

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST AS A LESSON IN REMEMBERING AND SAYING "NO" TO HATE: A TESTIMONIAL

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"If I was not here to write it, there would be no
trace of this unknown person's presence."

—Dora Bruder

After age twelve, I could never eat pizza from Pizza Hut again. Let me explain. My mother regularly volunteered to accompany elderly people in our community on errands or to doctor appointments or on visits to similarly aged friends. I tagged along on one of these journeys and met a woman whose name I do not remember, despite the impression she left on my life. She was old, ancient looking to a twelve-year-old, and she talked slowly and with an accent. We were picking her up from a doctor's office and taking her home to her small apartment.

I do not know how the conversation began or how I determined that this was an adult conversation I did not want to miss, but I began to listen carefully as we drove down the suburban tree-lined streets. They were talking about death, about someone the old lady knew who had died. The death had taken place a long time ago, but by the way she spoke of it, it was as if it had happened yesterday. The conversation moved along and the old woman pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to show my mother a tattoo on her forearm.

I knew what this meant, knew just enough about the events of World War II to know that I did not want to hear more. But I kept listening and she kept talking—we were still a few minutes from her home. As we passed a Pizza Hut, she was explaining how in the camps she was forced to haul the bodies of the dead and stack them in preparation for a mass cremation. She gestured towards the Pizza Hut: "They were piled as high as that."

I will never forget the impression her words left on me or how I felt, sitting in the back seat of our station wagon, learning a lesson I had not expected but one that shaped my emerging views on social justice. I would remember.

Six million! Counting only the Jews who perished in the Holocaust, the number is an astonishing six million. That is 375 times the number of people who lived in the suburb of Chicago where I grew up. The number overwhelms and horrifies. Then consider those who died for other inane reasons—some were homosexuals or they were mentally or physically challenged. Nazi Germany reveled in its "final solution." Anti-Semitism had existed for centuries, but why this tsunami-sized wave of hate at this particular point in history?

The questions surrounding the Holocaust are many. In a way, the events that together make up the Holocaust are so mind-numbingly horrible that we can easily

choose not to talk or think about it. But to forget the Holocaust would mean that the Nazis won. Forgetting would dishonor those who were lost and those who survived. Although the tragedy of the Holocaust is unique and is central to Jewish identity, one need not be Jewish to realize the impact this period had on the history of all humankind. It made us question our morality and motivations. It made us wonder who we are and how this could have ever happened.

We could put the Holocaust in a box and shelve it next to other incomprehensibles. But hate did not leave the world with the fall of Hitler's Nazi regime. It still haunts us today, in a world that is drowning in a general climate of hate. As editors Andrew Leak and George Paizis write in the introduction to *The Holocaust and the Text*, "The present historical moment is one in which racism and xenophobia are back on the agenda not only of the lunatic fringe, but also of the mainstream."¹

Teaching the Holocaust is important. There are many ways to begin, but one of the most accessible is through Holocaust texts written in the past few decades. The Holocaust inspired a generation of authors, both Jewish and not, to write prolifically. Hundreds of authors have documented their personal experiences, written accounts of historical fiction, or published diaries of people who perished. There are literally thousands of works educators can use with their students to build understanding. Many common elements unite these authors and their works, but most obvious are the paired themes of what Sara Horowitz calls "muteness and memory."²

Muteness. The Holocaust might have been nearly unspeakable for decades while we absorbed what had happened. But if we chose to forget, to remain mute, the result would be a loss of history and a willingness to pass on untruths to the next generation. Berel Lang writes that "the price of silence about the Holocaust—that cost of inviting the vacuum of forgetfulness—is too high."³

But the challenges of speaking about the Holocaust are not limited to merely forgetting or working to prevent the world from forgetting. There are technical difficulties as well. Horowitz writes of author Charlotte Delbo, who "complains that she has at her disposal only clichés—that she must use ordinary words such as fear, hunger, and fatigue to describe extraordinary conditions. Thus, these works embody a deep skepticism that they cannot deliver the testimony they promise."⁴ There simply

¹Andrew Leak and George Paizis, eds., *The Holocaust and the Text* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 6.

²Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

³Leak and Paizis, 18.

⁴Horowitz, 42.

are not words available in any language to describe adequately what authors experienced or are trying to document. To speak the unspeakable risks trivialization. This muteness is coupled with the related issue of memory. Memory is flawed and can be confused with what one has experienced since a given event. Survivors of the Holocaust, in some ways, are muted by these constraints of the written or spoken word.

The theme of memory, or remembering, is crucial to understanding the Holocaust and knowing why we should teach it. Some survivors, even immediately after their liberation, felt a sense that none of this was real, that it had not happened at all. Survivors talk about struggling to keep it in their memories, to make it real and to act as liaisons between those who had perished and those who did not experience the Holocaust at all. "To talk about their experiences in the camps has at one and the same time a psychological necessity and a way of bearing witness for others."⁵ To teach the Holocaust is to pay tribute, to provide testimonial, to try to make what seems unreal more believable.

It is also important to remember, not only to serve as a witness for those who did not survive, but also to remind all of humankind what darkness we are capable of. This might sound pessimistic. But by striving to remember the lives and the stories of the Holocaust, we are also being optimistic. Why would we think it was so important to remember if we did not think it would do any good? As Alvin Rosenfeld has suggested, "Holocaust literature is our record of that dying ... and, at the same time, our hope for what might still live on or be newly born."⁶

The Holocaust so deserves remembrance that a special day on the Jewish calendar has been set aside specifically for that purpose: Yom Hashoah. This academic year it falls on April 23, 2003. This is a time to teach students that the Holocaust was not a side-effect of World War II but a primary goal of the Nazi party. In this way it is a unique atrocity. Comparing the Holocaust to Hiroshima or to genocide in other countries hides the true cause of the Holocaust. Comparisons might make it easier to swallow, but true understanding will be lost.

The Holocaust Memorial and Research Center in Jerusalem echoes these sentiments. The plaque outside the building reads, "Redemption Lies in Remembering."⁷ We remember because it is right to do so, because we psychologically need to struggle with its meaning, and because within all the tragedy lies hope for what we can learn from it.

⁵Leak and Paizis, 2.

⁶Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 5.

⁷Rosenfeld, 185.

As educators we should continue to ask ourselves why we keep going to work every day. Through the education of our students, "What sort of world are we working to create?"⁸ How we answer this question has much to do with our morality and how we hope to see the world in the hands of the next generation. Teaching the Holocaust is teaching in a culturally responsive way. It is emancipating. We reveal truths. We empower. When we provide this type of educational environment for students, we see many areas of improved achievement. They learn to think clearly and insightfully. They become aware of others' perspectives and show more caring attitudes and well-developed interpersonal skills. They learn to understand the connections between individuals.⁹ They learn empathy. But it really is much simpler than that. Despite the theme of muteness in the Holocaust and its writings, it continues to be a topic that is studied intensely. By teaching the Holocaust we are opening a dialogue. H. Svi Shapiro has noted: "I have come to believe that people engaged in dialogues are optimists; they are acting on their belief that there exists the possibility of being understood and understanding self and others."¹⁰ We can come closer to understanding and social justice if we work optimistically to try to pass on the knowledge of the Holocaust to our students. We can teach the Holocaust to try to end hate, persecution, and injustice. We can teach it in remembrance and as a testimonial. And most importantly, we need to teach the Holocaust because it happened.

⁸H. Svi Shapiro, ed., *Strangers in the Land: Pedagogy, Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 134.

⁹Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 35.

¹⁰Shapiro, 136.