

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 this contribution, through literary content analysis, I examine the novel *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story* (2023). I am convinced that it should be included in literature classes dealing with modern historical issues, especially pertaining to the Shoah. For two excerpts from this novel, I present several questions and tasks, the aim of which is to guide pupils to an adequate understanding of the events of the Shoah. I am convinced that this narrative is the one in which the events that relate to the Shoah are presented authentically and in an attractive way for young readers, and whose presentation leads to a certain de-abstracting of these ideas.

**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 this 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). The story takes place in January 1945, when fourteen-year-old Moshe Kessler gets off the transport at Buchenwald concentration camp. He has already survived the selection on the platform at Auschwitz, hunger, exhaustion and the death march. The story is Moshe Kessler's personal testimony about his childhood in Sub Carpathian Russia and the fate of the Jewish minority there during and after World War II. Regev's novel focuses primarily on the so-called children's block in Buchenwald, where thousands of prisoners from the death marches went at the end of the war. In this extermination camp, a group of prison resistance fighters led by Czech communist and political prisoner, Antonín Kalina, managed to save 904 Jewish children at the risk of their own lives.

Goda (2014) states that this novel 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 the extreme persecution and genocide of Jews, has been explored through different perspectives, especially 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 Białystok, where strategies ranged from resistance to evasion. Building on this assertion, Geissbühler (2022) argues that oral history and survivor



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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 pre-existing friendships among Auschwitz prisoners significantly increased their chances of survival, as evidenced by research on Jewish prisoners from the Theresienstadt ghetto (Bélin et al. 2023).

Regev's novel anchors these themes in evidence. Among other things, it illustrates the complex interplay of individual resilience, community support and the harsh realities of life in the concentration camps. At the same time, it can be perceived as a contribution to the preservation of collective memory, to the understanding of the Holocaust, and as a testament to human perseverance, solidarity and the desire to live.

In this paper, I point out, among other things, the importance of the warnings that the topic under discussion brings to contemporary society, present possible ways of introducing pupils and students ("pupil" meaning pupils attending primary school, "student" meaning children attending secondary school and older) to literary representations of the Shoah and then give practical examples of how to incorporate the book into teaching.

Regev's story was chosen because it meets contemporary implementation requirements in the context of adequate artistic narratives with the theme of the Shoah in our opinion. In our opinion, the composition of this narrative allows for its selection at different levels of education, which I point out by postulating research questions and providing answers to them.

Regev's novel corresponds to current trends in the presentation of the Shoah in contemporary society, especially in the way that the events of the Second World War are presented through an individual's story (Lindquist 2013).

This paper is thus devoted to the explanation of certain possibilities for the inclusion of the novel *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story* in the teaching of literature. For this purpose, I have also included an excerpt from the novel *Transport for Eternity* (Tichý 2017), in the comparison of which, I see considerable didactic potential.

### 1.1. 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 dialog to preserve its lessons for future generations.

As the above suggests, the Shoah, which, together with Lane (2024), I perceive as the term that refers to the Holocaust, a catastrophic event during World War II, is characterized by the systematic extermination of six million Jews by the Nazi regime. This term, which translates into "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, and is central to contemporary society, especially in terms of the warning it brings. I 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 fulfill this potential, it is important to choose appropriate methods of introducing students to literary depictions of the Shoah.

## 1.2. Relevance of the Shoah for Contemporary Society

The Shoah, or Holocaust, holds profound significance for contemporary society, serving as a pivotal reference point for the understanding of 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 social values. The following sections explore these aspects in detail considering the story to be utilized in teaching the Holocaust.

### 1.2.1. Theological Reflections and Challenges

[Rahayu \(2024\)](#) states that the Shoah has prompted significant shifts in Jewish theology, particularly in theodicy (or the justification of God), 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 incomprehensible (i.e., incomparable to something known), the boundaries and limits of civilized society are in some way maintained.

### 1.2.2. 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 \(2024\)](#) highlights 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 the careful consideration of historical symbols in modern debates.

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

### 1.3.1. Historical and Interdisciplinary Approaches

[Mašát et al. \(2020\)](#) reflect on the “Historical Approach”, which involves presenting factual accounts and survivor testimonies, which help students understand 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 they 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.

### 1.3.2. Artistic Narratives and Figurative Dynamics

[Mašát \(2019\)](#) and [Krongold \(2020\)](#) underline that 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.

### 1.3.3. 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 choice of texts to the students' grade levels ensures that the material is both challenging and comprehensible (Mašát and Šmakalová 2019). Surveys conducted in Czech schools show that students respond positively to well-chosen literary excerpts, suggesting that the careful selection and presentation of texts can enhance understanding and empathy (Mašát and Šmakalová 2020).

In the next part of the paper, I 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. Our aim was to point out the potential of including the events of the Shoah (Holocaust) at different levels of education, based on the opinions of various experts. For that purpose, I chose the method of synthesizing different expert narratives to create an adequate theoretical basis for the results of our research, with a focus on highlighting the possibilities of implementing Regev's book in the classroom.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Learning Objectives

In this part of the contribution, I present a proposal for work with the mentioned novel in teaching. The main goal is to answer the following questions: (1) how accurately does the book *The Boy from Block 66* depict 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 do they contribute to understanding of the Holocaust experience?

#### 2.1.1. Interpretation of the Book

The title of the book 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. Let us 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, p. 102)*

Possible questions about the passage:

- How does the text depict the topic 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 a 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 understanding of the Holocaust and to the promotion of historical awareness?

### 2.1.2. Analysis of Literary Elements

An important stage of working with an excerpt should be the analysis of literary elements. Based on the given example, students should answer the following questions:

- What are the most important themes of the sample and its key motives?
- Who are the main characters in 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 Begecszász. 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, p. 130)*

This can be followed by a discussion about the extent to which the sample of this novel fits into the literary genre of memoir, historical novel or autobiography.

### 2.1.3. Literary Genre and Comparative Analysis

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

I have included an excerpt from this work because I believe that the comparison of these two passages has considerable didactic potential. Pupils can compare relevant aspects of life during the Second World War through two different but related literary stories. The

excerpt from Regev's book highlights the return of persons from internment and their sobering up from the negative reception in their original (home) area, as well as various other aspects that accompanied their return.

In the second excerpt, I find ourselves in the space of Prague, where Petr learns about the emerging persecution and stigmatization activities that foreshadowed the Nazi concept of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question".

It is thus a description of various aspects that preceded (second excerpt) or followed (first excerpt) the Nazi extermination machine. I believe that introducing students even to these undoubtedly World War II-related aspects can lead to a greater understanding of the mechanics that contributed to its unfolding and to the realization that although World War II ended on 8 May 1945, the warnings it presents are still relevant in contemporary society.

The study of literary genres through comparative analysis allows for a deep understanding of a cultural and literary phenomena by examining the interplay of different traditions and contexts. Comparative literary theory emphasizes a cross-cultural approach to literature and highlights how cross-fertilization with other traditions reveals common themes and narrative techniques, thus broadening our global perspective (Kholodniak 2023). Comparative literature as a discipline provides a framework for identifying common and specific aspects of literary phenomena, offers insight into the typological and genetic nature of literary events and facilitates a deeper understanding of literary relationships (Khaliyeva et al. 2022). In educational settings, the application of comparative methods, as highlighted by Tattimbetova et al. (2020), enhances students' cultural identification and critical independence by comparing literary characters, episodes and authors from diverse backgrounds, thereby revealing the general laws of a unitary literary and cultural process. I see the method of comparing two related narratives as one of the most appropriate ways to develop students' critical thinking skills.

Sample:

*I took a quick step towards the intersection, but after only a few steps I realized that Petr was standing still. "What? I turned to him". "Well..." my friend began awkwardly. "We should pretend like we don't know each other on the way". "What are you kidding? How don't we know each other?" I didn't understand. "Well, you know that helping Jews and showing them favor is punishable", he quoted, attempting a smile as he did so. But he wasn't very good at it. "Forget it!" I waved my hand. "we used to meet peacefully before, didn't we?" "Yeah, well, I didn't have to wear this beauty". And he pointed again to his star with Jude on it. "Everyone can see right away that we don't belong together!" (Tichý 2017, p. 64)*

### 3. Discussion

Based on practical examples, I tried to show how the examples from the mentioned narratives could be integrated into teaching. I oriented ourselves mainly based on the theses of the historical and interdisciplinary approach and integrated the receptive and interpretive approach.

Gall (2024) 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 (Grenaudier-Klijn 2022) highlights the exile state of Holocaust survivors, emphasizing the incommunicability of their experiences and the existential anxiety reflected in their fragmented identities. Grelka's analysis (Grelka 2022) reveals a synthesis of Jewish mysticism, Yiddish modernism and Soviet communism that portrays Jewish figures not only as victims but also as a 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.

Based on these statements, it can be concluded that Regev's book meets and fulfills almost all trends and opinions promoted in connection with the events of the Shoah and their accentuation in contemporary society. I believe that these theses, which reflect the current state of knowledge and understanding in the field, are relevant to the questions and challenges I have presented in the excerpts from this story. Among other things, readers will be provided with 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 article was Limor Regev's book. This story was examined using content narrative analysis. I chose this method because it is a multifaceted approach. It is also useful in exploring complex narratives, such as those found in autobiographical stories, where emotional aspects and themes such as mental health and empathy play a central role (Lustosa de Oliveira and Marín-Suelves 2024). According to Sulakatko (2024), the integration of qualitative content and narrative analysis enables the categorization of findings while highlighting the contextual richness of the data.

#### 5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have presented key themes and motifs from Regev's book, *The Boy From Block 66: A WW2 Jewish Holocaust Survival True Story*, through literary content analysis. Based on the results of the analysis, two excerpts were selected for which I developed questions that can be worked with in the context of a historical, integrative and comprehensive approach in connection with the adequate introduction of readers to the events of the Shoah. I also incorporated an interpretive approach, which is an integral part of working with literature.

I believe that the questions I presented can help children and teenage readers, to a certain extent and in an adequate way, understand the events of the Shoah. The questions were postulated to lead readers to internalize the warnings that these events present contemporary society, and thus to cultivate 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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