



Teaching the Holocaust in English



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INTRODUCTION



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Teaching the Holocaust in English has been created to support the growing number of English teachers who wish to explore the Holocaust with their students. The guide includes essential pedagogical considerations, an overview of literature created during and in response to the Holocaust, recommendations for appropriate texts for use in the classroom, and reference materials which provide essential historical context.

The Holocaust Educational Trust's cross-curricular scheme of work *Exploring the Holocaust* (see overleaf) provides a framework within which English can be incorporated to offer students a more holistic learning experience. It is recommended that any study of Holocaust-related literature form part of a wider programme of study of the Holocaust to ensure that it is properly contextualised.

WHY STUDY THE HOLOCAUST IN ENGLISH?

The Holocaust was a defining event in human history whose legacies continue to shape the modern world. For the first – and so far only – time, a state and its collaborators attempted to murder an entire people, using all of the resources at their disposal. The results fundamentally changed the fabric of European society and culture and had global reverberations. Study of the Holocaust can therefore help students to think critically about the world around them, and their place in it, and thereby contribute to their intellectual and personal development.

Whilst these considerations attest to the necessity of teaching the Holocaust in History, they also suggest that its study should not be restricted to History. Learning about the Holocaust encourages students to confront fundamental questions which cut across academic disciplines, and it is here that English has an essential role.

The best Holocaust-related literature, whether written at the time or subsequently, has immense potential

to engage students' curiosity, to give them a greater sense of the moral and emotional complexity of the Holocaust, and to appreciate the humanity of all involved. It enables them, through the power of the written and spoken word, to reflect on the experiences of victims and the ethical choices made by perpetrators, bystanders and others. They can thereby gain greater understanding of the lives of ordinary people not too dissimilar to themselves and – ultimately – grapple with a host of challenging questions about what it means to be human. These questions seldom lend themselves to easy answers but this is one of the strengths of Holocaust education, encouraging students to reflect critically on issues of identity, behaviour and ethics.

Study of the Holocaust in English can thus enrich students' learning experience across a range of subjects, especially if a cross-curricular approach is adopted. At the same time, it has subject-specific benefits, not least through engagement with some of the greatest and most intellectually challenging literature produced in the modern era. Indeed, study of the Holocaust can encourage students to reflect on the nature and role of literature itself, given the claim often made by survivors that language itself is incapable of properly capturing their experiences.

Study of the Holocaust additionally fulfils curriculum content requirements across the UK. In particular, it enables students to read, discuss and respond to texts which:

- represent a range of literary forms;
- are frequently derived from cultures other than their own;
- are often high-quality, seminal examples of modern literature;
- extend and challenge their moral and emotional understanding.

In so doing, students will have the opportunity to develop core reading, writing and talking skills including:



- Analysis of the language and structure of texts to infer meaning.
- Comprehension of the purpose, audience and context of texts.
- Critical comparison of texts.
- Exploration of their own emotions and those of others.
- Formulation of informed opinions and arguments through critical analysis of evidence.
- Written and oral presentation and debate of their own opinions and those of others.
- Extension of vocabulary.



EXPLORING THE HOLOCAUST

A Cross-Curricular Scheme of Work for Key Stage 3 & S2

Exploring the Holocaust is a comprehensive yet flexible free cross-curricular scheme of work created by the Holocaust Educational Trust. Although principally intended for students in Key Stage 3 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and S2 in Scotland, its contents can be adapted for the teaching of older age groups. The scheme of work is built around a series of 15 core lessons in History, Religious Education (or Philosophy), and Citizenship or PSHE, but it is also intended that English should play a crucial role in its delivery. Not only will such an approach offer students a better understanding of texts studied in English; it will also deepen their understanding of the themes they cover in the other subjects.

Given the wide range of possible texts available, the Trust does not prescribe a specific work of literature for incorporation into *Exploring the Holocaust*. Rather, it recommends that English teachers build their own scheme of work around a core novel or work of testimony of their choice, ideally taken from the recommended texts on pages 15-19 of this guide. This work, and any supplementary texts, can then be studied in English whilst students explore the wider

history of the Holocaust in the other subjects. Where possible, English teachers should, in consultation with colleagues in these other departments, attempt to link their lessons to the key themes explored in History, Religious Education and Citizenship, although how far this is possible will naturally depend on the nature and content of the book in question.

Exploring the Holocaust can be accessed for free by registering at www.het.org.uk/login.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST IN ENGLISH



GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

Study of the Holocaust presents unique challenges and opportunities for both teachers and students. The Holocaust has immense historical significance and considerable contemporary relevance, but it is not an easy subject to teach about: teaching methods that are used for other topics may not be suitable or wholly effective for such a complex and sensitive event.

For teaching of the Holocaust to be purposeful, it must be grounded in secure historical knowledge and understanding. Not only is this proper practice for the study of any historical event; it is essential to avoid perpetuating common stereotypes and prevent misunderstanding of some of the most challenging issues raised by the Holocaust. Teachers are therefore strongly advised to consult the appendices at the end of this guide before beginning study of any Holocaust-related text.

Teaching of the Holocaust in any subject should be informed by the following internationally-agreed general principles: detailed commentary can be found on the website of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (www.holocaustremembrance.com), which represents key Holocaust education practitioners from across the world. Teachers may find that these principles are transferable to other sensitive and emotive topics.

- Create a positive, student-centred, cross-curricular approach informed by dialogue with colleagues and supported by collaboration between departments.
- Consider the intended learning outcomes and contemporary significance, whilst avoiding ahistorical comparisons.

- Avoid simple, reductive answers to complex questions and issues. Adopt an approach which is rooted in the historical events of the Holocaust. Contextualise this history – just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable. Historical contextualisation is imperative if the event is not to be removed from its historical foundations and become a free-floating universal symbol of whatever people want it to be.
- Encourage students to consider, and assess the validity of, differing interpretations of the Holocaust.
- Do not romanticise history. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust should not be redemptive but challenging.
- Be precise with language. Define the term Holocaust, being specific and avoiding an all-encompassing definition. Avoid stereotypical descriptions, such as seeing all Germans as Nazis.
- Statistics are impersonal and difficult, if not impossible, to grasp. Focus on individual experiences to make understanding the enormity of the experience more personal.
- Avoid defining Jewish people solely by the Holocaust – teach about Jewish life in Europe before the war. It is these ways of life that were lost. Equally, teaching Judaism does not automatically mean that the Holocaust should be taught: Judaism is not, and should not be, defined by the Holocaust.
- It is important to see Jews (and others) not just as victims but also people who were also involved in resistance and rescue activities.

- Ensure students are aware of the variety of cultural and religious communities across Europe.
- Don't forget non-Jewish victims, but do not include them in a catch-all definition of the Holocaust as this obscures much about the different victim groups.
- Teach about perpetrators as well as victims. Ensure that students do not assume that the Holocaust was merely conducted by Nazis; it was a continental event, which relied on the cooperation, collaboration, and acquiescence of many for its enactment. Teach about those nations and communities who collaborated in the events, and those who simply had knowledge of them. However, avoid categorising contemporaries in simplistic ways or judging their behaviour with the power of hindsight.
- Re-humanise *all* involved – the Nazis were human beings not monsters.
- Make use of possible primary source material wherever and whenever possible. Be mindful, however, that much of this may have been created by the perpetrators. Teaching in this manner can reveal the range and complexity of historical evidence to students. Where possible, use eyewitness testimony.
- Choose resources carefully, with sensitivity to students, victims and survivors. This means avoiding the use of horrific imagery which can upset and desensitise students, dehumanise victims, and portray those who suffered in a light that would be recognisable to the perpetrators.
- Make activities meaningful (no word searches or dot-to-dot games!). Be prepared to intentionally complicate students' thinking – there are few, if any, simple answers. Similarly, avoid role-play/empathy activities – we cannot imagine or expect students to imagine what it was like to be in the camps or on a transport.

- Be a reflexive and informed practitioner who avoids perpetuating myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust, and continually updates their subject knowledge.

SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of additional factors to consider which are particularly pertinent to English:

- Choose texts which are appropriate to the age of the students. This involves consideration not merely of the complexity of the text but also its content – for example, works which directly address the murder process are not suitable for primary school students even if their language and structure might suggest otherwise.
- If teaching in primary school or the earliest years of secondary, bear in mind that this will probably be students' first exposure in the classroom to the history of the Holocaust. It is therefore imperative that texts are properly contextualised.
- When teaching works of fiction, ensure that students are aware of their relationship to the history: some texts, such as *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* or, despite its anthropomorphism, *Maus*, largely depict real people and events; others, such as *Once or If Not Now, When?* have invented characters or situations but are nonetheless grounded in historical reality; others still are entirely fictional and in some cases, notably *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, create scenarios which could never have happened.
- Try to use historically authentic sources alongside works of fiction. This could, for example, entail the comparison of a survivor testimony with a novel or poem which depicts similar experiences. Such testimony need not be written – hearing the first-hand testimony of a survivor in person is a uniquely powerful educational experience. For more information about arranging a visit by a survivor, please see [the Outreach page of the Trust's website](#).

- Be willing to encourage students to engage with examples of historical inaccuracy – this can be an effective learning experience which can prompt them to reflect on the purpose of literature itself.
- Also ensure that students are aware of how representative the experiences recounted in a text are. For example, if reading Anne Frank, they should appreciate that life in hiding was untypical even though Anne's ultimate fate was not.
- Consider whether or not to study texts in their entirety. The current trend towards reading full texts rather than extracts is a welcome development in many respects. However, some content of certain texts may not be appropriate to the age or reading level of the class.
- When setting creative writing tasks, remember the advice regarding empathy activities above.

In following these principles, it would be unreasonable to expect all English teachers to become experts on the history the Holocaust. The Trust therefore recommends cooperation with colleagues in History (and other departments) to assist in deepening students' understanding of texts and their contexts, ideally within a cross-curricular framework such as that provided by *Exploring the Holocaust*.

USING FILM

Film has historically played a prominent part in Holocaust education in many schools and has also had an active role outside the classroom in shaping students' (and society's) perceptions of the Holocaust. Its use in English further allows students to consider how texts change when adapted to different media and audiences. Used properly, therefore, film can form an effective educational tool which appeals to different types of learner. It can help students to better visualise both the history of the Holocaust and the characters, events and themes of the texts they have studied. Films can therefore be used to stimulate students' interest, frame questions for further study, and provide a reference point as this study evolves.

At the same time, films generate pedagogical challenges. Even more so than literature, most are made to entertain and, for narrative purposes, are rarely entirely historically accurate so it is important that students recognise them as fictionalised representations rather than detailed reconstructions. Furthermore, many Holocaust-related films feature graphic scenes which may not be age-appropriate. At the same time, it is debateable whether film can ever accurately convey the true horror of the Holocaust, especially given the entirely understandable desire of most films to find an ultimately redemptive and morally uplifting message amidst the bleakness.

Before using any film in the classroom, teachers should therefore consider the following questions:

- What will students learn from it?
- Is the content appropriate for the students?
- What activities will be used to follow up the film?

With these thoughts in mind, teachers may find that their most effective strategy is to be selective, picking out clips which are most relevant to their learning objectives rather than showing full films. (It will also be evident that showing an average length feature film would typically take up at least two lessons.)

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

It is good practice to use a range of supporting materials, in a variety of media, to deepen students' understanding of a text and its themes. The Trust offers a wide range of materials which can support learning in this way.

Although principally designed for use in other subjects, many of the resources in *Exploring the Holocaust* can be used in English to explore themes raised by texts, such as pre-war Jewish life, the Kindertransport, life in ghettos, and the moral choices posed by the Holocaust. These and other resources can be downloaded for free from the teaching resources section of [the Trust's website](#).

In addition, *70 Voices: Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders* is a unique digital commemorative project created by the Trust to mark the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Holocaust in 2015. Available as both a website and an app, *70 Voices* explores the history of the Holocaust through 70 powerful sources – including diaries, letters, testimonies and poems – created by victims, survivors, perpetrators and other witnesses. Use of a relevant selection of these sources can add an extra dimension to study of a literary text. See www.70voices.org.uk.



There are many other excellent online resources available. Please see the *Exploring the Holocaust* teachers' guide for recommendations and further advice on sourcing online materials.

One further point which the Trust would stress is the importance of the injunction made on page 6 above to avoid the use of graphic imagery in any materials. It is sometimes argued that it is necessary to shock students with, for example, photographs of corpses, as if the murder of millions of human beings were somehow insufficiently shocking in itself. Not only does this show disrespect to the memory of innocent men, women and children and deny their humanity; it also risks traumatising young people (raising child protection issues in the process).

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

Although it is to be hoped that study of the Holocaust will have an impact on students in ways which go beyond the classroom, this does not mean that academic assessment should be ignored – students' learning should be evaluated just as for any other topic.

In the changing educational landscape, schools and departments are increasingly devising their own assessment models. This is perhaps particularly true in England where the 2014 National Curriculum has removed the levels which previously underpinned the widely used assessment focus system. Teachers should therefore broadly follow their department's normal assessment methods and criteria to judge the effectiveness of their students' learning.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Trust offers a wide range of continuing professional development programmes for teachers, suitable for different levels of experience and adaptable to different subject backgrounds. They include free in-service training workshops, one-day study seminars with leading academics, a UK-based four-day residential course aimed at those new to teaching the Holocaust, and overseas CPD courses targeted at those committed to advancing their knowledge and pedagogy.

For more information on all of the Trust's CPD programmes, please see [our website](http://www.70voices.org.uk).

LITERATURE & THE HOLOCAUST – AN OVERVIEW

LITERATURE DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Hard though it may be to credit, a considerable body of literature was created by Europe’s Jews during the Holocaust – in ghettos, in hiding and even, in a small but significant number of cases, in camps. Although every type of literature was produced, two forms predominated: diaries and poetry.

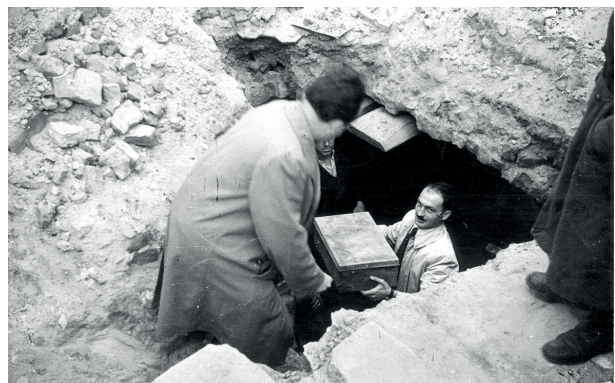
Hundreds of diaries written during the Holocaust have survived, with Anne Frank’s being only the best known. The act of writing a diary is, of course, an intensely personal one, and may be carried out for a variety of motives. Indeed, some examples – such as the diary of the Czech girl Helga Weissová who survived Terezín and Auschwitz – were begun before the war. Nonetheless, as Nazi persecution escalated towards murder, diaries were increasingly written as a direct response to the developing tragedy. In some cases, the motivation was again clearly personal – in other words, a diary offered a chance for its author to grapple with the apparently inexplicable and uncontrollable misfortunes afflicting them. However, a growing number of Jews turned to diaries with posterity in mind.

The best known example was the *Oneg Shabbat* project, organised by the historian and social activist Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto. Ringelblum, a diarist himself, encouraged as many Jews as possible to record their experiences. These diaries, together with a wide variety of other materials ranging from statistical questionnaires to apparently mundane artefacts such as sweet wrappers, formed the basis of a vast collection which Ringelblum hoped would inform post-war publications which he and others planned to write. However, as it became increasingly clear that chances of survival were limited, Ringelblum and his fellow archivists saw their mission in different terms. The view was most vividly expressed by David Graber, a 19-year-old activist who helped to

bury the first cache of materials during the height of the deportations from Warsaw to Treblinka in August 1942:

“May the treasure fall in good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened and was played out in the twentieth century. We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.”

Most, though not all, of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive was recovered after the war, providing both historians and students of literature with an invaluable source. Though the literary quality of the diaries is inevitably variable, they – like other such works produced by Jews across Nazi-occupied Europe – offer students a compelling and uniquely powerful means of exploring the reality of life during the Holocaust.¹



The *Oneg Shabbat* archive also contained poems written in the Warsaw Ghetto. Indeed, later generations

¹ – For more on *Oneg Shabbat* and another remarkable group of diaries – those written by members of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau – see the Trust’s resource *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust*. Graber quotation from Joseph Kermish (ed.), *To Live With Honor and Die With Honor!... Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives* (Yad Vashem, 1986), p. 66.

cannot fail to be awed by both the quantity and quality of the poetry produced during the Holocaust. This was particularly true of the ghettos in Warsaw and Vilna (Wilno in Polish, Vilnius in Lithuanian), reflecting these two cities' status as the historic centres of both Polish and Yiddish literature. The works of writers such as Władysław Szlengel in Warsaw or Abraham Sutzkever in Vilna stand both as vivid documents of their time and as great works of literature in their own right.

These poems served several purposes. Like diaries, they gave writers the opportunity to express their feelings and probe moral questions in a way that they felt prose did not allow. As Frieda Aaron, herself a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and later a professor of literature, put it, poetry was the dominant literary response to the Holocaust because of *"its greater ability than prose to generate the most exact correlations for feelings and states of consciousness in response to the unfolding catastrophe"*.² Like diaries, poems could also act as a form of testimony, recording the reality of life and death in the ghettos and elsewhere. However, much of the poetry written during the Holocaust had a more immediate purpose. Poets such as Szlengel and Sutzkever were consciously writing for an audience and their poems were widely distributed through underground printing presses or by word of mouth. They thus offered ghetto residents a form of moral sustenance and can also be seen as examples of what has been termed spiritual resistance. The creation of something as beautiful as a poem was an assertion of the human spirit which some have seen as a form of resistance in itself. More broadly, poems often served as exhortations to their readers to hold out and, in some cases – such as Sutzkever's 'The Lead Plates at the Rom Press' and 'On the Anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre' – as direct incitements to physical resistance. Some poems – including those of another Vilna writer, Hirsh Glik – were set to music and adopted as anthems by the growing number of Jewish resistance groups in the larger ghettos and the forests of eastern Europe.

It was not only Jewish poets who reacted to the Holocaust. Even before the war, W.H. Auden had commented on the indifference of the democracies to



the fate of German Jews in his widely-anthologised 1939 poem 'Refugee Blues', whose rhythms – inspired, like several works written by Auden in the late 1930s, by blues music – and vivid comparisons with the natural world make it readily accessible and comprehensible for students. The Holocaust itself produced an especially powerful response from Polish poets. In particular, the future Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz critically explored the behaviour of non-Jews in two of the greatest poems of the twentieth century – 'Campo dei Fiori' and 'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto', both written in response to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. In this context, it is worth noting that Miłosz was later recognised by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations for his role in rescuing Jews in Warsaw and Vilna, one of the most potent symbols of the engagement of many European writers with the fate of the continent's Jews, a theme which would gain even greater currency after the war.

POST-WAR LITERARY RESPONSES

The most quoted (or, more often, misquoted) aphorism relating to literature and the Holocaust is that of the German philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno, himself an exile from Nazism, that *"to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."*³ This much misunderstood dictum, which Adorno later modified in any case, has often been enlisted by those who argue that writing about the Holocaust is somehow indecent, which was not Adorno's point at all – rather, he was suggesting that the creation of any product of the barbaric

2 – Frieda Aaron, *Bearing the Unbearable: Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (SUNY Press, 1990), p. 1.

3 – Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms* (MIT Press, 1981), p. 34. [The essay was first printed in 1949.]



European culture which he believed had produced the Holocaust (he might have as easily referenced symphonies, for example) was to fail to confront and indeed to perpetuate this barbarism. In fact, one might argue that to write literature about issues other than the Holocaust would

be closer to the target of Adorno's scorn.

In any event, the decades since the Second World War have produced many works of literature which have attempted to represent the Holocaust and to force their readers to confront the uncomfortable questions raised by it. Indeed, it was literature rather than history which tended to dominate written responses in the first decade or more after the war, when historians – other than those writing in Yiddish – largely ignored or marginalised the subject. Several survivors wrote memoirs of immense power very soon after the war, notably Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (originally published in Italian in 1947) and Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys* (published in French as *Souvenirs de l'au delà* in 1946). Others, including Abraham Sutzkever, mourned the victims and their destroyed communities through poetry or prose fiction. Some writers, such as the Pole Tadeusz Różewicz or the Jewish-Romanian survivor Paul Celan (who wrote in German), sought to destroy or disfigure literary conventions and to refashion language in an attempt to convey the Holocaust's senselessness and incomprehensibility, in effect forestalling Adorno's argument before it had even been made. However, the greatest impact on the reading public came, of course, through the diary of Anne Frank. First published in Dutch in 1947, and in English in 1952, the book became a global phenomenon in the 1950s.

As the Holocaust began to enter wider public consciousness from the 1960s onwards, it attracted ever greater numbers of authors, including those writing in English, a language which had hitherto generated very little Holocaust literature. By the 1980s and early 1990s, prominent literary figures such as

Martin Amis, D.M. Thomas and Thomas Kenneally were tackling the Holocaust in novels which garnered press attention and literary prizes in equal measure. Indeed, novels have rather superseded poetry as the dominant creative literary response to the Holocaust in most languages in recent decades, a development which shows no sign of abating, as evidenced by the awards bestowed in the twenty-first century on the likes of Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Laurent Binet's *HHH* and Steve Sem-Sandberg's *The Emperor of Lies*.

This trend has been even more pronounced in the realm of children's fiction. Although some novels for younger readers were written at a relatively early date, such as Hans Peter Richter's *Friedrich* and Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, an extraordinary number have been produced from the 1990s onwards. The quality and historical veracity of such works has been rather variable, but, in the hands of gifted children's storytellers such as Michael Morpurgo or Morris Gleitzman, the Holocaust has often been handled honestly yet sensitively.

The broader impact of the Holocaust on post-war literature should also be noted. Though seldom in the foreground, it is a near constant subtext in the works of some of the era's greatest writers such as Günter Grass (it is addressed most prominently in *Dog Years* and *From the Diary of a Snail*), Philip Roth and Aharon Appelfeld. It has played a role in a number of alternative histories, notably Robert Harris's *Fatherland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. And then there are those works which do not openly address the Holocaust at all but which some critics have seen as written under its shadow – *Lord of the Flies*, for example, or Beckett's plays. Whilst such attributions have not convinced all observers, there can be little doubt that there are few, if any, historical events which have had such a profound and enduring impact on modern literature as the Holocaust.

TESTIMONY

Despite the immense power and impact of many novels, poems and plays such as those cited above,

perhaps the most remarkable literature to have emerged in response to the Holocaust is that of survivor testimony. Indeed, Elie Wiesel – whose *Night*, first published in French in 1958 as a heavily edited version of an earlier Yiddish memoir, is the best known example of the genre – went so far as to claim that “*[i]f the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.*”⁴



This is not to say that earlier generations did not write about horrific events. However, as Professor Robert Eaglestone has argued, such narratives “*tend to be subsumed into, for example, historical accounts (an eyewitness report, an oral history) or literary accounts (novels).*” By contrast, Holocaust testimony has “*its own form, its own generic rules, its own presuppositions*” which “*differentiate it from fiction and from autobiography.*” In particular, Eaglestone has highlighted the presence of a variety of “*generic markers*” – including the frequent use of a “*style of writing more commonly associated with history*”, “*interruptions in their narrative and disruptions in their chronology*” and a “*lack [of] closure, both as texts, and as part of each survivor’s oeuvre*” – which preclude the easy identification of the reader with the protagonists and their experiences. As a result, “*testimony is an encounter with otherness*” which forms “*a genre of its own... that holds best the memory of the Holocaust.*”⁵

4 – Elie Wiesel, ‘The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration’ in Elie Wiesel et al., *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Northwestern University Press, 1977), p. 9.

5 – Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 6, 67-68, 71.

As already indicated, testimonies were written immediately after the war or even, in some cases such as Jankiel Wiernik’s *A Year in Treblinka* (published by the Polish underground in 1944), during it. The numbers continue to increase, due not least to the wish of growing numbers of survivors to record their experiences whilst there is still time. Of course, this inevitably entails wide variations in quality as texts, although many testimonies – notably *Night* and Levi’s *If This is a Man* – are works of great literary merit. The reader must also be mindful, especially with later texts, of the fallibility of human memory and the potential for the absorption of generic tropes from other memoirs, such as the near ubiquitous presence of Josef Mengele on the selection ramp at Birkenau in Auschwitz testimonies. Nonetheless, as Wiesel indicated and, indeed, demonstrated through his own works, testimony – by offering the reader an unsettling encounter with events and experiences that appear to defy normal human comprehension – encourages us to reflect on both the Holocaust itself and the nature and limitations of literary representation.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS

Few books in recent years have had such an impact on the teaching of English as John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The reasons for the novel’s popularity in schools are not hard to fathom. It offers a readable meditation on friendship and the dangers of prejudice, and many teachers have found it an effective tool in encouraging literacy and reading for pleasure.

However, reception of the book has been rather different in the world of Holocaust education, where it has been widely criticised for what historians and survivors consider its distorted representation of the Holocaust. It would, of course, be unreasonable to expect any work of fiction to remain absolutely faithful to historical reality; indeed, it has often been suggested that it is impossible to accurately render the full horror and complexity of the Holocaust in the written word. Nonetheless, the problems with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* go beyond those inherent in the

genre. After all, many other writers have allied their literary imagination to diligent research to create texts, including many for children, which both grip the reader and take them closer to the essence of the Holocaust. By contrast, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* betrays such a lack of knowledge of the Holocaust, and of Auschwitz-Birkenau in particular, that it is a ‘fable’ in more than the sense intended by Boyne.

The many criticisms made of the book can essentially be distilled into three main charges:

- **Historical inaccuracy.** John Boyne has given contradictory public statements as to the extent to which he researched the novel. Whatever the truth, the text is riddled with historical errors. Some of these might generously be seen as devices necessary to advance the narrative such as the curiously unelectrified and unguarded fences at the largest death camp in Europe or, indeed, the rather radical recasting of the geography of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp system. Of greater concern is the fact that the entire novel is based on a fallacy: 9-year-old Jewish children were not allowed to spend months in the camp gradually starving to death – they were murdered as soon as they arrived.⁶
- **Characterisation.** The implausibility which runs throughout the story is personified in the breathtakingly inattentive Bruno whose extraordinary ignorance of the world around him is reflected in his repeated inability to understand the word ‘Führer’, a term – and an individual – with which any German child half his age would have been completely familiar (imagine a British boy or girl not knowing the word ‘leader’, its exact

English equivalent). Whilst this faux naïf style is a staple of books for children, it may be argued that Boyne pushes it beyond the bounds of decency. The suggestion that any German nine-year-old – still less the son of a senior SS officer – would have been unaware of Hitler, Jews or even, as seems to be the case with Bruno, the existence of the Second World War utterly ignores the lengths to which the Nazis went to win the hearts and minds of children. That they taught nine-year-olds to hate Jews might be considered important to understanding of what made an event such as the Holocaust possible; to deny that such a thing happened has thus been seen by some critics as an abdication of authorial responsibility.

In the case of Shmuel, the problem is less of characterisation per se and more of its absence. Like the other Jewish characters in the book, he is a one-dimensional cipher, only ever presented as a passive victim and denuded of individuality. Unlike Bruno, Shmuel offers the reader few insights into his inner thoughts whilst the details given of his life in Kraków are perfunctory. His lament that “*There are dozens of Shmuels on this side of the fence... Hundreds probably. I wish I had a name of my own*”⁷ thus rings truer than was presumably intended.

- **Messages.** It may be argued that a story which presents itself as a fable can be excused its implausibility since it is a vehicle to convey a more elemental ‘truth’. But what ‘truths’ does *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* offer? Whilst it is clearly intended as a warning against hatred and prejudice, readers – especially those with little or no prior knowledge of the Holocaust – may also derive rather worrying messages from the book. Some of these relate to points already made such as seeing Jews only as victims or a failure to appreciate what Auschwitz really was. The characterisation of Bruno is symptomatic of a wider trend in the narrative which implies that most ‘ordinary’ people were either ignorant of Nazi

6 – The only known exception to this rule was the curious case of the ‘family camp’, established deep within Birkenau (and thus completely inaccessible to the outside world) in late 1943, where Czech Jews deported from the Terezín Ghetto were held for six months before being sent to the gas chambers. This unique phenomenon, which was probably related to SS attempts to mislead the International Red Cross in the event of an inspection, is in any case irrelevant to the case of Shmuel who readers can infer was deported from Kraków to Auschwitz in 1942 or 1943; the city’s Jewish children were in fact murdered in 1942 either on the streets of its ghetto or in the gas chambers of Bełżec extermination camp. Of the at least 434,500 Jews deported to Bełżec from Nazi-occupied Poland in the mere nine months of its operation in 1942, precisely two (both men) survived.

7 – John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (David Fickling Books, 2006), p. 109.

crimes or, as in the case of Bruno's grandmother, hostile to them: this risks reinforcing a comforting but wholly discredited myth (widely articulated in post-war Germany) that responsibility for the Holocaust lay with a small criminal minority, represented in the book by the 'Fury', Lieutenant Kotler and, of course, Bruno's forbidding father. Were this true, then the Holocaust would prompt rather less troubling reflections on human nature.

An especial concern relates to the book's denouement. There is anecdotal evidence of reactions from a significant minority of readers along the lines of "but he [Bruno] shouldn't be there", the implication being that Shmuel should be. This problem is even more pronounced in the film adaptation of the novel, through both its gratuitous depiction of the boys' deaths and its final moments which show the pain and anguish felt by a mass murderer at the loss of his son. At no point do viewers see the equivalent feelings of victims' families and friends, leaving open the interpretation that killing Jews is wrong because German boys might inadvertently be killed as well.

Where, then, does this leave teachers? The book is undoubtedly popular with many students and it would be unreasonable to expect English departments, particularly in financially straitened times, to consign it to the dustbin of literary history. At the same time, however, it is to be hoped that the preceding points demonstrate the necessity of caution.

Perhaps the most important consideration is to ensure that the novel is only ever studied as a work of fiction and is never presented as a means of learning about the Holocaust, an injunction which need not be applied to almost any other comparable text, even those which are targeted at children of a similar age. Students must be made aware that the book does not in any meaningful sense represent the reality of the Holocaust, especially since it is commonly read before they have ever encountered the subject in History. Indeed, there is a growing body of academic research evidence that reading of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – whether in school or at home – has seriously impacted on student preconceptions of the Holocaust and the language

used to express them. In particular, it has given rise to deeply distorted perceptions of life and death in the camps which, as many History teachers have reported, have proved difficult to dispel.

This point may hint at one possible learning strategy – for English teachers to cooperate with their colleagues in History to ensure that the book is read within a context which will enable students to more easily appreciate and explore its flaws. However, this approach may not always be possible given that most students appear to be reading the novel in English at an earlier age – in some cases significantly so – than that at which they would typically study the Holocaust in History. It is therefore recommended that English teachers also consider, as some already do, how best to address these issues in their own classrooms.

A particularly fruitful approach can be to read *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* alongside other texts – both works of fiction and testimonies such as those recommended in the next section – to allow students to discover the concerns surrounding it for themselves. This has the added benefits of enabling them to read a wider range of texts and to begin to engage with challenging questions about the nature and purpose of literature. In this latter context, students could, for example, consider whether – and, if so, how far – authors have obligations to their subject matter. They might also be invited to speculate on what the novel is really about (some have read it as an allegory of Northern Ireland, for example) since it is so clearly not a book about the Holocaust in anything but the most superficial sense.

For further reflections on The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, please see the article by Professor David Cesarani on pages 29-30 below.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS



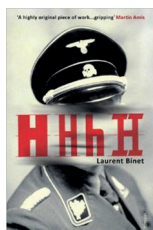
The answer to the question of which of the thousands of Holocaust-related texts to study is one that will vary from school to school. The main considerations, beyond cost and availability, should include age appropriateness, relevance, historical authenticity and, of course, literary merit. 'Authenticity' here need not mean that a text have been written at the time or by a witness, or even that it be entirely based on fact. Rather, it means that works are informed by some knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust and attempt to be relatively faithful to the historical reality.

The following suggestions represent a diverse range of literary forms and cultural backgrounds, and are appropriate to different reading levels, but are all works possessed of literary power and historical authenticity. Most are currently in print and/or published as ebooks; used copies of the other titles can be purchased online, often at extraordinarily low prices.

PROSE FICTION

Laurent Binet, *HHhH* (Harvill Secker)

Postmodernist tour de force which is simultaneously a study of one of the principal perpetrators of the Holocaust (Reinhard Heydrich), a gripping account of his assassination in 1942, and a treatise on the nature of historical fiction. Suitable for post-16.



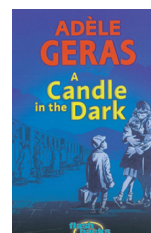
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Penguin)

A touching, often comic, and compelling magic realist novel which engages with the history and memory of the Holocaust whilst also drawing inspiration from classic Yiddish literature. The book's complex structure and playful use of language will not be to every reader's taste but will encourage advanced students to engage with the text at many levels. Suitable for post-16.



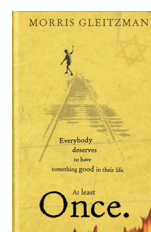
Adèle Geras, *A Candle in the Dark* (A & C Black)

A short story about the Kindertransport which does not flinch from some of the more uncomfortable aspects of its subject matter, including the attitudes of some British citizens. Suitable for late primary.



Morris Gleitzman, *Once, Then, Now and After* (all Puffin)

A series of well-researched novels which follow the story of Felix, a Jewish orphan struggling to survive in Nazi-occupied Poland. Avoiding the simplistic stereotypes of Jews, Germans and Poles which sometimes plague the genre, the books collectively address a wide range of themes, including resistance and rescue, alongside their central motif of friendship. Suitable for early to mid-secondary.



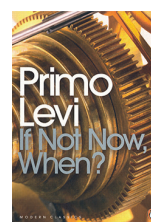
Judith Kerr, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (HarperCollins)

The perfect text for primary, this autobiographical novel does not directly address the Holocaust but rather focuses on the challenges of life as a refugee, providing an age-appropriate introduction to the era. The fact that the author – the daughter of a prominent Jewish socialist journalist who was forced to flee Germany in 1933 – will be well known to many from her classic works for younger children only adds to the book's immense appeal. Suitable for late primary and early secondary.



Primo Levi, *If Not Now, When?* (Penguin)

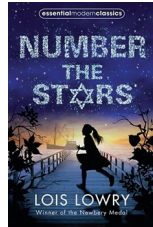
The author's only novel relates the odyssey of a group of Jewish partisans from the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union to post-liberation Italy. Written with Levi's characteristic honesty and humanity, the book challenges all too common stereotypes of Jewish responses to the Holocaust, encouraging students to



engage with the complex but inspiring history of Jewish resistance. Suitable for late secondary.

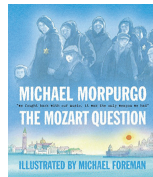
Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars* (HarperCollins)

An affecting story of friendship and courage which addresses the rescue of Denmark's Jews by the country's resistance in 1943. Suitable for late primary and early secondary.



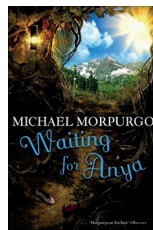
Michael Morpurgo, *The Mozart Question* (Walker Books)

A typically beautifully written short story which reflects on both the shadows of the Holocaust and the power of music. Although the book's brevity and design might suggest it is for primary-age readers, its vocabulary and subject matter (not merely the Holocaust, but also many of the musical references) do not. Suitable for early to mid-secondary.



Michael Morpurgo, *Waiting for Anya* (Egmont)

A suspenseful and sensitively narrated tale, set in the French Pyrenees, whose child protagonist is drawn into a mission to smuggle Jews to safety across the border. Written with human warmth and compassion, the novel carefully avoids simplistic characterisation or moralising. Suitable for early secondary and, possibly, late primary – teachers should exercise their judgement as to the potential emotional impact of the denouement on their students.



Hans Peter Richter, *Friedrich* (Puffin)

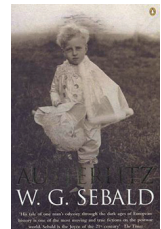
One of the earliest Holocaust-related novels for children, widely used in schools for decades, which relates the story of the titular character – a German Jewish boy – through the eyes of his non-Jewish friend. Does not shy away from the involvement of 'ordinary' Germans in the persecution



of Jews, although the issue is perhaps handled less candidly than would be the case in most modern novels. Suitable for early to mid-secondary.

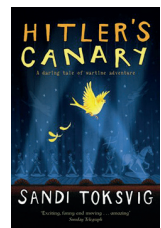
W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Penguin)

A mesmeric and melancholic treatise on memory, loss and friendship. To describe this as a novel about the Kindertransport and the fate of the Jews of Prague fails to do justice to the book's multiple layers and dreamlike prose which will challenge but reward the most advanced readers. Suitable for post-16.



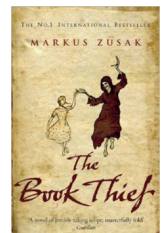
Sandi Toksvig, *Hitler's Canary* (Corgi)

A gripping novel, partly based on the experiences of the author's father, which – like *Number the Stars* – deals with the rescue of Danish Jews in 1943. Through rounded and believable characters and historically accurate plotting, the book enables accessible exploration of the complexity of human behaviour during the Holocaust. Suitable for late primary and early secondary.



Marcus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (Black Swan)

A poignant affirmation of the power of words which has become increasingly popular in schools in recent years. Although the Holocaust is only marginal to the narrative, the novel does offer students a means of beginning to engage with the wider history of life in Nazi Germany. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



PICTURE BOOKS & GRAPHIC NOVELS

Loïc Dauvillier, *Hidden* (First Second)

A poetic and touching evocation of the confusion, fear and loneliness faced by hidden children during the Holocaust, written and illustrated with younger readers in mind. Suitable for late primary and early secondary.



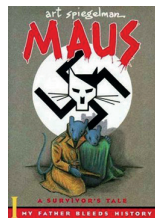
Ken Mochizuki & Dom Lee, *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* (Lee & Low)

Beautifully illustrated account of the Japanese diplomat who effectively saved 6,000 Jewish lives. Narrated from the perspective of Sugihara's son Hiroki, who provides an afterword. Suitable for early secondary.



Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (Penguin)

A multiple award-winning work which can be studied as a searing account of the Holocaust, as an exploration of family relationships, and as a case study of the literary value of graphic novels. Suitable for secondary.



Irene N. Watts & Kathryn E. Shoemaker, *Good-bye Marianne* (Tundra)

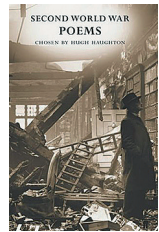
Simply yet effectively illustrated, this partly autobiographical account addresses the Kindertransport and its context. Watts's earlier prose version of the same story – *Goodbye Marianne* (Anchorage) – is harder to track down but comparing it with the graphic novel can be a rewarding learning experience. Suitable for late primary and early secondary.



POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

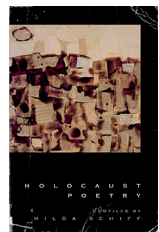
Hugh Haughton (ed.), *Second World War Poems* (Faber and Faber)

An excellent collection which gives the lie to the not uncommon assertion that the Second World War did not produce poetry to match the First. Includes Holocaust-related poems from some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century including W.H. Auden, Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Czesław Miłosz, Dan Pagis, Miklós Radnóti, Tadeusz Różewicz and Nelly Sachs. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



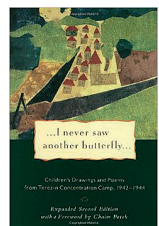
Hilda Schiff (ed.), *Holocaust Poetry* (Fount Paperbacks)

Despite some curious choices (the inclusion of works of questionable relevance, relatively little Yiddish poetry), this useful collection contains many of the most important poems written during or in reaction to the Holocaust. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



Hana Volavková (ed.), *... I Never Saw Another Butterfly... Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp* (Shocken)

A heartbreaking collection of poems from the Czech ghetto, whose impact is heightened by the beautiful accompanying pictures. Suitable for secondary.



DRAMA

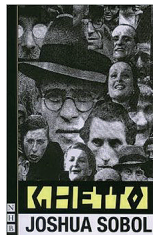
Diane Samuels, *Kindertransport* (Nick Hern Books)

A multi-layered play, for many years a GCSE set text, which uses the ambiguous story of the rescue of almost 10,000 Jewish children from central Europe in 1938-39 to explore a wide range of themes including identity, mother-daughter relationships, sacrifice, memory and loss. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



Joshua Sobol, *Ghetto* (Nick Hern Books)

Fictionalised account of the theatre which existed in the Vilna Ghetto in 1942-43. Incorporating songs which were actually performed in the theatre, the play explores the moral dilemmas facing the inmates of the ghetto in their struggles to survive and the role of culture as a form of resistance. Suitable for late secondary.



C.P. Taylor, *Good* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama)

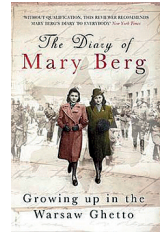
A powerful exploration of how an apparently decent and intelligent person could – for a range of eminently human motives such as ambition, vanity and the desire to fit in – allow themselves to be morally compromised by the Nazi regime. The play thus encourages students to confront the troubling reality that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were ordinary, fallible human beings rather than the caricatured criminals and sadists sometimes encountered in fictional representations of the period. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



DIARIES

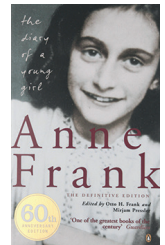
Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oneworld)

The astutely-observed diary of a teenager (who survived) which reveals much about the challenges of life in the largest ghetto. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



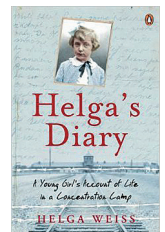
Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Penguin)

The best known and most widely read eyewitness account of life during the Holocaust, whose study is made all the more poignant by knowledge of its author's fate. Suitable for secondary. (Extracts may be used with younger readers.)



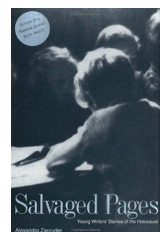
Helga Weiss, *Helga's Diary: A Young Girl's Account of Life in a Concentration Camp* (Viking)

This misleadingly subtitled account vividly follows a teenage girl's experiences from pre-occupation Prague through to liberation. The accompanying paintings, which hint at the writer's later career as an artist, were created in Terezín. The text is not without challenges since the post-Terezín sections – presented as diary entries – were in fact written up immediately after the war. However, this also offers opportunities for textual analysis with older students. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



Alexandra Zapruder (ed.), *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust* (Yale University Press)

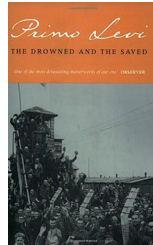
A powerful anthology of diaries written by children and young people, almost all of whom lost their lives in the Holocaust. Suitable for mid-secondary and above.



TESTIMONY & BIOGRAPHY

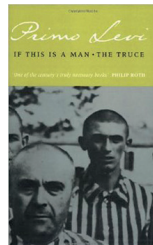
Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Abacus)

A series of challenging and often uncomfortable meditations by one of the best known survivors of the Holocaust, who became one of Europe's greatest post-war writers. Suitable for post-16.



Primo Levi, *If This is a Man/ The Truce* (Abacus)

If This is a Man is one of the earliest and most astute Auschwitz memoirs; *The Truce* recounts the author's adventures in the chaos of the immediate post-war period. Suitable for late secondary.



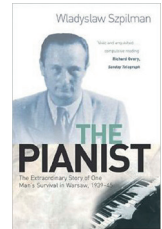
Karen Levine, *Hana's Suitcase* (Evans Brothers)

The inspiring story of a Japanese educator's quest to uncover the fate of a Czech Jewish girl whose suitcase was displayed in a Tokyo Holocaust museum. Suitable for early secondary.



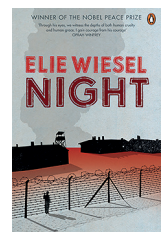
Władysław Szpilman, *The Pianist* (Phoenix)

An honest and moving account of survival, first in the Warsaw Ghetto and then in hiding in the increasingly devastated city. Adapted into one of the best Holocaust-related films. Suitable for late secondary.



Elie Wiesel, *Night* (Penguin)

A short but haunting Auschwitz testimony, written with an acute literary sensibility, which addresses challenging themes of faith, loss and memory. Suitable for late secondary.





APPENDICES

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

The Holocaust was the murder of approximately six million Jewish men, women and children by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the Second World War.

Antisemitism was the central and defining element of Nazi ideology, and Hitler's accession to power in 1933 led to immediate and escalating persecution of the Jews of Germany. In the pre-war era, the Nazis and their conservative allies aimed to exclude Jews from public life in Germany and eventually to force them to emigrate. However, Hitler's aggressive foreign policy, culminating in the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, inevitably brought millions of European Jews under German control. The Nazis developed various murderous plans to deport these Jews to remote locations – such as eastern Poland or Madagascar – in the full knowledge and expectation that this would entail the death of large numbers of people. In the meantime, the Jews of Poland – Europe's largest Jewish community – were increasingly interned in ghettos where appalling living conditions caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Jews across occupied Europe were subjected to discriminatory laws.

In the months following the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, Nazi policy evolved radically to one of outright mass murder. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews were shot, and by the end of 1941 the Nazi leadership had decided to seek to murder every Jew in Europe. In the following months and years, Jews from across the continent were killed by every means at the Nazis' disposal, including purpose-built extermination camps, mass shootings and use as slave labour. The killings continued even after Germany began to lose the war in 1943. Only the Nazis' eventual defeat prevented the death toll from being even higher.

The word 'Holocaust' derives from classical Greek and means 'completely burnt sacrificial offering'. It was originally used to describe religious animal sacrifices performed by the ancient Greeks and the Jews in the era of the Torah. Over the centuries, the meaning of

the term changed so that it came to denote a major act of destruction, and after the Second World War it was increasingly used in English to describe the murder of Europe's Jews, often as a translation of the Hebrew 'Shoah' ('catastrophe'). The American TV miniseries *Holocaust* (broadcast in 1978) is credited with introducing the term to popular consciousness.

COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

The term 'Holocaust' refers to all victims of Nazi persecution.

Although certain groups other than Jews (including Sinti and Roma, people with disabilities, Soviet prisoners of war and Polish elites) were victims of Nazi mass murder and many others were persecuted, only Jews were targeted for complete extermination. Historians therefore employ the term 'Holocaust' specifically to describe the murder of Europe's Jews. This is not intended to ignore or belittle the suffering of others but, in fact, to achieve the opposite. Using 'Holocaust' as a catch-all term for Nazi persecution can obscure the varying experiences of the different victim groups.

Hitler alone was responsible for the Holocaust.

Hitler was indeed ultimately responsible. However, he presided over a chaotic system of government in which rival individuals and institutions competed for influence. German officials across occupied Europe were actively involved in the decision-making process which led to the Holocaust. Similarly, its perpetration involved not only the SS but also many other agencies who knowingly made the murders possible, such as the civil service and the Reichsbahn (German railways).

The Holocaust was only perpetrated by Germans.

Although Nazi Germany initiated and organised the Holocaust, the perpetrators included many

non-Germans. They included governments which murdered Jews themselves (Romania, Croatia) or willingly handed them over to the Nazis (Vichy France, Slovakia), as well as individuals who served in German killing units or acted on their own initiative. There were people in every country who denounced Jews, just as there were people in every country who saved Jewish lives, illustrating the need to avoid the temptation to divide countries into 'good' and 'bad'.

If perpetrators had refused to participate, they would have been shot or sent to a concentration camp.

Historians and German prosecutors have failed to find a single case of someone being shot or arrested for refusal to take part in the killing of Jews. By contrast, there are well-documented examples of commanders offering their men the choice not to take part. Those who did not wish to participate were typically reassigned to other duties. Refusal might well have had implications for career advancement, but that raises very different moral questions to the belief that people were compelled to become murderers on pain of death.

Most Jews were murdered in concentration camps.

Most Jews were murdered in purpose-built extermination camps (including Bełżec, Chełmno, Sobibór and Treblinka), which were radically different to concentration camps, or by shooting in sites close to their homes. The confusion has two main causes. Firstly, the best known killing site, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was a concentration as well as extermination camp. Secondly, as German forces retreated in 1944-45, surviving Jewish prisoners were evacuated to concentration camps in Germany such as Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald where many died from disease and starvation. This led to the misconception, when these camps were liberated in 1945, that they had always been central to the Holocaust.

Jews did not resist.

There were many obstacles to Jewish resistance to the Nazis. Not only were Jews confronted by an opponent with overwhelming force; the starvation and exhaustion which characterised life in the ghettos of eastern Europe limited the ability to resist. It is also important to realise that Jews did not know in advance that the Nazis intended to murder them; many people therefore believed that resistance would make the situation worse by provoking Nazi reprisals. Nonetheless, as the Holocaust developed, armed Jewish resistance increasingly emerged in the form of ghetto revolts and partisan groups. There were even armed uprisings in three death camps (Auschwitz, Sobibór, Treblinka). In addition, many Jews practised what has been termed 'spiritual resistance' through activities such as preserving cultural life, organising education, and recording Nazi crimes.

Most Germans knew nothing about the Holocaust.

The Nazis certainly went to some lengths to conceal the evidence of their crimes; in 1943 Himmler famously described the murder of the Jews as "*an unwritten and never to be written page of glory in our history*". In reality, however, the Holocaust was what has been termed 'an open secret': most citizens were aware of at least some aspects of it, especially the deportation of German Jews, which could hardly be ignored, and the mass shootings in the Soviet Union, which were often witnessed by ordinary soldiers who in turn commented on them in letters home or whilst on leave.



SELECT TIMELINE OF THE HOLOCAUST

1933

January 30	Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany, leading a coalition of Nazis and conservatives.
April 1	First officially organised boycott of Jewish shops.
April 7	Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service removes Jews and socialists from government employment.

1935

September 15	Nuremberg Laws issued.
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1938

March 13	Anschluss with Austria. Immediately followed by pogroms.
November 9 – 10	Kristallnacht pogrom.

1939

January 30	In a speech to the Reichstag Hitler 'prophesies' " <i>the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe</i> " should " <i>international Jewish financiers, inside and outside Europe, succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war</i> ".
March 15	German occupation of Prague.
September 1	German invasion of Poland begins World War II.
October 8	First Nazi ghetto created in Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland.
November 23	Jews in the General Government region of Poland forced to wear Star of David armbands.

1940

June 14	First transport of Polish political prisoners to Auschwitz.
Summer	Nazi plan to deport Jews to Madagascar developed and then abandoned.
November 15	Warsaw Ghetto sealed.

1941

March – April	Ghettos created in many cities in the General Government (e.g. Kraków, Lublin).
June 22	German invasion of the USSR. Almost immediately followed by murders of Communists and Jewish men by Einsatzgruppen and other German police units. Also pogroms against Jews by local collaborators in some parts of Ukraine and the Baltic States.
August	Einsatzgruppen increasingly begin to murder Jewish women and children, including entire Jewish communities in many places.
September 1	Decree ordering German Jews to wear the yellow star.
September 29 – 30	Babi Yar massacre: 33,771 Jews shot in a ravine on the edge of Kiev.
October 15	Deportation of Jews from Germany and Austria to ghettos in the East (e.g. Łódź, Minsk) begins.
November 24	First transport of Czech Jews to Terezín (transports from Terezín to the East begin January 9 1942).
December 8	Gassings begin at Chełmno extermination camp.

1942

- January 20 Wannsee Conference.
- February 15 First gassing of a Jewish transport in Auschwitz (from Beuthen in Silesia).
- March 17 First transports to Bełżec, marking the start of Aktion Reinhard.
- July 22 Beginning of 'Great Aktion' in the Warsaw Ghetto, marking the start of deportations to Treblinka (more than 700,000 Jews murdered in Treblinka in 5 months).

1943

- April 19 – May 16 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
- August 2 Treblinka Uprising.
- October 1 – 2 Rescue of Danish Jews begins.
- October 14 Sobibór Uprising.
- November 3 – 4 Erntefest massacre: 42,000 Jews shot in two days in Majdanek and other camps in the Lublin region.

1944

- March 19 German invasion of Hungary, following attempts by the Hungarian leader Horthy to leave the war.
- May 15 Systematic deportations of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau begin: 435,000 Jews deported until Horthy orders a halt on July 7.
- Autumn Death marches begin.

1945

- January 27 Auschwitz-Birkenau liberated by the Red Army.
- April 30 Hitler commits suicide.
- May 7 Germany surrenders to the Allies.

SELECT GLOSSARY

Aktion (plural: Aktionen)

Nazi term for an operation in which members of a Jewish community were forcibly assembled and then either deported to an extermination camp or shot locally.

Aktion Reinhard

Code name for the largest killing operation of the Holocaust in which at least 1.7 million Jews (mainly from Poland) were murdered in the General Government between March 1942 and November 1943. Most victims were murdered in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka extermination camps but at least 300,000 were shot.

Anschluss

German annexation of Austria on 13th March 1938.

'Aryan'

Term originally applied to speakers of Indo-European languages. The Nazis and other racists used it to describe people of white European origin, especially northern Europeans.

Auschwitz-Birkenau (pronounced 'Owsh-vits Ber-ke-now')

Concentration and extermination camp in the Polish town of Oświęcim. Created as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners in 1940, it became an extermination camp in early 1942. Eventually, it consisted of three main sections: Auschwitz I, the concentration camp; Auschwitz II (Birkenau), an extermination and slave labour camp; Auschwitz III (Monowitz), a slave labour camp. Auschwitz also had numerous sub-camps. More than 1.1 million people lost their lives in Auschwitz-Birkenau, including approximately 1 million Jews, 75,000 Poles, 21,000 Sinti and Roma, and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war.

Concentration camp

Prison camp in which inmates were forced to undertake hard labour. The first Nazi camps, with the exception of Dachau (created March 1933), were generally small and temporary. From 1936 onwards

larger camps such as Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937) and Mauthausen (1938) were established, usually linked to economic enterprises run by the SS. Most inmates were political opponents of the Nazis or so-called 'asocials' (such as gay men, beggars and habitual criminals). Although more than 30,000 Jews were held in camps after Kristallnacht in 1938, the concentration camps in Germany and Austria (unlike those in Poland) had a limited role in the Holocaust until late 1944 when they began to receive tens of thousands of prisoners evacuated from the camps in the East. This led to catastrophic conditions in which huge numbers of Jews and others died.

Death march

Name given to the forcible movement of prisoners (especially Jews) from the concentration and labour camps in the East to camps in Germany from the autumn of 1944 onwards. Thousands died on these marches from cold, hunger and shootings by the guards.

Einsatzgruppen (singular: Einsatzgruppe; pronounced 'Ein-zats-grup-pe(n)')

Mobile SS killing squads made up of members of the Gestapo, criminal police and SD. During the invasion of Poland, Einsatzgruppen shot thousands of members of the Polish elites and, in some cases, Jews. Larger units were formed for Operation Barbarossa and shot hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews in the course of 1941. Similar massacres were also perpetrated by police battalions, other German units and local collaborators.

'Euthanasia'

Term normally used to describe a painless, voluntary death for the terminally ill. The Nazis used the term for the programme of state-sponsored murder of around 200,000 people with mental and physical disabilities in Germany and Austria: 70,000 were victims of the gas chambers of the T4 programme; others (including disabled children) were killed through deliberate starvation or lethal injection. The Nazis also murdered an unknown number of disabled people in Poland during the war.

Évian Conference

Meeting of 32 countries in France in July 1938 to discuss the question of German Jewish refugees. Accomplished little as most countries were reluctant to accept large numbers.

Extermination camp

Nazi camp for the mass murder of Jews, primarily by poison gas. Four camps were created in Poland in 1941-42 which existed solely for the murder of Jews: Belżec, Chełmno, Sobibór and Treblinka. Almost every person brought to these camps was murdered immediately: only a small number of Jews from each transport were selected to work in the camp (e.g. sorting the property of victims, disposing of the bodies) and most of them were soon murdered. In addition, the already existing Auschwitz-Birkenau camp became an extermination camp in spring 1942. Because Birkenau was also a slave labour camp, larger numbers of Jews were selected to work, giving them a slightly higher chance of survival. A number of other camps, notably Majdanek and Maly Trostenets, have sometimes also been described as extermination camps.

'Final Solution' (German: 'Endlösung')

Nazi euphemism for the plan to murder all European Jews.

Frank, Anne (1929-1945)

Daughter of a middle class German-Jewish businessman. The Franks moved from Frankfurt to Amsterdam when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Once deportations from the Netherlands began in 1942, the family went in to hiding, helped by the employees of Anne's father Otto. They were betrayed in August 1944 and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where Anne's mother Edith died. Anne and her elder sister Margot were transferred to Bergen-Belsen in October 1944 where both died of typhus in the spring of 1945. The diary that Anne kept whilst in hiding was published by Otto, who had survived Auschwitz, in the 1950s.

Genocide

Term first coined in the Second World War by the lawyer Raphael Lemkin to describe the deliberate and

systematic destruction of a religious, racial, national or cultural group.

Gestapo

Nazi secret police force created in 1933. Controlled by Himmler from 1934.

Ghetto

Section of a town or city where Jews were forced to live. Ghettos had existed in many parts of Europe in the Medieval and the Early Modern periods. They were revived by the Germans following the invasion of Poland: the first Nazi ghetto was created in Piotrków Trybunalski in October 1939. More ghettos were established in 1940 although widespread ghettoisation only began in 1941. Ghettos were also created in the Soviet Union from late 1941 onwards, usually for Jews of working age who had survived the Einsatzgruppen massacres. Many, though not all, ghettos were 'closed': i.e., surrounded by walls with exit forbidden. Ghettos were characterised by overcrowding, hunger, disease and exploitation for slave labour. All, except the unique ghetto of Terezín, were eventually liquidated with the Jews deported to extermination camps or shot.

Goebbels, Joseph (1897-1945)

Nazi Minister of Propaganda and leader of the Nazi Party in Berlin. Organised the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938 and was instrumental in persuading Hitler to begin the deportation of German Jews to the East in September 1941. Committed suicide in Berlin in 1945.

'Gypsies'

Commonly used term, often considered pejorative, to describe the Romani people, an ethnic group who trace their origins to northern India. Although Romani are stereotypically seen as nomadic, many 'Gypsies' lived in settled communities. The principal Romani groups were Roma and Sinti. The Nazis regarded 'Gypsies' as racially inferior and a danger to 'Aryan' society. Although policy varied from country to country, around 220,000 Roma and Sinti were murdered by the Nazis. Some Roma use the Romani term Porajmos ('devouring') to describe this genocide.



Heydrich, Reinhard (1904-1942)

Head of the SD and later of the Gestapo and criminal police. As Himmler's deputy, and also under orders from Hitler and Göring, Heydrich oversaw the development of the 'Final Solution' in the key 1941-42 period and chaired the Wannsee Conference. In 1941 he was also appointed Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. On 27th May 1942 he was shot in Prague by members of the Czech resistance and died on 4th June; Aktion Reinhard was named in his honour.

Himmler, Heinrich (1900-1945)

Leader of the SS and, from 1936, chief of all police forces in Germany. Himmler used his positions to control racial policy, especially once war broke out. As a result, he worked closely with Hitler to take the decisions which led to the Holocaust, and the SS and police became the principal, though not only, organisers of the murders. Committed suicide in 1945 after capture by the British.

Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945)

Leader of the Nazi Party and, from 30th January 1933, of Germany. Although Hitler's laziness and dislike of routine meant that he largely avoided day-to-day government business, he was responsible for key decisions with regard to Jewish and foreign policy. Committed suicide in Berlin in 1945.

Hoess, Rudolf (1900-1947)

Career SS officer who was appointed as first commandant of Auschwitz in May 1940. Hoess oversaw the camp's expansion and its development into an extermination camp. Transferred in late 1943, he returned to Auschwitz in spring 1944 to oversee the murder of the Jews of Hungary. Sentenced to death by a Polish court in 1947 and subsequently hanged at Auschwitz.

Holocaust

Literally 'completely burnt sacrifice' (Greek). Term most commonly used to describe the mass murder of approximately 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Although certain other groups were victims of Nazi persecution and genocide, only Jews were targeted for complete destruction. Thus, when used by historians, the term refers specifically

to the murder of Europe's Jews rather than to Nazi persecution in general.

Homosexuals

The Nazis regarded homosexuality as a threat to the survival of the supposed 'master race' because it meant that there were men who were not fathering children. Consequently, approximately 50,000 gay men in Germany were sent to prison or concentration camps.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Religious group which originated in the USA. Witnesses refuse to salute the flag, serve in the army or participate in politics. As a result, they were persecuted by the Nazis and several thousand, mostly from Germany, were sent to prison or concentration camps.

'Jewish badge'

A distinctive sign, usually a Star of David, which Jews were forced to wear in most countries under Nazi control, beginning with Poland in 1939. Depending on the country, it took the form of an armband or a badge.

Judenrat (plural: Judenräte; pronounced 'Yu-den-rat'/'Yu-den-rae-te')

Jewish council established by the Nazis to carry out their instructions. Most Judenräte tried to balance this role with caring for the welfare of their communities.

Kapo

A prisoner chosen by the SS to oversee a group of prisoners in a concentration camp.

Kindertransport

Literally 'children's transport' (German). Programme whereby the British government allowed the admission of almost 10,000 mostly Jewish child refugees from central Europe following Kristallnacht until the outbreak of war curtailed the operation. Because of immigration restrictions, most of the children were unaccompanied and they had to be sponsored by welfare agencies.

Korczak, Janusz (1878?-1942)

Pseudonym of Henryk Goldszmit, a Polish-Jewish educator, paediatrician and children's author. Korczak established an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw in 1911. The orphanage was relocated

with the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto in November 1940. Korczak, his co-workers and the children were deported to their deaths at Treblinka in August 1942.

Kristallnacht

'Night of Broken Glass' (German). Nationwide pogrom, organised by the Nazis, on the night of 9th– 10th November 1938 in which Jewish businesses and homes were attacked and looted, synagogues burned, and 91 people killed. More than 30,000 Jews were held in concentration camps until they agreed to leave Germany. The pretext for the pogrom was the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a young Jewish man whose parents had been deported by the Nazis; in reality, a violent action against Jews had been planned for months.

Levi, Primo (1919-1987)

Italian Jewish chemist who was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. His scientific background meant that he was eventually selected to work in the IG Farben chemical factory attached to Auschwitz III. His memoir *If This is a Man* (also published as *Survival in Auschwitz*) was one of the earliest and best-known survivor accounts. Committed suicide in 1987.

Nuremberg Laws

Two anti-Jewish laws enacted in September 1935 during the Nazi Party conference in Nuremberg which provided the basis for removing Jews from all spheres of German life. The Reich Citizenship Law effectively deprived Jews of German citizenship and associated rights. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour outlawed marriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews as well as prohibiting Jews from employing non-Jewish female servants of childbearing age and displaying the German flag. Supplementary laws defined who was a Jew, with a range of categories created for Germans of mixed ancestry.

Operation Barbarossa

Code name for the German invasion of the Soviet Union which began on 22nd June 1941.

Partisans

Irregular soldiers involved in guerrilla warfare. Many Jewish partisan groups were formed in Poland and the USSR during the war.

'Selection'

Euphemism for the process of choosing victims for death in camps and ghettos by separating them from those considered fit for work.

Shoah

Literally 'catastrophe' (Hebrew). A term for the Holocaust preferred by many Jews.

Sonderkommando

Jewish prisoners forced to work in and around the gas chambers in the extermination camps.

Soviet prisoners of war

During the course of Operation Barbarossa, 5.7 million Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner by Germany. The Nazis regarded them as both ideological and racial enemies. Around 3.3 million died in Nazi captivity, most from autumn 1941 to spring 1942 when they were held in 'camps' which were usually fenced off fields with no food or accommodation.

SS

Nazi Party organisation which was originally created as Hitler's bodyguard. Under the leadership of Himmler, the SS grew to become a 'state within a state' which controlled the concentration camps and racial policy, ran its own businesses and had its own armed forces.

Terezín (Czech), Theresienstadt (German) (pronounced 'Te-re-zeen'/'Te-reh-zee-en-shtat')

Garrison town in northern Czechoslovakia which was transformed into a Jewish ghetto in late 1941. Terezín served both as a transit camp for deportations of Czech Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau and as a 'model ghetto' to which certain groups of German and Austrian Jews were sent such as war veterans, partners in mixed marriages and prominent community leaders. In this way, Terezín was intended to deceive public opinion and the international community, notably the International Red Cross who inspected the ghetto in

June 1944. In reality, 35,000 Jews died in Terezín and more than 80,000 were deported to extermination camps.

T4

Code name for the operation (approved by Hitler in October 1939) in which 70,000 German and Austrian adults with disabilities were murdered in gas chambers at six killing centres, mostly former hospitals, between 1939 and 1941. Officially ended in August 1941, partly because of public protests, although killings of disabled people continued by other means to the end of the war. Many T4 staff were transferred to Poland to run the Aktion Reinhard extermination camps.

Transit camp

Camp in which Jews were held prior to deportation to extermination camps. Examples included Drancy (France), Mechelen (Belgium) and Westerbork (the Netherlands).

Wannsee Conference

Meeting of senior Nazi leaders and officials, chaired by Heydrich, on 20th January 1942 at a villa outside Berlin to discuss the 'Final Solution'. The conference had two main purposes: to coordinate all institutions involved in the Holocaust and to assert the control of the SS over the process.

Wiesel, Elie (1928-2016)

Auschwitz survivor who was deported to the camp from Sighet in Hungary (now Sighetu Marmăției in Romania). His memoir *Night*, which was first published in French in 1958, is one of the best known Holocaust testimonies. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.



DAVID CESARANI ON *THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS*

David Cesarani was, until his untimely death in 2015, research professor in History at Royal Holloway, University of London, and one of the UK's leading historians of the Holocaust. His publications include *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (2004) and *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49* (2016).

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Striped Pyjamas

In 2006 John Boyne, a professional writer with several novels to his name, published *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, a 'fable' that drew on the Nazi persecution and mass murder of Europe's Jews. It tells the story of a nine-year-old German boy called Bruno whose father is appointed to run a death camp in Poland in 1942. Bruno is wrenched away from his much loved Berlin home and virtually imprisoned, with his mother, sister and a maid, in the commandant's compound. Driven by boredom to explore more widely he slips out of the compound and stumbles upon the camp. Bruno sees a small boy on the other side of the perimeter fence and strikes up a friendship with him. Shmuel is the same age, but his efforts to explain why he is incarcerated meet with incomprehension. Indeed, Bruno is so uninformed about Jews and the purpose of the camp that after various adventures and misadventures with Shmuel he squirms under the wire, puts on a pair of the 'striped pyjamas' worn by the inmates, and ends up being swept into the gas chambers. Bruno and the little Jewish boy die holding hands.

Of course, the story is utterly implausible. Except for a few peculiar cases there were no Jewish children in the extermination camps: they were gassed on arrival. Fences were heavily guarded and frequently electrified. Apart from these necessary, but seriously

misleading, inventions the narrative relies on various nonsensical linguistic tricks. Boyne underlines Bruno's ingenuousness by having him refer to Hitler as the 'Fury' and to the camp as 'Out-With'. Yet any normal German nine-year-old would have been able to pronounce Führer and Auschwitz correctly. Nor is it conceivable that a boy who had been in a German school for several years under Hitler, and whose father was a committed Nazi, would have escaped seeing the Jews depicted in derogatory images or hearing them discussed in murderous terms. Boyne contrives a situation in which Bruno feels impelled to go under the wire already looking a bit like an inmate, but this beggars belief. Indeed, the book amounts to a distortion of history.

Should this matter if the book is a 'fable' which is presumably intended by its author to warn against the evils of prejudice? Yes. Because there are people at large who contest whether the systematic mass murder of the Jews occurred, using every discrepancy of detail to justify their denial of the whole thing, it is incumbent upon anyone touching the subject in any genre to get the facts right. Boyne wants to suggest that we are all the same and that children have to be taught to hate those who are, allegedly, different. But to achieve this he creates a figure who, in effect, justifies the post-war claim of Germans that they knew nothing about what happened to the Jews. Indeed, Bruno's mother also seems blissfully ignorant about the camp. The book is full of Germans who know nothing and, if they do, heartily disapprove. This is not fable; it is fiction in the worst sense of the word.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas has now been made into a feature film directed by Mark Herman, who also adapted it for the screen. Herman has mercifully jettisoned some of the more cutesy aspects of the book. He has also toughened up the moral dilemmas by making the characters a bit less one-dimensional. Bruno is shown being taught to hate Jews. Conversely, his father is transformed from a forbidding figure into a good and caring dad who believes he is doing an unpleasant but essential job. And Bruno's mother is made more sympathetic, rebelling against her husband's genocidal mission. Unfortunately, thanks to the convoluted plotting required to depict the

perpetrators confronting the consequences of their own ideology, the film-makers manage to turn Germans into victims of the Holocaust.

Worse, the denouement becomes less a consequence of prejudice and more a bizarre health and safety incident. If Bruno had been properly instructed about the camp (as would have been the case in reality) he would not have gone inside. The carefully orchestrated symmetry between Bruno and Shmuel invites the viewer to ridicule the imputation of false, racial difference, but the outcome is so incredible that the message has precious little traction. Instead, we are overwhelmed by the grief of a Nazi mass murderer and his complicit Frau over the loss of their nice Aryan boy. Their horror only makes sense if we accept the premise of their racial world view: their boy did not deserve to die. Needless to say this is not the message that the makers intended to convey. However much we are supposed to think that Bruno's fate will prove to his Nazi parents that the mass murder of people just because they are Jews is wrong, the alternative moral to the story is that you should keep a closer eye on your kids.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas resembles another controversial film 'fable' of the Holocaust, *Life is Beautiful*, written and directed by Roberto Benigni. That, too, was a travesty of the facts justified by the exposé of racism. Yet many critics applauded Benigni for his fantastic and comedic approach on the grounds that it took a grim subject to a bigger audience than would normally be the case. Many Jews shared this admiration. Within the Jewish world there is a belief that the wider community can only be induced to recall the fate of the Jews because it offers lessons for avoiding similar catastrophes and may blunt prejudice. Why else should the world grieve over six million dead Jews? Numerous politicians, educationalists, and creative figures have been persuaded by this argument. Unfortunately, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, like a host of other well-intentioned initiatives, suggests that a heavy price is being paid for the popularisation and instrumentalisation of the Holocaust. Perhaps it is too heavy.



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