

Holocaust and History



Terrible Things by Eve Bunting (1980). Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.

In this allegory of the Nazi Holocaust, the animals live together peacefully, until the day the “Terrible Things” come and begin to take groups away. First those with feathers are taken, and in relief at not being chosen, the others decide that the birds were too noisy and took up too much room. Then the “Terrible Things” come back to take away animals with bushy tails. Then they take those who swim, and those with quills. When Little Rabbit asks why, he is told to mind his own business. “We don’t want them to get mad at us.” None of the remaining groups of animals protest, as the Terrible Things come back for each one of them, until there is no one left except Little Rabbit. This book raises the question of the consequences when we fail to take responsibility for how others are treated. The story of being picked on and abandoned in the playground or the lunchroom is all too familiar to many children in our classrooms. Little Rabbit provides a glimmer of hope, however. He escapes and runs off to warn other animals in the forest. This introduction to the Holocaust can help children talk about what makes it possible to stand up for others who are being treated unfairly, which is an important conversation for elementary school children of all ages.

Streets of Gold by Rosemary Wells (1999). NY: Dial Books for Young Readers

The Nazi Holocaust was not the beginning of the persecution of Jews in Europe. In this story, we learn of the journey of one Jewish family from Russia to the United States in 1894. The narrator, Mary Antin, describes the treatment of Jews in Russia at that time. “Most Russians looked on Jews as an inferior and non-Russian race. . . . Our fathers were told what kind of work they could do Our brothers were stolen by the Czar’s army while they were still little boys.” Most upsetting of all to Mary Antin was being told that she could not go to school. Her mother simply tells her, “Jewish girls are not allowed to go to school.”



Mary Antin’s story ends happily, when her family escapes the Czar and comes to the United States, where she is allowed to go to school. Many Jewish families came to the United States during the same period as Mary and her family to escape persecution by the Czar and his armies. In fleeing from the Czar, these families escaped the Nazis as well. This book can be discussed with children in grades K through six. It can be read aloud to younger elementary school children, while older children can read it for themselves. Books for older elementary school children which tell more of these stories of escape from Russia and Eastern Europe include *The Night Journey* by Karen Lasky (1986) and *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse (1993).

The Children We Remember by Chana Byers Abells (1983). NY: Greenwillow Books, HarperCollins.

Most of the stories of children who did not escape from Europe before the Nazis came to power do not have happy endings. This book is a photo-essay that asks the reader to honor the memory of children killed by the Nazis by remembering that these were just ordinary children like themselves. The photos and the simple text remind us of what life was like for Jewish children in Europe before Hitler rose to power, how they were treated by the Nazis, how they helped each other, and how some people helped them survive. The author ends by telling her readers that the children who survived are grown now. “Some have children of their own. They live in towns like yours, go to schools like yours, play with their friends, or sit alone. . . . Just like the children we remember.” This book can help engage elementary school children of all grade levels in a thoughtful conversation about the Holocaust.



Flowers on the Wall by Miriam Nerlove (1996). NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

This is the story of a little girl named Rachel, and her family as they struggle to survive in Warsaw, Poland. Her father loses his store as a result of a boycott against Jewish merchants. Papa and Rachel’s brother Nat must work as porters, pulling loads once pulled by horses. With no money to buy shoes, Rachel must stay alone all day in the cold apartment while her mother looks for work. One day Papa brings home some paints, and Rachel is able to fill her days painting beautiful flowers on the walls of their apartment. The next winter, in 1941, German soldiers arrive and the flowers begin to fade. Rachel’s mother promises her more paints when these terrible days are over.

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But Rachel and her family are deported to Treblinka, a Nazi concentration camp. “Rachel’s dreams, along with those of thousands of other Warsaw Jews, faded like the flowers on her apartment walls. And they were gone forever.” Rachel’s story helps us remember people like Rachel and her family, who perished at the hands of the Nazis. It also reminds us that beauty can help sustain us and remind us that we are human, especially in terrible times. This story can be read and discussed with elementary school children at all levels.

One Yellow Daffodil by David A. Adler (1999). San Diego, CA: Voyager Books.

Images of beauty helped to keep some people alive until the end of the war. In this book, a yellow daffodil becomes a symbol that survival is possible for a young boy imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. Morris Kaplan is now an old man who runs a flower shop and lives by himself. Because of his kindness to them, a Jewish boy and girl invite Morris to celebrate Hanukkah with their family. His Hanukkah visit stimulates Morris to remember his time in Auschwitz. He was separated from his family and was losing hope, until he saw a yellow daffodil growing in the mud. “If this daffodil can survive here, Morris thought, maybe I can, too.” Morris decides to share this story with his new friends. He tells them that the flower, a tiny bit of beauty in a grim world, helped him to survive. This story, which can be shared with elementary school children at all levels, helps to affirm the need to remember. It also reaffirms the role that beauty can play in helping people hold onto their sense of humanity.



Let the Celebrations Begin by Margaret Wild & Julie Vivas (1996). NY: Orchard Books.

In this story, Miriam, a twelve year old girl in a concentration camp helps to plan a party for the children when the soldiers come. “And they are coming soon, everybody says so!” Secretly, Miriam and the women are making toys to give to the children when they are free. Some of the children cannot remember ever having toys of their own. One child will get an elephant, while another will have a stuffed owl, when the soldiers come. “And they are coming soon, everybody says so!” The dolls are made from bits of material and buttons that the women find, but they need more material. Miriam explains, “So now we are cutting up our own clothes. My skirt is getting shorter and shorter.” Planning the celebration helps Miriam and the women stay alive and hold onto their humanity during the very last days before the war ends.

And then the soldiers come! “They are here! Everyone, everyone, the soldiers are here!” The soldiers bring food and the children, who cannot remember having toys of their own are given their patchwork dolls. This book about surviving the Nazis could be read and discussed with children of all ages. The illustrations help us see the last days of hardships experienced under the Nazis transformed into days of anticipation and hope.

Rose Blanche by Roberto Innocenti (1985). San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Some people who were not Jews tried to save Jews from the cruelty of the Nazis. In this story, a little girl named Rose Blanche finds a clearing in the woods, surrounded by barbed wire. Rose tells us there were children behind the barbed wire. “I didn’t know any of them. The youngest said they were hungry. Since I had a piece of bread, I carefully handed it to them through the pointed wires.” Each day, Rose followed the road through the forest to bring food from her home to the children in the clearing behind the barbed wire. Rose noticed that “they were also getting thinner behind the barbed wire fence. Some of them had a star pinned on their shirts. It was bright yellow.” One day the clearing was empty. “There was a shot.”

For the title of this story, the author draws on the name of a group of young Germans who were eventually killed for their acts of resistance against the Nazis. The detailed drawings and simple text help the reader imagine what the coming of the Nazis would look like from the point of view of a little girl who brings food every day to children she doesn’t know, just because they are hungry. At the end of this story, the war ends. Spring comes, but we never see Rose Blanche again. Some teachers may find the drawings of the concentration camp too disturbing to show to young children. On the other hand, Rose Blanche may not be more than six or seven years old, the age of



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children who are in Kindergarten or first grade. Her insistence on helping children she did not know, at a hardship to herself, reveals the capacity of young children to care for others. The story also raises the question of whether people should be given food just because they are hungry. These are important questions for readers of all ages to discuss.



Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story by Ken Mochizuki (1997). NY: Lee & Low.

This is another story about someone who reached out to Jews just because they needed help. Rose Blanche brought food to hungry children. Hiroki Sugihara brought his signature to frightened Jews trying to escape the Nazis. This is a true story about the author's father, Hiroki Sugihara. In 1940, Hiroki Sugihara was a diplomat from Japan to Lithuania. As the Germans come closer, hundreds of Jews surrounded the gate in front of the Japanese consulate, calling Sugihara to help them by giving them visas (permission to travel) through the Soviet Union to Japan. The author, who was five years old, asked his mother what the people wanted, and she explained, "Unless we help, they may be killed or taken away by some bad men." The little boy looked out the window at the crying children. "I felt like crying, too." He appealed to his father, "Father, please help them."

Sugihara had the authority to issue only a few visas. When he appealed to the Japanese government, he was denied permission to issue more. Sugihara's family agreed that he had to help the Jews anyway. "They said we had to think about the people outside before we thought about ourselves. . . . that is what my parents always taught me--that I must think as if I were in someone else's place. . . . I said to my father, 'If we don't help them, won't they die?'" Sugihara worked for a month, trying to write three hundred visas by hand. Finally the family had to leave Lithuania. Sugihara wrote until the last moment, signing blank pieces of paper, handing them out the window of the train.

This is a story to be shared and discussed with all levels of elementary school students. Like Rose Blanche, the story of Hiroki Sugihara asks us to consider whether we should give help to other people just because they need help, and because we have the ability to help them.



The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark by Carmen Agra Deedy (2000). Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, LTD.

This book describes the resistance of the Danish people and their king, King Christian X, to the Nazi occupation of Denmark. It is a story of a people who loved their king so much that he could ride his horse unprotected through the streets of Copenhagen. It is a story of a king who loved his people so much that he could not stand by and let any of them get hurt. When the Jews of Copenhagen were ordered to wear yellow stars on their clothing, all the Danes were frightened. "Without the yellow star to point them out, the Jews looked like any other Danes. . . . If King Christian called on the tiny Danish army to fight, Danes would die. If he did nothing, Danes would die." The legend is that King Christian rode through the streets of Copenhagen the next day wearing a yellow star sewn onto his coat.

The author tells us this is a legend which she could never verify. However, she also gives us factual information about how Jews were treated in Denmark during the Nazi occupation. Among other information in the back of the book, we learn that Denmark rescued most of its Jews and that "No Jews within Denmark were forced to wear the yellow star." This simple book is beautifully illustrated and the simple text is moving. It is readily accessible to elementary students at all grade levels, and it can stimulate provocative discussions about the capacity of people to stand up for one another. Another story about the Danish resistance, written for older children is *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (1989). NY: Dell Publishing. It is a story about the courage of ordinary people in Denmark who helped to smuggle nearly 7000 Jews across the sea to Sweden.

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Other stories for older children and their teachers.

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen (1988). NY: A Puffin Book.

Hannah, the thirteen-year-old narrator of this book, travels back in time to find herself in Poland in 1942. Terrified by her knowledge of what is to come, Hannah tries unsuccessfully to warn her relatives to run before the Nazis arrive. In this painful story, Hannah returns to the present with a new understanding of the need to remember the past.

Greater Than Angels by Carol Matas (1998). NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Instead of being transported to a concentration camp, Anna and other Jewish children in a Nazi refugee camp are taken in and cared for by people in the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in Vichy France. Although separated from their parents, the children are able to eat real food and go to school. At great risk to themselves the people of Le Chambon continue to protect the children, even when the Nazis come to take them away. Anna and her friend Rudi help other Jews escape by bringing them counterfeit papers.

Behind the Bedroom Wall by Laura E. Williams (1996). Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

As a member of a Nazi youth group, thirteen year old Korrina believes that Hitler is a great leader who is helping Germany. Then she learns of the woman and young child hiding behind her bedroom wall, and she learns that her parents are part of an underground group trying to help the Jews. This book introduces readers to the conflicts experienced by Germans who had to decide whether to report the Jews or join them.

Resources for older children and their teachers.

Never to Forget: The Jews of the Holocaust by Milton Meltzer (1976). NY: Harper & Row.

In highly accessible writing, Meltzer describes the war against the Jews in Nazi Europe and the efforts of the Nazis to dehumanize the Jews. He also describes the many ways that Jews fought to “live and die with dignity,” despite their knowledge of the reprisals the Nazis took against those who resisted.

Rescue: The Story of How Gentiles Saved the Jews in the Holocaust by Milton Meltzer (1988). NY: H&R.

Meltzer tells story after story of how non-Jews put themselves at risk to save as many Jews as they could: hiding them, helping them escape, giving bread whenever they could. As Meltzer declares, “They are, all of them, human spirits whose lives witness the truth that there *is* an alternative to the passive acceptance of evil. Where they lived, goodness happened. And where we live, goodness *can* happen.”

Tell Them We Remember: The Story of the Holocaust by Susan D. Bachrach (1994). Boston: Little, Brown.

With photographs and brief descriptions, this book chronicles the story told by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C. It is full of powerful images including a photograph of the freight car I described in the introduction and a photo of nearly 300,000 pairs of shoes, stolen from the victims of the concentration camps.

Jackdaw: The Holocaust (J-G81)

Students will quickly realize the tragedy of overwhelming moral magnitude and great historical significance that was the Holocaust. The hands-on historical documents are powerful: the chronology from Yad Vashem; Reich Citizenship Law stripping Jews of all rights; photos of the horrors of the Holocaust; Hitler's directive by Bormann on the “Jewish Question”; extraordinary maps labeled with countries and numbers of Jews to go to death camps. This Jackdaw examines the evolution of prejudice from origin to its modern, fatal culmination in the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” Historian: William Phillips.

To order: www.jackdaw.com or 1-800-789-0022. Cost \$ 42.00.

Other Genocides: Teaching Using Zlata's Diary

by Janet Santo-Gruner

Zlata Filipovi and Christina Pribichevich-Zoric, translator (1995). *Zlata's Diary, A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. New York: Penguin USA (Paper).

Zlata's Diary was written by Zlata Filipovi starting when she was eleven-years old. It describes what life was like in war-torn Sarajevo for her, her family and her friends. In her diary, Zlata chronicles the drastic and disturbing changes that occurred in her life and the lives of those close to her as the Serbian army established their position in the hills outside of Sarajevo in late 1991 and began a campaign of shelling that lasted for several years. The conflict that erupted in Bosnia had its roots in ethnic and religious divisions that existed in the Balkan region for thousands of years.

For centuries, the Balkans had been controlled by outside forces including the the Ottoman Turks and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the years leading up to World War I, the different ethnic and religious groups put aside their differences in an attempt to create an independent and unified Slavic nation. This increasing Slavic nationalism led to the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary and contributed to the outbreak of World War I. After the war, the nation of Yugoslavia was created and Slavic nationalists seemingly had achieved their goal. Following World War II, the government of Yugoslavia became a communist dictatorship headed by Josip Broz Tito. Under the strict communist state, the ethnic differences between the different regions of Yugoslavia were kept in check, but as communism collapsed in 1990, these differences exploded and the region was thrown into turmoil. As non-communist parties won a majority in Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia, these regions demanded more autonomy, claiming that Serbia was attempting to dominate the other regions.

Serbia under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic refused to relinquish any control. Following the lead of Croatia and Slovenia, Bosnian Muslims and Croats living in Bosnia-Herzegovina declared Bosnia an independent republic. Serbs living in Bosnia opposed Bosnian independence and fighting broke out between the two sides. Neighboring Serbia and Montenegro supporting the Bosnian Serbs. With this support, the Serbs were able to dominate most of Bosnia. They carried out a policy of "ethnic cleansing" against their rival groups, and in early 1992, they laid siege to Sarajevo. It is against this historical backdrop that *Zlata's Diary* is set.

As with any primary source, *Zlata's Diary* is written from one perspective, that of a Bosnian teenage girl. While it does not tell the "whole" story, it is valuable as a historical source because it gives its readers insight into what it is like for a group of civilians to have their world ripped apart by a conflict they previously did not consider themselves involved in. Students often complain that they do not see the relevance of studying history and the forces that shape it; *Zlata's Diary* demonstrates the relevance. By focusing attention on the human aspect of the conflict rather than on its more distant political, ethnic, and military components, this book helps students understand that history shapes the lives of people just like them. It demonstrates that political and ethnic conflicts do not happen in a vacuum, but they involve innocent individuals who usually pay the price for the conflict.

In writing this diary, Zlata is writing for herself. She focuses on the sorrow of losing close friends, on the fear that comes with having one's life constantly threatened either through shelling or through a lack of food, and on the hope that one day the fighting will end and she can get her life back. She admonishes all of the politicians involved, likening them to "children" fighting over a game, a game in which innocent civilians like her are treated as expendable pawns rather than as valuable human lives. She criticizes those involved in the conflict for "taking away her childhood" and for the negative effect the fighting has had on her parents who age quickly. She does not write as a Bosnian, she does not write as a historian, she does not write against the Serbs. She writes as a human being that is experiencing first-hand the horrors caused by conflict, competition and hatred.

It is difficult to read the diary without wondering, as Zlata does, why? Why all the fighting, why all the hatred, why all of the destruction? Once this happens, the history behind the conflict becomes more than just history, it becomes the context of a person's life and as such, the students will be more likely to want to understand it. In class, I combine discussion of the book with newspaper accounts of ethnic cleansing and the trial of Slobodan Milosevic for crimes against humanity.

Recommended Holocaust Web Sites

Assembled by Michael Sangirardi and Daniel Gross

Note: Web sites should be previewed before assigning them to students.

Anne Frank Center (www.annefrank.com). Organized around the life and diary of Anne Frank. Pictures help students envision her life.

Anne Frank House (www.annefrank.nl). A website tied to the Anne Frank House Museum in Amsterdam. Includes activities that involve students in exploring the broader implications of the Holocaust and human rights.

Anti-Defamation League (www.adl.org/7th_heaven/7th_chrono_rev.html). Chronological look at the years 1933 through 1945 and the major events during World War II. Includes a look at the life of children during the Holocaust. Lists Nazi Anti-Jewish Laws and contains a useful glossary.

Beyond the Pale: The History of Jews in Russia (www.friends-partners.org/partners/beyond-the-pale/english/guide-exp.html). Survey of the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe from the Middle Ages on. Provides statistics on the number of people killed around Europe. Detailed maps and contemporary cartoons. First hand accounts of people who worked for and against the Jews.

Father Ryan High School, Nashville Tennessee: (fatherryan.org/Holocaust). Created by students in a Genocide studies course at Father Ryan High School. Easy to navigate with tons of information dealing with the Holocaust. Students research and reports included.

History Place- The Holocaust (www.historyplace.com). The World War 2 section includes events that led to Adolf Hitler's coming to power. Chronology describes what happened on a particular date.

Holocaust - Glossary of Terms (www.mtsu.edu/~baustin/glossary.html). Quick and easy reference with introduction to Holocaust facts and terms. Useful supplemental source. Developed by a professor at Middle Tennessee State University.

Holocaust History Project (www.Holocaust-history.org). The Holocaust History Project is an archive of documents, photographs, recordings, and essays including direct refutation of Holocaust-denial. A resource for teachers and advanced students. Essays present different points of view.

Holocaust Pictures Exhibition (www.fmv.ulg.ac.be/schmitz/Holocaust.html). Pictures on this site show the true horror of the Holocaust. Includes mass graves and medical experiments on human subjects.

Holocaust Names (www.Holocaustnames.com). Dedicated to putting faces and names to people killed during the Holocaust. Visitors can post information about themselves and family members. Links to other Holocaust related sites.

Jewish Network (shamash.org). Graphic Holocaust photographs accompanied by a brief description. May not be suited for younger students.

Photographs of the Holocaust (history1900s.about.com/library/Holocaust/blpictures.htm). This site contains photographs with short descriptive statements. Pictures show the faces of the Holocaust victims and victimizers. Part of the History Net.

Remember.org (www.remember.org). First hand accounts of life in concentration camps and under the Nazi regime. Includes art, photos, and poems. Numerous links to other Holocaust related web sites and shop where you can purchase Holocaust books. Includes student work.

Southern Institute for Education and Research (www.tulane.edu/~so-inst/d1.htm). Tulane University site explores the history of anti-semitism in Europe leading up to the Holocaust. Provides a guide and lesson ideas for teachers who want to use Schindler's List as an instructional resource. Designed for teachers, but useful for anyone who want to learn about the Holocaust.

Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust (fcit.coedu.usf.edu/Holocaust). An overview of the people and events of the Holocaust through photographs, documents, art, music, movies, and literature. This site shows how Jewish children viewed and were viewed during the Holocaust. Time line allows teachers to show events that led to the

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Holocaust. Students can track the experience of a Jewish family or individual. Produced by the Florida Center for Instructional Technology, College of Education, University of South Florida.

Teaching the Holocaust Through Stamps (web.mac.com/ochayo/einvertnew.htm). This site allows young learners to compare images of the Holocaust that have appeared on postage stamps. Eliminates the experience of sorting through terrifying pictures.

United States Holocaust Museum (www.ushmm.org). Permanent exhibit shows conditions in the concentration camps. Includes drawings by captive artists who were opponents of the Nazis, poems, songs, and stories. Special on-line exhibits including the music of the Holocaust, voyage of the St. Louis, Kristalnacht and the 1936 Berlin Olympic games.

Voice/Vision: Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories (Holocaust.umd.umich.edu). Includes archive of interviews by Dr. Sid Bolkosky with over 150 Holocaust survivors. Survivors talk about their lives before, during and after the war. People explain how they dealt with the impact of the Holocaust and the way it continues to affect their lives. Sponsored by University of Michigan-Dearborn

Voices of the Holocaust (voices.iit.edu/maps.html). First hand accounts by concentration camps survivors and their relatives. Often upsetting. Students can compare different interviews. Includes maps showing locations of concentration camps. Maintained by the Illinois Institute of Technology.

“The Holocaust: Fact Or Fiction?” (www.hercomputers.com/Holocaustweb)

The San Diego University website (webquest.sdsu.edu/webquest.html) links to 134 recommended middle school social studies webquests. One is called *The Holocaust: Fact Or Fiction?* (www.hercomputers.com/Holocaustweb). According to this site, “there are people who believe that ‘The Holocaust’ never happened” and it asks students whether they are “convinced that it did from everything we have studied so far?” Students are challenged, based on the readings, pictures, movies and discussion they engaged in during the webquest to consider “The Holocaust’ was “made up by people and governments in order to support Israel, the Jewish homeland.” Their assignment is decide to “if ‘The Holocaust’ is fact or fiction and report your findings to your ethics, social studies, and English classes.” As part of the project, students are directed to examine what are identified as “Holocaust Denial Sites.” They include www.nizkor.org/faqs/leuchter, www.ihr.org/leaflets/denial.html, and www.Holocaust-history.org/denial-hoax.

I contacted the creator of the webquest who wrote back that “the idea behind this quest, besides tolerance and respect, is to teach students that there are other views to an issue.” She insisted that “in all my years teaching, no student has come away thinking that the Holocaust did not happen. If you click on the denial links, and the students have learned how to evaluate a web site, they can see through the hollow and erroneous thinking of Holocaust deniers.”

I invite readers to examine *The Holocaust: Fact Or Fiction?* webquest. While it has much excellent material and students are directed to create a series of interesting projects, I have serious questions about the way it is conceptualized, especially legitimizing claims that the Holocaust did not happen or has been exaggerated. It is also a pedagogical error to frame a supposedly open research question in such a way that no student ever arrives at one of the possible answers. Why introduce students to unsubstantiated and unsubstantiatable claims? Once teachers offer Holocaust denial as a legitimate topic for discussion they are opening the door for debate about creationism, the presentation of racist arguments and claims that intergalactic aliens are secretly manipulating events on Earth.

The issue is not whether the Holocaust happened, but why it happened and its historical and philosophical significance. Nothing can ever be “proven” beyond any doubt, especially to people who are committed to conspiracy theories and simply dismisses as phony any evidence that runs counter to their beliefs. – Alan Singer