

## THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Berlin, April 28, 2004

Before embarking in the discussion of the very item of the role of education within the activities of the ITF that I have been asked to introduce as acting chair of the ITF, it might be appropriate to say in a few words what the ITF in fact is, should some of you not have a clear knowledge of what it is and how it was created.

The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, to which are now part 16 States, was created in 1998 as a reaction to resurgent nasty episodes of anti-Semitism in various parts of Europe, some of them being particularly worrisome for their symbolic value. The corner-stone document is the so-called Declaration of Stockholm, a paper issued at the Stockholm Conference of the year 2000, that clearly defines the commitments of the members of the ITF. Among these stands prominently the role of education which is specified, not by chance, in the very title of the Task Force as the first scope of activity to be pursued. Why is it so that this element is so outstandingly singled out?

The reason for underlying this element is to be found in our strong belief that only a very good knowledge and deep-seeded conscience of the roots on which anti-Semitism is thriving can be the real bulwark and the jumping-pad against the repetition of the horrible sequel of events that brought about what we now call the Shoah - an event so tragic and unbelievable in our times. It became widely known only at the end of world war 2 and it was such an upsetting discovery that some people could not believe to have taken place while others refuse to admit the reality of that tragedy. It is an event that has blotched our continent and stands as a permanent black mark for the entire mankind. It is true, other massacres have existed in the past and, I hate to say it, still exist to-day in our planet but the Shoah - unlike any other - stands out in its uniqueness because it was a deliberate and scientifically planned and coldly carried-out project of mass destruction of an entire single group of people that can be identified only by religion, not by other elements such as nationality or similar other distinctions, big being the differences of the various groups of Jews even in Europe. The roots of that monstrous project of the nazis is to be found in the ideology of an alleged superiority of one people over any others - the arian race they called it using a scientifically wrong and unfounded concept. A supposed superiority, which in fact was only intolerance towards anyone different, stemming from ignorance and stupid prejudice. And this is what we are all called to fight now before it is too late, and here comes the role allotted to our generation - to eradicate all these false and perverse ideologies. How can it be done? The answer is: through education and with special attention devoted to the younger generation. Even these few hints may provide you with a clue for better understanding along which lines moves the activity of the members of ITF, who have already finalised two main documents on the various facets of the issue of education, the so-called "What" and "Why" documents - two titles that clearly indicate the scope and aim of them. A third document is now under study and we hope to finalise it on the occasion of the first Plenary Assembly under the Italian chairmanship, hopefully already this June: this document is called "How". Admittedly, this is by far the most delicate document of the lot because it touches upon the selection of common and basic parameters for the best suited methodology for spreading out to the students of the various countries the knowledge of the historic facts and sites of the Shoah while also taking into account the specificity of each country both for the characteristics of their students as recipients of the knowledge or for some of them being close or far relatives or descendants of those of their countrymen who lived-through or were victims of the Shoah. The on-going semantic disputes of this document reflect in fact different approaches as far as the schools' or academic curricula are concerned not forgetting that the possibility of influence or impose them is a touchy issue impinging either on the autonomy of the cultural academic or on that of the governmental authorities, while other differences concern also other pragmatic or practical aspects like availability of texts and suitable translations. Yet these differences instead of standing as obstacles do in fact pave the way to better grasping the implications involved, while at the same time they foster and deepen the research for a wider and better methodology to be applied in the teaching of Holocaust.

Another way by which the ITF works in the field of education is to encourage the spreading out, within the schooling and academic network of each of the member-countries, the conscience of the necessity of teaching the Holocaust as a tragic –but in a sense an eloquent and therefore useful one - example of the consequences of wrong ideologies, the ideologies and prejudices on which thrive even to-day anti-Semitism, intolerance, and fanaticisms. Such an activity is pursued also in non- member countries by means of so-called “liaison projects”, which are partly financed by the special Fund of the ITF. From January last year 26 projects have been approved for a total amount of some 400.000 dollars. Among them special attention was devoted to training the educators so as to give them the proper tools to, on their turn, educate their pupils. A meritorious work on this field is done by several institutions in various countries – of course in Italy too – and among them a special role is played by Yad Vashem.

However, teaching is not the only way to educate – educate encompasses in fact a wider concept than the only though very important task of spreading out the knowledge of the facts of the past. I would say that teaching implies also something more and higher than that. It means to form and model the minds of our children. The Romans said : “ Historia magistra vitae “. Yet history is not only what we learn through the books, history is also what we learn through even more direct contacts with the reality of the past : history are also the monuments that we can visit or see with our own eyes. This is why – and forgive me if I quote an Italian experience but I believe that this example could be followed by other countries – many Italian schools do not limit their teaching to inserting in their curricula books or lectures on Holocaust –they also organise travels and visits to Auschwitz and other memorial sites. They show videos and some of them even create their own films and CD Roms on the tragedy of Holocaust, while others participate as actors in plays related to the issue. And not only that : for the past two years – and so will be done again - the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research has organised – together with the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities – a contest among the pupils of the elementary up to the second grades schools on subjects related to the Shoah and the prize-giving ceremony ( to which even the President of the Republic took part ) is geared towards the Day of the Memory (the 27 of January ). To give you an idea of the dimension of this event I am proud to tell you that this year more the 13000 students presented their works, the quality of which was so high and impressive to make it difficult for the jury to single out the winners. Another path that can be followed is the organisation of seminars open to academicians and students : such an event is now being organized by the University of Roma Three on the figure of Primo Levi as a survivor of the Shoah and as a world-known writer. It will take place in Rome on June the 10<sup>th</sup>. I think it is an event of very relevant interest that deserves special attention by all of you. Another seminar is to be organised in autumn, probably on teaching the Shoah in multicultural societies.

A third way to spreading out the knowledge of the Shoah both as a historic fact and as a reality to be analysed in its different facets – and I mean facts, sites, ideological roots and so on – is to contribute to the dissemination both of books and testimonial documents and of the direct experiences of the still living survivors. Again I quote here an Italian experience : the wonderful cooperation between the Italian State Archives and the Shoah Foundation, that has already brought about the recording of the testimony of some 400 survivors to be elaborated in a long footage of films and videos. Spielberg - in Rome these very days – praised such a governmental Italian activity as possibly a unique one.

These are some of the practical solutions that can be adopted along the general path towards the main goal to reach – to prepare the younger generations to match the new challenges that already now are confronting us but that will confront them even more in the future as a result of the ongoing process of mondialisation of the contacts and of easier travels and migrating possibilities open to an ever bigger mass of men and women for moving from one part of the world to the others. The main challenge to be confronted with is to convince our children of the importance of being open and ready to accept the existence of a pluralistic culture, a culture free of unfounded and sometimes stupid prejudices, where racism, sexism and intolerance towards anything or anyone different will no longer exist, where different religious credos can freely co-exist one along the other in mutual respect. Awareness of what happened in the past, a critical knowledge of stereotypes, the capacity of monitoring behaviours jeopardising or challenging different cultures are the corner-stones for the education of the future citizens and at the same time are the

fundamental elements, better said, the rampart towards the repetition of tragic mistakes committed in the past both at the individual and social levels.

I mentioned previously the role of the Italian Universities in education, and I am proud to say that a network of some 70 academicians has been created in Italy with the aim of exchanging experiences and ideas as well as discussing the problems of interest. At the student level monothematic courses are organized and degree topics on Holocaust and anti-Semitism are a common practice in various universities. The most valuable essays are thereafter publicized thus favouring interdisciplinary research. This happens because we in Italy have concluded that a historic, juridical, literary, anthropological and psychosocial research has resulted in a deeper knowledge of the issue of anti-Semitism and we have seen that the conclusions of a serious commitment in research has been reflected in up-dated pedagogic and didactical practices.

Should we use a compact lemma for the role of education I would say – and with this I conclude my intervention – that education is “remembering the past while shaping the future”. Admittedly, it is not an easy task, it is a serious challenge. Yet - and forgive me if I use once more an old latin expression – we must also be convinced that “Nihil difficile volenti”. In other words, we must all -and I am here somewhat quoting what the Italian writer Vittorio Alfieri said of his way of learning : we must all of us “will, will, strongly will” work and join forces aiming at the same goal – the eradication of anti-Semitism, intolerance, false prejudices and stupid stereotypes and don’t forget that will-power is also imbued with and a result of heart and brain . So, let us, by means of a well-planned education, instil into the minds of our children the important truth of the necessity of being tolerant and devoid of false prejudices. If we succeed in this difficult endeavour the future of mankind will no longer be bleak!

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