

## Application Essay

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for the institute. A historian by training, I entered the field of education in a non-traditional fashion. While I always had a personal connection to the Holocaust, my professional involvement began with an internship at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in NYC. It was here that I was able to deliver Holocaust content to urban students in the Philadelphia area. At face value the lived experiences of 21 century Jewish-Americans and African-Americans couldn't seem more different however when we explored the concept of "the other", the similarities became painfully clear. Though my subsequent positions in Holocaust research and investigation did not lean heavily on making these connections, it did plant the seed that would inform my future role as an educator.

I have had the absolute honor to work in a variety of positions within the field of Holocaust studies. Following the internship at MJH, I was selected as a graduate research assistant in the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was here that I began working on multiple projects dedicated to the furtherance of the museum's mission as well as targeted initiatives to provide recompense for the Jewish community. I worked directly with an organization to locate and identify Jewish cemeteries in Austria that were destroyed during the war, either intentionally or due to collateral damage. It was in this capacity that I developed and honed my skills as an image analyst through photographic research. I was able to positively identify a high percentage of the locations I was tasked with leading to these sites being returned to the Jewish community. Due to my acuity in this aspect of investigation I was asked to lead a small group of researchers in an equally daunting yet important project. We were given access to a large portion of the Roman Vishniac collection that had yet to be properly cataloged. A prolific photographer, Vishniac had traveled extensively through central and eastern Europe, capturing Jewish life from the city to the shtetl. The beauty and simplicity of the photos turns decidedly haunting when it becomes apparent that these communities and people would cease to exist within ten years. The challenge we faced was that Vishniac failed to date or provide locations for many of these photos. Using our prior knowledge and access to the photo archives at USHMM, we were able to identify the majority of the images. This collection was subsequently exhibited at the International Center of Photography in NYC. I would go on to work for The Shoah Foundation as a testimony indexer and served as an image acquisition consultant for two Holocaust museums.

Throughout this time, I always maintained a connection to Holocaust education either through teaching at a religious school or working with the museums education department. When I finally transitioned to teaching at a school full-time I had already created several Holocaust lessons and felt well positioned to deliver a comprehensive unit. I have successfully incorporated the content into my curriculum utilizing first person accounts, primary sources, broad theme perspectives on stereotype, exclusion and groupthink, as well as various other prompts and

writing assignments. Despite all this I feel like I am missing so much. The conundrum I have found myself in is: the more I learn, research and process about the Holocaust, the less I seem to be teaching about it. Of course that's not completely accurate however like many of us, I have a room full of books, journal articles and abstracts as well as an external hard drive packed with research that I know I will never be able to present, teach or deliver all of. The short response is, you don't need to. This leads me to the main question I hope to explore through participation in the institute: What do I teach about the Holocaust? This broad inquiry leads to a myriad of other questions, such as, what do I leave out? Should I establish curriculum anchors but rotate smaller lessons each year? Is a thematic approach better when time is limited? Currently I am in my third full year of teaching and I could ask those questions for any of my history classes. The difference with the Holocaust, besides the difficult content, is that a trimester is being devoted to a twelve year period. This has created for me the dilemma of when and where to plumb deep into any given sub-topic. Fortunately, I have been in talks with the language arts department at my school and they are excited and supportive of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching the Holocaust. This added dimension is exactly where I want the curriculum to go, however it will obviously demand collaborative re-working to accommodate the scope and sequence for two courses.

Most of my other questions are concerned with the micro interpretation of the Holocaust. In various capacities my research required me to follow people's lives through different stages and extreme circumstances. Each one had a unique story regardless of how similar they were. Yet despite this, we became comfortable with the overly generalized categories of victim, bystander, perpetrator, rescuer etc. While the overarching question is "How do group labels mischaracterize individuals?", this as well only scratches the surface. While at the Shoah Foundation, I indexed the testimony of a Holocaust survivor who emigrated to Shanghai from Austria in 1938. Though he spoke of some hardship, he never quite saw himself as a survivor and seemed embarrassed to be identified as such, considering the experiences of those who could not leave Europe. I also had the opportunity to research an individual who occupied the space of a victim and perpetrator simultaneously while serving as a kapo in a camp. While one doesn't preclude the other, it begs the question, "Who gets to self-identify and who doesn't?". And are these titles even relevant in an educational setting if we as teachers present the evidence and source material effectively and allow the students to designate? While it may seem too fine a point, this line of questioning goes to the very heart of what I am looking to accomplish at the institute. In my experience students feel boxed in when they are taught the Holocaust. It's as if they think the material is so intense and the experiences so dreadful that to apply the same higher order thinking or questioning of the resources, like we do with every other topic, would be disrespectful. This mindset limits the ability to connect with the material beyond the 'who, what, where, when and why', while the most intriguing and exclusive question is 'how'. How did an enlightened country such as Germany become a genocidal nation? How did ancient simmering resentments turn neighbors into murderers? How did the world willfully turn its back on the atrocities being committed? This year I began using a USHMM resource that analyzes local

newspaper reporting of the Holocaust at the time. Not only was this exercise a great introduction into the uncomfortable realm of Holocaust apathy, it also connected the students on a deeper level based on proximity and familiarity. It is here as well that I will look to the institute for inspiration and guidance in regards to teaching the gray areas of the Holocaust with intentionality.

Looking over my previous application for the institute, my goals and questions haven't changed that much. I bring the willingness to approach Holocaust education with fresh eyes and apply all the new information I hope to receive. What has changed are my abilities to do so. I currently teach 7th and 8th grade social studies at a Jewish day school and while the Holocaust is taught through the Judaics department, the administration is looking to reposition that class into the social studies department and update the curriculum. This shift to the humanities would allow me to work with language arts in creating an intersectional curriculum. Though I have some experience in doing this with US History, the Holocaust presents unique challenges that I feel could be addressed and successfully navigated at the institute. I think the greatest skill I bring from my time working on research projects is the ability to collaborate openly. This required the creation of a safe space which I hope to find at the institute as well. More than just an attendee, my goal is to grow with the institute and to cultivate relationships that grow along with it. The ultimate measurement of success will be how well I instill the importance of empathy, critical thinking and social justice into my students via the Holocaust. This is the lasting legacy that will honor those whose lives we recount in our classrooms.