



## THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

*“When you marched out...you never knew who would come back...”*

– ITKA ZYGMUNTOWICZ, JEWISH SURVIVOR

## 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 “Final Solution” and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

- 1** “The Final Solution of the Jewish Question” or “Final Solution” (written here in quotations to signify that it was a phrase created by the Nazis) was the Nazi policy to murder all of the Jews. It replaced earlier policies for forced relocation with a policy of systematic annihilation, and resulted in the murder of 6 million European Jews. While many other groups and millions of individuals suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis, only the Jewish people were targeted for complete annihilation. In the Nazis’ racial and antisemitic world view, the Jews were seen as their foremost enemy, and the “solution” of the so-called “Jewish Question” was paramount for them. The Nazis ultimately murdered two-thirds of European Jews.
- 2** Students’ information about the Nazi extermination camps is often in the form of dates, place names, and numbers. While it is important for students to realize that millions of Jews died at the hands of the Nazis, it is equally important that they see the victims of the Holocaust as individuals. They were mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and grandparents; young and old; tradesmen, teachers, students, scientists, and doctors. They were artists, musicians, and poets. Reflecting on the Holocaust as a human story will make it more meaningful in students’ lives and will make them more likely to take the messages that can be learned from it to heart.
- 3** All six extermination camps were located in occupied Poland. There were several important reasons for this: Poland had the largest population of Jews before the war, and Poland was considered a location where the Nazis could do as they pleased, without any concern for the Poles, who were considered inferior. In addition, Poland was far from the eyes of the Western Allies, yet it had a well-developed railway system that made transporting Jews from all over Europe to Poland feasible. Even though these camps were on Polish soil, the Poles were not responsible for initiating the camps, nor for the policies carried out in them. These were Nazi German extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Poland.
- 4** In this unit, students learn about the intense struggle for survival of Jews imprisoned in the extermination camps. It is important that students realize, however, that the vast majority of Jews who arrived at the Nazi extermination camps were murdered. Only a few were chosen to work and of those, very few survived the harsh conditions, the beatings, the lack of food, extreme weather, and forced labor.

**5** This unit contains difficult and complex subject matter. Teachers are encouraged to be sensitive to students' reactions and to assure them that experiencing a range of emotions—anger, sadness, outrage, melancholy—are all natural responses to this kind of material, and that they should feel free to express and discuss those feelings with others. Caution should be exercised in using graphic images.

## ABOUT THIS UNIT

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this unit is for students to learn about one of humanity's darkest chapters—the systematic mass murder of the Jews that came to be known as the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” This includes learning about the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads), the Nazi extermination camps, and the perpetrators and collaborators who took part in the murder. This lesson also provides an opportunity for students to learn how Jews attempted to maintain their humanity in the camps despite the inhumane conditions and brutal treatment they faced.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What were the circumstances and beliefs that made the Final Solution possible?
- What social and political systems make genocide possible?
- How does the dehumanization of a group of people in a society occur?
- How do some individuals and communities find ways to resist and maintain their humanity in the face of violence and inhumanity?
- Why is it important to focus on individual stories and experiences in accounts of mass atrocity?

### OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Define the Final Solution and explain how it was driven by Nazi ideology.
- Summarize the purpose of the mobile killing squads and extermination camps in Nazi Europe, and the systems used to carry out mass extermination.
- Interpret a variety of primary sources—visual history testimony, artifacts, artwork—used to document conditions of life and death in the camps.
- Describe the conditions and the experiences of people imprisoned in extermination camps.
- Identify ways in which some Jewish people imprisoned in the camps resisted spiritually and attempted to maintain their sense of humanity.