The Diaries of Etty Hillosum and Calek Pevechodnik  
by  
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Diaries of the Shoah period

Diaries, written during the Holocaust period, are the best authentic sources from which we can learn about the personal feelings, reactions, attitudes and the philosophy of the Jews under the German Nazi-regime. Probably many Jews wrote diaries in different places but due to the harsh conditions just a few were kept intact and can be read by us today, while others were destroyed together with their authors. The diaries were written by different people: young, old, educated, less educated, simple or sophisticated and reflect the spectrum of values, views and beliefs of each writer. Each diary contributes a great deal to our knowledge about the ways in which Jews tried to defend and protect themselves and attempted to fight to survive. Each diary is, therefore, a unique document which should be thoroughly read and discussed and included in the framework of the educational system. Most of the diaries can be used for educational purposes. In the following pages, we would like to suggest a model for the use of two outstanding and unique diaries of the Shoah.

Etty Hillesum's diary and Calek Perechodnik's diary represent two types of totally different people, with two unique personal worlds. They are extremely different in most of their attitudes. These differences in views, thoughts, feelings and reactions can be used to spark vivid discussions in the classroom. One can use various aspects of the diaries to discuss central questions like the subject of the Jewish fight for survival and human dignity which each author approaches in his own way.

The diaries

The two diaries are not only the last will of their writers who were both murdered in Poland; they also are a rare document about mankind—humanity and barbarity, justice and injustice, freedom and slavery.

Etty Hillesum's diary

Etty Hillesum wrote her diary in occupied Amsterdam and in the transit camp of Westerbork, during the years 1941 to 1943. Paradoxically, those years of oppression and barbarity in the life of Etty are also years of growth, development and creativity. These are years in which Hillesum develops and even exercises a new philosophy of life and also discovers an unknown inner strength of which she was unaware until that time. With this new inner strength, the 27-year-old intellectual uniquely interprets the Dutch-Jewish tragedy and makes a daring attempt to overcome the outer catastrophe by an inner mental fortitude. She prepares herself to be more helpful, not only to herself, but also to other Jews who are not able to cope with the Nazi atrocities, for whom she wants to become a thinking heart. Etty's ideas may not be accepted by everybody. It is possible that some members of the group taking part in the workshop will dislike her way of life and have negative feelings towards her personal philosophy. Still, it is a good take-off point for expressing their own views as well
as different and alternative ideas. The reading from Etty’s diary reveals, that the Jews, as individuals, developed different ways of reacting toward Nazi persecution.

The diary is written in such an open and personal way that each reader can fully discover the personality of Hillesum and dive into her thoughts, sentiments and feelings, including her most intimate ones. Hillesum’s diary is one of the most outstanding ones we have. It describes the events of the Shoah only briefly and tends to concentrate more on the individual’s soul. The events in Amsterdam and other cities in Holland are mentioned only briefly and remain in the background, creating two different levels of reality: the personal and subjective and the historical objective proceedings which do not necessarily meet or cross each other. The result is a more universal and general approach to the events of the Shoah which lacks, in this case, a Jewish national or religious touch. Hillesum interprets the world through universal, sometimes mystical, but always humane eyes, although she is ready to accept fully her fate as a Jewess.

Calek Perechodnik’s diary
Perechodnik’s diary is based on different ideas and represents a contradictory philosophy to that of Hillesum’s. He writes from a total Jewish starting point. He wrote his diary while hidden in a small shop in occupied Warsaw, after losing his wife and little daughter, who were deported to Treblinka, partly because of his apathy. He was pessimistic about his chances of survival but still fought though hunted by feelings of revenge, hatred (also self-hatred), rage and frustration with the world. This is the point which is so extremely different for the two writers - Etty Hillesum develops an approach of acceptance, a philosophy of pacifism and fatalism. She thinks there is no use fighting against one’s fate. If God Almighty has decided that the Jews have to die, they have to accept the decision without any discussion. They should even try to understand their oppressors and avoid any feeling of hatred.

Perechodnik thinks differently: the behavior of Jews, who do nothing to protect themselves, just run away and try to hide, instead of fighting bravely against the Germans and the Polish collaborators, irritate and disturb him. He is extremely critical about Jewish passivity and weakness.

The two diaries together
Our decision to combine the two diaries into one workshop is not just because of the resemblance of their literary form but because these two young Jewish authors, both 27 years old and living under Nazi dictatorship, forced into isolation, hated and unwanted, develop a totally different philosophy of life, at this time, which is also contradictory to their previous way of life and thinking. The fact that two young Jews can create such different views on every possible issue enables us to prepare an outstanding, vivid and important discussion on various questions.

By comparing the two diaries, we can achieve the following aims:
- Observe how Jews reacted in various ways when facing their fate as individuals and as a group.
- Note how the Jews changed their patterns of behaviour under the terrible circumstances of the Shoah.
- Understand how, in spite of the horrible situation, some non-Jews tried to remain human and dignified, disregarding the reaction of the surrounding society, and taking severe risks.
- Understand how the values, beliefs and thoughts of people quickly change under pressure, difficulties and oppression.
- Understand how the Germans used the weapon of terror, sadism and brutality and learn how they recruited their collaborators.
- Learn about the dynamics of the relations between the Jews and their Dutch or Polish neighbours during the years of World War II.

**Similar aspects**

Nevertheless, Perechodnik and Hillesum have something in common. First, their age: they are both young but not too young to be unexperienced. Perechodnik is already married and a father of a young girl. Etty Hillesum is unmarried but, according to her statements in the diary, was involved several times in romantic relations. Both are highly educated, had studied in excellent schools, are familiar with literature, arts, music, philosophy and foreign languages and are well integrated in the general society. The most significant point of their resemblance is their excellent talent to *read* reality. They both know that the Nazis have decided to kill all the Jews, have made a *total* plan for liquidation of the Jews, and that few Jews would be able to rescue themselves. They repeat this horrible prophecy several times in their diaries. This point is important for a discussion on the subject of *How much did the Jews know and how realistic were the chances for rescue?*

Both, although preoccupied by personal problems (she - with her obsessive relations with her psychologist, Spier; he - with the problem of his relations with his parents, whom he wants to save and by the heavy sense of guilt, having neglected his wife and child), do not lose contact with reality. On the contrary - Calek and Etty can probably be added to a small group of Jews, who during the Shoah, realistically understood the murderous nature of Nazi-Germany. Hillesum writes that according to her understanding, most Jews will be killed. Perechodnik expresses his view that no Polish Jew will be able to survive, mainly because of local collaboration with the Germans. This point is suitable for a discussion on the subject of: the ability of a society in a situation of danger, to foresee the seeds of disaster, to analyze developments correctly, and to take steps in order to defend, rescue and save the oppressed and weak. The discussion can also concentrate on the question to which extent an individual has the tendency to self-illusion and to blindness -- a natural trend, which in times of crisis can be decisive. Both authors were able to understand and observe facts that others did not. They point out that they are strongly connected to reality and criticise other Jews who try to cheat themselves and their families. The group can, for instance, discuss the question of what makes some people better equipped with an ability to be alert, while others remain naively ignorant and apathic.

Both Perechodnik and Hillesum were gifted writers, aware of the fact that their diaries could appear in book form after their death. They even made preparations and arrangements to make such a publication possible in the future. Their writing talents have created a unique literary source of the Shoah, a very detailed chronicle, accompanied with an insight into and an interpretation of the complete historical picture. Although Hillesum and Perechodnik were isolated and deprived of accurate information, both authors successfully could prophesy the future of the Jewish people under Nazi rule. Both authors felt that Germany had ultimately decided to liquidate the whole Jewish nation, and understood the totality and systematic character of its murderous action against the Jews. Their comprehension of the real nature of the Nazi policy against the Jews shows an amazing ability of interpretation taking into
consideration the lack of data and sources on which they could rely. In most other aspects, however, Hillesum and Perechodnik totally differed.

Both authors describe some personal experiences which happened to them during the Nazi occupation. We can learn the extent to which love, romance, sexual relations and friendship between people continued during this period. Hillesum kept her relationship with her mentor lover the psychiatrist Julius Spier, even under the burden of German terror. She was enriched and fulfilled by those relations but at the same time she developed a new understanding of relationships as they occur on the physical plane. This leads her to the conclusion, that physical relationships are, in the end, not the ultimate. The only real love, writes Etty, can be the love for God alone.

Different aspects

Hillesum developed a strong religious mystical belief which was deep and stormy: In comparison, Perechodnik is very angry towards his God whom he accuses of sacrificing his nation. He doesn’t want to pray to such a God nor does he want to believe in him.

Hillesum develops a strong love for God that starts with the love of one man, continues with the love of many and climaxes with love for God. Calek describes a different picture, already known to us from the other sources. Jews who are desperate, awaiting their death, decide to act wildly and make love as much as they can for as long as they can until this is impossible. He reveals a hidden secret - that he betrayed his wife Anka, and made love to a young Jewish woman with whom he was hiding in Warsaw. He thinks he should apologize for this by explaining that he is still young (only 27 years old), and his body sometimes needs such physical pleasures. The question of family ties, romantic and sexual relations in ghettos, camps, hiding places etc. is also an excellent item for discussion, and should be especially recommended because normally teachers avoid speaking about such personal issues which were part of the daily dilemma of many Jews. Let us remember that the Jews continued to live as normally as they could under the German oppression.

Similar aspects

The two diaries show very clearly how patterns of life, behaviour and thinking were totally distorted during the Shoah. In Etty’s diary the point where such phenomena happened was Westerbork; in Perechodnik’s diary, the most significant change was his relationship with his parents whom he began to hate. The two authors bring out many other episodes that show the full distortion of Jewish family life when persecuted and tortured by the Germans.

Different views

Let us deal with some examples of their different views. Hillesum thought that each person should accept his fate without any attempt to fight or resist against it. Perechodnik favored a persistent struggle and a permanent effort to change one’s reality and chances of survival. She believed in God and admired the way in which God dominates the world, while he lost his belief in God totally, because of the tragedy which happened in his personal life and the life of his people. She was ready to understand the psychology of the evil and even to try to understand the mentality of the SS people while he condemned the cruelty and brutality of the Germans, Poles and even some Jews. Hillesum saw the Shoah period as a time of rebirth, inner development and enrichment while Perechodnik colored this period with black and dark colours. The Shoah years changed Hillesum into a forgiving person, a subtle and a
more delicate person. Calek Perechodnik became cynical, critical and aggressive, desperate and pessimistic.

A central issue in which there is a huge gap between the two is that of revenge and hatred towards the Germans and their collaborators. Perechodnik wished to survive for only one purpose - to be able to revenge and pay for the death of his wife and daughter. He was even ready to let his diary fulfill this mission! Hillesum is extremely opposed to such feelings; she saw herself as a person who was free of hatred, one who could not hate at all, and the planning of any kind of revenge does not appear ever in her thoughts. Perechodnik explored and discovered the evil side of any person he observed: German, Pole and even Jew. Hillesum did the opposite: she tried to find positive and kind aspects in every person she meets - even in the Dutch SS men in Westerbork!

**Different views**

The authors also basically differ with regards to their Judaism. Hillesum is very remote from her Jewish origins: she writes as a person, a woman, a Dutch woman and as a universal being but not necessarily as a Jewish woman. This fact colors her diary with a general, non-Jewish tone. This can, therefore, ease the process of identification with the *Hero* of the story for non-Jewish pupils.

Perechodnik, on the other hand, was 100 per cent Jewish; he thought and felt as a Jew, although he himself was not religious and did not practice the Jewish commandments. Still, his diary is a Jewish document, where the reader can easily observe the clear gap between the Jews and non-Jews - Poles and Germans. For this reason, Perechodnik’s diary is a better example of the unique situation of the Jews during the Shoah, which was characterized by loneliness, humiliation, fear, suffering, hatred, hunger, helplessness and negligence.

Etty and Calek dedicate parts of their diary to relations between Jews and Gentiles -- a very delicate and controversial item which each of the authors deal with according to his personal attitudes. This issue can be used as a topic for discussion in the classroom, and has, naturally, many current facets (i.e. relations between Jews and Gentiles in the Diaspora, present antisemitism in several countries, including the USA). Perechodnik describes the deep roots of Polish antisemitism, and expresses his sharp hatred towards his Polish friends, neighbours and acquaintances who betrayed the Jews. He reveals the *real nature of the Poles* after 26 years of illusion. In very detailed descriptions, he tears the mask from the face of 90% of the Poles he knows trying to show us their real nature: wicked, greed, false and especially, Jew haters. On the other hand, and in order to be fair, he praises the 10% who assisted the Jews, gave them shelter and food, who were ready to sacrifice their security and, especially, did not lose their humanity. This subject, about which many Israeli students argue today, also discussed in the media, can be accompanied by citations from this diary.

Etty’s approach is the opposite: she also describes the ugly aspects of the Dutch population (see the episode near a pharmacy), including the sadistic nature of the Dutch SS, who torture the Jews in Westerbork before being deported to Auschwitz but she constantly tries to find a psychological explanation. Hillesum believes that mankind can overcome evil and become good and pure. People like her could fulfill this educational and moral mission; they just need the right occasion. Thus, we see two directions and two philosophies of two Jews during the Shoah!
Another delicate and controversial item, which both authors refer to, is the behavior of the Jews themselves during the Shoah. Although both look upon it negatively and critically, there is still a difference. Hillesum devotes several pages to the immoral behavior of the "Joodse Rat" - the Jewish council in Amsterdam. She herself was for a short time a part of the council, which allowed her to see the many ugly faces of the council members from the inside. But she doesn’t wish any evil for these Jews; rather, she doesn’t understand their way of treating other Jews and thinks they should taught to improve their behavior.

Calek is critical towards all kind of Jews he knew, due to their behavior during the days of tragedy: the Jews who behaved passively, lying in the pitch dark awaiting the bullets of the Germans (especially important is scene No.4); the members of the Jewish police (to whom Perechodnik himself belonged); the Rabbis, who were unable to rescue their brethren by praying to God; the rich Jews, who were sure they would be saved because of their money, the Jewish collaborators who betrayed the other Jews and hoped to save their lives. Each of the above can be discussed as a central and meaningful facet of a broader subject called Jewish reaction to the Nazi atrocities.

The discussion

The discussion will use abstracts from the two diaries according to the subjects which are dealt with or mentioned here. The participants of the workshops will be divided into several groups, each choosing one theme that is included in the two diaries. Later the participants will react to each subject and will defend the views of the authors or oppose them, according to their personal point of view. A good idea would be to use a dramatized scene, in which the group would chose two representatives, one playing Etty and the other playing Calek. Both actors would represent the ideas of both authors.

Hillesum’s diary appears in English, Polish, German, Norwegian, French, Danish, Hebrew and Italian. Perechodnik’s diary is published in Polish, Hebrew, English and German. This gives readers in different countries an opportunity to use the diaries as a source for learning and understanding the Jewish catastrophe in the Shoah epoch.

Different aspects

The two authors know that they will die -- but they go to their death in a different way: Etty with full acceptance, a clear mind and a sense of a common fate with the other members of her nation, the Jews. She could have been saved or rescued if she only wanted to, but she refused. Calek doesn’t want to share the fate of the Jewish people who are doomed to die, although he knows he has no chance of survival. He awaits his death in a bitter, desperate and broken manner. This aspect can also be dealt in the discussion, under the title: the meaning of life, the meaning of death - two attitudes during the Shoah.

The discussion

The workshop is based on the reading of several abstracts from the diaries according to several topics and later a general discussion in plenum. The presenter can divide the class into several groups each dealing with a different subject. Possible subjects might be the following:
- Personal struggle for survival during the Shoah
- The behavior of prominent Jews (policemen, members of the Judenrat, etc.)
- Punishment and revenge
- Religious feelings and expectations of God
- The meaning of life in times of crisis, death and suffering.
- Betrayal and atrocities by the Gentiles
- The meaning of friendship, collegiality and humanism during times of disaster
- The attitude towards fate: activism or passivism (or: fatalism versus activism)
- The ability to read the realistic situation of the individual and the group correctly
- Coping with feelings of helplessness, disease, death, destruction, dictatorship, cruelty, and injustice
- The need to be alert to the suffering of neighbours, friends and family members (personal responsibility)
- The importance of everlasting values such as life and freedom, in contrast to transient values such as money and belongings which can disappear and come to an end.

**Educational values**

The educational value of both diaries is tremendous. They deal with unique Jewish patterns of behavior during the Shoah but also with many universal ideas. They demonstrate accurately personal changes caused by the conditions of fear, suffering and humiliation. Both diaries reflect the realistic and authentic daily situation of the Jewish individual during the Shoah. The literary talents of the authors, their intelligence, sensitivity and analytical ability provide a valuable source for study and discussion in the classroom. We can learn a lot from both authors about the meaning of life, love and hate, personal weakness and strength, our dialogue with God, the meaning of relations between the sexes and especially the permanent struggle between good and evil. These are values that preoccupy each of us at every stage of our life.