

REMEMBRANCE AND HISTORY

The Holocaust brings about two approaches to the past, remembrance and history, with both differences and similarities.

Remembrance, or memory, has a direct and emotional connection with the past since it is first and foremost individual. With memory comes a feeling of intimacy, erasing the distance of time, especially when someone has suffered trauma which marks their life forever. This is not only the case for the survivors of extermination camps, but also for the children who were hidden, children who never saw their parents again. In addition, memories passed on to children, most often by their grandparents, transform a personal memory into a family memory. This transformation can also affect a larger group through survivors and/or direct participants, accounts (oral and written), through images or animations, which consolidate a feeling of belonging to the group. Thus we speak of collective or shared memory.

The difficulty with proximity and a living memory which retains memories is the extraordinary selectiveness of memory. To forget is thus a condition of memory, whether it be an event that seems insignificant or on the other hand, something too onerous and painful to carry. Also, when one cannot ignore an event one can also distort it. This is true of both individual and collective memory.

History creates a distance. In most cases, a historian has not experienced the event they are describing and an emotional, personal connection is not aroused. Indeed, their investigations require perspective, to eliminate any prejudices and presumptions and to discern fact from fiction. They must make use of all sources, all possible evidence of the true events, called documents, to cross-reference and scrutinise in order to reconstruct how events unfolded. Events must be put into the context in which they occurred, emphasising continuity and change. Thus the historian struggles with one of the principal dangers of looking at the past, inaccuracies. In other words, the false impression of absolutes in situations and feelings as if time did not exist.

If there was ever a truth which requires close collaboration between these two approaches to the past, it is the genocide of the Jews. Eyewitnesses do not just bring their experiences and emotion, but they are proof of the reality of systematised extermination – a reality with a terrible uniqueness, the determination to humiliate and worse, to precede death with dehumanisation. They are especially proof of the perversity of a system which involved its victims in their own destruction, both physically and emotionally. Without remembrance, actions such as the sheltering of Jewish children could go unnoticed. To be limited to written sources is to promote the views of those who devised the final solution, who from its inception aimed to hide its extent and genocidal methods.

However, history is also necessary. First and foremost history must be careful of a small number of accounts that are complete fiction. More often, history can correct confused memories. Rigorous historical work has in particular allowed thousands of Jewish child victims of the Holocaust to be recognised as those who survived. More broadly, it provides value to all eyewitness accounts. It places them in a historical context where extermination was at the very heart of a cultural and political system.

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The teaching of the Holocaust at Primary School
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