

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

## Read and Reflect: Hope and Despair

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### Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will consider the theme of hope and despair by comparing diary entries from three writers: Yitskhok Rudashevski writing in the Vilna ghetto, Miriam Korber writing in Transnistria, Ukraine, and Elsa Binder writing in the Stanisławów ghetto.

### Overview

This lesson was drafted by Holocaust educators Lisa Bauman and Colleen Tambuscio.

**Core diary entires from Salvaged Pages used in this lesson:** Yitskhoh Rudashevski: [December 10, 1942](#); Miriam Korber: [December 26, 1941](#) and [October 10, 1943](#); Elsa Binder: [December 31, 1941](#) and [January 30, 1942](#)

All those living under Nazi oppression struggled at one time or another to maintain their hope in survival in the face of despair. With so little control over their destinies, it was often their immediate circumstances—news of the Allied advances, the quality and amount of a food ration, the weather, or their treatment at the hands of the Germans—that dictated their states of mind. Sometimes, acts of self-determination, such as study or prayer, could bolster a sense of hope in the future. Other times, deprivation, illness, loss, and hunger were too much to bear. This ongoing vacillation between hope and despair is a pervasive theme throughout young writers' Holocaust diaries.

### Focus Questions

During the Holocaust, some human beings found the capacity to hope. Many who did, also experienced despair. Sometimes, they expressed a sense of loss at the same time that they affirmed their hope for the future. In any time of crisis, individuals can vacillate between optimism and hope for the desired outcome, and pessimism or the fear that things will end badly. Often, it is not only the facts of the situation that shape the way events are interpreted but also individuals' personalities, histories, and circumstances.

- Consider hope and despair as two sides of the same coin. How do they relate to each other?
- What roles do hope and despair play during difficult times, war, and atrocity
- What makes hope and despair fluctuate. or one of them prevail? Can we control the balance between these two emotions in a crisis situation?

## Activities

### Opener: Visual Analysis

Have students view "[Jewish Man Being Terrorized in the Vilna Ghetto](#)" below. Have students discuss the following questions:

- What do they see in this image?
- What emotions or reactions does it evoke?
- Based on the visual evidence, as well as your knowledge of the history, how do you interpret what is going on? What questions remain?
- How may this photograph relate to themes of hope and despair?

### Main Activity: Reflecting on the Experience of Hope and Despair

Read aloud [Yitskhok Rudashevski's Diary Entry on Life in the Vilna Ghetto, December 10, 1942](#). Ask students to underline where they hear expressions of both hope and despair within the entry.

Read aloud [Miriam Korber's Diary Entry on Life in Transnistria, December 26, 1941](#) and [Miriam Korber's Diary Entry on Survival in Transnistria, October 10, 1943](#). Ask students to underline where they hear expressions of both hope and of despair within these entries.

Read aloud [Elsa Binder's Diary Entries on Fear, Hope, and Despair in the Stanisławów Ghetto](#). Ask students to underline where they hear expressions of both hope and despair within these entries. Invite students to share their choices in pairs or in small groups.

After discussing their reflections from the diaries, facilitate a class discussion about the following ideas. You might also decide to ask students to write responses to the questions.

- Consider hope and despair as two sides of the same coin. Can hope exist without despair and vice versa? Where did they read evidence of this within the experiences of these writers? What sentences reveal this process?
- In what circumstances might a person vacillate between these two emotions? How might we shape the facts around us to convince ourselves of one reality or the other? Did they read evidence of this in the diaries?
- Is hope ever foolish? Is despair ever useful? Is there a point of struggling to find hope in terrible circumstances?

## Assessment

### Assessment: Reflective Essay on Hope and Despair

Begin by having students read the following passage from the Introduction to *Salvaged Pages*:

[T]hough many diarists expressed hope at one time or another in their diaries, the words they wrote do not give us, as readers, final answers to the questions we must ask ourselves after

genocide. While their words—positive and negative, hopeful and despairing, encouraged and resigned—give rise to meditation about what they endured, it's unfortunately up to us to assess this past in the full context of history, judging humanity's crimes by a critical review of the pasts, not by the world-be absolution or the condemnation of its victims. And though it is tempting to find in the survival of these diaries a core that transcends the evil that gave rise to them, they nevertheless do not redeem humanity for that evil, nor do they celebrate a vaguely articulated "human spirit," which is slanted to include only the saints and not the sinners.

There are many fragments from history that can be regarded as evidence of humanity's achievements and its progress; these diaries unfortunately do not fall into that category. For they were not created in celebration of beauty or in praise of progress but were produced in response to an overwhelming evil that threatened to engulf their writers. No praise for the writer of a diary can undo the fact that the task was undertaken in the context of annihilation, and that the diary is a cry to hold on to a place in the world in the face of erasure. No celebration of the courage or grace of the writer's gesture can cover up the human fallibility and frailty that is captured within the diary's pages. And no glorification of the diary (as the vehicle by which we are reminded of the "noble," "triumphant," and "indestructible" human spirit that we, by implication, share with the diarist) can alter what these diaries represent. At best, for the survivors, they are a record of years denied; at worst, for the perished, they are all that is left from a single life that ended in brutality. It is fair to allow the historical fragments that represent humanity's greatest successes to be treasured and cherished; it is also only fair to allow the remnants from genocide to serve not as a consolation or a comfort, but as a censure and a warning.<sup>1</sup>

After reading this passage, assign the following paper:

Write an essay exploring the theme of hope and despair as understood through three diaries included in this lesson. You may draw upon any of the entries as well as the Introduction in *Salvaged Pages* to support your thesis.

## Citations

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 9–10.