

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00

**Letters as a Tool in Teaching
about the Meaning of the Holocaust**

by
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Overview:

The goals of the unit

Perhaps the most important mission in teaching about the Holocaust is to instill in students a life-long concern about the era, and to ensure that the memory of it will not fade.

Helping students personalize the meaning of the Holocaust

This proposal is a plea to teachers to restructure their classic reading matter in order to create a lasting involvement in the historical reality of the Holocaust and to bring about personal identification with it. Experience in the classroom suggests that an effective method is to *personalize* the Holocaust. Consider Anne Frank for the power of her story far transcends that of a diary. *The Diary of Anne Frank* remains vital because it is a story that must be told.

In order for the students to understand the message from the documents, they are encouraged to participate actively in discussion sessions; where they may question, contemplate and share personal and/or family experiences in the concentration camps.

Key Source Materials:

The importance of personal accounts (Letters, diaries, and biographies)

Anne Frank's diary forces the reader to live in her times. But as powerful *A Diary of Anne Frank* may be, it is by no means unique. There is a large body of rich source material available that can affect students on a personal level such as the diaries by Mary Berg and Emmanuel Ringelblum. There are also numerous biographies, pre-Holocaust letters and letters written about and by concentration camp victims and survivors. Reading letters, we become part of a spirited conversation; these are truly rare and significant historical letters which recreate the milieu of the persecuted.

Kiddush Hahayyim

The above accounts bear witness to much brutality and suffering. However, they also express how guiltless prisoners rose above their tragic circumstances. This spiritual resistance was often based on the fundamental Jewish principle of *Kiddush Hahayyim* (sanctification of life). This concept forms a critical aspect of classroom discussion.

Who should document the Holocaust?

The study of letters has several functions but also present a number of problems. When we have the opportunity to interview a prisoner in a German concentration camp, we still may not obtain the desired information as interrogators often sought information that , of little significance to historians – who, given the opportunity, would have emphasized other areas. So we must return to the original documents to piece together the full picture, while remembering that letters often were subject to censorship; especially in the concentration camp.

How did such individuals treat the diary that recorded their feelings and observations? Letters create a basis for memory; they safeguard and store emotions, desires, and passions. Just as correspondences may impart an understanding of one's complex experiences, interests, and ideas; so too may letters convey a better awareness about a period of time. Correspondences, such as these under consideration here, provide us with a means to elucidate many topics which interest us.

The attempt to safeguard today's and future generations from such atrocities is made by studying correspondences, speeches, and essays. Our quest for historical truth must never falter. One of our goals must remain to help students better understand how innocent people responded to Hitler's persistent campaign of defamation, as well as, their response to the concentration camps.

Course Adaptability

Courses based on these personal recollections of the Holocaust, such as the one I am proposing here, can be adapted and modified to meet the needs of students at all levels. The following discussion will describe a possible method for introducing undergraduates to this course.

The "Zeitgeist" of the 1930's in Germany: Understanding the spirit of the times

My preferred approach is to begin with an introductory lecture about World War 1 and its background so students can better appreciate the Concentration Camp letters. Students choose from a wide range of significant works. In order to bring events into perspective, I give general lectures about events such as the *Reichstag* fire and, finally, the émigré experiences. The term-paper assignment plays a most important role in the course. Using the format of letters, each student places himself in the time of the Holocaust, and writes about 'his' experiences. Students take the censorship of their letters into account as well as the dangers of inadvertently exposing family and friends in their letters. Each student presents his letters as if they were newly discovered, unpublished documents.

An assignment of this nature works intermixing historical fact with personal involvement. The student is the main character in his own historical novel, told in the form of letters . The nature of the writer's "journey" is the criteria for deciding which letters to use, and not use. We also learn about the writer's attitude to the times in which he or she lived. Furthermore, these letters show growth and development in the personality of the writer, as the times change his or her perspective on life. Again – the emphasis is on *personalization*.

Achieving an historical perspective by tracing the times before, during and

after the Holocaust

Students are encouraged to create letters written throughout the entire historical period. Pre-Holocaust and exile documents help to establish parameters, giving students better focus and form for this assignment.

Learning the limits of letters (as a means of communication and as a valid reference source)

The selectivity of - and proper distancing from these documents (e.g. conscious objectivity) - must not be neglected. When we utilize such documents, we must guard against the inherent problems that are usually associated with these issues concerning: 1) ethics 2) authenticity 3) notoriety and, 4) empathy.

Establishing term-paper parameters

It is essential from the outset of the course that students are aware of what will be expected of them. For example, they must direct careful attention to historical detail as well as its interrelationships and consequences. The life that the writer creates in his or her letters must be true to the reality of the Holocaust.

It should be clear by now that letters meet the requirement of *personalization* we are seeking. Though they can function as a diary, the letters have the added advantage of bringing the recipient into the story. By their very nature, letters reach out to others – and are either heard or ignored. This helps to underscore another momentous question -How could Nazism rise and how could innocents be sent to death camps while the world stood by?

A cross-discipline curriculum – understanding the Holocaust's relevance to all areas of life

The course is further personalized for students because it shows that any of their areas of interest could have been impacted upon by the Holocaust. For example, engineering students may relate to the technical elements of the camps.

Lastly, the "letter method" invites students to engage in a form of textual archaeology and philosophical anthropology. Correspondence provides us with the opportunity to better understand what these individuals were forced to endure not only during the Holocaust but also in exile, which has no time restraints.

Sample Source Material:

The concentration camp letters of Heinrich Eduard Jacob

The unpublished concentration camp letters of Heinrich Eduard Jacob (1889-1967) exemplify the foundation of our presentation. Dr. Jacob is best known as a prolific writer. His biographies about Emma Lazarus, Felix Mendelssohn and others are all well-known. The fact that H. E. Jacob was a prominent intellectual figure adds greatly to the value these primary documents. During his tenure at the *Berliner Tagblatt* (1927-33), Jacob was stationed in Vienna, where he directed the newspaper's middle-European office. Such an opportunity allowed Jacob to interact with numerous important personalities. However, due to the atmosphere of the times, soon he lost his position and his works were blacklisted. Fame did not protect H. E. Jacob from the

uncivilized attacks and unfounded accusations of the Nazis. On 22 March 1938, he was rounded up in Vienna and taken by train to Dachau. Some months later, he was transported along with twelve hundred others to Buchenwald. About a year later, Jacob was released and immigrated to the United States.

Though he was well known in Europe, Jacob was not nearly as famous as Thomas Mann, for example, and that is one reason we chose to use his letters. Remember, with our emphasis on personalizing the Holocaust, we are better served by having students identify with more “ordinary” people. While Thomas Mann achieved outstanding recognition, life in exile was difficult and lonely for Jacob, who struggled in a world where it was hard for him to be accepted.

But what of Jacob's account of the times? As a creative writer and journalist par excellence, Jacob knew the importance of judicious impartiality. Therefore, one would think that he would be able to vividly describe the forces that shaped European history in the 1930's and 1940's.

In actuality, however, Jacob expressed to colleagues that he could never depict the genuine brutality that he witnessed. In this self-imposed censorship, he cannot bear to give word to what he has seen. Yet it is perhaps the unspoken messages "within" his letters that make H. E. Jacob an excellent resource. H.E. Jacob also functions as an excellent figure in elucidating the exile experience, especially the dilemma of the writer severed from his country, mother tongue and culture, including his publishers, readers, critics and colleagues. Jacob's "successful" experiences in the United States were limited, making him bitter – Jacob's "American outlook" in terms of economic survival and intellectual health was at times dismal. Despite this, America was the preferred land of refuge for these Europeans. The meaning of America to exiles was complex and generated ambivalent feelings. To some, America represented enlightenment, freedom, democracy and, above all, refuge. To others, it symbolized ignorance, greed, corruption, but still political asylum. In fact, Thomas Mann once explained that an exile's successful experience in the United States was dependent upon that individual's willingness to make changes in his life. H.E. Jacob willingly made changes in his response to life. However, as we have observed, he still was unable to accomplish what he wanted.

Finding meaning in a life damaged by the Holocaust

Equally important are Jacob's various reflections about the meaning of life: what are, as Jacob inquired, our expectations from life? How do we articulate an individual's identity? Do we have free will? How do we define freedom? Are we responsible for others? How do individuals respond when society no longer offers any nurturing? Furthermore, Jacob pondered and was disturbed by the following: did the KZ imprisonment represent an isolated case - some monstrous accident, or was it the natural consequence of natural causes?

Exploring personal and ethical issues in the context of the Holocaust

No matter which author is chosen, the point in reviewing his letters is to evoke questions from the students.

Jacob's concentration camp letters

As we examine Jacob's Concentration Camp letters, it becomes clear that these documents often provide relative, ambiguous, general and more or less conventional statements. These

letters introduce other statements which are appropriate to examine His letters reveal more than the handwritten text seemingly conveys. In all, thirteen Concentration Camp letters written by Jacob are available: six were written from July to September 1938 in Concentration Camp Dachau; seven were written from October 1938 to February 1939 in Concentration Camp Buchenwald. Indeed, we need to consider if Jacob's references to prior events or various situations camouflage the enormous, unrelenting pain which Jacob was experiencing.

Jacob's KZ missives evoke unusual feelings and thoughts in us. The texts conjure up an aura which, almost instinctively, induces a myriad of eerie sensations, especially intense emotions of alarm, trepidation, anguish, and disbelief which warrant further attention.

The horrific realities of the concentration camps need to be communicated to the students so that they can incorporate the experience into the personal viewpoint they are creating. The Nazis practiced many forms of deception. After one stepped into the camp grounds it would not take long to recognize there was no form of physical or psychic protection in this absurd, Kafkaesque-like universe.

More specifically, the Jewish concepts of U'vacharta Vahayyim (choose life) and Kiddush Hahayyim (the sanctity of life) are key to Holocaust literature. These Such beliefs were also held by H. E. Jacob, and it is important to discuss them.

While H.E. Jacob followed the principle of Kiddush Hahayyim, he sought to understand how Nazi ideology had regressed to the state of barbarism. What had he – and other Jews – possibly done to bring this about?

Conveying the meaning of losing one's self-determination

The prohibition against communication should also be conveyed to the students. Allowing letter or diary writing, and then suddenly taking away that right to create letters, is a powerful teaching tool in and of itself. The lesson is clear and will provoke discussion.

For Jacob, death in the pits and oven was not an imaginary Hell. He had witnessed this nightmarish world. It was real and torturous in ways incomprehensible for anyone who was not its victim.

In other Concentration Camp letters Jacob revealed the Camp circumstances by referring to situations in his narrative and dramatic works, thereby cleverly evading censorship. Obviously his family immediately recognized the circumstances in Dachau and, later, in Buchenwald, even though they privately expressed that they found such Nazi brutality possibly incomprehensible.

Probing the moral and ethical questions raised by the Holocaust:

Helping students examine their own values

In each lesson about the Holocaust we strive to have students reach a more profound sense of the moral dimensions of the topic being discussed. To accomplish this, have them ask questions that demand they look within their own set of judgments and values. The above are examined under the context of "Why did people do what they did?" We also ask the students to confront the helplessness of many victims.

Jacob, Herder, and mankind's morality principles

In Jacob's self-reflections about the nature of concentration camp experiences he doubted his prior definition of what had once constituted humanity. And just as Jacob spent the rest of his

years wondering about this issue, so, too, did Jacob question the thought of other philosophers, such as Victor Frankel, Primo Levi and others, of whom some are considered here.

Another premise: the theory of Victor Frankl

In his book about the concentration camp, Victor Frankl commented suffering must have meaning, if life has any meaning. He noted that camp inmates were preoccupied with the possibility of survival, because if they would not survive, the suffering would have no meaning.

Because civilization was threatened and because crimes against humanity took place, we remain ethically and morally obligated to reflect on - and to document – this inexplicable era in human history. "Observed from the outside," as Hannah Arendt exclaimed, "victim and persecutor look as though they were both insane and the interior life of the camps reminds the onlooker of nothing so much as an insane asylum." Even if any attempt at representing the horrors of the Holocaust inevitably fall short, every try is at least a step toward advancing our comprehension of this age of brutality. We can not remain silent.

But silence itself is equivalent to ignoring the truth.

Reviewing the implications of Jacob's concentration camp letters

Do Jacob's KZ letters fulfill our expectations? Do these documents provide substantive new information? How do we explain the paucity of critical statements in them? Are there other factors that account for our dissatisfaction with what, at first reading, they seem to offer? The KZ rules demanded: prisoners were forbidden to communicate about what they witnessed. All mail was censored; obviously such restrictions limited their freedom.

How do these newly found H.E. Jacob materials differ from currently available material? At first glance, Jacob's KZ letters are cryptic. However, these materials hauntingly urge us to explore their implications. As we correlate these documents with additional information we understand more about the Nazi period: We also question our values and the ultimate meaning of life

The immutable, immoral, and isolated walls of the KZ

Imprisoned within the immutable, immoral, and isolated walls of the KZ, the internee found himself or herself physically and mentally secluded from the seemingly unknowing innocent outer world; the environment of certainty, predictability and logic. These past expectations of civilization had established and fortified unquestionable principles of freedom and democracy, of morality and ethics. However, now the world was torn apart.

According to Frankl, conscious determination – provided the will power to survive the death camps. Indeed, in many ways his position may be identified *Kiddush Hahayyim*. However, to the majority of prisoners, Frankl's position represented but a dream that could not be realized. The suffering defenseless individuals were both physically and mentally too weak to contemplate either an understanding of the situation or how they might invoke methods of survival.

As Emil Fackenheim reminds us

Many performed the mitzvah of kiddush ha-hayyim by enhancing, defending, or even just barely clinging to life. Some could sanctify life only by choosing death (Fackenheim).

Conclusion:

Control over one's life

Certainly almost every KZ internee wanted to govern his or her own life. In this unquestionably unfathomable Kafkaesque-like world the only constant was continual alienation, torture, corruption, subjection to acts of awful, undeserved emotional and physical deprivation, destruction, and, death. These remained inevitable and inescapable. Internees learned a new truth: he or she would be constantly subjected to perverted emotional castigation.

Chronicling this period

Just as it is insufficient for history textbooks to chronicle only the so-called main events which occurred in Europe during the 1930's and 1940's, so, too, is it insufficient just to articulate the events of history: lessons must be didactic. Individuals of all disciplines must unite and comparatively delineate this period. As we strive to reconstruct the past, our account must be comprehensive, accurate and objective, and equally important, accurate and objective. Our scholarly search should be directed toward the acquisition of documents by other *Dichter*-type figures and, also, toward primary materials drafted by individuals of other professions. Such documents should provide us with the tools to help achieve accuracy. Finally, let us not forget that Jacob's Concentration Camp letters hauntingly urge us to read deeper into them, to understand what they are trying to communicate about things that cannot be said. We can teach our children. And we can keep the lessons – and the memory – alive for eternity.