

Using Literature In Your Holocaust Class

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

Lesson Plan:

Run copies of each of the following:

- Note-taking sheet
- Four memoir excerpts:
 - All But My Life* by Gerda Weissmann Klein – pages 173-177
 - Survival In Auschwitz* by Primo Levi – pages 33-35, 40-41
 - Four Perfect Pebbles* by Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan – pages 68-71
 - Night* by Elie Wiesel – pages 69-76 in old edition or 73-80 in new edition

Assign small groups of students to each memoir.

Instructions for Classroom Exercise (could be expanded for a homework exercise):

1. Students are broken into equal groups and read one of the above selections to identify the conditions outlined on the note-taking sheet. Students read individually and take personal notes.
2. Within their group, students discuss the memoir excerpt and what they learned about the conditions of that survivor in the camps.
3. Each small group reports back to the class about their memoir while the others take notes in the note-taking sheet. Once all the groups have reported, the class should discuss:
 - how the experiences are similar and/or dissimilar to each other;
 - how these excerpts come together to create a bigger picture of the overall camp system and experience than they do individually;
 - any other interests the students have developed.

Special Notes for Teachers:

1. Remember the USHMM Guideline which tells us to avoid comparisons of suffering and pain. This includes both individuals and groups. The activity is based on an analysis of different experiences and not of suffering.
2. This exercise can be adapted to look at any focused experience in the Holocaust such as the ghetto experience, children or women in the Holocaust, etc. When choosing your memoir excerpts, consider what is age-appropriate for your audience.

This is an adaptation of a lesson plan developed by Laura Patton, member of the MCHE cadre.