

Lesson
Duration:
Two 50-minute class periods

Read and Reflect: Survival in Alice Ehrmann's Diary

Learning Objectives

In this lesson students will read an entry from Alice Ehrmann's diary in which she writes about the responsibility of bearing witness (literally, to the remains of the dead and, metaphorically, for the crimes committed at large by the Nazis) and the personal and collective human cost of surviving the German occupation. Through this diary entry, students will reflect upon their overall understanding of the Holocaust and the social and moral questions that remain in its aftermath.

Educators and students are encouraged to read the introduction to Alice Ehrmann's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 395–403. It provides valuable information about the writer's life and a historical context for a reading of the diary.

Overview

This lesson was initially drafted by Holocaust educator Bonnie Sussman.

Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* Core diary entries from *Salvaged Pages* used in this lesson:
[Alice Ehrmann, November 1, 1944.](#)

Nazi brutality forever altered and, in many cases, permanently damaged individual lives. The trauma of war and genocide shaped the future of Jewish communities in Europe and around the world, and altered European civilization itself. As the tide of war shifted and it became clear that the Germans would lose the war, some diarists like Alice Ehrmann began to consider what "life after" might be like. They grappled not only with the big picture of decimated communities throughout Europe but also the more personal issue of rebuilding a life facing the conflicting emotions that this prospect entailed.

Focus Questions

For those who survive mass atrocities and genocide, the lingering effects of the violence they endured does not end when nations surrender. Even when war is officially declared ended and treaties are signed, the survivors endure the legacy of this trauma throughout their lives.

- What challenges, dilemmas, and fears might survivors from the Holocaust confront in the aftermath of the war? How might they understand or view the world and humanity differently after surviving?
- Does studying the Holocaust or other genocides influence the way we think about humanity, even if we were not alive at the time? What information or insights might you take from your examination of this history and these writings?
- How do the writings of those who experienced this history contribute to our understanding of it?

Activities

Opener: Reflection on Diaries from the Holocaust

Begin by asking students to respond to the following questions in writing:

- What challenges, dilemmas, and fears might these survivors confront in the aftermath of the war?
- How might they understand or view the world and humanity differently after surviving? Are there writers or diary entries that you recall that express and support your answer? If so, how?

Main Activity: Close Reading

Following a close reading process is one way to help students of all abilities engage with diary entries, understand the complexity of the content and its emotional weight. As the term is used in many state standards, *close reading* allows students to purposefully and slowly reread text to deepen their comprehension. They can focus their attention on the meaning of the individual words and sentences. They can also pay attention to the overall development of events and ideas.

Close reading usually includes text-dependent questions that call on students to analyze the text in order to draw meaningful conclusions and find real evidence. This sort of careful attention to the text allows students to synthesize their learning. They also gain important content knowledge. Then they can communicate their understanding to their peers or an outside audience.

The following steps can be used (and adapted) to facilitate the close reading:

1. As a First Read, read aloud [Alice Ehrmann's Diary Entry Envisioning Life after the Holocaust, November 1, 1944](#). Have students underline any unfamiliar words and discuss the passage as a class.
2. Have students complete their individual reads and circle passages in which Alice expresses her thoughts and feelings on surviving.

Next, have students answer the following text-dependent questions:

1. What questions does Alice pose in this entry? From the text, what do you feel she is seeking to answer.
2. How do you understand her use of the term *witness*?
3. What can you infer or interpret from her inclusion of other literary and biblical references?

Assessment

Assessment: Reflective Essay

Ask students to address the following question in a short essay. Students can draw from the diary of Alice Ehrmann as well as other diarists studied from *Salvaged Pages* to support their thesis.

- Does studying the Holocaust or other genocides influence the way we think about humanity, even if we were not alive at the time? How do the writings of those who experienced this history contribute to our understanding of it?

Extensions

Deeper Exploration: The Musy Train

Alice Ehrmann wrote on February 3, 1945:

A transport to Switzerland has been planned for Monday, February 5, twelve hundred people. There are a thousand versions: Danes and Dutch. Whole families, people up to twenty-five years, people whose families haven't been taken away, and so on. Those who are not eligible for these transports include those who are important for the ghetto and those for whom there has been an appeal based on family kinship. Who can survive this range of feelings that coursed through us a thousand times during these hours?¹

This entry speaks to another element of survival—the emotional and psychological aspects of witnessing others leave Terezin. This transport that Alice references, often referred to today as the Musy Train, is a little known chapter in the history of the Holocaust.

In February 1945 a negotiated agreement was made to rescue 1,200 Jews from Theresienstadt and transport them to Switzerland. To learn about this mission, choose any photograph from this [gallery of images from the Musy Train](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and read the accompanying summary.

Discuss:

- What was the Musy Train? How does this example complicate our understanding of survival and the relationship between survival and rescue?
- What story do the images collected from this mission tell us?
- What can you infer from Alice's last question in her February 3, 1945, entry?
- Compare the emotional tone of Alice's November 1, 1944, entry with her February 3, 1945, entry. What is similar? What are the noticeable differences?

Citations

1 Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 408–409.