

**Colloquy and ministerial seminar "Teaching about the Holocaust and artistic creation"  
- Strasbourg 17-18 October 2002**

## Speech by Simone Veil, President of the Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah : "How can we teach about the Holocaust in the 21st century ?"

18 October 2002

Ministers,  
Secretary General,  
Ambassador,  
Ministry representatives,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ministerial seminar being held today in Strasbourg, and to which I am greatly honoured to have been invited, is a particularly interesting and highly emotional event for me. This is the first time in this European capital, where I have in the past taken part in so many discussions and debates on questions concerning our future, that I am speaking to you about a subject that obsesses me, as it obsesses all my friends and all those who emerged alive from Auschwitz, vowing to bear witness to what had taken place.

How could one not be moved by the pronounced symbolism of this colloquy? I am very moved by the idea that the Holocaust is being discussed here in a city which symbolises reconciliation between France and Germany, and, with my own personal contribution today, in the Assembly Chamber of the Council of Europe where the countries of central and eastern Europe sit alongside those of western Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have a responsibility for educating the young generations of Europe. This role which falls to you is not only one of the most dignified but also one of the most difficult. You are here today to discuss how to teach, not history in general, but a specific period in our shared past, a sombre and bleak period of ashes and tears which has been constantly haunting us for the last sixty years: the extermination of the Jews of Europe and the Gypsies by Nazi Germany.

It is in my capacity as President of the Foundation for Holocaust Remembrance that I am speaking to you today, but it is also as a witness that I pass on, simply and with modesty, my thoughts on teaching the Holocaust in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Testimony, remembrance, teaching, history: in the public debate the borders between these words melt away. This situation reflects the increasing importance for the recording of history which the survivors of the camps have acquired over time.

It was the survivors themselves who first acknowledged their responsibility for passing on knowledge of the Holocaust and keeping its memory alive. The Holocaust was intended not to have any witnesses or history. The Nazi plan was to erase an entire people from the history and memory of the world.

Everything was planned, thought out and organised so as not to leave any trace. We were not supposed to survive. The Nazi death machine was designed to eradicate not only the Jews and Gypsies as peoples, but also all evidence of their extermination. The existence of the gas chambers was kept hidden like a state secret.

From the very outset, the anguish of total annihilation and the enormity of the crime committed gave rise to an irrepressible need to bear witness. Simon Dubnov, who was murdered in Riga in 1941, felt in the most compelling way possible this urgency to relate, speak and communicate, this overriding need to write and record. The clandestine creation of the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Centre, the drawings made by the children in the Theresienstadt camp, the stories from the ghettos, and the many personal diaries were all responses to this deep-rooted need to tell the world, before dying, that it had indeed taken place.

The end of the war came, too quickly no doubt for the SS to exterminate every last one of us and hide all traces of their crimes. But our return was a painful one. We had lost our families, those dear to us and our friends. The welcome we received was not at all what we had imagined. We were faced with indifference, sometimes even contempt. Nobody understood what we had gone through. Perhaps it was disturbing for them since what we had experienced and needed to communicate bore no relationship to the experience of ordinary people.

It was, in fact, years before we were listened to, each one of us in our respective countries amidst a whole range of varying circumstances. The Eichmann trial at the beginning of the 60s, allowed witnesses to speak and gave rise in Israel, western Europe and the United States to a demand for testimony. It is only recently that the attempts by the Communists of the countries of central and eastern Europe to hide the truth have finally subsided. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002 to Imre Kertész, the author of *Fateless*, is spectacular encouragement for this development. The survivor has finally managed to arrive in the public arena. There is now a clear social need for people to bear witness, particularly in schools. Books of memory, recordings, video archives, spontaneous testimonies and interviews today are all the mediums of our common memory.

The history of the Holocaust, therefore, began to be written thanks to the memories of the survivors. But just as the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the extermination of our parents and friends, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will see the disappearance of the last eye-witnesses. These people, reduced to skeletal ghosts of their former selves, had no other hope before they died than that we would remain faithful to their memory. Soon they will no longer have the support of our memory and our love.

We have become grandparents and even great-grandparents. Most have already died. Soon, this generation destined not to survive will disappear completely. The time will also come when those who interviewed us face to face will disappear too and then only books will contain what we remembered. It is not that there will be a shortage of information; what will be missing will be the unique, irreplaceable and deeply disturbing contact with a person who could say: "I was there and it happened." No matter how irreparable this loss is for the teaching of the Holocaust, we have to prepare ourselves for it.

The time of the witnesses is coming to an end. What effect will this have on the commemoration of the Holocaust and the passing on of memory to the younger generations?

This question leads me to address the challenges to be faced up to and the hurdles to be overcome in teaching the Holocaust. This is something which is very close to my heart and I regret that it has received but scant attention hitherto. While family, community and commemorative memories have taken on great importance, thanks to the action of certain people, and I am thinking in particular of Serge Klarsfeld, the deportees themselves and now the hidden children, the school milieu as such has remained circumspect, if not reticent and apprehensive. But the fact is that it plays a paramount role in shaping the young generations. If we are to ensure that this horror is never forgotten, if we are to fight against revisionism and trivialisation of the Holocaust, then it is not enough just to have remembrance ceremonies, necessary though they are.

Our role, as survivors, has been fulfilled: we have borne witness. It is now our duty to consider how the Holocaust should be taught in the future. It is our duty to think about how the knowledge of this event is to be passed on without eye-witnesses, how history can be taught in all its diversity, and the form and content of future research.

We are faced with a number of questions, the most crucial of which is “Should we be teaching the Holocaust?” If the answer is yes, then how should this be done? Lastly, what aspects should be taught of the Holocaust, of this cruelty, this absurd and monstrous universe from which, it would appear, all humanity had been banished.

As my contribution to this seminar I would like to help shape an educational approach to the Holocaust.

How can one be certain that there will be a continuing need to teach the Holocaust to future generations? Is it clear to everyone that the memory needs to be passed on?

Some say that Holocaust education should be designed first and foremost in order to learn the lessons of the past and to fight against anti-Semitism, racial hatred, intolerance, or even war. But what are the lessons we have not yet taken on board, we who are so enamoured of democratic values and our traditions of the rule of law? Are we not being just a little complacent and conceited in asserting that the study of the Holocaust could prevent future wars and massacres?

It is not a question of looking in a detached way at this event or refraining from any moral judgment. But if there are lessons to be learned from the past, this can only be done by looking at it in all its complexity and all its aspects. If we are to derive something constructive from the past, it must first of all be understood, not shaped and reworked.

And yet, I am firmly convinced that teaching the Holocaust is an absolute necessity. Why?

First of all, it is essential to teach the Holocaust in the interests of the victims. The Nazi operation was based on lies, on an overturning of values. The inscription on the

entrance gates to the Auschwitz camp was “Work will set you free”. I remember that there was no shortage of flowerbeds on the SS drive. The deportees went into the gas chambers thinking they were going to the showers. It is because lies were the instrument of their death that they are owed historical truth.

We owe a debt to those who perished, not only because they were our parents, our relatives and our friends and because they have no other tombs than our hearts and our books, but also – and this is a painful thought – because the obsession with efficiency, the relentless functioning of the state apparatus and the labyrinthine bureaucracy which ground them down in their millions are still with us today. Viewed from this perspective, teaching the Holocaust is part of the process of understanding our modern world.

The Holocaust is an integral part of our national and European identity. In certain respects, it is perhaps the most European event in the whole history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Whether we like it or not, the Holocaust has left a vivid scar on the history of every country of Europe. Historians argued in Germany, with Nolte and Habermas clashing in 1986 on whether the memory of the Holocaust would endure. This showed that the Holocaust involved the collective identity of the whole nation. Fortunately, Nolte’s theory that the elimination of the Jews was merely a response to the Bolshevik threat failed to gain acceptance.

Beyond that, the genocide of the Jews and Gypsies is a unique event in the history of humankind. What other terms can be used to describe the systematic extermination of a people – men, women, old people and babies – scattered throughout Europe, who were rounded up in the smallest Hungarian town and on the smallest Greek island, then herded together in ghettos and camps before being murdered at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Maidanek, Belzec or Sobibor, or in those communal graves which have now been obliterated? The first steps were a racist ideology, putting people on files, discriminating against them, humiliating them, plundering their property and excluding them; then came the plans to exterminate them, and lastly deportation to railway terminuses which were industrial centres for mass killing in gas chambers. At the end of the process, the corpses themselves were used as raw materials. That is what explains the metaphysical and ethical soul-searching provoked by these events. Some authors have said that the annihilation of Europe’s Jews and Gypsies marked a rift in the history of humankind. Auschwitz has become the reference for absolute evil and the Shoah, the paradigm to which people refer for numerous concepts and criteria. I am bound to agree with Elie Wiesel’s comments on the "universal implications" of the Shoah.

Don’t misunderstand me. Asserting the specific character of the Shoah does not in any sense mean demonstrating that Jews are different, that they have their own destiny or that a people described as chosen is exceptional. This event has implications far exceeding Jews and Gypsies alone. The Shoah reflects the image of absolute deprivation, of a process of dehumanisation carried through to the end, and as such it inspires an endless debate on the human conscience and human dignity.

- For all these reasons, I consider it essential to teach about the Shoah, whether there are Jews in your respective countries or not – whether there are many, or few, or none left. It is for you, as ministers of education, to decide – on the basis of your education system, your country's history and your relationship to history – how you will actually organise teaching about the Shoah.

I should now like to look at ways of teaching about the worst of modern tragedies. The issue of teaching and transmission first emerged in the wake of the Eichmann trial. As from the 1960s, the Shoah generated museums, memorials, conference series and educational programmes.

- As I said before, the survivors played a crucial part in keeping the memory of the Shoah alive and teaching about it. Many of them have given talks in schools. They are the ones who have had the agonising task of taking children to visit those desolate places. They – we – have tried to pass on that "elsewhere" that we have been in such close touch with. No one can really convey the horror of it.

- This necessary and in fact vital process is reaching its end. At the end of his life Primo Levi felt a sort of weariness, as if he was beginning to doubt whether it was advisable to go and bear witness. Racked by doubts, he repeatedly wondered how to answer the question "why?".

- We are entitled to wonder that too. Is an account of what one has experienced enough to make people understand it?

- The intimacy that gradually takes shape between survivors and their audience, the impression of immediacy given by an oral account, and the surge of compassion may give people the illusion that they know. The emotion sparked by witnesses' accounts in schools, in the courts and in the media should not be coupled with an allergy to knowledge. History should not be fragmented into a series of individual anecdotes, nor should feelings take precedence over reason and dispense people from trying to understand. That would result in a sort of short circuit between the instant of the eye-witness account and that of historical representation.

- At one time, there was an excessive tendency to challenge these eye-witnesses. Luckily, those days are over. But history based on emotions alone would have no lasting impact or epistemological implications. Oral history has irreplaceable qualities, but written history is nonetheless necessary. Alongside this personalised memory, which is confined to a limited number of people, I should like to see the growth of a widely shared desire for knowledge.

- The transmission of an experience must be part of a chronology, a debate and a thought process that only research can provide. The time has come for historians to take over from witnesses.

- The history of the Shoah is constantly revisited through the books, museums, exhibitions and films that appear each year. Claude Lanzmann's films *Shoah* and *Sobibor* are exceptional documents accessible to everyone. And the French Ministry of Education and the Foundation for Holocaust Remembrance considered it particularly appropriate to work together to distribute the video of *Shoah* to every secondary school in France. With the emergence of new media such as CD-ROMs,

DVDs and the Internet, the range of educational materials has considerably increased. This profusion of documentary sources may be somewhat confusing to those who have to teach the younger generations about the Shoah. But let's remember the most important point: the facts, the chronology, the sequence of events.

- The crux of the matter is the facts themselves, the concrete, unvarnished, straightforward facts, the will to humiliate and degrade, the organisation, the planning and the methods used to kill. But the facts in themselves would have little meaning if no attention was paid to the racist ideology that led to the genocide, the support it received from many different quarters, and its sources and spokespeople. There are so many avenues to explore before we understand how, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a nation of philosophers, musicians and poets was able not only to devise the "final solution", but also to carry it out so efficiently!

- I am therefore convinced that national education systems have a responsibility to provide this teaching, by training teachers, producing school textbooks and promoting new generations of researchers.

- Yet it would be pointless to contrast archives and fiction too sharply. Portraying the Shoah and teaching about it are not rival activities, far from it. Throughout this week, artists, film-makers, writers, poets and intellectuals have discussed this unanswerable question: how can you describe Auschwitz? Can you arouse aesthetic emotions about the Shoah? The diary of Anne Frank and *If This is a Man* are now part of the world's literary heritage. But where does one draw the line between literature and eye-witness accounts? And are images, which are so important in our societies, necessary aids to teaching about the Shoah?

- Films have now acquired an infinitely greater audience than books. Young people's imaginations are fuelled by fictitious images. Teaching about the Shoah should not mean disregarding the contribution that mass leisure activities can make. Polanski's *The Pianist* is an indisputable success in this respect. The television series *Holocaust* and the Hollywood-style *Schindler's List*, which were more controversial, at least had the advantage of making millions of viewers aware that the extermination of the Jews had really happened. That is not to say that all works are of equal value. Some authors and film-makers do not hesitate to seek success with a very slanted presentation of the facts which is simply designed to provoke or titillate. However, I should like to mention Art Spiegelman's cartoon *Maus*, which to my mind is an example of impossible boldness that really works. The author's intelligence and sensitivity, based on his own background, gave him the courage required to transpose the Shoah into the animal world via the commonest and most entertaining medium of mass culture. At the crossroads between art, fiction, oral history and ethnography, *Maus* succeeds in revealing the terrifying depths of the executioners' souls and conferring a tragic dimension on the extermination of the Jews.

- We cannot disregard the indisputable fact that, sober and respectful though it must be, teaching about the Shoah is bound to evolve with time.

- I should now like to discuss the content of teaching about the Shoah. The idea is obviously not to establish a dogma to be instilled into schoolchildren. Each country has its own history and its own educational traditions. When it comes to

commemorating and teaching about the Shoah, each nation has its own tempo. In the various European countries, the traces of the genocide may be obvious, obliterated or simply non-existent. Official history curricula normally teach about the Shoah, but some merely mention it and a few say nothing about it. This diversity must not be viewed as an obstacle.

- As soon as a researcher starts to explore the subject, every avenue seems to lead to this harrowing question: how could it have happened? Apart from the impossibility of answering it, historians tackle the archives with a constantly changing series of issues in mind. [The very fact that each country has its own name for what happened – *Shoah* in France, *holocaust* in the United States and Israel, *Endlösung* or *Vernichtung* in Germany – proves that the questions asked differ according to national debates and issues.]

- The history of the Shoah is not completely written yet. Archives still have to be opened and research completed, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the Vatican, where the attitude of Pope Pius XII to both Nazism and the Holocaust is concerned. People do not, unfortunately, know about the way in which Gypsies were hunted down and exterminated. The voices of surviving Gypsies, whether or not they were deported, have not often been heard, because of their lifestyle and the lack of associations able to defend their interests. Yet it is quite wrong, and indeed scandalous, that there should be such widespread ignorance of their tragic fate. As in the case of the Jews, it was simply because they belonged to a particular ethnic and religious group that they were persecuted.

- One of the aims of the Foundation over which I have the honour of presiding is to encourage research by historians. It has entered into contracts of several kinds, two of them concerning archives in particular. One, signed with the Holocaust Museum in Washington, is designed to speed up the microfilming of French archives. The other, signed with the French National Archives, provides for the microfilming of the documents of the *Commissariat aux questions juives*. In short, historical research is one of our priorities.

“Les multiples témoignages écrits.... Orphelins ajouter paragraphe page 9 version française

- At a time when the last surviving witnesses are disappearing, we realise to what extent Holocaust survivors have altered the way in which historians write history.

- Clearly, there are many areas still to be explored. But in investigating the issues in greater detail, one cannot just say anything that comes into one's head. A historiographic debate does not mean that history may be distorted. The denial of the existence of the Holocaust by mediocre academics in search of fame, who dare not admit their sympathy for those responsible for exterminating the Jews, is a sham to which no one pays attention any more. Admittedly, the lack of international regulations gives these people who falsify history, few though they are, a certain ability to cause trouble. But I do not think their propaganda has any future.

- I am more concerned about official denials of the existence of the Holocaust issued in certain Islamic states that hate Israel. Last year, when Faurisson and a few others

tried to organise a Holocaust denial conference in Beirut, Lebanon quickly put a stop to it. We took due note of this, but we are still very concerned about this.

- More pernicious still in my view, because it is more widespread and less frequently condemned, is the tendency to compare things, right, left and centre. These feverish, mindless efforts to compare everything the Shoah and lump everything together completely ignore the features specific to each event.

- It was not long after the Second World War that the name Auschwitz was bracketed with that of Hiroshima, in a manoeuvre designed to put the Allies and the Nazis on an equal footing. I also remember photos published in a leading magazine which showed, on the same page, victims of the 1944 Dresden bombing and the carts on which corpses retrieved when the Bergen-Belsen camp was liberated were stacked. Then there was the Sabra and Chatila massacre by the Lebanese militia, which Brezhnev described as a "genocide" of which the Israelis were guilty. It was intolerable that the situation should have been turned back to front in this way.

- Today, as in the past, this routine amalgamation is wreaking havoc. Saddam Hussein? A new Hitler. The Israeli crackdown? A Nazi policy. The camps in Bosnia? No different from Auschwitz. That is what prompts me to say that the main danger is not that the Shoah will be forgotten or denied, but that it will be trivialised.

- For these comparisons are far from neutral. If everyone is guilty, why stigmatise some more than others? Everyone is a victim and everyone is guilty. Consequently, no one is really guilty. Ultimately, the idea prevails that all tragedies are equal.

- Ladies and gentlemen, I am putting to you the demand that the specific features of the Shoah should never be scoffed at, watered down, buried, used for other ends and, in short, trivialised.

- And let no one retort that proclaiming the unique features of Shoah makes one deaf to the suffering of victims or blind to human rights violations.

- For decades, insofar as my resources and any influence I might wield have permitted, I have been fully involved in fighting for the dignity and inalienable rights of human beings. I think I have served this cause successfully and that my efforts bore fruit, particularly when, as Minister and President of the European Parliament, I intervened in numerous countries, regardless of the nature of their regimes, to defend peoples whose rights had been violated.

- I see this combat as a duty. Can one, for all that, put all human rights violations, regardless of their seriousness and the context, in the same basket? Can one approach the planned extermination of millions of human beings simply on grounds of their ethnic background and religious beliefs in the same way as a fratricidal war, however cruel and deadly it may be?

- Territorial claims, independence, a desire for security and the conception that each individual has of his or her rights – all these are causes of violence: repeated, lasting and deadly violence. But as long as the conflict is of this kind, there is hope that one day negotiations will take the place of confrontation, because these issues are basically political. The idea that history is nothing but a fight to the death between



human races is, however, the explicit basis of Nazi ideology. The same was true of the extremist Hutus in Rwanda in 1994. It leads to genocide.

- In his book on the place of the Shoah in the United States, the American historian Peter Novick suggests a few avenues for explaining this trivialisation. He quotes an astonishing survey: 97% of the people questioned knew what the Holocaust was, but a third of them were unaware that it had taken place during the Second World War. The fact is that, in the United States as in Europe, the Shoah is seen not so much as a historical event as the symbol of eternal evil. It has become a screen on to which people project various values and concerns. There are different interpretations of it: divine punishment, an eclipse of God, human madness, a collapse in values, the bankruptcy of modernity, the moral decline of Europe, the end-result of the philosophy of the age of Enlightenment, and so forth.

- In these times of moral relativism, the Shoah can perhaps show us the way: it is absolute, an example of absolute evil. That is no doubt why it is constantly referred to. But that is no reason to ignore the facts which show, first and foremost, that it is unique. There is no question here of "competition between victims" or of the recurrence of massacres. What is necessary is to teach the Shoah as it was – neither more nor less.

- It is not because the Shoah remains the symbol of absolute despair that all interpretations and comparisons are permitted. It is not because the shadow of the deported Jews and Gypsies still hangs over us that every human rights violation leading to human death must be described as a new Auschwitz. The history of the Shoah is sufficient in itself. It should not be a banner for all combats. Let us not use the memory of the Shoah for rhetorical ends. Let us not lump everything together.

- Ladies and Gentlemen, I should like to end my speech by reminding you that the Shoah is a legacy that belongs to us all. I ardently hope that the memory of the Shoah will not be used to give us a clear conscience, but that it will permanently serve to foster respect for human dignity and the fundamental values that underpin our civilisation.