

# Teaching the Holocaust in Greek schools – Practices and Methods.

By Eleni Kyttari

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She is very interested in gaining the tools and the knowledge needed to be able to teach the Holocaust in the most effective way. She has attended seminars and conferences on teaching the Holocaust (EMOTL Annual Review Conference on Holocaust Education in December 2018, TOLI for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights seminar in November 2018, World Holocaust Remembrance Center seminar in July 2017).

## 1. Teaching the Holocaust in the Greek school curriculum

As far as the official school curriculum is concerned the Holocaust is taught in the history book of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of high school, for pupils aged 15 and, in the history book material of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of senior high school, for pupils aged 18. It is an integrated part of Second World War and Nazi Occupation teaching. <https://tinyurl.com/y5lxrr8y> <https://tinyurl.com/y4lqcpmb>

There are also some literature texts taught in Literature classes for pupils at age 14 from the book 'The Diary of Ann Frank'.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day the Ministry of Education sends schools an official document about the Holocaust to be read to pupils and encourages teachers to spend that day teaching the Holocaust.

## 2. Teaching the Holocaust in Greek schools on an extra-curricular basis

Greek educators are free to decide on the extra-curricular material and the methods to be used, so that pupils gain extensive insight into the Holocaust (books, films, narratives, personal testimonies etc.). I used the following methods and practices:

- a. Educational program on Human Rights: a class of 14-year-old pupils visited the Jewish Museum of Greece. They were given a guided tour of the permanent and temporary exhibitions and attended an educational programme on Human Rights. They were asked to read in groups the story of a Greek Jewish child that had to hide himself during the period of the Nazi occupation in Greece. Then, they had to relate the stories to the UNHR

Declaration and also to refer to similar instances of human rights violations taking place at present. In this way they reflected on the dangers humanity runs when racism and discrimination prevail over tolerance, mutual understanding and fruitful co operation.

<https://tinyurl.com/y6evenv2>

- b. Projection of the Yad Vashem film -"May Your Memory Be Love"- on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27. In this film Ovadia Baruch, a Greek Jew born in Thessaloniki tells his own story on location where the events occurred. He recounts happy childhood memories in Thessaloniki, the deportation of the Greek Jewry to Auschwitz, the dehumanization process in Auschwitz, daily life in the camps and finally, his survival and return to normal life. The film is part of the "Witnesses and Testimony" series provided by the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/testimony-films/ovadia-baruch.html>

- c. Video contest for schools

This stands at the core of Holocaust education. Pupils from 16 to 17 years of age are asked to produce a six-minute film about '*The Holocaust and Greek Jews*'. The contest was organised for the first time in 2013, at the initiative of the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs of the Greek Ministry of Education and the Jewish Museum of Greece (JMG). Due to the encouraging results and the response of pupils and their teachers, the programme continued in subsequent years. My pupils participated in this programme in school year 2017 - 2018. There were 100 entries in the contest, involving more than 250 pupils. A total of 82 pupils were selected on the basis of their video and visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum.

- i. Pedagogical value of the contest

- a. An innovative and highly effective method of teaching
- b. Pupils are encouraged to take up active learning.
- c. They become researchers.
- d. They adopt critical thinking while using a variety of sources.
- e. They become writers, directors, producers.
- f. They learn to co-operate.
- g. They practice their artistic and IT skills too.
- h. They experience a variety of feelings from the beginning to the very end of the competition; enthusiasm, stress, thrills, emotional breakdown...

ii. My school's participation in the contest - Project completion phases

- a. Pupils in the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of our school are informed about the competition in October.
- b. Visit to the Jewish museum of Greece. We were given a guided tour and pupils learned a lot about the life of Jews before, during and after the Holocaust. Pupils had access to valuable sources and material offered by the museum which they used in their film.
- c. Extra-curricular classes and meetings to check project progress.
- d. Pupils hand in their work in January.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pYcYgdKv0I>
- e. A committee consisting of experts in a variety of fields (history, religious education, literature, film-making, photography) selects the best films. About 30% of the competitors are awarded with a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- f. My pupils were among the ones to be awarded and we had the opportunity to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, 24-26 April 2018.

The starting point of the tour was Auschwitz I camp, where we had the opportunity to inspect some of the museum's permanent collections. Sufficient time was set aside for us to tour Block 4, where photographic and other material relevant to the individual stages of the extermination process are displayed, and Block 5, where special showcases display materials found when the camp was liberated that provide shocking evidence of the Holocaust, such as glasses, artificial limbs, suitcases, shoes and other personal items that belonged to the murdered. Upon completing the tour of Auschwitz I camp, we were transported by private coach to Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp, where we had the opportunity to see up close the remains of the buildings, such as the crematoria, and also of lesser-known buildings, such as the stone huts where the children of non-Jewish Polish prisoners were kept. In this area, the tour also featured an open discussion, where the guides and the Jewish Museum of Greece historians fielded questions from the pupils that demonstrated both their interest in learning about life in the camp and, in particular, incidents involving Greeks and other prisoners.

iii. Follow up activities upon coming back to Greece

- a. Pupils who participated in the project were invited to the award ceremony which took place at the Greek Ministry of Education. They exchanged feelings, thoughts and queries. Pupils had the opportunity to reflect on what they had been studying from another perspective. Thus, the pupils engaged in an in-depth discussion on the experience of visiting this emblematic site of martyrdom. Definitely, their experience is beyond any study or research they had made. The pupils spoke about the contradiction between the beauty of the nature of the place with the horror of crimes that took place there, the boundless inhumanity, and the incomprehensible nature of the crimes committed.

Those wishing to do so also presented original artwork they created after the visit.

The aim of the meeting was also to complete the educational process that started at the beginning of the school year with the announcement of the competition. However, the process did not end there. It was just the beginning ... Their experience engaged an on-going process. It will be like a candle lit, shedding its enlightening knowledge on the darkest period of World War II. <https://tinyurl.com/y6scu8jz>

- b. We organised presentations in which pupils who visited Auschwitz shared their experience with the rest of the school. Pupils shared their photos, films, memories and thoughts. They answered numerous questions posed by their classmates and were indeed the eye of the witness bringing in substantial as well emotional information on the Holocaust in the most efficient way.

- c. Pupils created artwork on their experience of visiting this emblematic site of martyrdom.

- A poster with a photo signed by the whole group as a means of relating to those unfortunate people struggling to live in this death camp.
- Drawings and paintings
- A poem
- A video made up of photos pupils took in Auschwitz

- iv. Closing remarks – Pupils’ final thoughts
  - a. Pupils came to realise that history is largely shaped by specific choices and roles people assume in particular instances under specific circumstances. And since history repeats itself anybody, people like us, can potentially be in the role of the perpetrator, or in that of the victim, in the role of the passive or the active witness. It was indeed made pretty clear to them that it is up to them, to us, to make the right choice. It is up to us to condemn darkness and look on the bright side of life.
  - b. Pupils managed to grasp and express the contradictions the place itself conveys as well as the contradictory feelings and thoughts it evokes to the visitors. The place itself was in full bloom, the fields were green and full of life. The heavy rain stopped giving rise to a colourful rainbow. But getting into the camps they saw darkness, death and deep sorrow. All of the pupils stated that they found it extremely hard to realise the extent of the dehumanising and humiliating nature of human behaviour witnessed during the Second World War.
  - c. Pupils opted for an optimistic view of the world. That’s the message they sent through the short film they made after they came back to Greece. It’s a film that artistically combines photos from the death camp with the lyrics of Armstrong’s song:- ‘What a beautiful world’-. It’s a film that celebrates life over death, light over darkness, hope over despair, love over hatred! Though it uses photos from a death camp, it’s a film about life in a beautiful world with red roses, a blue sky and friendly people. A world that will be open and tolerant to all, no matter their ethnicity, race, religion, political or other preferences, special abilities or disabilities. A world that will respect universal human rights and values. A world young pupils dream of!  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAycDDiWyQM>