

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

**Exemplary
LESSONS**
i n i t i a t i v e

**BRINGING THE
HOLOCAUST UNIT
TO CLOSURE:
IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE FUTURE**

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Study of the Holocaust would not be complete without a discussion of implications for the future. How should the Holocaust be woven into the fabric of twentieth-century history? How can its study move us forward so that our children are not traumatized and fixated on its atrocities? Most important, what are the lessons that can be learned from this horrific event so that our children learn from the past to make a better world? These essential questions must be asked if the study of the Holocaust is to have meaning in the post-Holocaust world.

The lesson I describe is the last one in a three-week Holocaust unit. It involves three segments: one focused on Elie Wiesel's opening address at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, one focused on *Schindler's List*, and one on Leon Bass's speech about the liberation of Buchenwald.

The impetus for this lesson came from two places, the opening ceremonies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. I was at the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum when Elie Wiesel turned to President Clinton and asked him what he was going to do about Bosnia! It was an electrifying moment. Wiesel was admonishing us for our inaction when faced with yet another instance of genocide. His speech contended that the purpose of the Museum would be unfulfilled unless we confront genocide and terror when it occurs and take action to rescue those in need. Wiesel's words were also a reminder that we are all accountable. The lessons from the Holocaust must be taught and applied to today.

The *Schindler's List* lesson was taken from an activity I participated in at Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, in its 1999 summer seminar. During one class we watched the last segment of the movie and then went directly to Oskar Schindler's gravesite. There we were met by Schindler survivors Genya and Nachum Manor, who related their firsthand experiences and memories of Oskar Schindler. Standing at Schindler's grave with these two survivors while they related their stories was a profound experience. My personal connection to the survivors of the Holocaust has brought the history alive. I found the same thing to be true with liberators' testimony as I read Leon Bass's statement while reading the accounts from the *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945, Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Council).

LESSON BY

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GRADE LEVEL

10–12

**GRADE-LEVEL
APPLICABILITY**

7–12

SUBJECT

WORLD HISTORY SINCE 1500
AP EUROPEAN HISTORY

TIME REQUIRED

1–2 CLASS PERIODS

These events personalized the Holocaust story for me and helped me make a vivid personal connection.

The history of the Holocaust is complex; therefore, understanding its implications is complex as well. Elie Wiesel refers to the Holocaust as a question within a question. Questions lead to further questions, and still there are questions that will remain unanswerable. It is, however, only through the process of study and questioning that we gain understanding of the Holocaust and of its significance for the future.

Content and experience that precedes lesson

This lesson seeks to synthesize the historical period and show the relevance of the Holocaust to the present. For the project to be successful, students need to have had background study in the Holocaust. They should be familiar with the basic history, events, and outcomes. This lesson is *not* designed to stand on its own, but rather is a culminating activity.

Brief background

I teach this lesson in a traditional World History since 1500 course and in Advanced Placement European History. It occurs in the fourth quarter of the semester (April–May) after a study of World War I and the Rise of Hitler. My students are sophomores (10th grade). There is a wide range in their exposure to history as a discipline. Many have had World History since 1500 or World Cultures in their freshman year. However, for some of them, this is their first history course. About half of my students have had previous education on the Holocaust, but there are others who have had little or no previous exposure to the subject. The challenge, therefore, is to reach students who have a variety of learning styles and prior knowledge.

PURPOSE OF LESSON

Students must recognize the relevance of the Holocaust in our world affairs today and the role of individuals and communities in preventing dehumanization. Exploring in depth Elie Wiesel's speech at the opening of the Holocaust Museum shows students several things. First, it demonstrates that in this country a private citizen can question the President of the United States and urge action. Elie Wiesel put President Clinton on the spot, in a very public way. I would like to believe that this had something to do with the way the President addressed the Balkan crisis. When action was taken, the President called in Wiesel to let him know that he had been heard. It is important for students to know that one individual can make a difference, and that the government is accountable to us! Second, we have a responsibility to make our voices heard in a democratic nation. With rights, comes responsibility.

GOALS FOR STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

Ultimately, I want students to walk away from this lesson with three things in mind.

- **Remembrance:** The Holocaust is not just about the six million Jews murdered. It is also about the loss of future generations. What future doctors, scientists, artists, writers, or philosophers were never allowed to develop? As the Jews were killed, their progeny, our future leaders and our human potential, were also lost.
- **Relevance:** Students must understand that the lessons of the Holocaust are present in our daily lives and directly connected to world events. The names and places may change, but the lessons are still applicable.
- **Responsibility:** Students need to recognize their own responsibility in making sure that genocide does not happen again. We must all take action and respond whenever we see hatred, prejudice, and antisemitism.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL DO TO BUILD THEIR UNDERSTANDING

- Students recognize the impact of the Holocaust on postwar and future generations.
- Students begin to understand the importance of moral decision making in both their individual and public lives.
- Students delineate and begin to appreciate their role and importance as a citizen of their own communities and the larger global community.

STATE STANDARDS

This lesson is designed to meet the standards set by the *Bradley Commission on History in Schools* (1987–88.) It comports with the following guidelines:

- **Habits of Mind:** Understand the significance of the past to their own lives, both private and public, and to their society
- **Vital Themes and Narratives:** Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS

Current Events

For example, in May 2003, the hazing incident at nearby Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Illinois, made a profound impact on my students. Since Northbrook is a nearby suburb, I used this incident as an opener to talk about bystander behavior: all of those students who stood by and watched what was happening, who had cell phones in their hands, but no one called for help. They watched as their fellow students were being beaten. “All it takes for the triumph of evil is for good men to stand by and do nothing.” (Edmund Burke)

Materials

A. Videotapes

- *Schindler's List* (1994) MCA Universal Home Video
- A Week of Remembrance: The Dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1994) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

B. Web resources

Remarks from President Clinton and from Elie Wiesel:

- <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/index.utp?content=faq/wiesel.htm>
- <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/index.utp?content=faq/clinton.htm>

C. Handouts

- "Press Conference Proceedings" from the White House: President Clinton and Elie Wiesel, December 13, 1995, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (See Handout 1.)
- Remarks from Leon Bass. *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945; Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987). (See Handout 2.)

LESSON NARRATIVE

Segment I: *Schindler's List*

View the final 10-minute segment of *Schindler's List*. MCA Universal Home Video.

Teachers should set the context for students by giving the following background:

Oskar Schindler was an ethnic German businessman living in Czechoslovakia during the Holocaust. At the beginning of the war, Schindler's objective was simply to make money. He opened an enamelworks factory in Kraków, Poland, using Jews of the ghetto as slave labor. Jews were used because they were the cheapest labor and, therefore, profits would be higher.

The ticket for survival in the ghetto, however, was being employed in a necessary war industry. Jews employed in Schindler's factory were saved from being deported to the camps because they were performing vital work for the war effort. As Schindler became more involved with the Jews who were employed in his factory, he became more sensitive to their plight. He ultimately went to enormous lengths and used his own personal finances to save Jewish lives. After the war Yad Vashem recognized his efforts and identified him as a member of the "Righteous Among Nations."

Discussion Questions:

For each segment of the interactive discussion, questions are designed to be open-ended and do not have right or wrong answers. The goal is to get students to think about moral responsibility.

1. What is the importance of the survivors' paying tribute to Schindler?

Schindler's Jews, or Schindler Juden, were very aware of the risks Schindler took in order to save their lives. He is a shining example of the "Righteous Gentile." The Jews are very aware that they are alive because of Schindler.

2. Why do you think Schindler, an ethnic German and a Christian, was buried in Jerusalem?

Schindler made many visits to Jerusalem and visited with the people he had saved. He asked in his will that he be buried in Jerusalem because he felt a strong sense of connection there.

3. Why do you think Steven Spielberg, the director of *Schindler's List*, decided to include this final scene in the movie. Why is it in color when the rest of the movie is in black and white?

The survivors are a reminder of life after the Holocaust. These survivors have created a new life despite their horrific experiences.

Spielberg used color film in this segment as a symbol. As the colors are vibrant and alive, so is the Jewish community. It is also more than symbolic that this takes place in Israel, a country created as a Jewish homeland after the war. It is a living testament that Hitler did not succeed in making the world free of Jews, Judenrein.

4. Why is it significant that there are more than 6,000 descendants of the Schindler Jews?

These descendants represent the continuity of Jewish life in spite of the so-called "Final Solution." If their parents had not survived (and they are in the minority), these descendants would not be here. Their contributions to society would also not be there. As doctors, lawyers, businessmen, teachers, and members of a variety of other professions as well as nonprofessionals, they may have made significant contributions to society. Their lives and contributions should lead us to consider the kinds of contributions that were missed with the killing of the millions of victims of the Holocaust. Students should remember that it is not just the victims who were killed, but the potential succeeding generations as well.

Segment II: Elie Wiesel's Remarks at the Opening of the Holocaust Museum

View the five-minute segment of "A Week of Remembrance: The Dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (5 minutes).

Discussion Questions: (10 minutes)

1. Why do you think Elie Wiesel left his prepared speech to ask President Clinton to do something about Bosnia?

Wiesel has acted as the spokesperson for the Holocaust survivors and the voice of a moral conscience. After visiting the former Yugoslavia, he was most disturbed by the atrocities and conditions he witnessed. He felt compelled to ask President Clinton to address this problem. One of the many lessons of the Holocaust is that the world remained silent during the 1930s

and 1940s. By bringing the critical problem to worldwide attention, Wiesel was hoping that some action would be taken to help the plight of the people of the former Yugoslavia.

2. Do you think that Elie Wiesel was correct in using this forum for addressing this problem?

Yes: The primary purpose of the Museum is education. Therefore, it was fitting and proper that Wiesel use this opportunity to address the critical conditions in Bosnia. The lessons of the Holocaust will remain lost if action is not taken when genocide and atrocities are taking place. The world cannot stand idly by.

No: Wiesel overstepped his bounds by putting the President on the spot. It was inappropriate and disrespectful. There are more suitable forums for addressing these issues.

3. Why was Elie Wiesel able to do this?

Wiesel also has a unique status. As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, he has earned tremendous worldwide admiration and therefore is a voice and presence that commands respect. Very few individuals could have carried off the message to Clinton as Wiesel did.

Furthermore, his ability to speak directly to the president can be viewed as a positive comment on the democratic process in this country. Where else could a private citizen address the president of the United States in such a public forum to demand action? It is a reflection of our American brand of democracy that our leaders are responsible to their citizens and that private citizens have the right to ask their leaders for "redress of grievances." In this case it was to ask that the United States take some action to relieve the suffering in Bosnia.

4. Did Elie Wiesel's remarks make a difference?

This is an appropriate place to read the accompanying remarks made at the Oval Office on December 13, 1995.

These remarks are evidence that the President took Wiesel's words to heart and looked for a way to help. Wiesel voiced his approval, recognizing what a difficult task it was to find an appropriate way to help Bosnia. Wiesel acknowledges the importance of the United States' exhibiting moral leadership by working to send troops to keep the peace.

Segment III: Leon Bass "Remarks"

Read remarks from Leon Bass. *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987). (5 minutes)

Leon Bass was a soldier in the United States Army during World War II and a liberator of Buchenwald. As an African American educator, he lectures as an eyewitness to the liberation.

Read this speech aloud to the class. Teachers may want to make copies for each student. Leon Bass's speech calls on all of us to take a stand in whatever way possible to speak out against bigotry and prejudice. He uses everyday examples to demonstrate how individual actions can make a difference and are essential if we are going to prevent a Holocaust from happening again.

Discussion Questions: (10 Minutes)

1. What does Leon Bass say is the way to avoid another genocide?

We each have a personal responsibility to respond and react to incidents of violence and bigotry.

2. How can we, as individuals, make a difference?

When we hear name-calling, or people using derogatory language about another ethnic group, we must each ask the person using it to stop.

3. Ask students if there have been times that they have stood by when incidents like the one Leon Bass describes have occurred.

Most everyone has been involved in hearing or seeing seemingly small acts of bigotry.

4. Ask students how they could respond to these incidents differently next time they are faced with them.

Student responses will vary, but one hopes they will recognize that there are ways of speaking out without being confrontational. For example: "It offends me or hurts me when I hear you talk about someone or a particular group like that. I know that you did not mean it so please don't talk like that!" Students must recognize that by letting their friends and acquaintances speak in a derogatory or disrespectful way, they are actually saying that it is okay.

ASSESSMENT

Student understanding is assessed in a variety of ways (journal input, class discussion, observation of behavior at school).

Journal responses are one way of measuring student responses. Possible questions are the following:

- What are the three most important things that you have learned about the Holocaust that you did not know before? Why are these particular things important?
- What are the three most important lessons that you learned from the Holocaust and why do you think these lessons are important?
- In what ways do you think your behavior will change as a result of studying the Holocaust?

I am looking to see if students are able to make a connection between the specific situations we have studied and similar events taking place today. I consider spontaneous comparisons between past and present modes of living and worldviews as strong indicators of students' understanding. In my follow-up questions to students, I am often probing to see if they can go beyond a superficial reporting of facts to a deeper analysis of the situation. Can they look at causes and effects, for example? Can they consider alternative perspectives? Can they see differences between past and present as well as similarities? Furthermore, to what extent do I see a change in behavior—particularly in the classroom.

Students are incredibly engaged in this unit. It is important that I do a lot of listening. Students are usually very somber, and it is through their journal writings that I can see the impact this unit has on them. They want more information. I encourage them to read survivor accounts.

TEACHER REFLECTION

I have found that this lesson works extremely well. Since today's students are visual learners, the use of videos immediately engages them. The videos are meant to be used as "triggers for discussion" rather than on their own. Because the clips are short (at most ten minutes) students are actively engaged from the start. In the future I will probably change the piece on Bosnia and include Iraq in some way. Here are some questions I am thinking about:

- What does the Holocaust teach us about involvement in other nation's affairs when there are known human rights abuses and threats to international security?
- What is the role of the United States and the United Nations with respect to how nations treat their populations?
- What are the consequences of inaction?