

## “Healing the Past: moving into the future through a holistic education”

One-day Conference held in Warsaw, 18th September 2009



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

This conference was organised by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE), in cooperation with the Federation of Polish Waldorf Schools. Financial support was generously offered by the Jean Monnet Programme of the European Union and the proceedings were translated into Polish and English.

The speakers were:

- **Christopher Clouder**, Chief Executive Officer of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education
- **Sylvia Semmet**, Board-member of EUROCLIO,
- **Katarzyna Muszynska** and **Katarzyna Meron** from The Centre for Holocaust Studies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow
- **Dr. Jolanta Strzemieczny** from the Centre for Citizenship and Education, Warsaw
- **Edward Skubisz**, Director of the Foundation House of Peace, Warsaw
- **Michael Zech**, Board-member of IAO (International Association of Waldorf Education in Middle and Eastern Europe)

**Maria Swierczek** of Warsaw Waldorf School welcomed the 70 participants to the conference. A letter of support was read out from the Minister of Education. The month of September is a month that abounds with historic and bleak events from the human story. In this sense, the different speakers shared not only the platform but also a concern that we listen with care to the past and the different truths that echo into the present and that we remember to reflect on the memories that are carried into our cultures and our times.

As participants gathered in the Mazowieckie Cultural Centre, **Christopher Clouder** reminded us of a tragic and melancholy confluence of anniversaries: 70 years since the outbreak of the Second World War and the partition of Poland; 8 years since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York; 5 years since the awful scenes on the opening day of the school-year in Beslan. On an ascending note, it is 20 years since tidal waves of social and political transformation washed through Central and Eastern Europe, while on an 'in-house' note, this September marks 90 years of life and learning for the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart. If future human catastrophes are to be averted, a chance and a hope may lie in creating and sharing forms of education that meet and address the differences within people and between people and that are founded in tolerance, compassion and cultural understanding.

He spoke of Schlegel's idea of the historian as a prophet who looks backwards. In doing so, he or she tells about what and how and why the past was and in doing so history lays bare the seeds of the future. Professor Kolakowski

described how evil is a stubborn and unredeemable fact; a dark and undeniable

shadow that lies across humanity. Wrongs of the past are tenacious and do not die with the wronged; rather, a sense of revenge seems to live on in future generations. The fact that I was not born a witness to destruction, loss and suffering does not seem to deter me from wishing to 'get even' with my supposed foe or enemy, who was also unborn and a stranger to the 'historical' field of battle or conflict. Echoing lines from Twelfth Night, how do we stop the whirligig of time exacting revenge for the past?

To address this problem, we are called to create a shared truth. We have to try, together, to face the different truths that are woven through history. Looking back at warfare, injustice and oppression is bound to evoke intensity and raw sensitivities. From our communities, nations and regions we hear and hold different truths and so building a shared picture is an incredibly difficult task, yet perhaps a prerequisite in order to lay to rest the urge for revenge that seems to live on in future generations.

**Sylvia Semmet**, Board Member of EUROCLIO and history teacher at Goethe Gymnasium, spoke about the importance of coming to terms with painful experiences of the past through intercultural dialogue. The ethos of EUROCLIO is founded on the values of peace, democracy, stability and critical thinking. The wounds of yesterday may have scarred but continue to affect relations between Poland and Germany. In general terms, the recent past is not over; it forms the basis of European relations. As such, teachers and educators of history have a key role to play in informing and shaping children's attitudes towards the events of the past and their responses and feelings towards each other in the present.

A number of EUROCLIO Projects focus on places where difficult histories form part of the social, political and cultural landscape, for example in Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Romania, Cyprus and Russia. By considering and including 'multiple perspectives' the aim is to create a more inclusive view of the past and to promote inter- and trans-national cultural understanding in the classroom.

This work is not always welcomed with open arms by national politicians and obstacles can arise in developing differentiated or 'European' pictures, contexts and dimensions of the past. For example, in Georgia there is only one history text book used throughout the entire school-system.

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**Katarzyna Muszynska and Katarzyna Meron** pointed out that within the holocaust lurk issues of racism, marginalisation and a failure to perceive the human essence. While the holocaust is a heavy, empty event that haunts the consciousness of European society, we can fill the void with sensitive and creative commemorations. Thus, the holocaust presents a challenge to philosophy, education and art. A starting point is an appreciation of the nature of the collective human memory. Different people have different memories. The collective human memory is like a huge tree and in the branches different societies and periods of time hold their distinctive memories. Recognising that all societies have hurt and been hurt in the course of history can help to form a bridge over which religious and political dialogue can be conducted, with a space to acknowledge that awful events and experiences create different memories and contain different truths.

Mention was made of a series of artistic and cultural activities, or 'preservation points' in which the Centre for Holocaust Studies in Krakow is involved:

- In the town of Lublinie, a letter-writing campaign takes place in memory of the death of a 5 year-old boy whose final weeks have been researched. Every year letters written to the boy from Lublinie are marked "return to sender, address unknown".
- In the city of Krakow, at the ghetto site where deportations took place, there is an empty chair memorial, consisting of 68 empty chairs representing the 68,000 people killed in the Krakow ghetto and surrounding concentration camps.
- In Lodz, in 2003-04, Elzbieta Janicka displayed some 'blank frames' in an empty room, which, on closer inspection, proved to be photos of the air above the extermination camps. The installation made no reference to graves or earthly traces, simply the air that, during the early 1940s, was impregnated with hatred and evil.
- In a visit to Birchenau in 2003, Miroslaw Balka made two short films - Bambi 1 and Bambi 2. These pieces, accompanied by a musical piece entitled 'winter journey' evoked and portrayed a striking mood of emptiness and solitude; the innocence of the victims contrasted with the brutal, dismal and unforgiving material conditions.

By such means, the past does not grow stale, and the events that occurred are rescued from becoming banal and horrible things that happened once, but are now a hazy mark on a page of history.

**Dr. Jolanta Strzemieczny** reported on a project - "Healing from War - Working for Peace" - in which 1500 Polish schools are involved in an endeavour to preserve memories of the past. This is done by pupils gathering the memories of parents and grand-parents of the experiences and events of 1939-1945. There is an urgency to catch these reminiscences and pictures while those who lived through them are still alive.

**Edward Skubisz** spoke about the formation of the Foundation House of Peace in 1989 by the then German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl and the Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, to promote German-Polish relations. The 'History Told' project worked for clarification and reconciliation between peoples of different nations involved in the Second World War. The project provided materials for small groups of young people from Germany, Poland and the Ukraine to go and speak to their grandparents and

great grandparents about the displacement and resettlement of people across borders during and after the Second World War. For example, a German grandfather would tell his story to his grandson and a young Polish person. Following a two-month period of interviews, a one-week debriefing and sharing, a project exhibition was held and then workshops were taken into Polish schools. In tracing the birthplaces of parents and grandparents, demographic movements are clearly discernible as the trail goes back in time. People were shunted around by successive invasions of the German and Russian armies and then again in the settlement of borders following the war. The project also entailed discussions of discrimination in modern times and stories of conflict and violence in schools and on the streets and drama workshops focusing on victimisation, exclusion and marginalisation in society today.

In terms of professional identity, **Michael Zech** is a scholar of modern history and teacher of Waldorf education from Kassel. However, he began by speaking in a personal and moving way about his identity as a German citizen and speaker at a conference such as this. He described how, having lectured in some 20 different countries, the experience of speaking in the capital of Poland is poignant indeed; the words conveyed with a consciousness not experienced anywhere else.

As a child born in the post-war period, the events of 1939-45 stand as pictures in the mind - images that are coloured by a realisation that one's parents and grandparents lived in the midst of these unbelievable events. A sense of bewilderment echoes on - that all of this could happen in the land of Schiller and Goethe. How does one try to understand the staggering abuse of ideals from the land of Weimar, renown as a place of tolerance and culture to the land of Buchenwald, where artists, writers, and priests were detained, tortured and murdered? A question hangs heavy in the air - how to relate these events to children who are several generations removed from the war, yet, as young Germans and Europeans, are confronted with such history?

History lessons can contribute to healing the wounds of the past, but the anthropological aspects have to be looked at, not simply an analysis of political dynamics and social currents. Wherever fear and terror are sown - for example through National Socialism - simple psychology and sociology are not sufficient responses, or tools of understanding. Rather, an anthropological exploration of the differences in cultures and societies needs to be undertaken and understood. History is about understanding narratives, interpreting, making sense of things that happened, or that have led to things that are happening. The French Revolution tends to be lauded as the first act of European democracy, while the fact that the democratic, free constitution was pioneered in Poland is passed over. The soil out of which democracy grew may have been dug in France, the Netherlands and England, but in the long fight for political and cultural determination, the foundations were laid in Poland.

The first Waldorf School was founded 90 years ago and is now a world educational movement in 60 countries. At the heart of the Steiner-Waldorf ethos stand consciousness of individual ethics, human solidarity, freedom and responsibility. Prominent among the tools to nourish and further these values and qualities are freedom in the educational approach, autonomy and creativity in the curriculum design and self-administration in the running of the schools.

The historical curriculum in the Steiner-Waldorf approach begins on a 'world' level and follows successive cultural developments up to modern times and modern consciousness. It is not based on a 'national' history, which is part of the reason why Steiner schools were shut down by the National Socialist regime in the 1930s because progressive human development and biological determinism contradicted each other. In working not to see history through a particular lens or prism, the Steiner Waldorf approach to history may offer a model and a message for the development of contemporary approaches that question the discipline of history and the historical process themselves. A multi-ethnic, multi-cultural approach to history requires a dialogic approach to history and its processes.

A single defining concept of nationality cannot be applied to all European countries. Nationality in contemporary Europe involves an understanding and appreciation of one's own country through understanding the countries and cultures of others. As Friedrich Schiller said in Jena, in 1789, there is but one European family divided into a collection of nation-states and if you live in the same house you can make enemies of each other, but not kill each other. The development of humanity's consciousness is the history of the emancipation of the individual human being. In life, we acquire various levels of identity - as family-members, professionals, citizens of a particular country and so on. To be able to see through these levels of 'given' identity is helpful in fashioning an appreciation of the essential humanity of the person in front of you, or next to you.

**Christopher Clouder** concluded by remarking that the holocaust ('whole burning' in Greek) was a unique instance of man's inhumanity to man, when six million European Jews were murdered by the Nazis. It is conservatively estimated that between 1939 and 1945, 15 million civilians were purged, extinguished, killed in Europe. In recent times, the world has witnessed acts of mass murder and attempts to eradicate entire peoples in Africa, Europe and Asia. Genocide (killing of a race or tribe), tragically, is an event that is not unknown to other times and places. In more distant times, the treatment meted out to the Incas, the Aborigines and the North American Indians indicates that the human propensity to suffer and inflict suffering is durable and grave.

After the history comes the present - the new, the not-done - and here 'compromise' is a developing concept and gesture that has resonated in some troubled corners of the world, such as Northern Ireland and South Africa, where complete justice is simply not attainable. It seems that the search for complete justice serves only to bring back the cycle of violence and revenge. And so, in South Africa's Truth Commission, different and conflicting truths resounded and were heard, rather than a single, legally enforceable truth. Just as in Poland the ability to create a round table in early 1989 made it possible to create a negotiated revolution, rather than the violent ones of the past. But at the cost of forgoing justice, what Ernest Geller called "the cost of velvet". Christopher made mention of Karl Popper's proposition that the way into an open society

constitutes a journey into the unknown, the uncertain and the insecure. We have to use our reason and our love

to plan, with what we can and what we hope will be. The question beckons: how do we lead children on such a journey, without lumbering them with the past's heavy and unforgiving luggage?

The question of identity is prominent in this search. In days gone by 'my' identity used to be singular; supported and constrained by blood, culture and tradition. We and our children have an opportunity and a need to appreciate our multiple identities - both those we hold now and those we hold that are given us from the past. Children can be educated in multiple, shared identities through an exploration of truths in history and through an historical and artistic appreciation of different truths and differences. While people are free to choose identities depending on context and condition, there is a shared human identity that sits over all temporal, socio-geographical identities. In tracing and finding this essential togetherness, we move towards a position in which, one day, it will no longer be possible to conceive the words uttered by Primo Levi in Shema (10th January 1946):

*Consider whether this is a man,  
Who labours in mud  
Who knows no peace  
Who fights for a crust of bread  
Who dies at a yes or a no.  
Consider whether this is a woman,  
Without hair or mane  
With no more strength to remember  
Eyes empty and womb cold  
As a frog in winter.*

Rather, the future can slip the bonds of the past when, in the Cuban poet's Jose Marti's words, we learn to grow white roses for friend and foe:

*I have a white rose to tend  
In June as in January;  
I give it to the true friend  
Who offers his frank hand to me.*

*And for the cruel one whose blows  
Break the heart by which I live,  
Thistle nor thorn do I give:  
For him, too, I have a white rose.*

The conference closed with a beautiful, exuberant and moving choir performance from the pupils of the Hibernia Waldorf School (Germany) and the Lukow Lyceum (Poland). Among the pieces performed was Brahms's Requiem, sung in memory of all those who perished in the Second World War.

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## Ending child poverty – Measuring is the key!

Spanish and Belgian EU presidencies will cooperate to develop an EU recommendation on child well-being and the fight against poverty by the end of 2010<sup>1</sup>. This was one of the results of Eurochild's Annual Conference in Cyprus, ending today<sup>2</sup>.

### Urging for new indicators of child poverty and well-being

Furthermore, Eurochild members at the conference are calling for more child-centred indicators and subjective measures of children's well-being.

In the closing plenary, **Philippe Courard**, Belgian Secretary of State for Social Integration and the Fight against Poverty (Ministry of Social Affairs and Public Health), stated political leaders don't have to be afraid of indicators. They should support their development, and more particularly, use them as an instrument to help making a decision.

He went on wondering why it's so hard for the EU to set clear targets on child poverty reduction:

*"The promises are there, the studies are made, the strategies are clear. Why don't we deliver? How come that in Europe we have no problem to set a quantified target on employment, but apparently we fear to say that we want to reduce the number of poor children in Europe by 50% by 2015?"*

All EU Member States need to measure the progress that they are making in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the child. This is particularly important as we approach the 2010 European year to combat poverty and social exclusion.

### Children are Triple A investment for society

Any Euro spent on children must be considered as a long term investment in human capital as well as a moral and humanitarian obligation. Francisco Asensio Garcia, Head of Unit responsible for childhood in the Ministry of Health and Social Policy in Spain said that there is no excuse not to undertake such investments:

*"No matter if economies grow or are in the middle of a recession, children should be granted sufficient resources to enable their physical and mental development."*

Eurochild's President, **Catriona Williams**, concluded that investment in young children is essential for the overall improved situation of a country's GDP:

*"In these times of the global financial crisis, it is crucial that there is sufficient investment in young children to ensure that they reach their full potential."*

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<sup>1</sup> Find more information on the Website of the European Commission at [www.ey2010againstpoverty.eu](http://www.ey2010againstpoverty.eu)

<sup>2</sup> Find more information about Eurochild's Annual conference at [www.eurochild.org](http://www.eurochild.org) <sup>3</sup> Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to promote children's rights and improve the quality of life of children and young people. Eurochild's work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ECSWE is a member of EuroChild