



Ages: **High-School Students**

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Rationale

One of the most frequently asked questions about the Holocaust is: How was it humanly possible? In order to approach this question, a few things must be taken in consideration:

1. **The understanding that the murderers themselves were human beings who made a human choice, and that man-made circumstances led to the murder of six million Jews, along with millions of other victims.** This re-humanization of the perpetrators has two main implications: A. It re-attributes them the responsibility for their deeds. The understanding that the perpetrators were fully responsible for their actions and their consequences is a necessary condition for discussing one of the major educational lessons that can be taught through the Holocaust - importance of self-responsibility. B. It obliges us, as members of human society, to learn about and from the perpetrators' deeds. An important warning must, however, be added here: understanding some of the processes that were involved in the actions and choices made by the perpetrators does not mean that they are acceptable. Rather, it is precisely the moral obligation to reject and to revolt against such conduct that reasserts the historical burden of understanding how it was possible.
2. **It is important to understand the human dimension of mass murder.** The victims must be granted the human image and dignity that their executors attempted to deny them. The inherent danger in teaching the perpetrators' views and responses alone, is that the face of the victim will be lost - albeit unintentionally. The victims' perspective also needs to be heard and felt in order to get a better perspective of the significance of the perpetrators' actions.
3. **The tension between the universal human elements with which the story of the Holocaust is fraught and those aspects that were unique to the particular historical situation.** The moral mandate calls upon us to seek the universal. Such discussion can take place meaningfully, however, only when rooted in an understanding of the historical reality. In this lesson plan we provide a very concise historical background. It is the obligation of the teacher to provide the students with sufficient historical context for the events referred to in this lesson. We recommend to present a brief overview of the Nazi anti-Semitic policy between the years 1933-



1945, placing this unit in the time frame of the decision to exterminate systematically all the Jews.

Historical Background

Antisemitism was a major component of the Nazi ideology. The Jews were considered sub-humans, parasites, that suck the blood of every human society they live in and will eventually bring on the destruction of the world. The only way of redeeming humanity, therefore, was their elimination.

The anti-Jewish policy conducted by the Nazis, however, was gradual and developed over time. It began as soon as the Nazis came to power in Germany. The policy escalated gradually and was implemented later in every territory occupied by Germany.

In June 1941 the war against the Soviet Union was launched. It was perceived as a battle against Bolshevism, which was supposedly disseminated by Jews. This was probably one of the reasons for which the attack on the Soviet Union was also the beginning of the new and most extreme phase of the anti-Jewish policy - the systematic extermination of the Jews. In the beginning the murder was conducted by the four Einsatzgruppen (Task Squads) - units of the security police, that were ordered to follow the advancing army. Assisted by reserve battalions of the German police, units of the German army and members of the local population, the Einsatzgruppen gathered Jews and Communists, led them out of the town or village, and shot them. Some 90% of the victims in these shootings were Jewish civilians. Entire communities including women and children were destroyed.

In the course of time policies and practices of murder were developed and the murder spread to Poland and to the rest of Europe. Nevertheless the killing process was conducted in the eastern parts of Europe. Jews had to be deported from all over Europe to extermination sites in the east, where most were killed within hours from their arrival. A vast system of transportation had to be set up in order to implement these deportations.

The railway played a crucial role in the implementation of the "Final Solution". The organization and coordination of transports was a complicated matter, especially in a wartime setting. With the growing shortage of supplies and the priority given to military transports, the allocation of trains for the deportation of the Jews was not always easily accomplished. It took the close co-operation of all agencies- the SS, the civilian officials of the German Railway, the Ministry of Transportation and in some cases the Foreign Office - to overcome the difficulties and allow the transports to run so efficiently that millions of Jews could be deported to their death.

Deportations from Germany

Jews from Germany were among the first to be deported from central and western Europe to the east. In smaller numbers German Jews were deported already as of February 1940, before the mass killing began. The systematic mass deportations began in October 1941 and eventually brought on the elimination of German Jewry. German Jews were deported mainly to the ghettos of Lodz and Warsaw in Poland and to Riga, Kovno and Minsk in the former Soviet territories. In those Soviet areas mass murder was already taking place. Many of the German Jews deported to these places were murdered upon arrival. In the ghettos many died from hunger and disease. The others were murdered in nearby killing sites or later on in



extermination camps in Poland. In 1942 and 1943 dozens of thousands of German Jews were deported directly to extermination camps, mainly Auschwitz.

The sources

All transports of Jews were accompanied by a detail of guards who were usually recruited from the police. In the deportations from Germany the guard detail routinely included one officer and 15 men. Their task began with the boarding of the train and ended when they handed the transport over to the person in charge at the destination. Paul Salitter was one of these officers. He was in charge of escorting a transport of 1007 Jews that left Düsseldorf for Riga on 11 December 1941. The Jews were assembled at the slaughterhouse yard in Düsseldorf. From there they were taken to the railway station where they boarded the train that took them to Riga [1]. Since those transports to Riga were the beginning of the transports system implementation it was important to learn from mistakes and make improvements. Salitter produced a detailed report of the entire trip with recommendations for his superiors. This report serves as the basis for this lesson's discussion. It is juxtaposed with the testimony of Hilde Sherman, a young Jewish woman who was deported with her husband and his family in the same transport [2].

Through the documents that will be analyzed in this lesson, the student will examine the different people who were involved at various levels and to varying extents in the organization and implementation of the transports, which carried the Jews to the East. These people included the professional railroad staff, without which no transport could get under way; the policemen who accompanied and guarded the transports; and the SS officers who planned and coordinated the deportations. Another large group consisted of the many people who watched the trains go by- the bystanders- who were witnesses to the plight of the Jews.

Objectives:

- The students will analyze Salitter's report. Paying attention to significant choice of content and use of language, the students will try to track Salitter's motivations, attitudes toward people and actions, role in the murder machinery, etc.
Please note that even though a large part of the discussion during the lesson is dedicated to Paul Salitter, the aim is not to focus on him as a person but rather to refer to him as case study from which we can learn principles on the system as a whole and the motivations and choices made by various people who acted within the killing machinery.
- The student will analyze and learn the different roles, motivations and patterns of conduct of the various individuals who were involved in the operation and who witnessed it.
- The student will learn of the involvement of different agencies and bureaucracies in the complex organizational tasks that were involved in the process. Among them those who were created by the totalitarian state, such as the SS, and those which existed before and are a part of every modern state, such as the railway company.
- The student will discuss the responsibility of the individual within a totalitarian society and the role played by the ideology as apposed to the dynamics of the bureaucracy.



- The student will discuss the relevancy of these issues to us today. The events that are the focus of this lesson took place in a specific time and place. This systematic kind of international deportations of victims to the killing sites never repeated themselves. Nevertheless, these specific historical events do have universal aspects that derive from the fact that they were done by human beings to human beings, and as such should be thought.

The lesson

Start by reading the documents.

While reading you can ask the students to:

1. Make a list of all the people who appear in the document and participated in this deportation.
2. Note the significant differences of content and language between Salitter's report and Hilde Sherman's testimony.

Questions and points for discussion:

Salitter

1. Is Salitter a murderer?

Points for discussion: The students may hesitate before answering, and they may hold different opinions. It seems that the answer is not so clear-cut. This fact in itself is a point worth paying attention to.

2. Do you think Salitter considers himself to be a murderer??

Points for discussion: Examining the report one might realize that the answer is: not necessarily. Ask the students what supports that in the text? (you might want to refer to: A. Content differences between Hilde Sherman's testimony and the report. B. The fact that Salitter allows mothers and children to reunite.) Ask them to consider the importance of self-image for people taking part in the murder machinery.

3. Salitter makes no mention of the beating which Hilde Sherman mentions. As she reports it, "a high-ranking SS officer" beats her. It might even have been Salitter himself (although we have no way of knowing this, of course). What reasons might explain the fact that this did not make its way into Salitter's report?

Points for discussion: Taking into consideration local and foreign public view, it was in the German interest that the transportation of the Jews (especially from central and western Europe) will be carried out as smoothly as possible. One possible interpretation for Salitter's omitting an act of violence from the report is the fact that he did not consider it as an important event worth mentioning.



Another option is that Salitter wished to create the impression that everything went in an orderly fashioned way. Discuss with the students the educational importance of the fact that the Nazi regime took public opinion into consideration. It is recommended that one elaborate on the question of blame and responsibility-the difference between the two, and the importance of taking responsibility not only over your actions but also on what is done on your behalf. You can refer to the quote of the German Jewish essayist Kurt Tucholsky: "A country is not only what it does but also what it tolerates".

4. Which of the following definitions describes Salitter: a police commander, a murderer, a nice person, a caring person, efficient, an antisemite, a nazi? Explain your choices.

This question sums up some of the points we have raised so far. Points for discussion:

a. It is recommended that the fact that Salitter could be defined, among others, as a 'nice' and 'caring' person will be stressed. Most probably, in most of the social contexts Salitter never stopped acting according to basic moral values toward most human society. However, he stopped considering Jews as people and therefore members of the social circles to which he was morally obligated. This. Salitter cares about his men, enjoys sightseeing and wants to be home for Christmas. In that sense we can regard him as an 'ordinary man' [3].

b. Salitter's job is not to kill. His job is to see to it that the transport will get from Düsseldorf to Riga. Most of the people involved in the killing did not actually "pull the trigger". They enabled the murder. Salitter, like many other people in the murder machinery, therefore, does not have to change his self-image nor does he have to regard himself as a killer. This is one of the things that make it easier for 'ordinary men' to participate in the killing.

Other people mentioned in the report

5. When he refers to the argument he had with the stationmaster, Salitter complains that the latter clearly did not know the meaning of the term "Jew" and its implications. Salitter also mentions that he had to prompt the guards to act more energetically against the Jews. What does this seem to indicate about Salitter's attitude toward the task he is fulfilling? What can we learn from the way Salitter uses the term "Jew"? What does that indicate about the motivations of the guards and of the stationmaster? Does every person acting within the killing machinery act for the same motivations? What can we learn from that?

Points for discussion: this is one way of demonstrating the notion that the murderers and the other participants in the machinery were human beings. As such they acted out of different motivations. Some were ideologically motivated, others acted out of peer pressure and the power of norms (for instance: a person has no significance as an individual, only as a part of the nation. Similar norms were encouraged by the regime), others out of routine and indifference, etc. The important educational point to be stressed here is that this was a choice! There was no death penalty for



refusing to take part in the killing, and indeed there were people who refused to participate. If possible it is recommended that the norms encouraged by the Nazi regime during the 1930's be asserted (see next question), due to their influence on the behavior of the future perpetrators. Another important point that can be raised here is the dehumanization of the Jews that is expressed in Salitter's reference to "The Jew". In this context it is possible to refer to other choices of words Salitter makes in the report: Jews were loaded on to the train, male Jew, Jew as parasites and so on. The language is only one aspect of the process of dehumanization. Discuss the importance of the dehumanization of the Jews in the process that led to the murder and the process of the murder itself. You can refer to Gitta Sereny's interview with Franz Stangel - commander of the Treblinka extermination camp:

G. Sereny: "Would it be true to say that you finally felt they weren't really human beings?"

F. Stangel: "When I was on a trip once, years later in Brazil, my train stopped next to a slaughterhouse. Hearing the noise of the train, the cattle in the pens trotted up to the fence and stared at the train. They were very close to my window, one crowding the other, looking at me through the fence. I thought then, 'Look at this; this reminds me of Poland; that's just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they went into the wagons... I couldn't eat tinned meat after that. Those big eyes... which looked at me...'"

G. Sereny: "So you didn't feel they were human beings?"

F. Stangel: "Cargo, they were cargo." [4]

6. Salitter mentions the Red Cross nurses who take care of the guards. In the full report he mentions that they provide the guards with refreshments. How can you explain the fact that women who serve at a charity organization and whose duty it is to take care of the weak, ignore 1007 people in need?

Points for discussion: discussing the Red Cross nurses is a good opportunity to mention another important component of the answer to the question of 'how was it humanly possible?'. This is the nazification of Germany and the processes through which the German society went during the 1930's. These processes included the penetration of Nazi ideology and Nazi norms within every aspect of daily life. This process is also relevant when discussing the attitude of German society towards the Jews. The hatred towards the Jews, encouraged by the regime, made this social group 'socially dead' even before their extermination had actually taken place.

7. Which of the characters mentioned in the report is not German? What was this person's role? What could have been his motive?

Points for discussion: it is important to note that the responsibility for the killing can not be placed only with the Germans. Many others collaborated, participated and also stood by and watched the execution. The motivations of those people are also varied: antisemitism, greed, political interests, indifference, fear (as a motive of standing by).



8. Think of all the people any transport of Jews encounters from its departure until its arrival at the killing site. Can you divide them into categories?

Points for discussion: the basic categorization to use when discussing non-Jews during the Holocaust is: a. perpetrators, b. bystanders, c. rescuers. However, when asking the students to classify the characters we discussed according to those categories, we come to realize that the categorization is not clearcut. Who, then, is a murderer? Who is a collaborator? Who is a bystander? Can we draw a clear line between each category? These questions are significant when discussing questions of blame and responsibility. Suggest to the students this model of concentric circles: in the inner circle we may put Hitler as well as other policy makers. Ask the students who will they put in the next outer circles. Where would they put Salitter, the guards, the station master, the Red-Cross nurses? What about the local population in the different countries of Europe?? Ask the students what is the difference between blame and responsibility? Finally discuss the moral and educational importance of this model. Stress the fact that adopting the model means agreeing to see that perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders and rescuers are not four different species but rather human beings who made different choices. The Holocaust is what human beings did to human beings. Being members of mankind means that we have a responsibility to learn from what happened in the Holocaust.

9. There is an important comment to be made here: this lesson stresses the idea of human choice. Reality, however, is always complex. One should try to avoid simplistic analysis. Such simplicity is unlikely to engender a productive educational process. What can we learn from these events?

Points for discussion: one major concept that arises from these events is self-responsibility. Another element of the answer to the question 'how was it humanly possible?' is the escape from self-responsibility that characterized many of those who took part in the killing and witnessed it. During the Nuremberg trial, prison psychologist G.M. Gilbert asked Auschwitz commander Rudolf Hoess whether he considered the consequences at the time he started the job. Hoess answered: "At the time there were no consequences to consider. It didn't occur to me that I would be held responsible. You see, in Germany it was understood that if something went wrong, it was the responsibility of the man who gave the orders So I didn't think that I would ever have to answer for it myself" [5]. One's sense of responsibility to the implication of action or non-action is a key element in trying to prevent persecution.

Methodological suggestions:

- It is advisable to ask some of the students to read out loud both the report and the testimony: for each part of the journey one student will read Salitter's report and then Hilde Sherman's testimony. This way it will be easier to pay attention to the different language usage.
- After reading it is possible to discuss the questions, first in small groups and then to conduct a discussion with the whole class.



- Time permitting, it is recommended to open the lesson with a discussion on the processes the German society go through during the first years of the Nazi regime and the moral and social norms that are being created.

One last note:

It is very important that the students understand that the issues regarding bystanders, collaborators and perpetrators are not relevant only to Germany but to many other countries in Europe in which Jews were persecuted. We therefore urge the teacher to try and bring some additional materials from other countries (from his own if relevant). The additional sources can be for instance:

- Testimonies of Jews that speak of indifference of the local population regarding the fate of the Jews.
- Documents that speak of the participation of the local police in the rounding up and the deportations of the Jews.
- Sources that have to do with the looting of the Jewish property.
- Sources that present different kind of behaviors manifested by the local population from which one can learn something about the notion of personal choice and responsibility.

[1] The German army entered Riga on 1 July 1941 and was welcome by many segments of the Latvian population for having liberated them from Soviet rule. Mass executions of Riga Jews started immediately after this with the collaboration of the local population. Towards the end of October 1941, a ghetto, surrounded by fences, was established, and around 30,000 Latvian Jews were crowded into its small area. On November 30, 1941 the first transport of Jews from Germany arrived in Riga, to be followed in the coming months by another 24 transports with a total of over 25,000 Jews. Thousands of these Jews were murdered on arrival, others were put in concentration camps in the area. Around 15,000 were brought into a separate ghetto that was set up next to the ghetto for the Latvian Jews. The Germans conducted periodic mass executions of Jews from both ghettos by shootings in the nearby Rumbuli forests until their final liquidation in December 1943.

[2] Hilde Sherman's husband and many other members of her family were among the Jews who perished in Riga . She registered 26 names at the Yad Vashem Hall of Names where the names of the Jews who perished in the Holocaust are gathered.

[3] "Ordinary Men" is a term that entered research language when discussing perpetrators. It became the name of the book published by Holocaust researcher Christopher Browning in 1992. The book describes the findings of Browning's research on one police reserve battalion that was in charge of the killing of more than 80,000 Jews. Analyzing the interviews conducted with the policemen, Browning concluded that most killers were "ordinary men" in terms of their professional, intellectual and psychological profile

[4] G. Sereny, Into that Darkness. From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder, Gitta Sereny 1974, pp. 200-201

[5] G. M. Gilbert, Nuremberg Diary, The New American Library, 1947, New York, p. 230.