

WEEKEND

Noa Limone

Several years ago, Sarit Zeibert, an Israeli academic who studies persecuted minorities in Nazi Germany, conducted a spontaneous experiment. She stopped ordinary people in the street and showed them a collection of articles she and another scholar, Yair Auran, had published in 2016 under the title “Non-Jewish Victims of the Nazi Regime.”

On the cover were five triangles of various colors identifying the various non-Jewish populations whom the Germans had persecuted, oppressed and murdered. Red was for political prisoners, pink for gays, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses, brown for Roma and black for those deemed “asocial,” a group that included those who had been pushed to the margins of society.

Zeibert says that most of the people she asked didn't recognize the symbols or know what they stood for.

The European Jewish Holocaust is well known to every Israeli, but far less so the story of the Germans who were also victims of the Nazi regime due to their ethnic origin, sexual orientation, medical condition, political or religious affiliation or simply because they failed to match the Aryan ideal.

Zeibert, who gives lectures on the subject, said the public evinces a healthy curiosity and wants to know more. But over the years, her efforts to interest the universities and the institutions that document and research the Holocaust didn't pan out. Israeli schools, she says, “addressed the subject in most cases minimally. They mention the names of other groups, but little more than that. It was a glaring omission.”

Shira Yaacobi and Adi Novick, from the educational arm of Moreshet – The Mordechai Anielewicz International Center for Holocaust Documentation, share Zeibert's view of how Israel's educational system has treated the issue. They say that in meetings with young people at the center, it was obvious they knew little, if anything at all. “If it's not important to their teachers, they don't know it,” says Novick, who heads of Moreshet's education department. “In the best case, students mention the Roma and gays as separate groups, but nothing beyond that.”

Understanding the Nazis

Recently, Moreshet has developed, in consultation with Zeibert, an in-depth curriculum that recounts the stories of several non-Jewish groups persecuted by the Nazis – who they were, why they were targeted and how they coped with the persecution by the regime.

From the curriculum, which is available to all teachers in the Israeli school system, it is possible to learn, for example, that the first concentration camps in Nazi Germany were established as early as 1933 for the imprisonment of suspected dissidents without first subjecting them to due legal process. They were interned simply because they were defined as a “security threat.”

Students are asked to answer questions that encourage critical thinking, such as why opponents of the regime were the first to be sent to the detention camps, why such imprisonment was called “protective custody,” and whom it was intended to protect and from what.

The curriculum emphasizes the important role played by the obedient cooperation of many Germans with the regime's extreme measures – even when these were directed against their own family members – and the indoctrination that caused them to adopt the Nazi worldview.

The chapter devoted to the persecution of homosexuals, for example, reveals that while the Nazis regarded gay Germans as Aryans, they believed that their sexual orientation harmed the fertility of the German nation. Therefore, they were considered harmful to the body of the nation, and homosexuality had to be repressed. Since homosexuality was seen as a social and cultural phenomenon, not a biological one, other Germans were at risk of being “infected” by it. Gays could be “reeducated” through hard physical labor in concentration camps.

The first measures taken against gays were directed at LGBT clubs

Protecting Nazi Germany from itself

For the first time, the Education Ministry has approved a curriculum about the non-Jewish groups targeted by the Nazis, from gays they considered reeducating to the people sent for sterilization and those who were the first victims of the gas chambers



Roma prisoners at the Belzec death camp near Lublin, 1940.

and periodicals. In May 1933, the Nazis raided Berlin's Institute for Sex Research, violently assaulted its staff and finally closed it down. What followed was the destruction of the contents of its library in the notorious book burnings of that same month. The Nazis had confiscated its patient lists to create the Gestapo's “pink lists,” which included the names of men suspected of being gay.

The curriculum also shows that gays were persecuted and murdered only in Germany; the regime “encouraged” homosexuality in occupied countries on the assumption that this would limit birth rates. Within Germany, they were the first victims of the Nazi regime's medical experiments, but unlike other persecuted groups, their suffering did not end at the end of the war. Homosexual relations continued to be illegal, and prisoners who had served their sentences remained in prison even after fall of the regime.

The new curriculum is being added to others that the center offers on topics related to the Holocaust that tend to be on the fringes of Holocaust education in Israel.

Novick: ‘When you study the Holocaust only from the Jewish perspective and describe it as a relatively isolated event historically and socially, it doesn't give you a complete understanding of how dark and oppressive regimes harm everyone.’

The Moreshet Center, explains Novick, was founded by Holocaust survivors, fighters and partisans belonging to the Hashomer Hatzair movement. “From the beginning to the present day, the main goal has been to tell the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of young people and teenagers,” she says. “A humanistic approach accompanies the learning, and at its center is the human experience – what happened to the victims and what was the role of young people at the time who found themselves leading communities, many of whose adults had given up?” Learning is informal, she says, “sitting in a circle and conducting a values-based discussion and active learning.”

The curriculum has been vetted and approved by the Education Ministry, but in response to a Haaretz inquiry, it denied that it was innovative and emphasized that the regular history curriculum (in public junior and senior high schools) also includes “explicit reference to the non-Jewish victims of the Nazi regime, including people with disabilities, opponents of the regime and the Roma community.”

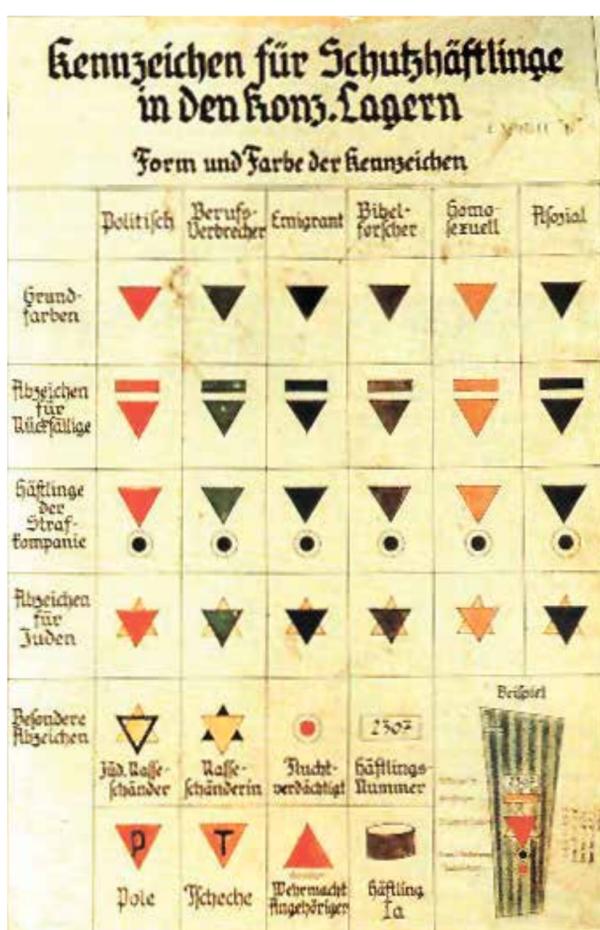
An examination of the Education Ministry program reveals that references do occur, but only in the margins. They appear in only two subsections – one concerning the Roma and the other on the sick and disabled. In a document for teachers detailing the topics to be included in this year's special Holocaust curriculum, additional subject matter on which students will be tested on in their matriculation exams (for those taking the exams in 2025), there is no mention of the topic.

In fact, from among 45 lesson plans the ministry recommends for high school teachers on “The Shoah and Heroism,” only one deals with the persecution of non-Jews and then only as part of a lesson dealing with Germany's transition from democracy to dictatorship.

“You can't really understand Nazi policies without recognizing its persecution of other groups,” says Zeibert. Many of the repressive measures taken against different minorities were unique. Familiarity with them, as well as with the means of resistance, moral standards and fundamental beliefs unique to each group, enable a student to get a more complete and in-depth understanding of Nazism and other repressive regimes.

The onset of the persecution of minorities, says Zeibert, occurred almost simultaneously, with differences of just a few months at most. Several laws, for example the 1933 Enabling Act, which allowed the government to enact legislation without approval of either the Reichstag or the president, and made it possible for the regime to deprive citizens of their civil rights, and the Nuremberg laws of 1935 applied to several minority groups at the same time.

Such was the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring,



Patches used to identify non-Jewish prisoners. Red for “political,” pink for gays, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses, brown for Roma and black for “asocials.” USHMM

enacted in July 1933 and allowing for forced sterilizations. As detailed in the curriculum, those sterilized under it suffered from a wide range of illnesses and disabilities – mental illness, alcoholism, mental retardation, epilepsy, genetic deafness or blindness, dementia and physical deformities.

Even Germans with very minor medical conditions, such as mild limb deformities or stuttering, were subject to legal sterilization. In practice, thousands of healthy people were included in the category because they did not fit the imagined Aryan model. Roma and Afro-Germans were also sterilized in this spirit.

“You can draw a conceptual line between the forced sterilization of the ‘defective and inferior among the German people,’ which continued until the

outbreak of the war, and the ‘Final Solution’ for the Jews,” explains Zeibert. “At the outbreak of the war, Hitler issued a secret directive to carry out ‘euthanasia’ for the terminally ill, which was in fact a code name for the murder of thousands of disabled and sick people in gas chambers set up in killing centers in Germany.”

The first victims were children and babies. “In the summer of 1939, an order was given to medical personnel – doctors, nurses and midwives – to report on children and babies that showed signs of physical limitations,” says Zeibert. Doctors encouraged parents to put their children into medical institutions all over Germany and Austria, where they were eventually murdered. Afterward, she adds, they began to kill adults through starvation, lethal injection, and

especially in gas chambers disguised as showers.

When the decision was made about the Final Solution, in January 1942, the entire euthanasia team contributed of its experience and was directly involved in the gassing – this time of Jews in the extermination camps.

“When you see how the Nazi regime acted even against an Aryan population that was considered under its system to be defective, you can better understand how all inhibitions were removed,” she says. “These groups were persecuted mercilessly through torture, medical experiments and confinement in prisons and concentration camps. The repressive measures against the German people themselves were without a doubt a prelude to the Holocaust.”

No comparison

The curriculum asks students about the role of science and medicine vis-à-vis the public and humanity in general, and to consider the way that they perceive the role of the state with regard to its citizens and the role of citizens toward the state. According to Novick and Yaacobi, one of the goals of the Moreshet Center is to enable students and adults to learn about history as a sequence of processes. That is aimed at providing them with tools to analyze the reality in which we live, from the perception that history has a tendency to repeat itself, and that human behavior is something that is worth studying and learning from in order to create a better future.

In this respect, Novick says, familiarity with the stories of the non-Jewish populations persecuted in the Holocaust is essential to understanding the Nazi regime and its ideology.

“When you study the Holocaust only from the Jewish perspective and describe it as a relatively isolated event historically and socially, it doesn't give you a complete understanding of how dark and oppressive regimes harm everyone – both the society they lead and the ‘other’ groups within it – and of the fact that the very existence of such regimes depends on oppression, on a policy of divide and rule, and on marking scapegoats,” she says.

Even Germans with very minor medical conditions, such as mild limb deformities or stuttering, were subject to legal sterilization. In practice, thousands of healthy people were included in the category because they did not fit the imagined Aryan model.

Novick and Yaacobi stress that studying other persecuted groups doesn't diminish the memory of the Holocaust of the Jewish people. There is no intention of comparing suffering but to reach a more complex understanding of the reality. At the same time, they hope it will also work to reduce Israel's inherent sense of victimhood.

“The Jewish people were victims,” says Yaacobi. “But it's wrong to separate this fact from its historical and social context or from what German society and Europe in general has gone through.”

Novick says that today, especially during the past year and a half, it's difficult to be a teacher of history. “We want to give teachers all that they need to teach history in an in-depth, interesting way that arouses curiosity. We are inviting teachers to help us think together about how to adapt the curricula to their classrooms.”

She adds: “In our experience, a historical perspective can help people deal with contemporary reality. We hope that teachers will be brave enough to introduce broad and slightly different content into the classrooms.”

Zeibert would like to remind everyone that the United Nations Charter calls for the commemoration of all minorities persecuted by the Nazi regime. “When you examine the media and the curricula in other countries, you do see reference to all groups of victims,” she explains. “Both Moreshet and the Education Ministry deserve praise for their courage and effort to expand the boundaries of knowledge about the Holocaust period, and I hope that this curriculum will mark a turning point in addressing the issue in the Israeli educational system.”

The Education Ministry said in response to a request for comment: “The Jewish Holocaust was the biggest organized slaughter of the modern era – in size, in organization and the intention to exterminate an entire people. As the nation state of the Jewish people, the State of Israel gives the memory of the Jewish Holocaust a central place – not out of ignoring the suffering of other victims, but out of a deep identity, historical, and moral commitment.”

“However, contrary to what is claimed, the history curriculum also includes explicit reference to the non-Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. This content is taught in a dedicated chapter as part of a lesson in understanding the tools of oppression, the persecution of those who are different and the use of political terror in 20th-century Europe.”



Moreshet Center educators Adi Novick and Shira Yaacobi

Rami Shillush