



LESSON PLAN: Spiritual Resistance: Attempting to Preserve Humanity in the Face of Inhumanity

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students consider how dehumanization made the Final Solution possible. They examine texts and testimony that delve into the theme of dehumanization from the perspectives of both a perpetrator and Jewish survivors. Students also interpret a variety of primary sources – including poetry and art – that deepen their understanding of spiritual resistance and how some people attempted to cope with and respond to Nazi atrocities.

PART 1: HOW DID THE DEHUMANIZATION OF JEWISH PEOPLE MAKE THE FINAL SOLUTION POSSIBLE?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

- 1** Students brainstorm and note on the board a list of the things that make them feel *human* (e.g., satisfying basic needs such as nutrition, health, and shelter; emotions; relationships; self-expression; autonomy; social and cultural belonging; learning; laughing; leisure).
- 2** Based on their list, the class comes up with a definition for *dehumanize* (e.g., to deprive someone of human qualities; to take away their dignity or make them feel less than human). The definition is posted and students are prompted to consider the following questions as they engage with the materials in this lesson:
 - How were Jewish people *dehumanized* as the Final Solution was carried out?
 - How did some Jewish people find ways to assert their *humanity* in the face of degradation and brutality?
- 3** In pairs, students read the *Interview with Franz Stangl* and *Excerpt from Survival in Auschwitz*. They think about how dehumanization made the Final Solution possible from the perspectives of both a perpetrator and a target of Nazi hate. Pairs select one phrase from each reading that most reflects this dehumanization for them. The class engages in a read-around, in which students choose one phrase to read aloud.
- 4** Students watch a testimony clip of a Jewish survivor who discusses her daily life at Auschwitz: **Itka Zygmuntowicz (bio)**. As they watch the clip, students reflect on the theme of dehumanization and take notes on *The One* or *Testimony Reflections* handout.
- 5** After reading the texts and viewing the testimony clip, students participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:
 - According to Primo Levi and Itka Zygmuntowicz, how were the prisoners at Auschwitz stripped of their humanity? What are some examples of the physical and emotional humiliation they endured on a daily basis?
 - What does Levi mean by “the double sense of the term ‘extermination camp’”? What was lost in these camps beyond human life?

- What was the effect, for Primo and Itka, of losing their possessions, names, and aspects of their identities?
- Based on the testimony and Franz Stangl interview, what enabled the guards and officials at the camps to see Jewish people as less than human?
- What is the connection between dehumanization and the ability to commit genocide?
- What is your reaction to the claim by Stangl and other Nazis that they were working for the system and did not have a choice?
- What was the power in Itka’s thought, “Our God is here, but where is yours?”

PART 2: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SURVIVORS ABOUT THE STRUGGLE BY SOME TO RETAIN THEIR HUMANITY DESPITE EFFORTS TO DEHUMANIZE THEM?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

6 In small groups, students interpret primary sources that reflect how some people coped with and responded to Nazi concentration and extermination camps. Stations are set up with the sources below. Students analyze at least two of these sources by discussing the accompanying prompts with their groups, and by continuing to record their reflections on *The One* handout.

- Poetry: *Poems from a Camp Survivor*¹
- Visual Art: *Appell, 1944*
- Artifacts: *Life in the Shadow of Death*

7 The class debriefs the station exercise using the questions below.

- What feelings emerge from these works and images? What stories do they tell?
- What is communicated through art and artifacts that cannot be communicated in a textbook?
- What is spiritual resistance? How do these pieces and artifacts reflect the humanity of Holocaust victims and the resilience of the human spirit?

8 Students continue to explore the idea of spiritual resistance through the following sources and take notes on *The One* or *Testimony Reflections* handout as they view/read:

- Testimony of **Itka Zygmuntowicz (bio)**, who wrote poetry to cope with her feelings as a prisoner at Auschwitz.
- *Excerpt from Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Dachau.

9 The class debriefs using some of the following questions:

- How does Itka Zygmuntowicz distinguish between her physical and spiritual existence while imprisoned?
- What did writing the poem help Itka to discover? How did it sustain her?

¹ Dan Pagis was born in 1930, in Bukovina, Romania. He spent three of his adolescent years in a Nazi concentration camp in the Ukraine before arriving in Palestine, in 1946. He became one of the most vibrant voices in modern Israeli poetry and is considered a major world poet of his generation. Dan Pagis died in Jerusalem in 1986. Zinovii Tolkathev was born in 1903, in the town of Shchedrin in Belorussia. As an official artist of the Red Army, he joined with Soviet forces in Majdanek, shortly after its liberation (1944) and immediately after that with the forces that liberated Auschwitz (1945). During this period, Tolkathev drew the series: Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Flowers of Auschwitz. Zinovii Tolkathev died in Kiev in 1977.

- What does Viktor Frankl mean when he says his “soul found its way...to another world”? What helped him to transcend life in the camps?
- How do you interpret Frankl’s statement that there was no need for him to know if his wife was still alive? What figurative as opposed to literal meaning might this have?
- After listening to Itka’s testimony and reading the selection from Viktor Frankl, what do you think made it possible for people to cope with life in a world that dehumanized them and denied their existence?
- Why is it important for those studying the Holocaust to understand how Jews struggled for life and dignity in a world of dehumanization?

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As a summative task, students return to Elie Wiesel and react to the following quote:

...We never try to tell the tale to make people weep...If we decided to tell the tale, it is because we wanted the world to be a better world...and learn, and remember. What is our role? We must become the messengers’ messengers.

Students consider their role as the “messengers’ messenger” and articulate two or three messages that they would want to carry forward based on their study of the “Final Solution.” They indicate specific learnings from unit sources that informed or inspired each message.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 120 MINUTES