

From Alan Bennett's play "The History Boys" (2004).

This scene takes place in England in the 1980s, at what Americans would call an all-boys high school. The old-fashioned English teacher (Hector) and the young new history teacher (Irwin) are preparing the boys to do well on a history exam and thereby improve their chances of getting admitted to Oxford and Cambridge.

[Boys come in, followed by Hector. They sit glumly at their desks.]

Irwin: Would you like to start?

Hector: I don't mind.

Irwin: How do you normally start? It is your lesson. General Studies.

Hector: The boys decide. Ask them.

Irwin: Anybody?

[The boys don't respond.]

Hector: Come along, boys. Don't sulk.

Dakin: We don't know who we are, sir. Your class or Mr Irwin's.

Irwin: Does it matter?

Timms: Oh yes, sir. It depends if you want us thoughtful. Or smart.

Hector: He wants you civil, you rancid little turd. (Hits him.)

Timms: Look, sir. You're a witness. Hitting us, sir. He could be sacked.

Irwin: Settle down. Settle down. I thought we might talk about the Holocaust.

Hector: Good gracious. Is that on the syllabus?

Irwin: It has to be. The syllabus includes the Second World War.

Hector: I suppose it does.

Irwin: Though in any case the scholarship questions aren't limited to a particular curriculum.

Hector: But how can you teach the Holocaust?

Irwin: Well, that would do as a question. Can you ... should you ... teach the Holocaust? Anybody?

Akthar: It has origins. It has consequences. It's a subject like any other.

Scripps: Not like any other, surely. Not like any other at all.

Akthar: No, but it's a topic.

Hector: They go on school trips nowadays, don't they? Auschwitz. Dachau. What has always concerned me is where do they eat their sandwiches? Drink their coke?

Crowther: The visitors' centre. It's like anywhere else.

Hector: Do they take pictures of each other there? Are they smiling? Do they hold hands? Nothing is appropriate. Just as questions on an examination paper are inappropriate. How can the boys scribble down an answer however well put that doesn't demean the suffering involved? And putting it well demeans it as much as putting it badly.

Irwin: It's a question of tone, surely. Tact.

Hector: Not tact. Decorum.

Lockwood: What if you were to write that this was so far beyond one's experience silence is the only proper response.

Dakin: That would be your answer to lots of questions, though, wouldn't it, sir?

Hector: Yes. Yes, Dakin, it would.

Dakin: 'Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.' [Hector groans and puts his head in his hands.] That's right, isn't it, sir? Wittgenstein.

Irwin: Yes. That's good.

Hector: No, it's not good. It's ... flip. It's ... glib. It's *journalism*.

Dakin: But it's you that taught us it.

Hector: I didn't teach you and Wittgenstein didn't screw it out of his very guts in order for you to turn it into a dinky formula. I thought that you of all people were bright enough to see that.

Dakin: I do see it, sir. Only I don't agree with it. Not ... not any more.

Timms: Sir.

Hector: [head in his hands] Yes?

Timms: You told us once ... it was to do with the trenches, sir ... that one person's death tells you more than a thousand. When people are dying like flies, you said, that is what they are dying like.

Posner: Except that these weren't just dying. They were being processed. What is different is the process.

Irwin: Good.

Hector: No, not good. Posner is not making a point. He is speaking from the heart.

Dakin: So? Supposing we get a question on Hitler and the Second War and we take your line, sir, that this is not a crazed lunatic but a statesman.

Hector: A statesman?

Irwin: Not a statesman, Dakin, a politician. I wouldn't say statesman.

Dakin: Politician, then, and one erratically perhaps, but still discernibly operating within the framework of traditional German foreign policy ...

Irwin: Yes?

Dakin: ... and we go on to say, in accordance with this line, that the death camps have to be seen in the context of this policy.

[Pause.]

Irwin: I think that would be ... inexpedient.

Hector: Inexpedient? Inexpedient?

Irwin: I don't think it's true, for a start ...

Scripps: But what has truth got to do with it? I thought that we'd already decided that for the purposes of this examination truth is, if not an irrelevance, then so relative as just to amount to another point of view.

Hector: Why can you not simply condemn the camps outright as an unprecedented horror?

[There is slight embarrassment.]

Lockwood: No point, sir. Everybody will do that. That's the stock answer, sir... the camps an

event unlike any other, the evil unprecedented, etc., etc.

Hector: No. Can't you see that even to say etcetera is monstrous? Etcetera is what the Nazis would have said, the dead reduced to a mere verbal abbreviation. What have we learned about language? Orwell. Orwell.

Lockwood: All right, not etcetera. But given that the death camps are generally thought of as unique, wouldn't another approach be to show what precedents there were and put them ... well ... in proportion?

Scripps: Proportion!

Dakin: Not proportion then, but putting them in context.

Posner: But to put something in context is a step towards saying it can be understood and that it can be explained. And if it can be explained that it can be explained away.

Rudge: 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.'

[Hector groans.]

Irwin: That's good, Posner.

Posner: It isn't 'good'. I mean it, sir.

Dakin: But when we talk about putting them in context it's only the same as the Dissolution of the Monasteries. After all, monasteries had been dissolved before Henry VIII, dozens of them.

Posner: Yes, but the difference is, I didn't lose any relatives in the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Irwin: Good point.

Scripps: You keep saying, 'Good point.' Not good point, sir. True. To you the Holocaust is just another topic on which we may get a question.

Irwin: No. But this is history. Distance yourselves. Our perspective on the past alters. Looking back, immediately in front of us is dead ground. We don't see it and because we don't see it this means that there is no period so remote as the recent past and one of the historian's jobs is to anticipate what our perspective of that period will be ... even on the Holocaust.

[The bell goes.]

Irwin: I thought that went rather well.

Hector: Parrots. I thought I was lining their minds with some sort of literary insulation, proof against the primacy of fact. Instead back come my words like a Speak Your Weight Machine. 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.' Ugh.

Irwin: I was rather encouraged. They're getting the idea.

Hector: Do you know what the worst thing is? I wanted them to show off, to come up with the short answer, the handy quote. I wanted them to compete. It's time I went.

Irwin: Went where?

[Dakin and Scripps come in, a touch awkwardly.]

Hector: Oh, home. Home.