

Philosophical thinking
For Form 2 of secondary schools
Excerpt

3. Is tolerance weakness?

Religious tolerance. The social issue of tolerance appeared in 16th Century Europe, which was torn apart by conflicts between religious denominations. At the time, the Reformation was at its peak. The inhabitants of Europe were divided into two opposing camps. Their mutual tolerance was the result of their understanding the impossibility of physically eliminating people with different opinions and different beliefs in God. Tolerance meant not persecuting or condemning people on the basis of religious differences. Later, tolerance began to apply to new phenomena and social groups, such as foreigners, the sick and the handicapped, the opposite sex, and people with different political convictions. A common feature was an awareness of their differences or foreignness, and perception of differences which had not been noticed before.

Accepting minorities. It has been noted that tolerance does not become an issue until someone who is perceived as being different lives near us or becomes our neighbour. For example, there were no problems of intolerance between Catholicism and the Orthodox Church or Islam, even though there were numerous conflicts and even wars, and in the case of Islam, the Crusades. The multi-racial Polish Republic during the Renaissance had no such problems either. The fact that people of many nations lived together in one country did not arouse significant emotions.

Tolerance first became an issue when people of different origins or beliefs became members of our own society and began to constitute minorities. As a result, the possibility arose of them being regarded by the majority as somehow inferior, or even as objects for contempt. This is why tolerance became a necessity, both on the part of the groups which constituted a majority and also on the part of minorities themselves.

Attempts to solve the problem. One group which constituted both a religious and ethnic minority was the Jews of the diaspora (literally “scattered” among the peoples of Europe). Jews fulfilled the criteria for a minority, in that they were both different and foreign, with their own religion and language. In every country in which they lived, they constituted a minority. As a result of intolerance, they were often persecuted, and sometimes people even tried to get rid of them. In 14th Century Spain, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity, and those who adhered to their own religion were simply expelled from the country. Many countries placed restrictions on the civil and territorial rights of members of the Jewish minority (for example, the Russian Czar explicitly banned Jews from living in some provinces).

Active anti-Semitism was one form of intolerance in Europe; another was the religious wars between various Christian factions. Sadly, it has to be acknowledged that tolerance was merely a reflection of the impossibility of eliminating all people of other faiths, and also the need for self-defence against other religious groups, who at times were powerful enemies.

Tolerance is not the only instance of restraint from aggression. Restrictions on individual freedom in the name of the common good are the basis of almost all laws, rules, and prohibitions. For example, the law not only forbids me to kill others, it also protects me

by preventing others from killing me. Similarly, tolerance needs to work both ways if it is to be effective. Not only do I have to tolerate others, but they also have an obligation to tolerate me. After all, from their point of view, I am the one who is different.

Forced tolerance. In this case, tolerance is something that is imposed on us- we are forced to put up with someone because there is no other option. However, if there is a change in the situation, if there is even a momentary lapse in the restraining power of the law and we feel strong enough, then we will take action and put him in his proper place! European history is full of situations where suppressed and restrained hate erupted with double force, resulting in pogroms and ethnic cleansing. These upheavals were all the more intense when ethnic differences were reinforced by religious ones.

Tolerance as a positive ideal. So far we have referred to tolerance in its negative sense. However, our culture is endeavouring to create a system of positive values, which will motivate human beings to aspire to some kind of ideal. In a positive sense, tolerance means a respect for differences which is based on understanding and familiarity with the values of “foreign” religion, culture or lifestyles. Tolerance in this sense does not mean putting up with someone from necessity, neither does it mean concealed or open contempt; it is a fascination with a different and hitherto unknown culture or lifestyle, and above all, it means acknowledging that **other people are no worse than I am**. However, we need to consider whether this is really such an easy and simple position to take.

Tolerance and human nature. Let us consider why we need tolerance at all, and what the fact that we have to make a considerable effort to tolerate people and things which are different says about what kind of people we are. There is no doubt that everyone has at least some potential for intolerance and contempt for everything which is foreign or different. Take, for example, the Rumanian beggars who frequented the streets of Polish towns and cities a few years back- were our feelings towards them always characterized by sympathy and noble altruism? Instinctive intolerance often conceals simple fear- we are afraid of having to see disease and disability, we avoid mentally ill people, we prefer not to talk about death, somehow hoping that all of these things will pass us by. Somehow we believe that threats which we cannot see cease to exist.

The statement that we simply do not like people and things which are different as a result of human nature is an over-simplification. However, intolerance exists in many forms, and they are enough of a threat for us to consider ourselves as being potentially intolerant, and to make it worthwhile searching for the cause of this. Let us therefore attempt to find the causes of intolerance or of forced tolerance with its undercurrents of hate and contempt. We also need to reflect on why we are sometimes capable of behaviour which later causes us to feel ashamed. As Leszek Kolakowski wrote, “there is potential for intolerance in each one of us, for the need to impose one’s own vision of the world on others is a powerful urge; we would like everyone to believe in the same things as us, because that would help us to feel more secure spiritually and protect us from having to reflect on our own beliefs or confront them with others. For this reason, there is considerable aggression in the confrontation of beliefs, whether religious, philosophical or political”.

Intolerance and us. We tend to think highly of ourselves, our beliefs and our culture. We usually think of ourselves and our beliefs as being better than others. We don’t need much in the way of proofs to believe this. Our way of thinking about ourselves is full of stereotypes and over-simplifications. We tend to say that this is the way things are and always will be, because they always have been like that. Lack of education encourages simplistic views like this, but cannot fully account for the phenomenon; after all, even university professors are to

be found in groups of people who are extremely intolerant, for example nationalists. Primitive thinking does not always go hand in hand with ignorance.

For intolerant people, any element of foreignness represents a threat. It represents a challenge to their comfortable routines and their simplistic way of thinking, as something which doesn't fit in the hierarchy of familiar things. As a rule, intolerance rejects the possibility that something which is different could also be better, even in the face of proof to the contrary. The view that we and our surroundings are better and other things are worse is the easiest way of building up one's self-esteem- easy, because it spares us the necessity of having to get to know alien values. This type of thinking conceals a terrible threat. It is only a short step from believing that somebody is inferior to us to believing that he is not a human being, and therefore not entitled to human rights. Although it is hard to believe, the Nazis succeed in convincing almost the entire German nation that Jews were not people, and therefore that they could be killed with impunity. No doubt those who were responsible for the bestial massacres of Bosnian Muslims, those who slaughtered entire villages, were influenced by the same inhuman idea: "they are not people".

Killing people is of course an extreme action, and it might appear to be unacceptable in civilized countries. However, stop and think whether there really is such a big difference between the kind of thinking described above and the reasoning of people who are responsible for graffiti such as "Jews to the gas chambers", commonly encountered in Poland. If something goes wrong in Poland, as it often does, we sometimes hear comments that everything is the fault of... the Jews! There are traces of primitive thinking and stupidity in every society, as a result of which we tend to look for a scapegoat for our failures- after all, somebody must be to blame! For people with this kind of mentality it is enough to believe that the leading politicians in this country are Jews to explain everything without the need for any rational arguments!

People who are always on the lookout for someone to blame tend to subscribe to so-called **conspiracy theories**, according to which all phenomena and events are under the control of hidden, omnipotent, malevolent powers. All of us are inclined to believe in such theories to some extent. We need to beware of them, and to constantly remind ourselves that **Poles, Germans, Frenchmen and Jews are all human beings, and that all human life is equally valuable.**

To conclude, let us hear what Leszek Kolakowski, the great contemporary philosopher, has to say about **the kind of tolerance which should not be tolerated:**

"However, we can also observe that the kind of tolerance expected from us is tolerance in the sense of indifference, a lack of any point of view or opinion, or even in the sense of approval for everything that we perceive in people and their opinions. This, however, is a very different form of tolerance. Expectation of tolerance in this sense is part of our hedonistic culture, in which nothing really matters to us; it is an attitude without any beliefs or sense of responsibility. These tendencies are reinforced by various fashionable philosophies, which teach us that truth cannot be said to exist; so merely by defending my own views, even if I do so without aggression, I can be considered to have offended against tolerance.

However, all of this is dangerous nonsense; contempt for the truth is no less damaging for our civilization than a fanatical belief in it. The indifference of the majority gives a free hand to fanatics, who are always present in abundance".

Reading texts

(1) A difficult identity- life in the shadow of anti-Semitism

[The author, Ryszard Horowitz, was born in Krakow on May 5th 1939. He was sent as a small child to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, and rescued from there by Oscar Schindler, the hero of Steven Spielberg's film Schindler's List. Horowitz was the youngest of those rescued from the camp by the heroic German, who, on the pretext of exploiting Jews for labour in the industries of the Third Reich, was able to save many Krakow Jews from extermination. In 1959 Horowitz emigrated to the USA. He graduated from university there and worked as a photographer, taking pictures for advertisements and also for artistic purposes. He is one of the most outstanding photographers in the world and a famous artist.

Ryszard Horowitz spent the first 20 years of his life in Poland, and he considers Poland to be his home. In his memoirs he recalls the good things which happened to him there, but he also writes about the many tragedies involving Jews which occurred even after the war, and about persecution on the part of Poles. It is true that under German occupation many Poles risked death even to save one Jewish life, but there were also some horrific crimes committed against Jews. One of them was the murder of several hundred Jews in Jedwabne in 1941, another was the Kielce pogrom of 1946 in which 42 Jews perished, as a result of rumours about the alleged ritual murder of Polish children. It is worth pointing out that as long ago as 1264, Prince Boleslaw the Pious, in a charter of rights for Jews living in Poland, prohibited accusing Jews of using human blood for ritual purposes, as their religion forbids them any contact with blood (a Jew who accidentally comes into contact with blood becomes unclean).

For many centuries, Poland had the highest concentration of Jews of any European country. Before the Second World War, there were 3 million Jews in Poland, including 40% of the population of Warsaw. In the 1930's, a wave of nationalism swept across Europe; anti-Semitism was common in Poland, too. It should be remembered that there was an almost complete lack of opposition from other European countries and societies to the German fascists' extermination of the Jews. As for the Poles, most of them were indifferent spectators to the Holocaust, however there were many who tried to help. The Yad Vashem Institute in Israel has awarded more "Righteous among the Nations" medals for rescuing Jews during the war to Poles than to any other nation (over one hundred thousand). We therefore need to be cautious in mentioning Polish anti-Semitism, and to bear in mind the heroism of people who risked their lives and the lives of their families to save Jews, at the same time as remembering events which have blackened the reputation of Poland such as the massacres in Kielce and Jedwabne.

Post-war occurrences of anti-Semitism are particularly shameful, because there were very few Jews left in Poland after the Holocaust, and those who had survived the nightmare of the war years had the right to expect more favourable treatment. There is no doubt that the post-war dislike of Jews in Poland had something to do with the significant participation of both Polish and Soviet persons of Jewish origin in the Communist authorities, especially in the secret police. However, all of these were assimilated Jews, that is, Jews who had renounced their connections with the Jewish religion and nation; besides, what is more important is that all of them were acting as the result of an individual choice, for which the Jewish nation as a whole does not bear any responsibility. The following text by Ryszard Horowitz is about this difficult period of Polish post-war history].

People often ask me: why did you leave? Why don't you come back? You could just as well work here, after all this is the place you were born, the place you grew up in, etc. My situation, like the situation of many Jews living in Poland, is a complicated one. In spite of the fact that my own contacts with Poles have been mainly positive, judging by what happened to others, this is purely by chance. Jewish friends of mine living in different parts of the world have many tragic things to tell, and they have very personal experiences of Polish anti-Semitism. They often criticize me for my attachment to Poland and my fascination with the country, and they are unable to understand why I came back, or why I have any contacts here.

I can understand their point of view, because many of them, after having survived the occupation, emaciated by concentration camps, were the victims of sufferings inflicted upon them by Poles. I have a friend who survived the Nazis together with his parents, only for his mother to be murdered after the war, just for being a Jew, and sadly, the perpetrators were Polish. This is something we need to talk about, something that we should not forget. I have another friend who is ten years

older than me who came back to Poland straight after being released from concentration camp, and as the witness of a pogrom after the war went through hell. He is a wonderful and educated man who speaks excellent Polish, but he feels distanced from the country. The tragic events which he witnessed are still at the back of his mind. How can someone like that be persuaded that it is worthwhile entering into dialogue? Not an easy task, by any means.

Some people I know have a very negative relationship to Poland, they say they're not interested in the country and that they never want to come back. I keep telling them that there is a new generation in Poland which shouldn't be blamed for the sins of their fathers, and if we don't make some kind of contact and enter into a dialogue with them, not only will anti-Semitism not disappear from Poland, it will be passed down from one generation to the next. Unfortunately, this is exactly what has happened: Poland, which had the biggest concentration of Jews before the war, now has none, and yet anti-Semitism still remains[...].

In the end I left the country- I was afraid that "it" would come back. And we now know from history that I had reason to be afraid, because 1968 came only a few years afterwards [the year of forced mass emigration of Jews from Poland]. At that time there was no chance of any dialogue- everyone was closed in themselves, everyone was afraid. However, now that we have freedom of speech, there is no reason to be silent any longer. We need to take advantage of the fact that there are witnesses of pre-war anti-Semitism who are still alive, and those who are older than me who can describe tragic events from their own experience. As for myself, I was a small child during the occupation, and there are many things which I experienced and still remember, but the older witnesses have more to say as they were more mature at the time[...]

During the publicity campaign for Spielberg's film, I was interviewed many times as the youngest of the concentration camp prisoners rescued by Schindler. It's good that they made the film. Thanks to the film, millions of people have learned about the sufferings inflicted on the Jews by Nazism and about the heroism and magnanimity of individuals in the face of oppression. In Israel I took part in a meeting of all the people who survived like me. There I was able to establish a more conscious relationship with the past, to make contacts and to look for answers to many questions from my childhood. It was an emotional catalyst, which has helped me to talk about the subject more freely and to communicate more easily. Unfortunately, the meeting left me with even more questions about my own life and absorbed me in a search for the roots of anti-Semitism.

Only a sincere dialogue between the two sides, respect for human dignity, and tolerance for religious and cultural differences can help Poles and Polish Jews to communicate with one another. We should not let this opportunity pass us by, and we should not leave the problem for others to solve. The experiences we shared during the war and the opportunity to make a better world for our children should make us do it."

(Ryszard Horowitz, *Photographer of Dreams*, in reply to the survey "Jews and Poles: a difficult identity", "Znak" journal, 1996, no. 3)

(2) A disaster in the supermarket

Mummy had disappeared, and Myszka was standing in the middle of the supermarket and slowly chewing an apple. The juice was dribbling down her chin, and with each bite, she felt an increasing urge to dance. The impulse was so strong that she was no longer able to resist it, in spite of all her Mummy's well-remembered lessons on how to behave in places like this- like a little mouse (myszka=little mouse), without attracting people's attention.

The weather was cold. She was wrapped up in a jacket and a cap, in a pullover, skirt and tights, and she blamed her inability to dance not on her own body or her unresponsive arms or legs, but on her clothes. And, although it usually took her ages to get undressed, this time it took no more than a few minutes [...].

Someone had turned the music up and the urge to dance became stronger. Myszka took off her remaining clothes. The clothes fell onto the tiled floor, and the girl gave a loud sigh, swallowed the last piece of apple and put her hands in the air.

Eva heard a growing murmur of voices. They spread through the supermarket like an the sound of an approaching storm- angry voices, nervous voices, giggles, she could clearly hear people shouting, and Eva immediately realized that it was something to do with Myszka... Myszka must have done something. Myszka was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared.

“She must have thrown something off the shelves!” she thought desperately and ran to the place where the loudest noises were coming from.

-My God...my God... why are you doing this to me...- she whispered, gasping and instinctively leaning on the nearest shelves, as she saw her daughter [...]. -Not here... just don't do it here...Don't do this to me- she whispered, unable to move.

In the middle of the shelves was Myszka, naked and moving in a strange and horrible way, ponderously, like a bear, to some repulsive, lethargic rhythm. Her eyes were closed and her mouth wide open, and her tongue was hanging onto her chin. Dribble was running down her chest and trickling onto her protruding white belly. Her flat, bare feet were clumsily scraping the tiled floor, and she was alternately touching her naked body with her hands and clumsily raising them in the air. There was a painful, trance-like expression of delight on the girl's face.

Eva stood, unable to move, as if paralyzed. She was torn between the impulse to run away and the consciousness that this was her daughter, who was in need of her help.

The shop assistants were shouting loudly, and there was an indignant chorus of many voices, of which she could only make out isolated phrases:

- Where's her mother?
- Fancy behaving like that in public...
- Dreadful...some kind of pervert...
- Someone should catch her...
- There's no way I'm touching her...
- Disgusting...

Myszka came out of her trance. Surrounded by angry shouting, she opened her eyes and saw for the first time that she was in the middle of a narrow circle of unfamiliar faces. The faces were unfriendly or hostile, and some were frightened; people were beginning to scream. Myszka gasped. And then, inevitably, came what Mummy usually referred to as a “little accident”, but in this case, as Myszka realized, was nothing short of a major disaster (“children with Down's Syndrome often lose control of their physiological functions, particularly when under stress”). All of these dreadful feelings began to play on Myszka's stomach and a few seconds later, a stream of urine was accompanied by a malodorous puddle of diarrhea. She stood there, helpless and in a state of shock, paralyzed by an intense feeling of desperation. The people's shouting filled the whole supermarket.

Myszka began screaming too. Her screams gradually changed into desperate howling, full of pain.

-Maa! Maa! Nee...! Neeee! Aaaaaaooooouuuuuu! Neeee!

The strangers' indignation was also becoming stronger, and the sound of their voices as they tried to out-scream one another, reflected from the shelves, threatened to shatter the glass walls of the supermarket. Only a few of them expressed pity, most of them were threatening.

- What a disgrace!
- Who will clean up the mess...!
- Right here, in the middle of the food section...
- Where's the police?

Somehow, Eva miraculously managed to overcome her panic-stricken urge to run away. She pushed her way through the crowd. She knelt down and with trembling hands she began to dress her daughter. Feeling angry, overwrought, hurt and embarrassed, she grabbed her and shook her, as a result of which Myszka stopped howling and started to cry. Once again, indignant voices were raised.

-Dirty pig! Ugh!- one woman said loudly, spitting on the floor.

(Dorota Terakowska, *Chrysalis*)

Interpretation of the text

1. On the basis of the text by Ryszard Horowitz, what arguments can you find to support the statement made at the beginning of the chapter that tolerance needs to work both ways?
2. In class, watch a video of Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. Discuss how far it is possible for an individual to resist barbarism in times of war. Is it reasonable to expect heroic behaviour from everyone? For Poles or Germans who witnessed the Holocaust, where is the borderline between tolerance and basic decency?
3. Explain why the word "tolerance" is relevant to the extract from the novel by Dorota Terakowska about the life of a girl with Down's Syndrome.
4. Describe the behaviour of the people who witnessed the unusual event in the supermarket. What do you think about their behaviour?
5. In your opinion, how should someone who happens to be a witness of such an event react?

Questions to think about

1. In your class there is a new pupil, from Rumania. He lives with his parents in a centre for refugees. The boy can hardly speak any Polish. Describe what it would mean in practice to show tolerance to the "newcomer", and how you would get on with him. Do you think it would be at all worthwhile to try to make friends with him, or should that be left to somebody else?
2. You are driving with your parents through a city. While you are waiting for the traffic lights to change at a crossroads, a beggar comes up and puts his hand out for money. Try to analyze your feelings- how do you think you would react?
3. Take a piece of paper from your exercise book and divide it into two columns. In the left-hand column make a list of several things (or groups of people) which, in your opinion, should be tolerated in a positive sense. In the right-hand column make a list of things or groups of people which should not be tolerated. Explain why (not). Give some reasons for placing things or groups of people on one side of the paper or the other.
4. Your friend's parents have just become unemployed and don't have much chance of finding new jobs any time in the near future. Your friend keeps saying, more and more angrily: "What can you expect when the government is full of Jews? And the House of Commons is just as bad!". In your opinion, what is the right way to react to such opinions? What is the reason for them?
5. One of your classmates is a girl in a wheelchair. She is clever and good-looking, and gets better marks than anybody else. There is also a boy in your class who is healthy but does not get good marks, and everyone makes fun of him. Which one of the two requires greater tolerance?
6. List the extra-curricular activities and lessons (including in summer school) which the girl in the wheelchair could not take part in. Why not? How could this be changed?
7. Plan a school trip to include three disabled pupils. What things would you need to pay special attention to?
8. Do you think that disabled children in your class should automatically be given good discipline marks, or should their behaviour be marked impartially? Explain the reasons for your opinion.
9. In ancient Sparta, which was an oligarchy, children with physical defects were thrown into a gorge in the Taygetos mountains. In democratic Athens, handicapped children were treated as equals with healthy ones. What do you think is the connection between tolerance and democracy? For which aspects of life in a democracy is tolerance especially important?
10. There are some people who say that tolerance is a kind of weakness as it means being too soft on other people. They also believe that intolerance is a sign of self-sufficiency and strength. What do you think? Is tolerance a weakness?

True tolerance means being open to other people, acknowledging their dignity, respecting their opinions and beliefs, even when they are very different to our own. It means accepting that other people are different, without trying to force them to be like us. It has nothing in common with pity or putting up with someone out of compulsion. Tolerance is not easy. It is something that we have to constantly work on; like humanity, it is something that we need to aspire to. Nobody who gives in to the base instincts of intolerance can be said to be a full human being. Our relationships with other people are a measure of our humanity.