

HISTORY AS EVIDENTIAL STUDY IN TEACHING OF THE HOLOCAUST

Nokuzola Bikwana
Cape Town Holocaust Center
zoebikwana@yahoo.com

Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance".
Senior Robert F Kennedy in a speech at UCT in June 1966.

Abstract

This paper will discuss how various programmes support the teaching of the Holocaust through evidence. The Holocaust also provides an ideal backdrop for a study of racism, victimisation and persecution. Mindful of the difficulty of comparing historical events, we nonetheless maintain that of a study of the Holocaust can show the learner evidence of the negative impact of racism, oppression, persecution, prejudice, stereotyping and victimisation in any society. We argue that the study of the Holocaust can encourage the learner to resist racism, discrimination and xenophobia, and develop empathy with the victims of prejudice. In so doing, learners can come to an understanding of their role as active members of the society, and those of others as bystanders or collaborators. We maintain that this aim is defeated when the educator or facilitator fails to provide enough evidence that will elicit empathy, understanding and develop this sense of agency among the learners. History is explored as an evidential study using various sources ranging from primary ones like photographs, artefacts, documents as well as secondary sources. To this end this complex study is brought to life through the use of evidence provided, and the learners learn valuable skills.

Keywords: Prejudice; Racism; Evidence; Stereotyping; Sources, Holocaust, Empathy.

Evidence in the teaching of the Holocaust

Denial of the Holocaust had been an issue of concern.¹ Denial of the Holocaust continues despite the evidence that is available most of which was collected by the Nazis themselves. I mention this so as to draw an understanding that in teaching this subject educators need to acquaint the learner with a great deal of evidence so as to equip the learners with the necessary skills from which to verify and be able draw logical conclusions from this historical event. This will hopefully enable the learners to have their own informed decisions as to the validity of the denial of the Holocaust. In September 2011 the Jedwabne Memorial monument was vandalised and desecrated. Jedwabne is where hundreds of Jews were led into a barn and burned alive in 1941 by Polish Nazi sympathizers. When exposed to images like these our learners might doubt the facts presented to them. It is therefore the duty of history educators to encourage the learners to search for the facts and validate them through evidence.

Image 1: Traces of Neo-Nazism in Poland. Inscribed on the walls are the slogans: “No need to apologise for Jedwabne,” and another read, “They were flammable”



Source: Available at: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/denial.html>

Mulholland² firmly believes that history is a search for truth, and it is my shared belief that in allowing the learners to be exposed to as much evidence as possible from Holocaust lessons, educators can equip them with the necessary skills to analyse the ‘more complex evidence’.

Evidence is used by historians to move towards an informed interpretation and an impartial judgement of issues pertaining to the past. As much as the use of evidence is the cornerstone of any research, so I would argue, should the use be of evidence in the teaching of the Holocaust in the school curriculum.

1 Available at: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/denial.html>, as accessed on 12 August 2011.

2 RB Mulholland, *Journal for Teaching History*, 1985, p. 10.

The Holocaust is a very complex subject that can be unsettling to some learners and for them to deal with this issue might deny the events that confront them. Images like these should not be things to begin with when teaching the learners about this complex subject as they could be overwhelming to some of them.

Historians agree that looking at ‘ordinary things’ can be a highly effective way for learners to discover the Holocaust and consider some of the complex issues it presents us with”.³

Image 2: Shoe of Hilda Cohen, Toddler



Source: Artefact Collection USHMM

This paper demonstrates how particular evidence can become an essential tool in the teaching of the Holocaust history and aid learners in understanding the consequences of fascist ideology.

From the evaluation forms filled in by the educators at the end of the teacher training workshops the SAHGF offers, it is gathered that some⁴ history educators struggle to find meaningful ways or methods to make this subject helpful for their learners. Are educators (myself included) confident enough to use the evidence presented to us through the volumes of sources at our disposal? Mulholland argues that in the past “Much of the history taught in schools has been so selectively chosen, so narrowly interpreted that myth rather truth has reigned in many classrooms”⁵. It is sadly the legacy of this past that makes some of us struggle to select and utilise the resources available to

3 M Baynham, Triumphs Show, *Teaching History Journal*, December 2010, p. 18.

4 Drawn from the evaluation forms filled in by educators in the teacher training workshops.

5 R Mulholland, *Journal of History teaching*, 1985, p. 10.

us. Struggling to teach one aspect of the curriculum has implications beyond the topic.

The CTHC has developed programmes that can assist the learner to grasp the intensity of hatred, prejudice, stereotyping and racism, and in this way hopefully encourage them to empathise with the victims, and critically examine the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust. We have selected evidence which we feel best helps the learners to grapple with the history without being overwhelmed by it.

In achieving this aim, we are aware of Bialystok's argument that history be always considered as a knowledge subject rather than an emotional one: "... Their approach is grounded in asking the student 'How do you feel?' rather than demanding 'What do you know?'"⁶ One of the aims we at the Cape Town Holocaust Center are trying to achieve is to bring as much knowledge as possible to the learners through the resources the centre provides to encourage change and not simply knowledge on its own. The aim to provide knowledge and encourage change is defeated when the educator or the facilitator fails to provide enough evidence that will encourage the learner to engage with this history, make it personal and be able to relate to it in order to understand human behaviour in society.

The Cape Town Holocaust Center offers a four hour programme which expose the learners to the conditions lived by the Jewish people before and during the Holocaust so that they may develop a well informed response to this subject.

Our programmes are developed to accommodate both the Grade 9 and Grade 11 learners, to meet the demands of the national curriculum statement. The programme is divided into four sessions: the introduction using a power point display of less than twenty minutes, a short documentary, the exhibition guided tour, and a group discussion. Because we address teenagers, we always try to encourage them to recognise bias and stereotyping and demonstrate through the power point introduction (through the *Pyramid of Hate*⁷ in particular) how we all can be judgemental. This is done by letting the learners view and examine the evidence given to them.

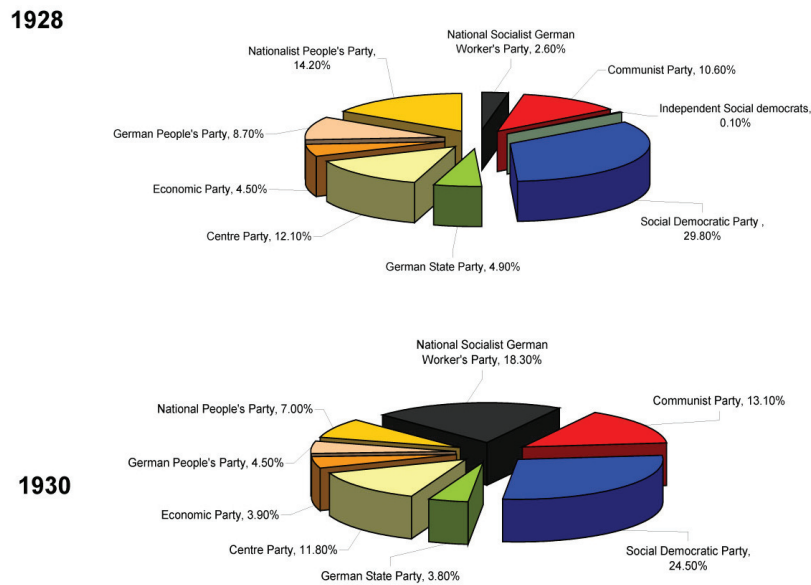
In the power point introduction the facilitator uses evidence to teach the importance of context around the events that led to the Holocaust, the pie chart below indicates the support the Nazis gain after the 1928 election

6 F Bialystok, "Americanising the Holocaust: Beyond the limit of the universal", 1996, p. 127.

7 ©2003, Anti-defamation league and survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. See Addendum 1.

bringing into context the impact of the 1929 Great Depression and the consequently Rise into Power of the Nazis.

Image 3: Election results in Germany, 1928 – 1933



Source: Translated into a Pie Chart by Rosemary Gon (Mulholland) for the Cape Town Holocaust Center from these websites: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/elect.htm. wikipedia.org/wiki/german_federal_election-1928

The facilitator then explains that in the guided exhibition tour they will find huge amount of evidence that was left by the perpetrators themselves as they were fleeing from the Allied forces as well as evidence that was left hidden in the camps by the victims.

Image 4: Reproduction of Hana Brady's suitcase



Source: "Through the eyes of Children" exhibition, 2008. Photographer: Amanda Cooper

“*Hana’s Suitcase*”⁸ a short documentary adapted from the book *Hana’s Suitcase* is used alongside ‘*Footprints*’. We choose *Hana’s Suitcase* for three reasons:

- It personalises the History: Through viewing *Hana’s Suitcase* the learners get to know something of Jewish people’s lives before the Holocaust.
- It shows research methodology: The photographic evidence in the documentary is used to let the learners compare their lives at present to the life lived by George and Hana before they were sent to Theresienstadt.
- It unveils the racist ideology of the Nazis: In the comments they make after viewing the documentary, the learners state that it becomes surprising that Hana Brady gets sent to Auschwitz and is ultimately murdered there even though she had the same physical characteristics the Nazis wanted (blonde hair and blue eyes) whilst her brother George Brady survives. In this story the fundamental racist principles of the Nazi ideology is dealt with and children are brought to an understanding that the Nazis used prejudice and non-scientific justifications in order to enforce their beliefs on people.

From the evaluations filled in by the learners, this documentary resonates with most of them as it is a story of children and survival. As the Hana Brady story unfolds, it uses historical evidence, revealing the process the historian undertakes in order to obtain information and illustrates good historical research methodology. After watching the documentary the facilitator asks the learners to think back to further information the suitcase provided the historian with. This helps the learners to understand that on its own an artefact is not entirely useful however, when necessary research is done a historian can get a great deal of information from it.

The story holds more evidence of the racist nature and prejudice of the Nazis. The learners find in the documentary evidence of coexistence, antisemitism, prejudice, and racism. To support this view learners are encouraged to extract evidence of these non-scientific justifications; consequently providing them the opportunity to work with a source and use information from it. Both *Footprints* and *Hana’s Suitcase*⁹ are good examples of how the teacher and the class research the past.

The guided tour of the exhibition comes after the documentary and illustrates to these young historians that one piece of evidence is not reliable enough to

8 K Levine, A film adapted from the book *Hana’s Suitcase*, *New Africa Education Books*, 2008, Pty (Ltd).

9 See Addendum 2 for photographic evidence from *Hana’s Suitcase*.

be used as the only source. The permanent exhibition provides a great deal of evidence as learners are brought in some cases literally “face to face” with events and the people of the Holocaust. One of the panels portrays the people of the town of Bedzin in Poland. Bedzin had a Jewish population 27000 before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. The panel has 600 photographic images which can be used by the guide to cover a personal story and a narrative of what happened to the individuals displayed on that panel.

Image 5: Identification photographs of Jewish Residents of Bedzin, Poland, deported to Auschwitz: An exhibit at the Cape Town Holocaust Center

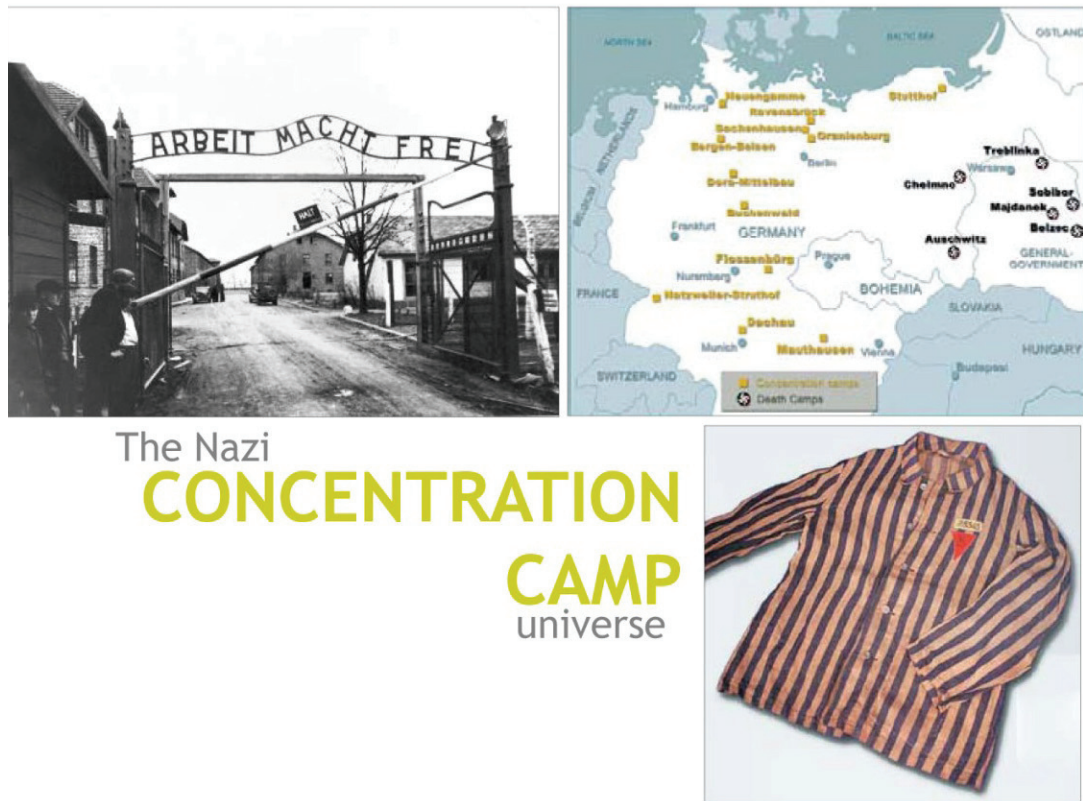


Source: USHMM Collection

Here the learners are encouraged to understand that the 6million people who were murdered during the Holocaust are not just a number as they now begin to attach a face to the pictures they view in the exhibition.

The other panel we choose to use has an artefact of a jacket that was worn by one of the prisoners in the concentration camp Dachau; this provides a glimpse of the camp system in Nazi Germany.

Image 6: A collage of the Nazi Concentration Camp Universe and an Artefact



Source: Courtesy of USHMM and Cape Town Holocaust Centre artefact collection

The guide may ask them who they think this jacket belonged to. Does it look like a normal piece of clothing? They may be asked to further examine the information on the jacket and make Image out what kind of people would wear such uniforms. Learners are required to qualify their answers with the information they find written on the panel.

The ghetto section illustrates evidence of the inhumane conditions to which Jews were subjected. The learners then examine the pictures of the children, and answer the question why the children are sitting along the pavement? Where are their parents? Why do the people look miserable? What thing do the pictures not tell us?

Image 7: Ghettos



Source: Both Images: Willy Georg, USHMM Photo Archives courtesy of Raphael Scharf, 1941

Image 8: Starving Children on the Ghetto pavements



Source: USHMM, courtesy of Guenther Schwarberg, 1941

Through viewing these primary and secondary sources the young people can hopefully comprehend the types and consequences of the choices people make, whether through apathy or voluntary action. The image of people scrubbing the pavements while others are watching hopefully prompts them into thinking around this.

Image 9: Jews forced to scrub streets by Hitler Youth and SS Officer



Source: Yad Vashem Photo Archives, courtesy of USHMM, 1938

At the end of the programme, both educators and the learners are asked to fill in evaluation forms. In as much as we are trying to teach our learners to best understand the Holocaust, we certainly do not want to leave them with the impression that this history only reveals the perpetrators story and leaves the Jews as hopeless victims or as Paul Simons puts it: “as passive objects of persecution...only to be brutalised, humiliated and murdered...”¹⁰ We want them to know that the Jews had a sense of agency despite the gruesome circumstances in which they found themselves. Their resistance can be seen in the art and musical sources, and the testimonies of the partisans.

10 P Salmons, *Teaching History Journal*, December 2010, p. 62.

Image 10: Butterfly painting from Theresienstadt



Source: Detail of a picture by Doris Weiserová, b. 1932, d. 1944, Auschwitz, Poland.

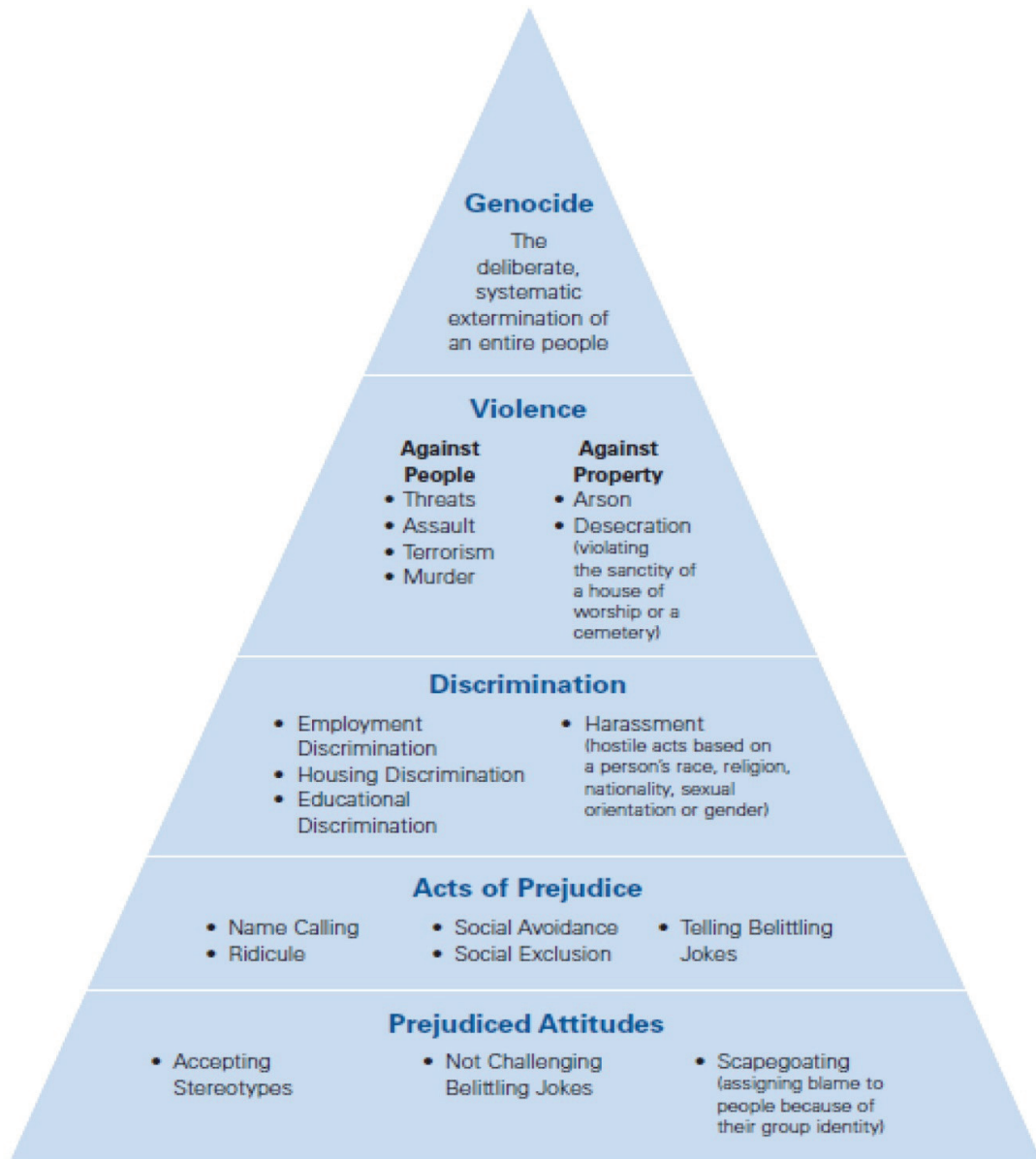
While we can never be certain what long-term impact the study of the Holocaust has on the teenagers we teach (as we do not yet have a system that follows them up after they leave school) I would like to concur with other Holocaust educators who equally affirm that “the Holocaust does provide a model of inhumanity”¹¹, and it is entirely up to us to find ways of bringing it opposite to life to act as an inspiration to positive action that is beneficial for all societies. In doing this we are hoping to develop young people who are ethical actors in society. This is what one learner from Camps Bay High had to say about our programme:

“It held me captivated and interested, introducing the Holocaust on a whole new personal level, bringing home the reality of the genocide not so long ago”.

¹¹ F Bialystok, *Americanising the Holocaust: Beyond the limit of the universal*, 1996: 125.

Addendum 1:

PYRAMID OF HATE



Source: ©2003 Anti-Defamation League and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation

**Hoe gaan jy 'n verskil maak?
Ungalenza njani utshintsho?
How can you make a difference?**

Addendum 2: Both Hana and George learned to ski when they were very young



Source: Courtesy George Brady from *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine, New Africa Edition, New Africa Books Pty (Ltd), 2008.

Image 11: Hana and George stood by each other as the Nazi restrictions increased



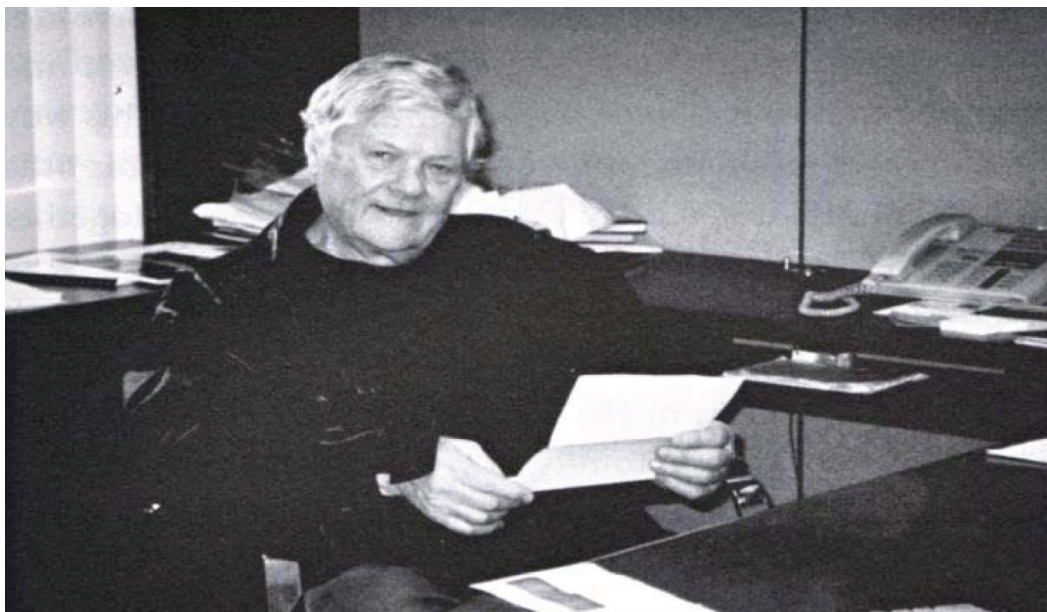
Source: Courtesy George Brady from *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine, New Africa Edition, New Africa Books Pty (Ltd), 2008.

Image 12: Hana, her mother and George in happier times



Source: Courtesy George Brady from *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine, New Africa Edition, New Africa Books Pty (Ltd), 2008.

Image 13: George Brady today



Source: Courtesy George Brady from *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine

References

Bialystok, F 1996. "Americanising the Holocaust: Beyond the limit of the universal", Millen, RL (ed), *New Perspectives on the Holocaust*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Levine, K 2008. "Hana's Suitcase". New Africa Edition: New Africa Books Pty (Ltd).

Mulholland, RB, Innovation in History teaching through training: Possibilities and Limitations, *Yesterday and Today*, 10, September 1985.

Salmons, P, Universal meaning or historical understanding? The Holocaust in history and history in the curriculum, *Teaching History*, TH 141, December 2010.

Baynham, M, Triumphs Show: Headteachers, Hungurians and hats: Using family photos to bring the diversity of Jewish lives to life, *Teaching History*, TH 141, December 2010.

Available at: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/denial.html>.

2003 Anti-Defamation League and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.