

The Holocaust: Victims' Voices (Jewish Civilization III)

Spring 2026 Syllabus

Instructor: Jessica Kirzane

Tuesday/Thursday, 9:30-10:50 AM

Location TBD

Office hours: Friday, 11:00-12:00 AM or by appointment, Cobb 501

Course Description:

This course approaches the history of the Holocaust through the literature of witness produced by its victims. Through an examination of a range of sources, primarily literary art (fiction, memoir, poetry) as well as video testimony and visual art, students will consider major concerns in the study of the Holocaust such as representation, authority, memory, testimony, translation and language. Students are advised that these readings will bear witness to human suffering and human cruelty, and they should be prepared to encounter emotionally taxing material. This course is part of the Jewish Civilization sequence, though the earlier two sections of the sequence are not prerequisites for this course.

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Class Materials:

Purchase online or borrow:

Doris L. Bergen, [*War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*](#)

[*In the Shadow of the Holocaust*](#), eds. Harriet Murav and Sasha Senderovich

[*Elie Wisel, Night: A Memoir*](#), translated by Marion Wiesel

All other materials will be made available via Canvas

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Assignments:

Attendance/Participation (20%)

- Students are expected to attend class regularly and to participate in discussion. Absences are excused for family and medical emergencies, scheduling conflicts

with academic or professional obligations, and other situations by approval. Please contact me as soon as possible in any of these cases.

Short assignments (20%): Below I outline a series of shorter assignments that I will ask you to do throughout the semester for 20% of your final grade.

Write-up of a text from the Ringelblum Archives (400-600 words, 100 pts): due 4/23

- Find a primary source that interests you in the Ringelblum Archives. I will demonstrate how to navigate the archives during class. You will receive 0 points for this assignment if you use other means (e.g., Google) to access these primary sources. In 500 words, first describe and then analyze a text from the Ringelblum Archives. This means that you offer an explanation of what you feel can be learned from the text – what dimensions of the historical experience it illuminates, what the document reveals and conceals, the perspective it brings, etc.

Self-reflections (2 pp. each, 100 pts total): self-reflection 1 due 3/31, self-reflection 2 due 5/21

- You will be asked to write two self-reflections. The first reflection (2 pp.) should discuss your previous knowledge of and exposure to Holocaust history, representation, and memory and your impressions regarding how it can (or should be) represented. In the second reflection (2 pp.), you should discuss how this class impacted your knowledge and understanding of Holocaust representation. Be specific: explain how class discussions or particular texts broadened, deepened, or challenged your thinking about the Holocaust. Your writing may be informal in style.

Discussion Questions

By 8pm the day before each class session, please submit two discussion questions about the reading to the appropriate thread in the “discussions” area of Canvas. I may use these questions to help guide our class conversation, or more broadly to inform me about what you think are important moments or ideas in the text.

Final Self-Assessment due 5/27

You will complete a self-assessment (in the form of a short essay or video) in which you will take stock of your performance throughout the quarter and propose a final grade for the class, taking into account the work you did on the final project, your work earlier in the term, your participation in class conversations, how you kept up with the reading, your

conversations with your reading partner, and how you met your own goals. I will take into account this honest assessment of your work and progress as I assign final grades.

Projects (60%; 30% each):

Comparative Analytic Project due 4/9

Choose two texts we have read this quarter and address one of the following questions:

- How do the authors experience and express changes in their experiences of space or time during the Holocaust?
- How does gender impact the author's experience of the Holocaust or the way they write about it?
- What does writing/creating in this genre or form allow the author to express, or how does this genre or form shape the way the authors express themselves?

You can answer the question in one of the following ways:

- A 7-10 page paper, with in-text citations, 12 pt font. If you do this you must sign an honor pledge that AI was not used in the writing of this paper.
- A reading journal with quotes from each text and reflections on the quotes (3-4 quotes per text) followed by a 1-2 page reflection essay on what you learned from this process.
- A one-on-one meeting with me in my office, in which you will present your ideas (you can bring notecards) and then I will ask you follow-up questions. You are responsible for scheduling this meeting at least a week before the deadline for this assignment.

Public Facing Resource due 5/27

You will be asked to create a public-facing resource to help an audience read something we have read for class. The resource will include the following:

A one-paragraph description of your intended audience and how your guide will address their needs or interests in particular (college students in a Jewish studies context, teenage learners in a public school, students of global genocide, etc)

An introductory essay (1-2 pages) in which you offer biographical information about the author and some historical context for the document. You should use outside

resources for this introduction, and you must cite every resource that you use. Acceptable resources include: Academic books and articles and websites from Holocaust museums or other public-facing recognized historical institutions. If you are unsure about the provenance of your information, DO NOT use it.

A description of the document itself, including an explanation of the type of text (memoir, fiction, poetry, diary, etc). You may wish to include a content warning.

5-10 discussion questions to help readers think about important issues in the text. These questions can be comprehension questions, personalization questions (ie., how does this text make you feel?), or interpretive questions (ie., what is the effect of the author's phrasing this sentence in this way?)

You may also want to include: a glossary, creative writing prompts, suggestions for further reading, etc.

Late Assignments

Papers are due on the dates noted on the syllabus. I know that life happens, so I offer a one week grace period, no questions asked (with the exception of the final assignment which may not be late due to university grading deadlines). After this, late papers may be penalized one step (A to A-, B to B-) for every 24 hours of tardiness.

Office Hours

Please come to my office hours in Cobb 501 (or set up a virtual appointment) so that I can get to know more about your interests. If there is a concern you wish to bring to my attention, either about the course or about something in your life that is affecting your performance, you are encouraged to visit with me as soon as possible.

Inclusivity Statement

In this course, it is my goal to enable an inclusive learning environment that welcomes the contributions of each student and is attuned to the individual needs and circumstances of each student. To that end, if there are ways that you believe I can improve the learning environment to make learning more effective and inclusive for you and your fellow students, I invite you to come to office hours to discuss your concerns.

Your success in this class is important to me. If the set-up of our learning environment or activities present any barriers to your full participation, please let me know as soon as possible, and together we'll develop strategies to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course. To this end, I invite you to discuss accessibility measures with me as soon as possible. I promise to maintain the confidentiality of these discussions.

If you have a documented disability, I encourage you to register with Student Disability Services. If you need official accommodations, you have a right to have these met. Here is their contact information:

Address: 5501 S. Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Phone: (773) 702-6000

Email: disabilities@uchicago.edu

<https://disabilities.uchicago.edu/>

Disclosure of disability status is always up to you, and that choice is protected by federal law. If you prefer not to disclose your disability status, we can still have a productive conversation about what specific adjustments might make our meetings and interactions more accessible.

A Note About Reading

On average, I would anticipate the need to allot at least three hours per class session to reading and preparation. You are expected to make your best effort to thoughtfully engage with the reading ahead of time. You should take notes (whether marginal or in a separate notebook), keep track of personal and place names, look up unfamiliar words, mark interesting passages, etc. You are required to have access to all assigned readings at each meeting – this can be a printed document or a pdf that is already open on a device. Class meetings will be devoted primarily to discussion. In order for these discussions to succeed, you will need to do the reading in a timely manner.

Academic Integrity

Submitting someone else's words or ideas as your own is dishonest, as well as counterproductive to learning and inquiry. Proper acknowledgement of others' ideas is expected. Poor student work is much preferred to presenting the stolen ideas or words of others. If I determine that plagiarism has occurred, I will have a conversation with you and with the university administration to determine the most appropriate course of action. Please be advised that plagiarism may result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any questions about the correct ways to cite sources and acknowledge intellectual debts, please write to me or see me in office hours. **AI POLICY:** Since writing, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course, all writing assignments should be prepared by the student alone. If you choose to use AI, please do so only in ways that do not hinder these goals (you must generate your own ideas, but you may use AI for revising spelling, punctuation, and grammar). Fully AI-generated submissions are not permitted and will be treated as plagiarism. If you choose to use AI tools, please include a brief statement that explains how you used them.

A Note on About Sexual Misconduct

Our school is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. Title IX and our school policy prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Sexual misconduct — including harassment, domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking — is also prohibited at our school.

As a teacher, I am required by our school to report incidents of sexual misconduct and thus cannot guarantee confidentiality. If you speak to me about sexual misconduct you have experienced, I am required to provide our Title IX coordinator with relevant details such as the names of those involved in the incident.

Our school encourages anyone experiencing sexual misconduct to talk to someone about what happened, so they can get the support they need and our school can respond appropriately. If you wish to speak confidentially about an incident of sexual misconduct, want more information about filing a report, or have questions about school policies and procedures, please contact our Title IX Coordinator. You can find this information at <https://equalopportunityprograms.uchicago.edu/title-ix/get-help/>. Our school is legally obligated to investigate reports of sexual misconduct, and therefore it cannot guarantee the confidentiality of a report, but it will consider a request for confidentiality and respect it to the extent possible.

Cell Phone Policy and Distractions

Please silence your cell phones for the duration of class and try to avoid checking email or doing activities not related to class during our class session. I know that you may have responsibilities outside the classroom and you are not required to disclose these to me – if you have an emergency and need to answer your phone or text, please leave the room.

Email Policy

You are strongly encouraged to come to my office hours if you have any questions or wish to discuss your progress in this course. You are also encouraged to communicate with me over email, but I do ask you to address me respectfully and be aware of the demands on my time. I aim to answer all emails within 24 hours of receipt with the exception of correspondence over the weekend. Please use appropriate, professional language in your emails. I prefer to be addressed as Dr. Kirzane or Professor Kirzane.

Community Standards, Etiquette, and Communication

We are all striving together to create a positive learning environment for all, with respect for everyone's ethnicity, color, creed, religion, national origin, citizenship status, sex, pregnancy, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, educational background, or veteran status. I ask that you maintain a commitment to a climate of respect and learning. This means that you must be aware that your need for self-expression is important, but may never come at the expense of other people's sense of safety and belonging in the classroom.

Your Wellbeing

The readings for this class are emotionally difficult. Give yourself time to process what you are reading and allow yourself to feel grief. Take care of yourself: prepare some strategies for encountering this material, and use them: take breaks, go on walks to clear your mind, take care of your own health and well-being. Reach out to your classmates and professor if you feel overwhelmed or need help.

Class Schedule

This schedule is subject to change.

Week 1:

Class 3/24: Introductions (no readings due)

- What is the Holocaust? Why read victims' perspectives?
- Case Study: [Unter dayne vayse shtern](#) (Sutzkever)

Class 3/26: The Nazi Regime Before the War

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapter 3

Excerpts from: Klemperer, Victor. *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941*. trans. Martin Chalmers: Preface, March 10-20, 1933; January 16-February 7, 1934; August 29-September 14, 1936; December 6-31 1938

Excerpts from the [memoirs of Hannah Bergas](#)

Suggested Reading: Marion Kaplan, "[Going or Staying Download Going or Staying](#)", excerpt from *Between Dignity and Despair* (1999) reprinted in *How Was it Possible? A Holocaust Reader* (2015)

Week 2:

Class 3/31: Visual Representations of Crisis

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapter 4

FIELD TRIP TO THE SMART MUSEUM TO VIEW FELIX NUSSBAUM PAINTINGS

Felix Nussbaum, [biographical essay from Yad Vashem](#)

Ro Oranim, "[Felix Nussbaum: Painting a Self Portrait of Death in the Holocaust](#)"

Adam J. Goldwyn, "[The Paintings of Felix Nussbaum as Visual Diary Download The Paintings of Felix Nussbaum as Visual Diary](#)" in *Zero Generation Holocaust Literature*

Paintings: [The Fantastic Square](#) (1931), [The Hurdy Gurdy Man](#) (1931) [Entombment](#) (1933), [The Refugee](#) (1939), [The Wandering Jew](#) (1939), [Loneliness](#) (1942), [Death Triumphant](#) (1944)

Class 4/2: Poetry of Crisis

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapter 5

Chava Rosenfarb, "[Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch, Poet of the Lodz Ghetto](#)" trans. Goldie Morgentaler

Simkha-Bunim Shayevitch, [poems from the Lodz Ghetto](#) (from: *Literature of Destruction* ed. David Roskies)

Chava Rosenfarb, "[Isaac's Dream Download Isaac's Dream](#)", trans. Goldie Morgentaler ([Yiddish version](#)) and "[From the Depths](#)", trans. Hannah Polin-Galay

Suggested Reading: Goldie Morgentaler, "[The Prayer House of Chava Rosenfarb: Poetry, Religion, and the Shadow of the Holocaust Download The Prayer House of Chava Rosenfarb: Poetry, Religion, and the Shadow of the Holocaust](#)"

Week 3:

Class 4/7: Fiction of Crisis

Ida Fink, "A Scrap of Time", "The Key Game," "A Spring Morning", "A Conversation"

Sara R Horowitz, "[Peripheral Vision Download Peripheral Vision](#)" in *Advancing Holocaust Studies*

Class 4/9: Memoir of a Roma Experience

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapter 6

The Memoirs of Ceija Stojka, excerpts

Potential zoom guest speaker: Cristina Teodora Stoica

Week 4:

Class 4/14: Warsaw Ghetto: Recording the Desperate Present

Emanuel Ringelblum, "Oyneg Shabes"

Watch the documentary [Who Will Write Our History?](#)

Suggested Reading: Samuel D. Kassow, "[Introduction Download Introduction](#)" in *Who Will Write Our History?*

Class 4/16: Warsaw Ghetto: Hunger

Leyb Goldin, "Chronicle of a Single Day"

[Oral history interview with Leon W.](#)

Helene J. Sinnreich, "[Hunger and Everyday Life in the Ghetto](#) Download [Hunger and Everyday Life in the Ghetto](#)" in *The Atrocity of Hunger: Starvation in the Warsaw Lodz, and Krakow Ghettos during World War II*, 91-106.

Suggested Reading: Sven-Erik Rose, "[Writing Hunger in a Modernist Key in the Warsaw Ghetto: Leyb Goldin's 'Chronicle of a Single Day'](#)", Download [Writing Hunger in a Modernist Key in the Warsaw Ghetto: Leyb Goldin's 'Chronicle of a Single Day'](#)," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 29-63

Week 5:

Class 4/21: Warsaw Ghetto: Feeding

Rokhl Auerbach, "The Kitchen at Leszno 40"

Stanislaw Rozycki, "Cafes"

Samuel D. Kassow, "[The Struggle to Survive: The Economics of the Ghetto](#) Download [The Struggle to Survive: The Economics of the Ghetto](#)" in *Who Will Write Our History?*, 279-283.

Class 4/23: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall* (excerpts)

Irena Klepfisz, "[Searching for My Father's Body](#) "

[Oral history testimony](#), Irena Klepfisz

From *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*: Joan Miriam Ringelheim, "[The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust](#) Download [The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust](#)," 169-177.

Week 6:

Class 4/28: Representing the Camps

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapter 8

Elie Wiesel, *Night*

From *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*: Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "[Representing Auschwitz Download Representing Auschwitz](#)," 318-322; Giorgio Agamben, "[What Is a Camp? Download What Is a Camp?](#)," 252-256.

Class 4/30: Babyn Yar

"Kiev, Babi Yar" in *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, pp. 3-12

Itsik Kipnis, "Babyn Yar" in *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Shike Driz, "[Babi Yar](#)"

Shay A. Pilnik, "[Introduction: Babyn Yar Unearthed Download Introduction: Babyn Yar Unearthed](#)" in *The Ravine of Memory*, pp. 1-20; "['Let Us Go There By Foot': Itsik Kipnis Download Let Us Go There By Foot': Itsik Kipnis](#)" in *The Ravine of Memory*, pp. 133-144.

Week 7:

Class 5/5: Postwar Fiction: Witnessing

Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Conclusion

Introduction, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

David Bergelson, "A Witness", *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Shira Gorshman, "Not Far from Saki", *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Shira Gorshman, "From House to House", *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Class 5/7: Postwar Fiction: Living on Bloodied Ground

Guest Lecturers: Sasha Senderovich and Harriet Murav

Shmuel Gordon, "Pohrebyshe", *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Rivka Rubin, "The Wall", *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*

Week 8

Class 5/12: Postwar Fiction: Anger

Chava Rosenfarb, “Edgia’s Revenge”

Goldie Morgentaler, “Land of the Postscript: Canada and the Post-Holocaust Fiction of Chava Rosenfarb”

Class 5/14: Global Refugeedom

Leo Spitzer, *Hotel Bolivia*, excerpts

[Introduction Download Introduction](#) to *Voices From Shanghai : Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*

Simkhoni, “[Three Countries Spat Me Out Download Three Countries Spat Me Out](#)” (1941)

Yosl Mlotel, “[The Lament of My Mother Download The Lament of My Mother](#)” (1941) and “[Shanghai Download Shanghai](#)” (1942)

Shoshana Kahan, [diary excerpts Download diary excerpts](#)(1941-1945)

Week 9:

Class 5/19: Oral History Testimony

[Flory Jagoda](#) testimony

Benjy Fox-Rosen “[Centering the Voice of the Witness](#)”

Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age*, [Introduction Download Introduction](#) and [Chapter 1 Download Chapter 1](#)

Class 5/21: Testimony, Performance, Memory

[The Waltz \(Yiddish song animation\)](#), from the Yale/Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies

Video: [Badkhen's Song](#)

Meaghan Guterman and D. Zisl Slepovitch, “[Shotns-Shadows: Songs from Testimonies in the Fortunoff Video Archive, Volume III: An Interview with D. Zisl Slepovitch](#)”

Judith Lin, "[Song in my Heart: A memoir of days spent with Moshe Ha Elion, a Survivor of the Shoah](#)"