

WHY SHOULD YOUNG ADULTS READ HOLOCAUST LITERATURE, ANYWAY?

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Description: Why does Holocaust literature still hold such fascination for many adolescents? This session will examine the important developmental tasks of adolescents as they relate to themes present in three types of Holocaust literature: historical fiction, memoirs, and diaries.

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Introduction

When I began to write an article
about Holocaust literature for young adults

(The New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, Birmingham, England, 2002), I quickly realized that it wouldn't be an easy task. The tragic events of the Holocaust preclude a discussion based solely on literary merit. One can't simply read these books in an objective and impartial way, commenting on plot, on character, on literary devices. One reads these books on various levels simultaneously--intellectual, emotional, even physical. The books hit you in the gut. They reflect a chapter of human history that is bitter and full of sorrow, but one that I maintain needs to be written and to be read.

But are young adults actually reading Holocaust books? Every year, the International Reading Association (IRA) surveys the books that young adults in the United States read. According to the 2004 "Young Adults' Choices List", not one Holocaust book made the list.

Let's check another list. This one's called the Children's Literature Top Choice Award (2005) from the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD). In 2005, the only book chosen was *Daniel Half-Human* by David Chotjewitz.

The year 2004 included four books on its list:

- *Hitler's Daughter* (Jackie French)
- *Milkweed* (Jerry Spinelli)
- *Room in the Heart* (Sonia Levitan)
- *Run, Boy, Run* (Uri Orlev)

According to these surveys, it would seem that young adults don't read Holocaust literature to any great extent for recreational reading. However, most young people are exposed to Holocaust literature in either English or history classes. The titles that recur in high school curricula most often are *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. The books seem to have a strong impact on their readers. Hazel Rochman quotes Betty Carter, associate professor in library and information studies at Texas Woman's University:

[She] asks her students in YA literature to name the most important book they remember reading as a teenager, the diary [of Anne Frank] comes up every year; in 1996, it was named by 60 percent of the class.

Hazel Rochman, "Should you teach *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*?"
Book Links, May 1998, 45.

Although Holocaust books aren't as popular with adolescents as realistic fiction, fantasy, horror, or even *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, they represent an important genre for a number of reasons. Today, I'm going to explore these reasons within the broader context of the developmental tasks of adolescents. I want to examine how

adolescents can relate to this literature and how the literature can help them grow towards maturity.

Holocaust literature isn't medicine. Young people won't read it because it's good for them or in order to learn a lesson. They'll read it because the plot is exciting, the characters engaging, the language powerful. Lee H. Brown states: "Holocaust stories are still unique individual stories--as varied as the stories in any other type--with themes of love, friendship, courage and betrayal."

Lee H. Brown, "A review of *The Holocaust in Literature for Youth*,
The ALAN Review, Vol. 27, No. 3, Spring 2000, 56.

Definition

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "holocaust" as the "complete destruction, especially of a large number of persons, a great slaughter or massacre". In a broad sense, the Holocaust--with a capital "H"-- includes the millions of people who were murdered in concentration camps because they did not meet the "Aryan" ideal of race, religion, or politics; those who died in ghettos or labor camps of starvation and disease and brutality; those who died while fighting the Nazis.

I'll use the term "Holocaust" to mean that destruction of **Jewish** life caused by the policies of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945. This more limited definition is in no way meant to undervalue or ignore the suffering of countless other people. However, the fact must be underscored that the Nazis' aim was to destroy one targeted group of people—the Jews.

Developmental Tasks of Adolescents

The principal theme that pervades this literature is the destruction of home and family. Whether this destruction occurs by gradual erosion or by sudden uprooting, it occurs over and over again. Here is only one example of this theme.

In *The Endless Steppe*, Esther Hautzig tells of the sudden, traumatic loss of home:

The truck began to rumble down Great Pogulanka Avenue, past our white house with its mahogany door...past our garden wall, down the avenue where I knew each house, each tree, each chipped stone on the sidewalk. Beneath my lowered lids I watched my world disappear forever.

Esther Hautzig, *The Endless Steppe*, 19.

This destruction of home and family is the stuff of nightmare for the young adult reader. Let's keep that underlying theme in mind while we examine the developmental tasks of teenagers.

The **three main categories** of Holocaust literature I'm going to quote from are: (1) Historical Fiction, (2) Memoirs, and (3) Diaries.

(1) Independence from parents

In *A Guide to Literature for Young Adults* (Scott Foresman, 1983), Ruth Cline and William McBride state that one of the developmental tasks of adolescents is to achieve independence from parents. They go on to say: "The mature relationship that develops must eliminate undue dependence on either side." (p.9) What, then, are adolescents to do when they are caught in a situation where they cannot overtly become independent, for example, when the family is in hiding and family members must depend on each other? Anne Frank describes her feelings about independence in a diary entry of March 17, 1944:

Although I'm only fourteen, I know quite well what I want, I know who is right and who is wrong, I have my opinions, my own ideas and principles, and although it may sound pretty mad from an adolescent, I feel more of a person than a child, I feel quite independent of anyone.

Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl, 179.

Sometimes, when young people have independence thrust upon them --for example, when a parent dies or disappears suddenly--the event is certainly traumatic. The death of David Ullman's mother in James Forman's book, *The Survivor*, evokes the shock the adolescent feels:

For this death in the family there had been no expectation, no ritual. Yet suddenly the linchpin that had held the Ullmans together was gone. The hearth fire had gone out. It would not be rekindled.

James Forman, The Survivor, 138.

Becoming independent implies that there is a family to leave, that one's support system remains. During the Holocaust, it's often that very support system that becomes dependent on the adolescent for survival. Livia Bitton-Jackson describes how this change happened to her:

My relationship with Mommy has undergone a transformation. The unavoidable reversal of our roles in the camps after her accident changed Mommy's attitude toward me. Although once again she became the strong, no-nonsense yet sympathetic, guiding hand, there is a striking difference. She treats me with respect, and frequently lavishes excessive praise on me.

Livia Bitton-Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 213.

The tests flung at the young person during the Holocaust were daunting. In Carol Matas' novel, *Lisa*, a Danish adolescent becomes involved in an underground Resistance movement. On learning about her activities, her mother says,

Let her decide . . . She's not a little girl anymore. My God, I wish she were. But she's old enough to make up her mind.

Carol Matas, *Lisa*, 105.

As are all adolescents reading this literature. Adolescents have the need for independence from their parents, but this striving usually follows a "natural" timetable. It would be fascinating for adolescents to read about this task in a world where "natural" has lost its meaning.

(2) Coming to terms with one's body

Adolescents need to achieve another developmental task: to come to terms with their bodies. Again, it would be intriguing for adolescents today to read about this task during the Holocaust. For example, Anne Frank confesses her feelings about entering puberty, feelings not so very different from other young girls:

"I think what is happening to me is so wonderful and not only what can be seen on my body, but all that is taking place inside."

Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl, 179.

Shame and degradation soon take the place of wonder. Isabelle Leitner describes the horrific journey from her home in Hungary by cattle car to Auschwitz:

I am menstruating. There is no way for me to change my napkins . . . no room to sit . . . no room to stand . . . no air to breathe. This is no way to die. It offends even death. Yet people are dying all around me.

Isabelle Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella*, 28.

On their arrival at the concentration camp, the new prisoners are subjected to further degradation:

Following orders, we hurried, dripping wet, out into another large bare room where women in striped uniforms grabbed us by the hair and chopped it off. Another woman used a razor and ran it around the crown of our heads. Without time to think, I was shoved forward, where two women grabbed my arms and shaved my armpits. Another woman kicked my legs apart and shaved between them. Again I was pushed forward, where I was doused with a shower of disinfectant that stung like needles on my bare skin.

Han Nolan, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, 143-4.

To accept one's changing body is a struggle for the adolescent under normal circumstances; to do so in a concentration camp would be a near impossibility. However, to read about adolescents who manage to survive and become healthy again would be heartening indeed for the adolescent who is trying to feel comfortable with his or her own body. The task might then be put into clearer perspective.

(3) Relationship with age mates

A third developmental task is to establish a new relationship with age mates of both genders. Even in Holocaust literature, this theme is important. The rejection by former friends was often the first hint to the young person that something was wrong. In *A Pocket Full of Seeds*, Nicole is trying to make sense of why Lucie, whom she admired, never liked her:

Maman, why did she hate me so much? I always liked her, and tried to be her friend. And now, there will never be a chance for us to be friends, will there, Maman?

Marilyn Sachs, *A Pocket Full of Seeds*, 89-90.

Friendships were often ripped apart. Jacob Boas summarizes succinctly how these teenage diarists felt about their lost friends: "The murder of friends left gaping wounds that never closed. Of all the senseless suffering thrown up by the war, nothing seemed to

make less sense to them than the death of their friends. And nothing caused them more anguish." (Jacob Boas, *Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust*, 174.)

Sonia Levitan describes this feeling in her book, *Room in the Heart*:

Now Niels sat with the gun on his lap, then sighed deeply and tucked it into his belt. It was his, his alone. He had decided that night, out under the stars, to keep this to himself, to trust no one, not even Emil. Especially not Emil, with his beer and his talk of violence. He had been gripped with an odd, empty feeling, a loss.

Sonia Levitan, *Room in the Heart*, 79.

On the other hand, new friends made in hiding, in the ghetto, in the camps, were often crucial for survival. Chana, the main character in *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, has finally come out of her shell of anger and fear, and tells another prisoner in the camp:

I met a girl. A real girl, only twelve years old. She wants . . . It is silly, but she wants me to be her family, her mother. She wants me.

Han Nolan, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, 170.

Adolescents would certainly enjoy reading accounts of first love that take place under difficult circumstances. The emotions--excitement, confusion, yearning--are the same no matter what the time and place. While in hiding, Anne Frank falls in love with Peter van Daan:

I have the feeling now that Peter and I share a secret. If he looks at me with those eyes that laugh and wink, then it's just as if a little light goes on inside me.

Anne Frank: *Diary of a Young Girl*, 181.

During the Holocaust, young love was even more painful and complicated than usual. Sometimes, it was even dangerous to be seen with the other person. For example, here is the account Friedrich gives to his friend about the German girl whom he would like to see:

I debated the whole week whether or not to go. When Sunday came I didn't go after all. I couldn't, you see. The girl would be sent to concentration camp if she were seen with me!

Hans Peter Richter, *Friedrich*, 113.

On the brink of catastrophe, young love still exists. In Aranka Siegal's memoir, *Upon the Head of the Goat*, the Hungarian Jews are waiting in the makeshift ghetto, waiting for the trains that will take them to Auschwitz. Piri has her first kiss:

Then Henri released me, cradled my face in his hand, and kissed me gently on the lips. He dropped his hands abruptly, turned, and walked away. I went straight into the shed without looking back.

Aranka Siegal, *Upon the Head of a Goat*, 172.

She never saw Henri again.

(4) Achieving social and economic status

Cline and McBride state that "a fourth concern of young adults is achieving social and economic adult status, which is frequently difficult because adult behaviour is expected without real adult status." (p.9) In the world of the concentration camps, often the opposite was the case. Whether prisoners were thirteen or thirty, after they passed the initial selection--for life or death--they were treated as adults. There was no gradual initiation here, no necessary striving to prove their status. They achieved their adult status only by surviving the intolerable conditions and the next selection. It was a giant leap from childhood to adulthood, with little to guide their way, and at a terrible price. In *I Am David*, the boy David overhears a conversation between the mother and father of Maria, the girl whose life he had saved. The mother is speaking:

And his eyes frighten me, too. They're the eyes of an old man, an old man who's seen so much in life that he no longer cares to go on living. They're not even desperate . . . just quiet and expectant, and very, very lonely.

Anne Holm, *I Am David*, 114-5.

David has survived the camps, but at an incalculable price--his childhood and innocence.

Economic status is not an abstract notion in this literature, for the issue is one of survival. To find food and shelter is the principal task. The adolescent gains economic status by learning new skills: Esther Hautzig takes apart worn-out sweaters and knits them again; Friedrich Schneider fixes old lamps; David Ullman loads powder into shells. Each person does whatever must be done in order to survive. The adolescent is on an equal footing with adults. Today's teenagers would probably find it interesting to compare their striving for economic independence with that of the adolescents in the literature. Perhaps status as an adult isn't so enviable after all.

(5) Acquiring self-confidence and a system of values

Cline and McBride describe another developmental task: "to acquire self-confidence and a system of values . . . Adolescents . . . are concerned with the questions: Who am I? What am I about? Adolescents seek their own identity and assess their own ability to perform." (p.9) To rebel and to question are natural parts of this task.

Many of the adolescents in Holocaust literature write about God, about justice, about good and evil. In his memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel agonizes about his loss of faith in God, a faith that had been an integral part of his life before the Holocaust:

Once, I had believed profoundly that upon one solitary deed of mine, one solitary prayer, depended the salvation of the world.

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes

were open and I was alone--terribly alone in a world without God and without man.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 73-74.

Many of the adolescents struggled to find their place in the world, a world that had shown itself to be cruel and relentless. Moshe Flinker, while hiding in Brussels, wrote in his diary on May 19, 1943:

My great complaint is against this terrible emptiness. I now understand that ideas and thoughts are worthless if one cannot convert them into action. In every single thing I hope to find a meaning which will fill me and satisfy me . . . I am lost and seek in vain, for meaning, for control, for purpose.

Moshe Flinker in Jacob Boas,
Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust, 112.

Young adults try to discover their own identity and often must test themselves for courage and resourcefulness. During the Holocaust, many felt frustrated because they wanted to resist, but were prevented from doing so by duty, by fear, by lack of opportunity, even by hope. Towards the end of February 1943, Yitzhak Rudashevski writes in his diary of the young people's resistance plans in the Vilna ghetto:

The future will require dedicated people who will have to guide the masses toward great renewal. Our first condition for such a task is discipline and conspiracy. For the first time I now sensed what it means to work in secret.

Yitzhak Rudashevski in Jacob Boas,
Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust, 76.

CONCLUSION

Young people need to have the chance to talk about these books in order to put the events into historical perspective and to evaluate the moral significance of the literature. They might want to ask a lot of questions: What is good and evil? What is the nature of fear and prejudice? Why did so many people stand by passively while these

events were taking place? And why did others help those who were persecuted? What is the nature of authority and when should it be questioned? Even more to the point: What would I have done if put in a similar situation? Would I have helped the victim, or participated in the genocide? Or would I have remained silent--a not-so-innocent bystander?

This literature can be more than a "good read" about young people caught up in horrific circumstances. There are no easy answers. We need to confront our own fears and prejudices. Only then will we be able to learn lessons from the past and thus "transform the nightmare into meaning". (Roger Sutton, "What really happened", *School Library Journal*, Oct. 1984, 116)

We read the literature in order to remember this tragic history and to prevent its repetition. We read the literature in order to recognize situations in our world today that resemble the intolerance, prejudice, and hate that led to the Holocaust. We read the literature in order to learn how to take an active role against racism of all kinds and to support human rights. Holocaust literature has value not only to adolescents who are growing to adulthood, but also to all people who wish to examine what it means to be truly human.

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