Visiting Holocaust Historical/Memorial Sites and Museums through the Lens of Human Rights and Human Dignity

Guidelines for Teachers

TOLI

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TOLI - The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights empowers teachers to explore the history of the Holocaust and its relevance to human rights and civic responsibility today. Inspired by the legacy of Holocaust survivor Olga Lengyel, TOLI offers professional development programs in the United States, Europe, and Latin America, fostering communities of educators committed to teaching with empathy, accuracy and respect for human dignity. Through seminars, grants, and international networks, TOLI supports teachers as they empower students to connect the past with the present and take action to build more just and inclusive societies.

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Introduction

This resource was developed in response to the expressed needs of dedicated TOLI educators across Europe, who sought practical and thoughtful tools to enrich student visits to Holocaust memorial sites and museums. Committed to moving beyond traditional methods, these teachers asked for guidance on how to approach such visits using TOLI's interdisciplinary methodology, which integrates Holocaust education, human rights education, and intercultural education to foster critical thinking, empathy, and active citizenship.

Today, a growing network of over 2,000 educators in more than 15 European countries are alumni of national TOLI seminars, implemented in close partnership with local organizations. Beyond the initial training, these educators participate in sustained professional development through the TOLI Impact Grant Program, transnational seminars, and active national and European Communities of Practice – creating long-term impact in classrooms and communities across the continent.

This resource complements the Handbook *Learning from the Past, Acting for the Future – An Interdisciplinary Approach to Holocaust, Human Rights and Intercultural Education*[1], which offers lesson plans and pedagogical strategies for classroom use. While the Handbook lays the conceptual foundation, the present guide focuses specifically on the educational potential of site visits – offering practical recommendations for preparing, conducting, and following up on these experiences in ways that are thoughtful, respectful, and impactful for students.

Educational visits to Holocaust-related sites play a vital role in deepening historical understanding, preserving memory, and fostering civic and moral reflection. As the number of living survivors continues to decline, these sites gain even greater significance as enduring witnesses to history – places that carry memory forward when firsthand testimony is no longer possible. Whether visiting major Holocaust museums or smaller local places of remembrance, the impact of such visits depends on how intentionally they are designed and framed. Developing clear learning aims and outcomes about the purpose of the visit is therefore essential. This guide supports educators in creating meaningful learning experiences rooted in the principles of human rights education – encouraging students to connect past injustices to present-day responsibilities and to reflect on their role in upholding human dignity.

Educators who accompany students to Holocaust-related sites – whether large memorial institutions, former ghettos, or smaller places of memory such as deportation markers or Stolpersteine – can draw on the principles outlined in this guide to support visits that are reflective, respectful, and educationally meaningful.

[1] The Handbook is available in 12 languages: https://www.toli.us/european-seminar-handbooks/

The guide is organized into two complementary parts. The first part provides general guidance for teachers on how to prepare, conduct, and debrief visits to Holocaust-related memorial sites and museums. It follows the natural stages of a visit – before, during, and after – offering strategies to support logistical and emotional preparation, to foster meaningful engagement on-site, and to consolidate reflection and learning afterward.

The second part presents a set of concrete activities that teachers can integrate into their visits. Each activity is accompanied by a ready-to-use handout placed immediately after its description, designed to support student observation, reflection, and discussion. These handouts can be used as they are or adapted to the age, context, and needs of the students. Together, the activities and handouts provide practical tools to help educators create visits that are thoughtful, impactful, and grounded in human rights and human dignity.

A glossary at the end of the guide provides definitions of the following key terms: historical sites, memorial sites, human rights education, competences for democratic culture, and Holocaust distortion.

Why visit historical/memorial sites and museums through the lens of human rights?

Visiting Holocaust historical/memorial sites and museums is not only a journey into history – it can also be a powerful educational experience rooted in the universal values of human rights and human dignity. While these sites preserve the memory of one of the darkest chapters in human history, they also offer a space to reflect on the past in ways that inspire responsibility in the present and future.

The Holocaust – a tragedy of immense human suffering – was the result of the systematic denial of fundamental rights and dignity to millions of people: first and foremost, Jews, who were targeted for total annihilation, but also Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, political opponents and so-called "asocials" – all those who did conform to the Nazi's vision of society.

Approaching these sites through a human rights perspective shifts the focus from history as something distant, to history as an integral part of the present and a call for action. It connects past injustice to contemporary issues and invites us to think critically about the conditions that allowed such crimes to happen and how they can be prevented in the future. It is tempting to see the Holocaust as the final chapter of antisemitism, but in reality, it persisted in the decades that followed and is alarmingly present today. Throughout the years, antisemitism has adapted, resurfaced, and continues to threaten Jewish communities today. Similarly, anti-Roma racism – which was an integral part of the ideology and policies of the Nazis and their collaborators – continues to persist across Europe today, often overlooked or minimized. Holocaust memorial sites and museums challenge us to recognize these dangerous continuities and to understand that the stereotypes, conspiracy theories, and dehumanizing language that fueled the Holocaust have not disappeared. Remembering the past is not enough if it does not also lead us to action, to standing up against antisemitism, anti-Roma racism, and all forms of discrimination and injustice that threaten human dignity in our societies today.

When Holocaust memorial sites and museums are visited through the lens of human dignity, they create powerful opportunities to connect with the human dimension of the past. These sites often preserve not only physical traces of atrocities but also personal stories, fragments of lives once lived: names, photographs, handwritten letters, objects left behind. This approach invites students to see the victims not as anonymous numbers, but as individuals with families, professions, aspirations, and everyday joys and struggles. By engaging with these deeply personal narratives, students are reminded that the

Holocaust was not only a historical event, but a rupture in countless individual lives and communities. In doing so, the experience becomes not just about remembering the scale of the crime, but honoring the humanity of each person whose life was affected and lost. At the same time, memorial sites are also places where we can learn about the present and the future: they reveal how a society chooses to remember, how it wishes to present itself, and what values it seeks to uphold.

Moreover, when approached through the lens of human dignity, Holocaust museums and memorials become powerful spaces for learning about moral courage, resistance, and solidarity. The stories of Righteous among the Nations, individuals who stood up for the rights and dignity of others – often at great personal risk – can offer invaluable lessons for educators and students, providing role models of empathy, civic responsibility, and the courage to act in the face of injustice.

In a time when human rights are still fragile in many places, and when hate speech, intolerance, and conspiracy theories spread easily, the educational role of Holocaust sites and museums is more relevant than ever. Visiting these places through the lens of human rights encourages reflection both on what happened and on what we want our societies to be. It reinforces the idea that defending human dignity is not the responsibility of a few but of all of us. It challenges us to confront injustice, to value diversity, to respect human rights, to nurture empathy and to develop other competences for democratic culture which are essential for building democratic and inclusive societies where every person can live in dignity.

Visiting Holocaust memorial sites and museums through the lens of human rights also provides students with the tools to critically analyze not only the history being presented but how it is being remembered and interpreted. In some cases, the sites themselves may reflect distorted or selective narratives, influenced by national agendas that downplay local collaboration, emphasize national victimhood, or omit certain groups of victims. A human rights framework encourages students to question these narratives, recognize omissions, and examine how memory can be shaped by political and social forces. By focusing on universal principles of human dignity, justice, and accountability, students are better prepared to identify state-sponsored distortion and other forms of Holocaust distortion. This approach transforms visits into more than passive learning experiences; it empowers students to engage critically with memorialization and to understand how the way we remember the Holocaust impacts the way we respond to injustice today.

Approaching Holocaust memorial sites and museums through the lens of human dignity also affirms the dignity of everyone involved – not only the victims whose lives and identities are remembered, but also the visitors themselves. This perspective encourages respectful engagement with the past while fostering a reflective and inclusive learning environment. It recognizes that confronting such traumatic history can be emotionally challenging, and that visitors – especially students – must be supported in processing these experiences in a way that upholds their emotional and psychological well-being. Framing the visit around human dignity helps ensure that the learning is not rooted in shock or trauma, but in empathy, critical thinking, and a shared commitment to safeguarding the rights and dignity of all people.

Preparing and organizing a visit to historical/memorial sites and museums through the lens of human rights

A visit to a Holocaust memorial site should not be seen as a standalone event or a symbolic gesture limited to a day of remembrance. Rather, it should be understood as one part of a broader and continuous educational process rooted in human rights and the affirmation of human dignity. Such visits offer meaningful learning opportunities only when they are thoughtfully integrated into a larger pedagogical framework that includes thorough preparation, contextual understanding, and guided reflection.

It is also essential to highlight the very meaning of being at a memorial site or museum. A visit should be about engaging with that place, its history, and its significance. If the purpose is simply to deliver information, this could be done in the classroom. The added value of being in the memorial or museum lies in connecting students to the authenticity of the space, encouraging them to reflect on why this site exists, what it represents, and how societies choose to remember or present their past. Supporting students to become aware of the meaning of the place allows them to engage more deeply with memory and human dignity.

Organizing these visits through the lens of human rights requires educators to develop clear educational goals that go beyond conveying historical facts. The aim is to help students connect emotionally and ethically with the history, and to explore the long-term consequences of dehumanization, antisemitism, racism, and indifference. When designed with care, these visits invite students to reflect on memory, justice, and responsibility – not only in the past but in their own lives and communities today.

Preparation for a visit to a Holocaust memorial should not be rushed. Ideally, it should unfold over several weeks or even months, allowing time to explore the historical, emotional, and ethical dimensions of the Holocaust and human rights. This long-term engagement ensures that the visit is not an isolated event, but part of a broader learning process that stays with students long after they return. It is also important to carefully consider the age and emotional maturity of the students when planning such activities. Memorial visits can be powerful experiences, but they must be age-appropriate and thoughtfully framed to ensure that students are prepared to engage with the content in a meaningful and respectful way.

Long-term preparation of a visit to a Holocaust-related site also allows for building or consolidating a relationship between the teacher and the students based on mutual respect and trust. This kind of relationship can provide valuable support during the visit, either when/if students express their need for emotional support, or when/if students display behaviors that are inappropriate or disruptive.

The guidance presented here is primarily intended for work with secondary school students and should be further adapted by teachers to meet the needs, context, and developmental stage of their learners.

Before the Visit

When framed as reflective, respectful, and inquiry-driven, visits enable students to connect more meaningfully with the human dimension of history, confront moral complexity, and cultivate a lasting commitment to human rights and dignity. The points below highlight key elements to take into account during the visit. More concrete approaches are provided in the section *Suggested Activities for Memorial Site and Museum Visits*.

Communicating with Parents and Guardians

Before the visit, it is important to inform parents about the goals and content of the trip. Parents should understand that students might be emotionally affected by what they see and learn. Teachers can encourage parents to be present for their children afterward by listening without judgment, asking open-ended questions, and helping them process what they experienced. A brief letter or meeting outlining the objectives of the visit, the nature of the site, and how parents can support emotional reflection at home can be highly beneficial. This action ensures not only supporting the students' well-being but it also strengthens the learning process by involving the broader community.

Thorough Pre-Visit Preparation for Students

Students should receive detailed information about the site: its history, what they will see there, what is no longer visible or has been erased, the emotional impact they may experience, and appropriate ways to conduct themselves during the visit. The more prepared they are, the more meaningful and less overwhelming the experience will be. Teachers can use historical sources such as testimonies, maps, photographs, and archival documents to build context and help students better understand the memorial site or museum. For instance, if the memorial includes names or references to specific individuals, it is helpful for students to already know who these people were. This prior knowledge allows them to recognize and interpret these references during the visit. Additionally, introducing students to key concepts such as human rights, human dignity, antisemitism, and group-targeted discrimination will frame the visit within a wider social and ethical perspective. The handbook *Learning from the Past, Acting for the Future – An Interdisciplinary Approach to Holocaust, Human Rights and Intercultural Education* contains eighteen educational activities that can be done with students and can serve as a foundation for their learning before visiting Holocaust memorial sites or museums, helping them build, empathy, and critical reflection[2].

Before the visit, it is important to create space for students to reflect on key questions that prepare them both intellectually and emotionally for the experience. Prompts such as "What do I already know about

2 The Handbook is available in 12 languages: https://www.toli.us/european-seminar-handbooks/

the Holocaust and human rights?", "Why are we visiting this site?", "What questions do I have about the people who lived through this?" or "What does it mean to visit respectfully?" encourage students to connect their prior knowledge, curiosity, and values to the purpose of the visit. To ensure all voices are included, teachers can invite students to submit questions or concerns – either directly or anonymously. For example, teachers can create a question wall or box and choose a time when questions posted there are addressed and discussed with the students.

In preparing students for a visit to a Holocaust memorial or historical site, incorporating historical sources can provide essential context and deepen understanding. Using survivor testimonies, photographs, maps, documents, or diary excerpts allows students to connect the location with real experiences and events. These sources can help students visualize what happened in that space, understand the broader historical processes, and develop empathy for those affected. Discussing sources before the visit also encourages students to ask thoughtful questions, engage more actively on-site, and reflect more critically afterward. When selecting materials, it is important to consider their appropriateness for the students' age and emotional readiness, as well as how they support the intended learning outcomes of the visit.

In addition, some sites provide virtual tours. These can be a valuable preparatory tool, allowing students to familiarize themselves with the layout and content in advance. A simple exercise is to ask students to click through the virtual tour and prepare three thoughtful questions to bring up during the actual visit. This not only primes their curiosity but also ensures they arrive ready to engage actively and meaningfully with the site.

When visits are voluntary, students may be more invested. However, when entire classes are required to attend, some students might not immediately engage. Giving students a say in their preparation – such as choosing a personal research project or taking on a specific task for the visit – can increase motivation and make the experience more meaningful.

Preparing worksheets or reflection prompts that students can complete during the visit encourages active engagement. These can include observation tasks, personal reflections, or guided questions about the stories and experiences of individuals they encounter. Examples are provided below and in the Annexes. Educational planning should take into account the nature of the site being visited, recognizing that sites differ in tone, content, and emotional weight, and may require differentiated approaches to support student engagement and reflection. Teachers are encouraged to adapt their methods accordingly, drawing from the sample materials and suggestions offered in the Annexes to ensure the visit is appropriate, respectful, and meaningful for their particular group of students.

Behavior and Practical Considerations

When preparing students for a visit, teachers are encouraged to begin with an open discussion that allows students to reflect on what respectful behavior might look like, rather than simply prescribing a list of rules. This conversation can address practical aspects such as dressing appropriately for both the weather and the solemnity of the site, maintaining a quiet and reflective demeanor, and approaching practices like photography with care. Students should be reminded not to photograph others without permission and to recognize that some areas may not be suitable for photos at all. Teachers may also encourage students to reflect on the purpose and tone of photography in different contexts – comparing, for example, selfies taken at parties or tourist sites with photographs taken at places of historical atrocity. Dis-

cussing appropriate body language and respectful presence in photos or their use on social media helps students develop awareness of how their actions communicate values, particularly in solemn settings. To deepen this reflection, teachers could invite students to analyze or discuss the potential impact of posting an image from a memorial site on social media:

- What message might such an image convey to others?
- How might the meaning of the image change depending on the caption, pose, or context in which it's shared?
- Can a photo taken at a memorial ever be both personal and respectful?

This type of activity helps students recognize that photographs are not neutral – they shape public memory and reflect personal values – and encourages them to think critically about how remembrance and digital culture intersect.

At the same time, it's important to encourage students to truly *connect* with the place — to be curious, to observe carefully, and to try to understand. Sometimes, students may focus too much on how they think they are *supposed* to behave, worrying about following expected norms of "respectful" behavior. Instead, invite them to approach the visit with curiosity and openness: to look closely, to wonder, to reflect on what happened there and what it means today. Being respectful is not just about silence — it's about genuine engagement, attention, and empathy.

Practical readiness is equally important. Students should be informed that they will spend significant time outdoors and should come prepared with sunscreen, hats, or rain gear depending on the season, as well as water to stay hydrated. It is advisable that they eat beforehand and bring snacks if appropriate, since visits can be long and emotionally demanding. Addressing these basic needs in advance helps minimize distractions and discomfort, allowing students to focus their attention on the learning experience.

An interesting reflection can also be framed around the contrast between the serene appearance of many memorial sites today and their traumatic past. Teachers can explain in advance that this dissonance is common and does not diminish the gravity of the events that occurred there. In fact, it can be an important starting point for reflection on how violence and dehumanization often occur in ordinary, even peaceful-looking places.

Framing both etiquette and practical guidance around the concept of human dignity – respect for the victims, the site, and each other – helps students internalize the significance of their conduct, reinforcing the core values of human rights education: respect, empathy, and responsibility.

Emotional Preparation and Support

Discussing the emotional impact of the visit is another important step in preparation. Students should be made aware that they may feel overwhelmed, sad, or confused – and that not feeling anything immediately is also a valid response.

Teachers can guide students in how to sit with their emotions, not fear them, and find constructive ways to reflect and process. Providing grounding techniques, such as deep breathing or taking breaks to step outside and connect with their bodies and the present moment, can be extremely helpful.

It is also important for teachers to open a conversation about students' expectations and worries. They can ask whether there are areas students might prefer not to visit, and why, while making it clear that opting out is acceptable. This helps normalize vulnerability and empowers students to voice their needs without stigma.

To further support emotional safety and peer connection, teachers may organize students into pairs or small groups, assigning them the dual role of emotional support partners and collaborative learners. These peer teams can check in on each other during the visit and work together on specific reflective tasks or observation-based activities. This strategy not only fosters empathy and mutual care but also strengthens the students' ability to process the visit meaningfully and respectfully.

Preparing as a Teacher

Ideally, teachers should visit the site in advance – either in person or through virtual tours – to understand what their students will experience, to better understand what the students need to learn before the visit in terms of context, and to process their own emotional reactions. If a preliminary visit is not possible, teachers should gather as much information as they can through books, interviews, and online resources.

Moreover, communication with the staff at the memorial or museum ahead of time is very important. When they are informed about what the students already understand about the Holocaust and human rights, and what the learning objectives are, they can better contribute to achieving these goals. Teachers are encouraged to share their plans and expectations in advance, as many sites and museums can offer valuable guidance, resources, or preparatory materials that help educators themselves feel better prepared to lead their students through the visit.

During the Visit

By approaching the visit as a reflective, respectful, and inquiry-based experience, educators help students connect with the human aspects of history, confront moral complexity, and develop an enduring commitment to human rights and dignity. Here are some general suggestions. More in the section *Suggested Activities for Memorial Site and Museum Visits.*

Providing Space for Choice and Reflection

When possible, give students a degree of autonomy in shaping their experience at the site. For instance, they may choose which parts of the exhibition to spend more time in, whether to listen to recorded survivor testimonies in full or to focus on certain stories, or whether to enter areas that are especially emotionally intense. Allowing such choices fosters empathy, maturity, and a stronger sense of responsibility.

Equally important is creating a balance between guided exploration and personal reflection. One effective approach is to divide the visit into two parts: a portion with structured group guidance and discussion, and another for quiet, individual exploration. Encourage students to revisit areas that resonated with them and to engage in personal reflection afterward, such as writing a short response or a letter to a victim or survivor whose story they encountered. These moments of autonomy and quiet reflection help students internalize the experience in meaningful and lasting ways.

Address Emotional Reactions and Misbehavior Constructively

Students may express discomfort in disruptive ways – including laughter, inappropriate comments, or even acts like mimicking Nazi gestures. Rather than shaming, approach these moments as teachable opportunities. Explain why such acts are hurtful and disrespectful, and ask students to reflect on the emotions behind their behavior. Emphasize the importance of preserving human dignity – both their own and that of others – through their actions.

Some students, especially teenagers, may try to hide their emotions of sadness, sorrow or anger, and instead show opposite reactions, such as laughing, chatting, or appearing distracted. In some cultural or peer contexts, openly showing sadness or vulnerability – particularly for boys – may not feel acceptable. Acknowledging this dynamic helps teachers interpret these behaviors with empathy and create space where students can feel safe expressing themselves in their own way, while ensuring that they take into consideration the need to respect the rest of the visitors, including their colleagues.

Upholding Human Dignity When Exploring the Past

When visiting Holocaust memorials and museums, it is important consider not only what is being presented but also how it is presented. Reflecting through the lens of human dignity encourages students to engage critically with the space, its narrative choices, and the emotional and ethical impact of its displays. The way victims are portrayed, the context given to historical materials, and the overall atmosphere of commemoration all influence how history is understood and remembered. The following questions can guide students in examining whether the site upholds respect for human dignity:

- Does the exhibition center the voices and experiences of victims, or is the focus primarily on perpetrators?
- Is antisemitic propaganda – or any other form of propaganda – clearly identified and explained to avoid unintentionally reinforcing harmful stereotypes?
- The way images are used also matters: Are they respectful of the people they depict? Students can reflect on how they would feel if such images – especially those showing naked, emaciated, or deceased individuals – were of themselves or someone close to them.
- Does the design and tone of the exhibition or memorial offer a respectful and dignified way to remember those who suffered and were murdered?
- Or does the site primarily promote a national narrative, or another form of instrumentalization

These questions encourage students to go beyond historical information and to think deeply about ethical representation, memory, and respect.

After the Visit

The learning experience does not end when students leave the memorial site – in many ways, this is when the most critical phase begins. The time following a visit is essential for helping students process what they have seen, translate emotional responses into deeper understanding, and reflect on the ongoing relevance of human dignity and human rights.

Initial Reflection at the Site

Before departing the site, create a moment for students to begin processing what they've experienced. This initial reflection can take many forms: students might share a single word or feeling, write down a brief thought or question, draw an image, or engage in a quiet group circle. The goal is not to analyze but to acknowledge and honor the emotional weight of the visit. This moment at the site offers an important first step in helping students transition from the intensity of the visit toward deeper reflection in the days that follow.

Acknowledging Emotion

Visiting sites of atrocity can trigger a wide range of emotional responses – sorrow, anger, confusion, numbness, or even guilt. It is important to reassure students that all these reactions are valid. To support emotional processing and personal growth, provide different modes for reflection, such as writing, journaling, drawing, or small group discussions. Encourage students to interpret the experience in light of their own values and connect it to wider issues of justice and identity. After the visit, on the return trip, some students may appear withdrawn, others may laugh or shift the conversation to unrelated topics. These can be natural coping mechanisms and should not be seen as signs of disengagement or disrespect. Creating space for various reactions helps foster a respectful and supportive learning environment.

Continued Reflection in Class

Allocate time for students to revisit the experience through facilitated group discussions where they can share what stood out to them, express unresolved questions, and explore the emotional and ethical impact of the visit. These conversations strengthen collective understanding and deepen individual learning. Guide students to draw connections between what they saw and broader themes such as memory, justice, and civic responsibility. Revisit key testimonies, artifacts, or moral dilemmas from the site and invite students to reflect on them again after some time has passed. Make it clear that processing this experience does not end with one session. Emotions and reflections may surface later, and it is important for students to know they have ongoing space to talk, process, and engage.

Encourage personal reflection with guiding questions such as: "What part of the visit impacted me most, and why?", "What have I learned about myself, others, and the importance of memory?", "How does this history connect to present-day issues of human rights or discrimination?", "What actions can I take to counter antisemitism and promote respect for human dignity in my school or community?" Reflection can also include considering how the site presented or represented the topics: "Was the approach appropriate and respectful?", "What choices were made in how the history was conveyed?", "How would I approach these topics if I were presenting them to others?"

Students can respond to these reflection questions in a variety of expressive formats that suit their age, interests, and learning styles. One option is to write a personal reflection – such as a journal entry or a letter to a peer – describing what the visit meant to them. Volunteers may choose to share their reflections aloud in class, fostering a sense of shared learning and empathy. Alternatively, students can also express their experiences through creative forms such as visual art, poetry, or music. These artistic expressions allow for emotional depth and individual interpretation, offering meaningful ways for students to process and communicate the impact of the visit.

Cultivate Responsibility

After a visit, students should be encouraged to think about how the lessons of the past can inform their actions in the present. What does it mean to stand up for others today? How can they recognize and resist antisemitism, anti-Roma racism, or other forms of exclusion in their communities? Activities that support this reflection may include designing awareness campaigns, planning peer-to-peer workshops to inform others or creating an upstander action plan by identifying ways in in which they can stand up for the rights and dignity of others in their daily lives.

Empowering Students as Ambassadors of Remembrance and Active Citizenship

Another way to promote reflection is by inviting students to communicate their experiences to others – especially to peers who could not participate in the visit, but also the wider school community, parents and other local stakeholders. This can take the form of presentations, creative projects, or shared digital journals. Not only does this consolidate learning, but it also reinforces a key message of human rights education: we bear responsibility not only for ourselves but for our broader communities.

With thoughtful, structured reflection rooted in respect for human dignity, teachers can ensure that a visit to a Holocaust memorial site is not an isolated experience, but a lasting contribution to students' growth as empathetic, responsible, and engaged citizens.

Suggested Activities for Memorial Site and Museum Visits

In this section, you will find concrete suggestions for organizing visits with your students. You are not expected to use all of them – in fact, it is best to select, adapt, and localize the ideas according to your students' needs and the specific site or museum you will visit. Each example is based on the assumption that the visit is part of a broader learning process (see the section *Preparing and organizing a visit to historical/memorial sites and museums through the lens of human rights),* that preparatory work has already been done (see the section *Before the visit*), and that students come with basic knowledge of the Holocaust and the site they are about to explore.

A. Anchoring Historical Facts within a Human Rights Framework

To facilitate students' active engagement with the historical/memorial site or museum from a human rights perspective, teachers can divide them into pairs or small teams, each focusing on four to five specific rights (e.g., from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Convention on the Rights of the Child). As they move through the site, students look for examples of how these rights were violated during the Holocaust or, in some cases, how they were upheld or restored, particularly in the periods before and after. A practical tool to guide this process is provided in the handout: *Human Rights Observation Guide for Site/Museum Visits.*

Teachers may also introduce students to the legal context of the time. Human dignity and rights such as freedom of speech, equality before the law, and the right to life were already present in Germany's constitutional framework before the war, yet they were systematically dismantled through the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws. Similar restrictive or exclusionary laws were also passed in other countries, showing that legal systems themselves were used to legitimize persecution and exclusion. By comparing these legal measures with the protections later enshrined in international human rights instruments, students can better understand how laws can both safeguard and undermine human dignity.

Here is a suggested approach for how teachers can prepare, conduct, and debrief a visit through the lens of human rights.

Before the visit:

- Ensure that students have a basic understanding of human rights values and principles
- Divide students into pairs or small groups, assigning each group a set of rights and discuss or review the human rights assigned (e.g., from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*).
- Encourage students to think about where these rights appear in daily life today, so they have a reference point for comparison during the visit.

During the visit:

- Students use the handout as a guide, taking notes on what they see, hear, or feel connected to their assigned rights. This handout is designed to help students engage with Holocaust memorial sites and museums through the lens of human rights and human dignity. The goal is not only to collect factual information but also to reflect on the human impact of laws, policies, and actions, and to connect these reflections to present-day issues.
- Remind them that "evidence" can include both what is present (exhibits, testimonies, artifacts) and what is absent (what is missing, erased, or left unspoken).
- Encourage them to also jot down emotional responses or questions that arise, not just factual notes.

After the visit (debrief):

- Each group shares one or two examples they documented, linking them back to their assigned rights.
- Facilitate a class discussion on broader patterns:
  - Which of the assigned rights did you see most clearly represented or violated at the site?
  - Were there rights that were harder to identify? Why might that be?
  - How did legal measures contribute to restricting or denying these rights?
  - What do these examples teach us about the importance of safeguarding rights today?
- Ask students to write the final reflection individually to consolidate their learning.

When students visit a memorial site only as observers, the experience can fade quickly once they leave. But when they approach it through the framework of human rights, the visit becomes an active exploration of choices, consequences, and values. It challenges them to see connections between past and present, to question how laws and institutions can protect or destroy dignity, and to recognize their own role in shaping a more just society. This shift turns the visit into a catalyst for critical thinking, empathy, and long-lasting civic responsibility.

Handout: Human Rights Observation Guide for Site/Museum Visits

As you walk through the site or museum, focus on your assigned human rights. Take notes on what you see, hear, or feel that connects to each right. Consider:

- Was this right violated, restricted, or (in rare cases) protected?
- What evidence (stories, objects, testimonies, laws, images) illustrates this?
- How did these violations shape people's daily lives?
- What lessons can we draw for today?

Assigned Human Rights	What did I observe? (objects, testimonies, exhibitions, site elements, absences)	Impact on people at the time (how lives were changed or dignity denied)	Personal reflection (How did this affect me? What questions does it raise today?)
1. Freedom from discrimination			
2. Right to family life			
3. Right to information			
4. Right to fair trial			
5. Right to healthcare			

Final Reflection:

- Which right stood out most strongly during the visit? Why?
- How do these observations connect to the importance of protecting human dignity and human rights today?

B. Connecting with History through Personal Stories

To create a meaningful and personal connection to Holocaust history, educators can invite students to explore the story of an individual who was affected. Ideally, this person might be close in age to the students, come from the same region, or share similar interests. Personal accounts – whether in video, audio, or written form – ground students' learning in the real human experience of those who lived through what they will be witnessing in physical form. Students can learn about this individual's life before, during, and – if applicable – after the Holocaust, identifying how their rights and freedoms were progressively stripped away. They can also begin to see how the decisions of politicians and authorities directly influenced individual lives, making visible the link between abstract laws or policies – such as the Nuremberg Laws – and their concrete impact on daily existence. This integrated approach shows the great power of individual stories: broad historical processes become tangible when seen through the lived experience of one person. During the visit to the site or museum, students can then look for references to events, locations, or experiences that relate to that person's story, deepening their engagement and empathy.

A powerful way to connect personal stories with place is through the IWalk resource,[3] an interactive digital education program developed by Zachor Foundation in partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation. IWalks combine survivor testimonies with specific historical sites, enabling students to engage with history where it unfolded. By hearing survivors describe their experiences in the very locations where events took place, students gain a deeper understanding of how individual lives were shaped by history, while also reflecting on the importance of memory and human dignity.

Here is a suggested approach for integrating personal stories into a visit, helping students connect individual lives with broader history.

Before the visit:

Invite students to get to know the story of one person affected by the Holocaust. This could be done through a diary, memoir, filmed testimony, novel, or historical research. The individual does not need to be directly represented at the memorial site or museum you will visit—though if that's possible, even better—but there should be a meaningful connection. For example, the person may have lived in the same region, faced similar restrictions, or been affected by laws and policies that the museum addresses.

Encourage students to pay attention to everyday details: What was this person's family like? What did they enjoy doing? What were their hopes for the future? Then help them see how political decisions and discriminatory laws slowly narrowed this person's rights and opportunities.

Students can work in pairs or small groups on a shared story, or individually on their own. Group work encourages collaboration, empathy, and collective reflection, while also sparking discussion that can deepen understanding. Working individually, on the other hand, may allow students to form a more personal connection with the story and space for deeper self-reflection. Educators can choose the approach that best matches their students' needs, maturity, and the objectives of the visit.

3 This educational resource can be freely downloaded from the Apple App Store or Google Play Store under the name *IWalk – Zachor*.

During the visit:

Invite students to keep this individual's story in mind as they explore the memorial site or museum. Provide them with the *Personal Story Observation Handout* so they can record specific connections. Remind them that connections may be direct (e.g., a ghetto, deportation, or event similar to the individual's story) or indirect (e.g., displays about laws, policies, or community life that shaped the individual's experience). This approach makes the visit reciprocal: the memorial or museum deepens understanding of the person's story, and the story helps students engage more meaningfully with the memorial or museum.

After the visit (Debrief):

Guide students in reflecting on the connections they observed. Possible questions include:

- What part of the museum or memorial site helped you better understand the individual's story?
- What did you notice that connected indirectly to their experience (laws, restrictions, daily life, discrimination)?
- How did seeing the memorial site or museum change the way you think about this person's life?
- What questions about their life or choices came to mind during the visit?
- What can we learn from their experience about dignity, rights, and the importance of remembrance today?

To consolidate learning, ask students to write a reflection or complete a creative response (such as a short journal entry, artwork, poem, etc.). This ensures the focus stays on reflection and civic responsibility.

Handout: Personal Story Observation Handout

Before the Visit

Name of the person:

Age during the Holocaust:

Country/Region:

1. Three things I learned about this person's life before the Holocaust:

-

-

-

2. What happened to this person during the Holocaust?

3. How were this person's rights and freedoms taken away?

4. What happened after (if applicable)?

During the Visit

What did I see at the memorial/museum that reminded me of this person's story (places, objects, photos, documents)?	
Were there examples of how this person's rights and dignity were denied, restricted, or defended here?	
Did I notice anything that helps explain how political decisions or laws shaped this person's life?	
Is there any mention of people who helped, resisted, or made different choices that relate to this story?	
Was there something I expected to find related to their story but didn't? Why might this have been absent or left out?	
How did being in this place change or deepen my understanding of the person's experience?	
What emotions or questions came up for me while thinking about this person during the visit?	

C. Exploring human behavior during the Holocaust

Examining how different people responded during the Holocaust – whether they helped others, stayed silent, resisted injustice, or caused harm – encourages students to think beyond historical facts and consider the personal decisions individuals faced in extreme circumstances. It is important to recognize that these decisions were often made under severe constraints, where options were drastically limited, leading to what has been called 'choiceless choices.' By reflecting on the beliefs, values, pressures, and lack of real alternatives that shaped people's actions, students gain insight into the complexity of human behavior. This approach invites important questions: Whose rights were violated? Who made efforts to defend those rights? Who caused harm, and who remained passive? These reflections help students connect the past to present-day realities, strengthening empathy and a sense of civic responsibility. A sample handout to support this activity is included in Annex 3.

Resisters and rescuers during the Holocaust remind us that even in the darkest times, individuals could choose to act with courage, empathy, and a sense of justice. Their decisions – whether to hide someone, speak out, or preserve culture and dignity – show that personal choices matter. Learning about these acts can inspire students to reflect on their own values and consider how they, too, can stand up for others and take responsibility in their communities. These stories encourage young people to become active citizens who are willing to challenge injustice and defend human dignity.

It is especially important to reflect on the role of bystanders and the impact of their choices. Long before the Holocaust reached its most violent stages, there were clear warning signs – such as book burnings, public humiliations, and laws that stripped Jewish people of their rights. Later, persecution unfolded in full view of local communities. Neighbors witnessed what was happening: some took advantage of the situation, many stayed silent, and a few showed remarkable courage by helping. Encouraging students to explore these choices helps them understand how discrimination and violence can slowly become 'normal,' and why it matters to recognize and resist such patterns in any society today.

Antisemitism played a key role in shaping the environment in which people made choices. Nazi propaganda did not only promote hatred and stereotypes but also reinforced existing prejudices, making it easier for some individuals to justify indifference or inaction. Others may not have been driven by antisemitic beliefs themselves, but the pervasiveness of such propaganda and the fear of standing out in a hostile climate still discouraged intervention. Recognizing how antisemitism was spread, normalized, and weaponized helps students understand both the power of prejudice and the dangers of remaining silent in the face of injustice.

Moreover, understanding how ordinary people became perpetrators is essential for grasping the mechanisms through which mass violence becomes possible. Those who carried out acts of violence, discrimination, and murder were not always fanatics or ideologues—many were everyday individuals who, over time, became complicit in systemic cruelty. Influenced by propaganda, social conformity, obedience to authority, ideological pressure, or fear, they began to see their victims as less than human. Encourage students to examine how this transformation could happen, and how social, political, and personal forces contributed to a gradual erosion of moral responsibility. Reflecting on this complexity allows students to see that the capacity for cruelty can exist in ordinary contexts and that respect for human rights and human dignity are essential in preventing such injustices today.

The following guidance outlines how teachers can frame a visit around human choices and behaviors, from resistance to complicity.

Before the visit:

Prepare students by introducing the idea that people during the Holocaust faced very different kinds of decisions. For victims, these were often *"choiceless choices"*—decisions made under extreme pressure, where none of the available options were good or truly free. At the same time, others still had a degree of agency: some chose to be perpetrators or collaborators, some remained passive as bystanders, and some took risks to resist or help others. Present short stories or testimonies from these different groups to highlight the complexity of human behavior. Encourage students to reflect on:

- What risks or pressures shaped people's decisions?
- In which cases were people's choices constrained, and in which did they still have freedom to act differently?
- What early warning signs (laws, humiliations, restrictions) were visible to neighbors or communities, and how did they respond?

During the visit:

Provide students with the Handout *Observation Guide: Human Behavior During the Holocaust* and ask them to look for examples in the memorial site/museum that illustrate different kinds of human behavior during the Holocaust. These might include testimonies, photos, artifacts, or exhibits related to resistance, collaboration, silence, or rescue. Students should note both what is visible and what might be absent or missing in the exhibition. They can also take photos (if the memorial/museum allows it) to illustrate their examples or make drawings if time allows.

After the visit:

Debrief by asking students to share their observations and connect their learning experience to present day. Possible questions include:

- What behaviors or choices did you observe being described at the memorial/museum (helping, harming, resisting, staying silent)?
- How did these behaviors make you feel when you encountered them?
- What thoughts or questions did these examples raise for you?
- Did you see situations where people had "choiceless choices"? How were those different from cases where individuals could have acted differently?
- How did propaganda, laws, or social pressure appear to influence people's decisions?
- What role did bystanders play in what you observed, and what impact did their actions (or inaction) have?
- How does reflecting on these choices help you understand similar patterns of discrimination or injustice today?
- What connections can you make between these historical examples and the values and responsibilities we hold in our own schools, communities, or society?

Handout: Exploring Human Behavior During the Holocaust

Choices and Circumstances

Type of Human Behavior	What did I observe? (objects, testimonies, stories, images)	What pressures, risks, or values may have influenced these actions?	What human rights were impacted by their actions?	Reflections / connections to today
Rescuers / Helpers – people who took risks to protect or support others				
Resisters – those who opposed injustice in big or small ways (e.g., protests, preserving culture)				
Bystanders – people who remained silent, looked away, or accepted discrimination				
Perpetrators / Collaborators – people who carried out or supported persecution and violence				
Warning Signs – evidence of early restrictions, humiliations, or propaganda that normalized discrimination				

D. Thematic pathways to understanding

A powerful way to explore memorial sites and museums is by inviting students to investigate history through selected themes. Working with a theme helps them focus their attention, observe more intentionally, and engage critically with what they encounter. Themes might include:

- **Resistance (spiritual and physical):** Acts of defiance, survival, and the preservation of dignity, whether through armed resistance or cultural and spiritual resilience.
- **Daily life:** How ordinary routines were disrupted, reshaped, or adapted under conditions of persecution and oppression.
- **Law and exclusion:** The role of laws and regulations (such as the Nuremberg Laws and similar laws in other countries) in stripping people of rights and legitimizing discrimination.
- **Propaganda and antisemitism:** How antisemitic imagery, stereotypes, and state-led propaganda spread hatred and justified exclusion or violence.
- **Remembrance and memory:** How the victims are commemorated today, what narratives are emphasized, and how societies choose to represent this history.

Teachers can also adapt or propose additional themes depending on the memorial site or museum they are planning to visit, the maturity of the students, and the learning objectives.

Students can be divided into small groups, each assigned a different theme. As they move through the memorial or museum, they observe, take notes, and (where permitted) take photos connected to their assigned theme. This approach can also integrate visual exploration. For example, students may compare historical photographs with the present-day site, reflecting on what has changed and what is absent: the missing people, destroyed buildings, silenced voices, or the contrast between the past marked by violence and the present-day peaceful environment, etc. Older or more advanced students may even be tasked with creating their own guided tour**,** taking photos of what they find most significant and reconstructing the story of the place from their perspective.

Linking thematic exploration to human rights deepens its impact: students can see how issues such as discrimination, silence, antisemitism, or solidarity played out in the past and reflect on their continued relevance today.

Here is one suggested way to prepare and conduct such an activity with students:

Before the visit:

- Introduce students to the chosen theme(s) (see list above). This introduction can be done through short readings, survivor testimonies, visual materials, or class discussions that spark curiosity and give students an entry point into the theme.
- Provide background information or examples for each theme so students know what to pay attention to during the visit.
- Divide students into small groups and assign or let them choose their theme.

During the visit:

- Provide each group with the **handout** *Thematic Pathways Observation* to complete as their move through the site/museum.

- Ask students to record not only what they observe, but also their thoughts and feelings related to their theme. In addition to completing the handout, they may take photos (if permitted) or create drawings of significant elements, which they can later share with their peers during the post-visit presentation.
- Remind them that "evidence" can be direct (objects, testimonies, exhibitions) or indirect (things missing, erased, or unspoken).
- Optionally, share historical photographs of the site connected to their theme, if available. Encourage them, where photography is permitted, to capture images from the same perspective as the historical ones and reflect on what has changed or disappeared over time. Comparing past and present images is enriching but not essential – the thematic exploration works even without photographs.

After the visit (Debriefing):

- Each group shares their findings with the class, using notes and photos to illustrate their reflections.
- Facilitate a discussion with guiding questions:
  - What did your theme reveal about people's lives, rights, and dignity?
  - What connections did you notice between your theme and other groups' themes?
  - How did comparing "then and now" (photos, changes in the site) shape your understanding?
  - What lessons does your theme suggest for today about human rights and civic responsibility?
  - How did your theme help you understand antisemitism – its causes, effects, and how it was manifested at the time?
  - What connections can you make between antisemitism during the Holocaust and antisemitism today?
- Encourage students to create a short collaborative product (poster, digital slideshow, or written reflection) to consolidate and share their learning.

Handout: Thematic Pathways Observation

Group theme: _____

Guiding Questions	Observations (What we saw/heard)	Reflections (What we thought/felt)
What we observed (objects, stories, spaces, photos, documents)		
What was missing, erased, or left unsaid		
If the group compared "then and now" photos, list the changes that stood out		
How did this theme show the impact of antisemitism, discrimination or loss of dignity on people's lives at the time?		
What lessons does this theme give us for today – about antisemitism, human rights, or the way people treat each other?		

Further Resources

1. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2011). *Human Rights Education at Holocaust Memorial Sites across the European Union: An Overview of Practices* Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1790-FRA-2011-Holocaust-education-overview-practices_EN.pdf

2. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2011). *Discover the Past for the Future: The Role of Historical Sites and Museums in Holocaust Education and Human Rights Education in the EU*. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1792-FRA-2011-Holocaust-Education-Summary-report_EN.pdf

3. European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS). (2024). *Preparing students for a visit to a memorial site*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9Dw4O3CU3c

4. International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (2023). *Charter for Safeguarding Sites*. Available at: https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/ihra-charter-safeguarding-sites

Glossary

Historical Sites

Locations where significant events from the past took place. In the context of Holocaust education, this can include ghettos, deportation points, concentration camps, execution sites, or buildings that played a role in the persecution of individuals or communities.

Memorial Sites

Spaces that are specifically preserved or designed to honor and remember victims of past atrocities, including the Holocaust. These can range from large museums and former camp complexes to small-scale memorials such as plaques or monuments in public areas.

Human Rights Education

An educational approach aimed at promoting understanding, respect, and action for the rights and freedoms to which all people are entitled. It involves three interconnected dimensions:

- *Learning about human rights* – gaining knowledge of human rights principles, history, and legal frameworks.
- *Learning through human rights* – using participatory, respectful, and inclusive teaching methods that reflect human rights values.
- *Learning for human rights* – empowering individuals to apply these values in everyday life and take action to protect the rights and dignity of others.

Competences for Democratic Culture[4]

The Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) defines a comprehensive set of 20 competences that students need to participate effectively in democratic and intercultural societies. These competences span values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. Among them are empathy, critical thinking, respect for diversity, and civic-mindedness – key elements that align closely with the aims of Holocaust and human rights education.

Holocaust Distortion

Any attempt – whether intentional or not – to excuse, misrepresent, minimize, or manipulate the historical facts of the Holocaust. Unlike Holocaust denial, distortion does not claim the Holocaust did not happen, but rather seeks to blur its realities, diminish its scale, shift blame, or repurpose its meaning for unrelated political, ideological, or commercial goals. It can appear in various forms: from gross minimization of the number of victims, blaming Jews for their own persecution, or casting the Holocaust as a positive event, to state-sponsored efforts to manipulate Holocaust history, equate unrelated events with the Holocaust, or glorify individuals and institutions complicit in its crimes. Holocaust distortion undermines the memory of victims and survivors, weakens public understanding of this history, and fuels contemporary antisemitism and disinformation.

4 https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture/rfcdc-volumes

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