

THE ROLE OF «CENTROPE» IN OVERCOMING THE REMINISCENCES OF TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

In order to understand the most successful anti-totalitarian practices of the modern world, we need to learn about the achievements of civil society institutions that have been at work in the tasks of overcoming the reminiscences of totalitarian regimes. Among the latter is «Centropa» [1], a nonprofit organization that has made a significant contribution to the studies of Jewish history. In order to create and preserve a powerful narrative made of real-life stories of Jewish people, this organization has interviewed Jews from the Central and Eastern Europe, and Sephardic communities of Greece, Turkey, and the Balkans. These interviews will be used for the purposes of education of future generations about the horrors of Holocaust.

Considering the possibility of traumatic memories coming back in connection with the events of the Holocaust, every participant was asked to only generally talk about the most important events of the twentieth century which they remembered. The interviews continued in the direction of events of Holocaust only in cases when the informants were inclined to recreate those events as parts of their lives or the lives of their relatives, were. Simultaneously with the interviews, photos of Jewish families of the twentieth century were being collected and scanned. Some of the most powerful stories came from short family films. The format of these films allows to use them in various educational institutions in the teaching of such disciplines as history, law, language, ethics, literature etc. Centropa's database includes 1,200 interviews, 22,000 family photos, as well as 30 biographical and 10 documentaries which are placed at open access [2].

Centropa's materials belongs, first of all, to teachers. Teachers are given the priority of using these materials before anybody else. To help teachers choose the right film, content, or teaching method, each film is accompanied with the background information that explains how this film can be used in the classroom setting. In order to improve their professional skills in teaching European-Jewish history of the twentieth century, teachers are encouraged to participate in regional and national seminars, as well as the annual international academy meetings organized by the Centropa team. These activities allow teachers to present personal achievements, get acquainted with achievements of fellow teacher, exchange ideas, participate in open educational and cultural dialogue, and find partners from other countries for creation and implementation of joint educational projects in the future.

Centropa's films also offer significant informational and critical potential to their second main target audience – students. These materials also motivate students to create their own projects that focus on family histories, local Jewish history, civil society development and intercultural dialogue. Students can participate in international competitions for innovative and creative projects, such as, films, graphic stories, photo stories, social and any other initiatives, etc. Students can also communicate with fellow students from other countries.

Connecting personal experience of using Centropa's films in teaching historical and legal disciplines with sharing of ideas with colleagues from all over the world during seminars and annual Summer Academy meetings, significantly helps to increase expected learning outcomes. It is also important to note that these films contribute to the strive of newly independent states to overcome the reminiscences of totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.

The most successful, in our opinion, in terms of revealing the phenomenon of totalitarianism are the films «Return to Rivne: A Holocaust Story» (the main characters – Shelly Weiner, Raya Kizhnerman) and «Surviving Stalin's Gulag» (the main character – Haya-Lea Detink). The films demonstrate how the destructive totalitarian machines of Nazi and Soviet regimes have crippled the lives generations of Jewish people. Generally, those films are divided into three parts: the first part describes lives of Jewish families before the events of World War II, the second part describes lives of Jewish families during the war, and the third – lives of those people after the war to the present. This continuity makes both films especially relevant to the dynamic of contemporary complex society.

The proposed films provide an opportunity to understand the essence of totalitarianism; they also allow to compare the two examples of totalitarian systems – Soviet and Nazi. These films show the similarity of the daily life of Jews and lives of other nationalities and ethnic communities who all shared the «same» experience of living in the same settlements in the prewar period. Jews took just as active part in socio-economic life of the cities as other ethnic communities did. Significant socio-economic contributions and unique cultural influences of Jewish population have definitely impacted the socio-cultural environment of the whole region. Tied together, these facts teachers and student to several important conclusions: Jewish history is a part of our common shared history; the Holocaust is a tragedy not only for the Jews, but our shared tragedy; Stalin's repressions affected the entire country which at that period consisted of many nationalities and ethnic groups; Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism equally are evidence of an inability to overcome the reminiscences of totalitarian times.

Centropa's films provide students with a unique opportunity to get acquainted with the phenomenon of totalitarianism, its manifestations and culture. These films also allow all of us, teachers and students alike, to learn about the historical epoch not from the pages of a school textbook, but directly through the prism of human life. These films allows us, teachers and students alike, to avoid schematism both in our understanding of totalitarianism and our the perception of history.

Centropa's materials «humanize» history and thus teach us to perceive that «history» not as a list of facts, events, or phenomena listed in certain chronological sequence. Instead, these materials require us to go beyond the perception of an average disengaged passive observer and ponder directly into history as a narrative of «real-life» human experience.

Centropa's work allows the student to «dive» into the lives of the films' heroes; live the lives together with the heroes, their families and friends, experience the tragic moments of those lives, feel and understand pain and despair, hope and loss. These films make students and teachers alike rethink their attitudes to the most mundane things by showing those things through the prism of a very different spectrum of emotions. Centropa's films provide an opportunity to understand that behind each fact, event, or phenomenon there is a life story of a specific person (or a whole nation); there is a story of a totalitarian or authoritarian regime as well as story of consequences of those regimes on both global and individual levels that ironically were determined by actions of a particular person (or a group of people). Once we understand this idea, it will inevitably lead to the fact that all of us, teachers and students alike will sooner or later face the moment of our personal responsibility for the life of a particular person (or the entire nation). Centropa's materials help the learner to understand that overcoming the reminiscences of totalitarianism or authoritarianism depends, first of all, on his/her own personal awareness of and his or her personal active position on this issue.

Considering everything stated above, the role of Centropa in initiating and maintaining intercultural dialogues as means of overcoming the reminiscences of totalitarian regimes, in developing democratic values, and in balancing of cultural memory is crucially important. Centropa's works must become a good contribution to modern tools of scientists and teachers.

References

1. Centropa. <https://www.centropa.org/about-centropa/who-we-are>
2. Educational programs: preserving jewish memory – bringing history to life. <https://www.centropa.org/about-us/educational-programs>