

The diaries and drawings of Jewish children and their affective dimension: a historical-comparative survey

*Diari e disegni di bambini ebrei e la loro dimensione affettiva:
un'indagine storico-comparativa*

Carla Callegari

Associate Professor of History of Pedagogy / Department of Philosophy Sociology Education Applied Psychology – FISPPA / University of Padua (Italy) / carla.callegari@unipd.it

abstract

Since the 1990s, there has been a notable increase in the publication of the diaries and graphic and pictorial productions of Jewish children and adolescents who experienced the impossible ordeal of life in the European ghettos and the drama of deportation to the death camps.

These diaries are written by young people of various European nationalities who were intent on surviving the brutal conditions of everyday life, holding on to their humanity and their feelings despite living in countries where racial prejudice was endemic.

The purpose behind the historical and comparative study of the volumes examined, which will highlight the historical context of Nazi-fascist Europe on the one hand, and personal forms of resistance on the other, is to show how reading this material can help children and adolescents of today to reflect on their feelings and reactions, and consequently provide a valuable affective/emotional educational tool.

Keywords: *Diaries and drawings, Resilience, Affective-emotional education, Comparative study, Jewish children*

Dagli anni '90, c'è stato un notevole aumento nella pubblicazione dei diari e delle produzioni grafiche e pittoriche di bambini e adolescenti ebrei che hanno vissuto l'impossibile esperienza della vita nei ghetti europei e il dramma della deportazione nei campi di sterminio.

Questi diari sono scritti da giovani di varie nazionalità europee che cercavano di sopravvivere alle condizioni brutali della vita quotidiana, aggrappandosi alla loro umanità e ai loro sentimenti nonostante vivessero in paesi in cui il pregiudizio razziale era endemico.

Lo scopo dello studio storico e comparativo dei volumi esaminati, che metterà in luce il contesto storico dell'Europa nazifascista da un lato, e le forme personali di resistenza dall'altro, è mostrare come la lettura di questo materiale possa aiutare bambini e adolescenti di oggi per riflettere sui loro sentimenti e reazioni, e di conseguenza fornire un prezioso strumento educativo affettivo / emotivo.

Parole chiave: Diari e produzioni grafiche, Resilienza, Educazione affettiva, Studio comparativo, Bambini ebrei

The diaries and drawings of Jewish children and their affective dimension: a historical-comparative survey

1. Resilience and empathy: diaries and drawings as educational tools

In European history, totalitarianism and the Second World War are emblematic of a dark period dominated by racial prejudice, and by a concept of social engineering that excluded entire segments of the population from the community, depriving them of all personal, social and civil rights, and even denying them the right to life itself (Dwork, 1999, p. 138).

For some, namely Jews, gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, the disabled, and political opponents of Hitler's regime, survival became impossible: these groups were condemned to live initially in the ghettos of major European cities like Warsaw or Lodz, then moved to transit camps, and ultimately to death camps. Mass arrests and deportations took place in almost all European countries at one time or another, involving varying percentages of the population according to the different degrees of opposition shown by individual governments. As Arendt observes (2000, pp. 169-186), the case of Scandinavian countries – and of Denmark in particular – is highly significant in that it offers proof that opposition to Nazi persecution, or even political opposition, was not only possible but actually achievable in practice. In places where people and governments were able to make a stand, whether this was based on a deep understanding of an unjust and painful human condition and a deep-rooted ethical awareness, on the Kantian warning that peace is founded on justice (Kant, 1795), or the Gospel message to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke, 10, 27), the act of rescue became viable and opened up the Talmudic promise that “whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world”.

This is an extremely important consideration from an educational standpoint, as forging personalities that are capable of compassion

and critical perception based on ethical judgement is as essential today as it was in the past.

The Jews, in particular, were deported mainly from Eastern Europe, from the *Shtetl*, the isolated villages where they already lived in isolation from the rest of the population, and where *pogroms* frequently occurred, subjecting the Jewish population to violent attacks and persecutions, as has been attested to by the many accounts from survivors who lived in that part of Europe at the time.

Children and adolescents were, without question, high on the list of those who were hit hardest by the brutal conditions in which they were forced to live: as Lidia Beccaria Rolfi, who was deported to Ravensbrück, and the historian Bruno Maida (1997) recount, their futures were shattered, and they were particularly targeted by the Nazis as it was they who embodied the hope of a subsequent rebirth (Maida, 2013).

These young people included Jews of various nationalities, who experienced the cruel impossibility of life in the European ghettos, as well as deportation to the death camps. Some kept diaries, wrote poetry, and left sketches and drawings that share common themes, providing silent witness to how inmates sought to withstand the terrible living conditions imposed on them and preserve their humanity and their feelings.

Since the 1990s, these diaries, poems and drawings have been published in ever greater numbers. As a result, there are many such records available today, some written or painted during imprisonment, others on returning from the death camps: examining them, we can discern the factors of resilience that enabled their authors to survive.

Resilience – the capacity to adapt and recover, allowing individuals to make the most of a traumatic experience in continuing to live their lives positively and dynamically (Malaguti, 2005, pp. 44-52) – can only be understood in relation to other people and to the trust and love that exist initially in a family context, then in other social relationships that are established during infancy and youth.

Being resilient means knowing how to interact even with an environment that may be difficult, hostile and possibly threatening to human life. It means not only facing up to and withstanding difficulties, but beyond that, repairing, building and managing to reorganize one's exist-

tence positively, despite having lived through traumatic situations. For a person who has suffered devastation, it signifies recovery and rehabilitation. To be resilient, therefore, the individual needs to accept and process the trauma, even when it may have been violent and destructive.

Among the resilience factors identified by Cyrulnik and Malaguti, the first, fortitude, is an individual and almost innate quality, but resilience is possible even for those who do not naturally possess this trait. Resilience – how to deal with discomfort and adversity without abandoning one's purpose in life, indeed turning negative experiences to one's own advantage (Cyrulnik, Malaguti 2005, pp. 132-139) – can be learnt and taught, especially to children.

Consequently, this possibility has an educational dimension that must be explored and defined insofar as it is possible, while at the same time allowing for that indefinable capacity of the human spirit to find improbable and even unimaginable resources when under extreme duress.

In short, resilience has much to do with the magnitude of possibility, of trust, of consideration and of acceptance, with the entertainment of hope and with utopia, all of which are fundamental pillars of education.

In the “Casita” – the model for promoting resilience proposed by the International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE) of Geneva, and subsequently modified and integrated by the Anglo-Saxon approach of the Bernard van Leer Foundation – the lowest level of the imaginary building, the basement, is defined by interpersonal relationships.

More specifically, the foundations of the building consist of the unconditional acceptance of the child as a person, irrespective of their behaviour, that exists in the sphere of informal relationships between family members and friends; the ground floor is provided by the ability to discover meaning and coherence in one's life; and the first floor consists of the self-esteem, skills and competences, and constructive humour which often materialize and take shape through apparently insignificant everyday gestures (Malaguti, 2005, pp. 180-181).

According to this model, the meaning of one's existence is discovered through acting out emotional, aesthetic, rational and even ethical experiences in the context of human relations.

The aim of this contribution is to explain and show, with the aid of

short examples, how a historical and comparative reading of the diaries in question can offer a worthwhile resource for children and young adults of today; something that can help them to reflect on their feelings and perceptions, and in the process, become an invaluable aid to their affective and emotional education, and their development of resilience factors.

In effect, one can agree with Rossi's statement: "that which is good, done well, worthy of being accomplished, can be appreciated not so much through theoretical knowledge as by *feeling*. Good is arrived at by following the itinerary of the affections" (2006, p. 25). An education based exclusively on rationalist criteria, that denies moral value to feelings, expects decision-making to be emotionally neutral and assumes sensibilities to be irrational components of the spirit, seems altogether unsuitable today. Conversely, giving visibility and importance "to the bond existing between *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos* [...] affirming that in sensibility one can identify the matrix of moral action" (2006, p. 25), signifies generating a sense of responsibility for one's fellow men and a readiness to care for them.

Children and adolescents today are exposed to two risks with regard to "feeling" emotions. The social emphasis placed on the "emotional man" and the consequently exaggerated search for strong, adrenalin-fuelled passions, can damage their sensibility and relationality and lead to the perils of a frenetic and uncontrolled life. On the other hand, the unremittingly morbid portrayal of suffering as a spectacle, highlighted not least by the media, often prevents them from truly connecting with that pain as a "favourable educational opportunity to experience other forms of knowledge and thought [...], to give affective depth to communication, to gain responsible and sympathetic languages" (Rossi, 2006, p. 118).

Becoming familiar, through reading, with the accounts of those who lived through the trauma of the concentration and death camps can offer two educational paths: on the one hand, prompting spontaneous and perhaps strong emotions, and demonstrating how to process them personally; on the other, learning about the pain, the thoughts and the behaviour of those who have experienced this trauma directly, to enable meaningful comparisons with one's own life experiences.

As Contini observes, reading a book or a poem or looking at a pic-

ture allows us to understand “from inside” what the characters are going through, and this indirect encounter with emotional experiences, whether related or depicted, enables the reader to acquire information relating to feelings and how they are lived and expressed, which belongs to the educational realm of the possible, and reduces the divergence between emotional and cognitive systems, allowing a positive interaction to develop between them (Contini, 1992, pp. 65-70).

In this sense, reading and viewing the diaries and images produced by young people during the years of racial persecution in Europe can provide an effective educational tool capable of generating empathy.

Before proceeding, however, the term “empathy” requires a definition for reference purposes. Bellingreri writes:

That which may be called the empathetic quality of a man or a woman consists in a certain capacity to identify with the thoughts and feelings of another person, who can be understood almost spontaneously, thanks to the “warm” nature of the emotion. [...] This means that we experience the feelings of another *as if* they were our own feelings; we “get into the skin” of the person communicating with us and it seems that we can see, feel and think almost as if we ourselves were “inside” that person (2013, pp. 11-12).

Empathy is therefore much more than an emotion: it is a feeling that brings with it new capacities for knowledge of the world, a virtue both ethical and dianoetic, which also has a physical and spatial significance since it implies the capacity to put oneself in the place of another at a given moment. Thus, it is clear that empathy pertains to the sphere of relationality and affectivity: with emotional resonance, the boundaries between two people almost vanish, allowing processes such as projection, introjection, identification, emotional contagion and imitation to take place. All this tends to consolidate one’s emotional-affective world, but there is also an ethical implication: empathy enables the subject to develop a moral vision of the world “that not only allows recognition of others as *different to oneself*, but also sees them as *intrinsically worthy*. The subject [...] becomes able to process a positive vision of the real world, in which sharing is perceived and sought as a value” (Bellingreri, 2013, p. 58).

And so, inducing empathy, not least through reading, becomes a basic educational goal that is concerned with the emotional side of a person, but also involves the ethical, both from the theoretical and from the practical standpoint, and is effectively at the root of the capacity to love (Bellingreri, 2006, pp. 64-66). Consequently, finding educational methods that can respond to this need means understanding the very nature of teaching as a creative and practical science that defines the educational tasks which enable people to acquire the skill of “good feeling” (Bellingreri, 2010, pp. 267-269; Bellingreri, 2007, pp. 103-156).

2. Diaries, poems, drawings: a comparative study

Children and adolescents who produced the written and pictorial documents presented here demonstrated the quality of resilience. As indicated above, the primary factor of resilience is a personal attribute: the strength to recover from what may be considered a definitive evil, as witnessed by Elie Wiesel, who relates that when searching for his father at Auschwitz, he thought:

“Don’t let me find him! If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and worry only about myself”. And straight away, I was eternally ashamed of myself (200117, p. 104).

The phrase “eternally ashamed of myself” suggests a feeling of irreversible self-reproach, a complete inability to forgive oneself for a cruel thought, albeit one formulated in an unimaginable and tragic situation that had destroyed even the deepest human relationships, those of the family.

Nonetheless, the life of Elie Wiesel, writer and winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1986, shows us that the episode in question – over time – fitted into a process of building resilience: not only did Wiesel revisit this tragic and inhuman experience in his memoirs and in his work *La nuit*, he also dedicated his life to the cause of peace, working not only as a philosopher and essayist, but also as a human rights activist.

Similarly Thomas Geve, who in 1943 at the age of thirteen was taken with his mother first to Auschwitz, then to the camp at Gross-Rosen and finally to Buchenwald, found himself seriously debilitated when he was ultimately freed on 11 April, 1945: he had lost his toenails as a result of the friction caused by direct contact with wooden clogs, and through malnutrition. In such a condition that he was unable to leave his hut, he stayed in block 29 for a month after the camp's liberation. During this period he made 79 miniature drawings, in colour and postcard sized, to illustrate the various aspects of life in a concentration camp.

Some examples are shown below: in the first, death seems to dominate reality; the second is remarkable for its depiction of a person coming into the camp as an individual and leaving it traumatized and depersonalized; the last example clearly illustrates the extreme and inconsolable loneliness of people who are continually exposed to the risk of losing their life. The crematorium suspended in the darkness, the person hanging in the infirmary and the bunker seem to leave no room for hope.

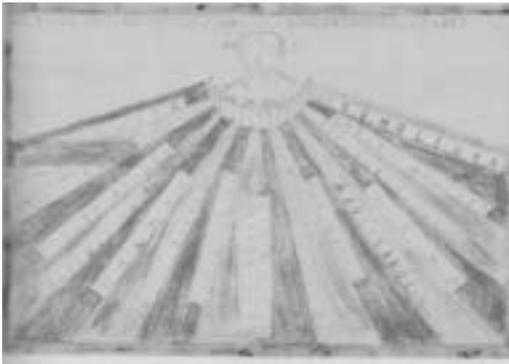


Figure 1. The death camps

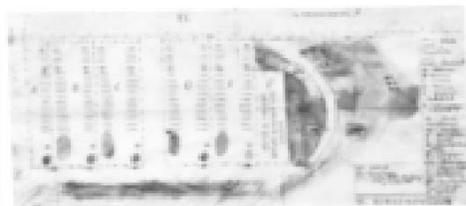


Figure 3. Map of the Birkenau camp



Figure 2. Disinfection and tattooing of deportees



Figure 4. The dangers. Left to right in the drawing: crematorium, epidemics, beating, bunker

What strikes the viewer is the clarity and inner strength of this adolescent, who faithfully reproduces the unimaginable, managing to re-process in such a short time the trauma he has experienced: in his maps, such as the one of the Birkenau camp in the third figure, one can make out the future civil engineer, but all of the images reveal that strength of character which enabled him, on joining his father in London in 1946, not only to start living again, but also to recoup the four years of school he had missed and to pass his final exams only a year later.

The resonance of these words and images might lead readers to a number of considerations. Knowing that someone of their own age has positively overcome such traumatic events can encourage them to come to terms with their own everyday difficulties and reassess the way they respond, with the knowledge that not everything can be explained rationally and scientifically, and that sometimes it is only in

solitude and silence that answers to their existential questions can be found.

Also, they are prompted to reflect on the importance of historical memory: remembering and reprocessing what has gone before helps us not only to comprehend what may seem incomprehensible because it is beyond human imagination, but also to understand that preventing the recurrence of those events – essentially planning the future, in effect – involves an acceptance of personal responsibility that cannot be delegated to others, and indeed can be neither avoided nor delayed.

A second resilience factor discernible in the writings and drawings by children of different nationalities is implicit in the unconditional love experienced through their family ties: Liliana Segre relates how in a situation where vengeance would probably be the most logical response, the impulses that lead her to choose a different code of conduct are rooted in the love and moral guidance she received during childhood:

There was a key moment in my life, a private episode in the epoch-making event I found myself living through. The commandant of that last camp, a merciless butcher, walking nearby – a tall and elegant man, I never knew his name – undressed down to his underpants, then proceeded to put on civilian clothes. He was going home to his wife and children. He was certainly unaware of my presence. After all, I was still only a Stück, a “piece”, a person of no consequence.

As he threw his pistol at my feet, with all the hate I had in me, and the memory of the violence I had undergone, invading my body, I thought for an instant “Now I’m going to bend down, pick up the gun, and in this total confusion, I’ll kill him”. I had been feeding on malice and vengeance for a long time. I thought that to shoot him then would be the right action at the right time, a fitting end to that story that had involved me both as a participant and as a witness. But it was no more than an instant. A moment of huge importance, defining my entire life, when I realized that never, for any reason in the world, would I be capable of killing. The realization that in my moment of extreme weakness, the ethics I had learned and the love I had received as a child prevented me from becoming like this man.

I could never have picked up that firearm and shot at the commandant of Malchow.

I had always chosen life. And having made this choice, it is impossible to take the life of another.

And from that moment, I was free.

Jona Oberski, deported as an infant with his mother and father, who later died in the camp, keeps alive the memory of the love that united his parents, and which both of them showered on him: I climbed up on my mother's lap. I put my arm round her neck. She hugged me tight. My father came over to us. "We'll make a circle of heads," he said. "That way we can give each other a kiss all at once." "That's just what we did" (Oberski, 1978, p. 18).

Though deeply scarred by the experience of the death camp, many years later Oberski managed to record the substance of it in his book *Childhood*, becoming a writer as well as a nuclear physicist.

This kind of narrative is certainly captivating and offers an example of inner strength: passages like these can stimulate young readers to recall and reassess their experiences of family life and of basic educational concepts such as, for example, the acceptance, emotional awareness and dialogue that form part of the learning process and are instrumental to the development of existential competence (Bellingreri, 2015, pp. 93-115). Armed with this skill, children and adolescents can respond to the world with confidence and openness, even when the world seems complex and incomprehensible in its workings – as is often the case nowadays.

The experience of Liliana Segre, for example, makes us reflect on the consequences of seeing a fellow being not as a person, but as a *Stück*, a thing, and this is something still very much in evidence today, even if it is engendered and manifested differently. As stated by Bauman (2005; 2008¹¹), in effect behaviour is often dictated by what one "feels" rather than by reason, and the danger is that feelings, like fear (Bauman, 2009), if left uncontrolled and uneducated, will ultimately condition our life, especially our relational life. And as Galimberti observes, "Those incapable of articulating the emotional alphabet [...] live their lives under the influence of an untrustworthy fear, and tend to exercise aggressive vigilance" (Galimberti, 2008⁴, p. 44).

Reading the experience of Oberski, one can reflect on the fact that the circumstances of each individual's life are unpredictable and the unthinkable can happen to any one of us: what will often make the difference is the ability to “accept one's own *shadow* with open arms” (Galimberti, 2008⁴, p. 54). This dark side that has touched our life and will be part of it forever, paradoxically, gives us the capacity to look pain in the face and continue on our way.

In the encounter with these texts and images, the mediation of an adult can be productive – not necessarily a teacher, but perhaps an educator or an adult with emotional insight who can give guidance on how to approach and reflect on them – but equally it can be a purely personal experience that puts the young readers in contact with their emotions as part of a self-educating process which can be defined as “looking after oneself” (Cambi, 2010).

The evocative power of poetry and images can be presented to young people precisely as an exercise in *cura sui*. Inge Auerbacher provides an example of this: deported to Terezin at the age of seven, she experienced extreme situations in the transit camp and related them in her poems, which she later went on to illustrate in 1986. One of these is Games:



Fig. 5. Games

Games

We were not like other children at play,
the future becoming more uncertain every day.
Our playground was a garbage heap,
and the treasures from it we'd reap.

[...]

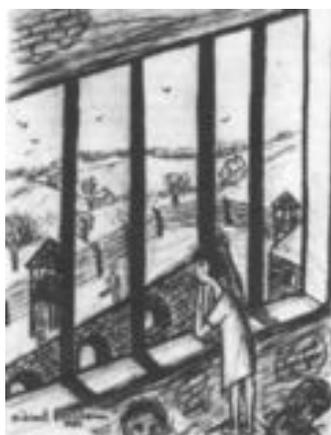
“don't run around and waste your energy,
save your shoes, don't use them foolishly!”
We played checkers on a hand-drawn board,
with black and white buttons we scored.

[...]

We saw carts piled with bodies roll along,
and turned our heads away to sing a song.

Purely by way of example, a simple observation invites us to consider the conditions of childhood in the world: the right to play, and often the right to life – both denied to Inge – are still denied today to millions of children, forcing them to live in dehumanizing situations which are often compounded by the indifference of adults, or worse, brought about by the violence of these same adults (Contini, Demozzi, 2016).

But despite everything, Inge maintains the ability to “see beyond” and writes poems like this one, in which she demonstrates the incredible capacity of the human spirit for recovery, stimulating the reader to look afresh at problems and difficulties, and offering tools with which to interpret reality and discover one’s own inner strength.



I wish

I wish I were a little bird,
up in the bright-blue sky that sings and flies
just where he will and no one asks him why
[...]

I wish I would wake up
To a new and brighter morn,
In another time, a different land,
And be reborn.

Figure 6 I wish

The ethical values of closeness and of care freely given emerge from the account of a twelve-year old Dutch boy, Dirk Van der Heide (pseudonym): during the war he was living in Amsterdam with his family, but then lost his mother when German bombs fell on the city. In his diary, he describes the event and the pain experienced like this:

Mother was killed when they bombed the hospital. [...] When Uncle Pieter gave me the news about her, I tried to run away. I wanted to go out into the street and fight the Germans, I don't remember everything I did. I went crazy (Holliday, 1995, p. 47).

Uncle Pieter subsequently managed to move his nephew Dirk and niece Keetje to safety, first in England, then by putting them on a ship that managed to evade the German U-boats and mines and take them to the United States. On arrival, one day out from the port of New York, something happened that restored Dirk's faith in humanity and enabled him to experience happiness after indescribable suffering:

when all the ships turned about face, it could be seen that everyone was frightened. [...] But then someone started shouting, pointing to the sky. There was a big airship above us. Written on it in large letters was "United States naval patrol number 14". We all shouted and applauded. I will never forget that number 14 and the wonderful sensation of being safe that it gave us. [...] Not a single bomb was dropped. Not even one. This is the reason why Keetje and I are now happy (Holliday, 1995, p. 57).

Once again, it is the emotional closeness of people that instils a sense of protection and faith in life, and brings to the fore positive feelings that had been forgotten.

3. Affective education and moral codes

An understanding of the importance of moral codes and the value of culture is evident in the diary of Petr Ginz, who died at Auschwitz aged sixteen. Indeed in Nazi-occupied Prague, he demonstrated not only that he understood the importance of moral codes, but also that he was able, by virtue of these same codes, to look out for others, such as, for example, school friends.

He also managed to maintain an extraordinary level of interest in culture, which he had already demonstrated in Prague, even endeavouring to continue his studies alone in the concentration camp at Terezin. In the camp, Petr and other boys housed in Home One of block L417 started the journal *Vedem* ("In the Lead"), in which they published feuilletons, poems and reflections expressing faith, and hope in the future:

They unjustly tore us away from the fertile land of work, joy and culture, which ought to have enriched our youth. In doing this they pursue a sole objective: to destroy us — not physically, but psychologically and morally. Will they succeed? Never! Deprived of cultural sources, we will create new ones. Separated from the wellsprings of our happiness, we will create a new life that exults with joy! (Pressburger, 2004, p. 13).

At times he is sustained by a dark sense of irony, that *gallows humour* we have identified as one of the factors of resilience.

To read Ginz's diary is therefore to rediscover the value in patterns of behaviour that under normal living conditions, even today might seem obvious and be taken for granted, such as going to school or being with friends... In effect, readers become able to appreciate how it is in precisely these situations that people can find out who they really are, above all by externalizing their affective and empathetic capacities through compassion (in the sense of “fellow feeling”) and mutual help.

By comparing the experience of these children and adolescents with their own existential situation, readers of today can find a basis for imagining paths in life that might offer solutions to the personal and social problems of the world in which they live (Rossi, 2015, p. 14).

The *proprium* of affective education lies in the intentionality of its contribution to the development of “self-awareness” as a force that produces humanity, of its “awareness of others” that leads to the acceptance and appreciation of otherness as a positive and enriching difference, and of its “awareness of life” as something always to be safeguarded and protected in all its forms (Rossi, 2006, p. 153), an awareness that generates that “common world” which, according to Edith Stein, we can all inhabit.

By encouraging the reading of these accounts, it becomes possible to educate people in the “culture of proximity” and coexistence, with each individual participating empathetically in the existential vicissitudes of others and defending their rights even when — or especially when — they seem to have none or have been deprived of them.

Affective education has long been neglected by Western cultures in favour of *Nous*, i.e. a “pure and ever active intellect”, and the fact of having given preference to the noetic mind has at the same time meant discarding the affections “relived only through the force of the

intellect over the will and therefore bound up in an openly constrictive and repressive process” (Cambi, 1994, p. 12). For a proper education of the feelings, one that can contribute to the ethical training of persons, being rooted not only in their way of *thinking*, but also in the way they most deeply “feel” the humanity in every being, new theories are needed, and those concerning mirror neurons could represent the next major frontier in this area. But this education also needs new teaching practices, that are capable of impacting on young people’s behaviour and building a society that has respect for common values and allows disengagement, if necessary, from the expectations of the social group in favour of moral values that the individual freely chooses and fully commits to.

In recent decades, a great deal of importance has been given to sites of remembrance, like the Shoah Memorial in Milan (Pasta, 2017), and to accounts given by the last survivors of the death camps, as their voice still has the power to capture the attention of listeners and guide them towards a personal reflection within a horizon “characterized by a deep synergy of affective and cognitive components and historical and spiritual dimensions” (Santerini, Sidoli, Vico, 1999, p. 15; Mantegazza, 2012).

The experiences of young people that emerge from a reconstruction based on strictly original sources undoubtedly provide a conduit to the historical atmosphere of that tragic moment in European history and for this reason have a historiographical value. In addition, they offer an opportunity for study and discussion in terms of an appreciation of the sense of history as a discipline connecting the past with the present.

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