



SECTION 3: CATEGORIES OF PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT IN THE HOLOCAUST

Integral to this project is the students' knowledge and understanding of the following categories of participant involvement in the Holocaust

1. Perpetrator
2. Bystander
3. Resistor
4. Victim

See Appendix E for an explanation of these categories.

Students may work through the following core activities for each category or they could be allocated one to 'teach' to the rest of the class.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

There are additional optional activities for each of the categories of participants in the Holocaust – Perpetrator, Bystander, Resistor and Victim – please see **Part 4: Optional Activities**. Teachers may select a range of these for students to consider according to their needs, interests and abilities and the time available.

THE PERPETRATOR

INTRODUCTION

Irena Steinfeld argues that:

The Nazi state practised a reversal of ethics and values in which murder became an ideal. Large segments of German society continued to cling to old moral precepts, however, even if they did not object to the murders. Why so many people with moral codes became executioners remains an open question to this day...the motivations behind the actions of the perpetrators were complex. In addition to pursuing "the ideal" other factors to think about include obedience to authority, opportunism, peer pressure, careerism, sadism and economic gain.⁸

This 'marrying' of murder and morality in Nazi ideology is illustrated in the extracts provided.

PERPETRATOR CORE ACTIVITY (STAGES 3, 4 & 5)

Read the following extract for an understanding of Himmler as a 'perpetrator' and respond to the questions that follow.

Himmler's Speech

SS Chief Heinrich Himmler gave the following speech in October 1943 before senior SS officers in Posen. In his speech, Himmler claimed that one could conduct mass killings and still remain a decent human being. By the time he gave this speech, the majority of Europe's Jews had already been murdered.

⁸ Steinfeldt, I, *How Was it Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders during the Holocaust*, The International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem Jerusalem, 2002, pg. 41

I want to mention here, in complete frankness, a particularly difficult chapter. Among us it should be mentioned once, quite openly but in public we will never talk about it ... I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews to the extermination of the Jewish people. This is one of the things that is easily said: "The Jewish people are going to be exterminated," that's what every party member says, "Sure it's in our program, elimination of the Jews, extermination – it'll be done." And then they all came along, the 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his one decent Jew. Of course, the others are swine, but this one, he is a first rate Jew. Of all those who talk like that, no one has seen it happen, no one has had to go through with it. Most of you men know what it is like to see 100 corpses side-by-side, or 500 or 1000. To have stood fast through this and – except for cases of human weakness – to have stayed decent, that has made us hard. This is an unwritten and never to be written page of glory in our history, for we know how difficult it would be for us to if today-under the bombing raids and the hardships and deprivations of war – if we were still to have the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators and inciters. If the Jews were still lodged in the body of the German nation, we would probably by now have reached the stage of 1916-17.

The riches which they, (the Jews), owned we have taken from them. I have given strict orders, which Obergruppenführer Pohl has carried out, that this wealth should naturally be delivered to the Reich. We have taken nothing. Individuals who have transgressed are being punished in accordance with an order, which I gave in the beginning, and which threatened that anyone who takes just a single mark is a condemned man. A number of SS men – not many – have (sic) transgressed against the order and they will be condemned to death mercilessly. We had the moral right; we had the duty towards our people to annihilate this people, which wanted to annihilate us. But we have no right to take a single fur, a single watch, a single mark, a single cigarette or anything whatsoever. We don't want in the end, just because we have exterminated a germ, to be

infected by that germ and die from it. I will not stand by while a slight infection forms.

Whenever such an infected spot appears, we will burn it out. But on the whole, we can say that we have fulfilled this heavy task with love for our people, and we have not been damaged in the innermost of our being, our soul, our character.⁹

Questions:

1. How does Himmler justify the 'right' of these actions? What 'moral stance' or 'moral argument' does Himmler take?
2. How do you respond to Himmler's speech and his justifications?
3. Imagine this is Himmler's speech as first speaker on the affirmative side in a debate on the "difficult chapter" of "the extermination of the Jews". As an opposing speaker how would you rebut his arguments?
4. How does Himmler's definition of morality differ from the definitions you developed in the 'Key Concepts' section of the program? Do you agree with Steinfeldt's assessment of 'why' such a reversal of ethics took place in Nazi Germany? What other factors may have been at play?
5. Research any organisations, treaties, laws, agreements or other universal actions that have been created or put into place in an attempt to ensure that human beings are treated humanely. For example, see The Geneva Convention, United Nations' Human Rights and Children's Rights Declarations, mission statements for organisations such as Amnesty International, The Red Cross etc.
 - What ideas do they have in common about human rights?
 - Why do you think such organisations and agreements are needed?
 - How do you think these treaties and other such agreements can be enforced?
 - What do you think is a just punishment for perpetrators and those people who break these agreements?

⁹ Steinfeldt, I., *How Was it Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders during the Holocaust*, The International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem Jerusalem, 2002, pg. 42



THE BYSTANDER

INTRODUCTION

The British statesman Edmund Burke claimed, “*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing*”. Burke’s insight draws attention to the fact that it is often difficult to distinguish between Bystanders and Perpetrators. Is there such a thing as a “passive onlooker”? Perhaps not taking action is also a decision and therefore a form of action in itself.

For example, in her recent study, “*Bystanders – Conscience and Complicity during the Holocaust*”, Victoria Barnett has found that Perpetrators and Bystanders often use the same justifications.¹⁰ Bystanders, like Perpetrators, create a distinction between public and private life, maintaining silence about acts they would consider unacceptable in the private world of home and family.

Some Bystanders explain their conduct by referring to authority or compliance to majority opinion. These two factors allow Bystanders to separate themselves from direct Perpetrators and thus escape moral responsibility. The texts and activities below illustrate how complex the connection between Perpetrators and Bystanders can be.

BYSTANDER CORE ACTIVITIES

Read the following extracts for an understanding of different Bystanders and their responses to events occurring around them and respond to the questions that follow.

10 Victoria J., *Bystanders—Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, Greenwood Press, Barnett, 1999

A. Letter of complaint from Mrs Eleonore Gusenbauer of Ried, the village above Mauthausen, September 1941 (Stages 3, 4 & 5)

‘Inmates from the Mauthausen concentration camp are constantly being shot at the Vienna Ditch worksite. Those who are badly struck still live for some time and lie next to the dead for hours and in some cases for half a day.

My property is situated on an elevation close to the Vienna Ditch and therefore often becomes the unwilling witness of such misdeeds. I am sickly in any case and such sights make such demands on my nerves, that I will be unable to bear it much longer.

I request that it be arranged that such unhuman deeds will cease or else be conducted out of sight.”¹¹

Questions:

1. What is Mrs Gusenbauer’s main cause for complaint?
2. How do you respond to this letter? What is your opinion of Mrs Gusenbauer and her request?
3. Using this letter as your evidence what do you think categorises Mrs Gusenbauer as a bystander?
4. How do you think she would justify her actions or refute being categorised as a bystander?



11 “Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstand” or Horwitz, Gordon J., *In the Shadow of Death – Living outside the Gates of Mauthausen*, The Free Press, 1990, pg. 35 cited in Steinfeldt, L., *How Was it Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders during the Holocaust*, The International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem Jerusalem, 2002, pg. 165



B. Report of a photographer (Stage 5)

'At the beginning of the Russian campaign on the morning of the 22 June 1941, I was transferred with my unit to Gumbinnen. We remained there until the following Tuesday, 24 June 1941. On that Tuesday I was ordered to transfer from Gumbinnen to Kovno with an advance party. I arrived there with the head of an army unit on Wednesday morning (25 July 1941). My assignment was to find quarters for the group following us. My job was made substantially easier because we had already pinpointed a number of blocks of houses for our unit on an aerial photograph of Kovno that had been taken beforehand.

There were no more significant clashes in the city. Close to my quarters, I noticed a crowd of people in the forecourt of the petrol station which was surrounded by a wall on three sides. The way to the road was completely blocked by a wall of people. I was confronted by the following scene: in the left corner of the yard there was a group of men aged between thirty and fifty. There must have been forty to fifty of them. They were herded together and kept under guard by some civilians. The civilians were armed with rifles and wore armbands, as can be seen in the pictures I took. A young man – he must have been a Lithuanian – ...with rolled up sleeves was armed with an iron crowbar. He dragged out one man at a time



from the group and struck him with the crowbar with one or more blows on the back of the head. Within three quarters of an hour he had beaten to death the entire group of forty five to fifty people in this way. I took a series of photographs of the victims ...

After the entire group had been beaten to death, the young man put the crowbar to one side, fetched an accordion and went and stood on the mountain of corpses and played the Lithuanian national anthem. I recognised the tune and was informed by bystanders that this was the national anthem. The behaviour of the civilians present (women and children) was unbelievable. After each man had been killed they began to clap and when the national anthem started up they joined in the singing and clapping. In the front row were women with small children in their arms who stayed there right until the end of the whole proceedings. I found out from some people who knew German what was happening here. They explained to me that the parents of the young man who had killed the other people had been taken from their beds and shot, because they were suspected of being nationalists, and this was the young man's revenge. Not far away, there was a large number of dead people who had been killed by the withdrawing Commissars and Communists.

While I was talking to the civilians an SS officer came up to me and tried to confiscate my camera. I was able to refuse since in the first place the camera was not mine and in the second I had a special pass from the 16th Army High Command, which gave me authorisation to take photographs everywhere. I explained to the officer that he could obtain the camera if he went through Generalfeldmarschall Busch, whereupon I was able to go on my way unhindered."¹²

¹² Klee, E., Dressen, W. & Riess, V. (Eds), *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, The Free Press, MacMillan, New York, 1988 pp. 31-32 (Report of a Photographer)

Questions

1. “Bystanders, Resisters and Perpetrators are part of the same moral universe – the difference being the choices they make within that universe.” What choices did this photographer make that classifies him as a Bystander? What options did he have?
2. Can you empathise with the photographer in any way? Explain.
3. How do you account for the responses of the other bystanders/onlookers who “began to clap” and sing the national anthem? What justification did they give to the photographer for the killings? Do you think this was valid? Why or why not?
4. Which bystander do you think is more morally irresponsible – Mrs Gusenbauer or the photographer? Give reasons.



any person who might consider direct action to protect the welfare, rights and dignity of others. Respond to the questions that follow.

On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto, Vladka Meed ¹⁴

‘Warsaw, July 1942 -doors opening and closing: hurried footsteps on stairs. The courtyard of the house at Leszno 72 was already astir. Tenants were scurrying about in their attempts to learn the news about the latest Nazi roundup. Horrible rumours had been circulating that the Germans were going to deport all the inhabitants of the ghetto – no one knew where.’

(Vladka’s mother, her brother and sister were deported. She was one of the lucky ones.)

One evening, Abrasha Blum (the leader of the Bund¹⁵) visited her apartment and asked her if she would consider becoming an underground courier. She would be required to smuggle herself across the ghetto wall and assume a new gentile persona – Wladyslawa Kowalska, nicknamed “Vladka”. The risks involved would be grave – to live amongst hostile and suspicious strangers, watch every word and gesture, a life lived “walking the streets between assignations and constantly on guard against the szmalcomicy (“blackmailers”) – insidious vultures who prowled the streets relentlessly looking for prey – the bane of Jews living on the Aryan side.

THE RESISTOR

INTRODUCTION

Many factors made resistance to the Nazis both difficult and dangerous. In much of the writing on the Holocaust, Jews have been portrayed as hapless victims waiting to be led to slaughter. However, there were many acts of courage both within the Jewish people and also by those who have become known as the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’. Each act of resistance presented a dilemma, required a decision: presented a moral choice.

RESISTOR CORE ACTIVITY (STAGES 3, 4 & 5)

Read the following extracts from Vladka Meed’s memoirs. They provide a profile of a resister and explore the difficult decisions that confront

13 Steinfeldt, I., *How Was it Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders during the Holocaust*, The International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem Jerusalem, 2002, pg. 42

14 All extracts from Meed, V., *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Beit Lohamei Ha Chettaat & Hakibbutz Hameichad House Publishing House, Israel, 1977 (Introduction by Elie Wiesel)

15 “The Bund – a League of Jewish workers in Russia, Lithuania and Poland. A Jewish Socialist party. The party established a broad base of operations including children’s and youth organisations, a sports movement and a women’s organisation.” Gutman I. (Ed) *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*, Volume I, MacMillan, New York, 1990, pp. 272-273



Extract 1

‘I happened to be in our cellar at Gornoszłonska 3 when a young Gentile in his twenties, well dressed, with a ruddy face and a snub nose, delivered several wooden crates. Our landlord owned a cart, and occasionally parcels were brought to him for delivery to various points. I was not at all surprised by the stranger’s visit, but I found it peculiar that Michal would welcome the stranger and speak so favourably of the transaction. It could be a friendly Gentile, I reasoned. The landlord set a price and as usual enquired about the contents of the crates.

“Nails,” the visitor told him.

After some bargaining the deal was made. Michal was to give directions as to the time and place of the delivery. As soon as the landlord went to stow away the crates, the young Gentile exchanged whispers with Michal and while leaving, observed cheerfully, “May we have many more such transactions.” When he eyed me suspiciously, Michal reassured him and introduced me. “This is Vladka – one of our group. She recently got out of the ghetto.” The visitor smiled. “Very good – lots of luck!” he remarked casually.

Only later did I find out that our visitor was none other than Aryeh Wilner, of Hashomer Hatzair, and representative of the Jewish fighting organisation (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa) on the Aryan side. The crate of nails actually contained the first ten revolvers to be secured from the Polish underground (Arma Krajowa) after prolonged negotiation (pages 110-111)

Extract 2

‘I myself processed scores of applications for assistance. The short scribbled scrawled applications made up one soaring wall of Jewish distress and despair...

Every one of the Jews asking for help had undergone ordeal by fire and had been left desolate, crushed, and penniless. After all these tribulations, every one of them yearned to live...

I came to know Blumenthal, an engineer from Lwow through Wolanska, a Gentile woman. The engineer had survived through his own efforts. After managing to locate his brother’s two children, he had found a hideout for them with a Gentile family. He was not asking for anything for himself – he would get by somehow- but he was pleading for the orphans. Funds were needed to pay for their upkeep.

Mietek Rozenfarb of Warsaw had escaped from Treblinka. He had lost his wife and two children. Thanks to his skill as a tailor, he had succeeded in finding sustenance and a hiding place by toiling from dawn til dusk for his German exploiter. His only plea was for forged Polish documents. “These are of life and death importance to me,” he wrote.

Every courier transmitted hundreds of such messages to the Coordinating Committee. Every phrase was a world of woe. Those letters, those words, seemed to echo but a single agonising appeal, “Help us to get on! We want to live!” (pages 230-231)

Extract 3

‘Very few Jewish children survived, though the Coordinating Committee paid special attention to their welfare, paying for their upkeep and care. We searched for them in every nook and cranny, asking every friendly Pole about them. Unfortunately, their number was insignificant.

It was difficult to determine the precise number of Jews in hiding. We were not in contact with nor aware of all of them. It was rumoured that some thirty or forty thousand Jews were living



in Warsaw and its environs. But we could not reach each one of them, nor could the coordinating Committee provide every Jewish applicant with the needed assistance. Often it even had to curtail the small monthly allowance of 500-1000 zloty at a time when subsistence called for 2000 zloty. This was done so that every applicant for assistance might receive at least a certain minimum.’
(page 233)

Extracts 4 and 5 highlight the role of those who were not Jewish, yet who put themselves at risk to help the Jewish people. They chose a moral duty over self-preservation.

Extract 4

‘It would not be right to suppose that all the Poles with whom we had to deal were treacherous blackmailers or at best cold and money minded. Most of the Gentiles we dealt with demanded cash for the least service rendered. Yet a few were kind hearted and sympathetic to our suffering. There were even some who risked their own lives to rescue Jews from danger. Though they were but a few in number, without the cooperation of this handful of friendly Gentiles we members of the Jewish underground who worked on the Aryan side could not have accomplished much. At crucial moments, in times of great peril, these friends enabled us to carry out our mission.

Wanda Wnorowska was one of the first Gentiles with whom I had contact after I left the ghetto. The widow of a Polish officer, a gentlewoman in her forties and a member of the so called “better” Polish society, ran a ladies tailoring shop where I found employment almost as soon as I crossed to the Aryan side. Not only was I assured of a job and warm quarters during winter, but I also had an important front for my underground activities.

When I was called upon to devote all my time to my underground work and had to give up my job as a seamstress, Wanda gladly accepted in my place those friends of mine who had just succeeded in getting out of the ghetto... Gradually she was drawn into our little world and became one of our confidantes...

I managed to transfer considerable sums of money to her from the underground organisation funds, and she in turn distributed these funds in accordance with our instructions. She never asked for anything for herself and when we offered her money to help in her own strained circumstances, she felt offended and refused the offer.

“You are in worse straits than I am,” she answered with dignity.’ (pages 239-240)

Extract 5

‘Juliana Larisz, a young Gentile who before the war had worked for the Zilberbergs, a Jewish family in Praga (Prague), was another such ‘good woman’. When the Aussiedlung began, the kind-hearted Miss Larisz had responded to the pleas of her Jewish friends. Moving cautiously, she began to smuggle them out of the ghetto until all told, twenty-one had escaped to the Aryan side...

Juliana also operated a thriving meat supply business and most of her profits went to the Jews in hiding providing them with clothes, food and books...





For weeks and even months, everything seemed to be running smoothly. Then early next morning, the German police knocked on Juliana Larisz's door. Fortunately, the Jews hiding there managed to conceal themselves in time. Nothing suspicious could be found. Juliana quietly and calmly answered their questions. Still the Germans would not give up. They demanded to be driven to her friend on Targowa Street (the home of a friend where she had hidden some Jews). On some pretext, she managed to slip away from the guards and telephone her friend of the imminent danger. Thus, when the police arrived, they found no one ... Juliana learned later that her own employees had been suspicious of her activities and after having trailed her to the hideouts, they denounced her to the Gestapo. Undismayed, she continued her work of mercy to the end of the war, sheltering refugees until new places of concealment could be found for them.

I used to make the rounds of Juliana's hideouts, supplying the Jews there with forged documents (page 242).

Questions:

1. Vladka faced choices and each choice had consequences. Identify the choices Vladka faced. What were the possible consequences of each choice?
2. What qualities do you think she must have possessed to choose her particular course of action and be a resistor?
3. Why do you think so few people were willing to make the kinds of choices described in Extracts 4 and 5?

THE VICTIM

INTRODUCTION

Marked as 'enemies of the German people', the Jews of Europe were targeted for mass murder. Other victim groups under the Nazis were the Romani and Sinti peoples, mentally and physically disabled persons, homosexuals, political opponents, forced labourers and Soviet POW's. Tragically, most victims of the Nazis did not live to bear witness to the predicaments that faced them throughout their persecution. However, from diaries written by those who did not survive and testimony from those who did, we are able to examine some of the ethical dilemmas that faced many victims of the Holocaust.

CORE ACTIVITY 1 (STAGE 3)

A. Go to the website for Anne Frank's house: <http://www.annefrank.org/content>

Questions

1. The home page contains visual images of her hiding place and diary with the quote from Anne, "Oh I'm so glad I brought you along!" Why do you think her diary was so important to her? Why do you think it has become such a popular text? What is its historical significance?
2. On the home page click on the link to The Story of Anne Frank and read/view the information provided.

What different insights into the experiences of victims of the Holocaust does this section of the site give you?





3. What do you think is the most tragic aspect of this story?
4. On the home page click on Museum/Virtual Display and view the film and other visual images provided here. What do these film and text extracts tell us about Anne's experience and view of the world from her secret annex? What insights into the world outside of her annex do they give us?

VICTIM CORE ACTIVITY 2 (STAGES 4 & 5)

The Sunflower Simon Wiesenthal¹⁶

A young Jew (Wiesenthal) is taken from a death camp to a makeshift army hospital. He is led to the bedside of a Nazi soldier whose head is completely swathed in bandages. The dying Nazi extends his hand toward the Jew, and in a cracked whisper begins to speak.

"I must tell you something dreadful ... something inhuman. I must tell you of this horrible deed ... tell you because ... you are a Jew" (page 34)

The Jew listens silently while the Nazi confesses to having participated in the burning alive of an entire village of Jews.

The soldier, terrified of dying with this burden of guilt begs absolution from the Jew.

"I know that what I told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again, I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left ...

I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace." (page 57)

Having listened to the Nazi's story for several hours- torn between horror and compassion for the dying man- the Jew walks out of the room without speaking.

¹⁶ All extracts from Wiesenthal, S., *The Sunflower*, Schocken Books, New York, 1970 (cover page)

"Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands ...

At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room." (page 58)

Questions

1. What is your opinion of Wiesenthal's choice? Do you think his action was morally right? Why? Why not?
2. A number of eminent persons were invited to express an opinion on the moral issue posed in the story of *The Sunflower*. A selection of these opinions are paraphrased below. Identify the key issues these raise about Wiesenthal's action and rank them according to your own understanding of, and response to the situation. Give reasons for your first, second and final placements.
 - i. The request for pardon occurred during the war whilst tortures and massacres were still being perpetrated. Pardon at this point could be construed as permission to continue killing. If however, the confession and request for pardon takes place after the cessation of hostilities, the hope of a return to reason, the hope that by forgiving, the next generation will not be burdened with the sins of the fathers, may be sufficient to grant absolution to those who are sincere in their repentance.





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- iii. The social group or nation cannot whitewash as a whole the instigators of crimes against individual persons. The repression of crimes against humanity is a duty unlimited by time, not as a measure of revenge but as a means of preventing criminals from reacquiring respected positions and preparing means of avenging their final defeat and beginning again their deeds of hatred and violence.
 - iii. The Nazi in the story is provided with a context, a family life, a personality and a background. One of the most difficult problems facing modern man is to decide on the degree to which psychological and sociological understanding of a criminal could or should make us less prone to judge his actions. Both the individual and society must retain the power to judge human action however much we respect the attempt to explain them, because without moral judgement there simply can be no pattern of civilised behaviour underlying a culture and there can be no incentive on the part of individuals to refrain from giving way to sadistic and cruel impulses if they can simply attribute them to psychological, sociological and even physiological factors.
 - iv. Another question posed by the story is, does one have the right to forgive on behalf of others? Can a distinction be drawn between “understanding” (i.e. I understand what you have done and even why you have done these things) and “forgiveness”? Is “understanding” a kind of forgiveness?
 - v. If a true moral offence is an offence against divine order in the universe, then only God can forgive.
 - vi. “What should I have done?” Is there a single prescription? There is no generic answer; it is an individual dilemma that demands a personal answer.
 - vii. If we forgive, will we not allow “the greatest European crime of our time to rest beneath a Sunflower?”
 - viii. Can one morally and with full deliberation refuse forgiveness to a repentant sinner? Forgiveness of repented sin is one of the basic moral concepts underlying both the Jewish and Christian traditions as well as universal natural ethics. Does the narrator watching the dying Nazi in his final agony pleading for mercy also fit the description of inhumanity? Should human conscience and integrity not transcend a condition of complete demoralisation? Is not the failure to transcend this condition another triumph for the brutalising and dehumanising process?
 - ix. Is murder unforgivable? Yes, without question.
 - x. Justice and Law cannot exist without forgiveness.
3. Is there a moral imperative for victims to forgive?
 4. How do you interpret the title of this text The Sunflower? (See point 7 for one possible interpretation. Can you think of others?)

