Letter to a Holocaust Survivor

**Concept(s)** Historical Significance

**Prepared for Grade(s)** 11

**Province** BC

**By** Tom Morton

**Time Period(s)** 1900-present

**Time allotment** two periods for culminating task; more for the whole unit

**Brief Description of the Task**

This task is the culminating one for a unit on the Holocaust. Students write a letter of appreciation to one or several Holocaust survivors whose testimony is on the Open Hearts, Closed Doors: War Orphans Project web site. In doing this, they also reflect on why the survivors' experience is historically significant using the criterion of revealing.

**Objectives**

Students will be able to establish historical significance based on the criteria of revealing: the event/person sheds light on enduring issues in history and contemporary life

**Required Knowledge & Skills**

general knowledge of the Holocaust

**Detailed Instructions**

This task was originally designed for a letter of thanks to a Holocaust survivor who visited my classroom and has been rewritten for use of the Open Hearts, Closed Doors: War Orphans Project web site, <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/orphelins-orphans/english/> in English and <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/orphelins-orphans/french/> in French. For this site, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre has interviewed eight orphans who survived and came to Canada after World War II, provided background and reproductions of various artefacts from each of the survivors as well as given additional resources such as a timeline on 20th century immigration to Canada and a teacher's guide that can be downloaded.

The letter is intended to be the culminating task for a unit on the Holocaust. The lesson procedure assumes that the students have some prior understanding of the criteria for determining historical significance. When considering historical significance, students find it easiest to use the criterion of resulting in change. In this case, the death of six million is quite a clear example. However, how the Holocaust is revealing of the past and of contemporary issues, the second criterion, is more challenging.

1. Introduce the unit with an essential question as a guide. The question related to historical significance might be "If most people alive in Canada have no experience of World War II and even less of the Holocaust, why are there so many books, movies and monuments about these events?"

Refer to this question often as the unit progresses, possibly posting it on the board. Check for student understanding periodically.

At some point – at the beginning of the unit or early on – introduce the task of reading an account of a surviving orphan and writing a thank you letter.

2. The primary sources featured in the Open Hearts, Closed Doors site could be used to introduce the unit and the task. The home page has a list of themes on the left hand side and pictures of the orphan survivors at the top. If one clicks on either one of these, there are photographs with accompanying stories. The stories are hidden, however, until the cursor is moved over it. This allows the teacher to project the photograph and ask students to study it before showing them the context. (This could also be used to explore the concept of evidence.)

For example, if one opens the theme of the Holocaust on the left hand side, there is a photo of a cloth Star of David belonging to Delia Van Haren as a young woman in Gorinchem, Holland. The accompanying story explains how she had to wear it sewn onto her clothes even on her wedding day. She goes on to say that of the twenty-three Jewish families in her town before the war, she was one of only three to survive.

Another photograph accompanies the interview with Mariette Rozen, a woman who impressed my students and me very much when she spoke at our school. This photograph shows her in a room with other young girls in an orphanage in Europe after the war. She has her palms together as if she were praying, the only girl doing so. The caption explains that this is because she had been trained to do so by nuns who were protecting her by having her pretend to be Christian.

Once students have explored the meaning of these artefacts and their context, make the links to the unit, for example, why would anyone insist that you wear a symbol of your religion? Why would one need to hide one's religion? Why did the Nazis want to kill children? Why are these events so significant that almost seventy years later people still study the meaning of this time and commemorate the dead? Which is repeating the essential question.

3. Once students have enough background knowledge, review with them the letter writing task and the criteria of revealing. The lives of these survivors might be significant because they inform us about the Holocaust and they might be revealing because they help us understand ongoing issues, problems and events today. Read with students the handout Letter to a Survivor and discuss the assignment's requirements.

4. Distribute to students Chart 1 and Chart 2 on possible topics about which the testimony might reveal something to us . Ask them to read one or more of the testimonies on the web site and complete the chart.

For further scaffolding, you may wish to have all students read one particular survivor's account, discuss what it reveals as a whole class and then ask students to do another on their own.

Discuss their answers as a class or in small groups.

5. An optional step in this lesson would be to use the co-operative learning structure Corners to help students explore further what the Holocaust reveals to us today, the substance of Chart 2. For Corners students are given four choices. In this case, they could be as follows:

a. we are obliged to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust and fight against all forms of racism today;

b. we can learn lessons from the Holocaust perhaps about the dangers of racism or about the importance of standing up to a bully;

c. the Holocaust was an extreme case, a long time ago in a foreign land so it has little relevance to us today in modern Canada;

d. the events of the Holocaust can help us understand today, for example, how social pressure can lead ordinary people to do horrible things to other ethnic groups, but we need to consider how modern Canada is different, for example, we are not in an economic depression as Germany was and racism is generally unacceptable.

The Teacher places a sign with each of these choices or corresponding letters in a different corner of the room. Students chose one of these options and move to the corresponding corner. They team with a partner to share their reasons and then share these with the class. An additional valuable twist is to ask some students to paraphrase what is said.

As the handout Letter to a Survivor explains, the question of what one can learn from the Holocaust is hard to answer. In her book Extraordinary Evil: A Brief History of Genocide… and Why It Matters (2007), Barbara Colorosso argues that "It is a short walk from bullying to hate crimes to genocide…." However, Gerald Caplan, the author of several books on Rwanda and genocides, in a review of Colorosso's book writes that "much of the genocidal killing is carried out by ordinary people who are temporarily persuaded to commit crimes that they would have thought themselves incapable of only hours before. They weren't schoolyard bullies; they were you and me."

6. When students have completed their charts, introduce the model for writing a formal letter and explain the rubric.

You may also wish to refer students to exemplars of student work attached to this task.

7. I generally have students complete a first draft that they peer edit before asking them to submit two copies, one for mailing and the other for marking.

In addition to this site and its downloadable teacher's guide, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre <http://www.vhec.org/> has a rich collection of other relevant materials for loan or purchase. Particularly suitable for the use of evidence would be the "Discovery" kits, collections of reproductions of artefacts, and "Too Close to Home," a collection of photographs and print documents on fascism and prejudice in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s against Jews and other minorities.

**Outcomes**

– assess Canada's role in World War II and the war's impact on Canada

– assess Canada's participation in world affairs with reference to human rights

– assess the development and impact of... programs related to immigration....