Teaching the Holocaust to Middle-School Students
A Suitcase Full of Dynamic and Interactive Ideas for Unforgettable Lessons
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Abstract
There are several objectives and particular challenges when teaching the event of the Holocaust to middle-school students, some of them are unique to this age group. One such challenge can actually become a foundation for a meaningful and powerful experience, if addressed properly. I present here a variety of dynamic, interactive, and meaningful activities, which use the interests and the developmental stage of the students to achieve these objectives and to overcome the challenges.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 1 discusses the objectives, the challenges and the general approach to teaching the Holocaust to middle-school students. Section 2 describes an example of interactive activities for dynamic lessons. In Section 3 many more ideas for interactive activities are briefly described. Finally, a summary is given in Section 4.

1. Introduction

The Objectives
Teaching the event of the Holocaust to middle-school students has three main objectives to be achieved. First, students should learn the history of the event. Second, they should remember the victims (ZACHOR). A third, objective (unique to this age group) is to examine how the events of the Holocaust relate to the students personally, in their lives and their communities today.
The Challenges and General Solutions

There are many challenges involved in teaching middle-school students. Two challenges are of particular relevance when teaching the Holocaust. On the one hand, students have short attention spans; and on the other hand, they are focused on finding and developing their own identities. These two characteristics and challenges can be turned into part of the solution, if addressed correctly. Furthermore, they help with effective learning and internalization of the material.

To handle the first challenge, a lesson should contain a wide range of dynamic activities. The second challenge can be addressed by personalizing the events; by studying the decisions and acts of other people, by learning about their own family history, and by self experience in class.

Examples of this are given in the following sections.

2. Interactive Activities for Dynamic Lessons

Example Lesson: Introduction to Life in the Ghettos.

The Suitcase

Here we discuss a specific example of an interactive activity for one particular dynamic lesson. An actual empty suitcase is brought to the classroom to make this activity more realistic. Students receive a worksheet with a picture of an empty suitcase and are asked to write or draw the objects they choose to take with them to an unknown place; without any idea of where they are going and for how long. Then a timer is set for 10 minutes.
After the time is up, a class discussion is held.

**Some Lead Questions for Discussion:**

What will you take with you, and why?
How does it feel to be under such a time limit and such pressure?
What did you feel when you were asked to pack those items?
What do you think that people felt when they had to leave their home?

**Reading Diaries of Teenagers Who Lived in the Ghetto**

To get a sense of how people felt in the ghettos, use the following activities (one or both can be used), following the suitcase activity.

Read together, out loud, from diaries, written by teenagers, about their life in the ghettos, and their physical and emotional conditions there. The story of Yitskhok Rudashevski from Vilna Ghetto is one of many that can be found in the book *Salvaged Pages, Young writers’ diaries of the Holocaust*, by Alexandra Zapruder. Other fascinating diaries can be used in this lesson. Yitskhok began writing his diary when he approached his fifteenth birthday. He wrote about his academic pursuits and of how he sees himself contributing to the intellectual and literary life of the Ghetto. On September 1943, the liquidation of the ghetto began. He and his family went into hiding; later on, the family was found and taken to Ponar, where they were shot to death. His friend, who survived, returned to the hiding place where she discovered the diary.
Monday the 5\textsuperscript{th} [October 1942]

Finally I have lived to see the day. Today we go to school. The day passed quite differently. Lessons, subjects. Both sixth classes were combined. There is a happy spirit in school. Finally the club too was opened. My own life is shaping up in quite different way! We waste less time, the day divided and flies by very quickly…Yes, that is how it should be in the ghetto, the day should fly by and we should not waste time.

Saturday the 17\textsuperscript{th} [October 1942]

I go out into the street—there is a disturbance near a bakery. A woman has snatched a pot from the bakery and has run away. She was pursued and beaten. It aroused a feeling of disgust in me. How terribly sad! People are grabbing morsels from each other’s mouths. I am overcome with pity for the hungry woman, how she is being insulted with the dirtiest words, how they beat her. I think: what peculiarly ugly things occur in the ghetto! On one hand, the ugliness of stealing a pot of food, and on the other to strike a woman crudely in the face because she is probably hungry.

Sunday the 18\textsuperscript{th} [October 1942]

A historic day in the ghetto. People are moving to added “districts,” Oshmene Alley. People can walk freely in the new courtyards.[…] I go over the new “districts.”[…] I have a pleasant feeling crawling over the few new courtyards, seeing new places, the large ghetto brick walls that have just been built, what a pleasure! A simple emotion of a prisoner, who has found another new corner in his cell. He examines it and is pleased for the moment: to discover something new lying in his cell.[…]

…I make the first round in the ghetto, a second, a third, and I soon feel the same prison, only a little larger as if someone were teasing us […]

*While reading, the class can discuss the atmosphere, events and feelings on different days.

From the book …I never saw another butterfly… read the poem \textit{Homesick}

\begin{quote}
I’ve lived in the ghetto here for more than a year,
In Terezin, in the black town now,
\end{quote}
And when I remember my old home so dear,
I can love it more than I did, somehow.

Ah, home, home,
Why did they tear me away?
Here the weak die easy as feather
And when they die, they die forever.

I’d like to go back home again,
It makes me think of sweet spring flowers.
Before, when I used to live at home,
It never seemed so dear and fair.

I remember now those golden days...
But maybe I’ll be going there soon again.

People walk along the street,
You see at once on each you meet
That there’s ghetto here,
A place of evil and of fear.
There’s little to eat and much to want,
Where bit by bit, it’s horror to live.
But no one must give up!
The world turns and times change.

Yet we all hope the time will come
When we’ll go home again.
Now I know how dear it is
And often I remember it.
Discussion

Discuss the poem with the students. How do they feel about their homes? Do they sometime feel like they want to go as far as they can? How do they feel after reading this poem? Do they see their home in a different way? How so?

How Objectives Were Met and Challenges Overcome in this Lesson

In this lesson the three main objectives can be achieved. The students learn about the history and the life in the Ghetto. From the diaries they remember the victims, and by the “suitcase packing” they experience (albeit mildly) for themselves some of the feelings and the pressures that were involved at this terrible time. Likewise, in this lesson the students are involved in three activities. This helps deal with the short attention span problem. Finally, from this experience they learn about their own lives, and how such events relate to themselves.

3. More Ideas for Interactive Activities:

1. **Picture books.** A story can be read as an opening to a new topic or discussion. For example, the following books: *Terrible Things* (An allegory of the Holocaust) by Eve Bunting; and *The Yellow Star, The legend of King Christian X of Denmark*, by Carmen Agra Deedy.

2. **Video tapes.** Videos are a wonderful resource. A large variety of genres are available, and in class they can be used either in full length or by selecting parts. For example: Documentary movies about Kristalnacht, Adolph Hitler’s biography, the life in ghettos, Ghetto Warsaw uprising; or fiction movies like *The devils arithmetic, Life is beautiful, The writing on the wall;* or Art movies like *Der Hzter Lubliner* (the last Jew in Loblin) and testimonies of survivals or witness such as *The courage to care*, to name just a few.

3. **Individual projects.** Students can do research about one individual or one group who lived at the time of the Holocaust. Next, they design a poster with the information, followed by a presentation to the entire class. Example for such project subjects include: Mordechai anielewicz, Janusz Korczak, Anne Frank, the Kinder Transport,
the Danish Rescue, and Partisans. In these types of projects students deepen their learning and are responsible to relay their knowledge to their peers.

4. **Group projects.** Similar to the Individual projects but done in a group.

5. **Reading from diaries.** The Diary of Anne Frank is a famous one and it can be used for this activity. There are many others, as I mentioned before the book *Salvaged Pages, Young writers’ diaries of the Holocaust*, by Alexandra Zapruder, is a collection of diaries. By reading from diaries two main objectives can be accomplished; first, students learn about the life and thoughts of the individuals, and second, they learn about the situation during this time period in general.

6. **Discussions.** Discussion should play a major role in teaching the Holocaust for middle-school students. Students like to be challenged, to think, and to express their own point of view. For example, while teaching the Nuremberg laws, students can be asked to make their own laws before starting to learn about the actual laws that where passed in 1935. Then, while learning about the actual laws, ask the students what can they learn from each law. Examples include: the forbidding of mixed marriages indicate that mixed marriages were common between Jews and Arians; forbidding of employing maids under the age 45 shows that Jews were well heeled and it was common to have maids in their houses.

7. **Old photos.** Photos can be brought from books or by students (if they have a family that lived in Europe before and during the Holocaust). These can be used in several ways. For example, From some photos students can learn about the life before the Holocaust. From others about life in the ghettos, concentration camps, and more. (Photos can be downloaded from the websites of Yad-Vashem and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.)

8. **Poems written by victims.** The book *I never saw another butterfly*, which contains children’s drawings and poems from Terezin Concentration Camp (1942-1944) is an exceptional collection that can be used to read out loud in class or to be illustrated by students, or as a reflection of the life and thoughts that occupied the writers’ minds.

9. **Art-work of victims.** For example: The book *David Olère--The Eyes of a Witness*, published by The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation in Paris in 1989. Olère's pencil sketches and color paintings capture the everyday events in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. There are also portraits of some Nazi soldiers and layouts of the crematoriums. The work of David Olère has exceptional documentary value. No
photographs were taken at Auschwitz of what went on in the gas chambers and crematoria. Only the memories of Olère, reproduced as art in his drawings and paintings, give an account of the horrible reality. He was the first to draw the plans and cross-sections of the crematories in order to explain exactly how the Nazis ran their death factory. He did not sketch for pleasure while at Auschwitz; there he was forced to work as an illustrator and to write and decorate letters for the SS.

10. **Art about the Holocaust.** Samual Bak is one of many artists that choose to express in their art work their feelings and thoughts about the Holocaust. Samuel Bak is a survivor of the Holocaust and for many years he painted subject surrounding the Holocaust. The following painting *The ghetto*, as Samuel Bak explains it is “An inclined surface with no horizon and no possibility of escape. Indeed, when we were thrown into the ghetto like human garbage, it felt like being in a deep hole. This hole is in the shape of the Star of David, the emblem of the ghetto. Near it lies our badge of identification.”
A painting such as the above or others can be used as part of a class about the life in the ghetto or as part of a class about art. Students can also try to make their own art after being inspired by other artists.

11. **Create art work about the holocaust.** This activity can follow a class about art from or about the Holocaust, or after a lesson about the life in the ghetto. Students can make art from the point of view of people in the ghettos or as outsiders. A large variety of material can be used, paint, water colors, pencils, crayon and so on. By using this activity students can express their understanding in a unique way.

12. **Make a memorial for the Holocaust.** This activity can follow a visit to a Holocaust memorial, after looking at photos or slides of Holocaust memorial around the world, or before doing one of the above. The students can design and build their own memorials, and exhibit them at the school. This exhibit, for example, can add to Yom Ha’Shoah ceremonies.

13. **Class library.** A lending library helps to expend the learning out of the class. There are many books. Here is a short list of books that can be the beginning of such a class library: *The cage* by Ruth Minsky Sender; *Of Heroes, Hooks, and heirlooms*, by Faye Silton; *Number the stars*, by Lois Lowry; *Stones in Water*, by Donna Jo Napoli; *The Devil’s Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen; *Friedrich* by Hans Peter Richter; *Until we meet again* by Michael Korenblit and Kathleen Janger; *Escape from the Holocaust* by Kenneth Roseman.

14. **Maps.** Maps of Europe before and during world war II, Maps of concentration camps, ghettos, death camp and more. By using maps students can identify the places which
they are learning about and they can attain a deeper understanding of the development of the war and the Holocaust.

15. **Timelines.** Timelines help put the mass of information in order and enable individuals to have a better understanding and fuller perspective of the matter being learned. Timelines can be made by the students about various topics. For example, timelines of the milestone events of the Holocaust, resistance in Europe, the development of the war in Europe (to learn about the effect on the Jews in these countries). Students can also receive timelines from the teacher and then will be asked to choose from it the events relevant for their work. The timeline can be displayed on a poster or on a worksheet and used for a presentation in front of the class. (Timelines of the Holocaust can be found in many books and on the websites of Yad-Vashem and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C)

16. **A visit to a Holocaust memorial in your area.** Find out where is the nearest Holocaust memorial in your area and visit there with the class. A memorial service can be held at the memorial. Many times guided tours are available.

17. **A visit to a Holocaust museum.**

18. **Memorial service for Yom Hashoah.** A proposal for a service can be found at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C or at your local Consulate General of Israel. You can also make your own ceremony. For example: Light a memorial candle, read El Male Rahamim (for the martyrs of the Holocaust), Yizkor, Kadish, poems, songs, etc.

19. **Invite a guest survivor to speak in class.** This can be the most powerful activity. Meeting a real person who was witness to the Holocaust can be stronger than any other lesson.

These are only a few of many activities that can enrich any lesson about the History of the Holocaust. A list of web sites and other useful resources is given at the end of this paper.
4. Summary

By teaching the event of the Holocaust to middle-school students, three main objectives are met and some challenges are overcome. At this developmental stage of the students’ lives a unique objective can be achieved. Students can personalize and internalize the events. Moreover, this experience can take part in the modeling of their personality and identity. All of this can be achieved only by using interactive and dynamic activities such as those presented in this work.

I hope that you will find this material beneficial in your future work.
Resources

Two of the finest, most complete bibliographies of books and videos are available through:

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, D.C. 20004
www.ushmm.org

Yad Vashem
Jerusalem
Israel
www.yadvashem.org

More information can be found on the following websites:

1.  www.ushmm.org  United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
2.  www.facinghistory.org  Facing History and ourselves
3.  www.yadvashem.org  Yad Vashem Jerusalem Israel
4.  www.auschwitz.org
5.  www.chgs.umn.edu  The center for the Holocaust, University of Minnesota
6.  www.mjhnyc.org  Museum of Jewish heritage, NY
7.  www.gfh.org.il  The Ghetto fighter house
8.  www.annefrank.com  Anne Frank center U.S.A