cyla Sokolowicz would state in the first edition of the *Centre News*:

The Centre's group of dedicated volunteer workers have great ambitions for the future and hope to be able to use the lesson of the Holocaust as a starting point in an effort to build bridges of understanding between Jews and non-Jews, so that they may work together *towards a future in which racial prejudice and hatred will forever be eliminated*.⁵

Such a focus on education, though, raises a number of issues. To date there has been little critical examination of what the outcomes of such work might be, and how this could be evaluated. If, as Elaine Heumann Gurian suggests, the museum can be a safe place for unsafe ideas, what are the unsafe ideas that are being thought? How does the museum create links with contemporary society and what lessons are communicated? How does the motivation of the Holocaust survivors to offer testimony interact with the JHC's pedagogic function?

After discussing the establishment of the education program and impact of key personnel, this chapter investigates the role of survivors in education and how the program has been affected by their attrition, before investigating the effectiveness of the education programs and both claims for, and anxieties over, its effectiveness, particularly over the long term.

The development of an education program at the JHC

A pattern for school visits was quickly established after the opening of the JHC in March 1984. Students were shown a film, followed by a question and answer session with survivor volunteers, before being taken upstairs in Leo Fink House to see the museum. School education was seen as a high priority: Bono Wiener argued that 'a thousand children here will do much more to combat antisemitism than all other Jewish institutions'.⁶ With slight changes in relation to showing of particular films and the incorporation of a map session, this structure of the school visit has in many ways remained the same:

We always showed a film and then one person spoke about the general history of the Second World War, then two or three guides would speak about their experiences, then we would trot them down to see the museum and guides would show them around.⁷

This is not to suggest that the educational activities of the Centre have remained static. Constant discussions have taken place both within the Centre and various user groups, such as teachers, regarding ways of improving the educational activities and how the JHC can respond effectively to new educational and curriculum developments. An initial education committee was established, which included Kate Prinsley and Paul Bartrop who, as we have seen, also contributed to the exhibition development. Ruth Adler became the JHC's first Education Officer and played an influential role in developing the Centre's work with schools.⁸ Adler formalised the schools' education program, supported by, and building on, the work of other volunteers who were professionally qualified educationalists, psychologists and sociologists like Rachelle Banczewska, Geulah Solomon, Naomi Rosh White and Jenny Wajsenberg.

Ruth Adler contacted every Victorian secondary school, an initiative that proved immediately successful. There was a 'huge response – we couldn't handle all the requests to visit, schools came in droves'.⁹ As Bill Anderson argues, this increase would have been problematic for the JHC as many of the survivor guides had their education disrupted by the Holocaust and few had formal teaching qualifications, but the survivors 'couldn't get enough' advice, they 'learnt on the job': to them 'education was everything'.¹⁰

The success of the school program became a source of pride and continued to grow – evidence, it was suggested, of the success of the JHC:

These letters (and many more unpublished ones) are representative of the general spontaneous reaction of students and other visitors, who come to the museum, look at the exhibits and listen to the survivors. These letters are also an indication to us, the founders and

volunteer workers of this museum, that the means we have chosen to ensure that the holocaust [sic] will never be denied or forgotten were the right ones.¹¹

It was during this period that the focus on school education broadened as university students taking classes on the Holocaust started using the JHC as a resource. Many students who undertook the unit (mostly in undergraduate courses) were not Jewish and ‘few had any contact with the Jewish community, let alone Holocaust survivors’.¹² In 2001, Pam Maclean from Deakin University arranged for her students to visit the JHC, where she noted that the visit ‘brings together on and off-campus students so that they have a sense of community of students studying the Holocaust’.¹³ Maclean’s inaugural visit with her students was to become annual. Soon, PhD students such as Monash’s Julie Fenwick would be seen regularly combing the archives, or interviewing survivors for research, like University of Melbourne’s Kate Pollard. Monash University’s Centre for the Study of Jewish Civilisation (now the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation) together with the JHC conducted a one-day seminar at Monash Caulfield campus and offered a seminar series in the second half of 2002 at the JHC.¹⁴

As well as students of all ages coming to the JHC, the survivor guides increasingly visited schools and community organisations, an initiative that had first been raised during the early years of the Centre. For example, many went on outreach programs or were invited to speak at schools and conferences. In 2003, guides visited secondary schools, universities, centres for the disabled, women’s groups, conferences and synagogues.¹⁵ When Ilona Oppenheimer retired in 2003, Bernard Korbman became Education Officer and continued this expansion, in particular, to adult non-Jews. Korbman, an experienced teacher, became the first full-time paid Education Officer, a development that reflected the increasing professionalisation of the Centre (see Chapter Three). Recollecting his early days at the JHC, Korbman noted:

When I first came here I realised that that the Centre in its education and philosophy was in some ways

quite exclusive, there was one program for all. I wanted education to be more than just for children, we weren't going out into the wider community enough.¹⁶

In order to achieve this, it was decided that it would be fruitful to broaden the education of the volunteer guides. After the death of survivor and volunteer coordinator Maly Kohn, a Development Fund was established in 2008, out of which arose a scholarship for JHC volunteer guides for study or overseas research.¹⁷ Child survivor, Board member and guide Henri Korn was awarded the scholarship in December 2010. Korn's dedication is admirable: he arrived punctually at the JHC for the award ceremony, 'but was called away urgently to guide a group of students through the museum. As a result, he almost missed the presentation.' The scholarship allowed Korn to attend the World Federation of Child Survivors meeting in August 2011 in Warsaw.¹⁸ Ziva Fain, long-time photographer for the JHC, won the award in 2013.¹⁹

Throughout the 30 years of the JHC's history, a number of themes emerge which articulated a tension between the universal and the particular in Holocaust education. This was foreshadowed in part by Professor Andrew Markus, writing on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the JHC who suggested:

In deciding future directions [for education at the JHC] one important issue could be the extent to which the museum will maintain a sole focus on the Holocaust. The pressure will come from two directions: those who are persuaded of the need for a broadening of the subject matter to include more attention to other victims of Nazism and provide consideration of the phenomenon of genocide in the modern world. The other direction concerns education for tolerance and against violent resolution of conflict – should this form of education be a direction in which the Museum is to invest significant resources?²⁰

This tension would indeed inform education at the JHC over the next fifteen years. However, this could be complicated by two

further issues: the role of the survivor guides in the education program and how to prepare for their passing and a related concern about the effectiveness of the education programs.

Role of survivors in education: zachor

‘We became the guardians of memory.’²¹

As we have seen, survivors considered themselves the guardians of the memory of the dead. A focus on the events of the Holocaust and the survivors as witnesses would be the safeguard against denial; ‘never again’ was the catchcry at the opening of the JHC, while ‘never forgive’ and ‘never forget’ were the key messages.

School education was the primary way in which this would happen. The success of this program would be paramount. As Cyla Sokolowicz argued in the *Centre News*:

If we believe that it is in our power to do something, to influence the course of history, this is the right path for preventing another holocaust [sic], be it against Jews or any other people. Even if we had to admit that our H. ‘Centre’ did not attain all its objectives in the first year of its existence – in one important area, of educating the youth, it has admirably fulfilled its commitment.²²

Education was thus key to the evolving rationale for the JHC. The instrumentalisation of the educational aspect of the Holocaust that went beyond teaching the events such as ‘lessons’ from the Holocaust gave the museum a clear civic pedagogic purpose. Through school education, the JHC would achieve its objectives. The following year Sokolowicz stressed:

It is individuals who in the final analysis influence the course of history, and it is therefore not unrealistic to hope that some of the thousands of students who visit the Museum, and then write emotional letters of thanks for the experience of talking to Holocaust survivors, will one day occupy leading positions in this country, with the power to make important political decisions.²³

In this, she echoes Ronnie Landau in claiming that the Holocaust

‘perhaps more effectively than any other subject, has the power to sensitise them [pupils] to the dangers of indifference, intolerance, racism and the dehumanisation of others’.²⁴ Edward Rothstein urges caution, however, asking why do many Holocaust museums:

... seem to feel obligated, given their claims on wider public interest, educational grants and class attention, to generalise beyond the particulars, as if simply recounting history would seem overly parochial. And thus they seem to set the stage for poor analogies being made every day.²⁵

This approach, however, ignores the dual meaning of *zachor* and its explicit call to act, resolving the perceived dichotomy between the particular and the universal messages of the Holocaust.²⁶ For example, Abram Goldberg argues that the most important pedagogical outcome is transmitting the message: ‘about racism, about antisemitism ... that what hurts one human being hurts another human being ... that life is beautiful, it’s worth living’.²⁷ Thus while some feel that the pedagogical role of the JHC is to teach (didactically) about the Holocaust, for others, like Goldberg, the lesson is philosophical: that despite horrific experiences, life is always worth living.

In 2000, survivor guide Maria Lewitt (who had been volunteering at the JHC since 1996)²⁸ openly passed the baton to a new generation of volunteers, noting that while those guides from 1984 were primarily Holocaust survivors, the new generation of non-survivor volunteers are continuing the message: ‘to remember the six million Jews who perished, and to fight racism in all its forms’.²⁹

The specifics of how this fight against racism would be achieved would be a matter of some debate. How could the lessons of the Holocaust be taught to students regarding the dangers of racism and intolerance in contemporary society? How could notions of personal responsibility be inculcated in students? Some survivor guides felt that their pedagogical approach to turn from ‘guardians of memory’ to ‘guardians of democracy’ was imperative, and is summed up well by Maria Lewitt:

Our aim is not to constantly remind the young and not so young of our suffering during the war but to make them realise that what was most shameful in human history was that the organised extinction of 6,000,000 European Jews was committed by the legitimate, well respected government of the Third Reich. Our aim is to make our younger generation aware of the mute acceptance of the crimes which had been committed on Jews and non-Jews not only in concentration and extermination camps, but throughout German-occupied Europe.³⁰

If the Centre's mantra was to teach about tolerance and racism, it had both an external and internal focus:

... not only using the Holocaust as a tool in promoting awareness and understanding of prejudice and toleration between groups in our multicultural society. It is equally urgent to promote awareness and understanding of the Holocaust within our own Jewish community, so that we should never again be the victims of prejudice anywhere in the world.³¹

The philosophy of Bernard Korbman in particular extended beyond the message of 'tolerance'; he argued that effective Holocaust education is a 'moral education. It is about making choices ... Holocaust education is about human rights and human dignity, both as individuals and as a collective'.³² The ideas of Peter J. Hass resonated with Korbman: 'The fundamental question is not why the Nazis did evil, but why they did not recognize evil as evil and therefore did not distance themselves from it'.³³

Indeed some survivors, from early on, argued that 'tolerance' was *not* something the JHC should be teaching. For example, Phillip Maisel states that 'tolerance shouldn't be used because the word "tolerance" means that someone is different, maybe it's like inferior [sic], that you have to tolerate him'.³⁴ Likewise, Saba Feniger expresses problems with the term:

[The JHC should] inform people ... but I object to

the word ‘tolerate’ ... why should we Jews be tolerated?
 ... we’re equal to everyone else ... we’re not teaching
 tolerance, we’re teaching that everyone is equal, that
 we’re all human, we’re all one race, we’re human. And
 what evil does. And what are we capable of doing ...
 And ... silence, how bad silence is ... Bystanders who
 don’t do anything are just as guilty.³⁵

The ability to go beyond particularism and speak to the contemporary political dimensions of Holocaust was, however, problematic. Politics and religion were considered ‘no-noes’, topics that were ‘off limits’.³⁶ Even though Abram Goldberg said that answering questions from students regarding religion and politics is ‘off limits’, he admitted that he spoke out against Pauline Hanson and supported refugees.³⁷

As we have seen, survivors of the Holocaust were and are central to the educational strategies used at the JHC, despite what they feel is ‘off limits’. Instrumental to the idea of the JHC as a ‘living memorial’, ‘survivor guides are like [the] number one exhibit’.³⁸ Jayne Josem summed up their motivations for speaking:

I think, my gut feeling from working here is that the survivors want to educate about the Holocaust because that’s their way of memorialising. So they don’t want their parents, brothers, sisters, friends, suffering [and] murder, etc. to be forgotten, so we must always talk about it.³⁹

The impulse to share their stories as proof of their experiences thus became a key theme that set the JHC apart from other museums. The *ability* to share their stories was another matter. Some guides such as Willy Lermer had prior experience of sharing his stories. After he was liberated in Dachau, Lermer worked for the Americans as an interpreter and was also a ‘guide’ for when officials came, and he would ‘take them around the camp, show them the crematoria, the shooting range and the hanging tree ... so that was my experience to talk’.⁴⁰ For others it was more problematic. Given the reluctance of some survivors to speak publicly about their

experiences after the Holocaust, it is unsurprising that many guides had no experience, and this caused anxieties about sharing their story. Maly Kohn, a Latvian Holocaust survivor who became the guide coordinator from 1990 to 2005,⁴¹ had great difficulty talking about her experiences. How could she convey how a collaborator ‘... and his Nazi officers... shot my father before my eyes. How I found my mother’s cardigan in a pile of clothing from gassed people. The smell of Zyklon B gas stays with me even today’.⁴² As Kitia Altman, who began as a guide around 1987, explained, she ‘would have sleepless nights on Sunday, before my roster day at the Centre’. Part of this anxiety arose from the traumatic memories that were uncovered through providing testimony, exacerbated by a lack of formal training.⁴³

The regular monthly guide meetings were important in developing educational skills and strategies, where a set of informal guidelines emerged. For example, when giving testimony, survivors should only talk about their first-hand experience of the Holocaust, ‘unless you experienced it don’t talk about it’. Another rule was, ‘don’t talk about hate – hate is a negative word and is not on our agenda!’ As with the exhibition, mention of Zionism was also avoided, and guides were asked not to ‘talk about Israel, even if provoked by questions about Israel, as this was not what the Centre was about’.⁴⁴

If survivor stories were central to the pedagogic project at the JHC, it was Mina Fink who had the foresight to understand that if there were to be a museum with survivor guides, there would need to be some formal training, both to support the volunteers and to make sure that a visit was an effective educational experience.⁴⁵ Naomi Rosh White, Bernard Rechter and Mina Fink formed the guides group and undertook the first training.⁴⁶ Fink arranged for some guides from the National Gallery of Victoria to come to the JHC to talk to the survivor guides. Jenny Wajsenberg also ‘set up projects, ran seminars for teachers ... [and established] links with the Yad Vashem teacher training program’.⁴⁷ Geulah Solomon conducted a report on the guides after spending three weeks at the JHC

in early 1985. She marvelled that, in these early years, the guides had the ‘ability to interpret and adapt themselves to individual schools’, and that they ‘convey the sense of living history’.⁴⁸

As guides were encouraged to speak only about their own experiences, often historical context and knowledge could be missing. The lack of training meant that messages were often inconsistent: Goldberg recalls giving a history of the JHC, rather than the Holocaust.⁴⁹ Likewise, Sara Saaroni argued no one can train her for telling her story and indeed, there is no reason therefore to talk about politics or religion.⁵⁰ Solomon observed that guides were unable to answer general questions such as:

- Why did Hitler choose to exterminate the Jews?
- Was it God’s will?
- Meaning of the word ‘Holocaust’
- Why didn’t the Jews escape? Or fight back?
- What is a ghetto?

In addition, some guides also struggled to answer more personal questions:

- How can you work in the Museum after what you went through?
- Do you want revenge?
- Do you hate Germans?
- Why did you come to Australia?
- How could you not know what was happening to the Jews?
- Who do you blame for what happened?

Solomon’s 1985 report suggested that while it would be ‘both unnecessary and presumptuous to require the recent group of guides to attend formal training sessions ... there were occasional minor areas which required some pedagogic advice to individuals’.⁵¹ Rather than advise formal training (which was mainly rejected among the survivor guides) Solomon suggested the guides take advantage of a resource person.