

## Using “Facing History and Ourselves” to Teach About the Holocaust

by Michelle Sarro

As a social studies teacher, the only thing more tragic than the Holocaust itself is the realization that it does not stand as the lone example of genocide. It is joined by a number of cases of mass murder, which although smaller in scope, remain equally devastating. It was with this in mind that I examined the resource guide *Holocaust and Human Behavior (HHB)* by Facing History and Ourselves as a supplemental text for teaching students about the importance of the Holocaust in history.

The greatest value of *Holocaust and Human Behavior* is the first person narratives and literary excerpts which make the events of the Holocaust palpable to students learning about it more than 50 years after it happened. No amount of statistical data, chronological timelines or “terms-to-define” capture the magnitude, complexity and human dimension of the Holocaust as these stories.

One of the things that makes *Holocaust and Human Behavior* so effective as a teaching tool is the way that it engages students in exploring the roles and choices made, not only by Nazis, but also by bystanders, rescuers and resisters. Because I found some of the passages a little too long for classroom use, I edited them to create a series of five high school level activity sheets.

**Lesson 1. Who was Responsible?** This activity begins with a look at Stanley Milgrim’s “shock experiment,” as a way of opening up the discussion of how and why individuals make the choices they do. Two excerpts from interrogations connected to war crimes trials (taken from *HHB*) follow the questions on the Milgrim experiment. Students must decide how much responsibility an individual has when institutions and societies injure people.

**Lesson 2. Do Bystanders Share Responsibility?** This lesson uses personal accounts, taken from *HHB*, to critically examine the decision made by thousands of individuals to essentially “look the other way” as the systematic destruction of Jews and other groups was taking place.

**Lesson 3. The Resisters.** This lesson uses the *HHB* accounts of the life and actions of various individuals and groups who in one way or another stood up against the Nazi regime, despite great personal risk.

**Lesson 4. The Rescuers.** This lesson uses the *HHB* accounts to draw student attention to individuals who made the choice to save another person’s life. The four passages focus on vastly different circumstances that each produced similar acts of courage and selflessness.

**Lesson 5. The Survivors.** This lesson combines material from *HHB* with passages that tell personal stories about other genocides. Students read the stories without realizing these events took place in other parts of the world at different times during the twentieth century. Passage A describes events in Armenia, 1914-1918; passage B describes events in Rwanda, 1994; passage C describes events in Cambodia, 1975-1979; passage D describes events in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-1995; and passage E describes events in the European Holocaust, 1938-1945.

### Follow-up Activities.

- Select and then research one of the persons/events discussed in this unit. Write an editorial for a newspaper (set in the 1940s) explaining your reaction to the person’s life or death or to the event you have chosen.

- Have you ever been in a situation where you were a bystander, a resister, or a rescuer? Write an essay explaining what happened, what you did and why?
- If a group of people in your town were being victimized because of “who they are,” what would you do? Why? Design a poster expressing your views on discrimination.

**High School Level Activities based on Holocaust and Human Behavior**  
(prepared by Michelle Sarro)

**Lesson 1. Who was Responsible?**

A. This section is based on the video of the Milgrim Experiment (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 210-212), which observed the effect of authority on individual behavior. The experiment was conducted in the 1960s and consisted of a control group of participants chosen to be “learners” and another group chosen to be teachers (the teachers are the focus of the experiment). Learners are taken into another room out of view of the teacher and the teacher is instructed to ask questions and give a shock to the learner for each incorrect answer. The video shows the “teachers” reactions to the increased shocks, the apparent auditory pain it causes the learner as well as the reality that most “teachers” administered the full 450 volts possible. After watching the video on the “Milgrim Experiment” answer questions 1-4.

**Questions**

1. What consequences did those administering the shock face if they did not comply?
2. What reasons did they give for continuing against their will?
3. Considering that 65% of subjects administered the full 450 volts, what can you imply about the effect of authority on human behavior?
4. Is being “told to do something” a justification?

B. At the Nuremberg Trials and the other courts that tried Nazis for war crimes, the defendants argued that they were innocent of criminal charges because they were simply “following orders”. Read the excerpts below before turning to the next page (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 433-436).

- “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... We just never heard anything else... 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... Himmler had ordered it and had even explained the necessity and I never really gave much thought to whether it was wrong. It just seemed a necessity. - Rudolph Hoess, Commander at Auschwitz
- “I was a German engineer and key member at the Topf works and I saw it as my duty to apply my specialist knowledge in this way in order to help Germany win the war, just as an aircraft construction engineer builds planes in war time, which are also connected to the destruction of human beings.” - Kurt Prufer, designer and builder of furnaces for crematoriums

**Questions**

1. In your opinion, are Hoess and Prufer guilty of war crimes? Explain.

2. C. P. Snow, a writer, argues that “When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion.” Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

## Lesson 2. Do Bystanders Share Responsibility?

**Instructions:** Read the excerpts and answer the questions.

A. During the Holocaust, railroad cars were used to transport millions of people to concentration camps. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Walter Stier, who was the person responsible for the “special trains” that transported the Jews to labor camps and an almost certain death (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 365-366).

Interviewer: But you knew that the trains to Treblinka or Aushwitz were—

Stier: Of course we knew. I was the last district; without me these trains couldn’t reach their destinations. So I had to . . . .

Interviewer: Did you know Treblinka meant extermination?

Stier: Of course not.

Interviewer: You didn’t know?

Stier: Good God, no. How could we know? I never went to Treblinka. I stayed in Krakow, in Warsaw, glued to my desk.

Interviewer: You were a . . .

Stier: I was strictly a bureaucrat.

B. Jan Karski, a courier ( someone who carries information, letters, packages, etc.) for the Polish resistance movement, talking about his conversation with United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 368).

“No one was prepared to grasp what was going on . . . not because of ill will, but simply because the facts were beyond human imagination . . . When I was in the U.S. and told Justice Felix Frankfurter the story of Polish Jews, he said at the end of our conversation, “I cannot believe you.” We were with the Polish Ambassador to the U.S., Jan Ciechenowski. Hearing the Justice’s comments, he was indignant. “Lieutenant Karski is on an official mission. My government’s authority stands behind him. You cannot say to his face that he is lying.” Frankfurter’s answer was, “I am not saying that he is lying. I only said that I cannot believe him, and there is a difference.”

C. When the Nazi’s took over Hartheim Castle in Vienna in 1939, it soon became an extension of a nearby labor camp (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 371).

- According to Sister Felicitas, “when there was intense activity it smoked day and night. Tufts of hair flew through the chimney onto the street. The remains of bones were stored on the east side of the castle and in ton trucks driven first to the Danube, later also to the Traun.”
- Christian Wirth, the director of the operation, met with local residents. He told them that his men were burning shoes and other “belongings.” The strong smell? “A device had been installed in which old oil and oil by-products underwent a special treatment through distillation and chemical treatment in order to gain a water-clear, oily fluid from it which was of great importance to U-Boats [German submarines]. Wirth ended the meeting by threatening to send anyone who spread “absurd rumors of burning persons” to a concentration camp. The townspeople took him at his word. They did not break their silence.

## Questions

1. What reasons do the bystanders give for not taking action?
2. What consequences, if any, did they face by resisting?
3. Justice Frankfurter acknowledges that he does not think Karski “is lying”, but still “cannot believe him.” What do you think he means?
4. Do bystanders, such as these, bear any responsibility for the events of the Holocaust? Explain.

## Lesson 3. The Rescuers

**Instructions:** Read the excerpts and answer the questions (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 383-393).

- The father, the two boys, and the baby girl moved in and we managed to survive the next two years until the end of the war. Friends helped us take up the floorboards, under the rug, and build a hiding place in case of raids. These did occur with increasing frequency, and one night we had a very narrow escape. Four Germans, accompanied by a Dutch Nazi policeman came and searched the house. They did not find the hiding place, but they had learned from experience that sometimes it paid to go back to a house they had already searched, because by then the hidden Jews might have come out. Then the Dutch policeman came back alone. I had a small revolver that a friend had given me, but I had never planned to use it. I felt I had no choice except to kill him. I would do it again, under the same circumstances, but it still bothers me and I still feel that there “should” have been another way.
- The people of Le Chambon, a tiny mountain town in south-central France, were also aware that Jews were being murdered and took action to save as many people as possible...Magde Trocme, the wife of a local minister explains what happened: “Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated...There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help.”
- Many people attributed the success of Le Chambon to the work of “le major”, the Nazi occupation governor of the region who, although he was later replaced, stayed on as second-in-command. The Trocmes claim he was responsible for the anonymous phone calls they received just before the raid. When he was brought to trial by the French resistance at the end of the war, he was greeted with kindness and gratitude from nearly everyone in the room, despite the accusations brought against him. Of his role in helping the people of Le Chambon rescue so many Jews, he said the meeting was almost painful and that: “He was glad for their praise and their affection, but didn’t they realize decency is the normal thing to do? Didn’t they realize that decency needs no rewards, no recognition, that it is done out of the heart, now, immediately, just in order to satisfy the heart now?”
- Oskar Schindler...began by turning his factory into an official subcamp of a newly constructed labor camp at Plazow. For a time it was a haven for about five hundred Jews. Then in the fall of 1944, the Nazis ordered both camps closed and the workers shipped to Auschwitz. Schindler refused to let that happen. He put together a list of eleven hundred men, women and children that he claimed as his workers. He then used his own money and influence to transport the workers to a new factory he was building in Brinnlitz, Czechoslovakia. When the Jewish women who worked in his factory were transported to Auschwitz by mistake, he accomplished the impossible. He managed to get the women back by offering Nazi officials a fortune in bribes.

### Questions

1. In passage A, the “rescuer” is forced to take one life, in order that she might save four others. Do you consider her action heroic or tragic? Explain.
2. Do you think as Protestants in a nation of Catholics, the oppression felt by the people of Le Chambon influenced their decision to help the Jews? Explain.
3. Should “le major” be considered a hero, despite the fact that he served the Nazis until the end of the war and as such, was likely responsible for as many deaths as he was for lives saved? Explain.
4. Schindler has been accused of profiting from cheap Jewish labor during the Holocaust. Even if profit was his original motive, does it make him less of a hero? Explain.

### Lesson 4. The Resisters

**Instructions:** Read the chart and answer the questions (Source: Holocaust and Human Behavior, 373-377).

Who were they?	What did they do?	What was the consequence?
Hans and Sophie Scholl, Students	Formed a group known as the White Rose which published and then distributed a leaflet which exposed the death of more than 300,000 Polish Jews.	Arrested by the Nazis and brought to trial. Freely admitted their responsibility and were found “guilty.” Both were guillotined later the same day.
Helmuth von Moltke, German Aristocrat	Smuggled copies of the <i>White Rose</i> , a leaflet that exposed the he plight of Polish Jews, to friends in Allied countries. The fliers were then dropped over German cities. Worked for The Kreisau Circle, a group dedicated to fighting the Nazis and creating a new Germany.	He was executed in January, 1945, after a member of the Kreisau Circle, Klaus von Stauffenberg, placed a briefcase containing a bomb under a table where Hitler and his top officials were meeting. Hitler and the other officials survived. Twelve thousand people were put to death for this act.
On February 27, 1943, women of mixed Aryan-Jewish marriages that openly protested the kidnapping and deportation of their children and husbands.	Went to Rosenstrasse 2-4 where their “Jewish” relatives were being held. A Jewish woman married to an Aryan did not have to wear a yellow star, but a man did. Many of the women were themselves secretly Jews and risked being picked up. They stayed for days despite SS threats to shoot and chanted the phrase “murderer, murderer” in the face of machine guns.	After several days of protest Joseph Goebbels ordered the release of all Jews married to an “Aryan”. An underling of Goebbels later claimed that Jews were released “so that others didn’t take a lesson from it, so that others didn’t begin to do the same.”

### Questions

1. Compare the experiences of the resisters. Did anyone have more at stake than the others did?

2. Is the choice to resist harder for a non-Jew like Moltke or the Scholls than it is for the women who protested to save their families? Explain your answer.
3. Does the fact that they were killed for their actions make them less successful? Defend your answer.

**Great Irish Famine Curriculum Available On-Line at [www.emsc.nysed.gov/nysssa/gif/index.html](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nysssa/gif/index.html)**

The award-winning New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum makes accessible to students and teachers the history of the Great Irish Famine. The curriculum guide is specifically designed to encourage the exploration of key concepts and develop essential skills outlined in the seven New York State learning standards areas. It includes exploration of social concepts such as culture, religion, economics, scarcity, democracy, citizenship, public policy and demographics, as well as issues in science and the environment. It enables students to examine and understand the intersection of art, music and literature with science, culture and history. – Mary Daley, New York State Department of Education

### Lesson 5. The Survivors

**Instructions:** Read the following accounts by survivors and then answer the questions below.

A. Out of convoys which, when they left their homes...numbered from two to three thousand...only two or three hundred arrive. All the nourishment they receive is a daily ration of a little meal sprinkled over their hands...a mass of about four hundred emaciated forms, the remnants of such convoys is lying in one of the [yards]...most of them are suffering from typhoid and dysentery . . . weakened by months of starvation...they just lie there quietly waiting for death . . .

B. First they asked people to hand over their money, saying they would spare those who paid. But after taking the money they killed them anyway . . . there were children begging for pity but they killed them straight away. . . for the next 43 days [I] lived among the rotting corpses, too weak to stand up and convinced the world had come to an end. . . I prayed that I would die because I could not see a future life.

C. We all sort of got used to such relocations. . . however, the place was not an ideal resting area. We have always known that it was a “processing center” . . . they called it a “work camp”, but we all knew it simply as “Death Camp” . . . There were thousands and thousands of people working...many died in front of me from heat stroke, sickness, exhaustion and starvation. . . and many were taken away during the cover of night to almost a certain destination, death. All that time I was wondering when our turn would come . . .

D. Everyday people were being brought to the camp. I knew many of them from before. As far as I know, five thousand men, two hundred forty boys age eleven to fourteen, and thirty-six women were there. The meal consisted of one piece of bread and a bit of cooked stuff, mainly beans. . . people would faint everyday from physical weakness and hunger . . . I was desperately hoping I’d be killed with a bullet. . . trucks took the bodies away, we don’t know where.

E. There were those who fell—we were not allowed to help them rise. They were shot - right there - wherever the fell. . . and finally my turn came. . . and then he turned my head. . . and shot me. . . I was praying for another bullet to put an end to my suffering. . . I felt bodies pulling at me. . . not all of them dead, but in their last sufferings . . . children crying “Mother,” “Father,” . . . I could not stand. . .

**Questions**

1. How are the stories told in these passages similar or different?
2. What words and experiences are repeated in each passage?
3. Does any one experience seem worse than the others? Why?
4. Passage A describes events in Armenia, 1914-1918; passage B describes events in Rwanda, 1994; passage C describes events in Cambodia, 1975-1979; passage D describes events in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-1995; and passage E describes events in the European Holocaust, 1938-1945. Did you realize they were describing different places and times? Why or why not?
5. In your opinion, are these all examples of genocide? Explain.  
In your opinion, could something like this happen in the world today or in the future? Explain.