Jewish LEARNING FUND

A Contemporary Framework for Holocaust Education

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"It happened once. It should not have happened, but it did. It must not happen again, but it could."

These sobering words, delivered by Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson at the 2000 Stockholm International Forum, still echo with urgency. They remind us that the Holocaust is not just a historical event—it is a warning, a responsibility, and a call to conscience. More than eight decades later, we live in a world where the echoes of antisemitism, racism, and genocide continue to reverberate. The responsibility to teach the Holocaust, therefore, has never been greater.

It is our shared responsibility—and our sacred charge—to ensure that today's learners and tomorrow's leaders understand what is at stake when hatred is allowed to grow in silence. Let them know, through our words and our example, that indifference is never neutral, and that the future depends on our courage to stand up, speak out, and remember.

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Why Teach About the Holocaust?

Teaching the Holocaust is not just an act of remembrance—it is an act of resistance. It pushes back against ignorance, distortion, and hatred. The Holocaust was a rupture in civilization, and understanding it helps us grasp what happens when institutions fail, when neighbors betray each other, and when humanity's darkest instincts go unchecked.

1. Preserving Historical Truth in a Time of Distortion

Holocaust denial and distortion are not relics of the past—they are present-day threats. In a digital world rife with misinformation, teaching accurate history is an act of moral courage. The Holocaust provides a clear example of what happens when propaganda, conspiracy theories, and racism are left unchallenged.

"The magnitude of the Holocaust… must be forever seared in our collective memory." – *Stockholm Declaration, 2000*

A classroom in Warsaw once played a clip from survivor Marian Turski, who spoke about his teenage years in the Łódź Ghetto. He ended his talk with a powerful refrain: "Auschwitz didn't fall from the sky." It was a chilling reminder that genocide is a process, not a sudden catastrophe—and that the early signs often go unnoticed.

2. Developing Critical and Ethical Thinkers

Holocaust education fosters reflection on ethical dilemmas, moral choices, and human agency. When learners consider why some people became rescuers while others turned perpetrators, they confront complex questions about personal responsibility, courage, and complicity.

A common classroom exercise involves studying the actions of Oskar Schindler—initially a businessman profiting from war, who later risked everything to save over a thousand Jews. His transformation invites learners to explore moral ambiguity and the capacity for change.

3. Promoting Empathy and Civic Responsibility

One powerful teaching strategy involves introducing students to the diary of Rywka Lipszyc, a teenage girl who documented her life in the Łódź Ghetto. Her words, penned amid starvation and loss, resonate across time: "I must live. I must not allow them to destroy me inside." These writings humanize the millions murdered and spark deep emotional engagement.

Such stories are essential in a world where “six million” can become an abstract number. Holocaust education reminds students that behind every statistic was a name, a face, a family—a life interrupted.

4. Building Bridges to Contemporary Human Rights Education

The Holocaust is a foundational reference for modern human rights discourse. The Genocide Convention (1948) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) emerged directly from the ashes of Auschwitz. Teaching this history enables students to make connections to other genocides, to current threats to democracy, and to the importance of standing against injustice.

A class in Argentina recently paired Holocaust testimonies with local stories from the country’s military dictatorship. This cross-historical analysis fostered critical thinking about state violence, collective memory, and the importance of preserving truth.

Key Takeaways for Educators

- **The Holocaust was not inevitable.** It unfolded through a series of choices made by individuals and institutions.
- **It is a human story.** Victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers were all real people shaped by their circumstances and decisions.
- **Learning about it demands both intellectual and emotional engagement.**
- **Its relevance endures.** Holocaust education is about the past—but equally about the present and future.

What to Teach About the Holocaust

Effective Holocaust education begins not with dates and numbers, but with questions—questions that probe the human experience behind historical events. While national and cultural contexts will shape specific curricula, there are essential themes, milestones, and narratives that every comprehensive program should include.

1. Framing the Holocaust as a Historical Event

The Holocaust, or Shoah, was the state-sponsored persecution and systematic murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. It was a genocide unique in scope and intent, targeting every man, woman, and child of Jewish descent across Europe.

Yet the Holocaust did not happen in a vacuum. Understanding its full scope requires examining the broader framework: pre-existing antisemitism, totalitarian ideologies, societal complicity, and war.

Quote: "Before everything was taken from me, I had a name. I want it remembered." – *From a letter by a deported Jewish child in France*

2. Foundational Themes and Essential Questions

Educators are encouraged to guide students through four core inquiries:

1. **What were the historical conditions and key stages in the process of this genocide?**
2. **Why and how did people participate or become complicit in these crimes?**
3. **How did Jews respond to persecution and mass murder?**
4. **Why and how did some people resist these crimes?**

Each question opens the door to interdisciplinary exploration and reflection.

3. Historical Timeline: From Prejudice to Genocide

3.1 Precursors to the Holocaust

- **European Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism**: Students should explore the long history of religious and racial prejudice against Jews in Europe. From medieval

church doctrines to 19th-century racial theories, these prejudices laid the groundwork for Nazi ideology.

> **Case Example**: In a classroom activity, students examine 15th-century depictions of Jews in Christian art alongside 1930s Nazi propaganda posters to discuss continuity and change in antisemitic imagery.

- **Post-WWI Germany**: The Treaty of Versailles, hyperinflation, and the search for scapegoats fueled nationalism and antisemitism.

3.2 Rise of the Nazi Regime

- Learners analyze how democratic institutions were dismantled through the Reichstag Fire, the Enabling Act, and purging of dissent. Emphasis should be placed on the gradual erosion of rights, particularly for Jews.

> **Classroom Reflection**: A high school class in Canada role-plays as German parliamentarians witnessing Hitler's rise, discussing the tension between fear, ambition, and complicity.

3.3 The Holocaust During WWII

- **The "Final Solution"**: Introduce students to key decisions, including the Wannsee Conference, where the mass extermination of Jews was bureaucratically planned.
- **Ghettos and Camps**: Detail the evolution from segregation to annihilation, exploring the brutal logic of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, and others.

> **Survivor Testimony**: Eva Mozes Kor, a twin survivor of Mengele's experiments at Auschwitz, later shared her journey of survival and forgiveness, offering students a lens into resilience amid horror.

3.4 Post-War Aftermath

- **Liberation**: Examine the chaos and trauma of liberation, particularly for child survivors and displaced persons.
- **Justice and Memory**: Explore the Nuremberg Trials and the gaps left by limited accountability.

> **Example**: Students can compare the sentences handed down at Nuremberg with survivor statements to consider justice, closure, and memory.

4. Broadening the Lens: Inclusion and Intersection

Victims Beyond the Jewish Population

While Jews were the primary target, Nazi policies also persecuted:

- Roma and Sinti (Porajmos)
- People with disabilities (T4 "euthanasia" program)
- Political dissidents
- LGBTQ+ individuals
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Slavic populations in occupied Eastern Europe

Educators should address each group's unique experiences while highlighting the ideology of racial hierarchy at the center of Nazi thinking.

5. Responsibility, Complicity, and Resistance

A nuanced understanding of the Holocaust requires breaking down simplistic binaries of good and evil. Students should investigate:

- The role of collaborators, especially in occupied countries like France, Hungary, and Lithuania.
- The passive acceptance by "ordinary citizens."
- The courage of rescuers like Irena Sendler (Poland), who helped save 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto, or the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon (France), who hid hundreds of Jews.

Quote: "I only did what had to be done." – *Chiune Sugihara, Japanese consul who issued over 2,000 transit visas to Jews*

6. Jewish Agency and Life Before and During the Holocaust

Teaching should avoid portraying Jews solely as victims. Pre-war Jewish life, with its vibrant cultures, languages, and traditions, must be illuminated. During the Holocaust, agency took many forms:

- Secret schools in ghettos.
- Armed resistance, like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
- Spiritual resistance through art, prayer, and cultural preservation.

Example: In the Theresienstadt Ghetto, imprisoned musicians staged performances of Verdi's *Requiem*—a defiant act of dignity and defiance under Nazi oppression.

7. Connecting to the Present

Learners should reflect on how Holocaust history helps them understand:

- The rise of modern authoritarianism
- The dynamics of exclusion and scapegoating
- Refugee crises and international responsibility
- Contemporary antisemitism and hate speech

Conclusion: A Human Story of Tragedy and Choice

At its heart, the Holocaust is a story of human choices—some heroic, many horrifying, most complex. Teaching its history invites learners to consider their role in shaping the world around them.

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." – *Elie Wiesel*

How to Teach About the Holocaust

Teaching about the Holocaust is not merely an academic exercise—it is an ethical undertaking that requires sensitivity, critical thinking, and care. There is no single correct method, but certain principles can guide educators in designing meaningful, impactful lessons that respect the subject matter and the emotional needs of learners.

1. Foundational Principles for Teaching

1.1 You Can Teach the Holocaust—Even if It Seems Overwhelming

Many educators hesitate, fearing they'll get it wrong or retraumatize students. But with preparation and the right materials, Holocaust education can be powerfully successful—even with younger audiences. Begin with personal stories and gradually layer in complexity. Focus on human dignity.

Example: A primary teacher in Greece introduced the Holocaust through the story of Anne Frank's tree, symbolizing hope and resilience, before exploring Anne's diary with older students.

1.2 Use Precise Language and Clarify Terminology

Words shape understanding. Terms like "ghetto," "concentration camp," or "Final Solution" require historical unpacking.

- Define "Holocaust" clearly: the systematic, state-sponsored murder of six million Jews.
- Acknowledge other victims—without collapsing distinct histories.
- Encourage students to analyze euphemisms used by perpetrators: What did "resettlement" or "special treatment" really mean?

Discussion Prompt: Why might Nazis use vague or deceptive language in official policies?

1.3 Always Contextualize the History

Students must understand that the Holocaust was not isolated. Explore:

- The war's influence on Nazi policy
- The broader history of antisemitism and racism
- Local collaboration and resistance in each region

Case Study: When studying the Hungarian deportations of 1944, examine the role of local gendarmes and political pressures from the Nazi-allied government.

2. Pedagogical Approaches

2.1 Foster Active, Reflective Learning

Create an open classroom environment where learners feel safe asking questions and discussing uncomfortable topics. Focus on:

- Inquiry-based learning
- Group discussions
- Personal reflections

Example: In Norway, students create "memory boxes" to tell the story of one Holocaust victim, blending research, empathy, and creativity.

2.2 Be Emotionally and Culturally Responsive

Learners come with different backgrounds and beliefs. Acknowledge:

- Cultural diversity in the classroom
- The potential trauma for those with their own histories of violence
- The difference between comparing and equating suffering

Activity: After learning about the Warsaw Ghetto, students compare refugee policies during WWII and the Syrian refugee crisis today—without reducing one to a lesson about the other.

2.3 Use Materials with Care—Avoid Gratuitous Horror

Avoid relying on graphic imagery to provoke emotion. Humanize, don't sensationalize.

- Use diaries, letters, poems, and songs.
- If visual sources are needed, provide context and reflection.
- Focus on life before destruction—build understanding of the world that was lost.

Tip: Teach "The Butterfly" by Pavel Friedmann, a poem written in Terezín. It speaks volumes without violence.

2.4 Make the Scale Personal: From Statistics to Stories

Rather than repeating "six million," introduce individual victims. **The Holocaust was not the murder of six million Jews, it was the murder of an individual Jew six million times.**

Project: A school in Denmark assigns each student the name of a Holocaust victim on January 27. Students research and create a brief tribute. The school hallway becomes a memorial of names and faces.

2.5 Show Complexity in Roles and Choices

Perpetrators weren't all monsters. Victims weren't all powerless. Bystanders made choices. History is messy—and so are people.

Discussion Prompt: Can someone be both a perpetrator and a bystander? What motivated people to resist—or stay silent?

2.6 Avoid "Pretend" Exercises

Roleplaying victims or Nazis can be emotionally dangerous and misleading.

Instead, ask students to take the role of contemporary observers—journalists, activists, or historians analyzing events as they unfolded.

2.7 Explore Local Histories and Sites

The Holocaust affected nearly every country in Europe. Where possible, teach local case studies:

- Identify nearby deportation sites, rescue efforts, or former ghettos.
- Connect students' family histories (where relevant) to broader narratives.

Activity: In Italy, students mapped Holocaust-related events in their town—then presented them at a public commemoration.

2.8 Interdisciplinary Approaches Deepen Learning

Holocaust history spans multiple disciplines:

- Use literature (Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi)
- Explore Holocaust art and music

- Connect with civics, ethics, and religion
- Create cross-national projects with other classrooms

3. Encouraging Critical Thinking and Historical Consciousness

3.1 The Holocaust Was Not Inevitable

Examine the warning signs, gradual escalations, and key decisions. Empower learners to see how their own choices matter.

3.2 History Is Complex and Subject to Interpretation

Invite debate:

- What do different memorials emphasize?
- Why do interpretations change over time?
- What responsibilities do we bear in remembering?

3.3 Represent Jews as More Than Victims

Jewish life before, during, and after the Holocaust should be shown in its full richness. Don't reduce individuals to suffering alone.

3.4 Recognize and Counter Denial and Distortion

Teach students to spot misinformation and conspiracy theories—especially online. Use the IHRA working definitions to explore what denial and distortion look like.

Activity: Students analyze a TikTok trend or YouTube video that distorts history. Then, they fact-check and respond.

4. Resources and Testimonies

4.1 Use Primary Sources

Encourage learners to engage with:

- Survivor testimony
- Official documents
- Letters, photographs, and objects
  Example: A German class read letters from Jewish parents in the Kindertransport—students wrote imagined replies in the voices of the children.

4.2 Invite Survivors or Use Video Testimony

When possible, host a survivor. If not, use digitized testimonies.

Example: The USC Shoah Foundation provides searchable video testimony archives suited for students.

4.3 Fiction Has a Place—With Caution

Literature can evoke empathy but must be historically responsible.

CAUTION: Avoid using *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* without critical analysis. While popular, it contains numerous historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations.

5. Connecting to Human Rights and Genocide Prevention

5.1 Human Rights Education and the Holocaust

Use the Holocaust to explore:

- The roots of human rights law
- The dangers of dehumanization
- The mechanics of authoritarianism

5.2 Avoid False Equivalency and "Suffering Competitions"

Each genocide or atrocity has its own causes, patterns, and impact. Teach differences as well as parallels.

5.3 Inspire Action, Not Just Reflection

End your unit by helping students connect past to present:

- Create a class memorial
- Organize a public exhibition
- Write letters about current human rights issues
- Partner with organizations fighting antisemitism, racism, or hate

"What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander." – *Elie Wiesel*

Conclusion: Shaping Memory, Shaping the Future

Holocaust education is not only a duty to history—it is a commitment to humanity. In teaching this past, we are not simply conveying facts or recounting tragedy; we are planting seeds of empathy, moral clarity, and civic responsibility in our students that will echo across generations.

To teach the Holocaust is to ensure that the lives of the victims are not reduced to silence. It is to lift up the voices of survivors, whose testimonies call out not for vengeance, but for vigilance—for a world where the dignity of all people is safeguarded. It is to bear witness to the cruelty that unfolded when hatred was allowed to grow unchecked, and to help students recognize that the roots of such hatred still exist today, often cloaked in indifference, misinformation, or fear.

As educators, you hold a sacred role: to pass forward not only knowledge, but remembrance. Your classrooms become bridges—between past and present, between memory and action. What you teach today will shape how future generations understand justice, courage, and what it means to be human.

Let us inspire our students to carry the torch of memory—to speak the names of those who were silenced, to share the stories of those who survived, and to heed the warnings written in history's darkest hour. Let us empower them to confront antisemitism, racism, and intolerance wherever they see it—not just because it is the right thing to do, but because they will remember what happens when we don't.

And let us teach in such a way that, decades from now, our students' children, and their children, will still know who Elie Wiesel was, what Anne Frank wrote, and why a world once turned away trains packed with families desperate to live. Let them know—because we taught them—that the Holocaust was not only a Jewish tragedy, but a human one, and that our shared future depends on remembering.

In every lesson, every reflection, every name read aloud—we reaffirm that memory is not passive. It is a choice. And we choose to remember.

"For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." – *Elie Wiesel*