

## Lesson: Introduction

## Vera Laska, Political Prisoner

### The Power of Resistance

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#### Target Audience:

Grades 9-12

(Note: Teachers may also find the lesson applicable and suitable for Grade 8)

#### Curriculum Connections:

American History, World History, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Government, Psychology, Sociology, and Language Arts

#### Materials for Lesson:

- [Non-Jewish Resistance: Overview](#) and [Political Prisoners](#) articles
- [Map of the Partition of Czechoslovakia 1938-1939](#)
- "There Were Those" poem by Susan Dambroff
- Vera Laska's 30-minute visual history testimony
- Vera Laska's biography
- "The Power of Resistance" handout
- Discussion questions
- Testimony glossary

#### Time Requirement:

1-3 class periods

#### Student Objectives

- To use viewing skills and strategies to examine Vera Laska's visual history testimony.
- To develop a basic understanding of aspects of non-Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.
- To identify examples of resistance and discuss the relationship between beliefs and behavior in Vera Laska's testimony.
- To consider, discuss, and assess ways that we may participate in resistance efforts against genocide in today's world.

#### Lesson Overview

Teachers will introduce the lesson by explaining to students that a common definition of resistance is the act of opposing something with which one disapproves or disagrees. Vera Laska was a teenager when World War II broke out in Europe, and in her testimony, she recounts her involvement in the "resistance movement."

Teachers should use the Historical Introduction section to provide a brief context about **Non-Jewish Resistance** and **Political Prisoners** during the Holocaust. Then, through the use of Vera's testimony and the accompanying student activity, students will identify examples of resistance and discuss the relationship between beliefs and behavior. Teachers are also encouraged to use the postviewing discussion questions to examine Vera's testimony for deeper meaning and contemporary connections.

#### Standards Addressed

To align this lesson with state content standards, teachers may visit **Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning** (McRel) for an 'Online Compendium' of K-12 content-area standards, which were selected from various state standards and from professional subject-area organizations. McRel national standards include **Historical Understanding**, **United States History**, **World History**, **Civics**, **Language Arts**, and **Behavioral Studies**.

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#### Historical Introduction

Assign and/or discuss the articles **Non-Jewish Resistance: Overview** and **Political Prisoners** from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Holocaust Encyclopedia* to provide students brief background information. Students may also find it helpful to examine the **Map of the Partition of Czechoslovakia 1938-1939** for additional historical context.

#### Previewing Focus

Write on the board or project the poem "There Were Those" by Susan Dambroff.

In response to the poem have students free-write for about five minutes.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: What examples of resistance do you see in the poem? Although all are examples of resistance, it's clear that resistance could mean many different things. Why? (Think of ways in which one could categorize the examples. Afterward, allow students to share but only by quoting their own pieces of writing.)

#### Transition

Students should start to see that the act of resisting and the forms of resistance a person undertook often depended on his/her beliefs and/or circumstances. Accordingly, resistance during the Holocaust ranged from simple and spontaneous activities to highly organized and planned actions, using violent and/or nonviolent means. Explain to students that they are about to view the testimony of Vera Laska, a young woman who became a political prisoner due to her opposition to the Nazis and their allies. Throughout her testimony, Vera demonstrates the relationship between cause and effect and belief and action.

#### Viewing Activity

Before students watch Vera's testimony, teachers may briefly introduce her by quoting from the introductory text card in her testimony:

**"Vera Laska was born July 21, 1928, in Kosice, Czechoslovakia. In this testimony, Vera recounts her experience as a young woman involved in the resistance, leading Jews and political opponents of the Nazi regime to freedom. After her capture, she was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gross-Rosen, and Dora-Mittelbau as a political prisoner."**

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Hand out “The Power of Resistance” activity for students to complete while they view Vera Laska’s abridged 30-minute visual history testimony. As they watch the testimony, students should pay careful attention to the relationship between her beliefs and her actions. A guiding question for consideration: When it came to her resistance activities, did Vera’s beliefs lead to her actions, or did her actions lead to the formation of her beliefs? In combination, or as a separate activity, teachers can also prepare students to examine Vera’s testimony by use of the discussion questions that follow.

It is also useful to have students examine Vera’s narrative style itself to discuss ways in which her style contributes to the overall poignancy of her testimony.

**POSSIBLE PROMPT:** How do Vera’s verbal and nonverbal communication techniques effectively contribute to meaning? *(Sample answer: Many aspects contribute to Vera’s effectiveness as an interviewee, such as the inflection/modulation/tone/volume of her voice, the tempo/pacing of her narrative, her descriptive word choice, enunciation, and grammar, as well as her physical gestures, such as her eye contact, posture, and facial expressions.)*

### Postviewing Focus

Using the student-activity handout for reference, have students gather in small groups to discuss how Vera’s beliefs affected her actions and vice versa. Students should consider and derive a possible motivation for each instance, keeping in mind the context of each quote. Groups should then share their conclusions with the larger class.

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#### Discussion Questions

*The following comprehension/discussion questions were created for use with Vera's testimony. They may be used in addition to the lesson or apart from it.*

1. How does Vera become part of a resistance group? *(Sample answer: Vera "slides" into it through a friend who had been approached to help. She and her friend, both expert skiers, agreed to lead two men who lacked proper identification papers from Slovakia to Hungary. After a successful journey, they agree to do it again, and then she remains involved despite the inherent dangers. Vera makes about a dozen trips organized by the resistance as part of an underground railroad from Slovakia to Hungary to Yugoslavia and beyond.)*
2. What personal qualities or characteristics are evident in Vera, which may have influenced her decision to help her friend and eventually to be an official part of the "resistance?" *(Sample answer: Vera talks about how she is strong-willed and didn't want to be managed. She says she always did what she thought was right. Vera expresses her patriotism when she described the anger and heartbreak of seeing her country invaded. Vera comes through in her testimony as both an idealist and a realist, who is adventurous, down-to-earth, loyal, and matter-of-fact. She also clearly demonstrates a quick wit.)*
3. Why is Vera sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a political prisoner? *(Sample answer: Vera was caught after someone in her group "evidently spoke or talked when they were not supposed to," according to Vera, which then endangered the entire group. Vera was caught on the street and arrested when it was discovered she had a false ID. She spent several weeks in jail, and from there she was transferred to Auschwitz. Vera was classified as a political prisoner because she was regarded as a political opponent of the Nazis and their allies due to her involvement in resistance activities.)*
4. What imagery does Vera use to describe her memories of arriving at Auschwitz? *(Answers will depend on what students remember from her description: phantasmagorical, dark, night, fires, chimneys, the stink, etc.)*
5. How does Vera explain her daily life and the living conditions in Auschwitz? *(Sample answer: Awful living conditions that included overcrowded barracks, straw mattresses, and lice, but at the same time, close friendships were made and people tried to keep morale up by having long conversations, including a "cooking group," which consisted of sharing recipes and describing in detail the way the food that had once been plentiful used to look, smell, and taste.)*

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6. Vera says she “cultivates” her memories in solitude because people won’t comprehend them. What does she mean by this, and how does she explain it further? *(Sample answer: Vera finds it hard to express her memories, because it entails a constant feeling of fear in her stomach; there is no way to convey not knowing from one moment to the next if, or when, one might be killed or die of illness or from starvation. She feels that even those survivors who are highly regarded writers cannot adequately describe one’s experiences in the Holocaust, so she feels some futility herself in trying to explain it.)*
7. Vera demonstrates through her testimony that even as a prisoner amid terrible conditions, she never allows herself to feel powerless. What examples might illustrate this? *(Sample answer: Even as a prisoner, Vera seized whatever opportunity she could to resist the Nazi war machine, such as participating in the “cooking group,” breaking thread, slowing down production, and sabotaging parts for the V-2 rocket. She also makes plans to escape and waits for circumstances that might facilitate it.)*
8. In her testimony, Vera illustrates the behavior of her guards at Gross-Rosen by saying, “and when the tide turned, suddenly they were nice; insurance, you know, [the guards] took out insurance. ‘I brought a prisoner an apple. I am not a Nazi.’” What does this suggest about the belief system of the guards with whom Vera came into contact? *(Sample answer: Vera’s testimony indicates that her guards were being more pragmatic than ideological. Although small gestures, such as bringing a prisoner an apple might indicate a slight shift in allegiance, the guards didn’t substantially change their behavior, such as rebelling or helping prisoners to escape. Therefore, their actions seem pragmatically self-serving instead of demonstrating a genuine shift in attitude.)*
9. What do all of the examples of resistance in Vera’s testimony have in common? What conclusions might we draw about making a difference through acts of resistance? *(All of the examples Vera cites throughout her testimony could be considered non-violent or spiritual resistance. Students will hopefully conclude that no matter the situation or how dire the circumstances, steps can be taken to make a difference.)*
10. Using Vera’s testimony as an example, how important was it to have deeply held ideals and/or beliefs in order to carry out acts of resistance? Explain your answer. *(Student answers will vary. Because Vera does not explicitly state beliefs that compelled her to join and remain in the resistance,*

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*some may conclude that her actions led to the development of her ideals. On the other hand, by relating that she was strong-willed and idealistic as a child, the implication is that the sum of her personality motivated her actions. It is likely that one does not preclude the other from being true. Vera's beliefs led to actions, but her actions also led to the formation of her beliefs. It is important for students to recognize and consider the complex relationship between beliefs and actions as they consider their own roles in the world today.)*

11. Why is it important to stand up for an ideal or act against injustice, both of which are forms of resistance? *(Students' answers will vary. At the core of this question is the encouragement of critical thinking and raising questions for the purposes of student application to their own lives. Discussion could lead to instances in every day life, when it is necessary to stand up for ideals or strike out against injustices.)*
  
12. If we use Vera's story as an example or inspiration, then what may be a first action we can individually take in resistance efforts against genocide in today's world? *(This takes the previous discussion and pushes it forward into a more global setting. For example, in researching Darfur, students may see that they could join a group that provides cooking stoves so that women don't need to gather firewood and risk rape. This action could certainly lead them to others. See Additional Resources section to provide students with concrete examples of how to become involved in fighting genocide in today's world.)*

### Biographical Connection

After students watch Vera's testimony and complete the activity and/or discussion questions, teachers may print and hand out Vera Laska's biographical profile to be read as a closing activity.

**SUGGESTED PROMPTS:** Compare and contrast how Vera's story is transmitted through the two forms of media: visual history testimony and written biographic profile. What content information, if any, was unique to each medium? What is the advantage of each medium? Are there any disadvantages? Which medium do you prefer? Why?

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#### Glossary

*The following glossary was created to assist students and teachers with potentially unfamiliar words, phrases, or concepts in Vera's testimony.*

**1984<sup>4</sup>** Written by George Orwell, a satirical novel set in London in the fictional future year 1984, published in 1949. Winston Smith lives in a society in which “the Party” maintains a ruthless stranglehold on power via total control over the thoughts and actions of its members.

**Appell<sup>1</sup>** The process by which prisoners are forced to stand at attention in straight rows, often for hours, to be counted.

**Auschwitz II-Birkenau<sup>1</sup>** In October 1941 10,000 Soviet POWs began the construction of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. After construction was completed, the camp had nine sections separated by electrified barbed wire fences. Originally intended as a camp for 100,000 Soviet POWs, Auschwitz II-Birkenau's main function became the murder of European Jews. The insecticide Zyklon B was used in the camp's gas chambers. Four large gas chamber and crematoria facilities became operational between March 1943 and June 1943. When all four were operational, Auschwitz II-Birkenau possessed an unsurpassed capacity for mass murder and body disposal. Gassing operations continued until November 1944. On January 27, 1945, the Auschwitz camp complex was liberated by Soviet forces; at Auschwitz II-Birkenau 5,800 prisoners remained. During the course of its existence, prisoners in the camp represented many categories, including Jews, political prisoners, Poles, criminals, Soviet POWs, and Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”). It is estimated that 1.1 to 1.6 million predominantly Jewish men, women, and children were murdered at Auschwitz, nearly all of them in the gas chambers at Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

**Dante's Hell<sup>4</sup>** The reference is from the *Inferno*, set in Hell in 1300. The *Inferno*, written by Dante Alighieri in Italy between 1307 and 1314, is part of the *Divine Comedy*.

**Death marches<sup>1</sup>** Forced marches of prisoners over long distances, under heavy guard and in extreme conditions. (The term was probably coined by concentration camp prisoners.)

**Gross-Rosen concentration camp<sup>1</sup>** The Gross-Rosen concentration camp, located south of the town of Gross-Rosen in Lower Silesia, was established as a subsidiary camp of Sachsenhausen in July 1940. In May 1941 it became an autonomous concentration camp. The increasing need to use



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concentration camp prisoners in the production of armaments led to the expansion of the Gross-Rosen camp. It became the center of a vast network of more than 60 subsidiary camps. The evacuation of the main camp began in early February 1945. The Gross-Rosen inmates were transferred to Mittelbau-Dora, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. The Soviet Army liberated Gross-Rosen on February 13, 1945.

**Levi, Primo**<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi was born in Turin, Italy, on July 31, 1919. During World War II, Levi, an Italian Jew, was arrested in northern Italy while trying to join the resistance movement. He was sent to Auschwitz. Levi discusses his wartime experiences in such books as *If This is a Man* or *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Truce* or *The Reawakening*, and *The Drowned and the Saved*. (Primo Levi died in Turin on April 11, 1987.)

**Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp**<sup>1</sup> Dora was built in August 1943 as a satellite camp of Buchenwald in the industrial area of Nordhausen. During spring 1944, the camp was expanded and eventually included more than 40 subcamps. On October 1, 1944, Dora became an independent concentration camp, and its name was changed to “KZ Mittelbau.” From September 1943 to April 1944, camp inmates worked and lived inside a tunnel system, where they produced rockets for Mittelwerke GmbH. By spring 1944, the Nazis began moving prisoners to barracks above ground. Transports from Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen began arriving in Mittelbau in early 1945; the resulting overcrowding led to more frequent illness and death among the prisoners. At the same time, executions in the camp increased. U.S. troops liberated the camp on April 11, 1945.

**Phantasmagorical**<sup>3</sup> A bizarre or fantastic combination, collection, or assemblage.

**Prisoners, political**<sup>1</sup> Political prisoners are people incarcerated before and during World War II because they were regarded as political opponents of the Nazis and their allies.

**Puszta**<sup>5</sup> arid grasslands that once covered a large part of eastern Hungary.

**Sabotage**<sup>1</sup> the deliberate destruction of property or the slowing down of work with the intention of damaging the German or Axis war economy or thwarting the destruction of European Jewry.



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**Shoah**<sup>6</sup> A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust

**Typhoid fever**<sup>1</sup> An acute, infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Salmonella typhi*. The bacterium usually enters the mouth after ingesting contaminated water or food.

**Wiesel, Elie**<sup>1</sup> Born in Sighet, Transylvania, Romani, in 1928, Elie Wiesel was known throughout the world for his writings on the Holocaust and his personal experiences as a survivor. Wiesel and his family were deported to Auschwitz in 1944, and he was later transferred to Buna and liberated in Buchenwald. After the war, Wiesel worked as a journalist in Paris and New York City. His 1956 Yiddish-language memoir, published in English as *Night*, was one of the first personal accounts of the Holocaust to receive international attention. His subsequent books dealt with Jewish themes and Jewish faith, reflecting his religious upbringing. In 1986 Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Wiesel’s position as chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council from 1980 to 1986 led to the creation of the Days of Remembrance and Holocaust education programs.

#### Source of Definitions

<sup>1</sup> USC Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History Archives Search Terms and Definitions

<sup>2</sup> The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online glossary and/or *Holocaust Encyclopedia*

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*. Joyce Moss and George Wilson. Vol. 5. Detroit: Gale, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> www.dictionary.com

<sup>6</sup> *Echoes and Reflections: a Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust*

#### Extension Activities

If time permits, teachers might include the following additional activities:

1. Have students create an additional stanza for the “There Were Those” poem by Susan Dambroff to illustrate examples of resistance Vera describes in her testimony.

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2. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Online Teacher Workshop: Sample Lesson 3, “**Why Didn’t They Fight Back?**” about Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.
3. Have students research post-Holocaust genocides in the world, as well as examples of ways individuals resisted. This can be extended into students’ brainstorming ways they could get involved with genocide prevention in today’s world.

#### References

The following is a list of the full Internet addresses used in this lesson:

1. **Non-Jewish Resistance:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005420>
2. **Political Prisoners:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007656>
3. **Map of the Partition of Czechoslovakia 1938-1939:** <http://www.ushmm.org/lcmedia/viewer/wlc/map.php?RefId=CZE71030>
4. **McRel:** <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>
5. **“Why Didn’t They Fight Back?” Activity:** [http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/detail.php?content=07-sample\\_lesson&section=1](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/detail.php?content=07-sample_lesson&section=1)

#### Additional Resources

To learn more about resistance during the Holocaust and how to act against genocide in today’s world, teachers/students may consult the following online sources:

1. **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Resistance during the Holocaust pamphlet:** <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/resource/pdf/resistancev.pdf>
2. **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Committee on Conscience, “Take Action”:** [http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take\\_action/action/](http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/take_action/action/)
3. **STAND: the student-led division of the Genocide Intervention Network:** <http://www.standnow.org/>