

LLOYD DUCK

GETTING READY TO TEACH THE HOLOCAUST

A Teaching Styles Approach for Personalizing History

The teacher's understanding and acceptance of himself is the most important requirement in any effort he makes to help students to know themselves and to gain healthy attitudes of self-acceptance.

--Aruthur Jersild, 1955

The parent or teacher should make it his first business to know himself; for most surely he will transmit his moral character by inspiration to his child in just such proportion as circumstances allow him to have any influence, and the child has any sensibility.

--Bronson Alcott, 1836, in Peabody's *Record of a School*

PERSONAL PRELIMINARIES

Teaching the holocaust requires deep personal and emotional preparation. How comfortable do you feel teaching about any issue dealing with morality, especially those involving social injustice and murder? Can you express your stand on a moral dilemma with friends or colleagues—calmly but with certainty and comfort? If so, you are probably ready to design and teach a lesson based on these issues.

If, on the other hand, you become too passionate to use coherent phrasing and too prone to blush, you need to get in touch with your own feelings about the matter and accept those feelings before you can verbalize them to others. The two quotes above are from educational pioneers who knew how crucial it is for teachers to know themselves and accept their own viewpoints before offering any instruction. The same personal preparation and self-acceptance are necessary before teaching about the Holocaust and other genocides. It parallels the advice I typically give to teacher licensure candidates when they first attempt to teach lessons based on moral dilemmas.

As a participant in the Holocaust Institute for Teacher Educators at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, many experiences and topics of conversation reminded me of Jersild's and Alcott's wisdom—but none more than the events of one afternoon when, during breaks from presentations and analysis of source materials, we were encouraged to visit exhibits on our own. I began walking through the museum's new exhibit on the Lodz Ghetto and was struck by the

personal memorabilia—old shoes, discarded soup bowls, pictures of children who didn't have enough to eat, the story of the family who grew their own vegetables and were in an "ecstasy of eating" when Nazis came to harvest new souls for the death camps. The father exclaimed, "Why should we go out? Let them come and take us!" But there was a new ecstasy in being left behind because the soldiers glanced hurriedly through the windows and, in the dimness, saw no one inside.

As I was absorbing these scenes, I overheard two other visitors talking—an elderly man and a young woman. The young woman was obviously an intern at the museum, and she was helping the elderly man—no longer as mobile as he once was—with details about getting back to the entrance, getting a meal, and getting a ride home. As I listened to his measured speech, I realized the elderly visitor was a survivor of the Lodz Ghetto (and the very experiences memorialized by the exhibit we were visiting)—like those children in the photos and newsreels who hadn't had enough to eat, who feared toil in the cramped city factories, who thought working "in the countryside" would be better, not knowing that working there would mean crematoria! I had the great privilege of hearing his recollections and observing him re-live his days in Poland and at Lodz—and I didn't want to disturb the moment. I listened silently and unobtrusively—knowing if I introduced myself I would be forcing him to serve as a "guide" to Lodz, rather than reliving the experience authentically for himself. I chose not to inject the distraction of my presence and interest into his reverie, and remained anonymous.

We three approached the part of the exhibit showing Mordechai Rumkowski, the Jewish leader who "ran" the ghetto for the Nazis; we saw his stern but caring face and heard his speech: "Brothers and sisters, hand them over to me. Fathers and mothers, give me your children." (The elderly guest exclaimed, "They have his *voice!* I *knew* him!") Rumkowski felt he had to "amputate the limbs to save the body" (Berenbaum, 2006, p. 80). He may have believed that by sacrificing the children he was saving adults in his community, but he was wrong. Rumkowski discovered the truth in August 1944 when he was deported to Auschwitz and murdered there (Berenbaum, 2006, p. 81). The elderly visitor softly explained an outcome of his experience to the youthful intern. In Rumkowski's day he was a little boy with blond hair and blue eyes. He survived the horrors; his parents didn't. The power of my museum experience only deepened as the afternoon progressed—through the "Daniel's Story" exhibit (Matas, 1993) and then visiting a display and account of Father Niccacci's sacrifices in Assisi (Pettit, 1993, pp. 61-87) to engage in Jewish rescue efforts.

How much emotion and empathy do I still feel for my fellow museum visitor who survived Lodz? (With each recounting of the experience, my emotional commitment is reinforced.) But more than that, can I talk about my emotions regarding Lodz and this guest *appropriately* during a lesson on the Holocaust for a group of high school students? Can I come to the place of being able to talk coherently and effectively *about* my emotions—rather than re-living them during the lesson? That's the kind of personal preparation, and self-acceptance, I mean when getting ready to teach the Holocaust.