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Teaching The Holocaust With Trade Books

By Helen Hoopes

Just before Christmas, 1992, a friend of mine asked me to recommend a couple of books that she could give to her 15-year-old daughter as a Christmas gift. After discussing the options with several of my colleagues, I recommended that she get the paperback edition of Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*. My friend’s daughter had just finished reading *The Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene (Dial, 1973) and had really liked it. When I explained the basic plot, a story of a young girl during the Holocaust, my friend agreed that it would be a good choice. The father’s reaction was completely different. He did not want his daughter “exposed” to the subject of the Holocaust. Between the two of us, my friend and I were finally able to convince him that it was past time for her to be introduced to the Holocaust, and that *The Devil’s Arithmetic* was a gentle way to do so. Besides, she would be reading it at home where discussion could take place and her questions answered.

That experience got me to thinking about how important it was for children to begin to understand this terrible time in world history. I have been drawn to this period of history ever since I was young, and have read extensively in this area—from both young adult and adult collections. If my memory serves me correctly, my first introduction was through *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, originally published in the United States (in a translation from the Dutch) in 1952. Even though the concentration camp experience was only an afterward, the trauma and tragedy of the Holocaust became real to me, and I was off on my quest.

If this was such an appalling issue in the history of mankind, why should we even worry about exposing our youngsters to the Holocaust? Consider the following by Ruth Minsky Sender (one of the few survivors of the Nazi death camps) as she tried to answer that very question to a group of elementary school children:

> On the teacher’s desk, I see copies of *The Cage*, my first book. It feels wonderful seeing my book in a classroom. Children and adults will read it and learn of my world, the world that was destroyed, the world we must not forget.

> ... As a Holocaust survivor I carry a heavy burden, a painful duty. The burden of remembering. The duty of passing on the agonizing
memories so that the world will learn from them. It should not happen again. It cannot happen again. *(The Holocaust Lady, pp. 11-12.)*

In her book, *Smoke and Ashes*, Barbara Rogasky helps us to understand why we need to carry the message of the Holocaust to each new generation:

It is tempting to think that nothing like the Holocaust can happen again. Nazi Germany lost the war. Many major Nazis are dead, others have been tried or are being brought to trial. Israel, the Jewish state, has a population of almost four million. Other millions of Jews live in peace around the world. . . . So it seems it is time to sit back and relax. The worst is over, everything has been taken care of, and there is nothing to worry about. Not so. Signs are everywhere, all the time, that the seeds that gave birth to the Holocaust lie buried not far from the surface. *(Smoke and Ashes, p. 178)*

Mrs. Rogasky then goes on to list some of the many events that are taking place in our modern world that are indicative of events that led up to the terror of the Nazi regime. She states:

So it seems the seeds of hate remain, ready to blossom once again into some present horror. The same kind of misunderstanding and ignorance that gave rise to Nazism and the Holocaust never goes away. It remains against the Jews. But not only against Jews. Blacks still fight their battles to survive equally with whites. Protestants and Catholics kill each other in Northern Ireland. Baha’is are still murdered for their religion in Iran. The white South African government continues to wrench its black citizens from their homes and jail them by the thousands as it wishes. *(Smoke and Ashes, p. 180.)*

To end her book, Rogasky quotes from Martin Niemoller, a German Protestant pastor who spoke up for the Jews, and, as a result, spent almost nine years in a concentration camp:

The Nazis came first for the communists. But I wasn’t a communist, so I didn’t speak up. Then they came for the trade unionists, but I wasn’t a trade unionist so I didn’t speak up. Then they came for the Catholics, but I was a Protestant so I didn’t speak up.

Then they came for me. By that time there was no one left to speak up. *(Smoke and Ashes, p. 180.)*
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Yes, our children need to be taught so that they will always remember and not allow such a gruesome catastrophe to ever happen again.

Melinda Fine ("Facing History and Ourselves: Portrait of a Classroom," in Educational Leadership, December, 1991/January, 1992, 44-49 pp.) chronicles a semester she spent observing a social studies unit being taught in Florida. The topic of the course was "Facing History and Ourselves." The teachers and administrators in this multi-ethnic/multi-culture school were searching for a way to help their students understand "what responsibility . . . individual citizens have for projecting the rights of those different from themselves" (p. 45). They decided to teach a unit on the Holocaust so that the students (in the words of the students, as they later explained) would realize "that people have to work together because that's the only way people can have any kind of existence" (ibid.). They tried to teach that each person has a moral responsibility to "help someone in trouble. [B]ecause if you don’t, you’ll be the same as he or she is, and then you’re both wrong" (p. 48). In evaluating the course, the teachers (and students) realized that one semester wasn’t enough to make the students permanently change their practices towards other people with different backgrounds, but they got a marvelous start.

I don’t remember studying this topic in the school setting. In elementary school, when I was growing up, the subject was never broached. I suppose the reasons could have included that any attempt at studying such a wholesale slaughter of an entire race of people is something a child’s mind should never have to try to understand, and could not even attempt to comprehend. Who among those who are older can? And yet, if this is never to happen again, we must begin at an early age—at least by the fifth or sixth grade.

The book, The Treatment of the Holocaust in Textbooks, edited by Randolph L. Braham (part of the Holocaust Studies Series, published through The Institute for Holocaust Studies, The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York, 1987), gives a very detailed accounting of how the Holocaust is treated in textbooks that are in use in the schools. For his study of elementary textbook treatment of the Holocaust, Braham reports that of the nine textbooks examined:

- There is a total of nine sentences dealing directly with the Holocaust.
- Only one book gives a separate paragraph to the topic.
- No book includes any reference to non-Jewish victims.
- Two books make reference to Jews as scapegoats, but no books explain why Jews were killed.
- One book refers to the pre-war period of oppression.
- One book includes a picture.
- No book names or describes the camps.
- One book uses the term "Holocaust," and no book uses the term "genocide."
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- No books refer to resistance, although one book mentions Polish freedom fighters.
- Three books mention survivors, although in a misleading manner.
- One book has a question for students, although the answer to the question is not in the book.
- No book refers to the Nuremberg Trials.
- No book has suggested reading for students.
- No book refers to any role the United States may have played before and during the Holocaust, and one book implies our immigration policies were much more relaxed than they were. (Braham, pp. 242-243)

As I've researched and examined copies of the texts used in the secondary school, I have learned that most publishers of world history textbooks either do not even list the word "Holocaust" in their indexes, or, the total entry is not more than a few paragraphs. Of the fifteen textbooks I examined, from fifteen separate publishers, only six had "Holocaust" in the index. These entries ranged from only a sentence or two, to six short paragraphs. There were only two pictures depicting the Holocaust in any way, and of those two, only one showed the depravity that individual Jews had to endure. Those who discussed the Holocaust were truthful in what they described, but they skimmed over this horrific period of world history. (See Braham, pp 243-281 for a detailed analysis [in each of the categories listed above under elementary textbooks] of secondary textbooks' treatment of the Holocaust.) Suffice it to say, if we want our young people to learn about the Holocaust, we must go beyond the classroom textbook.

There are many lessons to be learned from the study of the Holocaust that should be used with young people. Of course, in addition to factual information about the realities of the Holocaust, each book will have obvious themes emphasized by the individual authors; however, I am including a list of possible theme-centered lessons that can be taught using the Holocaust as a backdrop. They include the following:

- Learning to live peacefully with people of other conditions and races
- gaining compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves
- man's inhumanity to man—including the depth to which mankind can go in depravity
- prejudice
- the outrage of anti-Semitism
- appreciation of our freedom
- the danger of blindly following orders (or leaders), without first finding out for oneself if the resulting actions are moral
- values
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- decision making
- the value of human life
- the importance of caring for and about other peoples.

Intuitively, the teacher and the student will find many more issues that need to be discussed, but these few ideas should get you started.

Since becoming a member of the editorial board for the Brigham Young University Children’s Book Review (in 1986) I have kept a listing of those new books which in some way address this issue. Almost every aspect of the Holocaust has been covered in the books I have read. Although there is an annotated bibliography at the end of this article, I would like to point out some of the variety of topics (based on the list by Braham as quoted above) that are addressed in these books (both fiction and non-fiction) with the titles of those books which best exemplify that issue. The asterisk (*) are titles that this writer judges to be exceptional. (See the annotated bibliography at the end of this article for specifics.)


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Nuremberg Trials: *Smoke and Ashes* by Barbara Rogasky.
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If students are ever going to learn how to think, question, evaluate, and discover their world, educators must teach those skills. The Holocaust is an excellent issue to help students understand the world they live in, and the best resource available to teach that understanding is the use of trade books. Don't let them ever forget!

As for my friend's daughter, she still has not read Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* that she got for Christmas. Her younger sister did, and her mother, but other pressures have not allowed her the time to read. Rather ironic when you consider that many in the world do not even believe that the Holocaust ever happened and will not take the time to study and learn the truth about the Holocaust.
Annotated Bibliography


*Along the Tracks* is the story of Yankele and his family, who, fleeing Nazi-occupied Poland, enter Russia as refugees. The father joins the Russian army shortly before the fighting reaches Yankele’s village and his family is forced to leave their home to escape persecution. The train on which they are escaping is bombed, and at eight years old, Yankele is separated from his mother and little sister. The book chronicles his journeys through Russia as he travels by train and by foot along the railroad tracks—always searching for his family. Based on the true adventures of a friend of the author’s, this is the story of a remarkable child, who, through his courage and strength, survives years of hardship and suffering with courage and dignity.


Israel Bernbaum, born in Warsaw, Poland, escaped shortly before the ghetto walls were raised. He is an artist, whose greatest works are five paintings entitled *Warsaw Ghetto 1943.* This book features the complete paintings with many enlarged, detailed sections of the paintings. One of the most striking symbols that is carried throughout all five paintings is the differences between the ghetto side of Warsaw and the gentile side of the city, on the other side of the wall. Bernbaum has also included the actual photographs taken by German soldiers upon which he based the various images in his paintings. In addition to the paintings, Bernbaum has also written an easy-to-understand narrative that gives an overview of the persecution of the Jewish people and describes what the paintings represent. For such a small book (only 63 pages), Bernbaum has written a concise, stirring book that will have great impact upon the reader.

Biography.

Born to non-practicing, Jewish parents in Poland, Korczak "became a children’s doctor and author who was world famous for the books he wrote and the modern methods he introduced as director of two orphanages in Warsaw, Poland, before World War II." Eventually, Korczak, Stefa (the woman who had been his life-long friend and his right arm in one of the orphanages), and his orphans became part of the Warsaw Ghetto. They all lost their lives in Treblinka—the infamous death camp. Through the use of actual photographs and the written word, Korczak, and his life’s mission, become a touching tribute to a real hero of our times.


Non-Fiction.

This book covers much of Hitler’s background and his brand of anti-Semitism (his plan for the total annihilation of the Jewish people of Europe); the rounding up of the Jews; their treatment in the ghettos, the prison camps, the death camps; the crematoriums; and the final rescue by the advancing Allies. The last chapters include a listing of some of those who helped the Jews, and what happened after the war as the liberated Jews faced a world without families or friends or homeland and their struggle to get to Israel. The author does not try to shock the reader, nor get too graphic in her descriptions, but the subject matter itself is so harsh and brutal in its non-humanity, that the sensitive child, after reading this book, would need someone to talk to try to gain some understanding.


Fiction.

Written from a young German soldier’s point of view, this novel is about a group of young boys who are serving in the German army. As the book begins, we see them not only eager to fight the enemy, but also thrilled with the role Hitler is playing in the war. As the book progresses, one of the main characters, Hans, becomes disillusioned with Hitler and the role of Germany in the war. He has several experiences with the victims of the Holocaust—freight cars attached to his military train filled with waving, screaming prisoners; rumors of death camps; and finally, skeletal prisoners from neighboring death
camps crying with joy and throwing flowers as they surround a conquering American tank. The images of the Jews and how they suffered is minimal—as it probably was to the average German soldier; however, the book does give a good picture of how much the average German citizen actually knew about the atrocities that were occurring in their own country. An excellent book on how the tragedies of war can change people, but not a telling account of the Holocaust victims.


Who hasn't had the opportunity to read the book or see the film about the courageous Dutch girl who kept a diary while she, her family, and their friends were hidden in a lonely attic in Amsterdam? Anne's touching account of how she spent her days while waiting to be discovered by the Nazis, will touch the heart of any young reader. Only her father survived the death camps and later went back to the hiding place and found Anne's journal. An excellent book to help young readers understand the fears of a family in hiding—although it does not follow them into the camps where Anne died of pneumonia shortly before the camp was liberated.


The true story of the author's own adolescent years during World War II. Written in first person, with fictionalized names, we follow the war years as seen through the eyes of Anna and her German family, the Singelmanns. The events include the nights spent hovering in the bomb shelter as the air raid alarms scream and the bombs and fire-storms rain, the suicides of her Jewish friend's entire family, her brother and her boy friend going off to the Russian front, the arrest of her father (a high-ranking staff officer in Hitler's Lufwaffe), and the resulting terror as reflected in the face of her mother as the father is led away.
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A factual account of the armed resistance offered by the Jewish rebels which occurred in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. Lasting 28 days, this supreme effort by only a relatively few struggling young men and women is one of the finest acts of armed resistance and bravery of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Determined to kill as many Nazis as possible, and knowing that their fate would be certain death, these brave, untrained young people fought with everything they had to protect themselves and the Jewish population of the Warsaw Ghetto. Although easy to understand, with many pictures, some of the written images will disturb the immature reader so caution should be used. This is a compact little book that would be a good introduction to the this horrible happening in the Warsaw Ghetto.


Twelve-year-old Lisa and her family are awakened in Copenhagen, Denmark at 6:00 a.m. by the buzzing of German planes. It is 1940, and Denmark has just surrendered to Germany. Stefan (Lisa’s brother) is furious and quickly joins the Danish Resistance with Lisa soon following. They are a Jewish family and Denmark, one of the few nations which did all it could to protect their Jews. This novel tells of some of the experiences these young people have as they do all within their power to resist the Germans. Matas spares the reader many of the terrifying first-hand experiences of the Holocaust and although the book ends on a positive note, Matas leaves the reader with many questions which could lead to much creative discussion.


This is one of the most comprehensive books, written for the young adult reader, that I have come across. Meltzer, himself a young Jewish boy growing up in Massachusetts when the war broke out, has presented a well-researched, fully documented masterpiece on the Holocaust. He quotes extensively from personal accounts written by the survivors, as well as from other original works. Written to fill the gap left by school textbooks which barely touched on the events of the Holocaust, Meltzer does not write about the military aspects of the war, but rather, his focus is on the "human experience; what happened to the
Jews of Europe, what it meant to them, and what it means for all the rest of us, Jews and non-Jews alike. It is told in their own words as much as possible."

The book also includes a chronology of World War II and a very extensive bibliography on the Holocaust. Because of the candid way the survivors describe the atrocities that were committed against them, this book is not for the novice. It is filled with descriptions and statistics that will make you sick. That is not by chance. Meltzer wants us all to remember so that we will never forget the Jews of the Holocaust.


This story is retold from the viewpoint of a young fourteen-year-old Polish boy who lived in Warsaw at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A true story told to Orlev by Marek (the young boy in the story) in the late 1980's, it reflects the Polish gentile perspective. Marek is persuaded by his stepfather to help carry supplies through the sewers of Warsaw into the Jewish ghetto to help sustain the people there. Marek is appalled to see the vast difference between the almost-normal life on the Polish side of the wall as opposed to the starvation and deprivation on the Jewish side—a constant theme of the book. Because of a foolish mistake that Marek makes, his mother feels forced to tell him a secret that will change his life forever. This knowledge compels him to take part in an undertaking that almost costs his life as he finds himself behind the ghetto walls as the Warsaw uprising begins. Orlev uses this episode of the Holocaust to point out that there were a few people during the time of the Holocaust who remained true to their values and did whatever they could to help the people whom Hitler had singled out for mass extermination. It is also a little lighter reading than some of the other books on the Holocaust and would be a good introduction for the novice reader.


Starting with a history of Jewish persecution and the rise of Nazism, Rogasky follows the Jews of Europe to the ghettos, the concentration camps, and finally, to the death camps. She introduces all the major Nazi personalities and provides a listing of the justice they merited through the War Crimes Commission at the end of the war. The book is lavish with pictures, many of which will break your heart. Although written with the young adult reader in mind, the author does not spare details of the brutalities committed, and for this reason, caution should be used. However, as Rogasky says in her introduction,
"This book was not written to give you nightmares. It is about terrible things, the kinds of things that appear in nightmares. Unlike a bad dream, this really happened, and it went on happening for years."


Based on the real-life experiences of the author when she was a little girl living in the German occupied France of 1940-1944, this book was written as a diary from the perspective of a little child. It is about Renee and her two younger sisters who live with their parents in Paris. When Germany invades and takes over the city, Renee’s neighbors begin to disappear. The parents make arrangements to send the three girls to live (for their own protection) with Catholic nuns in the Normandy country-side. Conflicts are described as Renee must play the part of a practicing Catholic—a conflict that seems to continue to this day. A very well-written account of a little-know aspect of World War II: the occupation of France. There are no gruesome details as everything is told through the perception of Renee.


Ruth Minsky Sender—a young girl during the Holocaust and a prisoner in the Nazi death camps—was a Holocaust survivor. Leaving Poland with her husband and small children, she arrived in America in the early 1950’s (after years of pain and anguish) and decided that she must tell the world of the fate of the Holocaust victims. The book covers her arrival in America and her struggle to become a part of this country’s population. She affirms that the survivors do not want pity, but rather want us to learn from their painful past so that it will never happen again. Mrs. Sender’s style blends the past and the present in such a moving way that the reader will be able to experience a small portion of the sufferings and torment that the Holocaust survivor has had to endure—both during the war and for all the years since.


Ephraim Sevela, a Jew who grew up in the Soviet Union, has written this compelling novel of a young Jewish teenager, separated from his Jewish, Red
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Army parents at the beginning of World War II. Forced to flee, trying to stay alive, his travels take him from Siberia to Germany, always remembering the saying of his Russian mother, "We are not like other people." Riding the trains from one place to another, he is befriended and rescued by many different people; but each time, it becomes necessary for him to take flight again. A very interesting look at life in the Soviet Union during World War II and the destruction left by Stalin and his followers, this book shows the caring that still existed on an individual basis.


In a very simple, four-chapter book, Terry Walton Treseder has captured the very essence of the Holocaust. The story is told by young Isaac, who, together with his family, lives in Warsaw, Poland. Treseder has woven these disturbing events into a deeply moving account of an appalling time in the history of mankind. Perhaps it is so profound because it is told through the eyes of a child—simple and undeniable.


Twelve-year-old Hannah resents the traditions involved in being Jewish until she is miraculously transported back in time to Nazi-occupied Poland. Here she becomes Chaya and is taken to one of the death camps. As time passes, she begins to believe that she is really Chaya, forgetting all of her past life as Hannah. With a twist in the surprise ending, she realizes that she can never forget what has happened to her Jewish people. Even though the realities of the death camp are included, Yolen has softened the impact of the brutalities and this book should not offend even the most sensitive reader. A good way to introduce young people to the Holocaust.