Teaching About the Holocaust Using Literature
by Tammy Manor

Reading literature about the Holocaust is a good companion to a regular Global Studies curriculum. I became interested in the Holocaust because all four of my grandparents escaped from Nazi-occupied Germany. As a child, I never read a book about the Holocaust, but I lived it through stories told to me by my mother. The Holocaust occurred over fifty years ago and there are not that many survivors left. Fortunately, many of their survival stories are recorded in various forms, so by reading Holocaust literature another generation of students can learn about the atrocities and the struggle for survival.

I recommend *Night* by Elie Wiesel as the best novel for use in the social studies classroom. *Night* is very realistic and shows a lot of the horrific things that occurred in Europe during that time period. It is a memoir of Elie Wiesel’s childhood in Sighet, a little town in Transylvania. Elie is twelve years old when the novel begins in 1941. Elie is the only boy in his family and the reader senses that his family has sheltered him from the rest of the world. Elie is told by his parents that his job in this world is to be a student so he spends his days studying the Talmud.

One day all foreign Jews were expelled from Sighet. The Hungarian police put the foreign Jews in cattle cars and no one did anything to stop them. Everyone said that the foreign Jews were brought to Galicia, that they were put to work, and that they were happy. One person escapes and returns to Sighet with horror stories about the Gestapo and how they were murdering Jews. However, no one believed him. Years passed and Sighet was largely unaffected by the war until the spring of 1944 when the Fascists came to power and took over the government. Soon German soldiers were in their town and the Jews of Sighet were deported street by street. Elie and his family were put in a cattle wagon, with eighty people in the car. Anyone who tried to escaped was shot. They stood in the cars, barely able to move, until they arrived a few days later in Auschwitz. Elie survived the grueling torture, but unfortunately his father and mother died. After the war, he was reunited with his two older sisters.

Scholars agree that *Night* is one of the best works of literature on the Holocaust because it is both well written and historically accurate. What affects my students the most is that they know that these things actually happened to the author and that he was about their age when he experienced them.

While I feel that *Night* is the best novel to use to teach the Holocaust through literature, there are other valuable works. *Survival in Auschwitz* is the story of Primo Levi, a member of the Italian anti-Fascist resistance, who was deported to the SS death camp at Auschwitz in 1944. Levi survived to write memoirs of his life in the prison camp. It is a more difficult book to read than *Night*, so I recommend selecting passages for students to examine. *Number the Stars*, which is set in Denmark in 1943, was written for middle-level students. The main character is Annemarie Johansen, a ten-year-old girl. When Jews are forced to close their shops and get “relocated,” her family helps them sneak them out of the country. *Maus* is a comic book about a family of “mice” who are Jews. The author-cartoonist’s father is a Holocaust survivor who tells him stories about life in Poland during the war. In the two-volume set, German’s are portrayed as cats and Poles as dogs. *I never saw another butterfly*... *Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, is a collection of poems and drawings that were done by children who lived in Terezin Concentration Camp. The forward to the book of poetry describes
the camp itself, which was set up by the Nazis to show the Red Cross that conditions were bearable. As a result, this camp had nicer accommodations and the prisoners were dressed and fed better than in other camps.


For over a decade, Jaap Polak has spoken to Global History classes at North Salem High School during the students’ study of World War II. He speaks about a world gone mad and his survival at the Bergen Belsen concentration camp. North Salem High School is only one of many schools, colleges, and religious groups where Jaap has conveyed his message about the Holocaust and genocide. In December 1992, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands knighted Jaap into “The Order of Orange Nassau.” She commended him for his tireless efforts on behalf of the Anne Frank Center, USA. In 1997, the Regents of the University of the State of New York presented Mr. Polak their highly acclaimed Louis E. Yavner Citizen Award for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching about the Holocaust and about Other Violations of Human Rights.

This book is a true story told through love letters of two exceptionally strong individuals, Jaap (Jack) Polak and his wife of 55 years, Ina Soep. Their letters provided sustenance to help them endure and overcome the misery and upheaval of a real life nightmare. When would these days end and would they survive to create a new life together? It was to occur only through resilience of the human spirit strengthened by that powerful force called love. This book can provide teacher and student alike a lifelong lesson about the will to survive. As Ina states in the text, "Jaap buoyed my spirits with his indomitable self confidence." Jaap counters in one of his many letters to Ina, “that in everything, even the gloomiest things, you must look for the sunny side.”

These love letters provide a diary of document-based primary source information portraying the tension, insecurity, constant fear, and hope for what tomorrow would bring for Jaap, Ina, and their loved ones. Editor Harriet Ross wrote in the Introduction, “The love that developed between them during the internment years was love in its purest form; and its strength sustained them through the miseries of disease, starvation, and despair, keeping alive their determination to survive. This enduring bond was heightened by the Letters themselves written then and there was no conception of how their lives would eventually evolve.”

The story begins in 1940 when the German war machine overran Holland and occupied this western European nation. For Jaap, a Dutch Jew, the next five years were a roller coaster ride of hope and despair. For the 140,000 Dutch Jews, the process the Nazis labeled “the Final Solution” had already begun.

For Jaap, Ina, and their families, Nazi deportation came in July 1943, when they were sent to the transit camp of Westerbork in northern Netherlands. During the next 21 months in Westerbork and later at Camp Bergen Belsen near Celle, Germany, Jaap and Ina communicated with each other as often as possible with love notes and letters written on scraps of paper. Most of the letters contained in the book are from Jaap to Ina; most of Ina’s letters were lost at the time of her liberation at the end of the war. The letters are often emotional accounts of the daily drudgery and inhumane conditions of the camps, but are also filled with Jaap’s eternal optimism that their lives will come together in the future. The letters from the last days at Bergen Belsen are most poignant. They tell about people who struggled to avoid and survive the dreaded spotted typhus disease, but at the end, died just before liberation by the Allied forces. Jaap contracted this debilitating disease but fortunately survived after many months of care. As Ina wrote, “When you are that ill you don't get your strength back from so little food and that is what happened to so
many people. They died in such large numbers everyday so rapidly that they could not clear the bodies out fast enough.”

By the end of the war, only 3000 Dutch Jews of the 103,000 deported from Westerbork to the German extermination camps survived and returned to their native land. Jaap married Ina in 1946. The two remained in Amsterdam until they immigrated to the United States in 1951 where they have lived together for the past 50 years.

In our contemporary, fast-paced world of instantaneous e-mail communications, this book portrays the power, and perhaps a lost art form, of letter writing. According to Elie Wiesel “These letters, written in darkness, carry the messages of despair and hope to a world that needs to understand its own challenges.” Jehuda Reinharz, President of Brandeis University, feels “this book demonstrates a triumph of human spirit.”

Far from a fairy tale love story, this book is an encounter with two individuals who share a deep love for one another, each sharing a belief in God’s will to sustain them. This book is recommended as an interdisciplinary resource for Humanities, Global History, or Human Rights courses.

Anne Frank, The Diary of A Young Girl : “Seeking Courage In The Face of Opposition”
by Gayle Meinkes-Lumia

“Be brave! Let us remain aware of our task and not grumble; a solution will come. God has never deserted our people. Right through the ages there have been Jews, through all ages they have had to suffer, but it has made them strong too; the weak fall, but the strong will remain and never go under!”

From Anne Frank, The Diary of A Young Girl

These simple yet evocative words spoken by Anne Frank summarize my mission as an English and Holocaust educator. As part of a nine-week “Courage In The Face Of Opposition” unit on tolerance and prejudice, my middle school students in Brentwood, New York, a diverse, multi-ethnic, school district on Long Island, are immersed in Holocaust literature. The theme of having courage in the face of opposition is the central driving force of our work in the classroom. This theme is personified for my students through Anne Frank's autobiography Diary of a Young Girl. Courage is essential to living and breathing; for if we are unable to stand up for what we believe in, we are inviting oppression. Courage comes in many shapes and forms and frequently goes hand in hand with freedom.

As educators, our responsibility is to reawaken concern for freedom as we empower the young to create a world where compassion and solidarity prevail. Students need to realize that freedom does not develop in a vacuum, it can only be attained through an awareness and an understanding of those who were downtrodden in the past.

I find that the study of literature of courage, both fictional and non-fictional, helps create a passion for freedom and change in the world. Students need to learn about individuals that fought for emancipation. They need to realize that freedom would not exist in the world without the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman and Anne Frank; individuals who courageously struggled to obtain freedom for themselves and others.

After experiencing Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl, my students are transformed. They become different people - empathetic, considerate, and tolerant. They realize that Anne's voice must still be heard, more than fifty years later. I find that the Diary makes a tremendous impact on students. It provides them with the opportunity to gain insight about and reinforce the human capacity for love, understanding, compassion, faith, and respect for life. Year after year
students from my previous classes return to my classroom to discuss remembrances of the activities and tales of the knowledge they acquired during the study of Anne’s diary.

Perhaps it was Felipe who stated it best in his reflective journal: “This unit made me wonder about myself and the way that I treat people. Sometimes we make fun of the Dominican students, I don't really know why. What my friends think of me doesn't matter anymore, I will never make fun of anyone again. What those Jewish people went through is disgusting. Prejudice has to be stopped, it’s like an evil germ spreading through the world. I will spread only hope and tolerance.”

Before introducing students to Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl, I begin the “Courage In The Face Of Opposition” unit with a English/Social Studies roundtable discussion addressing the questions:

- What does it mean to have “courage in the face of opposition”?
- Is it important to stand up for what you believe despite opposition from others?
- What individuals in history have displayed “courage in the face of opposition”?
- Would life be the same today if it were not for freedom fighters?

During the course of the unit, students:

- Study Anne’s diary as a portrait of war, a portrait of adolescence, a philosophy of life, and a study of the nature of people;
- Complete a series of writing assignments, including research reports, short stories, letters, memoirs, interviews, illustrations, posters, bumper stickers, advertisements, poetry, persuasive and descriptive essays, journal entries, and literature circles;
- Present projects and writings orally to the class;
- Evaluate the courage displayed by Anne.
- Comprehend why discrimination is something to be fought against and eradicated.
- Learn to take notes on primary and secondary sources.
- Compare and contrast the way the Holocaust is represented in different genres (movies, documentaries).
- Create metaphors for freedom.
- Participate in a mock trial for war criminals.

**Literacy-based Social Studies-related Holocaust Assignments**

**“Impact of Prejudice” Review:** I choose a particular trait that will isolate a certain percentage of students in class (e.g., students who have birthdays during the summer). Their names are announced and all of their possessions are confiscated. They are given a star to wear, a number to pin on their clothes, and must sit on the floor and face the wall (the rest of the class is not allowed to speak to them). Everyone else is given candy and is allowed to roam freely. After about ten minutes, both groups journal write about their experiences and feelings. This is followed by a class discussion.

**Library Research:** Students cooperatively work with the mission in mind of defining and describing Holocaust terminology.

**Documentary:** Students view a documentary on the rise of Hitler and take notes and discuss.

**Guided Imagery:** Students view photos and pictures of courageous individuals (police officers, firefighters, etc.) and discuss freedom, discrimination, and courage.

**Interview:** Students interview an older relative in order to find out where they were during the Holocaust and what they were thinking at the time.

**The Great Diary Project:** Students create a journal of ten diary entries. Each entry is written from the point of view of a different character in Anne’s diary. Students include pictures, words, news articles in their journals that reflect a theme or concept.

**Diary within a Diary:** Students analyze Anne’s situation and compose their own entries regarding her plight.
Discussion Journals: Students evaluate Anne’s state of mind during this period in hiding. They focus on various relationships within the family. Students highlight Anne’s courage and will to survive.

Literature Circles: Students work in groups of five and analyze and evaluate specific characters and situations in the book.

Primary Source memoirs, Stories, and Poetry - During the course of reading Anne’s diary, students read short story selections and poetry about the Holocaust and compare what they read with what they learned from Anne’s diary.

Courage/Discrimination poetry: Students read “First they came for the Jews” by Pastor Niemoeller and analyze why people whether people should stand up for what they believe, even if it means standing alone.

Discrimination - connection to others - Students read accounts of the Gypsy’s oppression in the Holocaust and then compare the atrocity to that of the Jews.

First-person “Letters”: Students assume roles as either a prisoner in a concentration camp or a member of the resistance movement. They must compose letters home as well as letters to Winston Churchill in Britain and FDR in America, describing the horrors they see and the assistance that is warranted.

Text Rendering: Students become active readers by thinking while they engage with the text. They extract words, phrases, sentences, and passages that are important or memorable, highlight them and “call out” their chosen phrases to construct a collective poem.

Wall of Remembrance: Students use any medium they choose (poetic, artistic, and prose) to create an overall representation of the Holocaust. They create it, present it, and display it for all to praise.

Dioramas/Mobiles - Students create three dimensional images from Anne’s diary or other scenes of the Holocaust.

Theme Analysis - Students are divided into groups of four and are asked to teach a theme to the class as it relates to Anne Frank. They locate any relevant passages from the text and instruct others. The topics and group divisions are: the Diary as a portrait of war; the Diary as a philosophy of life; the Diary as a portrait of adolescence; and, the Diary as a study of the nature of people

Holocaust/Slavery Essay - Students compare and contrast the Holocaust to slavery. They focus in depth on the similarities and differences of the time periods.

Modern Day Genocide - Students research modern day genocide and propose remedies.

Survivor Letters - Students write letters to Holocaust survivors.

Mock Nuremberg Trial - Students research articles involving reparations and war crimes. A mock trial is set up with costumes, documentation, jury, etc.

Guest Speaker - A Holocaust survivor is invited to speak to students as they engage in a question and answer forum.

Final Essay - Students write a “Courage in the face of opposition” essay that demonstrates their understanding of Anne Frank and the Holocaust.

Recommended Bibliography/Resources for a Holocaust Unit

Written Sources:
Arnold, Elliot (1969). A Kind of Secret Weapon. New York: Scribners. A Danish family joins the resistance and publishes uncensored news for distribution. The father is killed but the mother and her 11 year old son carry out the family plan.


Rose, Leesha (1978). *The Tulips Are Red*. New Jersey: AS Barnes. A woman loses her family and lover to deportation. She is left to work in an invalid hospital and later joins the resistance.


Spiegelman, Art (1986). *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon Books. A memoir of a Jewish survivor and his son (Spiegelman). In this black and white cartoon, the Jews are portrayed as mice and the Nazis as cats.


**Audio-Visual Sources:**

*The Attic: The Hiding of Anne Frank* (1988). Television movies about Miep Gies, the woman who aided the Frank family during WWII.


*The Great Dictator* (1940). Charlie Chaplin satirizes the war as he plays the roles of a ghetto barber and a “great dictator.”


*Schindler’s List* (1993). Academy Award winning film that depicts Oskar Schindler's role in saving many Jews during WWII.

*The Holocaust: A Teenager's Experience* (1990). David Bergman was deported to Auschwitz at the age of 12. He is the only member of his extended family to survive. His simple words make him an accessible narrator.
Quotes from Anne Frank’s “The Diary of a Young Girl”

A. Hiding
- **July 11, 1942:** “Our little room looked very bare at first with nothing on the walls; but thanks to Daddy who had brought my picture postcards and film-star collection on beforehand, and with the aid of paste pot and brush I have transformed the walls into one gigantic picture. This makes it look much more cheerful. . . . We have to whisper and tread lightly during the day, otherwise the people in the warehouse might hear us. . . . Last night the four of us went down to the private office and listened to England on the radio, I was so scared.”

- **August 21, 1942:** “Now our Secret Annex has truly become secret. Mr. Kugler thought it would be better to have a bookcase built in front of the entrance to our hiding place. Now whenever we want to go downstairs we have to duck and then jump.”

- **September 29, 1942:** “Margot and I have declared the front office to be our bathing grounds. Since the curtains are drawn on Saturday afternoon, we scrub ourselves in the dark, while the one who isn’t in the bath looks out the window through a chink in the curtains.”

- **January 6, 1944:** “I think that what’s happening to me is so wonderful, and I don’t just mean the changes taking place on the outside of my body, but also those on the inside. . . .

**Courage/Discrimination Poetry**

**A. First They Came for the Jews**

*by Pastor Niemoeller*

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

**B. First They Came for _____________**

First they came for the _____________ and I did not speak out because I was not a _____________. Then they came for the _____________ and I did not speak out because I was not a _____________. Then they came for the _____________ and I did not speak out because I was not a _____________. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.

1. In your opinion, aside from the fact that the man was not a Jew, a Communist, or a trade unionist, why didn’t Pastor Niemoeller speak out?
2. “Stand up for what you believe, even if you’re standing alone.” What does this quote mean? What do you think Pastor Niemoeller would think of this quote? Why?
3. Complete poem B using the names of current groups that have been targeted for discrimination.
Whenever I get my period (and that’s only been three times), I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, discomfort and mess, I’m carrying around a sweet secret. . . . I’d just turned thirteen when I came here, so I started thinking about myself and realized that I’ve become an ‘independent person’ sooner than most girls.”

- January 28, 1944: “Our own helpers, who have managed to pull us through so far. Never have they uttered a single word about the burden we must be.”

- March 14, 1944: “As of tomorrow, we won’t have a scrap of fat, butter or margarine. Lunch today consists of mashed potatoes and picked kale. You wouldn’t believe how much kale can stink when it’s a few years old!”

**Activity:** Imagine if your family had to go into hiding in order to survive. Where would you go? Who would go with you? Who could you depend on? What would life be like? Based on what you have learned about Anne’s experience, write a story about your life in hiding.

**B. Despair**

- June 20, 1942: After May 1940, good times rapidly fled: first the war, then the capitulation, followed by the German invasion which is when the sufferings of us Jews really began. Anti-Jewish decrees followed each other in quick succession and our freedom was strictly limited. Jews must wear a yellow star, Jews must hand in their bicycles, Jews are banned from streetcars, Jews may not visit Christians, Jews must go to Jewish schools and many more restrictions of a similar kind. So we could not do this and were forbidden to do that.”

- September 28, 1942: “Not being able to go outside upsets me more than I can say, and I’m terrified our hiding place will be discovered and that we’ll be shot. That of course is a fairly dismal prospect.”

- October 9, 1942: “Today I have nothing but dismal and depressing news to report. Our many Jewish friends and acquaintances are being taken away in droves. The Gestapo is treating them very roughly and transporting them in cattle cars to Westerbork, the big camp in Drenthe to which they’re sending all the Jews. . . . If it’s that bad in Holland, what must it be like in those faraway and uncivilized places where the Germans are sending them? We assume that most of them are being murdered. The English radio says they’re being gassed. Perhaps that’s the quickest way to die.”

- November 19, 1942: “Countless friends and acquaintances have been taken off to a dreadful fate. Night after night, green and gray military vehicles cruise the streets. It’s impossible to escape their clutches unless you go into hiding.”

- December 12, 1942: “I saw two Jews through the curtains yesterday, it was a horrible feeling, just as if I had betrayed them and was now watching them in their misery.”

- March 16, 1944: “The brightest spot of all is that at least I can write down all my thoughts and feelings; otherwise, I’d absolutely suffocate.”

**Activity:** If you were in Anne’s situation, what would you do to survive? How would you handle growing despair?
**C. Hope**

- April 9, 1944: “One day this terrible war will be over. The time will come when we will be people again and not just Jews! We can never be just Dutch, or just English, or whatever, we will always be Jews as well. But then, we’ll want to be.”

- May 11, 1944: “You’ve known for a long time that my greatest wish is to be a journalist and later on, a famous writer. In any case, after the war I’d like to publish a book called the Secret Annex.”

- June 6, 1944: “‘This is the Day,’ came the announcement over the English news at twelve o’clock. The invasion has begun! English parachute troops have landed on the French coast. Great commotion in the Annex! Would the long-awaited liberation ever come true?”

- July 6, 1944: “‘This is the Day,’ came the announcement over the English news at twelve o’clock. The invasion has begun! English parachute troops have landed on the French coast. Great commotion in the Annex! Would the long-awaited liberation ever come true?”

- July 15, 1944: “We’re much too young to deal with these problems, but they keep thrusting themselves on us until, finally, we’re forced to think up a solution, though most of the time our solutions crumble when faced with the facts. It’s difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart... And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I’ll be able to realize them!”

- July 21, 1944: “I’m finally getting optimistic. Now, at last, things are going well! They really are! Great news! An assassination attempt has been made on Hitler’s life... by a German general... The Führer owes his life to ‘Divine Providence’: he escaped, unfortunately, with only a few minor burns and scratches... This is the best proof we’ve had so far that many officers and generals are fed up with the war and would like to see Hitler sink into a bottomless pit.”

**Activities:**

- Despite the difficulties of her situation, Anne Frank maintains her hope for the future. Write Anne a letter. In your letter explain your own concerns about the present and your hope for the future.

- Create a work of art, either symbolic or realistic, that commemorates the life and death of Anne Frank.