



HerStories Teaching Compendium

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About HerStories

The HerStories project presents the multifaceted Jewish history of the 20th century in Europe through the biographies of seven Jewish women from different countries. Their stories encompass experiences of persecution, survival, and rebuilding lives after the Holocaust and World War II, offering a diverse picture of Jewish women's lives and European history. Various formats, including exhibitions, teaching materials, a documentary, and workshops, aim to engage educators, students, and the public in preserving these stories.

www.her-stories.eu

Make sure to visit the HerStories project webpage (available in English, German, Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, Spanish and Greek) to find additional resources and teaching materials or to request the HerStories travelling exhibition.



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Axel-Springer-Platz 3
20355 Hamburg, Germany
hamburg@centropa.org

Authors

Maria Bitakou, Markus Freundorfer, Iza Galuba-Bryja, Dóra Kovács, Anna Pantelakou, Alexandra Patrikiou, Luz Pocostales, Sára Szilágyi, Anna Wencel

Editors

Anna Pantelakou, Fabian Rühle, Maximilian von Schoeler

Responsible for editorial content

Fabian Rühle, Maximilian von Schoeler

Design

Dóra Gyöngyösi, Hargitta Csík

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Teaching compendium

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Narration in history classes

Approaching a Jewish biography through the process of writing: students create fictional diary entries based on Eni Wygodzka's interviews and learn about her life, dreams, and experiences.

Teaching history classes in Germany

When students enter the history classroom, they should learn from the past to manage the present and make the future a better place. That is in theory logical and evident. But what about everyday situations with students? How can I, as an experienced teacher, make them understand what happened to Jews in Germany and Europe during the Nazi regime?

Their lives, their needs, their problems are far away from what happened 80 years ago – teachers often say. Really? On the one hand they are, on the other hand they aren't! This is where Centropa and its digital archive comes into the picture, or why the story/ stories need to be told from the beginning and not from the end.

In German history lessons, the period 1933-1945 is legitimately covered in at least 15-20 lessons many facts, including the rise of the Nazi regime, its main perpetrators, the Shoah, the Second World War, to name a few. However, sometimes we forget that these horrific events happened to families, mothers, fathers, children, friends, neighbors. Behind the inconceivably high number of victims, there are biographies that need to be told – again and again to understand the real dimension. So I have seen that personal stories help students to identify with the victims and make their fate a part of them. Fortunately, Centropa has collected these biographies and administers stories and tells them by publishing them with photos and films. And we can easily use them in our history lessons.

One of these stories is about the lovely person Eni Wygodzka – a Jewish woman who called herself “kind of wild” when she was young. The way she described herself piqued my interest and I wanted to introduce her to my history class.

Eni Wygodzka

Eni Wygodzka was born in Germany into a German-polish Jewish family in 1922 – not untypical for that time. She was raised in Germany and in Poland, so Polish, German, and also Yiddish were spoken at home. She herself and her family saw themselves as Jews (not Polish, not German) when she was a child, she didn't have much contact with Polish people in her childhood. When she talks about religion, traditions, and customs and food as a part of daily life routine – cooking kosher was always a topic for her. We can learn from the interview that she was conscious about her family living between traditional and modern life. In the person of her father, she describes that vividly – him being confronted discussing with his son. Incidentally, Eni didn't care much about religion. We also learn about her time at school and above all about her dreams and experiences. Finally, she

speaks about the time after the Nazi occupation in Poland and how she could escape.

My history class – background and prior knowledge

My history class consists of 20 students, some of them have a migration background (Turkey, Poland, Egypt, Italy) and none of them is into Jewish religion or traditions. I have been teaching them for three years and we made our way through different times in history. When talking about history, most of the students are more interested in social issues than politics. They are used to working on projects and can organize themselves in group work in terms of what is important about the topic and the task at hand.

Eni – a role model for my students

A young girl or later a woman, whatever her religion or social background she had, sought and found her way in an incredibly difficult time and under incredibly difficult circumstances. Sometimes she offended her family and her religious surroundings. But most of all, she asked questions that, for various reasons, not every girl in her position, at her age and at that time, was able to ask. So she did. That makes her special and of course very interesting for my history class. Can she be a role model for young girls nowadays? Or also for students from immigrant backgrounds, who are often confronted with the feeling of not being part of the majority society. Being “young, wild and unsteady” as she called herself, can perhaps be something that young people see within themselves and are not able or dare to live with and show in public, such as religion or sexuality. So here we have to ask, what social conventions, what traditions and customs shape our students? Can they reject them to self-develop themselves properly or live happily with them?

How did Eni Wygodzka come into our classroom?

When you work with students at the age of 15 or 16, these questions are part of your daily business. So I decided to bring Eni Wygodzka into my classroom for several reasons: my students, especially the girls, are struggling with the same issues and problems today; some of my students have a migration background or belong to a religious minority; my students should learn about Jewish life and about a Jewish girl of their age who has everyday problems and has to deal with them; and at least my students should learn about Jewish life in Germany and Europe as a part of it and as self-evident.

So I decided to take that biography to work on the topics mentioned. I asked them to read Eni's biography and see if they could find some topics that they were also facing. Topics and terms they could identify and were familiar with. The focus at this stage was not on the "big" history around, but on learning about a young girl who lived a long time ago. This worked very well.

Tasks for the students

So, we spent a lesson reading and talking about Eni. We used the Centropa website, the interviews and especially the texts from the Herstories projects to find out as much as we could about her. Each student could use their own tablets to scan texts and collect information in general. From the beginning, the class got involved in the story and got to know her as a person they wanted to know better. So, as a second task, I asked them to write down topics which they could find in the biography and which they were also familiar with in their own lives. "School" was an example I gave them to start with. Because it was so obvious. They did this in groups of four, each student had his or her own tablet to read through the texts and interviews, compare the pictures and contribute their own ideas.

Topics in the biography itself

The next lesson we collected all the ideas from the groups and tried to categorize them. The result was overwhelming. On the one hand because I myself had written down exactly the same topics, and on the other hand, because my students told me that they liked working on with Eni's biography for two reasons: they could identify themselves with her in some way as a person and wanted to learn more about her Jewish background. So we ended up writing down the following topics:

- School and Job
- Childhood, Youth, and education
- Family
- Religion, traditions, customs
- Language
- Escape

After that I organized the class again and asked them to form new groups – so that from now on they should work together with classmates who were interested in the same topic. The new groups found each other very quickly and each group chose a topic. The students reread the texts to gain more details and they also checked the internet for further information about, e.g. Jewish religious traditions and customs. So it was a very intensive time as all the students were working on mind maps and filling in all the blank spaces with facts.

What to do with all these facts and information? I had an idea and introduced it to my students.

Narration in history classes – a competence we train regularly

Teaching history includes different dimensions of competences that are self-evident – such as orientation, evaluation, expertise, or narration. So we discussed in class how to tell Eni's biography in a different way, but using all the information she gave us through the interviews and the family

photos. And all the information my students had collected and categorized. How could we add a personal touch to all this?

The next task I introduced to them: rewrite her story by writing diary entries; use the topics and the information you collected for an entry;

So every day has a special topic and theme. We talked about language as well and decided that the student's language can vary from the language Eni would have used. That was our connection to my students' lives. So finally, we got six entries the students created in their groups.

Writing or storytelling in general, is a perfect way to understand history and to give it a new but more personal touch. Eni was interviewed, but did she have the chance to tell her life as she lived it? No, so we decided to write diary entries – yes, it does not sound like the most creative idea. But as every history teacher knows, when students are confronted with Anne Frank's diary, they are more interested in history than anything else. So why not write entries in which the knowledge we have gathered through our fingers is compared

with Eni's eyes? And hopefully find a language she could have used, with thoughts she had, but didn't tell anybody, with hopes and fears as well.

Diary entries, podcast – an idea for a project

The work on the entries worked out very well and we read them in class. The students themselves put them in a proper order, added some personal things where necessary and tried to adopt the same language level. In the end, the product was an emotional, very personal text based on what the students had read about Eni. We thought that she could have written this diary herself – who knows? As a conclusion, some of the students made a podcast and we took part in a youth competition organized by Centropa.

If you have ever wondered what you can do with Centropa's interviews and photos? Here is one example. There are so many different stories on the site – find them and share them with your students.

Author

Markus Freundorfer

HISTORY AND ENGLISH TEACHER

I have been teaching students aged 11-16 for 20 years in Miesbach (south of Munich). I am also a teacher's trainer for History and I have worked for history museums in Munich and Tegernsee. I have participated in several seminars with Centropa and I organize training programs for history teachers.

How we develop training workshops for educators in Hungary

using Centropa biographies and photos

A few years ago, the Centropa Professional Advisory Committee was formed in Hungary, consisting of three teachers who had been connected to Centropa for quite some time. It was customary at Centropa's teacher training sessions for veteran/experienced teachers to present their own ideas and lesson plans on how to integrate Centropa materials into education. In recent years, at Centropa Hungary our goal was to renew our local educational programs and materials, including the teacher training seminars.

In addition to the teachers from the Professional Advisory Committee, three educators who had been particularly active in recent years and had volunteered extensively to assist in our work also joined the professional team. Thus, a system was established with this team of six teachers to collectively plan each teacher training program. This process involves creating an outline of the program, which we then discuss together, supplement with additional ideas, finalize, and divide tasks among ourselves. Therefore, eight of us co-facilitate the training seminars.

Regarding the HerStories teacher training seminar, we contemplated how to assist participants in getting closer to the women's stories, enabling them to create their own lesson plans. Only two Centropa films, which we could screen, are associated with the stories, and this usually helps participants connect to the narratives. Over the years, teachers had primarily developed new lesson plans related to films during our training

sessions - therefore we had to come up with something different this time.

Before the seminar, participants were assigned the mandatory task of reading the short summaries of all seven stories available on the HerStories website in Hungarian. We anticipated that even if they completed this task, they wouldn't fully remember them, and likely the stories would get mixed up since there is a lot of information in them. Hence, the idea arose to conduct workshops in seven small groups, each focusing on the story of one woman, facilitated by one of us (six teachers and myself), with 4-5 participants in each group. These workshops were planned to last for 45 minutes, aiming for each group to get to know at least one life story closer and to present their work to each other in some way afterward. Each of us facilitators chose different methods to process the life story of each woman that could potentially be used by teachers in the classroom as well: inspired by Lisa Pinhas' blouse, one group created their own T-shirt adorned with their chosen quotes, a detective game for Irena Wygodzka's story was developed based on the Mystery method, Vera's life stages were depicted in still images by the participants, etc. These workshops were so successful that the ideas developed were later used in the student workshops as well, and these workshop plans were uploaded to the HerStories and Centropa websites as lesson plans.

Following the workshops, the standard program of all our teacher training sessions followed: creating

lesson plans in groups. Uniquely, we conducted random groupings, whereas in previous trainings, participants could voluntarily join a group based on a topic idea. During our preparatory meeting with the professional team, we decided collectively to try this new method this time, and we believe it worked really well.

We designated a member of the professional team as a facilitator for the newer groups as well, ensuring that the collaborative efforts were coordinated and unified by an experienced Centropa educator at all times. This facilitator serves occasionally as the catalyst or supporter for emerging ideas and transforming them into lesson plans when needed. The facilitators were somewhat prepared for the group work process in advance, but the emphasis was on brainstorming and cooperation together with the participants. In one group, we discussed, reviewed, and supplemented the student exercises that had been created for the website, while the other groups worked through a life story or theme. In total, we allocated an hour and a half for group work during this training, knowing that it might not be sufficient for all groups to finish, but we didn't want to leave out any other important program elements from the training. Thus, although the teachers presented the results of the group work to each other on the last day of the training, we also scheduled a Zoom meeting for January, where we would meet online again, and by then, those who needed more time to work after the training

to finalize their lesson plans could present the final versions.

The experiences of recent years indicate that it is beneficial to have a follow-up online meeting for every teacher training a few weeks or even months later. After the HerStories seminar, the goal was for the groups to finish the final version of their lesson plans, suitable for uploading to the website, by the time of the Zoom meeting. In our most recent training in March, we allocated much more time for group work, with the aim that by the last day, each group would have their ideas finalized and ready for uploading. This goal was successfully achieved. Therefore, since our aim is not only to expand the repository of lesson plans available on the website but also to ensure that as many ideas as possible from Centropa's materials and developed lesson plans are incorporated into education, after the March training, we left 2 and a half months for the teachers to try out the lesson plans or at least part of them. We will meet again at the end of May, where they will share their experiences of implementing the plans.

We strive to provide frameworks for educational work that facilitate teachers getting as close as possible to Centropa's stories, films, and photos so that they are motivated and prepared to incorporate them into their lessons. Moreover, during the follow-up reunion, they are able to connect with each other and with us, share their experiences, inspiring each other in their work.

Author

Sára Szilágyi

PROJECT COORDINATOR, CENTROPA HUNGARY

I have studied Minority and Ethnic Studies at ELTE University in Budapest. I have been working in NGOs and education projects about social issues for many years. I really enjoy facilitating trainings with non-formal education methods and supporting young people in creating their own initiatives.

The motif of survival and new beginnings in the lives of Vera Szekeres-Varsa and Lisa Pinhas

In this article I will try to identify the motifs in the lives of Vera Szekeres-Varsa and Lisa Pinhas that could be the starting point for an interesting discussion with our students and help them to better understand the history of Shoah.

Both biographies contain many fascinating questions that can be asked in Literature, History, Ethics or Social studies lessons.

I also think it is important to try to sensitize the pupils by looking for common points between their lives and the biographies we are discussing, as this will make the lesson a much more personal experience for them.

The motive of survival

Vera survived the war in Hungary, as most of the Jews in Budapest were not deported to death camps. Her survival was aided by the help of her Christian relatives, who were able to move more freely than Vera's parents and thus, for example, managed to get Vera and her parents an apartment to hide in.

In this context, it may be interesting to point out to our students that not all European Jews ended up in Auschwitz during the Second World War, the situation of a Jew in Budapest and a Jew in Greece, for example, was very different during this period. A good example of this is the life of Lisa Pinhas, who was deported to Auschwitz in April 1943 and was sent to the so-called "Canada Command". Her survival was actually made possible by the fact that she was part of a work team that handled the personal belongings of deportees to the camp, so that she could exchange them for food and gain access to various valuable items. It is important to make our students aware of how mentally demanding this task must have been, as Lisa had to sort through personal effects, knowing that in many cases the owners of the items were no longer alive.

Another key motive for Lisa's survival was her responsibility to her loved ones, and the goal of protecting her sister and fellow inmates was a major factor in her survival until liberation. At this point in Lisa's story, it is also worth reflecting and asking the students who helps them in a difficult situation.

A new beginning after the war

*"We can never start a new life, we can only continue the old one."*¹

The post-war period also raises a very difficult theme in Vera's life: the question of revenge and

forgiveness. In her biography interview, Vera tells a story in which she highlights how, at the end of the war, she signals to the Russians that she has seen an Arrow Cross officer, and they execute the officer: "They shot him dead in front of my eyes." Although this is a very sensitive subject, it is an event that can be discussed with older, more mature-minded students. The other story concerns an anti-Semitic lawyer whose granddaughter becomes Vera's student after the war, and the grandfather visits Vera and asks her not to mistreat his granddaughter because of his actions during the war. Vera then always gives the girl, who is a mediocre student, slightly better grades, so that she will not be thought to be punished for her grandfather's actions. All this also highlights the complex relationships that had to be rebuilt and dealt with after the war.

Additionally, it is interesting that Vera (along with several of her peers) does not want to learn German after the war. In this context, a parallel can be drawn with the principle of collective guilt, under which part of the German minority in Central Europe was expelled. To this, we can add the fact that the Germans have managed to face up to their actions during the Second World War and highlight their good international relations with Israel.

It is an interesting parallel in Vera's and Lisa's lives that after the war they both return to their homeland to start a new life, unlike many of their peers, and choose not to emigrate to America or Palestine. Lisa even received an immigration permit to the "Promised Land", but did not use it. It's worth talking to our students about this: what could be the reason for both of their choices? Why were there so many people who, in the meantime, continued their lives in a new place after the war? It might be also interesting to ask them what home means to them. If this seems too abstract, they can create a word cloud using the concepts that come to mind when they think of the word 'home' (e.g. home, family, a sense

1 Imre Kertész: *Fatelessness*, Magvető Publishing House, 2016., translated by the author of the article

of familiarity, etc.). Younger children can even write an imaginary postcard to Lisa or Vera from Palestine asking them why they are not joining them to the Jews' new homeland.

Vera reveals in her life story interview that she did not want to go to a Jewish school because everyone there was Zionist, and (to her mother's delight) she did not want to emigrate to Palestine, but later she says that "I have an absolutely prejudiced attitude towards Israel".

In addition to homeland, the notion of identity can also be brought into both their stories. Lisa, who was an adult during the war, has a multidimensional cultural identity: she considers Ladino her mother tongue, while in the camp she declared herself Greek, but writes her memoirs in French. Her knowledge of French is a lifesaver in the camp.

Vera experienced the horrors of war as a child, and her identity is defined by the events. In the years following the war, her admiration for the English language and culture, as well as her turn to communist ideology are pivotal factors that shape her life course. Let us not forget that for Vera and her parents, it was the Soviet soldiers who brought liberation at the end of the war. Later, the crushing of the 1956 revolution disillusioned her with communist ideology.

Another interesting point of discussion is that Vera changed schools on her own decision after the war, because she feels that she has grown up as a result of her experiences during the war and no longer accepts the traditional role of a child. Here we can ask our students when they should take their place as adults? When and what makes someone an adult?

A touching moment in Lisa's life is the embroidered blouse which, soon after her return home, she decorated with quotes from Jean-Paul Sartre and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette in French, and which, she says, gave her the strength to move on after the war.



The black silk shirt embroidered by Lisa Pinhas, shortly after her return to Greece in 1945, with phrases from Jean-Paul Sartre and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette.

In doing so, she was ahead of her time and created an early example

An exciting exercise for students could be to ask them to work in groups to collect quotes that give them strength in difficult situations. Using textile pens, they can make their own 'embroidered blouse' by writing the quotes on a cotton T-shirt. In relation to identity, we can mention the relationship with religion and the question of assimilation.

Vera, for example, stated that she had never been religious, and despite not having been raised as such, her daughter identifies as Jewish. Vera said: "It is important that young people hear about the persecution".

This idea was also crucial for Lisa, who started writing her memoirs immediately after the war, making them one of the first female Holocaust memoirs. In this context, we can ask students why Lisa felt it was important to start writing her memoirs as soon as she returned home.

How is a female memoir different from the male autobiographies that have long dominated Holocaust literature?



Students created a T-shirt decorated with quotes important to them at a Centropa workshop.

Photo by Róbert Bácsi

As it was made clear, the biographies of both Lisa Pinhas and Vera Szekeres-Varsa are rich in motifs that could be the starting point for a meaningful discussion with our students. I believe that knowing the age, prior knowledge and maturity

of the students, we can select the biographical elements that best suit the purpose of our lesson, either by comparing them, or by examining them as individual fates.

Author

Dóra Kovács

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHER

I am Dóra Kovács, a primary and secondary school teacher for 11 years. I have been teaching Hungarian language and literature and History in an international school in Budapest. In my work, I try to present the history of the Shoah through personal stories, because I believe that these stories help students to better understand and empathize with the character of this period.

How they were and how they were seen

Deconstructing Ignorance: From Knowledge to Thought “Personal stories bring us closer to History”

Approaching the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps and the end of the Second World War (1939 - 1945), we find that the challenges of working with this episode of contemporary history are significant. To date, the narration and study of the Shoah had the invaluable support of its survivors. However, at present having to deal with the natural course of life, we are being left to rely on only primary and secondary sources, we only have primary and secondary sources left, most of which are linked to the genocide.

But Jewish culture, of which generally not much is known in the wider public, goes beyond the Shoah, which was one episode within the stigmatization and persecution of the Jewish people that has been ongoing since antiquity. Often, social prejudices, transmitted insistently and with a clear ideological intention, prevail over respect for otherness and insist on emphasizing the differences between cultures, instead of promoting what makes us equal and dignified as human beings: the right to live.

Consequently, teachers and educators committed to the transmission of historical memory¹ and the defense of human rights, find it difficult to bring Jewish culture apart from the Shoah closer to their students. This historical episode is also widely known amongst teenagers, due to its prolific dissemination through cinematography and literature. For this reason, we value the material offered by the HerStories project², which allows students to get closer to the lives of seven European women of different nationalities, who both experienced and represent the experience of Jewish culture and history from various positions and in diverse ways. The project shows their lives in their entirety - including hobbies, occupations and relationships - before, during and after the Shoah. Working from a biography allows us to see how a person at a given moment can be considered an active citizen and, from one day to the next, can lose all their rights due to a legal change; not having left of being the same, although it has ceased to be so in the eyes of others. Depending on arbitrary criteria, based on traditionally transmitted prejudices that respond to specific interests of authorities, these women were mistreated to the point of barely surviving. It didn't matter what the women were actually like, but how the fascist authorities wanted to see them so they could mistreat them accordingly, dehumanize them, and erase their culture at the same time.

Jewish culture, a fundamental part of Europe as a whole, is one of the foundational pillars of our present world. In our geographical framework, Catalonia³, we use words such as *call*, *xueta* or *Montjuïc*, as synonyms for neighborhood, Majorcan or mountain located in Barcelona. We have almost forgotten that many concepts indicate that an important Jewish community and its culture filled this territory. Thus, empathy and research would not be possible without knowing

what the differential fact of Judaism meant for Catalan and European culture. Historical empathy needs to humanize knowledge, put a face to it and make it hands-on, transporting historical facts that seem abstract to human experience, to human experience.

Reading HerStories biographies puts students in contact with new words that are discovered from specific lives. Many of these words may be totally unknown or others misunderstood, and therefore, it will be necessary to learn to define them in order to approach the knowledge of diverse European Jewish life, thus creating a broad glossary of general terms based on personal experiences. This lexical work seems essential for students to be able to analyze and understand historical sources, including the biographies included in the HerStories project, to approach this culture in this way. The construction of this glossary will allow them to be able to reason and explain using fair and appropriate words, and in order to argue without intentional interference. This lexicon can include religious terms, such as "synagogue", "mezuzah", "assimilated", "converted"; cultural, such as "Ashkenazi", "Sephardic"; political, such as "Zionism", "deputation"; linguistic, such as "Yiddish", "Ladino"; or others with their specific connotation of violence directed against Jews such as "pogrom", "ghetto", "selection", "concentration or extermination camps", "anti-Judaism", and "antisemitism." This glossary will not only allow us to relate and understand the past, but also current events related and relevant to Jewish people and culture.

Based on a general historical chronological axis (macrohistory) students will place in time the biographical facts described in the historical sources offered by HerStories (microhistory), highlighting the vital aspects linked to the reality

1 Grounded in the concepts of truth, justice and reparation [BODEN 2020, 1-2]

2 Telling Jewish women's stories of the 20th century. Retrieved April 1st 2024, from <https://www.her-stories.eu/en>

3 For more information you can consult the following book: FORCANO, M. and HURTADO, V., (2022). Atlas d'història dels jueus a Catalunya (2nd ed.) Ed. Rafael Dalmau.

of women (gender perspective). Women are a collective too often forgotten and silenced in history in general and also in the particular case of Shoah.

At the same time, the students will place in space, on a map, the multiple geographical displacements, often forced, of each of the women, thus relating their individual migrations to the larger political-geographic framework of the period. The aim of this analysis of the seven biographies, in time and space, will allow students to understand the consequences of the rising prevalence of prejudices against the Jewish community, which finally led to the Shoah.

By delving into the biographies of these women, we can see their need to leave a legacy behind. For example: Lisa Pinhas (Fig. 1) published her written testimony, which she wrote herself (Fig. 2); Irena Wygodzka (Fig. 3) agreed to be interviewed, so that through her story her experience would be remembered; and Rosl Heilbrunner (Fig. 4) and her husband collected evidence of the events they experienced, keeping all kinds of family documents in seven hidden boxes in their Barcelona residence to leave a record for their descendants. As a result of the find, Rosl's daughter, Dory Sontheimer, has been responsible for disseminating the contents of the boxes through several books (Fig. 5) and documentaries, while collaborating with the program "Testimonis a l'Aula", organized by the Democratic Memorial of Catalonia, and regularly attending educational centers.

The Shoah, students should realize, did not come out of nowhere, but was the final consequence of different deliberately premeditated actions that, apart from the immense human suffering it caused, led to the development of a new legal framework.



Front cover of the book *Les 7 Caixes*, written by Rosl Heilbrunner's daughter, Dory Sontheimer

The later desire to judge the crimes of Shoah led to the creation of the legal concept of "genocide"⁴ and motivated the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)⁵. Decades later, Gregory H. Stanton went on to define the well-known The Ten Stages of Genocide (2012)⁶, (Fig. 6), which will be presented to the students in order to identify them, deductively, in the different moments of the biographies of the seven women. The final objective of all this analysis is to give the students tools to be able to observe in present realities signs of these stages both from a critical position and one that is committed to democratic values, in order to be able to foresee them, denounce and act proactively and accordingly. It must become clear to the students that genocides are not achieved spontaneously and are actively carried out by perpetrators, but furthermore also need to be passively validated by bystanders.⁷

The students must become aware of the importance of all the learning and values obtained from the study of the lives of these seven women presented in HerStories. From now

4 To find out the origin of the word, you can consult: Genocide. Retrieved March 31st, 2024, <https://w.wiki/3kxz>

5 For more information: Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved April 1st, 2024, from <https://www.parlament.cat/web/serveis-educatius/drets-humans/index.html>

6 STANTON, G. The ten stages of genocide. Genocide Watch, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages>

7 For more information: The typology was first proposed by HILBERG, R. (2020) *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*. Harper Perennial

on, they will become the bearer of this message in the educational and local environment and beyond, using social networks⁸, and they will have tools to discern their own positions as protagonists of history.

Through the story of a specific person, a Jewish woman, you can empathize and restore an entire community. According to the precept, taken from the Talmud, that appears on Yad Vashem's Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations: "Whoever saves a Life, saves the World".

⁸ Template to present the final product How they were and how they were seen. Retrieved April 1st, 2024, from Template final product

Authors

LUZ POCOSTALES PLAZA

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY TEACHER (HIGH SCHOOL)

I have graduated from Yad Vashem and have trained in historical and democratic memory. I also participate in historical and democratic memory working groups.

Violant González Antó

CATALAN LANGUAGE, FRENCH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHER

I have graduated from Yad Vashem and have trained in historical and democratic memory. I also participate in historical and democratic memory working groups.

Francesc Xavier Cortés Nadal

HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND RELIGION TEACHER

I have trained in historical and democratic memory. I also participate in historical and democratic memory working groups.

Oral History and Education

“We live our lives as narratives.
We do not just tell stories. We are stories¹.”

¹ Cheryl L. Duckworth, *9/11 and Collective Memory in the US Classroom: Teaching about Terror* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 6.

What is it that makes a quote so compelling that it automatically captures everyone's interest? Contemporary studies in social sciences and current pedagogical approaches are bringing to the forefront the importance of orality, oral stories and oral history in the classroom. Immediately, even if the person narrating is unknown to students, orality makes the narrators accessible, resonant, relatable and exudes trust, since they themselves have a certain power and control over their narrative. Oral histories, through the different engagements to which students are introduced, enable a wider historical understanding, develop the learners' historical conscience, and their empathy for other people's experiences. Students have to make sense of what they learned and put it in a context of what they know and as a result, they can perceive history not as a central and linear narrative, but as a complex multilayered mosaic that is also composed of individual stories. Students are basically introduced to the methodology of microhistory, the genre of history that focuses on the unique characteristics and reveals the complexities of historical contexts.

Engaging with oral history enables students' abilities to connect with the individuals under analysis. By working on people's personal stories through projects such as interviews and further research, students better recognise the importance of these stories for a deeper understanding of the past, and hence the present. By coming into contact with older generations, they can also appreciate and explore the stories of their own ancestors or people in their community, and thus expand their understanding of their local history. In this way, they can learn about the value of oral traditions for many communities, and can often become informed about the people who 'carry' the memory of a community as mediators (through storytelling rituals). In turn, oral history

enables teachers and students of history and community to introduce historical evidence from the underside, shift the historical focus, open new areas of inquiry, challenge some of our assumptions and judgments of the past, and bring recognition to substantial groups of people who have been largely ignored. "Oral history is," Thompson reminds us, "a history built around people...It brings history into, and out of the community²".

In addition, by getting involved in discussion exercises and research outside the classroom, the students have the opportunity to get in touch with institutions of their country, such as museums, libraries and archives. With regard to archives in particular, oral histories enable teachers to instill in students how important it is to preserve memory, representation, and intergenerationality, and consequently young people are cultivated in terms of active citizenship and public engagement, and are able to understand and take on roles in shaping public history. Students become aware of their rights and obligations as active political subjects, as well as develop a deeper understanding of human rights (e.g. gender) and the struggles of other social groups or communities. In addition, the non-formal way of learning through oral histories empowers students who function better under other learning styles. This empowerment fosters cooperation with their peers and builds their emotional development and confidence.

"In following a story, we follow a story, we follow a story teller, or, more precisely, we follow the trajectory of a storyteller's attention, what it notices and what it ignores, what it lingers on, what it repeats, what it considers irrelevant, what it hurries towards, what it brings together. It's like following a dance, not with our feet and bodies, but with our observation and our expectations and our memories of lived life.³"

2 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.

3 Berger, John (2011): *Bento's Sketchbook* (London: Verso), 72.

By listening, recording or reading oral histories, students also come into contact with another dimension of education, that of subjective positioning and personal interpretation of knowledge. Since social sciences in school transmit knowledge from a position of authority, either the teacher or the textbook, the course should fulfill an important objective: that of acquiring the basic knowledge of a subject and that of covering the necessary curriculum in a structured system of learning and examination. However, by being allowed to use other learning methods, such as oral history, students listen to the narrating subjects and thus are able to comprehend how the same historical event or moments in history can be interpreted and conveyed so differently in each case. As a consequence, they perceive the uniqueness and singularity of the subjective dimension, that the subjects carry within them pieces of macrohistory, and therefore they are integral parts of social history and not merely uninvolved bystanders.

As a consequence, the students can also identify themselves as active historical subjects and realize their right to critical thinking and questioning of the knowledge of 'authority'. Of course, in line with what Berger notes, through oral histories we learn to sharpen our observation of what is silenced, what is repeated, accelerations or decelerations, and what has not yet become processed. These subtle yet discrete nuances in narratives can, through appropriate training, become elements that reinforce the students' ability for an open gaze and perception toward a constant reflection on what they are learning, and especially as far as history is concerned, toward a consciousness for constant reexamination, revisiting of facts and sources, and verifying, rejecting and/or enriching them.

Oral history has become well-established educational praxis, especially in Holocaust

Education, and rightly so. Interviews and testimonies constituted the main source of documenting the Holocaust. And a comprehensive understanding of the scale of racial persecution during the Second World War cannot be based only on abstract numbers of victims or published decrees of segregation and deportation. It should definitely include the perspective of those persecuted, as Yehuda Bauer and Saul Friedländer calls us to do. Only through the perspective of those persecuted, can one appreciate the wide range of experiences and different responses to persecution, as well as the variety of survival strategies and local contexts. If we consider oral history as part of a global social movement to democratize history and nation-states, then its combination with the topic of the Holocaust in the educational setting serves the purpose of further democratization even more effectively. Curricula based more on skill-oriented teaching rather than fact-based teaching have a lot to gain from the usage of oral history in the classroom.⁴

Does oral history solve all problems of history teaching and didactics of history? Of course not. Testimonies, interviews, memoirs or any other form of individual narrative of one's experiences are essentially historical sources. As such, they should be treated with the utmost respect. However, in order for us to fully understand them and to really appreciate their meaning and their role, we, as educators, need to properly contextualize them. Without its historical context, a source - no matter how valuable - remains a riddle waiting for its future researchers to solve it.

With all this at its core, the HerStories project has shaped all its deliverables based on how teachers and by extension students can delve into 20th century European history through [FR1] the life stories of seven Jewish women. Each deliverable enables students to engage

4 Llewellyn, Kristina and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (2017). "Introduction: Oral History Education for Twenty-First Century Schooling" in Llewellyn, Kristina and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (eds): *Oral History and Education. Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 1-14.

with parts of the women's oral stories, either by reading them directly through the exhibition, or by studying them more deeply to create a video and tell/create a short story themselves (youth competition), or even through the exercises created exclusively for the classroom (Class exercises), or by serving as a guide in exhibition (exhibition and student workshop). And last but not least the compendium at hand offers a theoretical as well as practical guide on how an educator could use the assembled material to effectively use in the classroom the seven individual stories.

Giving voice to these seven Jewish women through the entire project, creating a space to

share their experience is also a way to discuss the questions of remembering, understanding, learning from history, shaping a better society, helping ourselves and others to be free from prejudice and hatred.

It is heartbreaking to learn about the loss, pain and suffering they experienced, about the impossible choices they had to make. And – at the same time – it is empowering to see their strength and resilience, their individual ways of coping and rebuilding their lives, their determination to protect what was important to them.

Authors

Dr. Alexandra Patrikiou

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES AND SOCIAL WORK,
UNIVERSITY OF PATRAS

I hold a PhD in Contemporary Greek History and from 2017 till 2023, I worked as a Senior Researcher at the Jewish Museum of Greece, responsible for Holocaust Education and Research. Since March 2023, I am an Assistant Professor of History of Education and Didactics of History at the University of Patras.

Anna Pantelakou

COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION OFFICER, JEWISH MUSEUM OF GREECE

I have studied Theory and History of Art (BA) at the Athens School of Fine Arts and I hold a Master's degree from Panteion University in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Since 2020 I have been designing and implementing educational seminars and programs on subjects in modern and contemporary art history.

Ordinary women - extraordinary stories

How women perspective can empower Holocaust education

The Holocaust has been a fundamental part of my life for the past ten years. It has always interested me as a historical event, but ten years ago, I began to engage with the subject systematically. I noticed daily how much my students in secondary education, teenagers aged 15-18, were characterized by historical ignorance. This ignorance, in turn, contributed to the perpetuation of anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews. Meanwhile, the rise of neo-Nazism both in Europe and in Greece made the effects clear, with cases of racism and xenophobia causing increasing concern for all of us democratic citizens.

The economic crisis that hit Greece in 2010 contributed furthermore to the rise of the far-right and the intensification of racist phenomena.

All of these factors led me to deeply believe that as an educator, I had a duty to offer not only the knowledge prescribed by the curriculum but also to contribute to the establishment of substantial knowledge among teenagers regarding the Holocaust. This would help to mitigate the phenomena of racism in Greek schools and instill tolerance in teenagers, enabling them to understand the unique violence of the Holocaust.

From the beginning of my personal quest, I was fortunate to attend seminars for educators on teaching the Holocaust in Greek schools organized by the Jewish Museum of Greece with the support of the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, and Sports. In 2014, I attended the seminar for educators organized by Yad Vashem. In 2015 and 2016, I participated in the Summer Academies of Centropa. Through Centropa, I made contact with a network of teachers from many European countries with whom we continued to stay in touch, share the same concerns, and address similar problems. It was very relieving to seek solutions together and to be able to organize joint programs. Now, after these seminars, I had the necessary knowledge in theoretical background but also the very important equipment of educational tools and teaching methods with various approaches and depending on the age level of the students.

Of course, there were various problems I encountered due to the prejudices of some of my colleagues or even superiors administratively. Although there were no institutional obstacles, there were indirect behaviors that created obstacles; negative comments, insinuations, criticisms, and even obstacles when students had to participate in some action. Such behaviors pose a problem for the educator who wants to actively integrate Holocaust education into their classrooms. However, they are part of broader prejudices, ignorance, and the prevalence of stereotypes. But if we truly want to teach about the Holocaust, because our goal is for our students to feel the motto "Never Again" and for it to be a fundamental parameter of their lives; if we want to maintain the tradition of Jewish communities and Jewish presence in our country; if we want to revive the history of Jewish communities that were lost or decimated; if we want all of these, then these difficulties must be overcome.

The first years of my involvement in Holocaust education, the main goal was to engage more

and more educators in teaching proposals related to the Shoah and to find opportunities in the curriculum to teach basic elements related to the Holocaust. And we succeeded. More and more educators were creating educational programs, activities, participating in the annual video creation youth competition of the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports along with the Jewish Museum of Greece. With the training we had received and continued to receive, we managed to incorporate the Holocaust into Greek schools.

Today, we have the opportunity, after the progress of previous years, to delve into more specialized aspects of the Holocaust. Our enthusiasm was evident when we attended the seminar for educators organized by the Jewish Museum of Greece in November 2023 and learned about the HerStories project.

The HerStories project combines two very important parameters. Firstly, it is based on six interviews of Jewish women from European countries: Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, who survived the Holocaust, and on the written memories of Lisa Pinhas from Greece. Using the testimonies of these women, the Holocaust takes on a more personal form. It becomes humane. Each one narrates her experiences, losses, the attempt to pick up the pieces after the war, and try to live with her experiences. The story of each one is the voice, the story in some way, of all those millions of people who did not survive and were lost forever in concentration camps and mass graves in Eastern Europe.

In our days, the last survivors of the Holocaust are passing away, often without having shared their unique stories. In this particular case, however, we were fortunate that these survivors' accounts were recorded and preserved. They constitute rare, unique, and invaluable evidence. We observe how individuals' personal perspectives on events depend on how memory retains or repels events, on the perceptions of each informant, but especially on such a traumatic event as the

Holocaust, on how each person tries to manage the trauma consciously as well as in the level of unconscious.

The seven narrators were ordinary women, but their testimonies are extraordinary and remarkable. I use the words in all its possible meanings: these are extraordinary stories that convey something very important about our shared European identity, they are stories that capture our attention, evoke feelings of admiration, and at the same time deep sorrow.

The second aspect that makes HerStories delve into a particular aspect of the Holocaust is that all narrators are women. Before World War II, women were raised with quite conservative standards. The Holocaust subjected all its victims in concentration camps to unimaginable humiliations. For women, with the humiliations that affected their feminine nature and their role as mothers, the ordeal and trauma, both at the moment they experienced them and in their post-war lives, were particularly burdensome.

These women, with their stories, weave the threads of a common fate of women in various parts of Europe, shaped by Nazi policies of extermination of Jews, while also presenting the differences depending on the different living conditions, and the personal choices. Through their testimonies, they preserve the rich diversity of life-styles among the pre-war Jewish communities of Europe. Often, in Holocaust education, we focus mainly on pre-war anti-Semitism, concentration camps, and horror. However, it is of immense importance for Holocaust education to focus on life before the destruction, so that the victims do not appear merely as numbers but retain their human essence. Furthermore, it is extremely important to keep alive the memory of their communities, which were either decimated or completely eradicated.

Within these communities lived the seven women who became the focus of the HerStories

program. And through their stories, they give us the opportunity to approach the Holocaust from a different perspective. Through their stories, we understand that these women grew up differently. Each one as a child dreamed of her future according to the social, economic, and family but also personal circumstances, without anything predicting that she would do something special, unique, and memorable in her life. The Holocaust comes to overturn their lives, to dissolve every certainty, to deprive them of their families and loved ones. After the war, their need to confront the trauma forces them to confront their most difficult memories. Most of the women of HerStories will eventually find a way to tell their story. Thus, from simple everyday women, they became distinct, special, unique narrators. Women who survived, who found ways to survive, women who wanted to tell their stories to establish historical memory, to prevent future horror. Women who marched with strength in post-war life, carrying the trauma.

With this particular perspective, we can approach the Holocaust with our students through HerStories. In the next section, I will present a lesson plan that can be applied in Greek schools. In the detailed curriculum, there is no specific chapter referring to the Holocaust. However, we can use it with various opportunities in several classes. First of all, in history class regarding the chapter on WWII. In literature class by utilizing literary texts referring to the Holocaust, the persecution of Jews, and anti-Semitism. In chemistry class concerning the analysis of the chemical composition of Zyklon B used by the Nazis for the extermination of people in concentration camps. In religious education, it can be used since the Jewish tradition, the culture, and the basic principles of Jewish religion are taught. It can also be used on the occasion of the national celebration of October 28, 1940 (National Holiday for the struggles of Greeks during WWII) as an action, as well as within the framework of local history, as in many parts of Greece there were flourishing Jewish communities before WWII.

Lesson plan

Age Group

15-18 years old

Classes

History, Literature, Geography, Religious Studies, Foreign Languages, Chemistry.

Summary

Students are called upon to examine how the women of HerStories managed to become exceptional women-examples. What can we define, through their stories, as courage, resilience, humanity?

Sources, materials

HerStories interviews, maps, timeline of World War II events, photo material.

Educational objectives

- Understanding the motivations behind their actions.
- Focus on and recording the risks they faced.
- Determination of the actions that make them exceptional women.
- Highlighting their distinctiveness. How do they react differently from men under the female perspective, or how are they influenced differently?
- Highlighting and recording the criteria that make a person exceptional.
- Comparison of the particular elements of courage/survival of these women with established elements that characterize 'brave' people.
- Gathering evidence that there are "invisible" groups of people in history. Highlighting their characteristics and the dynamics they bring. Comparison with personalities in history considered exceptional.
- Exploration of pre-war Jewish communities. Way of life, customs, professions, diet, family customs. What is the image of these communities after the war?

Implementation steps

- Introduction: 1. Brainstorming ideas about words that students associate with the Holocaust. 2. Clarification of terms. 3. Use of the timeline - familiarization with the historical context.
- Classroom exploration through questions-discussion: When are some people considered exceptional? What are the criteria? Who are the "invisible" groups of people in history? Based on what criteria would we characterize some people as courageous? What was the expected life trajectory for women at the end of the Interwar period? etc.
- Presentation of material from Her Stories.
- Division of the class into groups. Each group is assigned to study an interview from the Her Stories narrators. Then, they are asked to identify: a) the life trajectory of each narrator as it was predetermined before the anti-Semitic measures and the Holocaust, b) the causes, actions, and choices that transform these women from ordinary women to exceptional women both during the Holocaust and afterwards, c) all groups undertake to identify, for the community in which the informant they have studied lived, elements indicating the way of life of the Jewish communities before the war and what their situation was like after the war. Presentation in class by a representative of each group of the conclusions about the narrator with whom the group dealt.
- Activity: a) Students can create an artistic creation (painting, collage, etc.) reflecting their inspiration from the transformation of these women. b) Creation of posters using women from Her Stories and indicative elements of their transformation into exceptional women, as well as posters with everyday women e.g., from their family, whom they consider to belong to exceptional women, with brief justifying texts. The posters can be part of an exhibition that can be presented throughout the school. With the same idea, students can create short films, which can also be presented throughout the school.

For the implementation of the presented lesson plan, it is proposed to use three teaching hours, something that is applicable within the official framework of the detailed curriculum. The time is sufficient for the effective conduct of it. The suggested ages are 15-18 years old (high school students, according to the Greek educational level), because at this age they can realize the importance of gender for the analysis of social phenomena. They also have the maturity to study the Holocaust and to deal with, with the help of the teacher, sensitive areas related to the inhuman conditions in concentration camps and the management of trauma. I would like to conclude this text by quoting the last paragraph from Lisa Pinhas's book. This paragraph alone proves how remarkable this woman was and will continue to be in our memory:

"I, the Auschwitz survivor, who miraculously escaped the Nazi camps' machinery, today represent a part of that society to which I once belonged, and I compare. What a contrast between the two lives... And to think that I could now be a handful of ashes, mixed with so many others, scattered in Poland, in Vistula, or somewhere else in Germany, useful for fertilizer. What strange twists life takes. And indeed, from now on, the life I have left to live is 'free,' if one can call it that, and I am in a hurry to lose not a minute from my new life, whatever it holds for me. And besides, I must hurry. I am already two years late."

Author

Maria Bitakou

HISTORY TEACHER AT 1ST GENERAL LYCEUM OF P. FALIRO, ATHENS GREECE

I was born and I still live in Athens. I am a graduate of the Department of History and Archeology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. My master's thesis was about the oral testimonies of Jewish women from Corfu. I am a history teacher at the 1st Lyceum(High school) of Palaio Faliro. I systematically work on the teaching of the Holocaust at school. I have attended the educational seminars of the Jewish Museum of Greece and of Yad Vashem, Centropa, The Olga Lengyel Institute, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yadad in Unum.

Why women's stories?

The HerStories project conveys European Jewish history of the 20th century through the biographies of seven Jewish women. The stories presented within this project – on the website, in educational materials, in the exhibition, and in all the other project results – are used to shed some light on the diversity and complexity of female Jewish experiences of the 20th century. Lisa Pinhas, Rosa Rosenstein, Katarina Löfflerová, Ludmila Rutarova, Rosl Heilbrunner, Irena Wygodzka, Vera Szekeres-Varsa are seven women whose stories are told in this project, who didn't know each other and never met - but all of them were born in Jewish families in the first decades of the 20th century, they all survived the Holocaust, and all somehow managed to rebuild their lives after the catastrophe.

“Following the example of several others who have written a few pages about the men's concentration camps, it is now my turn to give you some details about the women's camps, as I have experienced them”, writes Lisa Pinhas in her memoirs – written, re-written, edited and re-edited for 30 years after the events that she describes. What is striking in this opening sentence is that it sounds very calm, modest, careful, and polite. A rather surprising beginning of a story that recalls terror, dehumanization and mass murder on an unimaginable scale... And it clearly indicates that Pinhas decided to tell her

own story, and share her personal experiences at a time when the voices of men – former concentration camp prisoners – had already been heard and had their suffering recognized. This is how Lisa Pinhas indicated that the voices of women were missing in the narratives about concentration camp experiences. Her written account was brought to the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens in the 1980s, after her death. This was an extremely important period in the development of Holocaust studies: the first significant attempts to investigate and describe the specific fate and experiences of women during the Holocaust date back to the early 1980s.

Although extensive research on the Holocaust had previously been carried out, it was either rather general or concerned mainly the experiences of men. A conference “Women surviving the Holocaust”, organized by scholars Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz in 1983, is considered to be a breakthrough. The aim of this conference was to broaden knowledge about the Holocaust and the experiences of women during this period, and to identify and understand Jewish women's responses to the catastrophe and their coping strategies in the tragic reality, taking into account the particular dangers that they faced as women. Later, in the second half of the 1980s and well into the 1990s,

important works were published that opened the way for further research. One of the most important is the volume *Different Voices. Woman and the Holocaust*, edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (1993). Among these pioneers were Myrna Goldenberg, Dalia Ofer, Judy Baumel, Marion A. Kaplan, Sybil Milton. An important role in the further popularization of the topic was played, among others, by works by Nechama Tec, Elizabeth R. Baer and Paula Hyman. In their research, the above-mentioned authors focused particularly on the fate of women during the Holocaust, the conditions of a physiological (biological) and social (cultural) nature, and also raised questions of the changes in the structure of families and larger communities - changes resulting from various forms of discrimination and persecution. Thus, the gender approach to the historiography of the Holocaust appeared in mainstream consciousness only in the 1980s, and was fully established in the next decade.

In the 1990s, several groundbreaking books were written on this subject in the USA and Europe, and this upward trend in research and publications continues to this day. There is a growing awareness that although the scale of the suffering of both Jewish men and Jewish women during the Holocaust cannot be compared in any way, because all European Jews, regardless of gender and age, were condemned to death by the Nazis, the experiences of men and women nonetheless differed significantly. Both their understanding of the situation they found themselves in was different, as well as their memories of the survivors and the narratives they constructed. These differences resulted, among others, from gender determinants, and therefore it is necessary to re-analyse the already known facts related to the Holocaust, focusing on the consequences of the application of social norms regarding femininity and masculinity. The research into gender-specific experience was also expanded beyond the fate of Jewish women, and also began taking into account, among others, Romani and Sinti women. With time, the

experiences of LGBT+ groups were included in the study of the Holocaust.

As early as the 1980s, the first controversies related to this approach to the subject appeared. The discussion was still ongoing in the 1990s and has not been closed to this day: accusations against scholars of the Holocaust that adopt a gender perspective remain. The objection, however, results primarily from a misunderstanding of their purpose, and sometimes also from the attitude to the Holocaust itself as a kind of "inviolable holiness", about which, out of respect for the victims, one should not "theorize" in this way, in the context of gender or other, possibly more conceptual issues. To show their conviction that specific research into the lives of women during the Holocaust is unnecessary, some historians have repeatedly argued that women were murdered as Jews, not as women. Some historians also pointed out that Nazi racism did not make any distinction between genders, and therefore separate studies of the fate of women during this period are hardly justified. Moreover, there are voices claiming that this approach to the subject distorted the image of the Holocaust, as a contemporary feminist approach could not be applied to those times. However, historians studying the gender aspects of the Holocaust did not mean to belittle the tragedy or compare who suffered more, but to better understand these events as a whole, by incorporating the female experience into mainstream Holocaust research. It was, and still is, important to see the role of the traditional model of femininity and masculinity in shaping behavior in extreme situations, and how this traditional model fell apart in the particular circumstances of our interests.

Nazi ideology aimed at the annihilation of all persons identified as Jews. However, neither the victims, the perpetrators, nor the witnesses of the Holocaust lived in a social void. All of them were influenced by and practiced deeply ingrained cultural and social gender norms at the various

stages of the so-called "Final Solution," even though at the ideological level the main criterion was racial. If one delves into the Nazi vision of the role of a woman, the question of fertility comes first: German fertility and motherhood were almost "sacred", and the main role of an "Aryan" woman was to give birth to racially pure children. Thus, Jewish fertility and Jewish motherhood posed a threat to "racial purity," which meant that Jewish women were targeted by the Nazis in a double sense. Precisely because the German Nazis defined their "enemies" according to a racial criterion, both men and women fell within that definition. And it is precisely the way they treated women and girls that allows us to fully see that the Holocaust was an unprecedented act of genocide – one of total extermination.

Today, studies on the Holocaust in terms of gender consist of a wide variety of issues: from the general differences in the treatment of women and men by the Nazi Germans and their allies at the initial stages of the Holocaust, as well as the impact of discriminatory laws on the lives of women and men, through the situation in ghettos (when the traditional roles in families ceased to function and the social structure changed), through the system of labor and concentration camps, in which women and men were separated, to mass executions of men and women, which were also often carried out separated by gender. These research interests include strategies of survival, help, reactions to exclusion and threats to life, as well as forms of resistance developed by women and men. Early studies on this subject still include some gender stereotypes – assigning women and men specific features and roles, e.g. ones that facilitate or hinder adaptation in the ghetto or concentration camp. Over time, already in the 21st century, the awareness of stereotypes and the sensitivity of researchers has increased, and the approach to the issue gradually changed, a change that is still ongoing.

The approach to issues long considered taboo has also changed. They are related to, for example, women's physiology and threats that affect women in particular, including sexual violence and its consequences. In the first, and especially in the second decade of the 21st century, the issue of sex work in ghettos and concentration camps, questions related to pregnancy, childbirth, contraception and abortion in these inhumane conditions (an issue that is clearly featured in Rosa Rosenstein's story), the problem of sexual abuse of girls and women in hiding places and in partisan units, and rapes committed in ghettos and camps became less a taboo. An important aspect of the research is also the place of women among the perpetrators of the Holocaust, including as kapos (kapo - prisoner functionary assigned to supervise other prisoners) and guards in concentration camps (as portrayed in Lisa Pinhas' accounts from Auschwitz and Ravensbrück).

New discoveries and new research threads keep emerging, constantly broadening the scope and perspective of research. It is absolutely not about focusing solely on female physiology or violence against women, nor about portraying the women while ignoring the experience of men. It is important to point out the differences that occurred at all stages of the Holocaust, both in the treatment of victims by the perpetrators and in the perception of reality by both women and men in the ghettos, in the camps, in the hiding places, and in partisan groups. The goal of a gender-sensitive approach to historical research of the Holocaust should be to understand different ways of experiencing these situations.

The educational project HerStories, implemented by an international consortium of partners in six countries, aims to highlight the experiences of seven women from seven European countries. Seeing their biographies in a wider cultural, social and political context helps us understand the backgrounds of these women, their identities, and their decisions. The scope of telling these

Jewish women's stories is not limited to the period of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust – instead, this project's purpose is to present the whole story of each woman, from her family background and (if possible) early childhood to various aspects of her life through several decades after the Second World War, going as far as the beginning of the 21st century. This broad, multi-faceted picture of the lives of each of them allows us to see – through their subjective views – general issues, such as the specificity and functioning of Jewish communities in different countries, social and political changes in Europe in the 20th century, etc. However, we also see details - the specificity of a given family and social circle. The women's family situation, backgrounds, social status, education and many other factors are interesting in itself, but also in the ways in which they influenced their situation during the Holocaust and after the war.

The materials created in this project are based on three different historical sources. The majority of them – five women's stories – are based on the resources from the Centropa Archive: oral history interviews conducted at the beginning of the 21st century with Irena Wygodzka, Rosa Rosenstein, Katarina Löfflerova, Ludmila Rutarova, and Vera Szekeres-Varsa. The story of Lisa Pinhas can be presented through her own memoirs, and various documents and artifacts from the collection of the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens. In these six cases we could rely on first person narratives of Holocaust survivors. The seventh story – the one of Rosl Heilbrunner – is a different case: this is a reconstructed family narrative told by the second generation, in this case Rosl's daughter Dory Sontheimer.

The women's stories begin with them narrating how they grew up in Jewish families before the war, their memories of their education, work, relations with their families and friends, everyday struggles, plans and hopes. They include the experiences of the Second World War and the Holocaust: stigmatization and persecution,

deportation, hiding or flight, separation and loss, hopelessness and isolation, but also the subjects of hope and survival, resilience and resistance. And then they narrate their way of rebuilding their lives after the Holocaust – their ways of coping with loss and trauma, the decisions and choices they made after the war. Taken together, these individual stories paint a vivid and diverse picture of Jewish women's lives in 20th century Europe.

We should keep in mind that these seven personal stories show only a fraction of the realities of the 20th century in Europe, and should be embedded in the broader historical context. They do not replace textbook knowledge, but rather augment it. Any personal experience, even the most profound, is not in any way identical to historical knowledge, but certainly – and this is no less important – has a strong influence on one's attitudes towards and perceptions of the world. We also need to take into account that the factual level of some stories is up for discussion. These are oral history interviews or memoirs – personal narratives, therefore, not a story told by professional historians. This is connected with the mechanisms of human memory, which are sometimes surprising: images seen later in life in photographs or films, information from books and conversations etc. are woven into the personal stories and can become an integral part thereof. Inaccurate dates or numbers, as well as pieces of information that are not part of a person's own experience, certainly need to be verified and checked against actual findings by historians. But in these stories the most important thing is their universal message, the universal dimension of what the seven women experienced in their lives. Each story contains dramatic choices, fear, pain, helplessness and loneliness, and at the same time each story is about resilience and hope.

Through the fates of real persons and their experiences, we can show how historical events impacted the individuals, how they shaped their

lives, and we can search for deeper, universal meanings. The stories of these women also encourage reflection on fundamental issues, such as good and evil, empathy and indifference,

tolerance and xenophobia. Projects like HerStories have to be seen not only as a simple transfer of knowledge, but also – and above all – as a way of educating and shaping attitudes.

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Author

Anna Wencel

EDUCATOR AND PROJECT MANAGER, GALICIA JEWISH MUSEUM

I have graduated from the Jewish Studies Programme at Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 2008. I am an educator at Galicia Jewish Museum since 2008, I have worked as a museum guide, researcher, lecturer, and coordinator of educational projects.

From teacher to Youtuber

Reflections on teaching herstories and
engaging students in educational projects

Background

I am a teacher at the Economic Technical Secondary School in Kalisz; I teach Polish and also work in the library. I have been a friend of Centropa for many years – an institution that very effectively supports teachers in teaching about the Holocaust and fighting prejudice and discrimination. I have also participated in trainings, and seminars for teachers. After Centropa had equipped me with useful materials about Jewish history and the Holocaust, and about the significance of Jewish cemeteries, its most recent “HerStories” project, which Centropa developed in partnership with Galicia Jewish Museum and four other partners from all over Europe, enabled me to address to my students the specific issue of the presence of women in the pages of history.

Significance of the HerStories project

I got involved in the HerStories project because the roles and representations of women have always been important in my work. I have pursued these issues in the past. I am a mother of 15-year-old girls and I would like my daughters and my students to grow up in a world of equal opportunities, and change this world. But first of all, young girls need to be equipped with tools, to be taught soft skills, to find their strength within themselves.

During the seminar for teachers from Poland and Ukraine (“HerStories - Biographies of European Jewish Women” at Galicia Jewish Museum in November 2023), I became aware of how intricate and complicated the fate of Jewish women was.

They were discriminated against because of their gender as well as their origin. Dr. Edyta Gawron talked about the presence, or rather the absence, of women in Jewish history, using the example of Krakow. It is only by following these few biographies, scant traces, and rare memories, that it can be confirmed that out of 81 published biographies of Krakow's Jews¹, as many as three are portraits of women. They rarely appear on the pages of history and if they do, it is always in the company of a man – as someone's daughter, wife or widow, or mother – claiming a place in history only as a result of kinship. These roles were the only ones that defined the women of the time; this was the only way to exist in the male world.

The seminar in Krakow was linked to preparatory work on the exhibition "HerStories. In the Footsteps of European Jewish Women" and ongoing work on online resources within this project. This collection of biographies of seven Jewish women from Germany, Poland, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic presents the intricate aspects of Jewish history in Europe. Looking at the photographs of the few women recorded in history, standing out from the crowd of nameless sisters, makes me want even more to grasp their fates, to extract the facts, to save them from oblivion. I am fascinated by women who are resolute, who are self-determining, who boldly look to the future, and who change the world. All my areas of interest are intertwined like a Shabbat challah.

Previous experiences: working with Centropa materials and the role of youth competitions

I would like to briefly outline how I have used the content presented by Centropa in my daily teaching work. Every day, I try to sensitize pupils to multicultural local history, fight prejudice,

and motivate them to broaden their horizons. Sometimes this arouses enthusiasm among the students, but often is also met with indifference. But the indifference of the teachers is much worse.

A few years ago, I led a pedagogical innovation at my school entitled "We Are United by Memory - from Kalisz to Jerusalem." The innovation consisted of three thematic blocks:

- Jewish culture - religion, tradition, and history
- The Holocaust - broadening knowledge of the mass murder of the Jewish people during the Second World War
- Tolerance versus antisemitism

The aim of this teaching innovation was to familiarize students with the history of the Jewish minority in Kalisz, to learn about their culture, art, and customs, and thus to combat stereotypes both on the levels of thinking and feeling. The innovation was intended to broaden students' knowledge of the Holocaust. It was dedicated to pupils who were interested in the cultural values of the local and regional community and historical topics. The implementation of this educational project was intended to foster the development of students as active, open-minded, sensitive individuals who are prepared to live in a multicultural society, and who have historical knowledge and can use this knowledge in their lives. The use of such innovations will make students aware of the cultural diversity of Kalisz, and allow them to learn about the traditions and history of the Jewish people.

The final part of the educational activities was working with students to prepare competition films. Two groups participated in the Centropa film competition for students from the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic).

The students prepared films in thematic categories:

¹ Krakowianie. Wybitni Żydzi krakowscy, Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa, Kraków 2006.

- Local history - the history of the Jewish community in a specific locality. Two of my students presented the fate of the Jewish community in Kalisz in the form of TV news. Their work was honored.
- Individual fate - a biography of a selected person of Jewish origin. Three students prepared a film about the Kalisz-born sculptor Alina Szapocznikow. The girls took second place and received a valuable prize - a voucher for electronic equipment.

This was my first herstory project. At the time I wasn't aware that it was called that. We were simply enthralled by this woman - an artist, a very sensitive person, a little crazy, wanting to enjoy life. We read her letters with blazes on our faces - stories of love intertwined with the worries of everyday life. We fell in love with "our Alinka". This love, fascination, and admiration resulted in the pupils presenting their competition film several times and talking about the artist in an art gallery in Kalisz.

In recognition of their hard work, the students were invited by Centropa to an award gala in Budapest. The gala took place in May 2018 at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest. Not only were there participants from Poland, but also from the other Visegrad Group countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary). During the event, prizes were awarded and the results of the competition were announced. Those gathered were welcomed by the Hungarian ambassador, the Slovak ambassador, the head of the Polish Institute in Budapest, and Centropa founder and director Edward Serotta..

The implementation of pedagogical innovation has come to an end, but the topic is so important that I couldn't stop my activities on shaping cultural openness and tolerance. Everything I do from now on is the aftermath of this innovation.

Unfortunately, many students still use stereotypes in their perception of the world and reproduce verbal clichés. Sadly, it is becoming more and more difficult to find people willing to



Centropa youth competition award ceremony in Budapest, 2018
Photo by Róbert Bácsi

carry out planned activities, excursions, lectures, and meetings. Students mindlessly repeat what they hear in the media and at home. I hope that thanks to appropriately selected tasks and experiences, pupils will be able to free themselves from stereotypes, eliminate xenophobia and aggression, and learn to take advantage of the richness that diversity brings.

Local activism, herstories, and empowerment of girls

At some point I realized and fully understood that in many parts of the world, women are still discriminated against in so many different ways, based on their gender. After reviewing history, literature, and culture textbooks, it appears that women occupy a marginal place. Researching the presence of women in history saddened me. Using sources and literary texts, I searched with my students for biographies of women who inspire in some way. The longer I looked at women's biographies, the more I realized that it was much harder for them to succeed in areas usually attributed to men. Perhaps the hardest part was breaking through the resistance of people's prejudices and stereotypes. We still see the tendency to objectify and infantilize women in many environments. If they were pioneers, why do we know so little about them?

I have tried to answer these questions together with my students by implementing another pedagogical innovation entitled “I, a woman”. The innovation consisted of thematic blocks:

- psychological and empowerment workshops, workshops on the search for one’s personality
- women in politics
- herstory activities – portraits of women changing and influencing the world around them
- Health – prevention of women’s diseases

The main aim was to strengthen the intellectual and creative potential of adolescent girls who, as national and international studies show, experience a sharp decline in self-acceptance and self-confidence at this stage of their lives, withdrawing from activities in the areas of science, new technologies and sports, and from the roles associated with being a group leader.

I wanted to support girls in building a positive self-image and acceptance of diversity in other people’s appearance; to impart knowledge and sensitize girls to oppressive and discriminatory mechanisms regarding the image of femininity in media and – more broadly – in culture, to impart knowledge and inspire girls with biographies and achievements of prominent female figures in history and the present; reinforce motivation and courage to take on responsibilities, different roles and functions and achievements in the fields of science, (new) technologies, arts and sports, and shape attitudes of equality.

I have been implementing an empowerment innovation for girls at my school at the same time as being a member of the Kalisz Women’s Council for three years. The Council includes eleven representatives from various backgrounds. The formation of community councils is a sign of shared responsibility for the affairs of the city and its inhabitants. We are united by creative projects and initiatives.

For the past three years, we have been inviting students to take part in the competition “Where

Have the Superheroines Gone?”. Participants in the competition look at biographies of women and choose among them the one that inspires them the most. Using sources and literary texts, they find a biography of a woman who deserves to be remembered (e.g. one who is not taught at school, who was not appreciated, but whose life or choices inspire). The students should present her biography, her achievements or innovations, and explain what they have in common with the chosen character. The participants are free to choose how they present the story: it can be a poster, a literary text, a short film, or a multimedia presentation. They are also supposed to get into character, take a photo, and present the words that the Superheroine might say to the youngsters. They choose either a sentence spoken by the heroine, an aphorism, or they simply formulate a central thought that would be a message to other girls.

When the messages of our female predecessors resound, we will realize that we too are doing something important! Taking on the role of a Superheroine, preparing a costume, and props, finding characteristics, and looking for some common truth that connects with this person – these types of activities inspire, motivate, and encourage further development. Women’s stories from the past become signposts for life. Each time, I encourage the students from my school who take part in a competition to look into the biographies of the Jewish women of Kalisz.

HerStories Youth Competition – stages, motivation, and support

In my educational work, I often motivate male and female students to participate in all kinds of competitions and contests. I have noticed that my students more often engage in different activities and are more likely to absorb new knowledge in the hope of success. Without the vision of a reward, most of them do not

undertake the activity at all... (o tempora, o mores!) And I am grateful that various institutions and organizations prepare a wide range of such activities; annual competitions organized by Centropa and Galicia Jewish Museum are truly valuable.

I was delighted to find out that the HerStories consortium organized a youth competition in the framework of this project. It meant that my students would have to find and select a story of a person who had made their mark on the city's history with their achievements. Or perhaps one who had not made it, who has been forgotten, who has faded from the collective memory, and needs to be brought back and remembered.

Preparing the students to participate in such programs and creating the competition entries is always a broad educational project in itself. The very selection of the topics and coming up with a story that remains in line with the competition subject involves many hours of discussions with students – if we choose one thing, another one has to be discarded. In this way, I smuggle in a lot of content and knowledge. And I often try to make Jewish women the protagonists of the works. A herstory is a graceful subject to work on, but also very important, and very complex.

What characterizes our works is that they are always strongly anchored in historical sources. We base everything on documents, files, photographs, and witness' accounts. We always start our research with a visit to the State Archives and the Kalisz Museum. The archivists and librarians at the Jewish Historical Institute also provide great help. We often go to the places we want to talk about. We search for photographs of old Kalisz and find sites that are important to us. These unique illustrations of bygone realities help students to understand and relate to the fate of the people for whom they provide the

background and context. Sometimes we have the opportunity to contact the living family of our protagonist and also from them, we acquire photographs, family albums, documents, and stories.

We approach Internet sources with a great deal of precaution and verify all information as far as possible. Centropa's online collections are an extremely valuable source and they often guide our research. And here I'll let you in on a secret of mine – I always start my work with students by watching the film about Tosia Silbering. Using this example, I show how to weave photos into a story, how to build a narrative, how to leave out certain facts when there is excess information; and how to present individual fates against the background of historical events important for the whole community.

It might seem that we are presenting the fate of one family, but the fate of entire Jewish generations is playing out in the background. Often, in the process, students learn about Jewish traditions, religion, customs, music, and culture.



Recording a voiceover for the new film submitted to the HerStories youth competition. Kalisz, 2024.

I always work with my students. I motivate them and show them ways to explore while learning a lot myself. At the same time, I explain social phenomena, explain the world, and fight prejudice. I educate them.

Often I have to fight against their indifference, their straw enthusiasm, and their over-inflated promises. Sometimes it causes a lot of nerves because I am emotionally engaged: because I love my job, and I love my students.

Becoming a YouTuber?

At some point, I realized that over the last few years, I have made many films together with my students. They deal with the history of our town, they present important figures from the perspective of local history. Many of the film portraits are of people who were little known, lost somewhere in the whirlwind of time. I decided to collect all these films and set up a channel on YouTube. Yes, I am a YouTuber...

You can see the course of my work, and my fascinations; the fate of Kalisz residents is focused there like in a lens. Out of 34 videos on various subjects, six are portraits of women. So close to my heart. Other films mostly present important places in the old space of the city – the synagogue, and the Jewish cemetery.

The students involved in the projects have real satisfaction, seeing that their work is appreciated, preserved, and shared.

And here comes a bitter reflection - I do all this after my working hours, in my so-called free time. And, of course, nobody rewards me for it. In Polish schools, there are no systemic solutions to develop passion in students, to teach attitudes and values. Everything is based on passionate teachers and activists... and these are becoming fewer and fewer.

Author

Izabella Galuba-Bryja

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER, LIBRARIAN

I have been teaching at an economic technical school for 23 years. I teach Polish language and literature and I work in the school library. I live in Kalisz, the oldest city in Poland (the centre of Poland). I discover local history with my students because nowadays hardly anyone remembers that before the war, Kalisz had been the home to many communities (Jews, Germans, Russians, Ukrainians). Together with my students, I have written a book about a Righteous Among the Nations - the Jesuit Adam Sztarek. Currently, we are working on a second publication about the Righteous Edmund Łuczak.

I organise a lot of educational projects for my students, I have also implemented two pedagogical innovations on the culture and history of Polish Jews.

Taschendurchlasschein
Rutar Karl 495/2, B IV
bis 19.4.1943 zwecks Arbeiten als Zimmermann beim Bau
an die Stadtgrenze bis zur su überschreiten.
Der Lagerkommandant:
1943
16.3.1943



*Eud ein Lebenszeilen
auf von Eud bot*



**R MIT DAS WIR BEI
UCH DASSELBE VON**



*im Akoly, kau
Mag. Ealy me
in Kiroter sind*

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