

# Why teach about the Holocaust?

## Using identity circles

By Ido Abram, Stichting Leren, the Netherlands

During the final seminar of the three-part programme *Teaching about the Holocaust* the participants met in Amsterdam and discussed what they had learnt and how they might put this into practice in their lessons.

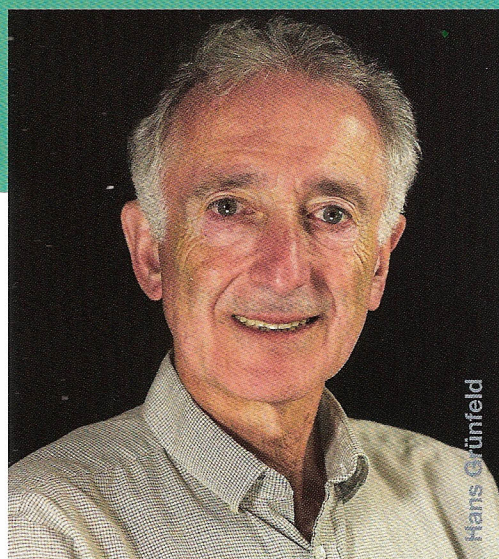
Within the framework of intercultural learning we can say that understanding our own identity and other existing images (imago) can be the key to understanding the world. As each person is a world of his or her own, all successful forms of learning are by definition intercultural. These ideas are central to my “Arena model” of intercultural learning, which can also be seen as a general theory for learning and communicating. Three pairs of concepts are relevant here: the stage and battleground, identity and imago, and dialogue and conflict. These concepts can help explain the importance of intercultural learning.<sup>1</sup>

A first step, however, is to explore our own “circle of identity”. Reflecting on identity can help a teacher understand at a deeper level why he or she considers teaching the Holocaust important. I asked the participants in my workshop what their personal reasons were for teaching about the Holocaust. To structure their thoughts, they created an “identity circle” and gave a brief explanation.

There are various important reasons why teachers might want to engage with teaching about the Holocaust; one is to get to know themselves, the human race. The Holocaust not only illustrates how evil “evil” can be but it also shows how people can go beyond themselves by helping others. We all have aggression within us. Our upbringing can teach us to use it to create rather than destroy, to build not demolish, and to transform conflicts into dialogues – with the reservation that some conflicts cannot be solved.

Another reason to teach about the Holocaust is to warn people, especially youngsters, about comparable situations that still occur. As Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, put it: “It happened, therefore it can happen again. That is the core of what we have to say.”<sup>2</sup>

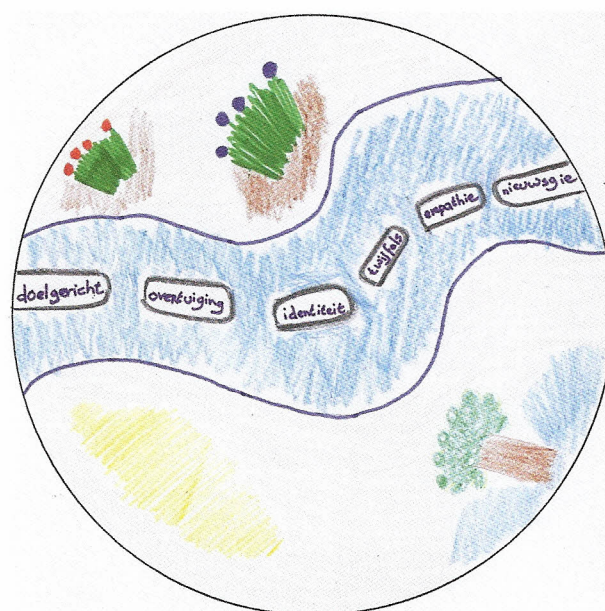
A third reason is to avoid joining the ranks of persecutors or Holocaust deniers. A French judge, Roger Errera,



Hans Grünfeld

noted that their intention was “the destruction of the dead’s only ‘grave’, that is, our memory, and the erosion of all awareness of the crime itself.”

The “identity circles” below are examples from the workshop and give the individual reasons why the educators engage with the Holocaust. These are not their real names.



### Ferdinand:

“This is my river. I chose not to make a pie chart ‘identity circle’ but instead to make a river with stones, or maybe tree trunks that you need to reach the other side.

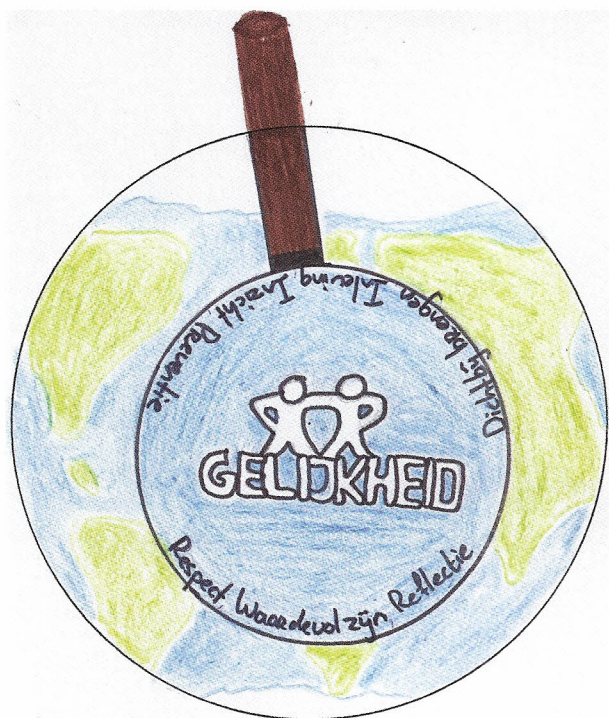
Everything starts with a target or a conviction; your ideas start here. The next step is to find your own identity and show empathy for the identity of others. Curiosity and



doubt also belong to this process. I did not finish the word 'curiosity', only 'curios ...' as an incentive to continue searching for subjects you are interested in or want to learn more about. A critical approach to what you hear and read is pivotal; always question what you read, even if you agree with it."

**Jacqueline:**

"I want my students to be aware of the events of the Holocaust, how it happened and what the consequences were, right up to today. I want to achieve this by giving them food for thought, to increase their empathy."

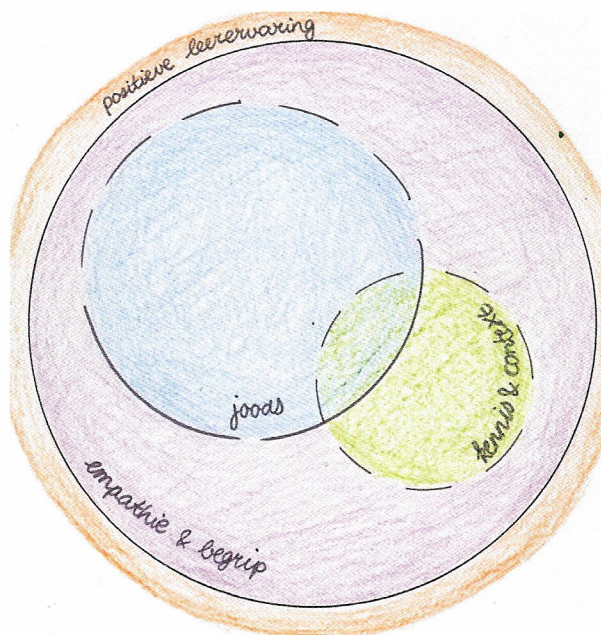


**Henk:**

"My drawing depicts a magnifying glass and a globe. To me, teaching about the Holocaust is about bringing the concept of equality close to my students. Each individual is equal and has the right to a good life. I want students to relate to other people to gain insight and respect for others and to reflect on their own attitudes. When they realise that every life has its value we can prevent a second Holocaust."

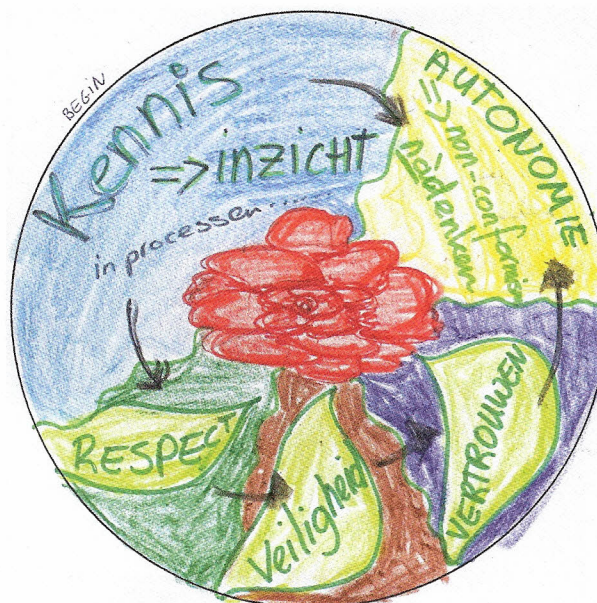
**Ester:**

"Teaching about the Shoah should always be a positive learning experience. The orange circle depicts that. The basis should be knowledge about history and historical context, before and after the Shoah (green). I work for the Jewish Cultural Quarter in Amsterdam and in our view we need knowledge about Judaism, both today and in history, in full width (blue). It adds to existing images and leads to more empathy and understanding of others (purple).



**Margriet:**

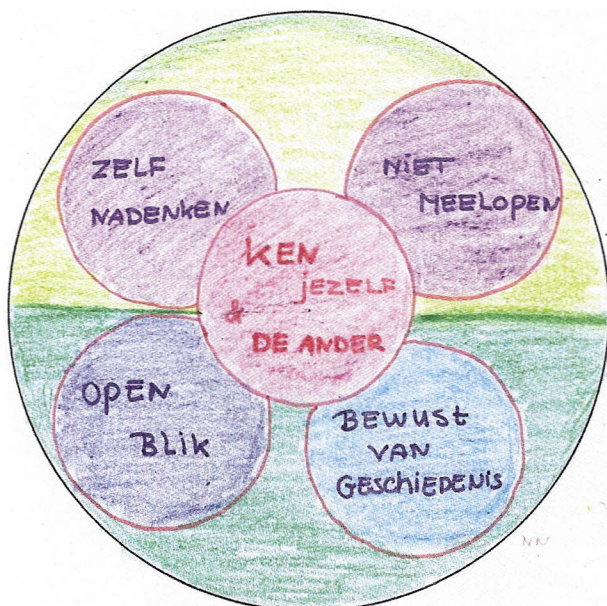
"The rose in the middle [of the identity circle] symbolises children as budding flowers. They need help to open up. I prefer to transmit knowledge, because it helps us to understand how people act in different situations and in different times. That knowledge leads to mutual respect here and now, even in the classroom. I try to create a safe space and trust, for my students to grow up to become autonomous people, who think for themselves and don't just follow others."



**Hilde:**

"The Holocaust was carried out by people after careful consideration and planning. They were people who were open to hate; people who were influenced by strong





leaders, by others they looked up to. Each of us is responsible for our own actions and choices, then and now. The most important lesson we can learn from the Holocaust is: Get to know yourself. Know your strengths and weaknesses. Take time to get to know other people. Ask yourself what is happening around you. And if something happens that is unfair, do something about it, don't remain silent."

Ido Abram is a Dutch mathematician and philosopher. He was appointed to the first European professorship in Holocaust Education and has been an important voice in intercultural education in the Netherlands since the 1990s.

1. Abram, Ido, (2008), The Arena model for intercultural learning, <http://www.stichtingleren.nl/english.htm>
2. Levi, Primo, (1986), The Drowned and The Saved
3. Jones, D., (Ed) (2001), Censorship. A World Encyclopedia. London/Chicago. See under: 'HOLOCAUST: Denying the Holocaust'. Author: A. de Baets

### How to make an identity circle or an ID circle:

Anybody can make an ID circle, young or old, alone or in a group, at home or at work.

1. Pick somebody or something that is important to you: people, pursuits, hobbies, objects, ideals, objectives and the like. Remember everything or jot down key words.
2. Arrange the key words in order of importance.
3. Divide an empty circle into 'pie slices': make the most important pie slices large and the less important ones smaller.
4. Place the key words in the pie slices.
5. Add texts, drawings, colours, photographs or collages to the pie slices.

Some circle-makers take a slightly different approach. Instead of making pie slices, they use other shapes: small circles in the large ID circle and / or an eye or cloud or other small touch here and there. Some use the empty space outside the ID circle as well. Anything goes.

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