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Report on Holocaust Education in Iceland

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Introduction

In order to understand the connection between Iceland and matters of the Holocaust it is essential to mention that there is no Jewish community in Iceland. Nor does there exist any social groups that can be described as survivors of the holocaust. There is no remembrance day dedicated to the Holocaust or organized events connected to it. The only connection to the Holocaust is the experience of the Icelander Leif Muller, who survived Sachsenhausen, and knowledge of a single Icelander being killed in the same camp.

The report therefore focuses on three topics: Firstly the teaching material, that has been used in Icelandic Secondary Schools since the early 40s to present time. Secondly, a research on the Icelandic word for Holocaust. And thirdly, books in Icelandic which focus on the Holocaust.

Ways of teaching

There are two main history courses taught in Icelandic Secondary schools, one of them covers the Second World War. In some schools students can choose additional history courses. Some of them cover the Holocaust but then always as a part of material on the Second World War and never as a specific course on the Holocaust alone. It is up to the teachers how they teach the period in question in these additional history courses.

To gather further information on teaching methods, a list of questions was sent to 20 secondary school history teachers. Two of

them responded, a male and a female. The female states that she is very interested in the Holocaust. In her course on religious history she has prepared her own material from various sources. Students start by looking at the Nürnberg law and are then required to find out how the Nazi persecution of Jews started and culminated in the Holocaust itself. She claims, that when it comes to the Holocaust, all students seem to have good general background knowledge on the subject. But that it is important to note that this knowledge is mostly achieved through films.

The male that responded claimed he followed the provided learning material more closely. He notes that the book now being taught at his school covers the issue in a general way. He then uses graphic Power Point shows in an extensive manner and states that issues concerning the Holocaust play a big role in his general coverage of the Second World War.

Books used for teaching

Matters of the Holocaust are taught in Secondary Schools in Iceland, which are attended by students aged 16-20.

Early material

The first book that mentions persecutions of Jews came out in 1942 and was taught in most secondary schools between the years 1947 and 1952. It was written by Ólafur Hansson and is called **“History of mankind- for high schools”**. It contains six pages about the Second World War including these two sentences. “Jews were deprived of their rights. Some of them fled and some were murdered”. A second edition of that same book was taught from 1956 until 1961

without any changes being made on material concerning the Second World War. A third edition followed and was taught from 1962 until 1965. In that edition a chapter of six pages, called “Poland after 1918”, had been added without it containing anything about the Holocaust or the persecutions.

In the year 1949, Ólafur Kristjánsson published a book called **“History of mankind for secondary schools, part II”**. That book remained the leading teaching material on matters of the 20th century for years to come, up until 1964. It includes a short paragraph concerning the holocaust in a chapter of nine pages about the Second World War. No pictures, maps or charts provided. The paragraph reads as follows:

The Germans normally occupied countries with a large military force. The German soldiers were extremely unpopular, they treated the inhabitants very harshly, killed people for little or no reasons at all. Many of the captured were sent to concentration camps where they died on mass after being severely mistreated. Jews and Poles were treated worst.

In 1961, Jón R. Hjálmarsson published a book titled **“History of mankind for secondary schools”**. It was taught in some leading schools until the mid 70s. The only thing it contains on the matter holocaust, in a chapter of four pages about the Second World War, is a short mention of Israel being a sanction for suffering Jews after the war.

Few years later, in 1964, **“History of mankind for secondary schools – the new age 1789 – 1962”**, by Knútur Arngrímsson and Ólafur Hansson, got published. It never gained any serious ground as

teaching material and was short-lived as such. It provided a chapter of ten pages on the Second World War including the following sentence concerning mistreatment of Jews. “Drastic persecutions of Jews took place which were forced to flee in flocks of hundreds of thousands”.

Einar Már Jónsson, Loftur Guttormsson and Skúli Þórðarson joined hands and published **“History of mankind 1914 – 1956 for secondary schools”** in 1975. Out of a 16-page coverage of the Second World War, half a page deals with the holocaust. It is the first somewhat detailed material on the holocaust made available for teaching.

The text begins by describing that it was not until the allied forces advanced into occupied territories and gained access to the concentration camps that people realized what had gone on inside the camps and how horrible the crimes were that had been committed there. It goes on describing how it became clear in the after-math that many millions died and that there had existed a clear policy to eliminate all Jews in Europe. Auschwitz and Maidenak are identified as the camps accountable for the largest number of killings. The numbers given in the text are: 4.000.000 in Auschwitz and 1.400.000 in Maidenak. Most of the victims were Jews or Slavs. They were executed in special gas chambers and their corpses burned. The whole truth was not fully revealed until during the Nurnberg trials which took place after the war. It was there and then that one of histories worst crimes was brought into light.

Additionally this coverage of the holocaust came with a map that indicates the position of the concentration camps as well as a chart showing how many Jews were killed in each of the occupied countries.

A translated version of a Norwegian book became available to secondary schools in 1985. **“History of mankind from 1850”**. Written by Sveen A. Aastad and A. Sveen. Three pages about the holocaust were included in a 16-page coverage of the Second World War. The essence of the chapter reads as follows:

German plans to exterminate the Jewish race were decided in a conference in Berlin 1942. The invention and testing of Zyklon B took place at this time in Auschwitz and then later used as a weapon of massacre. It is described how well organised the transportation of prisoners to the concentration camps were. A selection of able-bodied workers was conducted while others were hurled into gas chambers and then cremated. The text contains a direct quote from Eugen Kogon describing the effectiveness of the gas chambers and the general procedure of the killings.

It is then mentioned that in addition to the killing of the Jewish race in concentration camps there were also organized killings of other minority groups such as Gypsies, homosexuals and members of Communist parties. A short paragraph describing the uprising of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, followed by a mention of Jews being assisted by some groups and members of the general public in occupied countries.

Along with the text is a chart showing the total number of Jews living in each occupied country before the war and how many of them were killed. All of this is then illustrated by a series of pictures from a massacre in Latvia where women are systematically undressed, executed and then piled for burial.

Present material

In 1995 a new edition of the previous Swedish book got published. Now being called **“The inhabitants of the world - history of mankind”**

The chapter on the Second World War now covers 26 pages including three pages about the holocaust, like before. The coverage is in most areas the same as in the edition from 1985. Although it is a fraction shorter, there are some additional facts provided such as a mention of Croats, Slovenes and Bosnian-Muslims linking up with SS squads.

Two pictures appear with the text. One of women and children in the Warsaw ghetto and another one showing women in their harsh dwellings at a concentration camp. Additionally the same chart appears as in the previous edition and there is a chart provided which shows the number of Jews killed in every occupied country.

In 1993 a translation of a Danish book by Thorstein Borring Olesen, John T. Lauridsen and Nils Arne was published and titled **“History of Mankind 2, from the mid 19th century to our time”**. It contains a vast coverage on the holocaust that spreads over two pages in a ten-page chapter about the Second World War. The headline of the Holocaust chapter reads: “Final solution – industrial mass murders”.

The coverage begins by stating that what is most remembered from the war is not the German war aggression, but Germanys extermination policy against the Jews. A policy that was based on political and ideological reasons and executed with technologically planned methods that were not comparable to any former war crimes

in history. The chapter describes the views of the Nazis, that the pure race should be separated from others. Therefore Germany was much harder on the occupied people in the east during the war than they were in the west. It is believed that about half of those that died in the war were from the Soviet Union. This mass killing has been blamed on the special units of the SS.

It is stated that Jews were treated the worst of all races. From all over Europe Jews were moved to camps like Chelmo, Belzec, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau after 1941 for them to end their lives in the Nazi gas chambers. These remarks are then followed by a direct quote from the SS officer, Kurt Gerstein, which describes the real horror of events and provides a detailed description on the Belzec camp.

Finally a question is asked: "Who is responsible for these mass murders?" The author makes an attempt to answer: "The problem is that no written order to begin this mass murder exists. Most testimonies and those that are accountable point to Hitler and suggest that Himmler had received an order in 1941 to begin the final solution. Therefore the authors are brought to the conclusion that these crimes were an offspring of Hitler's sick obsession. All in all, six million Jews and 500,000 gypsies and others including private citizens had to pay for this madness with their lives.

In addition there is a large picture of victims in Warsaw provided and a map that shows the location of the concentration camps.

This book has been taught from publication date and is still being taught in various secondary schools.

"Important episodes of the western culture" came out in 1997, written by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Ragnar Sigurðsson. Out of an 11-page chapter about the Second World War there is one page entirely dedicated to the Holocaust. Events covered

throughout the war. Starting with the German policy against Jews decided in Wannsee 1942. The set-up of concentration camps described and conditions in them illustrated. A special emphasis is put on the cruelty against the Jews as they were gazed with Zyklon-B, which killed them in a matter of minutes. The SS squads are then described as the main task force in these persecutions. And lastly it is mentioned that even though the public throughout Europe seemed unmoved by these events at the time, there were those who tried to assist the Jews in avoiding being captured. Facts of numbers and dates are provided throughout the text. The text comes with a single picture of mistreated Jews. This book is still being taught today.

In 2001 Gunnar Þór Bjarnason and Margrét Gunnarsdóttir published the book **“History of Iceland and mankind”**. Out of a 17-page coverage of the Second World War one page is dedicated to the matters of the holocaust.

The coverage starts by describing how soon after the Nazis came to power they began to pressure the Jews. With the Nurnberg law in 1935 Jews were banned from going to High schools, marry “Arians” and from working in the public sector.

The “crystal night” on November 10th 1938 is described briefly. In the Second World War Jews were put in to Ghettos where they died from starvation and diseases. The most notorious of these Ghettos was the one in Warsaw, there lived at one time more than 500.000 Jews. In 1941 the decision to implement the “final solution” was agreed upon. Jews were transported to concentration camps where they were systematically killed. Auschwitz is the best known of these death camps. They were forced into a room and told to shower, instead they were gassed. Most of the Jews avoiding the gas chambers died from hunger or illness. In the occupied countries special death squads travelled the countryside and killed Jews in their villages. Also the Nazis conducted cruel medical experiments on the Jews.

In the Holocaust six million Jews died, about half of them were Polish. More than half a million gypsies, political prisoners, gays, mentally ill and retarded perished by the hand of the Nazi percussion. After the war, people did not understand how this could have happened.

The chapter is wrapped up by asking a series of questions without answers, such as. How could this happen? Who was responsible? Was Hitler's morbid paranoia to blame? Was the German public also accountable for the killings? Was this maybe a logical conclusion to the hatred Nazis had towards Jews?

Three pictures are provided. One from the Warsaw Ghetto, a picture of German citizens being shown the Buchenwald camp after the war and finally a symbolic picture of the measuring of a man's nose to determine his race. In addition there is a paragraph in the chapter about Leif Muller, a Icelandic survivor from a German concentration camp.

The Icelandic word for the Holocaust

In Iceland all foreign words are systematically translated in to Icelandic. Even words used to describe modern technology normally don't have any association with their foreign translation. This is, among other things, done by giving old Icelandic words new meanings. They are, in a way, recycled and used to describe new foreign words. In the case of the word "Holocaust", an ancient Icelandic word with a completely different meaning has become the known translation. The word "helför" has become the word Icelanders associate with the persecution of Jews in the Second World War.

The origin of the word "helför" can be dated as far back as 1589, then to be found in religious hymns. "Hel" means death, dying or the

realm of the death. In Snorri's Edda (written approximately in 1220) there is a mention of an influential character which has a daughter called "Hel". In ancient gothic, "hel" is written halja, which translates as the word "heljar" in Icelandic. Meaning: "the damned souls ending up in hell". The word "hel" refers, as it is used nowadays, to a place of torture. "Helför" was first associated with the persecutions of Jews by a translator named Kristmann Eiðsson when translating an American mini-series, "The Holocaust", in the early 80s. That meaning is now to be found in modern dictionaries in relations to the Holocaust and has even been used by the media in relations to genocides in general.

Additional material published in Iceland

Translated books in to Icelandic about Holocaust

Frank, Anna (1957) *Dagbók Önnu Frank*. H & K-útgáfan, Reykjavík.

Original title: Het achterhuis

(Has been republished numerously, most recent edition in the year 1999.)

Frank, Anna (1999). *Dagbók Önnu Frank*, lokaútgáfa. Hólar, Akureyri.

Original title: Het achterhuis

Wiesenthal, Simon (1992). *Réttlæti - ekki hefnd, Endurminningar*

Simon Wiesenthal. Skjaldborg, Reykjavík.

Original title: Recht nicht Rache

Wiesenthal, Simon (1982). *Max og Helena, sönn saga úr helförinni miklu*. Fjölur, Reykjavík.

Original title: Max und Helen

Matthew, M. (1983). *Edith Stein fórnarlamb fangabúðanna*.

Kapólska kirkjan á Íslandi, Reykjavík.

Original title: Edith Stein

Clarke, Comer (1961). *Adolf Eichmann saga miljónamorðingans*.

Elding, Reykjavík.

Original title: Eichman, the man and his crime

Szpilman, Wladyslaw (2004). *Píanóleikarinn*

JPV útgáfa, Reykjavík.

Original title: Pianista: Warszawskie wspomnienia 1939-1945

Levine, Karen (2004). *Ferðataska Hönu, sönn saga*.

Salka, Reykjavík.

Original title: Hana's suitcase: a true story

Icelandic books about the Holocaust translated into other languages.

Garðar Sverrisson (1997). *Wohnt hier ein Islander? Erinnerungen von Leif Müller*. Wirtschaftsverlag. Bremerhaven

Original title: Býr Íslendingur hér?

Icelandic essays on the Holocaust in other languages then Icelandic

Edda Jónsdóttir (2002). *Sensa nome: detenutte sestinate nemeri: donne italiane deportate per ragioni politiche*. Lokaritgerð við Háskóla Íslands í ítölsku, Reykjavík.
Material: Women in concentration camps. Italy, Ravensbruck: German concentration camp. Italian BA essay: University of Iceland

Material regarding Icelandic participation in the Holocaust published in Icelandic

Leif Müller (1945). *Í fangabúðum Nasista*. Víkingsútgáfan, Reykjavík

Garðar Sverrisson (1988). *Býr íslendingur hér? Minningar Leifs Muller*. Iðunn, Reykjavík.

Essays or articles in Icelandic on the Holocaust

Vigfús B. Albertsson (2001). *Sekt hins saklausa: stef úr helför gyðinga*. Title in English: The guilt of the innocent: A theme from the Jewish Holocaust
Lokaritgerð við Háskóla Íslands, guðfræði. Reykjavík.
BA essay. Religion. University of Iceland.

Ástríður Elín Björnsdóttir (2004). *Í klóm dauðans: skáldskapur og veruleiki í frásögnum um fangabúðir nasista - einkum ritverk Charlotte Delbo*. Title in English: A death claw: fiction and reality in narrations on Nazi concentration camps – the writings of Charlotte Delbo
Lokaverkefni (meistarapróf) við Háskóla Íslands, almenn bókmenntafræði. Reykjavík.

Masters essay. Litterateur. University of Iceland.

Ragna Garðarsdóttir (2001). *Óleysanlegur fortíðarhnútur, minningin um nasistatímabilið*. Title in English: *In bonds of the past, memories of the Nazi-era*
Ný saga, Reykjavík.