

## Lesson 14

To deepen your understanding of the ideas in this lesson, read Chapter Seven in Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

### The Holocaust

#### **WHY** teach this material?

##### Rationale

The purpose of this lesson, and the following one, is to give students an awareness of the enormity of the crimes committed during the Nazi Holocaust and to help them grasp the fact that thousands of ordinary people—teenagers, fathers, daughters, brothers, etc.—participated in perpetrating these crimes, while thousands more stood by and quietly witnessed the suffering and death of millions of innocent people. The next lesson focuses on the role of bystanders, as well as acts of resistance and courage during the Holocaust. The material in these two lessons reminds students of the importance of living in a democracy whose institutions safeguard civil and human rights and whose citizens are capable of making informed judgments, not only on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of a larger community.

##### LEARNING GOALS

The purpose of this lesson is to help students:

- Reflect on these **guiding questions**:
  - *What was the Holocaust? What is genocide?*
  - *What steps led up to the Holocaust?*
  - *How can we explain why ordinary people participated in the mass murder of millions of children, women, and men?*
- Practice these **interdisciplinary skills**:
  - *Recording ideas from a lecture*
  - *Interpreting and writing poetry*
  - *Grasping the ethical dimensions of historical events*
  - *Using prior knowledge to help understand new information*
  - *Communicating ideas in writing*
  - *Participating in a class discussion*
- Deepen understanding of these **key terms**:
  - *Holocaust*
  - *Genocide*
  - *Final Solution*
  - *Bystander*
  - *Perpetrator*
  - *Victim*
  - *Upstander*
  - *Emigration*
  - *Ghetto*
  - *Deportation*
  - *Bureaucracy*

- *Mass murder/extermination*
- *Concentration camp*
- *Auschwitz*

(See the main glossary in the unit’s “Introduction” for definitions of these key terms.)

## **WHAT** is this lesson about?

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In this lesson, students learn about the steps taken by Germans and others that resulted in the murder of one-third of all of the Jews in the world, in addition to nearly five million members of other groups deemed unfit or dangerous by the Nazis, including Gypsies,<sup>\*</sup> homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others. People have given this crime various names. Winston Churchill referred to it as “a crime without a name.”<sup>1</sup> In the United States, it is referred to as the Holocaust, a word people have been using since ancient times. Historian Paul Bookbinder explains that the word holocaust means “complete destruction by burning.”<sup>2</sup> The name Holocaust calls attention to the use of crematoria to burn the bodies of millions of victims of the Nazis’ gas chambers, and also symbolizes the Nazis’ goal to completely destroy an entire group of people, the Jews, solely because of their ancestry. Today, this crime is referred to as genocide—a word coined by Raphael Lemkin, himself a Polish Jew who fled the Nazis. Responding to his outrage over the Holocaust, as well as the mass murder of Armenians during World War I, Lemkin believed that the international legal community needed a word that described “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.”<sup>3</sup> He thought that perhaps the world would be better at preventing and stopping the mass murder of innocent people if this crime had a name.

In January 1942, before Lemkin coined the word “genocide,” 15 top leaders of the Nazi Party met in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. At this conference, they created their own name for their plan to annihilate the Jewish community of Europe, calling it the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” The purpose of this meeting was to design a systematic way to rid Europe of 11 million European Jews. Due to the official nature of this conference, notes were taken and distributed to those who did not attend. From these notes, we learn of the Nazis’ plan to use and dispose of Jews as they saw fit. For example, the notes read, “Under proper guidance, in the course of the Final Solution the Jews are to be allocated for appropriate labor . . . in the course of which action doubtless a large portion will be eliminated by natural causes.” The notes also address how Jews will be identified, explaining “In the course of the Final Solution plans, the Nuremberg Laws should provide a certain foundation.”<sup>4</sup>

\* At the time of the Holocaust, Germans and other Europeans used the name “Gypsies” when referring to an ethnic group of people whose origins can be traced to South Asia. (The name actually stems from the word *Egyptian* because Europeans originally believed that they came from Egypt.) Over time, the label “Gypsy” was placed on any nomadic group with similar physical appearance (i.e., darker skin and hair), lifestyle, and customs. Most of the individuals labeled as Gypsies are actually members of the Romani or Sinti community. Recently, in recognition of the inaccurate and derogatory qualities of the label “Gypsy,” the international community has adopted the more respectful Roma, Romani, or Sinti. However, to avoid historical anachronism, in the lesson plans we use the word *Gypsies* when identifying the groups of people who were targeted for segregation and annihilation by the Nazis, since this is what the Nazis called them at the time. Refer to the following websites for more information about the Roma people and their history: <http://www.romani.org>, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/roma.htm>, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_Roma\\_history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Roma_history).

The Wannsee conference did not mark the start of the Holocaust. Several years earlier, when Germany began invading neighboring territories, such as Poland and the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of Jews perished at the hands of SS soldiers and local civilians collaborating with the Nazis. This was mostly accomplished through the use of special squads of German soldiers and police called *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile killing units. These units would follow the regular German army behind combat lines, with the purpose of massacring Jews, Gypsies, Communist officials, and anyone else deemed to be a racial or political enemy of Germany. While later during the Holocaust most of the victims were murdered in ghettos or in concentration camps (or on the way to the camps), the *Einsatzgruppen* killed victims in their villages, typically by mass shootings or by using mobile gas vans.

Even though over 1.5 million Jews were murdered at the hands of these mobile killing squads, Heinrich Himmler, director of the *Einsatzgruppen*, was not entirely satisfied. He noticed the psychological burden that mass shootings placed on his men, and he wanted a more economical way to murder vast numbers of Jews. At the Wannsee Conference he was able to develop a plan that addressed his concerns. Through planning an efficient, systemic method of “extermination,” the murder of Jews would now be carried out according to rules and regulations, by clerks, administrators, guards, and other employees. One administrator involved in assigning Jews to concentration camps described his role, and the role of other bureaucrats like him as, “just little cogs in a huge machine.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Wannsee Conference was significant not because it started the Holocaust, but mainly because it transferred most of the responsibility of the “Final Solution” from the military over to the bureaucrats. In addition to the leadership of the Nazi Party, many “ordinary” workers were needed to make the system of mass murder function: train conductors, secretaries, guards, cooks, etc. Journalist Bernt Engelmann wrote, “girls like my cousin Gudrun, from solid middleclass families, . . . sat there with their chic hairdos and pretty white blouses and typed neat lists of the victims—an important service for *Fuehrer*, *Volk*, and *Vaterland*.”<sup>6</sup> This statement reflects the mindset of many Germans who participated in this genocide. They did not see themselves as murderers; rather, they saw themselves as loyal, effective workers.

“How can we make sense of this intentional killing of millions of innocent people?” is one of the most important questions asked during a study of the Holocaust. Many scholars have attempted to answer this question. Philosopher and Holocaust scholar Hannah Arendt argued that the Germans who carried out unspeakable crimes were ordinary people who simply accepted the conditions of their context as normal and the way things are done.<sup>7</sup> As explained above, the bureaucratization of the Final Solution—the fact that Germans had specific responsibilities to perform as part of their jobs—made the process of killing seem routine. Hitler and the Nazis were extremely skilled at using propaganda and a deliberately gradual process to make the isolation, segregation, and ultimate killing of Jews seem rational or justifiable.

Raul Hilberg, a prominent Holocaust scholar, agrees with Arendt that the Holocaust was made possible because of small steps, or “stages.” He began studying the Holocaust in 1948 while stationed in Munich for the U.S. Army’s War Documentation Project. His intense study of German documents led to the development of a widely accepted theory that the Final Solution was a bureaucratic, strategically planned process. A list of steps taken by the Nazis to achieve the mass murder of Jews, called “The Stages of Mass

### Raul Hilberg's Stages of Mass Murder<sup>8</sup>

1. **Definition:** Jews and other minorities are defined as the “other” through legalized discrimination.
2. **Isolation:** Through the accumulation of hundreds of anti-Jewish laws, social practices, residential living restrictions, job displacements, and property expropriation, Jews are marginalized in German society.
3. **Emigration:** Jews are encouraged through laws and terror to leave German territory.
4. **Ghettoization:** Jews are forcibly removed to segregated sections of Eastern European cities and are made to endure terrible living conditions.
5. **Deportation:** Jews are transported from ghettos to concentration and death camps.
6. **Mass murder:** Mass murder occurs through shooting, gassing, and confinement in labor and death camps where Jews are overworked and/or murdered.

Murder,” is one of the results of Hilberg’s research. The degree to which the Nazis planned each of these stages ahead of time is a matter of debate among historians, but there is consensus that the overall events unfolded in a way that followed this pattern. This kind of framework is helpful for a basic historical understanding of how the Nazis moved from legalized discrimination to mass murder.

Another way to understand how these small steps played out in the life of ordinary Germans is through the work of an American college professor, Milton Mayer. Seven years after World War II, Professor Mayer interviewed German men from a cross-section of society. One of them, a college professor, told Mayer how he responded to the policies of the Nazis from 1933, when they first came to power, until their fall at the end of the war:

If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes millions, would have been sufficiently shocked—if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in ’43 had come immediately after the “German Firm” stickers on the windows of non Jewish shops in ’33. But of course this isn’t the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.<sup>9</sup>

After describing his slow and steady process of moral decline, this professor admits that ultimately his decisions left him “compromised beyond repair.” By the end of the war, he was living “with new morals, new principles,” formed by years of living under Nazi propaganda and conforming to the socially-acceptable norms of Germany in the 1930s. He explains:

You have accepted things you would not have accepted five years ago, a year ago, things that your father, even in Germany, could not have imagined. Suddenly it all comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven’t done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing). You remember those early meetings of your department in the university



*This photograph shows Nazi officers and female guards taking a break from their work at the Auschwitz concentration camp.*

when, if one had stood, others would have stood, perhaps, but no one stood. A small matter, a matter of hiring this man or that, and you hired this one rather than that. You remember everything now, and your heart breaks. Too late. You are compromised beyond repair.<sup>10</sup>

Christopher Browning is another prominent Holocaust historian whose work has helped answer the question, “How can we explain why ordinary people participated in the mass murder of millions of innocent children, women, and men?” He studied interviews of over 200 men that served in Reserve Police Battalion 101, a group made up of mostly city-level police officers who were assigned to serve Hitler in Poland during World War II. Focusing on the events of one day, July 13, 1942, Browning discovered that the leader of the battalion, Captain Trapp, instructed his troops that they would be rounding up Jewish children, women, and men from the village of Jozefow and killing all but the young men who were fit for slave labor. Then, Trapp said that any man who did not want to participate in this task could receive a different assignment. Approximately 12 of the 210 men in the battalion stepped forward and handed in their weapons. The rest of the battalion proceeded to follow orders, shooting hundreds of Jewish women, older men, and children at point-blank range, although Browning noted that “they still shied away from shooting infants, despite their orders.”<sup>11</sup> Browning explains the behavior of these ordinary working-class men, very few of whom were members of the Nazi Party, through the lens of peer pressure. Men he interviewed admitted that they did not want to be perceived as cowards by their comrades. According to Browning, “To break ranks and step out, to adopt overtly nonconformist behavior, was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot.”<sup>12</sup> History professor Daniel Goldhagen disagrees with Browning’s interpretation that many followed Nazi orders out of a desire to fit in. Rather, he argues that many Germans willingly went along with Nazi policies because a history of virulent antisemitism led them to believe that killing Jews was justified.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, there is no simple answer to questions such as, “What made the mass murder of millions of innocent children, women, and men possible? How could thousands of people participate in committing mass murder?” For example, when Rudolf Hoess was asked why he participated in the Holocaust, his answer reveals how propaganda, antisemitism, conformity, denial, and obedience affected the choices he made as Commandant at Auschwitz:

Don't you see, we SS men were not supposed to think about these things: it never even occurred to us.—And besides, it was something already taken for granted that the Jews were to blame for everything. . . . Well, we just never heard anything else. It was not just newspapers like the *Stürmer* but it was everything we ever heard. Even our military and ideological training took for granted that we had to protect Germany from the Jews. . . . We were all so trained to obey orders without even thinking that the thought of disobeying an order would simply never have occurred to anybody and somebody else would have done just as well if I hadn't. . . . You can be sure that it was not always a pleasure to see those mountains of corpses and smell the continual burning.—But Himmler had ordered it and had even explained the necessity and I really never gave much thought to whether it was wrong. It just seemed a necessity.<sup>14</sup>

While Nazi propaganda, obedience, and antisemitism surely encouraged perpetrators, like Hoess, to commit terrible crimes against the Jewish community, it is important to note that the Holocaust took place under the cover of war. As Hoess explains, he was acting to protect Germany. Killing the Jews was seen as part of the war effort. And it was not only Germans who took part in the death of Jews. Most of the killing took place outside of Germany, often with the support of local residents from occupied countries, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. Although some civilians were alarmed by the brutality of the Nazis, others were sympathetic to the Germans' cause. Centuries of antisemitism in Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and Russia had made the local population openly hostile to Jews. Villagers assisted the Nazis by reporting on the location of Jews and, sometimes, by killing or hurting Jews on their own. Opportunism (e.g., the prospect of gaining Jewish property) and the fear of Nazi brutality also played a role in turning many civilians into bystanders and perpetrators.

To gain an understanding of the Holocaust, it is important to look not only at the acts of perpetrators, but also at the experiences of victims and survivors. Yet, it is impossible to truly understand the experiences of victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Nobel Prize winner and survivor of the Holocaust Elie Wiesel explains, “Ask any survivor and he will tell you, and his children will tell you. He or she who did not live through the event will never know it. And he or she who did live through the event will never reveal it. Not entirely. Not really. Between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced.”<sup>15</sup> And even if it were possible to understand the victim's plight during the Holocaust, what could prepare us emotionally to deal with the enormity of this crime? Referring to his experience as a member of the U.S. Army that liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945, Leon Bass shares, “I wasn't prepared for this. I was only nineteen. I had no frame of reference to cope with the kind of thing that I was witnessing.” He continues to explain the magnitude of the inhumanity that he observed:

And so I walked through the gates of Buchenwald, and I saw the dead and the dying. I saw people who had been so brutalized and were so maltreated. They had been starved and beaten. They had been worked almost to death, not fed enough, no medical care. One man came up and his fingers were webbed together, all of his fingers

together, by sores and scabs. This was due to malnutrition, not eating the proper foods. There were others holding on to each other, trying to remain standing. They had on wooden shoes; they had on the pajama-type uniform; their heads had been shaved. Some had the tattoos with numbers on their arms. I saw this. . . . I said, “My God, what is this insanity that I have come to? What are these people here for? What have they done? What was their crime that would cause people to treat them like this?”<sup>16</sup>

Still, even though it is impossible to truly understand the victim’s experience, and even though nothing can prepare us for the horror of this crime, it is still important to take stock of the scope of this genocide—to appreciate how humanity was stripped from millions of people as they were treated like cattle, or even worse.

Professor Larry Langer suggests that one way we can understand the victims’ experience is through appreciating the many “choiceless choices” that they confronted on a daily basis.<sup>17</sup> There are no moral equivalents in the “normal” world for these experiences, even in the combat of World War II. For example, is the decision to give one’s child to a stranger really a “choice” in this context? Rachel G., a Jewish girl from Belgium, recalls the day her father took her into hiding with a priest. “My mother could not take me to those people. Of course, I couldn’t understand. My mother crying and only my father could take and explain to me, ‘Don’t forget, you’re a Jewish little girl and we’re going to see you again. But you must do that, you must go away. We are doing this for your best.’”<sup>18</sup> When you are asked to bury the corpses of your neighbors or be pushed into a pit yourself, is that really a choice? Langer asserts that when making sense of the choices Holocaust victims made, we must keep in mind that people’s choices were determined by survival in the grimmest of circumstances.



*These Jewish women and children have been selected for death at Auschwitz-Birkenau.*

Another common question asked about victims of the Holocaust is, “Why didn’t they resist? Why didn’t they fight back?” Jews, and other victims, responded to their Nazi oppressors in a variety of ways, and, indeed, many did resist. Jews in Vilna, Warsaw, Kovno, Bialystok, Bedzin-Sosnowiec, Cracow, and 11 other cities organized armed rebellions against their Nazi oppressors. Jews, known as partisans, engaged in guerrilla warfare against the German army. In August 1943, inmates at Treblinka concentration camp duplicated the key to the camp armory. The plan was to take the weapons stored there, kill as many guards as possible, and then escape into the forest. All seven hundred Jews in the camp took part. There are countless examples of other efforts of resistance by Jews and non-Jews alike: laborers sabotaged weapons they were assigned to build, inmates organized clandestine schools for children, and some Jews used prayer as a means of defiance.

Yet, it is important to recognize the incredible challenges that confronted Jews trying to resist Nazi oppression. First, for some victims it was impossible to believe what lay ahead. They were easily deceived by the slivers of hope the Nazis offered their victims. Sometimes it was the possibility of a ghetto run entirely by Jews; at others it was the hope of resettlement in the east. Often people were willing to believe on the strength of little more than the need to buy a railroad ticket. Surely people being shipped to their deaths would not have to buy a ticket! Even once Jews recognized the gravity of their situation, during the war it was difficult for anyone, and especially Jews, to gain the arms and resources to resist the Nazis. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi points out how difficult escape and rebellion were, writing:

For everyone else, the pariahs of the Nazi universe (among whom must be included Gypsies and Soviet prisoners, both military and civilian, who racially were considered not much superior to the Jews), the situation was quite different. For them escape was quite different and extremely dangerous; besides being demoralized, they had been weakened by hunger and maltreatment; they were and knew they were considered less than beasts of burden. . . . The particular (but numerically imposing) case of the Jews was the most tragic. Even admitting that they managed to get across the barbed wire barrier and electrical grill, elude the patrols, the surveillance of the sentinels armed with machine guns in the guard towers, the dogs trained for man hunts: In what direction could they flee? To whom could they turn for shelter? They were outside the world, men and women made of air. They no longer had a country.<sup>19</sup>

Levi helps us understand how the “stateless” condition of the Jews coupled with the history of violent antisemitism in the area contributed to the nearly impossible task ahead of any Jew who dared escape or rebel. Furthermore, Jews faced a complicated ethical dilemma because acts of resistance by one individual were met by Nazi retaliation aimed at the entire community. In other words, an act of defiance by one individual could result in the deaths of many more. Furthermore, it is important to keep the issue of resistance in perspective. Expecting a defenseless, civilian population to mount an extensive challenge to their well-armed Nazi oppressors puts the burden on the victim and not on people and nations who were in a better position to help. Given this context, Elie Wiesel explains, “The question is not why all the Jews did not fight, but how so many of them did. Tormented, beaten, starved, where did they find the strength—spiritual and physical—to resist?”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, another question students often ask of teachers is, “Why are you having us study this horrible moment in history?” Many educators, scholars, and students agree that studying the Holocaust is important because of how it can help us prevent violence, prejudice, and injustice in our own communities—local, national, and global. As Catholic theologian Eva Fleischner declares, “The more we come to know about the Holocaust, how it came about, how it was carried out, etc., the greater the possibility that we will become sensitized to inhumanity and suffering wherever they occur.”<sup>21</sup> This human tragedy illuminates the circumstances that can cause ordinary people to make horrible choices. To prevent future acts of violence, we must look at the circumstances in which these choices were made. We need to appreciate the role of factors such as obedience, conformity, peer pressure, membership, identity, prejudice, and propaganda in shaping the decisions made by Germans and others, for these same factors also impact the choices we make on a daily basis. A study of the steps leading up to the Holocaust also helps us identify the resources at our disposal that can be used to prevent future violence and genocide, including strong democratic institutions, citizens who are capable of informed judgment, and communities that respect difference.

### Related readings in

*Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*

“No Time to Think” pp. 189–91

“Blueprint for the ‘Final Solution,’” pp. 319–20

“Obeying Orders,” pp. 321–22

“What Did People Know,” pp. 364–67

“A Commandant’s View,” pp. 353–54

The lessons in this section mostly focus on events of the Holocaust that were occurring within Germany and German-occupied Europe. To help students understand the larger political and military context of World War II in which the Holocaust was situated, refer to the following readings from Chapter 6 of the resource book:

“Hitler’s Saturday Surprise,” pp. 253–56

“Taking Austria,” pp. 257

“Appeasing Hitler,” pp. 261–63

“Enemies Become Allies,” pp. 278–79

“Targeting Poland,” pp. 286–87

“Conquests in the East,” pp. 289–91

“Conquests in the West,” pp. 297–300

“The Invasion of Russia,” pp. 301–3

“The United States Enters the War,” pp. 303–4

## **HOW** can we help students engage with this material?

### Confronting the Holocaust with Students

1. *Review class norms about a safe, respectful learning community:* In this lesson students will be confronted with evidence, through film and text, documenting the horrific violence of the Final Solution. Before presenting students with this material, inform them about the graphic violence to which they will bear witness. Learning about the crimes committed during the Holocaust can spark emotional reactions in students; thus it is critical that students

have a safe place to process their feelings throughout this lesson. At the beginning of this lesson, you might want to review your classroom contract. You can also ask students to think about what it means to them to feel safe in the classroom, and what they need to do to help other students feel safe and supported.

2. *Provide frequent public and private opportunities to process this material:* Students often react to the Holocaust with sadness, anger, or frustration, yet it is also the case that students do not have an immediate public response to learning about the Holocaust. Many teachers have been surprised by some students' lack of emotions during a lesson on the Holocaust. Experience has taught us that it can take time before students are able and ready to make sense of this material. In the meantime, many students report that their journals provide a safe space where they can begin to process their emotions and ideas. Therefore, we recommend that students are invited to write in their journals at many points throughout this lesson.
3. *Avoid having students hypothesize about what they would have done:* It is natural for students to wonder what they would have done if they were in the position of the victims. Yet following this line of hypothetical decision-making does not yield an educationally constructive conversation; it is impossible for us to truly imagine what it was like for victims of the Holocaust. To even come close to putting students in the position of imagining the suffering and loss of victims would be highly unethical. The challenge for teaching this part of the unit is to allow students to confront the suffering and loss experienced by victims of the Holocaust without overwhelming students with horror.
4. *Preview materials in advance to make appropriate selections based on the maturity of your students:* Viewing graphic images depicting the horrors of concentration camps and death camps can provoke strong emotional reactions in students. Some teachers assume that because students are surrounded by violent images in the media, they are desensitized to depictions of violence in any form. We have found that this is usually not the case. Most adolescents can distinguish between fictional acts of violence and authentic acts of inhumanity, and being confronted with the horrors humans can inflict on each other can be truly unsettling. Use your best judgment about the capacity of your students to be able to emotionally handle images depicting Holocaust victims. If you decide to show your students a few images of Holocaust victims, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)) has a wide collection of images from which to choose. For this lesson, we have selected images (Handout 3) that represent the violence of mass murder (i.e., a crematorium and a map of Auschwitz) without showing human remains.

**Duration:** two class periods

Suggestion for how to divide this class over two class periods: An appropriate time to divide the lesson would be after part two of the main activity because students will need an entire class period to confront the final stage of the Holocaust.

### Materials

**Handout 1:** For Yom Ha'Shoah

**Handout 2:** The Six Stages That Led to the Holocaust: Note-taking guide

**Handout 3:** The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

**Handout 4:** Selected quotations from "No Time to Think"

**Handout 5:** *Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History*—Poems 1–3

**Talking points:** The Six Stages That Led to the Holocaust

**Film:** *I'm Still Here: Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*

**Film:** *Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History*

## Opener

Facing History teachers speak strongly about the importance of preparing students before having them confront the horrible crimes committed during the Holocaust. One way to accomplish this goal is to use the poem “Yom Ha’Shoah” by Sonia Weitz, a Holocaust survivor (handout 1). We suggest having students read the poem aloud, at least two times. After each reading, ask students to respond to the questions: What does this poem mean to you? What questions do you have? You can begin a discussion of the poem by having students share their responses to these prompts. Their questions about the poem can be recorded on the board so that they can be revisited at the end of the lesson when students have greater familiarity with the Holocaust.

## Main Activities

### Part 1: Defining terms

By this point in the unit, your students have probably already heard the term *Holocaust*, and many may be familiar with the word from its use in the media or from prior classes. Still, do not assume that students know what this term actually means or what the event entailed. Before beginning an interactive lecture about the Holocaust, write the word on the board and ask students to tell you what they already know about the Holocaust. You might also wish to write the word “genocide” on the board and then ask if any students can define it. Here are two basic definitions you can use to begin this lesson:

*Holocaust*: A period of 4 years (1941–1944) when the Nazis organized and carried out the murder of six million Jews, as well as millions of other innocent victims, such as Jehovah’s witnesses, Gypsies, and homosexuals.

*Genocide*: Acts committed with the intent to destroy an ethnic, racial, national, or religious group.

At the end of the lesson, you can give students the opportunity to add their own ideas to these definitions.

### Part 2: Understanding the steps leading up to mass murder

We suggest helping students learn about the crimes committed during the Holocaust through an interactive lecture that incorporates video clips, images, and other documents. In this format, the whole class learns the same material at the same time, giving the teacher the ability to respond to questions and comments as they arise. The ability to respond to students “in the moment” is especially important when dealing with such sensitive material. Suggested talking points to guide you through this lecture are included in the appendix of this lesson. These talking points are framed by the work of Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg. He writes about the Holocaust not as one moment, but as a series of stages that led up to the genocide of millions. Students have already learned about three of these stages, so the early part of the lecture will serve as review. Students can take notes during the lecture on Handout 2 or in their journals.

We refer to this teaching strategy as an “interactive” lecture because we hope that students are active participants as the class develops an understanding of the Holocaust. As you present students with new information, they should have the opportunity to share their prior knowledge, ask questions, and write in their journals. We have structured the interactive lecture talking points to allow for this to happen. The lecture is divided into six

parts, each part corresponding to one of Hilberg’s “stages leading up to the Holocaust.” Each part includes a main term, a key question, suggested resources (i.e., class notes from previous lessons, images, film clips, quotations, etc.), possible answers to the key question, and suggested journal prompts. We recommend that students have the opportunity to write in their journals throughout the lecture so that they can have frequent opportunities to process their ideas and their feelings. You might allow volunteers to share what they have written with the class, or you can ask them to discuss the journal prompts with a neighbor. Experienced Facing History teachers have stressed that it is very important to pay attention to students’ needs, questions, and misconceptions as they learn about the Holocaust. For that reason, we have designed this lesson to be implemented over two class periods. While the disturbing nature of this history causes many teachers to want to rush through this material, for students’ own intellectual and moral development it is important to proceed at a pace that allows them to safely process what they are learning about this specific history and what it may reveal about human behavior in general.

### **Part 3: Processing the horrors of mass murder**

It is not possible to truly understand the horrors of genocide, nor would it be ethically responsible to put students in that position. Still, if students left a study of the Holocaust without confronting the scope of the crimes committed, their understanding of this event would be incomplete. The challenge for teachers is to find a safe, respectful, and historically accurate way to help students grasp the fact that thousands of ordinary people participated in unspeakable acts of inhumanity, while thousands more quietly stood by while millions of innocent children, women, and men were murdered.

One way to approach this pedagogical challenge is to have students bear witness to the testimony of a Holocaust survivor. We suggest showing students the 24-minute video *Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz’s History*. Students will already be familiar with Sonia Weitz as the author of the poem “Yom Ha’Shoah.” In this video, she reads this poem, and several others, as she recounts her experience before and during the Holocaust. Listening to Sonia’s story provides an opportunity for students to learn about the horrors of the concentration camps, and it also provides a concrete, personal account of the other stages leading up to the Holocaust. [Note: The extension section provides examples of other survivor testimony you could also use during this part of the lesson. In the extension sections, you can also find suggestions for how to help students process the horror of mass murder through looking at images and reading the words of those involved in this tragic event.]

Sonia’s testimony provides evidence of horrible brutality and students will need a way to debrief what they have heard. To help students process the ideas in Sonia’s testimony, you can structure a silent conversation. In preparation for the silent conversation, ask students to write the following questions in the middle of a large piece of paper (large enough to allow for students to write plenty of questions and comments):

- What made the Holocaust possible?
- How can we explain why ordinary people participated in the mass murder of innocent people?
- What could have prevented the Holocaust?

Small groups of two or three students can receive one of these “big papers.” Before beginning this activity, make sure each student has a pen or marker.

### Instructions for the Silent Conversations (“Big Paper”) Activity

1. *The importance of silence:* Inform the class that this activity will be completed in silence, and that they will share their thoughts and questions in writing on the big papers. Go over all of the instructions at the beginning, but you can also remind students of their task as they begin each new step.
2. *Comment on your big paper:* Distribute a “big paper” to each group. Tell students that they will begin by responding to the prompts on their big paper. Students continue to have a conversation about their ideas, not by speaking to each other, but by writing questions and comments on this big paper. If someone in the group writes a question, another member of the group should address the question by writing on the big paper. Students can draw lines connecting a comment to a particular question. Make sure students know that more than one of them can write on the big paper at the same time. Teachers typically give students 10–15 minutes for this step.
3. *Add comments to other big papers:* Still in silence, ask students to read the comments on other big papers around the room. Students should bring their markers with them because they can add their own ideas to their peer’s big papers. Teachers usually give students 10–15 minutes for this step.
4. *Return to your own big paper:* Still in silence, students read the comments written by their peers on their own papers. At this point, you might ask students to take out their journals and identify a question or comment that stands out to them at this moment.
5. *Class discussion:* Silence is broken as students are invited to share their ideas in a class discussion about the Holocaust. Before you begin the class discussion, you might want to have students write and recite a collaborative poem. (See the follow-through and extension sections for instructions on writing collaborative poems.)

### Follow-Through (in class or at home)

Facing History teachers have remarked that many students are able to process and express their reaction to learning about the Holocaust through poetry. Poetry can be simultaneously personal and abstract. It can both evoke a specific experience and draw a universal conclusion. It helps us reflect and respond. You might decide to give students some time to write their own poems responding to the material in this lesson. Or, you can create a collaborative poem as a class. In a collaborative poem, each student contributes one line. This could be the question or comment that the student recorded after step four of the Silent Conversation. You can go around the room with each student reading their line. A shorter version of the collaborative poem simply asks students to respond with one word that comes to mind after learning about the Holocaust. Each student shares his/her word, without allowing questions or comments to break the flow of sharing. The collection of words shared by the class creates a poem of its own. Regardless of if students write poems on their own or whether they create a collaborative poem, the ideas represented in the poems provide fruitful material for a class discussion.

As a final activity for this lesson, you might have students read the poem “Yom Ha’Shoah” again and then ask them to write in their journals about what this poem means to them after learning more about the Holocaust. They can also try to answer the questions they wrote at the beginning of the lesson.

## Assessment(s)

The notes students take on handout 2, as well as their journal entries, will provide evidence about their understanding of the steps leading up to mass murder. You might also ask students to turn in an exit card before they leave class with their definition of the words *Holocaust* and *genocide*. Encourage them to have their definitions show both an intellectual and ethical understanding of these words. At this point, it is too soon to accurately assess students' ability to grasp the horrors of the Holocaust; as explained above, it often takes students several days or weeks to come to grips with this information. But, you can give students the opportunity to share confusions they might have by asking them to record any questions on their exit card. This will give you an idea of material you might want to review in the next lesson.

## Extensions

- In addition to listening to Sonia Weitz's testimony, students might gain a deeper understanding of the Holocaust through looking at images and reading the words of those involved in this tragic event. Document 3 includes a collection of images and quotations that represent different stages of the Holocaust, but focus on the horror of mass murder. The "gallery walk" teaching strategy can be used to help students process these images. Arrange these images and quotations on the wall or on tables around the room. Then ask students to "tour" the gallery. As they view the images and read the quotations, ask students to record thoughts and questions in their journals. You might want to include several images of Jewish life before the war (from Lesson 5) to help students remember that before they were persecuted by the Nazis, Holocaust victims were ordinary children, women, and men who enjoyed family dinners and playing with friends. You could also include copies of Sonia's poems as part of the gallery walk. So that students have the opportunity to process their reactions to these images and words, we suggest that students participate in the gallery walk before they begin the big paper activity.
- Here are two alternate ways to structure the collaborative poem exercise: 1) You can ask students to write their contribution to the class poem on a slip of paper. Place the slips into a hat or bowl. Drawing one at a time, read the slips in a dramatic fashion. For example, you can repeat some lines or words for dramatic effect. 2) You can ask students to copy their one line or phrase contribution to the class poem on several slips of paper. Distribute 10–12 slips to small groups of students and allow them to arrange the slips any way they choose. Then have the groups present their arrangement to the class. This exercise is particularly interesting because students hear the same words used in distinct ways in the different poems crafted by their classmates.
- Another way to help students debrief the Holocaust is by having them read "No Time to Think," on pages 189–91 of the resource book. In this interview, a German professor describes his experiences living with Nazi policies from 1933 to 1945. His descriptions reveal how the Nazis were able to mold a citizenry with "new principles" through a gradual process of "hundreds of little steps," where the crimes against Jews and others escalated in "imperceptible" ways. In "No Time to Think," this German man also touches on how concepts students have studied throughout this unit, such as fear, obedience, conformity, peer pressure, opportunism, and propaganda, influenced his behavior. Ultimately, he is left "compromised beyond repair." As a class, you can read "No Time to Think" aloud in its

entirety, or you can select a few quotations from this text to read aloud. (See handout 4 for a list of suggested quotations.) A discussion after this reading might begin by allowing students to read off one word or phrase that stood out to them. You could also ask students to respond to the question, “When this professor was making his decisions about how to act (or not act), who do you think was most on his mind?” One interpretation of this reading suggests that the professor was mostly thinking of himself as the Nazis took steps to define, isolate, and eventually exterminate the Jews. In this light, “No Time to Think” reveals the implications of living in a society where the members only think about their own best interest. Other questions you might want to raise in a discussion of this text include: How do the ideas in this reading help explain why ordinary people participated in the mass murder of innocent people? What warnings does it include? To what extent are these warnings relevant today?

- Drama can also be used to help students process and express their responses to learning about the Holocaust. In addition or instead of writing poems, you might ask small groups of students to create “tableaux” or scenes that represent their answer to the question, “How can we explain why so many people participated in the mass murder of innocent people?” Of course, there are many answers to this question, so you can inform students that their scene is only supposed to represent one way of answering this question. For example, a group might depict the concept of conformity or the idea of small steps.
- Facing History teachers remark on the power of survivor testimony to help students process the horrors of the Holocaust. Sometimes, it is possible to have a Holocaust survivor speak to your students. Your local Facing History office may be able to help you arrange such a visit. Fortunately, many survivors have shared their stories on film. Facing History has produced a 23-minute film called *Challenge of Memory* which includes six survivor testimonies. Each testimony covers a different aspect of the Holocaust, from deportation to life in the camps: Shari B begins by sharing how her family could not believe the accounts they heard about the gassing of Jews. Edith P describes being locked in a cattle car on her way to Auschwitz. Helen K recalls an act of courageous resistance by inmates in Auschwitz, and Leon Bass, a retired U.S. Army sergeant, remembers the shock of entering Buchenwald concentration camp at the end of the war. Also, Disc 2 of the *Paper Clips* documentary includes interviews with two Holocaust survivors. While their accounts trace the stages outlined by Hilberg, they mostly focus on life in the camps. Bernard Igielski’s story begins when his family was moved to the ghetto when he was not yet thirteen. He recalls how he became an orphan at the hands of the Nazis, describes what it was like to be young and alone at a concentration camp, and shares the story of how a Jewish doctor at Auschwitz saved his life. Rachel Gleitman’s story begins before 1938, when she enjoyed a peaceful life in a rural village in Czechoslovakia. She then recounts how the Jews in her town were deported to ghettos and describes her own journey to Auschwitz with her sister. At the end of her interview, she describes how she escaped from the Nazis as the Soviets were advancing into German-occupied Poland. These interviews can help students confront the horrors of the Holocaust in lieu of, or in addition to, the images and quotations included in handout 3. To make sure the content is appropriate for your students, we recommend previewing any video before using it in the classroom.

- In the video *Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History*, Sonia reads three poems in addition to “Yom Ha’Shoah.” Copies of these poems are included on handout 4. So that students can follow along with Sonia, you can distribute handout 5 to students before they watch the film. After she reads each poem, you can pause the film and spend some time interpreting the poem’s meaning and why Sonia might have decided to include this particular poem in her testimony. Students who are interested in learning more about Sonia Weitz’s story can read her memoir *I Promised I Would Tell*. It can be downloaded for free from the Facing History and Ourselves website ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)) or can be borrowed from the Facing History lending library.

## The Six Stages That Led to the Holocaust: Talking Points\*

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### Using these Talking Points:

This interactive lecture is divided into six parts, with each part representing one of Hilberg's six stages that led to the Holocaust. We suggest you begin by presenting students with a definition of the stage and then the key question they should answer about what happened during this stage. In the talking points, we list resources where your students can find evidence that will help them answer the key questions. To help you evaluate students' responses, we have also listed possible answers to the key questions. You can introduce any ideas that students do not bring up themselves. Finally, we include journal prompts designed to help students process important themes relevant to each stage. We encourage you to give students the opportunity to write in their journals after they have learned about each of Hilberg's stages. These talking points are not meant to be used as a script. We encourage you to add more information based on your own expertise and the interests of your class. Since many students are visual learners, you might want to present the information and questions included in the talking points in the form of a power point presentation or on an overhead projector.

### **Stage 1. Definition: Jews are defined as the “other” through legalized discrimination.**

**Key questions:** How did the Nazis define Jews as different and inferior? What examples do you know about from the study of this history?

**Suggested resource:** Notes from prior lessons.

#### **Possible answers:**

- Through racism: categorizing people into fixed categories based on (supposed) bloodlines.
- Through laws: The Nuremberg laws defined who was a Jew and who was not a Jew.
- Through propaganda: Cartoons, books, movies, and posters portrayed Jews as different from (and inferior to) their Aryan neighbors.

**Journal prompt:** What are some reasons why many Germans labeled Jews as different and inferior? Why do we sometimes label groups as “other” or different than ourselves?

### **Stage 2. Isolation: Once individuals are labeled as Jews, they are separated from mainstream society.**

**Key question:** How did the Nazis isolate Jews?

**Suggested resource:** Notes from prior lessons.

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\* Hilberg's six stages outline how the Nazis systematically tried to murder the Jewish population of Europe. Other groups, such as Gypsies, homosexuals, and the physically disabled, encountered many of the steps described below as well, including mass murder. Also, Hilberg structured these stages based on his study of German documents. Because of this, the stages represent how the events of the Holocaust played out in Germany. As Germany occupied other countries, they applied similar policies to these territories. Yet, while the six stages defined by Hilberg played out over the course of nearly fifteen years in Germany (and more if you consider the impact of Nazi propaganda during the Weimar Republic), the stages were condensed or skipped in other countries. For example, most Jews in Hungary spent a very short time in ghettos (weeks or a few months) before being deported to Auschwitz or other camps. To learn more about Hilberg's stages, read Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).

**Possible answers:**

- Through laws: Jews were not allowed to attend German schools or universities. They could not go to public parks or movie theatres. All German youth were obliged to join the Hitler Youth Movement; Jewish youth were excluded from membership.
- Through social practices: Many Germans stopped associating or “being friends” with Jews. Jews and non-Jewish Germans were not allowed to join the same clubs.
- Through the economy: Jews were excluded from the civil service and Jewish businesses were taken over by Germans. Jewish doctors and lawyers had their licenses taken away. This made it less likely for Germans to interact with Jews in their daily life.

**Journal prompt:** What are some reasons why many Germans separated their Jewish neighbors from mainstream society? Why do we sometimes segregate or isolate groups that we label as different from ourselves?

**Stage 3. Emigration:** Jews are encouraged to leave Germany. With the beginning of World War II in 1939, the Nazis apply their racial laws to the countries they invade and occupy. Thus, Jews in these territories also tried to emigrate outside of the Third Reich.

**Key question:** How did the Nazis encourage the Jews to leave Germany and other occupied countries?

#### Chronology of Nazi Occupation in Europe

1938: Austria, parts of Czechoslovakia

1939: Czechoslovakia, Poland

1940: Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Hungary, Romania

1941: Yugoslavia, Greece, parts of the Soviet Union

**Suggested resource:** Notes from prior lessons and map of Europe.

**Possible answers:**

- Through discriminatory laws: Many Jews, especially artists and academics, left Germany when they were no longer allowed to work in the universities.
- Through new immigration laws: Jews were allowed to obtain exit visas so long as they left behind their valuables and property.
- Through fear: Kristallnacht encouraged many Jews to leave the area.

**Journal prompt:** What are some reasons why many Germans wanted their Jewish neighbors to leave the country? Why do people sometimes believe that those who are different do not belong in their community?

**Stage 4. Ghettoization:** Jews are forcibly removed to segregated sections of Eastern European cities called ghettos.

**Key questions:** What are ghettos? What were the conditions like in these ghettos?

**Suggested resource:** *I'm Still Here*, “Yitskhok” (16:55–20:20)—In this excerpt, we hear the words of 15-year-old Yitskhok Rudashevski as he describes his experience living in a ghetto in Vilna, Lithuania. So that students can focus on the idea of residential segregation in ghettos, we suggest you stop showing this clip at 20:20. After this point, Yitskhok describes the next stages on the way to genocide: deportations and mass murders.

Possible answers:

- Ghettos were walled-off areas of a city where Jews were forced to live. They were not allowed to leave their ghetto without permission from Nazi officials. Likewise, except for Nazi officials, non-Jews were not allowed to enter the ghetto.
- Conditions in the ghettos were crowded and filthy. Many families were forced to share one small apartment. There was limited access to proper waste disposal. Jews had to give up their property and valuables. There were very few jobs in a ghetto and since everyone had to give up their property and valuables, most of the residents were extremely poor. Food was scarce. Forced, unpaid labor was common.

**Journal prompt:** What are some reasons why many Germans allowed their Jewish neighbors to be forced to live in ghettos? Why do we sometimes allow those who we think are “different” to be treated unfairly?

#### **Stage 5. Deportation: Jews are transported from ghettos to concentration camps and death camps.**

**Key questions:** What is a concentration camp? What is a death camp? Who was affected by these camps?

**Suggested resource:** *I'm Still Here*, “Petr and Eva Ginz” (26:52–32:46)—In this excerpt, we hear the words of a brother and sister from Czechoslovakia who were deported to the Terezin concentration camp. They describe life in this camp, separated from their parents. In 1944, Petr was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a death camp. After students watch this excerpt from *I'm Still Here* you can show them a map of Nazi concentration camps and death camps in Europe in 1944. By studying this map, students can learn a great deal about the extent of the human lives affected by deportations, both in terms of the victims sent to these camps and the number of bureaucrats and soldiers required to operate these facilities. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website (<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/maps/>) publishes a map of where Nazi concentration camps were located, and the Jewish Virtual Library also posts a similar map (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/campmap.html>).

Possible answers:

- The Nazis built the first concentration camp in 1933 as a place to detain (place-by-force) communists and other opponents to the Nazi Party. At the beginning of World War II, the Nazis began building more concentration camps where they could imprison “enemies of the state,” including Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals, as well as prisoners of war. Many concentration camps functioned as labor camps, where inmates worked until they either starved to death or died of disease.
- Death camps, also called extermination camps, were designed for the purpose of killing large numbers of people in the most efficient manner possible.
- Because these camps were located away from major cities, victims had to be transported to them via train. Some rides lasted for several days. Thousands of prisoners died en route to the camps.

- Many people were affected by these camps. Of course, there were the victims; millions of children, women, and men suffered as inmates in these camps. But there were also bureaucrats—the train conductors, prison guards, cooks, secretaries, etc.—that made sure that millions of victims were transported to camps throughout Europe and who ran the camps once the victims arrived.

**Journal prompt:** What are some reasons why Germans might have participated in transporting Jews to concentration camps and death camps? Once the Holocaust reached this stage, who could the victims turn to for help? What choices did they have?

**Stage 6. Mass murder:** It is estimated that the Nazis murdered approximately 11 million innocent civilians during World War II. These are civilians killed not in the crossfire of armed combat but murdered for being an “enemy of the state” or for belonging to an undesirable group. The Nazis and those who worked for them killed children, women, and men mostly through shooting, suffocation in gas chambers, and imprisonment in labor and death camps. Conditions in the camps were such that many prisoners died from disease, such as typhus, malnutrition, and exhaustion from overwork. Of those killed, six million were Jews. Two-thirds of the entire European Jewish population was killed by the Nazis. Petr, Ilya, and Dawid, three teenagers profiled in *I’m Still Here*, were murdered by the Nazis.

**Suggested resources:** At this point, we suggest you end the lecture and use a different teaching method to help students process the horrors of mass murder. Refer to the lesson plan for recommendations.

**Journal prompts:** What was the Holocaust? How did the choices made by ordinary people contribute to the death of millions of innocent children, women, and men? What could have prevented these crimes from taking place?

## Lesson 14: Handout 1

### For Yom Ha'Shoah

This poem was written by Sonia Weitz, a survivor of the Holocaust. “Yom Ha'Shoah” is Hebrew\* for the Day of Holocaust Remembrance. In this poem, Weitz, a Holocaust survivor, invites others to learn about her experience while also acknowledging that this is an impossible task.

#### FOR YOM HA'SHOAH

Come, take this giant leap with me  
into the other world . . . the other place  
where language fails and imagery defies,  
denies man's consciousness . . . and dies  
upon the altar of insanity.

Come, take this giant leap with me  
into the other world . . . the other place  
and trace the eclipse of humanity . . .  
where children burned while mankind stood by  
and the universe has yet to learn why  
. . . has yet to learn why<sup>22</sup>

What does this poem mean to you?

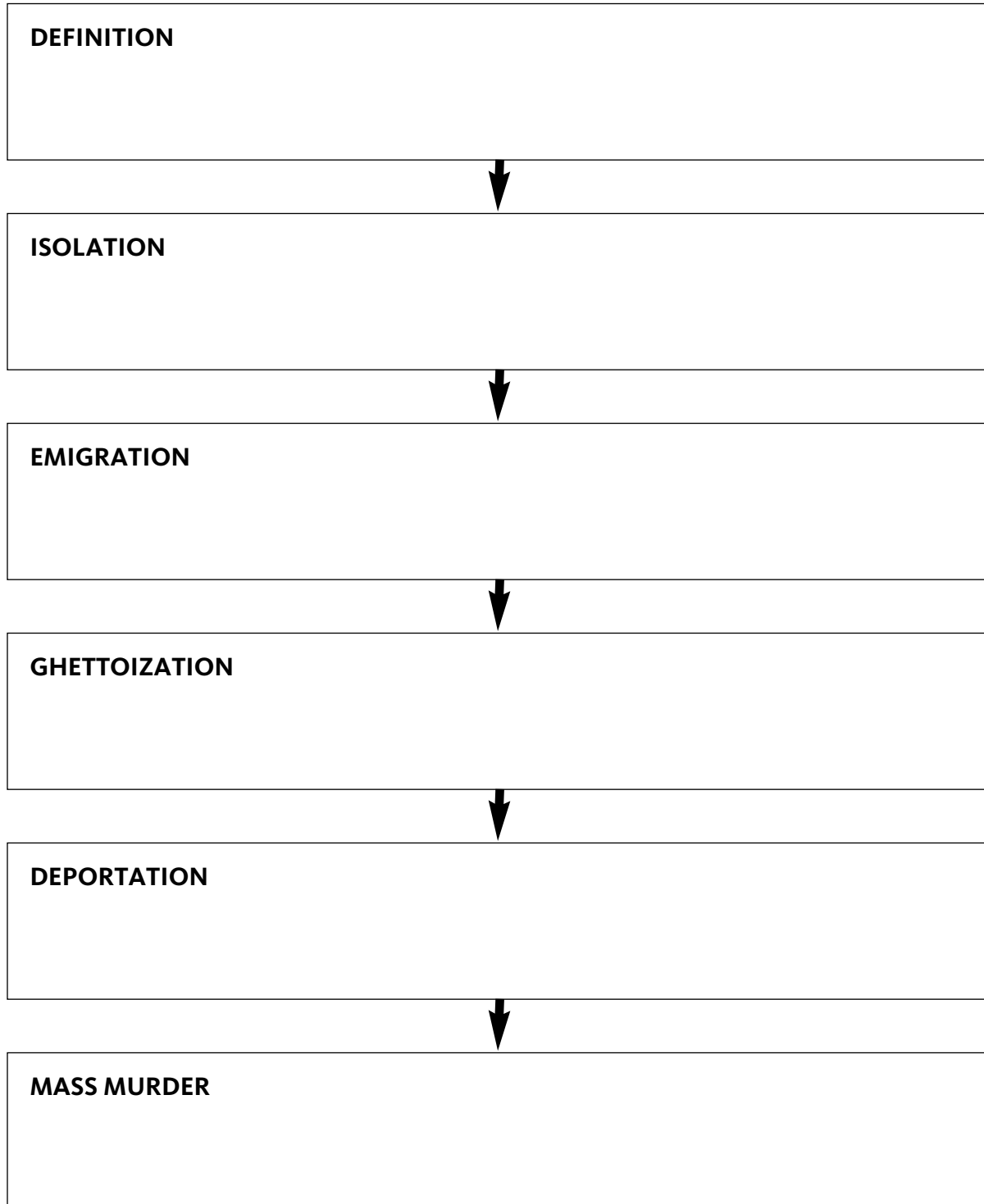
What questions does it raise for you?

\* Hebrew is the religious language of the Jewish community and the national language of the state of Israel.

## Lesson 14: Handout 2

### The Six Stages That Led to the Holocaust: Note-taking Guide

How can we explain why ordinary people participated in the mass murder of innocent people?



## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

Photograph of a boy in the Warsaw ghetto holding his hands up at gunpoint.



Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak's painting of this boy.



## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

This chart shows the many countries where the six million Jewish Holocaust victims came from.<sup>23</sup>



## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

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Rachel G remembers when her life as a Jewish girl changed because of Nazi policies:

*I had a very happy childhood until the Nazis came in. I remember just happiness, just a beautiful family . . . going to school very happily until one day I had to come home from school with a note that I had to show my parents. And that's when the whole thing started. . . . The note said . . . that the Jewish children could not go to school anymore.<sup>24</sup>*

Leon Bass, a sergeant in the U.S. Army, and one of the first American soldiers to arrive at Buchenwald concentration camp at the end of World War II:

*And so I walked through the gates of Buchenwald, and I saw the dead and the dying. . . . They had been starved and beaten. They had been worked almost to death, not fed enough, no medical care. . . . I said, "My God, what is this insanity that I have come to? What are these people here for? What have they done? What was their crime that would cause people to treat them like this?"<sup>25</sup>*

## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

This photograph was taken at a vacation resort near Auschwitz in Poland. It shows Nazi officers and female guards taking a break from their work at the concentration camp.



Here is one story of a German police battalion, a group of 210 men under the direction of Major Trapp: *With choking voice and tears in his eyes . . . [Major Trapp] informed his men that they had received orders to perform a very unpleasant task . . . that the Jews . . . would have to be rounded up, whereupon the young males were to be selected out for labor and the others shot. Trapp then made an extraordinary offer to his battalion: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments, one man stepped forward. . . . Then ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major. . . . Trapp spent the rest of the day in town. . . . Witnesses who saw him at various times during the day described him as bitterly complaining about the orders he had been given and “weeping like a child.” He nevertheless affirmed that “orders were orders” and had to be carried out.*<sup>26</sup>

Historian Christopher Browning interprets the fact that only 12 of 210 chose not to participate in the slaughter of Jews: *To break ranks and step out . . . was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot. . . .*<sup>27</sup>

## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

A photograph of one part of Auschwitz concentration camp. Approximately 16,000 prisoners lived in these barracks at any one time and worked as slave laborers in German factories. Many victims never saw this part of the camp because they were sent directly to another part of Auschwitz, called Birkenau, where they were gassed to death.



Sonia Weitz, Holocaust survivor, describes her walk to Auschwitz concentration camp:

*It was almost Christmastime and brutally cold. I remember that everything was bright. People saw us, but nobody offered help. Some averted their eyes. Others stared through us as though we were not there. Perhaps, in a sense, we were not there. We were no longer in the land of the living.*<sup>28</sup>

Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, describing his first few days in Auschwitz:

*Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name. . . . My number is 174517. . . .*<sup>29</sup>

## Lesson 13: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

This photograph was taken at Auschwitz concentration camp. These Jewish women have been selected for forced labor. They just had their heads shaved.



Rita Kesselman, Holocaust survivor, describes her experience at Auschwitz:

*For three days and three nights, we were taken. Destination unknown. Trains were stopping in villages and train stations, in cities. We were screaming through the windows, "Water, water." We were hungry. . . . I was alone. I didn't have my parents to cuddle up with. I was sitting there by myself. . . . After three days and three nights, we arrived in a big field. And that was Auschwitz. . . . We were told to separate the men from the women. . . . And then, from the younger people were selected people to go to the right and to the left. At the time, we did not know that the people who were selected to go to the right, would live and the rest would die. About one hundred people were picked from the women to go to work. . . . We were made to undress, leave the clothes on one side, and they took us to the other side. Every person was given a tattoo. My number was thirty thousand seven hundred seventy-five. . . . Our hair was shaved and we were given striped clothes and wooden shoes. And that was our uniform for the two years I was in Auschwitz. I never bathed. I never saw water. I never had water to drink.<sup>30</sup>*

## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

These Jewish women and children have been selected for death at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They died in the gas chambers.



Rudolf Hoess, the commandant [commander] of Auschwitz explained how the extermination [killing] procedure took place at Auschwitz:

*Jews selected for gassing were taken as quietly as possible to the crematoriums, the men being separated from the women. . . . After undressing, the Jews went into the gas chambers, which were furnished with showers and water pipes and gave a realistic impression of a bathhouse. The women went in first with their children, followed by the men who were always the fewer in number. . . .*<sup>31</sup>

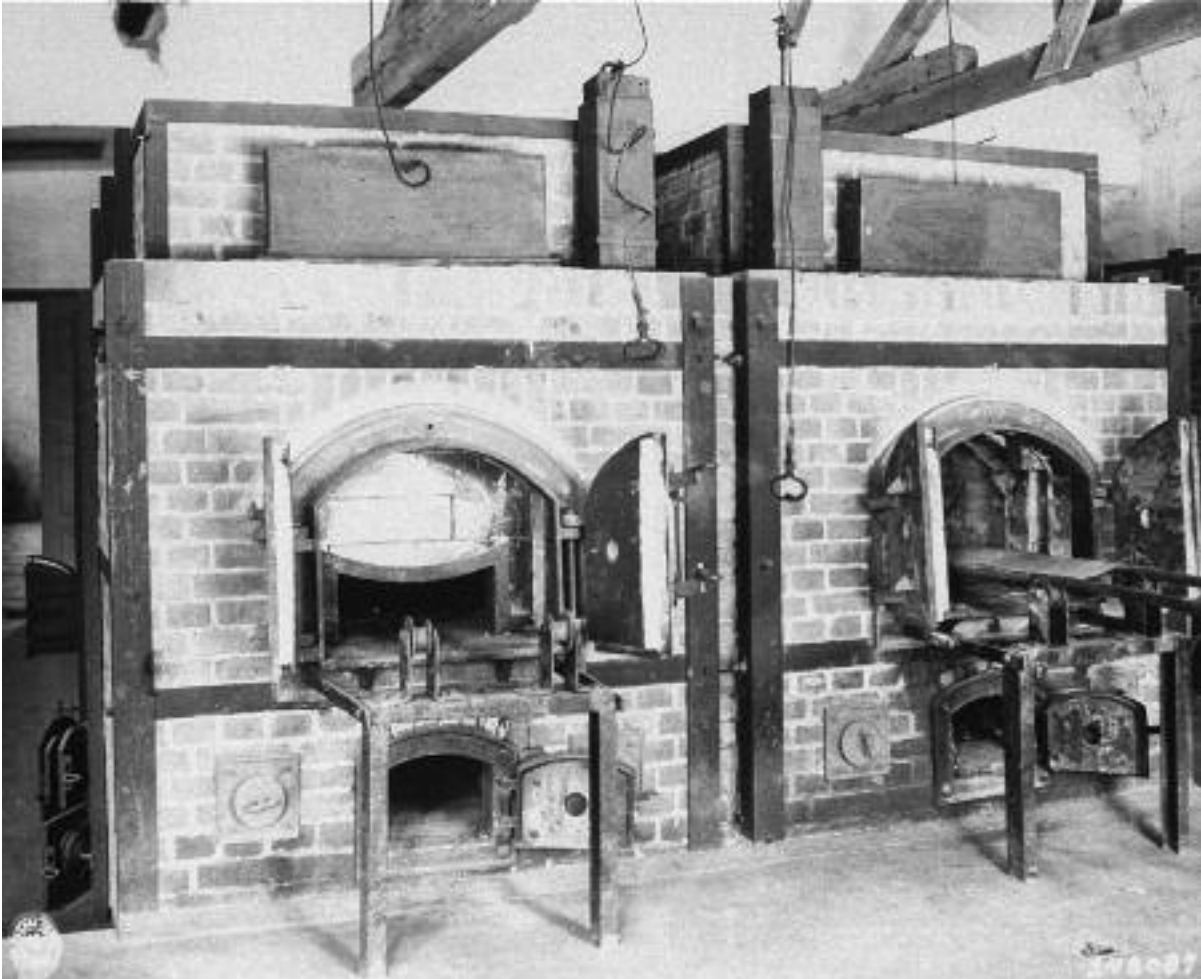
Heinz Stalp, an eyewitness to the murder of 18,000 Jews on November 3, 1943, at Maidanek concentration camp:

*Later on November 3rd there was an operation in which around 18,000 Jews were shot . . . in a large open area near the crematorium. Four big loudspeakers had been set up and played music records—waltzes, popular music, various songs. . . . And these prisoners, these Jews had to stand naked at the edge of the ditch and were shot from behind with two machine guns.*<sup>32</sup>

## Lesson 14: Handout 3

### The Holocaust: Selected images and quotations

After victims were killed in gas chambers, their bodies were moved to a crematorium where they were burned in ovens. Here is a picture of two ovens taken in the crematorium at Dachau concentration camp.



Helen K describes an act of resistance by inmates at Auschwitz concentration camp:

*Five or six girls who were working in a factory . . . putting ammunition, gunpowder, in the grenade . . . every day they were searched. But they were able to smuggle out some of the powder . . . in their mouths . . . and then they gave it to the men and we blew up one crematorium in Auschwitz. . . . The Germans were able to find the shells and they saw that they were from our factory. And they took the 5 or 6 girls that were working in the ammunitions factory and they hung them. . . . And the whole camp had to watch. And they were hanging there for three days. . . .*<sup>33</sup>

## Lesson 14: Handout 4

### Selected Quotations from “No Time to Think” (pp. 189–92)

Milton Mayer, an American college professor, wanted to find out how ordinary people reacted to Hitler’s policies and philosophy. Seven years after the war, he interviewed a German college professor. This is what he told Mayer about how he responded to the Nazis:

*“Nazism . . . kept us so busy with continuous changes and “crises” . . . that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us.*

*“Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. . . . If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes millions, would have been sufficiently shocked. . . . But of course this isn’t the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps . . . each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.*

*“You don’t want to act, or even talk alone; you don’t want to ‘go out of your way to make trouble.’ Why not? —Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.*

*“Outside, in the streets, in the general community, ‘everyone’ is happy. One hears no protest, and certainly sees none. . . . It is clearer all the time that, if you are going to do anything, you must make an occasion to do it, and then you are obviously a troublemaker. So you wait, and you wait.*

*“You have accepted things you would not have accepted five years ago, a year ago. . . . Suddenly it all comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven’t done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing).”<sup>34</sup>*

## Lesson 14: Handout 5, Poem 1

### Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History—Poetry

#### In Memory to My Mother

Where is your grave?  
Where did you die?  
Why did you go away?  
Why did you leave  
Your little girl  
That rainy autumn day?  
I still can hear  
The words you spoke:  
“You tell the world, my child.”  
Your eyes as green  
As emeralds  
Were quiet and so mild.  
You held my hand  
Your face was white  
And silent like a stone,  
You pressed something  
Into my palm . . .  
And then . . . then you were gone.  
I suffered, but  
I didn't cry:  
The pain so fierce, so deep . . .  
It pierced my heart  
And squeezed it dry.  
And then, I fell asleep.  
Asleep in agony  
And dreams . . .  
A nightmare that was true . . .  
I heard the shots,  
The screams that came  
From us, from me and you.

I promised I would  
Tell the world . . .  
But where to find the words  
To speak of  
Innocence and love,  
And tell how much it hurts . . .  
About those faces  
Weak and pale,  
Those dizzy eyes around,  
And countless lips  
That whispered “help”  
But never made a sound . . .  
To tell about  
The loss . . . the grief,  
The dread of death and cold,  
Of wickedness  
And misery . . .  
O, No! . . . it can't be told.<sup>35</sup>

## Lesson 14: Handout 5, Poem 2

### Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History—Poetry

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#### Victory

I danced with you that one time only.  
How sad you were, how tired, lonely . . .  
You knew that they would “take” you soon . . .  
So when your bunk-mate played a tune  
You whispered: “Little one, let us dance,  
We may not have another chance.”

To grasp this moment . . . sense the mood;  
Your arms around me felt so good  
The ugly barracks disappeared  
There was no hunger . . . and no fear.  
Oh what a sight, just you and I,  
My lovely father (once big and strong)  
And me, a child . . . condemned to die.

I thought: how long  
    before the song  
        must end

There are no tools  
    to measure love  
        and only fools

Would fail  
    to scale  
        your victory<sup>36</sup>

## Lesson 14: Handout 5, Poem 3

### Remembering the Past: Sonia Weitz's History—Poetry

#### My Black Messiah

A black GI stood by the door  
(I never saw a black before)  
He'll set me free before I die,  
I thought, he must be the Messiah.

A black Messiah came for me . . .  
He stared with eyes that didn't see,  
He never heard a single word  
Which hung absurd upon my tongue.

And then he simply froze in place  
The shock, the horror on his face,  
He didn't weep, he didn't cry  
But deep within his gentle eyes  
. . . A flood of devastating pain,  
his innocence forever slain.

For me, with yet another dawn  
I found my black Messiah gone  
And on we went our separate ways  
For many years without a trace.

But there's a special bond we share  
Which has grown strong because we dare  
To live, to hope, to smile . . . and yet  
We vow *not ever to forget*.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill Speeches* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 300.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Bookbinder, "A Historical Inquiry into the Background Causes of the Holocaust," (presentation, July 25, 1991, Facing History and Ourselves, Chicago, Illinois).
- <sup>3</sup> "The Crime of Genocide Defined in International Law," *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide*, Prevent Genocide International website, <http://www.preventgenocide.org/genocide/officialtext.htm>, (accessed January 21, 2009).
- <sup>4</sup> "The Wannsee Conference," The History Place website, <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-wannsee.htm> (accessed January 21, 2009).
- <sup>5</sup> Bernt Engelmann, *In Hitler's Germany: Daily Life in the Third Reich* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 127.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>7</sup> Edward Herman, *Triumph of the Market* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 97.
- <sup>8</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).
- <sup>9</sup> Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933–45* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 172.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.
- <sup>11</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 175.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Browning, "Ordinary Men," as quoted in *Holocaust Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 141.
- <sup>13</sup> Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1997), 47.
- <sup>14</sup> G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 259–60.
- <sup>15</sup> Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," as quoted in *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Leon Bass as quoted in *Facing History and Ourselves, Elements of Time* (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1989), 84.
- <sup>17</sup> Lawrence Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," as quoted in John Roth and Michael Berenbaum, *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1989), 224.
- <sup>18</sup> *Elements of Time*, 49.
- <sup>19</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 153–54.
- <sup>20</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The New Leader* 46, (August 5, 1963): 21
- <sup>21</sup> Eva Fleischner, *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav Publishing Co., 1974), 228.
- <sup>22</sup> Sonia Schreiber Weitz, *I Promised I Would Tell* (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1993), x.
- <sup>23</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Holocaust*, 3rd Edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>24</sup> *Elements of Time*, 49.
- <sup>25</sup> *Elements of Time*, 84.
- <sup>26</sup> Browning, *The Path to Genocide*, 174–75.
- <sup>27</sup> Browning, "Ordinary Men," 141.
- <sup>28</sup> Weitz, *I Promised I Would Tell*, 48.
- <sup>29</sup> Primo Levi and Philip Roth, *Survival in Auschwitz*, (New York: Touchstone, 1986), 27.
- <sup>30</sup> Rita Kesselman as quoted in Margot Stern Strom, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1994), 346.
- <sup>31</sup> Rudolf Höss, *Commandment of Auschwitz* (London: World Publishing Company, 1960), 222.
- <sup>32</sup> *Elements of Time*, 38–39.
- <sup>33</sup> *Challenge of Memory*, DVD (New Haven: Fortunoff Archives, 1989).
- <sup>34</sup> Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free*, 177–88.
- <sup>35</sup> Weitz, *I Promised I Would Tell*, 28–29.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.