

# TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

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AND DEBBIE FINDLING



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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to our fathers, Silvan S. Schweber and Fred S. Findling, whose hardships were honed into wisdom and whose wisdom was shared with love.

“Like the crying blood of Zechariah, which could not be brought to stillness, the blood of our brothers and sisters cry out from under the foundations of Europe. ...These immortals live with us, in us. They will live in us forever. This it is that makes our hearts so heavy—and our luggage still heavier. Let us carry it together.” —Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought* (1974)

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# INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Holocaust has come to occupy a position of tremendous power in the American imagination. It has become a moral reference point not only for American Jews, but for almost all Americans regardless of religion, ethnicity, or political persuasion. Indeed, as Peter Novick has written in his book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, the Holocaust has become such a dominant metaphor for Americans that references to it abound in political life regardless of context. In other words, you are as likely to hear people invoke the Holocaust at a pro-life rally, for example, as you are to hear people invoke it at a pro-choice demonstration, a pro-Israel or anti-Israel event, an anti-hunger campaign, etc. In the U.S., the Holocaust has become so powerful rhetorically that it serves as a rallying cry for almost any cause, even opposite sides of the same cause. And the U.S. is not unique in this regard. In many other countries across Europe and across the world, the Holocaust has become a focal point of attention, in one way or another.

Why has this happened? We'd argue that it's the moral power of the Holocaust which accounts for this magnetism; we'd suggest that the seeming moral clarity of the Holocaust has drawn the attention of the world. This is a history, after all, which people think of as having crucial moral lessons, maybe the most important moral lessons we stand to learn as human beings. Moreover, they are moral lessons that seem to garner agreement across the political spectrum. It is this clarity that draws people from decidedly different political positions to call on the Holocaust in support of their platforms. It is this moral clarity which entices people to use the emotional weight of the Holocaust as a metaphorical bullhorn, amplifying their arguments. As a side note, perhaps, we have often thought that when the immediacy of the losses of September 11 recede further into the past, an analogous kind of political utilization may occur with its events. As the Holocaust has been for most Jews, 9/11 is now for many Americans; though of course radically different in scale, timing and circumstance, both events are emotionally devastating and morally clear cut since the murder of innocents is always, utterly wrong. It is out of this same moral urge that we are drawn to teach about the Holocaust regardless of where we teach: public school, synagogue school, Jewish, Catholic or Christian day school.

In the wake of destructions, large and small, immediate and more distant, we are often moved to draw lessons, perhaps as a vehicle to soften the blows of loss. Learning from loss extends the possibility of hope; it provides the thread from which a silver lining can be sewed. Consider the slogan “Never Again!” While it may have served first as a rallying cry during the 1970s to drum up support for Jews trapped and discriminated against in the former USSR, its psychological staying power may be explained by its redemption of the Holocaust’s tragedy. “Never Again!” allows us to make some use of the Holocaust; it allows us some relief from its horrors, allows us at least the temporary conviction that things will be different in the future, that we can make a difference.

Other lessons that people have drawn from this history seem to extend the same analgesic. Such lessons include the imperatives to: defend the rights of minorities, speak out against injustice and oppression in all of its forms, safeguard the freedoms of democracy, question personal participation in bureaucratic systems, support the state of Israel, support an independent Palestine, and fundamentally preserve the dignity and uphold the sacredness of all human life. The lessons—whichever ones are embraced—are easy to arrive at. We don’t mean that the lessons are easy to enact in our lives or to teach to students, but they’re usually easy for people to identify with and to connect to the events of the Holocaust.

The seeming moral clarity of the Holocaust stems not only from its overarching wrongness, however, but also from the clarity of its actors’ roles. In other words, we know that the Nazis and their collaborators were the bad guys; the rescuers and resisters were good; the bystanders allowed and perpetuated atrocity. And the victims were victimized; they were thus innocents to be remembered as martyrs, heroes and heroines.

As Americans and as Brits, Australians, and Canadians, we’re usually positioned as rescuers. In fact, some have argued persuasively that one of the reasons the Holocaust has become so popular in the American imagination is that it is our last good war, the last moment in our collective memory as a nation that we were rescuers, heroes, unreservedly good. In contrast with our role in Vietnam and in a host of other, more recent events (some might add as a force of cultural imperialism), as regards the Holocaust, we were the ones who liberated the concentration camps, who fought and defeated fascism, who finally ended World War II. You need only imagine the entry points for visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to understand the power of this conception; as visitors travel to the main exhibit areas, the elevators show films taken during the liberation of the concentration camps. Visitors are therefore positioned as

American liberators. They are, in effect, introduced to the Holocaust museum through the “eyes” of liberators. The role we played during the Holocaust epitomizes how we’d like to perceive ourselves as a country more generally; we like to see ourselves as defenders of democracy, a nation which is selfless and heroic, triumphant and good.

## The Myth of Moral Clarity

Unfortunately, this kind of thinking is a trap. While it may be alluring to think of Holocaust history as morally simple, it isn’t. The large categories and the broad lessons may be simple, but when you really start to investigate their historical realities and more specifically, their implications, they become very, very complex, not only for American Jews, but for all Americans, for all Jews and for all thinking people. It may be tempting to think that as public school, Jewish or Christian educators, we serve our students best by simplifying history, by glossing over its considerable complexities, by clarifying its moral messages. The premise of this book is that the opposite is true. Following the arguments articulated in Katherine Simon’s groundbreaking research, *Moral Questions in the Classroom*, we are fully convinced that, as she writes, “The moral, existential and intellectual are intertwined [in education]; exploration in one realm often augments the others.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, delving deeply into the complicated moral terrain of the Holocaust not only serves our students intellectually, but morally and spiritually as well, and ultimately, religiously. If we want our students to be empowered to make hard decisions in the complicated world they will inherit, we would do best to help them illuminate the complexities of history. This means that we cannot teach stereotyped roles or simplified lessons.

An example of what we mean here may help to concretize our point. Consider the category of victims. Ask yourself what words come to mind when you hear the phrase, “Holocaust victim.” (Think specifically about “Holocaust victim” as the word, “victim” alone may carry quite different associations.) Do you find on the list of associated words a notion of martyrdom, of *Kiddush HaShem* (sanctification of God’s name), of innocence, of heroism? We would be surprised if somewhere in your associations these themes didn’t appear.

And yet, the approach to Holocaust education that we are advocating in this book would have you bear in mind as you plan your Holocaust unit the ugly reality that not all victims behaved heroically (although those are the accounts we most like to read). There were, among the victims, parents who sacrificed

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<sup>1</sup>Katherine Simon, *Moral Questions in the Classroom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 13.

children, sisters who stole from brothers, children who betrayed parents, people who within the concentration camp system occupied the liminal status of the [moral] “grey zone” in Primo Levi’s magnificent wording. Of course it is vitally important to recall that the systems of Nazi terror forced people into roles they wouldn’t otherwise occupy; nonetheless, the idea that Holocaust victimization yielded a huge range of human behavior among victims should make it into your curriculum.

Likewise, the idea that not all perpetrators were cruel should be represented in your teaching. The vast majority of perpetrators, in all probability, were not the animalistic killers portrayed by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler’s List* but people we would recognize, indeed people with traits we need to recognize in ourselves. The perpetrators of this atrocity were people, fully human; they had aspirations, families, careers and foibles. (In this line of argument, we are closer to adherents of Christopher Browning’s claims in his book, *Ordinary Men*, than to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s position in his, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. Ultimately, though, we consider both works useful in teaching about the Holocaust, which we discuss in greater depth below.) To teach about the perpetrators as a morally complicated group is exceedingly challenging, but utterly necessary. Were bystanders perpetrators? By doing nothing and allowing evil to flourish, were they culpable for the tragedies of the Holocaust? And, if so, to what degree, and how do you decide? Even the question of who constitutes the category of perpetrators, therefore, is morally complex.

Finally, not all rescuers were wholly altruistic or uncomplicatedly good. There were rescuers who exploited those they hid, extracting money, and labor, in some cases even sexual favors. Regarding Americans, while we were rescuers, liberators, fighters against Nazism, White Americans were also simultaneously racists and bystanders (at least most of us) to home-front injustices. Our immigration quotas severely restricted those who could find refuge on our shores. Our Black soldiers were fighting on two fronts. And our Japanese American neighbors were sequestered in internment camps. So, even rescue, the most valorized role associated with Holocaust history, must be recognized, at least in some senses, as a morally complicated category.

While working as an educator on the March of the Living program, Debbie learned an important lesson about not viewing Holocaust survivors as one-dimensional figurines of heroic icons.

Debbie: Bella, a Holocaust survivor who was liberated from Auschwitz, traveled with the teenagers to Poland and Israel. Bella had moved to Berkeley, California

after the war and was a former hippie who was active in Berkeley's liberal political scene. On the trip, I became increasingly frustrated with Bella because she would encourage the teenagers to sneak out of their rooms after their curfew to smoke cigarettes with her, publicly defying the rules of the trip. That experience helped me readjust my stereotypical image of Holocaust survivors. In short, because Bella was a survivor did not mean she was necessarily a role model (even if the students on that trip will likely remember smoking with Bella fondly). Throughout your teaching, we encourage you to present survivors and perpetrators and bystanders in the fullness of their humanity, rather than as personifications of stereotypes.

It may sound from this introduction that we are advocating a kind of cynicism in teaching about the Holocaust that we are recommending that all heroism be diminished, that only the bleakest truths be taught. That is not what we are suggesting at all. Instead, what we believe and what forms the basic premise for this book is that in teaching about historical actors in the fullness of their humanity, we are more likely to treat each other humanely, whether victims, perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators, resisters or rescuers. For aren't all of us at one time or another (indeed sometimes simultaneously) in all of these roles?

## **The Challenges of Teaching: One Example Not to Follow**

What does it mean to teach about historical actors in the fullness of their humanity? On the one hand, as mentioned above, it means that we avoid valorizing, ennobling and condemning so much that we forget that the Holocaust involved real people in truly complex situations. In other words, we need to do our utmost to understand the moral complexities of the situations in which people found themselves. We don't pretend for a minute that we can know how it might have felt to be Anne Frank hiding in the annex, Elie Wiesel traveling in a boxcar, or Primo Levi reciting poetry to himself in Auschwitz. But what we can understand is something of how complicated it was to live in that time, in those places, and specifically, how morally complicated. The real question at the heart of the endeavor, then, is: How do we do that? How do we teach our students to gain an appreciation for moral complexity rather than to diminish it, especially given the kinds of mythologies that shroud this history? We'll begin by giving an example from Simone's teaching of what not to do.

Simone: By the time you read this, I will have taught Holocaust history for almost 18 years, to students in grades four all the way through college. For the first 10 years, when I taught mostly middle and high school students, I did what a lot of

good history teachers do. I taught the informational content: the names, dates, places, what happened where and why. I don't mean that my teaching wasn't interactive; it was. But I would purposely hold off engaging the tough moral questions until the close of the unit, when we would spend one or sometimes two class sessions on the implications of this history. "Now that you understand what happened during the Holocaust and have some sense of why," I'd ask my students, "What is it you think we're supposed to learn from the Holocaust?" The students and I would come up with a list of moral lessons, profound ones even, and then we'd move on to the next unit or the next course.

When I think back about why I structured my unit that way for so long, I do have justifications—good ones even. Foremost among them was my dedication to content coverage. I firmly believed then that in order to draw lessons and make moral judgments, you needed to have the historical information under your belt, so I structured the two sequentially: have the students learn the information first, then they'll be prepared to make sound judgments. Over time, this conviction changed. While I still believe that students need rich wells of information in order to draw up meaningful lessons, I came to think that the best way to teach about the Holocaust was to do both in tandem: to have students muddle through the thick mud of moral issues as a way to examine the historical information itself. The moral issues, when fully explored, help students understand the historical circumstances and vice versa; the historical circumstances, when fully explored, necessitate discussion and exploration of the complex moral issues at play.

When I sat down to think about it, I came to realize that my own insecurities and inexperience as a teacher were preventing me from engaging kids in tough moral questions throughout studying the Holocaust. I think I was afraid of looking stupid. As teachers, we're trained to have answers. We serve as role models because of our knowledge, because of our competence, because of our abilities to guide students. Engaging students in discussions of tough moral questions in class, in some sense, is to compromise all three, at least it can feel like that. You don't know what will happen in a discussion of thorny moral problems, and engaging tough moral questions is to admit publicly to our students how little we understand, how little we know, how much we have yet to learn or figure out. I didn't know how to do that. I wasn't trained to lead conversations about morally complex events for which there can be no right answers. (As a side note, perhaps, I think it's fair to say that we have very few models for that kind of discussion in our public spheres. Think of a presidential debate, where in order to appear competent, you must condense the moral complexities of a question

rather than explore them. In order to model leadership, you must appear utterly convinced of a particular side rather than appear to understand multiple angles on an issue.) To facilitate a discussion of a morally complex issue, by contrast, requires teachers to hold their own answers in check, to fully expose the values underlying students' opinions, and to weigh moral issues critically.

According to Katherine Simon's research, I was not alone in my proclivities for avoidance; it is common for both public and religious school teachers to avoid raising such issues and to close down such questions when they do surface in classrooms. Consider the brief exchange Simon observed in a Jewish day school where the students were studying Elie Wiesel's famous memoir, *Night*:

Gary [a student, asks]: How can Wiesel still believe? How is it possible for anyone to believe in God after the Holocaust?

Ms. Sherman [the teacher, replies]: That's an important question. You really should bring it up with the rabbi in your religion class.<sup>2</sup>

While I understand Ms. Sherman's unwillingness to engage Gary's question, the reasonableness of deflecting Gary's inquiry to a rabbi's expertise, I can also attest to the greater power of that kind of teaching which delves students into such questions fully and consistently, whether they bring up the questions or you do. I know from my own practice that once my philosophy shifted to structure those kinds of discussions throughout the curriculum, my impact on students increased tremendously. They learned more, more deeply, and more enduringly.

As learners, we all have a natural tendency to connect what is foreign to what is known to create understanding and make meaning. That is, we compare what we don't know to what we do. Consider for a moment a time when you traveled to a new city, state or country. Oftentimes, travelers will say things like, "This French cafe reminds me of the coffee house near my house." Or, "The balmy weather in Florida is so different from the cold climate at home." The process of comparing what is not known to what is known enables us to make sense of new information. Debbie witnessed this natural tendency repeatedly over nearly a decade of traveling with teenagers to Poland and Israel on the March of the Living program.

Debbie: Depending on current world events at the time, students would naturally compare the Holocaust to other genocides. During the early 1990s, for example, students would say things like, "The Holocaust is being repeated again today in Bosnia." In the late 1990s, I heard students compare the Holocaust to

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 86.

the genocide taking place in Kosovo. My initial inclination was to discount those comparisons for fear that comparing other genocides to the Holocaust would somehow diminish its severity or distinctiveness. I would respond emphatically with statements like, “Six million people aren’t being systematically murdered in Bosnia like they were in the Holocaust.” My reluctance to have my students make these comparisons is understandable, but ultimately was not beneficial to their learning. Rather than shut down students’ natural inclinations to compare events, I learned not only to encourage those comparisons, but also to help students contrast current events with the Holocaust to better inform their learning. As the events of the Holocaust recede deeper into history, this process becomes even more important. As educators, we need to find ways to help students grapple with and comprehend a history that most students will have an increasingly more distant relationship to as the years pass.

## **A Guide to this Guide: What it is and What it is Not**

We have designed this book to help you avoid many of the mistakes that we and all teachers make in teaching about the Holocaust. Throughout this book we include lessons learned from our own teaching experience and disclose some of our own family histories in the hopes that doing so will engender deeper learning and will enable you to teach about the Holocaust with more integrity. We want you to be able to guide your students through its complicated moral terrain from the first day of your unit through the last one, and we want you to enter your classroom unafraid of engaging students’ queries. We’re not discouraging your students from bringing their questions up with their rabbis, grown ups, priests or parents, too; we simply want to make sure that the questions don’t get shut down in your classroom. We hope that you will encourage inquiry and discussion and caution you not to confuse students’ questions or doubts with disrespect. Towards that end, each chapter in this book contains ethical dilemmas and pivotal, moral questions, issues and scenarios to encourage student questioning and to help focus the discussions you have with your students.

The chapters in this book are organized by theme, which creates a vaguely, but not wholly, chronological architecture. As a result, certain ideas, topics or events may appear in more than one chapter. For example, the Wannsee Conference appears in the chapters entitled, *Naming the Holocaust*, *The War*, *Perpetrators*, and *Aftermath*. To ease your reading of the chapters, we decided not to reference these overlaps in the chapter text. In other words, we don’t include references

like “See Chapter 12 for more information about...” Instead, we encourage you to use the index to aid you in your searches.

Each chapter begins with an introduction, followed by *big ideas* and *key terms*. The *big ideas* are the main, overarching concepts that we hope your students will learn. The *key terms* are the words, phrases and names associated with those *big ideas*. Scientists ask “robust questions” as part of scientific inquiry; they look at the big picture while probing the details. We have designed the *big ideas* and *key terms* sections to mirror that approach; the *big ideas* relate to the big picture of the chapter and the *key terms* relate to the details. For example, one big idea related to resistance during the Holocaust is that acts of resistance were heroic, regardless of their outcomes. A *key term* of this big idea is the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In deciding what to teach, we suggest you first read the *big ideas* section of each chapter. Depending on whether you are teaching a single class, a short unit, a semester or entire year on the topic of the Holocaust, the *big ideas* sections will help you determine what you want your students to learn and to focus your curriculum accordingly.

Please bear in mind as you use this text that we have specifically avoided writing a history of the Holocaust. In other words, this book does not cover everything that is now known about the Holocaust. Instead, each chapter provides an overview of the teaching issues pertinent to its theme, a significant overview of content in that area, teaching ideas, and resources for classroom use and for further study for you and your students. Almost regardless of the reasons you’re teaching about the Holocaust, we think that the issues outlined in the following chapters are integral to a coherent, thorough and meaningful education on the topic. Whether, for example, you’re teaching about the Holocaust because it is one of the major historic events of the 20th century, because it continues to shape the world stage today, because it illuminates the tragic powers of antisemitism and racism, because it can aid in understanding the psychological processes by which victimizers oppress and the victimized respond, or whether because you know that study of the Holocaust can enrich your students’ senses of what it means to be a Jew, a Christian or indeed a human being, the chapters in this guide can be used to form a unit of study.

As you’ll see, with the exception of the first chapter, (*Teaching Young Children About the Holocaust*) all the teaching ideas and resources are designed for middle and high school students, not for students in lower grades. This reflects our conviction that the Holocaust should not be part of the formal school curriculum for young children, except in exceptional circumstances. To accommodate

such circumstances (*Yom HaShoah* commemorations, communities with large populations of survivors and their families, etc.), we have included a number of single-session activities for teachers of young children. The bulk of this book, however, is dedicated to the teaching of much older students—students who we feel are mature enough to begin tackling this subject with the seriousness it deserves.

## Closing Thoughts

Teaching about the Holocaust is necessarily an act of shaping memory, of forging the consciousness our students have. In creating our students' links to this past, we are helping to define their understandings of the present, and we are helping orient them towards particular futures. Of course as teachers, we are not alone in influencing their memory of the Holocaust; they will learn from their families, their friends, from the movies, from television, books, magazines and websites. They will hear urban myths about the Holocaust (“Wasn’t Hitler part Jewish?”), contested rumors, even deniers’ insults, the detritus of an information age and an ever-expanding politic. In our classrooms, by contrast, we have the unique opportunity to shape our students’ memory of the Holocaust in carefully thought-through ways, to structure their learning caringly, with serious regard for the nature of the subject matter, for the needs of our students individually and the demands of our religious communities as collectives. We thereby stand in a position of special responsibility: to aid in fashioning the collective memory of future generations. We hope that this book helps you in accomplishing that formidable job by helping you navigate the incredibly complex moral terrain of teaching about the Holocaust.

# TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST



A group of Roma prisoners congregate in the Rivesaltes internment camp in France, 1936–1942. USHMM, courtesy of Elizabeth Eidenben.

 To date, there have been very few studies on how old kids should be before they learn about the Holocaust as part of their formal school studies. Nonetheless, there are lots of opinions people hold about the subject of how old is old enough, and people often hold their opinions passionately, basing

their ideas on their personal convictions, experiences or dispositions. Roughly speaking, there are three schools of thought on the issue.

In the first are those who argue that early childhood should be a protected time, a time when adults need to shield the curious minds of children from the harsher aspects of the world they inhabit. This group tends to argue that teaching the Holocaust to youngsters is also developmentally inappropriate; young minds are simply not sophisticated enough to comprehend the complexities of the Holocaust, and young hearts are not well equipped to tackle the enormity of this tragedy. This group asks, “Why risk giving children nightmares needlessly? When the students are old enough and more mature, they will be ready to learn, and until then, we shouldn’t teach about it.”

In the second group are those who claim that it is the duty of adults to teach children, even young children, about the Holocaust. While children cannot fully comprehend its complexities, they can nonetheless begin to learn about it in a simplistic fashion. This group’s proponents tend to agree with Jerome Bruner, the educational theorist who believed that “there is an appropriate version of any skill or knowledge that may be imparted at whatever age one wishes to begin teaching—however preparatory the version may be.”<sup>3</sup> Kids can be taught what racism is, for example, or how important it is to speak up when someone is being hurt. In other words, kids can be taught about the social dynamics at play during the Holocaust as a way to prepare them for learning about its specific history in greater depth later. These proponents consider it better for students to be ushered into Holocaust knowledge slowly than not to be exposed to it at all; otherwise kids will be utterly unprepared for its horrors when they do encounter the Holocaust later.

In a third group are those who advocate teaching young children about the Holocaust without intellectually simplifying or emotionally minimizing its tragic content. According to this argument, it is the unenviable role of teachers sometimes to confront their students with the horrors of the world, the Holocaust among them. And it is better for kids to learn about the Holocaust for the first time from adults who can shape the experience carefully and caringly than for kids to learn about the Holocaust for the first time randomly, from a television show, older kids’ insensitive renderings or widely circulated rumors. As the Holocaust survivor Batsheva Dagan puts it, “Today’s children grow up in a

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<sup>3</sup>Jerome S. Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1966), 35.

world without secrets”<sup>4</sup>—better then to help them navigate what they will learn about anyway.

Most people can find some claim in each of these orientations to agree with. In fact, there is a way in which all three orientations are compatible if the age barriers between the orientations are left unexplicated. The question at the heart of all three, though, is still “how old is old enough?” or, put differently, “how young is too young?” What could we take as a sign that a child is ready to move from the protected zone of early childhood to a later stage of gentle exposure to the Holocaust, and then again, from gentle exposure to full confrontation? At what age or grade should we teach kids formally about the Holocaust or some preparatory version of it? And, more importantly, if we *are* going to teach young kids about the Holocaust, what should that preparatory version look like?

Although far from conclusive, Simone ran one of the only studies of what happens to young kids when they learn about the Holocaust as part of the formal school curriculum. She found that students in the third grade were too young to learn this material in any depth. While the parents and teachers in that study thought the kids were old enough to confront these horrors, the kids themselves wished they had been older before learning about it in school. If we are serious about listening to kids’ voices and valuing their opinions, the results of this study seem pretty persuasive. (It’s also clear that more studies need to be done.)

We base our recommendations in part on this empirical research, which is why we advocate strongly that kids in Kindergarten through third grade not be exposed to the Holocaust as part of their formal school curriculum. That is, we don’t advocate that you teach about the Holocaust to this age child. While you ought to teach preparatory Holocaust education to young kids—teaching them the importance of accepting difference, caring for the hurt, not judging others superficially, thinking critically, Jewish *mitzvot*, etc.—we don’t advocate that you teach about the Holocaust directly until fifth or sixth grade at the earliest. And, even then, we hope you’ll make accommodations by teaching kids in those grades about the Holocaust’s more redemptive aspects only—rescue, resistance, and stories that soften the harder blows of this history. We think that the earliest young people ought to be taught about the Holocaust in depth is when they are older, when as a group, they are mature enough to be appropriately staggered by its enormity and developed enough to discuss its implications. Some communi-

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<sup>4</sup>Batsheva Dagan, “Heutige Kinder wachsen auf in einer Welt ohne Geheimnisse” 6 Wie können wir Kindern helfen, über den Holocaust zu lernen? Ein psychologische-pädagogischer Zugang. Warum, was, wie und wann?, in Jürgen Moysich and Matthias Heyl (ed.), *Der Holocaust: Ein Thema für Kindergarten und Grundschule?*, (Hamburg: Krämer, 1998,) 36-50.

ties insist that students become *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, seventh grade before studying about the Holocaust in-depth; others put off study until even later.

As conservative as it may sound, this means that we advise you to keep younger students out of school-wide Holocaust commemoration activities if the ceremonies are to be overly explicit; in other words, if you are planning to commemorate the Holocaust in your school, plan to have separate arenas running simultaneously so that the K-third kids can have their own program separate from the older kids. This will allow you to help both groups commemorate an important part of Jewish history in an age-appropriate manner. Below are some ideas to help you plan such single-session educational commemorations.

## Teaching Ideas

### Pre-Kindergarten (ages three/four/five)–Kindergarten

1. **Candles:** Bring to class an array of different types of candles—Sabbath candles, a *havdalah* candle (braided candle used in the service that marks the end of Sabbath), birthday cake candles, decorative candles, and a *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle. Ask the students to describe what they know about each kind of candle and if they've used each kind in their home, and when. (This is an important step since it may let you know if your students have lost a family member.) Then, explain that some candles we light to celebrate happy events (birthdays); some we light to mark special times (Sabbath); and some we light to mark sad events, to remember people we love who are no longer with us.<sup>5</sup>
2. **Happy/Sad Holidays:** Ask your students to move around the room with their bodies showing that they feel happy. Then ask your students to move around the room with their bodies showing that they feel sad. Then ask, what did you do to show that you felt happy? What did you do to show that you felt sad? How did you feel doing each? Explain that in the Jewish tradition, we have some holidays that are happy (*Simḥat Torah*, *Purim*, *Tu B'Shevat*) and some that are sad (*Yom HaShoah* or the 10th of the Hebrew month of *Tevet*). Just as people sometimes feel happy and sometimes feel sad, so we have holidays that either celebrate happy times or help people remember sad times. Use an artistic medium to have students render happy holiday feelings and sad holiday feelings. (For example, they may make paper plate faces, paintings, drawings, collages, body tracings of both feelings, etc.)

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Janet Harris, Berkeley, California-based early childhood educator, for this activity idea.

3. **In God's Image:** Sitting together, explain to your students that it says in the Hebrew Bible that people are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1: 26). That means that people are made to be like God, not the same as God, but like God in some way. Ask what your students think is like God in each of them. What do they think is “Godly” in them? What do they like about themselves? What do they like about each other? Then ask if we're all of us made to be like God, what does that mean we're doing to God when we hurt each other?
4. **Losing Things:** Ask the students to imagine for a moment that they've lost something they love—maybe a stuffed animal, a pet or a special toy; what do they think would make them feel better if they knew they wouldn't find it again? What might they do to make someone else feel better when they've lost something (or someone) they won't see again? (There are a number of sweet children's books that could help you talk about this issue further. **Flora's Blanket** is about a little bunny at bed-time who has lost her special blanket. She finds it in the end, but you could talk about how she felt before she found it; the same goes for **Laney's Lost Mama**, which is about a little girl getting separated from her mother in a department store. While this story has a happy ending, too, it is more conducive to talking about losing people and the feelings you might have in that situation.)
5. **Jewish Life Before the Holocaust:** Another appropriate way to introduce this age child to what they will later learn about the Holocaust is to acquaint them with stories about Jewish life before the Holocaust. (Because *shtetl* life is often imbued with a kind of nostalgia, these books tend to be utterly charming. These are good texts for educators wary of any explicit Holocaust content.) A few recommendations include: **Joseph Had a Little Overcoat**, which is graphically interesting, playfully ironic, fun for parents and kids from birth on up and even includes Yiddish song lyrics and music. Although **Hannah's Sabbath Dress** is set in a non-specific time period, it has a sweet “old-world” feel about it and is appropriate for ages three and up. **You Never Know: A Legend of the Lamed-Vavniks** has a specific European setting and is appropriate for slightly older kids, four to eight. **The Feather Merchants & Other Tales of the Fools of Chelm** is good for slightly older kids, five to eight, since the younger ones don't understand its kind of silliness.

## First–Third Grades

Many of the activities in the above section can be adapted for use in the older grades. For example, you may use the same candles activity for older kids, explaining more specifically who lights a *yahrzeit* candle, when, and why, etc.

- 1. *Kaddish Yitom—Mourner’s Prayer:*** Sing or play a recording of the song, “Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head up high, and whistle a happy tune, and no one knows that I am afraid...” Make sure everyone understands the words of this song before asking the question, “Why would someone who felt afraid whistle a happy tune?” (The kids will come up with good explanations.) Then, ask why someone who felt sad might say a happy prayer? Explain that there’s a prayer called the Mourner’s Prayer that makes people feel better when they’re mourning, when they miss someone they love who’s no longer there. The words of the Mourner’s Prayer express our belief in the greatness of God, and when people who are in mourning say that prayer, they feel better (maybe not all at once, but after saying the prayer every day for a while they do). Explain that in some synagogues, when someone is mourning, everyone in the congregation says the Mourner’s Prayer with that person while in other congregations; just the people who are mourning recite the prayer. (Your kids may know how it’s done in their congregation. They may also have someone in their family who has said that prayer.) What’s nice about saying a prayer with other people at the same time? What’s helpful about saying the prayer alone? Brainstorm together what your kids could do to make a mourner in their community feel supported. (As a follow-up, in one synagogue school, for example, the second graders researched how many mourners their congregation had in a typical year and then produced that number of cards to be sent on behalf of the congregation at the appropriate time.) If you know of someone in your community who has lost someone in their family, observed the practice of saying *Kaddish* and who would be a sensitive and engaging speaker, invite them to come in and discuss what it was like to observe this ritual. (Make sure they know, though, that it’s not appropriate to lecture. Instead, invite them to tell stories about the person they lost, how it makes them feel and what it was like to say *Kaddish*.)
- 2. *The Sneetches:*** This Dr. Seuss book is a wonderful way to expose kids to the ideas of prejudice, discrimination, conformity (and commodification). Read this book aloud and talk carefully about what’s going on in it both as you read and after. Kids will often listen, but they may not always

understand the story. What do your kids think happens after the book ends? We like following up this book with a “stand-and-smile” exercise meant to show ways that the kids in your class are alike and different from each other. Ask the kids to stand up, smile and thumb their chests when you say a statement that applies to them. (“I have brown hair.”; “I’m seven years old.”; “I’m wearing white shoes.”; “I have a star on my belly.”) The kids themselves can take turns supplying statements once the pattern is set up.

- 3. Holocaust Picture Books:** There are an increasing number of picture books about the Holocaust targeted for young children. Many of them are very good: sweetly storied, rich in Jewish culture, enfolding loss within continuity, emotionally moving. All of them may evoke complex questions, though, which you should think about how you’ll engage before beginning, questions like: “Why do people go to war?” “Why did people blame Jews?” “What happens when people die?” Don’t be afraid of asking the kids to elaborate their own thoughts about each of these issues. Don’t feel, in other words, that it’s your job to answer questions. It is worth reiterating, too, that we suggest the titles below for single class period readings. We don’t recommend that you read more than one of these to your students as this age child is simply too young for a mini-unit.

A few of the titles we especially like include: **Grandma Esther Remembers** is great for younger grades and includes beautiful photographs. It is not too graphic of a story, but it is still honest with a great layout and perfect for activity extension ideas (a good recipe for *tsimmes* too). **The Tattooed Torah** follows the story of a Torah through the war (and after,) and in that way shields readers from thinking too much about people. The subtitle of **One Yellow Daffodil** claims that it is a *Hanukkah* story, but it is really a Holocaust story, and a good one to read on *Yom HaShoah* rather than *Hanukkah*. **The Feather-Bed Journey** is a gorgeous book about a family’s (and a mattress’) transformations from generation to generation. Because the storyteller’s family is killed, it’s better for older children. **The Never-Ending Greenness** has Van Gogh-ish illustrations, and follows a young boy’s childhood in Poland as the Germans take-over. It follows his subsequent move to a ghetto, his escape and his life planting trees in Israel after the war. **The Terrible Things** is marketed as an “allegory of the Holocaust,” and tells a version of Pastor Martin Niemoller’s famous quotation, “First they came for the communists, but I wasn’t a communist, so I didn’t speak up...” through the use of animals. If you use the book, it’s important to talk about why the “terrible things” did what they did. For a nice follow-up activ-

ity, Simone once saw a teacher have his students break up into animal groups shown in the book, and each group had to think up what they would do if the “terrible things” were trying to catch them. What could they have done if they had known what was coming? How could the animal groups have organized a resistance? Have them brainstorm and act out their resistance plans.

## Fourth–Fifth Grades

It’s worth noting that, except for the first two, all of the picture books in the section above work beautifully with fourth and fifth graders, too.

1. **More Picture Books:** These picture books are more explicit, more depressing, more graphic or more evocative than the preceding ones, which is why it’s worth reading them aloud to the whole class or a small group and discussing them together.

**The Yanov Torah** is Simone’s favorite Holocaust book for fourth/fifth graders since it reveals glimpses of human atrocity but through the lens of the holiness of Torah. It’s the true story of a Torah smuggled into a labor camp one scroll at a time. We suggest you edit out the last section of the book which focuses on the Torah’s being smuggled out of the former Soviet Union, not because it isn’t interesting reading, but because it takes about 45 minutes to read the whole book in total without that section. In **Nine Spoons** a grandmother explains to her grandchildren the origins of a very unusual *Hanukkah* that she lights every year. The *Hanukkah* was crafted from spoons in a children’s barracks of a slave labor camp. The illustrations are not great, but the story is very moving—uplifting, but still provocative, and centered on Jewish survival and continuity. You may want to not show the pictures and have students design the *Hanukkah* themselves, based on their imaginations. **Rose Blanche** is told from the perspective of a young, non-Jewish German girl who smuggles food to a group of children in a nearby concentration camp. This story requires some explanation as fourth graders often don’t understand the last few pages of the book where Rose Blanche herself is killed since it’s only implied. The pictures are riveting, and the bleakness of the story is tremendously powerful. You can have students write letters to Rose Blanche’s mother, pretending that they survived their stay in the concentration camp thanks to Rose Blanche’s food. **Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story** discusses the amazing rescue activities of Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat in Kovno who was able to save thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. It is told from the perspective of

his young son. Make it a point to read aloud the Afterward to your students, too; written by Sugihara's actual son, Hiroki, which discusses the repercussions post-war of Sugihara's rescue activities. **Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen** is based on the actual rescue activities of a Dutch heroine. This book contains a marvelous Epilogue, which you should read aloud. **The Grey Striped Shirt** is a little longer than the others and will take more than a single class period to read aloud. It is about a little girl who finds a grandparent's concentration camp uniform in the closet. The story discusses the Holocaust in very simple terms as the grandparents explain their experiences to her. There are no graphic images.

2. **Family Book Groups:** There are a number of good chapter books for kids of this age, too. If your students are strong readers, you can assign them to read these books aloud to their parents at home, chapter by chapter, and you can discuss the chapters in class. It's a great opportunity for family education, too. For example, you can organize "book groups": kids in one, parents in another, then 2-3 families in each group, etc. You can have one family session at the mid-point of a book and another at its conclusion. The kids might put on a skit of a powerful scene for the parents and vice versa, to serve as launching points for the discussions. The three best chapter books, interestingly, all focus on girls' experiences: **Number the Stars**, **The Devil's Arithmetic**, and **The Upstairs Room**.
3. **Films:** There are not many good films for this age child, but there are two that are both excellent in different ways. If you can find a copy, **Daniel's Story** is the video accompaniment to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's exhibit for young children. It takes about 14 minutes and brings up many questions specifically about the Holocaust, and yet it is not graphic or scary. It's a great video that sadly went out of print, but lots of Jewish institutions own it and would likely loan it out. Another good one is the Frontline film, **A Class Divided** (sometimes referred to as the "brown-eye/blue-eye" experiment). Students are very adept at analyzing why the kids acted the ways they did, what they should learn from the simulation, and how antisemitism works as a form of racism. We recommend that students watch the video and talk about how they think they would have reacted rather than having teachers perform this kind of simulation.

## Resources for Teaching

(Please see the section above for detailed summaries or highpoints of the books listed below.)

**A Class Divided.** Website: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/>. *This website houses the Frontline film in which Jane Eliot divides her kids into blue-eyed and brown-eyed kids. It's moving and fascinating, and despite the fact that it looks somewhat dated (made in 1968), all kids get involved in it quickly.*

**Daniel's Story.** Produced by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1993, 14 minutes. *This short video, though now out of print, was distributed to Jewish institutions as part of the Jewish Heritage Video Collection.*

**The Devil's Arithmetic.** Written by Jane Yolen and published by Puffin Books, London, 1990.

**The Feather-Bed Journey.** Written by Paula Kruzband Feder and published by Albert Whitman & Co., Morton Grove, IL, 1995.

**The Feather Merchants & Other Tales of the Fools of Chelm.** Written by Steve Sanfield and published by Scholastic Books, New York, 1991.

**Flora's Blanket.** Written by Debi Gliori and published by Orchard Books, London, 2001.

**Grandma Esther Remembers.** Written by Ann Morris and published by Millbrook Press, Brookfield, CT, 2002.

**The Grey Striped Shirt.** Written by Jacqueline Jules and published by Alef Design Group, Los Angeles, 1997.

**Hannah's Sabbath Dress.** Written by Itzhak Schweiger-Dmi'El and published by Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

**Joseph Had a Little Overcoat.** Written by Simms Tabak and published by Viking Children's Books, New York, 1999. *This version of the book won a Caldecott Medal.*

**Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen.** As told to Michelle R. McCann by Luba Tryszynska-Frederick and published by Tricycle Press, Berkeley, 2003.

**The Never-Ending Greenness.** Written by Neil Waldman and published by Morrow Junior Books, New York, 1997.

**Nine Spoons.** Written by Marci Stillerman and published by Hachai Publishing, Brooklyn, 2002.

**Number the Stars.** Written by Lois Lowry and published by Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1998.

- One Yellow Daffodil.** Written by David Adler and published by Harcourt Brace, Orlando, 1995.
- Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story.** Written by Ken Mochizuki and published by Lee & Low Books, New York, 1997.
- Rose Blanche.** Written by Roberto Innocenti and published by Harcourt Brace, New York, 2003.
- The Sneetches.** Written by Dr. Seuss and published by Random House, New York, 1961.
- The Tattooed Torah.** Written by Marvell Ginsburg and published by UAHC Press, New York, 1983.
- The Terrible Things.** Written by Eve Bunting and published by the Jewish Publication Society, New York, 1989.
- The Upstairs Room.** Written by Johanna Reiss and published by Harper Trophy, New York, 1990.
- The Yanov Torah.** Written by Erwin Herman, published by Kar-Ben Publishing, Toronto, 1985.
- You Never Know: A Legend of The Lamed-Vavniks.** Written by Francine Prose and published by Greenwillow, New York, 1998.

### Resources for Further Learning

**Auschwitz Explained to my Child.** Written by Annette Wieviorka and published by Marlowe and Company, New York, 2002. *This is an excellent introduction to the Holocaust, written as a series of common questions children have and the kinds of answers we as parents wish we could supply. Not suitable for young children, though, given its graphic content.*

***Incorporating Holocaust Education into K-4 Curriculum and Teaching in the United States.*** Written by Harriett Seppinwall. The full text is available at: [http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational\\_Resources/Curriculum/Incorporating\\_Holocaust\\_Educat/incorporating\\_holocaust\\_educat.html](http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational_Resources/Curriculum/Incorporating_Holocaust_Educat/incorporating_holocaust_educat.html). *The website is produced by the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota and the full texts of responses to her article are posted there as well.*

***Should there be Holocaust education for K-4 students? The answer is “No.”*** Written by Samuel Totten. The full text is available at: [http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational\\_Resources/Curriculum/Curriculum\\_Concerns/curriculum\\_concerns.html](http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Educational_Resources/Curriculum/Curriculum_Concerns/curriculum_concerns.html). *The website is produced by the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota.*

***Should There Be Holocaust Education for K-4 Students? A Reply to Dr. Samuel Totten.*** Written by Heike Deckert Peaceman. *This article is one of a series which addresses the question of how old is old enough for students to learn about the Holocaust. It was written in response to Samuel Totten's arguments (cited below).*

# NAMING THE HOLOCAUST



Warsaw ghetto residents attend a memorial service for a relative buried in the Warsaw cemetery. August, 1940. USHMM, courtesy of Gene Berkowicz.

 In teaching about the Holocaust, we often start with a lecture/discussion of the very terms people have used to describe its events. This is both a useful and a necessary preface to actually teaching about the Holocaust. While many (if not all?) of your students will have heard of the Holocaust, they may or may not have heard the terms, ‘Final Solution,’ or *Churb’n*. But teaching these terms isn’t only about enriching your students’ vocabulary. Teaching these terms, focusing your students’ attention on the language they use to describe the Holocaust, is one way for them to begin the difficult project of learning to think critically. After all, each of these terms casts the meaning of the Holocaust differently. Certain terms imply Jewish perspectives (*Churb’n/Shoah*) or Nazi

perspectives ('Final Solution'); other terms have decidedly political consequences (genocide). Even the ways that we write these terms or speak them have political overtones. What does it mean, for example, to capitalize the "H" in Holocaust vs. writing it with a lower-case "h"? Is there only one Holocaust, or are there holocausts? Does the distinction matter? In Simone's years of teaching, her eighth grade students were as adept as her college students at discussing the issues and implications involved in using different terms.

When teaching these terms, we usually lecture about their meanings first since we assume that most students don't know their derivations, even when they have heard the terms themselves. We think of teaching in this instance as providing a kind of baseline or platform of understanding that enables everyone to participate in discussions afterwards. We like to teach about each term and then pause to ask the following questions: What does this term imply? What's good about this term? What are the problems this term raises? Who do you think uses this term now, and how? And, how is it different to use this term now than it was when the term first appeared? After we have discussed each term's pros and cons, we ask students to consider which terms are most popular now, why they think that is, and which of the terms they prefer to use and why. We encourage you to make sure that your students know how you'll be using these terms, too, as those decisions will elucidate how you've structured their learning this content. In the following section, the names for the Holocaust are listed in approximate chronological order of their appearance, and some implications of each name are included.

The big ideas of this chapter are that:

- There are many terms used to refer to the Holocaust, all of which carry particular implications.
- Your students should learn the terms and discuss their implications, which should expose you, as their teacher, to their orientations towards this history and vice versa (expose them to your orientation).

The key terms of this chapter include: 'Final Solution', Adolf Hitler, *Wermacht*, *Einsatzgruppen*, Wannsee Conference, *Churb'n*, genocide, Rafael Lemkin, Auschwitz, Theodore Adorno, Holocaust, *Shoah*, *Gezerot tash-tashah*, and *Poreimas*.

## Terms for the Event

**‘Final Solution’** (1941): This term was used originally by the upper echelons of the Nazi hierarchy to describe the mass murder of Jews, or, in Nazi terminology, the ‘Final Solution’ to the so-called ‘Jewish Question.’ Though it was used within the Nazi government to mean other, preliminary steps in the process of annihilation, this was the term which ultimately referred to the plan to murder all of European (and eventually all of world) Jewry.

Hermann Goering was one of the original members of Hitler’s party, one of the few who supported him even before **Adolf Hitler** was elected to office in 1933. As such, he became an exceedingly important member of Hitler’s cabinet, overseeing and coordinating armament agencies. On July 13, 1941, Goering sent out the following order, which referred (only obliquely) to the planned mass murder of Jews:

I hereby commission you to carry out all necessary preparations with regard to organizational, substantive and financial viewpoints for a total solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.

Insofar as the competencies of other central organizations are hereby affected, these are to be involved.

I further commission you to submit to me promptly an overall plan showing the preliminary organizational, substantive, and financial measures for the execution of the intended final solution of the Jewish question.

Although this order was sent to a subordinate of Goering’s in July, which one might assume meant that the mass murder of Jews was not yet in place, the opposite is the case. Though there is some disagreement among scholars, most now believe that the plan to murder European Jews as an entire group was already in place by June 22, 1941, when the German army (the *Wermacht*) advanced into the Soviet Union. Attached to these army units were so-called ‘special units,’ *Einsatzgruppen*, whose job it was to round up Jews from the areas overtaken and to shoot them *en masse*. By September 1941, the Nazis were already experimenting with Zyklon B gas at Auschwitz to see whether it could be used to kill people; in December, they were experimenting with gas vans at Chelmno to establish exactly how. Clearly, by then, the policy of mass murder had already been established.

On January 20, 1942, the top leaders of the **Third Reich**, the Nazi German government, gathered to decide how best to implement Goering's orders. They met just outside of Berlin at Wannsee, which is why this conference is referred to (in English) as the **Wannsee Conference**. Commonly associated with the origination of the term, 'Final Solution,' the actual 'Final Solution' was already underway.

Some notes on the term: Like the majority of language used in Nazi talk, policy and documentation, the term 'Final Solution' is euphemistic, that is, it doesn't refer directly to what it means, but shrouds its meaning. The very euphemism, however, illuminates Nazi ideology since mass murder of Jews was seen as a 'solution.' A problem of the term is therefore that it doesn't seem to include non-Jewish victims of Nazi genocide (for example Sinti and Roma, who used to be referred to as 'Gypsies.')

As a side note, we never allow students to write the term (or other similar Nazi-generated terminology) without using single or double quotation marks around it, if only to reinforce the notion that it is a Nazi term and that it implies that the mass murder of Jews is positive. (Solution is a positively weighted term.)

**Churb'n:** This Yiddish term for the Holocaust was used by Eastern European Jews even as early as their being ghettoized, which in the case of Poland began in 1939. From the Hebrew root word, *cherev*, which means sword, the word came to mean warfare. It had been the Yiddish term that Eastern European Jews used to describe the destruction of the Temple, and before the ghettos were established in Poland in 1939, the Yiddish term was used to describe any great catastrophe.

Some notes on the term: There is something especially appropriate about using a Yiddish term—a term in a language whose embedding culture was wiped out—to describe the destruction of European Jewry. That said, Yiddish was not spoken by all Jews targeted by the Nazis. Greek Jews from the upper classes, for example, sometimes spoke Greek at home, *Ladino* for Jewish celebrations, and learned French and German as academic languages. Moreover, the term implies again a kind of exclusion of non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust, since the vast majority of non-Jews did not speak Yiddish.

**Genocide: Rafael Lemkin**, a Polish born Jew, lost 49 members of his family in the Holocaust. He coined the term genocide in his 1944 book, entitled, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. In the text, he describes that he wanted "to denote an old practice in its modern development." He used the term as a lawyer during the Nuremberg Trials. One of the unsung heroes of the fight for universal human

rights, Lemkin went on to almost single-handedly draft the Genocide Convention, which he presented at the first meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. Leaving a truly historical legacy, he also almost single-handedly lobbied for its passage. On December 9, 1948, the UN approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, which meant that nations incurred moral, legal, and military consequences for those instances later deemed to be genocide. By January of 1951, 20 countries had ratified the proposal.

Lemkin's terminology provided an alternative term to 'Final Solution,' providing people with a way to talk about the Holocaust without using Nazi language. The term genocide was also more general than 'Final Solution,' and referred beyond the specific annihilation of Jews. Lemkin invented the prefix from the Greek root, *gen* from *genus*, which refers to birth. This is the same root found in the words: gentleman, genius, genetics. He combined *gen* with the Latin *cide* from the root *cidera*, which means to cut or kill. This is the same suffix as found in the words: homicide, suicide, decide.

In regular usage, the term has come to mean "the deliberate extermination of an ethnic or national group" (this according to the Oxford English Dictionary definition). When he termed the phrase, though, Lemkin proposed the following definition:

Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity but as members of a national group.

Notes on the term: Interestingly, there is no mention of political groups being the potential victims of genocide according to this definition. The Russian emissary to the first UN meeting was present when the resolution passed and had wanted to make sure that Stalin could not be considered guilty of genocide. Sadly, as a result of the important moral, legal and economic consequences the

term genocide carries with it, governments purposefully avoid using the term in order to avoid intervention. Some people appreciate the clinical or scientific sound of this term, implying as it does a calculated rationality to mass murder. Others dislike the coldness it conveys, as if the term itself denies the humanity of victims of genocide. As a side note, Lemkin believed that the term ought to be capitalized whenever it was used as a way to further emphasize its horrendousness, no matter what the particulars. We do not capitalize it in this book as a way to recognize its tragic everydayness, the fact that at this point in history, it seems to occur frequently, if not constantly.

**Auschwitz:** **Theodore Adorno**, the great German-Jewish philosopher, launched many thousands of essays in response to his famous quotation, “After Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric.” While Adorno modified his claim somewhat after reading the poetry of Paul Celan, what is important for our purposes is his use of Auschwitz to refer to the Holocaust as a whole. In the 1950s, it was quite common for people to refer to the atrocities in general through reference to the largest concentration and death camp, Auschwitz. Though it’s uncommon today to speak about the Holocaust as Auschwitz, the use of the term then highlights how little was known in the immediate aftermath of the events.

Notes on the term: It could be said that Auschwitz has become a symbol for the Holocaust and that using the term Auschwitz to refer to the Holocaust highlights the central symbolic image of the gas chambers and crematoria. One problem with this term, though, is that it tends to overshadow other kinds of experiences Holocaust victims and survivors encountered. It used to be the case, for example, that survivor only referred to a survivor of a concentration camp, whereas now we tend to consider Holocaust survivors as those who spent the war years in hiding, in full view with false papers, in ghettos, forests, labor camps, etc. The term is also a little vague since Auschwitz the camp included the camp Birkenau and many smaller satellite camps, and since the name of the concentration camp was also the name of the town (*Oswiecim* in Polish) in which it was located.

**Holocaust:** Elie Wiesel is said to have fathered this term in the same way that Columbus discovered America; in other words, he was credited with its officialization, but was not in fact its inventor. He was, however, one of the first people to use the term in print in the mid-1950s. That said, the term was not widely used until the 1970s, following the airing of a television mini-series of the same name. This term is now the most widely used, the most widely known, and perhaps as a result, the most widely contested term for the atrocities committed under the Nazi regime.

The term comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which was completed somewhere around 200 BCE. The Hebrew word being translated was *olah*, from Genesis 22: 13: “Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.” The wholly burnt offering here is the *olah*, and the Greek translation of the word was *holocaust*. The prefix, *holo-*, came from the Greek root, *holos*, which means whole, total, complete. It’s the same prefix as in the words *holistic* or *hologram*. The suffix of the word *caust* came from the root word *caustos* which means to burn. This is the same root found in the word *cauterize*.

According to its etymology, then, the word *Holocaust* links the victimization of Jews under the Third *Reich* to the almost-sacrifice of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible. Many thinkers have objected to this linkage considering its ramifications. The term itself likens the Jews murdered by Nazis and their collaborators to Isaac, which implies that murders under the ‘Third *Reich*’ served a divine purpose. After all, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. In that analogy, too, the Nazis become God’s instruments, since they are likened to Abraham. The implication throughout is that God played a role in the perpetration of these events, or at least, that God was included in their universe. The term itself, in short, locates these specific atrocities within a theological terrain, which for many people, is unacceptable. The *Holocaust*, they might argue, despite this term, was not an example of God’s inhumanity to man, but of man’s inhumanity to man, or, put in non-sexist language, people’s capacity for inhumanity.

Notes on the term: Most of the early debates swirling around use of this term concerned its theological underpinnings. Since the term has become so widely used and widely understood, most of the more recent debates concern its vagueness. Does the *Holocaust* include only Jewish victims of the Nazis or all victimized groups? Is there only one *Holocaust* (so that it should be capitalized), or are there many examples of *holocausts*? And, does the *Holocaust* refer to all of the anti-Jewish activity in Nazi Germany (which would mean it began in 1933), or does it refer only to those activities that were directed towards mass murder (which would mean that most people date it to 1939, the establishment of ghettos, or to 1941, the year the ‘Final Solution’ became operationalized)? These days, when people write about the *Holocaust*, they typically define their terminology along these axes in order to orient their readers. In this book, we capitalize the *Holocaust* to indicate its special status in history, but we consider the *Holocaust* to have included not only Jewish victims, but all of its victims, Jewish and non-Jewish.

**Shoah:** This Hebrew term, like Holocaust, has Biblical origins, but this time, those origins are not connected to the will of God as much as to destruction wrought by human hands. For many, then, the term, *Shoah*, is preferable to the term, Holocaust. The Hebrew word appears in Proverbs 1: 27, “When your fear cometh as desolation (*shoah*) and your destruction comes as a whirlwind.” This prophecy references the destruction of the great Jewish Temple, which some have argued is a historic rather than a religious event. The enemies of the Biblical people Israel devastated the great Temple; God did not.

Notes on the term: For some, the fact that this term is in Hebrew is positive. That it is in Hebrew implies that the *Shoah*, unlike the Holocaust, is about an event in Jewish history, as opposed to an event in European or world history, and that it concerns Jewish victimization, rather than the victimization of Soviet prisoners of war, Sinti or Roma (previously known as ‘Gypsies’), Jehovah’s Witnesses, or other persecuted groups.

**Gezerot tash–tashah:** It used to be the case that in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, the Holocaust was referred to obliquely as “the Decrees of 1939 – 1945.” (*Tash-tashah* refers in shorthand to the years 1939–1945 in the Hebrew calendar.) Stated this way, the decrees allow the period to be thought of as either God’s work or humans’, though *gezerot* were usually considered human decrees. More recently, however, the ubiquity of the term, Holocaust, has meant that it has seeped into ultra-Orthodox Jewish usage.

**Poreimas:** The group that used to be called ‘Gypsies’ now refer to themselves as Sinti and Roma, the names of the most prominent family groupings in Germany and Austria respectively. The term Roma often refers to both groups now. ‘Gypsy’ was not only a term that had become derogatory, but it was originally applied to this group when they were thought to have originated in Egypt. In fact, the Sinti and Roma originated in Northern India and migrated to Europe during the Middle Ages. The Romani term for the Holocaust is *Poreimas*, which translates roughly as “the devouring.” Referring to the specific devouring of the Sinti and Roma during the Holocaust, this term is relatively recent and not many Roma use it or recognize it. Almost directly opposite of Jewish tradition, Roma tradition espouses a kind of forgetting, a dismissal of history in favor of “seizing the day.” As the historian, Inga Clendinnen puts it, “they have chosen not to bother with history at all, because to forget, with a kind of defiant insouciance...is the Gypsy [sic] way of enduring.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

## Teaching Ideas

- 1. Your Preference:** Ask your students to simply write for a few minutes about which term they prefer, why, and what it says about them as people. Some teachers refer to this as a “thinking break,” an opportunity for each student to collect their thoughts and form opinions individually before discussing them as a group. To begin the discussion, ask each student to go around the room, share their preference, and give one reason for that preference. Make sure your students know that they are entitled to have different opinions about the matter, and that they need not debate which term is right. How would they go about asking others to use the term they think of as the best one?
- 2. Word Bubbling:** After hearing this list of terms and their origins, try having your students freely associate words. What do they associate with one of these terms? Go around the room, and encourage the students, as fast as they can, to mention the next word that pops into their minds. You can do this activity in pairs or as a group. You can also do this activity aloud (which is preferable because it’s a quicker form) or in writing (which is preferable because it’s more private). If the activity gets to silly words, it’s a great opportunity to discuss why; why do you think your mind tends towards funny or lightweight associations rather than dwelling in horror? What can that tell us about the endeavor of studying the Holocaust?
- 3. Conceptual Mapping:** After distributing blank pieces of colored paper, scissors and tape, ask your students to “map” these words visually. How do they see the relationships between these terms? Which terms are the larger categories or the smaller categories? Which terms are umbrella terms or tree root terms? After the students have had a chance to think and intellectually map, have them explain aloud why they designed their maps as they did.

The famous Israeli historian of the Holocaust, Yehuda Bauer, for example, puts genocide and Holocaust on the same continuum, but argues that genocide is less extreme than Holocaust. After all, according to Lemkin’s definition, genocide can refer to the moral corruption of victims or to the appropriation of economic advantage by the perpetrators, both of which are less extreme than mass murder.

- 4. Uses of the Term:** If you or your students have access to the web during school hours, it’s a fascinating activity to look at some of the uses of the term, Holocaust. At the time of this writing, for example, there is a slide

show at the website for **People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals** (PETA), which compares the mass murders of victims, not explicitly Jews, during the Holocaust to the slaughter of animals for mass consumption today. The slide show is entitled “Holocaust on Your Plate,” and it contains quotations like: “To animals, all people are Nazis,” (attributed to Isaac Bashevis Singer, the writer of Yiddish comedic fiction), and “Our grandchildren will ask us one day, ‘Where were you during the Holocaust of the animals?’” The slides are carefully paired to show, on the left-hand side, images of emaciated or tortured people, and on the right, a visually similar image of emaciated or tortured animals. PETA members would like you to consider the paired images as morally equivalent, not only visually similar. Thus the slide show not only elevates the cause of veganism, but denigrates the sanctity of human life.

In addition, there used to be a record store in San Mateo, California, called ‘The Vinyl Solution.’ And there’s a famous episode of the television show, *Seinfeld*, called the ‘Soup Nazi.’ These examples and others, which your students can bring to your attention, can catalyze important discussions around questions like these: When should the word, Holocaust be used for an event other than this Holocaust? When should any of these words be used? What happens to these original meanings when they’re used for non-historical purposes? Should the term Holocaust be considered sacred in some way? Why or why not? Why is it people refer to the Holocaust in these ways? How do you feel about these uses, and what do you feel it’s important to do about them?

- 5. Charting Genocide:** An introduction to names for the Holocaust can help your students begin to identify the axes that are important in understanding all genocides. As your students listen to your lecture, have them write a list of factors that seem important. Their lists might include, for example, the intention of the perpetrators (to conquer, exploit or murder), the parts annihilated (culture/economy/people), wartime or peace-time, etc. Brainstorm the list together, and then have the students group and sort them. Then, create a chart together that lists the features of all genocides. As your study progresses, you may want students to refer back to this chart, noting how some of these aspects changed. And, when your study of the Holocaust is complete, your students should be able to use these features to compare the Holocaust to other instances of genocide.

## Resources for Teaching and Further Learning

**Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey.** Written by Isabel Fonseca and published by Vintage Books, New York, 1996. *Though relatively little of this book deals with the Sinti and Roma's experiences during the Holocaust, the section that does is, like the rest of the book, beautifully written, personal and fascinating.*

**A History of the Holocaust.** Written by Yehuda Bauer and published by Scholastic Books, New York 2001. *A fabulous and thorough textbook. Useful as a reference text.*

**The Holocaust in American Life.** Written by Peter Novick and published by Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1999. *Crafted by an eminent historian, this book documents public attitudes towards the Holocaust in the U.S.A. in the decades since 1945. Though sometimes his narration is too glib for our taste, the book is excellent. With regards to this chapter's content, it ably documents the political uses to which the Holocaust has been put.*

**People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.** Website: <http://www.masskilling.com/exhibit.html> . *This website contains a gruesome slide show entitled "Holocaust on Your Plate" in which the term, Holocaust, is applied, graphically, to the slaughter of animals for mass consumption.*

**A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide.** Written by Samantha Power and published by Basic Books, New York, 2002. *A phenomenal study of U.S. involvement (and non-involvement) in the genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this book contains chapters on Lemkin, the Holocaust, Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda and other genocides.*

**Reading the Holocaust.** Written by Inga Clendinnen and published by University Press, Cambridge, England, 1999. *A beautifully written set of reflections on Holocaust scholarship, this book weaves the way through various historiographical dilemmas.*

**While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust.** Written by Jeffrey Shandler and published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999. *This seminal book examines how the Holocaust was transmitted via popular culture to millions of Americans, and how it became a cultural icon as a result.*

