



PREPARING TO TEACH THIS UNIT

Below is information to keep in mind when teaching the content in this unit. This material is intended to help teachers consider the complexities of teaching about survivors and liberators and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

- On May 8, 1945, Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender became official, and Europe was liberated from Nazi rule. The offensives that ultimately defeated the German forces began on the Eastern Front in March 1944 and on the Western Front with D-Day in June 1944; these offensives lasted about one year. As the war was nearing its end, Europe was in complete chaos. Many cities, towns, and villages had been destroyed completely or in part. Multitudes had fled in the face of the fighting, including when possible, those persecuted by the Germans and their partners. Allied troops moving across Europe encountered forced labor camps, concentration camps, extermination camps, and mass graves. While liberation of the Jews was not the primary objective of the Allies, troops did free prisoners, provided food and medical care when possible, and collected evidence for war crimes trials.
- The Allies did not anticipate the enormity of the human challenge that liberation would pose. Essentially the Soviet forces liberated camp inmates and after some initial aid, left them on their own. Over time, the Western Allies set up agencies and a system of displaced persons’ camps in which liberated prisoners and the multitudes of displaced people—those who had lost their homes and become refugees—were given shelter and were helped.
- The personal condition of most Holocaust survivors was appalling after all they had endured. Individuals were in need of physical and emotional rehabilitation. It was only after they became stronger that they began to confront the loss of their families and former lives, and began thinking about how to build new lives. This entailed many decisions about where to go and what to do. A primary concern was to find surviving family members. On their own or with the help of organizations like the Red Cross and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), they embarked on their searches. Along with the occupation authorities, these organizations also sought to aid them on a daily basis and to ensure their physical well-being. A common tendency among survivors was that many married and soon thereafter had children. The remnants of European Jewry—hundreds of thousands of broken men and women who had been uprooted from their homes and their former lives—began the long and difficult process of rehabilitating themselves and rebuilding their lives. The period following liberation is often referred to as “Return to Life” or “Returning to Life.”