

**“Souvenez-vous” (Remember): Using Literature to Teach Young Children about the Holocaust**  
by Judith Y. Singer

In Père Lachaise, a cemetery in Paris, there is a row of monuments along one wall dedicated to victims of the Nazi Holocaust, or “deportees,” as they are referred to in France. It is a peaceful part of the cemetery. Not many visitors wander here. The monuments are stark and moving. Each one represents a different concentration camp; each has ashes from the camp crematorium buried at its base. Each monument exhorts the visitor to “souvenez-vous.” Remember. Ravensbruck, Mauthausen, Flossenbug, Nevengame, Auschwitz. . . “Souvenez-vous, souvenez-vous.” Remember.

In the Holocaust Museum in Washington D. C., visitors are issued “passports” to help them imagine what it was like to be categorized as a “Jew” under the rule of the Nazis. I watched as a class of middle school students boisterously raced through a reconstructed cattle car designed to help visitors imagine one aspect of this systematic dehumanization of the Jews. No one asked the students to stop and look around them. In this carefully wrought memorial to the extermination of twelve million people, six million of them Jews, no one asked for respectful reflection on the past. How will they learn to remember?

As I immersed myself in children’s literature about the Holocaust, in preparation for writing this article, I began to feel overwhelmed at the horrors, the deaths, the cruelty and the hopelessness generated by such evil. As a Jew, born in the United States in 1943, I am keenly aware that this could have been my story. What about people born after World War II, like the children racing through the cattle car? Do they need to feel like this could have been their story, too? What about elementary school children and their teachers?

In a debate over how to frame Holocaust education for children in grades K-4, published in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, one educator asks, “what is the point of ever subjecting such young and tender minds and hearts to such atrocities?” (Sept.-Oct. 1999: 36). Another argues that concern to develop self-esteem and respect for diversity provides “linkage between the goals and objectives of the early childhood curriculum in general with those recommended for Holocaust education” (Jan.-Feb. 1999: P5). As both a teacher of young children and of elementary school teachers from all backgrounds, I appreciate the reluctance many teachers feel about exposing young children to the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. At the same time, I believe learning about the Holocaust will always be too painful, no matter what age the children are that we teach. In our eagerness to protect young children, we continuously forget the past, and we end up making the world more dangerous for them in the long run.

Nevertheless, we need to be careful with what we present to young children and how we present it. I do not feel compelled to teach the entire history of fascism in Nazi Germany when I introduce young children and their teachers to this part of our history. I would rather look at the hope generated by those people, both Jews and non-Jews, who resisted the Nazis; those who fought back and struggled to retain their humanity as the Nazis were trying to take it from them. I would rather focus on what people have done and what we all can do today to make the world a place where every child is cherished. To begin, we need to teach children some very sad things. We need to remember. “Souvenez-vous.”

Many of the stories I describe below are told from the point of view of a child caught up in the Nazi Holocaust. Most are appropriate to read with elementary children of all ages. Each can be used to help teachers or parents open up conversations with children and help them imagine themselves as people who can take a stand against injustice in the world. A word of caution: Each child and each class is different. Teachers need to prepare themselves for a conversation with their students by first reading these stories to themselves. They need to listen carefully to the ways children respond and encourage their students to share thoughts and feelings about each story.

Throughout this article, I also include brief descriptions of books which are appropriate mainly for older elementary school children. At the end of the article, I list books which can be used by older children and their teachers to learn more factual background about the events of the Nazi Holocaust.

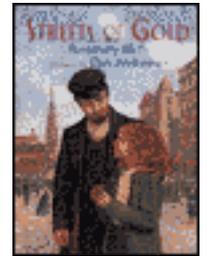


*Terrible Things* by Eve Bunting (1980). Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.

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

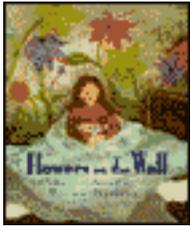
The Nazi Holocaust was not the beginning of the persecution of Jews in Europe. In this story, we learn of the journey of one Jewish family from Russia to the United States in 1894. The narrator, Mary Antin, describes the treatment of Jews in Russia at that time. “Most Russians looked on Jews as an inferior 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.



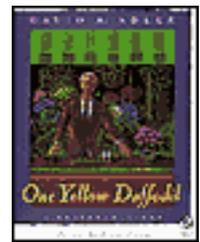
*Flowers on the Wall* by Miriam Nerlove (1996). NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

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.

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 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.

#### **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.

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