

Live Survivor Webcast



Susan Pollack MBE
Friday 24th January 2020

Preparing and debriefing your students



Teachers Guide

#SusanPollack

Thank you for participating in the Holocaust Educational Trust's survivor webcast to mark Holocaust Memorial Day 2020.

To help you to prepare your students effectively for the survivor testimony, we have compiled this pack of guidelines and lesson plans. Depending on the level of your students' prior knowledge, you should feel free to adapt these lessons to suit your specific needs.

If you require further resources, the Trust has a wide range of lesson plans and activity ideas which we will be happy to discuss with you. They are available to download for free from our website www.het.org.uk.

About Holocaust Memorial Day

Holocaust Memorial Day is marked each year on 27th January, the anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration and death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 2020, we will be marking the 75th anniversary of liberation. Schools, communities and faith groups across the UK will join together in national and local events to commemorate those people who became victims of the Nazis and their collaborators and to consider the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust.

The value of survivor testimony

The Holocaust was the murder of approximately 6 million Jewish men, women and children by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the Second World War. However, statistics are impersonal and difficult to grasp and we cannot ever expect students to comprehend the magnitude of the Holocaust. One way of ensuring that young people connect with the victims of the Holocaust is by focusing on the experiences of individuals. By providing your students with the opportunity to participate in the live survivor webcast, they can put a human face to history and engage with one survivor's personal experiences during the Holocaust.

Understanding the historical context

Where possible, the testimony should be framed within a historical context, taking into consideration the prior knowledge of the students. Although it can stand alone, it is important to remember that Susan's testimony is just one person's story told from a specific and personal perspective. It should not be students' only source of historical knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Students can get the most out of this experience when the testimony is an integral part of a unit of study on the Holocaust.

To enable teachers to provide their students with an in-depth knowledge of the Holocaust, we would recommend that schools use our free, comprehensive and flexible cross-curricular scheme of work, *Exploring the Holocaust*, which can be found [here](#).

The importance of preparing and debriefing

Holocaust survivor testimony can be challenging to students on both an intellectual and an emotional level. To ensure that they benefit from it as much as possible and to protect their emotional wellbeing, it is crucial that teachers make time before and after for students to share their expectations and responses.

The suggested preparatory activities help to dispel any stereotypes and misconceptions students may have about survivors today and their experiences during the Holocaust. They can also be used to address any concerns they may have about the story they will hear. The suggested debriefing activities give your students an opportunity to summarise what they have remembered about Susan's testimony; reflect on whether the testimony was as they expected; ask questions on points that need further explanation; and produce follow-up work.

Lesson plan: Preparing your students – 50 minutes

Aims

- To explore what the Holocaust was and why survivor testimony is important
- To ensure students feel prepared to hear from a Holocaust survivor
- To consider questions that students may ask the survivor before hearing their testimony

Resources required for this lesson

- Glossary sheet
- Expectation cards – cut out and collated for pair/group work
- Susan's biography

Starter: What is testimony? – 10 minutes

Ask students 'what is testimony/what can we learn from testimony?'

Emphasise the points below:

- When a person tells their life story to others, we call it a testimony.
- The numbers involved in the Holocaust are so vast, testimonies allow us to reflect on one person's experiences.
- Each person's testimony will differ – this gives us insight into the huge variety of survival experiences.

Invite feedback on why survivor testimony is important.

Alternative starter: What was the Holocaust? – 15 minutes

If your students have not already studied the Holocaust in-depth, it is important to begin with some basic historical context. This option takes more time, so it will require cutting some time from the next activities.

Write the term 'the Holocaust' on the whiteboard and ask students to create a mind map of everything they think they know about it. The following questions may help to focus their responses.

- When did the Holocaust happen?
- Where did the Holocaust happen? (Answers could include countries or specific sites)
- Who was persecuted and murdered during the Holocaust?
- Who was responsible for the Holocaust? (Answers could include groups or individuals)
- What else do I know about the Holocaust?
- Why do we study the Holocaust?

Students could complete this activity as individuals, in pairs or small groups.

Take feedback from the class, noting responses on the whiteboard. This is an opportunity to discuss students' prior knowledge, challenge any misconceptions, and ensure that they are aware of the varied components of the Holocaust. The appendices of this document provide non-specialist teachers with essential background information.

Lesson plan: Preparing your students (cont.)

Activity 1: Expectations – 20 minutes

Hand out the expectations cards and ask students to consider what they expect Susan to be like. Students should choose the cards that correspond with their expectations of Susan. There are also blank cards on which they can write their own thoughts. Discuss choices made by students and challenge and dispel any stereotypes.

Ask students if they have any worries about the experience of hearing Susan's testimony. Some students may be concerned that what they will hear will be graphic or frightening, so they should be given the opportunity to express this. Reassure students that survivors are used to speaking to young people, and that although their testimony may be at times unpleasant, it does not set out to be upsetting.

Activity 2: Biography/Keywords – 15 minutes

Ensure you have familiarised yourself with Susan's biography. You may wish to point out the basic biographical details to your students, but we recommend that you allow Susan herself to fill in the details of her experiences during the Holocaust.

Distribute the glossary sheet and explain that Susan will use some or all of these words in her testimony. Ask your students to highlight or underline any terms that need further clarification and discuss them with the class.

Plenary – 5 minutes

Ask if students have any further questions and ensure all concerns have been addressed. Encourage them to begin to think of questions they could ask Susan after they hear her testimony.

Abridging the lesson

Whilst it is strongly advised that teachers follow this lesson in its entirety, there may be practical reasons why this may not be possible in some schools.

In cases where time is limited, and where students have had little or no prior study of the Holocaust, it is advised that teachers should at least follow the alternative starter activity above to ensure that their class have a clear understanding of the basic outlines of the history of the Holocaust.

Where students have previously studied the Holocaust, teachers should ideally at least deliver the main starter and activity 1.

Lesson plan: Debriefing – 50 minutes

Aims

- To consider the experience of hearing Susan's testimony and to discuss the issues raised.
- To produce a piece of work that reflects hearing Susan's testimony.

Resources required for this lesson

- Sugar paper or A3 paper

Activity 1: Points for discussion – 15 minutes

Create a mind map on the board with Susan's name/picture in the middle.

Ask your students, in groups or in pairs to consider the following key questions (you may wish to ask your students to create their own mind maps on sugar paper or A3 paper):

- What did they think of the experience of hearing Susan's testimony?
- What aspects of Susan's testimony stood out? Why did they stand out?
- What did they think Susan's testimony taught them about the Holocaust?
- What questions did Susan's testimony raise about the Holocaust that they would like to explore further?
- What did they learn from the webcast about the importance of survivor testimony?
- Why do they think survivors like Susan are keen to speak to young people about their experiences?

Activity 2: Questions to Susan – 15 minutes

Hand out post-it notes/small pieces of paper to students and ask them to discuss in pairs or in groups what questions they wish they had asked Susan. Encourage them to note these down on the post-it notes or pieces of paper.

Read out a sample question – for example, “When did you first start speaking publicly about your experiences?”

Discuss questions with the class – key or most common questions could be written on the board.

Activity 3: Letter to Susan – 20 minutes

This is an optional activity in which your students can write a letter to Susan including some of their questions from the activity above. These can be sent in bulk to:

Susan Pollack MBE
c/o The Holocaust Educational Trust
BCM Box 7892
London WC1N 3XX

Suggested points to include in the letter:

- What did the students learn about the Holocaust from Susan's testimony?
- Which part of the testimony did the students find to be most memorable?
- Has Susan's testimony in any way inspired the students to consider their actions towards others in their school/community? If so, what actions could they take?

Glossary

Antisemitism

Prejudice against and hatred of Jewish people.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The largest Nazi death camp in Poland.

Bergen-Belsen

A concentration camp in northern Germany which became a collection camp for Jewish prisoners evacuated from camps in the East. It was liberated by British troops on 15th April 1945.

Concentration Camp

Prison camp in which inmates were forced to undertake hard labour. From 1936 onwards large 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 Camp

Six sites which included Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. They were established by the Nazis to systematically murder people and were located in Poland.

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.

Deportation

Process during the Holocaust in which Jews were rounded up and sent, usually by train, to killing sites.

Ghetto

An area of a city or town where Jews were forced by the Nazis to live in many parts of eastern Europe. Jews could not leave ghettos without special permission. Most ghettos were extremely overcrowded and disease-ridden.

Liberation

Word meaning to give someone freedom. In the context of the Holocaust, it is applied to when Allied soldiers of the British, US and Soviet armies freed people living under Nazi rule.

Liquidation

Term used to describe the closure of a ghetto or camp by the Nazis or their collaborators. Inhabitants were either forcibly deported to killing sites or shot on the spot.

Numerus Clausus

Referring to the introduction of a quota, the term describes the limiting of Jewish enrolments in universities first seen in Hungary in 1920. It was the first antisemitic law seen in Europe in the interwar period.

Sonderkommando

German for 'special commando' – groups of Jewish prisoners in the Nazi camps who were forced to work helping the SS run the gas chambers.

SS

Nazi party organisation which was responsible for security and racial policy. The SS was the most important organisation in the organisation and carrying out of the Holocaust.

'Expectations' cards

Strong	Victim
Brave	Resourceful
Weak	Foreign
Old	Interesting
Fighter	Upset
Powerful	Determined

Biography: Susan Pollack MBE

Susan was born Zsuzsanna Blau on 9th September 1930 in Felsögöd, Hungary. She had one brother, Laci, and lived with her mother and father.

Susan became aware of antisemitism in her hometown from a young age. In 1938, her uncle was murdered by fascists. His attacker was sentenced to just two years imprisonment and served much less time than that. From 1938, Susan's brother Laci was also affected by antisemitic laws. He had hoped to study at university, but a law restricted the number of Jewish students who could enter higher education.

Following the outbreak of the Second World War anti-Jewish graffiti appeared on the streets and antisemitic propaganda was broadcast on the radio. Physical attacks on Jews also became more common, and Laci was badly beaten at a Boy Scout meeting. The situation deteriorated further following the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944. Jews had to wear a yellow Star of David. Eventually a letter was issued by the council for all Jewish fathers to attend a meeting. Susan's father was among those men who went to the meeting, but when they arrived they were herded into waiting lorries and taken to a concentration camp. Susan never saw her father again.

Under the supervision of SS officer Adolf Eichmann, the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators organised the deportation of Hungarian Jews: within less than two months from mid-May 1944, almost all Jews were deported, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When Susan and her family were ordered to leave their home, they still hoped they would be allowed to resettle

elsewhere. Susan took a portable sewing machine with her. Susan, Laci and their mother were all sent to a ghetto in Vác and from there to an internment camp. In late May 1944, Susan and her family were sent by cattle truck to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Men and women were separated immediately, and Susan was further separated from her mother who was sent to join a group of elderly prisoners. She soon learned that her mother had been sent directly to the gas chambers. Susan was selected to work and remained in the camp for around 10 weeks before being sent to Guben in Germany to work as a slave labourer in an armaments factory. With the Allies advancing, the prisoners were forced on a death march to Bergen-Belsen. On 15th April 1945 Susan was liberated by the British army. After she was hospitalised for tuberculosis, typhoid and severe malnutrition, she was sent to Sweden to recover.

After liberation, Susan found that Laci was the only member of her family to have survived. More than 50 of Susan's relatives had been killed during the Holocaust. Laci continued to live in their parents' house, but Susan wasn't able to return to Hungary for 20 years after the end of the war. During his time at Auschwitz-Birkenau Laci had been forced to work in the Sonderkommando, moving bodies from the gas chamber to the ovens. He suffered with mental health problems caused by this experience until his death in 1995. After the war, Susan moved to Canada, where she met and married a fellow survivor.

Susan has three children and six grandchildren. She now lives in London and regularly shares her testimony in schools across the country.

Beyond Holocaust Memorial Day: Next steps for teachers

- The Trust provides Continuing Professional Development and in-service training to schools, local authorities and academy federations. To find out about up-coming events and free CPD opportunities for teachers [click here](#). To learn more about our free, bespoke programmes, [click here](#).
- Hearing survivor testimony is not a substitute for an in-depth study of the history of the Holocaust. *Exploring the Holocaust* is the Holocaust Educational Trust's free, comprehensive and flexible cross-curricular scheme of work on the Holocaust, consisting of 15 lessons designed for use in History, RE and Citizenship/PSHE. The scheme of work can be downloaded from the Teaching Resources section of our website. To register for free access [click here](#).
- Teachers who wish to consider more broadly issues relating to Holocaust education and remembrance can make use of the lesson *How should we remember the Holocaust?* which encourages students to consider the different ways in which the Holocaust has been remembered. The lesson can be downloaded from the Teaching Resources section of our website. To register for free access [click here](#).
- Our new project, Belsen 75, will commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the former concentration camp Bergen-Belsen by British Forces and will include visits to the former camp and educational resources. State-funded schools and colleges with post-16 provision are eligible to apply for two student (years 12 and 13) and one teacher place. More information can be found [here](#).
- If your school has post-16 provision, you may be interested in our *Lessons from Auschwitz* project, a four-part course centred round a one-day visit to the former Nazi concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. To find out more [click here](#).
- If the Trust can be of any assistance with anything further, please do not hesitate to contact us on info@het.org.uk.

Appendix 1: 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.

For the first and so far only time in history, a state and its accomplices attempted to murder every single member of a people. For this reason, historians apply the term 'Holocaust' to the murder of the Jews rather than Nazi persecution generally, in order to highlight this unprecedented nature.

It is, of course, important to note that there were many other groups of people who were victims of Nazi persecution and, in some cases, mass murder. However, it is also important to ensure that each victim group's experiences are considered on their own terms in order to properly preserve their memory.

Antisemitism was the central and defining element of Nazi ideology. Whilst the Nazis saw many groups of people, such as Slavs or Sinti and Roma (so-called 'gypsies') as racially inferior, what was different about Jews was that the Nazis viewed them as an existential threat; that is, the Jews were seen as the mortal enemy of Germany, and Europe, responsible for every social and political ill, whether Communism, capitalism or democracy. The Nazis genuinely believed in the existence of a world Jewish conspiracy which supposedly had Germany as its chief target. In Nazi thinking, therefore, this threat had to be eliminated in one form or another to ensure the survival of Germany and indeed mankind.

It is therefore not surprising that Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933 led to immediate and escalating persecution of the country's Jewish population. However, it is important to understand that this did not mean that the Holocaust was inevitable. Rather, in the pre-war era, the Nazis and their conservative allies aimed to exclude Jews from public life in Germany and eventually force them to emigrate. This led to the passage of an ever-growing number of discriminatory laws and increasing violence, which indeed led most German Jews to leave the country by 1939.

However, Hitler's aggressive foreign policy, culminating in the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, inevitably brought millions more European Jews under German control. In response, 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.

Mass murder on such a scale required the active involvement of hundreds of thousands of people across Europe: not merely the SS men in the killing sites, but also ordinary German policemen, the army, and civilian administrators (who often participated in killings and round-ups themselves). Equally, many perpetrators were not Germans, ranging from Romanian and Croatian government forces which murdered Jews themselves through non-German volunteer killing squads in many parts of the Soviet Union to ordinary policemen in almost every country who rounded up Jews for deportation. Whilst a large group of Nazi leaders contributed to the decisions which led to the Holocaust, a far larger number of people made its perpetration possible.

Although most victims of the Holocaust were murdered in 1942, 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.

Appendix 2: Common myths and misconceptions

The term ‘the Holocaust’ refers to all victims of Nazi persecution.

Although certain groups other than Jews (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 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 given 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: lack of weapons with which to fight an opponent with overwhelming force; limited help from the outside world; the effects of months or years of starvation and exhaustion; lack of advance knowledge of Nazi intentions, leading to fear that resistance could make the situation worse by provoking reprisals. Nonetheless, as the Holocaust developed, armed Jewish resistance emerged through ghetto revolts and partisan groups; there were even uprisings in three death camps. 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 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.



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