

Kansagor and Shenkus / A Legacy of Redefined Womanhood

Rationale and Goals

Women's experiences during the Holocaust were both unique to the period and specific to women. In the camps, many women strove to maintain their familiar roles as mothers, nurturers, and caretakers. In this unit, students will focus on writings by or about women in the Holocaust, writings that recount both the humanity and the inhumanity within the camps.

A primary objective is for students to better understand the unique experiences of individual women and, at the same time, the universality of experiences for women in the Holocaust. The authors and texts for this unit are: Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*, in particular her prose poetry from *None of Us Will Return*; Ruth Elias's *Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel*; and "Taut As A String" from Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*.

The first major question to be addressed utilizes readings from Delbo: What does Charlotte Delbo say about sisterhood in the camps and the seemingly natural role women played as nurturers? Delbo was a non-Jewish political prisoner. She was on tour with a theatrical group in South America in 1940 when the Germans occupied France, her native country. She decided to return home and join her husband. They edited and produced anti-German leaflets and were arrested by the Gestapo. Her husband was executed, and she was one of 230 French women, most of them non-Jewish, sent to Auschwitz; only 49 returned. Delbo reveals her suffering as a woman and her empathy for both the Jewish and the non-Jewish women subjected to the horrors of Auschwitz. In vignettes, poems, and prose poems, Delbo effectively employs

language to describe and communicate the indescribable and unfathomable conditions there.

The second question involves the role of women as mothers and the impossibility of giving birth to and then protecting and raising an infant in a concentration camp: How does Ruth Elias face the challenge of hiding her pregnancy, giving birth and becoming a mother who must make the “choiceless choice” that this situation has engendered – to take the life of her own child? Elias recounts her marriage, her pregnancy and the collaboration of the fellow prisoners who helped her through her ordeals. She relates her infant’s birth and the “help” she received from a female Jewish doctor, also a prisoner, who presented her with the means to save her own life but with a devastating “choiceless choice.” Elias wrenchingly explains the moments surrounding this “choice” concerning her baby – a decision faced by many women in the Holocaust. The author gives words to this traumatic event stirring the reader to empathize with women robbed of motherhood in unbelievably cruel circumstances.

The third question deals with women as mothers: How did women, as mothers and nurturers, often form a sisterhood to save, protect, and hide young children in the midst of constant danger? Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s work tells of Karola, a nurse, and her fellow women inmates and their efforts to save Karola’s thirteen year old daughter and five year old son. Putting themselves at risk of execution, the women band together to nurture, protect, and save the children in a dangerous, frightening situation. This piece explores the simple desire to be a mother at an incredibly difficult time and the women’s instinct to protect the young at any cost.

This unit will be taught in a semester course and will address sisterhood in the camps, women deprived of motherhood, and women as mothers and nurturers in the camps. Questions, activities, essays, and presentations will be utilized to explore these issues. The unit is designed for eleventh and twelfth grade students, and it covers approximately a three to four week time period. It is primarily geared toward an English, humanities or social studies class. New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards are included from both Language Arts Literacy and Social Studies. Because the unit is designed for Grades 11 and 12, the standards are cited from those to be accomplished by the end of Grade 12. It is designed to elicit further research and readings by the students about women in the Holocaust; if time permits, this research can be incorporated into the class. Additional overall activities and projects are included to allow students to pursue topics of interest to them based on the material in this unit.