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Article

# Implementing Shoah-Themed Literature into Teaching with the Example of The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story

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**Abstract:** In the contribution, through literary content analysis, we present the results of the analysis of the publication *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story* (2023). We are convinced that this book can be included in the teaching of Literary Education at various levels of education, especially at the level of application of the historical and integrative approach of introducing students to the literary themes of the Shoah. For two excerpts from this publication, we present several questions and tasks, the aim of which is to guide pupils to an adequate internalization of the tone of the events of the Shoah. We are convinced that (not only) this publication is an adequate narrative in which the events that connote the Shoah are presented authentically and in an attractive way for young readers, and whose presentation in this publication leads to a certain de-abstracting of them.

**Keywords:** the boy from block 66: A WW2 Jewish holocaust survival true story; Limor Regev; literary content analysis; literary education; teaching; excerpt

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of the paper is to point out the importance of implementing the Shoah theme into teaching at different levels of education, using the example of Limor Regev's *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story* (2023). In the paper, we point out, among other things, the importance of the warnings that the relevant topic brings to contemporary society, present possible methods of introducing pupils and students to the literary representation of the Shoah, and then give practical examples of integrating our selected publication into the teaching of Literary Education.

### 1.1. Relevance of the Shoah for Contemporary Society

The Shoah, or Holocaust, holds profound significance for contemporary society, serving as a pivotal reference point for understanding human rights, ethics, and the consequences of unchecked hatred and prejudice. Its impact extends across various domains, including theology, historiography, and cultural memory, shaping modern discourse and societal values. The following sections explore these aspects in detail.

#### 1.1.1. Theological Reflections and Challenges

Rahayu (2024) states that The Shoah has prompted significant shifts in Jewish theology, particularly in theodicy, which grapples with reconciling the existence of evil with the concept of a benevolent deity. Post-Shoah Jewish theologians, like Zachary Braiterman, have critically re-evaluated traditional theodicies, advocating for an anti-theodicy approach that seeks to move beyond the trauma of the Holocaust.

Admirand (2021) adds that in Christianity, the Shoah has led to the development of post-Shoah Christology, which addresses the historical failures of Christian communities during the Holocaust

and emphasizes the importance of maintaining the Jewish-Christian relationship. This theological reflection is crucial as the number of first-generation witnesses diminishes, necessitating a robust preservation of memory and moral accountability.

Postoutenko (2023) states that the Shoah holds significant importance for contemporary society as it is deemed incomparable, like the love of God, in the realm of foundational values. By labeling the Shoah as incomparable, it is shielded from being cross evaluated, thus maintaining the boundaries of civilized society. This declaration of incomparability serves to stabilize social semantics and upholds societal conventions. The Shoah's impact resonates across genres, epochs, and languages, highlighting its enduring relevance and the social contingency of ascribing incomparability.

### 1.1.2. Historical and Cultural Memory

Narcizo et al. (2022) state that the Shoah represents a catastrophic rupture in modern civilization, challenging the ideals of rationality and progress. Its historiography is extensive, evolving as new testimonies and interpretations emerge. This ongoing reflection is vital in countering Holocaust denial and ensuring that the lessons of the Shoah remain relevant in contemporary discourse.

Schiuma (2024) underlines that the Shoah's memory is also invoked in current geopolitical contexts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it serves as both a yardstick and a warning. This usage highlights the potential for cultural appropriation and the need for careful consideration of historical symbols in modern debates.

### 1.1.3. Antisemitism and Ethical Implications

Perelberg (2022) states that the Shoah's legacy continues to inform discussions on antisemitism and the ethical structures of society. It underscores the dangers of absolute power and the erosion of social and familial bonds, as analyzed through psychoanalytic frameworks. This understanding is crucial in addressing contemporary manifestations of antisemitism and ensuring the protection of human dignity.

While the Shoah's historical and cultural significance is widely acknowledged, there are challenges in maintaining its relevance as temporal distance increases. The diminishing number of survivors and the rise of Holocaust denial necessitate ongoing education and dialogue to preserve its lessons for future generations.

As the above suggests, the topic of the Shoah, which together with Lane (2024) we perceive as the term that refers to the Holocaust, a catastrophic event during World War II characterized by the systematic extermination of six million Jews by the Nazi regime. This term, which translates to "destruction" or "catastrophe," is often used to describe the Nazis' "Final Solution," a plan executed between 1941 and 1945 to annihilate the Jewish population in Europe is central to contemporary society, especially in terms of the warning it brings to this global society. We believe that it is important for the relevant warnings to be made known to pupils at as young an age as possible, so that these warnings are adequately internalized, thereby ensuring that these hateful, xenophobic, persecutory and stigmatizing practices against certain groups of people are not repeated. To fulfil this potential, it is important that appropriate methods are chosen in the field of familiarizing pupils with literary representations of the Shoah.

## 1.2. Methods Suitable for Introducing Pupils to Literary Representations of the Shoah

### 1.2.1. Historical and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Mašát et al. (2020) state the "Historical Approach" which involves presenting factual accounts and survivor testimonies, which help students understand the real events and their impact. This method is often complemented by the "Interdisciplinary Approach," which integrates history, literature, and social studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Shoah and further state that Israeli public schools serve as a model, where the Shoah is embedded in the curriculum

across various subjects, emphasizing the importance of democratic values and the dangers of racism and anti-Semitism.

### 1.2.2. Artistic Narratives and Figurative Dynamics

Mašát (2019) or Krongold (2020) underline those artistic narratives, including both factual and imaginative literature, are effective in engaging students. These narratives allow pupils to explore the Shoah through different lenses, such as memoirs and contemporary fantastical fictions, which can make the subject more relatable and less daunting.

Krongold (2020) also states that the use of figurative language in youth Holocaust literature helps in transforming complex historical events into accessible stories, enabling students to connect emotionally and intellectually with the material.

### 1.2.3. Reception and Interpretation of Texts

Research indicates that the reception of Shoah-themed texts varies among students, influenced by their cognitive and emotional development. Tailoring the selection of texts to the students' grade levels ensures that the material is both challenging and comprehensible (Mašát & Šmakalová 2019). Surveys conducted in Czech schools show that students respond positively to well-chosen literary excerpts, suggesting that careful selection and presentation of texts can enhance understanding and empathy (Mašát & Šmakalová 2020).

In the next part of the paper, we analyze the publication *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story*, applying the above methods to work with excerpts from this book.

## 2. Results

Godá (2014) states that The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story is a poignant narrative that fits within the broader framework of Jewish Holocaust survival stories, which have been increasingly studied through various lenses, including personal testimonies and community narratives. The Holocaust, a period marked by extreme persecution and genocide of Jews, has been explored through different perspectives, including the experiences of victims and survivors, as highlighted in recent scholarly works.

Finkel (2023) underlines that the survival strategies of Jewish communities during the Holocaust varied significantly, as seen in the contrasting experiences of Jewish ghettos in cities like Minsk, Kraków, and Bialystok, where strategies ranged from resistance to evasion and coping. Building on this assertion, Geissbühler (2020) argues that oral history and survivor testimony have become essential to understanding these experiences, with archives such as Yad Vashem and USC Visual History providing invaluable resources for historians.

Furthermore, the importance of social ties in survival is underscored by studies showing that preexisting friendships among Auschwitz prisoners significantly increased their chances of survival, as evidenced by research on Jewish prisoners from the Theresienstadt ghetto (Bělín et al. 2023).

That publication very much fills out the themes and provides evidence of the complex interplay of individual resilience, community support and the harsh realities of life in the concentration camps. At the same time, this book is an important contribution to the preservation of collective memory, to the understanding of the Holocaust, and a testament to human perseverance, solidarity, and the desire to live.

### 2.1. Learning Objectives

In this part of the contribution, we present a proposal for work with the mentioned publication in the teaching of Literary Education. The main goal of this lesson is to find out (1) How accurately the book The Boy from Block 66 depicts daily life in a concentration camp and what are the key historical facts that the author includes and (2) What symbolic meanings and themes appear in the book and how they contribute to understand the Holocaust experience?

### 2.1.1. Historical Context

We consider the first phase of teaching to be crucial, in which the teacher should introduce the students (readers) to the historical context and social background in which the story is set.

The Shoah (Holocaust) was a systematic, state-organized attempt to exterminate Jews and other ethnic and social groups by the Nazi regime during World War II. The death toll is estimated at six million Jews, with many more victims of political and racial persecution.

Concentration camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka and Sobibor were places of extreme suffering. Blocks in the camps: The term block 66 in the book's title refers to a specific block in the camp. Blocks were individual buildings where prisoners were housed. Each block could have its own specific task and conditions, reflecting the hierarchy and organization in the camp. Children under the age of fourteen were interned in the mentioned block, who were looked after by the local block commander. Thanks to his care (for example, he got them more blankets or more food), these children had a better chance of survival.

### 2.1.2. Interpretation of the Book

The title of the publication can have a symbolic meaning that reflects the specific experiences and sufferings of the protagonists. Block 66 may have been a place of a special kind of pain or resistance. Consider what the title means in the context of the story and how it may symbolize the general theme of survival and identity.

Sample:

*Jews were given a yellow triangle, while the uniforms of political prisoners were marked differently. Polish prisoners, for example, had a red triangle behind their number. We didn't know it at the time, but at the end of 1944, when the concentration camps in Eastern Europe began to be evacuated and the German army was withdrawing on all fronts, the leaders of the Buchenwald underground prison resistance decided to focus on rescuing the children who were coming to the camp. The main supporters of this idea were Antonín Kalina, a Czech of non-Jewish origin, and Jack Weber, a Polish Jewish prisoner. Both were active members of the resistance. Kalina and his comrades were able to convince the Germans to place the child in a special block. The Germans wanted to prevent riots, so they finally agreed and set up a separate barrack for children between the ages of twelve and sixteen. It was called Kinderblock 66. Kalina asked to be put in charge of Block 66 and arranged for all the children and teenagers from around the camp to be moved there. (Regev 2023: 102)*

Possible questions about the passage:

- How does the book depict the theme of survival in extreme conditions?
- What survival strategies and defense mechanisms do the characters use?
- How does the Holocaust affect the identity of the characters?
- How does the book depict the loss of identity and its consequences?
- Find out what the narrator's point of view is. Is the story told from the point of view of a child, an adult, or in retrospect?
- What effect does this perspective have on the interpretation of events?
- How does the book evoke emotional reactions and how does it try to approach the psychology of survivors?
- What techniques does the author use to achieve this goal?
- How does the book depict suffering and trauma without slipping into sensationalism?
- What lessons can we draw from the book?
- How can the book contribute to the understanding of the Holocaust and to the promotion of historical awareness?

### 2.1.3. Analysis of literary elements

- An important stage of working with an excerpt should be the analysis of literary elements. Based on the given example, the students should answer the following questions:
  - What are the underlying themes of the sample and its key motifs?
  - What are the main characters of the sample and what is their character?

- What narrative style does the author use? How does it try to affect the reader's emotions?

Sample:

*We stayed in Buchenwald for about four more weeks before we recovered a bit physically. After that time, the American doctors found us strong enough to leave the camp. The Buchenwald children were offered to emigrate to the United States and start a new life across the ocean, far from the European continent, full of traumatic memories. Most of the boys lost their families during the war and had no home to return to. Many therefore took advantage of this opportunity. But I was clear. I wanted to return home, to Begezász. I knew I probably wouldn't find any of my family there, but at the same time I knew I had to go back to where I grew up to find out what happened to them. Our first stop after leaving Buchenwald was a sanatorium in Prague, where, among other things, they issued us new personal documents. We also received more complete food, which no longer threatened our lives, our stomachs got used to digesting solid food. One day a soldier in a Czechoslovak uniform appeared in the sanatorium. They told me they were looking for me. I walked up to him and only when I was face to face did I recognize who he was. It was my cousin Moše Lazarovič. (Regev 2023: 130)*

#### 2.1.4. Literary Genre and Comparative Analysis

Pupils can compare the sample from the mentioned publication with excerpts from other works. Here is an excerpt from Transport for Eternity (2017). Transport for Eternity František Tichý focuses on the fate of Petr Ginz, probably the most prominent boy figure among the internees in the Terezín ghetto. This is a fictional story, based on Peter's diaries and the narration of his sister, who survived the Nazi extermination machinery.

Sample:

*"Good morning! So, let's be quiet... Sit down." The cantor took a few steps between the desks and looked around the class. "Who has an interesting thing planned today? You Ginzi? So come forward for all to see."*

*Petr stood up and mysteriously showed his invention: a glass tube on one side sealed and coated with wax. It was fixed in a simple wooden stand, on which a small candle was stuck.*

*"This is a cannon, or rather a small but functional model of it," he began to explain. "In the back the incendiary substance is placed in the part, and there is a wooden charge on it, and it is sealed a little with paper in front, so that there is more pressure inside."*

*It could be seen that the whole class was following his explanation with interest, even Láďa, who was mostly sleeping, annoying or secretly trying to have a snack.*

*"I'll heat it up over a candle here at the end," continued Petr. Then he struck a match, the candle slowly lit up. The teacher was obviously getting nervous.*

*"The incendiary ignites at a certain temperature and the expanding hot gases shoot the charge..."*

*"Peter, what kind of incendiary substance is this? Can't the glass break?" asked the cantor after a few seconds of heating the mixture.*

*"Professor, it's completely safe. We tried it with the boys."*

*Whoa! It hissed, a short flame shot out of the barrel, the wooden cartridge was replaced by an elongated one arc and hit a window more than three meters away.*

*The class roared in appreciation and someone called to show it again.*

*"That's interesting, Peter. Thank you, you may sit down. Could you tell us more about the composition of the mixture?"*

*"Professor, I'm sorry, but it's a secret," answered Petr uncertainly.*

*I pointed at them, "Look, he's definitely home," I pressed the button and the bell jingled. Nothing. We repeated this for a little longer, and when nothing happened again, they knocked we are.*

*"Who is it?" said an unpleasant voice from inside, and someone uncovered the peephole on the door.*

*"Hello, can Tomáš go out?" greeted Matouš loudly and smiled. Door they opened a little and the face of Tomáš's mother appeared in the narrow slit. She looked very stern. You could see that she hesitated for a few seconds, but then answered firmly: "It's not at home!"*

*"But Mrs. Blah..." I stopped her before she could close the door again. Then I did he got stuck for a moment and finished the sentence differently than I originally wanted, "When will he come back?"*

*"He wasn't well," she answered again in that unpleasant voice, but you could tell she was eating it doesn't come from the heart at all. "He certainly wouldn't go with you. Goodbye."*

*Bad luck! Matouš and I looked at each other and it was only at that moment that dawn began to dawn on both of us. Tomáš was like a little fish at school and cheerfully flirted with Anička. Not him, but we were not well.*

*"He wasn't home for us," I commented in a low voice, and Matouš added sadly: "That you are right Also, Petr didn't go with us. We can easily make fun of it, but no one will steal the star from him in the evening..."*

*I said nothing and headed downstairs. It wasn't easy for me.*

*"He can't," I replied briefly to Peter's questioning look. "So where are we going?"*

*"Matthew was talking about Hagibor, so if you wanted to? It's pretty fun there. Such a Jewish oasis..." suggested Petr and we agreed.*

*Hagibor was one of the few places where Jews could gather in Prague. They had clubhouses, a theater, a playground, and in the winter they even went skating there. How many times have we thought that we would went there with Petr to have a look, but we always gave up in the end - without the star we would have looked rather strange and nothing at all... Today, however, Matouš solved it elegantly, and what's more with a touch of adventure.*

*"What dad?" Peter asked after walking for a while.*

*"He is still in prison in Munich, sometimes we get a letter from him. He writes that it's not that bad there..."*

*"Hmm... who knows what, let him write," commented Matouš. "They must be checking the letters."*

*"Yes, but sometimes we get a slob and..." I stopped in mid-sentence and casually looked around. A young couple was walking a little behind us, on the opposite sidewalk an elderly man in a winter coat was looking at the shop window, approaching from the intersection cyclist. But none of them seemed to care.*

*"Mom went to see him the day before yesterday," I continued when we were alone again.*

*"He is allowed to visit, so hopefully he will tell me more. Maybe he'll allow a visit next time me too..."*

*"And how long will it actually be closed?" Matouš continued to wonder.*

*"He's just awaiting trial, no one knows anything," I answered tersely, and I was starting to feel sick annoying how they ask.*

*We went out onto the main street and stopped at a bakery window. "Guys, the smell!" he snapped I squinted my eyes and breathed in. "If you wait for me, I'd jump in and buy a piece bread. Mom is coming back today and there is nothing to eat at home."*

*I was already taking the handle when Petr stopped me in a calm voice: "Wait, John, there we must not now."*

*I turned to him, "What? Then they will certainly have nothing."*

*Without saying a word, the friend pointed to a small sign on the glass door:*

**BY REGULATION OF THE PROTECTORATE AUTHORITIES, HE IS JEWISH ALLOWED TO SHOP EACH WEEKDAY ONLY FROM 3 TO 5 PM IN THE AFTERNOON**

*At first I wanted to argue that it didn't concern me, but then it did happened Without saying a word, I turned and asked, "Which way?"*

*Petr grinned almost apologetically and pointed to the nearest tram stop.*

*This can be followed by a discussion about the extent to which the sample of the novel *The Boy from Bloo 66* fits into the literary genre of memoir, historical novel, or autobiography.*

### 3. Discussion

Based on practical examples, we tried to show how the examples from the mentioned publication can be integrated into the teaching of Literary Education. We oriented ourselves mainly based on the theses of the historical and interdisciplinary approach and integrated the receptive and interpretive approach.

Gall (2023) explores how literary narratives of the Shoah shape urban topographies and how they blend fiction with reality to portray cities as sites of annihilation that transcend autobiographical elements. Grenaudier-Klijn's study (2022) highlights the exile state of Holocaust survivors, emphasizing the incommunicability of their experiences and the existential anxiety reflected in their fragmented identities. In his examination of Walter Benjamin's life and work, Lane (2024) places the

Shoah in the larger context of National Socialism and its influence on European intellectuals, showing how Benjamin's thought was shaped by the omnipresent shadow of destruction during his lifetime. Grelka's analysis (2022) reveals a synthesis of Jewish mysticism, Yiddish modernism, and Soviet communism that portrays Jewish figures not only as victims but also as potential victors, offering a narrative of resistance and hope amid the devastation of the Shoah. Narcizo (2022) discusses the challenges of representing the Shoah in historical discourse, highlighting its impact on modern rationality and the ongoing struggle to adequately capture its enormity within historical narratives).

We believe that these theses, which reflect the current state of knowledge and understanding in the field, correspond to the questions and tasks we have presented in the excerpts from *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story*. Among other things, readers will get to know the authentic experience of a Holocaust survivor or learn about communist ideals compared to National Socialist ideals, in the extreme conditions of a concentration camp.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

The main material for this post was Limor Regev's *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story*. We examined this narrative through content narrative analysis. This method was chosen because content narrative analysis is a multifaceted approach that combines qualitative content analysis with narrative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of textual data. This method is particularly useful when exploring complex narratives, such as those found in the autobiographical narratives of experienced teachers, where emotional aspects and themes such as mental health and empathy are central (Barbosa & Suelves 2024). The integration of qualitative content and narrative analysis allows researchers to categorize findings while preserving the contextual richness of the data (Sulakatko 2024).

#### 5. Conclusions

In the paper, we presented the key themes and motifs from Regev's publication *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story* through a literary content analysis. Based on the results of the analysis, two excerpts were extracted, for which we created questions that can be worked with in the intentions of a historical, integrative and comprehensive approach to acquaint readers with the events of the Shoah. We have also integrated an interpretative approach, which is an integral part of working with all literary samples.

We are convinced that the questions postulated by us can help children and teenage readers to some extent understand the events of the Shoah, in an adequate way. The questions were postulated in such a way that through the answers to them, the readers would internalize the tone of the Shoah, and thus develop the ability to recognize these phenomena in their surroundings and try to prevent them in time, or at least not succumb to them.

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