

Laura Patton's List of Recommended (and Not Recommended) Holocaust Books and Films for Students

Introduction: While I was teaching, many students came into class during our Holocaust unit bursting with excitement to tell me about “the best book they had read” or “the best movie they had seen.” In both cases, the title almost always was *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. In my opinion, this is the worst book and film my students could choose to read or watch about the Holocaust. (Read the annotation under the title below to find out why.) I realized that if I was going to tell them what not to read or see I had better be prepared with suggested alternatives. Thus – THE LIST, which I began in 2014.

This list contains titles selected primarily for middle school students. I have a bias that the Holocaust should not be taught to students younger than 7th grade; I believe 8th grade is more appropriate age to begin. I also have a bias that non-fiction, memoirs, biographies, and diaries about Holocaust topics are generally preferable to fiction. I have not listed any title that I have not personally read or viewed and enjoyed or found educational. As an English teacher, I care about the quality of the writing and have not included titles that did not pass muster. I have listed books that students would find interesting for personal reading and have excluded books that serve better as instructional texts. Also, I've not read everything; I may be missing some great titles.

In preparation for the exhibition *Auschwitz: Not long ago. Not far away.*, which came to Kansas City's Union Station in 2021-22, I added books to the list that would help parents and teachers prepare children to see the exhibit or follow-up after. Furthermore, many states near Kansas—Arkansas, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma—have recently added Holocaust mandates for their schools—some requiring instruction starting in 5th or 6th grade. For these reasons, I have added books appropriate for younger children.

I hope you find just the book or film you are looking for on the list!

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Credentials:

Licensed 7-12 English, 7-12 Reading Specialist, K-12 English for Speakers of Other Languages
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Key to Codes:

F = Fiction

NF = Non-Fiction

0L to 2000L = Lexile Text Measure (See <https://lexile.com/educators/> for more information.)

JCL = Available from the Johnson County, KS Library

MCHE = Available from the Midwest for Holocaust Education Library

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell	<i>The Boy Who Dared: A Novel Based on the True Story of a Hitler Youth</i>	F	760L	JCL
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When Bartoletti was doing research for her award-winning non-fiction book, *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow*, she came across Helmuth Hübener's amazing story. Hubener was convicted of treason against the Nazi government and executed at age 17. This novel is meticulously-researched historical fiction. Gripping; I couldn't put it down. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Bascomb, Neal	<i>The Nazi Hunters: How a Team of Spies and Survivors Captures the World's Most Notorious Nazi</i>	NF	1000L	JCL
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This book tells the true story of how a team of Israeli spies, aided by Holocaust survivors in Argentina, located and captured Adolf Eichmann, then smuggled him to Israel to stand trial for his crimes against humanity. The story is as suspenseful as any spy novel and is filled with photographs, documents, and maps. Background knowledge about the Holocaust advised before reading this book. Recommended for 8th grade and above.

Bretholz, Leo with Michael Olesker	<i>Leap Into Darkness: Seven Years On the Run in Wartime Europe</i>	NF	---	JCL MCHE
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Leo Bretholz was a Jewish teenager living in Vienna when the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938. Not long afterward, his mother insisted that he leave home because she feared for his fate under Hitler's rule. Little did she know that most of Europe was soon become a death trap for Jews. Leo spent the years of the WW II living in Jewish transit camps, hiding in attics, and literally running for his life. This memoir is as action-packed as a suspense novel. Leo Bretholz visited Kansas City in 2000. One of my students and I attended Leo's presentation at the Johnson County Public Library; we both read Leo's book afterward and loved it. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Chiger, Krystyna with Daniel Paisner	<i>The Girl in the Green Sweater: A Life in Holocaust's Shadow</i>	NF	1010L	JCL MCHE
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In this memoir, Krysha Chiger tells the story of how her father, mother, and younger brother survived the Holocaust in Lvov by hiding in the sewer once the ghetto was liquidated in 1943. This story is well-written and unique for many reasons. First, the family was well- educated and affluent before WWII. Second, Lvov was first occupied by the Russians; therefore, family first experienced the effects of Communism. Then, in June 1941, when the Germans violated the non-aggression pact, Lvov's Jews felt the full weight of Nazi's racial antisemitism – aided by their Ukrainian collaborators. Fourth, Krysha describes hiding with her brother in secret compartments that her father built into their various ghetto apartments while her parents were gone to work. Finally, Father devises a plan for the entire family to hide in the sewer with the help of three Polish sewer workers. This story raises interesting questions. What constitutes an act of righteously saving Jewish life? Did the actions of the sewer workers qualify even though they took payment for their service? Was Genia Weinberg's action justified? Is it morally justified to take a life to save lives? What about stressful situations causes the worst traits to surface in some people and the best traits to surface in others? What can a human being endure in an effort to survive? Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Gaddy, K.R.	<i>Flowers in the Gutter: The True Story of the Edelweiss Pirates, Teenagers who Resisted the Nazis</i>	NF	950L	JCL
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The German teenagers who called themselves the Edelweiss Pirates were younger than the university students involved in the more famous “White Rose” movement, but they had the same goal—to fight the Nazis from within Germany. This narrative non-fiction book tells the stories of several of these pirates. It is filled with primary source photos and documents that support the narrative. Some of the teens are jailed and tortured; this is hard to read. Therefore, I recommend this book for 8th grade and older.

Giblin, James Cross	<i>The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler</i>	NF	1100L	JCL
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This is a complete and balanced biography of Adolf Hitler – from his childhood to his suicide. The final chapter deals with the Nuremberg trials and the rise of neo-Nazi groups in modern times. The book answers the questions that students always ask about Hitler but does not glamorize him in any way. Winner of the Robert F. Sibert Medal. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Gratz, Alan	<i>Prisoner B-3087</i>	F	760L	JCL
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This book recounts the true story of Jack Gruener. Gratz says in the Afterword, “...I’ve taken some liberties with time and events to paint a fuller and more representative picture of the Holocaust as a whole.” As Gratz relates Jack’s ordeal – surviving ten different concentration camps – he does a nice job weaving in contextual information about the Holocaust and WWII as well as concepts such as Jewish spiritual resistance and the Nazi tactic of collective responsibility. There are two scenes in the story involving bar mitzvahs. Like Leon Lyson’s, Jack’s story starts in Krakow; these two stories could serve as a counterpoint for each other. Recommended for 7th grade and older.

Gratz, Alan	<i>Refugee</i>	F	800L	JCL
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This book weaves together the stories of three children from different periods of time. Josef is a 12-year-old Jew fleeing from Nazi Germany with his family aboard the *St. Louis* in 1939. Isabel is an 11-year-old Cuban girl trying to sail from Cuba to Florida with her family in 1994. Mahmoud is a boy fleeing Aleppo, Syria with his family in 2015; they are hoping to find refuge in Germany. This book is fiction but is well researched. It unites three historical periods around common themes of political struggle, persecution, war, and the plight of refugees. It is not strictly a Holocaust book although Josef’s story highlights a particular incident from Holocaust history. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Green, Joshua M.	<i>The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising</i>	NF	1020L	JCL
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Vladka Meed was the code name of a Polish Jew named Feige Peltel. She had light-brown hair, gray-green eyes, and spoke fluent Polish; she did not match the stereotypes of Jews. These characteristics allowed her to help the Jews inside the Warsaw Ghetto by being smuggled out of it. From outside the ghetto wall, she helped other people escape. She also obtained weapons for what would become the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Vladka is one of the few people who survived this experience. This non-fiction book is based on Vladka’s video testimonies and her written memoir along with other primary source documents. Glossary provided. Recommended for 7th grade and older.

Hillman, Laura	<i>I Will Plant You A Lilac Tree: A Memoir of a Schindler's List Survivor</i>	NF	740L	JCL
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Laura Hillman was known as Hannelore Wolff when she was growing up in Germany. In 1942 she was deported to Poland along with her mother and two brothers. This memoir tells Hannelore's journey through eight camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, and eventual liberation from Brännlitz, a work camp run by Oskar Schindler. This story has several interesting elements. 1) Hannelore is able to maintain some contact with one brother. 2) Although she does not go into depth, Hannelore relates some of the unique experiences of being a female prisoner of the Nazis. 3) Hannelore meets and grows to love a Polish POW named Hillman in one of the camps. 4) There are strong themes of friendship and spiritual resistance in this story. The writing in this memoir is not as lyrical as Klein's *All But My Life*, but it is shorter and an easier read while sharing many of the same themes.

Klein, Gerda Weissmann	<i>All But My Life: A Memoir</i>	NF	780L	JCL MCHE
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Gerda Weissman Klein's memoir of her Holocaust experience is remarkable because of the eloquence of her language. This book is a beautiful piece of writing in addition to being a powerful story of friendship and resilience. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Learning for Justice, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, has wonderful instructional materials for the Academy Award-winning film *One Survivor Remembers* based on *All But My Life*. See <https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/film-kits/one-survivor-remembers>

Klein, Gerda Weissmann and Kurt Klein	<i>The Hours After: Letters of Love and Longing in War's Aftermath</i>	NF	---	JCL MCHE
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This book continues the story of Gerda Weissman and Kurt Klein where *All But My Life* ends. Kurt and Gerda decided that he should return to the United States with his military unit and then send for Gerda as soon as possible so that they can be married. *The Hours After* is a collection of Kurt and Gerda's love letters exchanged during the year they spent apart from each other. The book tells many of the details of their romance that are left out of *All But My Life*. Getting Gerda to the United States was no easy feat. As a Holocaust survivor, she was a stateless person with no documents to prove her identity. The book provides a fascinating look into the lives of survivors immediately following the war. *The Hours After* has romance, heartache, angst, a daring escape, and a happy ending. What more could a reader want? Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Krug, Nora	<i>Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home</i>	NF BIO		JCL MCHE
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In this graphic memoir, which won the 2018 National Book Critics Circle Award in Autobiography, Nora Krug comes to terms with the legacy of the Holocaust as a German. Nora was born in Karlsruhe in 1977; her mother was born in Germany in 1946. Nora's grandparents—the people who lived through WWII—died when she was young. Reading this book is a ride-along with Krug as she confronts “the collective, abstract shame I had grown into two generations after the war.” Although I would not recommend taking time away from classroom instruction on the Holocaust to teach this book, it offers a unique perspective on how the people of a country must heal—collectively and individually—after perpetrating atrocities. It raises questions: Is it right or fair for the generations that follow to bear the guilt and shame of their ancestors? Do we have a responsibility to help the perpetrators—or at least their children--heal? Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Levine, Karen	<i>Hana's Suitcase: A True Story</i>	NF	730L	JCL MCHE
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In March 2000, a suitcase from Auschwitz arrived at the Tokyo Holocaust Education Center. Working with only the few clues painted on the outside of the suitcase and a long list of questions from the children who visit the center, Fumiko Ishioka set out to discover as much as she could about Hanna Brady. This book tells the story of her research, how it brings together people from three continents, and honors the memory of a young girl who perished in the Holocaust. Recommended for 7th grade and older. A wonderful book for introducing the Holocaust to older elementary and younger middle school students.

Leyson, Leon with Marilyn J Harran & Elisabeth B. Leyson	<i>The Boy on the Wooden Box: How the impossible became possible on Schindler's List</i>	NF	1000L	JCL
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This is the story of Leib Lejzon, the youngest of Moshe and Chanah Lejzon's five children. He spent his early years in Narewka, Poland – a village where his ancestors had lived for more than two hundred years. In 1938 the family relocated to Krakow where his father had gained a position as a tool and die maker at a glass factory. Leib turned ten on September 15, 1939 – just after the German invasion of Poland and occupation of Krakow. Leib's story recounts the ghettoization and deportations of the Jews of Krakow, his imprisonment at Plaszow under the sadistic command of Amon Goeth, and the intervention of Oskar Schindler that saved Leib and most of his family. The story includes chapters on liberation and Leib's – now Leon's – life after immigrating to the United States. This book is a Christopher Award recipient. This award is given annually to books, films, and TV programs that affirm the highest values of the human spirit. Recommended for 7th grade and older.

Opdyke, Irene Gut	<i>In My Hands: Memoires of a Holocaust Rescuer</i>	NF	890L	JCL MCHE
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This is the true story of a Polish Christian woman who was only seventeen-years-old when WWII began. She was forced to work for the German army as a waitress in an officer's dining room. As she worked, she overheard bits of useful information that she passed on to the Jews in the ghetto. She raided a warehouse for food and blankets. She smuggled people out of the work camp into the forests. Later, Irene was asked to work as a housekeeper for a Nazi major; she hid twelve Jews in the basement of his home until the end of the war. This is the story of the risks Irene Gut Opdyke took and the sacrifices she made to save Jewish lives. Recommended for 9th grade and older.

Perl, Lila & Marion Blumenthal Lazan	<i>Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story</i>	NF	1080L	JCL
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Four Perfect Pebbles is an excellent book for introducing the Holocaust to middle school students. The Blumenthal family's story is unusual because all the family members are able to stay together throughout their imprisonment by the Nazis. As Holocaust stories go, it has a relatively "happy" ending. The book is liberally illustrated with photos and documents the family was able to preserve. MCHE offers lesson plans for this book, and the Lazans maintain a website with information about Marion (www.fourperfectpebbles.com). Recommended for 7th grade and older. This book could be an option for mature 6th graders.

Sutin, Jack and Rochelle	<i>Jack and Rochelle: A Holocaust Story of Love and Resistance</i>	NF	N/A	JCL
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Jack and Rochelle fell in love while they were hiding from the Nazis in the woods of Poland. This story is a fascinating look into the lives of the partisans and their acts of resistance. It is also a great love story. Recommended for 8th grade and older. This is a wonderful book to read before watching the film *Defiance*.

Tec, Nechama	<i>Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood</i>	NF	960L	MCHE
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Nechama Tec and her family were Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust by hiding with Polish Christians. Nechama's story is remarkable because, as the person in her family most able to "pass" as Christian, she had the responsibility to sell the bread that the family baked to support itself – even though she was only eleven years old. This autobiography is a good choice if you want to learn about how a family lived in hiding during the Holocaust and if you want to understand what life in occupied Poland might have been like during WWII. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Tito, E. Tina	<i>Liberation: Teens in the Concentration Camps and the Teen Soldiers Who Liberated Them</i>	NF	870L	JCL
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This 53-page volume conveys the stories, in their own words, of two teenage survivors of the Nazi camps and two teenage soldiers who helped liberate those camps. The stories are liberally illustrated with historical photos. The book includes a Timeline and Glossary. Although the Lexile level of this book would suggest that an elementary school student could read it, I caution against this. Like most Holocaust books, the text and photos require maturity and emotional resilience to navigate. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Toll, Nelly S.	<i>Behind the Secret Window: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood</i>	NF	910L	MCHE
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When she was only eight years old, Nelly Toll and her mother were hidden in the bedroom of an apartment in Lwów, Poland. During especially dangerous moments, Nelly hid in a space within a wall – behind a secret window. To keep her young charge occupied and quiet, the woman who owned the apartment gave Nelly a journal to write in and art materials with which to paint. The text of this book is based upon Nelly's journal and it is illustrated with the paintings that she created during her time in hiding. I highly recommend this book for 8th grade and older.

Volavková, Hana, Editor	<i>...I never saw another butterfly...: Children's Drawing and Poems from the Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944</i>	NF	---	JCL MCHE
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The Terezin concentration camp in Czechoslovakia was remarkable among the Nazi camps. One of the reasons for this is that a large number of artists, musicians, writers, and teachers, were imprisoned there. Many of these people took it upon themselves to defy the Nazis and create cultural activities such as concerts and plays and also to teach classes for children. This book is a collection of artwork and poetry created by children at Terezin during these clandestine classes. Most of the children did not survive, but their creative work stands as a testament to their spirits. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Warren, Andrea	<i>Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps</i>	NF	820L	JCL MCHE
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Surviving Hitler is the true story of Jack Mandelbaum, who started his life over again in the Kansas City area after surviving the Holocaust. It is written by Johnson County author, Andrea Warren. Jack's story is compelling and supported by Warren's meticulous research. The text is filled with historical photographs. This is an excellent book for middle school students to begin learning about the Holocaust. A Robert F. Sibert Honor Book. Those who wish to learn more about Jack after reading the book should contact the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education (www.mchekc.org), which Jack co-founded with fellow survivor Isak Federman. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

Wiemer, Liza	<i>The Assignment</i>	F	HL 720 L	JCL
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This book is fiction, but it is based on real teenagers who refused to do a real assignment given by a real teacher in Oswego, NY in 2017. The assignment is spelled out in the first three pages of the book. The students will take sides in a debate concerning the Nazis' "storage problem of Europe's eleven million Jews." The PRO side will argue for extermination; the CON side will argue for sterilization, ghettos, and work camps. Logan and Cade are the fictional students who offer a well-thought-out alternative but refuse to do the assignment. They find the assignment so abhorrent, they don't want anyone to do it. It does not take long before the student body, the parents, and the entire community are in an uproar. Although there are a few elements of this novel that pander to the audience*, it does several very good things. 1) It gets the historical facts right. 2) It provides a platform for discussion of sensitive issues about the prejudices that can divide communities. 3) It shows teenagers exercising their agency in ways that are mostly mature, appropriate, and well-reasoned. 4) It shows teenagers standing up against the crowd for what they believe is right. Bonus: The Lexile is low enough to make this book accessible for ESOL students and struggling readers, but it engages attention and is thought-provoking. Recommended for 8th grade and older. *Warning: The characters are high school kids; there are references to sex and some uses of salty language.

PICTURE BOOKS

Adler, David A.	<i>A Hero and the Holocaust: The Story of Janusz Korczak and His Children</i>	NF	---	JCL
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I completed a research project about Janusz Korczak for a graduate course many years ago. Of course, Adler's book caught my eye. I love this illustrated book because it makes Korczak's story accessible for younger kids. Korczak was a Polish Jew. He was a doctor famous throughout Poland because he had a radio program which gave child-care and medical advice to parents. He wrote books for children. He also directed an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw. When the Nazis invaded Poland, forced the Jews into ghettos, and ultimately deported them to death camps, Korczak had offers of rescue from his Christian friends. He refused them. Today there are stones on the site of the Treblinka death camp that represent entire villages of people who were murdered there. Only one stone bears the name of a single person; it is a stone that memorializes Korczak. Highly recommended for 6th through 8th grades.

Bat Zvi, Pnina and Margie Wolfe	<i>The Promise</i>	NF	520L	JCL
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The true story related in this picture book focuses on a specific incident in the lives of two sisters, Rachel and Toby, while they are imprisoned as slave laborers at Auschwitz. The authors are Rachel and Toby's daughters. The illustrations, by Isabelle Cardinal, are subdued, sepia-toned, collages that convey the mood of the story beautifully. This book is recommended for 6th through 8th grades. Parents and teachers will need to be ready to answer the questions it will likely provoke. This would be an interesting book for teachers to use to introduce a Holocaust unit.

Polacco, Patricia	<i>The Butterfly</i>	F	430L	JCL
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A true story of saving Jews in France during WWII. Elementary ed is not my wheelhouse. My judgement is that this book would raise a lot of questions among young kids that I wouldn't want to answer. I defer to my elementary experts if they disagree with me. Recommended for middle school.

Russo, Marisabina	<i>Always Remember Me: How One Family Survived World War II</i>	NF	720L	JCL
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In this picture book, the author tells the true story of how her grandmother, mother, and two aunts survived the Holocaust. Oma shows her granddaughter Rachel a photo album of her "first life before [she] came to America." In this way we learn about the family's life in Germany and how things changed when the Nazis came to power. Oma has never shown Rachel that last pages in this album but says that she is now old enough to hear the rest of the story about what happened to the family during WWII. The story concludes with Oma's second photo album. Although many family members did not survive, all three of her beautiful daughters did. The second album tells the story of the women rebuilding their lives and continuing into another generation. Recommended for 6th through 8th grades.

Vander Zee, Ruth	<i>Erika's Story</i>	NF	---L	JCL
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This is a true story of a child who survived the Holocaust because her parents made a choiceless choice and righteous strangers intervened. The story is told with exquisite, spare prose. The illustrations, by Roberto Innocenti, are hauntingly beautiful. I recommend this book for children in 6th through 8th grades with adult guidance.

RECOMMENDED FILMS

<i>Camera of My Family: Four Generations in Germany 1845-1945</i> (Film)		Not Rated	MCHE Resources Webpage
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Photographer Catherine Hanf Noren tells the story of her German Jewish family through the use of family photos. Short film (19 minutes). Recommended for 6th grade and older with teacher or parent guidance.

<i>The Courage to Care</i> (Film)		Not Rated	MCHE Resources Webpage
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This short film (28:42 minutes) features the testimony of people who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust and Jews whose lives were saved. Narrated by Elie Wiesel. Recommended for 7th grade and older with parent or teacher guidance.

<i>Defiance</i> (Film)	2008	Rated R	JCL
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This film is based on the book "Defiance: the Bielski Partisans" by Nechama Tec. It tells the true story of the Bielski brothers who led a Jewish partisan group in the forests of Poland and Belorussia. The unique characteristic of the Bielski partisans is that the group included women, children, and the elderly. This film is rated R for violence and language, but I recommend it because it realistically depicts a historically violent period of time. I do not feel that the use of violence or offensive language in the film is egregious or inappropriate considering the story the film is telling. I recommend that students age 13 to 17 watch this film along with their parents.

<i>Escape From Sobibor</i> (Film)	1987	Not Rated	MCHE
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This film was made for TV and won Primetime Emmy Awards in 1987 and Golden Globes in 1988. It is "Hollywoodized;" what I mean is that the people in the film look much healthier and cleaner than prisoners in a death camp would really have looked. There is also an improbable scene where a dance happens in the camp. Nonetheless, this film tells the true story of a prisoner uprising and escape at the death camp Sobibor. The whole film is worth watching, but I usually didn't have time for that. Instead, I used two short clips. I used the scene that shows the arrival of a train into the camp and the selection process the passengers are put through. I also showed a scene where the whole camp is called together to witness the punishment of prisoners who tried to escape; it teaches the Nazi tactic of "collective responsibility" better and faster than I could otherwise.

<i>Heil Hitler: Confessions of a Hitler Youth</i> (Film)	1994	Not Rated	MCHE Resources Webpage
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This short film (30:24 minutes) is the testimony of Alfons Heck who served in the Hitler Youth as a boy. Heck's testimony is supported by historical films and photographs. Heck unflinchingly describes the effects of Nazi propaganda and evaluates what happened to him from an adult point-of-view. This film works well in contrast with memoirs such as *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps* by Andrea Warren or *One Survivor Remembers* about Gerda Weissman Klein. Warning: There are some brief graphic scenes of dead bodies (war casualties and Holocaust victims) late in the film. Preview to assess suitability for the intended audience. Recommended for 8th grade and older.

<i>One Survivor Remembers</i> (Film)	1995	Not Rated	MCHE Resources Page
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This short documentary film (39:04 minutes) is based on Gerda Weissmann Klein's autobiography, *All But My Life*. The film and book tell of Gerda's gradual separation from the members of her loving family, her years spent working in slave labor camps, the death march she endured, the tight-knit group of friends who helped her survive, and the American soldier who rescued her. The film won an Academy Award in 1995. Recommended for 7th grade and older with parent or teacher guidance.

<i>Schindler's List</i> (Film)	1993	Rated R	JCL
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Schindler's List, directed by Stephen Spielberg, is a classic among Holocaust films. It is rated R because of violence and nudity; however, it is difficult to tell a true story of the Holocaust without these things. Students under age 18 should watch the film with their parents. The film tells the story of Oskar Schindler, an industrialist who swindles the Nazis and saves the lives of more than 1,000 Jews. The film contrasts Schindler with Amon Goeth, the Nazi officer who has control of the Krakow ghetto and later the Plaszow concentration camp.

BOOKS AND FILMS TO AVOID

Boyne, John	<i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i>	F	1080L	JCL
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The subtitle of this novel states that it is a fable. If readers read it as a fable, I wouldn't have such a strong objection to this book or the film based on the book. However, I have middle school students who arrive to class and tell me with great enthusiasm that they "read the best book/saw the best movie." This has happened so many times that I am now willing to take bets with them before they spill the beans that they are going to tell me they read/saw *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. My concern is that my 8th graders do not have the background knowledge and critical thinking skills to discern the historical inaccuracies of this film. They don't read or see it as a fable; they generally tend to accept what they read in a book or see in a film as the truth. This is problematic for several reasons. For starters, most children did not survive the initial selection to become inmates in a concentration or death camp. Therefore, no character like Shmuel would have existed in reality. Secondly, Shmuel has time to sit at the fence and talk with Bruno; no camp inmate would have been so poorly supervised. The only reason inmates were kept alive was for work. Thirdly, if Bruno is able to sneak into the camp underneath the fence, then the inmates would have been able to escape out of the camp. However, my largest objection to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is that it is emotionally manipulative. The audience is in tears as both Shmuel (the Jewish boy) and Bruno (the Commandant's son) are herded into a gas chamber. Who exactly is the audience crying for? Learning about the Holocaust often produces strong feelings for students; I don't know that this can or should be avoided. However, falsely representing history just to manipulate the reader's/viewer's emotions is self-serving and even unethical. Better to shed tears over the true stories.

See also <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research/the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas-in-english-secondary-schools/>

Yolen, Jane	<i>The Devil's Arithmetic</i>	F	730L	JCL
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This is the summary for *The Devil's Arithmetic* you will find on the Johnson County Library website: "Hannah resents the traditions of her Jewish heritage until time travel places her in the middle of a small Jewish village in Nazi-occupied Poland." Here is my spin on the book: "Spoiled Jewish teenager experiences an attitude readjustment when she steps through a doorway and suddenly finds herself in Nazi-occupied Poland. When she returns home, she is magically appreciative of her Jewish ancestors and religious traditions." Don't all parents wish we could time-travel our self-absorbed teenagers back to the good-old-days when we had to walk to school five miles through the snow uphill both ways? Yolen is generally a talented writer; her research in this novel is fairly solid. My objection is the time travel premise; it is ridiculous. There are so many excellent non-fiction Holocaust books. Why waste time with this nonsense?

Life is Beautiful	1998	PG-13	JCL
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This film is about an Italian Jewish family who is deported to a Nazi camp late in the war. To protect his young son, the father makes the entire experience a game. These are some of Roger Ebert's comments on the film:

"And Benigni [director and lead actor] isn't really making comedy out of the Holocaust, anyway. He is showing how Guido [main character] uses the only gift at his command to protect his son. If he had a gun, he would shoot at the Fascists. If he had an army, he would destroy them. He is a clown, and comedy is his weapon."

The movie actually softens the Holocaust slightly, to make the humor possible at all. In the real death camps there would be no role for Guido. But "Life Is Beautiful" is not about Nazis and Fascists, but about the human spirit. It is about rescuing whatever is good and hopeful from the wreckage of dreams. About hope for the future."

My objections to *Life is Beautiful* are much the same as my objections to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. If you want to view it as a piece of art, fine. However, the film lacks historical accuracy, and I fear that students who watch it will not have the background knowledge or critical thinking skills to understand that. A teaching colleague of mine showed the film to her middle school American history classes. Why? How does this film support 8th grade history standards? Was there a better choice for using precious instructional time? I don't recommend this as a film for instruction, even if Roger Ebert thinks it is a piece of art.