

Comparisons and (hidden) intentions

*What is the difference between
a grand piano and a violin?
The grand piano burns longer.*

At the end of a guided tour at the memorial site of Buchenwald I said to the participants that the causes of all the crimes organized by the Nazis in the camp were based outside the fence: In the minds of so many who would agree with the policy of discrimination, exclusion, deportation and also killing of all people, who did not fit into their picture of society. "You should tell that to Barack Obama and also mention Guantanamo Bay", one guest said loudly to me. How should I respond? Say, "You cannot compare this; Guantanamo is another story?" or "Yes, You are right; the US-Americans are not better than the Nazis" or should I ask back "What do You want with Your comparison?"

The history of the place called "Buchwald" is a little bit complicated for those who prefer easy answers and therefore black and white stories without grey zones: After the liberation of 21.000 survivors of the concentration camp in April 1945 (56.000 out of 240.000 prisoners were killed between 1937 and 1945) and the takeover of the Soviets in Thuringia in August 1945 the camp site was used for internment of Germans which were isolated there as Nazis or because of denunciations. Till spring 1950 more than 28.000 persons had been kept there; more than 7.100 died from the Soviet camp conditions.

7.100 out of 28.000 are more than 25 percent; 56.000 out of 240.000 less than a quarter: "So look", someone told me, "the Communists were worse than the Nazis; weren't they?"

How to weigh human suffering? And what for? And are the two mentioned comparisons really fuelled by compassion with the suffering of those who were in that Soviet camp or still are at Guantanamo?

We have a long, morally upheated debate on comparisons; which is not helpful at all, because too often it ends in the statement "You shall not compare". Now, to end comparisons includes the end of science as such, without looking for differences and similarities uniqueness of historical events or of us as human beings cannot be described - which is a matter of logic and not of emotion.

The nearly pain causing statement "The grand piano burns longer" is only understandable if You think of a person freezing in a house without a running heating system, but an old oven without coal or wood to use it. From that perspective it makes sense to prefer the grand piano to the violin; it will be totally different if someone has to carry the instruments up to the fifth floor or if a musician (violinist, pianist or drummer) is asked for his preference.

Comparisons are essential tools in science as in daily life; we cannot live without them. But we need to be clear about the intention of those who compare "apples with peaches". If - in the fields of history and social sciences - people compare with the aim better to talk about the crimes of the others instead about own responsibilities, its time to interrupt and clarify what we stand for as educators in memorial sites: Precisely dealing with proved facts to support a deeper understanding of the past with the aim to strenghten those who suffered or want to engage themselves for others in need - on the long run for a sustainable future on this planet, since we don't have a second one in spare.

Daniel Gaede, 15.10.09

Client orientation

*"How should I guide these people?"
"Ask them and decide."*

There are so many stories to be told at a place like Buchenwald that it is impossible to mention them all in a 90minute guided tour; a day, a week; a lifetime would not be enough. "Nothing is forgotten and no one is forgotten", says an inscription at the Leningrad (now again St. Petersburg) cemetery for the estimated one million inhabitants, who did not survive the 900 days of siege by German and Finnish troops during World War II. That statement became never true, like all other memories, also these had to pass a selective process: The first exhibition on the resistance organized within Leningrad was closed down only after some weeks – on order of Stalin, who feared a competition with those who were able to keep the power structures intact even under these desperate conditions. The names of these organizers shouldn't be mentioned again; even more, Stalin ordered their liquidation.

What for should we put up these painful stories onto the shoulders of young people, who will have their own problems today and tomorrow? Does it help them to understand our present times and actual conflicts better – and find ways into the future that will not end in even more trouble? After all, wars, genocides and state organized crimes took place also after 1945 and as it is said in the UNESCO constitution in 1945, "since wars begin in the minds of men it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." So, there's still a lot of educational work to be done, also in memorial sites.

And what image of visitors or clients do we educators have in mind? People, who need to be filled with stories like sacks with corn? And is it a worthy aim to produce "deep impressions"? It sounds more like pressing someone till he will be decorated with haematoms - not really a sign of deeper understanding. But still, some seem to believe that passing on "the right impressions" by using the most horrifying stories would be enough for all visitors, no matter, who they are, where they come from and go to. This approach is neither helpful nor respecting the visitors' individual dignity and has to be questioned, as the following example illustrates:

"Would You guide a group in English with participants from Northern Ireland, Egypt, Israel and Germany next week?", I was asked. Yes – but to which parts of Buchenwald should I go to and what for? The organizers thought they had given me sufficient information on the group, but I decided to ask for more and it came out that the trip to Buchenwald was part of a week seminar on the situation of political und religious minorities in different societies: The participants from Northern Ireland were in fact peace activists from The Netherlands supporting catholic-protestant reconciliation projects; none of the Egyptians was Muslim, but all Coptic, one of the nuns was blind; the majority of the young Israelis were conscientious objectors and the participant from Germany had worked shortly before at Buchenwald as a volunteer in an international workcamp for two weeks. Provided with these informations I had an idea where to go (touch the fence; for example, with the blind nun; and go to the site where that workcamp had continued archaeological excavations) and what to talk about (e.g. the deserters from the German army who were taken to Buchenwald, and Jehovahs witnesses in the camp, who refused to serve in the military at all – and were the only ones who could have left the camp within days; they "only" had to register to the German troops).

Since the themes we are dealing with are complicated already, in rational terms as in emotions, we need to look carefully for the best methods and examples we can offer our "clients": Accesses, which will meet their interests, their hopes and fears, their learning behaviour, their personal perspectives, social surroundings and responsibilities. So, which questions do they have in mind? And what is the setting of the visit to a museum or a memorial site? We need to know a lot about them and the best is to talk about these issues before they come – a questionnaire within a registration form is a first step, a phone call even better. Based on these informations it will be much easier to set up a well fitting program for both sides, in best case a dialogue; in the spirit of Plato and the Jewish tradition and ... better ask someone for continuation, there's no final point.

Daniel Gaede, 15.10.09