



## STUDYING THE HOLOCAUST

*“Racism, antisemitism...bigotry and prejudice...all that hating and more. That stuff is still with us. And it’s up to us to...fight it.”*

–LEON BASS, LIBERATOR

## 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 the Holocaust and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

- 1** Students will likely have a general understanding of what is meant by “the Holocaust,” but that understanding may come primarily from movies and a few assigned readings. Determine what students know about the Holocaust and how they have come to possess that knowledge.
- 2** It is best to learn about the Holocaust from a combination of diverse sources, both primary and secondary. The Holocaust is one of the most documented events in human history and students are encouraged to analyze and compare varied accounts and perspectives. Survivor testimonies are an extremely personal and important source of learning, as are the diary entries, photographs, and other personal documents of Jews and non-Jews who experienced the Holocaust. The perpetrators produced much of the evidence of the Holocaust, and official Nazi documents are available for examination. Likewise there are many Allied documents and accounts, and also post-war records from the trials of Nazi criminals. Together these sources will help students bring complex topics into sharper focus.
- 3** Many students will be unfamiliar with the medium of first-person, visual history testimony, and will react in different ways. This range of responses should be expected and welcomed. It may be necessary for students to view a particular testimony clip more than once in order to feel comfortable with the medium and to process the information presented by the interviewee. Throughout Echoes & Reflections lessons, students are asked to record their observations and reactions to testimonies using the graphic organizer, *Testimony Reflections*, in order to deepen their understanding of and connection to this content. For additional information, refer to **Using Visual History Testimony in the Classroom**.
- 4** Teachers are strongly discouraged from using simulations when teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides, and from asking students to assume the voice of someone who experienced the Holocaust (e.g., writing a diary entry from the perspective of a ghetto resident). There is a danger that students might be excited by the power of the perpetrators, demonstrate a morbid fascination for the suffering of the victims, or become traumatized by being required to occupy the mind space of someone who experienced or perpetrated atrocities. To build empathy, it may be more useful for students to take on the role of someone from a neutral country responding to events, for example a journalist writing an article or a concerned citizen reaching out to a politician. In addition to deepening understanding of historical events, such activities can highlight possible courses of action that students can take in response to issues that concern them in the world today.

**5** The second lesson in this unit (“Prewar Jewish Life”) honors the memory of the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust not by remembering how they died, but how they lived. It is important for students to understand that the Jews who lived in the 1920s and 1930s did not have the ominous shadow of the Holocaust hanging over them – they were just living their lives.

**6** Teachers should note that Jewish communities in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s were diverse in their customs, practices, and experiences. The majority were more assimilated and less religious than the stereotypes that many students may hold of European Jews in this period. Many – especially the younger generation – were struggling with notions of traditional identity, which often conflicted with their desire to become part of the modern world. These are important and universal themes that can help middle and high school students connect to this history and the individuals that they will meet in this unit.

## ABOUT THIS UNIT

### INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces students to the Holocaust by providing a vocabulary for studying the Holocaust and establishing a rationale for the importance of learning about instances of mass atrocity and genocide. Students explore the value of examining different types of source material when studying the Holocaust, with a special emphasis on visual history testimony. Before delving into the Nazi era in subsequent units, students spend time exploring prewar Jewish life in order to appreciate the rich diversity of the Jewish world. Students consider who the Jews of Europe were before persecution by the Nazis, and the commonalities they share with young people from different times and places.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do we study the Holocaust and instances of mass atrocity and genocide?
- What sources of information can provide a balanced and accurate understanding of the Holocaust?
- Who were the Jews of Europe before they were persecuted, and why is it important to understand their lives prior to the devastation of the Holocaust?
- What were the major trends taking place in Jewish communities before World War II?
- How did antisemitism impact prewar Jewish life?

### OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Identify prior knowledge about the Holocaust and the sources of their knowledge.
- Define Holocaust and genocide, and compare several definitions of the Holocaust.
- Distinguish between primary and secondary source material and explain why each is important when studying historical events.
- Investigate the diversity of prewar Jewish society through the voices of teenagers of that era.
- Describe trends and challenges in the prewar Jewish world.
- Reflect on visual history testimony from Jewish survivors and others who witnessed the Holocaust.
- Explain why it is important to study the Holocaust and instances of mass atrocity and genocide.