



**HOLOCAUST EDUCATION  
IN PEDAGOGY,  
HISTORY,  
AND PRACTICE**



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# DECLARATION OF THE STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON THE HOLOCAUST

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The members of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance are committed to the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which reads as follows:

1. **The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally** challenged the foundations of civilization. The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning. After half a century, it remains an event close enough in time that survivors can still bear witness to the horrors that engulfed the Jewish people. The terrible suffering of the many millions of other victims of the Nazis has left an indelible scar across Europe as well.
2. **The magnitude of the Holocaust,** planned and carried out by the Nazis, must be forever seared in our collective memory. The selfless sacrifices of those who defied the Nazis, and sometimes gave their own lives to protect or rescue the Holocaust's victims, must also be inscribed in our hearts. The depths of that horror, and the heights of their heroism, can be touchstones in our understanding of the human capacity for evil and for good.
3. **With humanity still scarred** by genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia, the international community shares a solemn responsibility to fight those evils. Together we must uphold the terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it. We must strengthen the moral commitment of our peoples, and the political commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences.
4. **We pledge to strengthen** our efforts to promote education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust, both in those of our countries that have already done much and those that choose to join this effort.
5. **We share a commitment** to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions. We will promote education about the Holocaust in our schools and universities, in our communities and encourage it in other institutions.
6. **We share a commitment** to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it. We will encourage appropriate forms of Holocaust remembrance, including an annual Day of Holocaust Remembrance, in our countries.
7. **We share a commitment** to throw light on the still obscured shadows of the Holocaust. We will take all necessary steps to facilitate the opening of archives in order to ensure that all documents bearing on the Holocaust are available to researchers.
8. **It is appropriate** that this, the first major international conference of the new millennium, declares its commitment to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past. We empathize with the victims' suffering and draw inspiration from their struggle. Our commitment must be to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.

## FOREWORD

Kathrin Meyer, Ph.D.



*“We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions. We will promote education about the Holocaust in our schools and universities, in our communities and encourage it in other institutions.”*

Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust (see p.1-2)

In the year 1998 then – Swedish Prime Minister, Goeran Persson, was deeply shocked to learn that a worryingly high number of Swedish High School students lacked appropriate knowledge of the Holocaust. Barely half a century after the Second World War, the Holocaust – an event which had fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization – was beginning to recede into the shadows of history.

Recognizing the crucial role that education about the Holocaust plays in the historical and civic education of young people, Persson began the

process of uniting governments to form the unique 31 member country intergovernmental body which is now known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

What Persson recognized - and indeed what this volume entitled *Holocaust Education in Pedagogy, History, and Practice* confirms – is that when we teach about the Holocaust, we are not only teaching history. By reflecting upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust, we raise awareness of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination.



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We reinforce the fundamental importance of respecting human rights. We also educate and inspire future generations to find strength and joy in diversity. It was with all this in mind that the IHRA dedicated a great deal of effort to developing a wide range of teaching guidelines, available on the IHRA website, to support educators in teaching about the Holocaust.

There will come a time when the survivors and other witnesses will no longer be among us to share their memories. This is a universal challenge that all educators face, whether we teach in a classroom in the Netherlands or a university in Canada. And as this publication with its wealth of expertise from around the globe shows, there is much to be gained by sharing best practices and strategies for overcoming challenges beyond national borders. I continue to be impressed by the innovative projects and approaches to Holocaust education being developed around the globe.

It is my hope that this publication can provide both a strong foundation and new and inspiring insights on the topic of Holocaust education. I take this opportunity to thank all scholars and educators for their efforts to keep the stories of the Holocaust alive, ensuring that they remain forever seared in our collective memory..

Dr. Kathrin Meyer  
Executive Secretary  
International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

## INTRODUCTION

Carson Phillips, Ph.D.



A primary goal of this publication is to provide educators and learners, who may have varying levels of knowledge about the Holocaust, with a concise and accessible resource. We are fortunate to be able to share the wealth of expertise offered by the Neuberger's Holocaust Education Week Educators and Scholars-in-Residence, showcased at our programming over the years. This publication extends the work and expertise offered during Holocaust Education Week to a wider audience and we are grateful to the authors who generously offered their articles for publication. They represent some of the brightest and most innovative

educators and academics in the field and we hope that their writing will inspire a deep and enriched learning experience. We extend special thanks to the Ernest (Ernie) Weiss Memorial Fund for the ongoing support offered to this project.

Titled, Holocaust Education in Pedagogy, History, and Practice. this publication features a series of ten essays, each of which provides significant opportunities for learning. Categorized thematically, each article reflects and expands upon its section's heading. The publication opens with three contributions on the pedagogy of teaching the

Holocaust. As we move further and further in time away from the events of the Holocaust, it becomes increasingly important that pedagogy adapt, not only to reflect new historical findings and context, but also to stay abreast of student needs and curriculum changes.

Karen Shawn, a visiting associate professor of Jewish education at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University opens this collection of essays with a poignant and personal essay on the importance of artefacts. She connects these items to individual narratives demonstrating a multifaceted approach to education. Her insights into the power of everyday objects to serve as triggers for deeper learning experiences are certain to resonate with many readers. UK-based Kay Andrews offers innovative strategies for incorporating the voices of survivors into the learning experiences. Andrews challenges us to listen, contextualize and interpret the recorded accounts of those who survived the Holocaust. Utilizing the holdings of the USC Shoah Foundation, Andrews provides insight into working with recorded testimony to engage new generations of learners. This opening section is rounded out by...Karen Polak. Karen Polak, immediate past-Chair of International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Committee on the Genocide of the Roma and a senior staff member of the International Department of the Anne Frank House in the Netherlands. She invites us to explore teaching about the genocide of the Roma during the Holocaust. Too often neglected, this topic provides important insights and strategies for incorporating the fate of the Roma as part of Holocaust education.

Section two provides readers with a series of three concise, historically focused essays that offer insights into the foundational components of teaching the Holocaust. Together, these articles provide readers with an important opportunity to broaden our understanding of how the Holocaust is an event that transcends traditional geographic and national borders. The authors aptly demonstrate how the Holocaust has had a global reach and at its core, is the fate of European Jewry. Doris L. Bergen, the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto reminds us that the Holocaust is in fact world history. Consequently, the Holocaust remains a topic of global interest, even in countries not directly impacted by the effects of the Holocaust. Robert Jan van Pelt, a university professor at the School of Architecture, University of Waterloo, Canada discusses the pre-eminent role that the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau has, and continues to play, in contemporary Holocaust consciousness. Van Pelt encourages us to situate the importance of the concentration camp network within the greater context of Nazi atrocities. Finally, Emily Amie Witty, an assistant professor of education at the Touro Graduate School of Education in New York City, reminds us that at its essence, the Holocaust is a Jewish tragedy that has come to affect the entire world. She warns us that attempts to universalize the Holocaust frequently result in a

de-Judaization of the Holocaust, and reminds us that the Jewish experience—as a group of people targeted for annihilation who struggled to maintain some degree of agency in the midst of Nazi aggressions, as victims, and finally as a surviving remnant who struggled to rebuild lives—must remain an integral component of the pedagogy.

The third section offers educators examples of best practices in the field of Holocaust education. Austrian historian and pedagogical expert Martin Hagmayr, who is affiliated with Castle Hartheim and the Museum *Arbeitswelt*, provides insightful and thought provoking examples of teaching about the Nazi's so-called euthanasia program. In what was the Nazi Germany's first orchestrated program of mass murder, it became a prelude to the Holocaust. Hagmayr's expertise in this area offers readers a sensitive means to approach this topic and encourage critical thinking skills in students.

Carson Phillips, Managing Director of the Neuberger discusses the role of photographs as primary source documents and a tool for learning about the past. Whether they are used to tell a narrative, or to contextualize specific aspects of Holocaust history, photographs offer learners a visual window into historical events. Thoughtfully deconstructed, they can encourage students to expand their research, analytical and critical thinking skills. Lauren Granite, North American Education Director for CENTROPA. discusses new ways to teach about Jewish life and the Holocaust. Using primary and secondary source material from CENTROPA's vast photograph and video archive, she show us and how to adapt pedagogical methods to an ever-changing classroom.

Finally, the publication concludes with an article jointly written by Carson Phillips and Emily Amie Witty. Professional colleagues who have individually been involved in Holocaust education for 20 years, they combine their knowledge and skills to offer insights into some of the most common myths and misconceptions that arise in teaching the Holocaust. Whether it is discussing pedagogical techniques, resources or deconstructing erroneous myths, Phillips and Witty provide strategic and useful insights into issues that frequently arise in classroom as well as public education settings.

The Neuberger welcomes your feedback by email at [neuberger@ujafed.org](mailto:neuberger@ujafed.org). We hope that you find this publication to be intellectually stimulating, informative, and useful in your research and teaching.

## PEDAGOGY

Karen Shawn

### The Poetry of Artefacts: Teaching Through Fragments Left Behind



Twenty-five years after the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel (1970) wrote, in his now-classic *One Generation After*, that that watershed “will soon be ancient history, unrelated to today’s conflicts . . . without impact on the aspirations and actions of adolescents eager to . . . conquer the future. The past interests them only to the extent that they can reject it.” To the name Auschwitz, Wiesel believed that the next generation would respond, “Never heard of it” (p. 3).

Wiesel was profoundly mistaken, fortunately, and he recognized it. In “Will the World Ever Learn?,” his introduction to the 2011 edition of *One Generation*

After, he writes, “And now, 60 years later, the entire world listens to the words of the witness” (p. ix).

The chairman of Yad Vashem, Avner Shalev (2015), echoes Wiesel as he notes that in the decades since 1945, “large portions of humanity have gradually come to perceive the Holocaust as a pivotal, landmark event for modern civilization” (p. 2). He quotes the world-renowned Holocaust historian and survivor Yisrael Gutman’s remark that “the Shoah refuses to become history” (p. 2).

That “it remain[s] so relevant to so many different people” means that thousands of educators around the world, even in “regions and countries not originally related to the events of the Holocaust, find it compelling and meaningful” (p. 2). Surely, they share the dilemmas of how to teach this subject most effectively—including the now especially pressing concern of how to teach it when the witnesses cannot visit classrooms and offer testimony. Teaching about the Shoah is a daunting task *today*. How much more so will it be when the survivors are no longer with us to humanize the grim statistics?

Currently, hundreds of scholars, researchers, and educators are examining the question of how best to do this. In Treblinka and Sobibor, for example, archaeologists are examining mass graves through new, non-invasive techniques that allow them “to record and examine topographies of atrocity” (Lebovic, 2015, n.p.). Scientists are bringing technology to the effort, making laser recordings that create holograms of the real people giving testimony—three-dimensional images that can then be projected onto a screen in any classroom in the future, bringing the survivor to life, so to speak, as if he were really sitting there and talking. For the past several years, “a group led by USC’s Shoah Foundation has been . . . creating three-dimensional holograms of nearly a dozen people who survived Nazi Germany” (Rogers, 2013, n.p.). The effect is quite eerie and quite real, and the hologram will even be pre-programmed with answers to commonly asked questions about the Holocaust.

We also have many thousands of video and audiotaped testimonies, as well as the newest interactive apps, which also bring the image and voice of the vitally important witness into the classroom.<sup>1</sup> These narratives are and will always be crucial to our knowledge of individual experiences and of some of the complex dilemmas confronted by the Jews during the Holocaust.

Yet those of us who grew up with survivors in our homes and communities long for something more intimate than an enhanced understanding of the death camps, more personal than images that speak but cannot be embraced. What can we add to our teaching to enrich our students’ affective as well as historical knowledge?

Recently, archaeologists’ discoveries have reinforced the potential for the widespread study of fragments left behind during the Holocaust, objects that, in their context, engage learners’ feelings. The research teams at Sobibor have “found hundreds of artifacts belonging to victims” (Lebovics, 2015, n.p.). Unearthed in Treblinka were “dozens of personal items,” including one that for the lead researcher, Caroline Sturdy Colls, was “the most memorable: a rose brooch.” Explains Colls, “These items belonging to women that we

found near the gas chambers, we felt that people had tried to hide them and smuggle them.” They are the ones . . . that send you into an emotional tailspin” (n.p.).

Even when the survivors are gone, we will always have the fragments they leave us: objects we can pick up, touch and feel, reflect on, examine, and discuss—artefacts from which we can often learn a great deal about the people who owned them and the history embedded in them.

## History Becomes Personal

I recently lost both my mother and my mother-in-law. They were not Holocaust survivors but, in the aftermath of each loss, I was struck by how important the things they had left behind became—to my siblings and me, to my husband and his family. We didn’t have holograms of our mothers. We didn’t have videotapes. But we did have their possessions—the things they had cherished for their entire lives—the things that mattered most to them—objects they kept, and kept again, even as they downsized their homes as they aged, as their worlds became smaller and smaller. As we carefully decided which sibling would best appreciate each possession, we realized that each artefact we touched had a story behind it that helped us to remember moments shared but long forgotten. We came to cherish the unbreakable connection that these random objects had with our mothers, which would now help *us* remain connected to these women and to their life experiences in a concrete and tangible way.

It was then that I understood personally the potential to reach the next generation, to teach them about the Shoah and the people who endured it, through artefacts—items the survivors, and those who did not survive, were somehow able to use and to keep.

These items, along with the vivid memories that survivors have shared and the historical facts the objects illustrate, can help us relate to the Jews of that time, bringing us a bit closer to the reality of a world we can hardly imagine. As we learn about these tangible possessions, we may empathize and perhaps reflect, as I did, on artefacts from *our* lives, objects that we hold dear, that represent a time in our lives that can be better understood by knowing their context. Empathy is a path to understanding, to wanting to learn more—and that is, after all, a most important goal of Holocaust education: to have our students want to learn more.

Artefacts hold stories—gifts from those who can no longer speak to those who will never have known them at all. These narratives give life to an object that would otherwise be wordless. For me, three small, now-tarnished silver spoons I found in my mother’s kitchen drawer would have had no meaning had I not known that these were the spoons she used when she fed hot rice cereal to me in my infancy, and then, years later, to my own baby daughter. For my husband, a small, plain, blue metal Chanukah menorah might have been of no consequence had he not known that his mom bought it some 50 years ago in the Old City on her very first visit to Jerusalem and loved to tell the story of her first encounter—and success!—with Middle East bargaining.

We no longer have our mothers, but we have a few of their things, and their things tell stories that help our mothers and their history to live on—in our hearts, and in our families.

## Witnesses and Their Possessions

Survivors, and those who did not survive, also have stories about objects—about, for instance, the things they wore or carried with them when they were displaced and forced to move unceremoniously from city to ghetto, from ghetto to camp, just as the woman who owned the rose brooch found at Treblinka wore or carried that pin, precious to her.

The historian Michael Berenbaum (2006) tells us that “29 storerooms [of Jewish possessions] were burned before the liberation of Auschwitz.” Six other storerooms remained. In them were, among other items, “348,820 men’s suits, 836,255 women’s coats . . . and even 13,964 carpets” (p. 185). These mute possessions teach us a great deal, including the fact of the large-scale Nazi deception that made the Jews believe that they were going to be resettled in the East.

The poet Stephen Herz (2014) illustrates this in a poem he called “Whatever You Can Carry,” reprinted here with permission. Using Berenbaum’s statistics as an epigraph, he continues:

“You will work in the factory, work in / the fields, you will be resettled in the East,/ bring whatever you can carry.”

So our dresses, shirts, suits, underwear, / bedsheets, featherbeds, pillows, tablecloths, / towels, we carried.

We carried our hairbrushes, handbrushes, / toothbrushes, shoe daubers, scissors, mirrors, / safety razors. Forks, spoons, knives, pots, saucepans, tea strainers, potato / peelers, can openers we carried. We carried / umbrellas, sunglasses, soap, toothpaste, / shoe polish. We carried our photographs. / We carried milk powder, talc, / baby food.

We carried our sewing machines. We carried / rugs, medical instruments, the baby’s pram. /

Jewelry we carried, / sewn in our shoes, sewn in our corsets, / hidden in our bodies. We carried loaves of bread, bottles of wine, / schnapps, cocoa, chocolate, jars of marmalade, / cans of fish. Wigs, prayer shawls, tiny Torahs, skullcaps, phylacteries we carried. / Warm winter coats in the heat of summer / we carried. On our coats, our suits, / our dresses, we carried our yellow stars. / On our baggage in bold letters, our addresses, /our names we carried.

We carried our lives. (pp. 105–106)

What did the Jews do with the things they could not or did not want to carry, limited as they were by the Nazi decrees of weight restrictions on their suitcases, and often fearful of taking their most valuable possessions, believing, as most did, that they would return to their homes at the end of the war? Elie Wiesel (1970/2011), in a short story called “The Watch,” writes about the objects his family buried for safekeeping in late April, 1944, “in the early morning hours” of the day they were to be deported:

After a sleepless night, the ghetto was changed into a cemetery and its residents into gravediggers. We were digging feverishly in the courtyard, the garden, the cellar, consigning to the earth, temporarily, we thought, whatever remained of the belongings accumulated by several generations. . . .

My father took charge of the jewelry and valuable papers. His head bowed, he was silently digging near the barn. . . . My mother, crouched on the damp ground, was burying the silver candelabra. . . . As for me, my only possession was my watch. It meant a lot to me. And so I decided to bury it in a dark, deep hole, three paces away from the fence, under a poplar tree whose thick, strong foliage seemed to provide a reasonably secure shelter.

All of us expected to recover our treasures. . . . Until the end of the storm, they would be safe.

Yes, we were naïve. We could not foresee that the very same evening . . . an excited mob of well-informed friendly neighbors would be rushing through the ghetto's wide-open houses and courtyards, leaving not a stone or beam unturned, throwing themselves upon the loot. (pp. 220–221)

We can learn a great deal about the Holocaust and its people, even from stories about artefacts we can no longer see, hold, and examine.

Herz (2014) writes also about photographs that the Jews first took with them as keepsakes and then, once they were on the trains and feared for their fate, used as note paper for desperate words meant for those left behind. They threw the photo-notes through cracks in the cattle cars with the hope that Polish passers-by would find them and help

before / they left / their lives / they left / their pictures / they left / scribbled / frantic / messages / on the back / in shaky / handwriting / asking / for help.

O so many / Jewish / families — / the / smiling / faces / of the young / and old / scattered / along / the / tracks / to the / camps. (p. 65)

Another Herz poem details one such artefact. As the poem's title indicates, this note, written by a man named Otto Simmonds to his wife and thrown from a passing cattle car, was "Found in a Crumpled Torn Envelope on the Tracks to Auschwitz" by a Polish railway worker, who sent it to Mrs. Simmonds in a new envelope with these words: "Having found this letter on the rails after one of the Jews passed through . . . hope this letter will reach you."

My dears, / on the way to Poland!!! / Nothing helped. / Tried everything. /

Allegedly it's going / to Metz. / Fifty of us in one car!! / Stripped of everything / in Drancy. / Be brave and courageous. / I'll be the same. / Kisses, Otto (p. 66)

Even in the ghetto, Jews, even children, had treasured possessions. A survivor named Myra Genn (1995) remembers what she kept when she was forced into hiding:

I was four years old. My mother woke me suddenly, in the middle of the night, from a deep sleep. It was

another "*aksia*," a systematic round-up and deportation of the ghetto Jews by the Nazis.

I could see the urgency reflected in my mother's face and hear it in her voice as she told me we must run and hide. I knew there was no time for my usual "But why?" She helped me to dress quickly, and grabbed my hand to run—and I grabbed the flowers that lay in a bunch on the floor next to my bed.

I hardly remember those flowers, or how I got them that day in a ghetto bereft of beauty. They were probably wildflowers, probably more weeds than anything else. But they were mine in a world where nothing was mine, and I remember my determination to hold onto them. Everything was being taken away from me—my home, my father, my toys—but I would hold on to these flowers no matter what. They, at least, were mine, and I would not leave them. They wouldn't take up much space in the hiding place, a cellar underneath a neighboring house; they did not make any noise; they would not hurt anyone.

I held my mother's hand, silently following her every cue and running with her out into the street, into the safer place, down the stairs—all the while clutching my flowers. (pp. 32–33)

Some artefacts even saved lives, as Sara Nomberg-Przytyk (2008) writes in her powerful short story "The Camp Blanket." She recounts her deportation on a cattle car in such bitterly cold weather that she thought she would not survive. Another prisoner gives her her own thin blanket in a remarkable act of kindness. Nomberg-Przytyk writes, "I realized that I did not even know my savior's name and that I would never be able to repay her for the gray blanket that, for me, meant the difference between life and death" (p. 209).

Artefacts may follow a circuitous route until they find the proper home. In the short story "An Encounter in Linz," Bernard Gotfryd, newly liberated, accepts the hospitality offered by a kindly Austrian couple until he realizes that their son is a member of the Waffen SS. As he quietly leaves their home, he sees

a silver candle holder—exactly the kind . . . I used to see every Friday night on our dining room table. There was no doubt in my mind that it had come from a Jewish home. . . . On top of the table was the other candle holder. Next to it stood a silver Passover wine cup with the Star of David engraved on it. I was incensed. Herr Gartner must have known that these were items of Jewish origin. (pp. 217–218)

Two years later, Gotfryd, reflecting on their generosity to him, wrote to the Gartners, and he and Herr Gartner began a correspondence. "One day," Gotfryd writes, "I received a letter from his nephew announcing that

Herr Gartner had died. In his will he had left me a silver wine cup and two silver candlesticks” (p. 219).

Sometimes survivors can tell us the story of an artefact they still cherish. Alex Brooks (1995) follows the path of his father’s wedding ring throughout the Holocaust and to today:

After my father’s funeral in Budapest, on the day I saw my mother and my sister for the last time before we were all taken away to separate death camps, Mother handed me my father’s wedding ring as a symbol of family heritage. I promised myself to safeguard it as if my life depended on it.

For a while I wore it on my finger. Then, in labor camp, on the day the guards strip-searched us for valuables and threatened to kill us if we withheld anything, I decided to hide the ring in the straw of the open lean-to where we had been sleeping for several months. That was a wise decision; several people were shot during the search as the guards discovered items they had hidden on their bodies.

When we returned from the ordeal of the search, shaken and upset, I went straight to the straw pile to recover my ring. Sure enough, I could not find it.

My whole group of friends helped me turn the place upside down. As the straw flew and the dust choked the air, we discovered that one of our comrades had used the thick layers of straw under himself for these months as his private bathroom. This was the reason he never had to get up during the snowy nights and make the trip to the outhouse like everybody else did. This was also the reason the whole place had begun to smell like dung within so short a time after we arrived. But I paid the mess very little attention, for out of the dirt and the dust and the straw rolled the ring. . . .

I never let it out of my sight after that, except when I had to hide it several times in my mouth or wherever I could to prevent its discovery by the ferocious guards. It was with me on May 5, 1945, the day of liberation. It was with me throughout my stay in the DP camp. It is the ring my wife put on my finger during our wedding ceremony more than 50 years ago. It is this ring, my father’s wedding ring, that is on my finger to this day. (pp. 81–82)

Fortunately, artefacts are available to us and to our children today even if we do not know any witnesses: They are exhibited in museums around the world. Herz’s (2014) poem “Waiting” helps us to think about particular objects now on display in the Auschwitz museum storerooms (which the prisoners called “Canada”), “where they sorted and stored the victims’ belongings before sending them on to the Reich” (p. 284). We’ve all seen

such items; with these poignant words, Herz brings them to life:

in Auschwitz / Birkenau / among the / burned-down foundations / they called Canada, / I stumble upon / a small heap / of bent forks & spoons / & knives — / thinking — / they’ve been waiting, / rusting & waiting / for the *Shabbat* table / to be set, / for the candles / to be lit, / for the blessing to be recited, / for the wine / to be sipped, / for the *challah* / to be shared — / waiting & waiting / for seventy years now / for the *Shabbat* dinner / that will never come. (p. 284)

## The Artifacts Drawings: A Film

Another way to make artefacts and their stories vivid is to film them. The renowned artist Nancy Patz, whose brilliant work is featured on the cover of the Spring 2014 issue of Yeshiva University’s publication *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, produced such a film with the help of faculty and students from Baltimore’s Goucher College. It is available for viewing at <https://youtu.be/MdOnQfmYZMk>.<sup>2</sup> This 14-minute film, *The Artifacts Drawings*, makes clear the necessity of learning the history behind the artefact. A child’s white dress is just a dress until we know it belonged to Chaya, a baby girl slated for murder just because she was Jewish; a violin, just an instrument until we know it was played as a form of resistance in a wretched, overcrowded ghetto.

When we learn, we need both the artefacts and their historical context to grasp the full story. Understanding artefacts depends upon a written or spoken narrative; without it, they are merely relics of a time long past and little understood. At the same time, survivor testimonies are more likely to be internalized when they are enhanced by relevant, tangible artefacts. Without such evidence, the narratives might be tales difficult to envision and sometimes soon forgotten. Yet together, the artefact and the narrative transform the mundane into the exceptional: daily items become the closest things we have left of the people who owned and valued them. The simple artefact and its story become a lens through which we suddenly see a fact, a person, a moment of the Holocaust differently, and in much sharper focus.

Artefacts help us to feel history—the truth of a person, a place, a moment—and when seen within the context of their story, they enrich our factual knowledge, as well. Every day of the Holocaust consisted of moment-to-moment thoughts, dilemmas, and decisions of individual Jews, millions of people who lived

lives just like ours—until their world was torn apart and turned upside down. Each artefact that we discover, whether in a film, a painting, a poem, a testimony, a museum, or our grandparents’ dresser drawer, helps us to know how individuals just like us responded to that cataclysm, how they lived each difficult day.

Preserving artefacts, as archivists worldwide have done, is a crucial act of memory. Displaying and sharing them—in synagogues, schools, Holocaust centers, and museums—is a brilliant act of memory and a commitment that we, the last witnesses to the witnesses, make to the next generation. As Wiesel (1970/2011) has written, “The past is in the present, but the future is still in our hands. . . . And what is memory if not a noble and necessary response to and against indifference?” (pp. ix–x). Painting, filming, and narrating these objects, as in Patz’s video, perpetuates and makes permanent that act of memory.

Consider, then, the use of artefacts as a way to help your students learn about the people who endured the Holocaust. Without survivors in our world, we will be bereft. We may, though, find comfort in the knowledge that when they themselves can no longer testify, their possessions, the fragments left behind, can speak for them.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Carson Phillips and Martin Hagmayr’s “Incorporating Apps Into Holocaust Education” and Paula Cowan’s “A Selective, Annotated Guide to Holocaust Websites” in the Spring 2015 issue of Yeshiva University’s PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators (K. Shawn, Ed.) online at <http://yu.edu/azrieli/faculty/prism-journal/> for reviews of the best and most current such educational apps and sites.

<sup>2</sup> The Goucher College Library website (<http://www.goucher.edu/the-library/about-the-library/friends-of-the-library/friends-of-the-library-programs/2014-2015-programs/artifacts-drawings-exhibit/artifacts-drawings-lesson-plans>) features 10 classroom-ready lesson plans for using artefacts in grades 7–12.

Dr. Kay Andrews

*Witness Memories in the Classroom:  
Challenges and Opportunities  
of Visual History Testimony*



The need to ‘remember’ the events and victims of the Holocaust is not a new theme. Before the Second World War ended, numerous Jewish individuals and groups sought to record and remember the genocidal events they were enduring (Young 1993, Zwiég 1987). In the post-war era those who survived set about creating *Yizkor* Books<sup>1</sup>, an attempt to remember life and experience before, during and after the War (Soo et al 2008). In the

immediate years after the war, ‘remembering’ was usually the domain of those who had survived and suffered. There was little interest from historians or others in delving into the personal memories of those who survived; instead, the focus was on Nazi records and Allied documentation. It is also fair to say that during the 1950’s and early 1960’s, social history and oral history was not main stream, and survivor memories were deemed unreliable. It was perceived that history was constructed through documentary sources (Kushner 2006). Since then, changes in the perception and use of oral history have led to an increased interest in personal

<sup>1</sup> *Yizkor* is the the Hebrew word for remember. These books varied in format but generally tried to record the names and stories of communities across Europe murdered during the Holocaust.

experiences and memories. The field of Holocaust history has been no exception to this development with institutions actively collecting survivor testimonies. Most notably is the USC Shoah Foundation which has the largest Holocaust visual history archive (VHA) of video testimonies in the world totalling 54,000 from survivors, aid givers, rescuers and liberators.

As the field of Holocaust education and remembrance has grown around the globe, educators have been encouraged to avoid a narrative that focuses solely on perpetrator sources, and to also include victim voices through literature or video recordings (IHRA 2005). The pedagogical implications of using video testimony should raise a range of questions for us as educators: questions relating to how we critically engage our students with the challenges of human memory, understanding the importance of seeing testimony as a reflective recording often 50 years after the events, and the role played by the interviewer are all relevant concerns. This article aims to touch on some of these considerations relating to the use of video testimony with high school students and reflect on the use of the USC Shoah Foundation's IWitness teaching tool to demonstrate how multiple video accounts can provide a deeper understanding of events relating to genocide.

## What's in a Name? Grappling with 'Testimony'

For those of us engaged in teaching and learning about the events of the Holocaust there is often a heightened awareness of the nuanced meaning of the words we use when talking about the genocide against European Jewry. Less questioned is the use of the term 'testimony' when referring to Holocaust witnesses' personal accounts of their experiences. Testimony is a word loaded with legal and religious meaning; it suggests a truth that might be beyond critical engagement or questioning, or a moment of revelation. Yet, in terms of Holocaust experience and memory neither of these definitions is fitting. Exactly when the term 'testimony' became broadly applied to survivor accounts is unclear, but in part its usage may date back to the trial of Adolph Eichmann held in Israel in 1961. One hundred and eleven survivors testified at length during the trial and were filmed when doing so (Rothberg 2004). This moment of giving testimony in a courtroom heralded the first large-scale public sharing of Holocaust victim experiences and can be seen as providing an opening for other survivors to speak about their wartime experiences, both in Israel and around the world.

In a classroom, what name we give to video witness accounts may seem pedantic and unnecessary, especially if as educators we ensure that students respectfully and critically raise questions of the witnesses they are watching. Perhaps though, more problematic are those occasions when video clips of witnesses are played in classrooms and given a reverential treatment that prevent student discussion. Doing so potentially reinforces quasi-religious and legalized use of the term 'testimony'. As educators we should remember that the Holocaust, like other genocides and atrocities, was caused and implemented by humans. As such, we and our students should raise questions about events, places and people in the same way we would with any other area of history.

## Memory

The majority of the more than 54,000 Holocaust - related testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) were recorded between 1994 and 1999. Most of the interviews were conducted in interviewees homes, at least 50 years after the experiences. Each interview is a reflection of the complex workings of human memory, rather than being raw historical data of the events being described (Firsch 1991). The interviews are an act of memory and should be seen as locating events from the past at a specific time when the interview was recorded (Shopes 2002, Bertolini 2014). As we all know from experience, human memory is not an exact device; it does not record a chronological, photographic impression of each moment we experience. Instead, memories tend to be fragmented snippets, sometimes expanded and at other times contracted, changing over time as we are influenced by other events. Memory may also muddle events in time or add in extra events. Furthermore, an individual's memories are influenced by social identity e.g. gender, education, socio-economic status and religious beliefs. In the same way individuals may experience the same event in different ways, the same is true of how we remember events. Each memory is unique to an individual.

Recent research into how gender relates to memory has demonstrated that women and men tend to remember events in different ways. Women will often focus on the details of their personal experience, whereas men will reflect on a bigger picture, using their experience to understand a broad historical narrative (Budryte 2010, Lentin 2006). An example of this can be seen in the VHA where survivors of the Lodz ghetto speak about food. Men and women of a similar age both speak of food; however, the women talk in detail about the preservation, preparation and quality of the food they had, while men speak about the need to

have food so that they could then work and stay alive longer. The men linked the concept of food into a broader historical understanding of events, which they may or may not have been aware of at the time.<sup>2</sup>

Pedagogically, these gender differences have significant implications for educators. Among these are the importance of including female and male testimonies, and the discussion of the differing perspectives of men and women. Additionally, such considerations help reflect on what might be considered atypical roles at the time; for instance, women who fought as partisans or ghetto fighters, or the difficulty facing Jewish men trying to hide among a non-Jewish population. It would be remiss to take one account as being better than another; rather, both serve different purposes and reveal different themes about memory.

## Witness Voices and ‘The Benefit of Hindsight’

Trying to make sense of life’s experiences often takes place in the months or years after events have occurred or may not occur at all. This is particularly evident when individuals are caught up in events such as war or genocide. Often, as individuals, there is a need to link earlier experiences to events that happened much later, and in so doing inadvertently create connections that weren’t present at the time or that create a neat over-simplification of history. For teachers and students this is a particular challenge of watching testimony, as it requires students to raise critical and often difficult questions about the complex nature of history and memory. Additionally, for educators there is the added pressure of needing a deep understanding of the historical narrative to be able to challenge such linking.

There are many examples of historical hindsight in the USC Shoah Foundation’s VHA, and to describe them as such is not meant to undermine or criticize the memories of the witness, but rather to reflect on the processes of the human mind and the implications for the classroom. Educators and students should be encouraged to critically reflect on what they watch and hear in each testimony, and, when necessary, to challenge historical links that are inaccurate. One example of this benefit of historical hindsight

<sup>2</sup> In a short comparison of gendered memory I chose to search IWitness for survivors of a similar age and background who spent time in the Lodz ghetto, using the index term ‘food’. A number of the men and women who spoke about food demonstrated differences in the way they addressed and remembered food in the ghetto. This was not scientific research and was used to illustrate a teacher education session held in the UK in October 2013.

can sometimes be seen when people who were pre-war refugees - those who arrived in the UK as child refugees, prior to the start of the war - speak of their experiences. Later referred to as the *Kindertransport*, some of these former child refugees speak of being saved from certain death. However, this was not the case at the time, as the Nazi’s genocidal policies did not begin until much after the outbreak of war (Andrews 2013). In the classroom, students could be encouraged to ask to consider what the witness knew at the time and how their later knowledge has shaped their understanding.

## Engaging Students with Witness Memories

As well as their extensive VHA, the USC Shoah Foundation has developed a free access teaching tool for educators and their students, called IWitness ([www.iwitness.usc.edu](http://www.iwitness.usc.edu)). This digital resource currently holds a subset of approximately 1500 witness videos. IWitness can be used in a variety of ways by educators and students who can search the witness accounts for specific indexed terms, watch full videos as well as develop their own short films using the built-in video editing tool. Additionally, there are a wide range of prepared activities which can be searched by theme or grade and completed by students.

The activity ‘The Nazi Genocide against the Roma and Sinti (Gypsy) people’ draws together different critical skills in using testimony as well as reflecting on the *Porajmos*, the genocide of the Gypsy people, which occurred in parallel to the Holocaust. All IWitness activities follow the same ‘4 C’ format requiring students to consider, collect, construct and communicate. The activity begins with a video clip from Julia Lentini describing her memories of childhood, and encourages students to move away from seeing Julia only as a genocide survivor and to recognize the normalcy of her life before the war. In the second page, Julia describes her memories of the morning her family were deported, the complicity of local people and the lack of knowledge her family had about where they were going. Students can read further historical context to the events and are given questions to consider as they watch.

In the ‘Collect’ section of this activity, students are given further historical and geographical information about Auschwitz-Birkenau, before hearing from three Jewish prisoners (one man and two women) who either visited or saw the ‘gypsy camp’ from other parts of Birkenau. Although the Jewish survivors are speaking about the ‘gypsy camp’, their reflections provide insight into their own experiences of

Auschwitz-Birkenau, as they comment on how the Roma and Sinti were living as families and wearing their own clothes, unlike the majority of Jewish prisoners who had be separated into male and female camps. The final section of 'Collect' once more focuses on Jewish survivors' memories of the 'liquidation' of the 'gypsy camp'. Again the purpose here is to encourage students to recognize that there is no single memory of the events and that the survivors' reactions to the deaths do not necessarily agree.

Having watched survivor clips, the Auschwitz film and read about the historical context of the 'gypsy camp', students move onto the 'Construct' part of the activity. Here they are asked to build a sound memorial that is both reflective and sensitive to the materials they have used so far before moving onto 'Communicate' where they share their work with other students.

## Conclusion

As outlined above, the nature of individual memory is both complex and often contradictory, and as such its effective use in classrooms requires educators to challenge and reflect upon what is being watched, something that has been missing from classroom practice. As educators, the responsibility falls on us to critically reflect on when and how we use witness accounts, this is especially important as more videos become available online for classroom use. Using iWitness as a platform for students to engage with witness memories is one way to encourage them to critically reflect on the point in time when the individual was videotaped and the memories he or she shares.

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Karen Polak

## *Teaching about the Genocide of the Roma*



### Summary

During Holocaust Education Week in Toronto, 2012, two programmes were dedicated to the genocide of the Roma. This article reflects on these events and looks at the experiences with diverse groups of learners and educators in workshops held in Europe since 2013. These workshops revolved around online teaching materials, *The Fate of the European Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust*, compiled by an international team of historians and educators. The implementation of these teaching materials is

an ongoing process. Exploring the differences in how they are used and received in various settings provides insight into both the opportunities and the challenges the educational community faces in bringing the history of this “forgotten” genocide into the mainstream. The significance of this history for society today and the urgent need for work on this topic are highlighted by some of the experiences of educators and responses from learners.

Educational practices developed through the workshops mentioned above are set against a wider framework of international developments.

- In April 2015, the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI) presented a report on *Teaching about and Commemorating the Roma and Sinti Genocide – Practices within the OSCE Area*.<sup>1</sup>
- In the same month, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for a European day dedicated to commemorating the victims of the genocide of the Roma during World War II.
- The work of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Committee on the Genocide of the Roma also forms an important background to many of the exchanges described here.<sup>2</sup>

## August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1944

During Holocaust Education Week in Toronto in early November 2012, in a small room filled to capacity, a documentary titled *A People Uncounted*<sup>3</sup> was shown to a mixed age audience of Roma and non-Roma. The film focuses on the culturally rich lives of people from eleven countries, but it also shows the difficulties faced by Roma across Europe, and demonstrates how their present circumstances have been shaped by the tragedies of the past. Holocaust survivors, historians, activists and musicians give insight into Romani life through poetry, music and personal accounts. As ethnic intolerance grows across Europe, the legacy of racism and genocide is highlighted. I was invited to take part in a round table discussion about the film with its Canadian film director, Aaron Yeger, and Gina Robah-Csanyi, the then director of the Roma Community Centre of Toronto, which hosted the event.

<sup>1</sup> The report will be published late 2015 at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/223681>

<sup>2</sup> The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is an intergovernmental body with 31 member countries. When some of the work described in this article started it was known as the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance (ITF). The name was changed in 2013. Throughout this article I will refer to the IHRA. The Committee on the Genocide of the Roma, initiated in 2007, is chaired by the author. See: [www.holocaustremembrance.com](http://www.holocaustremembrance.com)

<sup>3</sup> *A People Uncounted*, 2011, Canada, director Aaron Yeger and producers Marc Swenker and Tom Rasky.

As the film ended Judy Weissenberg Cohen stood up and said simply, “I was there”, referring to Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1944 when the so-called *Gypsy camp* was liquidated, and 2,879 Roma and Sinti women, men and children were taken to the gas chambers. It was the most memorable moment of an intense week of lectures, workshop and debates. I had often discussed the events of August 1944 with historians and colleagues in the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. There are no Roma survivors who were in Auschwitz-Birkenau at that time. So it is only the memories of “bystanders”, other prisoners near the barracks where the Roma were held, that can testify to the events of that night. I was hearing one of these bystanders speak.<sup>4</sup>

Judy arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau early July 1944 with part of her family from Debrecen in Hungary. She told the meeting and expanded to me later: “After the usual selections and separation from our parents and other relatives, my three sisters and I were settled down in the camp called B/III or, as the inmates called it *Mexico*. As we learned eventually, our parents and their first grandchild with his mother were murdered immediately in the gas chambers. Through rumours we became aware that the camp next to ours was the *Zigeunerfamilienlager* or *Gypsy Family Camp*. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, we, in camp B/III, became aware of very loud noises emanating from the *Zigeunerlager*. Yelling and desperate screaming of adults and terrified children’s howling, and SS soldiers threateningly barking orders. This continued for hours into the night. The mixture of noises indicated that the Roma were resisting vigorously their upcoming evacuation from the camp and their suspected, subsequent murder by gassing. We just listened in silent fear, impotent to do anything helpful, terribly sorry for what was happening next door and terrified that our camp would be next to be emptied. I know I will never forget that heart-rending death cry of thousands of Roma as they resisted. They were all murdered, as we learned later. This was one of my unforgettable episodes in Birkenau.”

Judy and her sister Eva survived. Their sisters, Klára and Elizabeth, starved to death in the *Stutthof* concentration camp. Judy and Eva emigrated to Canada in 1948. It took decades before Judy began talking about her experiences in Nazi captivity. “My public presentations always include testifying of my audio-witnessing the murder of thousands of Romani people in Birkenau.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I visited Judy Cohen the following year during the Canadian IHRA chairmanship in 2013. The following recollections were sent by email to the author, August 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Judy Cohen supports and sponsors events on the genocide of the Roma such as this programme during Holocaust Education Week, in memory of her parents, siblings and relatives, victims of the Holocaust, from Debrecen, Hungary.

A few days after first hearing Judy's story, I spoke to another large audience at an event hosted by the Hamilton Jewish Federation Holocaust Education Committee, the United Roma of Hamilton and Hamilton Police Services.<sup>6</sup> I was again pleased to see that very different organisations were working together to acknowledge the importance of addressing the past in relation to the present. Hate crimes against Roma in Canada sadly echo anti-Gypsyism in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Six months later, on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2013, the police and the Roma community in Hamilton got together in recognition of International Roma Day, in a session that offered both communities an opportunity to boost mutual understanding.<sup>8</sup> International Roma Day was designated in 1990. April 8th focuses on the persistent challenges faced by Roma people and highlights the protection and promotion of human rights of all people, but especially the Roma, worldwide.

## Museum of Romani Culture, Brno

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, a project to create a network of educators and policy-makers to support teaching about the genocide was being launched with a seminar in Eisenstadt, in Austria, in November 2012<sup>9</sup> Thirty-three educators from thirteen countries met to discuss ways of implementing the teaching materials *The Fate of the European Roma and Sinti During the Holocaust* in schools, teacher training and informal education. The participants gave detailed feedback and suggestions for improvements

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton Spectator Auditorium, November 5, 2012, lecture by Karen Polak, The Forgotten Genocide. The Process of Exclusion and Persecution of Roma and Sinti in Past and Present

<sup>7</sup> An important example went to court (R. v. Krymowski) in a case on hate speech triggered by protesters and banners with statements such as 'Honk if you hate Gypsies', 'Canada is not a Trash Can', and 'You're a cancer to Canada'. Roma refugees were associated with a culture of criminality and accused of taking advantage of Canada's immigration and social services systems in 1997.

The defendants also promoted White Power, thus referencing Nazi Germany persecution of the Roma in the Holocaust.

See: "R. v. Krymowski". Judgements of the Supreme Court of Canada.

<http://scc-csc.lexum.com/decisia-scc-csc/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/2206/index.do> (accessed 28-8-2015)

<sup>8</sup> <http://joeycoleman.ca/2013/10/15/hamilton-police-services-board-meeting-october-15-2013-4pm/> (accessed 28-8-2015)

<sup>9</sup> Erinnern.at (Austria) was the leading partner in this implementation project, co-funded by the IHRA and the Austrian Ministry of Education and Women's Affairs. The other partners were the Anne Frank House (The Netherlands) and the Museum of Romani Culture (Czech Republic). The first meeting of the project International Conference on Teaching Materials on the Roma Genocide took place from 8-10 November 2012.

of the materials that were subsequently handled by a small pedagogical team led by the main author, Gerhard Baumgartner, and the Austrian organisation Erinnern.at. The materials were made available in English and German on the website [www.romasintigenocide.eu](http://www.romasintigenocide.eu) in July 2013, and in a French version in 2014. The materials consist of 80 downloadable pdf sheets and a teachers' guide.<sup>10</sup>

At a follow-up meeting hosted by the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, Czech Republic, in November 2013, twenty-five experts from eleven countries shared their experiences working with the materials and their future plans. Roma NGO experts from Poland, Germany, Serbia, and the Czech Republic provided links with other efforts to raise awareness about the history of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti. The participation of international organisations such as the OSCE/ODIHR, Erionet and TernYpe, as well as institutions with an international outreach, such as Yad Vashem and Living History Forum, gave extra impetus to future international cooperation.

This article aims to describe my experiences of several workshops, with different audiences across Europe: from Polish secondary school students and Dutch trainee teachers, to Bulgarian Roma activists and educators with varying experience working on the topic,<sup>11</sup> and offer my conclusions on what priorities we need to set in the educational field. I will also reference several articles from *When Stereotype Meets Prejudice. Antiziganism in European Societies*, published in 2014, which gave me further insight into recent developments.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A French version followed in 2014. The Swedish language version of the website is being prepared by Living History Forum (expected launch 2017) and a Kalderash version will also be developed by LHF. The Bratislava based Milan Simecka Foundation is leading a project that aims to develop Slovak, Czech, Polish, Croatian, Romanian, Hungarian and Romani language versions with partners across Europe.

<sup>11</sup> The experiences discussed in this article are taken from twenty-eight seminar reports on seminars submitted by educators who met in Eisenstadt and Brno, as well as from eight workshops that I moderated. These eight were all organised by different (international) organisations. They took part in Zagreb, January 2013; Nijmegen, June 2013; Amsterdam, November 2013; Tilburg, January 2014 (with Lalla Weiss); Krakau, August 2014; Budapest, August 2014; Amsterdam, September 2014 (with Karolina Mirga); Graz, April 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Temofey Agarin (ed.), 2014 *When Stereotype meets prejudice. Antiziganism in European Societies*.

## Diversity and dialogue

My introduction to the issue of Roma genocide came during an expert meeting on the initiative of the IHRA Education Working Group in the Museum of Romani Culture in 2007. The participants represented a range of educational pursuits. Some brought expertise on the genocide of the Roma, knowledge of Roma history and culture or more generally knowledge of teaching about the Holocaust, while others had experience working with Roma students and communities, focusing on contemporary issues both in education and in response to discrimination. This diversity of backgrounds at this first meeting was essential for the work that followed. Disagreements arising from different experiences, knowledge bases and sensitivities were out in the open in a relatively safe space. This sort of dialogue, still rare in most parts of Europe, is necessary both in understanding history and reflecting on its relevance for today.

## The ‘Others’

The Anne Frank House has a long-standing cooperation with the history department at the HAN University of Applied Sciences in Nijmegen the Netherlands. Future teachers in pre-service training colleges are an important target group for introducing new fields of knowledge and methods of teaching. In June 2013 I had been invited to give a two-hour workshop on the genocide of the Roma within a course on teaching about the Holocaust. The students had been given homework to prepare beforehand. They had been asked to research one of the six life stories from the digital exhibition *The Forgotten Genocide* ([www.romasinti.eu](http://www.romasinti.eu)), and to study the online teaching materials.<sup>13</sup> One student had been particularly diligent, but after sharing his enthusiasm in the workshop he sighed and said he wished Roma and Sinti were not such “complicated” people. He wished they were more like Jews, “all the same”.

I was taken aback. He explained: “It would be a lot easier to understand if all Roma had the same religion, just as Jews did (*sic*), and if there were not so many different groups.” He was not familiar with Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and in general had no real knowledge about Jews or Roma. More importantly, he seemed to take for granted a view of the world in which “the others” should fit a simple pattern and be easy to label.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Polak (2013): Teaching about the genocide of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust: chances and challenges in Europe today, *Intercultural Education*, 24: 1-2, 79-92. This article describes the content of two websites, [www.romasinti.eu](http://www.romasinti.eu) and [www.romasintigenocide.eu](http://www.romasintigenocide.eu) and other international projects on the genocide of the Roma.

He didn’t seem at all aware of the controversial or offensive nature of his statement. Other students pointed out that such a view is hurtful to all minorities and questioned him quite severely. However, only one student, whose family came from the Balkans, had had personal contact with Roma. On reflection, the rest of the class was surprised that they had never met a Roma or Sinti or been taught anything about them.

Six months later, I co-moderated a similar workshop with a comparable Dutch audience at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences in Tilburg on a day dedicated to the Roma genocide as part of Holocaust Memorial Week. My co-moderator was Lalla Weiss, a Roma activist and spokesperson, and the daughter of a survivor.

One of the early questions was “who are Roma and who are Sinti?” and the fact that Lalla Weiss was there to answer immediately set the stage for dialogue on all the subsequent questions. The Dutch term for Gypsy, *Zigeuner*, is still commonly used, although it is considered offensive by most Roma.<sup>14</sup> These terms and the use of the word Gypsy were debated. Tilburg has a popular annual International Gypsy Festival, which had co-organised this particular day of workshops and presentations, and Lalla is one of their presenters. The complexity of the use of language, the diversity of backgrounds and identities of Roma and the (lack of) sensitivity toward the points of view of a minority group were all addressed during the workshop discussions. Although the aims and the materials used were the same as for the workshop in Nijmegen, the setting was different, largely because it was part of a whole commemorative day involving more than 100 people, including Roma and Sinti in many roles.

<sup>14</sup> Per language, the use of terms is very different. Some organisations in the UK (and elsewhere) adhere to the term “gypsy,” but mostly internationally, the term “Roma” is used. In German, “Sinti and Roma” are used as a pair. In the rest of Europe, “Roma” is the most generally used term to describe the different groups that all speak Romani languages and have a common history of migration to Europe some 2000 years ago.

Huib van Baar (2013) p. 34. Van Baar writes that “despite Romani and pro-Roma attempts to ban the use of this label in German and Dutch-speaking societies, these endeavours have never been fully successful. Indeed, we are now faced with the opposite trend, in which scholars such as Dina Sigel present ‘zigeuner’, usually written with a lower case ‘z’, as a legitimate alternative marker for ‘Roma’.” Dina Sigel, a professor in criminology at University of Utrecht got a lot of media attention for her research undertaken with the department Police and Science of the Police Academy, when she claimed the need to break down the ‘zigeuner taboo’.”

## Roma involvement

In September 2014, during a workshop for an international group of teachers at the Anne Frank House, Karolina Mirga, one of the leaders of the TernYpe International Roma Youth Network, spoke about the experiences of the international youth conference *Dikh he na bister* (Look and don't forget) and the commemoration in Auschwitz-Birkenau that year on August 2<sup>nd</sup>.

On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the destruction of the *Zigeunerlager* in 1944, TernYpe held a youth conference for more than 1,000 young Roma and non-Roma from 25 countries, hosted by the Pedagogical University of Krakow. TernYpe is a network of European youth associations helping young people to become active citizens. One of its main goals is to bring young Roma and non-Roma together to strengthen the intercultural dialogue between them, to promote trust and mutual respect, and to fight against prejudice, racism and discrimination. I had attended the expert meeting and youth conference in Krakow. However, at the teachers' seminar in Amsterdam a few weeks after the commemoration, the presentation by Karolina Mirga clearly created a different dynamic to the exchanges than would have been the case if only I had recounted my experiences of the meeting in Krakow.

Krakow that July had been teeming with meetings and initiatives: Roma survivors speaking to large groups of young people, and conversations between young people from across Europe. I led a workshop for fourteen people from eight countries that was memorable for its intensity, with all the participants thoroughly engaged. The Bulgarians particularly expressed their gratitude for the carefully researched and respectfully presented historical sources, and for these resources being available online.

Personal stories and historical sites were discussed as well as topics relating to contemporary issues, such as "crime prevention". The Nazis had framed their racist persecution of the Roma and Sinti as "crime prevention". Today, in several European countries, systematic institutional registration of Roma, including ethnic profiling by police forces, still takes place with a framework of so-called crime prevention.

In the workshop five Roma youth leaders, all active in high schools in Bulgaria, discussed how the murder of four Roma in Hungary in 2008 connected to the biographies of perpetrators during the Holocaust. There were no straightforward answers, but the open space to discuss the link between past and present was important.

Worksheets with biographies of Roma survivors who had been active in the resistance, articulating their own experiences, served as positive examples. The participants saw that these personal stories would be helpful in leaving behind the perception of Roma as perpetual victims. Worksheets on *The Fate of the European Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust* website draw, among others, on the life stories of partisan Josef Serynek, Red Army commander Aleksandr Baurov, writer Cejja Stojka and her brother, painter Karl Stojka, both survivors of several concentration camps.

## Professional development

In May 2014 a meeting was held in London with project leaders from across Europe, all working on the genocide of the Roma. The meeting was hosted by the Centre for Holocaust Education at the Institute of Education, University College of London, and organised by the IHRA Committee on the genocide of Roma. Twenty people from sixteen European countries spoke about the outcomes of eight projects, including both achievements and challenges.<sup>15</sup> At the end of a day of in-depth discussion, several topics were defined as of importance for all the projects:

<sup>15</sup> Six of the eight projects were co-funded by the IHRA, here marked by \*.

*The Fate of European Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust* by Kanzlei-Internationaler Verein für

Wissenschaft und Kultur (Austria), Anne Frank House (The Netherlands) & Mémorial de la Shoah (France). See: [www.romasintigenocide.eu](http://www.romasintigenocide.eu) \*

*International Conference on teaching material on the Roma Genocide* by Erinnern.at (Austria), Museum of Romani Culture (Czech Republic) & Anne Frank House (The Netherlands). See: [www.romasintigenocide.eu](http://www.romasintigenocide.eu) \*

*Requiem for Auschwitz* by International Gipsy Festival & Alfa Foundation (The Netherlands). See: [www.requiemforauschwitz.eu](http://www.requiemforauschwitz.eu) and [www.gipsyfestival.nl/eng](http://www.gipsyfestival.nl/eng) \*

*Giving memory a future* by Sacred Heart Catholic University of Milan (Italy) and USC Shoah Foundation (U.S.A.). See: [www.romsintimemory.it](http://www.romsintimemory.it) and <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/> \*

*Research on Roma deportations and Mass. Killing Sites during World War II in Eastern Europe* by Yahad In Unum (France) & Dignité Roms (Belgium). See: [www.yahadinunum.org](http://www.yahadinunum.org) \*

*School of Remembrance – Producing knowledge about the Roma genocide and how to prevent anti-Gypsyism* by Women's Space, Nis (Serbia), Forum for Applied History, Belgrade (Serbia) & Roma Center Göttingen e.V. (Germany). See: [www.fpi.rs/blog/category/skola-secanja/](http://www.fpi.rs/blog/category/skola-secanja/) \*

*Between Discrimination and Emancipation: History and Culture of Sinti and Roma in Germany and Europe* by Documentation Centre of German Sinti and Roma & Bavarian and Federal Agency for Civic Education. See: <http://www.sintiundroma.de/en/home.html>

*Save from Oblivion – Roma and Sinti Holocaust in testimonies and contemporary discourse* by The Roma People Association, The Dialog-Pheniben Foundation and Jagiellonian University (Poland). See: [www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net](http://www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net)

**Involving Roma of all ages.** Roma survivors involved in the projects were sometimes sharing their story for the first time.

**Meeting and recording survivors.** Oral testimony projects need to be encouraged with a sense of urgency. Young Roma need to take ownership of their families' stories in order to become spokespeople for their communities.

**Empowering young Roma.** Several projects uncovered a lack of historical knowledge throughout the Roma community. Creating more opportunities for young Roma to acquire historical expertise will be important. The special educational opportunities that peer education offers include both the empowerment of the peer educators and the positive aspect of peer role models on the learners.

**Professional development.** Lack of knowledge and expertise among professional educators was highlighted as a general problem that can only be addressed if professional development opportunities are created. Resources for educators in their own languages are essential, but attention should be paid to the quality of translations, so as not to, for example, reproduce the terminology of the Nazis in educational materials.

It became clear during this expert meeting in London that there were already many related educational and commemorative projects taking place across Europe and that the international organisations engaged in initiating or supporting these projects are not sufficiently aware of each other's work. After sharing the previously stated recommendations within the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the IHRA Committee on the Genocide of the Roma initiated two small research projects:

- To compile an overview of nineteen international organisations working on the genocide of the Roma and contemporary issues concerning discrimination; and
- To compile an annotated bibliography of the genocide of the Roma.<sup>16</sup>

The outcomes will further inform the work of the IHRA, and be a guiding principle in the cooperation with other organisations such as the OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and major Holocaust institutions.

<sup>16</sup> Both reports are available at <http://holocaustremembrance.com/focus/genocide-roma>

## Anti-Roma rhetoric

Following its expert meeting in May 2014, the UCL Institute of Education hosted a public conference in London on the genocide of the Roma at which many of the previously mentioned projects were presented in a practical way to people working in the educational field. Keynote speeches focused on the challenges faced by historians in researching and teaching the genocide of the Roma, and on the contemporary situation of the Roma across Europe, where hate crimes, human rights violations and discrimination are far too often part of daily life.<sup>17</sup>

Mirjam Karoly, Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, spoke of the importance of the commemoration of the genocide of Roma and Sinti and its relevance for combating racism and discrimination. Her focus on the current public discourse on Roma in Europe, "led by right-wing politicians but not restricted to these circles" is mirrored in some of the statements made by students quoted later. Karoly said: "It is clear that the current discourse refers to long-standing negative stereotypes against Roma, whether criminalising them and portraying them as a threat to internal security or labelling them as 'socially inadaptible' people. This discourse bears a dangerous potential, deepening racism and serving to legitimise certain policy actions."

Huub van Baar, who has written extensively about the Roma in Europe, elaborates on this point of view in his article *The Emergence of a Reasonable Anti-Gypsyism in Europe*.<sup>18</sup> He looks at the media coverage of the bomb attack that killed four Roma in Oberwart, Austria, in 1995, and the alleged kidnapping of children by Roma. He outlines the emergence of what he calls "reasonable anti-Gypsyism" – criminalising allegations against the Roma, not just by extremist groups but also by moderate politicians, citizens, policy-makers, the police, and sections of the media. "A widely supported movement of non-Roma seeks retaliation under the pretext that the Roma frequently exhibit undesirable behaviour."<sup>19</sup> Van Baar analyses media coverage

<sup>17</sup> The conference was attended by more than 100 people from twenty-two countries. See: Report on IOE and IHRA committee on the genocide of the Roma Expert Meeting and Conference on the Genocide of the Roma, 10-11 May 2014, for more detail <http://holocaustremembrance.com/focus/genocide-roma>

<sup>18</sup> Huub van Baar (2011), *The European Roma: Minority Representation. Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality*.

<sup>19</sup> Huub van Baar (2014), *The Emergence of a Reasonable Anti-Gypsyism in Europe*. 27-45. In: Temofey Agarin (ed.), 2014 When Stereotype meets prejudice. Antiziganism in European Societies. Van Baar tells the story of how the houses in the Roma settlement where the murdered men lived were first searched and the media and public opinion for weeks presumed it was an internal Romani dispute, although there was no evidence to indicate this.

of four recent cases of alleged kidnapping of children. He refers to the myth, widespread in European societies since the late Middle Ages, that Roma steal children. In May 2008, sixty Italians attacked a Romani settlement in the Ponticelli district of Naples over an alleged kidnapping. The houses of 400 Roma were burnt down.<sup>20</sup> Three more recent incidents (all in 2013) in Serbia, Greece and Ireland did not lead to the same level of violence, but raised similar questions about ethnic profiling. DNA testing was considered necessary to prove that the children were Roma, and not stolen. “If considering a child having a different appearance to its parents is being seen to be a legitimate reason for the authorities to intervene in the private lives of a family and resort to DNA test for ‘answers’ is not ethnic profiling, what is?”<sup>21</sup>

## Redoubled efforts

At the conference in London, Mirjam Karoly had referred to the legacy of the past: “The victims who survived and returned from concentration camps were again confronted with prejudices and rejection, while the perpetrators of the genocide were not prosecuted. If we want to understand today’s situation we have to account for what has happened in the past under National Socialism but also how post-war societies dealt with the past and the victims of the Roma and Sinti genocide.” She concluded that although the “forgotten Holocaust” was receiving more attention, efforts to share knowledge through formal education needed to be redoubled.

In January 2014, OSCE/ODIHR sent a questionnaire to all OSCE member states to establish which practices exist in the OSCE area to teach about and commemorate the Roma and Sinti genocide. In June 2015, a group of around fifteen people were invited to Warsaw to review the first analysis of answers provided by 17 states, to discuss the persistent challenges and define follow-up initiatives for the OSCE institutions. These included partnerships with ministries of education to promote teaching about the Roma and Sinti genocide. This is a long path to go down. However, the efforts over many years to get a resolution on the genocide of the Roma through the European Parliament are a recent example of what might be achieved.

<sup>20</sup> *Giving Memory a Future* is a website that includes Roma testimonies on persecution and discrimination from the Second World War and today. There is a short video about the attacks on Roma in Italy. See: <http://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/en/>

See also Huub van Baar (2014) p. 29

<sup>21</sup> Van Baar refers to ERRC, Legal Factsheet: *Child Protection – What should states do?* (Budapest: European Roma Rights Centre, 2013)

In April 2015 a text was published, stating that:

“Recognition of the genocide of Roma during World War II and the establishment of a dedicated European memorial day would thus constitute an important symbolic step in the fight against anti-Gypsyism and contribute to general knowledge of Roma history in Europe”;

And:

“... that a European day should be dedicated to commemorating the victims of the genocide of the Roma during World War II and that this day should be called the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Dark Unknown History

Just days after the European Parliament passed the preliminary resolution, an international seminar took place in Stockholm organised by the ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues with the Living History Forum and the Swedish Equality Ombudsman. More than sixty civil society and state authority representatives discussed how teaching about the Roma and Sinti genocide might promote tolerance and non-discrimination.

Mirjam Karoly spoke out again, opening the conference: “We have to address how state authorities and public institutions deal with the past, as well as promote reconciliation to bring justice to the victims and following generations.”

Thomas Hammarberg, chair of the Swedish Commission against Anti-Gypsyism, gave a particularly impressive presentation about events leading to the publication of the Swedish government’s *White Paper on Abuses and Rights Violations Against Roma in the 20th Century*, published in 2014 under the title *The Dark Unknown History*. It is a 300-page review, mostly based on government documents. Hammarberg said: “Most people don’t know that Sweden was one of the sources of the theories of race biology. And it is also not known how Roma were moved around and in this way were denied the opportunity to be

<sup>22</sup> The provisional text of the resolution was published Wednesday, 15 April 2015, Brussels:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2015-0095&language=EN&ring=B8-2015-0326>

educated. The report was an eye-opener as this history was not forgotten but hidden.”

The report also reveals the many crimes against the human rights of Roma that took place in Sweden throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The systematic registering of Roma continued until the very recent past, with lifelong consequences.

Kurt Magnusson is among those quoted<sup>23</sup>:

“A journalist showed me a document from the ‘*tattare* inventory’ from the 1940s. I was only a few months old when the inventory was drawn up. I’m in it, along with my whole family. The inventory was in preparation for Nazi Germany. That’s what I believe. If Sweden had been occupied and the Germans had come here, I wouldn’t have been alive today ... society never regarded me as an individual, rather I was part of a group that should be eradicated. My life has been marked by the fact that my ethnicity has been included in all documents. If this hadn’t been recorded, I would have had a different life. This documentation about me and my family is punishment for a crime I’m innocent of.”

In 2013, it was revealed that a register of more than 4,000 Roma in Swedish police files was still being used. In his article *It is in their DNA: Swedish Police, Structural Antiziganism and the Registration of Romani*, Matthew Kott analyses the persistence of institutionally racist cultural practices within the Swedish police force. Referring to the relationship between “structural anti-Gypsyism” and the otherwise successful and liberal welfare state in Sweden. Kott says:

“The problem in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe in 2013 is not that Roma have any genetic predisposition towards criminality, as *antiziganist* constructs would have us believe. On the contrary, given the prominent role of the idea of ‘Gypsy criminality’ in the development of modern policing, one could say that *antiziganism* is programmed into the very DNA of police forces of nation states.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Culture in Sweden (2014), *The Dark Unknown History. White Paper on Abuses and Rights Violations Against Roma in the 20th Century*, p.27.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Kott (2014), *It is in their DNA: Swedish Police, Structural Antiziganism and the Registration of Romanis*. 45-77. In Temofey Agarin (ed.), 2014 *When Stereotype meets prejudice. Antiziganism in European Societies*, p.68.

After *The Dark Unknown History* was published, the Swedish government set up a committee consisting of five Roma and four non-Roma members to promote understanding of the report’s content, particularly in education. Special training for professionals, teachers and police, is in preparation.

## Croatian educators

During a workshop in Zagreb, Croatia, in 2013, teachers were asked to consider how to include teaching about the genocide of the Roma in their lessons on the Holocaust.

The group was motivated, but participants had little if any prior knowledge of the topic. On the first day of the two-day seminar they were given a lecture by the local historian Daniel Vojak on the history of the Roma in the Balkans and on the second day they were set to work with the selected pages from [www.romasintigenocide.eu](http://www.romasintigenocide.eu), translated into Croatian. As a first step they made a “word web” of their associations with the word Roma. This raised some interesting issues, including prejudices they encountered in class. Some teachers had Roma students and most were positive about the need to address the prejudice.

Working in groups of four or five, the teachers then used photographs, documents and information from the website to prepare a model lesson on the genocide of the Roma. One group made a lesson plan using the story of an individual, discussing and analysing pictures, and developing empathy and critical thinking. The topic was to be introduced using a family photo of Max Bamberger, who was murdered at the Hrastina massacre in Croatia in 1945. Alongside engagement with Bamberger’s life story, issues would be introduced such as the change of status of Roma, the role of Interpol, racial laws and eugenics, the economic crisis and the concentration camp Jasenovac. The students would present the photos to each other and close with a class discussion about the post-war “oblivion”, taking the Hrastina massacre as example.

A second group also took the story of Max Bamberger but discussed how to raise awareness about prejudices, including their own. There was not much focus on history. These teachers proposed starting with a discussion about prejudice in jokes, followed by a brainstorming session with selected photos. The aim was to expose contradictory ideas. Focusing on the first use of passports, to register Roma, the students would then be asked to reflect on what passports are for and why were they created. Next racial laws and the Holocaust would be introduced, followed by a task: students would be asked to put

themselves in an imaginary position of isolation: where would you go, if, like Max Bamberger, you needed to flee your country?

This seemed to be a step away from history to a distant and imaginary “what if”. However, in the Croatian context the war of independence in the 1990s made such a question quite relevant. One educator in the group had been sent to Hungary at the age of 10, to escape the conflict. When she came back two years later, the family had great difficulties to bridge the different experiences they had had. Such an assignment plays a different role against the background of a still very present war, with refugees and genocide, than it would in other parts of Europe.

In Graz, in Austria, in 2015, a workshop for an international group of teachers was structured along the same lines as the workshop in Zagreb. Another motivated and engaged group of teachers developed lesson plans, but prejudices in society today did not play a role in their group discussions or presentations. When the participants were asked to reflect on the possible contribution of such lessons in fighting prejudice and discrimination, a Greek teacher described her experience in a small local shop, just days previously: a customer had paid for her goods and was packing them in her bag, and the shopkeeper had turned away when another customer started to shout “Thief, the Roma woman is stealing from your shop”. The woman had continued to scream, even after the customer, the teacher and the shopkeeper had told her she was wrong. The Roma woman had left the shop in tears. The group of educators seemed dispirited and agreed that learning about history would not help deal with this kind of prejudice.

## Students in Poland

A Polish history teacher who had taken part in the first meeting on the teaching materials in Brno in 2012 later shared short texts written by students at her school after a lesson on the Roma genocide on the basis of these materials. Some of the quotes are shocking in their blatant racism. However, it can be educationally useful to have these opinions out in the open during a structured lesson, so that students can challenge their peers and reflect on the consequences of stereotypes and prejudices and discrimination can be encouraged.



**Boy A:** “I think Poland isn’t a very tolerant country, but in my opinion it is good. If Polish people are more tolerant, many people from Turkey and many Roma people will come to Poland. It’s not good because many of them are thieves, burglars and stuff like that. Look at Germany. Soon there will be more Turkish than German people. My cousin lives there and two months ago two Turks stole his iPhone. So, in my opinion, we don’t need them in Poland.”

**Boy B:** “I’m not racist, in fact I am a pacifist. Everyone who is a well-behaved person can be my brother and sister. But I think that Roma are not a well-behaving nation. Stereotypes, which are not good, say that Gypsies are thieves and they are dirty and smell bad. Maybe it’s not true. But all the Roma I have ever seen were begging for money.”

**Boy, C:** “The problem of Sinti is not of their origin or colour of skin, or even not the language. They are just poor and the poverty is the biggest problem. It is always difficult to help poor people. In this case it is even more difficult because of the culture barrier. The laziest solution is to make them go away, which is not good in my opinion. It is just not right, and history proves that we shouldn’t accept any examples of intolerance. We have to show more action, then we will feel the reaction.”

**Girl, D:** “In the class we were talking about Roma people. There are many stereotypes about them. It didn’t help even if we couldn’t recognise Roma in the photos. Everybody was still talking about negative things and how other people are different from us. I think we should look for similarities and be more tolerant.”

Apart from concluding that stereotypes and discrimination needed to be addressed in lessons, the teacher stressed how important it was to empower those students who speak out against the stereotypes. These students were aged 16-17 and at a school with a good reputation. Many would go to university.

As the teacher said: “Most of them have educated parents. They know the definitions of terms such as stereotype, prejudice and discrimination.”

The student who flagged up not being able to “recognise” Roma in the photos pinpoints the limitations of using historical sources to counter prejudice. To work with the prejudices students have, educators need time, determination and specific skills, and they need to be trained in methods that open up minds. This is a major challenge in education: can we equip educators with the skills and working environment (colleagues and school administration) conducive to this? In the meantime, working to empower peers and to introduce peer education can make a difference.

## Conclusions

This article is based on my own observations and exchanges with Roma and non-Roma involved in educational projects. To gain more substantiated insight into how learners and educators respond to projects about the genocide of Roma and Sinti, more thorough study – on both sides of the Atlantic – is necessary. This might be participatory or research-led, but both need careful planning and execution.

A unique study is already underway at the Bavarian State Centre for Civic Education and the Department of Sociology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. In April 2015, a research project was launched into the use and resonance of the teaching materials *The Fate of European Roma and Sinti During the Holocaust*. The aim is to gain insight in how the topic is taught and learned. The study will also look at whether different types of knowledge about Sinti and Roma play a role in school settings. Experiences with the online teaching material will be analysed and discussed through guided interviews with teachers and students. The results, due to be published in 2017, are expected to give important input for further development of the education in this field.<sup>25</sup>

It is hoped that other projects will also be evaluated in this way and that international exchange on the outcomes will be used to inform both NGOs and educational authorities.

The Dutch student struggling to understand who the Roma are wanted to be able to see “them” as a homogenous group. The writer Markus End argues that we should focus on this mechanism in “majority” or mainstream society to understand anti-Roma discrimination. “The process involves not only the construction of the out-group, such as the ‘other’ or Gypsies, but purports an equally homogenized picture of the in-group.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Robert Sigel is a member of the German delegation to the IHRA, a history teacher also working for the Bavarian Ministry of Education and the Bavarian State Centre for Civic Education. He has presented the teaching materials to many German audiences including students, teachers, police officers and policy-makers. Holger Knothe, Robert Sigel et.al.: Der Genozid an den europäischen Roma und Sinti als Thema schulischen Unterrichts. Eine qualitative Studie. Bayerische Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit, Themenheft2/2017, München 2017

<sup>26</sup> Markus End (2014), Antiziganism as a Structure of Meanings: The Racial Antiziganism of an Austrian Nazi. 77-93. In Temofey Agarin (ed.), 2014 When Stereotype meets prejudice. Antiziganism in European Societies

Essential to the task that we must set ourselves is a focus on the majority and on mainstreaming education about the history of the genocide. This should include the mechanisms that led up to the genocide, but also an understanding of how many of these mechanisms are still present in contemporary hate speech and discrimination. It is encouraging that many educators are keen to take part in workshops and use the available educational materials in their lessons about the genocide of the Roma. However, it is clear that many are at a loss on how to respond to prejudices. Concrete suggestions for effective educational approaches and professional development opportunities for educators, specifically in dealing with anti-Roma sentiments, are essential. Considering the influential role that the media have, it might be useful to look more carefully at whether students can, by analysing the role of the media, better understand the mechanisms of stereotyping and scapegoating in society. It would also be valuable to promote good practice in the media.

However, the first step must be to empower Roma to play a bigger role in education, by creating opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop skills and make possible exchanges between active Roma. A second step is to promote dialogue between Roma and non-Roma educators everywhere, in formal and informal education. This might also lead to more non-Roma educators inviting Roma into their classrooms to meet their students.

The many conversations that I have had with Zoni Weisz, a Sinto from the Netherlands, have given me knowledge, insights and most importantly inspiration to work on this topic. His international role in commemorative and educational projects includes speaking to the German Bundestag in 2011 and more recently leading the Auschwitz Requiem project. Commemoration of his family, who perished in the Holocaust, education and dialogue all seem intricately linked.

Zoni Weisz was staying with his aunt when in 1944 his parents, sisters and younger brother were arrested during a national round up. He was seven years old at the time. His entire family was taken, via Westerbork, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Zoni managed to survive the war by going into hiding. But the sudden loss of his family was a trauma he carried with him for the rest of his life. Describing the post-war search for family members and the haunting memory of lost lives he passes on a message to us all:<sup>27</sup>

“... It also shapes your behaviour towards the community. You know the people around you. It also determines how you raise your children. Treat others with respect, do not judge, do not condemn. That’s what it is all about.”

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<sup>27</sup> [www.romasinti.eu](http://www.romasinti.eu), short filmed interview under the heading ‘Search’

## HISTORY

Doris L. Bergen, Ph.D.

*The Holocaust as World History*



Almost 70 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Holocaust has become a subject of keen interest all over the world. This interest is particularly evident in Canada right now, because for 2013 Canada chaired the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). The IHRA's annual meeting included a scholarly conference, held at the University of Toronto in October 2013, a joint effort between the Centre for Jewish Studies, Wolfe Chair of Holocaust Studies, and the Government of Canada. Our call for papers yielded a whopping 250 proposals from 24 countries: among them the

U.S., Israel, Germany, and Poland, but also Ireland, India, Argentina, Nigeria, and Australia.

It was not always this way. The career of eminent Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg (1926-2007) illustrates the change. "We have studied the Holocaust when it was out of the limelight and when it was in the limelight," Hilberg once said. Mostly it was out. Hilberg, a refugee from Vienna, spent 1939 in Cuba before being allowed to enter the United States. He returned to Europe as an American soldier, which entitled him to support for

his studies through the GI Bill. After a series of temporary teaching gigs, he landed a position in Puerto Rico, but in none of those jobs did he teach courses on the Holocaust, even though his Columbia University dissertation, published in 1961 as *The Destruction of the European Jews*, is widely considered the foundational work on the subject. Only in the late 1970s, decades after he took up a position in Political Science at the University of Vermont, did Hillberg begin to offer a class on the Holocaust. He supervised no doctoral dissertations, because his department did not have a Ph.D. program. So although his personal trajectory, like the Holocaust itself, was international, his work on the subject, at least until the 1990s, had limited reach.

The explosion of interest in the Holocaust is exciting but it also raises questions. Why are so many people drawn to this subject now? Many historians credit the opening of archives after the collapse of Communism, but the availability of sources does not necessarily inspire research. Is the growth of the field market driven, a product of the funding that since the 1990s has become available for scholars, filmmakers, and educators – through the Claims Conference, Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the IHRA, and other agencies? Or is it because of the attention and moral high ground one can command by working on or merely invoking a subject that many people deem the epitome of evil? Might some fascination with the Holocaust stem from the persistence of old myths about Jewish power?

Perhaps there is some truth to each of these explanations. Spotlights attract talent but they also draw moths. Still, conceptualizing – imagining, investigating, and narrating – the Holocaust on the world stage promises valuable insights. Allow me to consider four themes: languages, connections, ambiguity, and loss.

“The Holocaust,” Hillberg said in an interview shortly before he died, “is not a subject for amateurs. It is for people who know languages, who know history, who know political science, who know economics, etc. At the root they must be well trained.”<sup>1</sup> The first scholars of the Shoah, who started their work even before the war ended, fit this description. Survivors – and in some cases victims – themselves, like most of the Jews of Eastern Europe, were multi-lingual. Emanuel Ringelblum, Rachel Auerbach, Philip Friedman, Léon Poliakov and their counterparts knew Yiddish, Polish, German, Hebrew and, in many cases, Russian, French, and more. In short, they could access sources, oral and written, in the major languages in which the Holocaust occurred.

Few scholars in subsequent generations have comparable skills. Precisely North America and Israel, key sites of Holocaust Studies, are becoming increasingly monolingual. Indeed, according to Dan Michman,



head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, the triumph of modern Hebrew has had unforeseen consequences for research on the Shoah. The field needs scholars from – and in – Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, and the other sites of destruction of Jewish lives and communities during the Second World War. Their contributions have already made possible exploration of topics – notably local involvement in expropriation, killing, and rescue – that long remained obscure.

The expansion of Holocaust Studies beyond Europe – and the knowledge of languages and societies that comes with it – allows still other questions to be asked (and sometimes answered). As Anna Shternshis reminds us, more than one million Jews survived the war in Soviet Central Asia and Siberia.<sup>2</sup> Sources in Russian and Yiddish have been key to examining their experiences. What might scholars working in Central Asian languages bring to this research? And what might Chinese and Japanese sources reveal about the confluence of factors that allowed 18,000 European Jews to survive the war in Shanghai? Could experts on India in the decade before independence shed light on something I have heard about anecdotally: an initiative (formal? informal?) that got at least a handful of Jewish medical students out of Europe and into South Asia to work as physicians?

Experts on the world beyond Europe can elucidate connections that European specialists are unlikely or unable to see. Perhaps one example will suffice. Holocaust educators invariably present the Evian Conference of 1938 as a turning point when “the West,” in particular the United States and Canada,



refused to admit Jewish refugees. To highlight this failure it is often pointed out that at Evian, “only the Dominican Republic” agreed to open its doors to Jewish refugees. Melanie Newton, a historian of the Caribbean, first alerted me to the back story. In October 1937, under orders from President Rafael Trujillo, Dominican soldiers massacred some 20,000 Haitians inside the Dominican Republic. Although motives for the killings and for the subsequent invitation to Jewish refugees continue to be debated, it seems evident that these developments were connected. Perhaps both were part of an effort to “whiten” the population, or the generous refugee policy may have been a form of damage control, in the wake of an international investigation whose outcome remained under negotiation. As Marion Kaplan has shown, for approximately 800 Jews, being able to enter the Dominican Republic made the difference between life and death.<sup>3</sup> Still viewing that haven in its context of extreme violence is essential to comprehend the complex, brutal world in which the Holocaust took place.

Situating the Holocaust in a global frame puts many things into perspective, among them the matter of rescue. Since the 1960s, almost 25,000 Righteous Among the Nations have been recognized at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The largest number comes from Poland, with the Netherlands in second place, followed by France, then Ukraine. Smaller numbers, as small as one, come from places far from the killing fields and death camps: Armenia, Brazil, El Salvador, Georgia and Vietnam. Seeing these countries on the list highlights the international reach of the Holocaust. It also points to an escalating trend since the 1990s: the rush to declare rescuers.

By no means is this phenomenon limited to requests for recognition as Righteous Among the Nations. Instead, in Poland, France, Turkey, Albania, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, Germany, and even Canada one finds initiatives, public and private, to identify and celebrate people who helped Jews. Sometimes these efforts blur into defining any acts of opposition to Nazi German rule as rescue.<sup>4</sup> With so many rescuers, a cynic might ask, how could there even have been a Holocaust? Acknowledging the international surge of interest in rescue should not detract from individual heroism nor reduce the significance of every Jewish life saved. It should, however, alert us to the ways that concepts of rescue and refuge are ambiguous, not in the sense that they are meaningless but rather that they bear multiple meanings and as a result are all-too-easily oversimplified and instrumentalized.

Considering the Holocaust on the world stage underscores the ubiquity of loss. Survivors’ accounts reveal how distance brought safety but also terrifying loneliness. On November 3, 1938, Gerhard Maass, a young German Jew, arrived in Canada. Rather than relief he recalls feeling so frightened by the news from home

that he could neither work nor think. His father in Hamburg was arrested during the Kristallnacht pogrom and sent to a concentration camp, and although Maass's brother and cousins wrote to him, he could do nothing. In the fall of 1939, shortly after Canada declared war on Germany, he almost lost his foot in an accident at work. An RCMP officer visited him in Montreal's Jewish General Hospital, but it was no social call. If he tried to send another letter to Germany, the police warned him, he would be deported. Years later, Maass struggles to describe his state of mind at the time: "How to explain? To be a man without a country in a strange country ... I was on my own. I was frantic."<sup>5</sup>

Geographic distance did not alleviate the agony of grief. Anka Voticky, a Czech Jew, survived the war in Shanghai. In September 1945 she and her husband Arnold received a letter from a cousin describing the fate of their extended family. Arnold's parents and many other relatives had been murdered in Treblinka; altogether 65 members of their family had been killed. For two days after reading the letter, Voticky recalls, her husband sat: "not moving, not speaking, not eating, not drinking, not sleeping." When he finally spoke it was to express utter isolation:

Tomorrow is Yom Kippur. You can do whatever you want, but I am not fasting. In all my life I never saw my mother in her underwear. The thought that in Treblinka she had to undress in front of everybody and, naked, my parents had to dig their own grave.... I no longer believe that there can possibly be a God.<sup>6</sup>

Primo Levi drew attention to another international, even universal, aspect of the Holocaust: shame. He felt it as a victim and saw it in the faces of the Red Army soldiers who liberated him at Auschwitz. It was shame for the world, he explained:

the shame which a just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps a similar response moved Raul Hilberg to introduce a comparison in the third edition of *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Referring to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, Hilberg observed: "The disaster of the Tutsi took place in full view of the world. . . . The challenge was posed and not met. . . . History has repeated itself."<sup>8</sup>

Considering the Holocaust as world history reminds us of its specificity but also its universality. Violence, expulsion, assault on communal and individual lives – these are all-too familiar occurrences in the human past. For about a decade now, the national high school curriculum in South Africa has included a compulsory module on the Holocaust. Only for the topic of apartheid are more hours mandated. How do students respond, I asked a teacher? Learning about the Holocaust meant a lot to them, he said, because they saw that you did not have to be black to be the target of prejudice. That comment is a reminder of the transformative potential of scholarship, with its combination of proximity and distance, empathy and reason.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "Is There a New Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg," *Logos* 6, no.1-2 (2007), online at: [http://www.logosjournal.com/issue\\_6.1-2/hilberg.htm](http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.1-2/hilberg.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Anna Shternshis, "On a Journey from Soviet Citizen to Jewish Refugee: Jewish Perceptions of 1941 in the Soviet Union," address at the CJS Annual Graduate Student Conference, Toronto, 22 April 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement of Sosua, 1940-1945* (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> See Renée Poznanski, "From Historiography to TV: The Representation of the Resistance in Contemporary France," presentation at Centre for Jewish Studies, Toronto, 21 March 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> Gerry (Gerhard) Maass, born 1918, Hamburg; interviewed May 1998, Montreal; Shoah Foundation #40498, accessed U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>6</sup> Anka Voticky, *Knocking on Every Door* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2010), 74-75.
- <sup>7</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989), 773.
- <sup>8</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 1296.

Robert Jan van Pelt, D.Litt.

*Untrumpable: Auschwitz, the other camps,  
and the Memory of the Holocaust*



Twenty years ago the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observed that future generations might talk about the historical sequence of the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries as the ages of Reason, Enlightenment, Revolutions, and the Age of the Camps. While the twentieth century appeared first as an epoch of “modernity” in which humankind produced more, travelled faster, and became richer, the more significant achievement of “modernity” was a totalitarianism that embraced a thoroughly “modern” solution to the presence of undesirable ethnic or social groups—“fast and efficient killing,

*scientifically designed and administered genocide.”* Therefore Bauman predicted that the shadows cast by “Auschwitz” and “the Gulag” would dominate future generations’ understanding of the twentieth century because they had been so unexpected and hence bewildering to a civilization which had learned to see the past in terms of “the relentless and exhilarating progression of the ages of reason, enlightenment, and emancipatory, liberating revolutions.”<sup>2</sup>

When Bauman referred to the Soviet camps, he used

the term Gulag—an acronym for a department of the Soviet government: the *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovyykh LAGere* (Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies). In other words, he used a term that the Soviets themselves used to refer to the system as a whole. But when Bauman referred to the German concentration camp system, and also to the genocidal killings that took place outside of those camps, he did not use the acronyms WVHA or RSHA—the *Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt* (Economic Administrative Head Office) which ran the camps or the *Reichsicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Head Office) which oversaw the deportations to the camps, but he used the name of “Auschwitz”—a particular camp that was both the largest of the German concentration camps, and the most deadly destination of Europe’s Jews. In using Auschwitz as a synecdoche for the German camp system and the Holocaust, Bauman suggested the uniquely important position of Auschwitz in the Age of Camps.

In his novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (originally published in 1990), the Hungarian survivor and writer Imre Kertész described a gathering of survivors of the German *and* Soviet camps. “Someone came up with the melancholy idea that everyone should say *where he had been*, at which names began to drop with a weary spattering, like rain passing from a passing cloud which has so long ago spent its force: Mauthausen, the Don Bend, Recsk, Siberia, the Transit Centre, Fö Street, 60 Andrassy Avenue, Buchenwald, Kistarcsa.” The protagonist dreaded the moment he was to state *where he had been* but, fortunately he was preempted: “‘Auschwitz,’ said somebody in the modest but self-assured tone of a winner, and the whole gathering nodded furiously: ‘Untrumpable,’ as the host himself admitted, half-enviously, half grudgingly, and yet, when all is said and done, with a wry smile of acknowledgment.”<sup>3</sup>

Kertész consistently used the term “Auschwitz” to refer to what most of us define as the Holocaust. When he began work in the early 1970s on an autobiographical novel about his life in the German concentration camps, he noted in his diary that “the *Mythos* Auschwitz is the only thing that truly interests me. . . Auschwitz and everything that relates to it (and what is there that does not relate to it?) is the greatest trauma of European Man since the cross, even if it will take decades or even centuries before he will become conscious of it.”<sup>4</sup> Auschwitz was a *Mythos*, a concept that he had borrowed from Nietzsche, and which is quite different from a myth understood as a fictitious fable involving the supernatural world. For Nietzsche, a *Mythos* was a mode of thinking that communicates an idea of the world as a succession of events, actions and sufferings that appeals to the imagination and energizes groups to take action.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in a *Mythos* the name is also an event, saving the world from chaos.

In his Nobel Prize Lecture (2002) Kertész used the term “Auschwitz” when he referred to the contemporary human condition. “The problem of Auschwitz is not whether to draw a line under it, as it were; whether to preserve its memory or slip it into the appropriate pigeonhole of history; whether to erect a monument to the murdered millions, and if so, what kind. . . What was revealed in the Final Solution, in *l’univers concentrationnaire*, cannot be misunderstood, and the only way survival is possible, and the preservation of creative power, is if we recognize the zero point that is Auschwitz.”<sup>6</sup> Auschwitz, and not Buchenwald or *Arbeitskommando* Troeglitz near Zeitz, two camps where Kertész spent almost all of his time as a prisoner of the Nazis, and not Treblinka or Dachau, or any of the thousands of other Lagers that formed what the French survivor David Rousset had already identified in 1945 as *l’univers concentrationnaire*— the concentration camp universe.

Why is “Auschwitz” untrumpable? Let’s begin with considering Kertész’s writings for an explanation why Auschwitz became the symbol of all the camps. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall Kertész defined Auschwitz as “the universal and eternal parable. In its name alone it gathers both the whole world of the Nazi concentration camps as well as also the general shakenness of the spirit. It must be kept in its mythically elevated place of display, so that pilgrims can visit it, like they visit the hill of Golgotha.”<sup>7</sup> Kertész did not find it necessary to list objective “historical” reasons to understand why Auschwitz had obtained that central role. For him it was sufficient to invoke a concept first coined by Thomas Mann: the so-called *Geist der Erzählung*, or “spirit of story-telling” which is a law or necessary form a particular story must take in order to be believable, and which is incarnated in a specific storyteller when he or she decides to tell a tale.<sup>8</sup> This “spirit of story-telling” and not the storyteller determines what goes into the story, and allows it to become a *Mythos*. This spirit is, as Kertész put it, “a kind of both secret and communal decision, which obviously reflects real spiritual motives and needs and which come forward in truth. They define the horizon of our daily life, those—in the final analysis—stories that deal with good and evil, and our world, surrounded by this horizon, is immersed in a never ending whispering about good and evil.”<sup>9</sup> Kertész suggested that this bodiless, ubiquitous “spirit of story-telling” made witnesses and writers like himself decide on Auschwitz as the pre-eminent stage of the Holocaust and the embodiment of all Nazi concentration camps, even if, as Kertész admitted, there were countless other camps. Yet most of them are forgotten, and one should not quarrel with this fact. “The resolute spirit of the tale preferred to choose this camp instead of another, symbolizing the others through this one.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important here to note that Kertész referred to the importance of Auschwitz in the “story” or “tale” of the Holocaust, and not in Holocaust fiction—that is novels that use the Nazi-dominated Europa as the stage and the persecution of the Jews as a background. He had in mind the stories that people actually tell each other, and not those that are intricate works of art created draft by draft. He thought of stories that are shared, and that bring people together into a community, and that, therefore, must have a simple, linear and memorable structure that suggests that the world has an order, and purpose, and that, therefore, even the unavoidable pain, loss and suffering has meaning.<sup>11</sup>

When Kertész reflected on the centrality of Auschwitz in the story of the Holocaust, he had in mind such meaning-giving tales—tales like Elie Wiesel’s story *Night* or Claude Lanzmann’s 10-hour movie *Shoah* or Art Spiegelmann’s comic book *Maus*, or the thousands of stories told by survivors in their family circle, in schools, synagogues and in front of camera teams creating the great oral history archives. These are the stories that have shaped, and continue to shape, our post-Auschwitz civilization.

As a teacher who understands his vocation as akin to that of a story-teller, I appreciate the idea that the “spirit of story-telling” may be responsible for having chosen Auschwitz. But as a historian, I also need additional reasons which can be understood through reason and verified with empirical methods. I count ten such reasons why Auschwitz became so central to our understanding of the twentieth century as the Age of the Camps. I’ll enumerate them one-by-one.

## 1 Number of Victims

Auschwitz was the site where the single largest group of Jews were murdered. According to Raul Hilberg’s rather conservative figures, which I hold to be the most reliable estimate of total Jewish deaths, the Holocaust claimed 5.1 million Jewish lives: over 800,000 Jews died as the result of ghettoization and general privation, over 1.3 million were murdered in open-air shootings, and up to 3 million died in the camps, mostly in gas chambers. Of these, Auschwitz had the highest mortality with 1 million Jews, followed by Treblinka and Belzec with 750,000 and 550,000 Jews respectively.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Scope of Nationalities

Auschwitz was also the destination to a greater national range of Jews than any other. From at least twelve European countries Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and as such the history of Auschwitz testifies to the pan-European character of the Holocaust. In addition, Auschwitz was a place where the Germans killed tens of thousands of non-Jewish Poles, Sinti and Romani, and Soviet prisoners of war. These people died with Jews and died the death of the Jews, and as such gave Auschwitz a particularly universal character.

## 3 Modernity

Auschwitz was in its technology and organization thoroughly “modern.” Many have interpreted Auschwitz as the juncture where the European industrial system went awry. As the nexus of technological prowess, bureaucratic discipline and ideological determination, Auschwitz was not only thoroughly modern, but also “civilized.” The architects who designed the camp were university graduates, like the doctors who conducted the selections. Only in Auschwitz did modern, well-designed crematoria become the sites of continuous murder. These buildings offered in their logical arrangement of undressing rooms, gas chambers, and crematoria ovens a carefully thought-out production facility of death. As the question of the beneficial and/or perditious nature of modernity lies at the heart of our interpretation of the twentieth century, the modernity of Auschwitz places it at the center.<sup>13</sup>

## 4 Iconography

The crematoria, with their chimneys, were also powerful symbolic images of destruction. In the Jewish memory of the genocide, the traditional symbolic images of fire and smoke, which are associated with the stake on which Jews were burnt in earlier times, predominate. Hence also the ease with which first English-speaking Jews and later Jews in the diaspora as a whole accepted the term “Holocaust” as the proper way to refer to the murder of the six million. André Schwarz-Bart’s novel *The Last of the Just* (1959)

ends in the Auschwitz gas chamber where the protagonist, Ernie Levy, remembered in the moment before his death the legend of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion. “When the gentle rabbi, wrapped in the scrolls of the Torah, was flung upon the pyre by the Romans for having taught the Law, and when they lit the faggots, branches still green to make his torture last, his pupils said, Master, what do you see? And Rabbi Chanina answered, I see the parchment burning, but the letters are taking wing.” As Ernie remembered the letters taking wing, he died. Half an hour later his body was taken to the ovens. “And so it was for millions, who from *Luftmensch* became *Luft*. I shall not translate. So this story will not finish with some tomb to be visited in pious memory. For the smoke that rises from crematoria obeys physical laws like any other: the particles come together and disperse according to the wind, which propels them. The only pilgrimage, dear reader, would be to look sadly at a stormy sky now and then.”<sup>14</sup> Only in Auschwitz was incineration an essential part of the killing process from the very beginning. Only in Auschwitz did, in the words of Nelly Sachs, German-constructed chimneys provide “ingeniously devised habitations of death” through which “Israel’s body drifted as smoke.”<sup>15</sup>

## 5 Anonymity

In Auschwitz the whole killing process took place inside the crematoria, and therefore the killers did not have to confront the death of their victims. This made the killing procedure anonymous. The French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whose parents were killed in Auschwitz in 1944, noticed that this anonymity introduced the negation of the crime within the crime itself. This did certainly apply to the SS men who introduced the Zyklon-B into the gas chambers. They only needed to open a small trapdoor, empty a tin of cyanide into a hole, and close the trapdoor. The removal of the corpses after the killing and the cremation was done by Jewish Special Squads, and again SS men did not have to face the hellish reality of the situation.<sup>16</sup>

## 6 Survivors

While the symbolic significance of Auschwitz as the epicenter of the Holocaust can be understood by considering numbers and sophisticated arguments, the core of it must be located in its survivors and its material remnants. Of the 1.1 million Jews who were deported to Auschwitz, some 100,000 Jews left the camp alive. In addition there were 100,000 non-Jewish survivors of Auschwitz. Why are the survivors so

important to the memory of Auschwitz? Why are Auschwitz survivors more important to the memory of Auschwitz than the survivors of the Rotterdam (May 1940), Hamburg (July 1943) or Hiroshima (August 1945) bombings are to the memory of those atrocities? There are various good answers to this, and related questions. Auschwitz survivors will, probably, tell you that because the purpose of Auschwitz was the murder of all Jews, and the purpose of those bombings was the surrender of the Dutch, German or Japanese armed forces, the simple fact of their own survival can be seen as a both politically and historically significant negation of Auschwitz, while the survival of an individual Dutchman, German or Japanese caught in the terror carries only a personal, individual meaning.

When we consider the survivor as a witness, one who gives testimony, a person who tells a story, then another aspect comes to the foreground. Beginning with the Gilgamesh Epic and The Odyssey, the most fundamental narrative form is that of the man who once was home, like his audience, but who was pulled or thrown into a dangerous and exciting adventure that brought him to distant and strange lands, that caused the death of many comrades, and from which he returned, thanks to a thrilling escape from harm due to his skills or good luck or both, as a man who survived to tell the tale. Hence a good story is often a survivor story, and vice versa. This applies to a member of Shackleton’s expedition to the Antarctic, or a Jew who was shipped to Auschwitz, or a member of Canada’s First Nations who was confined in a Residential School.

The original and historically vital relationship between survival and storytelling is, of course, at the core of Jewish identity. Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel once observed: “If all the nations, in the long course of history, have taken bitter pains to trample on the Jews, it is perhaps because they wished to know that strange people who, more than any other, possess the secret of survival.”<sup>17</sup> The great exiles foreshadowed by the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt and triggered by the destruction of first Solomon’s Temple and then Herod’s Temple ought have destroyed the Jewish people, but they did not. It is not clear what is the chicken and what is the egg: survival as recorded in the Bible or storytelling as exemplified in the Bible.

This may help us to understand why we approach, understand and commemorate the Holocaust through the experience of the Holocaust-survivor—the person who returned from the *l’univers concentrationnaire*, or the “Planet Auschwitz,” the “Kingdom of Death” or whatever the realm of killings is called. The survivor claims, as a survivor, a quintessentially Jewish identity. This may be troubling to Orthodox Jews, who believe that Jewish identity ought to be rooted in the Covenant and experienced in a Jewish life ordered by commandments large and small, but as a historian one cannot but agree with Wiesel that because the story of the Jewish people as a collective is one of survival, the Holocaust survivor represents the ideal type of the Jew *par excellence*.

## 7 Goldilocks Principle

When we look at the historic impact of a historical event, the so-called “Goldilocks Principle” (after the well-known nursery tale “The Story of the Three Bears”) is at work: it must fall within certain margins to have its maximal effect. The *Einsatzgruppen* and police battalions engaged in countless massacres which left none, or at best one of two survivors. Only one of the 550,000 Jews deported to Belzec was alive in 1945; some fifty to seventy of the 250,000 Jews brought to Sobibor and forty from the at least 800,000 Jews sent to Treblinka saw the end of the war. Statistically, these survivors are freaks of history. Hence in the *Einsatzgruppen* killings and the Operation Reinhard camps, the millions who were killed dominate our understanding of the situation. And because the dead do not tell stories, their fate is beyond a story.

When we consider the Jews who went into hiding, the number of survivors far exceed those who were betrayed, arrested, and deported. In the case of the Netherlands, for example, two thirds of the Jews who found a hiding place survived the war. The survivors are in the majority, and their “luck” if we may call it so overshadows the scope of the catastrophe, distorting our understanding of the Holocaust.

Yes, if we employ the Holocaust as the story of destruction only, the deadliness of the *Einsatzgruppen* shootings, of the Chelmno extermination installation and of the Operation Reinhard camps ought to take centre stage in the manner suggested by historian Timothy Snyder in his *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010). And if we understand the Holocaust as the story of insightful and decisive survivors only, those in hiding, or who escaped over the green border to the Soviet Union (before 1941), Switzerland or Spain (between 1940 and 1944), take centre stage. Yet they represent extremes. In some fundamental way the fate of those deported to Auschwitz is most typical of the story of the Holocaust in general: most of those touched by it did not survive, but a minority was still alive in 1945 to tell a tale of deportation, selection, imprisonment, evacuation, and liberation.

## 8 Spatial Coherence and Diachronic Stability

Auschwitz offered a coherent universe in both spatial and temporal terms: the deportation, the arrival and the selection followed a fixed pattern, as did the initiation process that included undressing, shaving,

showering, tattooing and clothing in striped prison uniforms, the assignment of one’s billet, the revelation of what happened to those who had been sent “the other way” at the selection, the daily roll-calls, the struggle to obtain food, the struggle to remain clean, the tricks to survive the month and selections in the barracks. The grotesque but well-ordered life of the inmate occurred in a well-ordered environment of a camp that consisted of so many sub-camps of a fixed number of barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences, with each camp well organized with an inmate hierarchy—in short a physical and social matrix that could be easily described and of which a substantial part still exists.

Unlike Auschwitz, the memory of the Operation Reinhard Camps do not provide a complete, coherent world. They were places of improvisation, and chaos ruled. There was no regularity in camp existence that could provide structure to the tales of the few survivors that can be grasped by our own imagination. When Treblinka survivor Richard Glazar recalled the camp in his interview in Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, he described life in Treblinka as “a hurricane, a raging sea.”<sup>18</sup> And when a survivor of the Operation Reinhard camps is able to give some structure to his tale, it does not make an impact because each story is uniquely unique: in his path-breaking *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (2010) sociologist Arthur W. Frank observed: “Stories depend on other stories: on recognizable plots, character types, conventional tropes, genre-specific cues that build suspense, and all the other narrative resources that story tellers utilize.”<sup>19</sup> Because we have heard so many stories about survival in Auschwitz, all in many ways similar, and each in a particular way special, we remember them.

## 9 Singularity

A single place, Auschwitz, dominates our memory because we think of the Nazi murder of six million Jews and the Nazi destruction of Jewish culture and history not as a whole series of sometimes causally closely connected, sometimes roughly overlapping, and sometimes even contradictory developments, but as a single event, which we commonly know as “the Holocaust,” with capitalized “H” of “Holocaust.” To understand its dimensions, it is useful to notice that in common parlance the word “holocaust,” without a capital “H” for “Holocaust,” can be used to denote a genocide of groups other than Jews if the term is qualified: we may refer to the Turkish murder of 1.5 million Armenians as “the Armenian holocaust” and when we consider the possibility that the human race will commit suicide with atomic bombs, we shift the qualifier from the object to the agent of destruction and speak of a “nuclear holocaust.” In neither case do we capitalize the “H” of holocaust. But when we refer to the destruction of European Jewry, we drop the qualification because it appears redundant and capitalize the “H.”<sup>20</sup>

Labeling the very complex set of events that ended in the death of six million Jewish people, the flight of one million, and the destruction of so much Jewish heritage as “the Holocaust” suggests a historical singularity that, in a sense, calls for a singular place of focus to be remembered at its core. And while the most deadly of the shooting ranges, the Ponary Forest near Vilna, will always face competition from the Rumboli Forest near Riga, or Babi Yar near Kiev, and while Treblinka will always face competition from Sobibor or Belzec, Auschwitz is the only camp that is unique, and singular—because it was the largest and the most modern camp, and because it remains, thanks to the remains that are so well preserved, the most present. Therefore it is the only place that could become, as Kertész suggested, a *Mythos*.

## 10 Denial

Remarkably, Holocaust deniers confirm the status of Auschwitz as *Mythos*. David Irving, who considered his own task as a denier in naval terms, often referred to Auschwitz as “the biggest weapon” in what he described as the Jewish propaganda campaign against the truth. Auschwitz was “the great battleship,” and following Churchill’s 1941 instruction to “Sink the Bismarck,” Irving called other deniers to “Sink the Auschwitz.”<sup>21</sup> In the attacks on the evidence, deniers have trusted on the so-called “butterfly effect,” coined by the American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Norton Lorenz: a butterfly that flutters its wings might cause a hurricane thousands miles away. Deniers are gamblers at heart, and they believe that they may strike lucky if they flutter their tiny wings in the Auschwitz gas chambers. They believe that if they can cast doubt on a detail of the Auschwitz gas chambers, not only all the killings in Auschwitz will be in doubt, but the murder of six million Jews all over Europe. Holocaust denier Arthur Butz stated “the defenders of the [extermination] legend are in an impossible position. . . . It is very easy to bring down the legend as it applies to Auschwitz and Auschwitz in turn, on account of the nature of the evidence involved, brings down the rest of the legend with it.”<sup>22</sup> Create doubt about the Auschwitz gas chambers, and the Holocaust Kingdom will collapse.

Ten reasons seem enough. All of them seem to point to the fact that Auschwitz is the physical, historical and one might say symbolical center of the concentration camp universe and the pre-eminent symbol of the Holocaust. Institutions and commemorations embody this symbolic union. In Europe, the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, the day that units of the Red Army reached Auschwitz, has become Holocaust Remembrance Day, and in most European countries national Auschwitz committees represent all concentration camp survivors.

The broad consensus on the central symbolic significance of Auschwitz raises the question how we may understand other camps—larger *Lager* and smaller ones—or other sites of murder. Kertész admitted that the oblivion of the other camp is the price we pay when we try to understand the concentration camp universe. “Auschwitz, the pre-eminent stage of the Holocaust, has become for all times the embodiment of all national socialist concentration camps, even if there were hundreds of other camps and even when we know very well that in Auschwitz tens of thousands of non-Jews were incarcerated and murdered.”<sup>23</sup>

Auschwitz occupies a central place in the Holocaust narrative, and this implies that killing grounds and camps that can be easily related to this pivot can be understood. For example, the Ponary or Rumboli forests near Vilna and Riga, or all the other execution places outside of smaller towns, villages and hamlets, can be considered to be the precursors of Auschwitz in a narrative that focuses on the operational problems faced by the SS in conducting the murders. In this reading of the history of the genocide of the Jews, the argument goes more or less as follows: the killings of Jews with machine guns led to nervous breakdowns and problems of discipline amongst those involved, and hence a more anonymous method of killing had to be found. The gas vans and later stationary gas chambers provided the solution. An extermination camp like Treblinka, which had gas chambers but no crematoria equipped with high capacity ovens, can be understood as an intermediate step between the pits of Ponary and the smoking chimneys of Auschwitz. Thus Ponary and Treblinka have a place in the unfolding of that story of invention that culminates in the Auschwitz chimneys.

If Ponary and Treblinka relate to Auschwitz in a story that stresses the development of the machinery of destruction, holding-pens like the Lodz / Litzmannstadt ghetto, the Drancy transit camp near Paris, Mechelen/Malines transit camp near Brussels, Westerbork transit camp near nowhere, and Theresienstadt/Terezín near Prague functioned the anterooms to Auschwitz and hence the stories of those places can be understood *sub specie Oswieczensis*. And camps like Stutthof, Maidanek, or Dachau can be seen as variations of Auschwitz. And questions of Jewish resistance as they are brought to the foreground in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, or the uprising in Sobibor and Treblinka, or in the relative passivity of the Lodz ghetto inmates, all tie back to the lack of resistance shown by the deportees upon their arrival in Auschwitz (the facile and in my view mischievous “sheep to the slaughter” accusation leveled at the victims), the failure of the uprising of the Czech Family Camp in March 1944, and the partly successful uprising of the crematoria Sonderkommandos in October of that year.

Yet, if truth is to be told, many places will not find an easy place in the grand narrative of the Holocaust because they lack that simple connection to Auschwitz as the narrative core. I think, for example, about the killings by the Romanian Army or the deportations of Romanian Jews to Transnistria. This is certainly a problem, but I believe that, as educators who are responsible to carry the story of the Holocaust forwards to the next generation, we must make tough choices about the level of narrative complexity our teaching can accommodate. For a story to work, it must present the mind-boggling complexity and incapacitating infinity of the world into a simplified form, reduce the world to absorbable and manageable proportions.

Indeed, as a historian I fully accept that we must ignore most of the information about the past if we are to preserve that past as a story—that is as a history that is told, and shared, and transmitted from generation to generation. Zygmunt Bauman articulated this well in a remarkable aside in his book on waste. Knowledge, he argued, can only exist in relation to ignorance. Bauman compared stories, an essential bearer of knowledge, to the spotlights that only seek to brighten up parts of the stage, deliberately leaving the rest in darkness. “Were they to illuminate the whole of the stage evenly, they would not really be of use. Their task, after all, is to ‘cure’ the stage, making it ready for the viewers’ visual and intellectual consumption.” And stories do the same, “by separating the relevant from the irrelevant, actions from their settings, the plot from its background and the heroes or the villains at the centre of the plot from the hosts of supernumeraries and dummies. It is the mission of stories to select, and it is in their nature to include through exclusion and to illuminate through casting shadows... Without selection there would be no story.” And, returning to knowledge in general, Bauman argued that, “it is the courtesy of the surrounding darkness that the light of knowledge illuminates. Knowledge is inconceivable without ignorance, memory without forgetting.”<sup>24</sup>

I do not know what coming generations will care to remember about the Holocaust. Certainly, I think they will remember Anne Frank as she was writing her diary in an attic in Amsterdam, and György Köves—Kertész’s alter-ego—as he accommodated himself to the concentration camp universe in the Nobel-Prize winning masterpiece *Fatelessness*. And, certainly, they will recognize the contours of Auschwitz.

Toronto, June 2015.

Robert Jan van Pelt.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The theme of this essay deals with a theme that I have discussed, with different emphasis, in various lectures and publications. See, for example, Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 6–14; Robert Jan van Pelt, “The Memory of Auschwitz and the Oblivion of the Bloodlands,” *Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought*, vol. 4 (2015): <http://ijt.cjs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Van-Pelt-Vol-4.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford and Cambridge MA, Blackwell, 1995), 193.
- <sup>3</sup> Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, Tim Wilkinson trans. (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 33. Fö Street was the location of a prison run by the secret police
- <sup>4</sup> Imre Kertész, *Galeerentagebuch*, Kristin Schwamm trans. (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2002), 32–33.
- <sup>5</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth,” in *Untimely Meditations*, R.J. Hollingdale trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 236; and Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, Walter Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 135–36.
- <sup>6</sup> Imre Kertész, “Eureka!: The 2002 Nobel lecture,” trans. Ivan Sanders, *World Literature Today*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2003), 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Imre Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager,” in *Eine Gedankenlänge Stille, während des Erschiessungskommandoneu lädt: Essays*, Kristin Schwamm trans. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999), 44–45.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Holy Sinner*, H.T. Lowe Porter trans. (New York: Knopf, 1951), 3ff.
- <sup>9</sup> Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager,” 43–44.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52.
- <sup>11</sup> See William Gass, “The Nature of Narrative and its Philosophical Implications,” in William Gass, *Tests of Time: Essays* (New York, Knopf, 2002), 3–5.
- <sup>12</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Revised and Definitive Edition, 3 vols. (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1985), vol. 3, 1201–20.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Henry L. Feingold, “How Unique is the Holocaust?,” *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, Alex Goodman and Daniel Landes, ed. (Los Angeles: The Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983), 398; Franklin H. Littell, “The Credibility Crisis of the Modern University,” in Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy and Genocide* (Millwood: Kraus, 1980), 284.
- <sup>14</sup> André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*, Stephen Becker trans. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), 408.
- <sup>15</sup> Nelly Sachs, *O the Chimneys: Selected Poems, including the verse play Eli*, Michael Hamburger a.o. trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, David Ames Curtis, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 148–49.
- <sup>17</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Stephen Becker trans. (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 67–68.
- <sup>18</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 48.
- <sup>19</sup> Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 119.
- <sup>20</sup> See Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, “Why do we call the Holocaust ‘The Holocaust?’ An inquiry into the psychology of labels,” *Modern Judaism*, vol. 9., no. 2 (1989), 197.
- <sup>21</sup> David Irving, “Battleship Auschwitz,” *The Journal of Historical Review*, vol. 10 (1990), 498–99.
- <sup>22</sup> Arthur R. Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case Against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry*, 2nd edition (Torrance, Calif.: Institute for Historical Review, 1992), 363–64.
- <sup>23</sup> Kertész, “Die Unvergänglichkeit der Lager,” 51.
- <sup>24</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (London: Polity, 2004), 17–18.

Emily Amie Witty, Ed.D.

*Universal and Particular:  
Teaching the Holocaust as a Jewish Event*



In my more than two decades as an educator in both Jewish schools and public schools, and nearly half of that as a Holocaust educator of both students and teachers, I have been struck by the absence of a critical component in many commercial Holocaust education curricula.<sup>1</sup> In many of these programs, Jews do not appear. The topic of antisemitism is

<sup>1</sup> The author does not claim to have reviewed every Holocaust curriculum. The purpose of this statement is to describe the issue which this article will attempt to address. Additionally, explanations of “what does it mean to be a Jew” can be found in textbooks, but are often missing in educational materials for students.

included and perhaps some chapters even address the Jewish history of the Middle Ages, which include canards of Jews as greedy money lenders and the historically-false accusation that Jews were Christ killers. There is nothing beyond the negative image which then serves as the springboard and segue to the unit on antisemitism.

However, Jews, as a people bound by a covenant with God at Sinai<sup>2</sup>, who share a common history, as well as a set of religious beliefs and practices that

<sup>2</sup> See Exodus: chapters 19-20

can be found in the sacred texts, is noticeably lacking in many Holocaust education materials. To teach the Holocaust without addressing the question of “what does it mean to be a Jew?” is to de-Judaize the study of the Holocaust and to risk misunderstanding and misrepresenting this topic.

## What Does It Mean To Be a Jew?

The word “Jew” in Hebrew is *yehudi* (pl., *yehudim*) and is derived from the Hebrew name of the Patriarch Jacob’s fourth son Yehudah, in English, Judah.<sup>3</sup> Jews are called after Yehudah, the tribe from which the bloodline of Jewish kings originates.<sup>4</sup> After the twelve sons/tribes had been born to Jacob, this single Jewish family unit, upon redemption from slavery in Egypt and the acceptance of the Sinaitic Covenant, became a nation.<sup>5</sup> Having accepted God’s Law, the Torah, at Sinai, “their task, as they later came to understand it, was to observe the 613 commandments [in order to] bring nearer the redemption of the world” (Bauer, 2001, p. 17). For Jews, “strict and uncompromising monotheism . . . became basic to the Jews’ understanding of themselves and the world. God, without shape or form rules a universe created by Him absolutely” (Bauer, 2001, p. 16).

Known by the acronym TaNaKh, texts in the Written Law include a total of 24 sacred texts comprising the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), the Prophets, and the Writings. The Oral Law, which includes explanations of the Written Law, includes (1) the Mishnah, which was codified<sup>6</sup> in 200 CE<sup>7</sup> and (2) the Gemara which was

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 29:35

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 49:10

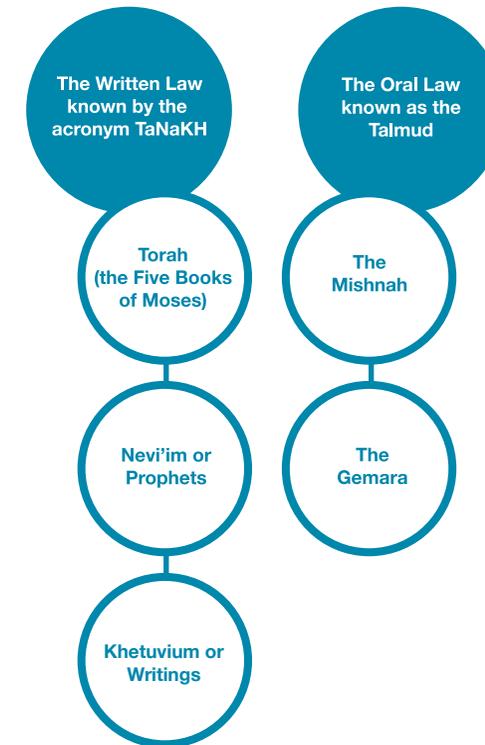
<sup>5</sup> Exodus 12:41

<sup>6</sup> Codified refers to the notion that the texts were written down. They had been transmitted orally prior to this, hence they were known as the Oral Law. This term also means that no further additions to could be made to the Mishnah or Gemara once they had been codified, or become part of the code of Jewish texts. Today, there are still explanations and commentaries written by modern rabbis and Jewish thinkers, but they are not—and cannot—be codified as part of the Oral Law of the Mishnah and Gemara.

<sup>7</sup> C.E. refers to Common Era; Jews do not use B.C. or A.D. because they refer to the life and death of Jesus. B.C. is used to date events that occurred before the birth of Jesus, the “C” stands for “Christ.” A.D. is the abbreviations for anno Domini (Latin for “in the year of our Lord”) and is used to date events that occurred after the birth of Jesus. Jews do not consider Jesus to be the Lord and instead use B.C.E. which stands for Before the Common Era, to date events before the birth of Jesus, and C.E. which stands for Common Era, to date events after the birth of Jesus.

## Judaism’s Sacred Texts

In Judaism, there are two categories of sacred texts:



codified by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. When referred to together, the Mishnah and Gemara are known as the Talmud.

Each category of sacred texts builds on and expands on the text that preceded it historically, with the Written Law being the holiest and the Torah, the holiest within TaNaKh. The Oral Law is a compilation of explanations and explications of the verses found in TaNaKh. The Jewish scholars who lived during the period of the Mishnah (mishnaic) and sought to elaborate and expound upon the Written Law were not permitted to repeal or to change anything written in TaNaKh; they were only permitted to explain. These scholars wrote down the Mishnah.

Similarly, the Jewish scholars who lived during the time of the Gemara were only permitted to explain and expound upon the texts of the Mishnah. They could not repeal anything said by the scholars of the mishnaic period. The scholars of the Gemara period could not repeal or change anything from the Mishnah or from TaNaKh. Each successive generation needed to adhere to the teachings, decisions, and rulings about applying Jewish law that had been identified by the previous generation of Jewish scholars, with God's Torah serving as the Supreme Authority for living a Jewish life. This concept was critical as the religious Jewish community in Germany under Nazi rule sought to respond to anti-Jewish laws that affected their religious observance.

## Jews in Germany in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Let's skip ahead approximately three-thousand years to the Jewish community in Germany during the 1930s. By this point, both Holy Temples in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BCE<sup>8</sup> and 70 CE<sup>9</sup>, respectively, and Jewish ritual practice and communal life no longer centered around the Temple worship. Jews had endured persecutions, including the Crusades, expulsions from various countries in Europe, including Spain, as well as the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648, to name just a few. Life for a Jew living under

foreign rule was always uncertain and frightening, and oftentimes dangerous. As Bauer (2001) explains,

As in Christendom, however, Jews in the Moslem world proved to be an obstinate and hard nut to crack. Refusing to disavow their religious and ethnic identity, they were relegated to second-class citizenship, in which toleration alternated with persecutions and massacres. (p. 25)

Their refusal to abandon their religious beliefs, practices, and customs was looked down upon by the majority culture in which they lived. Yet the majority of Jews clung to an identity which was for them rich and rewarding, confounding those of the majority culture.

## What Does It Mean to Be a Jew After Emancipation?

The emancipation of European Jewry, at varying times depending on the country, meant that Jews were no longer required to live as insular communities, with limited economic growth opportunities. Emancipation now afforded Jews full legal rights under the law, including citizenship and increased economic prospects that had heretofore been denied to them because of their Jewish identity. Emancipation was not without its detractors in the Jewish community, however. Many were worried that this new-found freedom would jeopardize the religious commitment of Jews—young Jews, in particular—to Jewish faith and practice. Now, for the first time in centuries, Jews had a choice to make: to stay within the religious Jewish community and withdraw from the larger population or to embrace these opportunities, abandon their Jewish practices, and assimilate into the larger citizenry. As Ben-Sasson and Goldberg (2003) write,

The “exodus from the ghetto” of the Middle Ages, which was the result of Emancipation and the development of the modern economy, starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, opened up possibilities that had been previously totally unavailable to Jews...it appeared that Jews, just as their Christian neighbors, were able to earn a respectable living, feel comfortable in the general culture, and maintain their loyalty to their country. It seemed that Germany no longer discriminated against Jews and might even have been said to look rather kindly on its Jewish citizens. In theory—if not always in practice—Jews enjoyed equality before the law; the walls of separation and isolation had begun to crack and collapse. (pp. 8-9)

<sup>8</sup>As mentioned in footnote 7, B.C.E. stands for Before the Common Era; Jews do not use B.C. because they do not count from dates linked to the birth or death of Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> While Jews certainly use the Gregorian calendar, AD *anno Domini* “in the year of our Lord” is replaced with C.E. which stands for Common Era.

## Liberal Judaism in Germany

The stream of Liberal Judaism came into being in Germany as a result of Jews being emancipated and receiving equal rights under the law. Adherents to this stream believed that the traditional practices of Torah-observance “expressed a world of obsolete values and ideas and w[ere], moreover, an impediment to the Jews’ integration into their environment” (Ben-Sasson & Goldberg, 2003, p. 8) and so German Jews began to integrate into German society, including serving in the German military during WWI, and they saw themselves as loyal, fully-participating German citizens.

Equally important in teaching the Holocaust is the knowledge that there was also a traditional Orthodox Jewish community in Germany at this time. The German Orthodox Jewish community is less well-known than the Liberal Reform Jewish community in Germany, and it is even less well-known than the Orthodox Jews living in Eastern Europe. Typically, the Orthodox Jew in the Holocaust narrative is limited to the image of the bearded Jews with curled sidecurls, known in Hebrew as *payot*, wearing traditional Jewish garb and living in Poland.

## Living as an Orthodox Jew in Germany Under Nazi Rule

An overview of the four stages of Nazi persecution of the Jews during the Holocaust reveals that the initial stage was social and professional isolation, followed by ghettoization, deportation, and culminating with murder (Kaplan, 1998). During the period of social and professional isolation, which began with Adolf Hitler becoming the Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933 and culminated with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, the Nazis issued a series of anti-Jewish laws. The next section of this article will examine how the Orthodox Jewish community responded to their new reality within the guidelines and parameters of Orthodox Jewish law.

Three weeks after the April 1<sup>st</sup> Boycott, on April 21, 1933, the Nazis banned *shechitah*, the ritual slaughter of animals according to Jewish law and required that all animals be stunned with an electric shock before being slaughtered. Jewish law stipulates that animals must be slaughtered in a specific manner, with a specific type of knife, in order to cause minimal suffering to the animal. Stunning is forbidden<sup>10</sup> and renders the animal *treif*<sup>11</sup>, not kosher<sup>12</sup>.

As a result of the ban on *shechitah*, there was a severe shortage of kosher meat, but the Jewish community responded by importing meat from neighbouring countries, though this was very expensive and was later banned by the authorities (Ben-Sasson & Goldberg, 2003, pp. 67-68). Access to kosher meat was a problem, not only for the individual Jewish family, but for Jewish communal establishments, as well. Observant Jews could no longer rely on the *kashrut* or kosher reliability, of meat served in restaurants, senior centers, and other public establishments. There was a real possibility that the meat being served in these places had come from animals that had been stunned prior to the kosher ritual slaughter process of *shechitah*. A new term, *New Kashrut* began to be used to describe the level of kosher reliability of the meat served in these public establishments. An article from the Orthodox Jewish journal *Der Israelit* (as cited in Ben-Sasson & Goldberg, 2003) includes a warning to the Jewish community about this *New Kashrut*. The closing paragraph of the article reads,

For our readers who are not sufficiently familiar with the meaning of the “*new kashrut*” and who cannot look it up in any Jewish lexicon, the concept is defined here briefly and to the point: it is meat from animals slaughtered after stunning, with or without *shechitah*—which in this case is insignificant. Thus, this is not meat that is kosher in a new way but completely non-kosher according to the old and new concepts, as no rabbinical power in the world can make *neveilot* and *treifot* [two types of non-kosher meat, determined based on whether the animal was improperly slaughtered or if it died of natural causes], kosher. It is already almost cynical that Jewish restaurant believe that they can advertise by using a concept that simply does not exist—“*new kashrut*”— in order to tempt *kashrut-observant* guests (p.73).

<sup>10</sup> Although the Liberal Jewish community in Germany declared adherence to be unnecessary, for Orthodox Jews *halachah* (Jewish law) is a pillar of identity and integrated into every facet of daily life. It may be difficult for some readers to understand the relevance of *halachah*, but for Orthodox Jewry, adherence to *halachah* is an essential component that cannot be separated or removed from their life.

<sup>11</sup> Treif means “not fit for ritual use.” See footnote 12 for the proper uses of the terms kosher and treif.

<sup>12</sup> Although the term kosher is often used in reference to food, it actually means “fit for ritual use.” Orthodox Jews use the term “kosher” to refer to ritual objects, such as a Torah scroll, the Four Species, and even the shofar, ram’s horn blown on the High Holidays, and whether these objects are fit for use for the ritual as prescribed by Jewish law.

## Praying as an Orthodox Jew in Germany Under Nazi Rule

Traditional Jewish law requires that a quorum, or *minyan* in Hebrew, of ten men be present in the synagogue in order to recite certain communal prayers, both during the weekday prayer service and the Sabbath prayer services.

During the 1930s, Jews who lived in small towns, villages, and the countryside began to move to the larger cities in order to benefit from the physical and spiritual support that the established Jewish communities in the city could offer (Ben-Sasson & Goldberg, 2003, p. 86). As a result, Jews in the small communities found that they were not enough men to maintain a regular *minyan* for prayers recited on the Jewish Sabbath. In an effort to address this problem and maintain a semblance of community that was provided by communal prayers in a synagogue, the regional rabbinical council in Bavaria issued a prayer book for communities that did not have a *minyan*.

A letter dated April 1, 1938, written by the Union of Jewish Communities in Bavaria to the Union of Religious Jewish Communities in Pfalz (as cited in Ben-Sasson & Goldberg, 2003) states,

The departure of members has made it difficult for many communities to hold regular services on *Shabbat* [Jewish Sabbath]. Following the example of the Union of Communities in Prussia, we are sending you a prayer book for communities that do not have a *minyan*, in which you will find instructions on conducting services in the absence of a *minyan*. We hope that this encouragement will mean that all community ties will not be severed as soon as there is no longer a *minyan*, that public prayer will not be abolished and that through public prayer even the smallest of our communities will feel themselves to be part of *Klal Israel* [The People of Israel]. (p. 87)

## Teaching About Jews When Teaching the Holocaust

The two examples of *kashrut* and prayer give a glimpse into the religious life of German Jews living under Nazi rule. As Mais (2007) teaches,

There is a need, therefore, to present the often-ignored Jewish dimension of the Holocaust. Doing so will help audiences get inside the heads of the threatened Jews, so they can understand not only how Jews perceived and reacted to changing Nazi policies but how they understood the implications of these policies. A more complete perspective will reveal that Jews were not passive victims, but active agents who responded with a surprisingly wide range of resourceful actions. (p. 18)

The Holocaust is the systematic persecution and murder of the Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during the years 1933-1945<sup>13</sup>. As educators we must first teach our students what it means to be a Jew and what Jewish people believe and practice. We must teach our students about Jewish life and Jewish religious observance. Only then can they begin to truly appreciate how the various Jewish communities responded to the Nazis persecution. We cannot only teach that the Jewish communities were victims. We must also explain that the Jewish German community did not implode as a result of the anti-Jewish policies issued by the Nazi between the years 1933-1938. We must tell the story of how the religious German Jewish community demonstrated a degree of agency and continued to maintain its religious practices and observances while living under Nazi rule.

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<sup>13</sup> Definition from Yad Vashem

## PRACTICE

Martin Hagmayr

### *Teaching About the T4 Program*



## Introduction

During the so-called “T4” program more than 70,000 handicapped, disabled and mentally ill individuals were killed in gas chambers in the years 1940 and 1941 in Nazi Germany. Six killing facilities were set up in the National Socialist state: Bernburg, Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Hadamar, Hartheim and Sonnenstein. Today, these places are memorial sites that explain the history, give relatives and society a place to commemorate, and provide us with the opportunity to learn.

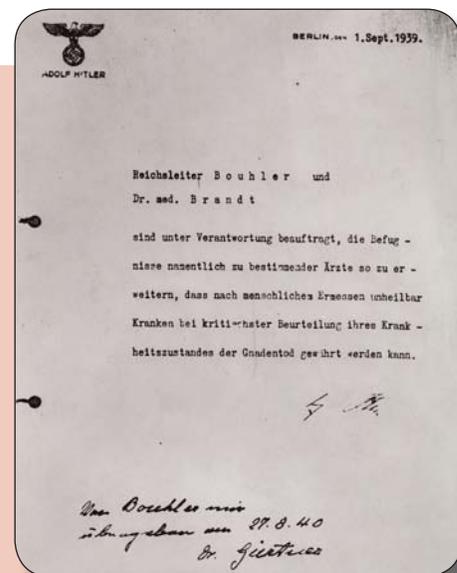
Figure 1, (page 98) shows the memorial site, Hartheim castle, as it appeared in the year 2009. Situated near Linz, Austria it is several hundred years old and is considered to be one of the most beautiful examples of Renaissance architecture. In the year 1898, the castle was converted into a care facility and became home to approximately 200 children and young adults with disabilities. In the period following the *Anschluss* of Austria into the

German Reich, the care facility was closed and the patients dispersed to other institutions. Within one month, a gas chamber and a crematorium were installed. In 1940, the castle was transformed from a former care facility into a killing facility for the disabled. Approximately 30,000 people were killed in Hartheim. This figure includes patients from care facilities as well as prisoners from concentration camps such as Mauthausen and Dachau who were transported to Hartheim. The killings stopped at the end of 1944, and the gas chamber and crematorium were demolished. After 1945 the castle became home to several tenants and did not function as a memorial site. Since 2003, Hartheim is a place of learning and remembrance. It is the aim of this article to provide information about this history and some ideas on how the T4 program can be successfully taught in class.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

In ideology, disabled people and those with mental illnesses did not fit into the ideal of a perfect, healthy and strong society. Nazism saw these people as a societal burden who generated costs and had no right to live in the Nazi-society. In October 1939, Hitler signed the so-called “Euthanasia decree” which was backdated to September 1, 1939. It reads:

Reich Leader Bouhler and Dr. med. Brandt are charged with the responsibility of enlarging the competence of certain physicians, designated by name, so that patients who, on the basis of human judgment are considered incurable, can be granted mercy death after a discerning diagnosis. — Adolf Hitler.



It was on the basis of this decree that the killing of the patients was organized. The organization had its headquarters on *Tiergartenstraße 4* in Berlin. The abbreviation of *Tiergartenstraße 4* (T4) gave rise to its use as a post-war name. The T4 headquarters sent out forms to all care facilities in the German state to record patients. Physicians, located in Berlin, marked the forms either with a blue minus or a red plus sign. A blue minus meant the patient should stay in the care facility, a red plus indicated the patient should be deported to one of the six killing facilities and be gassed there. Patients were deported from the care facilities by buses and sometimes trains.

In Hartheim, a small wooden garage was located outside the castle. It was here that the buses stopped and the patients disembarked (see also figure 4). It took a group of well-organized functionaries to carry out the systematic killing of the disabled. After the arrival, the patients undressed and their luggage was taken away. Next they were shown to the doctor, who chose a natural cause of death that could be told to the relatives, and the patients were told they would have to shower. In reality, the shower room was the gas chamber, where the patients were gassed by carbon monoxide on the day of their arrival. Afterwards, the staff of Hartheim burnt the corpses in the crematorium. Secretaries wrote letters of condolence to the relatives of the victims and sent them together with death certificates with false dates and causes of death.

## Deciding What to Teach

The history of the T4 program and Nazi medicine is an extensive topic. There are a variety of important topics that should be included for students. First and perhaps most importantly is the recognition that the history of the T4 program is the history of individuals. It is the history of the victims, but also the perpetrators, the bystanders and others.

<sup>1</sup> The information in this article is based, if not otherwise mentioned, on the following book: Kepplinger, Brigitte; Marckhgott, Gerhart; Reese, Hartmut (Hg.): Tötungsanstalt Hartheim (Linz 2008)

## Contextualising the Victims

Each of the approximately 30,000 victims shares the fate that they were killed in Hartheim by the Nazis. However, all these people were unique individuals. They varied in age, gender, nationality, and religion. Each had a life before they were brought to Hartheim to be killed. The reason why they were deported was often very different. Some suffered from disabilities like blindness or deafness; some had intellectual disabilities and others suffered from mental health disorders such as depression, epilepsy, or schizophrenia. There were also contingents of prisoners from the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Dachau who were killed in Hartheim. Although they do not fit the profile of the T4 victim, they were killed in a facility designated as part of the T4 program.

Today, the majority of the names of the victims of Hartheim are known. Indeed, one of the most important works of the Hartheim documentation centre is to find out more about the people who were killed there. It is necessary to give the victims back their individuality and show the person behind the name. This link <http://lebensspuren.schloss-hartheim.at> provides biographies of some people who were killed in Hartheim. Currently, all of these biographies are in German but there are plans to translate them into English. One of the biographies provided on the website is that of Erich Forster.

## Erich Forster, 1885 - 1941

Erich Forster was born in 1885 in Sulzberg in the Vorarlberg region of Austria. He had ten other brothers and sisters. Born deaf and with mental deficiency, he lived at home with his family. For employment, Erich worked with sand and made a powder that could be used for laundry purposes. He and his family were well-known and respected in their community. After his parents died and the rest of his family moved to Bavaria, Erich and another disabled brother lived in the poor house of the village. In March of 1941, they were brought from the poor house to the psychiatric hospital in Walduna Rankweil, Austria. Witnesses later recounted that he and his brother probably knew that they were going to be killed. Erich was very anxious and tried to “tell” people with his hands that he was about to be killed. His brother escaped, hid and survived the Second World War. On March 17, 1941, Erich was deported to Hartheim and killed the same day. In 2011, his hometown set up a memorial plaque for him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <http://lebensspuren.schloss-hartheim.at/index.php/2-biografie/15-erich-forster> (May 10th 2015)

## About the Perpetrators

Approximately 70 people worked in the killing facility. They not only worked in the Hartheim castle, they also lived there. The daily life of the perpetrators was organized and seemingly “normal”. Pictures discovered after the end of the Second World War illustrate the disturbing normality of the perpetrators in Hartheim. Figure 2 (**right picture**) shows the perpetrators celebrating a festival in Hartheim. Figure 3 (**bottom picture**) shows a social outing of the perpetrators. It also demonstrates that they took the same buses for their recreation trips that were used for the deportation of the patients.



## From the T4 Program to the Holocaust

Hartheim, the T4 program and the Holocaust are interconnected. So closely are they intertwined that Simon Wiesenthal called Hartheim a “school for murderers”. For the first time in history, people were systematically deported to be killed in gas chambers and their bodies burnt. Many of the perpetrators from the T4 later became leading figures in the Holocaust. Many individuals who started their work in Hartheim later worked in the extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Poland. These include Christian Wirth, Franz Stangl, Franz Reichleitner, among many others. Perhaps the best known is Franz Stangl.

### Franz Stangl; Profile of a Perpetrator

Stangl was born in 1908 in Altmünster, Austria. Beginning in 1931 he trained at the federal police academy in Linz. During this time he became a member of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) commonly referred to as the Nazi party. He made a career in the police force and became a member of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) in May 1938. In early 1940, Stangl was offered the job as a supervisor in charge of security at a T4 killing facility. He worked as the deputy office manager of the Hartheim killing facility and also of Bernburg. In March of 1942, he was given the opportunity of returning to the Gestapo in Linz or working for Operation Reinhard, the code name given to the secretive Nazi plan to mass-murder European as well as most Polish Jews in the General Government district of occupied Poland during the Second World War. Stangl chose to become part of the Operation Reinhard phase of the Holocaust. He was the first commandant of the Sobibor extermination camp and served from April to August 1942. From there, he went on to become the commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp.

In 1948 Stangl fled to Syria. He and his family were discovered later to be living in Brazil. It was there that Simon Wiesenthal, the Austrian Nazi hunter was able to track him down. Stangl was arrested, brought to Germany and tried for the killings of 900,000 people. He was found guilty in October 1970 and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died in prison in June 1971.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For Franz Stangl see also: Friedlander, Henry: *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (1997) / Sereny, Gitta: *Into That Darkness: from Mercy Killing to Mass Murder, a study of Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka* (1974) / [http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02\\_dokuzentrum/02\\_faelle/02\\_stangl.html](http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02_dokuzentrum/02_faelle/02_stangl.html) (May 10th 2015)

## Franz Sitter – Profile of One Who Refused

Franz Sitter was born in 1902. He worked as a nurse in a care facility in Ybbs, Austria. He married in 1929 and fathered two children. Sitter is described as having loved his work as a nurse. In October 1940, he was asked if he would be willing to help with the transportation of patients, and agreed to do so. Together with other nurses from Ybbs, he was brought to Hartheim. He accompanied several transports of patients from various institutions to the Hartheim facility. He was then asked to help the arriving patients undress before they were brought to the gas chamber, but it was against his conscience to work in the killing facility. He refused to work in Hartheim any longer and applied for his immediate transfer back to Ybbs. Although he could not know what the outcome for him and his family would be, he insisted on leaving Hartheim. The physician in charge, Dr. Lonauer, threatened that he would be drafted into the army. However, Sitter was persistent in his desire to leave and was able to leave Hartheim after about 9 days. He went back to Ybbs and carried on working as a nurse there. After some months he indeed was drafted into the army. He survived the Second World War and worked until his retirement in the care facility of Ybbs. He died in 1980. Franz Sitter was the only nurse at Hartheim who insisted on leaving the killing facility. It was not easy for him to leave, but he choose to follow his conscience.<sup>4</sup>

### About the People Who Lived Near the Killing Facility: Profile of a Village

In 1940, the village surrounding the castle stands consisted of several houses, farms, restaurants, a church and some other buildings. Some of these houses were just a few metres away from the castle. In contrast, Linz, the biggest city of Upper Austria, is about 16 kilometres from Hartheim. Some people living in the village came into contact with the killing of the patients. The people who lived in the direct vicinity of Hartheim noticed changes in the castle that unsettled them. They were also faced with disturbing actions in Hartheim. Nearly every day buses with covered windows approached the building. The most disturbing sign of the killing facility was the thick, black and unpleasant smell of the crematorium. The perpetrators brought the ash and some bones to the nearby Danube River. Sometimes they lost ashes and bones along their way on the street. Rumours spread and some people eventually found out what was really happening in the facility.

<sup>4</sup> Fürstler, Gerhard; Malina, Peter: Franz Sitter. In: *Österreichische Pflegezeitschrift*, H. 5, S. 20–22. (2003)

## Reactions of the Villagers

Perhaps not surprisingly, the people of the village reacted in very different ways. Some sold milk, bread and other supplies to the perpetrators living and working in the killing facility. Others tried to look away and maybe pretended that the killings were not happening. Some tried committing acts of resistance. As mentioned previously, sometimes bones were discovered which got lost on the way to being dumped in the Danube River. Some of the people who found them piled them up to construct little pyramids next to the street. They wanted to show the perpetrators that they knew what was happening.

The Schuhmann family lived directly next to the castle. Karl Schuhmann and his brother Ignaz secretly took two pictures of Hartheim when it functioned as a killing facility. Figure 4 shows the castle with the wooden garage where the buses arrived at the bottom of the tower. Directly next to the garage, houses within the village can be seen. Figure 5 shows the smoke billowing out of the crematorium. Until today, this is the only known picture that shows the smoke of the chimney. Karl Schuhmann and his brother took risks to document the crimes with photos. They and some others formed a small resistance group in the village. Sadly, they were betrayed and Ignaz Schuhmann and Leopold Hilgarth were sentenced to death.



Figure 4



Figure 5

## What Can We Learn From This History?

The complexity of this topic and of the human experiences can be of tremendous interest to students. The biographies of such people can be used to demonstrate how individuals acted and reacted in the system they found themselves living within. That patients of care facilities were victims of the Nazis might also be as interesting as the fact that the T4 is closely connected to the Holocaust.

It can also be interesting to talk about the reaction of the people from the surrounding area to the crimes that were happening in their village. We should not ask the question of what we would have done in the same situation; rather, we can ask the question of what we do now when we see injustice, or even crimes, occurring.

Today, Hartheim is a place of Learning and Remembrance. There is an exhibition in the castle titled: “The value of life”. This exhibition shows how disabled people were treated in history and how the situation of disabled people is today. The exhibition also raises questions about modern medicine and modern euthanasia.

History can also be a point of reflection for students and learners. Educators might encourage reflection on where our modern society stands now with respect to the inclusion of disabled people. This can begin among students to determine if their school, their hometown, and their favourite cinema or restaurants are barrier-free, accessible and welcoming for people with disabilities. Such an activity might conclude with students using this reflection to consider these questions in the broader context of how society deals with people who are “different”.

### Links to memorial sites of the T4 and Euthanasia in English

<http://www.schloss-hartheim.at/index.php/en/>

<http://www.gedenkort-t4.eu/en>

<http://gedenkstaettesteinhof.at/en/exhibition/steinhof-vienna>

[http://en.gedenkstaette-hadamard.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-1081/\\_nr-1/\\_lkm-1072/i.html](http://en.gedenkstaette-hadamard.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-1081/_nr-1/_lkm-1072/i.html)

<https://en.stsg.de/cms/node/789>



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Fürstler, Gerhard; Malina, Peter: Franz Sitter. In: Österreichische Pflegezeitschrift, H. 5, S. 20–22. (2003)

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Sereny, Gitta: Into That Darkness: from Mercy Killing to Mass Murder, a study of Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka (1974)

<http://lebensspuren.schloss-hartheim.at/index.php/2-biografie/15-erich-forsterStangl HP> (Retrieved May 10, 2015)

[http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02\\_dokuzentrum/02\\_faelle/02\\_stangl.html](http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02_dokuzentrum/02_faelle/02_stangl.html) (May 10<sup>th</sup> 2015)

## Figures & Photo Credit Information

**Figure 1** - Hartheim Castle. Photo credit: Martin Hagmayr

**Figure 2** - (Foto19885, NARA II, RG 549, Records of Headquarters, U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), War Crimes Branch, War Crimes Case Files ("Cases not tried"), 1944-48, Box 490, Case 000-12-463 Hartheim (P) VOL I/A Hartheim employees celebration. Credit: *Dokumentationsstelle Hartheim des OÖLA*

**Figure 3** - (Foto19895, NARA II, RG 549, Records of Headquarters, U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), War Crimes Branch, War Crimes Case Files ("Cases not tried"), 1944-48, Box 490, Case 000-12-463 Hartheim (P) VOL I/A Hartheim employees on a bus outing. Credit: *Dokumentationsstelle Hartheim des OÖLA*

**Figure 4** - Karl Schuhmann photograph of Hartheim. Credit: *Dokumentationsstelle Hartheim des OÖLA*

**Figure 5** - Karl Schuhmann photograph of smoke from Hartheim. Credit: *Dokumentationsstelle Hartheim des OÖLA*

Carson Phillips, Ph.D.

## *Using Archival Photographs to Teach About the Holocaust*



In today's digital world, photographs can be quickly taken, instantly seen and just as easily deleted, modified with filters or emailed to friends and colleagues around the world. Emergent technologies such as apps, and social networking platforms like Instagram and Snapchat provide further opportunities for photographs to be disseminated to previously unimagined audiences. However, it was not always so, and learning from archival photographs requires slowing down the learning process, at least a little, and asking probing questions about not only the origins of

the photograph, but the context in which it was taken. This can be a valuable learning experience for enhancing soft skills such as inquisitiveness, creativity and empathy, as well as knowledge acquisition. Factors such as who may have taken the photograph, in which year was it taken, the setting, what is visible in the shot and conversely what may be missing, can all help place the photograph in its historical, societal and cultural contexts. Finally, considering why the photograph was taken and by whom, can assist in understanding what the viewer is looking at and the particular "gaze" that may be

represented. The process of deconstructing archival photographs can be informative, enlightening and often surprising for learners of all ages and levels. It can serve as an effective method to encourage the development of research skills, critical thinking and analytical skills in our students.

Photography played an important role in not only capturing the events of the Holocaust as they unfolded, but also in documenting the crimes that resulted. As a visual window into the era, photographs can be used to discover how Jews struggled to survive and how they resisted Nazi persecution. Yet, it is the “gaze,” or the purpose and vantage point of the person who took the photographs that is one of the most important factors that must be taken into consideration. In this essay I examine three sources of photographs, highlighting what each can offer students and teachers who study the Holocaust, as well as providing contextual information about the limitations of certain sources, and resources to continue the learning process. I have listed these by category: familial photographs, ghetto photographs, and liberation photographs. This is not an exhaustive list, but it will lay the foundation for students and educators to expand their use of archival photographs.

## Familial Photographs:

One can find numerous, anonymous photographs on the Internet that captured Jewish life before the Holocaust. These however, should be used with a cautionary note; without access to any accompanying basic information, it may prove exceedingly difficult for students and novice researchers to uncover much about the stories behind the photographs. Similarly, having students colourise such photographs in an attempt to make them more individual or to build empathy with the photographic subjects as human beings similar to themselves, will likely result only in creating a series of colourised photographs having done little to encourage critical thinking or analytical skills. Instead, encourage students to appreciate the photographs in their natural state and not to colourise them in an attempt to make them appear more real to the contemporary learner. These photographs represent not only the individuals of the era, but also the state of photography at the time. Have students deconstruct the photographs considering the photographer’s use of light and shadow, how the prints may have aged over time and adopted a sepia or another colour tone, the style and fit of clothes being worn by the subjects, the posture and poses of the individuals, and consider the photograph as a clue or artefact with which to view one moment in a historical timeline that has been captured for posterity.

CENTROPA, discussed previously in this publication by Dr. Lauren Granite, has an impressive online archive of photographs spanning the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the current era. For students of all levels, this is an immensely valuable visual trove complete with background information on each photograph. They can be effectively used to explore the richness and diversity of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Europe while the background information can be used to assist in answering student questions. An example of what can be found in CENTROPA’s online archive<sup>1</sup> is this photograph of a summer family trip to Lake Balaton, in Western Hungary. The photograph immediately raises numerous questions about the subjects and the depiction, many of which will be answered in the accompanying text of an interview CENTROPA staff conducted with Katarina Lofflerova, the owner of the photograph. (see image 1) Used with care and thoughtfulness, such photographs provide students with new understandings about the diversity of Jewish life in pre-Holocaust Europe.

Another visual source of Jewish life before the Holocaust can be found in the photographs that Jews carried with them in their luggage or personal possessions when they were deported to concentration and death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Today, a curated selection of these photographs are hauntingly displayed at the so-called Central Sauna building in Birkenau. These photographs represent some of the most treasured possessions and memories of Jews deported to the camp. (see image 2) They serve as a direct visual link to those murdered in the gas chambers of Birkenau.



Image 1. *Katarina Lofflerova on a summer family trip.*  
Courtesy of CENTROPA

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.european-jewry.org/>



Image 2. Canadian teachers viewing curated photograph exhibition at Central Sauna Birkenau. Holocaust Educators' Study Tour 2013. Photo credit: Michael Rajzman

Although not all learners will have the opportunity to view these photographs at the historic site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dr. Anne Weiss launched a website<sup>2</sup>, as a companion to her haunting book *The Last Album: Eyes From the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau*. This invaluable contribution to Holocaust education provides learners with access to the photographs of deported Jews,

reminding us of the diversity of life and the immensity of what was lost in the Holocaust. The website and book are ideal for educators as both offer a visual vista into the pre-war life of European Jewry, and the enormous human loss exacted by the perpetrators of the Holocaust, contextualized for learners and educators.

<sup>2</sup> <http://thelastalbum.org/content/>

## Ghetto Photographs

Photographs taken in Nazi created ghettos, can provide students with an important visual understanding of how Jews struggled to maintain their humanity in the inhumane conditions they suddenly found themselves in. Used in conjunction with historical information about the creation and functioning of the ghetto system, they offer learners another visual tool to approach the topic of life in the ghettos while honing their critical thinking and analytical skills.

Again, the gaze of ghetto photographs is crucial to any understanding of this topic. Some of the most iconic and familiar images to us were taken by the perpetrators themselves. As such, they must be contextualized as to their purpose, intent, and the role they may have played in the realm of Nazi propaganda. The perpetrators, not infrequently, staged photographs to send deliberate messages about how they treated the Jews, and at times to confirm prejudices and myths about European Jewry. This is critical for students to understand. They cannot always take the photographs at face value. They cannot always believe what they see.

One of the most useful collections of photographs<sup>3</sup> representing a perpetrator gaze was taken by German soldier Heinz Jost. Yad Vashem has developed an online teaching resource based upon the more than 150 photographs Jost took in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941.<sup>4</sup> It can be used to illustrate the harsh reality of life in the Warsaw Ghetto as well as the overall conditions. Jost's gaze is particularly haunting as he is not stationed in the ghetto, but enters the ghetto as a sort of "tourist" to witness daily life and record scenes and happenings with his camera. Although it may seem strange to use today to imagine a soldier choosing to enter a ghetto during his leisure time to photograph daily happenings, it was a fairly common occurrence among German officers. One might describe Jost's gaze as a type of grief or dark tourism, whereby an individual travels to a place of death and tragedy to see it for himself, and document the environment. However, the sense of compassion and desire to draw attention to injustices that is frequently associated with grief tourism does not appear to be Jost's intent. The photographs were carefully arranged and securely stored for many years. In their online description Yad Vashem notes that: "They were arranged by him, together with other photos of Warsaw and his army experiences, in a fine, leather-bound album that read, "*Das Warschauer Ghetto*.

*Ein Kulturdokument für Adolf Hitler*" (The Warsaw Ghetto. A cultural document for Adolf Hitler).<sup>5</sup> Such contextual information, which does not always accompany Internet resources, are crucial to understanding how and why this collection of photographs was taken, why it may have survived, and certainly provides valuable insight into the gaze of the photographer. Yad Vashem's accompanying educator resources makes this photographic collection an important and accessible tool for both students and educators.

Nazis and their collaborators were not the only photographers of ghetto life however. The *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils charged with administering the ghetto for the Germans) frequently employed Jewish photographers to capture daily life. In some cases, such as the Lodz Ghetto, photographers such as Mendel Grossman<sup>6</sup> and Henryk Ross<sup>7</sup> were charged with photographing the productivity and efficiency of the ghetto as a means of demonstrating its usefulness to the Germans. As official photographers they had access to most areas of the ghetto and so were able to capture the full spectrum of life in the ghetto. Lesser known individuals also photographed ghetto life and for this discussion I have chosen a photograph from the CENTROPA archive. (see image 3) Taken in 1941 in the Opole Ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland, the accompanying interview with Lilli Tauber, the photograph's owner, provide important contextual information as to the origins, fate, and meaning of these primary source documents. In her CENTROPA interview, Tauber notes: "My father inscribed things on some of the pictures and sent them to Vienna. In his letters to his relatives my father expressed both his thanks for all the parcels they sent to him and my mother, and his fear of an uncertain future."<sup>8</sup> Such details not only contextualize the photograph historically, but also the establishes the personal and familial connection. The people in the photographs are not positioned as family members and friends of the Taubers, creating an intimacy with the subject.

<sup>5</sup> ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/grossman.html>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.agolodzghetto.com/?\\_sp=217a892ac5c0776f.1472378802484](http://www.agolodzghetto.com/?_sp=217a892ac5c0776f.1472378802484)

<sup>8</sup> <https://european-jewry.squarespace.com/austria/#/mass-accommodation-in-opole-ghetto/>

<sup>3</sup> Other online collections can be found at <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007436> and [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album\\_auschwitz/](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw\\_ghetto/german\\_soldier.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto/german_soldier.asp)



Image 3 – Mass accommodation in Opole Ghetto. Courtesy CENTROPA.

In working with photographs of ghettos or any situational event, the context in which they were taken is invaluable. Resource sites such as CENTROPA and Yad Vashem enable learners not only to ask research questions, but provide an avenue for them to acquire the information they seek. Carefully deconstructed and contextualised, such photographs emphasise the human dimension to historical events, and help personalize history for learners.

## Liberation Photographs:

Liberation photographs can also challenge students to think not only about the joys of liberation, but also the harsh reality that often accompanied it. Photographs of ticker-tape parades, and civilians joyful at news that the war was finally over, can lead to an overly optimistic view of how Holocaust survivors experienced liberation. Similarly, photographs taken immediately upon liberation of the camps may overwhelm students causing them to disengage from the process of learning about the complexity of the Holocaust. Photographs of camp liberation scenes may also be quite graphic in their depictions. None of this however, is meant to detract from the value of these photographs for historical and education purposes.

Indeed, it was General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, who urged government officials in Washington and London to send newspaper editors to document and record what was being discovered in the concentration camps. As a result, there is a vast collection of photographs and archival film footage of the liberation of the camps which serve, in posterity, as a reminder to the crimes committed by the National Socialist regime. Such images may be too graphic for most classrooms. As recommended in the teaching guidelines of the USHMM: “Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the lesson objective. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students’ emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful to the victims themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Respect for the victims of the Holocaust, valuing our students and being mindful of their emotional and cognitive needs, and carefully choosing photographs to build critical thinking and analytical skills are the foundation on which using archival photographs is based. Layered with other primary and secondary sources, including the testimony of Holocaust survivors, photographs offer students an invaluable visual resource for learning. These visual images are a powerful tool for teaching the Holocaust and engaging students to continue learning, long after they have left the classroom.

Lauren Granite, Ph.D.

*Redefining Holocaust Education:  
Centropa as a Resource for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*



“Dr. Granite, Dr. Granite – the weirdest thing happened.” Sam, a student in my 10<sup>th</sup> grade Holocaust Honors class, had just returned from a week in Moscow on a student exchange program with another Jewish school. “How was your trip, Sam?” I asked. “You won’t believe it,” he said excitedly. “It was so weird. We were rushing to catch a shuttle bus to our connecting flight in the Frankfurt airport, and one of the airport workers in a uniform said to us, ‘*Schnell! Schnell!*’” Sam shuddered. “It was so creepy.” Even as I told Sam that *schnell* merely means “fast,” or “quickly,” in German, deep

down I registered dismay: for this bright, educated student, the German language did not belong to Hesse, Goethe, Kafka, or even Freud, but only to Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels. His primary frame of reference for Germany was the Nazis. True, he was currently studying the Holocaust, and, as an American, the films and documentaries he had seen on television and in movie theaters depict Germans almost exclusively as Nazis, so the connection was an obvious one for him. In addition, as a Jewish teen, Holocaust history had special resonance for him. At the same time, it seemed to me that if, in

2007, my students only identified Germany with Nazis we were not preparing them for the world in which they actually live. This was the beginning of my realization that 21<sup>st</sup> century students need something different than late 20<sup>th</sup> century students, in content, pedagogy, and form.

Successful 21<sup>st</sup> century education – as described by leaders in the field such as Alan November, Cathy Davidson, and Clayton M. Christenson<sup>1</sup> – must be student-directed, meaningful, and have real-world value for students. As Alan November puts it, students want to create legacies and they will be motivated to work harder if they shape those legacies through projects that not only mean something to them but have an impact on the world.<sup>2</sup> Assignments that only the teacher will see do not inspire and rarely motivate; those that make a difference or teach someone else do. Students have daily access to information and world events in ways unimaginable to prior generations, which means educators must respond by designing learning experiences where students can use this unprecedented access *as students*. November, Davidson, Christenson and others also tell us that the most effective learning today comes from projects involving critical thinking, complex tasks, team work, and collaboration – all characteristics of the professional world today's teens will work in as adults.

How does this apply to Holocaust education? If we teach history so that students are prepared to understand the world they live in, then we must teach them history in ways that are relevant to who they are and how they live. That means moving beyond the twelve years of Nazi rule to put the Holocaust in the context of the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century – because that is how students from now on will see it. For students born after 9/11, the Second World War did not take place a few decades ago, but in the middle of the last century. To the extent they encounter European politics in the media, they will only know Poland as a democracy – no longer Communist, much less an occupied country; the Berlin Wall as a broken up artefact; and the Soviet Union as something they hear about in “old” films from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The history of the Holocaust may not change, of course, but how we understand it and teach it will because what we teach needs to be relevant for our students and the society in which we live.

The most striking example of this in Holocaust education is that we are losing survivors who can tell their stories to students first-hand – in school assemblies, as classroom speakers, during visits to museums or education centers. Hearing what happened directly from those who lived it is the ultimate experience for students learning about the Holocaust because it personalizes the events for them. However, at some point, such presentations will no longer be possible and educators need to find a way to create similarly powerful learning opportunities for students in the absence of Holocaust survivors.

It just so happened that the summer before Sam told me about his “creepy” experience, I had gone on a professional development program in Europe sponsored by Centropa ([www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org)), a historical institute based in Vienna, Austria. Centropa interviewed over 1200 elderly Jews in 15 Central and Eastern European countries, the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, Turkey, and Greece. They did not use video or focus on the Holocaust. Rather, they said to their respondents: show us your old family photographs and tell us your *entire* life stories spanning the twentieth century. Centropa digitized the photographs, translated most of the interviews, and began making short, multimedia films about 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish life: how Jews fell in love, the sports they loved playing, the jobs they took as young adults, how they survived, and how they rebuilt their lives after the war. While it may seem counterintuitive that an organization that worked more with old family photographs than video would provide useful teaching resources for 21<sup>st</sup> century students, Centropa brought my thinking about teaching the Holocaust into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in several ways:

- a** Centropa expands Holocaust education to focus more on how Jews lived than how they died, pulling back the lens from the 1933 to 1945 to include the people, communities, oxford, and cultures that were lost, what survivors faced when the war was over, and how individuals and societies rebuilt themselves post-war;
- b** Centropa's web-based, open-sourced materials and short multimedia films encouraged me to create student-directed projects using technology my students loved and found engaging;
- c** Traveling with Centropa to Central Europe enabled me to update my students about how European countries have rebuilt their societies and, where relevant, dealt with their complicity in the Holocaust;
- d** Perhaps most exciting, Centropa's international teachers network connected me to European teachers with whom I could partner to create cross-cultural projects so my students could learn, for example, what it was like to be a Jewish teen in Berlin, Budapest, or Prague in 2007. In other words, Centropa gave me new ideas, resources, and tools for bringing my teaching of the Holocaust into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Teaching how Jews lived, not only how they died

Centropa's original goal was to preserve Jewish memory, the stories of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe that were slowly but surely disappearing as elderly Jews passed away and took their stories with them. From the very beginning, Edward Serotta, Centropa's director, insisted that we doubly rob those who were murdered of their lives if we only teach about how they died, and that students cannot truly understand what was lost in the Holocaust without learning about the people and culture that were eradicated. Most of the photographs Centropa collected from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century depict the wide diversity of Jewish life in interwar Europe: in villages, small towns, and large cities; in poor, middle class, and wealthy families; on vacation, at work, in the army, at school, and during family celebrations. Particularly useful for classroom activities, descriptions in the interviewees' own words accompany each of the 22,000 old family photographs on the website: where they were when the photo was taken, who was in the photograph and, often, what happened to them. Photographs of teens in youth groups, on sports teams, with families on vacation – students relate to these images because they have the exact same photographs on their smart phones and tablets. Portrait photographs taken in studios, or wedding photographs, or pictures taken in a work place convey someone's economic status – the images speak, particularly to a generation that communicates through images.

Students know what it is like to be resentful of a sibling, fall in love, struggle through a hard time, or lose someone they love. These are human experiences, and young people of all cultural backgrounds connect to them viscerally because they get to know each person as more than a victim. These are not just personal accounts of the horror, but – as with visits from survivors – personalized memories of their lives. Mitchell Bloomer, Holocaust Resource teacher at the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center in Maitland, Florida, summed up the experience of working with Centropa's films and interviews like this: "Centropa's approach speaks to the larger truth students must grasp – that the victims were human beings. To learn about the European Jews as victims only, without regard to the richness and complexity of their lives, dehumanizes them and their memory. This, of course, is antithetical to the goals of Holocaust education." While video testimonies of what happened in the ghettos, camps, and other sites of persecution and death are critical for Holocaust studies now and in the future, the question arises: what are we teaching students about Jews if that is the only thing they learn about them?

## Beyond the boxed curriculum: flexibility for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

Centropa has no fixed curriculum. Anyone can access their database of photographs and interviews which means that every teacher can create the lesson or project she needs for her particular course or use the website materials as a reliable source for student research. Educators use the resources in myriad ways to expand their students' understanding of pre-war Jewish life: for example, short lessons where students might bring in a family photograph and then find one in the Centropa database that looks the same (a family on a ski vacation, a child holding a favorite pet, a wedding photograph), read about that family, and create a poster comparing their lives to the life of the Centropa family. Others do more in-depth research projects – students find a survivor in the database, read the entire interview, view all of the family photographs, and either make a film or write a paper about him or her. Other teachers print out 10-20 photos from the database, hang them around the room with the descriptions under them (or not), and have students respond to a question by writing on the butcher paper under each photograph, followed by a class discussion. Teachers who do not have time to design their own lessons can search the website by topic for lessons and projects created and taught by Centropa teachers in North America, Europe, and Israel (<http://www.centropa.org/teaching-materials>). These lessons can be used as is, or adapted to fit a specific curriculum.

### Centropa's open-sourced format makes it easy to create interactive, engaging, student-directed assignments. Some of the most successful include:

- family history videos
- cross-cultural projects with European schools
- films about a historical event, "our town's Jewish history," or the experiences of a World War II veteran
- student-edited cookbooks to be shared with another school
- student-created museums
- researching a survivor in the database to present in various formats to the class.
- a multimedia Yom Hashoah commemoration for a school community

This kind of flexibility is critical for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom since teachers, striving to engage students of different backgrounds and capabilities, no longer teach from a "one size fits all" model.

## Jumping classroom walls: bringing the world to your students

If learning experiences are to compete with the rich life students have outside the classroom interacting with the world through Facebook and YouTube, Instagram and Google, students must engage with the world through new technologies *as students*, as well. Centropa helps teachers bring the world to their classrooms in three ways:

**Resources about 20<sup>th</sup> century life in Central and Eastern Europe:** Centropa's short, multimedia films about Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe bring the world into the classroom through maps, photographs, and the wide variety of languages in which the films are narrated (they have English subtitles): German, Serbian, Czech, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, Macedonian, and even a few in Ladino (the Spanish-Hebrew hybrid language of Sephardic Jews). Students learn from first-person narrators about 20<sup>th</sup> century European life and places they have never heard of, a world beyond their own, yet one where people not so different from themselves grew up, went through hell, and survived to tell about it.

**Personal encounters with history:** Teachers cannot teach something they do not know, which is why Centropa's summer academies – eight days in the great cities of Central and Eastern Europe where several dozen teachers from 15 countries learn together and design projects for the coming year – are an important resource for teachers who want to bring the world to their students. Unlike traditional Holocaust-related professional development programs (in ten years, Centropa has only brought teachers to Theresienstadt twice and Auschwitz-Birkenau once), Centropa wants teachers to return home with an enriched sense of Central and Eastern European life throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tours of the old Jewish neighborhoods of pre-war Berlin or Krakow consist of reading first-hand descriptions from Centropa interviewees of their family lives, stories of growing up in the neighborhood, and anecdotes about school. Teachers read these excerpts while standing on the streets and in front of the buildings where these experiences took place. They then bring those excerpts back to their classes and, using Googlemaps' street view, take their students on a virtual version of the very same tour.

Summer Academy participants also return home with a deeper understanding of European life in the past few decades because they meet with state and city officials, community leaders and ambassadors, as well as members of the Jewish community, including survivors. They work in international groups, getting to

know educators from Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, and elsewhere, learning how each country has dealt with the painful events of the Holocaust, and how schools in those countries teach the Holocaust today. Eating meals together, collaborating on lessons, touring, and going out together at the end of a long day, teachers learn a lot more about the impact of the Holocaust in Europe post-war, during Communism and post-Communism, than anything they might read in a magazine, newspaper, or journal.

**The global classroom:** Centropa's teachers create cross-cultural partnerships with schools in other countries – and their students get to know one another through emails, videos, and Skype calls, connecting directly with teens their age. Projects range from one-time interactions to ongoing explorations of a particular topic. Many students in Central and Eastern European schools make videos about their town's Jewish history – often in towns where there are no Jews left – then share them with North American students. For students who may never leave their city, county, province, or state, these are opportunities to experience the world often not otherwise available to them, the kind of projects that have value for students eager to understand themselves as part of a global world.

If we want to motivate students, our content and pedagogies must compete with the real world students interact with through their devices. Centropa's online materials, professional development opportunities, and international teachers' network offer teachers resources to help them do just that.

## Conclusion

Our understanding of history naturally shifts as time moves forward. The Holocaust will never be forgotten but how we teach it will change as society changes and we move further away from the traumatic events that defined previous generations. The question is: how can we keep the Holocaust relevant for our students? Teaching beyond the twelve years between 1933 and 1945 will become key to Holocaust education as we naturally begin to see the devastating events of those years in a larger context. As generations pass away, we will need resources such as Centropa to help us give our students a fuller picture of the Holocaust and its impact on 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century history.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Davidson, *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*, Penguin Books, 2011. Cathy Davidson, *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*, Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Alan November. TedexNYED Talk. 5 November 2011. Online video. Novemberlearning.com. Accessed June 28, 2015. <http://novemberlearning.com/educational-services/educational-consultants/alan-november/>

Dr. Carson Phillips, Ph.D. & Emily Amie Witty, Ed.D.

*Holocaust Questions From the Field:  
Real Questions Asked by Real Students*



Teaching the Holocaust requires not only encouraging critical thinking skills in our students as well as engaging them in a dynamic approach to historic events; it also involves clarifying myths, as well as anticipating and correcting misconceptions that frequently arise. Not infrequently, unsubstantiated rumours, uninformed opinions, and erroneous assumptions attempt to masquerade as historic fact. Teaching the Holocaust however, demands that we adhere to historical fact while contextualizing the events for our students. We have encountered some very

common misconceptions over our approximately 20 years of individual experience in teaching the Holocaust. As educators of diverse student populations encompassing urban and rural youth; public secular, religious, and students who attend separate-gender schools; as well as learners from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, we have assembled some of the most common myths and misconceptions, as well as answers to seemingly basic questions that seem to lead to students' misconceptions that continue to reverberate across student populations.

The thread that links each of these misconceptions together is that they are the result of misinformation or a lack of historical knowledge, and are unfortunately perpetuated by a methodology or an approach that seeks simplistic answers to what are complex historical questions. Our shared goal in this piece is to identify misconceptions that you may have heard about or even believe yourself, as well as to provide factually-based, historically-sound, succinct answers to correct these misconceptions. Each of these queries is valuable and including them does not imply that students should be discouraged from asking such questions. It is our shared pedagogical belief that in asking questions, student are part of the learning process and should be encouraged to engage in questioning. We also provide information on where to find additional information on each of the relevant issues. Although it is not exhaustive by any means, it will equip educators with appropriate tools with which to correct some of the most common misunderstandings that arise, and dispel erroneous myths. We have chosen the questions that kept cropping up in our teaching experiences. Presented in numerical order on the following pages, we hope this content assists in your teaching.



## Misconceptions, Myths, and Questions We Have Been Asked During Our Years of Teaching the Holocaust

### 1 Didn't Hitler have Jewish ancestors?

Asked by: Jason, public high school, Grade 10

Students have frequently asked us this question in one variation or another. Variations such as “Wasn’t Hitler part Jewish?” or “Is it true that Hitler had a Jewish grandparent?” invariably crop up. The reason for attempting to find a Jewish familial connection to Hitler, or to another Nazi perpetrator, is as baffling as it is problematic. Historian Doris Bergen has written extensively on how this fascination with Hitler’s genealogy is representative of the obsession with issues of blood and race that existed during the National Socialist era in Germany. Bergen notes, “In Nazi Germany, accusations of so-called Jewish blood were a sure way to discredit someone (31).” Exhaustive historical research has also revealed that there is no evidence that Hitler had any Jewish relatives. The myth originates perhaps because his paternal grandfather Alois was born to an unmarried woman who did not name the identity of the father of her child. The myth persists, perhaps because of a desire to link the perpetrators to their victims as if to find a way to blame the victims for their fate. Yet as Bergen aptly demonstrates in *War & Genocide*, this is a complete myth. She writes, “Those allegations were unfounded. In fact there were no Jews in the town where Hitler’s grandmother lived, because Jews were prohibited from living in that part of Austria at the time.”

If we invert the question for our students as in “Would it make any difference if Hitler had a Jewish ancestor?” or “Why are we curious about whether or not Hitler had a Jewish relative?” it may reveal more about us, and our attitudes, than it would ever reveal about why Hitler fervently promoted his anti-Jewish, exclusionary Nazi ideology.

**This is important to know and teach because:** In teaching and learning about the Holocaust, it is imperative that we avoid simplistic answers and encourage critical thinking skills and self-reflection. We need to avoid looking for “the” answer as to why Hitler was an antisemite who created a racial hierarchy and subsequently engaged in genocidal policies. We need to stop looking only for the answer and instead, wrestle more with the questions.

## 2 Why did Hitler hate Jews?

Asked by: Liam, public high school, Grade 8

This question, or a variation such as “What did the Jews do to cause Hitler to hate them so much?” is frequently linked to the previous question. It erroneously, and dangerously, infers that Jews were somehow responsible for causing the Holocaust to occur. This is the “blame the victim” mentality and must be avoided when teaching the Holocaust. In approaching this question it must be clearly understood that Nazism embraced a racial ideology and saw the world in terms of a racial struggle, of which the so-called *Aryan* race was to master. Combined with long-standing prejudices, historical and ecclesiastical antisemitism, a fertile environment was created that allowed National Socialism to disseminate its racial hatred. These factors are essential for understanding how Nazism not only imagined other people, but also why they purposely chose to discriminate, persecute, and eventually murder Jews.

Some students may have heard the compelling, though erroneous story, that Hitler was upset because a Jewish doctor treated his ill mother and she subsequently died. This supposedly fuelled his antisemitism and caused him to hate Jews. In reality, Hitler’s mother suffered from advanced breast cancer, and was treated with care and compassion.

**This is important to know and teach because:** Many have sought to pinpoint Hitler’s hatred to a specific event or moment in history. Hitler’s racist and antisemitic belief in a superior *Aryan* race was the foundation for his pursuit of National Socialism. It may sound strange to us today, but the Nazis viewed the Jews not as a religious group, but as an inferior “race” that should be annihilated. After taking power, the Nazis introduced their pseudo-science in schools all over Germany and soon this dangerous pseudo-science permeated society. Judaism is the religion of a people and nation. Jews share a history, cultural, linguistic, religious and philosophic values grounded in the *Torah*, the Jewish Bible, and Jewish tradition. It is possible to convert to Judaism, and therefore to become a Jew; a member of the Jewish people. A race may be defined as group of people who are considered distinct from other groups because of supposed physical or genetic traits.

We need to think about myths and misconceptions that our students have about Jews. We dare not separate Holocaust education from a conversation about what it means to be a living Jew. Too often, the Holocaust centers around how Jews were murdered. We must teach about how Jews lived, as well. (See Emily Witty’s article, *Teaching the Holocaust as a Jewish Event* in section two of this publication)

## 3 Why didn’t Jews fight back?

Asked by: Raize, private Jewish school, Grade 6

Students of the Holocaust must understand that in the context of Jewish history, persecution was nothing new. When Hitler came to power, the Jews believed that this was a temporary situation. All the oppressors of the Jewish people from the past had been defeated while the Jewish people continued to survive and thrive. As the Jews of Germany understood Hitler’s rise to power within the context of Jewish history, Pharaoh of Egypt was no more, Titus of Rome was no more, and Torquemada of Spain was no more. So, too, Jews felt that Hitler and his antisemitic ranting would be but a passing phase. However, once the Jews realized that Hitler and his Nazi party were here to stay, Jews did fight back. For example: When religious slaughter (Hebrew) *shechitah* was banned on April 21, 1933, the Jewish community in Germany responded by importing meat or buying it from other countries. In some cases, when meat became too expensive to buy, Jews performed kosher *shechitah* in secret or switched to a meat-free diet.

As historian and international museum curator, Yitzhak Mais writes, “Jews were not passive victims, but active agents who responded with a surprisingly wide range of resourceful actions” (Mais, 2007, p. 20) during all four stages of Nazi persecution. Historian Werner Rings (1982, pp.154, 162, 172, 189) explains, Jews fought back symbolically, polemically, offensively, and defensively. Once Hitler had invaded Poland in 1939 and Jews had begun to be imprisoned in ghettos, labour camps, and death camps, Jews created art and kept their religion symbolically fighting the Nazis. They resisted polemically by documenting the events that were happening and creating underground newspapers and telling the truth. Jews fought back offensively with the few weapons they were able to secure, including weapons that allowed them to fight back during what became known as The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Jews resisted defensively by helping one another and establishing soup kitchens and schools in the ghettos to keep their community alive. Even in the death camps, there are recorded events of resistance.

**This is important to know and teach because:** People mistakenly define “fighting back” as only using weapons. In the complexity of teaching the Holocaust, we must teach the multiple ways of defining “resistance and fighting back.” Fighting back did not only mean killing the enemy, it meant maintaining dignity, adhering to your cultural and religious beliefs and practices and in the death camps, holding onto your humanity. Mais (2007) includes the following piece about Rabbi Oshry, a Holocaust survivor. [He] “paid tribute to both physical and spiritual expressions of resistance to the German occupation. Recalling this period in his life, he said: “One resists with a gun, another with his soul.”(p.25)

#### 4 Didn't Hitler murder other people and not just Jews?

Asked by: Molly, private Jewish school, Grade 12

Nationalism Socialism and its followers persecuted many individuals and groups based on what they determined, or perceived, were social, political or ideological differences. Among the groups who were victims of Nazi persecution were Jehovah's Witnesses homosexuals, Soviet prisoners of war, political dissidents, Roma and Sinti, Poles and Slavic peoples, and those with mental and physical disabilities. Although there is no hierarchy of suffering, it is important to understand that different groups were targeted for different reasons, were treated differently, faced different consequences, and suffered different fates.

Initially, Jews were singled-out and isolated wherever they lived; wherever the German sphere of influence encountered them. Marginalised from society, robbed of their homes and livelihoods, forced into ghettos and deported to killing centres and concentration camps or rounded up and killed in mass shootings by mobile killing squads, this coordinated attempt to murder the Jewish people is known as the Holocaust, or *Shoah* in Hebrew. Also singled out for persecution and genocide on so-called racial grounds were the Roma and Sinti peoples who lived in Europe for over 1,000 years. The genocide of the Roma took place simultaneously with the Holocaust. Roma and Sinti were also murdered in death camps, and died of starvation and disease in forced labour and concentration camps. Many more were deported and exploited as forced labour on farms, construction sites and in industry. The genocide of the Roma and Sinti is also referred to as the *Porajamos* or *Samudaripen*. Precise vocabulary assists us in understanding not only the complex nature of the Holocaust, but also how other groups were treated.

**This is important to know and teach because:** We must be certain that our students, tomorrow's teachers and leaders understand that the goal of Nazism was to destroy and eradicate Jews from the entire world, wherever they lived. Museum to the Extinct Race” in the Jewish Quarter of Prague when the Second World War was over. To this end, the Germans issued orders to catalogue thousands of religious and cultural items that were confiscated from Jews in the Czech lands. A vast collection survived and today is housed at the Jewish Museum of Prague. We must also underscore that the pre-Holocaust Jewish communities were well-integrated into their European environments. Jews spoke the language(s) of their country, often served in the military of their country, and many saw themselves as patriots. They did not pose any threat to the Germans or other countries, nor did they possess the power, land, or social or political influence that antisemitic propaganda thrust upon the general public.

#### 5 Why do we still study the Holocaust?

Asked by: Jayla, public school, Grade 10

The Holocaust was a defining moment in the history of the world and for humanity. It raises not only historical questions but moral, ethical, spiritual, religious, and philosophical issues, as well as matters of national and personal identity. Some historians and philosophers have referred to the Holocaust as a rupture with modernity that challenged the very core of civilisation and the Enlightenment values such as tolerance, pluralism, autonomy, and respect for individual and human rights. Others have described it as the annulment of the Emancipation of the Jews of Europe when Jews were given full rights of citizenship and discriminatory laws against them were dismantled in the nineteenth century.

Also, there is the enormous humanitarian toll that resulted from the Holocaust and the Second World War. Historian Doris Bergen (2016, p.304) notes, “An estimated 10 million refugees poured into western zone of occupied Germany alone, those parts controlled by the United States, Britain and France.” This humanitarian crisis more than 150,000 Jews living in Displaced Persons camps in the U.S. occupation zones. For many of these individuals, and those who were murdered in the Holocaust, no measure of justice could atone for all that was lost, including six million Jews. There is no redemptive message in the Holocaust, but we can honour the memory of the victims, learn *about* and *from* the Holocaust in the quest to build a fair and just civil society.

Unfortunately, genocides have occurred since the Holocaust and it continues to challenge, and frustrate, international bodies such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court in the Hague, the Netherlands. Each case of genocide has its own set of defining characteristics and deserves to be studied. Institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance have committees that work specifically with issues of genocide and other acts of mass violence. One of their aims is to be able to identify warning signs of mass violence or genocide and work towards identifying ways in which genocide can be prevented.

The Holocaust remains one of the most documented cases of crimes against humanity that the world has ever seen. We are not suggesting that there is a hierarchy of victims, or that one group's pain is greater than another. The Holocaust can however, serve as a prism where other learners may see aspects of their own experiences reflected, or feel comfortable exploring their own familial backgrounds. Scholars continue to discover new information and new generations learn about the worst and the best of humanity through the historical lens of studying the Holocaust. As a cautionary note however, we must be careful that we do not use the Holocaust to justify our own agendas or to explain our own histories. Before we extrapolate and learn *from* the Holocaust, we must learn *about* it.

**This is important to know and teach because:** Due to the vast amount of primary sources, secondary sources and educational resources available, the Holocaust can often be an accessible topic for students of diverse backgrounds and varying educational levels. A complex topic, worthy of study on its own merit, the Holocaust may also better prepare students to enter into a course of study of comparative genocide, or to further explore an interdisciplinary approach to studying the Holocaust. Other students may find encouragement in the resilience often displayed in survivor narratives, and other students may have the opportunity to learn more about their familial history through the study of the Holocaust. As one of the defining events in the history of the world and the history of humanity, the commitment to educate about the Holocaust is well summarised in the final point of the Stockholm Declaration: Our commitment must be to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.

## 6 Weren't many Jews saved during Holocaust?

Asked by: Stephanie, private school, Grade 10

Throughout the Second World War and the Holocaust, there were many brave individuals who actively sought to provide aid and provide shelter to Jews who were being persecuted. In 2014, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust authority in Israel, documented just over 25,000 such individuals who at great risk to their own safety, aided Jews. Yad Vashem gave these brave men and women the title of Righteous Among the Nations. The courageous individuals demonstrated enormous courage in the face of adversity and forever remain a shining example of the very best of humanity. However, when teaching about this vital component of the Holocaust, it is important to keep it in perspective.

**This is important to know and teach because:** At the end of the Second World War, two out of every three Jews (approximately six million men, women and children) had been murdered in the Holocaust. If more people had demonstrated the moral leadership as the Righteous Among the Nations, it is possible that countless more Jews could have been saved.

## 7 How could the Germans be expected to help if they didn't know what was happening to the Jews?

Asked by: Taylor, private school, Grade 9

Germany had an active propaganda machine that constantly worked to mold public opinion in favour of the National Socialist regime. Most ordinary Germans would have been aware of events that were taking place in their country. Beginning with the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation that began when the Nazis came to power in 1933, to the establishment of concentration camps, to the November 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom known as "the Night of Shattered Glass" or *Kristallnacht*; all these events were widely reported in newspapers throughout Germany. People were aware of what was happening in the country.

However, if we probe deeper into history and ask questions about how people responded, then we might ascertain that people did not know, because they either did not care to know or they were passive and did not ask questions about what was happening around them. Questions such as, "How did people react

when they saw their Jewish neighbours being rounded up and taken away?,” “Did people ask where their Jewish neighbours were going?,” “What was going on in the concentration camps and prison camps in Germany?,” or “Why were the violent and destructive actions that took place on *Kristallnacht* permitted?” will contextualise the history for students. They may discover that some Germans were seduced by the National Socialist vision for the country, accepted and went along with the changes taking place thereby supporting the regime. They might also discover that some Germans were afraid that they would become targets for Nazi persecution and therefore remained silent and some might have been de-sensitised to what was happening by the continual and slow changes taking place in society around them.

Only one exception is known. In 1943, German women protested the arrest and deportation of their Jewish husbands and male offspring. The Nuremberg Racial Laws of 1935 made marriage between Jews and non-Jews illegal. German spouses often endured enormous social and familial pressure to divorce their Jewish spouses. Marriage to a non-Jewish German offered the Jewish spouse a measure of protection. However, in 1943 the Nazis rounded-up approximately 2,000 Jewish spouses and male children and incarcerated them at a holding centre at Rosenstraße 2-4 in Berlin. This action was met with non-violent, resolve and nearly 200 German wives protested outside the holding centre. Never before had there been a protest in wartime Nazi Germany, on behalf of Jews being deported. The women took enormous risks, not knowing what the response to their protest would be. In the end, the men were released and no harm befell the women for protesting.

This became known as the Rosenstraße Protest, and stands out as a significant and effective protest against the events of the Holocaust. Some scholars have posited that because the protesters were women, that German soldiers would have been extremely reluctant to treat them harshly. There is perhaps no way of knowing, except for the factual information that these German women successfully protested and won the release of their Jewish spouses. What ordinary Germans might not have known, was the extent of the industrialised killing taking place in countries occupied by Germany. However, there were numerous concentration camps located in Germany and Austria including Saschsenhausen, Ravensbrück, Dachau, Flossenburg, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, Neuengamme, Mauthausen and numerous sub-camps. There were also six killing sites established in Germany and Austria for the so-called Nazi euthanasia or T4 program. (See the article by Martin Hagmayr , *Teaching About the T4 Program* at the beginning of this section.) Ordinary people worked in these facilities, while others lived nearby them, socialised with people working in them or heard about what was happening at these sites.

**This is important to know and teach because:** The Holocaust is a complex event in history and there are no easy or simple answers to questions surrounding it. Historian Christopher Browning (1992) studied the behaviour, reactions and responses to men who participated in the Einsatzgruppen mobile killing squads. His research on battalion 101 revealed that most men were willing participants, who did not opt of their mission even when presented with the opportunity to do so. Those who did, were not subject to punishment or retaliatory actions. Browning notes that the unit’s commander offered his men the choice of opting out of this duty — the murder of Jewish men, women and children by shooting — if they found it too emotionally taxing. Almost all of the men chose not to exercise that option and to carry out their mission. In all, Browning notes that fewer than 12 men chose to leave their battalion, out of a cadre of 500 men. These men shot and killed thousands of Jewish men, women and children as per their orders. These are the type of complex historical situations that need to be addressed with students. In doing so, they can understand that the average German, Nazi and Nazi collaborator each faced choices and moral decisions. Those who opted out of killing, did not experience any negative consequences. Similar examples can be found in the Nazi T-4 euthanasia program. (See article by Martin Hagmayr for additional information).

Coming to terms with the historical past means confronting unpleasant parts of history. However, these places of discomfort come important opportunities for learning and personal growth. A person is not guilty or to be blamed for the actions of their ancestors or previous generations, but we all share a responsibility in coming to terms with past events and ensuring that they do not happen again. We share a responsibility to learn *about* and *from* past historical events.

## 8 Didn’t the Germans make soap from the bodies of Jews in the concentration camps?

Asked by: Kyle, private school, Grade 8

The soap myth is one of the most persistent, yet there is no evidence that this occurred. Leading researchers such as Dr. Michael Berenbaum have investigated this claim, and it appears to be a cruel myth.

**This is important to know and teach because:** Accuracy and adherence to historical fact must underpin Holocaust education. There are numerous documented examples of Nazi cruelty, torture, and medical experimentation at the sites of the former concentration camps and Holocaust museums. Unfortunately,

## 9 Is it true that Norwegians wore paper clips on their lapels to show their support for Jews in their country?

Asked by: Alessio, Catholic school, Grade 9

During the German occupation of Norway, the paperclip was worn by many Norwegians as a form of non-violent opposition to the Nazis and to demonstrate support for King Haakon VII. It was not, however, connected to support for Norwegian Jewry. Norway's Jewish community numbered around 1,700 individuals at the time of the Holocaust. Approximately 760 of these were deported, many to Auschwitz-Birkenau where they perished. Others escaped to neutral Sweden where they survived, but the Quisling government administering Norway, collaborated with Nazi Germany. This is critical to teach the students because of the popularity of the *Paper Clips* program.

Another variation of this claims that King Christian X of Denmark wore the yellow, Jewish Star on his outer clothing to protest German orders that Danish Jews must wear such badges. This is a popular legend, but it is not true. King Christian and many Danes did support their Jewish neighbours and fellow citizens. However, nearly all Danish Jews who survived the Holocaust did so by being ferried on an armada of small fishing boats to neutral Sweden.

**This is important to know and teach because:** Many educators use the text, *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark* without placing it in its historical context. As stated in the teaching guidelines of the USHMM Accuracy of fact, together with a balanced perspective on the history, must be a priority.

## 10 Isn't the Holocaust really an example of bullying in the extreme?

Asked by: Tiffany, public school, Grade 8

Variations of this exist as in "Hitler was the biggest bully of all time" or "Left unchecked, bullying leads to the Holocaust." Such claims are dangerously erroneous as they contribute to trivialisation of the Holocaust. To deconstruct this myth, review the definition of the Holocaust. Although various museums and education centres have minor variations in the definition they use, all agree that definition includes the the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six-million Jews by Nazi Germany and their collaborators. As harmful as bullying is, it is not helpful to liken it to the Holocaust. Simply put, the Holocaust was **not** a severe form of bullying. The Holocaust was a systematic attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. Equating these two issues contributes to trivialisation of a complex, historical event. This is a viewpoint shared by many leading educators and Holocaust education institutions, and is covered by Dr. Michael Gray in his book *Contemporary Debates in Holocaust* (2014).

**This is important to know and teach because:** Although literature on bullying uses the same language of "bystander", "victim", and perpetrator/bully, these terms do not have the same meaning when discussing playground bullying and the Holocaust. Educators must be proactive and discuss these misconceptions with their students.

## 11 How could one man, Adolf Hitler murder six million Jews?

Asked by: Jamal, public school, Grade 11

Adolf Hitler was the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (in German, *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*), the Nazi party. He was not the only Nazi who murdered Jews. He was the mastermind. It took a great number of people to achieve Hitler's and Nazism's goals of re-ordering German society and eliminating elements deemed "undesirable." National Socialism built a personality cult around Hitler, and he ruled Germany in an autocratic manner. Central to this was the *Führerprinzip* (leader

principle), which demanded absolute obedience from everyone, to the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. By utilising a highly developed network of people and organisations, and establishing a personality cult around himself, Hitler ensured that his will was carried out.

Adolf Hitler used his antisemitic platform to indoctrinate his people. In 1936, the *Hitlerjugend (HJ)* or Hitler Youth was established and every boy or girl between the ages of ten and eighteen often faced great social pressure to join. Members were organized into two age groups: ages 10-14 and 14-18 and divided into military units. The purpose of the *HJ* was to shape the young generation into obedient Nazis and make sure the boys would be fit soldiers when they became old enough. Children and adolescents in *HJ* camps learned to use weapons, built up their physical strength, learned war strategies, and were taught to believe antisemitic and hateful things about Jews. Members of the Hitler Youth wore military-like uniforms. Being part of the *HJ* gave members a sense of pride, strength, belonging, and importance. It also positioned its members to be the future leaders of the National Socialist movement.

The girls belonged to the *Bund deutscher Mädel (BdM)* or League of German Girls and were taught to be the ideal Nazi woman—obedient, self-sacrificing, dutiful, and physically fit. They were also trained to hate Jews and become mothers of superior German or *Aryan* children.

Frequently, *HJ* and *BdM* programs and activities replaced their formal education in school and HJ members obeyed their leader instead of their parents. In some cases, this caused great tension and strife between parents and children, destroying family relationships. Baldur von Schirach, the head of the Hitler Youth, told children that their first loyalty was to Hitler and the Nazi state and not to their families.

Starting with the youth, National Socialism sought to re-define German society and mold it into its own self-serving interests. Professions such as teaching, medicine and legal professionals each had their own National Socialist leagues that supported the Nazi regime and further disseminated Nazi ideology. National Socialism permeated all areas of German society and enabled hundreds of thousands of men and women to carry out the Holocaust.

**This is important to know and teach because:** Students must not be misled into thinking that the Holocaust was the result of the actions of one man, Adolf Hitler. They must understand the Nazi hierarchy and bureaucracy that enabled the Holocaust to occur. They must realize that there were people, Germans and collaborators from other countries — who made each step of the Holocaust possible. Germans

boycotted Jewish-owned businesses during the one-day boycott on April 1, 1933, just three months after Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933. Germans and collaborators from other countries informed on their Jewish neighbours to the local Nazi authorities. Germans and collaborators from other countries willingly took part in the murder of innocent Jewish men, women, and children.

## 12 How can we blame the Nazis and their collaborators when Hitler invaded their countries too. I mean, if they hadn't done what Hitler said, they and their families would have been killed, too.

Asked by: Madison, Catholic school, Grade 9

It is vitally important to understand that how the Nazis treated people varied according to the time period, the place, and the circumstances. German nationals, and western Europeans were treated differently from eastern Europeans and Slavs. Generally, in western Europe, they treated the local populations with milder policies. This is partially due to the racial pseudo-science that Nazism promoted. They considered countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Nordic countries as related to them according to their so-called Aryan ideology. In contrast, the Nazi's treatment of Slavic nations was particularly harsh as they considered them to be of inferior ethnicity. The Nazis enacted a policy of "collective punishment" in Poland and the Czech lands in retaliation for those who resisted. Yet in Denmark, where many ordinary Danes worked to ferry Danish Jews to neutral Sweden thereby avoiding deportation, there were no repercussions. Similarly, German military officers and medical personnel who refused to carry orders were assigned to other units. Like most topics related to the Holocaust, there are no simple answers. Rather, a complex set of circumstances existed which individuals navigated according to their own moral compasses, their own set of particular circumstances, and their belief systems.

Despite such treatment, resistance movements (Jewish and non-Jewish partisans) arose in Nazi-occupied countries. Most were ill-equipped to directly take on the powerful German military, so they engaged in acts of sabotage and subterfuge in order to resist. Some ordinary citizens provided shelter and aid to Jews, and some including Bishop von Galen of Münster, Germany protested the so-called "euthanasia" program. Studying the Nazi-occupation of Europe leads to the discovery of a wide range of responses.

**This is important to know and teach:** Studying the Holocaust is not about assigning blame to generations of individuals born after the events we are discussing. It is however, coming to terms with the historical and taking responsibility, learning from the past to build a better future for everyone, and understanding that genocide is not inevitable. Learning about the Holocaust also leads us to consider how various branches of government, social service, military and other departments work; how decisions are made, how people are informed, and the decision making process. Doctors, nurses and support staff volunteered to work in the Nazi so-called euthanasia program. Police officers and military personnel signed up to be part of the Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing squads that swept across the Baltic states, the Balkans and parts of Eastern Europe eradicating the Jewish population in their wake. Individual choices carried responsibility, and learning about the Holocaust helps learners to understand the complex nature of history and how we are all responsible for our own actions.

**Concluding Thoughts on Answering Difficult Questions:** Stories, myths, and misconceptions arise around many events—historical, social, even personal happenings in our daily lives. The Holocaust however, was an unprecedented event in human history that had and continues to have ramifications across the globe and across generations. It continues to challenge the values and freedoms that define humanity and civilisation. Similarly, although the Holocaust holds a particular significance and meaning for the Jewish people, it also holds universal meaning for humankind. Like the signatories of the Stockholm Declaration, we too share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions. We are guided by honouring the memory of those murdered in the Holocaust—as well as those who survived—and committed to ensuring that sound, historically accurate information underpin Holocaust education. It is our sincerest hope that you will continue to be committed to this sacred work of teaching the Holocaust and that you will be guided by solid pedagogical principles: the principle of teaching the history accurately; the principle of researching the answers to questions your students might ask, and perhaps most importantly, the principle of seeking assistance and support in your own learning from scholars and master educators, and using research-based methodologies to help your students learn *about* and ultimately, *from* the Holocaust.

<sup>[1]</sup> For further information, please see the guidelines for teaching the Holocaust as developed by the USHMM. They are included as an appendix.

<https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>

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- [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)
- [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)

## APPENDIX 1



### **Stockholm Declaration**

<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration>

### **USHMM Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust**

<http://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>

### **IHRA Guidelines for teaching the Holocaust in schools**

<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/educate/teaching-guidelines/how-to-teach-about-holocaust-in-schools>

### **International Tracing Service**

International Tracing Service

### **Yad Vashem**

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/school/pedagogical\\_philosophy.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/school/pedagogical_philosophy.asp)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Andrews, Kay**  
Educator-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2011

Kay Andrews is one of the leading Holocaust educators in the United Kingdom. A former high school teacher, Ms. Andrews joined the Holocaust Educational Trust in 1999, becoming Head of Education in 2005. She is recognized for her work in professional development for teachers. She has spoken internationally and is a trustee of the Holocaust Education Centre, UK. She served as a UK delegate to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance from 2005- 2014 and coordinated the national outreach program of the Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP), at the world-renowned Institute of Education, University of London. She recently served as pedagogical consultant to the USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education in Los Angeles, contributing to the *Auschwitz: The Past is Present*, program.



**Bergen, Doris L.**  
Scholar-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2014

Doris L. Bergen is the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on issues of religion, gender, and ethnicity in the Holocaust and the Second World War and comparatively in other cases of extreme violence. She is the author or editor of five books, including *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* and *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*. Professor Bergen is a member of the Academic Advisory Committee of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.



**Granite, Lauren**  
Educator-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2015

Lauren Granite, is the US Education Director for Centropa, a Jewish historical institute dedicated to preserving 20th century Jewish family stories from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Before joining the Centropa staff, Dr. Granite taught Jewish history in colleges, a Jewish day school and congregational schools. As a teacher, Lauren created Centropa's first cross-cultural projects with schools in Berlin and Budapest. Since 2010, she has been building Centropa's network of Jewish, public, parochial and charter schools; running workshops and seminars; mentoring teachers; writing lessons and projects; and establishing teacher advisory teams to advise Centropa about curricula. Lauren lives in Silver Spring, MD, in the United States.



**Hagmayr, Martin**  
Educator-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2014

Martin Hagmayr holds a MA in History from the University of Vienna and is a graduate of the University College of Education Upper Austria. The recipient of several scholarships, he has studied at the University of Basel (Switzerland), Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany) as well as Yad Vashem and Beit Lohamei (Israel). In 2004 he completed Holocaust Memorial Service at the Hadamar Memorial Centre for the victims of the Nazi euthanasia in Germany. He has published numerous articles in German-language journals. He works with the pedagogical department of Memorial Site Hartheim Castle as well as Museum Arbeitswelt in Austria.



**Phillips, Carson**  
Managing Director,  
Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre

Carson Phillips is the Managing Director of the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre in Toronto, Canada. He served as a Canadian delegate to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance from 2009-2013 and is the recipient of numerous scholarly awards, including the 2013 BMW Canada Award for Excellence from the Canadian Centre for German and European Studies, York University. Dr. Phillips has presented and published his research in Austria, Canada, Germany and the United States. An editorial board member of *PRISM—An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, he is a sought-after speaker for formal and non-formal educational settings on new developments and best practices in Holocaust education and pedagogy.



**Polak, Karen**  
Educator-in-Residence  
Holocaust Education Week 2012

Karen Polak is a historian and educator. She has worked for over 20 years at the Anne Frank House. Currently she coordinates a project supported by the European Commission to develop an online learning tool on antisemitism and other forms of discrimination in seven European countries (see: [www.storiesthatmove.org](http://www.storiesthatmove.org)). She is a member of the Dutch delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and chairs the IHRA Committee on the Genocide of the Roma. In 2012 she was the Educator-in-Residence during Holocaust Education Week in Toronto, November 2012.



**Shawn, Karen**

Scholar-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2009

Karen Shawn, Ph.D., is a visiting associate professor of Jewish education at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration of Yeshiva University, and the editor of *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*. The founder of the *Holocaust Educators' Consortium*, an international, interreligious community of practice, Dr. Shawn has written extensively on Holocaust education. She is the author of the widely-used text *The End of Innocence: Anne Frank and the Holocaust* (1992) and co-editor of an anthology of Holocaust narratives and an accompanying teacher's guide titled *The Call of Memory: Learning about the Holocaust through Narrative* (2008). A recipient of the Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education (2000), her most recent essay, co-authored with Agnieszka Kania, will be published in the spring 2017 issue of *PRISM*: "What We Never Knew, What We Learned, and How: Polish Students Reflect on Their Introduction to the Holocaust."



**van Pelt, Robert Jan**

Scholar-in-Residence,  
Holocaust Education Week 2012

Robert Jan van Pelt is a University Professor at the School of Architecture, University of Waterloo, Canada. He is acknowledged as a leading world expert on the former Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. His books have focused on the history of architecture, Auschwitz, the Holocaust, and Holocaust denial. His most recent books include a fully annotated edition of David Koker's wartime diary, published as *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Concentration Camp Diary, 1943-1944* (Northwestern University Press, 2012). Van Pelt's forensic work on the crematoria of Auschwitz is represented in the recent movie "Denial" (2016) and was represented in "The Evidence Room," an exhibition at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale made by faculty and students of the University of Waterloo School of Architecture.



**Witty, Emily Amie**

Educator-in-Residence, Regional Communities,  
Holocaust Education Week 2010

Emily Amie Witty, Ed.D. is an assistant professor of education at the Touro Graduate School of Education in New York City. She has been an international presenter on the topic of Holocaust education and has been published in *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* (Azrieli Graduate School, 2009-2012). She is a contributing author to *The Call of Memory: Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative* (Ben-Yehuda Press, 2008). Dr. Witty is also the co-author of the *Educator's Guide, Volume I: Years Wherein We Have Seen Evil: Selected Aspects in the History of Religious Jewry During the Holocaust: Germany (Yad Vashem, 2003)*. She was the recipient of the 2008 Chai Award from the UIA Federations of Canada for Holocaust education in the Regional Jewish Communities of Ontario.



Sarah and Chaim Neuberger  
Holocaust Education Centre

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