

# Entangled memories: Holocaust education in contemporary France

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*Translated from French*

## Firmly established, plagued by conflicts

In some twenty to thirty years, the transmission to younger generations of what the genocide of European Jews entailed has become firmly established in France.

This transmission has significantly affected the entire French population, taking a paradoxical form of consensus, one that is perhaps superficial and definitely ambiguous, but nonetheless very real and now indispensable, to the extent of providing the paradigm of good and evil in politics. Not without misuse and not without controversy, the memory of the Holocaust provides the catalogue of images and concepts that allow the current historical experience to be visualized and gauged, and positions to be taken on the choices made. The paradigm shift is particularly profound for older people, who have known other times when, for example, among other paradigms developed in primary school history education, the figures and events of the French Revolution provided a framework for popular memory. Is this an enviable status? Probably not, but it is an envied status in any event and one that prompts many mimetic claims, more or less well-founded assertions from people who feel persecuted, and rage against the intimidating moral 'power' of the 'Victim'. But this conflict only strengthens the place of the Holocaust in the contemporary imagination. It requires only the additional task of having to deal with the abuse of memory by continual readjustments.

While elsewhere it is called 'Holocaust education', in France there is a preference for other terms, since the word 'holocaust', which has the historical meaning of 'sacrificial offering to God', has been vigorously rejected. This does not mean a stable agreement on an alternative choice of terminology has been reached: in France the term 'Shoah remembrance' is used, with or without capital letters, and the education authorities weighed each word carefully before deciding on 'education on the history of the systematic extermination of European Jews'. Does the 'straw of terms' really matter if we agree on the 'grain of things'? The incessant arguing over the terms we

use does make sense, however, in a domain where the issues are serious, though difficult to grasp outside the spheres of certain specialists. The risk of controversy over a clumsy sentence, perceived as a threat at the very least, accompanies everything connected to Holocaust remembrance, and yet, at the same time, there is an extraordinarily strong consensus on the importance of its transmission.

Holocaust education has a universal dimension but it inevitably takes on a national form linked to the historical, political and social characteristics of the country that implements it, not to mention how schools are organized and prevailing educational principles. Hence in this section of the book I will link educational matters to the national issues that give them meaning. I would tend to use the category of 'the imaginary' – in the sense of the term used by Cornelius Castoriadis in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* – almost more willingly than 'memory' or 'history'. This should by no means be seen as a denial of history or a way of playing down representations of the genocide in a pejorative way, but rather as the need to clarify the historical phenomena by which a society develops its meanings, or the value categories by which it establishes itself as a political society. Education, from this point of view, is not so much the place for transmission, where something that already exists is repeated, as the place where we can imagine a way of building the present and projecting into the future, in which an 'imaginary institution of society' is actually developed, carrying an ideal and promise, caution and improvement, prohibition and significance.

From this point of view, however, in a quite obvious way in the early 2000s and more subtly today, Holocaust remembrance occupies a special, unique place in transmission, which is neither sacred nor trivialized but firmly entrenched in the school education system. It is respected while being constantly plagued by conflict that, rather than threatening teachers and students, at the end of the day helps to stimulate reflection.

Such a general assessment does not mean, of course, that everything will be fine and that we can make do with routinization of the current reality. It simply means that, at a time when the pursuit of aims requires that we pay attention to conflicting opinions and criticisms, without dangerous illusions or inappropriate complacency, it is essential to assess the progress made. Those involved in the transmission deserve recognition for the quality of their mobilization, which has managed to take a variety of forms and remain as close to the field as possible. No other education is supported to this extent by such a range of institutions and teachers, resulting in students taking a real interest.

Questions and doubts are nonetheless raised quite frequently in the press, with a considerable echo in Jewish communities that remain uneasy: when the press exposes difficulties arising here and there, such as hostile behaviour from students of Arab descent, are these rare or common phenomena? As pointed out earlier – and this is one of the least of reasons for disputes – the mere fact of naming or refusing to name the event ‘Shoah’, ‘genocide’ or ‘extermination’ has on occasion triggered a disproportionate controversy over the motives, presumed too shameful to mention, for preferring the use of one term over another. We may find these quarrels superficial and unreasonable and the accusations unjust, but often they have also made it possible to examine real difficulties in depth.

Other sources of conflict take their anger and fear from the various ways of assessing the current situation of Jews in France, in connection with the tragic and intractable problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or when particularly violent or sordid anti-Jewish aggression creates panic in the community. In fact, several partial truths are juxtaposed. On the one hand, and certainly owing to the appalled awareness after the Second World War of the horror of Auschwitz, a powerful dynamic supported by a large majority has brought about a historical and continuous decline in antisemitism, in the historical and well-defined meaning of the term, which has become rare and socially stigmatized. This has come to light in political sociology surveys carried out in particular by Nonna Mayer through the Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po (CEVIPOF), research centre of the Institut d’études politiques (IEP) public research and higher education institution in Paris, using rigorous empirical methods that can follow underlying trends in long series of statistics. People from older generations have no doubts about it: the xenophobia and antisemitism of the 1930s and 1940s were open and virulent in France, incommensurate with the current situation; the extreme right was vociferous and unrestrained, and antisemitic prejudice was commonplace in the population. It is no longer commonplace today.

Despite this major historical trend in the entire population, there are, nonetheless, shifts in the opposite direction, reflecting disturbing developments. On the one hand, although only residually so, traditional antisemitism is still nurtured by far-right nationalists. The different extreme right-wing movements have nevertheless tended – what with the stigma attached to antisemitic discourse and following the war of decolonization in Algeria – to transfer their original antisemitism to anti-Arab racism, which, on the other hand has grown continuously, whether in open or insidious forms, extending far beyond the scope of these extreme factions.

On the other hand, from a background of Arab hostility towards Jews and Israel, new forms of anti-Jewish hatred have evolved among marginalized populations exposed to social exclusion and harbouring violent resentment, tinged with religious, 'anti-Western', 'anti-Zionist', 'anti-white' ideology. Some far-left movements have thus supplanted the far right, spreading one of the most characteristic forms of antisemitism and putting over attitudes to justify resentment.

This situation has poisoned the lives of the most identifiable Jewish communities, undermined by insecurity, as well as those of Arab people, constantly singled out as Muslims, branded as Islamists and suspected of terrorism and antisemitism, in incessant amalgams. While most Arab people do nothing to foster this state of mind, they can end up yielding, out of bitterness and in self-defence, to the temptation that some Jews have succumbed to, of a more or less sectarian withdrawal into their own community. Almost all accusations draw their strength from the very legitimate fears that weigh on the security of minorities because of the deteriorated social, economic and political climate, when the distress of some – for fear of exclusion – leads to the hatred of others, expressed in acts of violence.

The rise of racism and antisemitism, at the same moment as the very commemoration that should prohibit it for ever, perturbed teachers, but did not cause them to give up what they now regarded as 'normal'. It spurred them to enhance their skills and taught them how to avoid traps and address the questions that challenged them. From this point of view, the training was effective.

To be 'firmly established' in a modern democracy, in a time like ours – which has been convincingly described by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as 'liquid modernity' – does not necessarily imply the absence of conflict, a stable and intangible installation in the tranquillity of consensus, or a single framework in which each element fits nicely into the unity of a common vision. France is not, or is no longer, the 'Cartesian' and centralized country that we might imagine it to be, where every institution applies a programme imposed from on high by the republican political will. There is admittedly a degree of uniformity and centralization prescribed in the school education system, which lends weight to the decisions of the political powers. From this viewpoint, we can track the improvement in the transmission as a series of governmental directives – following up political recognition with official discourse – have given it an important place in the curriculum, examinations, and teachers' initial and continuing education. What was only prescribed by the authorities, however, could very well have remained a dead letter as often happens in France, even for key lessons in the curriculum when they fail to generate the motivation of all sections of

the population. But in fact this dictate has long corresponded in France to a strong social dynamic that has taken hold of it and lent it its full potential.

Disputes and controversies are undoubtedly perceived as painful by those involved in the transmission, such as teachers, educational mediators and the staff of memorial sites who, doing their best with a sincere dedication that often borders on abnegation, do not always grasp the reasons, whether valid or not, of such calling into question. Some, indeed, are justified, but others are pointless, offensive or absurd – such is the price of free debate.

But are these disputes and controversies not also a medium for elaboration? We could further argue that they are not futile. The necessary social conditions exist to ensure the debate will not be harmful and it will really represent progress in forming reasonable (or slightly more reasonable) opinions: it requires an interested and sufficiently informed public, gifted journalists and laws governing freedom of expression that ban incitement to racial hatred. The basic laws on press freedom include articles on the limits of such freedom and we must enforce them. This is one of the lessons learned from the experience of the 1930s. However, and this is one of the reasons for the current agitation, the emergence of new conditions for the debate with the advent of the internet has upset habits. Nobody controls the effects of the dramatic rise in this freedom of expression and people are certainly ambivalent about it, not knowing how to manage this innovation. Personally, and without pretending to know for sure, it seems to me the very open discussion we have had over all these years is less daunting than the lack of debate. In fact, this debate is strongly framed by the deep conviction that everything cannot be said and this ban, both legal and moral, permits a relatively reasonable regulation. It serves to work out meaning, as diverse communities, each with their own priorities and sympathies, take hold of an issue that they eventually make their own. Sometimes the process is long.

## Minorities in France

The population and history of France have characteristics that expose the country to many and recurring causes for discord, including acute sensitivity. It is the only European country that retains, far behind the United States and Israel, a sizeable Jewish population, more or less organized in religious or cultural communities, falsely unified and truly divided, except regarding the transmission of Holocaust remembrance and the fight against antisemitism.

The two issues are experienced as inseparable in a problematic but hard to challenge equivalence. The 'memory against antisemitism' has come to serve as the identity cementing groups that are otherwise very different in many ways: the Ashkenazi Jews, who are highly assimilated and not very religious, are descendants of Eastern European immigrants directly connected to the past genocide and may therefore look on themselves as 'survivors', carrying the memory of a lost world and *Yiddishkeit* (or 'Jewishness' in Yiddish); and the Sephardi Jews from North Africa, who did not really experience the destruction of the European world, but strongly identify with the memory, which mingles with their own memory of dispossession and traumatic expulsion from North Africa where they had been firmly rooted since time immemorial.

French Jews are affected by this memory at many levels of their complex individual and collective identity. It should be borne in mind that French Jews are first and foremost completely French and, with rare exceptions, fully share the French 'imaginary' and the same obsessions, dreams and concerns as their fellow citizens, making them place the same expectations and the same concerns as everyone else on the transmission of memory: schools must transmit the memory of the Holocaust to prevent its ever happening again. Obviously, a special relationship is also added to the transmission, which they monitor closely, as direct descendants of survivors from the lost world and the last representatives of ways of life engulfed in a disaster, for some; as Jews who recognize themselves in the history of persecution and derive a part of their identity from it; as Jews currently exposed to the possibility of resurgent antisemitism who would like to use the commemorations to remove this threat; as Jews showing their solidarity with Israel; or even as imaginary Israelis, though they live in France, who would like to use the memory of the Holocaust to defend Israel's legitimacy and, a step above this, in a way that is far from being accepted by all Jews and causes severe clashes, to use the memory of the Holocaust to provide unconditional support to Israel, regardless of its politics. These are many reasons to be actively involved in the policy of transmitting history to young people, more or less lucidly. The conflict is permanent, however, and fratricide between those who believe that we must transmit this history so 'nobody will ever again lay a finger on a Jew', or – for those who opt for a humanist message of a universal nature – so 'no state will ever again commit a crime against humanity'. Fortunately, most French people adhere to both assertions without exclusion.

It is nevertheless a sensitive point for all those who have taken the Middle East conflict to heart, on whichever side. France supported the creation of the State of Israel and, regarding itself as a friend of the Jewish national homeland, also aspires to be a key

partner of the Arab countries. A very widespread view held among the public at large in France, and quite often reflected in school textbooks, justifies the creation of the State of Israel as a direct consequence of genocide, reparation for harms suffered, and the 'solution' to the existence of refugees and survivors in the aftermath of war. This depiction of history is debatable in many respects but it does have the effect of closely linking Holocaust remembrance to the concerns of today. France also has the largest Arab community in Europe, as a result of longstanding immigration. With its debatable and controversial policy, Israel occupies a disproportionate place in foreign policy considerations and media news, a fact that greatly affects the generally tense and sometimes stormy relations between Jews and Arabs, and between official representatives of the Jewish community and French society at large.

In addition, there is the contentious resurgence of memories connected to the black communities that emerged from the first and second waves of colonization (slavery and colonialism) and the memories of the different protagonists of the wars of decolonization and the repatriation of French people from Algeria. For roughly a decade, between 2000 and 2010, the memories of crimes committed against national minorities were a constant subject of public debate, fiercely challenging what was taught in school history lessons. The public exposure brought these crimes to the fore and allowed their remembrance to be reconstituted according to the latest paradigms. It might not come as much of surprise that memories, in France, are perceived above all as grounds for insurmountable rifts and conflicts, with various denominations that have become clichés: 'memory wars' and 'victim competition' between 'communities' that the media find convenient to present as homogenous, united and aligned behind so-called 'representatives' with aggressive demands.

In this stormy context in which reciprocated grudges can become irrational obsessions and lead to actual physical assault, in an injurious climate of hatred and fear, it is, paradoxically, memory again that is considered the key to solving the conflicts it has engendered, so long as it is expressed in commemorations that can be shared by all and in genuine knowledge of the history of the past. Nothing better illustrates the eminent, founding function of memory in our societies than this renewed confidence, when in other societies and in earlier times it was considered absolutely necessary to consign these troubles to silence and oblivion and to erase all traces.

This confidence in rationalism and the power of knowledge is a tribute to the Republic's school tradition, although the doubts constantly expressed and the censure of dysfunction do reveal concern about how effective transmission really

is. Teaching the history linked to these troubled commemorations is expected to promote peace yet at the same time it is constantly cited as a model of the impossible cohabitation of minorities. The media, and in particular the internet that has exploded in the century's first decade, seem to reflect a deeply worrying reality.

Nonetheless, other than in localized trouble spots where problems are concentrated, as in all the world's major cities, the situation on the ground seems to be fairly peaceful, according to teachers and to the few statistically significant empirical surveys.

There is a strong contrast between the denunciations appearing in the main national media, which maintain and support a persistent suspicion in Jewish community media, and the far more measured findings of those who teach and interpret memories. This is partly due to the somewhat delayed perception of media intellectuals, who tend to be out of touch with the situation on the ground. In fact, in the face of various situations of unrest, there has been very energetic yet subtle action, using innovative teaching methods, to avoid the pitfalls of transmission, the excesses and clumsiness of the earlier period that inevitably sparked protest. This is worth emphasizing: there is no sociological inevitability here, which would impose an inescapable scenario according to communities' ethnic and religious allegiance. Transmission policy must take into account prejudice and resistance; it is capable of working on them and eliminating them, but this does not happen spontaneously.

## Positioning and mobilization of a national public system and pluralism of support organizations

In the school system and in society, however, not only has the situation calmed down significantly, but there is also a harmonious integration of these memories, far from the agitation of the 'memory wars' on which opinion leaders thrive. The French case makes it possible to identify a number of different factors and conditions that fostered this positive development and act complementarily and in synergy: on the one hand, a public statement of principle is required, a firm political commitment that clearly sets the limits of what is and what is not acceptable, of what is *common sense* in the society – major commemorations have this meaning. In the same vein, of what makes sense for everyone and helps reach young people, it is good for popular culture to take on problems of memory and allow them to be approached in numerous guises as individual characters in fictional films. French public television has played a big part by producing many films of varying quality, some of which are outstanding and have met with genuine popular success. Lastly, and this is what is



less visible to the public but perhaps the most important aspect, it is well worth having the teachers who are responsible for the front line of transmission and exposed to related problems strongly supported by a dense network of local trainers and experienced, passionate and dedicated specialists. These have enabled teachers to better 'sense' their pupils, and better manage, with flexibility and in depth, the contrasting emotions expressed, to explain better and in suitable words the basic features of the genocide, to address calmly the reasonable objections concerning Israel, without making concessions to antisemitism. In terms of history, they have also meant that education can constantly renew itself by expanding its scope and refining the issues instead of staying stuck in a cycle of repetition about a handful of stereotypical aspects of memory. This is essential to steer pupils clear of boredom and a feeling of saturation caused by a monotonous message.

It is hard to say what the state's responsibility was, and what has been made possible by non-governmental organizations, what came from education and what is to be credited to museums or television. In fact, all sorts of initiatives have combined over the long history of the establishment of memory, and they have ended up creating an interactive and functional equilibrium between the robustness of a state policy and the reactive flexibility of small private structures working on projects. The cumbersome, hierarchical, sclerotic, stripped-down, impoverished state apparatus of the public education system could not alone have conducted such an energetic and creative policy. The work of a foundation involved in private initiative projects, and a Memorial created by the Jewish community, could never have created a dynamic able to spread throughout the population of France. The success to which we are paying tribute was the outcome of an unintentional but effective equilibrium between the state and civil society, between public and private institutions, between centralized national-scale and local policies, between formal education and popular culture conveyed by the main mass media, between sophisticated new works, pioneering research and high-quality popularization, between systematic learning in a school setting and mass culture involving adult society, and between the centre and the fringes. What I have called elsewhere a 'remembrance apparatus' permits a joint system, one foot in the state education establishment and one foot outside, with the result that remembrance of the Holocaust is possibly transmitted better in France than many other traditional subjects whose poor results are of concern to the public and the authorities.

In reports on transmission, two practices are always highlighted: trips to Auschwitz, and the personal testimony of former deportees. Just as I have not discussed the interesting, specifically French practice of teaching in primary schools, which retains

an experimental, individualized aspect, so I will not refer to these practices that warrant separate consideration in painstaking detail. However, regardless of the very particular interest of these forms of transmission, there can be no certainty that these are majority practices or the most decisive. I think we overlook the impact of the more ordinary methods, such as regular teaching in secondary school curricula, fairly frequent school outings in the local area, and feature films and documentaries. From this angle, the existence of a network of professional mediators with very solid skills and ever aware of the latest developments, in terms of history and teaching practice, makes all the difference. The network performs the function of what is known as 'guidance', in a fairly vague way, but one that has real meaning in a time of mass consumption because it distinguishes between transmission that is fine-tuned and well-crafted and standardized work of mediocre quality.

We shall list these kinds of mediation in detail, at the risk of seeming tiresome. Transmission has taken all sorts of forms and vehicles; it is based on the rigour of the strongly centralized school establishment, and on the great expertise produced by memorial museums, whose work is essentially decentralized, rooted in local territories and associations, and focused on outreach. The transmission passes through a very large number of educational mediations, in the mass media, with the production of many highly varied and popular fictional films and documentaries; in culture, with effective support for high-quality arts productions – film, theatre, young people's literature; and in a wide variety of civil society organizations and associations. It is fully backed by state institutions with support from at least four ministries (defence, education, higher education, and culture) as well as from independent non-governmental organizations, which give it an enviable independence and flexibility, in skilfully constructed complementarity and cooperation. It receives material support and has its own well-funded institutions, advantages available to no other transmission.

In these times of austerity which have, over some twenty years, undermined education services and led to constant teacher-training cost-cutting, to the point of creating serious difficulties in all regular school transmission activities, it can safely be said that the crucial differential variable that partially explains this effectiveness is the scale of the material resources to hand. The state was able to use the large sums that were part of Jewish property expropriated during the Second World War to create a foundation to fund and facilitate all sorts of remembrance and cultural projects: the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah (FMS). While the funding made the enterprise far easier, or more robust, it alone does not account for the

quality and quantity of activities, or for their variety, intelligence and constantly renewed creativity.

This transmission in highly varied forms faces up honestly to the complexity of the matter, going much further than the initial exhortation of the 'duty of memory', which primarily expressed a feeling of profound trauma. It can do so because the resources allocated to transmission have helped create a sizeable group of specialist professional intermediaries, highly competent, stable and with a good reputation, which makes for experience and improved qualifications. Often trained by the state and the Ministry of Education, they nevertheless work in structures that are less rigid than the school system, in particular museums and memorials, and are professional and committed. One has only to compare this with the disastrous situation prevailing in other regular subjects of transmission, where the educational framework has been shrinking inexorably, in order to realize the extent to which the presence of these professional cultural mediators, greatly devoted to their mission, makes the difference between failed mass consumption and the spread of quality.

Are there any grey areas? Of course there are. However, time has shown the dynamic in place to be strong enough to withstand the shock of criticism, and to regroup to understand and resolve problems. The existence of specialized structures throughout France, with competent staff, for designing exhibitions, educational frameworks, research and tools, etc. enables informed reflection on specialist intellectual debates while remaining as close as possible to the situation on the ground with teachers and young adolescents, constantly on the lookout, and swift to integrate the slightest changes of circumstances.

Here we are addressing an essential criterion for quality in terms of education policy. The imposing edifice of the national education system, hierarchical and unbending, does not at present facilitate the free flow of ideas between top and bottom, does not take criticism easily and does not know how to learn from the experience of practitioners. And yet we cannot do without it. The existence of the public debate, however, and above all the dialogue maintained with and by non-state and non-educational organizations has made it possible to bypass the inertia and train teachers. On what we call the fringes of the education system, criticism has found outlets for expression and it is constructively reinvested. In comparison with all other sectors of education, the situation is far better. This very open reflection, almost in real time, with the dissemination of debates at the international level, is a condition of the dynamic that prevents the fossilization of transmission.

## A French history

Wherever it is possible, if not easy, to teach, knowledge can be transmitted and the Holocaust commemorated without triggering an outcry and while sparking keen interest among pupils, as borne out by the numerous baccalaureate research topics chosen on the subject (selected by pupils themselves for in-depth study).

This does not mean it is simple, for substantive reasons unrelated or partly due to the plurality of identities in contemporary France.

The history of the deportation and extermination of French Jews, under the authority of and involving the French State apparatus, obliges teachers to explain to their pupils France's age-old deep-seated political divisions that still inform current identities. Long-standing rifts have given rise to the country's foundational division between the right and the left, felt so keenly as a powerful factor of national identity. The current period is distinguished from previous times in France, however, by great uncertainty and confusion in the benchmarking imagery of politics.

Since the French Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century and the lengthy, difficult and much opposed establishment of democracy, the French experienced their divisions with each camp harbouring the conviction it embodied the 'real France'. During the Second World War, the cards of that enduring conflict were reshuffled by the Occupation, producing the opposing figures of Collaboration and Resistance, both claiming to represent a lofty idea of the Nation, albeit associated with very different meanings. These capitalized entities in reality represented commitments entered into by a very small minority, but they established benchmarks and a set of words to denote 'good' and 'bad' in politics throughout the post-war period and thereafter. The passage of time, succeeding generations, new developments and all doctrines to which political scientists attach the prefix 'post' (post-communism, post-nationalism and post-colonialism) have blurred and confused the situation, making it very hard to elucidate. The great divisive stories that had previously determined the structure of identities and commitments gave way once people awoke to the mass crimes perpetrated in the twentieth century. None of the major ideologies based on emancipation through Progress has remained untouched; those that nonetheless survive in relatively new guises do so in a typically post-modern interplay of rhetorical recycling of inconsistent and shallow figures and motifs. The recent development of a form of political communication that skilfully twists references, cynically and openly playing with them, has to an even greater extent blurred references to 'the darkest hours of our history' and the legitimacies

that emerged from them. It creates, in any event, great confusion that increases the country's uneasiness, apprehensions, stumbling blocks, fear of the future, and lack of understanding of the present.

History education in the school system, too, has been affected by the loss of benchmarks and struggles to find clarifying story lines, but it is generally agreed in French culture that the transmission of history is the main means of remedying such confusion, thus lending it strong legitimacy and vibrancy.

The anti-totalitarian paradigm did not provide a lasting substitute framework and is hardly useful for conflict management in a democracy. It can even prove counterproductive among young pupils who tend to understand 'totalitarianism' in the conventional sense of oppressive authoritarian dictatorship, tyrannical in speech – the 'Oriental Despotism' portrayed in classical texts by Montesquieu – and who are not wary of alluring and demagogic forms of deprivation of freedom and remain blind to the technical aspects of bureaucratic dictatorship.

As the spotlight turned afresh on Jewish deportee victims in France in the late 1970s, the infamous deeds of the Vichy government had to be appraised, leading to a shift in imagery and thus the identification of a new, and probably more elementary and more foundational, basis of legitimacy. This feat of imagery is as evident in public debate on topical issues as in the choices made about transmission. The issue of good and evil thence became less a matter of patriotic fidelity than a question of attitude to the mass crime that dared to sever a vulnerable minority group from the body politic. That is why the image of the Righteous people, who hid Jews and actively rejected the exclusion and elimination of their neighbours and contemporaries, has become so important in people's minds and become a mandatory element in school curricula. Certainly the mythology that has developed deserves some criticism from the standpoint of historical truth, even though it fulfils a genuinely felt symbolic need and plays the fundamental role of imparting legitimacy, as did the numerous versions of the Social Compact that marked the rise of liberalism in the eighteenth century. Emphasis on the Righteous person represents a kind of basic political requirement. It can be used to set a point for guidance in the hierarchy of values in politics, at two levels: firstly, it points specifically towards an ideal of ethical conduct valid for the individual; and, secondly, it lays down a founding principle as the boundary between what is acceptable in a democracy and what is not, regardless of all disagreements about the organization of life in community and about the distribution of power and wealth. The first principle in politics is that it is not acceptable to permit the slaughter of one's neighbours or of any other segment of humanity.

It is in this national context that one of the outstanding characteristics of Holocaust education in France, and clearly a force to be reckoned with, is taking root. The goal is to place the genocide in a historical context and to examine all explanations that can be gleaned from history, not limiting transmission to educational content consisting only of moral and civic considerations; correlatively, this historical knowledge is to be understood as deeply imbued with civic and critical significance. Ideally, all teenagers, at the end of secondary education to the baccalaureate level, must possess in-depth knowledge of the genocide's distant roots, the social and political configurations and triggering events that caused it, and the methods used. Study of memory of the event has been added recently, with the idea that memory is intrinsically historical and has important effects. This is an ambitious curriculum. It has become more or less a reality for those pupils best adapted to the elitism of the school system, while remaining mere fiction for many others. Yet the challenge it represents is widely accepted, and moreover, advocated and championed successfully. It is taught by a relatively united, qualified and dedicated corps of history teachers convinced of the importance of their role.

## Memory and basic ethics

It is difficult to understand the great importance ascribed in the 1990s to memory of the genocide in the educational world without appraising the symbolic void filled by memory at that time, when all kinds of modernist ideologies of progress had waned or collapsed.

It filled the void left by genuinely educational, moral and civic transmission, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the great founding story of Progress through the Republic or by the other moribund 'great narrative' of Progress through Revolution. French education is meant to be an integral part of the Republic and has been set the solid and explicit institutional goal of producing free, active and independent citizens; but since the end of the 1960s, it has had the utmost difficulty in drawing up a curriculum for moral and civics education acceptable to the people, teachers and pupils alike. Ultimately, 'to educate' seemed to run counter to the ideal of critical judgement. Moral education as provided in the past lay in tatters, age-old civics education was discredited and the horrendous pictures of the camps aroused universal indignation and disgust. The unspeakable simply could not be discussed, thus constituting a rallying point. 'Never again!' was the only historical rallying cry for morality and politics thrown into disarray by the post-modern collapse of the great narratives of yesteryear.

Holocaust remembrance then emerged as this traumatic shock that is indivisibly educational and critical, as seeing photographs of the horror of the camps causes minimal trauma and is thus akin to vaccination to prevent all murderous racist excesses. Everyone considered that rational and objective transmission of historical truth about the genocide and about the deviancy, errors and lack of vision that led to such actions could play a pre-eminent role as an institution standing for shared values and, at the very least, rejection of the worst. As obviously nobody can or dares any more define what constitutes virtue, progress and freedom, evincing the blind faith that led the masses in the heyday of triumphant modernity, nothing but the rite of negative commemoration can be planned for the future. 'Never again' has become an absolute requirement, a categorical, terribly peremptory order that is fairly effective with teenagers. But, as a watchword, it is completely indeterminate in its practical and actual implications for education and preparation for life and its inevitable challenges.

Transmission of Holocaust remembrance fits all the more into content transmitted by schools because it fills a void. It is one of the last possible alternatives to the void in the crisis of meaning that undermines the country and, perhaps more broadly, the West. In an education system increasingly mired in a meaningless venture, reduced to the slogan 'all pupils must pass', in which success entails making pupils fit for fierce competition, few lessons are strong enough to be taught as values in their own right, as bearers of non-utilitarian values. Hence the strange fascination with the duty of remembrance in an education system that tends otherwise to give pride of place to the transmission of content to the detriment of all other educational dimensions, in which teachers are meant above all to transmit academic knowledge, far removed from any interpersonal issues.

Educators must nevertheless ponder the philosophical and practical question of whether commemoration that elicits people's emotion and capacity for empathy can be the sole basis of moral and civics education. Even if it is backed up by sound knowledge of the past and an accurate analysis of the historical developments and processes giving rise to the Nazi regime, memory of the Holocaust cannot be the sole foundation on which moral and civics education rests. How can it be linked to other entirely different components to create a blueprint able to lend fresh impetus to humanistic education and to post-disaster humanism?

Can we really encourage young people to take up citizenship responsibilities and prepare for the future with only the credo that the horrors of the past must be avoided? Can the only point of reference for policy formulation and community life

be the anxiety-provoking idea of preventing disaster and combating everything liable to produce a rerun of the 1930s? Can people live in the present without looking to the future, otherwise than by dreading the past? The time has come to raise once more the question of moral and civics education designed for our time – negative commemorations will obviously play a decisive role in Holocaust remembrance, but a new balance must generally be struck by taking different dimensions into account, by developing a secular conception of morality and by promoting a higher idea of politics. ‘Only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope.’ This quote from Walter Benjamin could be associated with the transmission of memory of the Holocaust, as part of a broader and more positive project, in which it would have its rightful place.

## Conclusion: sound and flexible supporting mechanisms

The problem in transmission experienced during the period under consideration was not one associated with an *introduction* and all the problems raised by claims, concealments, half-truths, genuine falsehoods, legitimacy, resistance, ground-breaking activism and educational innovation. France had gone through all of those aspects in the earlier period, in which all kinds of powerful forms of transmission were tested by teachers who were particularly committed and thus generally very well armed for the job, in terms of both the knowledge and the meaning to be conveyed. We have moved to a very different stage, marked by the provision of mass education, which must perhaps be understood structurally rather than only quantitatively, or rather by considering all structural changes entailed by the shift to large numbers. The provision of mass education inevitably raises problems of organization, management, failures, standardized training, tools and evaluation. The issue of educational approach is considered macroscopically rather than microscopically and is more concerned with rules and standards than with scoring exceptional successes that cannot be replicated. This educational approach is concerned with ‘best practices’, but must pay sustained attention to bad and improper ones, too, if they are likely to spread, and it must never lose sight of intermediate practices and standardization. It must resist the utopic delusion of trying to make the exceptional the rule, and though haunted by the idea of identifying primarily what can be widely propagated, it must nonetheless retain a sense of the ‘achievable best’ and be receptive to genuine, creative and required innovation. It must establish frameworks for research and training, give thought to partnerships, consider acceptance and impact, find tools for evaluation, create resources, design course material and provide resources. It must fit into the various educational



structures, timetables, distinctions drawn between subjects and examinations; these must be made operational in their repetitiveness, without neglecting to bring about changes to meet genuine criteria. It must learn to manage standardization that is likely to lead to trivialization and set 'content' to which demotivated teachers and bored pupils glumly submit. In a word, it must tackle all bureaucracy-related risks and ills, wherever the initial impetus was experienced as an extraordinary, overwhelming and decisive revelation.

Mass education has fortunately retained some of its initial impetus, while fully meeting the organizational requirement arising from mass enrolment. It opens up an opportunity and constitutes a privilege.

Paradoxically, the history of the Holocaust is transmitted properly to pupils because memory is alive and active in society. Holocaust remembrance should make it possible to raise a major present-day moral and political issue, namely the status of religious, cultural and ethnic minorities in a body politic. Foreign, immigrant Jews in precarious circumstances had been the first to be deported from France and were treated more harshly. As a result, in the post-war period and until recently, the bearers of that particular memory considered it to denote a common cause with all minorities, all population groups different from the majority and thus likely to be marginalized and persecuted.

Such transmission is suffused with the energy generated by conflicting interpretations of basic issues. If teachers are generally and effectively mobilized for Holocaust education, demonstrating enviable dynamism and capacity for renewal, it is because the numerous reasons for vigorous involvement in this urgent struggle for the present and for the future have given rise to a wide variety of approaches, media, institutions and forms, all constituting, in a word, a substantial mechanism in support of education. As noted above, transmission is solidly established in France, owing to a tight-knit network of large and small organizations, private initiatives and public policies. Its 'establishment' intrinsically reflects dynamics in which conflict and disquiet trigger debate, reflection and continual adjustments.

Democracy is a reality only at this cost and it leaves us no respite. The same goes for Holocaust education, which has become a cornerstone of citizenship education, at the critical point where politics is attached securely to ethics.