

## ARE TRIPS TO AUSCHWITZ THE PANACEA FOR A HISTORY SICK SOCIETY? A CASE STUDY OF HOLOCAUST TEACHING: THE ITALIAN MEMORIAL TRAINS TO AUSCHWITZ

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**M**y paper will focus on a specific case study of Holocaust teaching, the Italian Memorial Trains to Auschwitz, which have become a very popular phenomenon, still unparalleled in Europe. After a short introduction on this phenomenon, some of the most relevant key-aspects of these educational projects will be discussed as well as some issues relating to Holocaust teaching in Italy in general. Namely, the main argument will be that memorial trains are an example of deterioration of Holocaust teaching. Why should historical knowledge of the Holocaust be facilitated, if not even conveyed, by collective trips to mass murder sites? It is worth raising this question.

In Italy, unlike many European countries, the Holocaust is not a mandatory topic in the national curriculum. Therefore, its teaching depends almost exclusively on teachers' personal initiative and motivation.

Since the implementation in 2000 of an Italian law establishing January 27<sup>th</sup> as National Holocaust Remembrance Day, school trips to the Nazi concentration camps have been constantly growing. In particular, over the last two decades the attention devoted to Holocaust in relation to memory culture and public debates has also increased considerably (Gordon 2012). As a matter of fact, year 2000 marked a watershed in the Italian approach to the Holocaust, pushing the expansion of memorial trips to a new level and making Auschwitz, the main if not unique destination of these visits, not only the symbol of the genocide of the Jews but also the essence of evil.

Until a certain time, visiting a memorial site has been considered only a step within a broader teaching on World War II and on the genocide of the Jews – i.e. an option among many other pedagogical tools. According to the latest trend a trip to Auschwitz today is considered not only as a “present-day rite of passage” (Cywiński 2014), but as a stand-alone goal. In other words it is seen as the best methodology to teach this topic to youngsters and also as a crucial educational tool to raise awareness about its lesson, under the slogan: “Never Again!”

Given the growing success of the Italian Memorial Trains as educational projects for schools and therefore their strong connection with the way history is taught, it is worth questioning how teachers respond to the major challenge they are faced with: combining good history teaching with the moral lessons of Auschwitz.

Let me first give you some background information and some figures about this phenomenon that every year involves thousands of students and hundreds of teachers and plays a significant role in ranking Italy fourth in terms of numbers of visitors to Auschwitz, with about 84.350 visitors per year (according to 2014 Auschwitz Memorial Report).

The first memorial train to Auschwitz was organized in 2002 by Tuscany region (for a review on this project, see the website of Tuscany Region: <http://www.regione.toscana.it/storiaememoriadel900/giorno-della-memoria>). Five hundred students boarded the train, accompanied by their teachers, some local politicians, members of associations of deportees and also some survivors of Auschwitz and of other concentration camps.

The project goal stated by the organizers was the following: “To remember the Holocaust not only as a massacre of Jews but also as a warning against cruelty and human indifference, that exist still today, and to let people have a first-hand experience leading younger generations to develop effective antibodies against racism” (Fortini 2011).

Only a few years later, in 2005, the example was followed by other cities: Milan and Turin in conjunction with the Former Fossoli Camp Foundation organized their own memorial trains to Auschwitz. Each train, carrying from 500 to 700 students left Italy for Poland on January

25<sup>th</sup> and reached Auschwitz on the 27<sup>th</sup> – the day the camp was liberated, establishing a symbolic link between the past, the liberation of the camp at the end of the Holocaust, and the present – the arrival of young visitors who promised to serve as “bearers of Holocaust memory”. In 2010, it became clear that it was necessary to schedule different departures and arrivals of the trains in order to avoid overcrowding and poor visiting conditions at the Auschwitz Museum. From that year on, Memorial trains have been regularly leaving Italy between January and March. All of the organizers agreed on choosing trains not only as a simple means of transport, but also as a useful pedagogical and emotional tool deeply affecting the participants during their journey. The words used by some of the organizers in their official speeches about the choice of travelling to Auschwitz by train are extremely meaningful:

Slowly travelling across Europe by train, as if we were almost forced to take the victims’ route... (Pasquini 2009. Lorena Pasquini is in charge of the project named “A Train to Auschwitz”, funded by Centro Studi Officina Memoria of Brescia together with CGIL and CISL [national trade union centres]).

Thanks to the time needed to reach Poland it is possible to leave behind one's own daily life and routine, this is something, which would be impossible to do with a shorter travelling distance (Association DEINA of Turin, organizer of the project named “A Train to Auschwitz”).

Within a short space of time, these initiatives enjoyed broad consensus in strong connection with the basic assumption stating that commemorating the Holocaust is both a moral obligation and a moral lesson. A secondary goal being that of developing through the visit to Auschwitz a deep sense of responsibility and critical citizenship in younger generations.

Under the clear catch phrase of “**standing together**”, Memorial Trains have been rapidly transformed into a political cause, and the transmission of memory has been turned into an unchangeable institutionalized model. Given the great success of these projects, some public bodies that had never been interested in such initiatives started to allocate resources to such projects for sponsorship and research purposes. It is worth mentioning that the rental cost of a train to Poland is of about 130 to 150 Euros per train, plus the individual participants’ fees, ranging from 100 to 300 hundred Euros.

In recent years, the mayors of Florence, Milan and Turin as well as other local politicians, trade unionists, famous writers, actors, musicians, journalists, photographers and school directors have joined the students in boarding the memorial trains. Last but not least, survivors took an active part in these trips in order to pass on to youngsters their experiences in the Nazi concentration camps. The fact that most of them were not Jews and did not survive Auschwitz

but other concentration camps, like for instance Mauthausen or Gusen in Austria where thousands of Italians were deported as political opponents, was not considered by the organizers as a problem. The testimonies on the evil and pain suffered in the camps, the civic and moral message on human values and, more globally, retracing the past and underscoring its links with the present have always prevailed over historical coherence and consistency.

The trip obviously carries strong symbolic but also political meaning. The obligation to remember, stressed by public organizations, is aimed at arousing a feeling of belonging to the international community: “Youngsters need to feel part of a project, they have to ‘work’ on memory. If they are actively involved, they can react with a high level of maturity. Therefore, they develop a feeling of belonging to a community, a feeling that probably is lacking in their daily lives” (Luppi 2015). In other words, travelling together to Auschwitz on the Memorial Train is a clear sign of association with those who stand for remembrance and act against the return of Fascism and barbarity. Some organizations go even further and define their Memorial Train as a sort of **lay pilgrimage**, precisely for its evocative power:

The Memorial Train is neither just a mere travelling experience nor a common school trip, it is a lay pilgrimage, a space for knowledge, a journey through history and memory... We define it as a lay pilgrimage precisely for its evocative power, because it must be a tool for one’s outrage with the aim to promote an actively engagement in daily life and to cause a radical change of ourselves (Alotto and Forte 2015; Oliviero Alotto and Roberto Forte are currently in charge of the Terra del Fuoco Association of Turin, Italy, i.e. of the project named *Il Treno della Memoria*).

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A special mention needs to be made about the Memorial Trains promoted by Terra del Fuoco and Deina, two very active and left-wing youth organizations of Turin. Unlike other projects based on students’ recruitment through schools and the mediation of teachers that follow specific preparatory training and join the journey, Terra del Fuoco and Deina promote the so-called “informal education” principle and directly address youngsters, tapping into non-schooling channels, and offering a peer-to-peer educational model. The educators who join the trips are usually people of the same age. Instead of mainstream history classes, the organizers prefer other activities considered to be closer to the sensitivity and language of youngsters such as: videos, images and visual tools in general, group discussions, role plays and simulations. According to them this approach is not only more suitable to young people's needs but also modernizes history with respect to traditional educational methods. For these reasons, since 2005, memorial trains to Auschwitz have been spreading like wildfire throughout Italy. It is self

-evident that regardless of the nature of the organization, public or private, Memorial Trains are extremely appealing to young audiences.

The promotion of this experience as “unforgettable”, “unique” and “deeply emotional” as well as the promise of a group adventure in the search for the meaning of life through the Holocaust, has unintentionally made Memorial Trains compete with mainstream history classes, which are doomed to be considered as out-dated, boring and completely unattractive.

Official statistics are not available yet, but the total number of students having boarded memorial trains from 2005 to 2014 can be estimated at around 50.000. Not even massive logistical difficulties have stopped the projects. The Italian Railway Company’s decision to stop renting the trains for this purpose did not discourage the organizers from carrying out their projects. For three years, Italian students have been leaving for Poland by bus up to the Austrian border and then from Austria by train. As a matter of fact, it has become evident that the attraction of Memorial Trains seems limitless and meaningless.

In short, Italian Memorial Trains seem to belong to a broader context, i.e. the tendency among educators, politicians and the general public to approach the Holocaust from a moral perspective, according to which the genocide has the power to convey relevant lessons both to youngsters and to adults hopefully leading to the creation of a more tolerant society, free of the evils of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

I am not sure that the main objective of teaching the Holocaust or any other historical event should be to have students learn universal and contemporary lessons. Before dealing with any human rights and moral issues, shouldn’t we try to teach first and foremost the historical facts? The connection between teaching and educating is given, as well as the idea that history is learnt to understand the past and to raise questions for our present. Nevertheless, in my view, the Holocaust should be considered in a historical rather than a moral framework.

There is no evidence of the fact that travelling across Europe to visit Auschwitz with the aim to get from the visual experience some relevant lessons for humankind can provide a deeper understanding of the Holocaust and its complex history and in particular of the specific Italian responsibilities of the Fascist regime in the persecution of the Jews.

There are two key questions that in my opinion express at best the crucial issues which should be raised on how Italy teaches the Holocaust through pedagogical projects like the Memorial Trains. The first question is about the danger of distorting the past in the search of a universal meaning. It is not only naïve to believe that the Holocaust happened because people made the wrong moral choices but it is also historically wrong (the German sociologist Harald Welzer, for example, has emphasized in his paper “Who is a Perpetrator? The Changing

Construction and Interpretation over Time” that the National socialist morale gradually elevated the extermination of human beings to the state of a moral duty; Welzer 2009). Moreover, approaching Auschwitz as an example of violation of human rights with the aim to teach empathy, tolerance and individual responsibility is indeed a worthwhile mission but it runs the risk of disconnecting the history of this genocide from its context and therefore of dissolving its specificity (Bauer 2010).

In other words, this approach focusing so much on the moral issues potentially may lead to overlook the historical reconstruction of what happened (when, how and why did the extermination of the Jews happen?) with the aim to curb the historical narrative in favour of a moral and universal lesson. We should ask ourselves if we really need Auschwitz to fulfill this goal. Unfortunately, both world history and our presence can provide many examples of crimes against humanity. It may not be surprising to note that many programmes behind the Memorial Trains are written in a vague and artificial language which bring all victims groups under one umbrella with no particular distinction made for Jewish victims. One can read that Auschwitz was the place where “human beings of all nationalities and ages were murdered, innocent people who died in the gas chambers, men women and children”. So, in the name of the universality of the Holocaust as a human tragedy, the word Jew never (or seldom) appears in the text, implying that all of the victims of the genocide were not only Jews but everyone targeted and persecuted by the Nazis. A general, mixed humanity that has no face, no name, no specific fate and could be anyone at any time in history or in present time. As the Italian Holocaust Remembrance Day is devoted to all victims of Nazism, one may also read in the Memorial Trains’ programmes that the Holocaust is not intended as just the Jewish tragedy but as the persecution and the annihilation of a range of victims. Defining the Holocaust as a universal history is certainly true, but only provided that we do not minimize the historical facts and the historical truth. The main consequence of this major feature of Memorial Trains, i.e. the powerful and universal meaning of the Holocaust as overall warning and rhetorical device, has overwhelmed some fundamental issues.

The second key question raised by this panacea-like use of such visits is the following. The lack of sufficient historical knowledge provided by the Memorial Train Projects makes it difficult for young people to achieve a clearer understanding of a complex history. Teaching Auschwitz to students only as a symbol of the Holocaust may overlook the fact that actually this concentration and death camp complex was very different from any other mass murder site for Jews like Treblinka, Belżec or Babi Jar where almost no selection took place. Concentration, torture and criminal experiments, forced labour, mass killings and murder of the Jews in the crematoria of

Birkenau were all different Nazi policies addressing different categories of prisoners. However, all of them addressed the Jews who were often targeted with parallel and often simultaneous methods of annihilation. Students should learn more not only on the broader context of the persecution and the genocide of the Jews, but also about the specific role played by Auschwitz in the Final Solution. Finally, they should also get more accurate knowledge on the complex historical narrative of Auschwitz which includes different and parallel Nazi policies that need to be carefully explained.

Most of students tend to emphasize in their reports the size of Birkenau as an immense place where the Jews were murdered. This clearly shows that they have not understood neither the complicated history of the camp nor the difference between the extensive concentration camp area where inmates of all nationalities and categories starved to death and the small killing area of the crematoria where the great majority of the Jews arriving there from all over Europe were immediately murdered by gas (in many students' reports on their visit, it is quite clear that most of them did not understand that Auschwitz had two simultaneous functions because it was at the same time the largest centre for mass extermination of the Jews and the largest Nazi concentration camp for prisoners of various nationalities). Because what they see in Auschwitz Museum, the victims' artifacts, is so powerful, and conveys a false impression that students (as most of the ordinary visitors) are not able to differentiate between Auschwitz I and Birkenau despite the efforts of well-trained guides to tell them otherwise.

Furthermore, due to the lack of sufficient historical knowledge of the Holocaust as a complex phenomenon, young participants of the Memorial Trains seldom know that Italian Jews – unlike other Jewish communities – were not deported to Auschwitz from the ghettos and they were not forced to wear the yellow star. Even if such examples provide only a brief insight into their knowledge level, they may be potentially meaningful.

In addition to this insufficient understanding of the role played by Auschwitz in the Final Solution, another matter worthy of discussion is whether Holocaust teaching should only focus on the ultimate destination, the gas chambers and the crematoria at Birkenau, i.e. devoting little attention to the first stages of the persecution which were not initiated by the Nazis but by the local government in Italy as well as in many other countries. Obviously, putting Auschwitz at the core of the teaching program, runs the risk that any other event of this history may seem less serious or interesting, for instance the enactment, in September 1938, of an anti-Semitic legislation by Fascist Italy that deprived the Italian Jews of their civil and political rights. Although there is no straight line from the racial laws to the gas chambers, it is undeniable that the Holocaust started with a legal persecution. But if teachers and educators take this for granted

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and they do not explain carefully this preparatory phase, the exclusion, the humiliation, the feeling of being rejected by fatherland that Jews had, the youngsters will not achieve a detailed understanding of a complex history.

The mistake is actually misunderstanding. Although the preparatory work is sometimes accurate and scheduled on quite a long period before and after the visit of the camp complex, i.e. the classes and workshops that students attend before boarding the Memorial Trains, this training is inevitably insufficient. As to the choice of the topics to be taught, this is strongly influenced by the need to prepare the visit to the Holocaust site. Therefore, the preparatory work cannot include the teaching of the Holocaust in its full complexity. In other words, taking part in a Memorial Train Project does not necessarily mean that this can replace a traditional history class at school.

Most teachers complain about the lack of time and they consider the Holocaust to be particularly difficult to teach. Boarding a Memorial Train and rely on the organizers of such projects seems to be an easy option. This seems to explain partially that both pedagogy and methodology would need more accuracy, because most teachers involved in the Memorial Trains Projects tend to have a passive attitude arising from their choice to leave their educational responsibility in the hands of the organizers, therefore renouncing to coordinate themselves the learning process of their students. Even the choice of the historical content of the training programme is not made directly by the teachers.

Another major weakness stems from believing that Holocaust learning should be a sensory experience through the visit of a site of extermination of the Jews in order to feel what happened there, to touch history and to see with one's own eyes. I do not want to question the popular belief according to which walking along the train tracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau and seeing from a close the barbed wire, the ruins of the crematoria and the rests of the victims, brings a whole new level of comprehension and empathy for those who suffered horribly. However, I would like to state a question why many teachers and educators believe that the visual experience helps their pupils to understand a historical event and even to understand it much more than just reading books or attending history lessons. Why has all this become like a sort of intolerant dogma that is not possible to criticize unless one risks to be accused of being a memory enemy? Leaving aside the fact that history teaching does not mean obviously taking students to visit all places in the world where the events of the past took place – and this may sound trivial but it is not in the case of Holocaust – what does the majority of people think it will learn about the murder of the Jews by visiting Auschwitz? Annette Wieviorka, one of France's leading historians of the Holocaust,



writes that “there is nothing to see in Auschwitz-Birkenau unless one knows what there is to see” (2008).

Visits organized by all Memorial Trains are lightning visits. Few hours are devoted to Auschwitz, the museum, and Birkenau. Students must strictly follow a guide, a teacher or the tour leader to avoid getting lost. So, immersed in a slow-moving stream with many other people visiting the place at the same time, young visitors are not in control of themselves and of their time. Finally, what they see is not what they thought they would see and their expectations may be totally disappointed. Another relevant question is the following: how much horror people generally need to perceive in order to understand that an event really happened? What we can see at Auschwitz is residual objects, not people. Most students are in tears when they are shown glasses, shoes and human hair belonging to the Jews who were murdered in Birkenau. But behind these glasses there is nothing to be found about the Jews as human beings, as the individuals they were before the Holocaust. Should not teachers ask themselves what precisely do these artifacts teach their pupils about the history of the people who once used them? Beyond affection, what does our knowledge of these objects have to do with our knowledge of historical facts? Teachers and educators should be more aware about the fact that on one hand their pupils are explicitly asked to identify with the victims – in many Memorial Trains projects the youngsters are asked to remember the name of one victim of the camp, pronounce it during the official ceremony together with the dates of birth and death – and on the other hand, identification is impossible because the presence of the victims is evoked through their absence – one sees footless shoes, eyeless lenses etc. – or by the perspective of their perpetrators at the moment of their destruction.

Therefore, most organizers of these collective trips seem not to be aware that “Visiting Auschwitz is an indirect learning experience; it is about making a physical connection with absence. How can one give a voice to absence?” (European pack for visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. Online at: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/remembrance/archives/Source/Publications\\_pdf/European\\_Pack\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/remembrance/archives/Source/Publications_pdf/European_Pack_en.pdf)). How can we deal with the paradox that the lives of Jewish communities are recalled primarily through the images of their death? (Young 2001).

### **Conclusion**

Based on the premise that prior learning is vital, but visiting an authentic site helps to deepen the understanding of this learning, the Memorial Trains are a good example to raise relevant

questions about the way Italy (but not only Italy) has been teaching history and namely the Holocaust. I do not mean to suggest that students should stop visiting the Auschwitz complex with the memorial trains. However, my feeling is that the organizers of these trips put too much pressure on the contemporary relevance of the lessons of the Holocaust that are expected from a visual experience of Auschwitz (even if rapid and with a huge group of visitors) and consequently on the power of transforming the young visitors into good citizens and “bearers of Holocaust memory”. A double pressure that can be more of a moral burden than a pedagogical opportunity.

In my view, Memorial Trains’ main achievement is having successfully succeeded in gathering mixed groups of youngsters and adults around a high moral and political ideal likely to generate a sense of national identity (protecting democracy and human rights from the resurgence of barbarity, racism and dictatorship). In this sense, I deeply share the common opinion that finds these projects as a really involving and very unforgettable experience, at least for most of the participants (see the results of a survey conducted in January 2011 by the CDEC Foundation of Milan [Jewish Contemporary Documentation Centre] among hundreds of students who had taken part in the year before to a memorial train to Auschwitz. Online: [http://www.cdec.it/home2\\_2.asp?idtesto1=1248&idtesto=940&xson=1](http://www.cdec.it/home2_2.asp?idtesto1=1248&idtesto=940&xson=1)).

Anyhow, although generally considered a positive for of civic education, I am not sure whether we can look at the Memorial Trains as a good example of Holocaust teaching just because of this unbalance between ethical and political militancy (turning young Auschwitz visitors into good citizens) and quality-based historical Holocaust education aimed at students, which should go beyond the simple journey preparation. We should question whether an emotional experience can really be said to constitute learning about the Holocaust. Moreover, we should be more aware about the fact the symbolic language that is utilized in many educational projects on the Holocaust like the Memorial Trains conveys at the same time the horrors experienced by the victims of Auschwitz and their meaning for visitors’ present. Students who are taken to visit Auschwitz have to cope not only with their emotional responses but also with several problems as for example “the difficulty of reconciling mythical representations of Auschwitz with the reality” (European pack for visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum). Moreover, they are asked on the one hand to keep memory of the past alive and on the other hand to comprehend the Holocaust as active memory, i.e. to make sense of what they have learnt and seen in relation to their own lives. Though, learning history, understanding the past and getting relevant lessons for the present are different tasks that need time much longer than the preparation for a visit to the site. As Oren Baruch Stier points out: “The struggle to represent

the Holocaust is therefore a struggle for adequate and appropriate modes of transmission. What kind of language, what vocabulary, suits the task?"(Baruch 2003: 25).

To sum up, the Italian society is experiencing a paradox of which it does not seem to be fully aware. On the one hand, the decline in history teaching, strongly affected by the heavily cut in history classes imposed by the latest reforms of national education. On the other, everything likely to turn history from a study experience into a sensory experience to be seen and touched is getting more and more popular. Within this context, the Holocaust seems to be losing ground as a subject to be thought in a classroom and is increasingly becoming something to experience. Therefore, a train trip to Auschwitz with hundreds of other young people of the same age becomes a unique appealing experience that cannot compete with more traditional history teaching methods. This is the reason why I think it is plausible to talk about a *history sick society*, which is not able to teach its past but claims to re-enact it by subjecting it to needs that are not always consistent with the studied topic.

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#### ABSTRACT

### **Are Trips to Auschwitz the Panacea for a History Sick Society? A Case Study of Holocaust Teaching: the Italian Memorial Trains to Auschwitz**

My paper will focus on the Italian memorial trains to Auschwitz, which have become a very popular phenomenon, still unparalleled in Europe. Namely, I will argue that they are an example of deterioration of Holocaust teaching by analyzing the three key following aspects:

1) Is the primary goal of this initiative teaching history or promoting moral education? Believing that a site visit is enough to generate a meaningful civilizing impact on the visitors means trivializing Auschwitz. On the one hand, the preparatory work for a trip there cannot include the teaching of the Holocaust in its full complexity. On the other hand, any content selection will obviously influence the students' historical perception.

2) Both pedagogy and methodology would need more accuracy because most teachers taking part in these projects tend to have a passive attitude arising from their choice to leave their educational responsibility in the hands of the organizers, therefore renouncing to coordinate by themselves the learning process of their students.

3) The use of an unsuitable language not only results from a lack of precision in defining the historical facts (mixing of political deportation, forced labour and extermination of the Jews) but also leads to a universally moralizing effect of the Holocaust. In particular, the use of a too general vocabulary (including terms like: human beings, victims, innocent people) risks overlooking and minimizing the specificity of the genocide. Such a language prevents students from understanding that the Holocaust victims were the Jews and that they were murdered just because they were born Jews.

Given the great success of the memorial trains initiative and its strong connection with the teaching of history, it is essential to consider how teachers respond to the major challenge they are faced with: combining good history teaching with the moral lesson of Auschwitz.

## KEYWORDS

Holocaust Education, Italian Memorial Trains, Use Abuse Auschwitz

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