

# OATH AND OPPOSITION:

EDUCATION UNDER THE THIRD REICH



**CASE STUDIES** What Choices Were Possible?

UNITED STATES  
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# OATH AND OPPOSITION:

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### CASE STUDIES What Choices Were Possible?

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# WHAT CHOICES WERE POSSIBLE?



Teachers and students from the Nos Petits school in Brussels, Belgium. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Olivia Matbis*

During Nazi rule, a struggle to control education policy emerged between the Ministry of Education, the National Socialist Teachers League (NSLB), and the Hitler Jugend.

These case studies feature both biographies and primary sources (photographs and documents). Their goals are to:

- Expand the lens through which we see this history.
- Identify and examine the challenges and pressures of education in Nazi-occupied Europe (1933–45).
- Examine classroom experiences in Nazi-occupied Europe (1933–45) to understand what choices were available.
- Challenge and complicate thinking about collaboration, complicity, and teachers' role in society today.
- Reflect on our own actions while considering the pressures that affected those who were complicit.

# RISKING HER LIFE TO PROTECT HER STUDENTS

**JEANNE DAMAN** was born into a Belgian Catholic family in 1919. When World War II began, she was a young Roman Catholic schoolteacher in Belgium. The Nazis—after annexing Austria, claiming part of Czechoslovakia, conquering Poland, and occupying Denmark and Norway—conquered Belgium and the

Netherlands in May 1940. They then organized the classroom curriculum to fit their propaganda requirements. Daman quietly resigned from public school teaching.



**Jeanne Daman was a schoolteacher who saved 2,000 Jewish schoolchildren and worked for the Belgian resistance. For her efforts, she was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.**

After Jewish children were no longer permitted to attend regular public schools, Fela Perelman approached Daman and asked whether she would be willing to join the staff of Nos Petits, a Jewish kindergarten in Brussels. The Perelmans were prominent Jewish citizens of Warsaw, Poland, who emigrated to Brussels and became Belgian citizens before Germany invaded. Daman was only 21 years old at the time.

“I had no contact with Judaism or the Jewish world, but the need was demonstrated clearly when we heard that (due to a Nazi raid) a small child left alone at home fell through a window to the street below and was killed. Having been raised in an anti-Nazi atmosphere, my immediate impulse was to agree to go into this work. It was essentially a question for me to take a political position, one of solidarity with the victims of the Nazis and sympathy for the children involved.”

Daman became the headmistress of Nos Petits at age 23.

Jewish schools had a precarious existence. It was a great danger to keep the children together because Nazi raids on Jews had already begun. The tactics of

Jeanne Daman (center) poses with Jewish children under her care in the Nos Petits kindergarten. *US Holocaust Memorial Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jeanne Daman Scaglione*

“Under their curriculum,  
I couldn’t teach what  
I wanted to. I wouldn’t  
teach what they wanted  
me to. My parents agreed.  
I took employment as a  
secretary. I spoke German.  
I was Catholic. The Nazis  
paid me no attention.  
I was ‘safe.’”

—JEANNE DAMAN

the Nos Petits staff changed as the occupation went on, and clandestine efforts to find shelter and hiding places for the children, to save their lives, became a matter of first importance.

Initially, children were placed with non-Jewish Belgian families simply out of a spirit of solidarity toward children in danger. However, as time passed, it became necessary to find money to make monthly payments to families providing shelter for the children.

Children were given new names and identities. These details would be rehearsed repeatedly with the child, with the teacher stressing the importance of never making a mistake.

There were times, however, when the placements did not work out well, and Daman was forced to move the child again.



Eventually, Jewish schools, including Nos Petits, were closed. Fela Perelman once again asked Daman to continue her rescue efforts by joining the underground.

A network emerged placing Jewish women as maids in the homes of the Belgian elite. Daman was involved in obtaining false identity papers and ration cards for them. She also worked with the underground to search for people who were denouncing Jews to the Gestapo.

Near the end of the war, Daman became actively involved with the Belgian resistance, transporting arms on her bicycle and providing intelligence.



Daman continued her efforts after the war by reuniting Jewish orphans with their families and fundraising for Israel through the United Jewish Appeal. Jeanne Daman was honored in 1971 by the Belgian Jewish Committee, the King of Belgium, and Yad Vashem.

Above: A group of young people, including Jeanne Daman (third from right), gather in an apartment in Brussels, Belgium. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jeanne Daman Scaglione.* Left: Daman and her husband, Aldo Scaglione, visit Yad Vashem in Israel. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Aldo Scaglione*

## JEANNE DAMAN'S DIARY

This excerpt from Daman's diary highlights the motives and pressures she faced, which influenced the decisions she made:

“ It was at the height of the raids. We knew, of course, when children didn't come to roll call, that meant their families, including them, had been taken by the Nazis. It became the way of life for us, day after day.

But one day, Gestapo agents arrived at the school in a truck. They named three children, told me they had been asked by their mothers to pick them up and take the little ones to them. These Gestapo men were pleasant and polite. Of course, I knew what it meant. But I had to think of the 60 other children we had in our school that day.

I was helpless to stand up to them and I didn't. I dressed those children myself, the youngest was three-and-a-half years old. I put them in the truck myself, delaying the moment when the Nazis would touch them. And they took them away. We learned later that the parents were hiding and the Nazis used this trick to get them out in the open. It worked. They got them all.

I knew those children would never be seen again, or their families. I couldn't intervene without peril to all our children. But I felt I should have done SOMETHING. I was anti-Nazi by conviction before. Now I wanted to strike back myself, to damage them. When Mrs. Perelman asked me, I didn't need time to answer. From the time I stood and watched those three children taken away from me, I was ready to join the underground. ”



Top: Studio portrait of Jeanne Daman. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Olivia Mattis. Above: A scan of Jeanne Daman's diary with a flower pressed between the pages. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Aldo Scaglione

# TEACHERS FACILITATE STERILIZATION OF STUDENTS



Why did some teachers choose to protect their students while others chose to collaborate with the Nazis?

## TRAINING INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS OF THE DEAF, BERLIN

Gotthold Lehmann became the school principal and director of the teacher training program (1924). He encouraged the implementation of the sterilization law among the students in his institution. Sources say he took the initiative to inform authorities about his deaf students and had children as young as ten years old sterilized against their parents' wishes.

Lehmann hired teachers who were loyal to the Nazi cause and quickly wrote to Reich officials so they would be recognized for their "professionalism." One of his hires, a teacher by the name of Schurmann, had recommended that his student, a 14-year-old boy, be sterilized. The student had tried to escape from

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A teacher helps a student to read in a school for deaf children in Geretsried. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Samuel B. Zisman*

What were the behaviors of ordinary individuals and what were the pressures and motives that might have shaped their behaviors?

the school three times. On his third attempt, Schurmann had police apprehend him, put him in handcuffs, beat him, and deliver him to the hospital for sterilization. Schurmann was recognized as a leader at the school and given a promotion.

**PROVINCIAL INSTITUTE FOR THE DEAF, SOEST**

Director Wegge carried out his educational duties in an SS uniform. He reported to the Reich on every student with handwritten notes in the margins. It is believed he recommended 98 percent of his students for sterilization. He also recommended that this be done during the summer holiday to prevent student unrest and to avoid circulation of details of the sterilization among clubs for the deaf. Health authorities agreed with his recommendation. Documents demonstrate that many were forcibly sterilized and that Wegge not only notified authorities, but arranged the transport of his students to the clinics where the operations were performed. Parents often were not informed until after the operation had taken place.



Director, State Institution for the Deaf and Training Institute for Teachers of the Deaf  
Log No. 930

Dear Frau NN,

NN was released from the clinic in good health on August 16. The operation proceeded normally. NN has already written you about this.

The law stipulates that in the case of persons above 14 years of age, the operation may be performed without the consent of parents and guardians. You could not then have changed anything in this regard. I believe that it will be quite a good thing for NN that she has no children. Her life will likely be hard enough as it is.

With best regards, Heil Hitler!  
Gotthold Lehman

Above: A letter from Gotthold Lehman regarding the sterilization of a young student. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Horst Biesold* Right: A translation of Lehman's letter. *Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schubman, Deaf People in Hitler's Europe (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2002)*



LETTERS REGARDING FORCED STERILIZATION OF STUDENTS

Teachers, local police, and city government officials collaborated with the Nazis to carry out the orders.



Above: Participants in a National Socialist Teachers Union (NSLB) training camp in Birkenwerder, Germany in 1935. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Horst Biesold.* Below: A decision regarding sterilization. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Horst Biesold.* A translation of the decision. *Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schubman, Deaf People in Hitler's Europe (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2002)*

Re: Sterilization of NN, baker's assistant in the Institution for the Deaf of Dillingen, born xx in XX, resident in Dillingen at the Institution.

Decision

It is hereby ordered that NN born on xx in XX shall be forcibly conveyed to the hospital in Günzburg for a sterilization operation, unless she immediately goes there of her own accord.

Grounds

NN is to be sterilized in accordance with the decision of the Hereditary Health Court of the Augsburg District Court of October 20, 1936, No. XIII 414/36. The decision has been drawn up by the court clerk in the office of the Hereditary Health Court with the mention that it becomes final on November 13, 1936, and that the sterilization operation may also be performed against the will of the subject. This decision was delivered on November 19, 1936, to the legal representative of NN, NN a farmer in XX, with the order of the public health officer that NN present herself for the operation at either the municipal hospital in Augsburg or in Günzburg within two weeks.

Since NN did not submit to sterilization voluntarily nor did her legal representative provide any further explanation, forcible sterilization at the hospital of Günzburg is to be effected in accordance with the prescription of the state health authority in Dillingen with the assistance of the responsible police authorities (Mayor of the City of Dillingen) (article 6 of the Ordinance of December 5, 1935, *Reich Law Gazette* 1, 1021, section 2, Ordinance of July 8, 1933; Referral No. 222/36).

Dillingen, December 10, 1936  
District Police Authority, Dillingen  
signed Dr. Hogen

## HELGA GROSS



“ We were young, we really didn’t understand. Then a man came from the government to our school and told the teacher to choose which children [to] send to the hospital for sterilization. Then as the time became near, I was in the kitchen and I was cleaning. My mother came and said, ‘Helga, sit down.’ And she explained, ‘You have to go to the hospital in two days.’ My father cried. He refused to see me. He didn’t want to hug me before I left home to go to the hospital.

Not until later, years later, I saw my baby sister; she had a beautiful baby. And the baby was so beautiful and I got to hold the baby and that morning my sister was feeding the baby and then I realized what I felt when I realized I couldn’t have any children. I started to cry and I, I ran into the bathroom and just cried and cried.

When I came back out my sister said, ‘What’s wrong? What’s the matter?’ I said, oh I’m just crying because I’m happy for you because you have a beautiful child. ”\*

\* <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn60511>

Above: Helga Gross (fourth from left) with her siblings; and holding a doll. Right: Helga Gross describing her experience. *Oral History Interview with Helga Gross, US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

**HELGA GROSS** was a deaf child who was sterilized at age 16. One of her brothers was also deaf but he avoided sterilization due to hospital overcrowding.

She refused to join the Nazi Party. Gross successfully immigrated to the United States in 1954 with her deaf husband, though they were initially denied entry due to their handicaps.



# TEACHERS ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE LETTERS TO HITLER



Wilhelm Becket (Becker) was a German elementary school teacher. He had the children in his class write Christmas letters to Hitler and pleaded with Hitler's half-sister, Angela Raubal, to deliver the Christmas greetings to Hitler on their behalf.

In December 1933, he wrote:

Dear Gracious lady!

My schoolchildren have taken extraordinary pains to give our beloved Leader and Reich Chancellor a little joy on Christmas and have written and illustrated their Christmas letters with great devotion and care.

We, as teachers, ask our students to write to government officials and political candidates.

Why do we do this? What is the purpose of this exercise? What are the implications of a lesson like this?

In both form and content they are entirely the intellectual production of each individual child, and from the fineness of the composition you will be able to see the feeling of happiness that has inspired each individual child. The portfolio was sent to you yesterday. I beg you to receive it.

Your brother will certainly take a few days off from the exertions of political life and seek rest and relaxation in the stillness of your mountain landscape.

We know how much he loves children; so many delightful pictures show us that.

I would like to ask you most cordially in the name of my schoolchildren to lay the portfolio before him during some leisure hour. Perhaps the tender little work of the Odenwald village children will become a Christmas radiance for him.

With German Christmas greetings!  
For the Hornbach Elementary School,  
Wilh. Becket

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Angela Raubal, with her half-brother, Adolf Hitler. *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München/Bildarchiv*

Am 23. Januar 1934 hatte Becker jedoch bereits bei Angela Raubal nachgehakt.

*Sehr verehrte gnädige Frau!*

Schon alle die Tage, seit der Unterricht wieder begonnen hat, schauen mich meine Kinder mit großen, fragenden Augen an, und gar manches kam schon geschlichen und wagte zage das Wort: »Hat er schon geschrieben?«

Sie werden es mir nicht verübeln, wenn ich, als der geistige Sachwalter für 47 kleine Leute, heute bei Ihnen anfrage, ob unsere Weihnachtsmappe für den Herrn Reichskanzler, die wir am 20. Dez. 33 zur Post gaben, noch rechtzeitig in Ihre Hand gelangte und ob es Ihnen möglich war, sie Ihrem Herrn Bruder über die Feiertage vorzulegen. Dass er zum Jahreswechsel außerordentlich viel zu tun hatte, können wir uns sehr gut vorstellen. Es wäre für meine Kinder jedoch sehr schmerzlich, wenn das Geschenk, das sie aus ganzem Herzen und mit Hingabe aller ihrer inneren Kräfte schufen, nicht imstande wäre, die Aufgabe zu lösen, die sie sich gesetzt: unserem Führer 5 Minuten Freude zu bereiten.

Meine Kinder sind nicht ungeduldig, aber ich empfinde es immer so stark, wie ihre kleinen Herzen der Resonanz entgegenzittern, die ihre Gabe bei unserem Führer auslöst. Verschiedene kamen schon beglückt zu mir, sie hätten von ihm geträumt; eines der Kleinen schon Kanzler die Dorfst

Besonders stark  
lich ein Freund da  
Blauen Blume vorl  
aller Herzen, der  
beglückt, ist doch  
Es drängt mich  
schicken.

Tun Sie damit,  
Meine Kinder  
Wort über das Sc  
leins erfüllen.



Above left: Letter from Wilhem Becket to Angela Raubal, January 23, 1934. *Henrik Eberle, Briefe an Hitler (Berlin: Bastei Lübbe, 2007)*. Right: Translation of letter from Wilhem Becket to Angela Raubal, January 23, 1934. *Henrik Eberle, Letters to Hitler (New York: Wiley, 2012)* Above: Hitler poses with children during an election campaign in 1932. The original caption reads, "One always sees the Fuehrer surrounded by children in pictures." *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Richard Freimark*

When Mr. Becket did not receive an immediate reply, he wrote again:

Dear Gracious Lady!

Every day since classes have begun again, my children look at me with big questioning eyes, and some of them have even slipped up to me and shyly asked: 'has he written yet?'

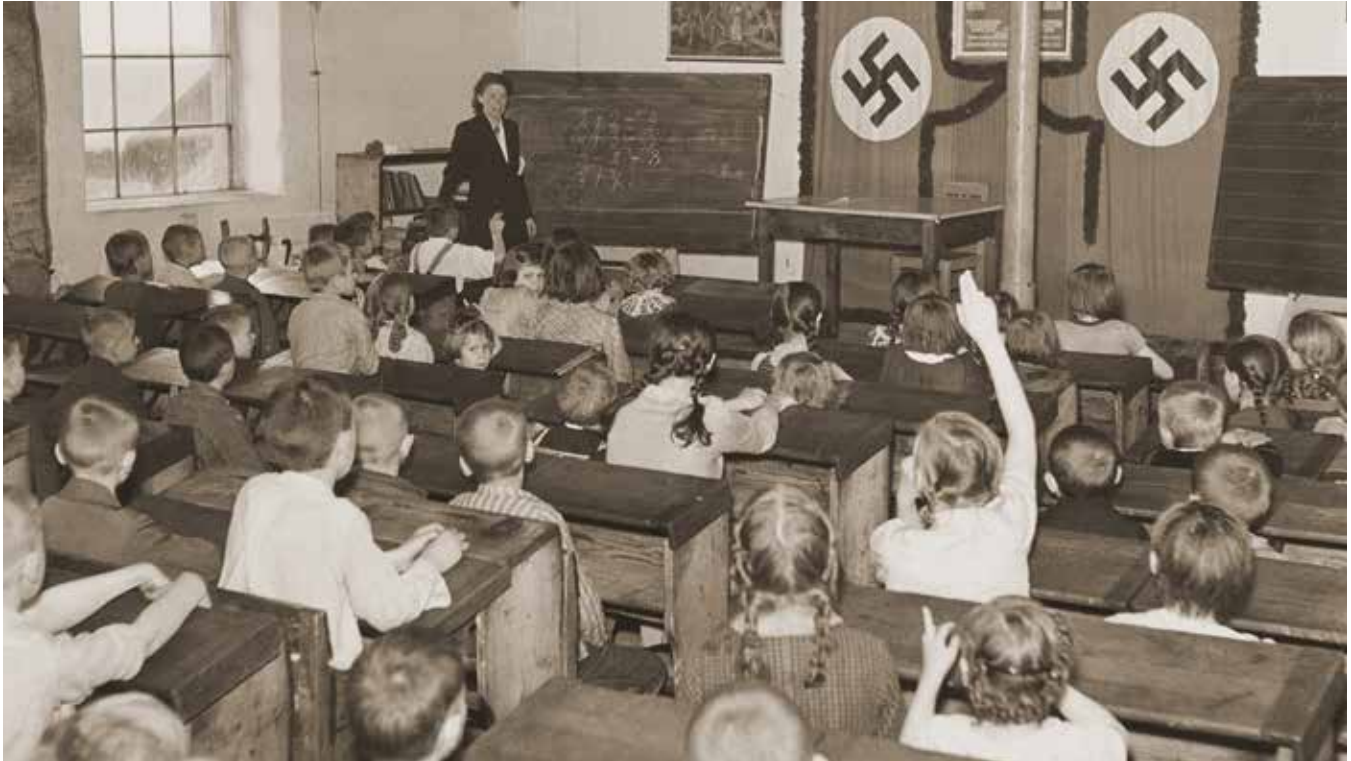
You won't hold it against me, if, as the intellectual custodian for 47 little people, I ask you today whether our Christmas portfolio for the Mr. Reich Chancellor, which we put in the mail on 20 December 1933, reached you on time and whether it was possible for you to present it to your brother over the holidays. That he had an exceptional number of things to do at the turn of the year we can very easily imagine. But it would be very painful for my children if the gift that they created with all their hearts and with the devotion of all their inner energies was not able to perform the task that they had set themselves to give our Leader five minutes of joy.

My children are not impatient, but I still feel so strongly how their little hearts quivered in response to the echo to which their gift gave rise in our Leader. Several of them have already come to tell me with delight that had dreamed of him; one of the little ones had already done so three times. And they are constantly seeing the Chancellor coming up the village street!

This feeling of togetherness was particularly strong when a friend recently read to us a splendid little book, *The Secret Garden*. It could be seen in every eye and it sprang from every heart that the royal son who thus frees his people and makes it happy is none other than Adolph Hitler.

I hasten now to send you the delightful little book. Do with it whatever you wish. My children would be overjoyed to hear what happened to their portfolio and perhaps also the book.

With a German salute!  
Wilh. Becket



A student raises her hand during a math lesson in a one-room school in Bohemia. The front of the classroom is draped with swastikas and a poster of Adolf Hitler is surrounded by Hitler aphorisms. *Deutsches Historisches Museum GmbH*

Eventually, Mr. Becket's letter was forwarded to Berlin along with other mail. Hitler's private office replied on February 27, 1934.

Dear Mr. Becket!

Mrs. Raubal forwarded your letter of 18 December of this year to us for reply. The Leader received the portfolio and took great pleasure in it.

He sends you and the children his heartfelt thanks. He would like to write each of the children personally, but he is extremely busy and unfortunately cannot do so.

With a German salute!  
Albert Borman"

It was implied that teachers would urge their pupils to send gifts to Hitler. Refusal to do so, by either the teacher or student, could result in social exclusion, being denounced, or being attacked.

Social pressure was deliberate and coincided with Christmas and Hitler's birthday. He received hundreds of such portfolios for these occasions.

# ARREST OF TEACHERS PROMPTS NATIONWIDE PROTESTS



## **NORWAY TIMELINE**

**April 8, 1940:**

Germany invades Norway, hoping to secure naval bases.

**June 10, 1940:**

Norway surrenders to Germany and King Haakon VII, along with the Norwegian government, escapes to London.

Vidkun Quisling, a fascist, proclaims himself prime minister.

**May 8, 1945:**

German forces in Norway surrender to the Allies.

**October 24, 1945:**

Quisling is executed after being found guilty of treason.

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Norwegian teachers imprisoned in the Falstad Concentration Camp, near Trondheim, for their refusal to participate in the Nazi Teachers Association in the spring of 1942. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



90 percent of Norway's 14,000 teachers resigned from the national teachers union under German occupation.

### TIMELINE OF NORWAY'S TEACHER PROTESTS

#### February 1942

Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling demanded compulsory membership in Norway's national teachers union under German occupation. In response, the Norwegian Department of Education was flooded with letters of protest, including letters from parents. Within two months, 90 percent of Norway's 14,000 teachers resigned from the union, making it ineffectual.

#### March 20, 1942

One in every ten teachers was arrested and pressured to retract their protest. Those who were arrested were sent to concentration camps and assigned hard labor.

#### March–April 1942

Ten thousand teachers had their salaries withheld. The Norwegian government-in-exile in London sent money to help the families of incarcerated teachers. The civilian resistance collected donations from private citizens to offer aid. Smuggled reports regarding the appalling conditions and unspeakable treatment to which the teachers were subjected were making their way to Oslo. Despite the Nazi-imposed ban on demonstrations, an incensed citizenry staged protests throughout the country, which strengthened the morale and renewed the spirits of Norwegians.

The teachers' resistance seemed to inspire others to join the civilian resistance movement.

It was remarkable that teachers could inflict such an unconditional ideological defeat upon Nazism in Norway. There can be no doubt that the Nazi attempts at mobilizing Norwegian children for purposes of Nazification, more than anything else, solidified the Home Front.\*

After two-and-one-half months of humiliation, forced resignations, loss of pay, torture, and other forms of maltreatment, it was obvious to the authorities that nothing was going to break the solidarity of the teachers.

#### April 25, 1942

The decree ordering the dismissal of teachers refusing to join the union was repealed. In May, the schools reopened and teachers were gradually released

\* Richard S. Fuegner, *Beneath the Tyrant's Yoke: Norwegian Resistance to the German Occupation of Norway 1940–1945* (Edina, Minnesota: Beaver's Pond Press, 2003), 81–82

Norwegian Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling (first row, left) sits next to Heinrich Himmler during his visit to Oslo. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

Members of various teachers unions in Norway distributed leaflets urging teachers to remain loyal to their country and true to their profession by refusing to sign any pledge promoting Nazism.

from prison. Although they were no longer required to belong to the union, they were still expected to teach Nazi ideology and, therefore, many teachers refused to return to work.

Seven hundred arrested teachers from eastern Norway were transported to a military training ground near Lillehammer after a grueling 14-hour train ride in open coal cars without food. The teachers were ordered out in the middle of the night, ten miles from their destination, and made to march the rest of the way. Those who collapsed were whipped or kicked-up and ordered to proceed. After reaching the training ground, they were given a slice of bread for breakfast and then put through a series of exhausting physical exercises, drills, and marches. Those who lagged behind or hesitated were made to crawl on their stomachs through ice, water, snow, and slush with hands tied behind their backs. Some were given the task of carrying snow on a table fork or on a broom handle or moving wood piles back and forth. All of this to break the spirit of the group.\*

Even after being subjected to such harsh conditions, the majority of teachers remained firm. Those who gave in typically had family responsibilities— young children or a spouse who was ill—and they simply had to get home.

The prisoners were all paraded outside the barracks occupied by the Nazis in charge of the camp. The first man to be called in to sign the statement of apology was a sickly, rather elderly teacher who had sole responsibility for a flock of children. The others had let him know that there would be no reproaches if he signed. He dragged himself up the steps in an obvious state of collapse, which was painful to watch. Two or three minutes passed, and then he came out on to the platform at the top of the steps a completely new man. Standing in front of all 600 men, he clenched his fists and shouted: “I bloody well didn’t sign!” Then he went back to his place, and after that it was not easy for anyone else to give way.\*

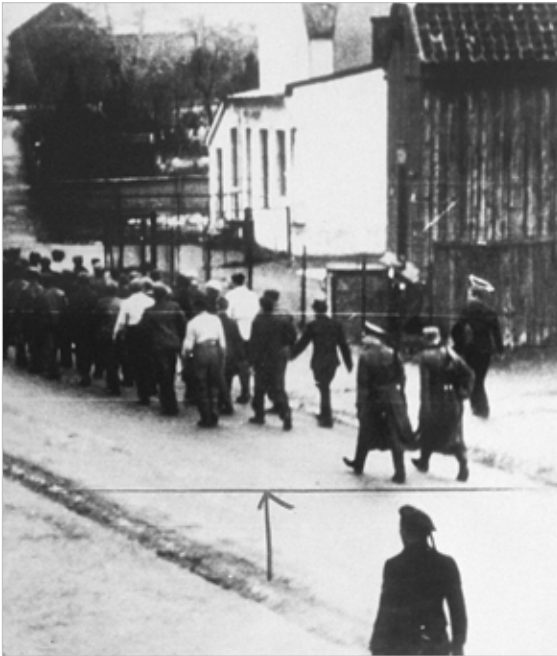
### STUDENTS IN NORWAY

Students were defiant toward the Nazis and their Norwegian collaborators. They created symbols, insignias, and gestures to demonstrate loyalty to the King of Norway. They also jeered at soldiers or turned their backs to them as they marched down the street. Children who sympathized with the Nazis or Norwegian collaborators were often ostracized or even beaten.

When Nazi school inspectors entered a classroom, the students frequently showed their disdain by singing patriotic songs. Students were expected to join the Nazi Youth Movement in Norway, but high school students in Oslo

\* Richard S. Fuegner, *Beneath the Tyrant’s Yoke: Norwegian Resistance to the German Occupation of Norway 1940–1945* (Edina, Minnesota: Beaver’s Pond Press, 2003), 81–82





refused. In retaliation, schools were broken into and teachers and students were beaten. Despite threats, arrests and bribes, the Nazis met with little success in attracting students into the Nazi movement and concluded that it was not worth enforcing.

The Nazis' determination to promote their ideology extended to university students as well. The vast majority of university students pledged with their university student associations to "oppose Nazification whatever the cost." When the Nazi candidate for student association president received only 11 votes, the acting minister for the department of education, a Nazi, announced that this would no longer be an elected office, but one that was appointed.

In 1942, although many university students were concerned chiefly about completing their academic studies, many were also engaged in illegal resistance and gathering intelligence, using the university as their base.

In 1943, when the Department of Education announced that "no association, club or assemblage except the [fascist party] would be tolerated and that no one outside that body would receive financial aid or scholarships," students voiced bitter opposition.

On November 28, 1943, a fire was set in the auditorium at the University of Oslo. Although it was believed that the Nazis set the fire intentionally as provocation, the students were blamed. Two days later, the Gestapo with 300 SS detachments closed in on the male students. More than 1,100 students were arrested on the streets, in their homes, and on campus. Eventually, about half were released, but 700 were sent to a "retraining camp" in Germany.

The President of Oslo University, Dr. Didrik Seip, after his release from a Nazi concentration camp at the end of the occupation, said this:

A dictator can close universities, but he cannot put out the light of reason, he cannot obscure the clarity of thought, and he cannot halt the drive to desire that which is right. Today our hearts are filled with happiness and thanksgiving that our university has carried on through want and slavery to a free status in a free land and that it can continue unhindered to work out the tasks which await it.

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Norwegian political prisoners marched through the streets of Trondheim under German guard on their way to a labor camp in October 1943. *University of Minnesota Libraries*

## A STUDENT CHOOSES TO RESIST

Reidar Dittmann was born on January 15, 1922, the third of four sons of religious Lutheran parents in a small seafaring and whaling town along the Norwegian coast. His father was a civil servant. Dittman attended public school and dreamed of becoming a musician.

Although he was not interested in politics, Dittmann sympathized with his Jewish neighbors who had come as refugees from Germany. On Christmas Eve 1939, while gathering with family, he learned that his uncle had died when his merchant ship was sunk by a German submarine.

“ I was 18 years old when the Nazis invaded Norway. I was arrested six months after the German occupation. My crime was disorderly conduct and leading young people, three to four thousand, in singing anti-German songs. I was a music student at the time, studying choral conducting, and they needed someone to lead the singing. Standing up there leading the group I was the most conspicuous, not any braver than anybody else, but I was the one the Nazis saw, so I was arrested. My sentence was six weeks imprisonment.

After I was released, the underground was organized. It was reasonable for them to make use of someone who had already shown his loyalty. I joined the resistance. I was an insignificant shipyard clerk whose task was to build ships slowly and sabotage as we were able. When a new ship sank upon launching (we had removed the metal plates the night before), I was arrested again. I was the only one arrested—because of my record. I received a life sentence, but the Norwegian Nazi government pardoned a thousand political prisoners in February 1942. After my third offense, the Germans deported me to Buchenwald. ”\*

Dittmann survived 30 months of captivity in Buchenwald. Released to the Swedish Red Cross on March 18, 1945, he returned to Norway before immigrating to the United States in 1945.

\* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group 50.156, Oral History, Interview with Dr. Reidar Dittmann, 50.156\*0010. [http://collections.ushmm.org/oh\\_findingaids/RG-50.156.0010\\_trs\\_en.pdf](http://collections.ushmm.org/oh_findingaids/RG-50.156.0010_trs_en.pdf)

Reidar Dittmann. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*, courtesy of Reidar Dittmann



What motivates a person to repeatedly put himself in harm's way?

**REIDAR DITTMANN** was sent to a concentration camp after he was arrested for leading youth in singing anti-German songs. He could have kept his head down after his first sentence was served, but he made the choice to become active in the resistance.

# SURVIVORS RECALL THEIR EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL



**LILI ARMSTRONG** (Berlin, Germany)

“She came into the class with a big book under her arm, and she addressed us. She spoke a slightly old-fashioned German. She would say, ‘*Meine kinder*—my children—*meine Kinder*, today we are changing our lecture and from now on, we are going to read *Mein Kampf*, written by our Führer, Adolf Hitler. And we have to interrupt our Romantic literature like Eichendorff and can’t read anymore Goethe or Schiller.’ And she was upset. She was very upset. And I think she had tears in her eyes. At the time, I wasn’t quite sure whether she was joyful about Hitler or tearful about that we have to change our literature.”



**EVA BREWSTER** (Berlin, Germany)

“When that Nazi teacher—she was the only one that was a party member at that time, and she recruited all the kids she could to the Hitler Youth. And she was also working with the Gestapo, the secret police, and so she spied on parents, on kids, on other teachers, and so everybody was really afraid of her . . . .”



**WERNER HALPERN** (Nördlingen, Germany)

“There was at least one teacher who tried to be kind. He rescued me a few times when, after school, I was being threatened by my fellow students in the school courtyard, and he happened to come by and chase them away so I could go home. But that occurred two or three times. He kind of took some special effort to make sure I’d be all right. But that was only one teacher.”

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*Oral history interviews courtesy of the University of Southern California Shoab Foundation Institute (sfi.usc.edu)*



**EMMA MOGILENSKY** (Cronheim, Germany)

“A real serious change that I noticed was when we found one morning when we went to school that all the other children had formed two lines in front of the schoolhouse door, and, as we walked through those two lines, they beat us up. And I went to the teacher and I complained, and he said, ‘Well, what did you expect, you dirty Jew?’ And, from that, we figured that he had the children every morning in church—they had to go for Mass every morning—and we figured that what he had done is organize the children to beat us up.”



**LEONARD KATZ** (Dresden, Germany)

“The whole class was asked to go there by bicycle as, you know, physical exercise. So, everybody had a bicycle but one of the kids in the school. And so the teacher said, ‘Well, Katz, you’re Jewish, you can give your—you’re not going anyway—can’t you give this kid the bike?’ And about, I’d say, 90 percent of the class said—I mean, they stood up as one—‘if Katz doesn’t go, we all don’t go.’ Now that was a very lifting experience. It turned out that he borrowed a bike from somebody else and we all went, but just the attitude of the class—that was really something.”



**HANNAH ALTBUSH** (Cologne, Germany)

“After November, after Kristallnacht, I—the day after—I got up in the morning. I said, ‘I’m going to school.’ And my mother said, ‘I don’t know, you know, how you’re going to be received.’ And I said, ‘I am going to school. I’m going to face them all and show them all that I’m coming to school.’ By this time I was angry. I was scared, but I was also very angry. And I told Ilse, ‘I’m going.’ And she said she’s coming with me. So the two of us went to school the next morning. And the effect on the—all the students—there was like very strange because they wanted to show us that they were with us. Our desks were filled with fruit and candy.”



**RUDY KENNEDY** (Rosenberg, Germany)

“Early in the morning and there were a lot of people lining up the streets, jeering, laughing. And out of that crowd came a friend of my father. His name was Studienrat Lüdtkke, a teacher, Catholic. And he had been discharged from—he was no longer allowed to teach—because one of his nine children had denounced him to the Nazis that he still had a Jewish friend and he didn’t believe in Hitler.”

*Oral history interviews courtesy of the University of Southern California Shoab Foundation Institute (sfi.usc.edu)*



**ROSA MARX** (Vienna, Austria)

“The girls in the classroom, who had some of them had been my best friends, just completely ignored me. They put their head down or looked elsewhere. And I was considered an outcast. I just was zero. I think that part really was the greatest shock: that you can be close friends with somebody, that you can trust a person, and suddenly that they would turn against you just because you’re Jewish.”



**ESTHER BEM** (Osijek, Yugoslavia; hid in Italy)

“And I also want to say that I have—as I was passionately going after this business of living—I feel today such a gratitude to those people that saved us. And these are ordinary—these were ordinary people that will never be in the history books, that I unfortunately don’t even remember their names and probably they’re not alive anymore. And I probably wouldn’t have even the emotional strength to find them. But I want to say in the era, when goodness was very rare, they cultivated it. And they showed that human decency and heroism, which was so rare in those times, they did it for us. And I am aware today that to be heroic is so unpredictable. They probably wouldn’t have known by themselves that they are going to behave the way that they did. They simply reacted to our despair with compassion. They didn’t think of themselves. They didn’t care what happens to them, and when you think, we were not family, we were not even friends. We were strangers that fell from somewhere into their laps, and they never looked for excuses to say, “Well we can’t, I’m sorry, we have a young family.” Never. And they were—never made us feel even that we are intruding on them. And this is something that I want the post-Holocaust generation to know, that people have choices. And they have proven it.”

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## DISCUSSION GUIDE



**At crucial junctures,  
every individual makes  
a decision...and every  
decision is individual.**

—RAUL HILBERG,  
HOLOCAUST SCHOLAR

### **RATIONALE FOR THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS:**

The Museum's programs for professionals and student leaders are founded on the belief that a healthy society depends upon engaged citizens. By studying the choices made by individuals and institutions during the Holocaust, participants gain fresh insight into their own professional and individual responsibilities today.

Under the authority of the Third Reich, teachers were obligated to join the National Socialist Teacher's Union and take an oath of loyalty to the führer. Within that framework, teachers were still able to make individual choices; some chose to comply with Nazi ideology, while others chose to act in opposition. This close scrutiny of the past provides a framework for a discussion on the role and responsibility of teachers in the education system in the United States today.

A short film sets the historical context of education under the authority of the Third Reich. Audiences then examine primary source documents in case studies that highlight the pressures felt by and the range of choices available to both teachers and students during Nazi rule.

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Teachers and students from the Nos Petits school in Brussels, Belgium. Jewish staff members are wearing the Star of David. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Olivia Mathis*

### CASES

- Risking Her Life to Protect Her Students
- Teachers Facilitate Sterilization of Students
- Teachers Ask Students to Write Letters to Hitler
- Norway, 1942: Arrest of Teachers Prompts Nationwide Protests

### FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

- Explain the Museum’s rationale for programs that deal with professions (read the above aloud or distribute to participants).
- View introductory film to set the historical context (4:40).
- Read through each case study (can split into small groups of three to five participants and have each group read a different case study, or the entire group can read through each case study together).
- Look at the guiding questions for each case study and briefly discuss them in small groups.
- Fill out the Situation Worksheet (individually).
- Move on to large-group discussion then discuss contemporary implications.

### LARGE-GROUP DISCUSSION:

- What is your case study about?
- What are the important facts of the case study? (facilitator may need to help set historical context)
- Based on the facts identified, what motives/pressures likely influenced decision making?
- What guided the individuals’ decision-making process? (if we can ascertain this)
- What are the implications of these historical examples for us today? In our own profession, what motives and pressures affect us and the decisions we make?
- Are there intersections/areas that overlap between contemporary and historical motives and pressures?

### DISCUSS CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS:

- The institutions that were supposed to uphold democracy failed during the Holocaust
  - What were the vulnerabilities of these institutions?
  - What does this consideration of the past mean for us today?
- Agencies that were empowered with authority and entrusted to uphold the wellbeing of citizens violated that trust—examples include the medical profession, the judiciary, the police force, the military, and teachers. So what is our responsibility/our role in society?

### THE BASIC QUESTION IS “WHAT IMPACT DO YOU HAVE IN YOUR CLASSROOM?”

- How are you making a difference?
- Are you making a difference?
- What is the experience you are providing to your students?

After all, each example we’ve discussed comes down to: What choice(s) did the teacher make and how did that impact their students or their students’ experience?

This exercise allows us to think critically about our role in society and our position as educators. What atmosphere will you set in your classroom and what kind of experience will that create for your students? As we say at the Museum, **WHAT YOU DO MATTERS.**

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

### RISKING HER LIFE TO PROTECT HER STUDENTS

When the Gestapo asked Jeanne Daman to turn over three children:

- What choices did she have? (brainstorm choices available)
- What were the repercussions of each choice?
- What motives and pressures did she face?
- Why do you think she made the decision she did?
- Payments eventually were made to Belgian families for hiding Jewish children. Does this complicate the issue for you?
- How does this affect the labels we want to use for people during this time period (e.g. perpetrator, bystander/onlooker, victim, rescuer)?

Consider these factors that complicate the conclusions we can draw from this case study:

- **Daman did not act alone.** Fela Perelman recruited her. She worked with other members of the Nos Petits staff, families across Belgium, and other agencies.
- **Daman's efforts took many forms,** from small acts (reaching out to parents) to grand gestures (working as a spy and concealing and transporting weapons for the Resistance)
- **Daman did not know any Jewish people** before deciding to help.
- **Daman used resources and skills available to her.** She was not a high-ranking official, but a teacher.
- **Daman paid attention to what was going on** and acted on her analysis of these events. For example, she noticed when children did not show up for school and she listened to Jewish parents' complaints and pleas for help.
- **Daman responded positively to a call to action** from Fela Perelman.

### TEACHERS FACILITATE STERILIZATION OF STUDENTS

When faced with the request to provide confidential data about students to the government (name, medical info/physical condition, address, age, etc.):

- What choices did the teachers have? (brainstorm choices available)
- What were the repercussions of each choice?
- What motives and pressures did they face?
- Why do you think individuals made the decisions they did?
- What is the role of the teacher today as a mandatory reporter when students appear to be in physical danger?
- Do teachers take an oath?
- Is it an oath of loyalty or conduct to their union? To the government? To protect their students?

### TEACHERS ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE LETTERS TO HITLER

In Nazi Germany, teachers asked their students to write letters to Hitler.

- Is this any different than teachers today asking students to write letters to politicians and government officials or to take a stand on a political or social issue (Save Darfur, etc.)?
- What's the purpose in writing these kinds of letters today?
- Do students ever object to the task or refuse to participate? How do you react?
  - Do you force them to complete the assignment?
  - Do you bribe them with extra credit or another perk?
  - Are there repercussions for not participating?
  - Does peer pressure play a role in whether they want to participate or not?
- Why do you think this particular teacher was so eager and persistent in ensuring his students' portfolios were delivered to Hitler? What were his possible motivations?



### ARREST OF TEACHERS PROMPTS NATIONWIDE PROTESTS

When Quisling demanded compulsory membership in Norway's national teachers union under German occupation:

- What choices did the teachers have? (brainstorm choices available)
- What were the repercussions of each choice?
- What motives and pressures did teachers face?
- Why do you think they made the decision(s) they did?

Consider these factors that complicate the conclusions we can draw from this case study:

- **Teachers did not act alone.** Letters were written in support of the teachers by parents. National unions urged teachers not to sign any pledge promoting Nazism. The government-in-exile sent money to help teachers who had been fired. Civilian resistance members collected donations from private citizens to help the teachers. The teachers found solidarity with one another.

### SURVIVORS RECALL THEIR EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

- What kind of atmosphere did the teachers set in their classrooms?
- What experience did each student have as a result of the choice(s) made by the teacher?
- What was the role of fellow students in the classroom?
- Whose example were the classmates following (if it can be ascertained)?
- Why do you think these survivors chose to speak about their experiences at school?
- What does this tell us about the role that teachers, classmates, and the school community play in society?

