

Using Literature Excerpts to Teach Holocaust Concepts

Some Holocaust survivors shared memories of their experiences to help educate future generations. They are not historians, but rather important eye-witnesses of what happened to them at a given place, in a given time, in a given set of circumstances. By reading excerpts of several memoirs or biographies on a particular topic, the reader is able to form a broader view of what was happening across a spectrum of experiences during the Holocaust.

The memoir/biography excerpts listed below focus on conditions in the Nazi camps.

Preparation:

- Select memoir/biography excerpts. Five suggestions are listed below.
 - All But My Life* by Gerda Weissmann Klein (780L) – pp.173-177. (Extended excerpt: pp.166-177)
 - Survival In Auschwitz* by Primo Levi (Lexile not available) – pp. 32-37, 39-41.
 - Four Perfect Pebbles* by Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan (1080L) – pp. 68-73.
 - Night* by Elie Wiesel (590L) – pp. 66-76 in 1982 edition; 69-80 in 2006 edition.
 - Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps* by Andrea Warren (820L) – pp.54-61.
- Assign small groups of students to each excerpt.
- Provide a print or digital copy of the note-taking grid for each student.

Instructions for a Cooperative Learning Exercise:

1. Learners will independently read one of the literary excerpts listed above, taking notes about the conditions described on the note-taking sheet. (Could be assigned as homework.)
2. Learners will meet within homogeneous groups to discuss their assigned excerpt with others who had the same assignment. Learners will make sure that their notes are complete and they are ready to share in heterogeneous groups.
3. Learners will meet within heterogeneous groups (one member for each literary excerpt). Each member has the responsibility to summarize their assigned excerpt for the group and help others complete their note-taking grids with the essential information. OR Each homogeneous group will report to the whole class about their excerpt while classmates complete their note-taking grids.
4. Once all the groups have reported, the whole class should discuss:
 - how the camp experiences are similar and/or dissimilar;
 - how these excerpts create a bigger picture of the overall camp system and experience than they do individually;
 - any other observations or conclusions the students have developed.

Special Notes for Teachers:

1. Remember the USHMM Guideline which tells us to avoid comparisons of suffering and pain. This guideline applies to both individuals and groups. This lesson is based on an analysis of different camp experiences—not a comparison of suffering endured in those camps.
2. This exercise can be adapted to look at any focused experience in the Holocaust such as life in the ghettos, children or women in the Holocaust, or methods of Jewish resistance. When choosing your memoir excerpts, consider what is age-appropriate for your audience.