

THE GESHER PROJECT
Elementary school “Nikola Tesla”
Rijeka, Croatia
2013/14

How it all started

- In April 2013, my school principal handed me a paper saying “Take a look, you might be interested”: an application for a sponsored seminar in Israel via Ministry of education
- a month later I attended a 3-day seminar in Jewish community of Zagreb called Shoah Academy (Šoa akademija)
- as a 10 year old in 1992, I became a refugee from Serbia, coming with my parents and sister to Rijeka, Croatia

Rijeka

- a port in north Adriatic, with some 170 000 citizens
- well known for its multiculturalism, which includes the Italian, Hungarian, Serbian, Roma and other minorities
- Jewish merchants are mentioned as early as 15th century, but first Jewish families settled in from Split in 18th cent.
- before WW2, Rijeka had two sinagogues (one orthodox, of course) and community was of both Ashekanzi and Sephard origine – now it has only dozen declared members
- on the last Croatian referendum, Rijeka was one of the few cities that voted against defining marriage as a heterosexual union, stading up to the right-wing suspension of rights
- *however*, it is not uncommon to see svastikas on the walls, Nazi salutes on the stadium or hear people talk of Rijeka's mayor Obersnel as a Jew

Why

- Holocaust and my personal history showed me that it isn't the question of whether it is possible, but *when* it is possible to: get away with lie, suspend rights, harass, steal, destroy and, finally, try to kill an entire nation
- Shoah Academy convinced me that something *extra* needs to be done, that no multiculturalism alone can preserve itself – *especially* in time of economic crisis when minorities are usually the scape goats
- i.e. it gave me **why**
- Yad Vashem gave me the tools - **how**

Israel

the trip in July gave me the opportunity:

- to talk, to my colleagues and other professors
- to see how one with years of experience deals with a difficult subject or aspect
- to ask the experts in field
- to feel the culture

Macedonia

- a month after Israel, I visited Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia (Меморијален центар на холокаустот на Евреите од Македонија), which beautifully explains Sephardic culture, the Jews on Balkan and the fate of Macedonian Jews under the Bulgarian regime
- the staff was very welcoming and gave me brochures and books, along with the ones I bought
- also, museum increased my interest in filmed testimonies

The wheels in motion

- back to school in September, I talked to:
 - my colleagues
 - Jewish communities in Rijeka and Zagreb
 - my colleagues/friends from the trip
- however, I got a new job with the deaf community, but luckily part of it was in the same school
- each professor with whom I talked agreed to participate: history, geography, theology, language and literature, music class, art, even the school psychologist
- and the rest of the school staff gave me support after I introduced the project (the principal and the history teacher even came to Shoa Academy in November)

What is the Geshher project?

- an *optional* course for the 8th graders (age 13-15) made up of lectures, debates, workshops and field trips
- *it must not be just about the suffering, but the culture as well*
- *gesher* – heb. bridge – is meant as a place of meeting, crossing the gap between the cultures
- *interdisciplinary*: every tuesday one professor with lecture/debate/workshop gives one aspect on judaism or human rights in general
- *field work* consists of visits to Rijeka's sinagogue and a trip to Jasenovac and Jewish community in Zagreb (and to the museum exhibitions in related theme)
- the course is “divided” into two parts (corresponding to two school semesters): culture and Holocaust

King David

Jews in the Middle Ages

Warsaw Ghetto

Totalitarian education
(children's books,
language purity,
burning books)

the scape goat effect

Visiting the sinagogue with rabbi

Catholic Church during Holocaust

The Nurnberg trials

CULTURE

HOLOCAUST

Bosnian Sephards

Jewish customs

Bystander effect

Contemporary Croatian antisemitism

“Protocols” and other fabrications

Testimonies (live and filmed)

Everyday life in camps