

# *Holocaust Teacher Training Program in U.S.*

POLIN  
MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY  
OF POLISH JEWS



Embassy of the United States of America

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**ABOUT THE PROGRAM** For over a decade, the U.S. Department of State, in cooperation with the Association of Holocaust Organizations (AHO) in New York, has helped organize summer teacher-training programs in the United States to foster Holocaust education. To date, this initiative has brought over 250 teachers from approximately thirteen countries to U.S. Holocaust-related institutions for training seminars. Since 2002, almost a hundred Polish teachers have taken part in the program.

The program is worthwhile in that it offers the opportunity to meet teachers from various countries (including American ones) and to gain new perspectives on the challenges of teaching the history of the Holocaust.

**WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?** The program involves five days of intensive work – lectures, workshops and discussions. Before the actual course, participants receive a set of materials to read. They should be studied carefully, because they are strictly connected with the program. Each participant needs to prepare a presentation about themselves and their work. The opportunity to present one's achievements in front of an international group has been a valuable experience for the participants.

All activities are carried out in English. Therefore, the participants are required to be able to communicate in English, disregard possible mistakes and take an active part in all of the discussions.

For most participants, meeting Holocaust Survivors is a very moving experience. It is a unique opportunity to talk to a witness of history, listen to his/her story and what message it reveals. Such meetings give participants strong motivation for their future work and shown them how important that work is – especially as injustice and human rights violations are still present in the world.

**FOR WHOM?** The program is aimed at secondary school teachers (middle or high school) of social studies or literature who want to improve their professional skills and learn new methods for educating about the Holocaust. Other professionals, especially educators and methodologists, may also apply and are occasionally invited to take part in the program.

**RECRUITMENT** Recruitment to the program is divided into two stages. Having assessed the applications, the recruitment committee chooses a group of candidates, who are invited for interviews. These interviews are led by representatives of the U.S. Embassy. The conversation relates to the candidate's work and activities as described in their application, and is conducted in English.

Each year there are about 100 applications but only a few people (4-5) from Poland are invited to take part in the program. However, please do not be put off by these statistics, some candidates are accepted after applying for several years and having built up their resumes with new teaching experience.

*In June 2012, I took part in The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous Summer Institute for Teachers at Columbia University in New York City.*

*The participants of the Summer Institute were mostly American teachers. Europe was represented by educators from Croatia and Poland. There were teachers coming from all over the United States, from big cities and small communities, working at different kinds of schools, they represented the whole diversity of the American education system. And this diversity proved to be one of the biggest advantages of the course. It revealed itself over and over again during classes and our private after-class conversations. For teachers coming from Europe, where many countries have centralized education systems, the American system can be a big surprise and provokes many questions.*

*From the very beginning of the classes it was apparent how the diversity of American society – ethnic, religious, economic – affects the teaching of social studies and how this teaching is used to affect and shape the society. For U.S. educators this comment would seem obvious, not very revealing, but for a teacher*

*coming from a country as homogeneous as Poland it can be a truly mind-opening experience.*

*As for the ways of teaching the Holocaust, there were even more things to be discovered. In most cases, the number of teaching hours the American teachers have to cover Holocaust topics is significantly more than the time we have in the Polish system. It varies from a few weeks to the whole term, in America. Their Holocaust teaching is also much more interdisciplinary, trying to find a balance between both knowledge-focused teaching and methods encouraging reflection and discussion on ethical, sociological or even psychological issues. I remember hearing about classes analyzing the way the contemporary media uses Holocaust symbols and associations for purposes unrelated to promoting awareness of the Holocaust. Other classes I found inspiring discussed the usage of children's diaries of the Holocaust while teaching (to mention only two of the many interesting topics).*

*The overall level of activities at the Summer Institute was academic. Most of the persons running classes were professional lecturers coming from renowned American universities. We had 45 contact hours of content-packed and intensive regular classes (not to mention the evenings we spent together sightseeing and constantly talking). The organizational solutions and logistics of the program left me with no objections. All of the participants were well introduced beforehand to the overall concept of the Summer Institute. As we had been sent and kindly asked to read a huge packet prior to coming to New York.*

*We felt welcomed and very well taken care of while attending classes at the Ivy League university and being accommodated in the Columbia dorms seemed a treat in itself.*

*Apart from a tremendous heat wave which struck New York during the time of my stay, I left the course with very positive impressions and a lot to think about.*

Honorata Michalak, Łódź

*I've been interested in the topic of the Holocaust for a long time. I took part in several training courses in Poland, Germany and France. I was really looking forward to lectures by the authors of the books I had read; there were so many questions I wanted to ask them. I was also interested in American teachers' methods of teaching about the Holocaust. I wanted to exchange experiences, and to meet new people. Those were the 5 most interesting days of my professional life.*

Anna Hawlena Drożdżak, Karków

*For me, it was a unique form of reward for my activities in the field of Holocaust education. I felt truly appreciated as a person and a provincial school teacher. American teachers have learned about my school!*

Renata Gryz, Mińsk Mazowiecki

*Teachers who work in villages and smaller towns will benefit the most from the program, since Polish-Jewish relations are still a difficult subject in those places. The opportunity to make this trip and meet other teachers has a fortifying effect and may help in solving some problems and difficulties in our daily work.*

Błażej Grabusiewicz, Gdynia

*Taking part in the program was a reward of sorts for my activities to date, but in fact it came to be the beginning of a large change in my life. I decided to enroll in postgraduate studies and write a doctoral thesis on the subject of Holocaust education. I decided to get involved in activities devoted not only to the remembrance of the Holocaust victims but to the life of Jews, their cultural inheritance and our common history.*

Katarzyna Łaziuk, Mińsk Mazowiecki

**HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN THE U.S.** The first information concerning teaching about the Holocaust in the United States can be found in the Act of 10 March 1949 issued by the House of Representatives of the United States of America. Subsequent amendments have been added in order to give more detailed recommendations regarding education in this area. The latest instructions were introduced in June 2014 (Act 70, 2014). The document includes general recommendations relating to education on human rights, with the stress put on making students understand the consequences of discrimination, oppression and intolerance. Furthermore, it endorses that priority should be given to the Holocaust, genocide, and breaking human rights.

Educational policy is the responsibility of individual states which can adopt the general recommendations of the aforementioned federal regulations. Obligatory education on the Holocaust has been introduced in the following 7 states: California, New York, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois, Michigan, Rhode Island. In 2017, they will be joined by Pennsylvania. Ten other states have passed general regulations regarding Holocaust education in schools: Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Washington.

Twelve states (Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia) designated special committees to enhance Holocaust education. Including this subject-matter in the curriculum is the task of state legislature or the directors of particular didactic institutions. In California and New York, the State Boards of Education issued official documents with general recommendations for schools. In Florida and New Jersey, the State Boards of Education formed a detailed curriculum with instructions for schools and teachers. In forty-eight states and the District of Columbia the standardized curriculum

for social studies includes the history of the Holocaust. Schools are obliged by state law to follow those standards, and the standardized tests are based on them.

**GENERAL PURPOSE OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION** Teaching about the Holocaust enables students to understand the mechanisms of using and abusing administrative power as well as the role and duties of citizens, various organizations and nations as regards the prevention of genocide. Students are taught to understand the consequences of prejudice, racism, antisemitism and stereotyping. The extermination of Jews during World War II shows how a modern state may use its technology and bureaucracy in order to implement a policy of destruction. This knowledge creates a context for teaching about the danger of silence and indifference in the face of oppression. Holocaust education is part of the curricula for social studies, world history, US history, human rights and genocides, English literature, and arts.

**NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND MUSEUMS SUPPORTING HOLOCAUST EDUCATION** The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. is one of the most important and significant places in the United States involved in Holocaust education. Apart from its basic mission, i.e., presenting the permanent exhibition which commemorates and documents the Holocaust, the museum offers several educational activities directed towards various age groups. It also organizes meetings with Survivors, debates on the current world problems, reacts to current manifestations of intolerance and antisemitism, and commemorates other crimes against humanity. The Educational Department of the museum gives instructions to teachers, suggesting 10 rules they should observe while working with students.

*What I found most valuable were the meetings with Survivors. I will remember them till the end of my life. Every day ended with a testimony and talk with a Survivor. I had been looking forward to this part of the program the most, even though the testimonies moved me deeply and caused emotional pain.*

*I think that those meetings have changed me both as a human being and a teacher.*

Katarzyna Matwiejczyk, Sopot

**DEFINING THE TERM "HOLOCAUST"** is the first stipulation of that set of rules. The definition stresses the point that the goal of the Holocaust – organized and promoted by Nazi Germany and its collaborators – was to completely exterminate European Jews. Other victims included Romani, Poles, handicapped people, homosexuals, Jehova's Witnesses, Soviet war prisoners, and political dissidents.

Suggestion no. 2 relates to the problem of **MAKING CHOICES**. The Holocaust happened because of particular decisions taken by individuals, groups of people and governments. Analyzing the outcome of those decisions leads to reflections on hu-

man nature and historical events, and teaches critical thinking. The Holocaust – unfortunately – took place but it did not have to.

Suggestion no. 3 is **AVOIDING EASY ANSWERS TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS**. While studying the Holocaust one cannot escape questions about people's attitudes and deeds, and their context. Oversimplification should be avoided, it is better to point out significant details.

**PRECISE AND ADEQUATE LANGUAGE** is extremely important. The complexity of the historical occurrences often leads to generalization or the twisting of actual facts. Paying attention to details and precise definitions is very important in the process of understanding the events. Students should be able to differentiate between discrimination and prejudice or understand various meanings of the word 'resistance'.

Not every German is a Nazi. No nationality should be reduced to a unidimensional definition. **SHOWING HISTORY FROM VARIOUS POINTS OF VIEW DEPENDING ON PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE AND USING SOURCE MATERIALS** is another piece of advice for Holocaust educators. It is recommended that teachers hold a discussion about a particular incident and show it from the

One should **NEVER MAKE COMPARISONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT EXAMPLES OF SUFFERING**. The Holocaust was undoubtedly a horrible crime but the 20th century unfortunately witnessed other cases of genocide.

**DO NOT IDEALIZE HISTORY**. Information presented to pupils should be carefully balanced, neither overstated nor played down. While telling students about people who risked their lives in order to save some victims from Nazi oppression, and pointing out that such attitudes are exemplary and deserve the highest praise and respect, it needs to still be remembered that these occurrences were not very frequent.

**PUTTING EVENTS IN THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT** is another important aspect of Holocaust education. Students should learn about the Holocaust within the context of European history, get to know the events preceding WWII and all of the circumstances that led up to the Holocaust. It would also be useful to include information about the contributions made by Jews to the culture of a given country. Victims should not be perceived merely as victims.

**SHOWING HISTORICAL EVENTS THROUGH INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE** is one more priority for educators. Behind the statistical figures there are real people – grandparents, parents, children. Those numbers from the statistics need be complemented with the voices of those they represent. Memoirs, diaries, and testimonies are invaluable sources of knowledge about people and their experience.

Summer Institute for Teachers – participants in Holocaust Teacher Training organized by The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, Columbia University, New York 2008.  
*Private collection of Bernadeta Mechelewska-Koruba, Katarzyna Matwiejczyk, Sopot*



Participants of 13th Annual Martin & Doris Rosen Summer Symposium “Remembering The Holocaust”, Appalachian State University’s Centre for Judaic, Holocaust and Peace Studies in Boone, NC 2014.  
*Private collection of Piotr Zimoch.*



Participants of Holocaust Teacher Training at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York 2015.  
*Private collection of Renata Gryz.*



**ADEQUATE CHOICE OF MATERIALS** is the last but not least item in our list of “commandments” for teachers. They are the ones that know their students’ needs and sensitivities best. Museum workers agree as to the impropriety of simulation while teaching about the Holocaust. No games with particular roles ascribed to students nor crossword puzzles nor other similar tools should be used when dealing with such a somber and grave subject.

*Working with a team of American teachers allowed me to learn about and from a completely new perspective than the one usually held by Polish teachers. It has been an exceptionally valuable experience.*

Katarzyna Matwiejczyk, Sopot

*Classes lasted from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. They included lectures, workshops, visiting the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, and meetings with Survivors. During breaks we also had a chance to talk to the American participants of the program. After classes, there was enough time left for sightseeing.*

Renata Gryz, Mińsk Mazowiecki

*It was a meeting of people representing different cultures, from various parts of the world, with different historical experiences, yet united by common goals, a similar set of values, and a sense of a mission that needs to be fulfilled. It was a gathering of people whose motto is: “I do care about this world!”*

Anna Hawlena Drożdżak, Kraków

**FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES** is an NGO which belongs among the leaders in the field of Holocaust education. Owing to the extensive resources of this organization teachers can obtain additional educational materials and methodological instruction in their usage. The organization provides substantial support and opportunities to improve one’s professional development through workshops (some online). It propagates innovative teaching methods which integrate knowledge from various fields – history, literature, human rights and ethics- and show the relationship between history and the present.

**USC SHOAH FOUNDATION – THE INSTITUTE FOR VISUAL HISTORY AND EDUCATION** collects testimonies and interviews with Survivors: Jews, homosexuals, Jehova’s Witnesses, liberators and witnesses of liberation, political prisoners, rescuers, Romani and Sinti, victims of eugenics and witnesses of the trials of war criminals. So far the Foundation has collected nearly 53,000 video accounts from 61 countries, in 39 languages. At present, it is the biggest visual testimonies archive in the world. The mission of

the Shoah Foundation is to fight prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry and the suffering that follows them. The Institute and other organizations use the archives in order to create educational tools and programs, in many languages, for recipients all over the world.

One of the most important and extensive programs of the Foundation is **IWITNESS** – an interactive platform which integrates testimony-based education with the development of media literacy skills, thus combining communication and historical competence.

The Core Exhibition of the **MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE – A LIVING MEMORIAL TO THE HOLOCAUST** presents rich and diverse Jewish life in the 20th and 21st centuries – before, during, and after the Holocaust. The museum's aim is to educate about social justice, civic responsibility, and Jewish heritage in the context of modern Jewish history and the Holocaust. The Museum offers a variety of educational programs and resources including online learning for teachers and students.

Another organization worth mentioning is **THE JEWISH FOUNDATION FOR THE RIGHTEOUS**. Apart from its long-term program of financially supporting non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, it carries out educational activities. It takes care of the Righteous' legacy and organizes courses and workshops for teachers from the United States and other countries. They give the participants an opportunity to share their experience in the field of Holocaust education as well as to enrich their knowledge of the history, culture and traditions of Judaism.

The above mentioned organizations have a common goal, that is to improve the quality of Holocaust education and show the relationship between past and present. Teaching about the Holocaust demonstrates how important it is to oppose hatred and promote respect, tolerance and dignity as fundamental human rights.

Even if these institutions provide educational tools and instruction for teachers, they do not provide answers to basic questions: Why? How come? And that is the mission of education – to provoke questions, discussions and analyses. And the final question always remains the same: **WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN IT, NOW THAT YOU KNOW?** (Question of a Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel, included in the USHMM folder)

Katarzyna Łaziuk

*Send your application, fear not, it is definitely worth trying. This experience is absolutely unique!*

Błażej Grabusiewicz, Gdynia

Today 212 organizations are listed in the Association of Holocaust Organizations' (AHO) Directory. Some of these organizations are national in scope and others are regional. Most, however, are local. Some of these local organizations are part of colleges and universities, some are part of Jewish communities, and some are independent. All are engaged in Holocaust education and remembrance; a few also engage in research. In addition, survivor and second generation organizations promote remembrance and research as well. International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance ([www.holocaustremembrance.com](http://www.holocaustremembrance.com), December 2016)

The map presents some of the U.S. Holocaust-related institutions.

**AMONG THEM ARE THOSE VISITED BY POLISH TEACHERS WITHIN THE HOLOCAUST TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM IN YEARS 2002-2016.**

