

Forgetting about Auschwitz?

Remembrance as a Difficult Task of Moral Education *

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„Forgetting about Auschwitz“ is a highly difficult and an extremely sensitive topic. Even posing the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ might be an offence to all those who had to suffer from German Nazism or are still suffering from it because they have lost their parents, grandparents, children, etc. So let me hasten to say that it is precisely out of concern for this suffering that I am asking the question. It is in fact my concern that Auschwitz might be forgotten unless we pose this awkward question.

A couple of years ago the need for answering such questions became very obvious to me. Karl Ernst Nipkow and I had been asked to prepare a paper for this Journal which was to describe moral education in W. Germany. Among other topics this paper included a historical overview of the development of moral education in Germany which of course led us to the question of what to say about the Third Reich. Convinced that this period of German history has nothing to offer which would be of value for a philosophy of moral education we only included the following paragraph¹:

„Unfortunately, this movement (i. e., the reform movement of the 1920s; F. S.) came to an early end when Hitler came to power in Germany. The time between 1933 and 1945 was characterized by totalitarian forms of indoctrination and uniformity taking the place of ethical education.“

While I still think that this is true, I am also aware that this short paragraph was far from enough. I am indeed grateful that one British reader of this article sent us a postcard reminding us of the fact that writing about moral education in Germany cannot be done adequately without taking up the issue of ‚Education after Auschwitz‘ as Theodor W. Adorno, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School of Sociology, once put it.²

The second reason why I feel that I should address this topic is at the same time personal and political. I was born 1954, nine years after the War. In many ways my

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¹ Nipkow, K. E. and Schweitzer, F. (1985). „Moral education in West Germany“, J. Moral Educ. 14, 3, 183 – 93, quote p. 197.

² Adorno, T. W. (1971). „Erziehung nach Auschwitz“. In: Erziehung zur Mündigkeit. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, S. 88 – 104.

political biography was shaped, as a youth, in the late 1960s. For me and many others of my generation this means that becoming conscious of political issues entailed the realization that our generation, that we ourselves, were the daughters and sons of parents and grandparents who had been the people of the Third Reich and who, in one way or the other, had been responsible, be it for Auschwitz itself or be it for letting it happen, by not becoming active against it.

To become aware of one's origins and of the questionable character of the German tradition might be thought of as an humiliating experience. For many of my generation, however, this was probably not the case. Rather, we took it as further proof of the need for a different culture and politics which, given the general atmosphere of the late 1960s, seemed plausible enough anyway. So the matter was such – we were the new generation against the dated establishment which had proven its moral inacceptability through its very own past.

Although in the meantime I have come to realize that it is not quite so easy to come to terms with tradition and origin, the 1960s still made the Auschwitz question something like a lifetime issue for me as well as for many others of my generation. This could be called a special responsibility which arises from being a German after the War. It is in some ways a special commitment to an issue which we cannot escape, but can either deny and so fail to live up to our position in history, or we can take up in order to face it.

In saying this I also realize that Germans cannot do this by themselves. Auschwitz was a crime against humanity – it was not just an internal flaw in the history of one particular people or nation. A commitment to this issue therefore necessarily entails an international dialogue, as difficult and hard a task this might prove to be for all who are to participate in this kind of exchange.

1. Posing the Question: ‚Forgetting about Auschwitz‘ or ‚The Return of Nazism‘?

Why does this paper not concentrate on Neo-nazism, as contemporary forms of Nazi orientations and attitudes have rightfully been called? The reason is not that I would like to overlook or to deny this phenomenon, which is to be found among W. German youth. Rather it is my conviction that while the issue of Neo-nazism only applies to a small group of young people, the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ refers to all young people in W. Germany. Being fixated on the question of Neo-nazism could therefore amount to missing our task as educators in respect of most of the younger generation.

As I am aware that this is contrary to much of what press reports have suggested over the years, it seems appropriate to have a closer look at some empirical findings in order to support my point of view.

There is a clear tendency which is supported by most recent studies on youth in W. Germany that Neo-nazism is only to be found among a small minority. Depending on what question exactly is asked, the estimates range between approximately one and five percent of W. German youth, with a noticeable decline in numbers between the 1950s and 1980s. According to an overview of the data currently available this minority is not to be seen as the tip of an iceberg. Rather they are to be considered as

an isolated group living among peers who in fact are highly critical of Neo-nazi attitudes. According to this interpretation, the attention which has been given to this phenomenon in the press is therefore not due to its size or significance but rather to the kinds of actions these people take and which are highly publicizable.³

Other researchers have questioned this optimistic interpretation by pointing out that from the beginning many of the survey studies have been confined to what is most visible – that is, to the organized forms of Neo-nazi or extremist youth. According to this critical point of view, much of what is underneath the surface and is less palpable has been neglected.⁴

I think this criticism has to be taken seriously. It is in fact not enough just to look at spectacular but nevertheless confined events or at the individual actions of particular groups. Rather it seems to me, we have to ask about German political culture as a whole. We have to ask about how this culture deals with its past and, more specifically, how this past is related to the younger generation in education.

The need to ask this question has recently again become obvious through a series of political statements and events. These include the joint visit of the American President Reagan and the German Chancellor Kohl to the cemetery of Bitburg, which, for many, was a sign that for the neo-conservative governments of the 1980s the political and military loyalty of Western countries is to yield reconciliation with whatever past these countries might be burdened. Added to this is German Chancellor Kohl's statement in Israel about the 'mercy of being born too late' by which he seemed to imply that post-War Germans can have no responsibility for what their parents have done. And there is finally the renewed concern with a German national identity as it is highlighted by the conservative German politician, Franz-Josef Strauss, who said:

„41 years have passed, soon it will be 42, since the end of World War II. It is high time now that we step out of the shadow of the Third Reich and out of the foul atmosphere of Hitler and that we again become a normal nation.“

Such political statements about the „restoration of national identity“⁶ for Germany are of course also meant to set the parameters of education. They entail an interpretation of our current situation and of the corresponding tasks for education. And while they are mostly indicative of a neo-conservative political orientation they also entail a number of questions which are in fact hard to answer and which have been widely neglected.

The most crucial of these is the question, why young people born 10, 20 or even 30 years after the War should be concerned with this past. Can there be guilt which

³ Zinnecker, J. (1985). „Politik, Parteien, Nationalsozialismus“. In: Jugendliche und Erwachsene '85. Generationen im Vergleich. Vol. III. Ed. Jugendwerk der Dt. Schell. Leverkusen: Leske & Budrich, 321 ff.; cf. Allerbeck, K. and Hoag, W. (1985). Jugend ohne Zukunft? Einstellungen, Umwelt, Lebensperspektiven. München and Zürich: Piper, 135.

⁴ Heitmeyer, W. (1987). Rechtsextremistische Orientierungen bei Jugendlichen. Empirische Ergebnisse und Erklärungsmuster einer Untersuchung zur politischen Sozialisation. Weinheim and München: Juventa.

⁵ Quoted according to Hennig, E. (1988). Zum Historikerstreit. Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Faschismus? Frankfurt/M.: Athenäum, 100. All translations here and in the following are mine.

⁶ According to Hennig (note 5), p. 100.

reaches across the generations? Do German youth have a special responsibility which is different from that of young people in other countries? And is the responsibility different in the case of the Third Reich than, say, in the case of World War I or the wars of the 19th Century? And how are educators to teach or to awaken such responsibility or even a sense of guilt?

2. Education after Auschwitz

„That Auschwitz be never again, this is the very first demand of education“. This statement is the opening sentence of Th. W. Adorno's famous 1966 radio speech on „Education after Auschwitz“⁷. And Adorno continues by saying that this demand is so much more important than all other demands on education that there needs to be no attempt at giving reasons for it. „To give reasons for it“, he says, „would itself be somewhat monstrous in the light of the monstrosity which has happened“. And he repeats his view that „all debates about educational ideals are idle and are of no import compared to this one that Auschwitz shall not happen again.“

Hearing or reading these sentences today one might assume that Adorno is just speaking out of moral outrage and personal abhorrence. But Adorno's conviction, that Auschwitz and the threat of its future repetition in fact entail a supreme goal for education, is not just based on such personal feelings (understandable as this might be in the case of an author who during the Third Reich had to give up much of his work and became a refugee in exile). For Adorno, however, it was his social scientific view of Auschwitz and of modern society as a whole which was at the base of his statement. For him, Auschwitz was the peak of the barbarian outbursts of violence which the dark side of modernity can produce. Auschwitz then not only means a monstrosity of the past but is the catastrophe which is ever present in modernity. In this perspective Auschwitz is not our past. Rather we, as inhabitants of modernity, inescapably are, and will be, the contemporaries of Auschwitz.

The consequences which Adorno suggests for education are roughly a summary conclusion from his famous studies on the „Authoritarian Personality“. They are aimed at helping the child to become a non-authoritarian and enlightened personality who is truly capable of loving and caring.

Rather than looking at Adorno's educational suggestions in more detail which would lead us on to a different set of questions, I would like to continue with a second statement on „Education after Auschwitz“. This statement was published in 1986 and is meant to be an update of Adorno's views of the 1960's. It was written by Christoph Wulf, a West-Berlin philosopher of education.⁸ Wulf starts out by saying that Adorno's lecture „has not lost its actual meaning at all“: Given ecological destruction and nuclear armament it has become more plausible that civilization itself produces barbarism. „So it appears more likely than unthinkable that humanity will destroy itself“.

⁷ Adorno (note 2)

⁸ Wulf, C. (1986). „Erziehung und Bildung nach Auschwitz angesichts der katastrophalen Seite der Moderne“. In Heitkampfer, P. and Huschke-Rhein, R. (Eds). *Allgemeinbildung im Atomzeitalter*. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz, 138 - 50.

Wulf then goes on to suggest that we should take „Auschwitz as a metaphor“ – that is, as a metaphor „for the catastrophe produced by humans for humans“⁹. And this catastrophe is, according to Wulf, still threatening humanity. Therefore Wulf is aiming at a reversal of modern culture and finally at overcoming modernity itself for the sake of a postmodern age.

What interests me in Wulf's statement is his understanding of Auschwitz as a metaphor. Wulf himself seems to feel somewhat uneasy with his own suggestion. He hastens to add that this suggestion is „not to generalize and so dissolve the historical guilt which Germans have taken upon themselves through the systematical murder of Jews“. – But what then does it mean to make Auschwitz a metaphor? Does metaphorical language not necessarily imply that a word is taken out of its original context in order to be used in a different one and with a new and different meaning?

To call Achilles a lion, as Aristotle did in his „*Rhetorics*“ when he tried to explain the nature of metaphorical language, did not only make Achilles look strong but also produced or maintained a distorted image of the lion who thereafter was understood as the Achilles warrior of nature. To take Auschwitz as a metaphor as Wulf suggests must therefore appear questionable. To call a nuclear holocaust the Auschwitz of today – would that not amount to abusing the death and suffering of all the victims by metaphorically putting ourselves in their places, so making ourselves the self-appointed victims of Auschwitz? – Whoever makes Auschwitz a metaphor will in fact, as Wulf says, run the risk of „generalizing“ and so „dissolving“ the historical concreteness of Auschwitz.

Adorno's view of an „Education after Auschwitz“ avoids the difficulties of metaphorical interpretation. For him, Auschwitz represents a threat which is present but at the same time is a concrete event of the past. Present and past are not held together by metaphorical continuity but are connected through historical and social continuity of the context of modernity. For Adorno, it is the same kind of modernity in which we are living today and which has produced the monstrosity of Auschwitz.

While this point of view is certainly more convincing than the metaphorical interpretation, it still remains over and above the more concrete question of the specific meaning of Auschwitz in the educational process between the generations. Adorno's view equally applies to all inhabitants of modernity. But it does not focus on the younger generation or on the special situation of German youth.

3. Auschwitz and the Sequence of Generations

One of the most fundamental aspects of education is the relationship between the generations. Intergenerational change is what in many ways produces the need for education. What does the sequence of generations mean for the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“?

Much to my own surprise not much research has been done to clarify what Auschwitz means to different generations in W. Germany. This is even more surprising as the intergenerational background of current debates like, for instance, the so-called

⁹ *ibid.* 139

„Historians’ Debate“ about the uniqueness of Auschwitz in history and about its possible explanations seem rather obvious.¹⁰ There was, for instance, in 1987 a series of interviews with the children of fathers who had been in high positions during the Third Reich. These interviews were undertaken by a young Jewish journalist and researcher who published them under the provocative title „Born Guilty“. ¹¹ Also in 1987 a number of accounts have been published which were given by the „Children of the Culprits“ as one author calls them. ¹²

These interviews and accounts clearly indicate how much the relationship to the Third Reich is embedded in an intergenerational context. They also indicate the psychological difficulties of intergenerational relationships which are enmeshed with history. First of all such books and statements come from people whose fathers have been highly involved in the political system of the Third Reich. But I think that what they are trying to express points to a more general experience which is to be found among most people in W. Germany. By this I mean the generation into which one is born which entails a certain relationship to the past.

To give just a sketch of what this means I will distinguish three different generations and ask about their different relationships to the past of National Socialism. A more detailed analysis would of course have to differentiate between several age groups within these generations. But even looking at just three different generations can highlight some of the educational problems.

First then, there is the generation of those who were adults in the years between 1933 und 1945, and who, in one way or another, have been culprits, at least potentially. According to contemporary observations of the 1950s, this generation was for the most part unable or unwilling to regret, or even to remember, their own past. There are very few signs of a readiness to repent or change and to give up and mourn the false ideals of former times. Rather this generation was suffering from an „Inability to Mourn“ as a famous book by the W. German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich put it in 1967. ¹³

The second generation to be considered here is formed by the daughters and sons of this first generation of potential culprits. They were either too young to have consciously experienced the Third Reich or they were in fact born after the War. This is my own generation, and, as pointed out earlier in this paper, it was the special experience of this second generation in their adolescence that coming to terms with their parents was deeply connected with the realization of what an atrocious past their parents had to account for.

There is one personal memory which makes this quite clear to myself. In order to embarrass our teachers in high school (which in W. Germany lasts to the age of 19) we would sometimes sing Nazi hymns during class. There was certainly no Neo-nazi motivation behind this. Rather,

¹⁰ cf. Henning (note 5), p. 83ff.

¹¹ Sichrovsky, P. (1987). *Schuldig geboren. Kinder aus Nazifamilien*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

¹² Von Westernhagen, D. (1987). *Die Kinder der Täter. Das Dritte Reich und die Generation danach*. München: Kösel.

¹³ Mitscherlich, A. and M. (1967). *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*. München: Piper.

without clearly understanding what we were doing, we enjoyed the complete helplessness of our teachers who were suddenly confronted with a problem which their generation had so often successfully avoided.

Although this example might sound rather hilarious it should not be assumed that the children's generation's relationship to the past of their parents was easy or relaxed. I think Dörte von Westernhagen is right when she assumes ¹⁴,

„that practically speaking the whole of the second generation has to struggle with the problems of a deeply ambivalent formation of ideals, just as if all of us had to face the dilemma: Did we, as adolescents, not have to despise our parents for the sake of our own self-respect? And did we, as children, at the same time not have to love them so unconditionally as each child needs to and wants to do first of all, in order to be oneself able to love later on and to achieve moral integrity ...?“

I think that this interpretation of the children's generation's experience of being caught between adolescent rejection and childhood attachment is quite correct. Maybe it is exactly this stalemate of rejection and attachment which is behind the special concern with the past which can be found in this generation.

While for this second generation the Third Reich and Auschwitz as the epitome of its monstrosity were of an ambivalent but nevertheless existential importance in their formation of personal identity, the same is most likely no longer true for the third generation, that is, the generation of today's youth born between 1965 and 1975. What distinguishes them from either the first or the second generation is that their relationship to the time between 1933 and 1945 is necessarily more distant and that there is no direct intergenerational link as was the case for the second generation.

How does this generation of grandchildren feel about Auschwitz? I have already mentioned that the number of young people who are adherents of Neo-nazi movements is rather small and that they are an isolated group. What about the majority? What do they know and how do they feel about the Third Reich?

According to survey data, they feel that they are better informed about National Socialism and Hitler than their parents do. Interestingly enough it is the school which for them has become „the most general means of transmission of this part of recent history. Ninety-three percent name school classes as their source of information“. Surprisingly there seems to be a lasting interest in dealing with this part of the past. According to the same survey data this interest is even growing: „A great majority (75 percent) of the young people suggest dealing“ with this part of the past „while half of the adults would like to leave the issue aside“ ¹⁵.

Is this renewed interest due to a positive fascination? There seems to be in fact a certain fascination with Hitler as a person or as a kind of „sick genius“. But today's youth in W. Germany are very clear in their negative judgement about National Socialism. ¹⁶

Although such data might be interpreted optimistically, they could still indicate no more than a surface phenomenon. What, for instance, do young people mean when they reject National Socialism?

¹⁴ Von Westernhagen (note 12), p. 157.

¹⁵ Zinnecker (note 3), p. 336, 339f.

¹⁶ *ibid.* 343, 353.

Another study¹⁷ quotes a young woman saying:

„One should be aware of what has happened in the past. I reject everything that was going on then. I do not repress anything. After all I do everything so that something like that will not happen again. But in no way whatsoever do I feel responsible for what happened then.“

The author of this study interprets this as follows:

„As representatives of a new generation they don't want to have anything to do anymore with the guilt of previous generations. What is lacking is the awareness of a shared German history for which one should be responsible and from which one should draw conclusions for the present.“

4. Searching for Moral Understanding: Liability – Responsibility – Guilt

The attitude of young Germans described in the previous section leads to the question of how today's young people can relate to Auschwitz in a moral way. In his speech of May 8th 1985, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, the President of W. Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, maintained that young Germans „cannot confess a guilt of their own for actions which they have not done“. And he continues, that nevertheless all Germans have „to accept the past“ because all are involved in its „consequences and are made liable for it“¹⁸.

„Not guilty – but liable“, this seems to be the central message which the presidential address holds for young people. While I do think that there is some truth in this point of view, I nevertheless consider it as insufficient for moral education. *Liability* is not necessarily a moral concept. Rather it is a legal concept which presupposes that one person can be forced to pay some kind of reparation to another. It does not presuppose that the person who is so made liable agrees to the legal constraint internally or subjectively. Internal and subjective consent will in fact be unlikely when a claim to liability is not based on one's own actions but is inherited from another generation. There seems to be some assumption of collective guilt involved in this kind of liability and such a collective understanding is contrary to our modern democratic notion of the person. Here the person is to be seen as an individual who is born without privileges but also without any discrimination as to origin.

Maybe it is for such reasons that in a later section of the presidential address a second concept is introduced which goes beyond liability. „The young people are not responsible for what happened then. But they are responsible for what becomes of it in history.“¹⁹ This notion of *responsibility* is closer to how young Germans think of themselves. As reported in the previous section of this paper, they accept, in part, their moral and political responsibility to prevent the monstrosities of the past being repeated. Such responsibility of course includes the prevention of a second Auschwitz. But there is no special reference to Auschwitz as such, nor do young Germans have

¹⁷ Kiersch, G. (1986). *Die jungen Deutschen. Erben von Goethe und Auschwitz*. Opladen. Leske & Budrich, p. 31.

¹⁸ Von Weizsäcker, R. (1986). „Ansprache des Bundespräsidenten Richard von Weizsäcker am 8. Mai anlässlich des 40. Jahrestages der Beendigung des Zweiten Weltkrieges“. In Gill, U. and Steffani, W. (Eds). *Eine Rede und ihre Wirkung*. Berlin: Rainer Röll, p. 180.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 191.

a special responsibility which would be different from that of people all over the world. Is this then a subtle way of accepting responsibility but still „forgetting about Auschwitz“? Is this some kind of seductive way of „learning from Auschwitz“, thus becoming a morally justified subject – an „ideal moral agent“, as it were, without any particular legacies from the past?²⁰

Such questions lead back to the more far-reaching but also more difficult notion of *guilt*. This notion would in fact imply a personal relationship to the past. But for exactly this reason it seems to be inapplicable here from the beginning. Personal involvement is to be excluded in the case of those who were not even born at a given time.

Some have tried to apply the notion of guilt to our contemporary situation by introducing the idea of a „third guilt“²¹. In this way of thinking the first guilt was to allow for National Socialism to come to and to stay in power. The second guilt was the permanent repression of the political and moral as well as the cultural aspects of National Socialism. Today's third guilt then is the repression and distortive interpretation of the scientific results of historical and political research concerning National Socialism.

This model of three different kinds or stages of guilt goes beyond the idea of responsibility. It always refers back to the concrete historical situation of the Third Reich and it does not reduce Auschwitz to a metaphor. It might therefore offer a perspective which could be useful for education today.

A philosophical study which was published in 1946 by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers offers another helpful understanding of guilt. Jaspers first sets out to deny the idea of a „collective guilt“ which was much discussed after the War. For Jaspers moral guilt is a question of moral character. Moral guilt is therefore necessarily personal and cannot be shared by a whole people.²² With this, Jaspers argues against all forms of collective thinking which in history has often been the basis for barbarism and slavery. But then Jaspers continues by saying that his refusal of collective guilt should not be used by Germans as a cheap wholesale defence. In order to avoid such a defensive use of his analysis he attempts to arrive at an acceptable understanding of a guilt which is shared by a whole people. He argues²³

„that the behaviour which led to liability is based on a set of political circumstances which so to speak possess a moral character because they co-determine the morality of the individual ... There is something like a moral collective guilt in the way of life of a population in which I as an individual participate and from which the political realities arise.“

Such guilt which is inherent in a particular „way of life“ and culture would also amount to a special responsibility of all those who, at whatever time, live in and share in this culture. It would imply that even future generations of Germans need to be aware of what monstrosities their cultural legacies entail.

²⁰ Cf. Markovits, A. S. (1986). „Was ist das „Deutsche“ an den Grünen? Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung als Voraussetzung politischer Zukunftsbewältigung“. In Kallscheuer, O. (Ed). Die Grünen - Letzte Wahl? Vorgaben in Sachen Zukunftsbewältigung. Berlin: Rotbuch, p. 146 ff.

²¹ Cf. Hennig (note 5), p. 29ff.

²² Jaspers, K. (1987). Die Schuldfrage. Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands. München: Piper.

²³ *ibid.* p. 51f.

5. National Identity

The previous paragraph focussed on moral understanding and on testing different moral concepts for their applicability and adequacy to the task of moral education. The focus on moral reasoning is, however, not to imply that the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ is primarily a theoretical or philosophical issue. Rather, there are strong political motives of power and influence behind it. Earlier in this paper I quoted the German politician Franz-Josef Strauss demanding that „we step out of the shadow of the Third Reich“ in order to restore national identity and „again become a normal nation“. Dan Diner, a German historian, is right when he considers Auschwitz as the ultimate stumbling block for such attempts of national restoration. „But the way for a return of Germany to herself, to a ‚national identity‘ which is positively charged, is barred by an event which is inaccessible to all integration: ‚Auschwitz‘“. ²⁴

German neo-conservatives like, for instance, pollster Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann are eager to re-establish a German national identity. ²⁵ Noelle-Neumann deplores, that the fact, according to her data, young Germans are consistently less proud of being German than their European and American counterparts are of their respective nationalities. Her claim is that the happiness of individuals and the welfare of nations equally depend on a national identity which is well established. Curiously enough, Noelle-Neumann does not even consider the possibility that the somewhat lower degree of national pride found among young Germans could be a legitimate sign of their historical remembrance.

Given this political background it is clear that we will not arrive at a sufficient answer to our topic unless we can say how Auschwitz and the issue of national identity should be related. Is there a way to national identity which would not presuppose „forgetting about Auschwitz“?

Usually a national identity arises most of all from the pride which one takes in the assumed greatness and in the achievements of the nation to which one belongs. This reminds us of the dangerous connection between national identity and nationalism in the sense of an aggressive self-image which necessarily includes the subordination of all others who do not share in this superior identity. Such an understanding of national identity can only be achieved at the expense of the past and its atrocities. In this perspective national identity and historical remembrance seem to contradict and to exclude each other. If, on the other hand, we follow Karl Jaspers' claim that historical responsibility can only arise out of the realization that one inescapably belongs to a culture and shares in the dangers inherent in this culture, then a German national identity could also be a presupposition for not „forgetting about Auschwitz“. Such a national identity could, however, not only be based on the assumed greatness of one's nation but would also comprise what is definitively negative in the past and present of this nation. It would mean being aware that we are coming out of a history full of monstrosities. And it would mean that pride cannot exist in forgetting about

²⁴ Diner, D. (1987). „Zwischen Aporie und Apologie. Über Grenzen der Historisierbarkeit der Massenvernichtung“, *Babylon* 2, p. 25.

²⁵ Noelle-Neumann, E. and Köcher, R. (1987). *Die verletzte Nation. Über den Versuch der Deutschen, ihren Charakter zu ändern*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, p. 19ff.

these monstrosities in order to focus on greatness but can only consist in facing up to the negative in order to claim responsibility and to realize what guilt is inherent in our ways of life.²⁶

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to explore some of the aspects which the awkward and complex question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ entails for moral education. I have attempted to shed some light on the intergenerational processes involved and to test moral concepts for their adequacy to the task of moral education. Finally I have tried to locate these educational questions within the wider political context of neo-conservative attempts at national restoration. A certain understanding of guilt which goes beyond liability and responsibility appeared as the only viable, yet difficult and mostly unexplored, way to relate to Auschwitz in a moral manner. This understanding of guilt was shown to imply a responsibility for what we have done with the past and what awareness we have developed for the legacies inherent in our culture. Finally, it was suggested that a national identity which does not deny the monstrosities of the past could be the wider framework, in which such a moral education is to take place.

However, I am by no means sure if there is any reason for optimism. Sure enough, German schools have included Auschwitz in their curriculum. In History as well as in Religious Education Auschwitz has become an important topic. But will schools succeed in not making Auschwitz just another topic of the curriculum, just as if it were like talking about the Romans or about the Middle Ages? And will even the best education succeed in steering against the currents of a culture of denial and of forgetfulness and against the increasing impact of a politics which is aimed at the restoration of national identity at the expense of history and by just stepping „out of the shadow of the Third Reich“?

It is possible that even the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ presupposes to much.²⁷ We can only forget what we have known and what we have been aware of. Have Germans ever become aware of Auschwitz or are we still at the point where the first step is to really learn about Auschwitz?

I am in no position to answer this last set of questions. But it seems clear to me that we as educators will not be prepared for facing the question of „forgetting about Auschwitz“ if our moral concepts and ideas are not developed in the context of such questions.

²⁶ Cf. Habermas, J. (1987). *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp; „Historikerstreit“. *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*. München and Zürich: Piper (1987).

²⁷ Brumlik, M. (1988). „Im Niemandsland des Verstehens. Was kann heißen: Sich der Shoah zu erinnern und ihre Opfer zu betrauern?“ In: Eschenhagen, W. (Ed). *Die neue deutsche Ideologie. Einsprüche gegen die Entsorgung der Vergangenheit*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 78ff.