

Teaching the Holocaust in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

The Holocaust is rarely a topic in foreign language textbooks, where history usually starts after 1945. In *Kaleidoscope*, the inclusion of a story on an aging German-Jewish woman reflecting on the past is a relatively recent exception. In an effort to motivate students to study languages, teachers often choose to structure their lessons around less disturbing topics than the Second World War. Many trust that the Holocaust will be effectively dealt with in history courses. However, we believe that the Holocaust is indeed an imperative topic for the language classroom, where students should become familiar with major aspects of the Holocaust and sharpen their critical awareness of the workings of such totalitarian regimes as Nazism and Fascism. This scrutiny can provide meaningful insights into the myriad factors that led to the Holocaust, while helping to prevent similar tragedies in the future. Furthermore, we have an additional, unique responsibility to discuss this topic within the language curriculum for several reasons: 1) Language learning always involves knowledge of the socio-cultural context and of the history of the people who speak it. An event as gigantic and destructive as the Holocaust is part of a nation's culture and history which, in turn, is intertwined with the target language and an understanding of its society today. 2) Language acquisition gives the learner more specialized and personalized perspectives regarding this event and allows the teacher to draw on original materials in the target language that make it more accessible to them. 3) Students are continually exposed to references to the Holocaust in the media, and class discussions in could help students put these messages in context and in perspective.

Discussion of the German national trauma has been a recurrent theme in the media since the generation of the 60's broke the prevailing silence and demanded to know what happened during the war. Among the latest media contributions are Walter Klemperer's recently discovered 1,000-page diary about his experience as a Jew in Nazi Berlin, and Bernhard Schlinck's novel *The Reader*,

which made it to Oprah's television program and the New York Times bestseller list. There have been numerous documentaries and movies on the subject, ranging from Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (which we will discuss later) to Italian Jews' accounts of their concentration camp experience. Increased awareness of the Holocaust experience in Italy is a recent development. It is thus appropriate to update course materials by introducing Fascism as a part of Italian history that should not be overlooked. These considerations inspired us to look at the topic from a joint Italian-German perspective.

This article presents some of the materials and approaches that we have used successfully in class to involve students in the study of the Holocaust. Visual materials—especially films in conjunction with the written texts on which they are based—lend themselves particularly well to discussing a difficult topic with students with limited vocabulary. We integrate pedagogical activities and teaching strategies that target various language learning skills in the context of the movies and texts discussed. As a result of these activities, we expect our students to: 1) know basic facts regarding the causes and the history of the Holocaust and relate that information in the target language; 2) be able to discuss specific aspects of the Holocaust in the target language; 3) recognize and use vocabulary distinctive to the topic; 4) identify and compare viewpoints regarding the Holocaust, pertaining to their own and the target culture; and finally 5) discuss and compare related issues, such as genocide in other contexts, in the target language. In an era of globalization, students need to realize that while the Holocaust is a unique event in world history because of the extent of its barbarity, totalitarian regimes and genocide are still very much with us. The recent crisis in Kosovo illustrates once again that indifference to the suffering of minorities is often the first step toward the infringement of their rights.

In the following pages, we first present visual materials and concrete poetry that can be used at all levels of language instruction. Then we move to materials that present the Holocaust chronological-

ly, i.e., before: the depiction of increasing anti-semitism; during: fascism and experiences of the war and concentration camps; and after: liberation from the camps and coping with this painful experience, from the point-of-view of both victims and victimizers.

The section on German materials discusses the movies *Comedian Harmonists* and *Europa, Europa*, while briefly referring to *The Nasty Girl*, as well as to Paul Celan's famous poem "Death Fugue" and two Anselm Kiefer paintings. The Italian part considers the movies *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *Life is Beautiful*, and *The Truce*. We conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications concerning "Measures against violence," using Bertold Brecht's intriguing short story of the same title, thus broadening the scope beyond the Nazi experience.

1. Facts and Fiction in Posters and Poetry

Visual materials and short poems are most suitable to introduce and illustrate vividly aspects of the Holocaust (the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is an important source of visual materials on the Holocaust—see Bibliography). We start with transparencies of such familiar pictures as the Nazi salute, book burnings, Kristallnacht, and concentration camp inmates. Asking students to describe the pictures and explain the context allows us to draw on their knowledge and preconceptions and to introduce relevant vocabulary and further details.

Campaign posters from the Nazis and other parties of the Weimar Republic, as well as statistics about election results, uncontrolled inflation, and rising unemployment rates from the 20's to the 30's are ideal ways to highlight the socio-political context that contributed to Hitler's rise to power. Numerous Nazi campaign posters accuse Communists and Jews (often used synonymously) of being responsible for all evil. This common scapegoat motif, as well as political cartoons from the period, elicit speculation and reaction from students, in the target language of course. John Heartfield's famous "Millionen stehen hinter mir" ("Millions are behind me") shows Hitler

with his hands behind his back receiving millions of Deutsch Marks, obviously from industry, while addressing, and herein lies the pun, millions of people. Discussion of these materials can be further supported by reference to present-day debates about World War II retribution charges and about German companies involved in one way or another in slave labor during the war.

Maps are a great resource to depict historical developments such as the changing borders of the Reich, or the distribution of concentration camps. Most of the latter were located in Eastern Europe (and thus far from the public view of the German people) and linked by trains. The strategically-chosen geographical location of the camps, as well as the loaded meaning of railroad cars, are stimuli for further discussion (the Holocaust Museum offers a color picture of a cattle car used for the mass transportation of human beings). Maps are also useful to illustrate the existence in Europe, during the 20's and 30's, of numerous totalitarian regimes (some temporary), not only in Nazi Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, and Spain, but also in Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, and elsewhere. This context helps students understand better Hitler's rise to power.

Having thus mapped out the larger context of the Holocaust, we use transparencies with facts and figures about the extermination of 16 million people in the camps, six million of whom were Jews, i.e., 67% of European Jewry. Interestingly, there were only 600,000 Jews in Germany in 1933, less than one percent of the total population (Holocaust Museum publication). Other groups included Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, gypsies, communists, socialists, Jehovah's witnesses, homosexuals, and the disabled—in short, all those considered different and thus non-human.

To illustrate the increasingly aggressive and relentless anti-Semitic politics of the Nazis, we present a chart listing developments from the 1920 NSDAP program (which insisted that Jews were not citizens) to the burning of books and boycott of Jewish stores starting in 1933. Students often do not realize that during that same year Jews also lost their civil service jobs, their university and law court positions, and, in 1935, their citizenship, because of the Nuremberg laws. Between 1937 and 1939 further regulations forbade Jews to attend public schools, go to the movies or theater, and even live or walk in certain parts of German cities. The *Reichskristallnacht* of 1938 gave the Nazis increasingly free rein to destroy Jewish property and life,

culminating in the Wannsee conference in 1942, which proclaimed the infamous “final solution,” the systematic elimination of all Jews.

Concrete poetry is another useful tool at all levels of language teaching. Its sparse and often playfully allusive language allows beginners to grasp complicated concepts despite their limited range of vocabulary. It also invites more advanced students to speculate about intimations and rhetorical devices. We have used successfully a poem entitled “*Lehrreich*” (“Educational”) by Burckhard Garbe (see Appendix 1), with its play on *Reich* (“empire”) and *reicht* (“is enough”); it makes obvious that another (Third) Reich is undesirable. Since our students often know little of German history, we also use that poem to introduce the First and Second Reich, the “Holy Roman Empire of German Nation” from the 9th century to the Napoleonic wars, and the Second German Reich from 1872 to 1918.

Another poem, with the ambiguous title “*Unbestimmte Zahlwörter*” (“Undetermined Numerals”) by Rudolf Otto Wiemer (see Appendix 2) lends itself well to the discussion of the controversial issue of whether all Germans were “Hitler's willing executioners,” to borrow from the title of Daniel Goldhagen's 1995 book. The poem repeats the phrase “*haben/hat gewußt*” (“knew”), listing different numerals from *alle* (“everyone”) to *keiner* (“nobody”). It points out that, as the recent Balkan crisis has once again illustrated, knowing the truth during war is difficult, not only for the people living under a totalitarian regime, but also for those living in democratic societies.

2. Before, During and After the Holocaust: Using German Movies and Texts

Together with the above materials, we find that films-documentaries as well as commercial feature films-provide an ideal means to introduce or supplement a discussion of the Holocaust. They can be effectively integrated into the lesson by focusing on specific aspects of the film and can often be linked to literary texts. Our favorites follow.

2.1 Comedian Harmonists (*The Harmonists*)

A recent representation of the pre-Holocaust era in Germany is the commercial film *Comedian Harmonists* (1997) by Josef Vilsmeier. It tells the true story of six young musicians in Berlin in the 1920's and 30's, who formed the group “Comedian Harmonists.” The first part of the film recounts the struggles

involved in the formation of the group in 1927 during a period of uncertainty, chaos, and unemployment in Berlin. The second half of the film focuses on the increasing manifestations of anti-Semitism in Germany and culminates in the break-up of the group in 1935 at the height of its career and the subsequent emigration of the three Jewish members to America.

The film successfully captures and mirrors the lavish extravagance, wit, and irony—as well as decadence and care-free innocence—that characterized the music and *joie de vivre* of the group during the Golden Twenties. It also shows how both were framed and shattered by the realities of life under the Nazi Regime. Extraordinary attention to, and exquisite indulgence in, musical and visual detail contribute to the film's appeal to audiences. Numerous aspects of the film lend themselves well to discussions among students of all levels of language learning, particularly the representation of German Jewish and non-Jewish life and culture in the pre-Holocaust era. It raises issues such as: To what degree is Jewish identity even acknowledged by the characters before it becomes a political issue? When and how do we realize that three members of the groups are Jewish? What aspects of Jewish culture are practiced and represented? How is the integration and later the disintegration of Jewish communities in German society depicted? Further emphasis on the shifts in perception of Jewish identity in the early twentieth century is produced by the initial general lack of racial awareness among the members of the group. A fiancée's conversion to Judaism in order to be with her Jewish husband, or the abandonment of a Jewish wife in the face of racial discrimination, demonstrate increasing racial awareness.

The film also provides some insight into German reaction, or rather lack thereof, to the rise of anti-Semitism. Scenes that are particularly representative of denial and disbelief invite analysis and may be followed up by characterizations of those figures in the film that are the most—or the least—politically aware. Students may also be given or asked to provide a historical background of events that are alluded to in the film—for example, a scene, in which the Jewish main character is informed of the 1933 racial laws making it difficult for Jewish musicians to perform.

The function of music and humor in the film is a further topic to explore with students. We find that questioning why the film—as well as the sextet—has been tremendously popular in contemporary

Germany generates animated discussion centering on the powerful role of humor and irony. In addition, the film reveals certain musical preferences of the Nazis. For example, in a disturbing scene, a high Nazi official asks the group to perform his favorite song with lyrics by the German Romantic poet Josef von Eichendorff, which the Jewish protagonist cannot bear to due to painful associations with the song's content. In this regard, one might investigate the history of German music in relation to its Jewish heritage (particularly Jewish composers such as Moses Mendelssohn, as well as anti-Semitic writings by Richard Wagner), the artistic ideals proclaimed by the Nazis, the music they condemned as being "degenerate," and the reasons for this condemnation.

Finally, the film questions how to define Jewish or Yiddish music and its survival during the Holocaust. Music written, composed, and performed by Jewish musicians during the Third Reich, and later in concentration camps, is relatively unknown. We analyze the Yiddish song "Es brennt," ("It is burning," see Appendix 6), written by children and set to music by resident composers in the ghetto "Theresienstadt." The song alerts students to the differences and similarities between Yiddish and German. It also presents an original perception of Jewish Holocaust victims through a distinctive language. Another example is the opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis: Die Todverweigerung* (The Emperor of Atlantis: Death's Refusal to Come) by Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944 at Auschwitz), also written at Theresienstadt. It manifests an artistic effort to overcome death through music. The cover of the score shows the painting "Der Triumph des Todes" (Triumph of Death) by Felix Nussbaum, a Jewish-German painter (1904-1944 at Auschwitz), which depicts an orchestra consisting of skeletons sure to stimulate strong reactions and interest from students.

Additional activities related to the "Comedian Harmonists" include research on the rather extensive documentary information available on the lives of the singers. We encourage students to read books, to collect information through the Internet (a number of very useful webpages are found in the Bibliography), or to watch the documentary by Eberhard Fechner about the group called *Comedian Harmonists: Six Lives* (1975/76) and compare the facts represented in the two films.

An effective follow-up to these activities is a debate on the appropriateness of compensation of Holocaust victims and

their families (some of the members of the "Comedian Harmonists" did eventually return to Germany and received compensation for their losses caused by the Nazi Regime). Current events, such as recent lawsuits and controversies involving Volkswagen and other major German companies and Swiss and German banks, can be used as starting points for classroom debates. Some students argue in favor of, and others against, a particular type of compensation for war victims or for retribution for war crimes. This type of activity has proven particularly successful if the target of the debate is a specific character and students are given a specific set of circumstances to consider as they defend or accuse the person. Students may represent various members of the community such as politicians, members of the church, or professionals in business and the arts.

Teachers can combine study of this film with a reading of "Die Jüdische Frau," (The Jewish Woman) from Bertold Brecht's *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches* (Fear and Misery in the Third Reich). Both works contain scenes of characters and their families or spouses affected by anti-Semitism.

2.2 *Hitlerjunge Salomon* (*Europa, Europa*)

The time period between 1939 and 1945 is vividly and effectively presented in the film *Europa, Europa* by Agnieszka Holland (1991). It addresses in a most individualized manner the following questions: What was it like to be a Nazi? What was it like to be a Hitler Youth? What was it like to be a Jew who had the option of surviving the war by pretending to be a Nazi? *Europa, Europa* is based on the autobiography of Salomon Perel and tells the true story of a Jewish boy who poses as a Hitler Youth to survive the war. Students generally respond extremely well to this film: it is suspenseful, accessible, often funny, personalized and thought-provoking. Combining elements from war movies and black comedies with surrealist elements, it makes for a strangely provocative and uniquely challenging representation of this ethically complex experience. Part of the appeal of the film is that it is told from the point of view of a naive, fun-loving boy, Solek, who is initially sent East by his family to avoid the Nazi invasion. In a Soviet orphanage he becomes a devoted Communist. When the Nazis invade, he denies his Jewish faith to save his life and claims to be a "Volksdeutscher" (Aryan German). Throughout the film, luck is on his side. Not only does he by chance become a Nazi war hero, he is also sent

to a prestigious Hitler School and is adopted by an important Nazi official. Yet, throughout the film, we are aware of his desperate efforts to hide his Jewishness and his plight to reexamine his identity as a Jew and as a German. The underlying question remains: What is a human being willing to do to survive? To what degree can one justify betraying one's faith to survive? How does one deal with having survived when so many did not?

A picture of Hitler Youth, a boy and a girl, serves as an effective introduction to the film and to the power of propaganda. We ask students to guess what the boy and the girl are doing and to what organization they belong before. They often assume that the children are involved in a harmless, enjoyable boy scout or girl scout activity and note the appeal inherent in being part of such organizations. They may also point out the Aryan qualities stressed in the picture, the blond hair, the athletic boy in uniform, the sweet girl with pigtails. The pictures provide a stepping stone to a discussion how the Hitler Youth used psychological manipulation and propaganda strategies in order to attract even the very young.

Many aspects of the film are considered controversial, including the title and its translation: the original German title of the film was *Hitlerjunge Salomon*, which makes a much stronger statement than *Europa, Europa*. Worthwhile questions to explore with students are: What significance does "Europa" have in the film? Why is it repeated in the title and what does this mean in the context of the 90's and the turn of the millennium? (Susan E. Lineville's 1995 article on "Deconstructive Humor in *Europa, Europa*" offers stimulating ideas on this topic, arguing that part of the message of the film is an effort to present a deconstructed image of authoritarian regimes of the European countries in the 20th century).

The film also lends itself very well to an exploration of Jewish identity through circumcision and other cultural traditions, as well as the treatment of racial stereotypes. Hilarious examples of the latter include a scene where a Hitler School expert on racial characteristics uses the Jewish boy as a clear representative of the Aryan race, thus completely undermining his own credibility and the validity of racial theories. A comparison of the educational methods in a communist orphanage with those in a Hitler school provides rich material for class discussion. Advanced students enjoy participating in discussions on topics such as, "chance," the necessity of "pretense and acting" for the sake of survival, the mean-

ing of “heroism” in the context of the film, the sudden cameo appearance by Shlomo Perel in the end of the film, and the fate of other German Jewish survivors after the war. As a further stimulus to classroom conversation, we present quotes from the film and ask students to explain who said them, why, and when; they then explain their importance in the context of the story-line. One example is taken from Goethe’s *Faust* and is quoted by Solek’s homosexual actor friend: “All that I now possess seems far away. And vanished worlds seem real to me today. Here I stand, a poor fool, and am as clever as before.” Other meaningful quotes are: “Isn’t it difficult to play someone else?” with the answer: “It is easier than being yourself.”

Complex or ambiguous excerpts from the book *Ich war Hitlerjunge Salomon* provide additional, extremely useful supplements to viewing the film. Our preferred excerpts are the preface, Solek’s denial of his faith in the face of the Nazi capturers, and the transformation from Solek to his Nazi identity Josef as he first enters the Hitler School. We highly recommend attendance at Shlomo Perel’s frequent public lectures which provide the opportunity to ask personalized questions and to bring the character even more to life.

2.3 *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* (*The Nasty Girl*)

How Germany is dealing today with its past and how it has been dealing with it since the Second World War is the topic of a German film that makes *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coping with the past) accessible to students. *The Nasty Girl* by Michael Verhoeven (1990) tells the story of a student who writes an essay about her hometown during the Third Reich and encounters hostility and violence as she uncovers facts that the town would rather not reveal. For a detailed summary and suggestions for use in the classroom, please see our review of *The Nasty Girl* in the Fall 1998 Northeast Conference *Newsletter*. In the present context we would like to point out that showing this film in an intermediate or advanced class allows students to take stands on controversial statements regarding the content as well as the production of the film. For example, a third-year class can be asked to produce film reviews in the style of Siskel and Ebert by debating topics such as: “The film is silly and trivializes the Holocaust.” “The film technique tries to be original and impressive, but is not avant-garde and rather distracts from the message of the film.” “The end is problematic and doesn’t adequately

provide closure to the rest of the film.” We use this type of activity to challenge students and familiarize them with important themes, especially in a class where the emphasis is on writing and the final incentive is the production of an entire film review or a film critique. Our students’ results have been creative and full of controversial information. Our experience has also shown that classes at any level enjoy the interactive nature of voicing comments on specific aspects of films in the format of a Siskel and Ebert dialogue.

2.4. Poetry and Painting after Auschwitz

A major question asked by Theodor Adorno and others in Germany after the war was, “Can there be poetry after Auschwitz?” The majority of Germans were interested in neither poetry nor the Holocaust; they were too busy rebuilding a bombed-out country. To be sure, taking care of 12 million displaced Germans and seeking retributions for what their government had done to other ethnic groups was not an easy task. However, most Germans lacked what the Mitscherlichs, in their 1967 analysis of the national psyche, called “the inability to mourn.” Paul Celan (1920-1970) was one of the few who, right after the war, proved there could be poetry after Auschwitz, albeit not realist. Born into a Jewish-German family in the enclave of Czernowitz, Bukowina, then part of Romania, Celan escaped, but his parents died in a concentration camp. After the war, he suffered from recurring bouts of paranoia and depression and eventually took his life by leaping into the Seine in 1970. Like many other Jewish survivors, he could not live with the guilt of having survived while others did not.

Celan’s most famous poem “Death Fugue” (see Appendix 4), written in 1945 and first published in 1947 in Rumanian as “Death Tango,” is taken from the collection *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (“Poppies and Memory”) (1952). The title evokes the simultaneity of dream and hallucination on the one hand, and reality and memory on the other. “Death Fugue” has been called the best-known of all post-war German poems. It deals with the concentration camp experience, juxtaposing the Nazi guard and Jewish prisoners—represented as individual “he” or “the man” and the collective “we” respectively. We find that the dense symbolism and stylistic devices in this poem appeal to more advanced students. They access the poem by finding characteristics associated with each group in the poem: the oppressor gives commands, carries a weapon, in short, represents omnipresent

power, while the oppressed fulfil his commands, are forced to dig graves, play music and dance to the Nazi’s amusement, thus symbolizing total powerlessness. The German words for power and powerlessness, *Macht* and *Ohnmacht* (the latter meaning “without power”, but also “unconsciousness”), also neatly highlight the difference on a linguistic level. The inhuman and cynical treatment of the Jews is emphasized by the equation of *Rüden* (“male dogs”) with *Juden* (“Jews”), whom the Nazi calls forth with his whistle: “er pfeift seine Rüden herbei er pfeift seine Juden hervor” (lines 10/11).

The central metaphor, “schwarze Milch der Frühe” (black milk of dawn), inspires students to propose various associations for the oxymoron. Milk, symbol of nourishment and life, becomes its opposite in the context of a concentration camp, the poisonous and deadly fumes from the crematoria lingering over the camps, enveloping everyone and everything in an atmosphere of death. The repetitive “wir trinken und trinken” (we are drinking and drinking) adds to this atmosphere of nauseating misery and death, culminating in the phrase “Der Tod ist der Meister in Deutschland” (Death is the master in Germany).

Students are immediately struck by the absence of punctuation and rhymes in the poem. These omissions underline the close interdependence of the two opposing groups, while emphasizing the ever-present sense of destitution and oppression. We ask students to add punctuation to indicate who is saying what and when—a precondition to understanding the relatively complex text.

Intertwined in this poem are two love letters, one addressed to Margarete by the Nazi, the other addressed to Sulamith by one of the prisoners. The two women are juxtaposed through their “golden hair” and “ashen hair” respectively. One is a metaphor of ‘Aryan’ heritage, but also reminiscent of Margarete in Goethe’s *Faust* and thus a cultural icon of female purity and German classicism (abused by the Nazis). The other is a reference to the bride of Jerusalem from the Songs of Solomon and thus a Jewish cultural image, but it is also reminiscent of the ashes from the crematoria.

We use two paintings by Anselm Kiefer that refer to Margarete’s and Sulamith’s hair to complement the poem. Kiefer (born 1945) is probably the best-known post-war German painter. In these and other paintings he uses landscape as a metaphor for contemporary history and culture. For example, the image of “burnt landscape” illustrates simultaneously the

destruction brought about by the Nazis and the fertility of the earth. Advanced students working on a comprehensive paper on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* are asked to compare the representation of the Holocaust in various media.

3. Before, During and After the Holocaust: Using Italian Movies and Texts

The recent release and success of the Italian movie *La vita è bella*, by Roberto Benigni, provides a good opportunity to talk about the Holocaust in an Italian language class. In addition, here are other films that we find work well with students.

3.1 *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis)*

The period starting with the racial laws in 1938, and culminating in the mass arrests and deportations in 1943, is effectively depicted in Vittorio De Sica's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, released in 1971 (a newly-restored version was released in 1996). Adapted from Giorgio Bassani's 1962 semi-autobiographical novel of the same title, the film was a worldwide success, winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, the Berlin Golden Bear and other awards. It portrays the gradual disintegration of the Jewish community living in Ferrara (Northern Italy) through the story of a wealthy, cultivated, and aristocratic Jewish family, the Finzi-Continis, who open their lush garden to the persecuted friends of their daughter Micol and their son Alberto. We introduce the work by giving students excerpts, starting with the Preface. Then we select passages like chapter I.VI, the first close encounter between the narrator, Giorgio (a middle-class Jewish student), and Micol, both in their early teens; or chapter II.I, which describes the official entrance of the narrator in the fabulous garden, ten years later, and corresponds to the beginning of the movie. Next, we either show the entire movie or divide it into two installments, the second one preceded by the reading of chapter IV.II, the description of Giorgio's encounter with Micol in her room. We further involve students by asking them to guess what will happen to Giorgio and Micol and how their relationship will evolve. This exercise leads them to reflect on the complexity of Micol's character, the reasons for her romantic reluctance, and the constant presence of life and death in her world. After seeing the movie, students read chapter IV.IX (a conversation with the father about growing pains and the role of suffering in life), followed by the epilogue, which differs a little from the cinematic version. By

alternating reading and viewing, we involve students in the story and elicit reactions to the different treatment of the characters and events in the book and the movie.

Several web sites on film discuss the movie at length both in English and in Italian. Students are usually expert net surfers, and they enjoy finding different sites and relating their content to the class, resulting in extensive comments and discussion. They like to discuss the funerary metaphors and contrasting elements or the beauty of nature and of the protagonists versus the ugliness of the events. Students interested in history often do further research on topics such as: the assimilation of Jews in Italy, many of them being very patriotic and later supporters of Fascism (like Giorgio's father); the segregation after 1938 (symbolized by the gilded ghetto of the walled-in estate of Finzi-Continis); the impact of the racial laws (anti-Semitic decrees by Mussolini introduced in Italy in 1938, presented very clearly in a scene of the movie, when Giorgio discusses the laws with his family); the different attitudes of representatives of the Jewish community towards the increasing persecutions: avoidance, hope, fear, anxiety (Giorgio's father, minimizing its import; Giorgio, worried and skeptical; Micol, detached and almost resigned); the Fascist anti-semitic measures versus the Nazi actions.

Finally, other topics that evoke lively classroom discussion include: 1) the attitude of Malnate, a Communist and a non-Jew, the best male friend of Alberto and Giorgio; 2) the different treatment of Malnate's character in the movie and in the book (especially in regard to his relationship with Micol); 3) the existence of "heroes" in the movie; 4) positive and negative aspects of the characters—are they more than victims? and, 5) the way discrimination is dealt with in this film compared with other Holocaust films.

3.2. *La vita è bella (Life is Beautiful)*

The film *La vita è bella*, released in the fall of 1998, is still being shown in cinemas. It won three academy awards: best actor, best foreign language film, best dramatic score. It covers the same time span as *Europa, Europa*, beginning in 1939 and ending with American liberators entering the concentration camp.

Roberto Benigni's character, Guido, meets and falls in love with the well-to-do school teacher, Dora, in a small Tuscan town. In spite of class differences and of Dora's engagement to a Fascist leader, Guido finds a way to marry her, and they

have a son, Giosuè. The second part of the film takes place in 1944, when Guido and Giosuè are sent to a concentration camp with Guido's uncle. Dora follows them of her own accord, even though she is not Jewish. In the camp, Guido tries to divert his child from the atrocities of the concentration camp by pretending that they are involved in a challenging game with an enticing prize, thus managing to hide Giosuè until the liberators come and rescue him. In the end, Guido is killed while searching for his wife, who will, like her son, survive.

La vita è bella is often extremely funny; it shares the lightness and humor of *Europa, Europa* and *The Nasty Girl*. Like *Europa, Europa* the Italian film has a hilarious scene in which Guido presents himself as a prototype of racial purity, undressing in front of a class to reveal his "Aryan" physical characteristics. When students compare the two films, they find intriguing points such as the survival of the protagonist of *Europa, Europa*, which is based on reality, and the death of the protagonist of *La vita è bella*, which is fictional. We have successfully combined this film with Primo Levi's writings, in particular *Se questo è un uomo* (If this is a man), Levi's account of his experience in Auschwitz. If class time and level do not allow for extensive reading, the brief Preface of *Se questo è un uomo*, the poem that introduces the narration (see Appendix 5), and the first chapter of the book suffice. The text and an analysis of the poem can be found in a web site on Primo Levi (see Bibliography), along with further information on Italian Jews. Students may be motivated to consult other historical sources for information on the history of the Italian Jewry during Fascism (see sections E and F of the Bibliography for information on the Italian history of the Holocaust).

The wide response that the movie has stirred in the media inspires vivacious class discussions. Our students find articles and reviews in newspapers, magazines, and web sites. Each student initiates a class discussion based on his/her research. We find that these themes provoke lively discussion about *La vita è bella*: humor and horrors; farce and pathos; human capacity to survive; resourcefulness in dire times; degrees of unselfishness. These questions have sparked vivacious student debate: Is this really a movie on the Holocaust? Is humor appropriate in dealing with such tragic events? Can totalitarianism be resisted simply with a gentle genial spirit? Is *La vita è bella* a "farce that trivializes the horror of the holocaust" (Richard Schiskel in Time magazine 11.9.98)? Is it

to be considered “feel-good popular entertainment” (idem) or does it rely on the intelligence of the viewers? Can the Holocaust be presented in different ways which all contribute to present a part of the truth? Finally, we have found mock press conferences to be an extremely effective way to involve all students in a class. Some impersonate Guido, his son, his wife, and the uncle and the former fiancé of Dora (depending on the size of the class and on the time available), and others play the role of journalists who interview them. This technique has led to unexpected insights into the film.

We find that students need historical/cultural background information to appreciate fully the plight of Italian Jews. We give them information on these topics: 1) the survival rates of Italian Jews (approximately 85 per cent, but the figures vary according to the criteria adopted in calculating them); 2) specific general characteristic of Italian Jews, some of which are shared with most other Western European Jews (high assimilation, their small number, their financial resources as middle-class citizens, the fact that they did not dress or look different from other Italians); 3) helpers (individuals rather than organizations helped their Jewish friends, because Italians in general were fed up and disgusted by the war and willing to help its victims); 4) a minimal anti-Semitic tradition in modern Italy (Jews had contributed to forge the Italian unity, and an anti-clerical liberal ideology was predominant in powerful posts); and 5) immediate and long-term factors explaining the high survival rate in Italy, such as the comparatively late and reduced danger period for Italian Jews (the period of highest risk began after the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943).

We make these historical and cultural manifestations more immediate by using two appealing documentaries. *Memoria: I sopravvissuti raccontano* (“Memory: Survivors tell their stories”) by Liliana Picciotto Fargion, Marcello Pezzetti and Ruggero Gabbai (1997) was inspired by Liliana Picciotto Fargion’s *Il libro della memoria (The Book of Memory)*, see Bibliography). It comprises a series of interviews between historians and 90 Italian-Jewish survivors who describe what happened to the Italian Jewish communities between 1943 and 1944 (over 8,500 Italian Jews were deported to Auschwitz and other death camps, while about 800—including Primo Levi—survived). In Italian with English subtitles, and filmed on location (Jewish neighborhoods, police stations, trains, Italian and German camps), the documentary makes real the terrible and moving experiences of those interviewed.

Another valuable classroom resource is the documentary, *The Righteous Enemy*, by Joseph Rochlitz (originally released in 1987) which presents the effort made by representatives of the Italian Fascist government (the Italian Army and diplomatic corps) to protect and save Jews in occupied territories like France, Greece, and Yugoslavia. It describes to what lengths Italian officers went in order to prevent the deportation of some 40,000 Jews in territories occupied by the Italian Army, thus defying Mussolini’s and the government’s orders and ignoring the Nazi pressure. The narration is in English, the interviews in Italian and Hebrew with English subtitles.

3.3. *La tregua (The Truce)*

La tregua (1996), directed by Francesco Rosi, is the story of Italian Jews returning home from Auschwitz after the war. It deals with their attempts to readjust to daily life and their fears about their future. Three versions of the film are available: in English, Italian and French. The movie is adapted from Primo Levi’s autobiographical book, which chronicles his lengthy geographical and spiritual journey home to Turin, after the Red Army liberated Auschwitz early in 1945 (it happens to start where *La vita è bella* ends).

To introduce the topic, we have our students read the preface of the school edition of *La tregua (La tregua, collana “Lecture per la scuola media”, Turin: Einaudi, 1965, pp. 5-10)*, written by Levi later in life and recounting his odyssey and his reasons for writing. His themes of bearing witness, memory, and history, are very useful in classroom discussions. The English translation is called *The Awakening*, a simple observation, which we use as the basis for discussion of these questions: What comes after the Holocaust? Is it just a respite, a temporary period of relief (a “truce,” as in the original title and in the title of the movie), or is it the awakening from a nightmare? Was the Holocaust unique? Are there in modern history other instances of mass murder? How does an individual find a reason to live after experiencing the abject hopelessness of torture and loss? Is there humor in this movie? Which parts of the film are particularly poetic? What is the position of the protagonist? Why is he mostly an onlooker? How are individual psychology and group dynamics treated in the film (and in the book)?

4. “Measures Against Violence”: Survival and Morality

The question of ethical behavior in the face of totalitarian power and violence is

a pertinent one and effectively treated in Bertold Brecht’s short story “*Maßnahmen gegen die Gewalt*” (“Measures Against Violence”). This peculiar short story, published in “*Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner*” (“Stories by Mr. Keuner,” see Bibliography), works best in intermediate or advanced classes and has been a success in all classes we have taught.

Brecht (1898-1956) had to flee the Nazis in 1933 because of his Marxist convictions. His books were burned and his citizenship was revoked. He fled via Scandinavia and Russia to the United States. He had to leave in 1947 after giving evidence before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and he eventually settled in East Germany, where he continued to criticize the Communist government.

“Measures Against Violence” provokes stimulating discussions, due, to a large extent, to its ambiguity. It raises highly controversial questions to which there are no definite answers. As the title indicates, the story addresses questions of how to react in the face of violence: survive or adhere to one’s principles. Brecht’s famous saying, “first comes hunger, then morality,” is a good point of comparison. The story opens with Mr. Keuner speaking against violence in front of an audience. However, when confronted by the allegorical violence, he denounces his beliefs. To justify his contradictory behavior in theory and practice, he tells a parable, the story of Mr. Egge. “During the times of illegality,” (a possible reference to the Nazis, but also to other “illegal” times), Mr. Egge opens his door to an agent (the personification of power) who demands to be served. Mr. Egge does so without saying a word. It is only when, after seven years, the agent dies that he says “no”—the final word of the story.

After reviewing the genre of parable, we ask our students what they think is the function and moral of this story within a story. For weaker classes, we first give students a handout with suggestions to be discussed in pairs before they develop their own ideas. Another effective tool for discussion is to present suggestions as right/wrong statements, such as “Mr. Keuner/Mr. Egge is for/against violence.” “Mr. Keuner is hypocritical, because he does not practice what he teaches.” “Mr. Keuner was right, because the most important thing is to survive.”

To inject a personal note into student discussion, we ask them to consider the following questions, (which incidentally give them ample opportunity to practice the subjunctive): What would have happened to Mr. Keuner and Mr. Egge if they

had spoken out against violence in the face of violence? Which other measures would you, or could they, have taken? If Mr. Keuner were your father, would you be happy that he survived, or would you be ashamed that he preached one thing but did another? Were you or anybody you know ever in such situations of moral dilemma? Finally, since Brecht's story contains no explicit reference to the Nazi regime, the resulting ambiguity leads students to explore similar situations in which one has to make such a decision: survive or serve, serve in order to survive. We have been pleased to see our students apply this dilemma to other texts and movies previously discussed.

5. Activities

Having discussed various visual and written materials about the Holocaust and their implementation in the foreign language classroom, we would like to add more suggestions for classroom use of this material. Depending on the syllabus and course level, the instructor can introduce only one work (and additional materials appropriate for the class) or a combination of several. These options provide either a limited but important insight into the Holocaust, or a rather extensive overview of its history, from the first instances of intolerance and of official restrictions, to the concentration camps, followed by liberation and reflection on the past.

The films can be watched together in class or assigned as homework. We prefer to show them in installments of 20 to 30 minutes, allowing closer analysis and explanation of historical implications, and involving students in the development of the plot. If the film is based on a book that students have read, stimulating discussions often occur about the contrast between the textual and cinematic renditions of the story.

We have developed a number of activities for each film, ranging from guided and free discussions of the whole movie, to more detailed analyses of particular sequences and quotes utilizing the written script. We often enrich a film with related texts or historical accounts. The following overview of our activities provides a guideline for the use of films and other media in the language classroom.

Students enjoying having to guess, in pairs or groups, who said a certain quotation and in which context. For example, "One has to know where everything is coming from, in order to know where to go" from *The Nasty Girl*. Or the funny quote in a tragic moment from *Life is Beautiful*: "There are three cases in which you lose all your points. One: Those who

cry. Two: Those who want to see their mama. Three: Those who are hungry and want some snack. Forget about it!"

Role plays are an ideal means to involve the students actively in the development of the plot and also to use vocabulary relevant to the material. They can be improvised, written and prepared ahead of time, based on a particular scene in the film, or simply inspired by the film. An example from *Comedian Harmonists* is a dialogue between the Jewish protagonist and his Aryan friend regarding the option, or rather necessity, of emigration to the U. S. We ask our students to reproduce the scene after having watched it, to rewrite it differently, or to write it even before they have seen the dialogue in the film, thus anticipating how the dialogue might develop. The same technique can be used with the scene from *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* in which Giorgio and his father are discussing the impact of the Italian racial laws, each representing a different view.

An expanded version of a role play is a mock press conference with the protagonists of the film. Each character is impersonated by a student, who has spent time before class reflecting on the character, while the other students have prepared questions and act as journalists, interviewing the various characters about their behavior, opinions, and motivations. Students generally find exciting and challenging the task of impersonating a character and endowing the person with added insight, or the opportunity to act as journalists and pose provocative questions.

We frequently have students conduct debates involving two or more groups representing contrasting opinions; the result is usually a lively discussion. Students "impersonate" fictional or non-fictional members of the community who argue for or against certain issues. Another successful technique for motivating students to talk about a film and to discuss its merits and weaknesses is a film review in the style of Siskel and Ebert. Students choose or are given provocative statements referring to specific aspects of a film; they then prepare skits acting as film critics and presenting their evaluations to their audience.

While oral exercises promote students' ability to interact and to express opinions in a foreign language, written exercises favor familiarization with new vocabulary pertaining to the topic. We use movie summaries or reviews, as well as analyses of one or more particular scenes or even of an issue chosen by the student. Sometimes we ask students to rewrite endings or to continue where the

story left off, or to offer hypotheses about how the film ends after watching only parts of it. Finally, we encourage our students to participate in the "Annual National Writing and Arts Contest" held by the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Conclusion

Our most important goal is to help students gain insight into the many factors that contributed to the Holocaust and to articulate that information, as well as their opinions regarding that information, in the target language. A combination of visual materials (ranging from individual images to recent films), and written materials (ranging from concrete poetry, novels as backdrops for films, and other literary works), allow students to focus on particular aspects of the Holocaust in a multi-dimensional manner. In addition to being exposed to factual information, students are encouraged to identify with the characters, to argue, to compare, to reflect, and to communicate in different forums. The recent Balkan crisis and the war in Kosovo have given particular urgency to some issues. We stress that individual perceptions of concepts such as justice, civil rights, peer pressure, national or racial identity, prejudice, and stereotyping still challenge human understanding and human behavior and can take on ramifications of immense scale affecting an entire people. Through discussion, we help students develop an understanding of the responsibilities of individual members and organizations in any society. Studying the Holocaust in foreign language classes with original materials provides students with the opportunity to develop unique perspectives on this imperative topic and to practice the skills needed to interact effectively in the target language in related contexts.

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APPENDICES:

Appendix 1. Burckhard Garbe: "LEHR REICH"

ERSTES REICH
ZWEITES REICH
DRITTES REICH

DRITTES REICHT

Appendix 2. Rudolf Otto Wiemer: "unbestimmte zahlwörter"

alle haben gewußt
viele haben gewußt
manche haben gewußt
einige haben gewußt
ein paar haben gewußt
wenige haben gewußt
keiner hat gewußt

Appendix 3. Paul Celan: "Todesfuge "

Schwarze Milche der Frühe wir trinken
sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir
trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da
liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit
den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach
Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und
es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift seine
Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt
schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken
dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir
trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit
den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach
Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir
schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da
liegt man nicht eng
Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken
dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein
Meister aus Deutschland
wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir
trinken und trinken
der Tod ein ein Meister aus Deutschland
sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft
dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes
Haar Margarete

er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt
uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumt
der Tod ist ein Meister aus
Deutschland
dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

Appendix 4. Bertold Brecht: "Maßnahmen gegen die Gewalt"

Als Herr Keuner, der Denkende, sich in
einem Saale vor vielen gegen die
Gewalt aussprach, merkte er, wie die
Leute vor ihm zurückwichen und weggingen.
Er blickte um sich und sah hinter
sich stehen — die Gewalt.

"Was sagtest du?" fragte ihn die Gewalt.
"Ich sprach mich für die Gewalt aus",
antwortete Herr Keuner.

Als Herr Keuner weggegangen war,
fragten seine Schüler nach seinem
Rückgrat. Herr Keuner antwortete: "Ich
habe kein Rückgrat zum Zerschlagen.
Gerade ich muß länger leben als die
Gewalt."

Und Herr Keuner erzählte folgende
Geschichte:

In die Wohnung des Herrn Egge, der gelernt
hatte, nein zu sagen, kam eines
Tages in der Zeit der Illegalität ein Agent,
der zeigte einen Schein vor, welcher
gestellt war im Namen derer, die die
Stadt beherrschten, und auf dem stand,
daß ihm gehören solle jede Wohnung, in
die er seinen Fuß setzte; ebenso sollte
ihm auch jedes Essen gehören, das er
verlange; ebenso sollte ihm auch jeder
Mann dienen, den er sähe.

Der Agent setzte sich in einem Stuhl,
verlangte Essen, wusch sich, legte sich
nieder und fragte mit dem Gesicht zur
Wand vor dem Einschlafen: "Wirst du mir
dienen?"

Herr Egge deckte ihn mit einer Decke
zu, vertrieb die Fliegen, bewachte
seinen Schlaf, und wie an diesem Tage
gehörte er ihm sieben Jahre lang.
Aber was immer er für ihn tat, eines zu
tun hütete er sich wohl: das war, ein
Wort zu sagen. Als nun die sieben Jahre
herum waren und der Agent dick geworden
war vom vielen Essen, Schlafen und
Befehlen, starb der Agent. Da wickelte
ihn Herr Egge in die verdorbene Decke,
schleifte ihn aus dem Haus, wusch das
Lager, tünchte die Wände, atmete auf
und antwortete: "Nein."

Appendix 5. Primo Levi:

“ Se questo è un uomo”

Voi che vivete sicuri
Nelle vostre tiepide case,
Voi che trovate tornando a sera
Il cibo caldo e visi amici:
Considerate se questo è un uomo
Che lavora nel fango
Che non conosce pace
Che lotta per mezzo pane
Che muore per un sì o per un no.
Considerate se questa è una donna,
Senza capelli e senza nome
Senza più forza di ricordare
Vuoti gli occhi e freddo il grembo
Come una rana d'inverno.
Meditate che questo è stato:
Vi comando queste parole.
Scolpitele nel vostro cuore
Stando in casa andando per via,
Coricandovi alzandovi;
Ripetetele ai vostri figli.
O vi si sfaccia la casa,
La malattia vi impedisca,
I vostri nati torcano il viso da voi.

Appendix 6. M. Gebirtig: “Es brent”

Es brent brider es brent,
S'ken cholile kumen der moment.
Ven dos shtetl mit aich tzuzamen
zol avek mit ash und flamen
Blaibn zol a puster shiad
shvartze puste vent.
Un ihr shteit un kukt azoi zich
mit farleigte hent.
Un ihr shteit un kukt azoi zich
vie unzer shtetl brent.
Es brent brider es brent.
Dos iz nor in aich alein gevendt.
Ven dos shtetl iz aichtaier
nemt die keilim lesht dos faier,
Lesht mit aier eign blut
bavaist vos ihr kent.
Shteit nit brider ot azoi zich
mit farleigte hent.
Shteit nit brider un kukt azoi zich .

It burns:

It burns, brothers, it burns.
The time of anguish—God forbid—now
churns
When the village and you in one blow
Turns to ashes, to flames all aglow.
Nothing will remain at all—
Just a blackened wall—
And you look and you stand,
At burned village and land.
It burns, brothers, it burns,
To you alone this agony turns.
If you love your town, its name,
Take the vessel, quench the flame.
Quench it with your own blood too:
Show what you can do.
Brothers, do not look and stand,
Each with folded hand.
Brothers, do not look and stand
While town burns and land.