“Who Will Tell Them After We’re Gone?”: Reflections On Teaching the Holocaust

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IN LOS ANGELES, a unique group of individuals regularly meet to share common experiences of almost five decades ago. They are victims of the Holocaust, dedicated to preserving the memory of the most terrible event of this century. As eyewitnesses to history, they frequently address students in elementary and secondary schools to testify about the Jewish experience in Hitler’s Europe. But the numbers of survivors are dwindling, and their greatest fear is that with their passing, the memory and lessons of the Holocaust will be lost to succeeding generations. This article, therefore, addresses issues related to teaching about the Holocaust. It seeks to establish a rationale for including this infamous episode in a social studies curriculum, and to illustrate how a study of the Nazi atrocity holds universal lessons for students at all grade levels.

The concerns expressed by the survivors seems unjustified, for it is inconceivable that the horrors of Hitler’s death camps will not be transmitted to future generations, even without benefit of first-hand testimony. The visual record of the ovens, the cattle trains, the gas chambers, and the butchery, clearly documented in newsreels and photographs, undoubtedly will etch the lessons of the Holocaust permanently into the consciousness...
of a future generation of students. Yet there is a human tendency to recall the past selectively and to erase painful memories. Nations, too, seek to dismiss or distort inglorious historical episodes. For example, considerable controversy was generated by the sanitized accounts of Japan’s role in World War II as they appeared in Japanese textbooks. Descriptions of the Vietnam War, written by American textbook authors, frequently omit reference to Agent Orange (or that the conflict resulted in a defeat for the United States).

The history of the Third Reich is already being re-evaluated in West Germany and elsewhere. One might easily dismiss neo-Nazi and pseudo-academic groups, such as the Institute for Historical Review which maintains that the Holocaust was nothing more than a hoax. However, respected scholars have also begun to reassess the significance of the horrors perpetrated during that infamous era. In 1986 an intellectual battle erupted in West Germany over the interpretation of the Nazi period. Some conservative historians in the Federal Republic argue that for too long Germans have been obsessed with guilt and shame over the recent past. Those academicians have begun to reassess the Hitler era in an attempt to foster a more positive identification with the German past. That effort fueled a debate known in Germany as the Historikerstreit, the war of the historians. The controversy has thus far failed to uncover new evidence about Nazi Germany, but it holds great significance for German national consciousness.¹

Ernst Nolte, a leading protagonist in the Historikerstreit, charges that the Nazi period has been turned into a “negative myth,” largely because the history of the Third Reich has been written by the victors in World War II. Professor Nolte maintains that Hitler’s attempted annihilation of Jews differed little from Stalin’s terror in the Soviet Union. “Wasn’t the Gulag Archipelago more original than Auschwitz?,” asks Nolte. “Wasn’t class murder by Bolsheviks logically and actually prior to ‘racial murders’ by the Nazis?”² Fellow historian Joachim Fest supports Nolte in arguing that it is only the technology of death that distinguishes Nazi atrocities from mass killings perpetrated by Russians in this century.³

Other conservative scholars in the Federal Republic have joined the controversy. Diplomatic historian Andreas Hillgruber is uncomfortable with the attention given to the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany. Hillgruber insists that the destruction of the German Reich was as great a tragedy as the Holocaust. He therefore urges that the focus of study shift to the sufferings of German soldiers who fought on the Eastern front during World War II. He joins Nolte in contending that the Nazi genocide was relative to other twentieth-century horrors such as the mass murder of Armenians, the innumerable deaths resulting from Stalinist terror, and the massacre of Cambodians by the Pol Pot regime.⁴
The new revisionist argument thus characterizes the slaughter of the Jews as an unexceptional chapter in the grim catalog of persecutions throughout history. The question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust has serious implications for the German nation and the German psyche. If the Final Solution is comparable to other genocides, then Germany could be considered no worse than other nations who have committed such crimes. But if the Holocaust is deemed exceptional, then the German past and perhaps even the German character may forever be tainted.5

Tragically, this century has witnessed oppression in every part of the world. Governments have killed their own citizens on a mass scale in the Ottoman Empire, in the Soviet Union, in South Africa, in Indonesia, in Cambodia, and most recently, on the streets of Beijing. But the destruction of European Jewry was different, qualitatively if not quantitatively. Eberhard Jackel, an authority on the Third Reich from the University of Stuttgart, notes that,

The Nazi murder of Jews was unique because never before had a state decided and announced, on the authority of its responsible leader, that it intended to kill in its entirety, as far as possible, a particular group of human beings including its old people, women, children, and infants, and then put this decision into action with every possible instrument of power available to the state.6

The historians’ conflict continues in West Germany. Critics regard the revisionists as apologists who shamefully distort history in order to rehabilitate the German past and restore German nationalism.7 Nevertheless, Nolte, Hillgruber and other conservative historians have won support in political circles and in the responsible German press. Reinterpreting the Nazi period is hardly the exclusive domain of the German right. Arno Mayer, a historian in the United States who identifies with the political left, argues that Nazi anti-semitism was little more than a by-product of the greater antipathy against Bolshevism. In a recently published work on the Holocaust, Mayer seems to minimize or overlook Nazi attacks on Jews that occurred apart from the context of anti-Bolshevism.8

The Nazi past has been re-examined in other quarters as well. The ultraconservative French presidential candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, who received nearly 15 percent of the vote in the April 1988 national elections, has dismissed the Nazi death camps as a “minor point” in history.9 Additional evidence of distorted memories of the Nazi period abound. Fifty years after Anschluss, many Austrians persist in depicting their nation as the “first victim” of Nazi aggression. In fact, Austrians greeted their German “conquerors” with unrestrained enthusiasm, thousands of Austrians served in elite Nazi fighting units during World War II, and 40
percent of all Nazi death camps were staffed by Austrians. The current
president of Austria apparently suffered a lapse of memory over his own
service to Nazism during World War II. President Reagan’s understanding
of that period of history was called into question when he honored those
buried at the German military cemetery at Bitburg which included forty-
seven members of Hitler’s SS troops. Reagan seemed to corroborate
Hillgruber’s version of the past by equating the fallen SS with those who
perished in the ovens and gas chambers. The President asserted, “[The SS]
were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps.”
Such misconstruction, intentional and unintentional, is alarming to those
who hope that the recollection of the Holocaust will remain in the
collective consciousness. One reporter who recently investigated that
period in history observed that “Europeans old enough to remember those
years have not forgotten the past, but often remember it too well and they
deply resent being reminded of it.”

It could be argued that such manifestations are exceptional, and that the
lessons of the Holocaust are firmly imbedded in popular consciousness.
But this may not be the case. Less than a generation following the end of
World War II, a number of citizens in Milwaukee were questioned for jury
selection in a case against a local chapter of the National Socialist White
People’s Party. Of twenty-three randomly selected individuals, all of
whom were alive during World War II, virtually none knew anything
about Nazism nor did they associate Nazism with the killing of 6 million
Jews. There is undoubtedly a wider understanding of the Holocaust in
this decade; nevertheless, a recent survey of 8000 seventeen-year olds
revealed that nearly a quarter of those interviewed did not know that the
term “Holocaust” referred to the Nazi persecution of Jews during World
War II. Of black children included in the survey, fewer than three in five
could correctly define the Holocaust.

Clearly, the need for teaching the lessons of the Holocaust grows more
urgent and compelling as the Nazi nightmare dims in the collective
consciousness. There was an uneasy silence about the Holocaust for more
than two decades following World War II, and the subject was barely
touched upon in schools throughout Europe and the United States. Interest
was revived in the shadow of the Eichmann trial and the turmoil of the
1960s. Holocaust studies began to appear in college and secondary school
curricula by the mid-seventies, although some critics felt that the subject
was given inadequate treatment. Public interest in the Holocaust contin-
ued to grow by the later 1970s, and the subject was particularly popular-
ized in 1978 by the NBC- TV presentation, Holocaust. Holocaust centers
were established in Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and St. Louis.
Courses on the subject proliferated and by 1980, school districts in twenty-
five states included a study of the Holocaust in their curricula. More than 140 institutions of higher learning offered such courses and students reported that they felt a strong emotional impact and that the subject stimulated interest and excitement in learning.\textsuperscript{15} A high school senior from Willmar, Minnesota, reflected the heightened interest in the Holocaust thusly: "When six million people are killed, and we forget about it, then we've lost the meaning of life."\textsuperscript{16}

But what has been the state of Holocaust studies in recent years? Has the enthusiasm and interest manifested in the early part of this decade been sustained? And what of the quality of those courses? The answers to these questions are somewhat discouraging. On the surface at least, it appears that a study of the Holocaust has been integrated into the standard history curriculum. New York, California, and other states have included units on the Holocaust in required European and world history courses, usually offered in the tenth grade. Some districts introduce the subject in courses on human rights, while others offer elective courses on the Holocaust. Yet, by 1983 fewer than 1 percent of the nation's 30,000 secondary schools had incorporated Holocaust studies into the curricula.\textsuperscript{17} Although the subject is commonly covered in world history courses, in a few days at best, a recent study by the National Endowment for the Humanities revealed that thirty-four states do not require any courses on world history in their public schools.\textsuperscript{18} Evidence also suggests that the quality of teaching on the subject is questionable. Many school systems offering courses on the Holocaust failed to provide adequate teacher training in content and pedagogy. Consequently, it was reported that such courses lacked focus.\textsuperscript{19} In a 1983 survey of twelve schools in northeast Pennsylvania, 95 percent of respondents answered No to the question: "Do you think that the Holocaust receives adequate coverage in your school's courses?"\textsuperscript{20}

Textbooks used in American schools do little to enlighten students and clarify issues related to the Holocaust. A 1987 study\textsuperscript{21} concluded that most social studies textbooks on the elementary school level make only passing reference to the Holocaust. Of nine books examined, there was a total of nine sentences related to the Nazi atrocity. The authors of the survey found that while many American history textbooks contained some description of the Holocaust, they uniformly failed to contain any explanation on the causes of those events. Treatment of the topic in secondary world history texts was more extensive than contained in American history texts, but again, there was little information about those factors responsible for bringing about the destruction of European Jewry. The Holocaust was mentioned in only one of ten secondary government and civic textbooks examined in the study. Coverage was similarly lacking in sociology and geography textbooks. History texts on the college level were found
inconsistent in their treatment of the subject. One might expect that the most extensive treatment of the Holocaust would appear in Western civilization textbooks, which cover major developments in European history. Nevertheless, the survey found coverage of the Holocaust in those texts "spotty and superficial."22

Considerable controversy has been generated over the issue of Holocaust studies. Does the Holocaust hold a special place in the school curriculum? What is the responsibility of educators in teaching the subject? Is it appropriate to present this most unpleasant chapter in modern history to school-aged children?

The Holocaust does not deserve special attention, some critics maintain, when history is everywhere replete with injustice, suffering and human misery. The Holocaust is therefore regarded by some as little more than another episode in a sequence of atrocities committed against a small number of people. Why, they ask, should schools mandate an essentially narrow subject that is of concern to but a small segment of the entire American population? Some critics charge that the Holocaust has been overemphasized and its lessons overgeneralized; they insist that the world has taken sufficient notice of the slaughter of millions of Jews, and that such a tragedy could never happen again. Others object on the grounds that the enormity of the crime renders it incomprehensible for students of all ages, or that the topic is too gruesome to expose to impressionable youngsters. Some educators cite practical problems associated with the teaching of the Holocaust, such as inadequate textbook coverage on the topic and a curriculum that is already overcrowded. They point out that overburdened teachers are required to cover an enormous amount of content in world history courses and in addition, are asked to stress skills development in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Some schools also insist that each social studies lesson emphasize values and citizenship education. Adding a unit on the Holocaust only compounds the problem.

Those objections notwithstanding, the rationale for teaching about the Holocaust is compelling and overwhelming. It is based on the assumption that history can teach lessons useful to future generations. As a subject for study, the Holocaust is both universal and unique. The universal implications of the Holocaust are firmly grounded in a world where dictatorship, terrorism, and nuclear technology make future Holocausts a distinct possibility. As the ultimate consequence of bigotry, intolerance, and hatred, the Holocaust raises significant and disturbing questions about people, nations, the use of science and technology, and the human condition. It is a subject deeply rooted in the European past and can be understood only within the context of the relationship between Christians
and Jews in history. Against the charge that it is too narrow a subject, it can be argued that the Holocaust is no more peculiar to Jews than is the study of slavery to blacks.23 The Holocaust is more than just the experience of European Jewry; it is a seminal event, one which altered the flow of history. As one observer stated: “The subject goes to the very heart of the relationship between man and state in the twentieth century.”24 Unlike other genocides in this century, the destruction of the Jews was a product of western culture and has left an indelible scar on the collective consciousness of that civilization. “Like the fall of Rome or the French Revolution,” writes historian Henry Friedlander, “the Holocaust is one of those historical events that represents an age.”25

Indeed, the subject of the Holocaust is too important not to teach to youngsters. Although the magnitude of the Holocaust strains the limits of comprehension, it holds lessons so universal that a school district would be remiss in not including the topic in its course of study. Awareness of the Holocaust can heighten a student’s sensitivity to suffering and injustice everywhere. It can help youngsters recognize those tendencies in our society that produce prejudice, acts of bigotry and anti-Semitism. The Holocaust holds lessons on the darker side of human nature and on the immorality of indifference; it has much to present on the effects of peer pressure, individual responsibility, and the process of decision-making under the most extreme conditions. It holds lessons on moral choices and moral reasoning, encouraging students to reflect upon an individual’s responsibility to others and to the society as a whole. Furthermore, it teaches the ultimate consequence of racism and the dangers of extreme nationalism.

Certainly, the Holocaust is an unsettling subject, one that seriously questions basic assumptions about our society and its values. It challenges our faith in progress, technology, and education. Taught correctly, the subject should confuse, disturb, and frustrate students. It should dispel the tidy but inaccurate impression that Western civilization has steadily progressed through the ages, that technology has always served the cause of progress, and that those who perpetrated the crime were uneducated hooligans. It raises the question of whether, after Auschwitz, it is still possible to maintain faith in progress and belief in God. Students should be disturbed to learn that Hitler’s extermination policy was made possible only by employing the tools of modern technology, that among Hitler’s accomplices were architects, doctors, lawyers, and psychiatrists, and that a large percentage of those responsible for the death camps held Ph.D. degrees. Youngsters should question how such destruction could be wrought by a society that was a product of the Enlightenment. The Holocaust stands as a challenge to those nations, including the United
States, which stood passively by and even contributed to the horror by refusing to accept Europe's Jewish refugees. It represents a challenge to those who openly collaborated with the Nazis, and to survivors who are reluctant to confront and recollect the trauma of the experience.

To be sure, the subject can be horrifying and traumatic for some youngsters. The teacher must take precaution against overwhelming impressionable minds with frightful depictions of piled corpses and endless statistics attesting to the mass killings. Such an approach can numb and de-sensitize students, or may even prove entertaining to afficianados of horror films. On the other hand, underplaying the atrocities might serve the cause of those who seek to minimize or deny the inhumanity. The challenge is to strike a balance to sensitize—not traumatize—students about human behavior and the forces that produce genocide and the Holocaust, in particular.

A study of the Holocaust is relevant to the major issues in social studies education today. It is generally accepted that schools should strive to imbue students with thinking skills. Barry Beyer, an authority in social studies skills education, maintains that such skills are best taught and reinforced when presented in the context of the subject matter rather than as isolated lessons on thinking.\textsuperscript{26} A study of the Holocaust confronts students with issues that require reflection, analysis, conceptualizing, and even decision-making. It would be impossible, for example, to consider the consequences of stereotyping, bigotry, ethnocentrism, and blind obedience to authority without employing the thinking skills of inference, problem-solving, evaluating evidence, distinguishing fact from opinion, detecting bias, identifying unstated assumptions, among others.

It is also relevant to the current controversy over the teaching of morals and values. Over the past few decades critics have equated values education with indoctrination, and consequently, schools have de-emphasized the teaching of values. Recently, however, there has been a rising tide of support for schools once again to promote a moral climate that elicits respect for honesty, honor, justice and truth. Emile Durkheim, the early champion of a moral education, identified as fundamental those values that uphold human dignity and the protection of life. He further held that it was the responsibility of schools to reinforce those values.\textsuperscript{27} Those very issues—human dignity and the sanctity of life—are at the core of any Holocaust curriculum. The Holocaust raises issues of consciousness and moral responsibility, and can easily serve as a springboard for discussions on justice, survival, tolerance, and civic responsibility.

Many social studies educators regard citizenship education as the primary concern of the social studies.\textsuperscript{28} They urge that every social studies class contain some message concerning civic responsibility. Schools
should teach constructive ways of confronting prejudice and should prepare students to live in harmony with an increasingly pluralistic society. However, research suggests that merely exhorting and persuading students to act in a democratic and humane manner does little to reduce prejudice and discrimination. According to Glenn S. Pate of the College of Education at Arizona University, students often feel manipulated by anti-prejudice lessons and human relations training, and the experience can be superficial. "If students are to study prejudice," says Pate, "the approaches should be scholarly and cognitive. The study may be part of a sociology, history, anthropology, or psychology teaching unit." Pate suggests that students would respond more positively to lessons on prejudice reduction if they were to study behavior from the viewpoint of an objective outsider. So removed, claims Pate, students will not feel manipulated or personally threatened by the issues raised in the lessons. It follows that students can learn much about bigotry, intolerance, and discrimination by studying the Holocaust since the phenomenon of prejudice is central to the attempted destruction of European Jewry.

There is disagreement over the question of when youngsters should be exposed to the subject. Some suggest that students must attain a degree of emotional maturity and intellectual sophistication in order to comprehend the enormity and magnitude of the genocide. However, youngsters at the earliest grades can relate to a subject matter which includes obedience to authority, individual responsibility, and the pressure to conform. Other issues central to the Holocaust, particularly those in the affective domain, have relevance to children at all grade levels. For example, children often feel victimized by what is perceived as irrational authority; they may have felt themselves the target of intolerance or discrimination. Students in primary grades might be able to empathize with the victims of the Holocaust if the teacher can touch issues in their lives that relate to power, authority, and asserting oneself in a repressive situation. Moral dilemmas, inherent in any study of the Holocaust, are also useful in teaching about issues relating to the Holocaust. Youngsters often confront problems of ethics, such as whether to tell the truth and face the consequences, or to lie; whether or not to cheat on examinations; whether to report to authorities on misdeeds of their peers. While such choices are not nearly as difficult as those which concentration camp inmates had to confront, youngsters do have a sense of grappling with moral issues under stressful conditions.

There is a more powerful reason for introducing some aspects of the subject at the earliest grades. Research has demonstrated that attitudes are formed in the early years of life. Even the youngest school children are aware of ethnic, religious, and racial differences among people. One study maintains that the elementary school years are crucial in determining
attitudes and feelings towards various social groups, and that these attitudes are unlikely to change unless children are encouraged to rethink and analyze those beliefs.\(^{31}\) A study by the Anti-Defamation League and the University of California at Berkeley concluded that twelve-year olds had already developed stereotypes about the major racial, ethnic and religious groups in the United States. The report cited the social studies classroom as the appropriate place to reduce and counteract prejudicial attitudes.\(^{32}\) Accordingly, kindergarten teachers can introduce youngsters to the idea of “insider” and “outsider,” and why we might fear people who are not like us. Students can then begin to understand concepts such as prejudice and scapegoating. This will provide a foundation for what they will later learn about the treatment of the Jew, the “eternal stranger” in European society.\(^{33}\)

Some might object that the Holocaust was a European problem, an episode of inhumanity which holds no relevancy for life in the United States today. But studies have shown that under certain circumstances, Americans have proven vulnerable to blind obedience. Psychologist Stanley Milgram (1963) found that volunteers were willing to administer severe electric shock to human subjects, merely because ‘experts’ directed them to do so.\(^{34}\) In another case, a classroom simulation of a prison scenario had to be aborted because student “guards” were so willing to mete out punishment to student “prisoners.”\(^{35}\) A teacher in Palo Alto realized that his students could not separate role playing and reality in an attempt to simulate a fascist movement called the Third Wave. Some of the youngsters were quickly attracted to the fascist attitudes and trappings of the movement, and the teacher had to abort the experiment.\(^{36}\) Americans are also subject to another aspect of the Holocaust, bystander apathy. The most famous illustration of that phenomenon occurred in New York in 1964, when thirty-eight people refused to respond while Kitty Genovese was brutally stabbed to death. Studies by B. Latane and J. M. Darley (1968) further testified to the passivity of bystanders in emergency situations.\(^{37}\)

Thus the lessons of the Holocaust have meaning for societies with the most deeply rooted democratic traditions. But simply introducing the topic to students is not sufficient, for the impact of teaching about the Holocaust can be lost without appropriate attention to curriculum design and teaching methodologies. In many school districts the Holocaust is introduced as part of a unit on human rights, in which the subject is taught along with other atrocities and injustices in history. The comparative approach enables students to draw insights concerning conditions that give rise to mass killings, and helps them understand something about the behavior of the perpetrators and victims of inhumanities. But that design also tends to remove each case from its historical context, leaving students
with only a superficial understanding of antecedents, causes and effects. The full dimension of the Holocaust cannot possibly be understood unless presented within the framework of a European history that highlights the treatment of Jews from the time of earliest Christianity. The Final Solution was the end-product of centuries of accusations and libels aimed at Jews, of attacks on Jewish communities by Crusaders and by Russian Cossacks, of virulent diatribes. Martin Luther, for example, attacked Jews with a language even more violent than Hitler’s, calling for the destruction of synagogues and the expulsion of Jews from Germany. Luther beseeched his followers: “Know Christian that next to the Devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent than a true Jew.” Students may be surprised to learn that with the exception of the Final Solution, every anti-Jewish measure imposed by the Nazi regime had its precedent in history.

The subject lends itself to more general themes as well. A unit on the Holocaust will necessarily introduce students to the topics of anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, and scapegoating, but it also offers the opportunity to analyze various aspects of human behavior. For example, a study of the apparent indifference to the fate of Jews by many people during the Hitler period can lead to a more general discussion of the danger of passivity in the face of evil. The teacher can use a variety of excellent resources to help students focus on the problem, including Maurice Ogdens poem “The Hangman,” Elie Wiesel’s The Town Beyond the Wall, and the song “Outside a Small Circle of Friends” by folksinger Phil Ochs. Arthur Morse’s While Six Million Died, and David Wyman’s The Abandonment of the Jews address the issue of American apathy during the Holocaust.

In addition to a study of specific conditions that lead to the Holocaust, students can examine the more general conditions of fear, frustration, and insecurity that lead groups to commit unspeakable crimes. How does prejudice get translated into the systematic murder of an entire people born of a certain religion? Instead of dwelling only on Hitler, the teacher should raise the question of why the masses of Germans obeyed Hitler and responded to his pathological fantasies. The Painted Bird, a novel by Jerzy Kosinski, gives insight to this dark side of human behavior. It addresses the problem of how a group, feeling threatened by someone whom they perceive as different, tries to destroy the outsider.

The Holocaust is an emotional topic and as such, students should be given the opportunity to react and express their feelings, and to listen to the sentiments of their classmates. Art and literature can serve as excellent vehicles for that purpose. Literature can heighten an empathetic awareness of issues related to the mass murder. Books that convey feelings and emotions can lend insight and sensitivity to a subject that might otherwise
seem uncomprehensible.43 Art helps youngsters confront their feelings and can serve as an outlet for self-expression. Students can connect emotionally with the victims by studying the art produced in the concentration camps.44 Another way to promote self-expression is to encourage students to write about various aspects of the topic. The use of role-playing is an effective strategy for getting students to identify and empathize with individuals involved in the Holocaust. The subject also lends itself to classroom use of moral dilemmas in which students must decide what they would do in a given situation. In one scenario, for example, a Jewish girl begs her best friend to hide her from the Gestapo.45 Should the friend, a Christian, risk her own safety and that of her family? The teacher might want to use a cooperative learning approach by breaking the class into groups which will then report on how it would resolve the moral dilemma under examination. Another effective device to bring the subject to life is to invite Holocaust survivors and those who liberated the concentration camps to share their experiences with school-aged youngsters.

The Holocaust, with all its irrationality and inhumanity, can also be an uplifting and inspirational subject. The teacher should not fail to discuss those episodes that brought out the heroic in the human condition. The people of Denmark, for example, refused to allow Danish Jews to be rounded up and deported, and consequently, 95 percent of the Jews in Denmark survived World War II. The Holocaust is also the story of the French villagers of Le Chambon sur Lignon who gave refuge to thousands of Jews in the face of Nazi threats. Students should be told of the resistance to Nazism as demonstrated by the White Rose in Munich and by underground movements in occupied Europe. The unit on the Holocaust should emphasize the heroism of ‘Righteous Gentiles’ such as the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and Tibor Baranski who saved the lives of thousands of Hungarian Jews, and German industrialist Eduard Schulte, who first informed the world about the Holocaust. It should puncture the myth of Jewish passivity by highlighting the uprisings in ghettos in Warsaw and in Byelorussia, as well as the revolt in the Treblinka death camp. It should familiarize students with the non-violent forms of resistance to the Nazi program. It should stress the indomitable spirit of the human spirit by telling the stories of those who managed to survive the horror.46

In summary, there is clearly a need to teach youngsters at all grade levels about the Nazi program against Jews. It is important to help students realize that the Holocaust was not a freak occurrence, but rather the product of deep-seated prejudice, the outgrowth of philosophical, political, and social currents rooted in the European past. A course or unit on the Holocaust should meet the following objectives:
a) to disseminate facts surrounding the systematic destruction of the Jews, particularly in light of neo-Nazi literature that denies the atrocity;

b) to help students understand how a highly cultured and highly educated society could perpetrate crimes against humanity;

c) to help students recognize sources of prejudice, hatred and intolerance, and the ultimate consequence of anti-Semitism;

d) to help students recognize the ultimate danger of blind obedience to a state that fosters unethical and immoral acts;

e) to make students aware of the individual’s responsibility in a democratic society;

f) to have students reflect on issues of conscience and moral responsibility; and

g) to encourage students to recognize the danger of apathy and thereby prevent the possibility of a future Holocaust.

Teaching about the Holocaust is a mission of the highest order, one that will assure the survivors that the lessons will be remembered long after they are gone. A decade ago, Elie Wiesel addressed the issue against those who deny or minimize the importance of the event. “Should the teachers fail,” said Wiesel,

should these desecrators succeed in erasing the memories of their victims, only then will we feel and experience something worse than what we experienced then. We shall feel shame because we will have betrayed the victims for the last time, we will have completed the killer’s work.47

Notes


22. Ibid., p. 308.
25. Friedlander, “Toward a Methodology of Teaching About the Holocaust,” p. 522.
43. For a selected bibliography on Holocaust literature by grade level, see Barbara C. Ganz, “Holocaust Literature: Our Hope for Understanding,” paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Eastern Regional Conference of the International Reading Association, Boston, MA (December 2-5, 1982).